

Beyond Price Advantage: Shopping experience and value perception in a Malaysian duty-free island

Azila Azmi^{1*}, Hanani Ahmad Zubir², Mohd Faisal Abdul Wahab¹, Nensi Lapotulo³

**Corresponding Author*

¹ Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Permatang Pauh Campus, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

² Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Permatang Pauh Campus, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

³ Batam Tourism Polytechnic, Batam, Indonesia

azila.azmi@uitm.edu.my, hanani.az@uitm.edu.my, mohdfaisal@uitm.edu.my, nlapotulo@btp.ac.id
Tel: +60194887750

Abstract

Shopping tourism has become significant driver of destination competitiveness, particularly in duty-free island destinations where price advantage and experiential value intersect. This study explores the shopping behaviour and experiences of domestic tourists visiting Langkawi Island using a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews with fifteen tourists were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that affordability, product availability, and supporting facilities significantly influence shopping behaviour, while hedonic factors such as enjoyment and leisure integration enhance overall tourist satisfaction. The study highlights the importance of positioning shopping as a holistic tourism experience to strengthen destination appeal and competitiveness.

Keywords: Shopping tourism; Tourist experience; Value perception; Duty-free destination

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1.0 Introduction

Shopping tourism has evolved into a significant segment of the global tourism industry, becoming a key driver of destination attractiveness and tourist expenditure. Early studies indicated that tourists allocate considerable time and resources to shopping (Jansen-Verbeke, 1991; Timothy, 2005). Today, tourists are motivated not just by sightseeing but also by consumption-related activities that offer emotional and experiential value. This shift is part of the broader experience economy, where shopping is viewed as an experiential activity contributing to tourist satisfaction and destination branding strategies (Badu-Baiden et al., 2024; Ngwira et al., 2023). Recent tourism research further suggests that tourist experiences are increasingly shaped by emotional engagement, personal meaning, and value co-creation throughout the travel journey (Chen, 2025).

Beyond its experiential significance, shopping also contributes substantially to tourism expenditure and local economic development in many destinations. Tourists typically spend on souvenirs, luxury goods, and local products (Mihaylov, 2020). Shopping experiences fulfil functional needs while creating emotional attachments to destinations with robust retail environments. Duty-free destinations, in

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particular, attract tourists with tax-exempt products at competitive prices, enhancing their appeal. However, recent research indicates that economic incentives are not the sole drivers of shopping tourism; tourists increasingly seek emotional satisfaction and enjoyable retail experiences (Alhomaid & Bel Hadj, 2025). Consequently, shopping in duty-free contexts has evolved into multidimensional experiences, blending utilitarian and hedonic values. Langkawi Island is a prominent duty-free destination in Malaysia, recognized for its beaches and retail opportunities since being declared a duty-free island in 1987. Shopping is a primary attraction for domestic tourists, particularly for tax-exempt goods like chocolates and apparel. Despite the recognition of shopping tourism's significance, existing studies focus mainly on economic impacts and destination marketing, often overlooking tourists' experiential perceptions. Previous research emphasizes utilitarian aspects like affordability, neglecting the growing importance of experiential consumption and emotional engagement (Pujianto & Marwati, 2024). Contemporary literature highlights hedonic value, including enjoyment and emotional satisfaction, as crucial in shaping tourist behaviour and loyalty (Badu-Baiden et al., 2024).

Understanding the interaction between utilitarian and hedonic values is vital for grasping contemporary tourist behaviour. While utilitarian value may attract tourists, hedonic value enhances overall satisfaction and revisit intentions (Hwang & Kim, 2023). Although shopping tourism in Langkawi is recognized for its contribution to development, limited research examines how domestic tourists experience shopping in this context. Most studies emphasize utilitarian dimensions, leaving the experiential and emotional aspects underexplored. Thus, this study aims to investigate how the interplay of utilitarian and hedonic values shapes domestic tourists' shopping experiences, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions in Langkawi's duty-free retail context. By addressing this gap, the study contributes to a better understanding of shopping tourism experiences and their implications for destination competitiveness.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Shopping Tourism and the Experience Economy

Shopping tourism has significantly evolved due to changing tourist behaviour and the emergence of the experience economy. Traditionally viewed as a secondary activity, shopping has become a primary motivation influencing destination selection and tourist expenditure (Mihaylov, 2020). Jansen-Verbeke (1991) noted that shopping functions as both a recreational and tourism activity. Timothy (2005) argued that shopping enhances destination attractiveness through retail diversity and experiential engagement. The experience economy framework posits that consumers seek memorable experiences rather than merely functional products. In tourism, experiences are co-created through interactions among tourists, destinations, and retail environments. Consequently, shopping tourism encompasses emotional engagement and symbolic meaning, with tourists valuing environments that offer sensory stimulation and leisure integration.

