

ENHANCING BRAND EQUITY THROUGH SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MARKETING: A STUDY ON HOME-STAYS IN MALAYSIA

Zain ul Abedin Janjua^{1*}, Gengswari Krishnapillai², and Mobashar Rehman³

¹*College of Business, The American University of Kurdistan, Mustafa Barzani Building,
Zakho Road 42001 Duhok, Kurdistan, Iraq*

²*Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business and Finance, Universiti Tunku Abdul
Rahman, Kampar, Perak, Malaysia*

³*Department of Management, Leadership and Organizations, Faculty of Business and
Law, Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom*

*Corresponding author: zain.janjua@auk.edu.krd; zainjanjua@hotmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the antecedent and consequent relationship between sustainable tourism, marketing, and brand equity in the Malaysian rural community-based homestays (RCBHs) perspective. A self-administered questionnaire method was employed to collect data. Homestay operators from three Malaysian states, namely Kuala Lumpur/Selangor, Pahang, and Pulau Pinang participated in the study. In order to test research hypotheses, a structural equation modelling approach was used. The findings of the study suggested that the antecedent (sustainable tourism marketing), the consequent (brand equity), and moderator (political support by local authorities) have a significant relationship. Additionally, it was found that sustainable tourism marketing (STM) promotes rural community-based tourism. As a branding tool for sustainable rural community-based tourism. This study provides a unique contribution to the tourism body of knowledge by introducing political support by local authorities (PLA) as a moderator in STM and brand equity relationship. RCBHs can employ tailor-made promotion policies for the development of homestay business brands; likewise, policymakers can apply undifferentiated promotion policies for the holistic expansion of sustainable homestay market.

Keywords: brand equity, rural community-based homestays, sustainable tourism, marketing, tailor made promotion policies

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry has become a competitive, dynamic, and important industry in Malaysia. In 1995, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC) introduced Malaysian Homestay Programme as an official tourism product. The programme is an attractive rural tourism initiative to provide income opportunities in rural areas and to promote Malaysia as a tourist destination (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019). The Malaysian government acknowledges the benefits of the homestay programme as a vital source of income and employment for local communities (Aziz et al., 2018).

A tourism firm's brand equity is recognised as an antecedent of customer satisfaction, loyalty, future revisit intentions, and recommendations (González-Mansilla et al., 2019). Tourists are now more knowledgeable about sustainability issues and aspire towards sustainable living. The tourist's sustainable attitude is an important psychological attribute, hence, the tourism businesses are inclined towards sustainable brand equity (Khandelwal et al., 2019). Likewise, sustainable brand equity has become an important concern in rural community-based tourism (CBT) development and an indispensable element for rural community-based homestay (RCBH) products (Martinez & Nishiyama, 2019). The homestay business is a component of the larger hospitality industry. It has the special characteristics of intangibility, variability, and inseparability, making the shaping of brand equity especially pertinent (González-Mansilla et al., 2019; Cho et al., 2021). Homestays are also regarded as a major component of rural CBT and represent an authentic locally run experience (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). RCBHs development is guided by the principle of sustainable development (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021). It is further boosted by the tourists' sustainable attitude and green consumption; green sensitivities and likings; firms' sustainable practices and brand equity are strongly related (Grubor & Milovnov, 2017). Therefore, sustainable tourism marketing (STM) is a gateway towards the longevity of brand equity of tourism firms (Liao et al., 2017). Despite the important role offered to homestays as a major component of CBT (Sen & Walter, 2020), and as a tool for rural sustainable development, there is still a knowledge gap about the homestay's impact on rural sustainable development (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021).

According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the governments play a crucial role in formulating policies to boost sustainable tourism industry for future generations. Most governments are only concerned over the tourism's economic contributions above all, while researchers have highlighted the shortcomings in institutionalising tourism public policies in

intergovernmental institutions (Estol et al., 2018), such as lack of bottom-up planning and decentralisation of tourism policies (Wanner et al., 2020), absence of local population identity, values, needs, and capabilities in tourism policy (Zimmermann, 2018). Due to these deficiencies in public policies, the economic side of tourism has eclipsed its social and environmental dimensions and thus, hijacked by those who pursue narrow policy agenda (Zolfani et al., 2015).

The tourism approach in Malaysia is centralised, and it needs the efforts of the state and local levels to transform the strategy (Saad et al., 2014). The Malaysian national planning system does not explain how the public's recommendations are incorporated in tourism policymaking procedures (Marzuki et al., 2012; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). The public sector experiences problems with overlapping jurisdictions and a lack of shared vision (Zatul et al., 2018). In Malaysia, the question of public involvement in decision making has not received much consideration where such practices are still at the infancy stage (Marzuki et al., 2012; Balasingam & Bojei, 2019).

