

# Positioning Rural Tourism: Perspectives from the Local Communities

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**Abstract**—Malaysian rural tourism is composed of a large number of rural communities, each with distinct and varied assets. Within Malaysia, it is noticeably that tourism demand drivers play an important part in generating trips to rural tourism areas. Rural tourism enables tourists to reunite with nature and the culture of the destinations, and that it contributes to the economic and social recovery of the rural areas, as well as to the conservation of the environment and the spreading of local cultures. There are significant strengths and potential opportunities available to rural tourism marketing efforts. Ecotourism has been actively promoted by governments as well as the industry, without an overall effective strategy, successfully protected area management plans and without consultation or inclusion of local communities. Hence, the purpose of this research is to conduct an analysis based on the existing tourism industry in Bario by examining the impact of economics, environmental, social and cultural factors of the tourism industry on the local communities in Bario. The findings suggested that the tourism industry has created a significant impact on the cultural aspect of local communities. Implications of these findings are discussed further.

**Index Terms**—Economics, environment, social, cultural, rural tourism, positioning.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In an area of rural setting, the economic well-being and employment opportunities for the local residents may very much depend on tourism industry [1], [2]. In tourism market, rural tourism is a growing sector whereby, the economic growth, socio-cultural development, protection and improvement of both natural and built environment and infrastructure are the significant contributions of rural tourism. Rural tourism allows tourists to blend with nature and appreciate the culture of the particular destination. In managing a rural tourism destination, one of the major tests is to understand customers' perceptions and expectations as customers can compare products offered by various destinations. With that in mind, it is imperative for industry

players to understand and fulfill the needs of their customers. A systematically managed and marketed rural tourism has a vast potential of providing opportunities to fulfill visitors' needs especially those who are searching for new destinations and experiences.

Rural tourism offers differentiated product offerings than their urban counterpart as rural areas are rich in natural and cultural traditional elements. Hence, it is imperative that these product offerings are preserved as well as practiced, as their existence provide attractions in promoting these rural destinations. In promoting rural destinations, it is therefore important to recognize the destination's tourism products and how these products are able to meet the needs of the customers.

Tourism plays a significant role in the economy of Malaysia as it is one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) under the Tenth Malaysia Plan, a comprehensive blueprint by the Government of Malaysia to allocate the national budget from the year 2011 to 2015 to all economic sectors, and it is Malaysia's third largest revenue generating industry, after oil and gas, and manufacturing sectors. Statistics have shown that in 2010, Malaysia welcomed an estimated 690,000 foreign visitors and 54% of these opted for rural tourism. Hence, it is important to ensure environmental sustainability of tourism activities in rural tourists' destination.

This study endeavors to evaluate the impact of economics, environmental, social and cultural factors of the tourism industry on the local communities in Bario, a rural tourism destination in Sarawak, Malaysia. Bario is located on the island of Borneo, close to the Malaysia-Indonesia border between Sarawak (Malaysia), and Kalimantan (Indonesia). As Bario is remotely located, it takes about 14 hours drive through unpaved and muddy logging road; or a two-day boat ride or a 12-day-long trek across forested mountains. The only practical way to get there is a one-hour flight on a 19-seater Twin Otter aircraft. Bario is rapidly becoming a popular rural tourism destination and tourists' arrival has increased from year to year. While the significant economic outcome can be readily understood, it is less apparent what the dramatic increase in tourism has on the Bario communities. Hence, understanding local communities' concerns in the development of a rural tourism destination is vital. It is believed that through this study, researchers would be able to uncover perceptions and attitudes that counterbalance the economic benefits of tourism as potential negative social and cultural outcomes of tourism would be examined. As stated by past researchers [3], [4], there is a growing need to assess communities' attitudes in places that are starting in tourism development process such as in Latin

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America, Africa, and Asia.

