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RURAL DEVELOPMENT: MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS IMPACTING COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR RURAL TOURISM

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Abstract

Rural tourism has emerged as a viable domestic tourism option and a means of raising the standard of living and enhancing the environment for rural residents. Successful rural tourism greatly depends on rural tourism products and the local communities residing in particular areas. This study examines factors that influence rural community support for developing tourism in remote areas. The theoretical concept is framed by integrating social exchange theory with social representation theory. It employs a case study approach by examining multiple stakeholder views located in remote Kinabatangan, Sabah. Using a mixed-method approach and four labels of data convergence, the findings reveal conflicting views among the stakeholders pertaining to Indigenous motivation and participation in rural tourism activities. The study highlights employing a comrade approach to encourage aboriginal participation in tourism ventures, not merely depending on monetary incentives and tourism awareness campaigns.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Mixed method research, Dual theories, Indigenous people, Kinabatangan, Sabah

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INTRODUCTION

According to United Nation (2021), rural development refers to strategies and policies that aim to boost the economy, society, and environment, including to promote poverty eradication and pro-poor planning in rural areas. Absolute poverty is still widespread in Malaysia despite ongoing economic growth since independence in 1957 (Department of Statistics, 2021). The poorest people in the country are frequently located in rural areas, where families struggle to put food on the table and to pay for necessities for basic human rights like healthcare and education (United Nation, 2021; Department of Statistics, 2021). Sabah in particular continues to have the greatest prevalence of absolute poverty. In order to raise the social, economic, and living standards of rural residents, effective rural development that is in line with sustainable development goals (SDG) is urgently required. Rural tourism has played a vital role in reviving the rural economy (Ristić et al., 2019). Rural tourism is a type of vacation in which visitors spend a significant amount of their time enjoying recreational activities in rural areas or on farms surrounded by nature (Ristić et al., 2019; Rosalina et al., 2021). Rural tourism can also be a form of tourism that involves visiting rural places to partake in a variety of activities for tourists to experience rural life more authentically or to be closer to nature (Liu et al., 2020).

Malaysia views rural tourism as one of its key strengths, given the abundance of its natural resources, heritage, and diverse culture (Latip et al., 2019). Sabah, one of the thirteen states that make up Malaysia, is situated in Borneo's northern region. In particular, rural Kinabatangan, Sabah, supports essential ecosystems and endangered wildlife species (e.g., Bornean elephant, orangutan, and proboscis monkey), all of which are on the edge of extinction and listed as red species by the IUCN Red List (Estes et al., 2012; Pimid et al., 2020). Apart from the wildlife, this area is known for the nature and cultural values of the local Indigenous people, known as Sungai people (River people) (Pimid et al., 2020). With Sabah's rich living legacy and ethnic diversity, it is also regarded as one of the world's twelve mega-diversity locations, making it perfect for rural tourism (Latip et al., 2019). Many studies have examined the visitor perspectives, yet few have focused on the host communities (Rosalina et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2001). Therefore, understanding factors that motivate local people to engage in rural tourism activities is critical in order to increase the rural economy, alleviate absolute poverty, and protect the natural resources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework to Assess Community Support for Rural Tourism

Based on social exchange theory (SET), scholars prove that local people are more supportive of tourism development if they perceive the benefits of tourism (i.e., social, economy, and environment) outweigh associated costs (Jurowski et al., 1997; Latip et al., 2018). In many studies, positive impacts of tourism in terms of

economic gain are argued to be a leading factor that influences Indigenous support for tourism development in rural areas (Nepal, 2002; Strickland-Munro, & Moore, 2013; Gunter & Ceddia, 2020). This is because tourism provides employment opportunities and revenues to Indigenous communities, including an exchange of cultural experiences (Thimm & Karlaganis, 2020). It is proven that tourism provides economic incentive for sustaining costs in managing protected areas, in a similar way conservation is essential for tourism to develop sustainably (Fennell & Weaver, 2005). Despite the fact that the SET is widely applied for investigating residents' attitudes towards tourism development (Hadinejad et al., 2019), it has been criticised for reducing human interaction to economic calculations, including its focus on fulfilling individual needs from individual perspective, suggesting that it may not be applicable to group behaviour (Li et al., 2015).

