

## ANTECEDENTS OF DESTINATION IMAGE IN NATURAL PROTECTED AREA: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED VALUE

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**Citation:** Chin, Y.S., Mohamad, A.A., Lo, M.C., Ibrahim, W.H.W., & Ha, S.T., (2020). ANTECEDENTS OF DESTINATION IMAGE IN NATURAL PROTECTED AREA: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED VALUE. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 32(4), 1222–1228. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.32405-561>

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**Abstract:** Ecotourism is a nature-oriented tourism idea that is flourishing and with promising outlook. The present study attempts to explore the importance of local communities' attitude, carrying capacity and destination attractiveness & resources towards destination image by adopting perceived value as a moderator on examining the antecedents on destination image. Data were collected from 146 tourists who have visited Bako National Park, Sarawak. The research employs WarpPLS 6.0 and the results revealed that local communities' attitude, carrying capacity and destination attractiveness & resources have impact on destination image. Perceived value has moderating effect between destination attractiveness & resources and destination image.

**Key words:** local communities' attitude, carrying capacity, destination attractiveness and resources, perceived value, destination image

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### INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a noteworthy part of economic development. As revealed by Andrades and Dimanche (2017), the future economic benefits of tourism to regions or countries have been a recurring topic in the literature on tourism research. Ecotourism is a nature-oriented tourism that is thriving with promising future as it is able to satisfy the needs of tourists. It serves tourists with enriching "experience" that enables them to fulfil their tourism experiences (Lin, 2019). Therefore, the development of ecotourism has become the development direction of various governments to meet tourists' expectations and satisfaction. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), Malaysia has encountered a rise in terms of visitor arrivals with an inclination rate of 14.66% among international tourists in 2018 (MOTAC, 2020). Besides, The National Ecotourism Plan 2016-2025 forms part of Visit Malaysia 2020 and was planned to optimize the capacity of ecotourism and ensure the sustainability of tourism (The Star Online) which would further improve the contribution of the tourism industry to the economy given the lackluster results in the first quarter of 2020 with figures adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The challenge of sustainable development of ecotourism has emerged as an important and popular theoretical objective to consider the costs, risks and impacts of global environmental hazards on tourism and travel (Jamal and Budke, 2020). Two immense drivers of change are climate change and global health emergencies namely the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) that is currently impacting tourism sector. In addition, national parks are known as ecotourism or recreational tourism destination due to pristine environments with a unique natural formation. Establishing national parks without efficient tourism management could also have a negative impact in protecting and conserving natural areas where it can damage the environment, causing overcrowding and pollution (Buckley, 2011; Tepavčević et al., 2019).

The present study was conducted at Bako National Park situated in Sarawak, Malaysia. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Sarawak (MTAC), Bako National Park is the oldest national park in Sarawak and is easily accessible from Kuching. It has proven a hit with foreign and domestic tourists where it has recorded the highest number of tourist arrivals on its diverse biodiversity, unique landscape, and favorable tourism infrastructure. In the light of the above discussion, this study attempts to examine the antecedents of local communities' attitude, carrying capacity and natural resources on destination image in Bako National Park, Sarawak. In addition, perceived value is adopted as a moderator variable to examine the relationship among the constructs. There are no studies investigating on perceived value as a moderator on linking between antecedents and destination image. Therefore, this paper tries to fill the gap by conceptualizing perceived value as a moderator in the relationship between local communities' attitude, carrying capacity and natural resources on destination image. The outcome of the study will provide useful and effective insights for future research.

### Literature Review and Development of Hypotheses

#### Destination Image

An increasingly strong competitiveness of a destination is focused primarily on the perceived image of its destination (Michaelidou et al.,

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2013). Destination image is an attribute of strengthening destination for tourists (Le et al., 2020). This can be described as the sum of a person's beliefs and impressions towards the destination (Chiu et al., 2014). Destination image may be analysed by multi-attribute approach because of its effective identity and holistic images which are influenced by cognitive interpretation of destination attributes (Jiang et al., 2017). The thoughts and feelings of a tourist destination are created, and the forming image of the destination is affected holistically (Veasna et al., 2013; Moon and Han, 2019). Therefore, a good and positive destination image will be a factor that impacts the perception of tourist towards tourism destination. Destination image can generally prove its attraction and satisfy the expectations and satisfaction of the tourists. In addition, previous studies have provided empirical evidence that the destination image is a valuable concept for understanding tourist preferences, selection processes, revisiting intentions and recommendations (Kim and Lee, 2015; Kladou and Mavragani, 2015; Souiden et al., 2017).

