The destination product and its impact on traveller perceptions

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Abstract

The growing interest in destination competitiveness has focused attention on the definition and description of a destination product, and how the tourist perceives this complex amalgam of elements and experiences. This paper reviews the literature and identifies two sub-components of a destination product, then proceeds to examine their significance as perceived by tourists. Testing of the conceptual model is undertaken using secondary data relating to visits to a premier Canadian destination, with respect to its visitors’ perceptions of quality, value and intent to return. The results reveal that all seven hypotheses are supported, although the strength of general environmental elements and quality seem more significant than other elements in this one test. Certain managerial and research issues are raised as a result of the analysis. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Increased competition for tourists among international destinations has underscored notions of quality and branding value as important factors that can make visiting a place more attractive (Stevens, 1992). Quality and value have typically been considered issues relevant to the management of retail products. However, past application of the “product concept” and its “lifecycle” to the management of tourist destinations make these strategic issues pertinent to tourism researchers and practitioners alike (Butler, 1980). Indeed, managers of those international destinations entering a post-maturation [decline] phase, replete with diminished attractiveness and declining visitor numbers, would find research on such product issues particularly cogent. As Grabler (1997) has noted in his life cycle study of 43 European city destinations:

It is important to detect the factors that influence the cycle or are consequences of it. Irrespective of the direction of their casual relation to the life cycle, those correlates constitute important managerial information.

Quality and value are concepts that can provide insights on how to rejuvenate products and the way they are viewed by customers. Several destination marketing organisations have highlighted quality and value as critical objectives for revitalising their flagging tourism industries. Northern Ireland for example, recently documented several government initiatives to increase its industry performance and the number of people who visit, by developing a sense of “quality” in their visitor experiences (O’Neill & McKenna, 1994). Although destination managers from this country concentrated on quality, research on the Pacific Islands prioritised “value” perceptions as a key objective for increasing the attractiveness of these island destinations to tourists (Choy, 1992).

The concepts and definitions of destination, quality and value are somewhat vague in the tourism literature due to the large number and varied users of the terms, each with their respective priorities. Based on the various models of tourism development outlined by Pearce (1989), it is proposed to define a destination as an amalgam of products and services available in one location, that can draw visitors from beyond its spatial confines. Quality is viewed as a positive distinguishing characteristic, which according to Berry and Parasuraman (1991) is “the foundation for services marketing because the core product (destination) being marketed is a performance”.

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Value can be seen as combination of a product's (destination's) perceived quality and associated price which a visitor will summarise as the value received (Chang & Wildt, 1994).

Creating traveller perceptions of quality or value is no easy task, as these experiences tend to be complex and intangible (Zeithaml, 1988). Further to this, understanding the role of the destination in generating these types of experiences has been complicated by different understandings and past debate over the nature of the destination product itself (Smith, 1991; Leiper, 1993). These limitations have restricted tourism research so that little is known about which destination features lead to visitor perceptions of quality and value.

What is needed is a way to understand the links between a destination's product mix and the perceptions of quality and value they generate amongst visitors. Further, what would be useful is a way to assess how such links can help in the competitive environment all destinations are faced with today. One such way would be to examine the relationships between a destination's product mix and visitors' reactions, as measured by their core perceptions of quality and value, and ascertain how these elements combine to influence future visitation patterns.

Therefore, the intent of this article is threefold. First, the nature of the destination product is reviewed and a subsequent model of its component parts is proposed. Second, parts of the model are then used to investigate a particular destination's attributes and their effect on a visitor's sense of trip quality and value. Third, these product mix attributes and visitor perceptions of quality and value are used to predict visitor intentions to return.

2. The destination product

Several tourism researchers have attempted to clarify the nature of the tourism product. Some of these approaches have incorporated a supply and a demand side that describe how multiple components of the destination interact with travellers during their trip. For example, Murphy (1985) equates destinations with the market place; where demand and supply characteristics jostle for attention and consumption. Gunn's (1988) model of the Tourist System denotes the tourism product as a complex consumptive experience that results from a process where tourists use multiple travel services during the course of their visit (information, transportation, accommodation, and attraction services). Smith (1994) also acknowledges the role of such travel services in creating a product experience, and describes how various “inputs” from the destination could produce an experiential “output” for tourists. Numerous authors assert, however, that tourism is not just a series of inputs but also an experience in its own right (Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987; Mayo & Jarvis, 1981; Ross, 1994).

