



Competitiveness Determinants of Rural Tourism: A Case of Amedy Region, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Abstract

Rural tourism has recently acquired considerable significance for several emerging nations. Rural tourism is seen as a significant contributor to economic growth. The rural areas of the Amedy region are experiencing a notable rise in visitor numbers; hence, any oversight or inadequacy in the systematic development of its resources may deplete its tourism potential. This study evaluates the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations in the Amedy district, since destination competitiveness underpins the plan, development, and sustainability of tourism destinations.

For this purpose, a questionnaire with 61 questions was used to assess the impact of destination management and destination attractions on destination competitiveness, focusing on the supply-side perspective. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select a subset of 284 private sector suppliers in the travel and tourism industry, the Generalized Linear Model was used to analyze the gathered data.

The research findings indicate that destination attractions have a positive and significant impact on destination competitiveness. Furthermore, destination management exerts a significant and moderate impact, both directly and indirectly by influencing the attractiveness of the area. Ultimately, the competitiveness of a destination is determined by the existence of captivating





attractions, and its long-term viability is governed by efficient destination management.

The study advocates for the preservation and enhancement of natural and cultural resources to promote agro - eco tourism. Furthermore, the study advocates for the development of an integrated plan involving all stakeholders to effectively manage and sustain the destination.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Destination competitiveness, Destination attractions, Destination Management

محددات القدرة التنافسية للسياحة الريفية: منطقة العمادية نموذجاً / إقليم كردستان العراق

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المستخلص:

اكتسبت السياحة الريفية في الآونة الأخيرة أهمية كبيرة لمعظم الدول النامية. ويعتقد ان السياحة الريفية قادرة على المساهمة في التنمية الاقتصادية. تشهد المناطق الريفية في قضاء العمادية ازدياداً كبيراً في عدد السواحل لذا فإن أي إهمال أو ضعف في تنمية مواردها بشكل منطقي قد يستنزف امكانياتها السياحية. وفي هذا السياق تركّز هذه الدراسة على تقييم القدرة التنافسية لواجهات السياحة الريفية في قضاء العمادية كون الميزة التنافسية أساس في تخطيط وتطوير واستدامة الواجهات السياحية، من أجل تحقيق هدف البحث، تم استعمال استبيان مكون من 61 سؤال لتقييم تأثير إدارة الوجهة وموارد الجذب السياحي على القدرة التنافسية للوجهة الريفية، مع التركيز على منظور جانب العرض. تم استعمال استراتيجية هادفة لأخذ العينات لاختيار مجموعة فرعية مكونة من 284 من موردي القطاع الخاص في صناعة السفر والسياحة، وتم استخدام النموذج الخطي المعمم لتحليل البيانات المجمعة.

تشير نتائج البحث إلى أن عوامل الجذب السياحي لها تأثير إيجابي وكبير على القدرة التنافسية للوجهة. علاوة على ذلك، فإن إدارة الوجهة تمارس تأثيراً كبيراً ومعتدلاً، بشكل مباشر وغير مباشر من خلال التأثير على جاذبية المنطقة. في نهاية المطاف، يتم تحديد القدرة التنافسية للوجهة من خلال وجود عوامل الجذب، كما أن استمراريتها على المدى الطويل تحكمها إدارة الوجهة بكفاءة.

توصي الدراسة بالعمل من أجل الحفاظ على الموارد الطبيعية والثقافية وتعزيزها، من أجل تحفيز السياحة الزراعية والسياحة البيئية. علاوة على ذلك، توصي الدراسة بصياغة خطة متكاملة مع جميع أصحاب المصلحة لإدارة الوجهة واستدامتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السياحة الريفية، القدرة التنافسية، عوامل الجذب، إدارة الواجهة



Introduction

Rural areas make up the majority of the land in developing countries (Khalil, 2021). Therefore, rural development plays a crucial role in all facets of life development. Enhancing rural development is essential for increasing the national output and establishing a secure living environment for a substantial proportion of the population. Therefore, it is imperative to foster the growth and advancement of rural communities (Al-Garaawi, 2019; Fons et al., 2011; Long & Lane, 2000).

