

Integrative Framework for Sustainable Rural Tourism Development and Community Empowerment in Malaysia

Dayang Zuhaiza Abg Abd Wahap

School of Business and Management, University of Technology Sarawak, Centre on Technological Readiness and Innovation in Business, Technopreneurship (CONTRIBUTE), University of Technology Sarawak, 96000 Sibu, Sarawak, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author Email: dayang.zuhaiza@uts.edu.my

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i7/28540>

Published Date: 18 July 2026

Abstract

Sustainable rural tourism has emerged as an important strategy for promoting rural development, community well-being, and environmental conservation in Malaysia. This study reviews contemporary literature to examine the relationship between sustainable rural tourism practices and community empowerment. Relevant studies published between 2021 and 2025 were identified through major academic databases and analyzed using a thematic review approach. The findings reveal that environmental sustainability, economic participation, socio-cultural preservation, governance effectiveness, and digital transformation are key factors influencing sustainable tourism outcomes. The review further highlights the importance of community participation, entrepreneurial development, indigenous inclusion, and capacity-building initiatives in strengthening local empowerment and tourism resilience. Despite the growing potential of rural tourism, several challenges remain, including limited digital competencies, inadequate marketing capabilities, governance constraints, and unequal access to development opportunities. The evidence suggests that successful rural tourism development requires a balanced approach that integrates economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social inclusiveness. Strengthening stakeholder collaboration, institutional support, and technological readiness can further enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of rural tourism destinations. This review contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing an integrative framework that supports policymakers, practitioners, and local communities in advancing sustainable rural tourism development and community empowerment in Malaysia.

Keywords: Sustainable Rural Tourism, Community Empowerment, Malaysia, Marketing Innovation, Digital Transformation

Introduction

Background and Importance of Rural Tourism in Malaysia

Sustainable rural tourism has emerged as a strategic approach to promoting balanced economic development, environmental conservation, and community well-being while contributing to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). Unlike conventional tourism, sustainable rural tourism seeks to generate long-term economic benefits while preserving environmental resources, protecting cultural heritage, and improving the quality of life of rural communities. It provides opportunities for employment creation, entrepreneurship development, poverty alleviation, and the diversification of rural economies through the sustainable utilisation of local resources (Croes et al., 2023; Chan, 2023). As global tourism continues to recover and evolve, sustainable rural tourism has become increasingly recognised as an effective mechanism for enhancing destination resilience, strengthening local livelihoods, and supporting inclusive and sustainable rural development.

Recent international review studies demonstrate the growing importance of sustainable rural tourism as an interdisciplinary field of research. A systematic literature review by Li et al. (2024) concluded that sustainable rural tourism contributes significantly to the sustainable development of traditional villages by promoting economic diversification, environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and community participation. Similarly, bibliometric analyses have shown a substantial increase in global research output on sustainable rural tourism, with governance, innovation, digital transformation, stakeholder collaboration, and community empowerment emerging as the dominant themes shaping future research and practice (Geng et al., 2025; Pato et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that sustainable rural tourism has evolved beyond tourism development alone and is increasingly recognised as an integrated rural development strategy capable of generating economic, social, environmental, and institutional benefits.

In Malaysia, rural tourism has become an important contributor to national tourism development because of the country's rich biodiversity, multicultural heritage, indigenous traditions, and diverse rural landscapes (Chin, 2022; Chan, 2023). Community-based tourism, homestay programmes, ecotourism destinations, agrotourism, and cultural villages have created employment opportunities, strengthened local entrepreneurship, promoted environmental conservation, and preserved cultural heritage (Janjua et al., 2023; Kunjuraman et al., 2022). Furthermore, rural tourism has enabled local and indigenous communities to diversify their income sources, improve their quality of life, and participate more actively in local economic development (Khorl et al., 2024; Rashid et al., 2025). These contributions demonstrate the strategic importance of sustainable rural tourism in supporting Malaysia's rural transformation agenda and long-term sustainable development.

Despite these positive developments, sustainable rural tourism development in Malaysia continues to face several challenges. Many rural tourism destinations experience limited community empowerment, inadequate governance mechanisms, insufficient digital capabilities, ineffective tourism marketing, fragmented stakeholder collaboration, and unequal distribution of tourism benefits (Murniati et al., 2024; Pimid & Chambers, 2025). In addition, rural tourism operators often encounter difficulties in adopting digital technologies,

developing competitive tourism products, and accessing broader domestic and international markets (Janjua et al., 2023; Murniati et al., 2023). These challenges reduce destination competitiveness and limit the long-term sustainability of rural tourism initiatives, highlighting the need for integrated approaches that simultaneously address economic, environmental, social, technological, and governance dimensions.

Although previous studies have examined important aspects of sustainable rural tourism, including destination competitiveness (Chin et al., 2022), community participation (Pimid et al., 2024), governance (Croes et al., 2023), sustainable tourism marketing (Janjua et al., 2023), digital transformation (Murniati et al., 2023), and community empowerment (Khorri et al., 2024), these dimensions have generally been investigated independently. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to developing a comprehensive framework that integrates these interrelated factors into a unified perspective capable of explaining sustainable rural tourism development and community empowerment within the Malaysian context. This fragmented understanding restricts policymakers' and practitioners' ability to formulate coordinated strategies that balance economic growth, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, technological innovation, and effective governance.

