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Perception of Tour Operators On Rural Tourism Products: To Sell or Not to sell?

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Abstract

This study reports the empirical investigation of Malaysian tour operator's behaviour in promoting rural tourism products. The tour operator's perception of rural tourism products and how they translate their perception into behaviour was tapped using a quantitative approach. The sample population was among the selected Malaysian tour operators selling inbound and domestic rural tourism packages. The findings revealed that rural tourism cultural, natural and historical products positively influence tour operators' action behaviour. This promising indicator highlighted the varying consequences and implications not only for the individual tour operators but tourism organisations—tour operators and travel agencies—tourism policy makers and government authorities. Understanding the tour operator's perceptions of the importance of rural tourism products is crucial in helping the government to collaborate with them in promoting Malaysian rural tourism products to the international market.

Keywords: Rural tourism, cultural, natural, historical, tour operator, action behaviour

1.0 Introduction

Tourism has been an important pillar of the Malaysian economy. Tourism is one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in Malaysia, continuing its upward trend in 2018, proving to be a resilient sector despite economic and political uncertainty (Timboun, 2018; TalentCorp, 2018). Increased tourism demand is largely related to the rise of niche tourism products—such as rural tourism in the country—as Western tourists, increasingly look for ‘unique’ travel experiences. A growing interest in immersive travel experiences has strengthened demand for eco-tourism and cultural activities in Malaysia’s rural and countryside areas, opening up opportunities for inbound sellers to pursue a greater diversity of tours and activities in the country (Bernama, 2013; Performance Management Delivery Unit (PEMANDU), 2012; Timboun, 2018).

The Malaysian government perceives rural tourism as another mechanism to enhance the quality of life in rural areas (Hanafiah, Jamaluddin & Zulkifly, 2013; Muresan et al., 2016). Effort is undertaken through government interventions to facilitate rural tourism development. The Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, for instance, spent 6.7 million Malaysian Ringgit in 2010 for infrastructure development related to rural tourism projects (Mosbah & Saleh, 2014). The Malaysian government realised that besides urban development, rural tourism could also contribute to the country’s economy (Husin & Kunjumarana, 2014). Initially, as stated in the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006–2010 (Economic Planning Unit, 2006), the purpose of development in rural areas is to provide more significant opportunities for the rural community to reduce poverty levels, besides uplifting their economy and creating opportunities for employment (Ibrahim & Razzaq, 2010; Nair & Hussain, 2013). As a result, rural tourism development was one of the main agendas under the 11th Malaysian Plan for year 2016–2020 (TalentCorp, 2018).

Rural tourism involves the local community in participating in the tourism activities within their village area (Husin & Kunjumarana, 2014; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Mohamad & Hamzah, 2013; Okazaki, 2008; Othman, Sazali & Mohamed, 2013; Opperman, 1996; Reed, 1997). Traditional culture, custom, local dishes, wildlife, the local farm, produces, homestay, rural landscapes and others are the examples of rural tourism products (Amir, Ghapar, Jamal & Ahmad, 2015; Rid, Ezeuduji, & Pröbstl-Haider, 2014). The local community involvements with tourism activities created direct employment opportunity as well as increasing the income levels and reducing the level of poverty in rural communities (Timboun, 2018). However, the rural tourism products would not be able to attract the international tourists in particular, if there is lack of support and collaboration from government bodies, public agencies, travel agencies and the tour operators (Christou, Farmaki & Evangelou, 2018; Khairil & Yuhanis, 2011; Mottiar, Boluk & Kline, 2018).

