

3rd Penang International Conference on Hospitality 2023 [Special Issue]. e-Academia Journal of UiTM
Cawangan Terengganu 12, 74-88, December 2023

Developing River Tourism Products and The Marketing Strategies: Observation and Focus Group Discussion Approach

Kai Xin, Tay¹, *Grace Ing, Phang¹ & Jennifer Kim Lian, Chan¹

¹ Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy,
Universiti Malaysia Sabah,
Jalan UMS 88400 Kota Kinabalu Sabah

*Corresponding author's email: gracep@ums.edu.my

Submission date: 30 October 2023

Accepted date: 11 December 2023

Published date: 21 December 2023

To cite this article: Tay, K. X., Phang, G. P. & Chan, J. K. L. (2023). Developing River Tourism Products and The Marketing Strategies: Observation and Focus Group Discussion Approach. 3rd Penang International Conference on Hospitality 2023 [Special Issue]. e-Academia Journal of UiTM Cawangan Terengganu 12, 74-88, December 2023

ABSTRACT

This study adopted a multi-stage and multi-method approach to identify the river tourism product development and related marketing strategies in Malaysia. Using Smith's (1994) tourism product model, the study aimed to examine how all five elements of the model contribute to the development of river tourism products. The study utilised an inductive approach, incorporating observation and focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore the development of the Putatan-Petagas River tourism product and its marketing strategies. The analysis revealed five themes, categorised into six sections, with physical plants having two sections, including resources and potential areas for river tourism product development, service, hospitality, freedom of choice, and involvement. The findings provide a robust examination of TPD and marketing strategies for river tourism products and highlight the importance of considering all elements of the tourism product model for success. This study offers insights into the development and marketing of river tourism products, which can assist in the planning and promotion of sustainable tourism in Malaysia.

Keywords: *River tourism, product development, marketing, observation, focus group discussion*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Product development is not a new concept, especially in manufacturing industries where tangible goods are produced. In the services industry, studies related to product development have been relatively limited (Kelly & Storey, 2000). In the tourism sector, Smith (1994) posits that tourism product development is 'a prerequisite for changing tourists' demand and assuring long term profitability' (p.582). However, the importance of tourism product development has been overlooked by many tourism operators (Komppula, 2001). In many cases, tourism product development is more of a tactical strategy rather than a structured process that considers all tourism stakeholders. It is common for tourism operators to offer what they have

without a proper development process and procedure, often ignoring the fact that there is 'the need for a continuing stream of successful new products risk being overtaken by more marketing-oriented competitors' (Hodgson, 1990, p. 2). In fact, product development in the tourism industry should not differ significantly from the other services sectors. However, 'the circumstances of tourism and the nature of the product itself affect how new product development (NPD) in tourism has to take place' (Hodgson, 1990, p. 2).

According to the Handbook of Tourism Product Development (UNWTO, 2020), Tourism Product Development (TPD) is defined as 'a process whereby the assets of a particular destination are moulded to meet the needs of national and international customers' (p. 4). From a marketing perspective, TPD should not be solely the effort of one party but should be part of an 'extensive and interlinked process' involving well-coordinated market research, product development, and marketing processes (p.1). In general, tourism products can encompass experiential, emotional, and physical elements that authentically and indigenously reflect the unique attributes of the destination. These tourism products include a wide range of offerings, whether natural or man-made, such as heritage or historical sites, beaches, rivers, hotels, restaurants, resorts, museums, events, festivals, and more. Smith (1994), for instance, proposed a five-element model for the development of tourism products, including physical plant, services, hospitality, freedom of choice, and involvement. Furthermore, TPD can be defined based on either an isolated attraction or activity specifically provided for visitors or and encompass all the elements with which the visitors to a destination come into contact.

Sabah, Malaysia, with its rich tapestry of rivers, uniquely benefits from the impacts of river tourism. The nation's diverse river ecosystems provide a dynamic backdrop for various tourism activities, offering opportunities for adventure, relaxation, and cultural exploration (Susanto et al., 2022). River tourism aligns with Sabah's commitment to sustainable tourism practices, promoting environmental stewardship and community involvement. Furthermore, river tourism often thrives in both urban and rural settings, contributing to balanced development across different regions of the country and fostering inclusivity and equitable growth. It transcends leisure to emerge as a pivotal economic driver and cultural preserver (Dianawati, 2021). Its multidimensional impact resonates across environmental, economic, and cultural spheres, making it a cornerstone of Malaysia's tourism landscape. As the nation embraces the potential of its rivers, it simultaneously cultivates sustainable growth, cultural vibrancy, and community empowerment, reinforcing the indispensable role of river tourism in Malaysia's journey towards responsible and holistic tourism development.

Due to the involvements of multiple stakeholders and higher customer expectations, TPD is a highly complicated process. It should be based on market intelligence, stressing on the essence of marketing in fulfilling customers' needs and wants (Li, et al., 2019; Wittmer & Bieger, 2019). Despite this understanding, as posited by Yap et al (2018) and Yap et al. (2020), there is lack of empirical examination of TPD for river tourism from a multi-stakeholder and multi-element perspective, particularly in the emerging markets such as Malaysia. Through the site observation and focus group discussion (FGD) approaches, this study aims to provide a robust examination of the TPD for river tourism products and the related marketing strategies, while adopting the Smith's (1994)'s tourism product model.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Tourism Product and Marketing Strategies

Product development has long been neglected by researchers and practitioners in comparison to other marketing issues, such as segmentation, consumer behaviour, and advertising etc. (Smith, 1994). In fact, many have historically separated the product development from the rest of the marketing mix strategies. Product development typically occurred at an earlier stage compared to the other marketing mixes (Smith, 1994), with promotion, price, and distribution strategies planned only after the product was developed. Nevertheless, product development is unarguably a component of marketing strategy, especially in tourism, where diversification, intensification, and linkage of the tourism products are essential for maintaining competitive and sustainable advantages for tourism destinations (Benur & Bramwell, 2015). It is critical for the tourism destinations to develop their own unique set of product offerings and adopt properly planned marketing mix strategies.