Rural areas are known for their agricultural industry; however, agricultural revenues have declined. The loss in agriculture can be attributed to various issues, the most important of which is the challenge of access to markets, especially isolated mountainous areas characterized by weak infrastructure (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012; McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011). This led to a shift towards the tourism industry, which has experienced growth due to factors such as urban difficulties, climate change, increased health awareness (Bianu et al., 2013), and its recent superior performance compared to other sources of economic growth (Al-Shadidi & Al-Wardi, 2017; Soufiane et al., 2021).

Competitiveness is a multifaceted concept that may be examined from various perspectives, such as products, enterprises, economic sectors, and national economies, in both the short and long run. In terms of macroeconomics, the primary goal is to enhance the real income of the community, while addressing national competitiveness as a significant issue. From a microscopic viewpoint, the phenomenon is regarded as occurring at the level of individual firms. In order to maintain competitiveness, it is imperative for any firm to provide products and services that fulfill the ever-increasing expectations of contemporary clients (Siudek & Zawojnska, 2014). Previously, travel destinations believed that





the key factors for competing and thriving in the international tourist business were attracting guests, having abundant resources, offering inexpensive (Streimikiene et al., 2021) wages, and benefiting from advantageous exchange rates (Vengesai, 2003). This approach resulted in the formulation and implementation of measures and regulations that primarily sought to enhance the influx of tourists. Generally, the results fell short of expectations, leading to skepticism regarding the efficacy of this technique (Rasool et al., 2021; Streimikiene et al., 2021)

The results necessitated the implementation of a new tourism development framework that should give priority to destination characteristics. Competitiveness is considered an essential factor for achieving growth and development, especially in light of the current economic conditions. Empirical studies on destination competitiveness vary by author and region. This means that the competitiveness of a location varies from one place to another (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Knežević Cvelbar et al., 2016; Mazanec et al., 2007). A study investigating the competitiveness of the UAE as a prominent and highly competitive tourism destination in the area revealed that a general business climate plays a crucial role in determining its level of competitiveness (Michael et al., 2019). Nevertheless, Kazakhstan rivals its equivalents in terms of tourist strategy and the nation's natural environment (Tleuberdinova et al., 2022). (Yozcu, 2017) study's emphasizes the significance of natural resources and innovation as crucial elements in Istanbul's popularity as a global vacation destination. According to (Zelege & Biwota, 2020) the achievement of tourism in Ethiopia necessitates a dynamic and suitable management framework.

Political and economic stability, the state of the economy, marketing, and the variety and quality of food are the main factors that make South Africa a competitive travel destination (Cronjé & du Plessis, 2021; Du Plessis et al.,





2015). The World Tourism Organization (2011) outlined the elements that influence how competitive a destination is through investment, output, macroeconomic policy, brands, reputation, cost, market share, and guest satisfaction; additionally, through safety, high-quality experiences, innovation, and human training resources. A review of the factors influencing the competitiveness of tourist destinations revealed Strategic position and natural resources, (ii) safety and security, (iii) lodging options, (iv) historical and cultural resources, and (v) transit infrastructure. When developing growth strategies for a particular location, a tourism destination should take these five factors into account (Rheeders, 2022).

Like other industries, the tourist sector is facing challenges from an increasingly competitive worldwide market. One of the most developed industries nowadays is the travel and tourism sector. demonstrates consistent growth ever since the world financial crisis. The World Tourism Organization (2017) reports that in 2016, there was a 3.9% increase in the number of foreign arrivals. In 2023, Istanbul achieved the largest annual growth rate of international tourists (26%), with London coming in second (17%) and Dubai coming in third (18%). As well as, 16.5 million tourists travel to Antalya each year, it is More than 12 times as many foreign visitors are in the country as there are in Paris, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and New York put together (8.5 million visitors) (Luštický & Bednářová, 2018).