1.1 Issues

It is undeniable that tour operators play a crucial role in the tourism industry. Tour operators are seen both as sources of information as well as distribution channels that affect tourist images and decisions (Christou, Farmaki, & Evangelou, 2018; Mottiar, Boluk, & Kline, 2018; Trunfio, Petruzzellis & Nigro, 2006). Thus, active cooperation and commitment from those parties are required to further develop the rural tourism sector (Gorbuntsova, Dobson & Palmer, 2018). To boost tourist

arrivals in rural areas, it is evident that tour operators are essential and play a vital role in the tourism industry (Novelli & Hellwig, 2011). As intermediaries between tourists and tourism service providers, tour operators can influence (a) the choices of consumers, (b) the practices of suppliers, and (c) the development patterns of destinations (Gorbuntsova et al., 2018; Novelli & Hellwig, 2011; Pearce, 2008). This unique role means that tour operators are the key and catalyst factors in the rural tourism realm; furthering the goals of sustainable tourism development and protecting the environmental and cultural resources on which the tourism industry depends for its existence and growth (Metzger, 2003; Mottiar et al., 2018; Rønningen, 2010).

The degree of dependence on tour operators varies from one destination to another. To date, despite the diverse dimensions of rural tourism studied by many tourism researchers, most tour operators focus on (a) rural nature and development (Campbell, 1999; Chambers, 2014; Christou et al., 2018), (b) images and sustainability (McClinchey, 1999; Silva, Kastenholtz, & Abrantes, 2013; Unwin, 1996), (c) demand (Rid, Ezeuduji, & Pröbstl-Haider, 2014; Skuras, Petrou & Clark, 2006; Yang, Liu, & Qi, 2014), (d) supply (Kastenholtz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012; Page & Getz, 1997) and, (e) visitor motivation (Devesa, Laguna, & Palacios, 2010; Pesonen, Komppula, Kronenberg, & Peters, 2011; Streimikiene & Bilan, 2015). However, there are only limited studies which explored the importance of rural tourism products from the tour operator's perspective (Akbar, Zahari, & Dusi, 2016; Gorbuntsova, Dobson, & Palmer, 2018; Kim, 2005; Kalkstein-Silkes, 2007; Tay & Chan, 2013) and limited attention has also been given when it involves Malaysian tour operators.

From the notion above, questions arose, especially those related to Malaysian tour operators perception towards the rural tourism products. How the local tour operators perceived the importance of rural tourism attributes and their behavioral actions toward this market? To be more specific, do they perceived rural tourism as an important Malaysian tourism product? If yes, what are their actions towards promoting rural tourism sites as part of their tour package? The understanding of tour operators, who perceive the importance of rural tourism, is crucial in helping the government in promoting the rural tourism to the mass market (Christou et al., 2018; Fang, 2020; Mottiar et al., 2018). With this gap, there is a need for an empirical investigation on the Malaysian rural tourism perspective.

This study intends to bridge the gap between rural tourism and tour operator's action behavior by addressing the following main goals: (a) to examine the perception of tour operators on the cultural, natural, and historical rural tourism products in Malaysia; (b) to investigate the effect of cultural, natural, and historical rural tourism products on tour operator action behavior. The current study presents a literature review on destination branding and behavioral intention in general, and rural tourism products in particular. The model proposed uses Qu, Kim and Im's (2011) conceptual framework of building destination branding and suggested attributes of rural tourism destinations, and how these attributes would affect the tour operator's intention to recommend.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Rural Tourism

The phenomenon of rural tourism among unconventional tourism products has received significant attention from travellers and researchers around the world (Kastenholz et al., 2012; McDonald & Jolliffe, 2003; Page & Getz, 1997; Hall, Roberts, & Mitchell, 2017; Streimikiene & Bilan, 2015; Trunfio et al., 2006). Tourism researchers agree that rural tourism is a multidimensional branch of tourism related to natural attractions and human connections which contributes to the local community and country's economy (Fang, 2020; Kastenholz et al., 2012; McDonald & Jolliffe, 2003; Hall et al., 2017). McDonald and Jolliffe (2003) proposed rural tourism as a concept that interrelates rural culture and tourism. Meanwhile, Mihailovic and Moric (2012) proposed rural tourism as sustainable, multi-functional activities which are based on local culture, and natural resources. Hall et al. (2017) further claimed that rural tourism is a multidimensional branch of tourism-related to natural attractions and human connections which contributes to the local community and country's economy. Fang (2020) on the other hand proposed rural tourism as a means of achieving economic and social development and regeneration that can benefit local people.