This paper focuses not only on positioning strategy from the angle of the local communities but also from the economics, environmental, social and cultural perspectives of communities, in creating a holistic planning of tourism positioning.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism industry generates economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits [5], which contribute to the revitalization of the local communities and improved local communities standard of life [6]. With the slowing down of the economy and the anticipation of recession, it is predicted that many foreign and local tourists would opt for an affordable tourists' destination and rural tourism destination is expected to be one of the potential tourists' choices. Past literatures in tourism [7]–[10] indicated that it is important to differentiate one tourism destination from the other by creating a unique identity for a destination. However, just like any other industry, tourism may bring changes to the local communities that may negatively affect local communities' lives. To achieve successful sustainable tourism development, community leaders and developers need to view tourism as a 'community industry' [11] as this enables local communities to actively decide and plan future tourism development. The primary reason for the attention of these issues is how the impacts of tourism are likely becoming important factors in planning for the successful development, marketing and operation of existing and future tourism programs and projects with the involvements of the local communities.

### A. Tourism and Local Communities

The local communities play a pivotal role in ecotourism development as their participation and involvement are critical to the process. They should be empowered to make decisions or be part of the decision-making process as they are dependent on natural resources provided by the environment. Past researchers posited that most of tourism studies concerning local communities were mostly focusing on the economic well being [5], [12] but ignoring on the other factors such as environment, social, and cultural aspects, which are equally important in determining if tourism has impacted positively or negatively. In studying communities' perception on ecotourism development, it is necessary to explore the impacts of economics, environmental, social and cultural factors on local communities, which will be the foundation of this research. From the economic standpoint, local people deserves to be given fair opportunities to be involved in tourism related activities, thereby increasing their earnings which could subsequently help to improve their standard of living [13]. Without the involvement of the local communities, the most likely outcome is that the local communities maybe powerless in the face of development and does not have the strength to influence tourism development [14]. Furthermore, ecotourism provides employment opportunities such as in homestay, retail, agriculture and handicraft sectors [13].

From the social aspect, communities' perceptions and

attitudes are vital in the development of ecotourism as ecotourism may result in the increase of crime rates, traffic congestion, and social ills in the communities. The negative impact of tourism on environmental scale such as pollution, the construction of accommodation and other tourists' facilities, and overcrowding is also being examined in this study. From the cultural perspective, this study is to investigate how ecotourism is likely to affect the local communities' way of life, the local culture and difficulties faced by the local communities as a result of ecotourism.

### B. Positioning Strategies

The concept of positioning is applicable to a company, service person or place and this is in tandem with the concept of a product, which can be defined as physical goods, service, place, person or idea [15]–[16]. Destination image refers to how a place is represented and it plays an important role in influencing tourists' choices in visiting the destination [17] and hence it is crucial for the destination to have a differentiation strategy in order to create a unique selling proposition [18]. This is further supported by [19] whereby the changes in the tourism sector, the intensifying competition, changes in tourist's behavior and expectation would affect the positioning strategy. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten about the fact that all these branding and positioning would not be successful without the careful involvement of local communities and their views should be included as part of the strategic planning of a rural tourists' destination. This is consistent with a study by [4] that found social, cultural and economic aspects of tourism impacted positively, but was negative towards environmental aspect as tourism development caused crowding and congestion, as well as urban growth. This further highlight the fact that in developing rural tourism destinations, careful planning ought to be placed on concerns of the local communities based on the aspects mentioned earlier.

## III. METHOD

An experimental study, convenience sampling method was adopted to select the respondents. This paper examined the impact of tourism at Bario, Sarawak. The sampling frame in this study is the local communities who are more than 18 years old and have live in Bario for more than 5 years. This study adopted method employed by [20] - [21] to measure the four impact of tourism studies known as economics, environment, social and cultural impacts because of the conceptual consistency underlying the definitions that were used in its development and also because it has been proven to have adequate psychometric properties. On the other hand, positioning question items were finalized based on the interviews and questionnaires adapted from [22] tourism scales. Nonetheless, some questions were dropped and reworded to suit the context of the local communities. A total of 120 questionnaires were distributed to the local communities residing at Bario. Out of the 120 questionnaires, only 66 questionnaires were used for analysis. To assess the model developed, SmartPLS 2.0 (M3) was used which is based on path modelling and then the bootstrapping [23] – [25] with 200 re-samples were used to generate the standard