Therefore, this study aims to develop an integrative framework for sustainable rural tourism development and community empowerment in Malaysia through a comprehensive review and synthesis of recent empirical literature. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine individual dimensions of rural tourism, this study integrates environmental sustainability, economic participation, socio-cultural preservation, governance effectiveness, digital transformation, marketing innovation, and community empowerment into a holistic conceptual framework. The proposed framework contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive understanding of the interrelationships among these dimensions while offering practical guidance for policymakers, tourism authorities, destination management organisations, local governments, tourism entrepreneurs, and rural communities in designing evidence-based strategies that promote sustainable tourism development and inclusive community empowerment. Ultimately, the findings are expected to support more effective policy formulation, strengthen stakeholder collaboration, enhance destination competitiveness, and contribute to the long-term sustainability of rural tourism in Malaysia.

Problem Statement

Despite the potential benefits, integrating sustainable tourism with genuine community empowerment remains a significant challenge. Many rural tourism initiatives face difficulties ensuring that sustainable practices translate into meaningful economic and social gains for local residents, including Indigenous populations. Studies indicate that while local communities often express support for tourism development, this support can wane due to unmet expectations, lack of inclusion, or insufficient capacity building (Pimid & Chambers, 2025; Pimid, Marzuki, & Sampil, 2024; Pimid et al., 2022). Furthermore, sustainable rural tourism growth is impeded by constraints related to limited marketing innovations, technological gaps, and governance issues, which hinder competitiveness and long-term viability.

The marketing and digital competencies of rural tourism operators show considerable variation, with many homestay operators struggling with digital transformation and effective outreach (Murniati, Razzaq, Nopembri, Kharim, & Paryono, 2024). This digital divide limits access to broader markets and restrains potential growth. Similarly, institutional support, political engagement, and sustainable tourism marketing practices are critical yet often lacking elements that directly influence rural tourism branding and community empowerment (Janjua, Krishnapillai, & Rehman, 2023; Janjua, Krishnapillai, & Rehman, 2023). These challenges are compounded by insufficient knowledge-sharing mechanisms and resistance to innovation within traditional rural settings, which can dampen tourism performance and sustainability (Suffarruddin, Jaafar, & Anim, 2023; Suffarruddin, Jaafar, & Rahman, 2021).

Additional complications arise from governance-related matters such as land ownership and legal empowerment, particularly for Indigenous communities who face systemic barriers to securing land rights and economic autonomy (Khor et al., 2024). Without legal recognition and participatory policy frameworks, these communities cannot fully engage in tourism development or harness its benefits. This discord often jeopardizes sustainable community empowerment and threatens social equity.

Objectives and Research Questions

In light of these challenges, this paper aims to develop an integrative framework that holistically combines the principles of sustainable rural tourism development with robust community empowerment strategies specific to the Malaysian context. The central objectives include:

- i. To identify and synthesize the key success factors that contribute to sustainable rural tourism and community empowerment based on empirical evidence across Malaysia.
- ii. To delineate the main barriers and challenges encountered in harmonizing sustainable tourism goals with effective community participation, capacity building, and governance.
- iii. To provide insights into how marketing innovations, technology adoption, governance frameworks, and socio-cultural dynamics interact to influence rural tourism outcomes.

By addressing these objectives, this study seeks to inform policymakers, development practitioners, and community stakeholders about practical strategies to enhance rural tourism sustainability while ensuring equitable community benefits and long-term resilience.

Conceptualizing Sustainable Rural Tourism

Sustainable rural tourism is an integrative concept encompassing environmental, social, and economic dimensions aimed at achieving long-term viability while respecting local contexts. Chan (2023) emphasizes sustainable rural tourism practices focusing on conservation, economic benefits, and community collaboration, with a strong connection to fairness, quality attractions, and meeting tourists' needs. Similarly, Chin, Lo, and Wong (2022) highlight the relevance of destination appeal, infrastructure, and service quality as hard measures driving rural tourism competitiveness, which in turn influences sustainable management outcomes. These dimensions reflect the intertwined nature of tangible and intangible resources necessary for competitive and sustainable rural tourism. For instance, Chin, Chan, Ming, and Chin (2025) explicitly examined both tangible assets (e.g., natural resources,

infrastructure) and intangible resources (e.g., destination image, local culture), finding a strong positive correlation between these resources and rural tourism competitiveness. Notably, mobile technology use moderates these relationships, signaling the growing importance of digital tools in rural tourism sustainability.

Community Empowerment in Tourism Development

Empowering rural communities, particularly Indigenous peoples, is pivotal in sustainable tourism development. Pimid and Chambers (2025) investigated Indigenous communities in Kinabatangan, Sabah, and found that social, economic, and environmental governance factors positively influence local support for conservation, although personal values had less impact. Early-stage community involvement and clarity on tourism benefits, as noted by Pimid, Marzuki, and Sampil (2024), foster stronger local support and legitimization of community-based tourism (CBT) projects. Legal empowerment through land ownership rights (tanah saka) is another crucial aspect, as demonstrated by Khor et al. (2024), who underscored that official recognition of customary land could unlock economic development potentials, including expanding agriculture, entrepreneurship, and tourism activities. Social transformation through ecotourism also shows positive impacts, as highlighted by Kunjuran, Hussin, and Aziz (2022), where community-based ecotourism enhanced livelihoods across economic, socio-cultural, and environmental domains despite some negative consequences that require management.

Community participation extends beyond support to active involvement in tourism planning and innovation. Suffarruddin, Jaafar, and Anim (2023) noted that marketing innovations, especially in homestay programs, significantly improved community involvement and performance, pointing toward the critical role of local agency and adaptation in rural tourism success.