Most extant studies have only examined the advancement of homestay, namely homestay improvement, tourist view of homestay, homestay issues faced by operators, and other general viewpoints (Shukor et al., 2014). The rural tourism strategies are developed based on the tourist's viewpoint and have neglected the local community's perspective; sustainable tourism in short, is difficult to achieve without community support (Artal-Tur et al., 2019). Many homestay establishments are difficult to withstand over time, as homestay operators lack the crucial marketing and branding knowledge, resources, and links to attract tourists (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019). Lack of sustainable marketing and branding knowledge among the homestay operators jeopardises future development of the homestay industry in Malaysia (Affizah & Melissa, 2017). Successful homestay branding depends on the involvement of the community, political support by local authorities (PLA), and sustainability marketing (Lim & Lee, 2020). STM is an important driver of brand equity (Parguel et al., 2011). The sustainability performance of a product to strengthen brand equity has become increasingly important (Grubor & Milovnov, 2017). Brand is the most powerful marketing weapon the tourism business has and it is an effective brand strategy that gives it a key edge in an increasingly competitive tourism market. Execution of branding strategy is viewed as a defining moment for homestays that endeavour to build a strong brand with a specific goal to enhance their market visibility, fortify competitiveness and boost economic efficiency (Mikulić et al., 2016). A study found consumer green sensitivities and likings, the firm's sustainable practices and brand equity are strongly related (Grubor & Milovnov, 2017). Hence, STM is a gateway towards the longevity of brand equity of community-

based homestays (Phelan et al., 2020). Considering the growth of community-based homestay business generally in the Asia-Pacific region and particularly in Malaysia, this study examined the relationship between STM practices and brand equity of RCBHs in Malaysia. It also analysed the political support offered by Malaysian local authorities, STM practices and homestay brand equity relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Tourism Marketing

Sustainable marketing refers to the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers so that both natural and human capital are conserved or upgraded completely (Scott et al., 2014). As a derivative of sustainable development, sustainable marketing ensures ecological, social (equity and equality), and economic balance in time and space. The tourism industry depends on natural resources like no other industry. The long-term economic success of the tourism industry is closely aligned with environmental and cultural preservation and local community success (Wise, 2016; Janjua et al., 2021).

The STM extends the theory of marketing in warranting environmental, societal (equity and equality), and economic stability in the development of sustainable tourism businesses and destinations (Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2019). These three dimensions of sustainability are also known as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) (Elkington, 2004). As indicated by the TBL theory, the dimensions of sustainability marketing are: people (social), planet (environment), and profit (economic) (Taylor & Hochuli, 2015). The TBL approaches are widely recognised by scholars, educators, planners, policymakers, and business operators. Its framework evaluates tourism addressing economic, social, and environmental impacts (Wise, 2020), the UNWTO frames motives and initiatives around TBL to address social, environmental, and economic sustainability concerns (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Wu et al. (2019) highlighted that tourism firms need to integrate with TBL perspectives to achieve sustainable tourism. Thus, STM is essential for viable contributions from businesses and tourist destinations (Hudson et al., 2019). Additionally, the tourism industry's long-term economic realisation depends on local community success, the preservation of culture and the environment (Wise, 2016).

The TBL based decision making duly considers economic, social, and environmental aspects, and the tourism sector provides exclusive opportunities to examine the efficiency of TBL (Wondirad et al., 2020). The tourism sector gains tremendous benefits of improved market positioning, strategic decision-making, and cost savings, also, better stakeholder relationships, and sustainable branding by adopting principles of TBL (Wondirad et al., 2020). The goal of TBL is to proactively expand sustainable tourism while remaining environmentally vigilant, economically resilient, and socially responsible (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2019). The TBL balances the beneficence of economic and environmental tourism impacts to empower locals and enhances bottom-up sustainable economies (Cooper & Alderman, 2020). The TBL uses three bottom lines (economic, social, and environmental) for increasing brand equity and hence, performance of RCBHs. Methodologies based on TBL are extensively acknowledged by academics, organisers, and companies and well adapted and applied in tourism (Wise, 2016) similarly, for increasing brand equity and hence performance of RCBHs.

Environmental STM practices are the optimal use of environmental resources, biodiversity, and ecological processes (Ren & Toniolo, 2021) and a shift to responsible capitalism (Wise, 2016). Embracing this responsibility towards society and the environment, in addition to the shareholders, is at the core of sustainability (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). Carroll (1979) argued that corporate social responsibility (CSR) includes society's economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic or voluntary expectations of organisations at a given point in time. Müller et al. (2017), broadly defined CSR as the company improving the well-being of society and following high ethical standards, also contributes to human and societal capital development. The CSR is the social strand of sustainable development and responsibility embracing temporality (Ashrafi et al., 2018). Economic sustainability aims to ensure liquidity and profitability (Schulz & Flanigan, 2016). The economically sustainable marketing activities seek long-term planning to report to all stakeholders, with socio-economic benefits evenly distributed for stable employment opportunities based on competitive businesses (Padin, 2012; Renfors, 2020). The tourism sector should consider visitor spending, employment of residents and business opportunities resulting from increased tourists flow (Wise, 2016).

