

The Role of Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency in Improving the Marketing Performance

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of a nature-based environment on innovation capability and entrepreneurial sustainability in three districts, as well as the factors that influence the competitive advantage of Indonesian Lake Toba ecotourism. SEM was used to test the hypotheses. The 197 respondents were ecotourism SME entrepreneurs, capital owners, community leaders, and government officials. A responsive market orientation has the most decisive influence on IEDC. Competitive advantage begins with comprehensive entrepreneurial innovation activities, including product and process innovations, as well as marketing-related activities. Factors that influence the sustainability of ecotourism in Lake Toba, cannot be separated from the presence of management that prioritizes holistic entrepreneurial products and services including the availability of food stalls, strengthening local access and transportation, shopping places, accommodation, ecotourism tours, and entertainment that reflect the dynamics of services to improve ecotourism marketing performance. This study examines the extent to which ecotourism industry entrepreneurs possess a responsive market orientation, focusing on the role of current market experiences in generating innovative and proactive ideas for market sustainability development. People and communities surrounding ecotourism destinations can benefit by capitalizing on the opportunities offered by ecotourism.

Keywords: Responsive market orientation, Innovative ecotourism development competency, B2B subsystem, Ecotourism sustainability, Marketing performance

A. INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is broadly defined as travel to natural areas with objectives that include environmental conservation, recreation, education about nature, appreciation of scenic beauty, and engagement with local communities and their cultural practices (Santarém et al., 2018). In addition to providing leisure, ecotourism serves as a platform for acquiring knowledge about wildlife, cultural heritage, and historical contexts. Thus, ecotourism activities contribute directly to the sustainable management of natural environments (Lee & Jan, 2017). The essence

of ecotourism lies in its association with clean, unpolluted environments—often far removed from urban luxuries—and its proximity to preserved natural heritage or protected landscapes (Lenao & Basupi, 2016; Lee & Jan, 2017).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on global ecotourism activity, leading to economic losses of approximately USD 2.1 trillion and the elimination of around 75 million jobs in the tourism sector (Zenker & Kock, 2020). In response to such disruption, market-oriented strategies, particularly Responsive Market Orientation (RMO), offer adaptive benefits. RMO refers to organizational behavior concerned with managing market intelligence, particularly concerning identifying current and emerging customer needs (Amangala & Wali, 2020). Firms implementing RMO play a dynamic role in shaping strategic design by creating new value orientations, developing innovative concepts, and analyzing decision-making frameworks to penetrate new markets. RMO emerges from the intersection of market expansion and ecological systems thinking (Wales et al., 2019), positioning it as a critical driver of improved marketing performance (Sendero & Baharun, 2019). Companies practicing RMO align their operations with consumer lifestyle trends, interests, and preferences (Ferrucci, Painter, & Kalika, 2019).

Such companies typically exhibit intelligent business behavior, including an acute understanding of consumer values and community needs, strategic communication management, crisis response capabilities, employee engagement, investor relations, client reputation enhancement, and cost efficiency (Tong & Chan, 2020; Ofem et al., 2020). Moreover, responsive market-oriented firms can capture contextual market variations and effectively engage target audiences (Sundström, Hyder, & Chowdhury, 2020). Their responsiveness is evident in the formulation of innovative strategies that align organizational resources toward sustainable value creation, ultimately enhancing marketing performance (Singh, Verma, & Verma, 2020). This responsiveness also fosters interactive communication with consumers, strengthens market engagement, builds competitive advantage, and enhances resource utilization (Gupta, 2020). RMO entails the systematic acquisition of market information, the creation of superior service value, and mastery over complex markets through the development of marketing skills (Buccieri, Javalgi, & Cavusgil, 2020). The success of RMO is closely tied to ICT infrastructure, advanced information systems, and effective methods for disseminating and applying market insights (Singh et al., 2020).

A market-oriented focus is a necessary condition for achieving long-term strategic objectives. Entrepreneurship grounded in continuous learning enables the recognition of opportunities, responsiveness to change, and improved innovation and marketing outcomes (Pudjiarti & Hutomo, 2020). Innovation, in this context, refers to the ideation, design, initiation, and implementation of new products or services (Jones et al., 2020). However, the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have challenged firms' ability to implement effective responsive strategies, resulting in a weakened linkage between market orientation and marketing performance (Yadav, Tripathi, & Goel, 2019; Zenker & Kock, 2020; Warth et al., 2020). Consequently, firms have been compelled to enhance innovative and creative capabilities to remain competitive, with one key area being the expansion of communication technology (Blasco et al., 2018). Responsiveness in this context supports the development of sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships between producers and consumers, thereby enhancing marketing performance (Lee et al., 2017). Existing literature on the relationship between RMO and marketing performance (e.g., Didonet, Fearne, & Simmons, 2019; Sa & Chai, 2018; Jyoti & Sharma, 2013) suggests that RMO can enhance marketing outcomes. Conversely, other studies (Sampaio et al., 2019; Beck et al., 2011; Amangala & Wali, 2020) suggest that RMO does not always result in improved marketing performance.