Other researchers apply social representation theory (SRT) to examine tourism impacts, perceptions and attitudes of residents, wherein "*the SRT is concerned with describing and understanding how and what people think in their ongoing everyday experiences and how a wider social reality influences these thoughts*" (Pearce et al., 1996, p. 29). Social representation theory allows groups to share a common social experience and provides guidelines to individuals for how to react to certain phenomena, but once social representation is created, it is spread through media and other social interactions (Moscardo, 2011). Social representation theory serves two purposes; (1) it enables groups who experience new phenomena, make a reference point and use it as a comparison against one's own prior knowledge (e.g. past experiences, social interaction, and media), and (2) it enables sharing of communication among similar members of community, facilitating an understanding, and provides the members with codes for social exchange and classifying various aspects of their individual and group history (Li et al., 2015). Therefore, by focusing on everyday thinking and communication, SRT establishes a link between social and psychological organisation of knowledge (Moscovici & Marková, 1998).

Cheng et al. (2022) apply SRT and report that local perceptions of tourism are related to direct experiences, social interaction, and other information sources like the media. In the context of social interaction, the usage of social media creates wider chances for many people to communicate in the tourism sector. There are some debates on how to make social media effective for tourism research, but little is known regarding its role for Indigenous people and tourism (Hussain et al., 2018; Hamid et al., 2020). Therefore, further research on this matter enables a better understanding of how social media influences Indigenous people to engage in and support tourism ventures.

Research that integrates both SET and SRT theories is limited, but a few studies have applied both theories to examining tourism impacts and residents' perceptions. Weaver and Lawton (2013) explain that local residents'

attitudes are complex social exchange dynamic and supporters/opponents rely on personal experience or social representation. Li et al. (2015) explains that both theories are distinctive; the SET provides a rational information processing based on cost and benefit assessments, while the SRT allows subjective reactions to tourism based on individual social values. However, the latter authors highlight that when both theories are combined, they greatly assist in deeper understanding of resident perception on tourism because it looks into both personal gain/loss of associated tourism activities and social representation of direct experiences. Considering the concepts of SET and SRT, it is appropriate to incorporate both theories to provide a critical understanding of community motivational factors that influence views about tourism in rural Kinabatangan, Sabah, so we can examine:

- 1) Community perceptions on social, economic, and environmental impacts.
- 2) How social exchange affects individual values and community interaction.
- 3) Evaluation of social media as a potential tool for advancing rural participation.
- 4) Multiple social challenges and difficulties related to tourism that the native people encounter.

Conceptual Framework for Rural Tourism in Kinabatangan, Sabah

The study assesses the three pillars of social exchange and social representation concepts on factors influencing Indigenous support for tourism (Figure 1). The community support for tourism is measured in terms of interest to learn and participate in tourism activities. The integration of both theories focuses on eight aspects of examining the motivational factors that influence community support for rural tourism. Individual perceived impacts of tourism on social, economic, and environmental components (items 1 to 4) are personal reflections on their daily lives and how they evaluate such effects influencing their social interaction with other community members. In addition, we are looking at how existing community norms for those already participating in tourism influence others who have not participated in tourism venture (items 5 to 8). Therefore, capturing the intersection between the perceived impacts of tourism, personal values/experiences, and how wider social interaction among the community members influence their thinking, hence identifying what factors motivate them to engage in rural tourism.

Using this framework, we aim to extend the understanding and application of SET and SRT to encouraging community involvement in rural tourism so that the people, tourism, and conservation can coexist sustainably in this region. To support the theoretical concept, we employ a mixed method research (MMR) by integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to assist in the validation of empirical results with qualitative findings, and generating wider

perspectives on the dynamic relationship of Indigenous attitudes and tourism development (Creswell, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2016).

