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# Developing a Rural Tourism Destination Brand Framework from the Perspective of a Relationship-Based Approach

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to develop a destination brand framework for rural tourism destination. Bario a rural community in Sarawak (Borneo) in Malaysia was chosen as a study context. The choice of Bario over other pre-selected rural destinations is because of its unique remote destination. The primary data collection method for this paper was the in-depth interview with 48 participants; this was supplemented by participant observation and documentary evidence. From the perspective of relationship-based approach adopted in this paper, the findings outline three components for a theoretical construction of rural tourism destination brand framework that comprise tourism destination appeals, branding strategies, and stakeholders' roles. Findings also indicate that the development of rural tourism destination brand should be from the bottom-up, where community-driven strategies can be most effectively delegated to the local leadership system and community's association. Implications for practice and host community well-being are discussed in detail.

**Keywords:** destination brand, rural tourism, relationship-based approach, Bario

## 1. Introduction

Common assets of rural destinations such as heritage, culture, food and landscape; inadvertently means there is a lack of distinct differentiation among rural tourism destinations [1], making it a challenge to identify or develop a sense of destination image, identity and awareness for rural destinations [1]. In addition, rural tourism destinations are limited in their drawing power and "individual rural destinations are often too small to form a critical mass required of a primary destination" ([2], p. 838). As a consequence, smaller destinations specifically those that are rural lack resources and capability to promote and market their destinations competitively. To overcome these limitations, the concept of relationship-based approach is indispensable to source for the much needed resources to embark on a destination branding process. In this circumstance, one of the ways rural destinations can address these limitations is to brand and initiate marketing efforts. More recent studies have recognised the important role of destination branding in rural tourism destinations [1]; and sustainable improvement of competitiveness in rural

tourism destinations [3]. Likewise, more emphasis has been focused on how branding can be used to promote rural destinations [4].

Despite the importance of branding, the literature on destination branding points to a lack of theory for developing a rural tourism destination brand, one that considers rural settings and community stakeholders. The role of stakeholders in rural destination brand development is an essential component of destination brand development [5, 6]. This is important because very few tourism studies have analysed the roles of stakeholders in destination brand development [7], and further research has been suggested [8]. It is important to focus on the elements of tourism destination appeal [or attractions or ‘must sees’ or must dos’] [9], p. 7, destination attributes [10]; core resources and attractors (Ritchie & Crouch [11]); and destination image [2, 12, 13]. It is important to identify the relevant theories for rural tourism destination brand development that support the achievement of the purpose of this paper. Therefore, this study is underpinned by two of the relationship-based theories [stakeholder theory] ([14] p. 46; [15]), and relationship management theory [16, 17]. Notably, the main aim of this study is to develop a destination brand framework for rural tourism using the relationship-based approach – by asking the questions, “How should a rural destination brand best be developed?”, and “What are the existing frameworks for supporting this development?” To address these questions, the next section on existing literature works is focused on destination branding framework, approaches in destination branding and underpinning theories.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Existing destination branding framework

Extant literature on place and destination branding found that there are different frameworks developed over the years for place and destination brand development. These frameworks as presented in **Table 1** were developed by scholars, but also place/destination branding management experts, consultants, and United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO).

## 3. Approaches in destination branding

There are different approaches that researchers and practitioners on nation, place and tourism destination branding have adopted in previous studies. These approaches, strengths and weaknesses are presented in **Table 2**.

Based on the analysis of destination brand approaches in **Table 2**, it should be noted that most of the existing approaches and studies were conducted in cities, countries and regions with the exception of Cai [2], and Wheeler et al. [44]’s studies which were carried out in rural destinations.

## 4. Relationship-based approach (RBA) and stakeholder theory

The concept of relationship management, otherwise known as relationship marketing, is an approach that is used in the marketing field [50–54]. The purpose of employing relationship marketing is to develop customers’ loyalty to the organisation’s products and services. The relationship-based approach is rooted in both

Framework (Citations)	Strengths	Weaknesses
Diamond model [18]	Destination competitive advantage	Economic model for nations
Brand equity, Aaker [19]	Useful in nation branding and products	Not suitable for rural destination
CAGE model, Ghemawat [20]	Destination brand image formation	Focus on nation branding building of a country
Destination branding, Cai [2]	Cooperative rural destination branding (multiple rural destinations)	Complex model and the focus is not on a single rural destination
Destination branding, Laws [21]	Offers step-by-step process of destination branding planning	Provides relatively generic steps
Destination branding model, Kaplanidou & Vogt [22]	Destination brand value from the tourist's point of view	It focuses on brand identity tourists. These two components are not adequate to develop branding framework in rural destination
Destination competitiveness, Ritchie & Crouch [11]	Tourism destination branding components are recognised: awareness, identity, image and the roles of stakeholders	It fails to describe the different appeals that are peculiar to each tourism destination. The model is too broad.
Nation brand hexagon, Anholt [23]	Promotion of tourism and components of destination branding	The model is targeted at nation branding
Relational network brand, Hankinson [24]	The model is focused on managing stakeholders relationship in order to build a favourable destination image	Not specific on destination brand building process for any given destination (e.g. city, nation or rural tourism destination)
City image communication, Kavaratzis [25]	Perceptions and image through communication strategy	Focus on city image and not rural branding destination framework
de Chernatony's The Brand, Caldwell & Freire [26]	Relevant in destination brand identity, awareness and image	Model developed for physical products and not tourism place
Destination branding model, Risitano [27]	Identified two types of brand equity - brand identity and brand knowledge	Too generic and narrow to develop a rural tourism destination branding Framework
7As Destination branding model, Baker [28]	Extension of Law's (2002) model. It highlighted adoption and attitudes as branding process	The focus is only on the stages involved in building destination brand in general terms
City brand model, Gaggiotti et al. [29]	It explains component of place branding such as infrastructure and superstructure	The framework was developed and applied to Kazakhstan cities
The conceptual model of destination branding [30]	Brand knowledge, brand trust and loyalty	Tourist-centred in destination brand model
Destination branding model [31]	Featured destination brand development and destination brand maintenance	These two stages are inadequate to develop a branding framework for rural destination
A model of destination branding [32]	Brand image and tourist future behaviours	Focus is on visitor's behaviours destination image
Strategic place branding model [33]	Key components: stakeholder engagement, brand identity, WOM, brand experience	Developed for place branding practitioners

