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**Student’s Perception towards Rural Eco-Tourism Destination Implementation: A Case of Sebuyau, Sarawak**

<sup>1</sup>Abang Zainoren Abang Abdurahman, <sup>2</sup>Jati Kasuma, <sup>3</sup>Lenny Yusrina Bujang Khedif, <sup>4</sup>Zubaidah Bohari, <sup>5</sup>Johana Adlin, and <sup>6</sup>Silverina Annabelle Kibat

<sup>1</sup>Senior Lecturer, Universiti Teknologi Mara Sarawak, Faculty of Business Management, Jalan Meranek, 94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, MALAYSIA

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, Universiti Teknologi Mara Sarawak, Faculty of Business Management, Jalan Meranek, 94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, MALAYSIA

<sup>3</sup>Lecturer, Universiti Teknologi Mara Sarawak, Faculty of Computer Science and Mathematics, Jalan Meranek, 94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, MALAYSIA

<sup>4</sup>Lecturer, Universiti Teknologi Mara Sarawak, Faculty of Computer Science and Mathematics, Jalan Meranek, 94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, MALAYSIA

<sup>5</sup>Lecturer, Universiti Teknologi Mara Penang, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism, Jalan Permatang Pauh, 13500 Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang, MALAYSIA

<sup>6</sup>Lecturer, Universiti Teknologi Mara Sabah, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism, Beg Berkunci 71, 88997 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research is to explore higher institution student as a tourist perception towards eco-tourism at Kampong Sebuyau. This research tries to gain insight about student’s perception upon Sebuyau being an eco-tourism destination. This research involves three main dimensions (word of mouth, external communication & destination image) that relate student perception about Sebuyau. Results show that there is a relationship involving students’ tourist level of perception on Word of Mouth, External communication and Destination image has a positive relationship with student’s patronage behavior towards Sebuyau being an eco-tourism destination. The findings of this research could provide a better understanding about student’s perception on Sebuyau and to use this information as a milestone in promoting especially in the aspect of encouraging the development of Sebuyau as an eco-tourism destination.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia is indeed blessed with a wide range of natural and cultural assets that makes ecotourism a highly beneficial, feasible, sustainable and long-term form of tourism. The land of Sarawak especially holds a great number of beautiful yet filled with cultural value that is waiting to be unveiled and experienced by the outside world. Malaysia’s reputation as one of the best ecotourism destinations in the region is further strengthened by the inclusion of the Mulu National Park in Sarawak and Kinabalu Park in Sabah in UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites List. Meanwhile, Malaysia has submitted two other nominations for UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites for future consideration: the Taman Negara National Park in Pahang and the Lanjak-Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary and Batang Ai National Park in Sarawak (Tourism Malaysia, 2009). Sebuyau is a coastal

fishing village that lies 70km away from the main city of Kuching, Sarawak. The resident’s economic dependence mainly comes from fishing, farming, small businesses and cottage industry products (Johanna Adlin Ahmad, et.al, 2014). Such research is fairly necessary since it emphasizes on enriching personal experiences (student tourist) and environmental awareness. It is important for Malaysia, in this case Sarawak district to realize that development is needed to fulfils the requirement of the visitor preferences through the concept of ecotourism, (Tourism Malaysia, 2009). It may come a long way to fully implement due to the reason that research in the area of eco-tourism in Sebuyau has somewhat been limited. It includes limitations in data regarding higher institution student tourist (in group) perception towards eco-tourism at Sebuyau. Moreover, the Eight Malaysia Plan 2001- 2005 revealed that rural-urban income disparity continues

**Corresponding Author:** Jati Kasuma, Senior Lecturer, Universiti Teknologi Mara Sarawak, Faculty of Business Management, Jalan Meranek, 94300, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, MALAYSIA  
Tel: +60820677627; E-mail: [jati@sarawak.uitm.edu.my](mailto:jati@sarawak.uitm.edu.my)

to widen (Razali, Abdullah & Jamain, 2008). Implying that it is necessary that such research is carried on as it may inflict students to have an open eye about Sebuyau. Special attention is also given towards learning about this student tourist patronage behavior. With the data and information gathered, it should be able to imply towards not only harnessing the eco-tourism at the Sebuyau, but also in garnishing the locals income generation. This research can be an effort in recognizing the dimensions involved in determining student (tourist) perception on eco-tourism in Sebuyau.