TABLE I: LOADING AND CROSS LOADING

	Attitude	Cultural Impact	Social Cultural	Natural Amenities	Economics Impact	Environment Impact	Recreat_ Entertain	Social Impact	Value
Attitude 1	<b>0.748</b>	0.082	0.159	0.301	0.086	0.090	0.365	0.255	0.454
Attitude 2	<b>0.772</b>	0.185	0.367	0.290	0.145	0.231	0.614	0.210	0.767
Attitude 3	<b>0.851</b>	0.126	0.175	0.137	0.048	0.075	0.322	0.257	0.624
Attitude 4	<b>0.810</b>	0.201	0.189	0.176	0.017	0.133	0.377	0.230	0.651
Cultural Impact 1	0.128	<b>0.808</b>	0.244	0.354	0.424	0.519	0.268	0.748	0.247
Cultural Impact 2	0.215	<b>0.887</b>	0.412	0.372	0.278	0.406	0.364	0.459	0.287
Cultural Impact 3	0.098	<b>0.822</b>	0.350	0.268	0.183	0.285	0.289	0.270	0.186
Social Cultural 1	0.242	0.289	<b>0.853</b>	0.047	0.179	0.083	0.361	0.151	0.343
Social Cultural 2	0.332	0.464	<b>0.884</b>	0.140	0.205	0.117	0.387	0.116	0.386
Social Cultural 3	0.042	0.221	<b>0.766</b>	0.144	0.241	-0.001	0.295	-0.015	0.183
Social Cultural 4	0.157	0.172	<b>0.449</b>	0.343	0.173	0.196	0.364	0.113	0.322
Natural Amenities 1	0.401	0.105	0.265	<b>0.619</b>	0.152	0.265	0.582	0.167	0.484
Natural Amenities 2	0.125	0.077	0.259	<b>0.669</b>	-0.070	0.022	0.292	-0.205	0.245
Natural Amenities 3	0.153	0.437	0.092	<b>0.931</b>	0.225	0.383	0.538	0.390	0.187
Economics Impact 1	-0.078	0.291	0.135	0.245	<b>0.846</b>	0.510	0.242	0.471	0.114
Economics Impact 2	0.138	0.289	0.196	0.265	<b>0.868</b>	0.579	0.256	0.493	0.180
Economics Impact 3	0.064	0.316	0.307	0.191	<b>0.908</b>	0.509	0.230	0.332	0.200
Economics Impact 4	0.142	0.282	0.220	0.102	<b>0.761</b>	0.418	0.274	0.291	0.175
Environment Impact 1	0.091	0.565	0.292	0.416	0.575	<b>0.874</b>	0.313	0.492	0.202
Environment Impact 2	0.165	0.147	-0.143	0.247	0.395	<b>0.731</b>	0.132	0.456	0.194
Environment Impact 3	0.161	0.158	-0.224	0.143	0.247	<b>0.612</b>	0.006	0.626	0.117
Recreat_ Entertain 1	0.258	0.123	0.279	0.484	0.154	0.118	<b>0.645</b>	0.045	0.431
Recreat_ Entertain 2	0.406	0.172	0.330	0.617	0.178	0.301	<b>0.721</b>	0.165	0.443
Recreat_ Entertain 3	0.303	0.348	0.264	0.419	0.224	0.194	<b>0.741</b>	0.228	0.448
Recreat_ Entertain 4	0.450	0.149	0.305	0.423	0.043	0.057	<b>0.760</b>	-0.056	0.580
Recreat_ Entertain 5	0.467	0.393	0.436	0.550	0.340	0.256	<b>0.837</b>	0.242	0.628
Social Impact 1	0.297	0.549	0.129	0.357	0.473	0.606	0.243	<b>0.943</b>	0.329
Social Impact 2	0.230	0.718	0.212	0.410	0.374	0.437	0.207	<b>0.812</b>	0.260
Social Impact 3	0.249	0.372	-0.013	0.213	0.364	0.592	0.146	<b>0.876</b>	0.236
Social Impact 4	0.277	0.329	0.010	0.284	0.408	0.593	0.140	<b>0.875</b>	0.293
Value 1	0.571	0.327	0.507	0.349	0.178	0.227	0.681	0.193	<b>0.781</b>
Value 2	0.664	0.302	0.408	0.406	0.250	0.226	0.716	0.244	<b>0.912</b>
Value 3	0.651	0.244	0.207	0.235	0.141	0.157	0.534	0.315	<b>0.893</b>
Value 4	0.755	0.177	0.273	0.225	0.154	0.212	0.486	0.338	<b>0.891</b>

error of the estimate and t-values.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Assessment of the Measurement Model