Rural tourism destinations often present a rich set of unique resources that are appealing, authentic, and offer memorable tourist experiences (Christou et al., 2018; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). There are three main types of attributes derived from the diverse attractions–activities found in the rural tourism destinations (Anderson, 2015; Mihailovic & Moric, 2012; Hall et al., 2017; Nair, Munikrishnan, Rajaratnam, & King, 2015; Weaver, 2012). They are categorised as cultural products, natural products and historical products. However, even if the main attributes of rural tourism have been found to be complex and diverse, little is still known about the way rural tourism is perceived by tour operators, which attributes are important, and how the availability of these attributes affects tour operators' decisions to promote rural tourism in their travel packages.

2.2 Tour Operator Behavior in Promoting Rural Tourism

Rural tourism has been gaining recognition by tour operators as a growing segment of the tourism industry around the world (Anderson, 2015; Kastenholz, Carneiro & Marques, 2012). Looking at the potential direct and actual effects of rural tourism, Wearing and McDonald (2002) stressed that intermediaries such as tour operators need to market and promote rural tourism sites in their travel packages. Tour operators are instrumental in determining market trends and may affect the demand levels for the destinations. Moreover, travellers are highly dependent on tour operators when travelling to remote areas (Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011; Fang, 2020; Rid et al., 2014), thus, the tour operators also have critical functions in rural tourism marketing efforts such as providing information to the potential travellers and promoting the destination packages.

However, promoting rural tourism products is an investment in a niche market. Thus, tour operators need to carefully design their programmes according to the interests and expectations of their target groups (Akbar et al., 2016; Budeanu, 2005; Gorbuntsova et al., 2018). Only then could the tour operator's behaviour play a significant role in affecting the tourist's behaviour and attitudes towards rural tourism. Moreover, several researchers proposed that rural tourism products such as

culture (Anderson, 2015; Fatimah, 2015; George & Reid, 2005; Liu, 2006), nature (Chaiyakot & Visuthismajarn, 2012) and history (Laing, Wheeler, Reeves, & Frost, 2014; Wang & Bramwell, 2012) are important attributes of rural tourism. Thus, the challenges are linked to the rural tourism marketing process as it differs between destinations, as each destination had distinct features of available rural tourism products. Moreover, the success of rural tourism depends on the form of tour operators to market it effectively by promoting the available rural tourism products to the tourist market (Fang, 2020).

2.3 Hypothesis Development

2.3.1 Culture as rural tourism products. Culture has been one of the crucial tourism concepts since the 19th century (Anderson, 2015; Richardson & Crompton, 1988). Nair, Munikrishnan, Rajaratnam, and King (2015) stated in their study that tourists visit rural tourism destinations to learn the local culture and traditions informally. Meanwhile, Royo-Vela (2009) claimed that the characteristics of cultural appeals attract tourists who travel from urban places to rural areas. Royo-Vela (2009) further noted that cultural and historical possessions could be found in rural destinations; thus, it portrayed a strong image of the rural destination itself, like in Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy. McDonald and Jolliffe (2003), on the other hand, postulated that culture is a valuable resource which is often well preserved in rural areas and helps to sustain the local community economy.

In other words, integrating cultural attributes and rustic values of rural areas into tourism helps in shaping the emerging form of rural tourism (Anderson, 2015; Liu, 2006; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019; Yusoff, Zahari, Kutut, & Sharif, 2013). Accordingly, Anderson (2015) concluded that ‘cultural’ involves both ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ elements. Tangible cultural attributes include (a) arts and crafts, (b) galleries, (c) theatres, and (d) monuments. Intangible cultural attitudes are customs, beliefs, and languages. In the context of rural areas, culture is cultural symbols comprising (a) art, (b) craft, (c) music, and (d) folklore, and many others. In this sense, cultural life of rural people is symbolised through a different way of life and is portrayed through various symbolic traditions, texts, art, crafts and others, which contrasted with the urban life (Fatimah, 2015; George & Reid, 2005). A strong, unique culture would increase the favorability of the rural tourism destination.

