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## Communication Versus Geography: The Case Study of Sarawak Homestay Operator Association

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### ABSTRACT

Homestay is being developed throughout the decades making it as one of the best tourism product in Malaysia. The increasing number of homestay in Sarawak each year is challenging the communication among each other administratively. Communication among all the homestay is vital in order for the information could be reached in a timely manner. Without a proper communication media used to communicate, a lot of important information could be missed out causing some of the homestays to be left out. This research is conducted to study the communication used among the homestay operators using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Interviews are conducted with the representatives of Sarawak Homestay Operator Association (SHOA) and questionnaires are distributed to the homestay operators in gathering the information. Locations could not be changed as locations are the unique selling point of a homestay and recommendations can be addressed to have mobile communication towers within the vicinity of the homestays to improve the signals. It is revealed that communication issues could be resolved if operators are actively involved as there are a variety of apps available in the market for these operators to choose from.

**Keywords:** *Homestay, Communication, Technology, Geography, Challenges.*

### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a unique country which accommodates a variety of races living together in peacefully. These races include Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans, Kadazans and a lot more while being able to live together in harmony while acknowledging each other's culture and customs. This builds an impression of a centre of culture for Malaysia, thus having tourists from all over the world to make Malaysia as one of their traveling destinations as to experience the culture. Sharip (2016) mentions that service sector, which covers tourism, nowadays contributes to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and expected to increase parallel to the flow of most of the progressive country in the world. The development in tourism sector itself have brought Malaysia to be known internationally. It has been contributing in economic growth, social progress and modernization and distribution of wealth among the citizens of the state.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism have been developing in Malaysia over the past decades. Tourism plays an important role in the development of a country with its contribution in economic growth, social improvement, and the modernisation of a country. Tourism is one of the largest economic sectors in the world (Creaco & Querini, 2003). This is because it involves other sectors that have connections with tourism itself such as food and beverages, transportations, accommodations, and other services provided by organisers to develop this sector. Tourism covers almost all aspects of society.

Assessing the 'Product' (2015) stated that tourists needs and demands are generally defined in terms of the following 5 A's; attractions, accessibilities, activities, accommodations, and amenities. This is because all these five elements become the essentials that are demanded by the tourists. The types of tourism are dynamic in time; they vary a lot. The types of tourism presented in a given period are generated by the needs of its objectives, the level of cultural and social facilities and the existing means of transport (Tureac & Arca, 2008). There are various kinds of tourism which includes cultural tourism, music tourism, religion tourism, health tourism and each of the tourism activity has its own attractions and speciality. The same goes to the homestays in Sarawak where there are various kinds of homestay in Sarawak which have their own attractions.

Homestay in the form of tourism can be considered as cultural tourism. Some people are interested to know how other people or communities stay, survive and prosper. The kind of culture they practice their art and music is different from ours. So, in order to acquire knowledge, understands culture well, to become familiar with the culture, they undertake journey (Singh, 2011). Cultural tourism is defined by the World Tourism Organization (Report WTO, 2012) as "trips, whose main or concomitant goal is visiting the sites and events whose cultural and historical value has turn them being a part of the cultural heritage of a community" (Dolj, 2013).

Othman (2010) defines homestay as an isolated village remote from the city which has been used as a tourism destination due to having certain attractive features and its own uniqueness. Based on this concept, tourist not only can experience themselves the culture of the village, they also have the opportunity to dive in the beauty in the nature of that place. Apart from that, they could also interact with the locals which they can share experiences and knowledge with each other. Home is defined as the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household. Meanwhile, stays are defined as a period of staying somewhere in particular of living somewhere temporarily as a visitor or guest. Hence, homestays can be defined as staying in a period of time with a member of family of a community or a living.

Homestay is a form of tourism that allows visitors to rent rooms from local families inside their dwellings. It is sometimes used by people who wish to improve their language skills and become familiar with local lifestyle. Some countries encourage homestay as a means of developing their tourism industry. Hosting a homestay participant allows the host family to earn an income. Homestays differ for each place. It usually follows the culture concept and lifestyle of society of the place. Homestay programme allows visitors to experience how the family live their life as well as joining them in doing their daily routine.

Homestay in Malaysia is tourist experiencing village/community living in rural area lifestyles and stays with the host under one roof. Thus, involving oneself with the community activities in the period of stay. Homestay in Malaysia started back in the 70s where a local lady by the name of Mak Long took in long staying hippies and provide foods and accommodation within her house (Pusiran, 2013). This became the start of the homestay trend which then followed by the villagers. Afterwards, other villages started to see the benefits from doing these especially with the influx of domestic and international tourist who seeks for experiences in local community. The trend become widely known and in 1988 the first official homestay program started by Desa Murni Homestay which consist of five villages (Pusiran, 2013). With this, other places started to develop the idea of operating a homestay.

