



Institute of Social Informatics and Technological Innovations

**Service Quality, Satisfaction and Revisit Intention to Rural
Tourism Destination in Sarawak:
The Moderating Impact of Local Communities' Attitude**

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**Master of Science
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Service Quality, Satisfaction and Revisit Intention to Rural Tourism
Destination in Sarawak:
The Moderating Impact of Local Communities' Attitude

Law Fung Yee

A thesis submitted

In fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science
(eTourism Management)

Institute of Social Informatics and Technological Innovations
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2018

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Masters

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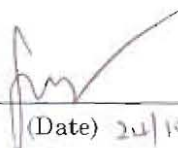
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ABSTRACT

Due to the changing tourist expectations and strong competition from urban tourism, there is a necessity for entrepreneurs of rural tourism to fulfil customers' needs especially in service quality so that they can survive in tough environment. This study is an attempt to evaluate repeat visiting determinants through satisfaction on the different dimensions of service qualities such as accessibility, accommodation quality, destination's resources and attractions and outdoor activities. Local communities' attitudes toward tourists will be used as moderator to evaluate the constructs. In order to access the research model developed, SmartPLS 3.0 (v.3.2.6) is applied in this study used to analyse the data collected based on pathmodelling and then bootstrapping analysis. Besides, a total of 255 questionnaires collected back from Sarawak rural tourism destinations, which are Bario *Kelabit* Highland, *Annah Rais Bidayuh* Longhouse and *Telaga Air* Malay Village by using convenient sampling technique. Unsurprisingly, based on the results, accommodations, destination resources and attractors, outdoor activities and accessibility have significantly influence tourists' satisfaction. Furthermore, local communities' attitudes also moderated the relationship between outdoor activities with tourist's satisfaction. However, local communities' attitudes are not moderated the relationship between accommodations, destination resources and attractors, accessibility and tourist's satisfaction. On the basis of obtained empirical results from this study, it is suggested that some improvements should be made to Sarawak rural tourism destinations for them to become more competitive rural tourism destinations.

Keywords: Service quality, satisfaction, intention to revisit, local communities' attitude, rural tourism, Sarawak

Kualiti Perkhidmatan, Kepuasan, dan Keinginan untuk Melawati Semula Destinasi-Destinasi Luar Bandar dalam Sarawak: Kesan Sikap Komuniti Tempatan sebagai Moderator

ABSTRAK

Disebabkan oleh pilihan kegemaran pelancong selalu berubah dan persaingan yang kuat dari pelancongan bandar, pengusaha perlu memenuhi keperluan pelancong terutamanya kualiti perkhidmatan. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menilai mana satu komponen kualiti perkhidmatan seperti aksesibiliti, kualiti penginapan, sumber-sumber destinasi dan sumber tarikan dan aktiviti luar akan mempengaruhi kepuasan pelancong supaya mereka mengunjungi semula destinasi yang sama. Sikap komuniti tempatan terhadap pelancong juga digunakan sebagai moderator untuk menilai konstruk. SmartPLS 3.0 (v.3.2.6) digunakan dalam kajian ini untuk menganalisis data yang dikumpul berdasarkan kaedah pemodelan dan bootstrapping. Dengan ini, sebanyak 255 soal selidik dikumpulkan dari Tanah Tinggi Kelabit Bario, Rumah Panjang Bidayuh Annah Rais dan Kampung Melayu Telaga Air dengan menggunakan teknik persampelan kemudahan. Berdasarkan analisi hasil, kualiti penginapan, sumber-sumber destinasi dan sumber tarikan, aktiviti luar dan aksesibiliti dapat mempengaruhi kepuasan pelancong. Selain itu, sikap komuniti tempatan juga memoderasikan hubungan antara aktiviti luar dengan kepuasan pelancong tetapi tidak memoderasikan hubungan tiga konstruk lain. Berdasarkan hasil kajian empirikal yang diperolehi dari kajian ini, beberapa penambahbaikan perlu dirancangkan supaya destinasi-destinasi pelancongan tersebut menjadi lebih kompetitif.

