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Assessing the Issues and Community-Supportive Behaviors in Malaysia's Rural Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Residents in rural areas have an advantage in ensuring the sustainability of rural tourism. Their supportive behaviors displayed during the interaction with the tourists significantly affect tourists' experience, satisfaction, and loyalty. This study aims to investigate the issues in Malaysia's rural tourism from the community's perspective or residents' perspective. Besides, the purpose of the study is also to explore possible community-supportive behaviors in the rural tourism landscape, especially in the eastern and northern parts of Malaysia. A qualitative approach based on a focus group discussion using semi-structured questions was employed to gather the relevant data. Semi-structured questions about issues and community-supportive behaviors in rural tourism were developed based on past literature. The data were verbatim transcribed and thematic analysis was performed using Nvivo 12 software. Thematic analysis was performed based on Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework. The findings revealed that communities in rural tourism areas face three major issues: community awareness, promotion initiatives, and frustration with rural tourism development. The thematic analysis also revealed that communities are willing to support rural tourism by displaying several extra-role behaviors, such as supporting, protecting, and recommending behavior. Despite the challenges faced by local communities, they are willing to voluntarily support rural tourism by displaying a positive attitude. The findings could help tourism operators and authorized parties to plan relevant destination branding strategies to ensure the sustainability of rural tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The hospitality and tourism industry largely contributes to a country's political, economic, social, and environmental development. For instance, before the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), hospitality and tourism activities contributed about 10.4% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and offered more than 320 million jobs. The contribution could be seen through the development of infrastructure, foreign exchange, generating government income, employment opportunities, as well as preservation of the environment, culture, and heritage of the nation. However, due to the pandemic and restriction of mobility worldwide, the GDP for 2020 decreased to 5.5%. Besides, more than 62 million people lost their jobs worldwide due to pandemics [1]. Literature review persistently recorded that rebuilding the tourism industry post-COVID-19 is challenging as the condition remains highly uncertain [2-4]. Furthermore, a recent article highlighted that reviving the tourism industry required four major resilient frameworks [5]: 1) government support, 2) technological innovation, 3) local belongingness, and 4) customer and employee confidence. References further stressed that the tourism industry is not only required to recover, but the industry players should also reimagine and reform the next normal and economic order to build resilience toward future crises for overall business excellence [6].

The study forecasted that Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore are among the quick recovery markets post-pandemic [7]. The tourism industry is expected to grow smoothly, supported by a relatively small number of daily COVID-19 cases, consistent business travel campaigns, and supportive policies such as the 'travel bubble'. More importantly, rural tourism is identified as the popular choice of travel after the pandemic [8-10]. However, tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic not only affects tourists but it is recorded that residents were also skeptical about participating in local tourism subject to their level of community citizenship behavior [11]. Meanwhile, the recovery of tourism post-COVID-19 is driven by the conflict between residents' accepting tourists for recovery and personal fear of interacting with tourism [12]. Thus, a study considering resident/community attitudes and behavior toward rural tourism is of utmost importance, especially post-pandemic COVID-19.

Local tourists should support more local tourism for fast recovery [5]. Tourists should have local belongingness by considering local places for a holiday. Apart from that, primary emphasis on local belongingness, for many years, researchers in rural tourism have acknowledged the urgency of a resident (the community) in managing sustainable rural tourism [13, 14]. For instance, the study pointed out that the sustainability of rural tourism largely depends on local community support [13]. This is because local communities' attitudes and behavior in rural tourism surrounding areas could play crucial roles in determining visitors' experience, satisfaction, and revisit behavior [15, 16]. According to Lin et al. [17] and Lo et al. [18], the development of rural tourism is based on the concept of co-existence and co-prosperity. The success of rural tourism heavily depends on residents as they live in the tourism area and have the autonomy to ensure local tourism attractiveness and success.

A recent systematic review on rural tourism [19] opined that local community engagement is identified as the most influential agent of change in the tourism sector. This is because, the local community or residents in rural tourism frequently engage in voluntary, spontaneous, and supportive behaviors toward tourists. Residents' behavior such as helping tourists, welcoming tourists, tolerance behavior, giving recommendations to tourists, guiding the direction, keeping the tourist destination clean, and participating in tourism activities recognized as a bedrock of sustainable and enriching tourist experiences. In rural settings, where natural landscapes and cultural heritage are often the primary attractions, the engagement and warmth of local communities play a pivotal role in shaping the overall tourism encounter, thus enhancing the authenticity of the tourist experiences toward rural tourism. Given this, Guan et al. [20] and Sasongko and Trisandini Azzizi [21] highlight the critical role of community support for sustainable rural tourism development. Importantly, a few researchers also indicate that community-supportive behavior in rural tourist development could lead to residents' life satisfaction [22]. Residents' satisfaction is of utmost importance because dissatisfied residents will engage in resistance thus hindering sustainable tourism development [23]. Hence, community-supportive behaviors not only enrich the tourist experience but also enhance resident's quality of life.