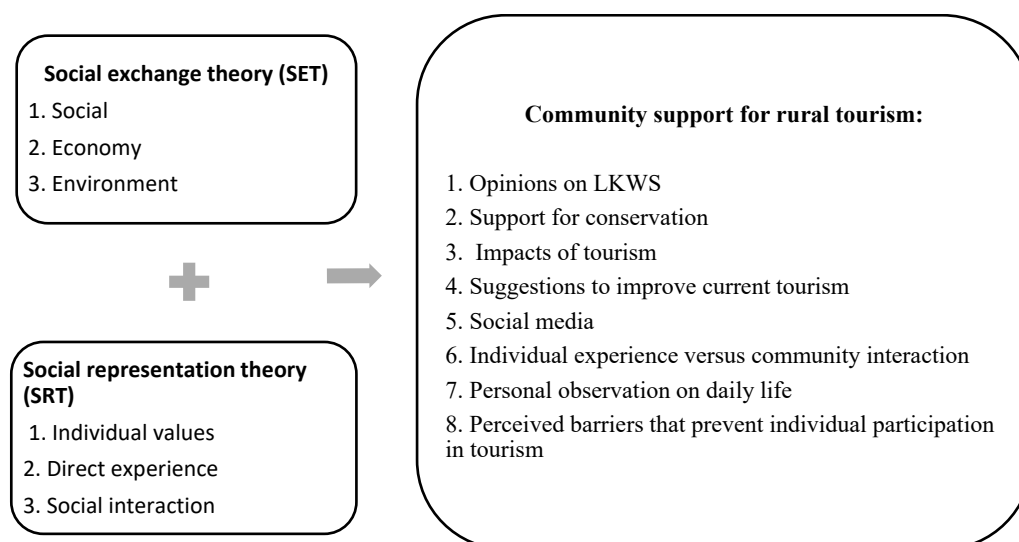


Figure 5: Conceptual framework on factors influencing Indigenous support for rural tourism.

Source: authors

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Site and Data Collection

The rural Kinabatangan is located in South-Eastern Sabah, Malaysia (5.5884°N and 117.8460°E). This study focused on two villages, Sukau and Batu Puteh located in this area. The Kinabatangan is dominated by the native, Indigenous people known as 'Orang Sungai' (River people). The majority of the Orang Sungai continue to maintain their daily life by engaging in traditional livelihoods such subsistence farming, fishing, season fruit harvesting, and the collecting and sale of forest harvest (Latip et al., 2015).

The study employed a mixed method research by integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, to address similar research questions with increased reliability, transparency, and consistency comparisons, starting from the development of the research questions through data collection, analysis, and discussion of findings. The selection of this method is based on the criteria that the study: (1) include multiple perspectives and more complete understanding to uncover the factors that influence the community support for tourism development; (2) validate and explain the quantitative results with qualitative

experiences; and (3) allow the presence of a researcher in a natural setting to best learn about community participation (Creswell, 2013).

For the quantitative method, 404 self-administered questionnaires were distributed to each house in Sukau and Batu Puteh villages, Kinabatangan Sabah. Five research assistants from the Kinabatangan were hired and trained in terms of understanding and explaining the research purposes to respondents in both villages. The questionnaire used was designed based on previous literature on Indigenous participation in tourism at or near protected areas (Latip et al., 2018; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2020; Hamid et al., 2020). The questions were organised into three sections:

- 1) socioeconomic profile: gender, ethnic, age, and occupation.
- 2) perceptions on current tourism: current community participation in tourism, decision-making, power to voice out opinions, perceived economic value.
- 3) five factors that influenced Indigenous support for tourism: opinions on Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary (LKWS), social media, support for conservation, impacts of tourism, and suggestions on how to improve current tourism.

The section 3 applied 5-Likert scale (1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree). The questionnaire also included one open-ended question: Please write down your opinions regarding factors influencing native support for tourism, tourism issues, and suggestions to improve current tourism policy.

To enhance the quantitative findings, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to 32 key informants comprised of five important stakeholder groups, including community leaders, government authorities, tourism operators, private sectors, and non-government organisations (NGOs). The interviewees were selected based on their expertise and experiences in tourism and conservation of protected areas in the Kinabatangan Sabah. Each interview was conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded, and typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interview questions focused on three themes: current Indigenous participation in tourism, factors that influenced Indigenous support for tourism, and future recommendations on how to improve current tourism.

