

**ENHANCING BRAND EQUITY THROUGH SUSTAINABILITY  
MARKETING AND ICT: A STUDY ON HOMESTAYS IN  
MALAYSIA**

**BY**

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Business and Finance, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Management Sciences, April 2022

## **ABSTRACT**

### **ENHANCING BRAND EQUITY THROUGH SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING AND ICT: A STUDY ON HOMESTAYS IN MALAYSIA**

**Zain ul Abedin Janjua**

Tourism stands to be gravely undermined by the effects of unsustainable growth; the tourism industry is still struggling to fully incorporate sustainable development in its practices. Addressing the concerns on sustainable rural tourism development, this study examined the antecedent and consequent relationship between Information and communication technology (ICT) competency, sustainability tourism marketing, and brand equity in the context of rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. This study also examined the political support of Malaysian local authorities and how this support benefits sustainable tourism marketing practices. A self-administered questionnaire was employed to collect responses, data were collected from 180 homestay operators. Homestay operators from Kuala Lumpur/ Selangor, Pahang, and Pulau Pinang, Malaysia participated in the study. The purpose of using the questionnaire in the current research was to generalize data from a sample of homestays located in these three states. To test research hypotheses a structural equation modelling approach was applied. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Smart PLS 3 software was used for statistical analysis. The study findings suggest that the antecedents (ICT competency, sustainable tourism marketing), the consequent (brand equity), and the moderator (political support by local authorities) have a significant relationship. The study likewise recommends sustainability tourism marketing as a strategic tool to promote sustainable rural tourism development. Tourism development acceptable

to all stakeholders that cover profit, people and planet aspect of sustainability is essential in the new normal post-COVID-19 pandemic. Also, a synergy between three aspects of sustainability and ICT competency is vital for achieving longevity in tourist firms' brand equity. This study provides a unique contribution to the tourism body of knowledge by introducing political support by local authorities as a moderator in sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity relationship. Rural community-based homestays can employ tailor-made promotion policies for the development of homestays' business brands; likewise, policymakers can apply undifferentiated promotion policies for the holistic expansion of the sustainable homestay market.

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## APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis entitled “**ENHANCING BRAND EQUITY THROUGH SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING: A STUDY ON HOMESTAYS IN MALAYSIA**” was prepared by Zain ul Abedin Janjua and submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Faculty of business and finance at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman.

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**SUBMISSION OF THESIS**

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Yours truly,

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## **DECLARATION**

I Zain ul Abedin Janjua hereby declare that my thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UTAR or other institutions.

Zain ul Abedin Janjua

Date: 16 April 2022

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

GDP	Gross domestic product
WTTC	World travel and tourism corporation
MYR	Malaysian Ringgit
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
UNEP	United Nations Economic Program
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
TBL	Triple bottom line
MOTAC	Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
SD	Sustainable Development
TCE	Transaction Cost Economic
RBV	Resource based view
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
AVE	Average variance extracted
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ICVI	Inter-item content validity

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Research background

Sustainability marketing uses marketing skills and techniques to understand market requirements, in planning new sustainable products and identifying new credible means of communication to bring behavioural transformation (Font & McCabe, 2017). The marketing team can become an advocate for sustainability, they shape a corporate personality around sustainability and they communicate with strategic stakeholders in changing their perception and behaviour toward sustainability (Soat, 2018). Without taking steps toward sustainability, marketing will keep on driving worldwide emergencies connected to climate change, poverty, food deficiencies, oil depletion, and species elimination, rather than handling them (Martin & Schouten, 2015).

The execution of a sustainable policy remains difficult besides challenging due to some flaws such as the lack of clear objectives and policy instruments, and uncertainty linked with the perception of sustainability, making it critical to communicate the idea in an accessible way, particularly for some stakeholders that have limited resources to integrate sustainability into their continuous operations (Fayos-Solà & Cooper, 2019). Firms are trying to integrate sustainability into their overall strategy, yet it is challenging for them to keep up with the sustainability viewpoint after some time because of issues including cost and competition pressure, changes in leadership and

less knowledge at lower-level management about the environmental and social impact of their activity (Soat, 2018).

Sustainable development practices are critical in empowering Malaysia is turning into a leading country in the 21st century. In October 2015 Malaysian stock exchange Bursa Malaysia launched a new sustainability system for its publicly listed companies. This commands every single listed company to issue sustainability reports in stages over three years. This is a strong sign of the progress made by Malaysian regulators in understanding and by applying the idea of sustainability in businesses, Malaysia can play its part in the United Nations sustainable development objectives and succeed in the country's 11th Malaysia Plan (11MP). The tourism industry is a competitive, dynamic, and important industry in Malaysia. In 2019, 26.10 million tourists visited Malaysia with RM 86.10 billion in tourist receipts (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019, tourist arrivals decreased and in 2020 only 4.33 million tourists visited Malaysia with RM 12.7 billion in tourist receipts (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). The outbreak of COVID-19 has hugely and adversely impacted Malaysia's tourism industry, due to travel restrictions imposed by the Malaysian government. This downward trend is expected in 2021 also. however, after a successful vaccination roll-out, the tourism industry is expected to fully recover by end of 2022 (Mohd Halmeem, 2021).

Before the outbreak, the Malaysian tourism accommodation sector performed an important function in both rural and urban tourism settings. As it is at the centre of tourists' exploration of urban and rural environments. The government extensively support rural community-based homestays product in rural Malaysia, as it is recognized as a rural tourism development tool. Rural

Malaysia is home to 7.3 million people, and they live in 26,400 villages across the country (Adnan, 2019). Under the rural tourism master plan and a national plan for rural development, the Malaysian homestay programme is designed to motivate rural communities' participation in the tourism sector (Yu, Liu, & Chang, 2020). According to MOTAC, in the Malaysian homestay programme, operators provide tourists with a kampung or traditional village life experience. The kampung homestays provide a village-style living to tourists. Homestays are selected carefully and conform to strict MOTAC guidelines to instigate the finest Malaysian experience. All homestay tourism activities are authentically Malaysian like preparing traditional food, harvesting fruits, feeding animals, indulge in traditional games (kite flying, top spinning and congkak). Tourists can also explore natural surroundings, and join cultural events (traditional dances, mock weddings). The rural community-based homestay product is an element of the larger hospitality industry, having the special aspects of inseparability, variability, and intangibility making the shaping of brand equity especially pertinent (González-Mansilla, Berenguer-Contrí, & Serra-Cantalops, 2019; Cho, Bonn, & Jung, 2021).

## **1.2. Research problem**

Tourism positions to be extremely diluted by the effects of unsustainable development systems, with exceeding carrying limits, global warming, the centralization of wealth to a few and an uncertain future for other people (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Rosato, Caputo, Valente, & Pizzi, 2021). The tourism industry is still struggling to fully incorporate sustainable development in its practices, though there is a valuable line of research and practices in the marketing literature on responsible consumption and sustainable concerns (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). The COVID-

19 pandemic has exaggerated this problem, and the health and economic calamity caused by this pandemic impact all activities and processes with unprecedented challenges and implications for tourism industry sustainability (Vărzaru, Bocean, & Cazacu, 2021). Tourism has an array of well-documented destructive sustainability concerns (UNWTO & UN Environment, 2019, Gössling, 2020). Tourism development lacking sustainability possibly will cause damage to the atmosphere, culture, heritage, and economy (UNWTO & UN Environment, 2019). On one hand, tourism can be utilized for self-centred, exploitative, hedonistic and individualistic purposes and on the other hand, it is one of the enablers of learning, multicultural engagement, environmental gratefulness, and spiritual advancement (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Disregarding sustainability marketing in tourism may result in producing permanent damage to the environment, culture, and society (Hatipoglu, Alvarez, & Ertuna, 2016). Similarly, exponential growth in the number of tourists has adverse environmental impacts caused by pollution, endangering natural heritage and irrational natural resource usage (Strugar, Boljevic, & Boljevic, 2017).

### **1.2.1. Malaysian rural tourism**

The rural tourism sector in Malaysia has shown remarkable growth and contributed to the country's economic growth, and local community's standard of living. In Malaysia, rural tourism products include indigenous tourism, ethnic tourism, agro-tourism, ecotourism, nature tourism, farm tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism and rural community-based homestays etc. (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, & Tangit, 2018). Malaysian rural tourism attracts both inbound and outbound tourists (Tan, Lee, & Fu, 2021). Rural tourism benefits the income of locals by providing employment opportunities, and also promotes the local products market, local's food and

beverages, accommodation, transportation, and handicrafts (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2018). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, rural tourist destinations have gained new development opportunities with a significantly lower risk of infection as compared to cities (Li et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive effect on rural tourism as an increasing number of tourists seek safe/low-risk destinations because of more secure travelling to non-dense rural tourism destinations compared to urban destinations (Seraphin & Dosquet, 2020; Vaishar & Šťastna, 2020). Rural tourism products provide an answer to the tourist's safety concerns by offering open-air activities in non-overcrowded tourism destinations, and by allowing tourists to improve their mental and physical health (Huang et al., 2021). Likewise, rural tourism offers a significant number of products for post-COVID-19 sustainable tourism recovery e.g. Agro-tourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, heritage tourism, and cultural and nature-based tourism in rural destinations. One of the most effective programs to expand rural community-based tourism is the homestay program (MOTAC, 2015; Janjua et al., 2021). It inspires the rural community to get engaged in the tourism industry (Ma, Wang, Dai, & Ou, 2021). MOTAC has implemented several initiatives for rural tourism development (Chin, Law, Lo, & Ramayah, 2018).