Framework (Citations)	Strengths	Weaknesses
A framework of place branding [34]	Divided into three dimensions: destination management and marketing, destination brand identity, and destination brand equity.	Developed for place branding – country or nation branding, small city branding
Stakeholder collaboration McComb et al. [35].	Success factors and critical evaluation	Stakeholder collaboration within the Mournes, Northern Ireland
Sustainable competitiveness Campón-Cerro et al. [3]	Sustainable improvement of competitiveness in rural destinations	The focus is on the quest for tourist loyalty in Spain

Source: Developed for this study.

**Table 1.**  
*Summary of strengths and weaknesses of existing framework (model).*

relationship-based theories [55] and relationship management theory [16, 17]. Relationship-based approach is concerned with trust and commitment in terms of mutual benefits to be derived by participating parties (stakeholders and non-stakeholders) involved in relationship building in a tourism destination [45]. Aitken and Campelo [56] suggest that relationship forms one of the major components of place branding, and they suggest that relationship building has been a challenge for branding a destination. The use of relationship-based approach to study how a destination brand framework for rural tourism is developed is crucial because the process involved in developing a destination brand is very complex [57, 58]. There is a dearth of theoretical and empirical studies featuring the relationship building process in the literature in connection with developing a destination brand framework [45, 53, 59], and specifically in rural tourism. Notably, tourist expectations and tastes have been a challenge to several destinations because of various opportunities that present itself to the visitor in terms of preference over other destinations or switching capacity of the tourist in terms of where to spend their holiday. This leads to stakeholder theory as one of the relationship-based theories supporting this study.

Stakeholder theory is regarded as one of the relationship-based theories [55]. A stakeholder is defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives” ([14] p. 46; [15]); and those groups who are vital to the survival of the organisation [60]. The stakeholder theory is important in rural tourism destination brand in order to identify the individuals or groups that are likely to affect or be affected by tourism related activities. The few studies that have applied the stakeholder theory in understanding the destination branding process have narrowed down the application of the stakeholder theory to specific aspects of destination branding. For example, Marzano [5], and; Marzano and Scott [6] have used the stakeholder theory to explore the power of stakeholders in destination branding. Quinlan [39] also adopted the stakeholder theory to study the branding of urban destinations. Other studies are complexity of tourism destination branding [61]; identity and salience [62].

In a rural destination context, recent studies indicate that the destination brand building process is a joint effort of different stakeholder groups which involved city authorities, residents, entrepreneurs, artists, craftsmen and community associations. For example, in Leineperi village Finland, a joint community association was



Approach (Citations)	Strengths	Weaknesses
Image building [2]	Destination identity and destination image	Image building not sufficient overlooked stakeholders' roles
Nation image [36]	Nation/Country image	The focus is on governance
Stakeholder power [37]	Positional, reputational decision-making approaches	It suggests destination branding success depends on the power of stakeholders
Stakeholder power [5]	Effect of stakeholder power on destination branding (DB)	It considers mainly the use of power in DB process
Customer-based [38]	Customer-based brand equity (CBBE)	Focused on visitors' benefits
Stakeholder approach [39]	Destination stakeholder	Unity among stakeholders, overlooked destination branding strategies
Customer equity-based approach [40]	Brand strategy and customer relations management	Focus only on visitors and overlooked CSFs
Innovation and network [41]	The role of innovation and network approach	Target market is women between (20-40) years old in the Sapporo city in Japan
Public relations [42]	Nation branding	Tends to replace image with public relations
Identity-centred [43]	Evaluation of destination image	Destination image from the viewpoints of selected industry leaders – Iowa State in USA
Identity-based Saraniemi, (2011)	Destination identity	Focused only on NTO in Finland
Values-based [44]	Destination brand identity and values	Lacks consideration for destination branding strategies
Tourist behavioural centred experience [45]	Destination loyalty and communication	Emphasised satisfaction, experience and loyalty
Destination image and destination personality [46]	Factors contributing to destination image	Destination image – functional destination (tangible) and psychological features (intangible)
Integrated approach [47]	Five dimensions of destination brand equity	The city of Rome was the case study. It focused on cultural assets only.
Destination Competitiveness Law and Lo [48]	National park and tourist perspective	Focused on national park and not rural destination.
Destinations' loyalty Alves et al. [49].	Enhancing relationship quality	Emphasised tourist loyalty through improving relationship building but not Enough to develop destination brand

Source: Developed for this study.