To gain a deeper understanding of tourism products, preceding researchers such as Medlik and Middleton (1973) defined tourism products as 'a bundle of activities, services and benefits that constitute the entire tourism experience'. This definition consists of five key components: destination attractions, destination facilities, accessibility, images, and price. Lewis and Chambers (1989) later defined tourism products to be composed of 'goods, environment, and services' (p.36) at three distinct levels: formal product, core product, and augmented products.

According to Smith (1994), all tourism products incorporate the five essential elements, although the relative importance of each element may vary. The success of a tourism product depends on how effectively these five elements are designed and integrated. The development and production of a tourism product typically commence with the physical plant, which refer to either fixed property or conditions of a physical environment, including land, natural resources, facilities, or even the 'weather, water quality, crowding, and the condition of the tourism infrastructure' (Smith, 1994, p. 588). It is critical for tourism operators to develop the physical plants appropriately (Benur & Bramwell, 2015) because they provide 'the natural and cultural resources on which any form of tourism is based' (p. 588). The quality of physical plants affects tourists' experience and satisfaction significantly. As some elements are more tangible than the others, attention should be given to the complex relationships between them (Benur & Bramwell, 2015).

Service, on the other hand, refers to 'the performance of specific tasks required to meet the needs of tourists' (p. 588). Service failures have devastating impacts on the hospitality and tourism industries, posing a threat to the survival of the business (Koc, 2017). As expectations rise, providing good service is no longer sufficient. Customers now anticipate that a tourist destination should not only offer standard service, but they have certain expectations in 'the attitude or style in which the task is performed', characterised in sincerity and warmth. Emotional and cultural intelligence have been proven to enhance tourists' experiences and loyalty (Paparoidamis et al., 2019; Prentice, 2020). For instance, rather than a quick and efficient check-in at a hotel, customers would be delighted to receive a warm smile and attentiveness to their special needs from the hotel staff.

The final two elements of the model involve the role of the customers not only in the delivery process but also as part of the product production. Freedom of choice, according to Smith (1994), refers to 'the necessity that the traveller has some acceptable range of options in order for the experience to be satisfactory' (p. 589). Customers should have the freedom to choose an airline, a travel package, define their travel purposes, and most importantly, to decide whether to travel or not. Even when tour packages have fixed schedules, flexibility and spontaneity can offer freedom in choosing room types, meal options, or slots for free and easy tours. This type of environment allows tourists to co-create the environment (Gupta & Vajic, 2012), enhancing the experience and perceived satisfaction. All the four elements then set 'the stage of physical, intellectual, and/or emotional involvement in travel services' (p. 590) ultimately guaranteeing a satisfying tourism product. The experiences of the tourists are valued because they differ from their daily routines and schedules (Quan & Wang, 2004), and the 'emotional outcomes associated with extraordinary experience are embedded in relationships between consumer and service provider' (Arnould & Price, 1993, p. 41).

Consistent with the above understanding, a successful river tourism product should effectively integrate coordination of the five elements: physical plant, services, hospitality, freedom of choice, and involvement. The physical plant should include all activities that allow tourists to appreciate the beauty of the river. Within such a context, tourism operators are expected to go beyond providing standard service to their customers and extend a greater degree of hospitality. In many cases, the river tourism products necessitate customer involvement at free will, not only in terms of physical participation, but also on emotional and intellectual levels.

2.2 River Tourism Product Development

The rivers have become crucial sources of income and sustenance for many individuals, particularly those residing along their banks. The captivating river ecosystems, characterised by picturesque river sceneries, flowing waters, encircling mountains and hills, and the diverse aquatic and terrestrial life, draw people in. These unique attributes possess untapped potential for diverse developments, particularly within the realm of tourism. A plethora of tourism products offering immersive river experiences, such as river diving, cruising, white-water rafting, kayaking, camping, fishing, hiking, and cycling along riverbanks, and bird watching (Prideaux & Cooper, 2009, p.2). The allure of serene river views has transformed riversides into

inviting settings for meals, accommodations, and leisure pursuits, forging an appealing atmosphere for relaxation (Brito et al., 2019).

Urban riverbanks have become increasingly sought-after locations for establishments like hotels and restaurants, with waterfront activities becoming pivotal recreational venues, attracting both tourists and locals alike (Susanto et al., 2022). This allure of river-oriented leisure has prompted individuals to explore rivers and their surroundings for a variety of activities, including sunset sailing, dinner cruises, and strolls along the banks (Pradana, 2020).

The study conducted by Abbas et al. (2021) provides a comprehensive examination of the evolving river tourism along the riverbanks of Banjarmasin. Their in-depth exploration revolves around meticulously curated guided tours, strategically designed to unveil a comprehensive portrait of the city's river-centric tourism. Employing a qualitative approach bolstered by a descriptive methodology, the researchers intricately navigate the intricacies of this unique tourism model. Their multifaceted data collection process includes observation, interviews, and documentation. This study's rigorous analytical procedure encompasses data reduction, presentation, and triangulation of techniques, sources, and time, resulting in a vivid depiction of riverbank tourism. This approach ingeniously encapsulates Banjarmasin's river-based tourism, focusing on the pivotal initiation point at Siring Tendean. It introduces 24 distinct attractions thoughtfully categorised into religious, historical, cultural, and culinary dimensions. The amalgamation of these diverse elements stands as a testament to the transformation of Banjarmasin's tourism landscape, primarily driven by its vibrant river-centred offerings.