### **1.2.2. Malaysian rural community-based homestay**

In spite of the immense growth of the Malaysian homestay program, this tourism product faces various new sustainability-related challenges (Ismail et al., 2016; Khan, Aziz, Saad, & Rahman; 2018; Pusiran, Janin, Marzuki, Boonyanmethaporn, 2021). Homestay offers available natural and cultural attractions to tourists (Ly, Leung, & Fong, 2021). Homestays are viewed as a significant part of community-based tourism (CBT) and signify an original locally run insight (Dangi &

Jamal, 2016). CBT provides an alternative to mass tourism. Rural community-based homestay development is driven by the sustainable development principle (Pasanchay, & Schott, 2021). Despite the significant role of homestays in CBT (Sen & Walter, 2020), and as a tool for sustainable rural development, so far there is a knowledge gap about the homestay's impact on rural sustainable development (Pasanchay, & Schott, 2021). Besides this many homestay establishments are difficult to withstand over time, as homestay operators lack the crucial marketing and branding knowledge, resources, and links to attract tourists (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019). Marketing and brand equity is a homestay's significant strategic asset (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017). Homestays can draw sustainability-oriented customers by embedding sustainability branding practices as an integral measure of their image (Vesal, Siahtiri, & O'Cass, 2021).

### **1.2.3. Tourism policies and Sustainability issues**

By and large, tourism firms solely focus on the economic side contrary to the “Triple bottom line” (TBL) concept which demands a uniform and balanced approach to environmental, economic, and social sides (Wise, 2016). In this sense, measures of improvement include indicators, for example, the number of tourist arrivals and economic receipts, without a more basic assessment of the genuine effects on the communities. Especially for developing countries, the tourism industry might represent “growth without prosperity”, where Government discusses the environment yet, importance is typically given to economic advancement over environmental well-being (Pandy & Rogerson, 2020). The existing tourism policies are lacking the requirement of sustainable tourism growth that is community-building capability (level of competency, aptitude, and skills of the



community) required collectively for positive sustained change (N'Dower, Moscardo, & Murphy, 2021).

#### **1.2.4. Stakeholders' participation in tourism policies**

The practice of stakeholder (public sector, private sector, tourists etc.) involvement as a facilitator for attaining sustainable tourism is naturally challenging due to conflicts over resource use between advocates of (economic wealth vs environmental conservation) (Hardy & Pearson, 2016). Today there is developing proof that sustainable market evolution is in progress, yet this change has not stayed up with the extending volume of scholastic research on sustainable tourism (Moyle et al., 2020). Dolnicar, Knezevic, & Grün, (2019) highlighted the percentage of tourists that purchase sustainable tourism products remains relatively limited.

The government regards tourism's economic contributions above all, what is considered a tourism approach is centred on how to expand incomes from tourists, and more particularly international tourists. Due to these deficiencies in public policies, the economic side of tourism has eclipsed the social dimensions of tourism by allowing tourism to be hijacked by those that pursue narrow agendas (Zolfani et al., 2015; Mihalic, Mohamadi, Abbasi, & Dávid, 2021). The tourism approach in Malaysia is centralized and it needs the efforts of the state and local levels to transform the strategy (Saad, Khalid, & Abidin, 2014). So, the lack of a durable approach for tourism promotion at the state level would influence the planning at the local level and may prompt the inability to operationalize the national tourism strategy (Saad et al., 2014). Tourism is hardly at the front of

public policy considerations as it is perceived as means to an end (i.e., backing to accomplishing these goals), not an end in itself (Walsh & Dodds, 2017).

### **1.2.5. Malaysian tourism policies**

The Malaysian national tourism planning approach does not clarify how the public's recommendations are incorporated into tourism policymaking processes (Marzuki, Hay, & James, 2012; Rasoolimanesh, Roldán, Jaafar, & Ramayah, 2017). The state and local government officials heavily control all decisions related to tourism planning and development. In Malaysia, the public involvement issue in the decision-making process has not received considerable attention. The utilization of such practice is currently at the infancy stage (Marzuki et al., 2012; Balasingam, Bojei, Awang, & Radzi, 2017), only chances for community involvement occur in the preparation of the local and structure plans but still, the viability of community participation has been criticized (Marzuki et al., 2012; Hussin & Buchmann, 2019).

### **1.2.6. Tourism branding**

The brand is the most powerful marketing weapon a tourism business has and an effective brand strategy gives a key edge in increasingly competitive tourism markets. Execution of the branding strategy is viewed as a defining moment for tourism firms (homestays) that endeavour to build a strong brand with a specific goal to enhance their market visibility, fortify competitiveness and boost economic efficiency (Mikulic, Milicevic, & Kresic, 2016). Sustainable tourism branding is an important brand equity driver (Gatti, Seele, & Rademacher, 2019). ~~Brand equity is the~~ In the

advent of the sustainable era, products' environmental performance to strengthen their brand equities has become more important for companies (Grubor & Milovnov, 2017). Consumer green sensitivities and likings, firms' sustainable practices and brand equity are strongly related (Grubor & Milovnov, 2017). Hence, sustainability marketing in tourism is a gateway toward the longevity of brand equity of tourism firms (homestays) (Liao et al., 2017).

### **1.2.7. ICT competency and tourism**

ICT provides an intrinsic dimension for an added reasonable sustainable, competitive economy and society (Janjua, Krishnapillai, & Rehman, 2021; Ramdani, Raja, & Kayumova, 2021). The development of ICT presents unprecedented opportunities for tourism and hospitality businesses (Law, Buhalis & Cobanoglu, 2014), ICT possibly produce a sustainable competitive advantage, but it is still not accepted as a “multi-functional tool” that can support practically every action in the industry (Šeric, Saura & Molla-Descals, 2016). Likewise, the role of ICT in facilitating tourism businesses to improve their abilities to address sustainability issues is less researched (Gouvea, Kapelianis & Kassicieh, 2018). The relationship between ICT and sustainable tourism has constantly drawn controversial views (Sigala, 2018). Because of the arguments that technological developments like (augmented reality, virtual reality, digital marketing etc.) make tourism a supporter or challenger of sustainability (Higgins-Desbiolles et.al, 2019). Despite that, several researchers are exploring the constructive effect of several technological applications on sustainable tourism (Gossling, 2020). However, these researches are restricted in examining how ICTs can manage current and future sustainable tourism issues (Tham & Sigala, 2020), also tourism sustainability has become a challenge due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic

(Fennell, 2021). Additionally, the presence of ICT in a high-level policymaking development is still scarce in numerous hospitality and tourism firms (Law, Buhalis & Cobanoglu, 2014; Janjua et al., 2021). The full utilization of ICT capabilities in tourism firms is restricted because of management's motivation, approach, and financial condition instead of the technological limitations (Law, Buhalis & Cobanoglu, 2014; Hatefi Ardakani & Estehlaji, 2021).

### **1.2.8. Rural community-based homestays issues**

Most studies just examined the advancement of homestay, by and large, for example, homestay improvement, tourist homestay understanding, homestay operator's issues and other general viewpoints (Nor & Awang, 2018; Dey, Mathew, & Chee-Hua, 2020). The rural tourism positioning strategies have been developed from the point of view of a single stakeholder tourist and have neglected the local community's viewpoint; sustainable tourism is difficult to achieve without community support (Artal-Tur et al., 2019). Sustainability goals cannot be achieved by targeting a specific stakeholder or a single aspect (Janjua et al., 2021). Likewise, it is essential to keep in view that the theoretical definition of sustainable tourism involves environmental, social and economic protection dimensions (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Malaysian public policies lack active involvement of communities in tourism development and homestay growth, and their impact on local communities following sustainable tourism standards (Falak, Chiun & Wee, 2014; Hanim et al., 2014; Balasingam, 2022).

Considering the community-based homestay businesses generally in the Asia Pacific and particularly in Malaysia, this study examined the relationship between ICT competency,

sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. Political support by Malaysian local authorities, sustainable tourism marketing practices and homestay brand equity relationships were also studied.

### **1.3. Research aim and objectives**

#### **1.3.1. Research aim**

The research aim underlined the obstacles to achieving sustainable tourism in Malaysia. Investigated the role of ICT in sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity in rural community-based homestays. The research also examined the role of political support by local authorities in benefiting sustainable tourism marketing practices and homestay brand equity.

#### **1.3.2. Research questions**

To address the research gaps discussed above following research questions were formulated.

- 1) What is the relationship between ICT competency and sustainability tourism marketing (environment, social and economic) in Malaysian homestay Operations?
- 2) What is the relationship between the environmental aspect of sustainable tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?
- 3) What is the relationship between the CSR aspect of sustainable tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?

- 4) What is the relationship between the economic aspect of sustainable tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?
- 5) What is the role of political support by local authorities in the relationship between sustainability tourism marketing and brand equity in homestay operations?

### **1.3.3. Research objectives**

The main objectives of the research are as follows.

- 1) To examine the relationship between ICT competency and sustainability tourism marketing practices in Malaysian homestay operations.
- 2) To examine the effect of the environmental aspect of sustainability tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity.
- 3) To examine the effect of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) aspect of sustainability tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity.
- 4) To examine the effect of the economic aspect of sustainable tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity.
- 5) To examine the role of political support by local authorities in the relationship between sustainability tourism marketing and Brand equity in homestay operations.

### **1.4. Theoretical significance**

This study analysed ICT competency, and sustainability theory in rural community-based tourism in conjunction with brand equity and presented a novel construct "political support by local authorities". This integrated conceptual framework is an important sustainable rural tourism growth model and is related to the parental idea of sustainable development. This causal model is empirically tested to prove ICT competency, sustainable tourism marketing practices, and political support by local authorities' constructs as vital explanatory variables of homestay brand equity. This study provided valuable theoretical insights for rural tourism planners striving to achieve sustainability.

