

## An Empirical Study on Customer Retention: A Case Study of Melaka Tourism Industry

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**Abstract:** Customer retention has been emphasized as a significant subject of study in the competitive landscape of tourism destinations. Melaka is among the most frequented sites in Malaysia by both local and foreign tourists. It features a combination of heritage attractions that reflect its designation as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. This study examines the determinants of customer retention in Melaka empirically. Questionnaires were employed to gather pertinent information from the tourists to know the factors affecting their repeat visitation to Melaka. The objective of the study is to examine the relationship between Destination Attributes, Motive, Cost, and Promotion Strategy related to customer retention in Melaka. The results indicate that Destination Attributes, Motive, and Cost have a positive relationship to customer retention meanwhile Promotion strategy was not related to customer retention empirically. The findings of this study suggested that "cost" was the primary factor influencing customer retention in Melaka. In conclusion, first-time and returning tourists possess distinct expectations yet exhibit comparable pleasure about the aspects of heritage attractions in the Heritage City of Melaka. Future researchers are advised to explore additional factors such as service quality and attraction management to increase the scope of the study. Expanding the sample size would also provide more robust insights, allowing for a broader generalization of findings. By refining the research design, future studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of customer retention in the tourism sector.

**Keywords:** *Customer retention, Tourism industry, Customer satisfaction, Customer loyalty & Revisit*

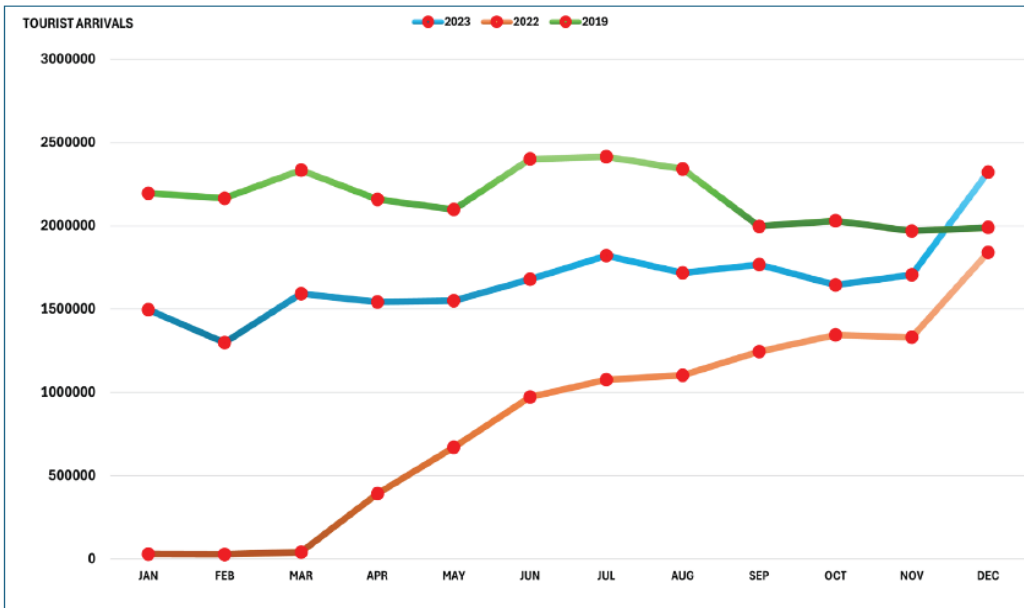
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### 1. Introduction

Malaysia's domestic tourism performance in 2023 has been remarkably robust, with domestic visitor arrivals reaching 213.7 million, marking a 24.6 percent increase from 171.6 million in the previous year. Moreover, domestic tourism revenue saw a 32.5 percent surge, totaling RM84.9 billion, highlighting the positive effects of the full resumption of economic activities. The social and demographic profile of domestic tourists revealed that nine states in Malaysia including Johor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Pulau Pinang, Selangor, and the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan, and Putrajaya, predominantly attracted visitors from households with monthly incomes between RM5,001 and RM10,000. (Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 2024). The tourism sector is among the greatest sectors globally. In the expanding domestic tourist industry, the creation of diverse new locations, characterized by superior infrastructure and aesthetic appeal, secures a competitive advantage through repeated visits.