To bridge this gap, particularly in districts undergoing early ecotourism development, such as Toba, Samosir, and Humbang Hasundutan, there is a pressing need for responsive strategies that simultaneously promote entrepreneurship and environmental stewardship. A more holistic model is therefore required, one that incorporates the mediating variable of Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency (IEDC). Responsive strategies must be both agile and sustainable to effectively address situational challenges such as those posed by the COVID-19 crisis (Gretzel et al., 2020). Accordingly, this study proposes a model to be tested across ecotourism SMEs in the districts above, employing a dynamic capability perspective grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Schoemaker, Heaton, and Teece (2018) and Thomas (2018).

Dynamic capability theory provides a foundation for introducing IEDC as a mechanism through which RMO influences innovation performance and dynamic marketing capabilities, with the ultimate goal of enhancing global marketing performance (Buccieri et al., 2020). From this perspective, firms conceptualize innovation opportunities as multidimensional capabilities involving the exploration and exploitation of novel ideas and practices (Saul & Gebauer, 2018;

Teece, 2017). Ecotourism SMEs, through innovation activities, can not only ensure their survival but also foster long-term growth by continuously developing new products and services. Innovation is crucial for effectively communicating value propositions, attracting customers, analyzing competitive offerings, and enhancing overall performance (Kamboj & Rahman, 2017).

Additionally, the entrepreneurial process requires holistic service delivery, efficient capital utilization, structured human resource management, comprehensive market analysis, and effective marketing strategies (Indrawati et al., 2020). Firms' dynamic capabilities must support the construction, integration, and reconfiguration of marketing strategies to access and compete in international markets (Buccieri et al., 2020; Zhao & Smallbone, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to investigate the influence of nature-based environments on innovation capability and entrepreneurial sustainability across the districts of Toba, Samosir, and Humbang Hasundutan. It also aims to identify the key competencies required for developing ecotourism enterprises, subsidiary ventures, and sustainable ecotourism models. In doing so, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how marketing performance in ecotourism can be effectively realized across these three emerging regions in Indonesia.

From our investigation of the literature, we identify a significant gap in the relationship between Responsive Market Orientation (RMO) and marketing performance, where findings remain inconsistent and inconclusive. Some studies report a positive influence, while others suggest that RMO alone does not guarantee improved outcomes. Moreover, few empirical studies have explored how RMO operates within the ecological, cultural, and entrepreneurial dynamics of early-stage ecotourism destinations. There is a noticeable lack of integrative models that address how RMO fosters innovation, competitiveness, and sustainability, especially when mediated by dynamic entrepreneurial competencies. Specifically, in underdeveloped ecotourism areas such as Toba, Samosir, and Humbang Hasundutan, the linkage between market responsiveness, innovation capacity, and sustained marketing performance remains largely unexplored. This creates a significant empirical and theoretical gap in understanding how responsive strategies translate into tangible marketing advantages under resource-constrained and post-crisis conditions.

To address this gap, this study makes four significant contributions. First, it introduces and operationalizes the construct of *Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency (IEDC)*

as a dynamic capability that mediates the effect of RMO on marketing performance. Second, it extends dynamic capabilities theory by empirically testing a structural model that incorporates B2B subsystems and ecotourism sustainability as complementary factors in enhancing the competitiveness of ecotourism SMEs. Third, by focusing on three lesser-studied but strategically important Indonesian districts, the study provides localized insights with potential global relevance for similar developing ecotourism contexts. Fourth, it provides empirical evidence, based on structural equation modeling (SEM), that highlights the central role of responsiveness-driven innovation in enhancing marketing outcomes, even during external disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, the study advances both academic theory and managerial practice in sustainable ecotourism development.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Responsive Market Orientation

Company responsiveness constitutes a strategic effort to develop complementary capabilities that facilitate sustainable innovation and market adaptability, thereby enabling firms to respond effectively to evolving customer demands (Ngo et al., 2019). Within this context, Responsive Market Orientation (RMO) encompasses both proactive and reactive competencies that serve as a mediating mechanism, enabling firms to engage meaningfully with both customers and competitors. As a holistic strategic driver, market-oriented responsiveness enhances a firm's dynamic capability to penetrate and sustain presence in global markets (Wales et al., 2019).

Organizational responsiveness is rooted in the collective efforts of responsive individuals within the firm. Each stakeholder plays a specific role, contributing to a shared standard of responsiveness that becomes embedded in the company's strategic behaviour (Sendero & Baharun, 2019). In practice, market-oriented responsiveness equips firms with the ability not only to analyze market dynamics but also to generate relevant market content, positioning them to meet market expectations proactively.

