

COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS ON THE USAGE OF DIGITAL MARKETING FOR HOMESTAYS: THE CASE OF BA'KELALAN, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Rural tourism has become a dynamically developing area in tourism. Apart from developing physical infrastructure, a national priority is to develop ICT in rural areas to improve the local communities' communications with the outside world. With the help of ICT, rural tourism industries have risen up and tourist behaviour, when making purchases for tourism activities, has changed (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The objective of this study is to examine the perceptions and attitudes of tourism service providers in Ba'kelalan in setting up promotional websites for their premises and services. A structured questionnaire was used as a guide to conduct in-depth interviews. Fieldwork was carried out in July 2016 and a total of 7 people were interviewed. The study revealed that homestay owners and other tourism suppliers largely depended on word-of-mouth or direct contact (via phone calls or emails) for bookings, and were generally not aware of the business promotional potential of digital marketing. This is a first baseline study on communities' attitudes towards the usage of digital marketing with respect to their tourism products in this area. The findings will be relevant to future studies of community-based ICT initiatives. Implications from the study and recommendations therefrom are further discussed.

Keywords: Digital Marketing; ICT; Homestays; Malaysia; Rural; Community Perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism has become one of the most developed areas in Malaysian tourism as it brings many economic benefits, especially to underdeveloped areas which need employment/income opportunities and revitalisation (Liu, 2006; Sharpley, 2002). However, although tourism may be a promising source of economic stimulus (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993), it might be difficult to convince outsiders to visit a destination, especially for rural communities that suffer from lack of recognition in the tourism marketplace. Therefore, effective destination marketing efforts will aid rural tourism by increasing tourist visitation, tourist satisfaction, and their intention to return to a

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destination or recommend it to others (Ekinici & Hosany, 2006; Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007).

Such destination marketing efforts include the use of digital marketing (Garren, 2012). In fact, the rapid evolution of ICT has added value to the tourism industry as tourism industry players utilise ICT to understand customer needs and behaviors, and improve their relationship with the customers as a result (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Law & Jogaratnam, 2005). The internet has also changed tourism behaviour in terms of online purchasing of tourism activities and destination (Buhalis & Law, 2008). For a rural destination, ICT can be leveraged upon for marketing purposes by communicating images of the said destination to the tourist, as tourism is largely visual in nature (Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007; Greaves & Skinner, 2010), and especially due to the increasing use of the internet by prospective tourists due to its speed, interactivity and flexibility (Singh & Formica, 2006). Social media can also serve as a marketing vehicle in “helping visitors to form a compelling personal narrative about the country, which enhances their power as ‘viral agents’ or informal advocates for the country’s brand once they return home” (Anholt, 2009, p.89). Digital marketing using the avenues of marketing website and social media has been used to good effect in the rural destination of Gunnison County, Colorado (Garren, 2012).

In the case of Malaysia, as part of the initiative to develop rural areas, the government has attempted to develop physical infrastructure as well as ICT in rural areas in order to improve rural communications with the outside world. It is believed that with the help of ICT and established telecentres in Malaysia, tourism industries within a rural destination have experienced advancement (Lo, Mohamad, Songan & Yeo, 2012).

Numerous studies have been done on the use of digital marketing in tourism development (e.g. Bonn, Furr & Susskind, 1998; Bai, Hu, Elsworth & Countryman, 2004; Luo, Feng & Cai, 2004). Studies such as Andreopoulou, Tsekouropoulos, Koliouka and Koutroumanidis (2014) and Clarke (2005) have examined internet marketing for rural tourisms. However, such studies assumed the ease of adoption of such digital methods by the tourism suppliers, and did not consider the barriers to adoption by the same, especially amongst rural suppliers. The perceptions towards digital marketing adoption amongst such providers have also not been investigated. In view of this, the objective of this study is to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of Ba'kelalan's tourism providers, especially that of homestay owners and other providers, towards ICT utilisation to further their tourism businesses.