### **Local Communities' Attitude**

The attitude of local communities can be described as the psychological behaviour of local communities through the expression of their favourable or unfavourable attitude towards tourists (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). The impact of local communities has been recognized as an important aspect of ecotourism (Duffy et al., 2017). In most ecotourism destinations, the community plays an important role as a provider. Their favourable and unfavourable behaviours will enhance the destination's popularity otherwise it will result in negative impression (Abas and Hanafiah, 2014; Chin et al., 2018). Past studies have revealed that local communities are one of the key factors in encouraging tourists' visitation and to spend time at a destination as well as significantly influencing a tourist's expected behaviour and destination image (Henkel et al., 2006; Reitsamer et al., 2016). The local community can complement natural and experiential resources in a destination. According to Kim et al. (2012), tourists who experience close encounters with local communities and the local culture are most likely to experience memorable tourism experiences that directly leads to higher tourists' satisfaction and generate a positive image of a destination which will likely result in a positive word of mouth publicity. Based on aforementioned, the following hypothesis is developed:

H1: Local communities' attitude has a positive effect on the destination image.

### **Carrying Capacity**

From a general point of view, tourism capacity can be defined as the maximum number of people who can visit a tourist destination at the same time without causing the physical, economic and socio-cultural destruction and an unacceptable reduction in the quality of tourist satisfaction (Coccosis and Mexa, 2017). Carrying capacity is further defined as the environmental quality and visitor satisfaction that could not be diminished by the physical, biological, social and psychological capacity of the environment to support the visitant activity (Dioko and So, 2017). Past studies (Maggi and Fredella, 2010; Ndlovu and Chigora, 2019) have reported that an uncontrollable carrying capacity may destroy the environment and attractiveness of a tourism destination where it may result in the tourism destination losing its image to potential eco-tourists who are environmentally conscious as well as their future revisit intention and their level of satisfaction towards the destination (Joshi and Dahal, 2019). Besides, Wang et al. (2020) revealed that over-tourism of a destination can bring impacts to wider factors such as air quality and local environmental environments. The importance of carrying capacity may be instrumental in the success of developing and creating a positive and memorable destination image (Yamagishi et al., 2020). Therefore, carrying capacity helps to maintain the balance between the benefits of a tourism destination and tourists' perception towards tourism activities. In light of the above discussion, the following hypothesis is developed:

H2: Carrying capacity has a positive effect on the destination image.

### **Destination Resources and Attractiveness**

Destination resources and attractiveness refer to attractions, attribute and resources and considerable diversity of items compounding the set of characteristics of the destination's offer (Vinyals-Mirabent, 2019; Enright and Newton, 2005; Hong-bumm, 1988). Reitsamer et al. (2016) state the uniqueness and attractiveness of the destination is based on tourists' insights about a destination and its ability to satisfy their satisfaction and needs. Past studies (Wong and Teoh, 2015; Zhang et al., 2014) have intensively explored the influence of this element on tourist's behavior, loyalty and revisit intention. Additionally, (Martín-Santana et al., 2017) revealed that destinations with various resources and attractiveness contribute to the formation of the overall impression and image of the destination in tourists' minds. Therefore, the destination's resources and attractiveness are crucial for both image formation and memorability of the staged destination experiences. The following hypothesis is proposed based on the above discussion:

H3: Destination resources and attractiveness have a positive effect on the destination image.

### **Perceived Value**

*The Moderating Role of Perceived Value on Local Communities' Attitude, Carrying Capacity and Destination Attractiveness and Resources on Destination Image*

Perceived value is defined as the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product or service based on perceptions of what is received and what is given (Zeithaml, 1998). It can further recognize its role in predicting future behavioural intent and influencing competitive advantage as one of the most influential forces in the tourism industry (Bigne et al., 2009; Cheng et al., 2018). Previous study by Cheng and Lu (2013) confirmed that more favorable destination images are correlated with higher perceived value. Additionally, local community plays an important role by recommending the uniqueness of the destination and increase tourists' revisit intention (Cheng et al., 2018) while local attitude has been identified as a factor shaping the attractiveness of the destination (Gonzalez et al., 2018). Tourists are satisfied if they perceived the experience of what they expected (Dean et al., 2019).