The proactive-responsive dimension of RMO pertains to a firm's dynamic capacity to identify and address the latent and emerging needs of current and prospective customers (Hu, Wang, & Chen, 2019). Key indicators of market-oriented responsiveness include customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination—core dimensions through which responsiveness is operationalized (Sampaio et al., 2019). Firms that engage in

proactive and responsive strategies are better positioned to cultivate customer commitment, deliver superior customer value, and more accurately interpret consumer preferences (Olabode, Adeola, & Assadinia, 2018).

An effective RMO strategy enables firms to achieve a competitive advantage through a deep understanding of customer needs and the provision of innovative, creative solutions that differ from those based on conventional approaches (Eggers et al., 2018). Thus, organizational responsiveness is conceptualized as a dynamic capability that fosters continuous learning and opportunity recognition by maintaining a strong market focus. This approach allows companies to anticipate future developments and adapt to shifting customer demands with agility and foresight (Teece, 2017; Schoemaker, Heaton, & Teece, 2018).

Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency

Ecotourism development competency refers to the development of regional potential at both regional and local levels, with an emphasis on harnessing adequate natural resources and supporting the environmental sustainability of ecosystems, as well as local social and cultural patterns (Vinodan, Manalel, & Edward, 2020). Ecotourism activities include visiting places such as rural areas, natural sites, and other similar areas that have undergone minimal changes (Sheykhi, 2020). Ecotourism development competency can be interpreted as a new approach to renew products, processes, markets, supply sources, and organizations, as well as problem-solving to generate new ideas, enabling them to compete (Trunfio & Campana, 2019). Users drive the company's dynamic capabilities. The dynamics of innovation show the efforts of entrepreneurs to give priority to tourism governance, planning, dynamics of knowledge, production and consumption, community empowerment, development, and use of information and communication technology in sales strategies (Yu, 2020), (Phi & Dredge, 2019). The development of innovative ecotourism activities involves a management control system that encompasses controlling input, behavior, and output, as well as financial and non-financial aspects, promotion, products, culture, technology, aesthetics, creativity, and service (Suhairom et al., 2019).

The competency of ecotourism destinations aims to attract more tourists. Requires the development of innovative ideas for moving tourists. Sustainable development, tourism development, and competitiveness must be considered in determining the factors that contribute to the sustainable competitiveness of a destination and its relationships. Sustainable ecotourism development is achieved through a balanced approach that considers economic,

socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions. In other words, the competitiveness of a destination can be sustainable if it is realized simultaneously in all dimensions. Sustainable ecotourism development has economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and political aspects. Competitive ecotourism destinations can increase the value of nature conservation, attract and satisfy visitors, and improve the welfare of local communities (Nadalipour et al., 2019), (Sundström et al., 2020). Competitive advantage begins with comprehensive entrepreneurial innovation activities, including product and process innovation, experimental development, marketing-related activities, organizational innovation, design and layout, R&D activity innovation, technology development, and use (Almeida et al., 2019).

B2B Subsystem

Dynamic capability refers to a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to adapt to rapidly evolving business environments. It encompasses an organization's capacity to deliberately create, expand, and modify its operational capabilities to maintain competitiveness. Dynamic capabilities are fundamental for anticipating, initiating, and responding effectively to changes in the entrepreneurial environment, and for transforming operational capacities accordingly. The conceptual framework of dynamic capabilities encompasses adaptive, absorptive, and innovative capabilities, which are often realized through the development and interaction of subsidiary business units (Saul & Gebauer, 2018).

In the context of ecotourism, enhancing marketing performance requires expanding service offerings to meet visitors' needs more effectively and ensure a comfortable and engaging experience. This may involve the development of complementary business units, such as culinary services, transportation options, and temporary lodging facilities, including tent accommodations. The availability of diverse consumption services is thus a critical element within the broader ecotourism framework (Ellis et al., 2018).

Entrepreneurs frequently engage in collaborative efforts with other business actors, referred to as mutually beneficial cooperation, forming what is known as the small and medium enterprise (SME) business-to-business (B2B) relationship. These partnerships often involve the establishment of new subsystems or sub-businesses that function as part of a larger value chain, facilitating the management and sustainability of B2B interactions between suppliers, customers, and partners (Zhu et al., 2020; Salmela & Huiskonen, 2019). The emergence of business partnerships often aligns with broader enterprise development initiatives. The current

study contributes to this body of research by examining the relationships between Responsiveness Market Orientation (RMO) and Marketing Performance (MP), with a particular focus on the role and effects of B2B relationships and sub-business patterns. It posits that even within geographically concentrated business clusters, partners can maintain a competitive posture (Ritter, 2019).

To enhance the performance of SMEs, entrepreneurs must evaluate multiple strategic alternatives, develop a nuanced understanding of customer expectations, and possess a comprehensive grasp of the value chain to effectively fulfill customer needs. Consequently, the capacity of B2B SMEs to adapt to environmental and market dynamics can be regarded as a manifestation of dynamic capability (Rachinger et al., 2019).