With that, we first present a brief background of Ba'kelalan. It is a group of 9 villages situated in the Kelabit Highlands, a remote area in Sarawak, Malaysia. It can be reached by flight via a 19-seater Twin Otter plane or by land using four-wheel drive vehicles on unsealed logging roads (Wikitravel, n.d.). The main economic activities in Ba'kelalan, other than tourism, are rice production and salt processing. Ba'kelalan has 25 homestays which are self-organised into a homestay association approved by the Sarawak Ministry of Tourism. These homestays were located throughout the 9 villages as follows: 1 at Buduk Nui, 2 at Kampung Long Rusu, 6 at Kampung Long Langai, and 16 at Buduk Nur (the largest village). The homestays were established in 3 phases: 14 in the first phase, 8 in the second and 3 in the third. Out of the 25 homestays, 4 are the most active, being 3 located at Buduk Nur and 1 in Long Langai (C. Balang, personal communication, July 29, 2016). During the period of our visit, only 2 homestays had staying guests.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative research approach was taken as it was a way to appreciate and understand, in depth, the attitudes, motivations and perceptions of the local community. In selecting samples for data collection, a convenient non-random method was employed. Such an approach is consistent with current tourism research on examining perceptions amongst rural tourism providers (e.g. Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012; Guo & Sun, 2016; Gao & Wu, 2017; Zhou, Chan & Song, 2017). In our study, only tourism suppliers in Ba'kelalan were selected as part of the sample as this would enhance the validity and reliability of data collected. The participants selected took part voluntarily in this study.

To address the research objectives, in-depth interviews were conducted. An advantage of this approach is that the data collection is adaptable, whereby ideas and leads can be followed up on. Further probing or exploration can also be performed should there be responses that needed clarification, or should the researcher need to discover motives and feelings. To ensure coverage of research objectives, a standard semi-structured interview sheet was utilised as a guide for the interviewer (not directly administered to the respondents). Respondents were allowed (and encouraged) to elaborate on their views as and when considered necessary; the interviewers would offer minimal or no interruption. Interviewers would only provide further clarification if respondents indicated they did not understand what was being asked; if responses were unclear, prompts were given. Each interview session was attended by two interviewers: a person to administer the interview and the other to record the responses. Such a protocol ensured that the first interviewer was able to focus on the answers provided and take the necessary follow up action. The act of recording the responses in writing was intended as an immediate reference for the purpose of seeking further clarification or further probing, in the event that vague answers were provided, or if any interesting areas or issues emerged. The use of a voice recorder would not avail such opportunities as transcription of the interview would be performed later.

The interviews lasted an average of 45-60 minutes, and were scheduled according to the convenience of the interviewees to ensure that their schedules were not disrupted. There was no predetermined sample size given the qualitative nature of the interviews. The total number of respondents was considered sufficient when the saturation point had been attained, which meant that no new insights were by additional sources of data. Data was collected over a five-day period in July 2016. Each interview was preceded by an introduction about the objectives of the research project.

For each respondent, the following questions were asked in-depth:

1. Does your tourism business have a website?
2. If yes, what do you use it for?
3. How do your customers (tourists) find you?
4. How do you currently promote your tourism business?
5. What do you feel about employing digital marketing for your tourism business?

The respondents' verbatim comments were recorded and content analysis was carried out accordingly. The data was analysed based on a qualitative-phenomenological approach, which is data and conceptually-driven, and attempted to understand the people studied in order to derive meaning from the data (Patton, 2002). The responses were read thoroughly and analysed to extract

the key themes. The unit of coding was based on a single phrase or several significant and meaningful statements, and themes relating to the perceptions, attitudes and motivations of the tourism suppliers in Ba'kelalan were generated. The dimensions/themes identified from the data were grounded in the respondents' own descriptions, thus enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants of this study totaled 7, and their details are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Details of Respondents

Attribute	Item	Frequency	%	Cum %
Gender	Male	2	29	29
	Female	5	71	100
Type of tourism business involved in	Homestay/inn	6	86	86
	Tour guide	1	14	100
Length of operations of tourism business	< 10 years	3	42	42
	10-20 years	2	29	71
	> 20 years	2	29	100

The participants comprised of homestay owners/operators, a self-employed guide, an owner of a canteen, and an employee. Many of the participants held multiple roles at the same time, as is common in rural regions. For example, a homestay owner could also own a canteen, a paddy field, work as a kindergarten teacher, or be involved in various contracts.