Brand Equity of Homestays (BEH)

Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers. Brand equity is built through image and meaning (Rust et al., 2021) and enhanced by socially

responsible activities. Sustainability awareness has driven marketers to centre on the necessities of tourism's economic, social, and environmental dimensions and relate it with branding (Aray et al., 2020). Pursuing the sustainability route is an effective way of building brand equity. Hence, researchers recommend embedding sustainability concerns to create brand differentiation (Sheth & Sinha, 2015).

The STM through social, economic, and environmental practices enrich brand equity (Kim et al., 2019). Brand equity is a homestay's significant strategic asset as it requires a particular thought to develop a sustainable competitive advantage (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017). Homestays can draw sustainability-oriented customers by embedding sustainability branding practices as an integral measure of their image (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Vesal et al., 2021).

Political Local Authorities

Sustainable tourism development involves solid political leadership to ensure informed participation of all stakeholders and consensus-building. Miller and Twining-Ward (2005), identified five key tourism stakeholders: tourism businesses, tourists, locals, government officials (regulators), and NGOs. Regulatory programmes (at the national and local levels) have a central role in the sustainability transition of firms (Luzzani et al., 2021). The central and regional governments guide with macro-level policies and provide policy-related stimulation to local authorities. The local authorities team up with residents, tourists, and the public sector to be actively involved in the process of rural tourism development (Kapera, 2018; Liu et al., 2020).

Sustainable tourism indicators serve as a stepping-stone for PLA to practise the principles of sustainability (Agyeiwaah et al., 2017). The role of PLA is to shift tourism development from community-based to community-controlled tourism. Implementation of both objective and subjective sustainable tourism indicators for the development-control approach, natural environment-related strategy, security, and visitor wellbeing arrangement by PLA help to support robust tourism policy monitoring and enforcement (Rasoolimanesh et al. 2020).

The PLA plays a crucial role in making advancement plans, coordinating resources, and destination brand building. The PLA's support the success of local tourism by offering supervision and fundamental administrations and effectively communicate with the subordinate institutes' for example, tourism businesses, villagers' committees, and rural residents (Liu et al., 2020).

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Environmental Sustainable Tourism Marketing (ESTM) and BEH

Environmental sustainability is an important antecedent of brand equity (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021), and crucial for homestays' sustainable brand development. Homestays as an environmentally sustainable product plays a critical role in rural sustainable realisation (Li et al., 2018), and generate a multiplier effect of increased brand equity in addition to providing additional income to communities and employment (Dinis et al., 2019).

In developing countries, environmental sustainability is the primary aim of small tourism enterprises like RCBHs (Zhang & Zhang, 2018; Ruiz-Ortega et al., 2021). Environmental sustainability is a scarce, valuable, and inimitable source of competitive advantage in tourism firms (Vesal et al., 2021), and an important factor that shapes homestay brand equity (Coelho et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1: Environmental sustainable tourism marketing positively affects brand equity of homestays.

CSR and BEH

Baalbaki and Guzmán (2016) recognised social sustainability as an essential element of brand equity, as it indicates brand preference, brand awareness, and brand image (Kang & Namkung, 2016; Dressler & Paunovic, 2021). The CSR is a key strategic tool as it provides valuable content to sustainable homestay brand equity and it is co-created through interaction with multiple stakeholders (Martinez & Nishiyama, 2019). The CSR and homestay brand equity goal can be realised if it is supported and enforced by national, regional, and local authorities (Kavita & Saarinen, 2016). Hence, this cooperation will result in increased brand equity of RCBHs (Khartishvili et al., 2019; Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2019). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H2: CSR practices positively affect brand equity of homestays.

Economic Sustainable Tourism Marketing (ECSTM) and BEH

Economic sustainability is an integral part of brand equity (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Loučanová et al., 2021). Economically sustainable marketing activities represent sharing economic benefits among employees,

customers, and stakeholders in the community through sustainable economic growth (Ghezal & Khemakhem, 2020), Thus, ECSTM activities have a positive effect on long-term profit and brand image development (Jung et al., 2020).