The robust performance of the tourism sector has fueled economic growth and generated employment opportunities in various regions worldwide. Consequently, countries that rely on tourism should formulate policies that promote sustainable tourism growth by enhancing tourism products, and facilities, and developing human resources. (Zainal et al., 2021). As a result, many of these countries have adopted tourism as a strategy for the eradication of poverty. In numerous notable results, well-managed tourism enterprises have directly benefited the poor by providing employment opportunities (Breugel, 2013; Zaimah, Er, Sarmila, Habibah, Hamzah, Nurain & Nadiah, 2016).

The tourism industry in Melaka, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is influenced by various factors that contribute to customer retention. Understanding these factors is essential for developing effective marketing strategies and enhancing the overall tourist experience. Melaka recorded 5.12 million tourists arriving between January and April 2024, in conjunction with the Visit Melaka Year 2024 (BERNAMA, 2024a). At the end of the third quarter year 2024, the tourist arrival in Melaka reached nearly 10 million visitors surpassing the target of 8.7 million for Visit Melaka Year 2024 (BERNAMA, 2024b).



Source: Strategic Planning Division, Tourism Malaysia with the cooperation of the Immigration Department, Malaysia

Melaka has been selected as the research location owing to its status as a premier tourist destination in Malaysia. (Ferdous Alam *et al.*, 2015; Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 2024). Melaka encounters rivalry regarding visitor arrivals from other UNESCO-recognized places, including Myanmar, Cambodia, and Indonesia (Tung, Noor & Azila, 2016). The study primarily targets tourists in Melaka, since they significantly contribute to the overall number of tourist arrivals (Tourism Melaka, 2023).

This study focuses on the significance of various factors influencing tourist satisfaction and their likelihood of revisiting. It examines the impact of environmental quality, destination attractiveness, accessibility, and facilities on tourists' satisfaction and intentions to return. Melaka serves as the research setting, with visitors to this destination being selected as the respondents. The findings of this study give better knowledge about the determinants of customer retention in the tourism industry in Melaka. This study explores four constructs, i.e. destination attributes, motive, cost, and promotion strategy.

## 2. Literature Review

In this study, the researcher develops a theoretical framework based on an integrated independent construct, which provides a more suitable conceptual model for explaining customer retention. Various factors can influence customer retention in Melaka's tourism industry. To better understand these influencing factors and examine the determinants of customer retention, this study focuses on four key constructs: destination attributes, motives, costs, and promotional strategies.

From a marketing perspective, customer retention refers to maintaining long-term relationships with customers. Identifying customers who show signs of potentially ending their relationship with a company enables timely intervention to address their concerns and encourage continued loyalty (Peelen, 2005). Customer retention occurs when customers purchase a product or service again and again (Getz and Thomas, 2001). Developing customer retention strategies requires managers to set clear priorities and make informed strategic decisions. Their role involves identifying key focus areas and implementing actions to enhance customer loyalty and satisfaction (Cravens *et al.*, 1996), emphasizing that the organization's customer base represents a vital strategic resource (Schmittlein, 1995). According to Ramakrishnan (2006), customer retention is a critical factor in achieving strong business performance, as it directly influences profitability,

operational efficiencies through economies of scale, and other elements essential for sustaining a competitive edge. Research suggests that the cost of acquiring a new customer is significantly higher—ranging from five to 25 times—than the cost of retaining an existing one. Additionally, increasing customer retention by just 5% can result in a profitability boost of 25% to 95%, as loyal customers tend to make repeat purchases and contribute to long-term revenue stability (Mittal & Lasser, 1998; Gallo, 2014). As businesses face rising competition and increasing costs to attract new customers, they are prioritizing customer retention as a key strategic focus. Effective retention efforts enable companies to meet their goals more efficiently while optimizing costs. The research underscores that acquiring a new customer can cost five to 25 times more than retaining an existing one, and even a modest 5% increase in retention rates can boost profits by 25% to 95% due to factors like repeat purchases and greater lifetime value (Gallo, 2014; Experian Annual Report, 2023). Stewart (1996) highlighted that heightened competition and the demand for sustained growth necessitate a strong emphasis on retaining existing customers as a primary objective for service managers. More recently, customer retention strategies have expanded to include leveraging data analytics, enhancing customer experiences, and fostering loyalty programs to create a more cost-effective and sustainable competitive advantage.

According to Jones et al. (2002), customers are more likely to continue using a service if they are happy with the quality of the items and services offered. Customer retention is one of the most essential criteria for increasing the competitiveness of the tourism industry. This needs to be taken seriously. According to Deng (2013), tourists who have a strong desire to visit again are more likely to share pleasant experiences with friends and family via word-of-mouth referrals. Retaining such clients is a cost-effective method for generating future market growth. Loyal consumers frequently promote the company on social media, boosting its reputation and recruiting new clients through positive recommendations (Santouridis & Trivellas, 2010; Gallo, 2014). This supports the dual benefits of keeping customers: it reduces acquisition expenses and creates natural marketing opportunities that expand the brand's audience.