Despite the growing importance of community in rural tourism development, the study that systematically involved the community or residents is not well integrated [19]. Wu et al. [24] focused on citizenship behavior from tourism business entrepreneurs, meanwhile, Li et al. [25] examined tourist value co-creation in rural tourism, and Li and Shi [26] were concerned with tourist citizenship behaviors. Little is known about how the community or residents support rural tourism to enhance overall tourism activities in their location. Most studies were conducted in developed countries and a lack of study was conducted to understand the phenomena in the Malaysian context. This aligns with the suggestion of Madanaguli et al. [27] that future research should explore rural tourism in other countries, as most studies in Asia have been disproportionately focused on China's perspectives. Jeuring and Haartsen [28] pointed out that residents commonly engaged in voluntary behavior, such as positive and negative WOM. Meanwhile, Choo et al. [29] outline several other appropriate residents' or community behaviors, such as participation, positive word-of-mouth, and activities for visitor satisfaction. Besides the work of Saldarriaga Isaza and Salas [30] on five-dimensional community citizenship behavior, more is needed to understand the appropriate behavior(s) underlying the conception of community or residents' citizenship behavior. Reference of Wu et al. [24] further suggested that community citizenship behavior should be tested in other contexts, particularly among residents not directly involved in tourism. They emphasized the need to investigate whether citizenship behavior persists despite the issues and burdens faced by residents, especially in situations of over-tourism. This also concurs with the suggestion on the negligation of understanding of rural community struggles that may interfere the community-based tourism development [31]. In addition, most pieces of literature were quantitative in nature [32-34]. Moreover, the study by Demirović Bajrami et al. [32] proposed that residents' support for tourism was based on unidimensional, thus limiting an in-depth understanding of what is/are appropriate community behaviors that could underpin community supportive behavior conception. In addition, according to Nair et al. [14], the study on rural tourism required redefinition as most studies of rural tourism in Malaysia systematically focused on homestay tourism. For example, the recent work also focuses on rural community-based homestays [35]. The concept of rural tourism is broader and goes beyond homestay tourism. Hence, the present interpretation of Malaysia's rural tourism issues and development could be biased. Based on the co-existence and co-prosperity concept of rural tourism and the urgency of community behaviors for overall rural tourism sustainability [17, 36], hence, the objectives of this study are to 1) identify the major issue in rural tourism based on a community perspective and 2) to discover major themes of community supportive behaviors in Malaysia's rural tourism context, based on the qualitative approach.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural tourism involves all tourism activities that take place in a rural area. According to Othman et al. [37], rural tourism requires a collaboration, combination, and consolidation of all tourism elements including rural communities and rural settings. Most common rural tourism includes farm-stay, country stays, rural self-catering units, camp/caravan sites, adventure, and ecotourism. However, Nair et al. [14] stated that rural tourism definition, especially in Malaysia, required redefinition as much focus on rural tourism had skewed to homestay programs. Hence, it is worth exploring the issues and supportive behaviors among communities in rural tourism which does not explicitly focus on homestay programs.

2.1 Rural tourism issues as faced by the local community

Rural tourism has become one of the strategic agendas of many countries worldwide. Rural tourism is not just a catalyst for capacity building or empowering rural areas in economic, social, and environmental development. Importantly, rural tourism development could reduce the discrepancies between urban and rural and subsequently achieve total sustainable development [38]. Rural tourism benefits the community in many ways, in the short and long run, most of which are related to community diversity, community structure, and community resilience [39]. In short, rural tourism has transformed rural areas in both positive and negative ways. Rural tourism provides an opportunity for the community to highlight its

local uniqueness to tourists. For example, showcase the production of local handicrafts, cultural heritage, and local customs [40]. Given the opportunity for the locals to enhance their quality of life, and at the extreme level, the community sometimes competes with tourists on the limited resources in rural tourism areas [41]. In certain situations, it creates a conflict between tourists and residents [42]. This is because most rural tourism planning excludes the residents' quality of life and acceptance of promoting sustainable rural tourism [43]. Hence, it creates unsettled issues in the rural tourism area.

As a result, various community participation strategies were suggested to reduce the negative impact in a rural tourism context. Researchers proposed the typology of community participation from as low as self-mobilization to higher commitment-manipulative participation [44]. For manipulative participation, the community in rural tourism is independent, and empowered to drive rural tourism development and activities. However, a review of the literature indicated that most community participation considered as low or passive participation [45]. As such, researchers claimed that the main strategies for achieving community participation involve empowering residents through well-structured systems, enhancing their participation capabilities, and overcoming their sense of powerlessness [46]. Besides, the study by Riyanto et al. [47] among 175 Malang, Indonesia's residents proposed several approaches to strengthen community participation. Among others, the authors suggest establishing community-based tourism programs, involving residents in tourism planning processes, incorporating their perspectives into destination management strategies, promoting eco-friendly tourism initiatives, engaging communities in conservation projects, and raising awareness about environmental issues.

