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LOCAL COMMUNITIES' PERCEPTIONS ON RURAL TOURISM COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE: A STUDY ON KAMPUNG BAKO (BAKO NATIONAL PARK), KUCHING, SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

Rural tourism in Malaysia has been designated as a potential segment to give a boost to the tourism industry in further up the value chain; it is also a natural and ready-made vehicle for the rural community to develop their local area economically and infrastructurally. The development of tourism destination, however, should own a capacity in maximising the competitive advantage to be effective and yet sustainable. This study examines the perspective of local community on the relationship between economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts on tourism, stakeholder involvement, and community tourism knowledge with rural competitive advantage. 150 residents of a rural tourism destination in Sarawak, Malaysia voluntarily took part in this study. SmartPLS 2.0 (M3) was applied, to assess the developed model, based on path modelling. Subsequently, to generate the standard error of the estimate and t-values, bootstrapping with 500 re-samples was applied. The findings suggested that stakeholder's involvement in tourism, community support for tourism, and economic impact of tourism have had a significant positive impact on rural competitive advantage; community knowledge of tourism and environmental and socio-cultural impacts of tourism, did not have a significant impact on the same. The implications arising from these findings are then been further discussed.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is one of the very few studies which have investigated the tri-dimensional constructs of tourism impacts, community knowledge and support, and as well as stakeholder involvement for the development of rural tourism competitive advantage in a single framework and was conducted in developing countries in Asia, specifically Sarawak, Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism in Malaysia is a fast-growing segment that received governmental attention at the federal level. To be precise, this tourism segmentation has been given more attention at the state (Sarawak) level, by the fact that Sarawak's tourist attractions are located mostly outside the urban area. In fact, the Sarawak Ministry of Tourism is encouraging all rural community to participate themselves into tourism industry via home-stay programmes and community-based ecotourism activities; such programmes involve proper registration (which implies regulation is implemented) 1and skills training to ensure the maintenance of quality and standards of service (Towards More

Rural Tourism Participation, 2014). However, the local community themselves are the key participants and they need to be willingly involved in proposed initiatives. The coordination between all rural actors and stakeholders (known as the rural regime), leading to a balanced development of a rural area as to be in place (Randelli *et al.*, 2012) . It has been noted that local community of rural destination has different motivations when dealing with a development of tourism destination (George *et al.*, 2009). The community could be active in their approach, especially when they experience economic crisis which requires them to develop the destination in question economically (contrived tourism development model). On the other hand, the community could also be more passive and only attempted to develop rural tourism when opportunities emerged, perhaps as a response to a market demand.

In view of the foregoing, the researchers would surmise that community and other stakeholder involvement is imperative for rural destination development. The involvement of the community is reflected in locality support for tourism, and knowledge about the rural destination. The sustainable effort from people in the community is a must, and the motivation factor would determine the sustainability of the effort when positive outcomes were experienced through various channels, namely favourable economic, socio-cultural, and huge environmental impacts on the rural destination targeted. Whatever the motivation is, the ultimate goal would remain by ensuring the destination as the one that is competitively advantaged.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Rural Tourism Competitive Advantage

There have been several studies which investigate the relationship between community and stakeholder-related factors, and the competitive advantage of a tourism destination. For example, Crouch (2007) proposed a very comprehensive model for destination competitiveness, in which several attributes were linked to stakeholders and the local community; the involvement of community in the staging of special events which have touristic significance, the political will of community and political leaders in shaping attitudes towards tourism, the level of hospitality of the local community towards tourists, entrepreneurial talent (mostly amongst the local community players) in tourism development, and stakeholders' and community's input into destination policy, planning, and development. Wilson *et al.* (2001) also noted that stakeholders' involvement, the local community's knowledge about tourism, and localities tourism support were the factors to success.