Kata kunci: *Kualiti perkhidmatan, kepuasan, keinginan mengunjungi destinasi semula, sikap komuniti tempatan, pelancongan luar bandar, Sarawak*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

The tourism industry has grown remarkably well as a key contributor to both the economic and social health sectors throughout the world. There is a rising trend of travellers who enjoy rural life which is rich in culture, artefacts and activities of the past. This is generally termed cultural or heritage tourism, and it is becoming the fastest growing segment in the tourism industry. This positive trend is proven by the rising volume of tourists seeking adventure, history, archaeology, culture, and enjoying interaction with local communities.

Due to the changing tourist expectations and strong competition from the urban tourism segment, there is a necessity for entrepreneurs of rural tourism to fulfil tourists' needs so that their business can prosper in the coming year despite the tough environment (Campón-Cerro et al., 2017). This issue is critical to rural tourism operators since tourists are increasingly demanding and expecting services of high quality; they would compare tourism products and facilities offered by various operators of other tourism segments before they make a final choice (Nygård, 2012). Therefore, the rural tourism industries need to emphasise providing quality service as well as focusing on service areas that may attract a large number of tourists and increase customer satisfaction. This will motivate tourists to revisit places of interest and recommend them to their friends by word of mouth, thus ensuring long-lasting profitability and survival of the rural tourism industry (Ismail et al., 2016). Kumra (2008) highlights that operators of tourism enterprises, be it private or

public, have to determine their target groups' expectation of the services offered. It is a must to improve the service quality by understanding customers' expectations, their current knowledge, word of mouth and their past experiences to increase customer satisfaction, which in turn will raise the possibility of tourists to revisit a destination (Hersh, 2010). Moreover, the local communities' attitudes towards tourists also play a key role in determining their intentions to revisit a rural destination (Reitsamer et al., 2016). Attitudes of local communities towards tourists are important ingredients in tourism development planning; local communities can participate in the decision-making process as a stakeholder by giving their views and feedback (Abas & Hanafiah, 2014; Hanafiah et al., 2013; Ling et al., 2011).

Based on the Eleventh Malaysia Planning (2015), almost 75% of Sarawak is consisting of rural land. However, the population living in rural areas dropped from 29.1% in the year 2010 to 26.3% in the year 2014. In addition, most of the jobs available involve manual labour such as hunters, farmers and fisherman, which make up the low-income group of the rural population, works of this nature is unattractive to young people. On the basis of the aforementioned facts, transformation of rural areas into rural tourism destinations can create more attractive jobs and increase the income of the local communities. Rural tourism is not only a driving force for regional development, but it can also act as a catalyst for rural regeneration to uplift the wellbeing of rural communities. Development of rural tourism can bring about great contributions to a rural region improving the living standard of local residents (Moscardo, 2008), creating more employments (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004) developing better infrastructure and facilities (Scheyvens, 2002), increasing new investments (Topolansky Barbe et al., 2016), elevating the awareness of culture and better livelihood (Zhang, 2012), heightening the

importance of natural environmental reservation (Bandara, 2001), and improving social life (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). In many rural destinations, the extra incomes spun off from tourism are a key factor to keep the household incomes stable. In some instances, the earnings from tourism are even higher than those from agriculture (Pažek et al., 2010).

The concept of service quality has been studied extensively in a variety of service industries, with a growing research attention on the tourism. However, these studies mostly mainly focus on the context of sport tourism or urban tourism and most of these studies were conducted in Taiwan (Lai et al., 2016; Pan, 2012), Hong Kong (Chan, 2015; Zhu, 2010), Thailand (Jankingthong & Gonejanart, 2012; Nilplub et al., 2016), the United States (Assaf & Tsionas, 2015; Boley & McGehee, 2014) and so on.