Delivering high-quality services effectively and efficiently is a key factor in determining customer happiness, which in turn increases customer retention (Nischal, 2015). High-quality service delivery has a direct correlation with customer satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Therefore, to get a high level of client retention, service organizations must continue to provide exceptional service quality at every stage of customer interactions.

### **Destination Attributes**

Conceptually, Destination qualities are best defined by the tourist's perceived appeal as a cognitive appraisal of the attitude structural model. Different visitors may have varying judgments of a destination's attractiveness due to differences in culture, age, experience, marital status, and financial position (Bowie and Chang, 2005). A destination characteristic has a significant impact on tourists' destination selection decisions. According to Klenosky (2002), a location's features become more visible and contribute to the destination when viewed by tourists, influencing their decision to go or avoid. Thus, the attractiveness of destination attributes could influence the tourist a destination selection. According to Ferdous et al. (2015), 15 important elements influence how satisfied travellers are with a place. These consist of distinctive architectural and artistic features, rich greenery, and the beauty of nature. Religious attractions, historical landmarks, and ancient ruins all contribute significantly to a destination's allure. Practical factors that were emphasized included leisure activities at night, good lodging, and the easy physical distance or travel time to the location. Overall happiness is also influenced by the accessibility of local tour guides, the kind demeanor of the locals, and necessary facilities like ATMs, banks, and utilities (water, electricity, and sewage). Reasonably priced hotels and transportation are also valued by tourists, making them essential components of a satisfying trip. This extensive collection of characteristics captures the variety of factors that influence how a visitor views and enjoys a place.

Mostafavi Shirazi and Mat Som (2010) have identified repeat visits as a sign of commitment to a tourist location that is significantly influenced by destination features. Furthermore, a variety of attractions has been identified in their study as one of the prerequisites for explaining return visits. The association between image and destination loyalty has therefore been the subject of several research (Rittchainuwat et al., 2001; Ross 1993; Tasci and Gartner, 2007; Wang et al., 2011).

### **Motive**

Physical and mental relaxation, trying new things, seeking excitement, visiting tourist sites, and enjoying natural resources were some of the reasons that Ahmad Puad et al. (2012) found to be the most common reasons or motives for intending to return to a place. Relaxation is one of the primary goals or motives that travellers hope to accomplish when they travel to another location for vacation (Ngoc and Trinh, 2015; Hassan and Shahnewaz, 2014; Al-Ababneh, 2013). Having a sense of belonging or being in the correct location might boost visitor satisfaction and encourage them to return (Yuksel et al., 2010). In addition, visitors can be pleased by thrilling experiences (Banki et al., 2014; Ragavan et al., 2014; Toyama and Yamada, 2012) since they can build good impact and memories (Huang et al., 2015; Asgari and Borzooei, 2013; Ballantyne et al., 2011), which will increase their contentment and want to return.

### Cost

Costs, which may be thought of as a mix of money, time, and effort, are frequently practical considerations affecting a customer's decision to visit a site (Lu et al., 2011). Cost is a significant factor in determining perceived value, as noted by Deng (2013). Furthermore, pricing has a direct and indirect effect on consumer behavior, with opinions about price justice having a big impact on whether or not a customer plans to return. This, in turn, is essential for promoting client retention and loyalty. Destinations may improve perceived value and increase tourist attraction by addressing these cost-related variables.