This study allows us to better describe the triple bottom line theory when applied in juxtaposition with ICT competency, brand equity, and the newly introduced construct of Political support by local authorities. The triple bottom line theory appears as a relevant framework to guide a rural community-based homestay product to enhance the social, economic, and environmental sustainability dimensions. The theoretical model of study highlights the importance of the "ICT competency and Political support by local authorities" relationship with the three pillars of TBL, also the importance of these two in designing sustainable and durable rural community-based tourism brands.

The model shows high levels of consistency between the theoretical design and the empirical results of its constructs, contributing to a new step in the tourism sustainability literature. This study offers a more comprehensive model by inclusion of Political support by local authorities construct, as it is hardly possible to maintain a balance between the three traditional dimensions of sustainable tourism with the exclusion of the local political dimension. Also, this model is not

restricted to a specific destination and tourism setting, which broadens the applicability of this causal model. This study provided important theoretical insights for rural planners striving to accomplish sustainable tourism. This research added a significant theoretical contribution to Malaysian tourism where sustainability is being acknowledged as a valuable modern aspect.

### **1.5. Practical significance**

The tourism industry is interested in sustainable development that is acceptable to all stakeholders and covers profitability, people, and planet aspects of sustainability. Accomplishing sustainable tourism is a constant process and it involves continuous monitoring and employing the essential preventive and corrective measures whenever necessary. The study results in evidence of crucial implications for policymakers and practitioners of rural community-based tourism. Focus on cost-effectiveness (minimize economic cost), Environmental efficacy, Policy integration (combination of environmental, social and economic goals in tourism policies), and accountability and transparency to accomplish Malaysian and United Nations sustainable tourism goals.

The study discusses Malaysian homestay licensing policies; the government's homestay licensing policy needs to be flexible to encourage the younger generation. By decreasing the barriers to starting a rural homestay by shortening the procedural delays for obtaining operational permits and licenses. Improvement in homestay licencing policy and incentives will inspire an educated younger generation to become homestay operators. Also, entrepreneurship education and skill development can be initiated in the Malaysian young generation.



Collaboration is required between the Ministry of Youth and Sports Training Institution, MOTAC and local government to secure budgets for ICT awareness, literacy campaigns, ICT equipment and training programs for rural homestay operators. The marketing of rural homestays must be a true reflection of the sustainable offerings, this will generate sustainable perception and positive word of mouth by tourists. The marketing policies with local cultural attributes are appropriate in business homestays' brand building, so rural community-based homestays can employ these policies for their competitive advantage, likewise, policymakers can also use mass marketing for the holistic expansion of rural community-based homestays, in tourism exhibitions, governments official websites and Tourism Malaysia campaigns.

In Malaysia central governments have a strong influence on local tourism development planning and policies. Local authorities familiar with these policies can cooperate with the central government in promoting sustainable tourism development. The local authorities help in local partnerships and collaborative arrangements. These partnerships, Particularly the partnerships among local tourism businesses appear to be positive and this cooperation results in commercial success and local sustainable tourism development.

Practically, this study contributed to policymaking as well as highlighted management practice implications for homestay operators. For long-lasting brand equity and performance synergy between all three aspects of sustainability and ICT competency is vital for homestay operators. So, this inquiry provided one of several ways to achieve long-term sustainable tourism development.

## **1.6. Research scope**

This study focused on the conceptual framework development, for rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. This study also discussed homestays as an alternative form of rural community-based tourism product for sustainable development, homestays are more than (“bed and breakfast, or guest house”), where the host’s culture become a new and unique experience for the tourists. Rural homestay variants include farm stay, cultural homestay, leisure homestay, cottage homestay, agricultural homestay, and heritage homestay.

Rural community-based homestays registered with MOTAC stand for the social-economic development of the rural community, and they play an important part in sustainable tourism development. The study framework integrated knowledge from ICT, sustainable tourism marketing, and branding literature and was tested with homestay operators in Malaysia. The study was limited to data collection in Klang Valley, Pahang, and Pulau Pinang, these three states are the topmost states in the number of domestic and international tourists. Study data were collected from homestay operators/ coordinators only.

### **1.7. Definition of key terms**

- Homestay: Rural community-based homestay registered with the Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, Malaysia.
- CSR: Corporate Social Responsibilities by Tourist firms.
- Environmental practices: Environmentally sustainable tourism marketing practices of homestays.

- Economical Sustainable: Economically sustainable tourism marketing practices of homestays.
- Brand Equity: Brand equity of homestays.
- Sustainable tourism marketing: Sustainable marketing practices of homestays.
- ICT competency: Information and communication technology competency of homestays.
- Political support by local authorities: Political authority and responsibilities of local community representatives and government officials.
- TBL: Triple bottom line theory is a sustainability framework that measures a firm's success in profit, people, and the planet's key areas.
- RBV: Resource-based view, resources for competitive advantage
- TCE: Transaction cost economic perspective of a homestay.
- WTTC: World Travel and Tourism Corporation, Its international tourism body.

### **1.8. Thesis organization**

The thesis organization section highlights study contents that are divided into five different chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the thesis subject and outlined the study's contextual background. The study's research problem, study aims, and objectives were also provided. The study research approach adopted with theoretical and practical significance was highlighted. Chapter 2, introduced the theoretical foundation and important theories and discussed variables of interest and theoretical framework. Chapter 3 illustrated the research methodology of the study. A suitable research approach was chosen from the proposed research philosophy. The quantitative research

methods, questionnaire development, scale selection and data collection procedures are also outlined. Chapter 4 discussed the study results and findings.

The study developed an assessment model that evaluated the relationship between ICT competency, sustainability tourism marketing, political support by local authorities, and homestay brand equity to achieve the study aims and objectives. This section also analysed survey data collected by questionnaires and presented the findings. Chapter 5 discussed key study findings and theoretical and practical implications. Moreover, also provided study limitations and future recommendations.

## **1.9. Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined the thesis introduction. It introduced the study background and defined the research problem by focusing on research gaps from the extant literature. This chapter clarified the research problem, setting the research objectives as well as research questions to be achieved. Moreover theoretical, and practical significance and scope of research were discussed. Chapter two presents a literature review, all study variables are reviewed, and hypotheses development and research framework are discussed.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1. Introduction

Sustainability offers an enduring outlook of the future, one that stresses commitment to a set of moral ethics and principles, which direct responsibly and pleasantly acts, integrating the environmental, social and economic objectives. Sustainability is concerned with a balanced tactical approach with clear roles for all stakeholders, and also focuses on both present and future generations' right to the use of resources (Font & McCabe, 2017). Sustainability is defined as a procedure and tool to accomplish the expected sustainable development (Olawumi & Chan, 2018). There are challenges in achieving sustainable development due to the constraints forced by social concerns, technological innovation, and the capacity of the environment to accommodate human carbon footprints.

The United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 approved sustainability goals “to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all as part of a new sustainable development agenda”, with detailed objectives to be completed by 2030. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 detailed objectives centre on “areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) state that all countries should target economic, socio-cultural and environmental sustainability (UN, 2020). The development and administration of tourist destinations gradually need tools that permit a broader and fundamentally reasonable idea to categorize trends (Verma &

Raghubanshi, 2018) and encourage ventures for stable development (Torres-Delgado, Palomeque, Elorrieta, & Urgell, (2021). Consequently, it is impractical to devise a sole sustainable development plan for all countries or regions. Therefore, each country needs to develop localized sustainable development strategies and criteria but with an international objective in mind (Olawumi & Chan, 2018), according to standards set by the United Nations.

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (UNWTO, 2005) classifies 12 distinct aspects of “sustainable tourism development” these aspects are associated with environmental, economic and social “pillars” of sustainability. Environmental sustainability requires managing and conserving non-renewable resources, likewise, minimizing air, water and land pollution and preserving the natural heritage and biological diversity. Economic sustainability represents making all economic activities cost-effective and creating prosperity at all levels of society. Likewise, creating a viable business environment for tourism businesses to flourish. Meanwhile, social sustainability means equal distribution of wealth, equal opportunities for all races and ethnic groups, and respecting human rights. Also, focusing on local communities’ development by respecting and recognizing different cultures and preventing all forms of exploitation.

The twelve aims for sustainable tourism marketing agenda are explained below:

**1) Economic Viability:** Safeguarding the suitability and attractiveness of tourism destinations and ventures.

**2) Local Prosperity:** Expand the commitment that tourism income is utilized for the economic prosperity of host destinations; discourage financial leakage.

- 3) Employment Quality:** Support the tourism-related jobs to locals, with an equal level of pay, providing services and accessibility to all with no bias by sex, ethnicity, or disability.
- 4) Social Equity:** Look for equitable allocation of social and financial gains from tourism through equal distribution of income, services accessible to the poor, enhancing opportunities, income and benefiting the whole society.
- 5) Visitor Fulfilment:** Deliver a satisfying, safe, and fulfilling experience for guests, accessible to all with no distinction based on sexual orientation, ethnicity, and disability or in different ways.
- 6) Local Control:** Empower and involve local stakeholders in tourism administration and future tourism decision-making in their regions.
- 7) Community Wellbeing:** Prevent any form of mistreatment and social deprivation of locals. Preserve and reinforce the local community's quality of life, including access to assets and life support systems, and social structures.
- 8) Cultural Richness:** Regard and improve the history, true culture, customs, and uniqueness of locals.
- 9) Physical Integrity:** Preserve and upgrade the tourist sites in urban and countryside and avoid both visual and physical environment degradation.
- 10) Biological Diversity:** Conservation of wildlife and natural habitats.
- 11) Resource Efficiency:** Reduce the usage of rare and non-renewable resources during the execution and expansion of hospitality and tourism services and facilities.
- 12) Environmental Purity:** Reduce water, air and land contamination. Decrease waste generation by tourists and tourism firms.