Therefore, perceived value has a significant moderating impact on the relationship between local communities and destination image by reinforcing tourists' level of attitude and give rise to positive behavioural intention. In addition, a key perception in carrying capacity is the perception of overcrowding. Zhang et al. (2017) elucidated that uncontrollable carrying capacity of a destination may decrease tourists' satisfaction and expected needs. Thus, the perception of crowding may be thought as an attitude in which perception of an excessive use level of tourism and may lead to tourists' negativity perceived behavioural intention and will indirectly affect positive image of a destination (Gonzalez et al., 2018). Other than that, destination attractiveness and resources have been specified as the most important factors in strengthening destination image. Previous research has reported that tourists' perceived value of a destination would depend on the attractions that a destination provides on its positioning as a tourist destination (Michael et al., 2018). Therefore, it is widely accepted that perceived value is important in promoting a long-term relationship with tourists proven by Wang et al. (2016) that it has a positive effect on the likelihood of revisiting and recommending the destination to others by increasing the positivity of a destination image. Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses have been developed as follows:

H4: The positive relationship between local communities’ attitudes and destination image will be enhanced when the tourist’s perceived value is high.

H5: The positive relationship between carrying capacity and destination image will be enhanced when the tourist’s perceived value is high.

H6: The positive relationship between destination attractiveness & resources and destination image will be enhanced when the tourist’s perceived value is high.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A cross-sectional analysis was used in this research, in which results were used a self-administered questionnaire. All questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies and measured on a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In this analysis, local communities’ attitudes were calculated using four elements (Collins, 2005; Tseane, 2006; Yusof and Rahman, 2011; Canny and Hidayat, 2012); carrying capacity was measured using four items (Artuğer, 2015); destination resources & attractiveness were measured using four items (Kim et al., 2006; Maroofi and Dehghan, 2012; Oriade, 2013; Herstanti et al., 2014); destination image was measured using five items (Buhalis, 2000; Aliman et al., 2016); and the perceived value was measured using four items (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Apostolakis and Jaffry, 2005; Sanchez et al., 2006).

This study utilized G\*Power Version 3.1.9.2 software to analyze and calculate the minimum sample size. Based on the calculations, a sample size of 103 (N=103) is needed for this study with the power set at 0.80, assuming a significance level of 5% and the effect size of 0.15A pre-test was performed before a full-scale survey to detect any problems that respondents might encounter with the questionnaire items, such as unclear wording or other difficulties. WarpPLS 6.0 was applied based on path modeling to assess the model developed as shown in Figure 1 (Kock, 2017). A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to examine the tourist’s perception towards ecotourism development after they visited Bako National Park, Sarawak. In total, 146 valid responses were received, indicating a response rate of 36.5%. 46.6% were male and 53.4% were female and most of the respondents were found between 21 to 30 years old (52.1%). 38.4% of the respondents are employed, 34.2% are students and 9.6% are running own business. Lastly, 41.8% of the respondents earned monthly income less than RM1500, 17.1% earned monthly income between RM4501 to RM6000 and 14.4% earned monthly income ranged from RM3001 to RM4500.

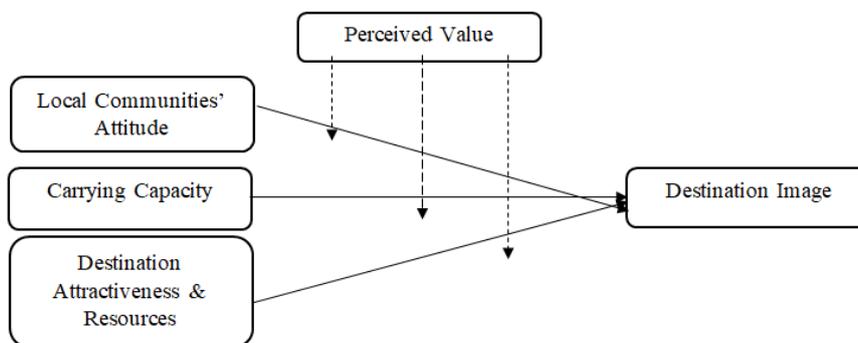


Figure 1. Research Model

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

To analyze the proposed model, WarpPLS 6.0 software was applied. As suggested by Hair et al. (2017), this study tested the model using a two-stage approach. The first stage tests the measuring model, which involves evaluating the validity and reliability of the measuring components. The second stage involves the evaluation of the structural model, which enables assessment of the proposed relationships between the measurable constructs.