The evolution of B2B subsystems, such as those operating in the food, transportation, retail, accommodation, touring, and entertainment sectors, is strategically oriented toward satisfying the full spectrum of customer demands, thereby enhancing the appeal of a given ecotourism destination (Songjun et al., 2017). Emerging B2B SMEs, particularly those with a strong service orientation, tend to have a significant impact on B2B marketing success (Lin et al., 2019). These enterprises emphasize customer-centric strategies that contribute to building a sustainable competitive advantage. As such, B2B systems serve not only as mechanisms for customer support but also as critical inputs into strategic decision-making processes aimed at improving marketing performance (Bommaraju et al., 2018).

Ecotourism Sustainability

Ecotourism sustainability encompasses efforts to enhance eco-process efficiency, conserve the natural environment, promote environmental awareness, and foster public engagement in environmentally responsible behaviors. These efforts often involve collaborations with non-governmental organizations aimed at strengthening the reputation of ecotourism enterprises. A core principle of ecotourism lies in the application of eco-production practices to generate added value by increasing customer satisfaction. This includes the provision of environmentally friendly service designs that align with market demands, minimize service-related waste, eliminate the use of hazardous materials, incorporate eco-friendly packaging, and safeguard the habitats of wildlife and overall biodiversity. The evolving nature of ecotourism has enabled the adoption of eco-organizational strategies to enhance competitiveness and profitability (Wu et al., 2019; Lee & Jan, 2018). Moreover, ecotourism sustainability is actualized through policy implementation and the promotion of

environmental awareness among stakeholders (Ahmad & Zhang, 2020). The innovation of ecotourism service products such as expanding tourism routes into remote and pristine natural areas has the potential to enrich the tourist experience while simultaneously increasing the income of ecotourism entrepreneurs (Zhang & Zhang, 2019).

Nevertheless, inadequate planning and limited understanding of ecological systems and the dynamic interaction between tourism and environmental quality often jeopardize the sustainability of tourism and economic activities in destination areas. Sustainable ecotourism hinges on a shared commitment to maintaining healthy ecosystems, natural landscapes, and hospitable cultural environments (Ouattara, Pérez-Barahona, & Strobl, 2019). Sustainability and competitiveness are closely interlinked objectives within ecotourism. Sustainable practices contribute to increased competitiveness by empowering destinations to safeguard their natural and cultural resources, thereby ensuring long-term prosperity for local communities.

A key strategy in sustainable ecotourism is the empowerment of local communities through the development of ecotourism-focused small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which exemplify sustainable business practices. Such practices necessitate active community involvement in sustainability initiatives. Sustainable ecotourism SMEs are typically characterized by innovation, a strong market orientation, and an operational ethos rooted in environmental stewardship and a commitment to nature (Ebdane, 2019).

Innovation within the ecotourism sector must also serve to stimulate local economic opportunities, enhance the quality of life for residents, and protect local ecosystems. In doing so, it can create new sources of income and contribute to broader economic sustainability. Sustainable ecotourism aims to support community well-being across several dimensions: material prosperity, social cohesion, emotional health, physical well-being, and safety (Lee & Jan, 2018). Indicators of sustainable ecotourism SMEs include the presence of a healthy ecosystem, preservation of local culture, creation of an enabling policy environment, maintenance of ecological carrying capacity, active community participation, widespread awareness, and effective conservation management (Ashok et al., 2017).

Marketing Performance

Marketing performance can be evaluated through the dual lenses of efficiency and effectiveness. Performance is considered effective when it achieves the intended objectives, and efficient when it does so by optimally utilizing available resources. For ecotourism SMEs to attain both effectiveness and efficiency in their marketing efforts, entrepreneurs must

actively engage in monitoring and innovation processes. Effective performance control depends on access to reliable information regarding performance benchmarks—comparing expected versus actual outcomes and the ability to implement corrective measures in response to deviations. Business performance, therefore, is closely tied to the firm's dynamic capabilities (Santos & Marinho, 2018).

In this context, the efficiency of ecotourism SMEs reflects how well dynamic elements such as product design, distribution channels, customer consumption patterns, and end-of-life product management are integrated into marketing decisions. Entrepreneurial actions that prioritize environmental sustainability not only align with ecological goals but also contribute to building reputational capital, which in turn enhances marketing performance (Gupta & Singh, 2018). Moreover, innovative approaches to ecotourism marketing frequently involve increased use of information and communication technology (ICT) in service delivery processes, reinforcing both responsiveness and adaptability.

Firms endowed with robust dynamic capabilities are better positioned to seize opportunities ahead of their competitors. They possess the agility to develop new business ventures without compromising ongoing operations. Additionally, such firms may influence or shape the broader business ecosystem by setting industry standards, engaging in regulatory development, or utilizing other strategic levers. These capabilities often encompass a wide range of activities, including new product development, business model innovation, and the formation of strategic alliances (Schoemaker, Heaton, & Teece, 2018). Operational enhancements complement these capabilities by further improving organizational efficiency and effectiveness.