According to (UNWTO, 2018) these sustainable tourism development aims are a combination of social, economic and environmental issues and impacts. The economic viability strongly advocates helping local people while preserving the local environment. Visitor fulfilment is providing tourism opportunities and meeting tourists' needs (a social intention), but it has importance in economic sustainability. Cultural richness is a social sustainability domain, but it has an environmental feature when dealing with construction and site-building. Community wellbeing is a social sustainability aspect however it is strongly linked to environmental resource management (e-g. freshwater access). Employment quality and social equity issues, directly relate to both social and economic issues (e-g. poverty alleviation).

## **2.2. Underlying theories**

The important theories related to the study are discussed in subsequent sub-sections.

### **2.2.1. Transaction cost economics theoretical perspective**

Transaction Cost Economics theory is an approach used to estimate the cost-effectiveness of institutional arrangements (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975). Transaction cost economics theory has remained an introductory theory for forecasting when businesses will commence tasks under their order or when they will leave the tasks to be executed in the marketplace (Williamson, 1975). From the customer's viewpoint, transaction cost economics issues are serious predictors of an individual's recognition and liking for e-commerce, purchase and repurchase transactions and loyalty to the transaction partner (Che et al., 2015; Hossain, Akter, & Rahman, 2021). An



organizational pledge to tourism sustainability provides access to different markets and clients (Connelly, Ketchen, & Slater, 2011).

Transaction cost economics theory recognizes the existence of expenses of undertaking a transaction, whether through the market or within a firm and states that the organizational method that will succeed is the one that reduces those transaction costs (Calveras & Orfila-Sintes, 2019). Transaction cost economics, in theory, describes why an individual or firm involved in a transaction selects a specific transaction partner instead of others (Che et al., 2015). According to the transaction cost economics perspective, information and communication technologies (ICT) and procedures that decrease the expense of execution of sustainability activities will improve the probability of their adoption (Liang, Lin, & Hou, 2021).

### **2.2.2. Theory of triple bottom line (TBL)**

The idea of "Triple Bottom Line" (TBL) presented by Elkington (1998), proposed the requirement for a legitimate balance, among the three parameters environmental, social, and economic to accomplish sustainability in organizations. As per the "Triple bottom line framework", the sustainability marketing dimensions are 1) people (social) and the planet (environment) and Profit (Economic) (Taylor & Hochuli, 2015). The execution of the theory of triple bottom line is a nonstop and iterative procedure that involves trade-offs between environmental, social and economic motivating forces and influences judgments within organizations and their business systems, and in the market and society (Nosratabadi et al., 2019). The theory of the triple bottom line is a unique and novel belief, it makes companies responsible for their overall impact on the

environment and society. The theory of triple bottom line negates traditional frameworks that focus only on the profit aspect, likewise, it motivates companies to inform their impact on “profits, people and the planet” aspects and adopt this integrated framework (Goh, Chong, Jack, & Faris, 2020).

Methodologies based on the “triple bottom line theory” are extensively acknowledged by academics, organizers, and companies in tourism. While preparing for future sustainable tourism policies methods based on TBL are well adapted and applied (Wise, 2016). The theory of triple bottom line dimensions is the fundamental sustainability pillar (Chalermchaikit & Kozak, 2021). UNWTO set up a tourism sustainability path by addressing environmental, economic and social obligations (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). According to the TBL, firms have to ensure their businesses respect society and the environment while making a profit (Elkington, 1998; Wise, 2020). The “theory of triple bottom line” embraces an added emphasis on profitability, to highlight the economic gains that resulted from sustainability.

### **2.2.3. Institutional theory**

The institutional theory is an approach to realising management and organizational practices because of social as opposed to financial pressures. It has turned into a famous point of view in management theory due to its ability to explain organizational behaviours’ that challenge economic rationality (Kessler, 2013). According to Institutional theory, acceptance and preservation of numerous organizational practices are frequently more reliant on social demands for compliance and legality than on practical economic performance pressures (Kessler, 2013).

For institutional scholars, "sustainability" is a socially built idea (Jennings & Zandbergen 1995; Kouhizadeh, Saberi, & Sarkis, 2021). Its significance and techniques are objectified and refined from time to time, and organizations become partners in this practice through their policies and approaches. Pioneers in the development to execute sustainable practices will be influential in characterizing what legitimate is (Miska, Szócs, & Schiffinger, 2018). Businesses that are accustomed to the altering nature of regulatory components as they identify with sustainability will be better situated to accommodate and may even have the capacity to be a part of establishing standards in the first place (Connelly et al., 2011).

According to Institutional theory, Businesses can develop their capability to continue and succeed by being conscious of and compatible with evolving industry developments and policy shifts around sustainability. There may be significance in imitation of effective sustainability advantages that a difficult to model by competitors. The external institutions affect "going sustainable" practices (Nguyen, 2021). Specifically, the institutional (norms and rules) outline the tourism firm's sustainable strategies and subsequently their sustainable performance (Stumpf & Swanger 2017).

#### **2.2.4. Resource-based view (RBV) of the firm**

"Resources" are defined by RBV scholars in numerous ways, but can include human, organizational, financial, and technological resources (Hofer & Schendel 1978). Marketing resources consist of market intelligence, customer networking, brand equity, customer equity, and

channel relationships (Day 1994; Srivastava et al., 1998); and marketing communications, pricing, selling, and product development capabilities (Vorhies & Morgan, 2005).

RBV supports an 'inside-out' procedure. The procedure starts with an inside analysis that concentrates on firms' possession of different forms of resources and abilities which facilitate them to cultivate differing schemes (Javidan, 1998; Bianchi & Saleh, 2020). Competitive advantage is built on the possession of firm-specific resources (Lockett et al., 2009; Dagnino, Picone & Ferrigno, 2021), which take several features in that they must be: valuable; rare; inimitable, and non-substitutable ('VRIN') (Barney, 1991). Researchers studied RBV in different Tourism settings e-g Tourism firms (Romão, & Nijkamp, 2019), and destination competitiveness (Tseng, Lin, Lin, Wu, & Sriphon, 2019). Culinary tourism (Yousaf & Xiucheng, 2018). Destination Marketing Organization (Line, Runyan, & Gonzalez-Padron, (2019). etc.

According to RBV, Tourism RBV viewpoint, sustainability advantages that exist at the intersection of social, environmental, and economic concerns provide more competitiveness with the greatest chance of success hence market opportunities (Connelly, Ketchen, & Slater, 2011; (Lee, Che-Ha, & Alwi, 2021) Sustainability practices can deliver sustainable competitive advantage, it can be created through both internal and externally driven structural resources such as government financial support. Moreover, the branding and promotional efforts from local and central governments can create a sustainable competitive advantage in niche tourism products like rural homestays (Campbell & Kubickova, 2020). As organizations have limited resources, sustainability efforts must reflect that the resources are sustained and improved over time.

## 2.2.5 Application of theories

### 2.2.5.1. Transaction cost economics (TCE) theory

According to a TCE viewpoint, firms are expected to involve in product development, quality improvement and marketing with the least negative effects on society and the environment when economic justification is clear (Rudawska, 2018). ICT is included as an antecedent of sustainability initiatives by a tourist firm if it reduces the transaction costs of its adoption and implementation (Connelly et al., 2011). Many researchers emphasize using Transaction cost economics theory in different circumstances few are highlighted in table 1 below, showing TCE's importance.

**Table 1: Summary of past literature with TCE theory**

Study Title	Significant Arguments	Reference
Transaction Costs and Information Systems	The transaction cost economics (TCE) approach describes ICT as a tool that stands for information essentials, providing added information and information management control.	Cordella, 2006
	TCE method is a dominant theory that defines the perspective of information technology to increase information flow and decrease transaction costs, in this manner improving the productivity of the economic system.	Cordella, 2006
Multinational enterprises, internal governance, and industrial organization	The TCE theory has been a prominent example in the multinational firm evaluation, mainly to respond to the question of whether undertake an activity or not.	Teece, 1985

The impact of information and communication technology adoption on multinational firm boundary decisions	ICT provides cost-effective means to access and process market information. So, a firm can directly reduce Market transaction and external coordination costs.	Chen & Kamal, 2016.
A response to “Transaction Cost Economics on Trial Again”	TCE is the dominant analytical framework for IT Outsourcing research.	Schermann et. al, 2016
The Impact of IT– Coordination Costs on Firm Size and Productivity: Transaction Cost Perspective	TCE is extensively used in describing organizational structures, markets and governance in diverse fields primarily due to the determinations of pioneer researchers.	Chen, Su, & Hiele, 2017
Supply Chain Collaboration in Tourism: A Transaction Cost Economics Analysis	TCE has been applied to hospitality Supply Chain Management scenarios to explain the decision process of whether to implement in-house operations or outsource the operations instead.	Piboonrunroj & Disney, 2015

Table 1 above discussed important past studies and justified the adaptation of ICT in a different industrial setting, the importance of ICT competency is ratified by many past TCE research. The TCE, viewpoint guides tourism firms to adopt ICT in their operations. Moreover, the integrated use of ICT solutions increases a firm’s efficiency and sustainability, enriching the tourist experience and boosting the firm sustainable competitiveness (Yang, Lau, Lee, & Cheng, 2020).

### 2.2.5.2 Institutional theory

According to institutional theory, organizations are open systems deeply influenced by the external environment. The institutional environment includes rules & regulations, norms, and social beliefs that have considerable control over an organization’s decision-making, goal setting and performance-making indicators (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Many researchers emphasize using Institutional theory in different circumstances few are highlighted in table 2 below, showing Institutional theory’s importance.

**Table 2: Summary of past literature with institutional theory**

Study Title	Significant Arguments	Reference
Corporate social responsibility reporting in the cruise tourism industry: a performance evaluation using a new institutional theory-based model.	Corporate Social Responsibility can be theorised using institutional theory in the cruise industry.	de Grosbois, 2016.
Environmental sustainability and competitive advantage in a wine tourism micro-cluster	How institutional and appropriate resources impact the sustainable competitive advantage of “green” clusters situated in rural areas. With the value-adding framework on tourism micro-clusters.	Grimstad & Burgess, 2014.
Effects of formal institutions on the performance of the tourism sector in the	The study draws from institutional theory which incorporates the neo-institutional economic outlook and sociological outlook of institutions.	Roxas & Chadee, 2013.

