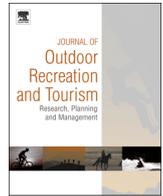




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Examining the structural relations among hikers' assessment of pull-factors, satisfaction and revisit intentions: The case of mountain tourism in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to offer an integrated approach to understanding the pull-factors that influence hikers to hike certain mountains and the causal relations among the assessment of pull-factors, overall satisfaction, and revisit intentions. A research model was proposed in which three hypotheses were developed. Data were collected from a survey of hikers participating in mountain tourism in Malaysia. A total of 396 questionnaires were returned and analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The pull-factors that influence the hikers' to hike certain mountains are the effectiveness of the organising company, trail accessibility, perceived safety risks and the landscape of the mountain. The mountain landscape is the most important factor influencing hikers' assessment to hike certain mountains, followed by the role of the organising company. The mountain landscape emerges as the strongest predictor of the intention to revisit a mountain.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

In the Marketing for mountain tourism destinations four aspects are relevant:- landscape character-accessibility- organizing company and - perceived risk. Hikers have favourable revisit intentions when they perceive their hiking experience as extraordinary. Therefore marketing and management should help the hikers to value the specific attributes of their hiking experience.

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1. Introduction

Mountainous regions in Malaysia comprise spectacular attractions such as wildlife, rivers, waterfalls, moss, rocks and caves. Such attractions have differentiated the Malaysian mountains from other mountains in the world. The mountains in this country are located in the tropical rainforest areas, which are the oldest forests and host a wide variety of wildlife. These mountains have inspired many legends and myths because of their mystery and splendid natural beauty, thus creating a link between the mountains and the local culture. In addition to experiencing the tranquillity of the Malaysian mountains, hikers have the opportunity to choose different grades of hiking that are well suited to their needs and levels of skill and can range in duration from a day trip to a multi-day expedition. These distinctive mountain characteristics have made Malaysia a perfect location for mountain tourism.

Mountaineering activities in Malaysia emerged in the 19th century with the British explorers who explored the mountains for wild flowers and introduced tea plantations into the highlands (Yunus, 2005). Since then, the exploration of the mountain regions has become a trend. Eventually many hikers came to realise the importance of hiking activities, especially the health benefits; and others noticed the money-making potential of mountaineering activities and transformed mountaineering into a profitable business. Hiking activities have grown from half-day hikes to mountain tours and latest are summit tours. The challenges as well ranging from the tough exertion of a 9-day traverse to a relatively gentle trek along the trail that suit all levels of ability (Malaysia Traveller, 2015).

Currently, mountain hiking is included in tour packages by local tour operators and is one of the major means of promoting mountain tourism locally and internationally. Many travel agencies exhibit the most interesting portions of the mountains in their promotions, thus stimulating an interest in hiking. Among the most popular mountains in Malaysia that have become frequent tourist destinations are Mount Tahan (Pahang), Mount Korbu

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(Perak), Mount Yong Belar (Perak), Mount Gayong (Perak), Mount Chamah (Kelantan), Mount Yong Yap (Perak), and Mount Ulu Sepat (Perak-Kelantan border). These mountains offer challenging trails and are appropriate for more experienced and proficient hikers who have the endurance to walk uphill, safely cross streams and balance a heavy pack between hips and shoulders (Morin, 2005). Additionally, there are many mountains in this country with easy trails that are appropriate for beginners, children and family holidays.

Despite of Malaysia having more than 300 mountains and forests available for tourism use together with a growing demand for mountaineering activities, only a few mountains have become the popular spots among the hikers living the rest underexplored (Ahmad, 2011; Latif, 2006). Thus, there is merit therefore in paying attention to the hikers' assessment of the primary factors that influence their choice of specific mountains. This study as well attempts to examine the theoretical and empirical evidence of the causal relations among the pull-factors, overall satisfaction, and hikers' revisit intentions.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. An overview of mountain tourism

Mountains have become a magnet for tourism, recognised as one of the rising segments of the tourism industry and growing in popularity worldwide (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006; Schneider, 2010). Mountain tourism contributes up to 15–20% of worldwide tourism, or US\$ 70–90 billion per year and it promises exhilaration and adventure because of risk and possible danger in mountaineering activities. The tourists' limitless needs and desires have caused an increase in the demand for mountain hiking, mountain trekking and rock climbing. Numerous previous studies have focused on the demand aspects of mountain tourism, exploring the motivations of mountain tourists (Buckley, 2007; Fredman & Heberlein, 2005; Pomfret, 2006), visitors' expenditures in mountain tourism (Fredman, 2008; Laesser & Crouch, 2006) and current tourism patterns in mountain regions (Heberlein, Fredman & Vuorio, 2002). Less attention has been paid to how tourists and visitors perceive the pull-factors that influence their selection of certain mountains and whether these assessments are related to their intention to revisit.