Marketing and Technology Integration

Sustainable tourism marketing and technology adoption effectively bolster rural tourism development. Janjua, Krishnapillai, and Rehman (2023) illustrated the vital role of ICT competency, sustainable tourism marketing practices, and political support in reinforcing homestay brand equity. Their model confirms that political support by local authorities strengthens the relationship between sustainable marketing and brand building. Similarly, Murniati et al. (2023) highlighted barriers related to the digital divide among rural homestay operators in Malaysia, including limited technical expertise and restricted language use (predominantly Malay), which hindered global market access. They emphasized the urgency of training programs to improve social media marketing awareness and adoption.

User-generated content (UGC) and digital transformation also play increasingly strategic roles. Vu, Hoang, Hoang, and Nguyen (2025) identified five key clusters in digital transformation related to rural tourism, including smart travel technology and community-based applications. Rasool et al. (2025) developed a UGC model revealing that access and interactivity foster tourists' decision-making and engagement in rural tourism, suggesting that rural destinations in developing countries like Malaysia benefit from integrated digital strategies to capture cognitive and affective gratifications of tourists. These technologies offer novel pathways for rural community participation and destination branding in a competitive tourism landscape.

Policy and Governance Frameworks

Effective governance and political support form the backbone of sustainable rural tourism and community empowerment. Chin, Janjua, and colleagues (2023, 2024) emphasized local authorities' pivotal role in enabling sustainable marketing and shaping brand equity for rural homestays. Political support serves as a moderating factor that amplifies marketing efforts and legitimizes community initiatives.

From the governance perspective, Croes, Kubickova, and Ridderstaat (2023) applied the capability approach to showcase the critical force of human agency over formal governance structures in achieving human development via tourism. Their findings advocate prioritizing empowerment and occupational opportunities to sustain development, highlighting a bidirectional link between destination competitiveness and community well-being. Complementing this, Khor et al. (2024) highlighted the legal empowerment potential via land ownership guarantees, which are essential for Indigenous communities to harness economic opportunities through agriculture and tourism, supporting government development plans. Collectively, these studies underscore the need for integrated policy frameworks that harmonize governance, political will, legal recognition, and community empowerment to advance rural tourism sustainability effectively in Malaysia.

Methodological Considerations

Mixed Methods Approaches

The study of rural tourism in Malaysia has frequently employed mixed methods approaches combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to yield comprehensive insights. For instance, Pimid et al. (2025) utilized a cross-sectional survey alongside qualitative examination of Indigenous perspectives to understand factors influencing community support for conservation and tourism development. This integration of methods allowed the researchers to triangulate findings, combining statistical analysis with rich, descriptive data that contextualizes local Indigenous views.

Similarly, Pimid et al. (2024) adopted qualitative methods to explore early-stage community-based tourism readiness in Sabah while incorporating cross-sectional approaches to gauge wider community attitudes. This mixed methodological design underscores the value of simultaneously capturing subjective experiences and broader community trends.

In another example, Janjua et al. (2021) conducted a community-based tourism enterprise training program assessed through primarily qualitative means but grounded in quantitative evaluations, such as measuring effectiveness through structured feedback. Their approach highlights how mixed methods can be used not only in research but also in implementation evaluations, facilitating an understanding of both process and outcome.

Moreover, Rashid et al. (2025) employed structured quantitative interviews with tourism stakeholders across Malaysian and Indonesian rural villages. Although primarily quantitative, their study integrated qualitative content by exploring dynamic contextual factors influencing rural tourism differentiation. This blend allowed them to interpret statistical results within the nuanced socio-economic realities of the communities in question.

Stakeholder Engagement and Data Collection

Robust stakeholder engagement is critical in rural tourism research and development, ensuring that diverse voices shape both the design and outcomes of projects. Ismail and Jaafar (2022), through a mixed-method framework that combined qualitative research and structured surveys, involved multiple stakeholders, including academicians, government agencies, NGOs, business entities, host communities, and tourists. Their multisectoral approach affected the sustainability planning of Malaysia's Homestay Experience Programme, demonstrating the effectiveness of broad-based engagement.

Janjua et al. (2021) also reflected multi-stakeholder involvement through collaboration between a university, governmental economic authorities, and local communities in the Lenggong Valley. This cooperation facilitated a relevant and culturally sensitive training program tailoring entrepreneurial capacity building.

Other studies have emphasized the role of local entrepreneurs and tourists as vital informants. Dan and Shimizu (2022) conducted in-depth interviews with women entrepreneurs in family tourism businesses in Tioman Island to gather empirical insights about resource mobilization, thus foregrounding the importance of involving business actors directly for pragmatic understanding.

In digital transformation research, Rasool et al. (2025) engaged rural tourists as respondents in surveys assessing user-generated content influences, illustrating the inclusion of consumer perspectives alongside local population data in rural tourism studies.

Analytical Techniques

Advanced analytical techniques have increasingly been employed to analyze complex relationships within rural tourism research. Structural equation modeling (SEM) has become a favored technique to explore interacting variables and latent constructs. Chin et al. (2022) utilized partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate how environmental stimuli affect tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions at rural destinations in Sarawak, allowing for the modeling of moderating effects such as local community attitudes. Similarly, Pimid et al. (2025) applied SEM to identify underlying motivational factors of rural Indigenous communities' conservation support, highlighting the method's capacity to examine predictors and mediators in social science contexts.

Chin et al. (2022) also employed SEM in investigating destination competitiveness and knowledge sharing effects, reinforcing SEM's utility in assessing multifaceted tourism-related constructs where causal relationships are theorized.