Statistical Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the surveys were subjected to exploratory factor analysis and multiple linear regression analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 23). The interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis described by Gale et al. (2013) which was comprised of seven stages: transcription, familiarisation with interview data, coding, develop a working analytical framework, application of the analytical

framework, charting data into a framework matrix, and finally interpreting the data. In addition, this study also considered a manifest approach by Bengtsson (2016, p. 3) whereby the researchers “describe what the informants actually say, stays very close to the text, uses the words themselves, and describes the visible and obvious in the text.”

For triangulation, the results of quantitative and qualitative research were compared and contrasted using four labels of data convergence, namely confirm, contradict, mixed, and enhance (Fitzpatrick, 2016). When the results directly addressed a similar issue, they were labelled as either confirming or contradicting one another. The label ‘mixed’ was used when the data pointed both confirmation and contradiction. When the results provided different perspectives on a similar phenomenon or added a richness of understanding (but it neither directly confirm nor contrast one another), it was labelled as ‘enhance.’ Both quantitative and qualitative data findings were also compared with notes written during the field sampling.

RESULTS

Socioeconomic Profile of Respondents

The surveys yielded 328 completed questionnaires which indicated 81.2 % response rate. Majority of the survey respondents were male with 60.7 % while female was 39.3 %. Most respondents are local Indigenous people known as ‘Sungai’ people (75.9 %) while non-native people comprised of Bugis, Kadazan/Dusun, Malay and Chinese (24.1 %). A majority of them age between 34 to 49 years (48.5 %), followed by 18 to 33 years (37.8 %), and above 50 years (13.7 %). This area was famous for tourism activities such as wildlife viewing and homestay, but only 5.2 % of the respondents participated in this sector. Most of the respondents involved in subsistence work (25.6 %), conservation sector (25.3 %), or unemployed (23.5 %), while few were doing personal business (14.3 %) and working at government sector (6.1 %).

Assessment of Factor Analysis

A factor analysis using principal component analysis with oblimin rotation and Kaiser normalisation was employed to identify underlying structures of factors that influenced the local support for tourism development in this area (Table 1). The analysis resulted in five factors explaining 57 % of total variance. A reliability test showed an acceptable value of 0.86 for Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin with a significant Bartlett’s test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$), supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. The five factors were opinion on LKWS, social media, support for conservation, impacts of tourism, and suggestions to improve current tourism with items loading for each factor were listed in the table 1. These factors were subjected to a multiple linear regression analysis to determine the best

predictors that influenced the local support for tourism development in the Kinabatangan Sabah.

Table 1: Assessment of factor analysis.

Constructs Items	Loadings					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Opinions on LKWS						
1. Aware about LKWS conservation.	0.575					
2. Management of LKWS is good.	0.832					
3. LKWS involve local participation.	0.365					
4. LKWS protect natural resources.	0.358					
Social media						
1. I learn about tourism from social media.		0.955				
2. I promote tourism through social media.		0.834				
3. I learn about conservation from social media.		0.831				
4. Social media improves my tourism skills.		0.821				
5. Social media improves my conservation awareness.		0.732				
Support for conservation						
1. Share knowledge regarding conservation.			0.679			
2. Change negative attitudes for conservation.			0.656			
3. Participate in conservation activities.			0.610			
Impacts of tourism						
1. Encourage conservation in Kinabatangan.				0.484		
2. Generate job opportunities to local people.				0.801		
3. Tourism is owned by local people.				0.757		
4. Current tourism policy is good.				0.593		
Suggestions to improve current tourism						
1. Capacity building to train tourism skills.					0.751	
2. Financial assistance for local people.					0.793	
3. Improve tourism facilities in Kinabatangan.					0.686	
4. Prioritise tourism opportunities to local.					0.650	
Support for tourism development						
1. Interest to learn more about tourism.						0.737
2. Participate in tourism if given chances.						0.699

