

# Exploring the barriers to digital marketing adoption at the rural tourism destination of Long Lamai, Sarawak

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Rural communities have been envisaged to benefit from tourism economically and socially, and digital marketing has been noted as a low-cost and effective method to promote a tourism destination. For rural tourism, it aids to leapfrog the barriers of information transmission to the intended tourist markets. The Sarawak government's initiative to set up the Digital Sarawak Centre of Excellence to accelerate Sarawak's economic growth, reduce the socio-economic divide and increase youth employment, represents an opportunity for rural tourism destinations to piggyback on and profit from, especially in the areas of digital and content marketing. Long Lamai, Sarawak, is currently being developed as an eco-tourism site and has been equipped with internet service for mobile devices. However, none of the tourism service providers have adopted digital marketing of their services. The objective of this study is to examine the barriers towards digital marketing adoption by rural tourism service providers in Long Lamai, Sarawak, based on the perspective of the service providers themselves. In-depth interviews were conducted with the aid of a structured questionnaire. Fieldwork was carried out in February 2017 and a total of 12 people were interviewed. The study revealed that the Long Lamai community is largely willing to adopt digital marketing, with the assistance of outside parties in digital content creation, website design and website maintenance. However, tourism itself is largely held back by physical constraints, which in turn affects the readiness of the community to receive and entertain tourists on a large scale. The collectivist nature of the community, aimed at ensuring equal participation in economic benefits, may slow down the process of digital marketing adoption as a whole.

**Keywords:** Digital marketing adoption, ICT, tourism suppliers, Malaysia, rural, community perceptions

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rural communities have been envisaged to benefit from tourism economically and socially<sup>1-3</sup>. However, tourists have to be first persuaded to visit a rural destination, which may not have previously received any recognition in the marketplace; effective destination marketing will increase tourist visitation, tourist satisfaction, and their intention to revisit and make recommendation to others<sup>4-5</sup>. Digital marketing has been noted as a low-cost and effective method of getting the word out to customers<sup>6</sup> through visual representation<sup>7-8</sup>; it can also leapfrog the barriers of information transmission to the intended market. The last point is especially pertinent for rural destinations.

However, in the case of Sarawak, Malaysia, the state government is attempting to spearhead an initiative towards digital transformation, whereby tourism is designated a priority sector. In this initiative, the government has set up

the Digital Sarawak Centre of Excellence to undertake research and development activities in partnership with researchers and practitioners, with the view to accelerate Sarawak's economic growth, reduce the socio-economic divide and increase youth employment<sup>9</sup>. Such an initiative represents an opportunity for rural tourism destinations to piggyback on and profit from, especially in the areas of digital and content marketing.

In terms of digital technology, a solar-powered telecentre was installed in 2009, with the assistance of Unimas, which connected the village to the internet<sup>12</sup>. A five-year subscription to internet service was provided by a local telecommunications company, Maxis, giving free Wi-Fi service to the entire village; however, this service was not renewed. In 2014, a telecommunication tower was installed, providing internet access to those with mobile internet devices<sup>13</sup>.

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