Complementing quantitative modeling, multicriteria decision-making (MCDM) techniques have been effectively adopted for evaluating sustainable rural tourism development strategies. Ismail and Jaafar (2022) integrated DEMATEL and analytic network process (ANP) methods to formulate a sustainable community-based tourism framework, underscoring these techniques' utility in stakeholder-informed decision prioritization.

Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative inquiries, as in Murniati et al. (2023, 2024), who conducted thematic analyses of interviews with homestay operators to investigate

marketing competencies and digital divides affecting tourism sustainability. This approach provides systematic interpretation of qualitative data, capturing nuanced perceptions of community actors managing tourism enterprises.

Overall, methodological pluralism combining surveys, interviews, participatory approaches, and advanced data analysis tools provides a robust foundation for investigating the multifaceted nature of sustainable rural tourism and community empowerment in Malaysian contexts.

Key Components of Sustainable Rural Tourism Development

Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability forms a fundamental pillar in rural tourism development, focusing predominantly on conservation, preservation, and judicious natural resource management. Chan (2023) articulates that sustainable rural tourism practices encompass active conservation and preservation efforts that protect environmental integrity while enabling community benefits. Environmental stimuli such as environmental quality, carrying capacity, and opportunities for relaxation have been empirically shown to significantly enhance tourists' satisfaction and positive revisit intention, emphasizing the tangible effects of maintaining high environmental standards in rural destinations (Chin et al., 2022).

Moreover, Terence and Masni (2021) highlight the importance of monitoring environmental pollutants such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) in sediment profiles, which can indirectly affect tourism appeal and ecosystem health. Such environmental assessments provide critical data needed for sustainable tourism planning, ensuring that tourism activities neither degrade the environment nor diminish the long-term viability of rural tourism assets. Dasi and Shahrudin (2023) contribute further by examining amphibian habitat assemblages in the Langkawi Archipelago, demonstrating the significance of understanding species' habitat preferences and their tolerance to disturbance. This knowledge is vital to minimizing detrimental disruptions from tourism development and infrastructural expansions, reinforcing the need for integrating biodiversity conservation within tourism strategies. Thus, holistic environmental impact assessments and proactive natural resource management are essential components in sustaining rural tourism destinations.

Economic Sustainability

Economic sustainability in rural tourism development emphasizes entrepreneurship, local innovation, and the role of community-based ventures as engines for rural economic growth. Dan and Shimizu (2022) showcase how family tourism businesses on Tioman Island mobilize women entrepreneurs effectively, underlining the intersection of familial structures and tourism industry dynamics in enhancing business competitiveness. This case broadens our understanding of gender-inclusive entrepreneurship as a crucial economic pillar in rural settings.

Halim et al. (2022) investigate Malay micro-entrepreneurs' business performance within rural and suburban tourism contexts, finding that entrepreneurial competencies and use of technology are significant predictors of business success. This highlights the necessity for capacity building and technological empowerment to uplift rural tourism enterprises.

Community-Based Tourism Enterprise (CBTE) training programs, such as those implemented in the Lenggong Valley by Janjua et al. (2021), further demonstrate how structured training enhances local competencies, facilitating sustainable business practices and entrepreneurship in rural areas. The training was well-received and resulted in strengthened community enterprises, exemplifying effective economic empowerment through knowledge and skill development.

Village-owned enterprises are another dynamic element of economic sustainability. Rashid et al. (2025) present comparative research showing that village-owned enterprises in Malaysia leverage tourism potentials to boost local economies, supported by community management and government backing. Pimid et al. (2024) reinforce this by emphasizing local support and leadership as critical for early-stage community-based tourism development, ensuring economic benefits remain within rural communities and contribute meaningfully to poverty alleviation and livelihood enhancement.

Socio-Cultural Sustainability

Preserving socio-cultural identity and heritage is an indispensable aspect of sustainable rural tourism. Ahmad et al. (2021) analyze Kampung Sungai Dua Besar's tourism products, where cultural heritage, community resources, and conservation efforts collectively offer viable and attractive tourism assets. Protecting these cultural elements safeguards intangible heritage and helps maintain rural distinctiveness amidst rapid development.

Jamu and Thiagarajan's (2021) ethnographic study on the Ajat Indu dance tradition among Iban subgroups illustrates the tension between urban institutionalization and rural traditional practices. The hegemonization by governing organizations can challenge authentic cultural expressions, yet local communities sustain individual cultural expressions, showing resilience in preserving cultural heritage within tourism development.

Furthermore, Kunjuran et al. (2022) acknowledge community-based ecotourism as a potent social transformation tool, enhancing livelihoods economically, socio-culturally, and environmentally. The authors note that while positive social transformations predominate, challenges such as upskilling and mitigation of negative impacts remain essential for long-term sustainability.

Pimid et al. (2025) also discuss Indigenous community perspectives in Kinabatangan, Sabah, highlighting that socio-cultural sustainability is deeply linked to environmental governance, social and economic factors, and community inclusion in tourism planning. Positive community attitudes foster greater support and inclusion in conservation and tourism initiatives, reflecting the inseparability of cultural continuity and environmental stewardship. In summary, socio-cultural sustainability not only involves preserving heritage and identity but also enabling equitable socio-economic benefits and fostering positive community transformations that strengthen local resilience and uphold cultural authenticity within tourism development.

Community Empowerment Strategies

Capacity Building and Training

Community empowerment through capacity building in Malaysia's rural tourism focuses significantly on lifelong learning and community education to sustain tourism marketing efforts and manage the digital divide challenges effectively. Murniati et al. (2024) highlighted that many rural homestay operators face barriers such as poor marketing competencies and over-reliance on government and travel agents, leading to resistance to change. However, homestays that actively incorporate lifelong learning through community education demonstrate better adaptability and sustainability. They found that partnerships between key stakeholders are essential to enhancing the quality of community education and tourism marketing skills, which ultimately supports sustainable tourism development.