Therefore, it is deduced that: ‘H₁—Cultural products of rural tourism positively affect the tour operator behaviour’.

2.3.2 Rural tourism natural products. Natural attractions encompass (a) the natural environment, (b) wide-open spaces, (c) rural landscapes, and (d) forests (Deng, King & Bauer, 2002; Nair et al., 2015). The natural resources of destinations are important elements as they serve as part of the attractions in which people spend their leisure time (Lee, Kruger, Whang, Uysal & Sirgy, 2014). Parks, lakes, forests, rivers, and mountains, for instance, are the resources of natural attributes and they produce economic benefits to the local community (Deng et al., 2002; Majumdar, 2011). Meanwhile, other researchers posited that natural areas offer scenic, historical, cultural, archaeological and scientific values (Huang, Beeco, Hallo, & Norman, 2016; Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003).

However, many researchers argue that natural resources are associated with its sustainability (Blancas, Lozano-Oyola, Gonzalez, Guerrero & Caballero, 2011; Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012; Ko, 2005; Lee et al., 2014; Stone, 2013). De Lima and

Green (2017), in their research, claimed that rural tourism destinations attracted thousands of wildlife and bird watchers every year around the world. This phenomenon is important as it not only showcases wildlife and birds to international tourists, but also the value of rural landscape which is comprised of (a) mountains, (b) terrain, (c) forests, (d) flora and fauna, (e) waterfalls, and (f) many others (Dissart & Marcouiller, 2012). Owing to this, tourism in rural areas has received attention and has been acknowledged, as Stone (2013) and de Sousa and Kastenholz (2015) specifically proposed that tourism policies and programs that adhere to the principles of sustainability need to be addressed in rural tourism destinations.

Henceforth, keeping a high level of quality of natural resources is also an essential requirement for the preservation and continuous development of tourism consumption. Unaltered and unaffected natural resources would be more powerful in attracting and creating diverse activities which links to different tourists' needs. Moreover, Chaiyakot and Visuthismajarn (2012) contend that there is no doubt that rural tourism sites have great chances to be visited not only due to their cultural resources but also natural resources offering multiple tourists' activities in a rural setting such as adventure and sport thus generating benefits for the local people. Similarly, Ohe and Kurihara (2012) noted that exposing the production of local farm produce in Japan's rural areas—which included collecting fruits and learning about plant species—indirectly helped the community economically. Consequently, our study proposes that the availability of natural product would positively affect the tour operator behavioural intention.

Thus, hypothesis 2 is established as: 'H₂—Natural products of rural tourism positively affect the tour operator's behaviour'.