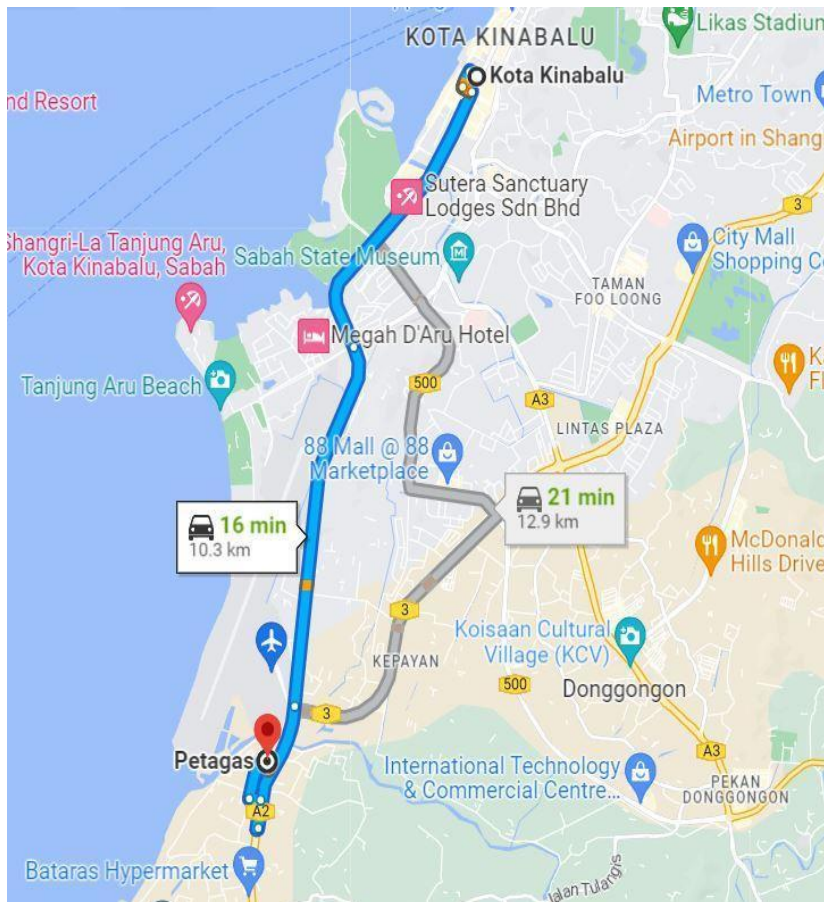
In the context of Malaysia, a country with abundant river resources, river tourism, particularly within the state of Sabah, has been overshadowed by the prominent sea and mountain tourism sectors. It is only recently that the local government has begun to explore the potential of river tourism. The Kedamaian area in Kota Belud, known for its scenic river and mountain vistas, as well as the traditional white-water fish conservation system known as the 'tagal system,' has gained attention. However, in comparison, the Petagas River area, despite its proximity to the Kota Kinabalu International Airport and picturesque coastlines, has received less recognition. The initiation of the Petagas River tourism development marks a collaborative endeavour between the university, local government, and the community to harness the river's tourism potential.

River-focused tourism activities revolve around the waterways and the tourism prospects presented by the surrounding landscape, encompassing both natural and man-made elements (Hafizudin et al., 2013). This entails the creation of riverfront parks and open spaces to promote heritage, natural, and eco-tourism. Initiatives such as riverfront markets and water-based recreations, such as bike rentals, possess the capacity to generate additional revenue for local communities. Despite the evident economic advantages of river tourism, including infrastructural development, employment opportunities, and support for local entrepreneurs (SMEs), limited research has been conducted on the development of river tourism products in Sabah, Malaysia.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Site

Petagas is a subdistrict located in the district of Putatan, Sabah, Malaysia. The name of Petagas is derived from a type of insect known as Agas. The Petagas River has connections to the Moyog River and the Putatan River at Penampang, Sabah. There are two villages located on the river side, namely Kampung Petagas Baru and Kampung Muhibah. Petagas is located 13 kilometers away from Kota Kinabalu Town, which is about a 17-minute drive. In addition, it is in close proximity to the Kota Kinabalu International Airport, located just about 3.8 kilometers away, which translates to about 8 minutes to reach by car. Approximately four decades ago, the Petagas River served as an economic source for the fishing community along the river (Chong, 2012). The water in the river was cleaner, and the surrounding riverbank environment was peaceful. However, in recent years, the Petagas River was heavily polluted due to irresponsible dumping of industrial garbage (Eboy & Chan, 2021). As a result, the river is no longer suitable for daily community use and recreational activities. The river is currently limited to transportation purposes for the villagers (Eboy & Chan, 2021).



Map 1: Kota Kinabalu to Petagas (Google Maps, 2023)

3.2 Research Design

The study adopted an inductive approach, consisting of two main parts: (1) observation study and (2) focus group discussion (FGDs). The observation study was conducted on 16th August 2022, involving a site visit to the Putatan-Petagas River to observe the current situation of the river and to identify resources suitable for tourism product development. The observation was conducted by three researchers, who were guided by a local boatman. The researchers utilised a boat to navigate the river, and the entire journey was documented using a GoPro Session device. Additionally, researchers recorded their observations and any information provided by the boatman regarding the river and its resources. The observation process lasted approximately one and a half hours. During the observation, the researchers primarily focused on identifying physical aspects and potential areas for river tourism product development. They paid close attention to the surrounding natural environment, including the flora and fauna along the riverbanks. The observation study provided valuable insights into the present state of the Putatan-Petagas River and identified resources suitable for tourism product development. The use of the GoPro Session device allowed the researchers to capture the journey along the river visually, providing a record of the observation process.

The choice of conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) is based on its effectiveness in inspiring participants and obtaining their views (Kitzinger, 1994). Four FGDs were conducted, each with participants from three different villages located near to the Putatan-Petagas River. All participants were recruited with the assistance of the district officer, who was informed about the criteria for the participants (refer to Table 2). The four FGDs consisted of a total of 17 villagers, which included 2 heads of village, 6 boatmen, 5 villagers, and 4 local authorities. This multi-stage approach was chosen to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the river's tourism potential, utilising both direct observation and expert insights to inform the research outcomes. The basic profiles of the selected village destinations and FGD participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Profiles

| Participants | N | Age (years old) | Gender | Location | Label |
|------------------------------|---|-----------------|--------------------|---|--------|
| Heads of Villages | 2 | 60 – 70 | Male | Kampung Petagas Baru 1&2 | KPB1-2 |
| Boatmen | 6 | 20 – 40 | Male | Jeti Pasir Putih, Kampung Muhibbah | BM1-6 |
| Villagers of Muhibbah | 5 | 30 – 60 | Male | Kampung Muhibbah | KM1-5 |
| Local Authority | 4 | 30 – 40 | 2 Males, 2 Females | Kampung Muhibbah, Kampung petagas, UPPM N23 Petagas | LA1-4 |

The FGDs were conducted at the district meeting room on 8th September 2022. Participants were briefed on the contents of the research project, including the purpose of the study and the definition of river tourism. Subsequently, the participants were divided into four groups, each with a moderator and a research assistant. The moderators were the experts in river tourism and were also members of the research group, while the research assistants were either postgraduate students or PhD candidates in the field of tourism.