1.1.1 Rural Tourism in Malaysia

Tourism sector has been recognised as a very important economic contributor to the growth of domestic business, offering job opportunities to the citizens and raising their per capital income and living standards. The Malaysian government has taken the growth of this sector very seriously, after the first tourism boom in 1990, and the successful launching of Malaysian tourism activities through the ‘Visit Malaysia Year Campaign’. Undeniably, tourism has become a significant economic activity for Malaysia and this fact can be seen in the outstanding performance of Malaysia’s tourism industry in 2015. Based on the statistics obtained from the Tourism Malaysia official site, the tourist receipts were RM69.1 billion for the year 2015, which slightly exceeded the initial target of RM65 billion. In comparison, the Visit Malaysia Year 2014, recorded higher receipts of RM 72 billion, this excellent contribution came about as a result of the government’s bigger financial allocation for conducting various publicity and promotion activities. Even though

the amount recorded in the year 2015 represents a decline of 4%, compared with that of the year 2014, it is reasonable as there was no special allocation. The performance of the year 2015 is fair showing tourist arrivals with a 0.02% increase (Tourism Malaysia, 2016).

Considering the sizeable contribution of the tourism industry to Malaysia's economy, Tourism Malaysia, which is the primary agency of Malaysia's tourism, has aggressively promoted Malaysia as a preferred tourist destination with a number of promotional and marketing strategies. For example, at the international level, the theme 'Malaysia Truly Asia' continues to be the slogan for all types of advertising. To develop the untapped potential and promote tourism in the state, 'Zoom Malaysia' was promoted aggressively across the country since early year 2008. The campaign was later expanded to cover Singapore. At the same time, Tourism Malaysia continues to promote niche products, especially those with elements of eco-tourism and adventure sports to the long-haul travellers. The establishment of MyCEB raises the awareness that Malaysia is a good destination for meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE). The agency is also instrumental in the development and provision of many establishment of many MICE facilities and services in Malaysia. Tourism Malaysia continues to pay special attention to this segment (Tourism Malaysia, 2009).

However, these promotion events would certainly be wasteful if they are not harnessed to develop the potential of rural tourism that can contribute to the Malaysian economy. Various studies (Li et al., 2016; Mihailović & Moric, 2012; Nair & Azmi, 2008) had shown that several changes have occurred in the last two decades in the evolution of the rural tourism industry. As indicated by Wall (1994), there was a growth of visitation to many natural places, particularly in the developing countries. Rural tourism destinations are well-known among tourists who enjoy unique travel experiences, such as peaceful

relaxation, inspiration, recreation, local culture and entertainment (Lo et al., 2013). Developing rural tourism helps to energise the rural economy and in particular, plays an important role in creating a commercial channel for local produce (Liu, 2006), through which the rural residents can sell their value-added products and generate extra income for themselves.

Moreover, the Malaysia Ministry Deputy Secretary-General, Rashidi Hasbullah highlighted the importance of rural tourism by declared that “Rural tourism is seen as one of the potential segments to boost the tourism industry further up the value chain.” The comment is significant because of the potential social and economic benefits of rural tourism. Business activities of this segment are able to generate revenues which can be utilized to develop infrastructures for the rural and less economically developed areas (The Star Online, June 2014). Realising the tremendous potential in rural tourism, the Ministry of Tourism in Malaysia has been actively involved in promoting community-based activities such as Homestay Program, the purpose of which is to encourage interaction between the rural communities and tourists; this will help to increase the number of tourists visiting Malaysia (Abdul Razzaq et al., 2011). Besides, the Economic Planning Unit of Malaysia was assigned to prepare a 5-year Rural Tourism and Cultural Master Plan for country for the years 2016-2020. The emphasis of the plan is to transform the rural areas and to uplift the wellbeing of the rural communities by these programs: reenergising rural economic activities, enhancing human capital capabilities, extending provision of quality rural basic infrastructure and basic services, improving the provision of rural basic infrastructure and streamlining delivery system (Economic Planning Unit, 2015).

The latest tourism policy in the 10th Malaysian Plan from the years 2011 to 2015 was drafted by the Tourism Ministry; it sets out some guidelines to promote rural tourism

widely as one of the new niche products for the next 10 years. However, the promotion may fail to sustain the development of rural tourism if tourism operators do not understand on tourists' taste or meet their expectations of travel (Salleh et al., 2013). Therefore, in order to transform rural tourism into a sustainable industry and a high-income generating business, there is also a need to identify commercially viable services and products that are inherent in the local industry and local communities (Said et., 2011). It is clear nowadays that the new waves of tourists would say "no" to mass tourism (Wild Asia, 2006). They are more concerned with journeys of real quality experiences to natural places; they are more interested in processes, services or products that promise relaxation, adventure, and experience sharing. Therefore, tourism operators, either private or public, have to be clear about tourists' expectations, their knowledge, their past experiences, and word of mouth. A detailed understanding of the tourist profile will help tourism operators to improve the quality of services or products offering (Kumra, 2008).