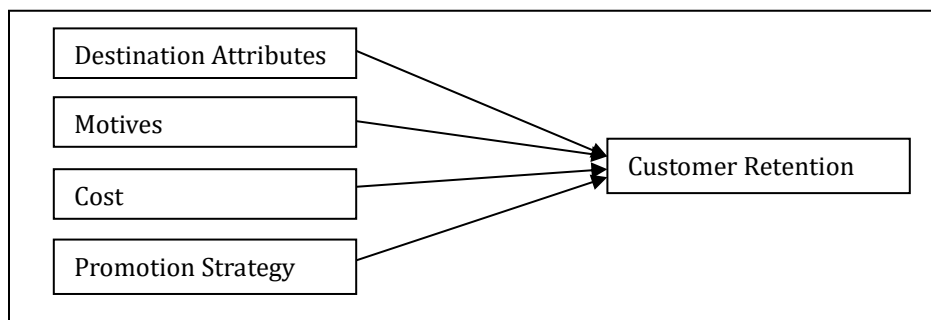
### Promotion Strategy

To provide pertinent information to target visitors and encourage positive behaviors, such as making a reservation or paying for a service, promotions are an essential activity for organizations that run tourist attractions (Dick et al. 1996). Location marketers employ strategic promotion, similar to consumer product marketing, to craft persuasive messaging to encourage travellers to select their location (Chen & Sambath, 2013). Promotional tactics affect future traveller behaviors, such as referrals and return trips, after the original decision-making stage. It is frequently less expensive to retain existing tourists with focused marketing than to draw in new ones. Because they understand the long-term advantages of developing enduring connections with returning visitors, many attractions and destinations make repeat business a key component of their marketing campaigns.

### Research Framework and Hypotheses Development

The discussion in this part addressed the research framework for this study. The elements being studied include destination attributes, motives, cost, and promotion strategy which are expected to have a favorable impact on customer retention. Thus, the study framework is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Research Framework



The following hypotheses were generated to guide this research:

- H1: There is a positive relationship between destination attributes and customer retention
- H2: There is a positive relationship between motives and customer retention
- H3: There is a positive relationship between cost and customer retention
- H4: There is a positive relationship between promotion strategy and customer retention

### 3. Research Methodology

This study uses a quantitative technique and a cross-sectional research design (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). To gather information on the underlying constructs suggested in the theoretical model, a self-administered questionnaire has been used. Since the data was gathered from the chosen respondents at a single point in time, the cross-sectional method is employed (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using these techniques might result in high-quality, accurate, and less biased data. The convenience sampling method is used to gather information from the respondents. The unit of analysis is the individual tourist. The sample size was determined using guidelines from Krejcie and Morgan (1970) to ensure a representative subset of the population for analysis. According to Krejcie and Morgan's table, the appropriate sample size would be 384 respondents as it is enough to represent the whole population. Data for this study is collected from the visitors or tourists using a questionnaire. In this study, the researcher distributed the questionnaires directly to randomly selected respondents who came to visit the state of Melaka. The researcher distributed about 384 questionnaires to the area of visitors or tourist attraction areas such as Portuguese St Paul's Church, Jonker Walk, Stadthuys, and Christ Church.

### Survey Instruments

The questionnaire consists of seven (7) sections. Section A contains demographic questions that relate to gender, age, marital status, annual income, education level, and occupation. Section B focused on the travel characteristics such as number of visits, purpose of visit, travel characteristics, source of information, type of accommodation, and tourism types. Further, Sections C, D, E, and F consist of items regarding destination attributes, motive, cost, and promotion strategy respectively. Finally, factors pertaining to the dependent variable—customer retention—are included in Section G. The respondents were asked to score the questions that look at the link between destination attribute, purpose, cost, and promotion approach to customer retention using a five-point Likert scale with the anchors of (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree." Using IBM SPSS software version 24, conventional multiple regression, univariate analysis, and descriptive statistics are the data analysis methods employed.

## 4. Results

**Table 1: Reliability Analysis of Each Variable**

Factors	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Strength
Customer Retention	3	0.717	Acceptable
Destination Attributes	19	0.933	Excellent
Motive	18	0.933	Excellent
Cost	13	0.924	Excellent
Promotion Strategy	9	0.916	Excellent

Table 1 indicates the reliability of variables based on Cronbach's Alpha, assessing the strength of association for each. Destination attributes and motive both show a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.933, indicating excellent reliability, while cost has a value of 0.924 and promotion strategy 0.916, both also demonstrating excellent strength of association. The dependent variable, customer retention, has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.717, reflecting an acceptable level of association. Overall, the results show that the variables—destination attributes, motive, cost, and promotion strategy—exhibit excellent reliability, and customer retention is reliable with an acceptable strength of association.