Competitive advantage also has the elements which pertaining with identity preservation of the destination in question (Caprarescu *et al.*, 2013) the ability to effectively utilise resources in the long-run, a suitable marketing strategy, government support and the sharing of a common vision with stakeholders (Oye *et al.*, 2013) a co-operative marketing structure and collaboration amongst tourism providers towards market development (Ritchie and Crouch, 1993; Gorman, 2005). The researchers managed to overlook themes of networking, co-operation, involvement and initiative, from relevant parties, are the essential in developing competitive advantage. Meanwhile, the following sub-sections would oversee the themes in further detail, together with the positive effects on the rural tourism destination, which simultaneously lead in motivating further on the community and stakeholders' efforts.

2.2. Stakeholders' Involvement in Tourism

Stakeholders have a strong influence on the achievement of sustainable tourism objectives (Waligo *et al.*, 2013). Stakeholders can be defined as "*any group or individual who can affect or is affected by*" tourism development in an area (Freeman, 1984) and hence they can be the governments, tourist, local community, entrepreneurs, and other sectors (Gunn, 1994; Swarbrooke, 2001). Each stakeholder group can be considered as an important component of the tourism destination, based on their initiatives and thoughts which are external to the strategic planning and management processes (Dill, 1975) and their involvement has "*the potential to provide a framework within which*

sustainable tourism development can be delivered" (Robson and Robson, 1996). In addition, stakeholder's participation is vital especially when there are competing with interests and major conflicts between stakeholder groups that need to be avoided (Healey, 1998; Beierle and Konisky, 2000).

2.3. Community's Knowledge about Tourism

The success of a rural tourism destination is also linked with community's information and knowledge. Communities are often ignorant of tourism projects in place, or perceived their own level of knowledge as insufficient to develop and manage their respective tourist destinations (Lepp, 2008; López-guzmán and Sánchez-cañizares, 2011). Thus, increasing the community's tourism knowledge is part of the capacity building process. The capacity of community could be enhanced through three levels (Aref and Redzuan, 2009) namely individual level, community level and organisational level (Raik, 2002; Kieffer and Reischmann, 2004). At the community level, residents are involved in advocacy and decision making related to tourism activities, while at the organisational level, the community members are been organised into local organisations in their tourism participation.

2.4. Community's Support for Tourism

Based on the previous studies, community support has been found to be affected by the ranging of attitudes, perceived benefits (effects), and community attachment (satisfaction) (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2011; Lee, 2013). The tourism industry is expected to grow when local community support is present, regardless of the level of involvement from the said local community (Hanafiah *et al*., 2013). Community support has influences the treatment of tourists, which in turns affects their level of satisfaction with the destination in question, their intention to re-visit, and their word-of-mouth recommendations therein (Gursoy and Rutherford, 2004). The community can upgrade their level by involving into tourism product which providing excellent service and authentic experiences (Heath, 2002).

2.5. Environmental Benefits of Tourism

Most of previous researchers have noted the link between the environment and tourism. Basically, tourism is the obvious way that possibly capable to generate income in supporting ecosystem conservation and natural resource management (Archer *et al*., 2005) perhaps even improving the destination as a whole. On the flip side, however, tourism may cause negative impacts on the environment; perhaps a catalyst for reducing or even destroying natural resources, which includes vegetation and wildlife (Zhong *et al*., 2011; Kim *et al*., 2013). Furthermore, the more attractive a destination is, the more likely it is to be degraded by a high level of tourist presence (Hillery *et al*., 2001). Hence, a tourism destination must be maintained and enhanced due to the high reliance of tourism development on the natural environment.

2.6. Socio-Cultural Benefits of Tourism

The socio-cultural benefits of tourism include the preservation of traditional culture, improvement of inter-cultural communication, enhancement of social welfare and standard of living, and the refinement of recreational opportunities (Tsundoda and Mendlinger, 2009). Also, tourism is often a catalyst for change in socio-cultural elements rather than being as the main agent of change (Brunt and Courtney, 1999). However, local culture and customs may be exploited to satisfy the visitor, sometimes at the expense of local pride and dignity (Archer *et al*., 2005). By having a good management and planning, however, tourism can motivate the preservation of ancient cultures successfully.