Philippines: The mediating role of entrepreneurial orientation

Institutional context and hotel social responsibility	The connection between institutional theory and CSR in hotels with three, four- and five-stars categories situated in the Northern region of Portugal and Galicia (Spain).  The framework of the institutional theory has been verified in public organizations, such as municipalities, higher education sectors and hospitals.	Sanchez-Fernandez, Vargas-Sanchez, & Remoaldo, 2014.
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Table 2, above discuss important past studies and justifies firms adopting environmental, social, and economic sustainable practices. Due to the presence of institutions that influence goals, objectives, and performance indicators of organizations (e-g environmental institutions, NGOs etc.), tourism firms adopt sustainability. Likewise, the fundamental principles of competitiveness and sustainability and the extension of institutional regulations on social and environmental cohesion add value to the tourism industry's sustainable development (Estol, Camilleri, & Font, 2018).

### 2.2.5.3 Triple bottom line (TBL)

A firm emphasis on sustainable marketing is now acknowledged as necessary for long-term societal and customer goals, organizations follow sustainable marketing strategies to balance social, environmental and economic goals to guarantee lasting growth, contribute to society and attract customers (Höckert, Rantala, García-Rosell, & Haanpää, 2020; Dyck & Manchanda, 2021). Many researchers emphasize using TBL in tourism settings few are highlighted in the table below.



**Table 3: Summary of past literature with TBL theory**

Study Title	Significant Arguments	Reference
The Triple Bottom Line: A Framework for Sustainable Tourism Development	<p>The triple bottom line (TBL) framework is adopted by Tourism development organizations to enhance sustainability.</p> <p>The TBL is a contemporary rational orientation, whereby firms not only apply a traditional economic growth strategy but also incorporate environmental and sustainable strategies.</p>	Stoddard et. al., 2012.
The Practice of Triple Bottom Line in the Sustainability of Tourism: A Gender Perspective	Especially in sustainable tourism development in rural areas TBL is being increasingly used as an important framework.	Chalermchaikit & Kozak, 2021.
The Triple Bottom Line: What Is It and How Does It Work?	<p>Many profits and non-profit organizations and governments at federal, state, and local levels have adopted the TBL sustainability framework to evaluate their performance.</p> <p>TBL frameworks are also used by regulators for their actions or inactions to make society more sustainable.</p>	Slaper & Hall, 2011.
A sustainable tourism planning model: components and relationships	<p>Sustainable tourism guidelines and sustainable management practices are applicable in all destinations, and tourism forms (mass tourism or various tourism segments) (WTO, 2007).</p> <p>All stakeholders in society are required to get involved in achieving a sustainable tourism process. Identification of important stakeholders is a must for sustainable tourism planning.</p>	Padin, 2012.
Domestic tourists' mindset towards responsible tourism management: a case	Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) should consider TBL factors for the improvement	Amin, 2017.

study on Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh of tourists' positive attitudes to rural tourism development.

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Table 3, above discusses past studies and highlights the importance of TBL theory in tourism and other industrial settings, TBL is the main theory in current research and emphasis using three bottom lines (economic, social, and environmental) for increasing brand equity and hence performance of tourism firms (homestays).

#### 2.2.5.4 Resource-based view (RBV)

According to the RBV firm's resources are limited so, competitive advantage can be provided by sustainability practices. How firms can maintain or renew resources through sustainability efforts is crucial (Connelly et al., 2011). Brand equity is an important source of competitive advantage. Many researchers emphasize using RBV in different organizational settings few are highlighted in the table below, showing RBV's importance.

**Table 4: Summary of past literature with RBV**

Study Title	Significant Arguments	Reference
Exploring a developing tourism industry: a resource-based view approach	The RBV underlines that firm capabilities and resources provide the crucial source of enduring competitive advantage when they are valuable and expensive to copy.	Alonso, 2017
	In the field of tourism, various studies emphasize the significance of coordination and capabilities, including marketing (Brand Equity, promotion,	

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	distribution etc.), innovation, human, and quality capabilities as sources of competitiveness for tourism firms.	
The effects of quality and environmental management on competitive advantage: A mixed-methods study in the hotel industry	Environmental quality management provides a sustained competitive advantage.	Molina-Azorin, Tari, Moliner, Gamero & Ortega (2015)
Doing good to do well? Corporate social responsibility reasons, practices and impacts in small and medium accommodation enterprises	Sustainability measures have a positive effect on the financial performance of small and medium accommodation enterprises.	Garay & Font (2012)
Impacts of Positive and Negative Corporate Social Responsibility Activities on Company Performance in the Hospitality Industry	CSR actions have a positive impact on a firm's financial position.	Kang, Lee & Huh (2010)
Antecedents and Outcomes of Brand Management from the Perspective of Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory	Internal brand management based on RBV is crucial in brand equity building and management as without supportive internal processes no brand objectives can be accomplished.	Gisip & Harun, (2013).

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Table 4, above discusses past studies and highlights the importance of attaining a competitive advantage. RBV stress enhancing tourist firm brand equity to gain a competitive advantage. Homestays can achieve a competitive advantage and develop brand equity by embedding

sustainability in their operations. Sustainable branding is a structural competitive resource in the RBV context, if properly leveraged. In the milieu of RBV rural tourism firms can develop sustainability as their unique branding resource (Campbell & Kubickova, 2020). In the current study ICT competency can act as a tool for sustainability (environment, social and economic) initiative of tourism firms as per the TCE theory viewpoint. Information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital procedures reduce the expense of executing economic, social, and environmental sustainability practices. In the TCE context, tourism firms will adopt ICT competency to gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

Meanwhile, in line with the Institutional and Triple bottom line theories, tourism firms can implement environmental, social, and economic sustainability practices. The governmental institutions, NGOs, regional and local authorities, residents, and tourists make up the external environment of tourism firms. In the case of rural community-based tourism, local political authorities are key stakeholders. These institutional forces shape the environmental, social, and economic sustainable strategies and practices of rural tourism firms.

The UNWTO derive global tourism growth policies around “Triple bottom line dimensions” and sets its sustainable goals and performance targets. This study refers to RBV which views that tourism firms can create sustainable and competitive resources and sustainable brand equity under RBV. The sustainable orientation of tourism firms enhances their brand equity, sustainable features should be integrated into the organization's capabilities to obtain a competitive advantage and develop sustainable brand equity.

## **2.3. Review of study variables**

### **2.3.1. Brand equity of tourism firm**

A brand is a “Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers” (American Marketing Association, 2015). A brand is a firm’s asset that is rare, valuable, and imperfectly imitable (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). A brand is a source of creating economic value and enables firms to create a competitive advantage (Rahman, 2020). This competitive advantage creates brand equity, it reflects various strategic advantages of the brand compared to competitors (Rahman, Rodríguez-Serrano, & Faroque, 2021).

In addition, Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers. Brand equity serves as a product’s competitive advantage and conveys added value to the “branded” as opposed to “non-branded” product (Peco-Torres, Polo-Pena, & Frías-Jamilena, 2020). Effective branding strategy is a turning point for tourism destinations, that strive to build a strong destination brand to strengthen competitiveness, enhance market visibility, and improve economic efficiency (Mikulić et al., 2016). Destination branding has become more important because of the ever-increasing number of tourism destinations, increased destination substitutability and a lack of destination differentiation (Mikulić et al., 2016).

Moreover, brand equity development communicates tourism destination attributes, culture, values, norms and destination personality to tourists (Wu & Liang, 2020). Tourism brand equity plays a

pivotal role in establishing product characteristics, tourist loyalty and market segmentation, vitally boosting tourism industry revenues (Chou et al., 2020). Aaker proposes four dimensions of brand equity: brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand associations/ Image and Brand (perceived) quality. Explained below.

#### **2.3.1.1. Brand awareness**

Brand awareness refers to “the ability of a potential buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category” (Aaker, 1991). Awareness is an important component of the brand equity conceptual model. Due to the brand's high brand awareness, a high level of purchase is expected. Because customers buy brands, they are aware of it also enhances the firm's sales and profitability (Baldauf et al., 2003; Koshksaray, Ardakani, Ghasemnejad, & Azbari, 2020).

Brand awareness is the main component of brand equity and a catalyst of consumers' purchasing decisions in hospitality and tourism (Liu & Jiang, 2020; Keller, Geyskens, & Dekimpe, 2020). Brand awareness is the most important element and valuable antecedent of brand equity and customer value (Liang, Choi & Joppe, 2018; Piancatelli, Massi, & Vocino, 2021). Moreover, it contributes to the tourism firm's performance (Górska-Warsewicz & Kulykovets, 2020).

#### **2.3.1.2. Brand loyalty**

A customer's attachment to the brand is called "brand loyalty" (Aaker, 1991). According to Aaker's model, brand loyalty reduces marketing expenses and leverages trade this increases the firm's value (Ray, Bala, Chakraborty, & Dasgupta, 2021). Loyal customers spread positive word of mouth and entice others to use the brand. Brand loyalty is an effective way to manage brand equity as it increases the probability of brand choice (Pitta & Katsanis, 1995; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Customer brand loyalty is the core of brand equity (Aaker, 1991). Jeon & Yoo (2021), stated that brand equity stems from superior customer confidence in the brand. This confidence results in customers' loyalty and their readiness to pay a price premium for the brand.