**Assessment of the measurement model**

The measurement model was examined by assessing the individual item reliability, construct reliability, convergent reliability and discriminant validity as all constructs in this study are modelled as reflective (Henseler et al., 2016). As shown in Table 1, all the factor loadings exceeded the minimum cut off point of 0.50 (Gefen et al., 2000), which thus signified the internal consistency as to be achieved.

Table 1. Summary of Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	No of Items	Items Deleted	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR	Cronbach’s Alpha
Local Communities Attitude	4	1	LCA_1	0.852	0.653	0.849	0.731
			LCA_2	0.844			
			LCA_4	0.722			
Carrying Capacity	4	1	CC_2	0.817	0.565	0.795	0.611
			CC_3	0.771			
			CC_4	0.658			
Destination Attractiveness & Resources	4	0	SQ_DRA_1	0.725	0.656	0.883	0.822
			SQ_DRA_2	0.865			
			SQ_DRA_3	0.879			
			SQ_DRA_4	0.760			
Perceived Values	4	0	Values_1	0.832	0.643	0.878	0.814
			Values_2	0.822			
			Values_3	0.819			
			Values_4	0.730			
Destination Image	5	0	DI_1	0.724	0.555	0.862	0.799
			DI_2	0.778			
			DI_3	0.752			
			DI_4	0.770			
			DI_5	0.669			

According to Sarstedt et al., (2014), construct reliability is considered adequate if the composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s alpha values of the constructs are between 0.70 and 0.95. The average variances extracted (AVE) should be more than 0.50 for adequate convergent validity. As presented in Table 1, all AVE values exceeded this threshold (Chin, 1998; Hair et al., 2014). Lastly, the discriminant validity was tested by using Fornell-Larcker criterion, in which the square root of AVE must be significantly greater than the variance shared between the construct and other constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table 2 shows that all constructs have met the requirements of discriminant validity.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity of Constructs of HTMT of Measurement Model

	Local Communities’ Attitudes	Carrying Capacity	Attractiveness & Resources	Perceived Value	Destination Image
Local Communities’ Attitudes	<b>0.808</b>				
Carrying Capacity	0.348	<b>0.752</b>			
Attractiveness & Resources	0.513	0.544	<b>0.810</b>		
Perceived Values	0.578	0.515	0.658	<b>0.802</b>	
Destination Image	0.446	0.537	0.543	0.599	<b>0.745</b>

**Assessment of the structural model**

The structural model was assessed based on the significance of the structural path coefficients, the R<sup>2</sup> values, the effect size of f<sup>2</sup> and the collinearity. Table 3 and Figure 2 display the results. Out of six hypotheses, four hypotheses were supported. There are three direct relationships supported namely, local communities’ attitudes, carrying capacity and destination attractiveness & resources, and one moderating effects relationship was supported. Specifically, the results of the statistical analysis support Hypothesis 1 (β = 0.204, p < 0.005), Hypothesis 2 (β = 0.364, p < 0.001), Hypothesis 3 (β = 0.149, p < 0.032), Hypothesis 6 (β = 0.162, p < 0.022). In addition, the result shows that destination image (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.372) has weak value (Hair et al., 2017). On top of that, the variation inflation factor (VIF) values were obtained to test multicollinearity issue among the constructs. The results in Table 3 indicate that multicollinearity is not a concern in this study, as all VIF values are below the threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2011).

Table 3. Summary of Path Coefficients and Hypotheses Testing (Include T-Values, Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals)

Hypotheses	Relationship	β	Std. Error	p-value	VIF	f <sup>2</sup>	Decision
<b>Direct Relationships</b>							
H1	LCA->DI	0.204	0.079	0.005	1.663	0.093	Supported
H2	CC->DI	0.364	0.076	<0.001	1.651	0.198	Supported
H3	SQ_DRA->DI	0.149	0.080	0.032	2.486	0.081	Supported
<b>Moderating Effects of Perceived Values</b>							
H4	Values*LCA->DI	0.108	0.081	0.091	1.656	0.043	Not Supported
H5	Values*CC->DI	-0.265	0.078	<0.001	1.868	0.112	Not Supported
H6	Values*SQ_DRA->DI	0.162	0.080	0.022	2.459	0.069	Supported