To minimise the influence of social expectation bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), all participants remained anonymous. The moderators emphasised to the participants that there was no right or wrong answer, and all are encouraged to express their opinions freely. The interview questions were listed in Table 2.

Table 2: FDG Protocol

| Section | Questions |
|--------------------------|---|
| Physical plant | What are the resources at your village that have the potential to be developed as tourism packages? What are the tourism products that you wish to promote and develop based on the resources that you have? |
| Services | What are the recreational and tourism activities to be developed and promoted along the Petagas river? |
| Hospitality | What are the key components that should be included in the river tourism packages? |
| Freedom of choice | What are the types of tour packages that you would like to sell the Petagas River as a tourism destination? |
| Involvement | What are the tourism activities that you like to involve in developing and promoting the river tourism in Petagas? |

Each FGD lasted approximately 60-90 minutes, depending on the richness of the information shared by the participants and the point at which data saturation was achieved. All discussions were conducted in Malay, the native language of the participants. All discussions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and later translated into English by the researchers for thematic analysis. The member check was then performed through researchers who have cross-checked the data to improve the reliability of the generated themes produced. The analysis of the data revealed the presence of five themes, which were further categorized into six sections. Notably, the category of physical plants has two sections, which are resources and potential areas to be developed as river tourism products.

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to examine the Putatan-Petagas River tourism product development and the related marketing strategies. In the presentation of the findings derived from the observation and FGDs: the data was gathered from the researchers' notes (RN) as well as the information provided by the boatmen (IBM) during the site visit (Figure 1) in cooperation with the FGDs results. The themes were grouped according to the five-element tourism product model (Smith, 1994; refer to Figure 2 and Table 3).



Photo 1: Putat Fruit (Poison) along the River



Photo 2: Nipah Palm Fruit along the River



Photo 3: Coconut Pandan along the River



Photo 4: Seafoods from the River



Photo 5: Private Jetty



Photo 6: Boat Docks



Photo 7: Cruise Ship Pier



Photo 8: Boat Ride to the South China Sea

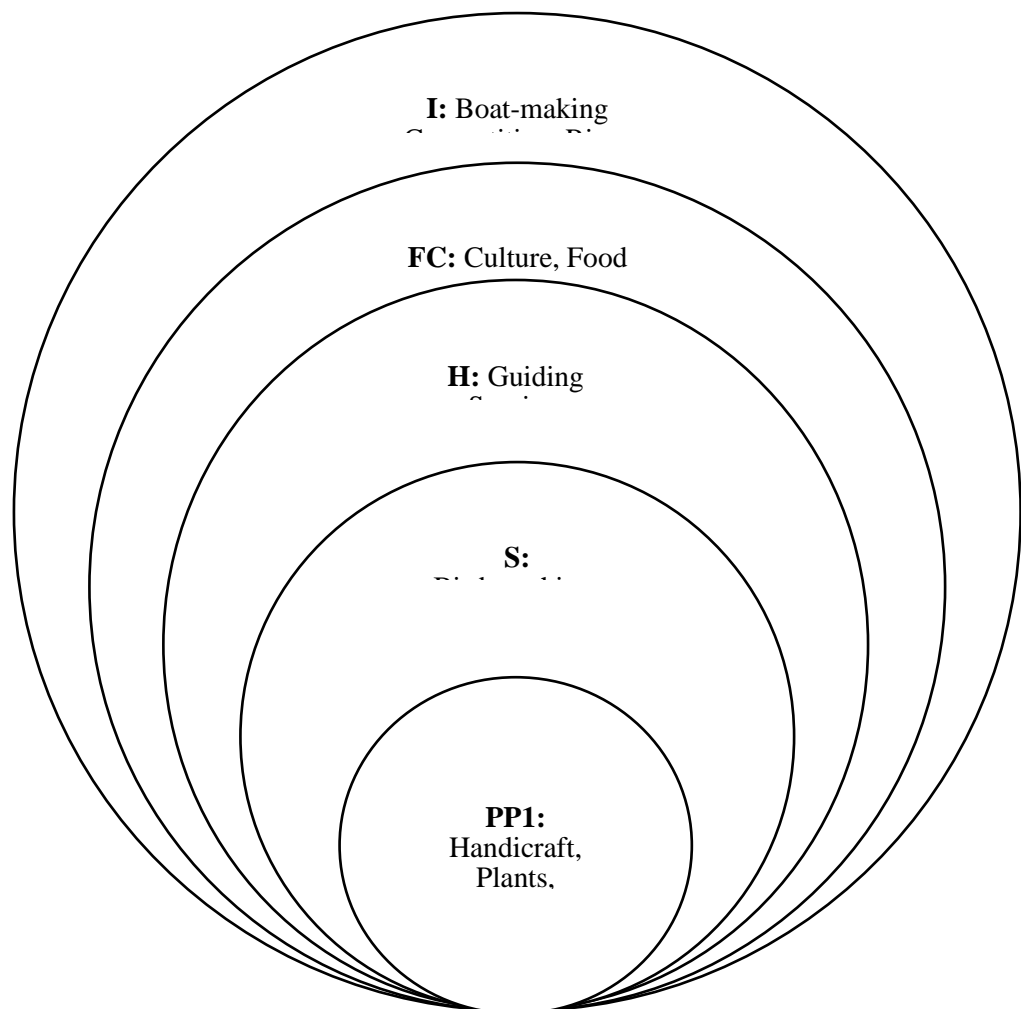


Figure 1: River Tourism Product Development (Source: Authors)