Brand loyalty is the primary source of customer-based brand equity, the major goal of brand management is the ability to create brand loyalty (Keller, 2003; Harits & Yuliati, 2021). Brand loyalty is considered either an attitude or behaviour (Foroudi, 2019). Tourism brand loyalty is a tourist's unique preference for a particular destination brand. Tourists' loyal attitudes and behaviours lead to destination recommendations to others (Chou et al., 2020).

### **2.3.1.3. Perceived brand quality**

Brand quality and perceived quality are interchangeably used by customers (Zeithaml, 1988; Aaker, 1991). Brand quality is one of the key dimensions of brand equity (Lassar et al., 1995; Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003). Brand performance is an important aspect of brand quality, in tourism branding destination service infrastructure and environment are considered in destination brand performance (Buhalis, 2020; Chou et al., 2020). Perceived quality adds value to consumers' purchases as it is at the centre of strong brands (Peltier, Dahl, & VanderShee, 2020). In tourism

perceived tour quality positively impacts tour value. Likewise, perceived tourists' destination quality is positively related to the perceived value of the destination (Mohaidin, Wei, & Murshid, 2017). Meng & Cui, (2020) stated that in tourism, brand quality is the main customer-based brand equity dimension.

#### **2.3.1.4. Brand image**

Brand image is also an important brand equity source (Keller, 2003; Lassar et al., 1995). Brand image is related to customers' brand memory and is possibly the most important aspect of brand equity. The brand image incorporates product lines, consumer uses, product features, competitors, countries, and lifestyles. A brand image helps buyers to make purchase decisions as it helps consumers process, manage, and recover product information (Aaker, 1991).

In tourism effectiveness measurement of a destination or product is based on brand image (Perkins, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, 2020; Hanna, Rowley & Keegan, 2021). Tourism and hospitality brand image has been considered the main dimension of brand equity (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril, & Gázquez-Abad, 2020). Perkins, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, (2020) postulated that in the destination branding model brand image is an important component.

#### **2.3.1.5 Sustainable brand equity**

The market is witnessing shifts in sustainability awareness and business's role in sustainability (Khan et al., 2019). Sustainability awareness has driven marketers to concentrate on customers'



sustainability desires (Khan et al., 2019). Pursuing the environmental, social, and economic dimensions is an effective approach to building a corporate reputation (Sheth & Sinha, 2015; Vural, Baştuğ, & Gülmez, 2021). One of the most important responsibilities of a marketer is brand building; by which a firm develops the value of the brand or the brand equity (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017). Brand equity is a tourist firm's significant strategic asset. To maximize long-term company performance brand equity needs constant monitoring and support (Hanssens, Rust, & Srivastava, 2009; Rust et al., 2021). Tourism branding needs consideration, given the sensitivities connected to this activity, the understanding of such characteristics permits marketers to develop a point of differentiation that would give their products a sustainable competitive advantage (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017).

From a sustainability viewpoint, researchers recommend embedding sustainability concerns to create differentiation (Connelly, Ketchen, & Slater, 2011; Taoketao, Feng, Song, & Nie, 2018). Consumers form a solid emotional relationship with a brand and seek sustainable brand differentiation (Kurowska, 2003; Ferreira & Fernandes, 2021). For current sustainability-oriented customers firms can better appeal to them by embedding; sustainability branding practices in their operations, also, by transforming sustainability associations as an integral part of brand image, likewise communicating sustainability practices to customers and gaining a sustainable competitive advantage (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Vesal, Siahtiri, & O'Cass, 2021). Managers responsible for brand management should lead to sustainability concerns from a marketing perspective as they create differentiation for brands (Gupta, Czinkota & Melewar, 2013; García-Muiña, Medina-Salgado, Ferrari, & Cucchi, 2020).

### 2.3.2. Sustainability marketing

Sustainable Marketing is the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital is preserved or enhanced throughout (Martin & Schouten, 2014). As a derivative of sustainable development, Sustainable marketing extends the theory of marketing to ensuring ecological, social (equity and equality), and economic balance in time and space. Sustainability marketing in the view of micro marketing is to change both consumer and producer behaviours in the long-term, while macro marketing's approach emphasizes three basic principles that are ecological, social, and economic also known as 3Ps profit, people, and the planet (Belz & Peattie, 2013).

Meanwhile, Peattie & Belz (2013) gave the concept of 4C's and tried to mould traditional 4P's (Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) into 4C's i.e., Customer solution, Customer cost, Convenience, and Communication. These are very much related to the 4Ps of marketing given by (McCarthy, 1960). The 4Ps are converted to 4C's to include sustainability criteria in a marketing strategy.

#### Traditional Marketing Mix

Product
Price
Place
Promotion

*Transformation*



#### Sustainability Marketing Mix

Customer Solution
Customer price
Convenience
Communication

## **Figure 1: McCarthy's 4P Approach Vs Peattie and Belz's Sustainability Marketing Mix**

Belz & Peattie (2013) postulated a two-part sustainability marketing explanation: Planning, organizing, implementing and controlling marketing programmes and resources to satisfy consumers and to meet corporate objectives considering environmental, social, and economic criteria. Also, emphasize maintaining sustainable relationships with the customers, and the natural and social environment. Sustainability can be defined in several terms to describe some or all of its components, including green business, corporate citizenship, corporate social responsibility (CSR), environmental management, sustainable development and the triple bottom line (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014).

Firms that do business with a larger public-interest factor pledge themselves to business activities that support environmental, economic, and social benefits to people (Vesal et al., 2021). From a variety of sustainability definitions, it embraces economic, social, and environmental aspects referred to as the triple bottom line (Brundtland 1987; Elkington 2004). According to the "Triple bottom line framework" the sustainability marketing dimensions are 1) people (social) and the planet (environment) and Profit (Economic) (Taylor & Hochuli, 2015).

The tourism industry is dependent on its resources like no other industry. The tourism industry's long-term economic success is closely affiliated with the preservation of the environment, culture and local community success (Wise, 2016). Marketing can play a crucial role in changing the behaviour of tourists and tourism suppliers by further developing sustainable tourism products, for an environmentally prosperous and responsible tourism industry, one that acknowledges all

stakeholders (tourists, residents, and industry) requirements to achieve positive, successful, and long-term outcomes (Font & McCabe, 2017).

The following sub-sections discuss in detail each dimension of sustainability marketing in the context of tourism firms.

### **2.3.2.1. Economic (profit) aspect**

Economic sustainability implies that a firm makes profits to stay in business and benefit the local and international economic system (Rasoolimanesh et.al, 2020). In simple terms a firm ability to stay in the business. The traditional marketing paradigm is fundamentally unsustainable as it only focuses on the economic side (Noo-urai & Jaroenwisan, 2016). Economic indicators bring progress and change, so economic development should not only reflect income generation but how economic indicators create new employment opportunities and drive positive socio-cultural changes for locals (Tosun, Dedeoğlu, Çalışkan, & Karakuş, 2021).

In addition, the economic sustainability dimension pursues long-term planning to report to all stakeholders, equal distribution of economic benefits, stable employment opportunities and a competitive business environment (Crespi-Vallbona, Pérez, & Miró, 2019). Sustainable economic tourism not only considers visitor spending but local's employment and business opportunities resulting from increased service demands due to increased tourist following (Kersulić, Perić, & Wise, 2020). Moreover, offer stable employment and income-earning prospects to reduce absolute poverty and inequality in local tourist destinations (Zhang & Zhang, 2019; Lai et al., 2020).

Incorporation of the economic aspect, with CSR and environmental aspect, broadens the sustainability scope and constructs a superior stakeholders value (Lloyd-Walker & Walker, 2011). Independently, economic sustainability refers to profit margins, sales, working capital, assets and taxes (Alzubaidi, Slade, & Dwivedi, 2021); environmental sustainability emphasizes waste minimization, reduction of material used, recycling, energy consumption and pollution prevention (Lukman, Omahne, Sheikh, & Glavič, 2021). Social sustainability refers to a firm's social activities and the advantages it receives in a competitive marketplace (Amatulli, De Angelis, & Stoppani, 2021).

#### **2.3.2.2. CSR (people) aspect**

Carroll (1979) contends that CSR involves society's philanthropic or voluntary, ethical, economic, and legal prospects for businesses. Müller, Habel, & Stierl (2017) describe CSR as "the company improving the well-being of society" and "following high ethical standards". Moreover, CSR is an essential characteristic of sustainable marketing (Sanclemente-Tellez, 2017; Anwar & El-Bassiouny, 2020). Firms pursuing CSR focus on marketing activities that positively influence society such as supporting education, advocating community relations, and sponsoring charities (Mamo, Agyemang, & Andrew, 2021).

Firms that aim at societal well-being build excellent customer relationships (Mamo et al., 2021; Holiday, Hayes, Britt, & Lyu, 2021). CSR has a positive impact on multiple stakeholder relationships, CSR creates positive firm relationships and an increased commitment to do business

with, invest in and work for (Ji, Tao, & Rim, 2020). The firm's CSR activities are to encourage cohesive community member involvement and alter societal attitudes and outlooks to develop individual and social capital (Gentle, Thwaites, Race, & Alexander, 2013; Gannon, Rasoolimanesh, & Taheri, 2021). The social sustainability dimension relates to societal and social marketing; in social marketing social issues are used as tools for designing marketing strategies and achieving the objective of societal well-being (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Tkaczynski, Rundle-Thiele, & Truong, 2020).

The implementation of environmentally sustainable tourism practices is directly linked to the implementation of the primary CSR concept (Svensson et.al, 2018). Management of multifaceted and perhaps challenging fundamental sustainability requirements (economic stability, social awareness, and environmental care) has execution difficulties (Gupta et al., 2020). Scholars have suggested a synchronized emphasis on all sustainability aspects with the coordinated implementation of sustainability programmes by all business spheres (Machado, Winroth, & da Silva, 2020). Achieving sustainability by adopting only one sustainability aspect does not result in great advantages for the organization (Eagle et.al, 2019).