Depending on the level of community participation, rural tourism leaves several issues to the community itself. The content analysis conducted by Aslam et al. [48] revealed numerous issues regarding rural tourism. Among others associated with the incapability of tourism operators to market rural tourism, threatening the stability and harmony of the community, failure to convince the local community of the economic advantage of rural tourism development, lack of infrastructure development, lack of manpower and expertise, community's unable to participate, ignorance of preference and priority of communities. The list continues as highlighted by the recent study of Rosalina et al. [49] whereby the scholars classified it as internal issues (social & political, workforce, planning & management, marketing strategy, financial, physical, and sustainable strategy) and external issues (tourists' demand, other competitors and external sources). Meanwhile, Reindrawati [50] classified the issues faced by the community into operation, structural and cultural factors. The qualitative study by Mansor et al. [51] among Indigenous ethnic in a rural area of Malaysia (Cameron Highland) revealed that the local community's dissatisfaction concerning the domination of the local businesses by outsiders, negative impact on the environment such as traffic congestion and pollution. Similarly, the report by European Union [52] among European countries also emphasized that social and cultural differences between the local community and tourists further create conflicts and tension about overcrowded, congestion, and increasing social crime. Moreover, the study by Baloch et al. [53] among 650 rural tourism stakeholders including the local community in Pakistan stated that socio-culturally intolerable ecotourism which refers to tourism activity that does not benefit locals and their socio-cultural values would create issues. However, the qualitative study by Kunjuraman et al. [54] among the community in Borneo suggested that rural tourism has contributed to more positive social transformation in the local community rather than a negative social impact. Based on the mixed result, it is worth understanding how the local community perceived the issues related to rural tourism development specifically in the Malaysian context. Hence, the first research question is to identify what are the major issues as perceived by the local community in the context of rural tourism.

2.2 Community-supportive behaviors in the rural tourism context

Literature also indicates that researchers attempted to conceptualize community-based rural tourism development [55]. The scholars suggested that the success of any rural tourism development should include all tourism operators, community organizations, and residents. It is observed that strong bonds and trust from residents are identified as contributing factors to initiating and maintaining community support for tourism. In short, community-driven rural tourism highlights the importance of the local community in rural tourism planning to ensure the engagement of residents. More importantly, rural tourism has become one of the popular places for post-pandemic tourism [10]. Reference further added that 'slow tourism', which offers physical and mental relaxation, social interaction, escape, novelty, and discovery, such as those available in rural tourism, is more demanding post-pandemic [9]. Hence, the local community's attitudes and behavior would significantly affect overall rural tourism satisfaction.

Based on the literature from various perspectives (tourism operators, visitors, and residents), three interrelationships were observed in rural tourism and resulted in several outcomes. Firstly, the relationship between tourism operators and visitors is based on a transactional relationship. Tourism operators such as hospitality providers (homestays, cafés, restaurants, small local stalls, transportation providers, etc.) gained economic advantages through their business operations. Secondly, the relationship between tourism operators and community/residents is commonly associated with resource development and conflict. Residents or local communities might face several difficulties and dissatisfaction as discussed previously which include crowdedness, congestion, pollution, and difficulty in accessing local infrastructure. This would create tension and conflicts between operators and local communities utilizing limited resources in the rural area. Depending on the level of conflict, such constraint perhaps still would lead to extra-role behavior from the local community by displaying tolerance behavior [33]. Thirdly, the relationship between visitors and residents is based on social interaction. For instance, Wu et al. [24] summarized that social relationships, rural living rituals, tourism operation rituals, and event and festival rituals emerged in the context of residents-tourists interaction. The following Figure 1 summarizes the relationships.

The overlapping relationship between operators, visitors, and residents not only would possibly create issues and conflicts, but interestingly, such a relationship could result in more sustainable tourism opportunities. Appropriate attitudes and behaviors displayed by the residents could diminish all the

negative impacts of rural tourism to enhance the overall tourist experience in rural tourism [31]. Such behavior could be observed or conceptualized through citizenship behaviors. This is because the interaction between residents, operators and tourists is more voluntary as they commonly do not directly engage in profitability activities (rewards).