Table 3: Product Development from Focus Group Discussion

| Themes | Sub-Themes | Participants |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Physical Plants (Resources) | Handicraft | BM1&3, KPB 1, KM1, LA1&2 |
| | Plants | BM1&3, KPB 1&2 |
| | Local fruit and food | BM1, 2, &3, KPB 1&2 |
| | Fisheries | BM1, LA1 |
| Physical Plants (Potential Areas) | Jetty | KPB1 |
| | River Sidewalk | LA11 |
| | Cultural | KPB1&2, KM1&2, LA1&2 |
| Services | Birdwatching | KM1 |
| | Floating Market | KPB2, LA2 |
| | Cooking Class | KPB1&2 |
| | Cultural handicrafts | BM1&3, KM1 |
| Hospitality | Guiding service | BM1, LA1 |
| | Welcoming Drinks | BM2&3 |
| | Performances | KPB1 |
| Freedom of Choice | Culture | BM1, KPB1&2, KM1&2 |
| | Food | BM1, 2&3 |
| Involvement | Boat-making Competition | KPB1&2, KM2 |
| | River Festival | KPB1&2, LA2 |
| | Floating Market | BM1&3 |
| | River Cruise | BM1&3, LA2 |

Note: Boatmen (BM), Kampung Petagas Baru (KPB), Kampung Muhibbah (KM), Local Authority (LA)

4.1 Physical Plants

The element of physical plants was observed and discovered through site visit and FGDs. Figure 1 presents a comprehensive view of the local resources that can be leveraged for the development of the river tourism product. The first physical plant would be the *putat* fruit, frequently mentioned by the participants (Photo 1). While it was previously used for cooking in dishes like *ulam* (a type of salad produced from the fresh leaves, vegetables or fruits), it is now mainly used for mouse extrusion (IBM). The second physical plant would be the *Nipah* trees, a type of mangrove palm growing along the river side (Photo 2). However, according to IBM, the local communities have shown less interest in the *Nipah* trees. The third physical plant observed lies in the existence of the big pandan coconut farm (see Photo 3) which belonged to a private company. The pandan coconuts were mainly to serve the export markets (IBM). These physical plants, especially the *putat* tree, can serve as interesting selling points to attract tourists. Furthermore, the villagers who live along the river are mostly fishermen who catch and sell seafood, such as fish and shrimp (IBM) (Photo 4). As they lack a fixed venue to sell their catches, facilities such as a floating market, selling fresh fruits, fish and shrimp on a boat, can potentially become a tourist attraction (RN).

During the FGDs, three resources were highlighted, namely handicraft (i.e., handbags), plants (i.e., *putat* tree), local fruit and food (i.e., bananas, coconuts, local cakes – *Kuih cincin*) and the fishery. The participants suggested numerous resources, such as '*... necklace, handbag, snagging.*' (BM1); '*... the keychain too. Make it in Kadazandusun style.*' (BM3). Others mentioned the plants such as bamboo, *putat* and coconut trees: '*The tree is there. That's the history of the name Putatan, it is indeed coming from Putat tree.*' (BM1); '*Yes left and right of the forest too. That day I went to the bridge..., there was a pandan coconut grove, so I drank some coconut there. Yes, tourists can eat fruit, the garden is really big.*' (BM3); and '*Oh bamboo yes, there are those ends there. The end of the Petagas river has a lot of bamboo growing*' (KPB2). On the other hand, gastronomy was highly recommended by the participants to be developed as a tourist attraction. Local communities and boatmen suggested that local delicacies such as *Kuih Cincin*, *Kuih Penjaram*, and seafood cooked in local culinary style can be tourist attractions. For instances, '*... Food such as Pinjaram Kuih are traditional items for the residents here that can be promoted to tourists*' (KM1), '*My family is really good at making these Kuih Cincin. My sister is good at making it.*' (KPB2); and '*Catch fish, because you can eat [the] fish like that at the edges.*' (BM1)

The study also explored other potential areas that can be developed as tourist attractions. A number of private jetties were identified along the river (Photo 5), along with some private docks or piers that are

rented out by the villagers to the boatmen and cruise owners. Kinabalu Area Fishermen's Association (KAFA) also played an important role in assisting boatmen with their daily fishing operations. According to one of the boatmen, '*...there are many small jetties, and some of them belong to villagers... One boat dock is owned by the KAFA and that we need to pay about RM20 per month for boat docked (Photo 6) if we are members of KAFA, RM50 per month if non-members. RM100 or more for a big boat or cruise docked (IBM)*'. According to another boatman, '*these cruises (Photo 7) are the cruise operators for bringing tourists back and forth from Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park*'.

However, during the observation (RN), there is not a proper jetty dedicated to tourism activities. According to Khalib and Yusof (2022), the development of the terminal and jetty infrastructures and facilities is imperative for river tourism development. The presence of boardwalks and jetties is a key element that can affect the tourism and recreational potential of the aquatic ecosystem (Hadwen et al., 2012). As highlighted by Eboy and Chan (2021), the condition of existing jetties along the Petagas riverside was observed to be uneven, which can hinder the construction of commercial jetties. However, this problem can be easily rectified by utilising geographic information system (GIS) to locate suitable locations.

The villagers and the district officer agreed with the importance of a jetty: 'Jetty in Pasir Putih. The others are all gone. All the piers are in the proposal, they just haven't been built yet. But that's it, the villagers are not getting used to this way. [They] must rather sell the land. If you are selling it (products) on the jetty, it's okay. But the villagers are not getting used to it' (KPB1). Other than the jetty, the local authority highlighted the river sidewalk, as shown in the given statement: '*if we are going to build a sidewalk, it can. This means that we will create a sidewalk from Muhibbah to Nilam, but it means that we can create a cycling joy track at the same time*' (LA1). The following sub-theme was cultural part, such as '*... cultural ba! Just like the one in Semporna. We can decorate according to our tradition. Bajau Later we will ask for a connection with the Bajau people in Petagas and ask for help with what is missing from the boat.*' (KPB1); '*Culture night is also possible. Like a night of dancing.*' (KPB2); and '*The multiracial culture in Petagas is suitable to be promoted to tourists. Among the cultural activities that can be highlighted in the Petagas river is the Lepa-Lepa festival.*' (KM1).