Recent studies highlight that shopping experiences significantly impact destination image, tourist satisfaction, and revisit intentions (Badu-Baiden et al., 2024). However, research has mainly focused on urban retail destinations and international markets, leaving a gap in understanding duty-free island destinations like Langkawi. While shopping contributes to tourism experiences, the motivations of tourists in duty-free contexts remain unclear. Nevertheless, experiential consumption is increasingly recognized as vital for enhancing destination competitiveness, as tourists seek immersive retail experiences integrated with leisure activities (Ngwira et al., 2023). Shopping tourism not only drives economic outcomes but also enriches emotional and psychological dimensions of tourism experiences, as supported by qualitative research emphasizing experiential, cultural, and destination-specific elements (Buzlukçu et al., 2026).

2.2 Utilitarian and Hedonic Value

Consumer value perception significantly influences purchasing behaviour and tourist satisfaction. This concept is typically divided into utilitarian and hedonic dimensions (Adi et al., 2024). Utilitarian value encompasses rational benefits like convenience and affordability, critical in duty-free contexts where tax exemptions attract tourists. Research indicates that price remains a strong motivator for tourist purchases (Pujianto & Marwati, 2024). In contrast, hedonic value reflects emotional and experiential benefits, including enjoyment and relaxation. Tourists increasingly seek experiential consumption that offers emotional fulfilment (Badu-Baiden et al., 2024). Shopping environments with appealing designs and enjoyable atmospheres foster positive perceptions.

Current studies show that both utilitarian and hedonic values influence tourist satisfaction and behavioural intentions, but findings are inconclusive regarding which has a greater impact. Some research emphasizes affordability, while others highlight the significance of enjoyment and emotional engagement. This suggests that the interaction between these values is not well understood, particularly in duty-free destinations. Utilitarian value may drive initial attraction, while hedonic value fosters destination attachment and loyalty. Thus, shopping behaviour cannot be explained solely through economic lenses. Additionally, the concept of value co-creation highlights that tourists actively shape their experiences through interactions with destinations and retail environments (Alhomaid & Bel Hadj, 2025), reinforcing the multifaceted nature of shopping tourism experiences.

2.3 Duty-Free Shopping and Destination Competitiveness

Duty-free shopping destinations enjoy unique competitive advantages by offering tax-exempt products at lower prices. Historically, duty-free tourism was linked to utilitarian motivations, but recent trends reveal that experiential dimensions increasingly influence shopping behaviour. Destination competitiveness relates to a destination's ability to attract tourists and provide satisfying experiences. In shopping tourism, competitiveness is influenced by pricing, service quality, retail environments, and experiential engagement (Ngwira et al., 2023). Although studies suggest tourists prefer destinations with integrated leisure and shopping experiences, the literature often focuses on economic and marketing perspectives, neglecting tourists' experiential perceptions.

Within the ASEAN region, shopping tourism is vital for destination competitiveness, with places like Bangkok, Singapore, and Langkawi positioning shopping as a key component of their tourism offerings. Shopping malls and duty-free outlets serve as attractions,

contributing to local economic development and sustainability through retail-driven activities (Azmi et al., 2025). However, there is limited understanding of domestic tourists' perceptions and experiences in duty-free island contexts. Thus, this study is guided by concepts of shopping tourism, utilitarian and hedonic value, tourist satisfaction, behavioural intention, and destination competitiveness, informing the interview protocol and analytical lens for examining participants' shopping experiences in Langkawi.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the shopping experiences and value perceptions of domestic tourists visiting Langkawi Island. Qualitative methods are well-suited for understanding subjective meanings and emotions related to tourism experiences (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The study aimed to investigate tourists' experiential perceptions and emotional engagement, making qualitative approaches appropriate for generating in-depth insights. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with fifteen domestic tourists at Kuala Perlis and Kuala Kedah jetties, serving as key gateways to Langkawi. A purposive sampling approach ensured participants had relevant shopping experiences.