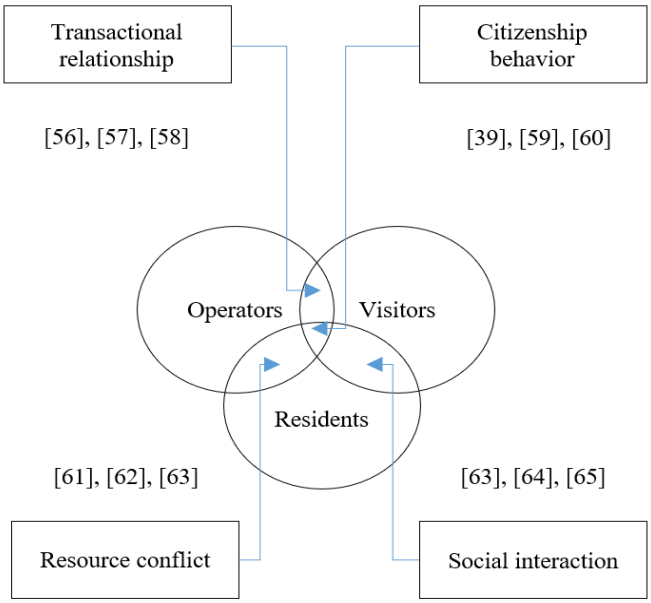

Figure 1. Resident's citizenship behavior or community-supportive behavior [39, 56-65]
Source: Author

A qualitative study by Gunawijaya et al. [44] among 21 stakeholders in Purwakarta, Indonesia revealed that community commitment to participate in rural tourism development through several behaviors such as tolerance of access and infrastructure, organizing and promoting cultural events, and voluntarily protect the cultural and natural environment. Meanwhile, the study of Arismayantiab and Suwenaa [66] among the community in Penglipuran, Bali revealed that the community is ready to participate actively if tourism management engages them in tourism development decision-making and increases community tourism knowledge. This is consistent with the suggestion of Reindrawati [50]. In addition, the case study by Yin [45] involving eight villages in China reveals that residents participate passively in rural tourism. Their involvement is primarily driven by economic activities, and their enthusiasm for participation diminishes if they do not receive sufficient monetary benefits. This contrasts sharply with engaging in voluntary, community-supportive behavior. Based on the mixed results on appropriate citizenship behaviors from past studies, further study is needed to know about appropriate supportive behaviors among residents in the context of rural tourism. Hence, the second research question is to discover relevant residents' citizenship behaviors or community-supportive behavior in rural tourism.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative approach and employed a small focus group discussion among the community in various rural tourism places specifically in the east and northern parts of Peninsular Malaysia. Hence, this study is based on the post-positivism paradigm. Methodologically, post-positivism applies multiple approaches to an inquiry, including qualitative research, mainly to understand the cause-and-effect relationships toward certain phenomena. This approach enables the discovery of both the researcher's and participants' perspectives [67]. The qualitative study was chosen over the quantitative study because it suits the objective of the current study. According to Hammarberg et al. [68], qualitative studies especially focus groups, permit the researcher to gain answers on background information and informants' beliefs, attitudes, and behavior toward certain phenomena (in this study, it refers to community-supportive behavior in rural tourism). For the purpose of focus group discussion, a semi-structured or unstandardized interview was developed as it is more flexible and encourages informants to lead the discussion and be open to more exploration of the topic [69]. This is also to overcome data collection bias whereby standardized questions and procedures can be guaranteed [70]. To improve the reliability and validity of the questions, the instrument was verified by the 'University's Research Ethical Committee', comprised of professors and experts in the field. The instrument consists of three major parts, namely: 1) informant background, 2) issues and problems faced by the community, and 3) supportive behaviors. Most questions were developed based on the previous literature on rural tourism and citizenship behaviors.

In the first session, basically, an opening question, informants were asked to introduce themselves in terms of name, location of residence, type of tourist attraction, number of years as residential, and their employment background. This is to build rapport between researchers and informants and to ensure the flow of discussion runs smoothly. For section two, informants were asked the question of general opinion on rural tourism. Next, informants were asked whether they had been directly involved in rural tourism and gained direct benefits or vice versa. Informants were asked to indicate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the current state of rural tourism. Probing questions were then used to encourage them to justify their answers. For the third session, informants were asked about their expectations of rural tourism, and their opinions on community participation, engagement, and interaction. Besides, informants also were asked about their contribution and voluntary behavior in the context of rural tourism. Lastly, informants were asked about suggestions to improve their local rural tourism.

The rural areas of the study were divided into two clusters: the Eastern cluster which includes Setiu, Terengganu, and the Northern cluster which includes Baling, Kedah; Balik Pulau, Penang, and Pantai Cenang, Langkawi, Kedah. According to Department of Town and Country Plannin [71], a rural area is defined as *"areas other than urban locations, comprising of all types of settlement villages, small towns and other settlements of less than 10,000 populations, with agricultural characteristics and rich in natural resources"*. Meanwhile, rural tourism refers to all tourism activities that occur in rural areas [72]. The selected locations of study have met the criteria [71] and the definition suggested by Chiritescu [72]. Hence, the informant was selected from these locations.