4.2 Service

Four recreational and tourism activities were identified from the site visit and FGDs. According to Smith (1994), the physical plant element requires the input of services to make it useful for tourists. In this context, the term 'service' here refers to the tourism activities needed to meet the needs of tourists. For example, if the physical plant is local food, its corresponding service can be a cooking class. As a result, the birdwatching, floating market, cooking class, and hand-on cultural handicrafts were revealed by the participants of FGD. Birdwatching was described by KPB2 as: '*... The beautiful view of the sunrise, there are also migratory birds in the trees near the river. The birds are very beautiful and always migrate there in certain months, we can organise some bird photoshoot competition to attract tourists to visit there.*'

Floating market was another suggestion, specifically made by KPB2 in their statement: '*... Better to have a floating market for attracting tourists to our place, but we must be extra careful in Kampung Tengah Padang because sometimes there will flood...*'. Food exhibition and demonstration is one of the key tourist motives to visit a destination (Brien, 2014; Park et al., 2022). For this matter, KPB1 stated that '*we can make cooking class by the river there... We don't do it in the hall, we do it in the riverside.*'. Another recommendation made by the participants was hand-on cultural handicraft, as seen through statements such as: '*we have Bajau [ethnic] cultural, like tourist can make Serdang Woven handicrafts by themselves as souvenirs.*' (BM1) and '*... Yes, rattan weaving also can be learned if they [tourists] want to...*'.

4.3 Hospitality

Hospitality refers to the value-added services that may make tourists feel welcomed. Based on the obtained results from the FGDs, the boatmen suggested offering guiding service and a welcome drink as part of the hospitality package. For instance, BM1 suggested, '*If a tourist wants to go around the river, river to sea then sea to the river. Yes, in 2 to 3 hours too. This boat ride covers the whole Putatan.*' BM3 added, '*Yes, we can charge a little for sunset. Another price for another time. Once with welcoming drinks. Sunset time is the best time to drink.*' The villagers recommended the Homestay programme promoted by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC, 2014). Through homestay programmes, tourists would have an opportunity to stay with a local family. They can interact and experience the daily life of their host family, as well as to learn about the culture and way of life of the Malaysian rural community. However, it was

noted that there were certain limitations to such an idea, as expressed by KM2: '*... We want to open homestay, but we have many kids, not enough rooms for our own, how can we rent out to others? In addition, our village is near to the town, about 30 mins drive from Kota Kinabalu, tourist prefer to stay at the hotel in Kota Kinabalu.*'. Due to these constraints, accommodation was removed from the sub-theme of hospitality.

Head of the Petagas Baru village introduced the '*Bertitik*' performance, which is a Bajau tradition. KPB1 further explained that *Bertitik* is a traditional folk music of the Bajau ethnic group in Sabah. The term *bertitik* means to beat or to forge, and it is played during marriage ceremonies, the evenings before the nights of henna and during the nights of henna. This musical ensemble serves as a signal informing the villagers about the ongoing ceremony. On the flip side, *Bertitik* is not played in times of difficulty, such as when a death occurs in the village, up until the mourning period of 40 days has passed. During the FGDs, KPB1 made an emphasis on the importance of cooperation and organizing various cultural programs for tourists. They stated, '*This really needs cooperation too... You just list what the program wants to do. We will provide. Not contradictory, right? One category to cuisine, another to handicrafts. Another category is an art, then culture. When the people have arrived, there must be a musical to welcome them in our village.*'(KPB1).

4.3 Freedom of Choice

Freedom of choice in tourism refers to the need for the travellers to have a reasonable range of product options to choose from (Smith, 1994). It encompasses the variety and assortment of tourism products. The first sub-theme is related to culture, as described by LA2: '*In Putatan, the culture is still strong... The culture is like the elders, right? If he is strong, his culture is still strong. There are certain parts, maybe it has become universal, maybe there are things that people have forgotten... If there is tourism that wants to be introduced to... The grip of the culture... It means like, okay, this kind of example is a fisherman. From what I know, there are still many fishermen here who -- even though there are facilities, there are modern things, they still want to use something that...things that their ancestors used to use. So, that will be an attraction to tourists...*'

In addition, the villagers also proposed some popular local cultural activities, such as dragon boat race and musical festivals. Some of the narratives included: '*The multiracial culture in Petagas is suitable to be promoted to tourists. Among the cultural activities that can be highlighted in the Petagas river is the Lepalepa dragon boat festival.*' (KM1); '*The residents of this village also have talent in the music game kulingtonan (a type of musical instrument) and have been champions in competitions*'; and '*What if it's the culture here? Which is like a decorated boat, inviting tourists to come with the costume of the Bajau here.*' (KP2). According to the study by Reichenberger (2019), the demand for culture-related tourism activities and experiences is on a growing rise, because people are seeking for a sense of belonging, affiliation, and acceptance.

Food-oriented packages were also recommended by boatmen and villages, spotlighting local delicacies such as *Kuih Penjaram* (BM1), *Kuih Cincin* (KPB1), seafood (BM2), and *Taipai* (BM3). They made statements like: '*Panjaram cake, the green or brown one.*' (BM1) '*Seafood. It's really seafood. Fish from the sea and river, tourists can choose what they want to eat,*' (BM2); and '*...What else, must be Taipai, it is an alcoholic drink.*' (BM3). Creating culinary itineraries can be an alternative to the implementation of strategies aimed at social and economic development and the promotion of specific areas (Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2012). Local cuisine has been established to be an attraction for people to visit rural areas (Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2012). Niedbala et al. (2020) also suggested the concept of culinary trails combining agriculture and food produced in cultural heritage with tourism. This can be an attraction or the motive for foodies or foreign tourists to visit the rural destinations. In the case of Putatan-Petagas river, it is feasible to transform the typical rural food (*Kuih Cincin*) into a unique marketable attraction. For instance, new flavours of *kuih cincin* can be developed by combining them with interesting physical plants such as *Nipah* or *putat*.

4.4 Involvement

Involvement pertains to the consumer participation (Smith, 1994). It's worth noting that, in many cases, the providers of tourism products are among the first to experience or experiment with the tourist products. Hence, in this paper, the involvement of the local communities are reviewed. Participants were asked the following question: '*What are the tourism activities that you like to involve in developing and promoting*

the river tourism in Petagas? It is important to note that the willingness of local community involvement in tourism product development is essential (Ahmad et al., 2019). Participants expressed a keen interest in getting involved in various tourist activities, such as boat building competitions, boat racing, and fishing during the river festivals. KPB1 expressed that *'Back in the 60s, there was a river where you could have a boat race. Once a year. But no more now'*, and KPB2 added that *'Yes. One day later, I want to do that again in a boat competition, a boat race. Fishing all. This river is not that small.'* Another group also proposed that *'... To hold a decorated raft competition and if we have walkway or waterfront so we can hold such competitions, and these activities can attract more tourists to come there'*.