Turkey's status as a prominent European destination for culinary, artistic, religious, and cultural tourism is expected to contribute to a tourism income of USD 54.3 billion by 2023. Euromonitor International conducted research for the 2023 Top 100 Destination Cities Index, which identified the ten most popular tourist destinations globally international visitors. In 2023, Istanbul experienced the most significant annual increase in the number of international tourists, with a growth rate of 26%. London ranked second with a growth rate of 17%, while





Dubai came in third with a growth rate of 18%. What is particularly remarkable is that Antalya, a city with a population of 1.3 million on the Turkish Riviera, received a staggering 16.5 million foreign tourists in 2016. This number is more than 12 times the population of Paris (2.1 million), Hong Kong (7.4 million), Bangkok (11 million), and New York City (8.5 million) (BBC, 2024).

Iraq exhibits a wide range of cultural and climatic variations. The southern region of Iraq shares a comparable environment with Gulf countries like the Emirates, whilst the northern region, known as Kurdistan, bears resemblance to Turkey. This suggests that the destination is highly appealing to tourists, but, numerous conflicts have caused significant damage to the natural surroundings and disrupted the cultural heritage, in addition to the impact of climate change. Some remote areas in Kurdistan, distant from the southern districts, provide a considerable degree of security, making them highly appealing to local tourists. According to a statement from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), a total of 1.7 million visitors visited the Kurdistan Region in the first four months of 2024 (Kurdistan24, 2024)

1. STUDY AREA

Amêdy Region is located in North of Kurdistan region of Iraq Figure (1). It is just over an 48 km north of Duhok city and about 402 Km from Baghdad. It has an area of 1798 km². The fame of the region is attributed to its city ; the city center of Amidi district is considered to have outstanding universal significance and is among the top five most unique and noteworthy cities in terms of both morphological and archeological constitution (Ismael, 2015) .