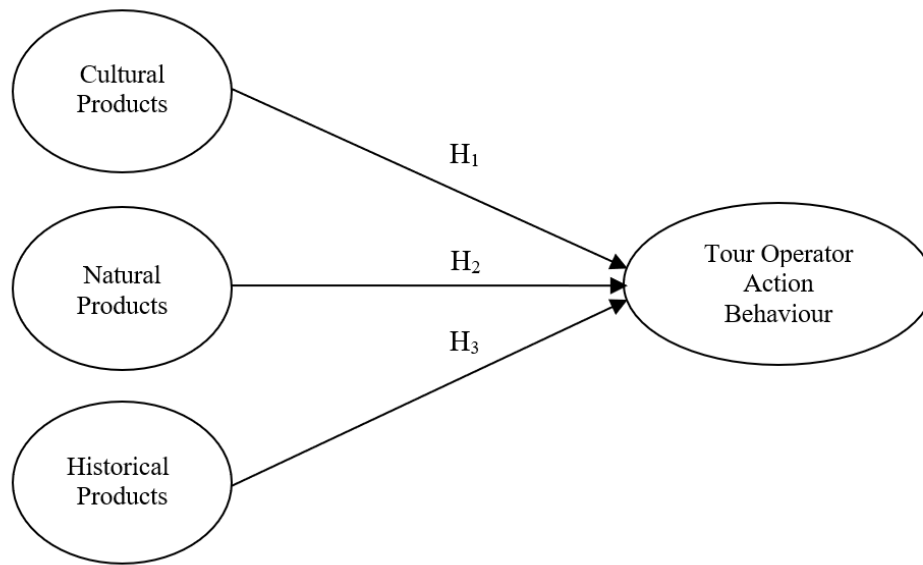
2.3.3 Rural tourism historical products. According to Garrod and Fyall (2000), heritage sites include irreplaceable cultural, natural, and historic resources. Braithwaite and Lee (2006) and Fang (2020) on the other hand claimed that heritage serves as a platform for the development of tourist attractions. Meanwhile, other researchers claimed that heritage is closely associated with the distant past, implicating castles, battlefields, and similar historical phenomena that are worthy of protection (Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011; Weaver, 2012). Wang and Bramwell (2012) pointed out that historic resources can be better managed from the revenue received through rural tourism activities.

Historic resources can facilitate the community's and the destination's well-being. Residents may share their knowledge of a region's history, culture, and natural heritage, or offer opportunities of closer contact with their way of life (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Peixeira Marques & Lim, 2012; Mottiar et al., 2018). Due to this benefit, many governments are keen to use historical resources as a platform for encouraging tourism activities mainly in rural areas (Laing, Wheeler, Reeves & Frost, 2014; Wang & Bramwell, 2012).

Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis: 'H₃—Historical products of rural tourism positively affect the tour operator behaviour'.

This study adopted the Qu et al. (2011) conceptual framework of building destination branding. The research framework (see Figure 1) suggests the attributes of rural tourism destination and how these attributes would influence the tour operator intention to recommend.

Figure 1: Research framework.



3.0 Methodology

3.1 Sampling and Population

This study proposed a causal relationship between rural tourism products—cultural, natural, and historical attributes—and tour operator action behaviour. Thus, the quantitative approach and survey questionnaires were suitable to be utilised as the research instruments for data collection. The unit of analysis is the Malaysian tour operators offering rural tourism packages. There are 277 tour operators selling rural tourism packages, according to the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (2017). Purposive and convenience sampling were applied in determining and approaching the respondents (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Before the actual survey, the telephone numbers and electronic mail addresses of 277 registered tour companies were obtained from the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents. After that, the managing directors, managers or head of the tour operators in each company were contacted via telephone and electronic mail to obtain permission and ascertain their willingness to participate in the research survey. In light of the positive feedback and the absence of any apparent problems with either the instrument or both processes, 164 completed questionnaires were collected with a response rate of 59 per cent.

3.2 Research Instrument

The survey instruments were replicated from Nair et al. (2015). The survey includes three major sections with Section A soliciting information about the tour operators, while Section B measures the tour operator's perception of rural tourism products. Section B was divided into three sub-dimensions, which assessed the tour operators' perception of rural tourism cultural products, natural products and historical products. Section C gauged the tour operator's behaviour in promoting rural tourism packages. In this section, respondents were required to translate their

view on a five-points Likert scale ranging from 1 ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 ‘strongly agree’. A pilot study was conducted to verify and confirm the reliability and validity of the items used. All comments and recommendations were considered, and some further changes were made before arriving at a final version of the survey instrument.

3.3 Data Analysis

Before testing the hypothesis, the collected data first went through a series of preliminary analyses—missing values and normality test—using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. The first stage of the analysis involved testing the validity of the research variables via the exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Principal component extraction with Varimax rotation was applied. Based on the EFA output, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.81 and Bartlett's test was significant at 0.000 level. The criterion for the significance of factor loadings was set at 0.70, as proposed by Hair and Lukas (2014). Next, descriptive analysis was applied to explain the demographic profiles. Finally, this study adopted the covariance based-structural equation modelling technique via the AMOS version 22 to test the item reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measurement scales.