2.7. Economic Benefits of Tourism

The most obvious contribution of tourism, and in most cases the reason for its existence in the first place, is the economy itself, which potentially capable to increase employment levels, business opportunities, and diversify economic activity in particular places (Tisdell, 2003; Yacob *et al.*, 2007). Tourism may also provide a monetary incentive for the preservation of local crafts, as there may be a tourist demand for local produce (Archer *et al.*, 2005). The development of tourism also requires supporting infrastructure, such as transportation facilities, utilities and accommodation; which the support has a spill over the local community accessible facilities. In many destinations, transportation infrastructure which constructed primarily for tourism purposes has serve as an access to the wider markets for locally produced goods (Archer *et al.*, 2005).

In view of the foregoing, the researchers formulate the following research questions as follows:

(a) Is there a positive significant relationship between stakeholders' involvement in tourism to rural competitive advantage?

(b) Is there a positive significant relationship between community's knowledge of tourism to rural competitive advantage?

(c) Is there a positive significant relationship between community's support for tourism to rural competitive advantage?

(d) Is there a positive significant relationship between the environmental impact of tourism to rural competitive advantage?

(e) Is there a positive significant relationship between the socio-cultural impact of tourism to rural competitive advantage?

(f) Is there a positive significant relationship between the economic impact of tourism to rural competitive advantage?

The above research questions are answered from the local community's perspective. To be precise, the researchers of this study chose the community as the respective respondents by relied on these two concrete reasons. Firstly, local community personnel could act as tourism suppliers (accommodation providers, tourist guides, food and beverage suppliers, transportation providers), and having vested the interest in the rural destination. Hence, they would be cognisant of the elements that are successful and the flipside for the said destination. They would also be aware of any logistical (or other) problems, and therefore be in a good position to offer good insight. Even if a local community representative was merely a resident who have no direct vested interest, he or she would still have insider knowledge about a destination that an external party would not be privy to.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study took place in Kampung Bako (Bako National Park), Kuching, Sarawak. Bako National Park is the oldest national park and the smallest one in Sarawak. However, that is one of the well-known national parks in Sarawak. The nearest village to this national park is Kampung Bako, with Malay as the main ethnicity. A quantitative approach was employed for this study and the research instrument used for data collection was a single questionnaire. In the said questionnaire, a total of 59 items were adapted from a previous study and modified accordingly to fit the Malaysian context. Respondents were requested to respond to the statements by stating their level of agreement via a seven-point Likert-scale (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Respondents were sampled via a purposive sampling technique using the following criteria: any local community person who has stayed at the Bako Village for a minimum of 1 year and aged of 16 years old and above.

Out of a total of 200 sets of the questionnaires which distributed to the local community by individual, only 150 sets were returned and could be utilised for further analysis. The response rate was as high as 75%, which signifies as an indication of freedom from response error (Nulty, 2008). The data had been preliminarily analysed via the

Statistical Package for Social Science 23.0 (SPSS). Because 25 questionnaire sets were found to be incompletely filled, they were discarded during the data cleaning process. Measurement and structural analyses were conducted on the remaining 125 sets of the questionnaires. PLS-SEM analysis (using SmartPLS 2.0 (M3)) was used to assess the research model; a two-step analysis approach was used to analyse the data. Bootstrapping, with 500 resamples, was used to generate standard errors of the estimation and t-values.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. The Measurement Model - Assessment

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test every item reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measurement scales. As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, all the items loading exceeded the minimum cut off point of 0.50 (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991) and thus the researchers can conclude that internal consistency has been achieved. All composite reliability (CR) values were above the minimum cut-off point of 0.7 (Chin, 2010) and all the average variance extracted (AVE) values were above the minimum criteria of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) while the Cronbach's alpha values were more than the minimum of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). Hence, convergent validity has also been achieved. To determine the discriminant validity, the researchers tested the square root of the AVE against the intercorrelations of a construct with other constructs in the research model (see Table 2); where all values were noted as greater than each of the construct correlations (Chin, 2010). The R^2 value for this model is 0.642. In summary, the researchers can conclude that the measurement model has passes the item reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity tests.