Our findings revealed that none of the tourism suppliers whom we interviewed utilised a website for their business, either for promotional purposes or for online purchasing. They used to be featured on a general blogsite for homestays in the Bornean interior region (Sabah and Sarawak), which included photos of their premises. However, the blogsite is no longer online. Their main website presence is now on the Homestay Borneo Facebook page, but it has not been updated since 2015. One homestay operator informed us that guests have complained of a lack of website for her premise.

We noted that guests usually found the homestays or other tourism suppliers via a few ways. Some took the direct approach by making direct contact, either via email, phone or via Whatsapp of a homestay family member. Some guests go through a designated agent. A few have contacted one homestay via the aforementioned Facebook page. A number of guests were walk-in customers, who either came with or without word-of-mouth recommendations. Those who came with word-of-mouth recommendations, usually came via formal or informal channels. Formal channels include the World Challenge organisation which arranges educational school trips for students from UK, US, Australia and New Zealand in rural destinations. Ba'kelalan is a regular destination for the said programme, and one of the homestays is a regular host for visiting students. Other channels are the Gap Challenge programme, involving volunteer teachers in rural areas, private sector employees in Ba'kelalan for work purposes (e.g. Maxis and Malaysian Airports Berhad). As for the tour guide respondent, other than direct bookings, business is also obtained via referrals from fellow tour guides who could not take up the jobs themselves due to poor English competency.

None of the tourism businesses we interviewed engaged in active business promotion, as business is mainly obtained via word-of-mouth, or via agents. One homestay distributes business cards to outgoing guests with the hope that they would pass it out to others as a form of advertisement.

In terms of the employment of digital marketing for the service providers' tourism businesses, the reactions were mixed. Although the general consensus was that it was a good thing, not all saw it as an important tool for marketing purposes. Two respondents pointed out that one of the main reasons why Ba'kelalan did not have a high level of tourism is the lack of regular tourism events, such as the Sukan Sempadan involving Brunei, Indonesia, Sabah and Sarawak, Slow Food Festival (based in nearby Bario) or the Apple Festival. The Apple Festival is specific to Ba'kelalan, as the area has apple orchards, but it has not been celebrated for several years. Another cause of the low number of tourists at Ba'kelalan was seen to be the lack of flights to the area, especially compared to that of nearby Bario. Bario has 2 flights servicing it, and during the annual Slow Food Festival the number of flights increase to 7 a day; Ba'kelalan has only 3 flights per week. The few respondents felt that a website was pointless if there were few flights to Ba'kelalan and a lack of tourist attractions to pull in visitors; they felt that the involvement of the Ministry of Tourism was needed to create and promote attractions in the area.

However, some respondents had a more proactive attitude and welcomed the opportunity to learn how to create a marketing website, and were even open to using a payment/booking engine to ease future bookings. Most respondents were already using smartphones and one was in the process of getting one, which should ease the learning process.