Rural community-based homestay generates direct (employment and revenue) and indirect (tourism growth) economic sustainability (Kastenholz et al., 2016). Moreover, these economic sustainability practices also enhance their brand equity (Kastenholz et al., 2016). Economic sustainability-centred attributes shape positive image and attitude (Mena et al., 2018), and in return tourist organisations like RCBHs gain competitive advantages based on sustainable brand equity (Vesal et al., 2021). Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H3: Economic sustainable tourism marketing positively affects the brand equity of homestays.

The Moderating Role of PLA

Rural community-based homestay products and PLA are inseparable. The PLA support environmentally friendly, socially equitable, and economically viable rural homestay products (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). In order to achieve long-term sustainability, the development of rural community-based homestay tourism products requires cooperation among PLA and communities in planning and management processes (Khartishvili et al., 2019). Wang et al. (2021) found that regulators have the greatest effect on a company to actualise a sustainability plan. Moreover, these regulatory guidelines assist firms to improve their sustainability competitiveness and strengthen their brand equity.

A broader approach to sustainability and brand equity development is the stakeholder-focused approach (Mena et al., 2018). Government regulators are among the primary stakeholders and hence, in the case of sustainable rural tourism developments, local authorities are the primary stakeholders (Hamdan et al., 2021). The PLA are more knowledgeable on the local sustainable issues than central governments, and they can better address sustainable issues by mobilising local stakeholders and by generating locally specific solutions (Tevapitak & Helmsing, 2019). The PLA are closer to local people and entrepreneurs, and they can effectively coordinate with other government agencies to instruct homestay operators to improve their sustainability performance and thus, sustainable brand equity (Tevapitak & Helmsing, 2019).

Furthermore, at the local level, communities represented by local governments have the authority to support sustainable tourism development policies in tourism firms (Kapera, 2018). Similarly, the local government’s political support motivates homestay tourism establishments to involve in environmental, economic, and social sustainable development and create a sustainable image and brand equity (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Therefore, the interaction effect of PLA and STM strengthens BEH.

Based on the above, PLA can be considered as a moderator in the relationship between environmental sustainable tourism marketing, economic sustainable tourism marketing, CSR, and brand equity of homestays. Therefore, the following hypotheses is postulated:

- H4: Relationship between environmental sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays is positively moderated by political local authorities.
- H5: Relationship between CSR and brand equity of homestays is positively moderated by PLA.
- H6: Relationship between economic sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays is positively moderated by political local authorities.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the proposed conceptual framework, ESTM, CSR, and ECSTM practices directly affect BEH shown as hypotheses H1, H2, and H3. This antecedent and consequent relationships are moderated by PLA shown as H4, H5, and H6.

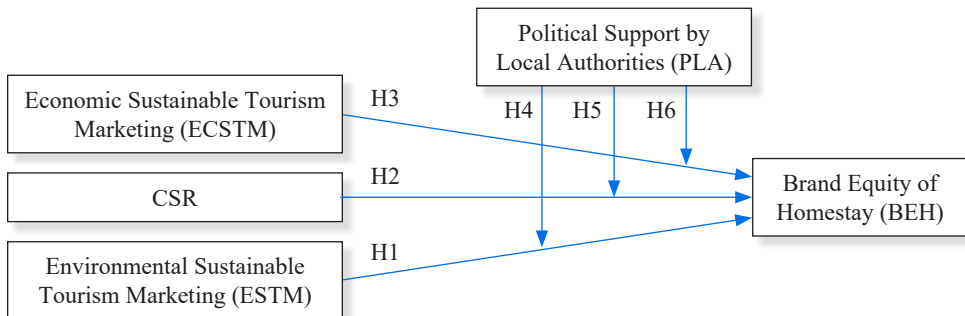


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the current study, quantitative (survey) and deductive hypothesis testing approach was applied to test the relationship between the variables. The self-administered survey collection technique was used to collect data from operators of homestays registered with MOTAC, and data were collected between 1 September 2019 and 30 November 2019. The survey was conducted in Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor), Pahang, and Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. A disproportionate stratified sampling technique was used for data collection from respondents. Homestay operators were respondents of the current study. A sample size of 180 homestays operators (respondents) was used, as it is sufficient for examining seven or fewer constructs (Hair et al., 2018). In terms of proportion of home stay operators based on region, 43% were from Klang valley, 32% from Pahang and the rest from Pulau Pinang.

According to MOTAC's February 2021 report, the total number of registered homestays in Klang Valley, Pahang, and Pulau Pinang was 1,011. Details are described in Table 1.