A destination may be viewed as an amalgam of individual products and experience opportunities that combine to form a total experience of the area visited. Hu and Ritchie (1993) conceptualised the tourism destination as “a package of tourism facilities and services, which like any other consumer product, is composed of a number of multi-dimensional attributes”. A tourist’s destination experience, however, is not solely derived from the consumption of various travel services (Cohen, 1979). Indeed, factor analytic work on the international travel experience has described how tourists desire particular (novelty–familiarity) experiences from the physical setting itself, as well as from the service infrastructure that supports their visit. One particular study (Mo, Howard & Havitz, 1993) showed that the destination’s environment was the primary factor (“Destination Orientation Dimension”: e.g. social and culture features), and the destination’s service infrastructure the secondary factor (“Travel Service Dimension”: e.g. transportation, food and lodging services) in an international tourist’s experiential desires of the destination product.

Smith (1994) supports this concept of a hierarchy of influential factors by noting that service infrastructure is housed within the larger macro-environment or “physical plant” of the destination. Indeed, as Watson and Kopachevsky (1994) have argued, tourist [service] experiences cannot be properly understood unless we take into account the larger context and setting in which these encounters take place. Consumer research on service experiences also corroborates this notion. That in addition to the service itself, the physical environment in which the encounter takes place plays a significant role in the consumer’s experience (Bitter, 1990).

An interesting consumptive parallel to the tourism product experience is found in work on retail stores. Research on the perceptions and experience of retail consumers underscores a similar product–experience relationship. In this sense, consumers travel to particular store locations and make purchases (retail merchandise) in a particular setting or store environment. Like tourism, the retail environment can also affect shopper experiences (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Murphy, 1980). Baker, Grewal and Parasuraman (1994) found that the store environment (e.g., ambience, store design and social characteristics) and in-store service were important factors in customers’ impression of the store. Though similar, the retail experience is distinct from the tourism experience in that travellers primarily visit places to consume the “atmosphere” provided by the destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993), whereas most shoppers visit store locations to consume or purchase the goods and services available.

The importance of atmosphere to a tourism experience is tied to a destination image, defined by Kotler, Haider and Rein (1993) as “the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a people have of a place”. As such the image is
a sum of associations and pieces of information connected to a destination, which would include multiple components of the destination and personal perception. Hence, it is no surprise that image research has produced a variety of complex patterns which require further analysis (Britton, 1979; Lilly, 1984; Phelps, 1986; Ross, 1993).

Unfortunately, past tourism interpretations of the product environment have also lacked the necessary complexity to begin to clarify the diverse colour and atmosphere we see in many destination images throughout the world. A fuller model of a product’s environment is offered by Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (1996). They propose that six environmental factors shape the (destination) “macro-environment”; demographic, economic, natural, technological, political and cultural forces, which some believe impinge upon the visitor experience and sense of a destination (Ward & Russell, 1981). In this sense, certain physical, social, cultural, technological, political, and economic characteristics of a destination develop an environmental effect that directly influences tourist perceptions and experiences (Russell & Pratt, 1980).

In agreement with Smith, it is considered that destination elements can and in many cases do, make up the core of the environmental effect on visitors. Physical elements of the destination could include features like a site or facility, natural resources such as scenic landforms, flora and fauna, or physical conditions such as the weather (Dunn & Iso-Ahola, 1991; Buckley, 1994). Social factors like the friendliness of the local people, the language spoken, family structures, occupations, urban layout and population density, are also attributes of the destination that can form part of the macro-environment (Canestrelli & Costa, 1991; Machlis & Burch, 1983). The level, use, or lack of infrastructure and technology in a destination (e.g., water and power supply, use of computer technology and communications etc.) are also visible features of developed and under-developed tourism products that can factor into the visitors’ trip experience (Choy, 1992; Johnson & Edwards, 1994). The economic conditions and structural features that characterise a country, such as currency exchange, market behaviour and pricing, are further attributes of the product that can influence traveler experiences and thoughts about a destination (Dieke, 1991; Stevens, 1992).