The sampling strategy was based on purposive sampling based on specific criteria set by the researchers. The criteria are: 1) the participant or informant must be a resident in the selected rural area for at least one year, and 2) the participant is not directly engaged in tourism activity such as running a business in the community area. Local communities who are

directly involved in rural tourism such as entrepreneurs, tourism operators, or local authorities were not eligible to participate in this study. The criteria were set to ensure the individual has adequate knowledge or experience with rural tourism issues and supportive behavior. Besides, purposive sampling also hopes to mitigate issues of sampling bias by clearly defining the inclusion and exclusion criteria [73]. Initially, 15 participants were selected to be involved in the focus group discussion. Due to movement order restrictions of COVID-19, the focus group discussion was conducted via online Webex Meetings platform. According to Lune and Berg [69], it is a common practice today that marketing researchers benefit from the Web application to conduct a virtual focus group. The session was digitally recorded, and all the audio was then verbatim transcribed. However, only nine informants were available during the session and involved in the focus group discussion. Hence, the selection of informants was based on convenience by considering; that they have the time to participate and are comfortable discussing the topic in a group setting. This is considered acceptable for small focus group discussions [74]. Besides, there is no specific sample number for qualitative study [75]. The number of samples is considered adequate following the suggestion of Boddy [74] on achievement of theoretical saturation, whereby: 1) all the informants provide the same theme code, and 2) researchers and informants discussed the result, and no conflict or controversy of the results was recorded. The details of the informants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Informant profiles

Informant	Description	Type of Rural Tourism
Informant 1	Male, 25 years old, Pantai Chenang, Langkawi	Nature-beach
Informant 2	Female, mid 40s, Balik Pulau, Penang	Ecotourism (national park)
Informant 3	Female, 28 years old, Baling, Kedah	Ecotourism (river, campsite)
Informant 4	Female, 25 years old, Baling, Kedah	Ecotourism (mountain hiking)
Informant 5	Male, mid-30s, Kampung Duyung, Terengganu	Cultural (batik/handicraft, traditional boat building, seafood crackers)
Informant 6	Female, mid 30s, Kuala Terengganu	Cultural (batik/handicraft, beach, seafood crackers)
Informant 7	Female, 41, Kuala Nerus, Terengganu	Ecotourism (beach)
Informant 8	Female, 50, Kuala Besut	Nature (waterfall, hot spring)
Informant 9	Female, 48, Setiu, Terengganu	Ecotourism (mangrove, lagoon)

The focus group interview was recorded via Webex Meeting recording. The data later were verbatim transcribed and recorded in the NVivo 12 software, allowing the researchers to quantify, clean, and code the data and underline important statements, sentences, and quotations from the informants [76]. Recording from the Webex platform and verbatim transcripts could reduce the deviation in data interpretation. Besides, to avoid the researcher's personal beliefs, expectations, and preferences toward data collection and interpretation, the focus group discussion was participated by four researchers and one research assistant [77].

Thematic analysis in this study follows the six-phase framework as suggested by Braun and Clarke [78] which starts with 1) Become familiar with the data, 2) Generate initial codes, 3) Search for themes, 4) Review themes, 5) Define themes and 6) Write up.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following Figure 2 shows a word cloud generated by NVivo 12 using the word frequency analysis. According to Atenstaedt [79], the word cloud is a visual illustration of word frequency that appeared in the analysis. The bigger the size of the word, the more common the term or words being mentioned by the informants. In this study, the words "people" and "tourism" are relatively bigger and identified as the most cited by the informants. Besides, the word "villagers", "promotion", "nature", "community", "residents", and "places" were among the most referred to by the informants in explaining their opinion and experience with rural tourism. It is indicated that, when discussing rural tourism, "people" could be the main agenda to ensure its overall success. Hence, it is consistent with the aim of the study to understand how the community (people) support rural tourism.

Figure 2. Word cloud for rural tourism

4.1 Issues in rural tourism as perceived by the community

To identify the issues and interpret the patterns and themes, thematic analysis was applied. According to Yardley and Marks [80], the thematic analysis offers the researcher a better understanding of the potential of any issues. Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase framework for thematic analysis [78]. For research question one, based on the thematic analysis from the focus group discussion, the communities highlighted three major themes about the issues in rural tourism. The themes are (1) community awareness, (2) promotion initiatives, and (3) frustration with rural tourism.

4.1.1 Theme 1: Community awareness

On the theme of community awareness, the informants shared their experience living in rural tourism areas as a lack of collective work towards developing rural tourism. Besides, the informant has also seen that local communities are not very tourist-oriented due to a lack of understanding of what tourists expect due to limited exposure. For instance, Informant 1 stated that rural communities need to be educated so they can appreciate rural tourism as an industry rather than just running their routine life in rural areas. Informant 1 said, *"Our people don't know the real meaning of rural tourism, they don't know how to treat tourists properly"*. Informant 7 further expresses that rural people's mindsets should be changed, *"People in the rural area used to depend on nearby forest output such as hunting and harvesting. If we fully develop rural tourism, the villagers do not need to destroy the forest. We can find an alternative to generate income for villagers, and the result will be very unexpected"*.