Table 1
Homestay details

State	Total Villages	Rooms	Homestay Operators	Study Sample
Klang Valley	35	724	449	77
Pahang	21	450	333	58
Pulau Pinang	28	275	243	45
Total	84	1,438	1,011	180

Source: MOTAC (2019)

The original English language questionnaire was translated into Malay language from English by a translator certified by Malaysian Institute of Translation and Books (ITBM). This was to ensure responses were accurate. The research items were adapted from prior studies. The CSR and ESTM were adapted from (Singh & del Bosque, 2008) while ECSTM was adapted from (Turker, 2009). The PLA items were adapted from (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006) and BEH items were adapted from (Aaker, 1991; Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Keller, 2003). The questionnaire in English and Malay is provided in the Appendix.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse data and Smart PLS software for structural equation modelling (SEM) techniques was used for the statistical analysis.

Table 2
Respondents' profile

Demographic characteristics		%
Gender	Male	37
	Female	63
Tourist Nationality	Local	59
	Foreigner	41
Homestay Location	Klang Valley (Selangor and Kuala Lumpur)	43
	Pahang	32
	Pulau Pinang	25
Homestay Owned	One	64
	Two	25
	Three	10.55
	More than three	0.55
Room Type	Single	19
	Double	78
	Dorm type	3
	Other	1
Business Duration	2 to 3 years	21
	3 to 4 years	3
	4 to 5 years	6
	More than 5 years	70

RESULTS

Measurement Model

The study model was initially checked for multicollinearity effect using variance inflation factor (VIF). The VIF values were below the maximum threshold level of 5 (Hair et al., 2018) and indicate no evidence of multicollinearity. In order to check “common method bias,” researchers used Harman’s single factor test (Podsakoff, 2003). All indicators were imported into SPSS and an exploratory factor analysis was performed with unrotated principal components. The results produced one factor with a variance of 36.95%, below the value of 50%, thus verifying that common method bias did not occur (Kock et al., 2021).

Additionally, the convergent validity of the measurement model was tested through factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) as shown in Table 3. Hair et al. (2018) recommended item loading of ± 0.50 or greater as practically significant, and all the current study item loadings exceeded the recommended value of 0.5. Loading values between 0.4 and 0.7

are considered acceptable if CR and AVE cross the threshold (Hair et al., 2018). The CR and AVE values exceed the recommended value of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively (Hair et al., 2018).

Table 3
Validity and reliability of constructs

Constructs	Items	Loading	AVE	CR
ECSTM	Item 1	0.731	0.569	0.868
	Item 2	0.681		
	Item 3	0.802		
	Item 4	0.748		
	Item 5	0.802		
CSR	Item 1	0.854	0.828	0.960
	Item 2	0.883		
	Item 3	0.934		
	Item 4	0.924		
	Item 5	0.950		
ESTM	Item 1	0.799	0.613	0.917
	Item 2	0.835		
	Item 3	0.694		
	Item 4	0.698		
	Item 5	0.759		
	Item 6	0.872		
	Item 7	0.806		
PLA	Item 1	0.882	0.758	0.972
	Item 2	0.870		
	Item 3	0.787		
	Item 4	0.870		
	Item 5	0.895		
	Item 6	0.876		
	Item 7	0.898		
	Item 8	0.839		
	Item 9	0.917		
	Item 10	0.838		
	Item 11	0.893		
BEH	Item 1	0.788	0.592	0.941
	Item 2	0.786		
	Item 3	0.717		
	Item 4	0.714		
	Item 5	0.830		
	Item 6	0.845		
	Item 7	0.887		
	Item 8	0.622		
	Item 9	0.738		
	Item 10	0.694		
	Item 12	0.796		

The discriminant validity was measured in the subsequent step. Table 4 shows acceptable discriminant validity, as each construct’s correlation coefficient is less than the construct’s square root of the AVE (diagonal values) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 4
Discriminant validity

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5
BEH	0.88				
CSR	0.50	0.95			
ECSTM	0.56	0.18	0.86		
PLA	0.29	0.29	0.28	0.93	
ESTM	0.83	0.52	0.48	0.19	0.88

Note: Diagonal values are the square root of the AVE while the off diagonals are correlations.

Henseler et al. (2015), proposed the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) and recommended HTMT cut-off values of 0.85 or 0.90. Discriminant validity was tested using HTMT_{0.90} criteria, no value exceeded 0.90 thresholds.

Table 5
HTMT correlations

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5
BEH					
CSR	0.51				
ECSTM	0.64	0.19			
PLA	0.30	0.22	0.30		
ESTM	0.87	0.54	0.56	0.2	

Note: Shaded boxes report HTMT procedure.

Structural Model Analysis

Hair et al. (2018) recommended using a bootstrapping procedure with a resample of 5,000 to observe R², corresponding t-values, and beta, besides effect sizes (f²) and predictive relevance (Q²). The results of the study confirmed H1: ESTM practices (β = 0.57; p < 0.05) positively affect BEH, H2: CSR practices (β = 0.11, p < 0.05) positively affect BEH and H3: ECSTM practices (β = 0.14, p < 0.05) have a positive relationship with BEH.