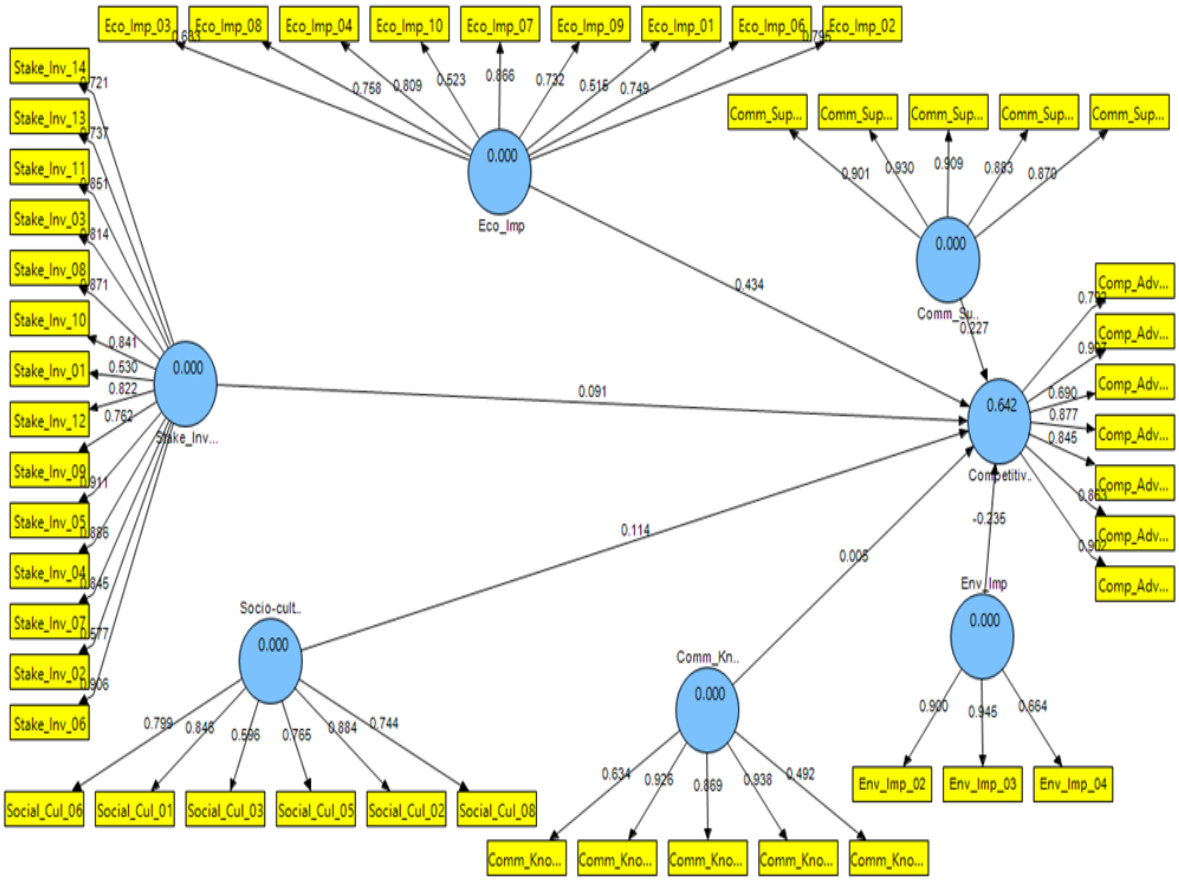

Figure-1. Results of the path analysis.