Note: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01; LCA represents local communities’ attitudes, CC represents carrying capacity, SQ\_DRA represents destination attractiveness & resources, Values represents perceived values and DI represents destination image

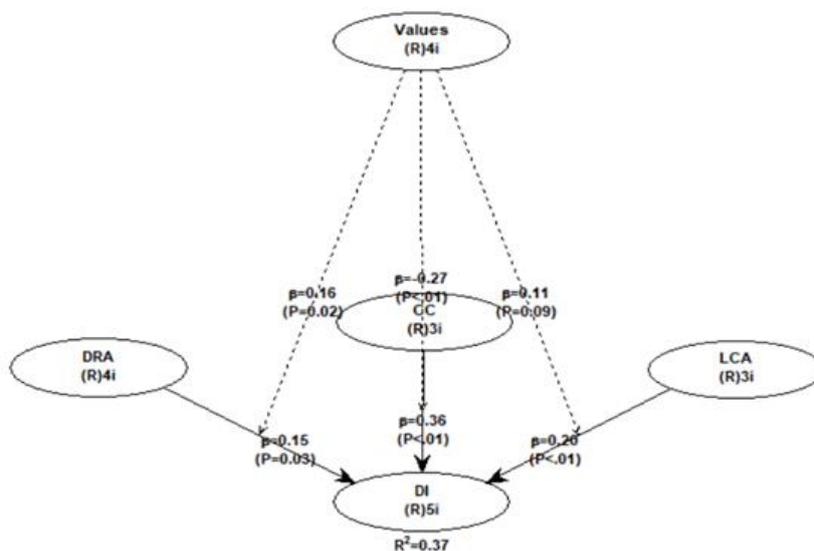


Figure 2. Results of Path Analysis

This study aims to examine the tourist’s perceived value as a moderating role and destination image of Bako National Park, Sarawak as a tourist destination. Past studies have demonstrated that destination image is an important variable in the evaluations by tourists with respect to their travel experience and has an impact on their satisfaction (Toudert and Bringas-Rábago, 2016; Wang et al., 2017). In addition, the perceived value of tourists is seen as benefits of expected consumption.

Therefore, the perception of the tourists on the attributes of the destination and destination attractiveness will interact to shape the overall image of the destination (Susilowati and Sugandini, 2018). This study has adopted three independent variables, namely, local communities’ attitudes, carrying capacity and destination attractiveness and resources, with perceived value as the moderator and destination image as the dependent variable. In summary, out of six tested hypotheses, four hypotheses were found to be supported.

As predicted, the empirical results showed that local communities’ attitudes have had a significant impact on destination image, and thus supporting H1. Local communities have a better understanding of the destination politically and economically, instead of receiving unilateral information from the media (Isaac and Eid, 2019). Previous research by Mai et al., (2019) has proven that local community contributes to

shape destination image by direct contact with tourists and help to enhance the attractiveness of the destination. Additionally, the results of this study indicated that carrying capacity has a positive impact on the destination image, indicating that H2 is supported. Carrying capacity is regarded as a way of providing sustainable management to a destination and is a crucial value to the conservation of vulnerable area such as national parks, protected area and heritage sites (Andrade, 2018). This is supported by past study (Andrade, 2018) that the carrying capacity of a destination will influence both destination image and tourist's revisit intention. Moreover, Reitsamer et al. (2016) indicated that attractiveness of destination is important for image formation and memorability of the destination experience. As such, the destination's popularity highly depends on its perceived prestige (Ram et al., 2016) as well as exclusive experiences that go beyond purchasing goods or services. This, therefore, underlines that intrapersonal authenticity has a positive influence on the image of the destination. In short, this indicated that tourist satisfaction will influence the attractiveness of the destination and in turn bring a positive image towards the destination.