All hypotheses with corresponding *t*-values are shown in Table 6. ESTM, CSR, and ECSTM practices explain 78% variance in BEH ($R^2 = 0.78$). The $R^2 = 0.78$ of the current model is substantial for theoretical and practical predictions (Hair et al., 2018). Next, the f^2 was assessed as the *p*-value indicates the relationship does not affect size, so both f^2 and (*p*-value) need to be reported (Hair et al., 2018).

Table 6 shows that H2, H3, H4, and H5 have a small effect as f^2 values are between (0.02 and 0.15), H6 has a medium effect as the f^2 value is 0.21, H1 has a large effect as f^2 value (0.74) (Cohen, 1988). A cross-validated redundancy procedure was used to calculate Q^2 . If Q^2 is greater than 0, the model has predictive relevance and lacks predictive relevance if Q^2 is less than 0. Figure 2 indicates acceptable predictive relevance as $Q^2 = 0.445$.

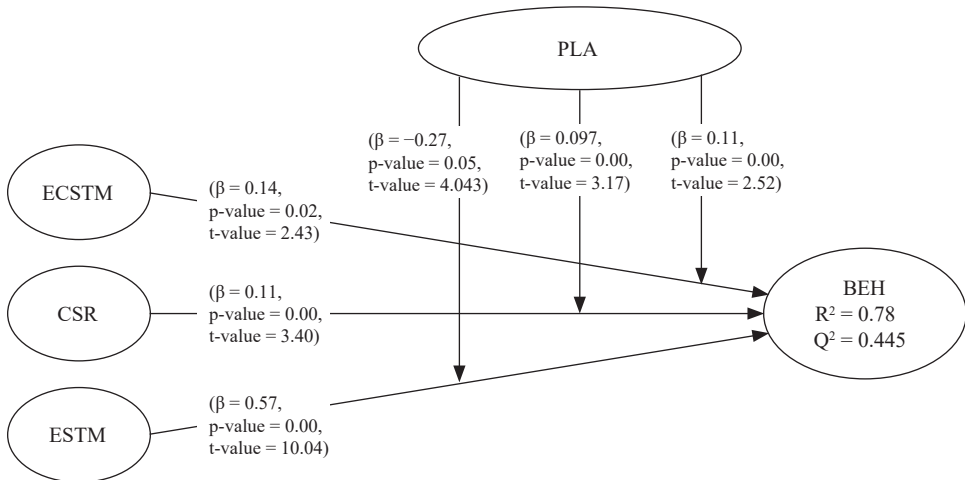


Figure 2. Structural model

Moderation Analysis

The study hypothesised PLA to have a continuous moderation effect on the relationships between ESTM, ECSTM and CSR practices, and BEH. Figure 3 shows PLA as a moderator in ESTM and BEH relationship. It negatively moderates the relationship between ESTM and BEH.

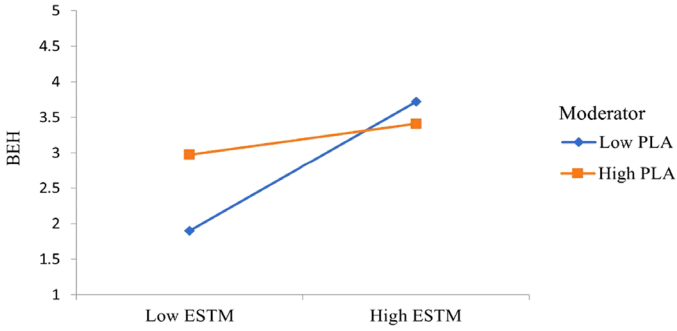


Figure 3. PLA as a moderator in ESTM and homestay brand equity

Figure 4 shows PLA positively moderates the relationship between CSR and BEH. In fact, it strengthens the positive relationship between CSR and BEH.

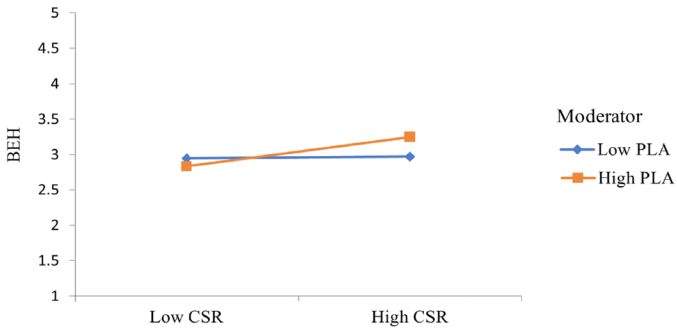


Figure 4. PLA as a moderator in CSR and homestay brand equity

Figure 5 shows PLA positively moderates the relationship between ECSTM and BEH. In fact, it strengthens the positive relationship between ECSTM and BEH.