### **2.3.2.3. Environmental (planet) aspect**

Environmental security not only considers the physical environment, but as well as includes cultural landscapes and historic sites conservation, promoting societal values, and so, a shift from shareholder capitalism to responsible capitalism (Wise, 2016). Embracing social and environmental responsibility, and increasing shareholders' value is essential for sustainability

(Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). Researchers have investigated the environmental sustainability impact on firm performance. Hameed, Nisar, & Wu, (2021), postulated that greater environmental performance is related to higher profitability, as revealed by their better return on assets. This is higher in firms operating in fast-growing industries (Hameed et.al, 2021).

Sustainable tourism can be achieved by optimal use of environmental resources (Yin, 2016; Lesar, Weaver, & Gardiner, 2020) by conservation of local environmental resources, biodiversity, and ecological processes as they constitute key elements in tourism development (Yusoff, Nejati, Kee, & Amran, 2020; Hosseini, Stefaniec, & Hosseini, 2021). Tourism firms embracing environmentally sustainable contributions correspondingly profit with growth in sales (Ramirez, Gonzalez & Moreira, 2014; Schiavone & Simoni, 2019). Such firms benefit from higher sales through direct and indirect product demands, in addition to building strategic partnerships with environmentally sustainable partners (Ranta, Keränen, & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2020). Contemporary firms are aware that their environmentally sustainable products and cost-saving pursuits are non-mutually exclusive activities (Ramirez, Gonzalez, & Moreira, 2014; Prior & Keränen, 2020). Likewise, corporate's environmental sensitivity is on the rise (Gupta, & Barua, 2017). Firms implementing an environmentally sustainable approach to doing business benefit from this business methodology (Ramirez, Gonzalez & Moreira, 2014; Mousa & Othman, 2020).

However, there are not many commercial tourism firms with positive triple bottom lines, as environmental and social dimensions are constrained to marketing, legal compliance, political manoeuvring, and public relations (Sharpley, 2020). Firms that consider higher environmental mandates to meet stakeholders' environmental expectations show less unsystematic risk compared

to firms that consider low environmental legitimacy (Duque-Grisales, & Aguilera-Caracuel, 2021).

### **2.3.3. Information and communication technology (ICT) competency**

The United Nations Organizations (UNO) presented its 2030 agenda for sustainable development (SDGs) with 17 goals and 169 targets. UNO highlighted the pivotal role of ICT in promoting sustainable economic development and the achievement of SDGs. The accessibility and application of ICT and innovations are vital for achieving the national and international SDGs. ICT is acting as a vector of environmental, social and economic changes globally, likewise, it's changing the nature of environmental, social and economic relationships (Jabbour, Foropon, & Filho, 2018; Akande, Cabral, & Casteleyn, 2019). Thus, ICT is an essential dimension of a nation's desire for a more reasonable, comprehensive, competitive, sustainable society and economy (United nations conference on trade and development UNCTAD, 2015; Vrontis et al., 2021). The emergence and ubiquitous accessibility of ICT, and the parallel social media rise, signifies the single major shifts in the international tourism structure over the past years (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Lee & Xue, 2020). ICT fits very well with the ideology of sustainable tourism (ST) (Luc, Tejwan-Bopp & Szmanda, 2016). The role of ICT in tourism has comprehensively shifted from an offstage support tool to an important tactical tool (Melián-González, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2021) also as a helping tool for sustainable tourism development. ICT has increasingly developed a vital foundation of sustainable competitive advantage, predominantly in the areas of promotion, distribution, development, organization, and delivery of hospitality products (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021). The increasing demands of sophisticated customers, besides



the tourism industry's intensive need for information, are leading managers to adopt ICT, to meet current and future business requirements (Gonzalez, Gasco, & Llopis, 2020).

ICT competency is described as an organization's knowledge and effective utilization of ICT to manage information within the organization. ICT competency conceptualization also includes the firm's ICT objects (e-g. IT personnel, hardware, software). Cumulatively, the ICT competency dimensions represent specific resources that imply the firm's capacity to realize and employ ICT tools and procedures to handle customer and market information (Tippins & Sohi, 2003). ICT competency in a tourist firm is a combination of ICT Knowledge, ICT Operations, and ICT Objects. ICT knowledge is conceptualized as the extent of an organization's technical knowledge of computer-based systems (Tippins & Sohi, 2003). ICT operations are conceptualized as the extent of organizations' utilization of ICT to manage customers and market information (Tippins & Sohi, 2003). The IT objects are conceptualized as computer-based IT personnel, software and hardware (Tippins & Sohi, 2003).

#### **2.3.4. Political support by local authorities**

In 2005, the UNWTO and the UNEP released the *Making Tourism More Sustainable: A Guide for Policy Makers* report, which defines sustainable tourism as. Tourism is responsible for its present and future environmental, social, and economic impacts, focusing on the needs of all important stakeholders (tourists, industry, host communities, and the environment) (Edgell, 2019). Sustainable tourism development involves the informed participation of all important

stakeholders, and solid political leadership to guarantee broad participation and consent-developing.

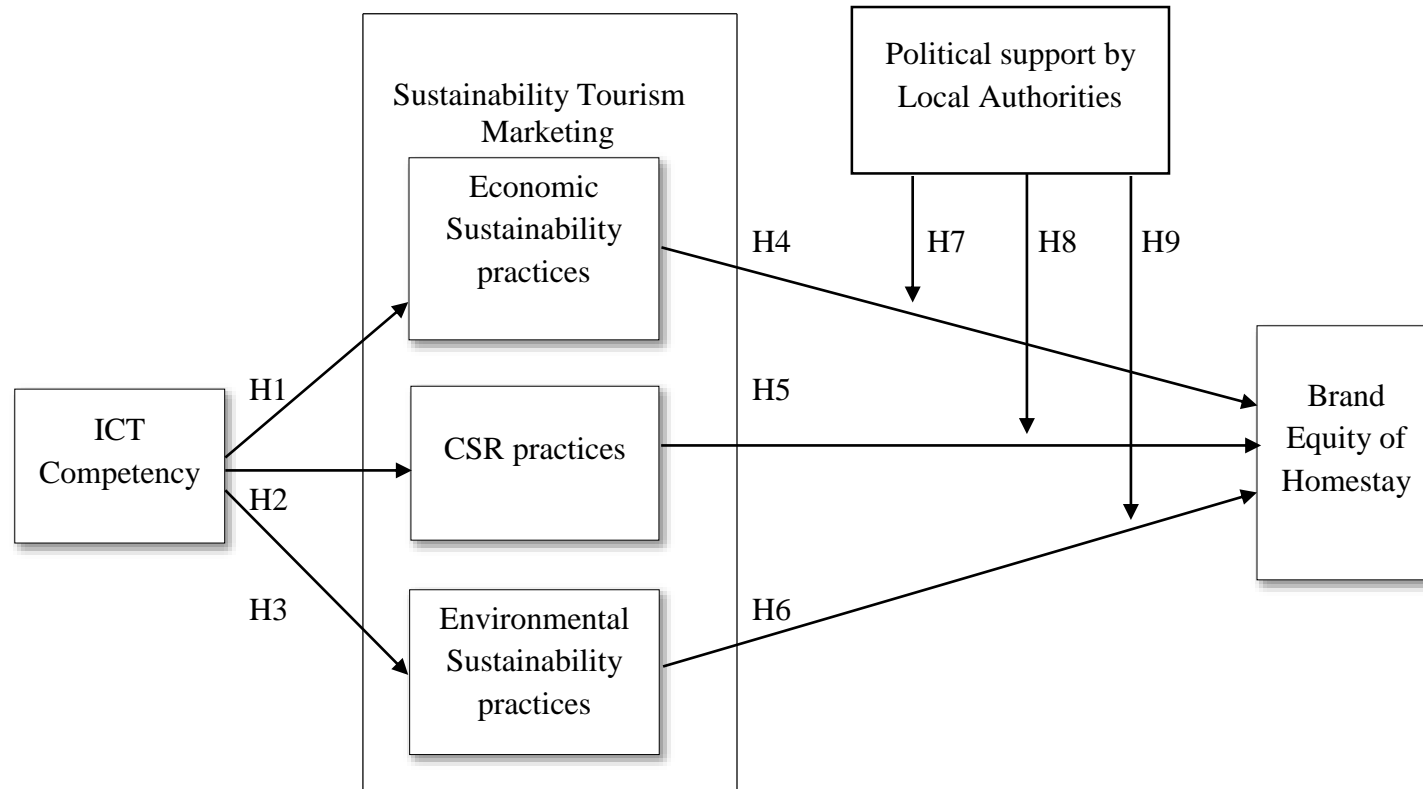
Sustainable tourism policies cannot work in isolation, because different sectors such as government (national, regional, and municipal), communities, SMEs and large companies, and non-governmental organizations should all be involved and need to be consulted in the development and implementation of strategies and policies related to sustainability (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005a; OECD, 2010). The role of stakeholders is essential because they can generate synergy among the parts and promote partnership between the public and private sectors and even among private companies (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005a). Researchers have recognized five key stakeholders in tourism: government officials (policymakers), residents, tourists, industries, and NGOs (Miller & Twining-Ward, 2005; Chilembwe & Mweiwa, 2019).

Sustainability is increasingly getting researchers, companies and policymakers' attention, as they are identifying the opportunity and necessity of employing sustainable practices in their operations. It is the public sector's job to approve and implement policies and regulations, to safeguard and conserve the urban environment to minimize the negative impacts of developments (Wise, 2016). Moreover, policy programs for improving residents' well-being through tourism planning, events, and leisure activities (Poczta et al., 2020). Timely and prudent government decisions are a basic criterion for a sustainable transformation of society towards sustainable consumption. Political support by local authorities plays a significant part in this transformation (Prothero et al., 2011).