The findings of this study can be summarised in the following Table 2:

Table 2: Summary of Key Findings

Item	Summary of findings
Existence of website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None utilised a website, either for promotional purposes or for online purchasing. • Main website presence is now on the Homestay Borneo Facebook page which has not been updated since 2015.
How customers find tourism provider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct contact, either via email, phone or via Whatsapp of a homestay family member. • Via a designated agent. • Via Homestay Borneo Facebook page. • Walk-in customers, came with (e.g. World Challenge, Gap Challenge programmes) or without word-of-mouth recommendations.
Current promotion efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None engaged in active business promotion, as business is mainly obtained via word-of-mouth, or via agents.
Perceptions towards employment of digital marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed reactions • General consensus on its value • But not all saw it as an important tool for marketing purposes, as there were other constraints to rural tourism: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Lack of regular tourism events (e.g. Apple Festival, Sukan Sempadan) (b) Few flights to Ba'kelalan (c) Lack of tourism attractions

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, homestay owners and other tourism suppliers largely depended on word-of-mouth or direct contact (either via phone calls or emails) for bookings, and were generally not aware of the full potential of digital marketing to promote their businesses.

As the homestays have experienced complaints from guests about their poor market visibility in the lack of a website, that would and should be the first step. The website infrastructure can be set up with the expertise of the local university, which currently has research sites and projects in the area. However, a website is more than just form and function; it needs to be populated by interesting content such as write-ups and photos of tourism attractions and activities. Instead of placing reliance on outside parties or the government to organise tourism activities and festivals, the local community can brainstorm regular village events that may be interesting to tourists, and create a diary of events on the said website. A good example would be the birding excursions run by Cikgu Sang, a local bird enthusiast who is well-known for being able to locate the “frogmouth” bird.

The community as a whole can have a village-level landing page with links to individual pages to various homestays and other tourism businesses. Such a network of linked pages would achieve better search engine rankings, meaning that it will be more easily found via search. The webpages could also, in themselves, be search-engine optimised for the same reason. Partnership with the local university in such tasks, as well as content writing, can be done. The webpages can also be translated into different languages to maximise exposure to different nationalities of tourists, as well as to achieve a presence on search engines of different languages.

Going even further, the village-level website can be a tool to promote stewardship tourism, which is defined as offering visitors opportunities to care, learn and connect deeper with a destination and its people (Steele, 2013), via programmes that benefit the destination such as cleaning up the environment, attending charitable events and supporting the agriculture and products of the destination. It must be mentioned, however, that having a website may take away the ‘rural-ness’ of a destination, in two ways. Firstly, the destination is made to be more accessible (easier to find). Secondly, the perceptions of prospective tourists who may expect a rural destination not to have any modern trappings may be affected. Therefore, there is a need to strike a balance between maintaining the uniqueness of the destination and convenience for visitors.

An easy way to create an internet presence is the writing of Wikitravel pages. Such pages are a natural place for prospective visitors to find out more about the place they intend to go to. As at present time, the page for Ba'kelalan is empty although there is a link to the page for Kelabit Highlands. A Wikitravel page has a standard format – it contains important information for a traveller intending to visit the destination in question, such as landscape, climate, how to get there, things to do and see, what to eat and places to stay. Ba'kelalan's page can be populated with the relevant information, and a list of references can be included, which would be linked back to any webpages already set up.

The second prong of the digital marketing strategy would lie in social media, in order to create a constant buzz about the rural destination. This includes participation in forums, travel hub pages, Facebook, review sites, and blogs. The commitment needed is in terms of time and effort, put in consistently, as such efforts should be ongoing to ensure the currency of information. Hence, it

should not be done by a single person but as a coordinated effort involving all ICT literate community members.

The value of this study lies in the investigation of community perceptions and attitudes towards the adoption of digital marketing among rural tourism businesses, an area in which a knowledge gap exists, as discussed earlier. This paper also contributes to the literature on bridging the digital divide amongst rural communities in general, and to the body of literature on rural tourism and rural destination marketing.

The limitations of this study lie in the lack of generalisability, given that the approach is qualitative in nature and not quantitative. Other limitations include the small sample size, and the non-inclusion of the views of tourism suppliers from villages other than Buduk Nur. Also, as data was obtained during one specific period of investigation, it is limited in a temporal context.

The use of longitudinal studies would overcome this limitation.

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