Culture is another important factor shaping many tourist experiences. Authentic local culture, its history, institutions and customs can provide a rich experiential tapestry for the visiting tourist (Cohen, 1988; Prentice, 1993). Finally, the political dimension is another key factor that contributes to the nature of the destination product. For example the political stability, foreign policy, or government policy on important issues such as human rights or democratic elections can determine tourist perceptions and behaviour. Furthermore, government control, responsiveness to tourism, and the treatment of tourists (e.g. visa applications, ports of entry, industry support, specific entry conditions, etc.) can also affect the destination environment that tourists experience. The political dimension can also extend to what is included in a destination, as with heritage displays and interpretation, which regularly reflect the view of the winners or survivors (Teye, 1988; Hall, 1997; Richter, 1989).

We believe that multiple attributes from these factors can contribute to an environmental effect. Our interpretation of the destination product is that it considers the environmental impacts of the destination’s setting, plus the effect of service infrastructure on the visitor experience; but that the two components have never been combined in an analysis of traveller’s perceived trip satisfaction as indicated by their intent to return. Fig. 1 illustrates this and describes the various elements involved in these effects. While past conceptualisations have played a formative role in the model’s specifications, work is yet to be done on which of these many destination attributes and effects substantially influence the perceptions of quality and value in a visitor experience. The next section examines past definitions of quality and value and describes how these perceptions might be arrived at by a tourist. The discussion then culminates in a series of research hypotheses designed to examine the formative effects of the destination product on these constructs and their relationship to future intentions.

3. The product experience: perceptions of quality and value

The implicit assumption driving this investigation is that certain attributes and destination effects can influence the tourist experience and perceptions of quality and value. While the previous discussion has outlined the general nature of a destination (Fig. 1), we now turn to examine the tourist experience and the notions of quality and value.

3.1. Trip quality

Past work on quality by Fick and Ritchie (1991) was based on Lewin’s expectancy theory and used an established consumer model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985). Fick and Ritchie described how perceptions of quality were formed when a product (service) performed at or above the level that a consumer expected. In a touristic context, quality perceptions are thought to reflect a positive summary evaluation of the trip experience. This in large part, is based on product performance and the extent to which traveller expectations were satisfactorily met over the history of trip encounters. Carlzon (1987) describes this customer interaction as being comprised of a “million moments of
Fig. 1. A conceptual model of the destination product.

truth”. Each “moment of truth” encountered with the destination environment and its service infrastructure becomes a thread woven into the traveller’s overall sense of trip quality. Indeed, the more positive those encounters are the stronger the sense of quality.

Some tourism researchers (Cai & Woods, 1993; O’Neill & McKenna, 1994) have primarily thought that quality perceptions originate purely from encounters with the service infrastructure (Fig. 1). However, this may not be so. In consumer settings, Gotlieb, Grewal and Brown (1994) found that both the focal (service) and the contextual (environmental) dimensions of a product played significant roles in determining quality. This finding supports the following hypotheses, that both the destination’s macro-environment and its service infrastructure affect tourist perceptions of quality.

H1. Positive experience with elements of the destination’s macro-environments will positively affect perceptions of trip quality.

H2. Positive experience with elements of the service infrastructure will positively affect perceptions of trip quality.

3.2. Trip value

Perceived trip value is also thought to be a cognitive evaluation. Morrison (1989), described value as the mental estimate that consumers make of the travel product, where perceptions of value are drawn from a personal cost/benefit assessment. In this sense, the time or money invested in a trip is compared with the experience(s) gained from that visit. Steven’s (1992), in his work, noted that value perceptions arose from an assessment of the goods and services purchased at the destination. This however, only reflected whether visitors to Canada thought their financial (i.e. price-based) investment was worthwhile. A further aspect of trip value could consider whether the time invested in a visit (experience) was worthwhile.