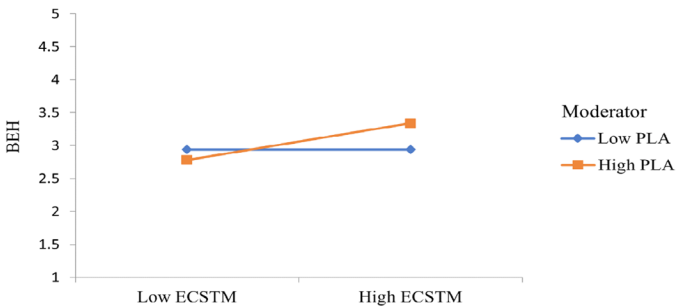


Figure 5. PLA as a moderator in ECSTM and homestay brand equity

Table 6 shows the estimated standardised path coefficients for the effect of the PLA (moderator) on ECSTM practices ($\beta = 0.11$; $p < 0.05$), CSR ($\beta = 0.097$, $p < 0.05$), ESTM practices ($\beta = -0.27$; $p < 0.05$) on BEH. It indicates that PLA moderates the relationship between three aspects of STM practices and BEH.

Table 6
Hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Beta (β)	t-Value	F Square (f^2)	Decision
H1: ESTM \rightarrow BEH	0.57	10.04	0.74	Supported
H2: CSR \rightarrow BEH	0.11	3.40	0.04	Supported
H3: ECSTM \rightarrow BEH	0.14	2.43	0.06	Supported
H4: (ESTM \times PLA) \rightarrow BEH	-0.27	4.04	0.21	Not Supported
H5: (CSR \times PLA) \rightarrow BEH	0.097	3.17	0.04	Supported
H6: (ECSTM \times PLA) \rightarrow BEH	0.11	2.52	0.06	Supported

Note: Critical t-values. *1.96 ($p < 0.05$)

DISCUSSION

The result of the study reinforces the effect of ESTM on BEH. It confirms ESTM practices as an important antecedent of sustainable BEH. The success of RCBH products in Malaysia and elsewhere depends on their ability to acquire core competency in local cultural heritage, landscape resources, geographical features, and agricultural products, etc., and integrating these resources to continuously develop attractive, long term and sustainable tourism services (Tang et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2013). These results are consistent with previous findings that empirically showed the effects of ESTM on BEH (Coelho et al., 2020; Dressler & Paunovic, 2021; Vesal et al., 2021). This study has identified CSR as a core antecedent of BEH, suggesting that the success of CSR depends on its ability to understand the economic conditions of locals and provide them income opportunities. Social sustainability and economic STM practices go hand in hand, so RCBHs can achieve desired sustainability goals with increase brand equity. These results are in line with those of previous studies (Kavita & Saarinen, 2016; Khartishvili et al., 2019; Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2019).

The study has also postulated that paying proactive attention to economic ECSTM practices increases BEH, but too much of it can be detrimental. Perhaps a moderate level of proactiveness towards profit generation is better for rural homestays as over emphasis of the economic goal is an antithesis to the essence of the TBL of sustainability. This strategy may also harm the environmental

and social goals of sustainability. Nevertheless, economic sustainability of tourism practices as an important antecedent of BEH has been pointed out in this study and this finding is consistent with that of earlier literature (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Ghezal & Khemakhem, 2020; Loučanová et al., 2021). The relationship between ESTM and BEH when moderated by PLA is strong and significant but negative. The finding of this study that suggest PLA support positively impact environmentally sustainable practices to increase homestay's brand equity are inconsistent with those of some earlier studies (Zhang & Zhang, 2018; Wang et al., 2021). Specifically these older studies did not show the effectiveness of PLA regularity guidelines to assist rural tourism businesses to improve their environmental sustainability competitiveness and strengthen their sustainability competitiveness and enhance brand equity. Therefore, adequate PLA is vital for protecting destination brand image, sustainable tourism promotion, and regulating the tourism market (Liu et al., 2020), so the success of sustainable rural tourism depends upon the support of the PLA. The PLA's support is important in directing homestay operators to lower adverse environmental and societal impacts, to harness their the positive impacts, and concurrently stay competitive and economically sustainable (Liu et al., 2020)including the construct ofby excludingthis dimension,