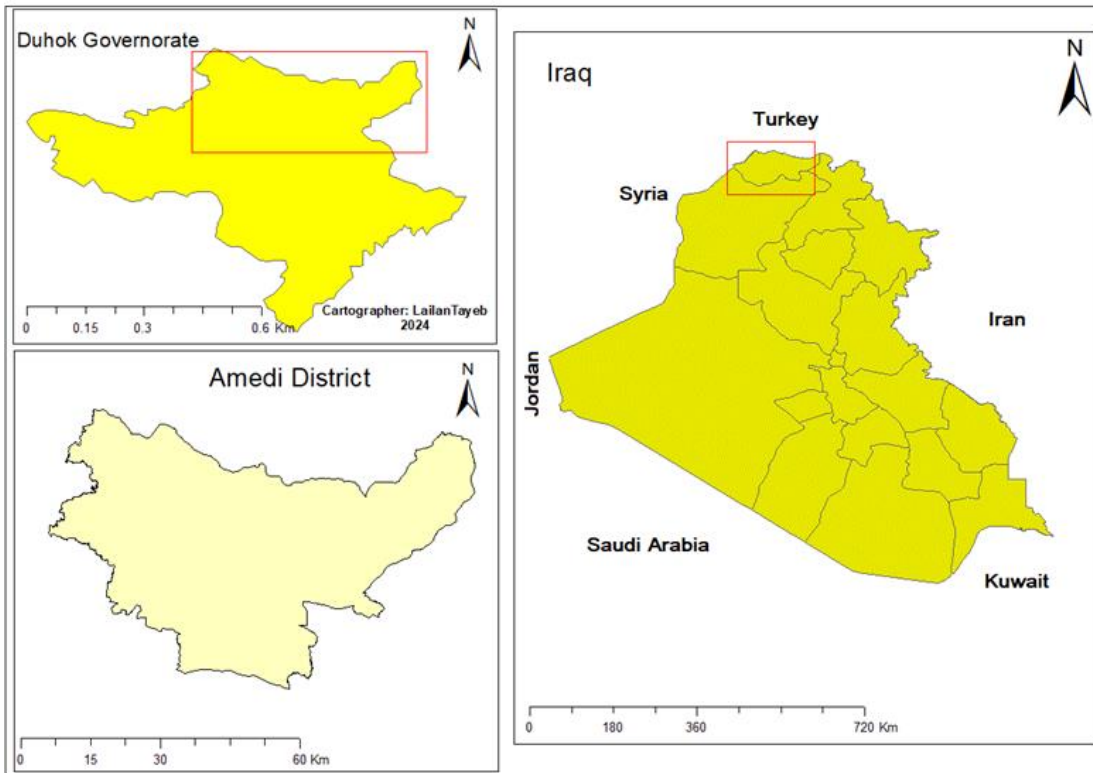


FIGURE 1: Study Area

The Amêdy region consists of urban and rural communities' urban communities are concentrated in the towns of Sarsing, Kani Mazi, Gamanki, Bamerni Cheladzi and the city center of Amêdy, which is the largest in the Duhok governorate and has elevations that can reach 2387.41meters above sea level, stands out for its challenging hilly landscape. Its situation creates unique climatic conditions for tourism and agriculture, setting it apart from the rest of Iraq. While the district consists of 6 sub-districts, and the total number of villages in it is 356 villages, but 201 villages have become deserted due to the Turkish conflict with the Party called PKK¹ until 2024 and displacement continues and at an increasing pace. The region has always been a crossroads of culture and trade throughout history. Due to major changes in political, social and economic developments. It witnessed

¹ The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) now concentrates on mountainous regions in northern Iraq and southeast Turkey where Kurdish people make up the majority. Turkey, the United States, the European Union, and other countries regard the PKK as a terrorist group (Efeşil, E. (2008). Turkey's new approaches toward the PKK, Iraqi kurds and the kurdis question. *Insight Turkey*, 53-73.



fluctuations in social, cultural and economic development. But the border conflict will badly affected the future of the region. The presence of Muslims and Christians, both the Assyrian and Chaldean sects, adds to its cultural variety. The popularity of the Sarsing region as a prominent tourist destination in Iraq is evidence of the long-term presence of tourism in the region, due to its unique topography and climate. It is important to mention that this site is home to two tourist settlements that gained popularity in the 1980s, namely Eneshki and Syarteka village. In the late 1980s, the settlements of Eneshke and Ashaw were officially designated as presidential-level tourist destinations. The region is witnessing a significant increase in the number of visitors. Despite the limited data available, the General Directorate of Tourism in Dohuk confirms that the Amidi countryside are the most attractive tourist destinations.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study were two-fold:

1. To examine the effect of destination attractors on destination competitiveness of the tourism villages in Amedy
2. To establish the effect of destination management on destination competitiveness of the tourism villages in Amedy
3. Examine the fundamental links between a destination's tourism attraction resources and destination management, as well as how this relationship affects the competitiveness of rural areas in Amedy

3. METHODOLOGY

An investigation was conducted in the Amêdy district of the Duhok province in 2022. The investigation covered several tourist attractions in Amedy, including Sarsing, KaniMase, Bamarni, Shiladze, Derloak, and Gamanke. Questionnaires were utilized to gather data, following the principles outlined by (Ritchie & Crouch, 2010). The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale to quantify the





response levels, ranging from one (indicating strong agreement) to five (indicating severe disagreement). The surveys addressed many aspects of destination competitiveness and strategic components, such as destination management and destination attractions. This study employed non-probability sampling procedures. Volunteers were picked based on their utility to the study, rather than their representation of society numerically. The survey was conducted among individuals from various demographics, including different age groups, genders, employment positions, and educational backgrounds, who were associated with the tourism supply site. The main questions were how destination management (DM) and attraction development (DA) affect destination competitiveness (DC).