Since rural tourism plays an important role in the Malaysian' economy development, it is necessary to provide a comprehensive tool for tour operators to understand the key factors of destination competitiveness and quality improvement. Within this context, this study aims at conducting a research to provide a more analytical understanding of tourist's needs. Another objective of the study is to identify service quality attributes that can influence the current satisfaction level of tourists and how tourists' satisfaction leads to their revisit intention from the perspective of the tourist.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the importance of rural tourism and its potential contributions to the country's economic growth as well as improving the local community's standard of living (Aliman et al., 2016; Hui et al., 2007), debate and extensive discussion are still ongoing; industry participants are stuck at the stage of argument about successful development of tourism destinations that will lead to sustainability of profitability (Chang, 2013; Chi & Qu, 2008; Cho et al., 2014; Kwok et al., 2016). Hence, it is noted that the issue pertaining to sustainability and profitability of rural tourism destinations remains unsolved. In fact, among the alternatives, study on service quality, satisfaction, and revisit intention from the viewpoint of demand side is seen to be imperatives (Han & Radder, 2011; Rajaratnam et al., 2015). According to past researchers (e.g., Awad, 2012; Lai et al., 2011), the ability of tourism destination to satisfy customers is the key factor for tourism destinations to increase the incomes from repeat tourists, provided the condition of service quality is maintained.

With the current competitive business environment, in this globalised and technology-oriented world, quality of services and customers satisfaction are always the key point to gain a competitive advantage in the tourism industry (Hoang et al., 2016; Tan & Omar, 2014; Woo, 2016). Undeniably, the tourism market has increasingly become more competitive (Thiumsak & Ruangkanjanases, 2016), and the Malaysian' tourism sector faces the same situation (Ahmad et al., 2014; Lo et al., 2013). Thus, based on the findings of past studies, good service quality is seen to be one of the contributing factors that may enhance the attractiveness of a tourism destination, and hence tourists' satisfaction (Dmitrović et al., 2009; Xiaoli & Chirapanda, 2013); this is a good way for the

tour business to stay competitive. On the other hand, poor service quality tends to result in dissatisfaction among tourists and leads generating negative word-of-mouth. These two unpleasant elements will ultimately reduce the tourists' revisit intention.

Clearly, consumers or best known as tourists in the context of rural tourism, do play a vital role in determining the success or failure of a destination. According to the evidence provided by various studies, a destination's ability to attract, retain, and increase tourists' revisit is the factor for a destination to remain competitive (Hsu et al., 2008; Tan & Omar, 2014). It is crucial to provide a good quality services to satisfy the requirement of tourists, as they become more demanding and look for feel-good experiences (Richards, 2001; Godbey, 2008). Nevertheless, a very limited study has been done to understand tourists' perceptions on service quality based on destination attributes, particularly in the context of rural tourism destinations towards satisfaction and revisit intentions (Rajaratnam et al., 2015). This scenario is certainly true for rural tourism destinations in Sarawak.

Moreover, researchers of past studies (Alegre & Garau, 2010; Arabatzis & Grigoroudis, 2010; Chui et al, 2010; Liu, 2006; Meng et al., 2008; Stickdorn & Zehrer, 2009; Yusof & Rahman, 2011) have pointed out the issue of declining number of tourists to tourism destinations; this is a major concern among the tourism destinations. It is believed that the dwindling number of tourists is due to dissatisfaction with the services or products delivered. In fact, service quality is recognised as a prerequisite for the success of a service sector (Chang & Tsai, 2016; Kwok, et al., 2016). It is propounded that a good service quality tends to lead to higher satisfaction among the tourists, which will produce revisit intentions. There is limited demand for rural tourism destinations and not all of them are suitable for all type of tourists as compared with urban tourism spot. However, the rule of thumb is this: the higher the rate of re-visitation to a destination, the more promising the