**Table 2.**  
*Existing destination brand approaches – Strengths and weaknesses.*

set up to manage and promote the development of the rural destination brand of Leineperi and the 13 surrounding villages in southern Finland [63]. The responsibility of running the joint association was given to a hired employee who co-ordinates, collaborates and handles the information distribution. In addition, voluntary donations are made by the villages [63]. The involvement of different stakeholders could be traced to the expected mutual benefits that destination branding would bring to Leineperi and other villages. In addition, the existence of stakeholder collaboration has been suggested as a means of rural tourism

destination success within the Mournes, Northern Ireland [35]. Based on the different explanations from literature sources presented in this section, the methodology section reveals research approach, data collection methods and analytic techniques adopted in this study.

## **5. Methodology**

This study is the first to empirically test the relationship-based approach of rural destination brand development, and the consideration for the inclusion of multiple stakeholders' voices in terms of how they see themselves in connection to the development of the tourism destination brand. Therefore, the research paradigm is structured around interpretivism [64]; the method is qualitative in nature [65]; and reflective account of 'the researchers in the tourism research' ([66], p. 260).

### **5.1 The context**

Bario a rural tourism destination in Sarawak (Borneo) in Malaysia has been pre-selected from an extensive panel of researchers at the national level following a long-term research grant scheme (LRGS) of RM9 million (or US\$3 million as of 2011) from the Ministry of Education Malaysia. Bario is one of the 10 rural destinations in the list ([67], p.8). The choice of Bario over other pre-selected rural destinations is because of its unique remote destination. Bario is not easily accessible; the means of transportation is limited to tourists compared to other rural tourism destinations in Malaysia with similar offerings such as Taman Negara, Royal Belum Park and Kota Kinabalu Park which are easily accessible to tourists by roads [68].

### **5.2 The pilot study**

The primary data collection method for this study was the in-depth interview method; this was supplemented by participant observation and documentary evidence. A pilot study was first conducted in July 2013 by the first author with ten participants. This is consistent with Ghauri and Gronhaug [69], and Yin [70] that a pilot study or pretesting is a good approach of preparing the actual data collection, before refining the interview questions.

### **5.3 Participants**

The participants were chosen based on the relationship-based approach to comprise of all levels and categories of stakeholders. For the study criteria as participants, the following procedures were followed. A total number of 55 participants were approached for this study and 48 were included for analysis. These participants included the tourists who were in Bario, specifically the selection criteria of having spent a considerable amount of time engaging with Bario community. All participants were informed with a request letter for participation in advance before the actual interviews were conducted. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed that focuses on the main question: 'How can a destination brand framework for rural tourism be developed using the relationship-based approach? To provide answers to the main research question, this study provides the following specific research questions: (a) What are the tourism destinations' appeals in developing a destination brand for rural tourism? (b) What are the destinations' branding strategies involved in destination brand building for rural tourism? And

(c) what are the roles of tourism destination stakeholders in developing a destination brand for rural tourism?

The in-depth interviews were conducted in five different locations namely, Bario, Miri, Kuching, Shah Alam and Putra Jaya: Prime Minister's Department - Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) in Malaysia from April to September 2014. The in-depth interview sessions lasted an average of 60 minutes and were digitally recorded [71]. Transcription was undertaken immediately after the conclusion of the interview [72], so that the data collected from the participants would still be fresh in the researcher's mind [73]. In addition to the in-depth interviews, participant observation was carried out in Bario for a total of 30 days. As a result, 50 pages of field notes were generated as a narrative account to record all the events, places visited and activities in Bario. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of participant observation, this study adopted the seven steps suggested for participant observation by Cresswell [74], pp.134-135. This study also followed the recommendation of Tilstone [75] that the participant observation should address the context (i.e. date, time, length of observation, and activities or events) and content (i.e. stakeholders' involvement in local events) of the phenomenon being studied. In addition, documentary evidence such as brochures and printed materials in relation to Bario were also used to complement the data obtained from both in-depth interviews and participant observation. Scott [76]'s four criteria for assessing the quality of documentary evidence (authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning) were used as a guide to assure validity and reliability of the collected materials.

## 5.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data collected from the in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was deemed fit because it is a qualitative analytic method that involves identifying themes by systematically reading the data very carefully and then re-reading the data several times [77]. The themes emerged from the study's findings. This study also used the six stages of thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke [78] which sees the researcher: (1) familiarising with the data; (2) developing the initial codes (or open codes); (3) searching for the relevant themes; (4) reviewing themes that have emerged; (5) defining, labelling or naming the codes; and (6) producing a report of the findings. This analytic method specifically identified codes and themes that provide answers to the main questions. Finally, content analysis was used to analyse the field notes from the participant observation and documentary evidence as supplementary data to the in-depth interviews. Content analysis is widely used in tourism research [79].

## 6. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings based on the triangulation of data sources (in-depth interviews, participant observation and documentary evidence) used in this study. The case study presents an in-depth investigation into Bario as a unique study context of a rural tourist destination in Malaysia. The main aim of this study is to develop a destination brand framework for rural tourism destinations using the relationship-based approach. The number of participants is presented in **Table 3** and the main findings from the research questions are presented in three sections. For the purpose of anonymity, participant code number (PCN) representing identification of each of the participant were used.