3.1 Statistical analysis

The collected data from questionnaire sheets was entered into an Excel spreadsheet and organized based on the primary influencing factors and the variables that were influenced. Subsequently, the data was inputted into the SPSS program (SPSS, 2019) for statistical analysis. The Alpha Cronbach's coefficient was calculated as a measure of reliability for the primary variables under study. The obtained values, starting at 0.6991, indicated an adequate level of reliability. The statistical measurements for the main study variables have been calculated. The study utilized multiple regression analysis to assess the correlation between DC and the two main components, DA and DM, in order to ascertain whether DC can be forecasted in the future. Furthermore, the correlation coefficients were calculated for the variables (axes) being examined. The generalized linear model was employed to create the optimal model for DC and assess the precision of the previous regression analysis. However, it is clear that the aim achieves the desired model in this way:

$$DC = \beta_0 + \beta_1(DA) + \beta_2(DM) + e$$





Where:

The term "TDC" denotes the variable that is affected, whilst "DA" and "DM" represent the variables that have significant effects. The symbol β_0 indicates the intercept or constant term in a regression model, whereas β_1 and β_2 represent the partial regression coefficients. The random error is represented by the symbol e . The Generalized Linear Model ensured the reliability of the model.

The plots of the previous model were made using R programming to illustrate the link between DC and both DA and DM separately.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive analysis ensures that subsequent interpretations are grounded in an accurate understanding of the data and lays the groundwork for more complex analyses.

The descriptive statistics of the studied variables are shown in Table 1. It could be noticed that all studied variables are normally distributed (Skewness values less than 1.96 and relatively small Kurtosis values). Also, the variables have logical means (except DM), which at the same time has a small range (Table 1).

TABLE1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
	Valid						
TDC	284	3.736	0.407763	-0.697	0.683	2.43333	4.7333
DM	284	1.850	0.4138	0.022	-0.339	1	3
DA	284	3.988	0.4329	-0.306	0.394	2.6	5



4.1 The relationship between variables (Correlation)

The correlation coefficients between the variables under study are displayed in Table 2. It is evident that every combination has a highly significant coefficient ($p < 0.01$), with the greatest coefficient (0.61) being seen between DC and DA. The main factor influencing tourism in a particular area is its allure. The results are in line with Ritchie and Crouch's (2010) study, which demonstrated that attractions and resources have a significant impact on how well tourist locations function in the marketplace (Thong et al., 2020). According to (Omerzel, 2006) destination attractions have a critical role in determining how competitive a destination is for travelers. There is a substantial positive ($p < 0.01$) association between destination management (DM) and tourist destination competitiveness (DC), as indicated by the correlation coefficient of (0.506) between DC and DM. Results are consistent with the findings of (Armenski et al., 2018) which found that destination management had a positive effect on how competitively attractive tourism destinations were. Additionally, there was a statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) correlation coefficient (0.425) found between the destination management (DM) and destination attraction (DA) variables. In a same vein, natural resources and destination management have an unbreakable bond that cannot be broken. Destination management and natural resource management are inseparably intertwined. The growth of rural tourism depends on the preservation of natural elements. Any major damage or elimination of these elements will impede this sector's future expansion. Restrictions in destination management are associated with a developing destination's low competitiveness ranking (Boley & Perdue, 2011; Bosnić et al., 2014; Capone, 2015).

**TABLE 2. The Correlation Coefficient Between the Studied Variables**

	DC	DM	DA
DC	1	.506**	.610**
DM	.506**	1	.425**
DA	.610**	.425**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Significant correlation between certain variables that collectively affect the same dependent variable (DC) can lead to multi-collinearity, which obscures the true impact of the variables being researched. Consequently, the subsequent action involved utilizing regression analysis, specifically a Generalized linear model, to optimize the combined impact of both variables (DA and DM) on DC.