Many scholars have explored the key factors affecting participation in mountain tourism (Delle, Bassi & Massimini, 2003; Pomfret, 2006), examining mountain tourism in European regions and in the Alps. However, an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence hikers to hike certain mountains, especially in tropical mountain regions, is limited (Siong, Shaharuddin & Sah, 2009; Iswani, 2006). Because Malaysia has numerous mountains and forests available for tourism use and a growing demand for mountaineering activities, the investigation of hikers' assessment of the primary factors that influence their choice of specific mountains is significant.

2.2. Pull-factors influencing mountain selection

Previous literature has shown that several 'pull' factors may compel hikers to hike certain mountains and their actual behaviour are influenced by a range of factors, such as the organising company (Pomfret, 2006), perceived risk (Muhar et al., 2007), mountain accessibility (Backhaus, 2011) and the landscape of the mountain which include scenery and natural resources (Klenosky, LeBlanc, Vogt, & Schroeder, 2007; Williams & Soutar, 2009).

Organisations are responsible for arranging mountaineering tours, and these organisations can be private or organisational

associations, clubs, or tour operators (Pomfret, 2006). This arrangement has influenced hikers' judgment regarding their ability to organise a climbing tour on their own (Pomfret, 2010). Because mountaineering is now perceived as a commodity and profit-making enterprise, many tour operators offer hiking tours (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Muhar et al., 2007). In stimulating the demand for such tours, tour operators have created appealing promotional materials highlighting several interesting areas of the mountains that attract tourists and stimulate their desire to know more and to experience the mountains first-hand (Pomfret, 2006).

Mountaineering tours address risks and challenges that can be dangerous or even fatal if the expeditions are not prudently organised. The risk perceived by the hiker differs greatly depending on individual characteristics (Gómez, Hill & Ackerman, 2007). Some hikers perceive risk as being exciting and emotionally arousing as well as providing an opportunity to test their abilities (Pomfret, 2006; Bentley, Cater & Page, 2010). Hikers can be categorised into three groups based on how they perceive risk: risk neutral, functional risk and place risk (Saffery, 2000). The 'risk neutral' hikers do not associate the mountains with risk. The 'functional risk' group associate risk with the mechanical failure of mountaineering equipment, transportation or related organisation. The 'place risk' hikers consider the risk connected with the tour because mountaineering is highly risky. According to Pomfret (2006), beginners and novice hikers tend to inaccurately perceive risk and their own competence because they lack experience and skill. Generally, beginners view risk and competence from a negative perspective. However, over-confident hikers are likely to invite devastation and disaster because of their opinion that mountaineering is low-risk, their belief in their own competence and their pursuit of adventure.

Previous literature has suggested that the landscape of a mountain is one of the pull-factors that allow hikers to distinguish one particular mountain from the others (Williams & Soutar, 2009). According to Gyimothy and Mykletun (2004), the landscape of a mountain includes aspects of scenery and other natural resources such as rocks, cliffs, plants and streams. This factor plays a vital role in shaping different people's perspectives. The unique features of a particular mountain can become a natural backdrop and photo subject for photographers, either for personal or commercial reasons (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). Some hikers who are researchers themselves are interested in studying the natural dissemination of flora and the construction of rocky and hilly land (Johns, 2006). Daniel (2001) observed that natural landscapes such as valleys successfully marked a particular mountain. Other scholars have also recognised that hikers rank the landscape of a mountain as an important factor in justifying their hiking decision (Muhar et al., 2007).

Accessibility refers to the mode of transportation used to reach their destination, which is the starting point of the mountain (Backhaus, 2011). Mountaineering cannot occur without transportation (Gurung & DeCoursey, 2000), and the mode of transportation varies greatly depending on the nature of the routes to the starting point. Reliance on four-wheel-drive vehicles occurs when the routes go over muddy terrain, especially in bad weather (Finnegan, 2007). However, some mountains are located close to the main road, giving them greater accessibility. Therefore, other modes of transportations such as privately owned vehicles or public vans, cars and buses can be utilised. Higher levels of accessibility require a greater financial investment (Nepal & Chipe-niuk, 2005). Rented four-wheel-drive vehicles are expensive compared to other type of vehicles. The undeveloped infrastructure surrounding mountainous areas can render such areas difficult to access (Daniel, 2001).

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