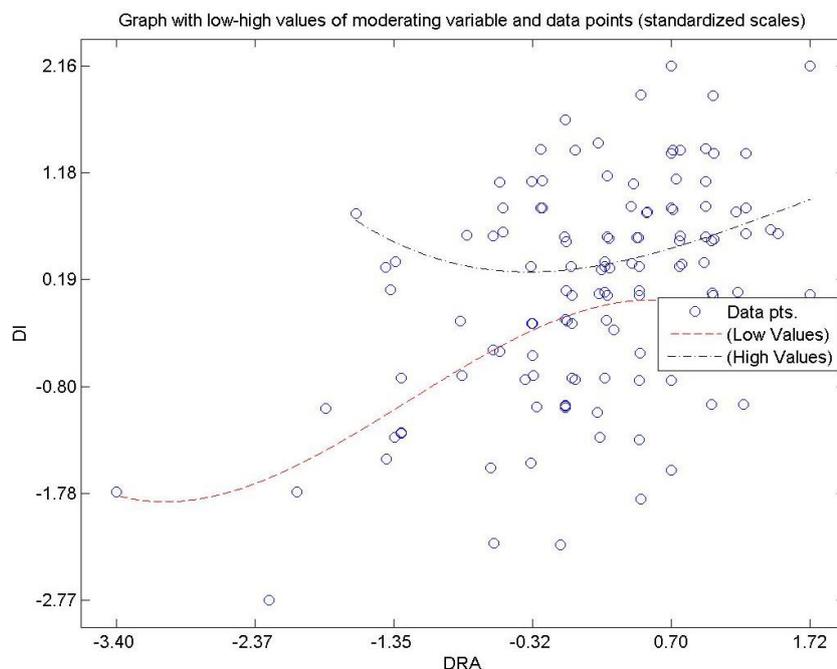


Figure 3. The Moderating Effect of Perceived Value on the Relationship between Destination Attractiveness and Resources and Destination Image

The statistical results further revealed that perceived value moderated the relationship between destination attractiveness and resources and destination image, thus supporting H6. Figure 3 showed the low-high values of the moderating effect of perceived value on the relationship between destination attractiveness and resources and destination image. The results indicated that the relationship between destination attractiveness and resources and tourism destination image is stronger when tourist perceived value is higher. According to Mura (2015), an exceptional resource and attractiveness of a destination may trigger a tourist's sensory stimulation that leads to the deepest perceived experiences of existential genuineness. The destination attraction contributes to tourist's perceptible value by engaging in adventurous activities (Ram et al., 2016; Jiang et al., 2016). Therefore, destination attractiveness and resources through moderation support from tourist perceived value bring positive influences and image on the destination. On the other hand, the statistical results have also indicated that perceived value had no influence on the relationship between local communities' attitude and carrying capacity of tourism destination image, thus H4 and H5 are not supported. Plausible justification can be due to the tourists' themselves might think that the local community is not able to provide better and reliable information of their perceived destination and has no effect of giving positivity image towards the destination. Besides, tourists may think of the opinion that Bako National Park provides value as perceived by tourists in return. It can be concluded that this destination has fulfilled the demand of visitors and provides value experienced by tourists during their visits.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this study provides empirical evidence for the influence of local communities' attitudes, carrying capacity and destination attractiveness and resources on tourism destination image from tourist perception. In addition, perceived value is confirmed as a moderator moderating the relationship between destination attractiveness and resources and destination image. Both theoretical and practical implications and recommendations for future research are further discussed in this section.

From the theoretical implications, this study provided a comprehensive investigation into whether each antecedent such as local communities' attitudes, carrying capacity and destination attractiveness and resources as well as moderating variable, the perceived value on a sample of tourists at Bako National Park have substantiated the hypotheses in this study. From a practical point of view, the outcome of this study provides valuable information to tourism stakeholders and tourism planners about the importance of local communities' attitudes, carrying capacity and destination attractiveness and resources in the development of destination image. Therefore, tourism stakeholders, business operators, and tourism planners can focus on the prominence on these antecedents for effective implementation and development of ecotourism.

Nonetheless, there is some limitation that needs to be acknowledged. A tourism destination needs to maintain its positivity image of the destination to stay competitive and sustainable. Therefore, this research model may highlight other characteristics that could assist in building a stronger quantitative measure for destination image. In addition, it is possible not solely focusing on the view of the demand-side but also the perception view for the supply side. A wider concept and comprehensible perspective from different respondents such as tourism players should be integrated to get more accurate and precise results. For future studies, it is suggested to examine on tourist travel satisfaction and focus on more protected areas. Moreover, this study employed perceived value as the moderating variable to examine the relationship among the constructs. Future research may consider adopting another potential moderator variable and to test the framework.

**Acknowledgement**

The funding for this project was made possible through the research grant [UHSB/B-AM2018/093] obtained from Sarawak Multimedia Authority and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.

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