5.2 Linear Regression and Generalized Linear Model

The regression analysis findings are displayed in Tables 3 and 4. Table 3 shows that all regression coefficients are positive and have a substantial impact on DC ($p < 0.01$). This means that the model can be used in the future to forecast how to maximize DC using both DA and DM. Nevertheless, the model's R² estimate is 0.447, indicating a substantial influence ($p < 0.01$) and confirming the importance of both DA and DM in maximizing DC. It is plausible to infer the overall advantages of DC purely from DA data. Moreover, the data on DM can serve as a basis for protecting natural resources through the implementation of government policies, strategic planning, and environmental management.



TABLE 3. Regression Coefficients of the Dependent Dc on Both DA and DM

Coefficients ^a								
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF	
1	(Constant)	1.375	.168		8.185	.000		
	DA	.454	.046	.482	9.840	.000	.820	1.220
	DM	.297	.048	.301	6.140	.000	.820	1.220

a. Dependent Variable: DC- all Average elements

TABLE 4. Model summary of the regression analysis

Model Summary ^b									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.668 ^a	.447	.443	.304429	.447	113.363	2	28	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), DM, DA

b. Dependent Variable: DC- all Average elements

Nevertheless, the proposed model was validated using Generalized Linear Model. The table displays the attributes of the model's goodness of fit in Table 5. It is evident that the majority of attributes fall within logical ranges, which ensures the ability to predict with DC using both DA and DM.



TABLE 5. The Goodness of Fit by Generalized Linear Model

Goodness of Fit ^a			
	Value	df	Value/df
Deviance	22.594	245	.092
Pearson Chi-Square	22.594	245	.092
Log Likelihood ^b	-43.534		
Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC)	167.069		
Finite Sample Corrected AIC (AICC)	180.567		
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	313.028		
Dependent Variable: DC			
Model: (Intercept), DA, DM			
a. Information criteria are in smaller-is-better form.			
b. The full log-likelihood function is displayed and used in computing information criteria.			

Furthermore, the prior model was sent to the R programming software to create a graphic that shows the impact of DA and DM on DC, independently. The findings are depicted in Figures 3 and 4. Figure 3 illustrates a clear and direct correlation between the Agree choice (option 4) and the positive linear trend of the DA influence on the DC. Regarding the impact of DM, Figure 4FI also demonstrates a favorable trend effect, specifically highlighting option 2 and the altered ranges.