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study tested the TBL theory in rural community-based tourism in conjunction with brand equity and proposed the importance of PLA to promote rural homestays. This causal model was empirically tested in the Malaysian RCBHs setting and proved that STM practices and PLA constructs are essential explanatory variables of BEH. This study enables readers and sustainability researchers to better understand and explain the TBL theory when applied in juxtaposition with brand equity, and the newly introduced PLA. The TBL theory appears as a relevant framework to guide a RCBH product to enhance their social, economic, and environmental sustainability dimensions. The model shows high levels of consistency between the theoretical design and the empirical results of its constructs, contributing to the tourism sustainability literature. This study offers a comprehensive framework in promoting RCBHs by including the construct of PLA. It is not possible to maintain a balance between the three traditional dimensions of sustainable tourism by excluding the local political dimension. Also, this model is not restricted to a specific destination and tourism setting, which broadens the applicability of this causal model. Moreover, this integrated conceptual framework is an important sustainable rural tourism development model and related to the parental paradigm of sustainable development.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study contributes to existing knowledge on sustainable tourism, and notably, to RCBHs in Malaysia. The results have implications for both tourism stakeholders and academics. The importance of PLA in STM practices and BEH relationships are the primary findings of the study. Therefore, for tourism academics, this result can enhance their understanding of the relationship between PLA, STM, and BEH. They further support the strategic effect of STM practices on BEH and that this relationship is moderated by PLA. Tourism stakeholders can also benefit from these findings as the study is first to highlight the pivotal role of PLA in STM practices and BEH relationships.

The study highlighted the important implications for RCBHs to position their tourism products strategically based on sustainability, and this echoed (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021). Policymakers also benefit. Female homestay operators outnumber their male counterparts suggesting women's empowerment and positive signs towards poverty alleviation. It was also found that most homestay license holders are older indicating MOTAC licensing policy is not attracting the younger generation to participate in this programme. The older generation is not knowledgeable about the latest social media platforms and accommodation sharing platforms, such as Booking.com and Airbnb. (Zhang et al., 2017), which accounts for one of the reasons fewer foreign tourists coming to homestays. The younger generation can promote RCBHs on social media platforms to encourage foreign tourists, as rural homestays have a unique Malaysian appeal. Additionally, tailor-made promotion policies are suitable in building homestay business brands with local cultural attributes, so RCBHs can employ to promote their competitive advantage—this is consistent with recent findings by (Janjua et.al, 2021). Undifferentiated promotion policies can also be used by policymakers for the expansion of the homestay market (Chakraborty, 2020).

The lack of marketing skills and the ignorance related to the strategic importance of sustainability in community based homestays are the main challenges that limit the Malaysian rural tourism marketing and promotion. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). Sustainability has positive influence on RCBHs in terms of providing green job opportunities, generating income, strong social capital, preservation of local culture, women's empowerment and awareness of environmental protection (Kunjuraman, 2020). Homestay operators' ICT competency needs to be improved so they can target international tourism markets and promote RCBHs on the latest social media platforms. The ICT competency provides a competitive advantage and unlocks new possibilities in rural CBT (Janjua et al., 2021).

Table 7
Key findings and practical implications

Sr.	Findings	Practical Implications
1	Strategic importance of sustainability in RCBHs	The study highlights important implications for RCBHs to position their tourism products strategically based on sustainability.
2	Useful insights for policymakers	There are more female homestay operator compared with males.
3	Tourists nationality	More domestic tourists stayed in homestays than foreign tourists.
4	The inflexible licensing policy of MOTAC	Most homestay operator's license holders are older and this indicates MOTAC licensing policy is not flexible, and the younger generation is not encouraged to participate in this programme.
5	Homestay operators lack marketing skills	The older generation is not knowledgeable about the latest social media platforms and accommodation sharing platforms, namely Booking.com and Airbnb, etc. This is one of the reasons for fewer foreign tourists coming to homestays.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite relevant practical and theoretical implications of the study, some limitations must be acknowledged. This study focused only on STM, and PLA without considering other potential variables that may enhance the brand equity of RCBHs. For example, it did not consider demographic attributes, such as gender, age, and other dimensions. A detailed assessment of the relationships between STM practices, PLA, and BEH could generate a better understanding of the situation and if additional perspectives were investigated. Additionally, data from important stakeholders, such as customers, government officials, villagers among others can be used to generalise the findings. It is worth replicating similar studies in other rural tourism contexts to confirm the model.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

Comparative studies among countries ought to be conducted to generalise results, with country detailed studies that must not be ignored either. In order to actualise sustainable tourism, rural CBT product requires more promotion on social media platforms, namely Booking.com, Agoda, Airbnb. In order to accomplish

this, more ICT competency among homestay operators and coordinators are required. Furthermore, it is essential to motivate behavioural changes concerning sustainability; this requires additional socio-psychological studies.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive model by including the construct of PLA, as it is hardly possible to maintain a balance between the three traditional dimensions of sustainable tourism by excluding this dimension. The antecedent consequent relationship suggested and tested in the current model proves that STM practices, when moderated by PLA construct, affect the BEH. The study confirms an important relationship between STM practices, PLA and brand equity in the context of RCBH.

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