Participants	No. of participants
Local residents, Kelabits in diaspora and tourism entrepreneurs in Bario	17
Local tourist	1
International tourists	14
Government agencies – STB, PEMANDU, DoI, MOT, & MTTF	6
Non-government organisations (NGOs) and volunteers	5
Branding and marketing experts	2
Academic researcher	1
Airline Company (sole rural air services provider to Bario)	1
Mechanised rice farming investor in Bario	1
Total number of participants	48

Source: Developed for this study.  
Legend: STB, Sarawak Tourism Board; DoI – Department of Immigration; MOT – Ministry of Tourism. MTTF, Miri Tourism Task Force; PEMANDU- Performance Management and Delivery Unit.

**Table 3.**  
*Participants’ profile.*

The 48 participants interviewed came from eight different countries or five continents of (Europe, North America, Asia, Oceania (Australia and New Zealand), and Africa) as shown in **Table 3** and they are in the age range of 20 to 68. The number of days spent by these tourists was important because their experiences would have been enriched to provide relevant responses to the in-depth interview questions. This view is consistent with Prayag and Ryan [73] that this was important in order to capture the essence of the place and “where visitors’ experiences were complete”. The following section presents findings on research question one.

**7. Tourism destination appeals**

Thus far, this section has reported findings that seek to answer the first research question that reads: ‘What are the destination appeals in developing a destination brand for rural tourism?’ The objective was to identify tourism destination attractions. Findings indicate there are eight rural tourism destination appeals as presented in **Table 4**. These constructs contribute to the existing literature on the tourism destination appeals which are conceptualised in developing a destination brand framework for rural tourism using the relationship-based approach.

The following are the extracts from the participants’ opinions on the tourism destination appeals. When asked if Bario is a rural tourism destination, comments from respondents illustrating this point include a statement from a key informant from the Ministry of Tourism in Sarawak:

*Basically, if you look at the image of Bario, the geographic location itself is already rural. ... in Bario most people will agree that it is still rural because you have difficulty in getting there, you stay in old Kelabit longhouses, there is no road and you don’t have 24 hours of electricity supply and water supply; so the characteristics of Bario itself is already rural. (PCN34).*

Moreover, a director from PEMANDU in the Prime Minister’s Department in Malaysia echoed:

Main themes	Findings
Characteristics of rural tourism destinations	Communal relationship with people
Destination image	a. Traditional longhouses as tourist product b. Educated community
Destination awareness and identity	a. Food festival and cultural events b. World challenge organisation c. “Bario Revival” book
Destination accessibility	Accessibility by smaller aircraft and logging road on 4WD viewed as adventure tourism and unique
Hard factors	Historical and archaeological sites – megaliths and stone monuments
Soft factors	a. Relationship building experience b. Sense of belonging
Community-based tourism and Cultural events (CBTCEs)	a. Name changing ceremony (IRAU in Kelabit) b. Traditional wedding ceremony
Local meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (L-MICE)	a. eBario knowledge fair or developmental conference b. Annual Bario revival anniversary and conference

Source: Authors.

**Table 4.**  
*Tourism destination appeals.*

*... If you have been to Bario it is remote; the jungle is also unique - that would be another area where people would also be interested to go and visit ... the food ... for example, is Bario rice is a form of highland specie you don't see ... anywhere else in the country. (PCN38).*

The image of Bario seems to be of a unique destination due to its location, nature, traditional farming and food attractions. The positive perception of a rural tourism destination is important in order to draw the attention of would-be visitors. This view is shared by Anholt [80] that destination image is very crucial for the travel and tourism industry, and this accounts for the rationale why great importance has been attached to destination branding. The participants’ views on destination image are consistent with the literature on the attributes that determine the perceived destination image such as trekking, scenery, weather condition, hotel and self-catering accommodation, relaxation and gastronomy [12]. In Bario, there is no hotel facility but alternatively, there are traditional Bario (Kelabit) longhouses where visitors could stay with multiple family members. These longhouses are unique to rural destinations; more specifically, these longhouses are found in very few rural tourism destinations and Bario prides itself with significant numbers of longhouses. This traditional system of accommodation is a niche product in Bario’s tourism and hospitality services. By living in the longhouses, it provides the visitors an opportunity to learn quickly about the culture and lifestyle of the host. This is followed by findings from research question two.

**8. Rural destination branding strategies**

This section addresses research question two. The aim was to identify the destination branding strategies in developing a destination brand for rural tourism.

Findings show that there are eleven destination branding strategies for rural tourism destinations uncovered with the potential contributions in developing a destination branding framework as shown in **Table 5**.