The homestay program is a tourism product that has been given special emphasis by the government through the Ministry of Tourism. Realizing the potential of the program, the Rural Tourism Master Plan 2001 was formulated to promote homestay program as a catalyst for rural community development (Ibrahim & Razzaq, 2011). In 1995 Ministry of Tourism started to promote homestay for the better understanding of rural life aspects that makes Malaysian village culture unique (Chow, 2013). The ministry also provided a complete guideline about planning and operating this program. This

includes important aspects such as health and safety. This homestay program is open to all Malaysian citizen however, most of the homestay offered as a community program especially from the rural areas.

In 1995 Ministry of Tourism started to promote homestay for the better understanding of rural life aspects that makes Malaysian village culture unique (Chow, 2013). The ministry also provided a complete guideline about planning and operating this program. This includes important aspects such as health and safety. This homestay program is open to all Malaysian citizen however, most of the homestay offered as a community program especially from the rural areas. Malaysia is one of the country that accommodate various races as well as indigenous tribes. With the variety of races, various types of homestays had been developed across the country. From indigenous nature to traditional lifestyle, Malaysia has developed a lot of homestays for the development of the rural communities. For example, there are homestays from the Ibans, Malays, Chinese, Kadazans, and Bidayuh. Each homestay offers different kinds of experiences for the visitors including foods, daily routine, activities, and environment as well.

## METHODOLOGY

Based on the further research done, there are 35 registered homestays in Sarawak which all twelve regions in Sarawak having at least one homestay in each region. The most number of homestay in a region is 14 which are located in Kuching. This can be due to the fact that Kuching is the capital city of Sarawak which made it as the centre of attention. Miri Follows second which have six registered homestays in it. Serian, Mukah, Sibuan and Limbang have the same number of homestay which are 2 each. While other region, Samarahan, Sri Aman, Betong, Sarikei, Kapit, recorded to have the least number of homestay which is one for each region.

Sarawak Homestay Operator Association (SHOA) is an organisation that is responsible in monitoring the development and the well-being of all the homestay in Sarawak. SHOA is currently being led by Puan Jamilah binti Shukri and the office of the association is located at Satok, Kuching. This association holds the responsibilities in the development of the homestays in Sarawak, therefore communication among the homestays must always be taken seriously so that each homestay could receive information evenly and none being neglected. The researcher chose to focus on the communication of the Sarawak Homestay Operator Association (SHOA) in this study. This is because communication plays an important role in every organization itself. Communication itself could affect various kinds of aspects in an organization including, information sharing, news, promotions, urgent calls, and a lot more.

Communication is important in everyday living. Abidin (2013) defines communication as a process of transferring information from one source to another. Generally, communication was conducted verbally where both source would understand each other. However, communication can also be seen through body languages, which will show certain meanings. Communication is a basic instinct from every living thing. Every creation has its own way in communicating including humans who communicate with others using a lot of methods. Fauziah (2010) mentioned in her book that the cry of a new born baby is the earliest form of communication. The cry represents the baby himself showing his existence and telling others about its arrival to this world. That communication will continue and at some point, the communication will be ended with its death. Communication is an effort in understanding each other's mind. A good communication happens when a message delivered can be understood by the receiver. Thus, our quality of life also depends on our communication skill.

In a communication and interaction relationship between humans, a suitable technique is needed to get the best result. If the communication and interaction do not perform with the right way, it might fail and will affect both parties. Thus a good communication is one of the main factors for the success of oneself or even an organisation. There are many factors that affect the effectiveness of communication (Fauziah, 2010). One has to identify the factors in order to become good at communication.

- a. Difference in background and experiences- difference in races, religion, culture, experiences and expertise sometimes lead to misunderstanding or misinterpretations
- b. Limited acceptance or attention on information- most people would likely to choose or filter messages received and only focus on what they want
- c. Misunderstanding, prejudice and presupposition- presuppositions can affect how people receive messages causing the message to be rejected
- d. Emotion and feelings- failure of a communication can occur when people tend to ignore emotions and feelings aspects as people tend to interpret message based on emotion and feelings.

Zainal (2013) mentioned that an effective communication is the one that can affect someone else's attitude that can be seen through the communication proses. The purpose of an effective communication is to help in understanding the message from an informant to a receiver. This can be seen when the information being sent can be understood well by the receiver. Apart from that, an effective communication is used to get feedback and information from someone as well as training one's non-verbal communication. Effective communication is important as it relates to emotional and inner instinct of a human. Humans can be excited when it comes to softness, comfortability, and sweetness of memories as it can leave beautiful memories out of it. Therefore, an effective communication needs to be achieved so that information can be delivered as well as reaching its objective in the communication.

Communication serves many functions in organizations. According to Richmond & McCroskey (2009), there are six functions that seem to dominate the communication in the organizational context. The functions are to inform, regulate, integrate, manage, persuade, and socialize. The informative function of communication is fairly self-explanatory. It is the function of providing needed information to personnel so they can do their jobs in an effective and efficient manner. People need to be informed about any changes of procedure or policy that are related to their work. Sometimes this function is accomplished by the people at higher levels sending information to people at lower levels, and vice versa. And sometimes people needing information must contact others who have the information that they need to acquire it.