Current tourism policy refers to providing adequate income to Indigenous community. Source: authors

Assessment of Regression Model

Multiple linear regression was employed to assess the ability of five independent variables to predict factors influencing the support of Indigenous people for tourism development in the Kinabatangan Sabah (Table 2). Initial analyses showed the results adhered to the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. In particular, the independent variables had a correlation with “support for tourism development” with values above 0.3, and the correlation between each independent variable were less than 0.7 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The tolerance value was more than 0.1 whereas VIF value was less than 10, indicating the analyses did not violate multicollinearity assumption. Outliers were checked using Mahalanobis distance with a value of 28.54 which exceeded a critical value of 20.52 and Cook’s distance of 0.05 was

smaller than 1, thereby confirming an absence of outlier problem (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

The total variance explained by the regression model as a whole was 39.4 %, and this model was expressed as $F(5, 322) = 41.94, p < 0.01$. The results showed the support of local Indigenous for tourism development was significantly influenced by the five factors, namely “opinion on LKWS, social media, support for conservation, impacts of tourism, and suggestions to improve current tourism.” The most important step was to compare the contribution of each independent variable towards dependent variable (i.e., support for tourism development) using the Beta values. In this study, the largest Beta coefficient was 0.34, which was for the factor “support for conservation.” It indicated this variable made the strongest unique contribution to explain the dependent variable, when the variance explained by other factors in the model was controlled. The second factor was “suggestions to improve current tourism” (Beta = 0.27, $p < 0.01$), followed by “opinion on LKWS” (Beta = 0.11 $p < 0.05$), “social media” (Beta = 0.11, $p < 0.05$), and “impacts of tourism” (Beta = 0.11, $p < 0.05$). Overall, the quantitative analysis empirically confirmed that the five factors influenced the Indigenous support for tourism development in this area.

Table 2: Regression analysis on the community support for rural tourism

Independent variables	Beta	t	Sig	Support factor	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	-	-0.405	0.686	-	-	-
Opinions on LKWS	0.105	2.157	0.032*	Yes	0.800	1.250
Social media	-0.106	-2.300	0.022*	Yes	0.889	1.125
Support for conservation	0.340	6.289	0.000**	Yes	0.643	1.556
Impacts of tourism	0.114	2.250	0.025*	Yes	0.731	1.367
Suggestions to improve current tourism	0.268	4.710	0.000**	Yes	0.582	1.718

Significant when * $p < 0.05$ or ** $p < 0.001$.

Source: authors.

Triangulation of Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses

The interviewees related the lack of community participation with inadequate capabilities and resources such as personal skills, knowledge, facilities, and finances. The Indigenous communities were not involved in the tourism decision-making and they were only informed after discussions.

The respondents who perceived the impacts of LKWS positively were more supportive of tourism development because they realised that tourism alone could not be sustained without protecting the natural resources, indicating three-way symbiotic link between the Indigenous, tourism, and conservation. They perceived positive impacts of tourism on employment opportunities, economic revenue, women empowerment, and wildlife protection. Nevertheless, the informants highlighted that a profit prevailed against a pure intention in protecting the tourism resources.

They also explained that the community support for rural tourism related to their unique interests, and that it was difficult to encourage others to join tourism programs. Due to a lack of knowledge, only few respondents used social media to promote tourism. The interviews enhanced the survey findings in terms of developing products and tourism sites at community level, strategies to integrate different opinions, resolve conflicts, a smart partnership to attract more tourists, as well as to find a balance between the stakeholders' needs, conservation, and tourism development. The interviews unveiled compelling issues that discouraged Indigenous participation such as tourism competition, a lack of avenue to openly talk about tourism problems, and that the stakeholders had vague understanding on their own roles in tourism. After the comparisons of quantitative and qualitative analyses, the study categorised the motivating factors into the four labels (Fitzpatrick, 2016):

- 1) Confirm: Indigenous participation in tourism, social media, and impacts of tourism.
- 2) Contradict: community involvement in the decision-making process and platform to openly talk about opinions.
- 3) Mixed: factors influencing Indigenous participation in tourism.
- 4) Enhanced: suggestions to improve current tourism.

