

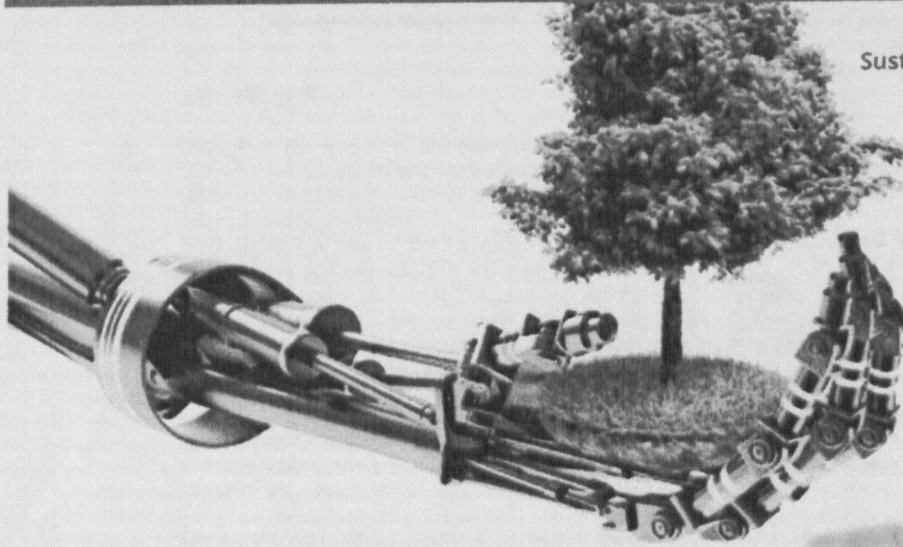
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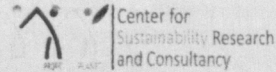
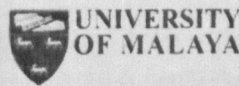
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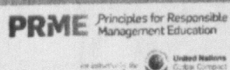
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Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism Destination Competitiveness: Assessing the Influencers and Moderating Role of Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of hard measures (destination appeal and tourism infrastructure) and soft measures (service quality and destination image) on rural tourism destination competitiveness. In addition, knowledge sharing is adopted as the moderator variable and testify its moderating impact in strengthening the relationship between the proposed four predictors on rural tourism destination competitiveness.

Methodology: A total of 283 respondents comprising tourists both domestic and international visited the five rural tourism destinations in Sarawak took part voluntarily in this study. To assess the developed model, a PLS-SEM approach was adopted and WarpPLS (version 6.0) software was used to perform the PLS estimate and for hypotheses testing.

Results: The empirical results revealed that destination appeal, tourism infrastructure, and service quality were found to have significant and positive impact on rural tourism destination competitiveness. Interestingly, knowledge sharing was found strengthen the relationship on destination image to rural tourism destination competitiveness.

Implication: The research study has inevitably and successfully developed some guidelines for scholars and practitioners in developing rural tourism destination for competitiveness. The findings also provide valuable information to tourism stakeholders such as local communities, industry players, and tourism related government department on the tourists' concern in making decision for visiting rural tourism destinations and the valuable information could serve as a value added to better develop the rural tourism destination for competitiveness in Sarawak, and Malaysia as a whole.

Keywords: *Hard and soft measures, Destination appeal, Tourism infrastructure, Service quality, Destination image, Knowledge sharing, Rural tourism destination competitiveness, Moderator, PLS-SEM, Sarawak, Malaysia.*

1. Introduction

Tourism sector is considered as one of the world's largest and fastest growth industries that significantly contributes to the development of a country's economy (Ghasemi & Hamzah, 2014; Grigaliunaite, Pileliene, & Bakanauskas, 2015) as well as the key factor to enhance the country's long-term economic growth and specifically contribute in enhancing local communities' earnings through job creation (Falak, Lo, & Yeo, 2016). Based on the recent statistical facts, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has revealed that there is an increased in international tourist arrivals by 7% in 2017 compare to 4.4% recorded in 2015 and it is projected to grow by another 4-5% worldwide in 2018 (UNWTO, 2018). The scope of this study is to take a closer look into the potential contribution from tourism specifically in the rural area instead of urban tourism. Rural tourism as defined by Maksin (2012), as tourism that take place at rural destination with the existence of natural, cultural, and human experiences that equipped with rural character. The reason rural tourism is in the focus of today's tourism industry development, it is because of more and more tourists are seeking for rural destination for enjoyment and get rid of everyday stressful activities (Kumra, 2008). This study was conducted in Sarawak, a Malaysian state on Borneo that stretches along the island's northwest coast, is rich with various natural heritages and resources for cultural uniqueness which all these existing resources have added additional advantages to the development of its rural tourism industry (Er & Simon, 2015). This study took places in several rural tourism destinations in the state of Sarawak which is in line with the state's focus for tourism development. As mentioned by Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (2012) that the state is aiming to attract about 4 million tourists to the state that can help to boost the employment opportunities to the local people by up to approximately 30,000 by the year 2020.

Due to the increased competition among tourism destinations, and realising the potential growth of rural tourism industry as well as its contribution to country specifically community's income (Wani & Shafi, 2013; Heikkilä, Poladova, & Kääriä, 2014), thus it is crucial to investigate factors that influence or enhance the competitiveness of a rural tourism destination (Zainuddin, Radzi & Zahari, 2013; Ramseook-Munhurrin, Naidoo, Seebalck & Pillai, 2016). The study on factors contributing to the development of tourism destination competitiveness has been the recent focused, the findings could possibly provide considerable help to the tourism industry to stay relevance and sustainable over time (Demirović, Petrović, Monteiro, & Stjepanović, 2016). Goffi (2013) has highlighted that it is vital to have detailed understandings about the tourists' perspectives on various factors that influence the competitiveness of tourism destinations because by incorporating tourists' opinions for rural tourism development