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the scales. As shown in the TABLE I and II, most item loadings were larger than 0.5 (significant at  $p < 0.01$ ).

As shown in TABLE III, all Average Variance Extracted (AVEs) are closed to or exceeded 0.5 [26]. The composite Reliability (CRs) exceeded 0.7 [27] while the Cronbach alpha values 0.7 [28]. Thus, we ensured convergent validity because all the indicators load much higher on their hypothesized factor than on other factors (own loading are higher than cross loadings; [23]) (see TABLE I).

In addition, as indicated in TABLE IV, the square root of the AVE was tested against the intercorrelations of the construct with the other constructs in the model to ensure discriminant validity [23], [29] and all the square root of the AVE exceeded the correlations with other variables. Thus, the measurement model was considered satisfactory with the evidence of adequate reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Next we proceeded to test the hypotheses generated for this research.

B. Assessment of the Structural Model

TABLE V and Fig. 1 present the results of the hypotheses testing. The results indicated that only one dimension namely, cultural impact was found to have a significant impact on

repositioning of the rural tourism destination with standardized beta of 0.312 and is significant at  $p < 0.01$  thus, H4 was supported. Whereas, the other hypotheses such as the economics, environment and social were not contributing factors in repositioning of rural tourism destination, hence, hypotheses H1-H3 were rejected.

A global fit measure (GoF) assessment for PLS path modeling was also conducted, which is defined as geometric mean of the average communality and average R2 (for endogenous constructs; [24]) following the procedure used by [30]. Following the guidelines of [25], GoF values (see formula) were estimated, which may serve as cut-off values for global validation of PLS model.

TABLE II: RESULTS OF MANAGEMENT MODEL

Model Construct	CR <sup>a</sup>	Cronbachs Alpha	AVE <sup>b</sup>
Attitude	0.874	0.808	0.634
Cultural Impact	0.877	0.792	0.705
Economics Impact	0.910	0.867	0.718
Environment Impact	0.787	0.679	0.557
Natural Amenities	0.696	0.559	0.462
Recreat_ Entertain	0.860	0.808	0.553
Social Cultural	0.836	0.744	0.574
Social Impact	0.931	0.901	0.771
Value	0.876	0.808	0.616

Note:

a Composite reliability (CR) = (square of the summation of the factor loadings)/{(square of the summation of the factor loadings) + (summation of 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 error variances)}.

TABLE III: SUMMARY RESULTS OF THE MODEL CONSTRUCTS

Model Constructs	Standardized estimate	t-value
Attitude 1	0.748	3.492
Attitude 2	0.772	3.887
Attitude 3	0.851	5.552
Attitude 4	0.810	4.748
Cultural Impact 1	0.808	9.914
Cultural Impact 2	0.887	25.123
Cultural Impact 3	0.822	20.102
Social Cultural 1	0.853	13.119
Social Cultural 2	0.884	25.022
Social Cultural 3	0.766	6.205
Social Cultural 4	0.449	3.392
Natural Amenities 1	0.619	2.931
Natural Amenities 2	0.669	0.959
Natural Amenities 3	0.931	3.779
Economics Impact 1	0.846	14.252
Economics Impact 2	0.868	16.861
Economics Impact 3	0.908	31.611
Economics Impact 4	0.761	11.957
Environment Impact 1	0.874	2.871
Environment Impact 2	0.731	2.370
Environment Impact 3	0.612	1.754
Recreat_Entertain 1	0.645	7.328
Recreat_Entertain 2	0.721	9.100
Recreat_Entertain 3	0.741	8.213
Recreat_Entertain 4	0.760	8.747
Recreat_Entertain 5	0.837	16.973
Social Impact 1	0.943	15.281
Social Impact 2	0.812	6.692
Social Impact 3	0.876	13.537
Social Impact 4	0.875	15.738
Value 1	0.781	2.090
Value 2	0.912	2.753
Value 3	0.893	3.199
Value 4	0.891	3.201