DISCUSSION

The present study provides comparative views on motivational factors that influence communities' support and participation in rural tourism using a mixed method approach. In this study, the value of integrating two theories and apply the mixed method research is a deeper understanding of 'what, how, and why' because it provides a fuller picture of factors influencing community support for tourism in rural areas.

Factors Influencing Community Support for Rural Tourism

The empirical results showed that respondents who supported conservation, had positive perceptions on the LKWS performance, perceived tourism impacts positively (i.e., job opportunities and good incomes), and that rural tourism policy was drafted based on their opinions were more inclined to support tourism

activities, indicating consistent findings with previous studies (Fletcher et al., 2016; Özel & Kozak, 2017; Latip et al., 2018). Good economic development, social experience, tourism planning and management are prevailing factors that encourage successful rural tourism in developing countries (Rosalina et al., 2021; Isa et al., 2022). In this study, an empowered interrelationship between rural tourism benefits and successful conservation interventions is an added value that strengthen the Indigenous inspiration for living hardship in remote areas.

The analysis revealed that it was difficult to encourage a major portion of rural people who are not participating in rural tourism activities. This problem is compounded due to a low participation poses a sustainability issue – future tourism in this region might see a domination from outside inhabitants. Consequently, the rural people still maintaining subsistence livelihoods, not much involved in tourism development, slowly but eventually may be discouraged in preserving the environmental resources (Latip et al., 2015; Pimid et al., 2020). In Kinabatangan, rural community needs to experience tourism benefits, even in a small scale, hence to soften impacts of tight conservation regulation on restriction of resources consumption and slowed infrastructure development. Apart from achieving sustainable development, the economic benefits derived from rural tourism activities are essential element for protecting the ecosystem and cultural environment in rural areas (Ristić et al., 2019).

The present study highlights contradictory finding observed between communities' perspectives and stakeholders' perspectives about their abilities to make decisions and platform to openly talk about their opinions. Importantly, community exclusion in tourism decision-making, inefficient communication, and a lack of transparent governance are factors that discourage community support for rural tourism (Strickland-Munro & Moore, 2013; Wilson et al., 2001). In Kinabatangan, one possible reason for the discrepancy result observed here is that the interviewed stakeholders are directly related to tourism works, whereas questionnaire participants are representative of each house who might not directly involved in tourism. This indicates important methodological implication when conducting a mixed method approach. On hind-sight, it shows the benefit of employing triangulation approach to validate research findings (Fitzpatrick, 2016).

We found a significant effect of social media on community support for rural tourism development. Our findings revealed those working at private sector tourism were able to expand rural tourism coverage to both local and international tourists. Unfortunately, majority of local Indigenous, whom work at local tourism operators or doing homestays, do not know how to utilise social platforms:

“Local people use internet to connect and promote tourism here, but the numbers are few because not many know how to do so. There is a need to educate them in using digital platform to promote tourism products here.”
(Local resort operator, Respondent 21)

Although internet access is readily available in this region, application of advanced social media such as to establish a website to promote rural tourism packages, contactless payment, and sharing of tourists’ experiences online in remote areas, is currently not utilised among the villagers. From the SRT theoretical perspective, the locals could apply tourists’ experiences and social interaction with the rural community for promoting tourism packages (Moscovici & Marková, 1998; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Because tourism is place-oriented, management and marketing typically involve a collective community effort: the community as a whole and its image must be marketed, not just one attraction (Wilson et al., 2001). Therefore, community ability to practice digital platforms for marketing is important to promote high-quality tourism.

Strategic Approaches to Enhance Tourism in Rural Areas

Common challenges experienced by rural areas in developing countries are: struggle to establish a comprehensive planning, poor access to rural tourism destinations, seasonality, the competition and threats of outsiders (who might take the job opportunities) (Rosalina et al., 2021). Scholars highlight important success factors for rural tourism: good leadership, support from local government, sufficient funds, widespread community support, informative technical assistance, good convention and technical bureaus (Wilson et al., 2001; Liu et al., 2020). Notably, Kinabatangan encounters the same troubles, exaggerated by poverty incidences, local limited capacity to market rural tourism, and the few participations of local villagers. Therefore, understanding how to stimulate local support for tourism has become more prudent and timelier.