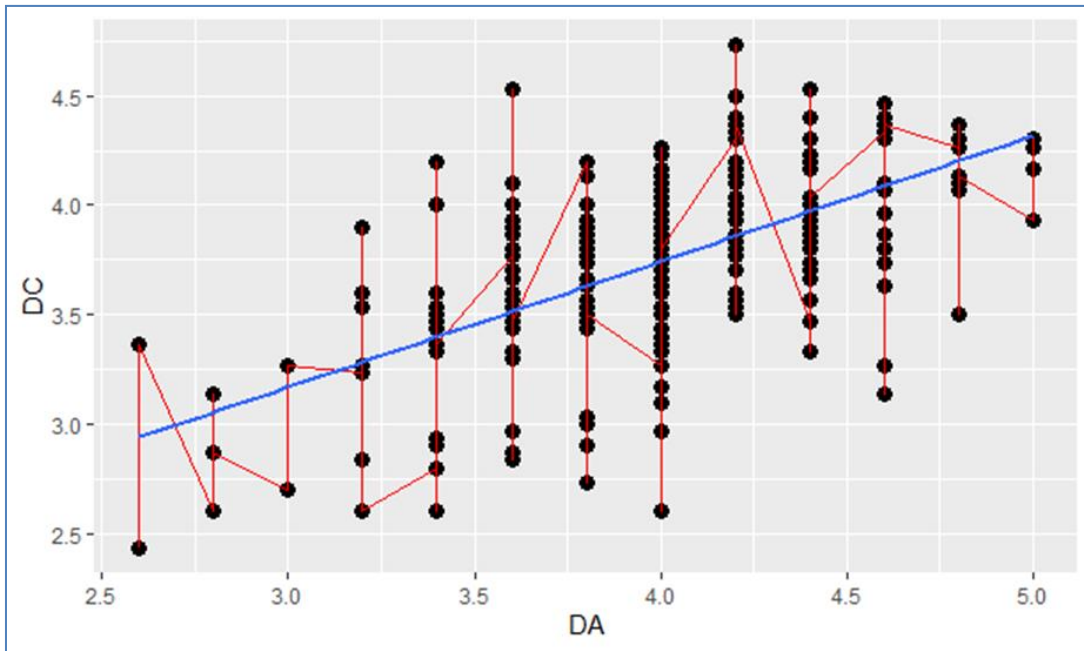


FIGURE 3. Destination Attractions (DA) effect on Destination competitiveness(DC)

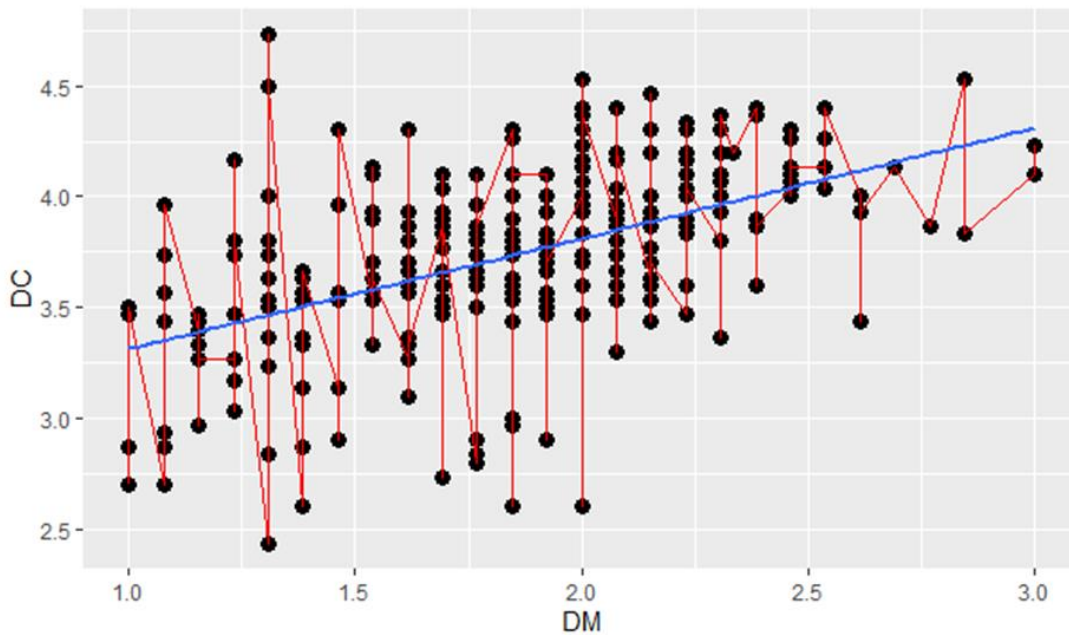


FIGURE 4. Destination Management (DM) Effect on Destination Competitiveness (DC)



5. Conclusion

From the results, it is clear that the attractiveness of destinations affects the competitiveness of Amedy. However, continuous and responsible management of the destination is needed in order to achieve and maintain the appropriate level of competitiveness. Since achieving good performance and good standing in tourism depends not only on the ability of the destination to attract tourists, but also requires adequate management of destination attractors in order to provide a basis for differentiation. The research recommends for the preservation and enhancement of natural and cultural resources to promote agro-ecotourism. Furthermore, the analysis supporters for the development of an inclusive plan involving all stakeholders to effectively manage and sustain the destination.



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