Contrary to Stevens’ investigation, Choy’s (1992) article on the Pacific Islands noted that value perceptions were not solely based on the destination’s infrastructure, but that other factors also influence these assessments. Murphy and Pritchard (1997) established that other factors can and do alter value perceptions. Their findings provide circumstantial evidence that both service infrastructure and the destination environment in terms of weather conditions are active in determining trip value. For example, during the wintry low season, local visitor perceptions of trip value were relatively unaffected by restricted service infrastructure and concomitant discount pricing. Whereas international visitor value perceptions were adversely affected by the low season environment, and the fact that the weather, physical, and social attractions were not at their best, regardless of the price discounts offered. We believe that a more comprehensive understanding of trip value can be gained by considering both of these effects. The following research hypotheses examine this contention, testing the impact of the environment and the service infrastructure on value:

H3. Positive experience with elements of the destination’s macro-environments will positively affect perceptions of trip value.

H4. Positive experience with elements of the service infrastructure will positively affect perceptions of trip value.

The four previous hypotheses examine the impact of product performance (i.e., effects) on customer perceptions. However, similar perceptual models by Gotlieb et al. (1994) and Chang and Wildt (1994) go further and examine the latent relationship between these (quality and value) perceptions and a consumer’s behaviour. Their studies suggest subsequent causal links between quality, value and the intent to repurchase. The following discussion describes these linkages in a tourism context, and proposes a fuller model to test three additional hypotheses.

Because value is a price-quality comparison, quality is also thought to be instrumental in the formation of value perceptions (Zeithalm, 1988). In this sense, when tourists develop a sense of trip quality, their perceptions of trip value are also thought to be enhanced. Furthermore, perceptions of quality are surmised to have a direct affect
on repeat purchase intentions. Destination products that do not meet tourist quality expectations are less likely to be revisited (repurchased) than those that satisfy. Although not originally hypothesised, Chang and Wildt found a direct relationship between quality and purchase intention beyond the indirect effect expected though perceived value.

Based on consumer research and work by Stevens, perceived value is also thought to be a significant determinant of whether a traveller would intend to return and visit a destination again. Murphy and Pritchard found that a high sense of trip value corresponded with a traveller’s intent to return to a destination. Although this sense of value varied over the seasons and between the three market groups of Canadian, United States and overseas visitors.

Certainly, the notion of visitors returning is an important outcome measure for destination marketing organisations to consider (Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Godbey & Graefe, 1991). All businesses, including destinations, strive to create customer loyalty. Furthermore, understanding the strength of quality and value assessments in swaying tourist behaviour can yield useful strategic information. The next three research hypotheses test relationships already established in consumer settings. Quality’s part in value and the role of both on intent to return is examined:

H5. Perceived trip quality will positively affect perceived trip value,
H6. Perceived trip quality will positively affect traveller intentions to return,
H7. Perceived trip value will positively affect traveller intentions to return.

All the above hypotheses and their relationships are presented in Fig. 2.

4. Research design

To test the seven hypotheses an existing data set relating to a major Canadian destination was used. The conceptual model was tested using secondary data from the summer and fall 1994 visitor surveys conducted by Tourism Victoria, which is the local destination association. The visitor survey is a convenience sample exit survey that is administered periodically across years and seasons to assess the traveller experience with the Victoria area. Victoria, on Vancouver Island, is the capital city of British Columbia and is constantly rated as one of the premier world destinations by readers of Conde’ Naste magazine.

The 1994 visitor survey data set consisted of 3088 completed surveys, but it was felt that only a portion would be relevant to the questions addressed in this paper. Given the focus on visitors’ likelihood to return to a destination it was decided to examine those visitors who lived in close proximity to Victoria, rather than on distant visitors who might view the destination as a “once in a life-time” opportunity. Accordingly a subset of visitors living in British Columbia and the surrounding states of Alberta, Washington and Oregon was drawn from the total sample, to produce a data set of 610 for this analysis. Mean substitution was used to replace the missing values.