The participants had discussions regarding the possibility of holding river festivals: *'It's been a long time. Before Covid. Not enough financial support. Planned only.'* (KPB1); *'If we want to make it [river festival], it's better to open for KK [Kota Kinabalu], [but] if let KK to join, there are many problems. We should give a lot [priority] to the village first. So, our people can be involved.'* (KPB2). KPB 2 further explained that *'... It is up to the villagers. They can make corndogs to sell to the tourists... Then there is a competition for store decoration category... For example, a wall made of bamboo. It's creative bah!'* Annual and ongoing events, such as festivals, can be tourist attractions. It can also be used for marketing, as well as a strategy to create an image of the destination, thus attracting visitors (Jaelani et al., 2020).

Another two sub-themes, namely river cruise and floating market, were found in the FGDs involving boatmen and local authority. LA2 stated, *'About this river, it is long. After that, it crossed several villages in Putatan, Penampang. That means, if this has been repaired, it has been developed, it means all kinds of activities that can be provided here... tourists can dine in a unique setting above the river, like in Thailand, the floating market, right?... Several villages along the river have different cultures, they can provide performance shows...'*; On the other hand, LA1 mentioned, *'at the banks of the river, maybe can sell fruits and vegetables or souvenirs made by the local community. Then, afterwards can bring the tourist on the river cruise'*. The boatmen expressed their enthusiasm for participating in this floating market as boat sellers to sell their fishing products on their own boat.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study has several limitations. First, the state of the river development for tourism activities is still at its early stages. The river is highly polluted, which might have influenced the participants' resistance and negative perceptions among the participants.

These negative emotions may have biased their perceptions and suggestions regarding the tourism potential of the river. Second, the findings are primarily based on the views of the local residents, boatmen, and members of the local council. The views of the potential tourists are not included in this study. As the river requires extensive cleaning and reconstruction efforts, a longitudinal study can be conducted in the future to compare the involvement and commitment intentions of stakeholders in tourism product development after the river is cleaned. In addition to that, comparison studies could be conducted to analyse the stakeholder's involvement and commitment in tourism development in comparison to those of similar nations, such as Indonesia and Thailand. Mass scale quantitative surveys could be carried out to compare and predict the perceptions and behavioural intentions of stakeholders, including potential tourists.

This study adopted a multi-stage and multi-method approach to investigate the issues of river tourism product development and the associated marketing strategies in the Malaysian context. In this study, the observation method was used to identify the physical plants in Putatan-Petagas river that can potentially be developed as tourism products. The findings from the observation were then cross-checked with the perspectives of local communities and local authorities through focus group discussions (FGDs). This holistic approach allowed for the identification of relevant and feasible physical plants for tourism development, and that the perspectives of relevant stakeholders were taken into account. By using multiple methods, the study was able to gather rich and diverse data that provided a more comprehensive understanding of the issues surrounding river tourism product development and related marketing strategies in Malaysia. This approach can help increase the reliability and credibility of the findings, which can be useful for policymakers, industry practitioners, and other stakeholders who are interested in promoting sustainable tourism in Malaysia.

The study also underscores the subjective nature of tourism product development and emphasises the importance of considering all five elements of the tourism product model, including physical plants, service, hospitality, freedom of choice, and involvement. By employing the five-element tourism product model, the study presents insights into the potential for cultivating and advancing sustainable river tourism products in Malaysia. Among the resources identified within the physical plants' category are handicrafts, local plants, fruit, and food, and fisheries. These resources can be used to develop unique and engaging river tourism products, such as cultural handicrafts, cooking classes, and floating markets, which have the potential to attract visitors and generate economic opportunities for the local communities.

Potential areas for river tourism product development include jetties, river sidewalks, and cultural sites. These areas can be utilised to create birdwatching experiences, cultural performances, and guided tours, which can enhance visitors' overall experiences and promote the region's cultural and natural heritage. Services such as birdwatching, floating markets, cooking classes, and cultural handicrafts can be offered to visitors to create unique and engaging river tourism experiences. These services can be provided by local communities and authorities, therefore generating economic opportunities, and promoting sustainable tourism development in the region. Hospitality offerings, including guiding services, welcoming drinks, and cultural performances, can enhance visitors' experiences and create a welcoming and hospitable environment for them. Freedom of choice opportunities, such as cultural experiences and food choices, can create a diverse and engaging river tourism experience for visitors, catering to their unique preferences and interests. Involvement opportunities, such as boat-making competitions, river festivals, floating markets, and river cruises, makes it engaging for the local communities and visitors alike, fostering a sense of participation and ownership in the development of river tourism products. By utilising these findings, local communities and authorities can develop and promote unique and engaging river tourism products that generate economic opportunities, preserve natural and cultural heritage, and promote sustainable tourism development in the region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to extend her appreciation to the University Malaysia Sabah for research grants: SDK0326 entitled: 'Developing and Promoting Sustainable River Tourism Products and Services Along Petagas-Putatan River, Sabah'.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, N. M. N., Razzaq, A. R. A., & Maryati, M. (2019). Potential of community capacity building for ecotourism purposes in Tg.Piai, Johore. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 269(1). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/269/1/012007>
- Arnould, E. J., & Price, L. L. (1993). River Magic: Extraordinary Experience and the Extended Service Encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/10.1086/209331>
- Benur, A. M., & Bramwell, B. (2015). Tourism product development and product diversification in destinations. *Tourism Management*, 50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.02.005>
- Brien, D. L. (2014). A Taste of Singapore: Singapore Food Writing and Culinary Tourism. *M/C Journal*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.767>
- Chong, R. (2012, December 15). Attempt to put life back in Petagas river. *Sabahkini*.
- Dianawati, N. (2021). Developing River Tourism in Palangka Raya Municipality Central Kalimantan Province. *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute (BIRCI-Journal): Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.33258/birci.v4i2.1982>
- Eboy, O. V., & Chan, J. K. L. (2021). Application Of Gis In Identifying Potential Site For River Tourism Activities Along The Petagas River. *Ilkogretim Online-Elementary Education Online, Year*, 20(4), 743–752. <https://doi.org/10.17051/ilkonline.2021.04.78>
- Google Maps. (2023, February 6). *Kota Kinabalu, Sabah to 88200 Petagas, Sabah - Google Maps*. Google Maps. <https://www.google.com/maps/dir/Kota+Kinabalu,+Sabah/88200+Petagas,+Sabah/@5.9442412,116.0270273,13z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m13!4m12!1m5!1m1!1s0x323b6995e6a6aba7:0xf182336a16947a7e!2m2!1d116.0734568!2d5.980408!1m5!1m1!1s0x323b67fd75caab5f:0x9de7f9ccd0659987!2m2!1d116.0504392!2d5.914058>