Based on the findings, this indicates that few residents or communities were well aware of the importance of preserving nature, resources, culture, and heritage in their rural tourism area. This is consistent with previous findings from Hu et al. [81], indicating residents' willingness to protect and support rural tourism. Besides, it also shows a shred of evidence that rural tourism planning and development required formal participation and integration of all parties, especially residents. Based on the discussion, a provision of basic training in tourism and hospitality among residents should be considered to improve residents' attitudes and perceptions of local benefit-sharing from rural tourism development.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Promotion initiatives

Among the most cited issues in rural tourism is promotion. Based on the analysis, ten references were made concerning promotion. Besides, the findings also indicate two subthemes, namely (i) identity and (ii) unique attraction, were bound with promotion initiatives. For promotion, communities view that the promotion of rural tourism requires momentum and integration. Current promotion is seen as intermittent and was not equally promoted. Informant 5 said, *"There is less promotion for inland tourism as compared to island tourism in Terengganu",* Informant 7 further added, *"We had a good place for rural tourism, such as on ecotourism but the promotion is still not widespread"*. Informant 9 also shared a similar opinion, *"There are many other places to promote, don't focus on a specific place and don't over-promote"*. Besides, Informant 9 said *"Most of the promotion I see when it comes to rural tourism, I get a lot of information from social media such as Facebook, very limited formal promotion from local authority"*.

Concerning the subthemes, the majority of informants highlighted that rural tourism should have a good package-a unique attraction and identity. Identity enables visitors to associate with and appreciate certain destination branding [82]. Besides, Demeter et al. [83] stated that identity is also important to residents in displaying appropriate ambassadorial behavior. Informant 1 stressed, *"Rural tourism should have its signature, the elements that create an identity. For instance, we should showcase what we have rather than highlight the same thing that visitors (especially foreigners) have in their countries. We highlight our own culture, traditional dishes, and even architecture"*. Informant 4 further shared her view of her local community, *"Yes, my friend came to Baling and was shocked to try meat curry with the banana stem. This is something rare for them, a thing that not all people experience"*. Besides, three references also were made by the respondents about government support, especially in promoting rural tourism. At the current stage, the authorities seem not to focus and take an opportunity to promote this rural tourism, as cited by Informant 5 and Informant 7. Besides, a control mechanism should also be employed to protect both communities and tourists, especially in the mushrooming growth of homestay concepts nowadays in rural areas (Informant 7).

4.1.3 Theme 3: Frustration with rural tourism

Based on the findings, two issues arise pertaining the rural tourism from the perspective of communities. In general, communities observed a declining trend of visitors even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Informant 1 raises the question that communities also sometimes wonder what new things or innovations they have to offer in their rural tourism. Among the main concern that creates tension and frustration among the community in rural tourism are (i) facilities and (ii) crowd. Firstly, though few informants shared that adequate facilities were provided in rural tourism such as a place to relax, small shops for tourists to eat, and other basic amenities, however, the facilities were rather limited and not well maintained over time. Informant 4 said, *"We are not that strong in terms of facilities to welcome visitors. Sometimes, visitors face difficulties moving from one to another location in the rural tourism area"*. Informant 1 expressed, *"So, there are many things whose potential is still high but run down due to poor maintenance. For instance, Taman Lagenda is a magnificent piece of property for tourists to tell the legend of Langkawi but is now badly managed"*. Besides frustration with the facilities, four references were made concerning the crowd issue. Based on the findings, three informants highlight the issues of crowdedness, which sometimes creates tension, and they could not tolerate it. For instance, Informant 2 stated that too many visitors entering one session at one time would create congestion and crowd. Informant 6 said, *"Sometimes people come in a group, by bus, too many of them, too crowded, I become tension"*. Informant 1 also added that, in a particular location, we could see overtourism, thus would lead to crowd issues. In this situation, the government and the tourism operators should cooperate in developing the rural areas by considering not only the perspective of tourists but, more importantly, to consider the quality of life of the communities.