Extracts from the participants’ opinions on the destination branding strategies include that of a tourist from the United States of America:

*It has to start with the relationship building among the ... Bario people ... they should work with the local authority and the state to promote ... and ensure that the destination image of Bario and its attractions are well communicated ... (PCN24).*

The destination branding strategies of tourism destinations are diverse and come from different segments of the tourism destination. Findings show that relationship building, local community involvement and communication of the brand are key success factors mentioned by the participants. Other strategies include the

Main themes	Findings
Understanding branding and description of rural tourism destination brand	a. Value added activities and experience b. Destination authenticity (real, untouched)
Rationales for rural tourism destination brand	a. Building high-end tourism destination b. Geographic location and unique destination accessibility experience
Roles of tourism attractions in rural destination brand development	a. Promoting jungle and pristine experience b. Premium destination – less is more, no mass tourism
Strategic stages of destination brand building	a. Strong local leadership b. Provision of infrastructures and superstructures c. Destination brand management and sustainability
Challenges of developing a destination brand	a. Lack of destination branding experts and manpower b. Lack of local leadership to drive the brand vision c. Geographic location and accessibility
Managing the challenges of destination brand building	a. Strong leadership and relationship building with stakeholders and non-stakeholders b. Partnering with marketing and destination branding experts
Critical success factors (CSFs)	a. Heart of Borneo project BIMP-EAGA b. Food, farming and forest (FFF) strategy c. Develop a community protocol d. Stakeholders’ relationship building e. Leadership of Rurum Kelabits Sarawak (RKS)
Implementation and monitoring of CSFs	a. Promoting premium or mass tourism destination
Destination brand influence and tourist destination of choice	a. Tourist willingness to pay (WTP) more b. Extending tourist length of days and nights
Destination brand benefits	a. Promotion of sustainable tourism b. Preservation of traditional farming occupation c. Human capital and capacity development d. Agriculture and non-tourism investment
Destination management and monitoring	a. Management of risks and crisis to protect brand values.

Source: Authors.

**Table 5.**  
*Rural destination branding strategies.*

development of a destination logo and tagline because they remind the visitors about the destination. These findings are in line with the existing literature on destination branding strategies and critical success factors (CSFs) of developing a destination brand [34, 80]. Furthermore, a tourist from Austria commented:

*I think it would also be good to have brochures about Bario to take along and show people all over the place is a beautiful place to visit, the attractions, the culture, megaliths, the paddy rice fields, the hospitable people in Bario, homestay, the longhouses, everything must be featured in the brochure something they can hold that is tangible to take along. (PCN32).*

Brochures have been used in many destinations to promote tourism [81]. In the case of Bario brochures have not been used to really promote tourism and develop its destination brand. It is also being suggested that the heart of Borneo and East Asia Growth area (EAGA) strategy should be used. This is because EAGA is an international collaboration of four countries namely Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines (BIMP). Findings also indicate that Bario should be developed gradually and not overdeveloped in order to maintain its basic characteristics and preserve the tourist attractions. The establishment of a tourist and visitors information centre (TVIC) is suggested so that it would be a one stop centre where the visitors would have information on different tourism activities available and where to visit. Importantly, findings from research question three is presented in the following section.

## 9. Tourism destination stakeholders' roles

This section addresses research question three. This study has uncovered eight constructs and potential contributions to tourism destination stakeholders' roles. These contributions to the existing literature on the destination stakeholders' roles are conceptualised in developing a destination brand framework for rural tourism using the relationship-based approach as presented in **Table 6**.

Findings in this study also support extant literature on the issue of leadership in tourism destination which has always been an interesting subject and viewed by researchers and practitioners alike across different disciplines as very complex. The participants' statements in relation to the sources of community leadership initiative in relationship building are presented in the following sections. According to a local resident, retiree and farmer in Bario said:

*I think in Bario there are one or two community associations so they could appoint representatives or leaders among them who will be saddled with the responsibility of meeting with other stakeholders in Bario. (PCN4).*

Comments from other participants on who should spearhead the responsibility and become a bridge builder [82] among the stakeholders include that of a tourist from Germany:

*I think the local community should initiate it [leadership] if they want Bario to be branded through the local leaders in collaboration with other stakeholders ... (PCN20).*

Findings show that the leadership initiative to promote relationship building should be initiated from the local community because the local people know more about their community and how they want tourism to be promoted in Bario. In the

Main themes	Findings
Identification of rural tourism stakeholders	<div>a. Tertiary stakeholder – logging companies</div> <div>b. Secondary or Non-tourism stakeholder - general public outside Bario, individuals and private organisations involved in the provision of infrastructures projects and developmental events.</div> <div>c. Primary stakeholder – tourist, researchers, NGOs and volunteers, local residents, government, DMMOs, travel, tour operators, transporters and airlines, local business and homestay operators.</div>
Tourism destination stakeholders’ roles	Tertiary stakeholder - logging companies or loggers investment in trees planting due to harvest of matured trees, specifically in Bario, linked logging road from Ba’kelalan to Bario
Roles of destination management and marketing organisations (DMMOs)	<div>a. Promoting Bario food and cultural festival</div> <div>b. Assurance on safety and security of the tourists</div> <div>c. Sustainability of tourism destination attractions</div>
Strategies and benefits of relationship building (stakeholders and non-stakeholders)	<div><b>Strategies</b></div> <div>a. Build and maintain good relationship among stakeholders</div> <div>b. Integrity and quality of service</div> <div>c. Communication, honesty and transparency</div> <div>d. Alliance and consultation with destination branding experts</div> <div>e. Innovation and creativity</div> <div>f. Networking with non-stakeholders</div> <div>g. Progressive relationship, sense of ownership and trust</div> <div><b>Benefits</b></div> <div>a. Networking with branding experts and resource opportunities</div> <div>b. Provision of financial requirements</div> <div>c. Unique trust destination</div> <div>d. Inflow of business investment</div> <div>e. Infrastructure development and CSR projects</div> <div>f. Successful brand development and implementation</div> <div>g. Sustainable destination brand development</div>
Leadership initiative in relationship building	<div>a. Rurum Kelabit Sarawak (RKS) community association</div> <div>b. Bottom-up approach: Stakeholder power through the rural community association and local leadership (e.g. RKS)</div>
Descriptions of tourism destination sustainability	Tourist spend reasonable number of days
Stakeholders involvement in tourism destination sustainability	<div>a. Building sustainable destination brand</div> <div>b. Develop training programmes on sustainability</div>
Future of tourism development and management in Bario	<div>a. Educate and involve younger generation</div> <div>b. Gradual and balanced development avoid major transformation of Bario</div> <div>c. Improve eBario website and directory</div> <div>d. Promote archaeological sites as tourism attractions</div>