A report done by Richards & Wilson (2003) has differentiated many characteristics of youth and student travelers according to how they define their style of travel, as well as other factors. This increases the need to develop products oriented specifically to those who prefer a particular travel style. It seemed appropriate to study the relevance about different point of view by students on their perception regarding the implementation of Sebuyau as an eco-tourism destination.

#### **Research objectives:**

##### ***This research was carried out to:***

- (1) To examine relationship between *WOM* and students' tourist patronage towards Sebuyau as an eco-tourism destination.
- (2) To examine relationship between *external communication* and students patronage behavior towards eco-tourism in Sebuyau.
- (3) To examine the importance of *destination image* in relation with students perception and patronage behavior on eco-tourism at Sebuyau.

#### **Literature Review:**

##### ***Tourist Perception:***

Tourist perception means the identification and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the environment. Hsu *et al.* (2008), defined destination as the epicenters of tourism industry. Destinations are the places at the centre of the tourist experience. There is an idea about tourism system that divide destination into three regions that linked to each other (tourist generating region, transit route region and tourist destination region). Hsu, Wolfe and Kang (2004) summarized that countries and regional area are now taking their role as tourist destinations more seriously, committing extensive efforts and funds towards enhancing their image and attractiveness among travelers. However, not all destinations are created alike. Some destinations have abundance of endowed resources, or comparative advantages; others are genetically disadvantaged with limited natural advantage. It is the destination with a clear market position and appealing attractions that will remain at the top of consumers' minds when they book their holiday. Based on their study, respondent who were not likely to visit the state perceived there

was nothing to do or they did not know what activities or attraction were available.

The branding cannot change the physical attributes but only the perception of the clients. Regarding the branding of a country, the full understanding of the clients' perception of that country is important. Their perception of that country is based on the following factors: Personal experience – e.g. they have visited the country, Education or knowledge, The holder or the user of a product manufactured in that particular country, The image of the country perceived through mass-media and Stereotypes, etc (Olimpia, 2007). In addition, some tourists may find unfamiliarity with the destination adventurous and worth exploring. Food consumption can offer tourists a memorable sensory experience which becomes an important part of the travel experience (Rand and Heath, 2006) representing both an adventure and a cultural encounter (Kivela and Crofts, 2009).

##### ***Words of Mouth (WOM):***

Information from different sources contributes to the formation of the image of a certain destination, information which can be distributed into: the promotion performed by the destination; the other's opinions (direct or indirect); mass media and the popular culture (Gunn, 1972). Word of mouth, or *viva voce*, is the passing of information from person to person. It is also distinct from the study of morality, which can be defined as thought and believes. A factor contributing to the formation of the image is represented by the actual consumers of the destination which acquire a strong opinion and are ready and willing to disseminate it, (Olimpia, 2007). Gunn speaks about the organic information (digested by the autonomous agents of image formation) and the induced information originating from the destination through the promotion activity (Gunn, 1972). Sebuyau should seek word of mouth that able good recommendations being forwarded to others (student tourist).

Visitors interpret events and activities while visiting. This behavior extends Weick's (1995) proposition about often knowing what we think only after listening to what we say. Surprisingly, experience-related research remains under-represented in tourism research (Ritchie *et al.*, 2011). Finally, activities done (and not done) affect the attitude and intention consequences resulting from, and associating with visiting a destination (Frazer, 1991). Central to consumption decisions is the proposition that prior purchases and experiences trigger later purchases and recommendations to other people, (Martin & Woodside, 2012). Information collected for framing and trip planning affects the process of selecting and rejecting destination alternatives (Lockyer and Roberts, 2009). Word of mouth can go viral and can be off influential to others as WOM disseminates information and experience regardless whether it is a good one or vice

versa. Such situation seems believable and that others who heard or listen to it will capture a perspective about the topic forwarded. Therefore, WOM about Sebuyau should incorporate a positive image of the tourist destination, as it plays an essential role in the decision making process regarding the choice of a holiday.