Table-1. Results of measurement model

Construct	Item	Loading	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Community Knowledge	Comm_Know_01	0.938	0.627	0.889	0.862
	Comm_Know_03	0.492			
	Comm_Know_04	0.634			
	Comm_Know_05	0.926			
	Comm_Know_07	0.869			
Community Support	Comm_Supp_01	0.870	0.808	0.955	0.941
	Comm_Supp_02	0.909			
	Comm_Supp_03	0.883			
	Comm_Supp_04	0.901			
	Comm_Supp_05	0.930			
Economic Impact	Eco_Imp_01	0.515	0.516	0.903	0.878
	Eco_Imp_02	0.795			
	Eco_Imp_03	0.633			
	Eco_Imp_04	0.809			
	Eco_Imp_06	0.749			
	Eco_Imp_07	0.866			
	Eco_Imp_08	0.758			
	Eco_Imp_09	0.732			
	Eco_Imp_010	0.523			
Environmental Impact	Env_Imp_02	0.900	0.714	0.880	0.798
	Env_Imp_03	0.945			
	Env_Imp_04	0.664			
Socio-Cultural Impact	Social_Cul_01	0.846	0.605	0.901	0.868
	Social_Cul_02	0.884			
	Social_Cul_03	0.596			
	Social_Cul_05	0.765			
	Social_Cul_06	0.799			
	Social_Cul_08	0.744			
Stakeholder Involvement	Stake_Inv_01	0.530	0.638	0.960	0.957
	Stake_Inv_02	0.577			
	Stake_Inv_03	0.814			
	Stake_Inv_04	0.886			
	Stake_Inv_05	0.911			
	Stake_Inv_06	0.906			
	Stake_Inv_07	0.845			
	Stake_Inv_08	0.871			
	Stake_Inv_09	0.762			
	Stake_Inv_010	0.841			
	Stake_Inv_011	0.851			
	Stake_Inv_012	0.822			
	Stake_Inv_013	0.737			
	Stake_Inv_014	0.721			
Rural Tourism Competitive Advantage	Comp_Adv_02	0.690	0.710	0.944	0.930
	Comp_Adv_05	0.845			
	Comp_Adv_06	0.877			
	Comp_Adv_07	0.907			
	Comp_Adv_08	0.863			
	Comp_Adv_09	0.902			
	Comp_Adv_10	0.792			

Note:

[a] Composite Reliability **(CR)** = (square of the summation of the factor loadings) divided by{(square of the summation of the factor loadings) + (square of the summation of the error variances)}

[b] Average Variance Extracted **(AVE)** = (summation of the square of the factor loadings)/{(summation of the square of the factor loadings) + (summation of the error variances)}

* Items Comm_Know_02, Comm_Know_06, Eco_Imp_05, Env_Imp_01, Env_Imp_05, Social_Cul_04, Social_Cul_07, Comp_Adv_01, Comp_Adv_03, Comp_Adv_04 were deleted due to their low loading.

Table-2. Discriminant validity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Community Knowledge	**0.792**						
2. Community Support	0.396	**0.899**					
3. Rural Tourism Competitive Advantage	0.571	0.505	**0.843**				
4. Economic Impact	0.638	0.378	0.612	**0.719**			
5. Environmental Impact	-0.239	-0.037	-0.399	-0.254	**0.845**		
6. Cultural Impact	0.762	0.570	0.677	0.613	-0.224	**0.778**	
7. Stakeholder Involvement	0.601	0.414	0.481	0.444	-0.205	0.444	**0.799**

Note: Diagonals represent the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) while the other entries represent the correlations.

4.2. The Structural Model – Assessment

Next, Table 3 presents the results of the hypotheses testing. The statistical results showed that three out of six hypotheses tested were supported. The results revealed that community support, economic impact, and stakeholder involvement were positively and significantly related to rural tourism competitive advantage from the local community perspective. Hence, H2, H3, and H6, were supported, whereas H1, H4, and H5 were not supported.