Source: Developed for this study.

**Table 6.**  
*Destination stakeholders’ roles.*

case of Bario, findings also suggest that there is a need to educate and involve the younger generation in destination branding activities so that they can revive and preserve the culture which is one of the main tourism attractions in Bario. The empowerment for the younger generation is necessary because of the ageing



population of most of the local residents in Bario. Besides that, there should be gradual and balanced development, but that avoids major transformation of Bario. Based on events in some tourism destinations such as Pankor Island, Langkawi Island, Cameroon Highland and Tioman Island where “it seems that tourists, as a force of change, have introduced ultramodern culture to the villagers” ([83], p.170), these destinations are in Malaysia where major economic transformations through tourism have dislocated the ecosystem. Additionally, documentary evidence was used to supplement findings from this study as presented in the following section.

## 10. Findings from documentary evidence

The documentary evidence was grouped into three categories that include brochures, books and press releases, and archaeological research reports. **Table 7** presents a comparison of findings uncovered from the three categories of documentary evidence in order to identify the extent to which these findings from documentary evidence corroborate findings from in-depth interviews.

These findings include: (1) industry innovators award; (2) slow food praesidium award for Bario rice; and (3) intelligent community’s award. These three findings were not uncovered in the in-depth interviews which basically could be regarded as part of destination image, destination awareness and identity of Bario. On top of this, participant observation was adopted to supplement findings from both in-depth interviews and documentary evidence as follows.

Documentary evidence	Categories	Findings uncovered from in-depth interviews	Findings uncovered from documentary evidence
Brochures	Brochures on food and cultural festival	Tourism destination event	Promote local food culture and tourism through Bario food and cultural festival
	Bario knowledge fair downloaded from e-Bario website	Tourism destination event	Local MICE events or developmental conferencing
Books and press releases	The Bario Revival	a. Tourism destination event	a. Bario revival anniversary conference
		b. Destination image	b Industry innovators award
	Education Excellence Awards	Destination image	Educated community
	Slow Food Italy	a. Destination image b. Destination awareness and identity	Slow food praesidium award for Bario rice
	World Teleport Association – press release	a. Destination image b. Destination awareness and identity	Intelligent community award
Archaeological research reports	Cultured Rainforest Project (CRP)	Hard factors	Megaliths and stone monuments sites

Source: Developed for this study.

**Table 7.**  
*Comparison of findings from In-depth interviews with documentary evidence.*

11. Findings from participant observation

Table 8 presents a comparison of these findings from in-depth interviews and participant observation. Based on the analysis of findings in this section and comparison with the in-depth interviews, it was discovered that most of the findings

Component of destination branding strategies	Findings uncovered from in-depth interviews	Findings uncovered from participant observation
Tourism Destination Appeals – Research Question 1		
Tourism events	a. Food and cultural festival b. Local MICE	a. Food and cultural festival b. Local MICE – WWF/ Kalimantan Indonesia and Kelabit highlands Malaysia Meetings
Destination Branding Strategies – Research Question 2		
Critical success factors of tourism Destination branding	a. Brand communication benefits b. Brand promise	a. Effective brand communication benefits to the stakeholders b. Brand promise
Destination Stakeholders’ Roles - Research Question 3		
Analysis of stakeholders’ involvement in activities and events	Findings uncovered from in-depth interviews	Findings uncovered from participant observation
Identification of destination stakeholders	a. Local residents b. Volunteers/NGOs c. Researchers d. Tourists e. Government agencies f. Local airline company g. Agro-business investor h Logging companies	a. Local residents b. Volunteers/NGOs c. Researchers d. Tourists e. Government agencies f. Local airline company g. Agro-business investor
Community involvement and commitment in activities and events	a. Food and cultural festivals b. Host vs. guest relationship c. Local salt production d. Rice production e. Participation in exhibition	a. Food and cultural festivals b. Host vs. guest relationship c. Local salt production d. Rice production e. Participation in exhibition f. Trees planting g. Guest vs. guest relationship
Tourist participation in events and relationship building	a. Food and cultural festivals b. Taking photographs c. Relationship building d. Visit archaeological sites	a. Food and cultural festivals b. Taking photographs c. Relationship building d. Visit archaeological sites e. Trees planting f. Participation in exhibition
Involvement of other stakeholders in activities and events	a. Tree planting b. Painting of long houses c. Taking photographs d. Relationship building e. Participation in exhibition f. Food and cultural festivals g. Visit archaeological sites	a. Trees planting b. Painting of long houses c. Taking photographs d. Relationship building e. Participation in exhibition f. Food and cultural festivals g. Visit archaeological sites