- Gupta, S., & Vajic, M. (2012). The Contextual and Dialectical Nature of Experiences. In *New Service Development: Creating Memorable Experiences*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452205564.n2>
- Hafizudin, M., Nasarudin, M., Muchtar, A., & Bahar, A. (2013). River Tourism: A Potential in Pergau River, Jeli, Kelantan. In *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Sports-An Open Access International Journal* (Vol. 1).
- Hodgson, P. (1990). New tourism product development. Market research's role. *Tourism Management*, *11*(1). [https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-5177\(90\)90002-Q](https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-5177(90)90002-Q)
- Jaelani, A., Setyawan, E., Aziz, A., Wahyuningsih, N., & Djuwita, D. (2020). Sustainable Event and Festival in Cirebon, Indonesia: in Islamic Marketing Perspective. *Revista Rosa Dos Ventos - Turismo e Hospitalidade*, *12*(4), 811–838. <https://doi.org/10.18226/21789061.v12i4p811>
- Kelly, D., & Storey, C. (2000). New service development: initiation strategies. *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, *11*(1), 45–63. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09564230010310286>
- Khalib, A., & Yusof, Z. B. (2022). View Of Comport: Redevelopment Of Kuala Besut Terminal As Community Hub In Terengganu. *Design Ideals Journal*, *4*(2), 6–15. <https://journals.iium.edu.my/kaed/index.php/dij/article/view/748/574>
- Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of Focus Groups: the importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *16*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.ep11347023>
- Koc, E. (2017). Service failures and recovery in tourism and hospitality: a practical manual. In *Service failures and recovery in tourism and hospitality: a practical manual*. CABI. <https://doi.org/10.1079/9781786390677.0000>
- Komppula, R. (2001). New-Product Development in Tourism Companies - Case Studies on Nature-Based Activity Operators. *10th Nordic Tourism Research Symposium*.
- Lewis, R. C., & Chambers, R. E. (1989). Marketing leadership in hospitality. Foundations and practices. In *Marketing leadership in hospitality. Foundations and practices*. Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Li, X. R., Wang, D., & Guo, Q. (2019). Place attachment, destination image and loyalty: Evidence from two mountain tourism destinations. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, *12*, 46-56.
- Medlik, S., & Middleton, V. T. C. (1973). Product formulation in tourism. *Tourism and Marketing*, *13*.
- MOTAC. (2014, April 21). *Malaysian Homestay Programme - Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Official Portal*. MOTAC. <https://www.motac.gov.my/en/faqs/malaysian-homestay-programme>
- Niedbala, G., Jeczmyk, A., Steppa, R., & Uglis, J. (2020). Linking of traditional food and tourism. The best pork of Wielkopolska-culinary tourist trail: A case study. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, *12*(13). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12135344>
- Paparoidamis, N. G., Tran, H. T. T., & Leonidou, C. N. (2019). Building Customer Loyalty in Intercultural Service Encounters: The Role of Service Employees' Cultural Intelligence. *Journal of International Marketing*, *27*(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069031X19837950>
- Park, E., Kim, S., & Xu, M. (2022). Hunger for learning or tasting? An exploratory study of food tourist motivations visiting food museum restaurants. *Tourism Recreation Research*, *47*(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2020.1841374>
- Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J. Y., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2003). Common Method Biases in Behavioral Research: A Critical Review of the Literature and Recommended Remedies. In *Journal of Applied Psychology* (Vol. 88, Issue 5). <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.5.879>
- Pradana, H. (2020). Pengembangan Pariwisata Pasar Terapung Kota Banjarmasin. *Jurnal Kebijakan Pembangunan*, *15*(1). <https://doi.org/10.47441/jkp.v15i1.56>
- Prentice, C. (2020). Enhancing the tourist experience with emotional intelligence. In *Tourism Review* (Vol. 75, Issue 5). <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-06-2019-0254>
- Prideaux, B., & Cooper, M. (2009). *River Tourism*. Cabi.
- Quan, S., & Wang, N. (2004). Towards a structural model of the tourist experience: An illustration from food experiences in tourism. *Tourism Management*, *25*(3). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(03\)00130-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(03)00130-4)
- Reichenberger, I. (2019). Popular culture shaping tourism. *Journal of Tourism Futures*, *7*(2). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-10-2019-0102>
- Sánchez-Cañizares, S. M., & López-Guzmán, T. (2012). Gastronomy as a tourism resource: Profile of the culinary tourist. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *15*(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2011.589895>

- Smith, S. L. J. (1994). The Tourism Product. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 21(3), 582–592. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728759403300240>
- Susanto, E., Adiwarna Prawira, M. F., Raharso, S., & Sumardi, V. (2022). Strategic Environmental Analysis of River-Based Special Interest Tourism Development in Sukabumi City. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v5i3.227>
- Wittmer, A., & Bieger, T. (2019). *Tourism destination development: Actors, concepts and sustainability*. CAB International.
- Yap, S. F., Yeoh, E., & Wan Yusoff, W. S. (2018). Sustainable river tourism development: An exploration of stakeholder perceptions in Malaysia. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 26(10), 1793-1813.
- Yap, S. F., Yeoh, E., & Wan Yusoff, W. S. (2020). The complexities of sustainable tourism planning for river tourism: The case of Malaysia. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 17, 100421.