The interview protocol focused on themes such as shopping motivations, product preferences, perceptions of affordability, experiential aspects of shopping, and overall satisfaction. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes emerged. Thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2021) approach, involving familiarization with data, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation. The researcher maintained reflective notes to support interpretation and ensure transparency in theme development. Table 1 presents the main themes identified from the thematic analysis and evidence derived from participants' interview responses.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Supporting Evidence

Theme	Key Findings	Example Quote
Shopping Behaviour and Product Preferences	Tourists were attracted by product variety and lower prices, particularly chocolates, apparel, fragrances, and kitchenware.	"Shopping is one of the main reasons we visit Langkawi because many products are cheaper compared to the mainland." (P4)
Utilitarian Value and Functional Benefits	Affordability, convenience, accessibility, and product availability influenced shopping satisfaction.	"Most shopping places are easy to access and close to tourist attractions." (P7)
Hedonic Value and Experiential Shopping	Shopping was perceived as enjoyable, relaxing, and integrated with family holidays and leisure activities.	"Shopping in Langkawi feels more relaxing because the environment is different from shopping in the city." (P2)
Shopping Tourism and Destination Competitiveness	Positive shopping experiences contributed to satisfaction, revisit intention, and destination attractiveness.	"I would definitely revisit Langkawi because shopping here is enjoyable and convenient." (P6)

(Source: Semi-structured interviews data)

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Participants Profile

Table 2. Participants Profile for the Study

Participant Code	Gender	Age Group	Occupation	Visit Frequency to Langkawi
P1	Female	25–34	Private Sector	Repeat Visitor
P2	Male	35–44	Government Officer	Repeat Visitor
P3	Female	25–34	Entrepreneur	First-time Visitor
P4	Male	35–44	Private Sector	Repeat Visitor
P5	Female	45–54	Teacher	Repeat Visitor
P6	Male	25–34	Private Sector	First-time Visitor
P7	Female	35–44	Government Officer	Repeat Visitor
P8	Male	25–34	Entrepreneur	Repeat Visitor
P9	Female	18–24	Student	First-time Visitor
P10	Male	45–54	Business Owner	Repeat Visitor
P11	Female	35–44	Private Sector	Repeat Visitor
P12	Male	25–34	Engineer	First-time Visitor
P13	Female	35–44	Teacher	Repeat Visitor
P14	Male	55 and above	Retiree	Repeat Visitor
P15	Female	25–34	Government Officer	First-time Visitor

(Source: Participant demographic information)

As shown in Table 2, the participants consisted of fifteen domestic tourists with diverse demographic backgrounds, including government officers, private sector employees, entrepreneurs, teachers, students, and retirees. Both first-time and repeat visitors were represented in the sample, providing a range of perspectives regarding shopping experiences in Langkawi Island. The diversity of participants enhanced the richness of the data and enabled a broader understanding of shopping behaviour and value perceptions within a duty-free destination context.

4.2 Shopping Behaviour and Product Preferences

This theme emerged from recurring references to product purchases, price comparisons, and shopping motivations across the majority of interviews. Participants consistently associated Langkawi's shopping appeal with the availability of duty-free products and perceived price advantages. The findings reveal that domestic tourists primarily purchased chocolates, apparel, fragrances, kitchenware, luggage, and household items during their visits to Langkawi Island. Chocolates emerged as the most frequently purchased product due to their affordability and wide product variety. Many participants perceived chocolates as iconic duty-free products associated with Langkawi Island. One participant stated, *"When people come to Langkawi, chocolates are definitely a must-buy because there are many choices and the prices are much cheaper."* (Participant 9). Participants consistently described Langkawi as a "shopping heaven" due to the availability of duty-free goods at significantly lower prices compared to mainland Malaysia. Tourists frequently compared product prices between Langkawi and mainland retail stores, emphasising affordability as a key attraction factor. This finding reflects earlier shopping tourism studies suggesting that affordability and retail diversity remain key drivers of destination attractiveness within duty-free tourism contexts (Jansen-Verbeke, 1991; Timothy, 2005). Another participant explained, *"Shopping is one of the main reasons we visit Langkawi because many products are cheaper compared to the mainland."* (Participant 4).

These findings align with previous studies indicating that utilitarian value strongly influences shopping tourism behaviour within duty-free destinations (Adi et al., 2024). Product affordability and accessibility remain important motivations shaping tourist purchasing decisions. Similar findings were highlighted by Timothy (2005), who argued that retail diversity and affordability contribute significantly to destination attractiveness. The findings also suggest that shopping behaviour among domestic tourists is influenced by social and family-oriented motivations. Many participants travelled with family members and purchased products not only for personal use but also as gifts and souvenirs. This indicates that shopping tourism activities involve social interaction and symbolic consumption beyond individual purchasing behaviour. Similar observations were highlighted by Mihaylov (2020), who argued that shopping tourism increasingly involves experiential and symbolic consumption associated with travel experiences.