The marketing performance of ecotourism SMEs also relies on the presence and functioning of a Business-to-Business (B2B) subsystem, involving tour operators, travel agencies, accommodation providers, and other tourism stakeholders. Delivering superior services and improving performance outcomes in this domain involves multiple interrelated activities: social interactions, promotional campaigns, advertising, public communications, tourism information terminals, and entertainment offerings (Labanauskaitė, Fiore, & Stašys, 2020). Several objective indicators are commonly used to assess marketing performance capabilities, including market share growth, sales revenue increases, customer acquisition rates, and the expansion of sales among existing customers (Buccieri, Javalgi, & Cavusgil, 2020).

Based on the elaborations, this study proposes six hypotheses as follows:

- H1: The higher the Responsive Market Orientation (RMO) is achieved, the higher the Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency (IEDC) will be.
- H2: The higher the Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency (IEDC) is achieved, the higher the Marketing Performance (MP) will be.
- H3: The higher the Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency (IEDC) is achieved, the wider the Business-to-Business Subsystem (B2B) will be.
- H4: The higher the Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency (IEDC) is achieved, the better the Ecotourism Sustainability (ES) will be.
- H5: The higher the joint service creation (SC) of the Business to Business Subsystem (B2B) area is achieved, the higher the Marketing Performance (MP) will be.
- H6: The better Ecotourism Sustainability (ES) is achieved, the higher the Marketing Performance (MP) will be.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative research design, utilizing surveys and semi-structured questionnaires as the primary data collection instruments. The survey method was selected due to its capacity to encompass a larger sample size, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings. A total of 197 respondents were sampled, comprising ecotourism entrepreneurs, managers, supervisors of tourism business units, community leaders, and representatives from the Tourism Office. While the titles and designations of decision-makers vary across ecotourism enterprises, typically influenced by the scale of the respective businesses, their functional roles remain consistent as key decision-makers. The sample population was drawn from ecotourism village groups located in the districts of Toba, Samosir, and Humbang Hasundutan. These districts were selected based on their developmental stage, characterized as either in the early or transitional phase of establishing ecotourism infrastructure, in alignment with governmental directives to develop Lake Toba as a national ecotourism destination in Indonesia.

Data filtering and processing procedures ensured the inclusion of all completed questionnaires in the analysis. The study employed a 10-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 10 = strongly agree) to measure the constructs under investigation,

following the recommendations of Tong and Chan (2020) and Singh, Marinova, and Singh (2020).

The questionnaire was structured into two main sections. Section A captured the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Section B focused on measuring the construct of the independent variable, namely the Responsiveness Market Orientation (RMO), which assesses the extent to which an enterprise emphasizes market orientation to fulfill the needs of ecotourism customers. The dependent variable of marketing performance (MP) was examined based on this construct, as outlined in Fernandes Sampaio et al. (2019), along with additional dependent variables, including Innovation-Ecotourism Development Competence (IEDC), Business-to-Business (B2B) relationships, and Environmental Sustainability (ES). Analysis of the demographic characteristics of the respondents found that 0.66 percent were men (130), and the remaining 0.34 percent were women (67). Based on the distribution of regions, 0.43 percent (85) were from Toba, 0.37 percent (72) were from Samosir, and 0.20 percent (40) were from Humbang Hasundutan.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The measurement indicators for each construct item (variable) were 26 items. The questionnaire was designed based on items to measure the construct using a 10-point semantic difference scale (ranging from the most disagreed answer to the most agreed answer) in the respondent's answers (Tong & Chan, 2020). The measurement results show that the factor loads of all measurement items for the five constructs have values that are typically distributed across the other indicators. The Cronbach's Alpha value shows an acceptable level of reliability, with a value greater than 0.70, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Measures

Measurement Item	Item Loading	Cronbach Alpha (α)
<i>Responsive Market Orientation (RMO)</i>		0.7068
X1 Customer orientation	0.701	
X2 Competitor orientation	0.738	
X3 Inter-functional coordination Fernandes Sampaio, et al., (2019)	0.658	
<i>Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency IEDC)</i>		0.9154
X4 Product	0.632	
X5 Culture	0.683	
X6 Technology	0.681	
X7 Aesthetic	0.740	
X8 Creativity	0.628	
X9 Service	0.650	
X10 Management	0.602	

Measurement Item	Item Loading	Cronbach Alpha (α)
(Suhairom, et al., 2019) B2B Subsystem (B2B)		0.8531
X11 Food	0.586	
X12 Transportation	0.748	
X13 Shopping	0.707	
X14 Accommodation	0.741	
X15 Touring	0.652	
X16 Entertainment	0.829	
(Songjun Xu, et al, 2017) Ecotourism Sustainability (ES)		0.8451
X17 Healthy Ecosystem	0.454	
X18 Maintenance of local culture	0.508	
X19 Enabling environment	0.594	
X20 Carrying capacity	0.698	
X21 Peoples participation and Awareness Generation	0.771	
X22 Conservation management using	0.663	
(Ashok, et al., 2017). Marketing Performance (MP)		0.7214
X23 Market share growth	0.477	
X24 Growth in sales revenue	0.687	
X25 Acquiring new customers	0.747	
X26 Increasing sales to existing customers	0.436	
(Buccieri, et al., 2020).		