Besides marketing, entrepreneurial competency and financial literacy are critical components of capacity building for rural micro-entrepreneurs involved in tourism. Halim et al. (2022) noted that entrepreneurial competency and technological adoption significantly influence business performance among Malay micro-entrepreneurs in rural Kuala Terengganu, whereas financial literacy and innovation had less direct impact. Jaafar et al. (2021) further emphasized the effectiveness of community-based tourism enterprise (CBTE) training programs in the Lenggong Valley, which improved participants' entrepreneurial skills, business sustainability, and sense of agency. Training focusing on skill enhancement, particularly entrepreneurship and financial management, is vital for transforming rural economic opportunities into lasting success.

Governance and Legal Empowerment

Governance and legal empowerment strategies in rural Malaysia have shown to be instrumental in securing economic benefits and ensuring sustainable community involvement in tourism. Khor et al. (2024) provide a nuanced understanding of the role that land ownership plays in empowering indigenous Orang Asli communities economically through the formal gazettement of their customary lands (tanah saka). This legal recognition enables the communities to develop organized settlements, advance agriculture, and engage in entrepreneurship and rural tourism initiatives with improved security and investment potential.

Community participation in decision-making and policy design is another core element of governance empowerment. Ismail and Jaafar (2022) developed a multi-criteria framework that actively involves diverse stakeholders—including government agencies, host communities, businesses, and tourists—to collaboratively produce sustainable community-based tourism (CBT) plans. Their approach bridges conservation goals with rural development, facilitating comprehensive policy interventions that nurture environmental, economic, and socio-cultural growth simultaneously. Croes, Kubickova, and Ridderstaat (2023) further argue that human agency, empowered through participation and occupational opportunities, is paramount compared to governance structures alone in fostering destination competitiveness and human development in rural tourism contexts. They underscore that policies prioritizing active local agency yield stronger impacts than top-down governance models.

Inclusivity and Indigenous Engagement

Inclusivity in rural tourism involves embracing indigenous peoples' cultural perspectives and ensuring that early-stage leadership and support mechanisms are in place for sustainable community-based tourism. Pimid and Chambers (2025) revealed that in Sabah, social, economic, and environmental factors, more than personal values, meaningfully influence indigenous support for conservation and tourism initiatives. While indigenous communities recognize the importance of environmental governance and economic benefits from tourism, their engagement hinges on inclusive planning processes that respect cultural identity and livelihood needs.

Pimid et al. (2024) examined the early tourism development stage in Sabah's Moyog Agrotourism and Tourism Park and found that native community support intensified where tourism benefits were visible, leadership was strong, and project legitimacy was well-established. Demonstrating tangible advantages early on fosters credibility, resource access, and sustained participation.

Moreover, Pimid et al. (2022) address Indigenous kinabatangan perspectives on coping with climate change impacts, emphasizing a bottom-up approach that integrates Indigenous knowledge and livelihoods. Transparent communication and inclusion in adaptation strategy planning cultivate greater indigenous support and long-term community resilience. This culturally sensitive and participatory approach aligns with social transformation aims and contributes to more equitable and sustainable rural tourism development.

Thus, fostering inclusivity through respect for indigenous knowledge, early engagement, leadership empowerment, and ensuring that perceived benefits align with community priorities forms a critical pillar of community empowerment strategies in Malaysia's rural tourism sector.

Sustainable Tourism Marketing Practices

Sustainable tourism marketing in rural Malaysian contexts increasingly emphasizes the critical role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) competency, which directly influences the success and brand equity of homestay operations. Janjua, Krishnapillai, and Rehman (2023) empirically demonstrated that ICT competency, sustainable tourism marketing practices, and political support from local authorities are essential explanatory variables contributing to brand equity among rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. Their model revealed a strong, consistent relationship between these factors, highlighting that technical skills and favorable governance environments enable homestay operators to develop stronger tourism brands. This finding aligns with prior research by Janjua et al. (2021), which underscored the importance of sustainable tourism marketing as a precursor to improving brand equity and recommended that policymakers develop undifferentiated promotion policies to expand the homestay market.

Marketing innovation is another crucial dimension influencing rural tourism performance. According to Suffarruddin, Jaafar, and Anim (2023), homestay programs experienced performance declines when innovation efforts in marketing were lacking. Through face-to-face interviews with homestay coordinators, they identified three categories of marketing innovations: participation in commercial programs, ventures with external agencies, and the

utilization of digital media platforms. Implementing these innovative marketing approaches led to increased community involvement and recognition through homestay awards. Furthermore, a complementary study by Suffarruddin, Jaafar, and Rahman (2021) found that product innovation in rural homestays is significantly influenced by market orientation, entrepreneurial spirit, government support, and knowledge, which collectively determine the successful implementation of new rural tourism products. Both studies highlight the intertwined nature of product and marketing innovation as catalysts for sustaining rural tourism enterprises.

Digital Transformation and User-generated Content

Digital transformation is reshaping how rural tourism stakeholders engage with markets and tourists. Murniati, Razzaq, Ismail, and Mota (2023) highlighted the pressing need for training to bridge the digital divide among community-based tourism (CBT) homestay operators. Their study indicated low awareness of digital marketing tools and a lack of technical expertise, with most operators relying predominantly on Malay-language social media content, limiting access to broader international markets. This digital skill gap constrains homestays' ability to maintain competitiveness and sustain tourism businesses in a rapidly changing digital landscape. Thus, they emphasize that effective community education and training programs are critical for enhancing social media marketing adoption and overall digital literacy.