The GoF value of 0.326 (average R2 was 0.171, average AVE was 0.0.621) for the (main effects) model, which exceeds the cut-off value of 0.25 for medium effect sizes of R2. As such, this concluded that the model has better explaining power in comparison with the baseline values (GoFsmall =0.1, GoFmedium =0.25, GoFlarge =0.36) [30]. It also provides adequate support to validate the PLS model globally [25].

$$GoF = \sqrt{AVE \times R^2}$$

V. DISCUSSION

Past studies suggested that an image of a destination consists of a few components and is a multi-stage process that the friendliness of the locals also plays an important part in positioning [31] - [32]. Tourism researches in the past focused on the tangible returns of tourism to the local communities and ignored the human dimension factors [33] - [34] and hence, it is timely to involve communities in the planning of positioning of a rural tourism destination in order to avoid wrong brand stigmatization with wrong decision [35]. It is believed that these results were able to assist in generating a greater competitive advantage and increase the profile of Bario as a unique rural destination since it has highlighted the impact of communities on positioning and branding of tourism destination. In addition to that, the increase in tourists' arrival will result in enhanced employment opportunities, which further translates to increase in revenue for the communities in eco-tourism destinations. Furthermore, more youths and their families will be willing to make a living in rural destinations by operating the homestay lodges and other tourism related activities. This will help to reduce rural-urban migration and increase the number of visitors, enhance the quality of services provided and will ultimately generate repeat businesses. The bigger objective is to improve the livelihood and increase the quality of lives of the local community which can be largely achieved among those involved in the tourism-related industry. Past research on rural tourism had mainly centered on developed countries in Europe or North America, and not many in the Asian continent [36]. This study investigates local communities' perception on destination positioning strategy and from this study; it was found that the local communities perceive the dimension of cultural as an important factor in positioning a rural tourist destination of Bario. This study also tested the dimensionality of tourism scales that are important for rural tourism development, based on local communities' perspectives. Past studies have noted that attitudes and perceptions of local communities are influential on the successful development of tourism program [21], [37].

In this study, four dimensions of tourism scales, namely environment, social, cultural and economics were used to measure the perceptions from community perspective and were tested on its capabilities of explaining sufficient variation in the construct being measured in Malaysia context.

TABLE IV: DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY OF CONSTRUCTS

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>1. Att_Service</b>	<b>0.796</b>								
<b>2. Cultural Impt</b>	0.182	<b>0.840</b>							
<b>3. Econ Impt</b>	0.087	0.348	<b>0.847</b>						
<b>4. Environ Impt</b>	0.156	0.479	0.597	<b>0.746</b>					
<b>5. Natural Amenities</b>	0.277	0.397	0.237	0.411	<b>0.679</b>				
<b>6. Recreat_Entertain</b>	0.508	0.371	0.295	0.271	0.663	<b>0.746</b>			
<b>7. Social Cult</b>	0.266	0.406	0.259	0.109	0.182	0.446	<b>0.758</b>		
<b>8. Social Impt</b>	0.301	0.581	0.466	0.630	0.372	0.217	0.110	<b>0.878</b>	
<b>9. Value</b>	0.770	0.290	0.201	0.237	0.340	0.685	0.394	0.323	<b>0.785</b>

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

Interestingly, only one dimension namely, cultural, was found to be statistically significant to positioning and is of the concern of the local communities when it comes to the positioning of the destination. This finding is supported by past researches [4] where cultural aspect plays an important part in rural tourism destination. This result could be due to the fact that Bario is a rural destination where traditional norms and customs prevail compared to other factors such as economics, social and environment impact. As stated by [38], in order to promote sustainable tourism development, one of the potential ways is educate the local communities to promote new behaviors that support the vision of tourism development without forcing for a value shifts in them. In addition to that, if the local communities believe that a friendly tourism branding results in more positive impact to them, their attitudes would shift quicker [39]. From the findings, it is concluded that though sustainable tourism is important, it will not be successful without the local participation and that the dimensions of positioning should be locally determined, based on the perspectives of the local communities.