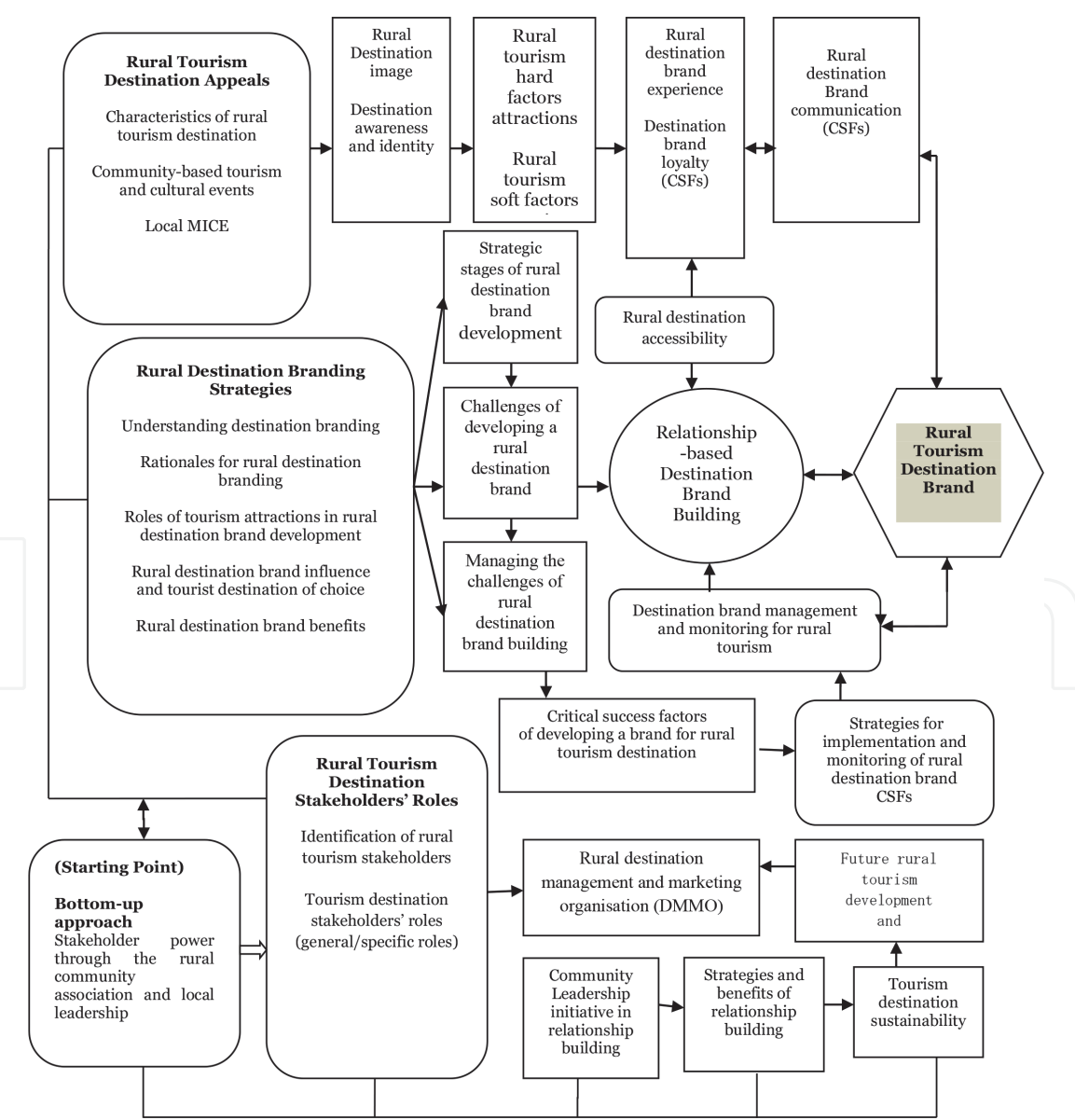
Source: Developed for this study.

Table 8.  
Comparison of findings from in-depth interviews and participant observation.

from participant observation support findings uncovered in the in-depth interviews.

11.1 Rural tourism destination appeals

This section summarises **Table 4** and its relevant to **Figure 1**. Based on the analyses of the data, eight main themes of destination appeals or attractions have been identified that would help brand a rural destination namely: characteristics of rural tourism destinations; destination image; destination awareness and identity. Others include destination accessibility; hard factors attractions; soft factors attractions; community-based tourism and cultural events (CBTCEs); and (h) local meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (L-MICE). These findings are important because within this study, relationship building experience, staging of food and cultural festivals which include the name changing ceremony and the traditional wedding are unique tourism attractions. Similarly, the locally organised MICE that has featured the eBario Knowledge fair and the annual anniversary of Bario revival are destination appeals that would enhance the destination brand



**Figure 1.**  
*Destination brand framework for rural tourism: A relationship-based approach.*

development of Barrio. These constructs were conceptualised into the destination brand framework developed in this study as presented in **Figure 1**.