The modelled constructs of Fig. 2 were operationalised using multiple indicators from the data set, all of which were assessed on the five point Likert scale format of

![Fig. 2. Conceptual model of a destination’s environment and infrastructure relationships to perceived quality, price and intent to return.](image-url)
5. Results and discussion

PLS measurement results were assessed using the approach advocated by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Fornell and Barclay (1983), and they demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity. Item reliability was mostly satisfactory as the loadings of measures on their respective constructs were generally above 0.70 (Table 1). Construct reliability was assessed using the reliability and validity measure of internal consistency which can be interpreted similar to Cronbach’s alpha. Internal consistencies (IC) ranged from 0.79 to 0.96, well above Nunnally’s (1978) guidelines for acceptability (Table 1). With the exception of “Environment”, the measures demonstrated convergent validity as the average variance of manifest variables extracted by constructs (AVE) was at least 0.57, indicative that more variance was explained than unexplained in the variables associated with a given construct. The low AVE for Environment (0.42) was mainly due to the item “clean city” which was not perceived as being as strong an element of Victoria’s environment as other items in the scale. Finally, discriminant validity was found to be evident in that average variance extracted by constructs was greater than the squared correlation between constructs, and hence the relationships between measures and constructs were stronger than the relationships between constructs. The measurement results were considered sufficiently strong to warrant evaluation of the structural model.

The full structural results are presented in Table 2, and were both interesting and supportive of the value of a Total Destination Concept. Path coefficients, interpreted like standardised betas, indicate the strength of direct relationships between constructs. All the path coefficients were found to be significant at the 0.01 level using
Table 2
Structural results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Infrastructure</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Intention to return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to return</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Diagonal is variance explained ($R^2$); latent variable correlations above the diagonal; path coefficients below the diagonal.

Fig. 3. Conceptual model results using PLS analysis.

jackknifed $t$-values as advocated in Fornell and Larcker (1981) and the signs were in the expected direction. This is supportive of all the hypothesised relationships. The model also demonstrated a modest degree of predictive power as the modelled constructs explained 12 per cent of the variance in “Intention to Return” (within two years), 25 per cent of the variance in destination “Quality”, and 37 per cent of the variance in trip “Value”. While the variance explained in “Intention to Return” was low, the test data did not incorporate other proven trip motivators such as novelty, kinship, or prestige and the time period for returning was restricted to two years. As the objective of PLS is prediction in a regression sense there is no overall goodness-of-fit index. However, the results are encouraging and suggest the Total Destination Concept may be fruitfully adopted by destination marketers.

The most interesting result was the finding that destination “Quality”, as measured by overall satisfaction and quality relative to US destinations, was a key predictor of visitor “Intention to Return” within two years ($\beta = 0.30$) but perceived trip “Value” was not ($\beta = 0.08$) (Fig. 3). Destination “Quality” also had an indirect effect on “Intention to Return” by being a strong predictor of trip “Value” ($I = 0.36$). These results suggest that destination quality should be a central focus for destination marketers and that programs akin to those adopted in many cities to improve general service quality need to be developed to measure and improve the quality of a tourist destination. Interestingly some destinations have focused on value in their marketing which is a strategy not supported by these results.

As expected, tourism “Infrastructure” was found to be an important predictor of both destination “Quality” ($I = 0.22$), and perceived trip “Value” ($I = 0.28$). This supports the need for destination marketers to actively manage the mix of restaurants, attractions, hotels and other infrastructure to develop a consistent destination image for different target segments. It illustrates the importance of destinations and their tourist associations agreeing on what aspects of the region to promote and to what markets. But this is not an easy task in communities which often have a variety of opinions on what should be developed and promoted for tourism and
in an industry which frequently is more competitive than collaborative.