Sources: Data Processing Results Amos, 2025

For model estimation, the latent construct measurement model was tested individually before the complete structural model was tested. The items were ensured beforehand to be the right indicators of latent constructs (Fleischman et al., 2019). Analysis of reliability and validity yielded satisfactory results, with a minimum Chi-square value of 333.069, 293 Degrees of freedom, and a probability level of 0.053.

Table 2 shows that the B2B Subsystem à Marketing Performance path has a standardized estimate or regression weight of 0.226 at a significance level (α) of 82.1%. This result can be stated to have an insignificant relationship. Thus, it is concluded that the hypothesis stating that the B2B subsystem factor loading is equal to zero cannot be rejected. Meanwhile, the other variables, RMO, IEDC, ES, and MP, have significant relationships with zero values or <0.05 (Tweneboah-Koduah et al., 2020).

Table 2. Hypotheses, direct and indirect impacts with significance

Hypothesis	Direct impact	Indirect impact	Hypothesis supported
H1: RMO→IEDC	.801***	000	YES
H2: IEDC→MP	.379*	0.041	YES
H3: IEDC→ B2B	.773***	000	YES
H4: IEDC→ ES	.782***	000	YES
H5: B2B→ MP	.024 ^{ns}	0.821	NO
H6: ES→ MP	.394*	0.024	YES

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.1$; ns - not significant
Sources: Data Processing Results Amos, 2025

The results of the hypothesis measurement show the role of IEDC in mediating RMO towards MP. IEDC is significantly able to increase Ecotourism Marketing Performance. These results inspire the development of the tourism industry while adding knowledge and experience in creating added value. The results of this study also provide insight into tourism entrepreneurship and its role in driving innovation, particularly in cases where B2B is unable to demonstrate an increase in MP (H5). The inability of B2B to increase MP is likely because each tourism business, such as culinary, transportation, entertainment, accommodation, and entertainment tourism, often pays less attention to the importance of synergy and interconnectedness. The tourism industry needs to build networks between business-to-business and people-to-people interactions and strengthen value co-creation, not always as competitors, but instead focusing on how to create mutual benefits.

The results of measuring indicators obtained from data from 197 respondents show that the model produces well-accepted indices (Zheng et al., 2020). The results of the fit model are shown in the following table.

Table 3. Results of model fit

Model Fit Indices	Value	Threshold*	Assessment
Chi-Square (χ^2)	333.069	284.66	Good
Probability (p)	0.053	> 0.05	Good
CMIN/DF	1.137	≤ 2.00	Good
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0.873	≥ 0.90	Marginal
Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)	0.848	≥ 0.90	Marginal
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	0.975	≥ 0.95	Good
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.978	≥ 0.95	Good
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.026	< 0.08	Good
Degree of freedom (DF)	0.293	< 0.3	Good

Sources: Data Processing Results Amos, 2025

The results of the structural model reveal that the Responsive Market Orientation (RMO) variable is the strongest contributor to Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency (IEDC). The ability of nature-based environmental innovation, as one form of entrepreneurship, to respond to changes in demand for ecotourism services. When entrepreneurs demonstrate responsiveness to ecotourism development, it is found that IEDC can improve ecotourism marketing performance. Thus, Lake Toba ecotourism entrepreneurship needs to emphasize product innovation, cultural aspects, technology, aesthetic services, creativity, and overall service quality. This finding is important because it

shows that the ecotourism development and innovation competencies contained in the IEDC contribute highly and provide an important role in the performance of ecotourism marketing and are proven to be strong in mediating the B2B Subsystem with Ecotourism Sustainability so that its role becomes clearer in improving the marketing performance of ecotourism SMEs. This performance is evident in the model results of the ecotourism marketing performance analysis below.