The role of user-generated content (UGC) in shaping rural tourism dynamics is gaining traction in Malaysia. Rasool et al. (2025) developed a novel model examining how access to digital platforms and interactivity precede the generation of UGC among tourists visiting rural destinations in Sarawak. Their structural equation modeling results confirmed that UGC plays a pivotal role in influencing travelers' cognitive and affective gratifications, which subsequently affect their decision-making and travel intentions. This creates opportunities for tourism managers and hospitality stakeholders to harness UGC strategically to enhance destination visibility and tourist engagement.

Supporting this, Vu, Hoang, Nguyen, and colleagues (2025) identified five distinct clusters of digital transformation in rural tourism, such as Digital Folklore and Smart Travel Technology, Digital Technology Solutions Supporting Green and Sustainable Tourism, Digital Communications and Marketing, and community-focused IT applications. These clusters provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how digital innovation intersects with sustainable and community-based rural tourism initiatives. The continuous growth in digital transformation research since 2017 reflects Malaysia's active role in embracing digital technologies to revitalize rural tourism markets.

Political and institutional support further influence the adoption and success of digital marketing initiatives. Janjua et al. (2023) found that political backing from local authorities moderates the relationship between sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity. Chen et al. (2022) similarly argue that governance capacity and policy integration significantly affect sustainable tourism marketing effectiveness and product development.

In summary, sustainable tourism marketing and digital transformation are inseparable elements that foster rural tourism success in Malaysia. Enhancing ICT competency, fostering marketing innovation, bridging the digital divide through community education, promoting

the generation and use of user-generated content, and securing political support collectively contribute to building competitive and resilient rural tourism destinations. Addressing these interconnected areas remains an ongoing challenge requiring multi-stakeholder collaboration and continuous capacity development.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

Institutional Support and Political Will

Institutional support and political will are crucial determinants in fostering sustainable rural tourism development in Malaysia. Empirical evidence underscores the pivotal role local authorities and political structures play in enabling community-based tourism initiatives to flourish. Janjua et al. (2023) demonstrated that political support from local authorities significantly moderates the relationship between sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity, thereby enhancing rural community-based tourism's competitiveness and market positioning. Furthermore, Chin et al. (2024) corroborated these findings by emphasizing that political backing is essential to achieve policy integration and sustainable tourism goals. The careful alignment of institutional mechanisms and political incentives fosters a conducive environment where rural communities gain access to resources, training, and promotional platforms actively supporting sustainable tourism practices. Additionally, Janjua et al. (2021) highlighted the effectiveness of community-based tourism enterprise training programs that require governmental collaboration to succeed, emphasizing that institutional recognition and endorsement act as vital trust-building factors between stakeholders.

Integrated Rural Development Frameworks

Integrated Rural Development (IRD) frameworks hold promise as strategic catalysts for advancing rural tourism by harmonizing multiple economic sectors and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders. Hanapiah et al. (2022) investigated the impacts of IRD in traditional villages in Terengganu, Malaysia, revealing that integrated approaches encompassing agriculture, aquaculture, SMEs, and rural tourism generate synergies that can overcome economic disparities. The Creative Index Analysis (CI) used in their study indicated potential for significant rural economic integration with respondents largely favorable toward multi-sector development projects. Importantly, the study emphasized the necessity of targeted interventions such as training, product marketing support, and ongoing development initiatives over a five-year horizon to sustain positive outcomes. This multi-sector collaboration model not only diversifies income sources but simultaneously bolsters rural tourism by embedding it within a broader rural economic ecosystem. IRD effectively serves as a framework to facilitate capacity building, infrastructure development, and political engagement that collectively empower local communities and optimize rural tourism resources.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite the promising frameworks and institutional support, multiple challenges impede the full realization of sustainable rural tourism growth in Malaysia. Resistance to change among local communities remains a significant internal challenge, as illustrated by Murniati et al. (2024). Their study revealed that a large proportion of homestay operators exhibit comfort with existing government and travel agent support structures, perpetuating dependency and generating reluctance toward adopting innovative marketing strategies or technological tools.

This inertia limits marketing proficiency and operational flexibility necessary for competitive sustainability. Furthermore, Murniati et al. (2023) identified the critical urgency for bridging the digital divide, pinpointing low digital literacy, lack of technical expertise, and exclusive use of Malaysian language in social media promotion as barriers restricting homestays' penetration into global markets.

Chin (2022) also highlighted infrastructural and perceptual barriers affecting rural tourism competitiveness. Through survey-based analysis in Sarawak, it was found that while created and supporting resources such as infrastructure contribute positively to competitiveness, inherited resources intrinsic to rural areas are undervalued, suggesting a disconnect between community potential and perceived urban standards of attractiveness. Collectively, these knowledge gaps, technological limitations, and attitudinal resistance constitute barriers that require comprehensive policy approaches and grassroots capacity enhancement.

Recommendations for Sustainable Growth

Sustainable rural tourism growth in Malaysia demands deliberate coordination across stakeholders to foster collaborative governance, continuous innovation, and balanced resource management. Chan (2023) identified that successful sustainable tourism practices in rural settings strategically focus on economic benefits, environmental conservation, social collaboration, and destination uniqueness while embedding the principles of reduce, reuse, and recycle (3Rs) in their operations. Increased stakeholder participation and cooperation facilitate community empowerment and resource stewardship, which are vital for long-term sustainability.