Table-3. Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	t-value	Decision
H1	Community Knowledge → Rural Tourism Competitive Advantage	0.005	0.077	0.071	Not Supported
H2	Community Support → Rural Tourism Competitive Advantage	0.227	0.083	2.721**	**Supported**
H3	Economic Impact → Rural Tourism Competitive Advantage	0.434	0.086	5.047**	**Supported**
H4	Environmental Impact → Rural Tourism Competitive Advantage	-0.235	0.070	3.329	Not Supported
H5	Socio-Cultural Impact → Rural Tourism Competitive Advantage	0.114	0.140	0.818	Not Supported
H6	Stakeholder Involvement → Rural Tourism Competitive Advantage	0.091	0.055	1.670*	**Supported**

Note: **p< 0.01, * p< 0.05

5. DISCUSSION

From the findings, the researchers noted a significant and positive impact wielded by stakeholder involvement on rural competitive advantage at the Bako National Park. Local community had the desire to be consulted and advocated on the formulation of tourism policies, even though decisions are ultimately made by formal and authorised bodies. Local community who wished to invest in tourism development opined that they should be accordingly financially supported. A direct involvement can also come via entrepreneurship endeavours or participation as staff. From the perspective of the community, tourists as a stakeholder group could contribute by simply showing their interest in the area/destination in question and continuing to maintain mutual connections with the local community after their first visit. Stakeholders in the form of the tour operators and businesses, tourism institutions, and local government do act mainly as the mediator and destination's promoters. At the same time, the tourism institutions and local government could facilitate the participation of tourism businesses such as travel entrepreneurs, restaurants and lodging providers; the tourism business players then should build their network with each other for mutual benefit purposes and for furtherance of tourism development.

Besides, community support for tourism has a significant positive impact on rural competitive advantage. Community support is manifested in the form of involvement in tourism planning and management, working

together with initiatives from tourism planning and development which are top-down, participation in tourism-related activities, cultural exchanges with visitors and promotion of environmental conservation. This has shown a consistency with the findings that noted for stakeholder involvement as mentioned earlier, where the local community has been portrayed as a vital component of the tourism equation and had its own role to play, in co-operation with the efforts of other stakeholders. Despite the support for tourism which noted amongst the community at Bako National Park, tourism knowledge among the community is not correlated with rural competitive advantage. This knowledge pertains to the economic boosting nature of the tourism industry in the destination area, which carry the fact that tourism involves both foreign and local tourists, the practice of eco-tourism in harmony with the environment, and local attractions. The community did not seem to understand tourism to the correct degree; yet they still placed their support behind tourism in their destination. This can probably be explained by the next point, which is the noted correlation between the positive economic impacts of tourism and rural competitive advantage. In other words, the local community may support every tourism initiative solely because of the economic benefits that they experienced, and not the community knowledge of tourism.

The economic benefits of tourism refer to the employment creation and business opportunities (especially for boat handlers/owners, as tourists could only enter and leave the Bako National Park via boat ride), investment and spending by tourists at the tourism area in question, the upgrading of public facilities and infrastructure, and enhanced standard of living. The findings are the economic considerations, which have been taking into account when developing the tourism industry at Bako, and the community is receiving economic benefits from tourism simultaneously.

The impact of tourism on the environment has no correlation with rural competitive advantage. At the study area, tourism was not perceived to provide an incentive for the protection of the natural environment. Also, the current level of tourism appeared to be the source of overcrowding, pollution and traffic congestion, leading to a lower quality of life for the residents. Most of the respondents have generally agreed that tourism does bring more negative than positive effects to the environment at the study area. The reason for these findings could lie behind the fact that the Bako National Park has been in existence since 1957 and is one of the popular tourism attractions in Sarawak, which obviously attracting many tourists every year. The high number of tourist arrivals would most likely be an inevitably inconvenience to the residents.