TABLE V: THE ARRANGEMENT OF CHANNELS

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient	t-value	Supported
H1	Economics Impact→ Positioning	0.068	0.649	NO
H2	Environment Impact→ Positioning	0.170	0.890	NO
H3	Social Impact→ Positioning	-0.036	0.256	NO
H4	Cultural Impact→ Positioning	0.312	2.534	YES

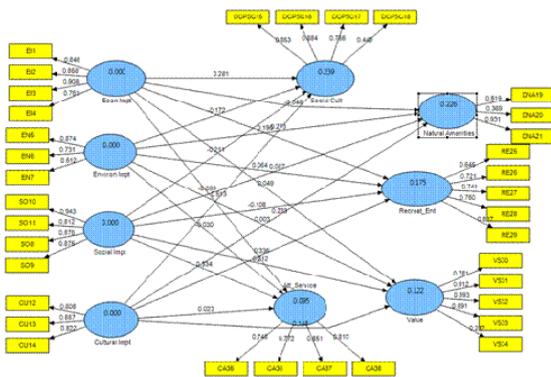


Fig. 1. Result of path analysis.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

It is interesting to note how the local communities at rural destination were first exposed to tourism and are able to utilize it to generate income from the tourism industry. This study has proven to be a valuable and efficient means of uncovering positioning strategies of rural areas at an early stage of rural tourism research. An important management implication that can be learnt from this study is that, though economics benefit is important, cultural values of the local

communities should be considered and carefully preserved by having a “softer” development approach such as training in order to support the underlying goals and purpose of the tourism industry. It is believed that such knowledge may influence and assist rural tourism implementers in rural communities and possibly improve the business prospects of the local tourism industry.

VII. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Though data collected from the perspective of communities could gauge some information about the perception of communities on positioning of tourism destination, nonetheless the sample size is small to generalize the results to other rural tourism destination. Nonetheless, the results have served as a fundamental research for future discussion on branding and positioning strategies for other rural tourists’ destination. Next, this is not a longitudinal study, and like any other cross-sectional study, it can only provide a static perspective on fit. In addition, different cultural and international contexts may limit the generalizability of results. It is unclear whether the findings may have the same implications for other tourism destination in different cultural environment as the values of the local communities in this current study might not accurately represent the values in other countries.

VIII. FUTURE RESEARCH

Though this study has contributed to the importance of tourism research particularly in Bario, yet future endeavors should be dedicated to comparing these findings in other rural areas. It is believed that the findings would assist the remote community to be more self sufficient and to be a better sustainable community both socially and economically. Future research pertaining to rural tourism in the rural community should investigate the acceptability of local communities by taking into consideration the key success factors before implementation. In addition to that, it is crucial to take note that the objectives and the purpose should be made known to all parties involved and accepted by all members and strike a balance between the inevitable diverse and similar interest.

IX. CONCLUSION

It has been propounded that, the progress of research on rural tourism has been slow but steady. Over the past few years, there has been a strong increased interest in these matters both in terms of theoretical thinking as well as empirical research. It is believed that an appropriate time to address the extent to which the progress about rural tourism destination thus far could be applied to a variety of social issues. Hence, it is timely to understand the importance of the dimensionalities affecting the local rural tourism industry as it can be extremely useful for tourism studies. Although these four impacts namely, environment, social, cultural and economics have been studied in previous researches, no known researches have been found to empirically study the

impact on rural tourism destination in the Malaysia context especially when it is linked to planning of positioning. This study has added to the growing body of research in tourism by examining the perspective of local communities on positioning strategy of a rural tourism destination. This study has chosen local communities of Bario as respondents and it emphasizes the importance of communities' attitude for the development of rural tourism industry. Ultimately, local Bario community and the industry players in particular will benefit from this study as this will amplify which are the areas in the community concerns that need improvements.

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