4.3 Utilitarian Value and Functional Benefits

Utilitarian value emerged strongly throughout the interviews. Tourists highlighted affordability, convenience, accessibility, and product variety as key factors influencing shopping behaviour. The availability of multiple shopping complexes and duty-free outlets further enhanced shopping convenience. Participants also appreciated the accessibility of shopping areas, particularly locations such as Pekan Kuah and Pantai Cenang. Easy transportation access, parking facilities, and retail clustering contributed positively to shopping experiences. One participant noted, *"Most shopping places are easy to access and close to tourist attractions, so it is convenient for us to shop while travelling around the island."* (Participant 6). Participants also noted that shopping outlets were conveniently located near tourism attractions, accommodation areas, and transportation hubs, enabling tourists to combine shopping activities with sightseeing and leisure experiences.

This finding supports previous studies suggesting that functional value significantly influences consumer satisfaction within tourism retail environments (Pujianto & Marwati, 2024). Duty-free destinations continue to attract tourists primarily due to economic advantages associated with lower prices and wider product accessibility. The utilitarian dimension, therefore, remains an essential component of shopping tourism competitiveness. Previous studies similarly emphasised that functional value, including convenience, efficiency, and affordability, significantly influences tourist satisfaction within retail tourism environments (Adi et al., 2024). Several participants also highlighted the importance of product variety and product availability. Tourists appreciated the ability to purchase imported goods and premium products unavailable in smaller mainland retail stores. One participant shared, *"Some imported products are easier to find here and the prices are more affordable compared to my hometown."* (Participant 11). The availability of branded goods at lower prices enhanced perceived value and purchasing satisfaction. This supports earlier studies indicating that product accessibility and perceived value positively influence tourists' purchasing behaviour in duty-free destinations (Pujianto & Marwati, 2024). However, some participants indicated minor concerns regarding overcrowding during peak tourism periods and inconsistent product availability in selected retail outlets. Although these issues did not significantly affect overall satisfaction, they suggest the need for tourism stakeholders to improve retail management and customer flow within shopping areas.

4.4 Hedonic Value and Experiential Shopping

Although affordability remained important, participants frequently emphasised emotional and experiential aspects associated with shopping activities. Tourists described shopping experiences as enjoyable, exciting, relaxing, and memorable. One participant mentioned, *"Shopping in Langkawi feels more relaxing because the environment is different from shopping in the city."* (Participant 2). Many participants perceived shopping in Langkawi as part of a holiday experience rather than purely transactional consumption. Participants also highlighted the integration of shopping with leisure activities such as sightseeing, beach visits, family outings, and dining experiences. This finding aligns with the experience economy perspective, where tourism experiences are increasingly shaped through emotional engagement and leisure integration (Ngwira, 2023; Badu-Baiden et al., 2024). Another participant explained, *"We enjoy shopping while spending time with family and visiting tourist attractions. It feels like part of the holiday experience."* (Participant 13).

This finding reinforces previous tourism studies indicating that hedonic value significantly contributes to tourist satisfaction and emotional attachment (Badu-Baiden et al., 2024). Emotional engagement and experiential enjoyment play important roles in shaping overall destination experiences. Several participants also associated shopping experiences with emotional satisfaction and stress relief. Shopping activities were described as enjoyable family bonding experiences and opportunities for relaxation during holidays. This suggests that shopping tourism in Langkawi extends beyond purchasing behaviour into experiential and emotional dimensions. Similar findings were discussed by Alhomaid and Bel Hadj (2025), who highlighted the importance of value co-creation and emotional

engagement in shaping tourism experiences. The aesthetic and environmental qualities of shopping areas also influenced tourist experiences. Participants appreciated clean retail environments, organised shopping layouts, and friendly customer service. These experiential factors contributed positively to tourists' emotional responses and overall satisfaction levels.