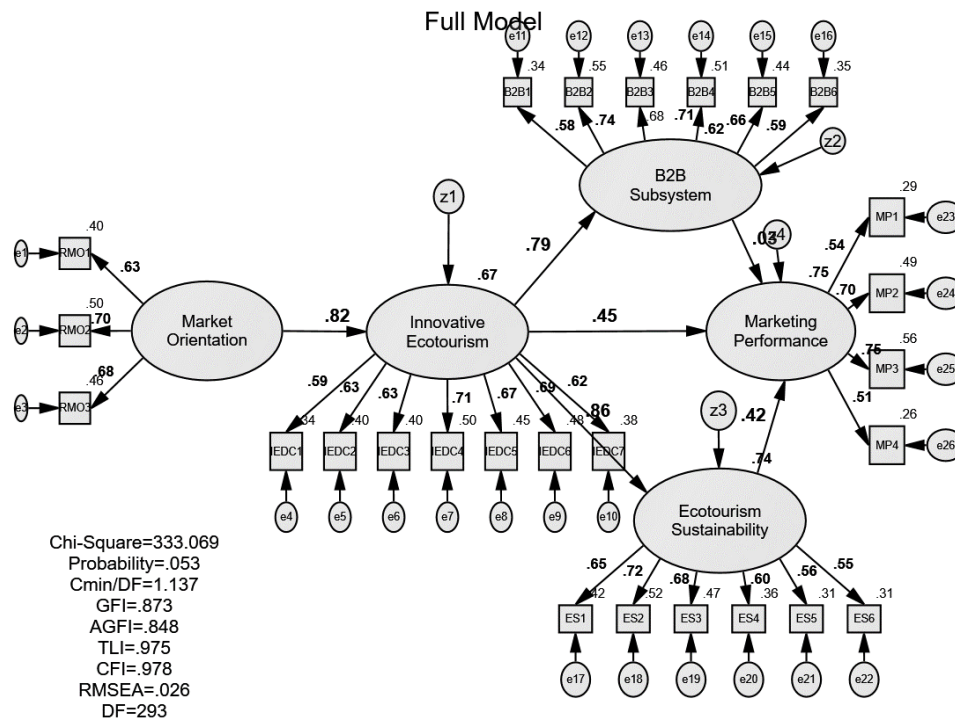


Figure 1. The results of the SEM implementation

E. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of a nature-based environment on innovation capability and entrepreneurial sustainability and to explore the factors that contribute to the competitive advantage of Indonesian Lake Toba ecotourism. Lake Toba Tourism Destination, as a top priority for the development and planning of the tourism industry, provides the background for why this study is necessary. The next phenomenon is the lack of strengthening stakeholder interaction, whether in the form of awareness, cooperation, or positive competition, especially between the tourism industry and other industries, which suggests that the development of sustainable tourism is not holistic. In addition, the next concept that underlies this study is the discovery of a gap in previous research between Responsive market orientation and Tourism Marketing performance.

Apart from the results of the structural model related to hypothesis testing, the five hypotheses in this study have proven to be significant. However, one variable is insignificant. This finding is exciting and highlights the role of genuine, responsive contributions in enhancing the competitiveness of ecotourism SMEs. The ability of SMEs to compete and develop is when entrepreneurs respond highly to dynamic efforts to meet customer needs. The dynamic ability to generate innovative ideas, products, and services for ecotourism SMEs, including the ability to explore what customers' priority is in carrying out ecotourism activities (Trunfio & Campana, 2019). Response and responsiveness of SMEs, such as Customer orientation, Competitor orientation, and Inter-functional coordination, are dynamic implementations of SMEs' competitiveness. The dynamic activities of SMEs, as stated in the IEDC measurement indicators, require various types of innovation, such as the development of ecotourism products, the development of cultural values, local wisdom, and nature preservation, the ability to involve technology in promoting communicative ecotourism activities concerning the beauty of ecotourism natural management, creativity attractions with nature reserves, services and management of ecotourism management.

There is a positive relationship between IEDC and marketing performance (MP). This result indirectly addresses the inconsistency in the effect of RMO on MP, as noted in the gaps in previous research (Sampaio et al., 2019). It is clear that the IEDC contribution, which mediates the two previous variables, is proven to play a crucial role in improving the performance of ecotourism marketing, allowing SMEs to compete even in the COVID-19 pandemic conditions. The positive influence of IEDC on B2B demonstrates that the more comprehensive dynamic capabilities of ecotourism SMEs are pointing towards the growth of various sub-businesses that cater to customer needs, such as availability and ease of access to food, Transportation, Shopping, Accommodation, Touring, and Entertainment. (Ouattara et al., 2019). Factors that influence the sustainability of ecotourism in Lake Toba cannot be separated from the presence of management that prioritizes holistic products and services, including the availability of food stalls, strengthening local access and transportation, shopping places, accommodation, ecotourism tours, and entertainment that reflect the dynamics of services to satisfy visitors, thereby increasing the economic value of the business. It is also proven to simultaneously increase ES (H4), namely the dynamic ability to create competitive innovations, which in turn fosters healthy ecosystems, maintains local culture, enables an

environment conducive to growth, and promotes carrying capacity, people's participation, awareness generation, and Conservation management.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes meaningfully to the theoretical development of Responsive Market Orientation (RMO), dynamic capabilities, and innovation in the context of ecotourism SMEs. First, the findings demonstrate that RMO alone does not directly lead to improved marketing performance but does so through the mediating effect of Innovative Ecotourism Development Competency (IEDC). This addresses prior inconsistencies in the literature by offering a nuanced, evidence-based explanation of the RMO–performance relationship, particularly in volatile and resource-constrained ecotourism markets.