A demographic profile was collected to identify the characteristics of the respondents in terms of gender, age, marital status, annual income, education level, occupation, and nationality. The result shows the majority of the respondents were female about 57% and male, around 43%. As for the age group of tourists and visitors in Melaka shows that they were from the age group of 21 – 30 years old which is 60.9%, which is the largest number of respondents collected. Followed by 41 – 50 years old and below 20 years old about 14.8% and 12.2% respectively. The fourth highest is 31 – 40 years old which is 9.9%. Meanwhile, the least is 51 – 60 years old which is 1.3%, and lastly above 60 years old which is 0.8%. The majority of the respondents were single and the data shows around 75.5% of them. The highest annual income group is below RM 20,000 which consists of 63.0%. The second highest is from the group of RM 20,001 to RM 40,000 and the third is from the group of RM

40,001 to RM 60,000 which consists of 14.1% and 11.50% respectively. The fourth is the group of RM 60,001 to RM 80,000 which is 6.5% meanwhile the fifth is the group of RM 80,001 to RM 100,000 which is 2.6%. There are 2.3% of the respondents that earned annual income more than RM 100,001 and that means that the lowest is from the group of above RM 100,001. As for the educational level of the respondents, the highest educational level of the respondents is from bachelor's degree which consists of 36.2% of them. Followed by the diploma and secondary which about 33.1% and 20.8% respectively. In addition, the respondents who hold a master's degree were about 5.7% and the least is the doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) around 2.3%. The private sector employees who came as tourists or visitors were about 32.3%, the next was self-employed tourists around 10.2%, and for the government employees and professionals were 7.8% and 6.0% respectively, and others were students about 38.3% of them. Furthermore, there were also business owners (2.3%), housewives (1.6%), and retirees (1.3%) were among the visitors who came to Melaka as the destination of their choice.

The result for the frequency implies the number of visits by the respondents that have come to Melaka showing that about 37.8% visits more than 6th times. Followed by the 2nd times visits about 18.2%. Furthermore, the frequency for the 3rd time is slightly lower than the 2nd time which consists of 17.2%. In addition, the 4th time and the 5th time-frequency are 10.9% and 8.3% respectively. This showed Melaka has many things to offer to tourists as they are willing to revisit many times. The purpose of the visits was leisure around 56.5%. Second, the respondents were coming to Melaka to visit a friend or relative which consists of 18.5%. Others (15.9%) show high frequency compared to the business which is about 9.1%. As for the source of information, the highest frequency number is coming from their previous trip(s) which is 27.9%—followed by the internet which is 24.2%. Next, is word of mouth, which is around 22.1%, and lastly from the travel agencies 9.9% respectively. Meanwhile, information from travel guidebooks and tourist information centers share the same result of 1.8%, and the lowest is brochures which is about 1%.

**Table 2: Regression analysis**

Variable	Std. $\beta$	t.	Sig.
Destination attributes	-.243	-3.263	.001
Motives	.231	2.832	.005
Cost	.313	4.503	.000
Promotion Strategy	.039	.569	.570
<b>F-Stat</b>		16.624 (0.00)	
<b>R-squared</b>		0.149	

Based on the findings, the R-square is 0.149. Therefore, the result shows that 14.9% of customer retention can be explained by independent variables (destination attributes, motive, costs, and promotion strategy). Meanwhile the rest 85.1% can be explained by other factors that are not included in this research. The result in the table also indicates f-stat is 16.624 (sig < 0.00). Based on the findings of the multiple regression analysis above, the highest Beta ( $\beta$ ) value is cost with 0.313. That shows that cost (variable) is the most influential factor variable towards customer retention among all independent variables (destination attributes, motive, and promotion strategy) in this research.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter provides a summary of key findings, conclusions, and recommendations from the research conducted on factors influencing customer retention in the tourism industry of Melaka. The study aimed to identify the influence of variables such as destination attributes, motive, cost, and promotion strategy on customer retention. Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and regression analysis to determine the relationship between these independent variables and the dependent variable (customer retention).

The findings revealed that cost had the strongest correlation with customer retention (0.348), followed by motive (0.271), while promotion strategy (0.259) and destination attributes (0.134) showed weaker associations. However, multiple regression analysis indicated that all variables, including destination attributes, were significant in influencing customer retention. Although cost was the most significant factor, the study highlighted the importance of understanding visitor motives, as tourists tend to be selective about destinations that meet their personal or recreational goals.

Based on the results, the researcher recommends that local businesses in Melaka should focus on affordable pricing, ease of access, and cleanliness to maintain customer retention. Additionally, the rich diversity of local food in Melaka can be promoted internationally through food festivals. Improving the quality of tourist attractions, museums, and cultural spots with unique features and experiences and providing visually appealing settings for social media sharing could further enhance tourism.

Future researchers are advised to explore additional factors such as service quality and attraction management to increase the scope of the study. Expanding the sample size would also provide more robust insights, allowing for a broader generalization of findings. By refining the research design, future studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of customer retention in the tourism sector.

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