Similar to that of environmental impact, positive socio-cultural impacts of tourism are having no significant link with rural tourism competitive advantage, whereby the said socio-cultural impacts refer to the foreign culture and customs exposure on the part of the local community and vice versa, and the increase in recreational facilities' accessibility which purposely act to accommodate the tourists. At the same time, negative socio-cultural impacts have been noted which the erosion of local traditions and culture, problems with security and crime, and lower quality of life because of increased tourist presence are considered as several of examples. The foregoing implies that tourism development in the study area is not considering the aspects of socio-cultural.

In summary, the factors that have a positive relationship with rural competitive advantage are stakeholder involvement, community support for tourism and the economic impact of tourism is, while community knowledge about tourism, and the socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism on the community, have little or no correlation. The implications of the findings from this section will be discussed in the next topic.

6. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, factors that are linked to the collective efforts to develop tourism from the economic viewpoint have an impact on competitive advantage. Stakeholder's involvement refers to the involvement of multiple parties of influence, and the findings of this study suggest that the local community appear to have a significant amount of influence on the tourism development efforts initiated. However, they only benefit from the economic perspective and not the socio-cultural and environmental aspects. A possible reason for this would be due to the reluctant of

relevant authorities in taking their views on the socio-cultural and environmental aspects into account, or perhaps the community did not see the fit to proffer any feedback to the relevant authorities. Whatever the case, the local community should be given a bigger arena to express their opinions on socio-cultural and environmental matters and be consulted thereon for when drawing up tourism policies.

The findings inferred that tourism development efforts may not have placed leverage on the socio-cultural aspects of tourism. As such, tourism planners or entrepreneurs can take into consideration in promoting programs that highlight and utilise the shared cultural resources of the local community to the fullest. Tourism planners can investigate the various tourism products/attractions available to be marketed (and monetised) such as festivals, customs, music and musical instruments, dances and handicraft. Indeed, the community themselves and the uniqueness of their way of life could be marketed widely through tourism activities.

This study investigated the community's perspective on the contributing factors leading to rural tourism competitive advantage, which hence the value would be the contribution to the body of literature on rural tourism, and rural tourism competitive advantage in one developing country. The findings of this paper can serve as a contribution towards the construction increment of a tourism destination performance index. Such a performance index can be used to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of a destination, which represents precise information which can be utilised in the devising of programmes and policies to meet specific tourism outcomes or rural development objectives. Governments, at federal and state levels, can also use the said index as an objective basis to for sector goal-setting and establishment of investment priorities; the index can also serve as a tool for rural destination ranking and monitoring over time.

The researchers have endeavoured to the best of their ability by ensuring a rigorous investigative approach and data collection techniques as to be carried out; however, the current research findings are subjected to many limitations, like previous empirical investigation that has been conducted. Using larger sample, and increased sampling at other rural tourism destinations, would possibly lead to the improvement of the generalisability of this study.

Another study limitation refers to the use of cross-sectional data. In other words, data collected has reflected information that was correct of the local community at the time the primary investigation was done. The data obtained may vary over time, which hence lead this study as to be temporally limited. Hence, the researchers have suggested to any future studies, of the same issue, to be longitudinal in nature to capture the changing attitudes and responses (if any) of the local community in the same destination. Throughout the method on an ongoing basis, that can aid in proactively detecting whenever any tourism activity has reached its critical mass. This information would be a valuable input to each implementers and decision-makers for curbing of excess tourism activity while preventing and reducing negative impacts to the local community and destination in question.

Qualitative studies would also be of value. An example suggested to future studies would be to study the motivation of the local community in participating in tourism at different levels; perhaps to discover motivations other than that of an economic nature. This would also serve as valuable input for tourism planners in a rural destination, as that would indicate ways and means to experience local community involvement accordingly.

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