Ismail and Jaafar (2022) proposed a fuzzy multi-criteria decision-making framework positioning sustainable community-based tourism as an effective rural economic development tool. This model supports policy-makers in creating integrated plans that encompass environmental preservation, cultural conservation, and economic viability, ensuring spatial development is equitable and comprehensive.

Finally, Zamzuki et al. (2023) applied the Delphi approach to assess homestay sustainability factors on Malaysia's East Coast, underscoring that environmental, economic, and social dimensions must be treated holistically. They called for robust community resource management coupled with adaptive sustainable tourism policies able to withstand shocks such as pandemics. Their findings provide practical guidance for operators to improve sustainable management and resilience, further supporting the need for policy frameworks that encourage innovation, community education, and dynamic environmental stewardship. Taken together, evidence from Malaysian rural tourism shows that institutional support, inclusive governance frameworks, and proactive knowledge and technology adoption are indispensable. Policymakers and stakeholders must address socio-cultural resistance, digital divides, and resource valuation gaps to unlock the full economic and social potential of rural tourism while preserving natural and cultural assets.

Conclusion

This review consolidates current understanding of sustainable rural tourism development intertwined with community empowerment in Malaysia, revealing multifaceted dynamics

across environmental, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. It highlights consensus on the critical role of capacity building, legal recognition, and inclusive governance in enabling local communities to actively participate and benefit from tourism initiatives. Despite progress, challenges persist, particularly regarding technological adoption, infrastructural limitations, and fragmented policy implementation. The integration of marketing innovations and digital transformation emerges as pivotal for enhancing rural tourism competitiveness and community engagement. Significantly, fostering multi-sector collaboration and political support is essential for institutionalizing sustainable practices and community-led development. Future research should focus on developing holistic frameworks that balance economic growth with environmental stewardship and social equity while exploring innovative approaches to stakeholder participation and technology utilization. Ultimately, this integrative framework offers a pathway to empower rural communities, promote sustainable tourism, and contribute to broader rural development and poverty alleviation goals in Malaysia.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by the university research grant (URG) (UTS/RESEARCH/4/2022/03). The author also extends appreciation to the University of Technology Sarawak for its support in facilitating this research.

References

- Azmi, A., Abdullah, A., Mohd Kamal, S. B., Mat Isa, N., Sirait, N. N., & Hadyan, Y. P. (2024). The critical success factors towards homestay development in Penang. *Journal of Ecohumanism*, 3(7), 3235–3250. <https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i7.4457>
- Chan, J. K. L. (2023). Sustainable rural tourism practices from the local tourism stakeholders' perspectives. *Global Business and Finance Review*, 28(3), 136–149. <https://doi.org/10.17549/gbfr.2023.28.3.136>
- Chin, C. H., Chan, W. C., Ming, L., & Chin, C. L. (2025). Revealing the competitiveness of rural tourism: Exploring tangible and intangible resources in Sarawak (Malaysia) and Henan Province (China). *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 58(1), 18–31. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.58102-1387>
- Chin, C. H., Lo, M. C., & Wong, W. P. (2023). The role of political support by local authorities in sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity. *Asian Academy of Management Journal*, 28(1), 237–263. <https://doi.org/10.21315/aamj2023.28.1.10>
- Chin, C. H., Lo, M. C., & Wong, W. P. M. (2024). Assessing the tourism potentials of Kota Marudu and its surrounding villages, Sabah, Malaysia. *Journal of Sustainability Science and Management*, 19(12), 74–86. <https://doi.org/10.46754/jssm.2024.12.005>
- Chin, C. H., Wong, W. P. M., Ngian, E. T., & Langet, C. (2022). Does environmental stimulus matter to tourists' satisfaction and revisit intention: A study on rural tourism destinations in Sarawak, Malaysia. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 42, 683–692. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.422spl06-877>
- Chin, C. H. (2022). Empirical research on the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations: A practical plan for the rural tourism industry post-COVID-19. *Consumer Behavior in Tourism and Hospitality*, 17(2), 211–231. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CBTH-07-2021-0169>
- Chin, C. H., Lo, M. C., & Wong, W. P. M. (2022). The connection between competitiveness and sustainability in tourism destinations: Examining the hard, soft, and moderating effects