4.2 Major themes for community-supportive behavior in Malaysia's rural tourism

To answer research question two, based on the thematic analysis using NVivo 12, guided by the theory of citizenship behavior [33], three major themes were observed in supporting behavior among communities in rural tourism. The themes are: 1) supportive behavior, 2) protecting behavior, and 3) recommend behavior.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Supportive behavior

According to Zhang and Xu [33], supportive behavior includes behavior that directly supports rural tourism. In this study, it was found that communities are willing to be involved in the agenda of rural tourism. Besides, the informant also highlighted that rural tourism in their area received strong support from the community. In a certain context, according to Informant 7, *"I found that one of the villagers had run Lata Air Deru, he managed to mobilize the energy of villagers. The villager also together to develop the area and build the resort"*. When Informant 7 further asked about the contribution of the community in this context, the Informant said *"In the perspective of economy, not everyone will be involved without a proper reward, so I must say this support comes together with certain rewards such as become the worker at the place"*. In detail, two subthemes emerged in supportive behavior, namely (i) welcoming behavior and (ii) volunteering behavior. For welcoming behavior, four references were made by the informants. For welcoming behavior, Informant 1 thinks that the community was not entirely tourism-oriented in terms of hospitality as compared to foreign countries such as Bali as an example. *"We just can guide the tourist like give direction, turn left, go straight, but not more than that, we not well trained and educated in hospitality"*. Meanwhile, Informant 7 views that the majority of the residents welcome the tourists. Informant 5 added, *"To*

date, I heard no specific complaints about the place, tourism products, and community itself". For volunteering behavior, Informant 7 stated, " *The village leader volunteered to create a tourist area for cultural sharing with the visitor. He knows the benefits he could bring to the community in terms of generating income for the community. He is very opportunist and sees what he needs to do to develop his area".*

4.2.2 Protecting behavior

Protecting behavior relates to maintaining order in public areas in rural tourism [33]. Using this sample, informants highlighted that the community should maintain the environment, not destroy the forest, conserve the heritage, and prepare the 'do and don't.' Overall, 12 references were made to protecting behavior. According to Informant 2 who lived nearby an ecotourism attraction, "*We should maintain our environment. Cleanliness, flora and fauna because it's not easy for us to get those things, the thing that we have explored, we want to get them back, it takes a long time".* Informant 3 added, *"So far, the facilities provided by the operator are still not well managed. Government should provide certain facilities to strengthen the rural tourism attraction".* When the informant further asked about their readiness to protect the environment, Informant 7 who lived in Kuala Nerus (ecotourism attraction) shared her view *"The field of ecotourism can generate income. I observed that we have nature and heritage and should educate people not to destroy the forest. We should prepare the tourist on the 'do' and 'don't' in our local tourism area".* Besides, according to Informant 8, the main reason she did not welcome the tourists is due to pollution issues such as improper rubbish and waste management. This is consistent with the recent findings of Demeter et al. [83] that revealed tourism as one of the polluting industries.

4.2.3 Recommend behavior

Due to the limitation of formal promotion initiatives from the authorized parties in rural tourism, as highlighted in the issues, it is recorded that recommended behavior is another central theme that emerged in this rural tourism study. Overall, seven references were made to recommend behavior by the informants. According to the informants, they are willing to recommend rural tourism in their area to acquaintances and non-acquaintances. For instance, informant 3 stated, "*Personally, I'm happy to promote the best place around me to the public".* Utilizing their limited capacity, Informant 2, Informant 3, and Informant 4 are willing to promote their rural tourism via social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok. Besides, Informant 3, persistently highlighted that she was excited to introduce the local food to visitors. Based on the work of Zhang and Xu [33], recommend behavior could be similar to 'positive word of mouth'.

In conclusion, the findings of this study can be presented in the following Figure 3.

It is important to note that the study is consistent with Zhang and Xu [33] who proposed community-supportive behavior directed to both the destination brand itself as well as tourists. In this study, community-supportive behavior and protecting behavior are directly associated with rural tourism sustainability, whereby recommend behavior is directed to potential tourists and visitors.