#### **External Communication:**

Individuals perceive service intangibility as an element of uncertainty. Individuals seek information from several sources to relieve this adverse situation (Murray, 1991), and consequently, to clearly form their expectations of a future service encounter. Thus, external communication and word-of-mouth communication influence service expectations (Clow *et al.*, 1997; Dion *et al.*, 1998; Fache', 2000 ; Hoffman and Bateson, 1997; Kalamas *et al.*, 2002). A television program or movie featuring a destination may trigger thoughts about planning a visit (Kim *et al.*, 2007). External and internal personal influences affect framing leisure choices (e.g. Baggio and Sainaghi, 2011). Tapachai and Waryszak (2000) break these stored images into functional, social, emotional, conditional, and epistemic values creating beneficial images in tourists' minds and affecting destination selection. The external stimuli affect leisure choice framing and influence the final destination choice. Features and perceived benefits in framing leisure choices influence the destination choice. Long-term memory information is recalled to working memory tipping the balance in trip decision-making (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). Lacking a message directed from the host destination, the prospective visitors will gather, consciously or not, data from the autonomous agents. The press especially the tabloid press, based on negative reports, is the one that can influence overwhelmingly such a subject (Ban and Gurau, 2000). Memories serve as external influences to reference groups also framing their next trips (Martin & Woodside, 2012). Woodside and Dubelaar (2002) found the use of visitor information guides positively influences evaluations of destinations and events. As such, heightened awareness and perceived knowledge about the foreign culture will discount aspects of the experience that do not meet the expectations derived from one's own culture because foreign tourists will attribute perceived differences to dissimilarities in cultural norms and standards.

#### **Destination Image:**

Defining the image of the destination is problematic and a variety of different interpretations has been issued. One of the widest definitions is the one issued by Echtner and Ritchie (1991). They concluded that the image of the destination contains qualities, attributes, holistic, functional, psychological, common and unique components. Each year state, cities, airlines, resort, and many,

many others spend millions of dollar on attempt to construct images conducive to vacation travel. Beneficial image, perception or impression of a destination held by tourist is aligned with the expected benefit or consumption value. These perception or impression in turn leads to decision to visit a country as a vacation destination (Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000).

Destination image is important and how a destination is represented can inspire people to visit and re-visit. Shelby and Morgan (1996) discussed that it was critical to counteract the negative and outdated images which still persisted outside the destination amongst potential visitors. Before establishing strategy, they suggested to do market research to support the program and not put market research in low priority. It might be expensive but can be deal with partnership with private sectors. Chon (1991) found that the perception of South Korea by post-visitor were more positive compared with the perception held by pre-visitors. His findings indicate that the most appropriate marketing objectives a tourist destination, could employ in the marketplace appear to be two fold – first the creation of a positive image of a destination at the traveler's destination choice stage so that the initial purchase" by first-time visitors can be encourage; and second, the satisfaction of tourist need through the offering of the highest surplus benefit of experience (positive reality).

#### **Patronage Behavior:**

Tourism is a fundamental element in safeguarding the cultural and natural heritage of rural areas that also promotes employment and economic growth, (Council of the European Union, 2006). Therefore, it is necessary to realize the creation and monitoring of sustainable ecotourism development and biodiversity conservation in the nation, whereby in this case Sebuyau. Nowadays, more and more countries are incorporating branding management as part of their marketing strategies to facilitate the promotion of tourism. It is believed that branding will help to set the destination apart from its competitors. Some countries were doing well in incorporating this strategy and they have invested a lot of resources (Sumaco & Richardson, 2008).