4.0 Descriptive Analysis

4.1 Respondent Profile

The descriptive statistics tabulated the essential demographic profiles of the respondents. The units of analysis of this study are 164 Malaysian registered tour operators offering rural tourism packages. Table 1 below presents the overall dimensions of the respondents' profiles.

All of the interviewed tour operators sell rural tourism packages. Thus, they fit the attributes of this study unit of analysis. The majority of them claimed that their main customers were domestic tourists (N=113; 69 per cent). The highest percentage of tour packages were those dealing with tourists from the Asian continent, which accounted for around 38 per cent (n=62), while 18 per cent (n=30) were from the European continent, 17 per cent (n=27) from the Australasian continent, 15 per cent from the American continent (n=25) and 12 per cent (n=20) from the African continent. Their duration of business operation was between five to over 15 years. Of the tour packages offered, 32 per cent (N=52) of the companies offer business and leisure packages while 39 per cent (N=64) offer city tour packages. It is interesting to note that 17 per cent (N=27) of them offer rural tour packages, and 12 per cent (N=21) deal with educational vacation.

Table 1: *Respondents' Profiles*

Profile	N	Percentage
Did your company sell rural tourism packages?		
Yes	164	100%
No	0	0%
Major customer		
Local tourists	113	69%
International tourists	51	31%
Major international markets		
Asian	62	38%
European	30	18%
Australasian	27	17%
American	25	15%
African	20	12%
Duration of the business operation		
Less than one year	0	0
Between one to five years	17	10%
Between five to ten years	67	41%
Between ten to fifteen years	52	32%
More than fifteen years	28	17%
Main tourism packages sold		
Business and leisure package	52	32%
City tour packages	64	39%
Rural tourism packages	17	17%
Education packages	21	12%

N=164

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The respondents translated their perception of rural tourism products using the five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 ‘strongly agree’.

4.2.1 Tour operators perception of rural tourism cultural products. The majority of tour operators perceived culture as an essential rural tourism product and they would included the rural community way of life in their tour activities. Next, they also perceived that it is essential to expose rural cultural activities (M=3.71), the unique rural food and beverages (M=3.59), religious, culture and social custom practices (M=3.85) as well as local festivals–rites (M=4.09) to the tourists. Also, they believe that tourists should be exposed to rural handicrafts (M=4.15) and traditional dances (M=3.81) as important cultural attributes of rural destination.

4.2.2 Tour operators perception of rural tourism natural products. The majority of tour operators agree that it is imperative to promote the rural local farm products to tourists (M=3.85). They also perceived that bird, landscape, and adventure nature are considered as part of the rural tourism natural products (M=3.78). In addition, tour operators view rural outdoor activities in natural open spaces such as river cruising, fishing, hunting, kayaking, walking or cycling (M=4.06) as important rural tourism products. Similarly, the tour operators expressed the importance of showcasing the rural landscape such as (a) mountains, (b) terrain, (c) forests, (d) waterfalls, (e) beaches, etc (M=4.09) and (f) the flora and fauna (M=3.78) in their travel packages.

4.2.3 Tour operators’ perceptions towards rural tourism historical products. The majority of tour operators place great importance on historical products available at the rural tourism destination. They felt that it is essential to promote rural myths and legends to the tourists (M=4.14), and the locals’ mystique, historical and ethnic characteristics (M=4.17). The tour operators also perceived that promoting rural archaeological sites (M=4.14) and showcasing rural historic buildings, landmarks and unique past legacy (M=4.32) were important rural tourism products.