- of knowledge sharing. *Enlightening Tourism*, 12(1), 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.33776/et.v12i1.5524>
- Croes, R., Kubickova, M., & Ridderstaat, J. (2023). Destination competitiveness and human development: The compelling critical force of human agency. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 47(4), NP62–NP75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10963480221140022>
- Dan, N., & Shimizu, T. (2022). Effective resources to mobilize women entrepreneurship: A success case study of family tourism businesses in Tioman Island, Malaysia. *Sustainability*, 14(15), Article 9133. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14159133>
- Dasi, O. N. G., & Shahrudin, S. (2023). Habitat assemblage of amphibians from Langkawi Archipelago, Kedah, Peninsular Malaysia. *Current Herpetology*, 42(2), 171–190. <https://doi.org/10.5358/hsj.42.171>
- Geng, Y., Zhao, S., Zhang, X., Li, J., Yan, Y., & Gao, J. (2025). Bibliometric analysis of sustainable rural tourism. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12, Article 788. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05213-z>
- Halim, M. A. S. A., Awang, N. F., Omar, K., Saputra, J., Kamaruddin, S. N. A., & Samsudin, H. (2022). Analyzing the factors that influence the entrepreneur business performance of tourism destination of Kuala Terengganu City Centre, Malaysia. *Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism*, 13(2), 403–413. [https://doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v13.2\(58\).10](https://doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v13.2(58).10)
- Ismail, A., & Jaafar, S. M. R. S. (2022). A fuzzy multi-criteria framework for the development of sustainable community-based tourism in Malaysia. *Journal of Sustainability Science and Management*, 17(9), 114–125. <https://doi.org/10.46754/jssm.2022.09.008>
- Jamu, A. I., & Thiagarajan, P. (2021). Hegemonizing the Ajat Indu in Sarawak, Malaysia. *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, 23, 168–185. <https://doi.org/10.14456/jucr.2021.26>
- Janjua, Z. U. A., Krishnapillai, G., & Rehman, M. (2021). Sculpting a community for tourism enterprise: A case study in Lenggong Valley, Malaysia. *International Journal of Business and Society*, 22(1), 496–512. <https://doi.org/10.33736/IJBS.3191.2021>
- Janjua, Z. U. A., Krishnapillai, G., & Rehman, M. (2023). Importance of sustainable tourism marketing practices: An insight from rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, 6(2), 575–594. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTI-10-2021-0274>
- Khori, H. M., Simin, M. H. A., Ibrahim, M. A., Sahadom, M. N. I., & Lokman, A. (2024). Economic empowerment of indigenous communities through the gazettelement of land ownership. *Planning Malaysia*, 22(6), 513–525. <https://doi.org/10.21837/pm.v22i34.1645>
- Kunjuraman, V., Hussin, R., & Aziz, R. C. (2022). Community-based ecotourism as a social transformation tool for rural community: A victory or a quagmire? *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism*, 39, 100524. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2022.100524>
- Li, Y., Ismail, M. A., & Aminuddin, A. (2024). How has rural tourism influenced the sustainable development of traditional villages? A systematic literature review. *Heliyon*, 10(4), e25627. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e25627>
- Murniati, D. E., Razzaq, A. R. B. A., Ismail, A. B., & Mota, L. (2023). Training urgency to bridge the digital divide for social media marketing awareness and adoption: Case of CBT rural homestay operators Malaysia. *Journal of Technical Education and Training*, 15(1), 142–157. <https://doi.org/10.30880/jtet.2023.15.01.013>
- Murniati, D. E., Razzaq, A. R. B. A., Nopembri, S., Kharim, A., & Paryono. (2024). Community education as a lifelong learning to support sustainable tourism. *Cakrawala Pendidikan*, 43(1), 62–73. <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v43i1.63529>

- Pato, M. L., Ribeiro, C., & Oliveira, A. (2025). Mapping innovation and sustainability in rural tourism. *Sustainability*, 17(6), 2574. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17062574>
- Pimid, M., & Chambers, G. K. (2025). How personal values affect conservation initiatives: Indigenous community support for conservation in rural Sabah, Malaysia. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, 14(3), 404–422. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-10-2024-0238>
- Pimid, M., Marzuki, A., & Sampil, S. (2024). Inspire and ignite: Enabling factors for early tourism development in Sabah, Malaysia. *Planning Malaysia*, 22(5), 467–481. <https://doi.org/10.21837/pm.v22i34.1602>
- Pimid, M., Nasir, M. R. M., Scian, J., Ahmad, A. G., Mutalib, A. H. A., & Perijin, J. (2022). Indigenous Kinabatangan perspectives on climate change impacts and adaptations: Factors influencing their support and participation. *Sustainability*, 14(11). <https://doi.org/>
- Rashid, M. F., Rahayu, P., Andini, I., & Permana, C. T. (2025). Differentiation of tourism performance in rural areas: Case study of Desa Lestari, Malaysia and Desa Mandiri, Indonesia. *Planning Malaysia*, 23(2), 320–334. <https://doi.org/10.21837/pm.v23i36.1722>
- Rashid, M. F. A., Rashid, K., Azman, M. A. A., Ahmad, A. L., & Rejab, H. S. M. (2024). Malaysia modern rural ranking index: Validated dimensions, criteria groups, and performance criteria. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 32(3), 805–827. <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.32.3.01>
- Rasool, S., Morelli, M., Mubushar, M., Centobelli, P., & Cerchione, R. (2025). Encouraging user-generated content to engage travellers in rural tourism of developing countries. *Current Issues in Tourism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2025.2481492>
- Suffarruddin, S. H., Jaafar, M., & Anim, N. A. H. M. J. (2023). Impak inovasi pemasaran dalam pengkomersialan pelancongan luar bandar: Kajian kes program inap desa di Semenanjung Malaysia. *Jurnal Pengurusan*, 69. <https://doi.org/10.17576/pengurusan-2023-69-02>
- Suffarruddin, S. H., Jaafar, M., & Rahman, S. (2021). The capability of product innovation implementation in homestay program in Peninsular Malaysia. *Jurnal Pengurusan*, 61. <https://doi.org/10.17576/pengurusan-2021-61-09>
- Terence, R. C., & Masni, M. A. (2021). Vertical profile of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in the core sediment found in Langkawi, Kedah. *Journal of Environmental Biology*, 42(3), 849–856. [https://doi.org/10.22438/JEB/42/3\(SI\)/JEB-17](https://doi.org/10.22438/JEB/42/3(SI)/JEB-17)
- United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
- United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2024). Tourism for rural development. <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-for-rural-development>
- Zamzuki, F. A., Lola, M. S., & Aruchunan, E. (2023). Assessing the sustainability of the homestay industry for the East Coast of Malaysia using the Delphi approach. *Heliyon*, 9(11), e21433. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e21433>