Tourism pundits have long defined tourism as a search for novel experiences that are distinct from the routine experiences encountered at home (Li *et al.*, 2008). Paradoxically, there is considerable evidence in the literature to support Franklin's (2003, p. 53) view that "what many tourists seem to enjoy is the return to the familiar". It would seem that some tourists prefer to exchange the familiarity of their home environment with the familiarity of a holiday destination. Tourist perceptions about a holiday destination can help to determine the destination's success or failure (Formica, 2002; Kozak and Rimmington, 2000) since loyal customers act as

“information channels that informally link networks of friends, relatives and other potential travelers to a destination” (Reid and Reid, 1993, p. 3), produce more sales revenue (Hennig-Thurau and Hansen, 2000) and minimize marketing costs (Kozak, 2001; Lau and McKercher, 2004; Oppermann, 2000). On the one hand, the perceived attractiveness (Um *et al.*, 2006), quality (Atilgan *et al.*, 2003), value (Sanchez *et al.*, 2006) and low risk (Aqueveque, 2006) of a holiday destination can influence repeat visitations, contributing to increased employment and modern infrastructure (Darnell and Johnson, 2001).

The quest for what is familiar via repeat tourism becomes more pronounced when “the rewards of security outweigh any possible rewards brought by the high costs of uncertainty” (Burch, 1969, p. 132). It may be that tourists’ need for safety and certainty are a response to the insecurity and unpredictability of contemporary living (Beck, 1992; Rojek, 2000). It is likely that repeat visitors enjoy a holiday destination for either (or both) aesthetic reasons (sentimentality, memory, a sense of belonging) or utilitarian reasons (better knowledge of geographic area for selected activities) (Li *et al.*, 2008). While tourism researchers have recently started to pay attention to the concept of perceived risk, the focus has been on the way relates to gender, previous travel experience and affinity for novelty (Reichel *et al.*, 2007). Few studies have examined whether repeat visitors still perceive of risk and if so, how they cope with risk in a familiar destination. Understanding why such tourists revisit a holiday destination is fundamental in developing effective tourism marketing and management strategies as well as building travel motivation and decision-making theories (Hui *et al.*, 2007; Lau and McKercher, 2004; Oppermann, 1997; Petrick, 2004).

### Research methodology:

A survey questionnaire consisting both closed and open-ended questions was designed to gather the required data for this exploratory quantitative research. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed and 378 retrieved. *Four independent variables were identified and three research objectives will be tested using correlation and regression test.*

### Findings and Discussion:

#### Demographic Breakdown of the respondents:

Majority of respondents are *females* at N = 195 in which most of the respondents are aged at 21-24 years old. N = 300 implying that most of the respondents status are *single*. Moreover, high frequencies indicates that majority of respondents are *Malays, Degree holders* and *earns <1000* a month. Cross tabulation analysis were carried in order to retrieve number of student that had been to Sebuyau. Out of the total 378 questionnaires, 139 respondents have been to Sebuyau. The percentage retrieved on what level do they feel about their recent/previous visit to Sebuyau, it implies that *majority* at >50 percent of the students who went there agrees that they had a positive experiences; satisfied. The information retrieved can be an additional useful information to be used in understanding to what extent does these students felt about their recent/previous stay at Sebuyau.

#### Research Objective 1:

To examine relationship between *WOM and students’* tourist patronage towards Sebuyau as an eco-tourism destination

**Table 1:** Model summary on regression analysis (coefficient determination).

Model Summary <sup>b</sup>				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.504 <sup>a</sup>	.254	.248	.58488
<sup>a</sup> . Predictors: (Constant), DesImage, ExtComm, WOM <sup>b</sup> . Dependent Variable: Patron				

Based on the table above, three independent variables explain 25 per cent of the variances (R square) of student’s perceptions and patronage behavior towards Sebuyau. Adjusted R square measures the proportion of the variation in the dependent variable accounted for by the explanatory variables. For this reason, adjusted R square is generally considered to be a more accurate goodness-of-fit measure than R square. Based on the table, *adjusted R square < R square*, this normally means that some explanatory variable(s) are missing. Without them, the variation in the dependent variable is not fully measured, which means that 25% of total variation in IV can be explained by the linear

relationship between IV and DV. The other 75% of the total variation in IV remains unexplained.