4.2.4 Tour operators’ action behaviour. The majority of the tour operators agreed that their companies aggressively promote rural tourism sites (M=3.25), and include rural cultural products, nature products, and historical products in their tour packages (M=3.35). They also claimed that they received a substantial demand for rural tourism packages from tourists (M=3.37). They also agreed that bringing tourists to rural sites (M=3.21) and selling rural tourism sites packages had become their standard operating procedure (M=3.41). They also agreed that selling rural tourism products generate better profits (M=3.08), and they will keep promoting and offering more of Malaysia’s rural tourism sites to tourists (M=3.02). Consequently, most of them agreed it is worth promoting rural tourism sites to international tourists (M=3.56).

5.0 Structural Equation Modeling

Next, the analysis continued with the assessment of structural modelling. The two-step process includes an evaluation of the measurement model and the structural model analysis.

5.1 Measurement Model

Before testing the hypothesis, the data were initially submitted for the assessment of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). CFA tests the relationship between observed variables and their underlying latent construct—rural tourism cultural attributes and action behaviour—(Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Bagozzi, 1981; Chin, 1998). For the assessment of the measurement model, twenty-six items were identified among the study variables, with (a) seven items reflecting rural tourism cultural products, (b) seven items relating to rural tourism natural products, (c) four items for rural tourism historical products, and (d) eight items relating to tour operator behaviour as the dependent construct. The goodness of fit indices for each independent and dependent construct was examined, and the result is summarised in Table 2:

Table 2: *Goodness of Fit Indices of all Independent and Dependent Constructs*

Goodness-of-Fit Statistics	Model 1 Cultural	Model 2 Natural	Model 3 Historical	Model 4 Action Behavior
χ^2	145.343	5.193	2.497	11.315
Degree of Freedom	31	2	1	5
P	.000	.075	.114	.045
χ^2/df	4.688	2.597	2.497	2.263
RMR	.043	.011	.007	.032
GFI	.854	.985	.992	.974
AGFI	.842	.926	.925	.921
IFI	.907	.993	.997	.970
CFI	.906	.993	.997	.969
RMSEA	.095	.099	.096	.088

N=164

Based on the output presented in the table above, the values of goodness of fit indices are considered adequate to produce a parsimonious fit measurement model with a factor loading of all models ranging from .89 to .70 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Bagozzi, 1981; Chin, 1998). Next, the Cronbach's alpha (CA), composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated to measure the reliability of each factor (Kline, 2016), as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: *Summarized Measurement Model Results*

	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha (CA)	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Cultural products	C1	0.867	0.929	0.913	0.727
	C2	0.820			
	C3	0.851			
	C4	0.857			
	C5	0.829			
	C6	0.867			
	C7	0.800			
Natural products	N1	0.815	0.920	0.923	0.715
	N2	0.879			
	N3	0.888			
	N4	0.897			
	N5	0.912			
	N6	0.856			
	N7	0.839			
Historical products	H1	0.932	0.915	0.910	0.703
	H2	0.926			
	H3	0.918			
	H4	0.796			
Tour operator behavior	A1	0.866	0.944	0.951	0.683
	A2	0.829			
	A3	0.868			
	A4	0.859			
	A5	0.804			
	A6	0.792			
	A7	0.812			
	A8	0.834			

N=164

As shown in Table 3, all the items's loading exceeded the minimum cut off point of 0.50 (Bagozzi, 1981), confirming the internal consistency of the items. In terms of convergent validity, the composite reliability (CR) values for the four constructs were above the minimum cut off point of 0.7 (Chin, 1998) and the average variance extracted (AVE) values met the minimum criteria of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker,

1981). The Cronbach’s alpha values for all the variables were also above the minimum cut off point of 0.7 (Kline, 2015).