The regulative function of communication is involved with the communication that is directed toward regulatory policies within the organization or messages about the maintenance of the organization. Communication that involves the regulative function is often not pleasant, but it is essential to the smooth operation of the organization. The integrative function of communication is focused on coordination of tasks, work assignments, group coordination, or the fusing of work units toward a common goal. In other words, it is communication directed at getting people to work together. The management function is a communication focused on getting personnel to do what is needed, gathering information about personnel to know them better, and establishing relationships with personnel.

Koch (2013) defines media as everything. Media used to be known as only television, prints (newspaper and magazines), and radio. Nowadays, media is defined in a much broader, looser context, and things that would never been considered "media" past are at the forefront of how people consume information. Communication media is also known as the channel in the elements of communication.

- a. Printed media- any printed materials which is used to spread information such as newspaper, brochure, and posters
- b. Audio media- a communication which needs hearing to be conducted
- c. Visual media- communication which uses sight to be conducted
- d. Audio visual media- a media which uses both sight and hearing such as television and videos

Raab (2014) mentioned that communication had to be done regularly and consistently. This letter is called a circular. It is comparable to when today an executive might send a regular memo of

important information to a leadership team. It is written “circular” at the opening of the letter so that the recipient would know. The collectors of customs, who were stationed in the various ports, received such communications with regularity, and major announcements usually contained the same messages sent to all.

Communication in this research will be defined as the ability of the members of Sarawak Homestay Operator Association (SHOA) in transferring information among each other. The ability to contact each other plays a major role in the development of the homestays where latest information might be needed or sharing certain projects among homestays would definitely benefits the homestays.

Researcher chose to do the research across Sarawak. This is because researcher is studying about Sarawak Homestay Operator Association (SHOA) which located in Kuching Sarawak. Apart from that, the homestays are located across Sarawak as well as the members of the association. This research is being conducted because of some problems that may have disturbs and slow down the development of the homestays in Sarawak. First of all, there are no communication media that can guarantee to have an effective communication among the members of the association. Nowadays, there are various kinds of communication media used. Accessibilities on each media differs in many ways especially in this research location with the fact that not every corner of Sarawak is yet fully develop as mentioned by the Prime Minister (Lai, 2016).

Apart from that, members of the association took quite some time to give feedbacks. Zainal (2013) stated that effective communication is the one that can affect someone else’s attitude that can be seen through the communication proses. This shows that without a proper means of communication, audience might not be interested to participate in the communication. There are places with bad communication networks. Sarawak Monitor (2012) mentioned that there are in needs of new communication networks in Sarawak especially in the rural area, that are still in the dire need for development and progress. There are few homestays that are located in the rural area causing the use of some communication media is being limited.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

There are pertinent views on the communication with among the homestay operators. Out of the 35 operators, only a few contacted the association in terms of programs and trainings. Other remote homestays located away from the town centres, the operators find issues in communicating with the SHOA. These operators depend on letters which could only be reached a few weeks if they visited the shops that operates as a mailbox for them. At certain times, landslides may have been the cause for poor communication among the operators. Every homestay operator depends on telecommunication towers. The better the development of the surroundings of the homestay located, the better it is for these operators to get good receptions for their communication.

Recently, apps are getting more popular than short messages and telephones. Nearly all the operators do not have a fax machine and depend their communication through mobile phones. With the development of new social network apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Line and emails, internet connection is vital for their businesses either within their own groups or with the potential customers. Even if the homestays are located near towns and cities, it was indicated that some operators are not using any means of communication with the SHOA. Some of the operators engages a third party such as Agoda.com to assist them in communicating with the customers. The majority of the operators interviewed stated that they prefer WhatsApp to be their medium of communicating with their customers. SHOA has also taken the initiatives of creating a group designed to communicate with each of their members. However, communication by WhatsApp is still passive.

In light of all these issues, it is recommended that the best solution for communication is for the members to be actively involved in any forms of communication with the association. The members could also take the opportunity to voice out in the Annual General Meetings held yearly. Yet again,

because of the cost of logistics, those operators who are located far from Kuching may not attend the function. In the study, the researcher found out that the website for the association has not been updated for a few years. It was understood that the website was under the Ministry of Tourism Sarawak and the webmaster have some issues communicating with the operators to update the products and services on offer.

The Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture, Youth and Sports Sarawak should play a vital role in assisting these operators to communicate better. They should be using the existing Pusat Internet 1 Malaysia as their base of operations to communicate effectively among themselves on matters important to the homestay industry. It is paramount for the homestay industry to look at whether geography where the homestays are located or communication was their issue in developing the industry in Sarawak. Whereby geography is the key as tourists needs to experience physically being at the homestay and whether by the location again, creating issues in communicating between the operators and the potential customers. At the end of the day, the operators have to find means to communicated actively and create a better network with the available resources to promote their business effectively.

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