#### Research Objective 2:

To examine relationship between *external communication* and students patronage behavior towards eco-tourism in Sebuyau.

Validity analysis gives us the correlation coefficient which is a measure of the strength and the direction of the linear association between the variables. Based on research objective 2, at significance = 0.001, it can be concluded that *external communication* has a relation with students perceptions towards eco-tourism in Sebuyau.

Moreover, correlation coefficient of +1 indicates that the variables are perfectly related in a positive linear sense. Tourists use information from internal sources (past experience) and external sources (e.g. advertisements, brochures or word-of-mouth) in order to reduce the uncertainty, and therefore to clearly form their expectations of a future destination

experience. Kalamas *et al.* (2002) also find an influence of these factors on service expectations.

### Research Objective 3:

To examine the importance of *destination image* in relation with students' perception and patronage behavior on eco-tourism at Sebuyau

**Table 2:** Output on Validity Analysis to test correlations.

CORRELATIONS					
		ExtComm	WOM	DesImage	Patron
ExtComm	Pearson Correlation	1	.392**	.557**	.337**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.001	.001
	N	378	378	378	378
WOM	Pearson Correlation	.392**	1	.596**	.365**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.001	.001
	N	378	378	378	378
DesImage	Pearson Correlation	.557**	.596**	1	.491**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001		.001
	N	378	378	378	378
Patron	Pearson Correlation	.337**	.365**	.491**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001	.001	
	N	378	378	378	378

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 3:** Model summary on coefficient determination (relative importance).

COEFFICIENTS <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.904	.168		11.341	.001
	ExtComm	.062	.040	.083	1.535	.126
	WOM	.079	.042	.104	1.870	.062
	DesImage	.378	.061	.383	6.190	.001

a. Dependent Variable: Patron

Standardized coefficients or beta coefficients are the estimates resulting from an analysis performed on variables that have been standardized so that they have variances of 1. Standardization of the coefficient is usually done to answer the question of which of the independent variables have a greater effect on the dependent variable in a multiple regression analysis, when the variables are measured in different units of measurement (for example, income measured in dollars and family size measured in number of individuals)., (Larry, David & Paula, 1986). From the table above, at  $Sig = 0.001$ , *Standardized Coefficient; Beta = 0.383 Destination Image* holds highest relative importance among the independent variables involved in the study.

### Conclusion:

To conclude, for research objective 1, at  $R^2 = 0.254$ ; there is a relationship involving students' tourist level of perception on *Word of Mouth* (about Sebuyau). Word-of-mouth communication is factors generating perception and expectations of a future destination experience, (Ignacio. Marti N, Jesu S, and Salmones, 2009). Based on research objective 2, at significance = 0.001, it can be concluded that *external communication* has a relation with students perceptions towards eco-tourism in Sebuyau. Moreover, correlation coefficient of +1 indicates that the variables are perfectly related in a positive linear

sense. Tourists use information from internal sources (past experience) and external sources (e.g. advertisements, brochures or word-of-mouth) in order to reduce the uncertainty, and therefore to clearly form their expectations of a future destination experience. Kalamas *et al.* (2002) also find an influence of these factors on service expectations. In addition, it can be concluded that research objective 3 has identified *destination image* owns the highest relative importance since it attain highest *Beta Coefficient* value. Destination image represents the true capabilities of a tourist destination, at least in the eyes of tourists. As a result, individuals have a great deal of confidence in this psychological factor to form their expectations of a future destination experience (Ignacio et.al, 2009).

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