Second, by introducing and validating IEDC as a dynamic capability construct, the study enriches the theoretical understanding of how innovation competencies, encompassing product, service, cultural, technological, aesthetic, and management dimensions, can translate market responsiveness into competitive advantage. This reinforces and extends dynamic capabilities theory into the domain of ecotourism entrepreneurship, a sector where such models have been underutilized.

Third, this research reveals that IEDC significantly contributes not only to marketing performance but also to the sustainability of ecotourism and the development of B2B subsystems. The structural relationships confirmed in the SEM analysis establish IEDC as a critical nexus linking strategic responsiveness with both internal performance and external ecosystem outcomes. Although the B2B subsystem was not found to have a significant direct impact on marketing performance, its strong relationship with IEDC and ecotourism sustainability suggests an indirect strategic relevance.

Fourth, the study advances theoretical discussions on community-based innovation by highlighting the dual role of entrepreneurs and local communities as both innovators and stewards of natural and cultural heritage. This reinforces the ecotourism literature, which argues for the integration of ecological integrity and entrepreneurial agency in sustainable tourism development.

Finally, by situating its empirical work in emerging, underdeveloped districts of Indonesia Toba, Samosir, and Humbang Hasundutan—the study contributes valuable contextual insights to the largely Western-centric literature on RMO and dynamic capabilities.

This supports theory building in ecotourism settings marked by limited infrastructure, evolving governance, and strong cultural embeddedness.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study hold several important implications for managers, practitioners, and policymakers operating within the ecotourism sector. Ecotourism entrepreneurs must cultivate and apply dynamic capabilities such as IEDC to translate market insights into meaningful innovations. This requires intentional investment in creative product design, technology use, cultural enrichment, and aesthetic service improvements that align with visitor expectations and sustainable tourism values. The significant role of IEDC in enhancing marketing performance underscores the need for SMEs to embrace holistic innovation strategies, not just in isolated product offerings, but across management practices, stakeholder coordination, and environmental stewardship.

The empirical evidence suggests that community engagement plays a vital role in driving innovation and sustainability. Entrepreneurs are advised to leverage local knowledge, traditions, and environmental resources in the co-creation of tourism experiences. Community involvement in innovation also fosters ownership, cultural preservation, and resilience. The results support the integration of environmental consciousness into all stages of ecotourism service delivery. SMEs should actively promote sustainable values through educational programs, guided nature tours, and awareness campaigns to foster a culture of sustainability. These actions not only reinforce ecological values among visitors but also differentiate SMEs in an increasingly sustainability-conscious market. Policy makers and supporting institutions should prioritize training and pilot programs to strengthen the innovative and ecological capabilities of ecotourism SMEs. Such interventions should be tailored to local contexts and promote cross-sector partnerships that enable small firms to scale sustainable practices.

The insignificant direct effect of B2B subsystems on marketing performance suggests that service interdependence alone is not enough to drive success. While businesses such as food stalls, local transport, and lodging are crucial to the ecotourism offering, their impact on performance is mediated through innovation and sustainability. Thus, inter-business collaboration should be strategically aligned with innovation competencies and long-term sustainability goals.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its significant contributions, this study has several limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, the scope of the empirical investigation was confined to three districts, namely Toba, Samosir, and Humbang Hasundutan, which, while strategically relevant and comprising most of the tourism around Lake Toba, do not fully represent the diversity of the broader ecotourism ecosystem. One can also argue the unique characteristics and culture of Batak ethnic group might also influence the dynamics behind the effects that we observe in our analysis. To strengthen the generalizability of our findings, future studies might consider investigating other tourism districts beyond Lake Toba. Additionally, future research should consider expanding the model to include external institutional variables, such as government support, regulatory frameworks, or funding mechanisms, which may condition the strength of dynamic capabilities and innovation outcomes in SMEs.

Second, while the structural model tested various interrelationships among RMO, IEDC, B2B subsystems, and sustainability, it did not include longitudinal data or comparative analysis across periods, which would be useful in understanding how these relationships evolve, particularly in response to crises like COVID-19. Future studies should incorporate longitudinal designs to capture the temporal dynamics of innovation and responsiveness.

Third, the absence of significant findings regarding the direct impact of the B2B subsystem on marketing performance warrants further investigation. Future research could explore whether this relationship is moderated by factors such as digital transformation, governance structures, or visitor segmentation. Moreover, the influence of indirect pathways, such as B2B through IEDC or ES, could be modelled in more complex analytical frameworks.

Finally, further analytical procedures, such as sensitivity analysis or multi-group comparison, would enhance the robustness of future models. Researchers are encouraged to test this framework across other ecotourism regions in Indonesia and Southeast Asia to build comparative insights and contribute to the global theory of innovation in sustainable tourism.

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