Consistent with the SRT concept (Pearce et al., 1996; Li et al., 2015), our findings showed the motivation factors that regulated the community support for rural tourism were shaped by their direct experience and social interaction within their communities. More importantly, motivating them is not all about monetary value and awareness talks, rather using comrade approach (exemplar):

“Most of the married women here are not working. That is why they think, rather than they sit and do nothing at home, it is better to join us. At least they get extra income. Of course, we do not get daily income, but when the tourists come here to stay for 2-3 days, we get money. When we explain like this, they feel more interested to join.” (Homestay owner, Respondent 30)

“It is not easy to motivate the villagers here... We can motivate others to join by giving them an equal income. For example, if I bring tourists for a morning river cruise, then I bring one or two guides for the cruise, I must pay an equal amount to both guides, including me – we have to share the benefits equally among the three of us...” (Local tourist guide, Respondent 15)

The interview findings showed the rural villagers were more inclined to listen to ‘what and how’ their comrades said and behaved, as compared to engaging them in public awareness campaigns on tourism development. Therefore, other villagers who already participate in homestay can show and explain to others the benefits they gain when participating in rural tourism activities. The exemplar approach is a crucial part of psychological learning, using a role model of known individual (e.g., family, friends, and relatives) among studied participants, and illustrates remarkable outcomes for individual changes towards positive attitudes in educational and health interventions (Jopp et al, 2017; Han et al., 2017). In this study, this approach shows a promise in motivating rural community who is uninterested in rural tourism.

Rural tourism policy needs to balance everyone’s needs for economic development and conservation goals, at the same time assuring the needs of local communities are not being compromised. Based on our findings, we list five recommendations to improve rural tourism policy:

- 1) Establish smart collaboration by integrating contradictory perspectives, but devise stakeholders’ structure to highlight the importance of inclusion of rural peoples in leadership roles, not merely taking lower-level roles.
- 2) Tourism policy should consider using exemplary approach, motivating rural Indigenous people through role model or comrade approach.
- 3) Improve local participation in governing rural tourism: establish two-way communication platforms that provides interactive and honest discussion on the ground to facilitate understanding of community difficulties with tourism. This approach helps resolve community exclusion in the decision-making of tourism development.
- 4) Where applicable, capture broader perspectives by soliciting multiple stakeholder views to assess real scenarios on the ground.
- 5) Rural community should be included and trained in digital platforms, by providing hands-on experience to utilise social media to maximise tourism revenue.

CONCLUSION

Rural tourism is an important development concept for many remote destinations, particularly those involving Indigenous people. Without the support of rural

community, the sustainability of rural tourism is questionable. The study supports that the SET and SRT are distinctly operative in different contexts but complement each other in explaining community participation in rural tourism. From the SET perspective, our results illustrate that the communities have positive perceptions on the impacts of social, economic, and environmental factors (i.e., supplementary incomes, cultural experiences, learn foreign languages, and encourage natural resources protection), which influenced their support for engaging in rural tourism activities. Beyond the SET concept, however, some villagers are simply lacking the desire to join tourism activities. In this regard, application of SRT concept greatly assists in understanding that the communities' direct experiences and interactions are more influential factors when motivating those uninterested villagers. Therefore, our study extends the applications of SRT to a rural tourism context by suggesting that using a comrade approach is more effective compared to the conventional methods (i.e., tourism awareness programs and public talk), and that motivation in rural tourism is not exclusively monetary.

The study is not without its limitations. Rural tourism is occurring at global scale, but rural attraction and economic development is very dynamic. In other words, community motivating factors for rural tourism can vary at different rural destination areas. The study in the Kinabatangan serves as guidelines in utilising mixed method research to examine multiple stakeholder views about rural tourism development. Future studies are necessary to address the aforementioned gaps and further examine the efficacy of comrade approach in rural tourism context.

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