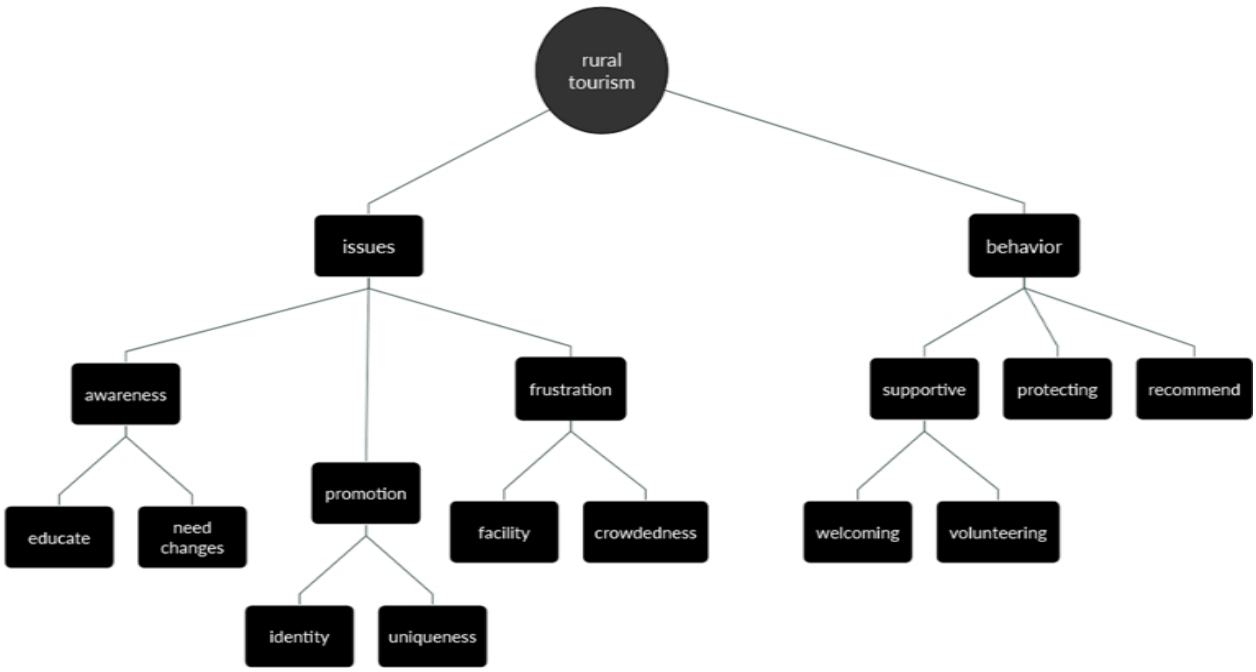

Figure 3. Rural tourism thematic mindmap using NVivo 12

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study adds to existing literature specifically in understanding community-supportive behaviors in the context of rural tourism. As much literature was based on quantitative, this study offers an in-depth understanding of how the community shared their experience on the critical issues in the rural tourism context and how the community showed a willingness to support rural tourism. Firstly, based on the findings, it is shown that promotion initiatives should be integrated, holistic, and widely covered. More formal information dissemination from authorized parties is seen as the urgency to boost the rural tourism industry. Rural tourism developers and authorized parties also should consider a

unique selling proposition or signature to their destination to facilitate image or identity building. In this context, place or destination branding orientation should be considered in rural tourism planning and development to create awareness and strengthen the identity and image of rural tourism places.

Secondly, local communities also need to be educated and exposed to the hospitality agenda so that they can see rural tourism as an industry and guarantee them an alternative income. Under certain circumstances, authorized parties are welcome to interfere in providing superior facilities in a rural tourism context with the tourism operators. For instance, access to the main road, basic transportation, and the traffic light are crucial, especially during the peak seasons and crowds. Basic amenities should be made available and outstanding so that the community doesn't feel frustrated due to the conflict of resources between tourists and the communities. This action will subsequently increase the resident's trust, satisfaction, and quality of life and improved the perception of benefit-sharing in the context of rural tourism thus enhancing the likelihood of engaging in supportive behaviors.

Thirdly, community-supportive behaviors could be context-specific. Previous studies in China revealed that place citizenship behaviors include helping behavior, supportive behavior, protecting behavior, tolerance behavior, and positive word-of-mouth; community supportive behaviors include helping behavior, keeping interpersonal harmony, involving behavior, recommending behavior, and protecting behavior. The study in Iran highlighted that residents' support toward rural tourism includes attraction support, development support, extensional and promotional support, financial and investment, and facilities and services support. This study in Malaysia found only three main community supportive behavior: 1) supportive behavior, 2) protecting behavior and 3) recommending behavior. In addition, this study found additional subthemes for supportive behavior: welcoming and volunteering. Rural communities give full support to their local tourism and, more importantly, welcome tourists to their location. This is an opportunity for them to exchange their knowledge, ideas, and culture. Surprisingly, the local community also voluntarily offers themselves to tourism development. Rural communities also go the extra mile by protecting the environment and engaging in recommended behavior. It is also observed during the focus group discussion that, residents from nature-based tourism would be more voluntarily engaged in protecting behavior, while residents from cultural-based tourism would be more pleased to recommend and welcome the tourist. As a result, tourism operators should maintain a good relationship with communities and reduce frustration by ensuring the quality of life of the local communities. Doing so, this is perhaps could produce a resilient community.

The main limitation of this study is due to the small sample to represent and make a generalization on overall community-supportive behaviors in Malaysia. Generalizability should be made with caution. However, the study locations were scattered, especially in the north and east regions of Malaysia, where most rural tourism areas are located. Therefore, this finding could be relevant in the context of these rural tourism areas. Using this sample, the finding offers an initial idea of how communities or residents in rural tourism are willing to support rural tourism by displaying appropriate behaviors which ultimately could affect visitors'/tourists' satisfaction. Future studies should consider a larger sample and nationwide coverage to increase the understanding of community-supportive behavior in rural tourism. The triangulation method could be considered in the future to validate community-supportive behaviors, specifically in the Malaysian context which is unique due to diversity of the cultural values.

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