4.5 Shopping Tourism and Destination Competitiveness

The findings suggest that shopping tourism contributes significantly to destination competitiveness through the integration of utilitarian and hedonic value dimensions. While affordability initially attracts tourists, experiential factors sustain satisfaction and encourage revisit intention. One participant stated, *"I would definitely revisit Langkawi because shopping here is enjoyable, convenient, and suitable for family trips."* (Participant 7). Three key dimensions influencing shopping tourism behaviour were identified: product availability, price attractiveness, and supporting facilities and services. These dimensions collectively shape tourists' value perception and overall destination evaluation. Previous tourism studies similarly emphasised that both utilitarian and hedonic dimensions contribute significantly to destination competitiveness and behavioural intention (Ngwira, 2023). Product availability and price attractiveness represent utilitarian dimensions, while supporting facilities and experiential engagement contribute to hedonic value creation.

The findings suggest that tourism stakeholders should position shopping not merely as a transactional activity but as a holistic tourism experience. From a managerial perspective, destination marketers and retail operators should enhance experiential retail environments through improved service quality, leisure integration, and destination atmosphere. Enhancing emotional engagement may strengthen tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness. The findings also indicate that experiential retail environments contribute positively to destination branding. Shopping experiences influence how tourists perceive Langkawi as a tourism destination and shape emotional attachment towards the island. Positive shopping experiences, consequently, contribute to stronger destination image and tourist loyalty. This finding supports previous shopping tourism literature suggesting that experiential retail environments enhance destination attachment and revisit intention (Timothy, 2005; Badu-Baiden et al., 2024). Additionally, shopping tourism contributes to local tourism economies through tourist expenditure and retail-driven activities. The continued development of shopping tourism may, therefore, support broader tourism sustainability and local economic growth. However, maintaining destination competitiveness requires balancing affordability with experiential quality to meet evolving tourist expectations.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study explored the shopping behaviour and experiential perceptions of domestic tourists visiting Langkawi Island within a duty-free destination context. The findings demonstrate that shopping tourism extends beyond price-oriented motivations, encompassing both utilitarian and hedonic dimensions that shape tourist satisfaction and behavioural intention. While affordability, product accessibility, and retail variety remain important motivations, enjoyment, emotional engagement, and the integration of shopping with leisure experiences also play significant roles in influencing tourists' perceptions. These findings suggest that shopping activities in Langkawi function not only as transactional consumption but also as experiential tourism experiences that contribute to destination attractiveness and competitiveness. The study contributes to shopping tourism literature by highlighting the interaction between utilitarian and hedonic value dimensions in shaping tourist behaviour within a Malaysian duty-free island destination.

The findings have several theoretical, practical, and policy implications. Theoretically, the study extends shopping tourism literature by demonstrating that domestic tourists evaluate duty-free shopping experiences through both utilitarian and hedonic value dimensions rather than price considerations alone. Practically, the findings suggest that retail operators and destination managers should develop shopping environments that combine affordability, product variety, and experiential elements to enhance tourist satisfaction and loyalty. From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the importance of integrating shopping tourism into broader destination branding and tourism development strategies, particularly in island economies that rely on tourism expenditure. The insights may also be relevant to other duty-free destinations, island economies, and tourism-dependent regions seeking to support domestic tourism growth, enhance retail tourism planning, and strengthen destination branding through value-driven and experience-oriented approaches.

From a practical perspective, tourism authorities and retail operators should enhance shopping experiences through improved crowd management during peak seasons, clearer price displays and product information, better wayfinding signage, and more diverse product offerings. Experiential retail activities, such as local product showcases and family-oriented shopping events, may further strengthen visitors' engagement and satisfaction. Despite these practical implications, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is limited by its qualitative design and relatively small sample of domestic tourists recruited at Kuala Perlis and Kuala Kedah jetties, which may not fully represent the broader tourist population. The findings also reflect experiences captured during a specific period and may be influenced by participants' subjective responses and recall bias. Furthermore, the study focuses solely on tourists and does not incorporate perspectives from tourism authorities, retail operators, or local communities. Thus, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific insights into domestic tourists' shopping experiences in Langkawi rather than broadly generalisable conclusions. Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches involving more diverse tourist segments and stakeholders, including tourism authorities, retail operators, and local communities, as well as comparative studies across multiple duty-free destinations.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to shopping tourism literature by integrating utilitarian and hedonic value perspectives in understanding tourist behaviour within a duty-free destination context. The findings highlight that shopping tourism extends beyond price advantage, as experiential factors such as enjoyment, convenience, and leisure integration also influence tourist satisfaction and behavioural intention. The study further contributes to destination competitiveness research by demonstrating the role of experiential shopping in enhancing destination attractiveness and tourist engagement within Langkawi Island.

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