5.2 Structural Model

Path analysis using covariance based-structural equation modelling was carried out to assess the proposed hypotheses (Kline, 2016). Specifically, a standardised parameter with maximum likelihood estimation was used to estimate the path coefficients. The results are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 4: *Summarised Path Analysis Results*

Path Analysis	Standardised Estimates	Critical Ratio (t-value)	P-value	Result
H ₁ : Cultural products of rural tourism positively affect the tour operator behaviour	0.610	15.176	***	Supported
H ₂ : Natural products of rural tourism positively affect the tour operator behaviour	0.558	11.736	***	Supported
H ₃ : Historical products of rural tourism positively affect the tour operator behaviour	0.480	4.484	***	Supported

Note: ***Significant at $p < 0.001$

Based on Table 4, the path analysis showed that there is a significant relationship between cultural products and tour operators’ action behaviour (β : 0.610, t : 15.176, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H₁ is accepted. Meanwhile, H₂ proposed a significant link between natural products and tour operators’ behaviour. The result shows a significant relationship (β : 0.558, t : 11.736, $p < 0.001$), thus H₂ is accepted. H₃ tested the relationship between historical products and tour operators’ behaviour. The result shows a significant relationship (β : 0.480, t : 4.484, $p < 0.001$), thus H₃ is accepted. The results confirm that the rural tourism cultural products, rural tourism natural products and rural tourism historical products significantly influence the tour operator behaviour.

The findings of this study show that the majority of tour operators agreed that the availability of cultural, natural, and historical products is vital in selling rural tourism packages. Also, the findings revealed that rural tourism cultural products—rural food, customs, festival, culture and arts (Anderson, 2015; Fatimah, 2015; George & Reid, 2005; Liu, 2005)—and natural products—flora, fauna and landscape (Chaiyakot & Visuthismajarn, 2012; Nassau, 2012)—influenced the tour operator’s behavior more as compared to the historical products (Laing et al, 2014; Wang & Bramwell, 2012). These findings strengthen previous similar studies which found that there was a relationship between rural tourism products and tour operator behavior (Chaiyakot & Visuthismajarn, 2012; Dissart & Marcouiller, 2012;

Frangos, Karapistolis, Stalidis, Constantinos, Sotiropoulos & Manolopoulos, 2015; Ragavan, Subramonian & Sharif, 2014; Rowsell, 2013; Li, Cui & Xin, 2007).

Rural tourism has become an integral element of rural economies; generating employment and income for local communities besides creating entrepreneurship opportunities for small and medium enterprises. Thus, active involvement of tour operators in promoting rural tourism would be beneficial for rural development. In this context, it is undeniable that the initiative by the Malaysian Government through Tourism Malaysia and Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture in continuously developing rural tourism had significantly benefited the tourism industry and local people as international tourists are now favouring more experiential tourism, that is, rural tourism (Husin & Kunjumar, 2014; Ibrahim & Razzaq, 2010; Nair & Hussain, 2013). Thus, proactive action should be taken by the government in upgrading and maintaining the infrastructure of rural tourism sites through the homestay programs which facilitate the development of rural tourism.

For tour operators, to attract nature, culture and experiential visitors; rural places must be packaged, promoted, priced and positioned, just like any other products or services. In addition, tour operators should utilise local experiences and products in their offering. For example, by having visits to (a) farms or rural production–processing facilities, (b) local handicrafts workshops, or (c) rural markets or events. They must also ensure their package includes serving traditional local food, participation in the harvest and/or helping in preparing the food. Moreover, they should collaborate with farmer organisations, rural producer organisations or cooperatives before offering rural tourism packages.

6.0 Conclusion

As the main tourism promoter of the country, Tourism Malaysia should increasingly enhance the tour operators' familiarity with the rural tourism products. The familiarisation trip, for example, should be organised widely with the collaboration of local tour operators and travel agencies. The collaboration and cooperation between tour operators and related government authorities is therefore crucial and should be further strengthened if the 'total tourism experience' among the international tourists in this country is to be achieved. The tour operator plays a vital intermediary role between supply and demand and contributes to the success of rural tourism sites. Their commitment and cooperation are, therefore, crucial in gearing towards promoting Malaysia's rural tourism sites. The failure to develop such commonality of approach may lead to what has been stated by Yusoff et al. (2013, pp. 463), "the collaboration and cooperation between tour operators and other stakeholders involved are therefore crucial and should be further strengthened in order to sell "total tourism experience" to the tourists."

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