### 11.2 Rural destination branding strategies

The focus of this section is derived from **Table 5** as part of the components to develop a rural tourism destination brand framework as depicted in **Figure 1**. Analyses of data on destination branding strategies in **Table 5** produced eleven strategic themes: understanding branding and description of rural tourism destination brand; rationales for rural tourism destination brand; roles of tourism attractions in rural destination brand development; strategic stages of destination brand building; challenges of developing a destination brand; and managing the challenges of destination brand building. Other branding strategies are critical success factors (CSFs); strategies for the implementation and monitoring of CSFs; destination brand influence and tourist destination of choice; destination brand benefits; and destination management and monitoring.

### 11.3 Rural tourism destination stakeholders' roles

The third main component of the destination brand framework in **Figure 1** is the destination stakeholders' roles. Analyses of data in **Table 6** produced eight main themes relevant to the construct of destination brand framework as follows: identification of rural tourism stakeholders – primary, secondary and tertiary stakeholders were identified; tourism destination stakeholders' roles; roles of destination management and marketing organisations (DMMOs). Similarly, leadership initiative in relationship building – bottom-up approach through committed community leaders and associations; strategies and benefits of relationship building; destination sustainability; and future of tourism development and management in Barrio. The main significant finding in this study is that the starting point in developing a destination brand for rural tourism is the bottom-up approach, community-driven which would allow relationship building between the host community and other destination stakeholders. In other words, it should not be a top-down approach from the government ministries, agencies and department.

## 12. Implications to theory, practice and policy makers and host community

### 12.1 Theoretical implications

This study has contributed to the scholarship of destination branding. From the theoretical view point, it has contributed to the existing theory on destination branding by developing a 'destination brand framework for rural tourism using the relationship-based approach' as presented in **Figure 1** which is the main aim of this study. Findings from this study also indicate that the destination brand framework for rural tourism emphasises the significance of understanding relationship building among the local community, rural destination stakeholders and non-stakeholders (friends of the host community) to develop a destination brand for rural tourism. Other theoretical contributions are the rural tourism destination appeals, destination branding strategies and stakeholder power - through the rural community association and local leadership. The starting point is to adopt a bottom-up approach and engage committed community's association leaders to drive the brand vision, planning and development are important elements.

## **12.2 Practice and policy implications**

This study has practical implications for policy makers and practitioners. Firstly, the destination brand framework can be used in practice for the destination brand building of Barrio and transfer to other rural tourism destination using the relationship-based approach (RBA). This is because RBA encourages stakeholders to be involved in activities that will promote and develop the tourism destination brand. This suggestion is corroborated by Szondi [42] that relationship-based management in building a destination brand can lead to mutual understanding, collaboration efforts and shared values among the stakeholders and non-stakeholders. The second managerial contribution is the formation of community protocol and engagement behaviour of stakeholders and non-stakeholders to encourage sustainable and responsible rural tourism practices. Tourism practitioners should understand tourists' behaviour in terms of their expectations by maintaining the remote image and identity of a rural destination and avoiding massive infrastructure development which may result in the number of tourist attractions being lost and reducing the number of tourist arrivals and receipts.

## **12.3 Implications to the community**

The study implication to the host community is that the development of a rural tourism destination brand has the potential to provide employment opportunities for the host community. This is because an increase in the number of tourist arrivals will require more local residents to be gainfully employed. Notably, increase in the tourist arrivals could draw the attention of the government and investors alike. A good example is the study context where we have private investments in rice production which has increased the number of rice output, employing more people from the community and provision of seven dams for rice irrigation planting system. In addition, is the preservation of core values of the rural tourism destination such as local culture, heritage and historical sites attractions, farming community status would be preserved. Besides that, tourist desire for authentic experience would be enhanced and this suggests that the rural destination appeals can be sustained in a longer term.

## **12.4 Transferability of destination brand framework to similar tourism destinations**

Transferability is important in qualitative research findings [84]. Transferability connotes external validity [70]. The following elements of the destination brand framework can be transferred or implemented in other tourism destinations brand building. These include: (a) the application of relationship-based approach suggests the involvement of the local community other rural destination stakeholders and non-stakeholders in the process involved of developing a destination brand for rural tourism; (b) the bottom-up approach and community-driven strategy through the stakeholder power delegated to the local community's association leadership initiative; (c) local community association and leadership initiative in understanding the strategies and benefits of relationship building in destination brand development; (d) stakeholders' involvement in rural tourism destination sustainability in building a destination brand; (e) identifying specific rural tourism destination appeals (hard and soft factors) that can be used in developing destination brand for rural destinations; and (f) communicating destination brand benefits specific to rural tourism destination.



## **13. Limitations, recommendations for future research and conclusion**

### **13.1 Limitations of the study and recommendations**

This study has been conceptualised from the rural tourism destination context which may not be applicable to other large tourism destinations such as cities, states, regions and nations branding. Notably, a qualitative single case approach was used. It is suggested that future studies should adopt the multiple case studies approach in rural tourism destinations that are not uniquely positioned like Barrio for comparison among the different study destinations. This is important to ascertain if similar results would be obtained. A longitudinal study is recommended because it would provide additional findings on the process involved in developing a destination brand for rural tourism over time.

## **14. Conclusion**

To sum up, the application of the relationship-based approach in this study is strengthened by the existing study in destination branding which highlighted there is limited or no empirical studies in the relationship building approach in developing a destination brand [45].

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