Destination “Environment”, in terms of climate, scenery, ambience, friendliness, and to a lesser extent cleanliness, was found to be a key predictor of destination “Quality” (β = 0.36) but only a modest predictor of trip “Value” (β = 0.12). The effects of the environment on perceptions of destination quality, and subsequently the intention to return, illustrates the importance of environmental factors to tourism in Victoria and supports consideration of the environment as a central component of the destination product. It reveals the importance of the industry working with local government and in particular its strategic planning goals and general quality of life objectives.

Together these results support the conceptualisation of a destination product as consisting of a set of core benefits (captured here by overall quality and value) that are delivered through a tourism infrastructure that can be managed directly and by environmental factors, some of which may be influenced by public policy. They indicate that a tourism destination needs to consider and integrate these factors into its overall planning strategies, including physical and social planning, along with a stronger partnership with business concerns. This is becoming more evident as more cities are combining their quality of life objectives with facilities and amenities that will appeal to both residents and tourists. Currently, the City of Victoria is planning a multi-functional recreation complex to replace an old ice arena, one which will have the potential to attract conference delegates as well as local recreationists.

It is felt that the results of this empirical test were particularly satisfying given that the test involved the use of secondary data collected for another purpose. Using such a data source certainly imposed limitations to the analysis of the hypothesised relationships within the model. For example, the model and subsequent tests could benefit from the inclusion of a wider range of variables in such a complex decision making situation. Missing from this analysis were personal variables, like the type of travel experience sought and individual situation variables. Environmental variables such as weather and the changing product mix would also have a bearing on the destination’s appeal and customer satisfaction.

While the focus on intent to return or regional travelers was relevant in such an exploratory analysis this is not the only way to measure satisfaction and repeat visitation. Inclusion of international travellers may well have led to a decrease in return responses, due to the distances involved and vastly increased number of intervening opportunities. But even with such travellers a positive evaluation of the destination experience could be expected to generate another outcome — a word of mouth recommendation. Unfortunately, such a question was not available in the data set.

Although our application of the Tourism Product framework to the Victoria region was limited by the use of secondary data, and hence had certain operationalisation constraints, it still illustrated the utility of understanding the role of environment and infrastructure factors in complementing core benefits sought by visitors. It clearly demonstrated the interrelated nature of the constructs and their importance to future visits.

This utility could be furthered by examining which environmental and infrastructure factors contribute most to the benefits sought by different market segments at a particular destination. For example, destination marketers might develop a more comprehensive measure of destination quality that could be used as a benchmark to assess their progress in developing appropriate infrastructure and protecting or enhancing specific aspects of the environment. Specific restaurants, hotels, attractions, and other elements of the infrastructure could be assessed in terms of the extent they contribute positively or negatively to visitor perceptions of destination quality or to specific functional, experiential, or symbolic benefits important to the positioning of the destination. Thus the Tourism Product framework can become a tool that not only helps marketers think about the destination as an integrative entity but one that can be used diagnostically to improve the tourism product.

6. Summary

This paper has attempted to integrate some of the concepts from the literature relating to destinations and the service industry environment into a more comprehensive conceptual model of the destination product. It proceeded to examine the identified constructs within that model in terms of their relationships to quality, value and a tourist’s intent to return. In this way the model and analysis may be viewed as a diagnostic tool of a destination’s competitiveness.

It found in the case of Victoria, BC, that the two primary constructs of a destination product — its overall environment and its constructed infrastructure — could both be linked to regional tourists’ perceptions of quality and value related to the visit experience. These in turn, especially quality, were positively related to the intent to return, indicating that the hypothesised relationships were supported and could be used to support competitive strategies at the destination level.

It should be emphasised that this has been an exploratory study using existing data to uncover some of the significant variables operating within a consumer’s perception of product/destination competitiveness. The competitiveness was tested by the tourists’ stated willingness to return and the model constructs related to that objective were proven to be relevant in this context. However, much more needs to be done before more
specific relationships and statements can be made concerning tourists' perceptions of a destination product. In the meantime managers may be well advised to focus on the more general environmental conditions of a destination, as well as the infrastructure and businesses over which they have more direct control. For according to this study both have a strong bearing on tourists' perceptions of quality and value, which in turn influence their assessment of a destination's competitiveness.

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