At the local level, local community representatives and government officials are normally allocated authority and responsibilities as well as those related to tourism sector development. The local authorities collaborate with political and non-political entities at the local and international levels to do their job more efficiently (Kapera, 2018). An important partnership consists of tourists, residents, and the public sector (Phuc, & Nguyen, 2020). The local political authorities seem to be the natural leader with two main tasks improving local living standards and local resource management (Kapera, 2018; Phuc, & Nguyen, 2020).

The national and local regulatory procedures have the main role to play in sustainability transition. This practical transition can alter practices and attitudes towards sustainability (Sautier, Legun, Rosin & Campbell, 2017; Bilali, 2020). At the local community level, sustainable tourism requires a natural-environmental policy, a development-control policy, and a tourist safety policy (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). Likewise, land zoning and development regulations, Legal compliance regulations (imposed with fines and punishments). Implementation of both objective and subjective sustainable tourism indicators by local authorities can help to create strong policy monitoring and enforcement (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006).

## 2.4. Proposed research framework



## **2.5. Hypotheses Development**

### **2.5.1. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Competency and Sustainability tourism marketing**

Understanding the ICT and sustainable tourism marketing relationship is significant for tourism industry growth and development (Ali & Frew, 2014; Tham & Sigala, 2020). ICT is a key tool in implementing and acquiring innovative sustainability marketing techniques. Likewise, ICT and sustainability marketing innovations are positively associated with one another (Divisekera & Nguyen, 2018).

Effective sustainability marketing with the support of ICT can significantly increase tourists' awareness of their impacts on sustainability (UNWTO, 2017). Integration of ICT in tourist firms is found to have positive effects on sustainability marketing. ICT provides tools as Sustainable tourism requires constant education (social and environmental understanding), monitoring and collaboration (ecological resources and energy usage) (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Lee, Hong, Chung & Back, 2021).

ICT competency can be utilized for partnerships to manage sustainability tourism marketing (Ali & Frew, 2014; Lee et al., 2021). As it provides managers with the necessary information to do crucial decisions regarding sustainable tourism marketing (Ali & Frew, 2014; Tham & Sigala, 2020). ICT positively influence the prospect of employing sustainability marketing innovations by tourist firms like homestays. Undoubtedly, the acceptance and utilization of ICT are among the key drivers of the sustainable development of the tourism industry, likewise,

the marketing and promotion of tourism products depend heavily on ICT (Divisekera & Nguyen, 2018).

Knowledge about environmental sustainability is needed to make ICT an important enabler of environmental sustainability (Ojo, & Fauzi, 2020). ICT helps tourist firms (homestays) to pursue environmental sustainability by improving their efficiency of resource use (Antoni, die, & Abareshi, 2020) and converting the homestay's marketing practices into more environmentally sustainable processes (Wang, Chen, & Benitez-Amado, 2015). ICT competency assists homestay's environmental management performance.

ICT-centred services also make the systems and processes efficient. ICT also make CSR information more readily available to stakeholders, moreover, it creates new technical possibilities to link company information with other sources to create synergy (Uyar et. al, 2020). The innovative ICT usage for sustainability tourism marketing creates a destination competitive advantage, leading to economic benefits for rural homestays operating in these tourists' destinations (Gretzel et.al, 2020). ICT is interconnected with rural tourism firms like homestays to promote environmental sustainability (environmental purity, biological diversity, resource efficiency, physical integrity and virtual substitution of travelling), social sustainability (local control, social equity, host community well-being and cultural richness), and economic sustainability (capacity building, stable employment, local prosperity and economic viability) (Tham & Sigala, 2020).

So, considering the above discussion about ICT competency and its role in Sustainability Marketing practices following hypotheses can be formed.

*H1: ICT Competency positively affects Environmental Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices of Homestay.*

*H2: ICT Competency positively affects the CSR practices of Homestay.*

*H3: ICT Competency positively affects Economic Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices of Homestay.*

## **2.5.2. Economic Aspect and Brand Equity**

Economic sustainability is an integral part of brand equity, through economic sustainability sustainability-oriented brands are made and organizations enjoy the recognition that follows (Loučanová et.al, 2021). This Economic sustainability creates a positive perception among customers and leads them towards the brand, thus the organization's long-term performance is increased (Sivarajah, Irani, Gupta, & Mahroof, 2020). Economic sustainability procedures also deliver indirect benefits to the stakeholders, this increases the brand equity of the organization (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Loučanová et.al, 2021). The economic sustainability approach provides business opportunities to different organizations, with brand equity as a marketing tool for superior performance (Sivarajah et.al, 2020).

The application of economic sustainability-based actions by rural tourism firms (homestays) benefits the firm's brand equity. Economic sustainability improves a firm's brand equity, thus the firm's financial indicators (Ghezal & Khemakhem, 2020). Sustainability gives rich meaning to brand image, deeper emotional bonds and consequently differentiation (Ferreira & Fernandes, 2021). Sustainability centred approach form brand image and brand value propositions that impact the performance of firms (Mena, Hult, Ferrell & Zhang, 2019). Business economic performance and brand are connected, the higher levels of brand equity

produce substantially superior market share (Mor, Bhardwaj, Singh, & Sachdeva, 2019). According to (Keller, Parameswaran & Jacob, 2015), economic performance affects brand equity positively by making its image strong, favourable and unique.

Sustainability characteristics have now become important elements in brand equity valuation, linking economic sustainability with brand image and performance is now a leading way to differentiation (Mor et.al, 2019; Fung, Chan, Choi, & Liu, 2021). Thus, with economic sustainability at the centre of its philosophy, brand management has become an even more central and dynamic business procedure (Fung et.al, 2021). Consumer green perceptions and preferences, a Tourist firm (homestay's) sustainable economic practices and brand equity are strongly interrelated (Grubor & Milovanov, 2017).

So, considering the above statements following hypothesis can be formed.

***H4: Economic aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.***

### **2.5.3. Social Aspect (CSR) and Brand Equity**

CSR practices positively affect brand performance and equity (Shou, Shao, Wang, & Lai, 2020). Baalbaki & Guzmán (2016) recognize sustainability and CSR as fundamental brand equity elements, likewise, CSR leads to enhanced brand image, brand preference and brand awareness (Kang & Namkung, 2016). Rural community-based homestays can incorporate social orientation in firms' business strategies to diminish harmful effects on local communities and the natural environment (Martínez & Nishiyama, 2019). CSR promotes a firm's positive



image while retaining current customers and attracting potential customers, so CSR increases the firm's brand equity (Sung, Tao, & Slevitch, 2020).

CSR strategies build brand equity (Hur, Moon, & Kim, 2020). while developing brand equity tourism firms (homestays) need to know the customer's value system, particularly about the customer's preference related to CSR (Saurage-Altenloh & Randall, 2020). CSR activities connect firms with ethical values like respect, honesty, and sustainability, these ethical values provide valuable content to brand associations (Martínez & Nishiyama, 2019). Contemporary customers expect firms not just to make profits but to act as good corporate citizens (Ahn, 2021). CSR has long-term economic value genuine CSR systems are an effective way to generate competitive advantage and, ultimately, brand equity and superior performance in rural community-based homestays (Kavita & Saarinen, 2016; Cristófol, Cruz-Ruiz, & Zamarreño-Aramendia, 2021).

So, considering the above statements following hypothesis can be formed.

***H5: CSR aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.***

#### **2.5.4. Environment Aspect and Brand Equity**

Environmental sustainability is a crucial antecedent of brand equity (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021), and imperative for homestays' sustainable branding. Homestays as an environmentally sustainable product play a critical role in rural sustainable realization (Li, Liu, Zhu, & Zhang, 2018), and generate a multiplier effect of increased brand equity besides providing additional

income to communities and employment (Dinis, Simões, Cruz, & Teodoro, 2019). Likewise, customers tend to prefer brands that develop green sustainable products (Feng et al., 2018) which leads to an increase in brand equity.

Due to the vibrant growth of the homestay business, individual operators develop brand equity to enhance business performance and compete efficiently (Shen & Liu, 2015). Homestay's brand equity based on the future tourists' requirements and society's future requirements will make homestay brands more appealing to tourists (Foroudi et al., 2020). Homestay's sustainability practices can enhance the homestay's sustainable image and create sustainable brand equity (Janjua, Krishnapillai, & Rahman, 2021). The brand-building journey through sustainability marketing is likely to be challenging because for most firms the sustainable brand equity route is not only economic but comprises their environmental and social contribution (Sheth & Sinha, 2018).

In homestay businesses, environmental sustainability is a significant element that shapes brand equity (Shen & Liu, 2015; Dressler & Paunovic, 2021). Tourism firms (homestays) adopting environmental initiatives create sustainability associations (environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and morality) and impact organization brand equity. So, by sustainability initiatives, homestays can create sustainability-oriented brand equity (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Coelho, Bairrada, Simão, & Barbosa, 2020; Janjua et al., 2021).

So, considering the above statements following hypothesis can be formed.

***H6: Environment aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.***

### **2.5.5. Moderating role of “Political support by Local Authorities”**

The brand equity of tourism firms associated with sustainability influences customers' perceptions of the firm (Xie, Bagozzi, & Grønhaug, 2019). The sustainability-centred methodology simultaneously delivers environmental, economic, and social benefits (Kushwah, Dhir, & Sagar, 2019). Sustainability-focused and stakeholder-centred marketing approaches have arisen as an alternate marketing performance nexus (Mena, Hult, Ferrell & Zhang, 2019).

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

Regulators make sustainability-centred public policies, these approaches are instrumental in focusing on financial performance and community wellbeing (Mena et al., 2019). Sustainability as a strategy appears in forefront of holistic business policy and specific branding strategies (Wadera & Kaur, 2019). Also, this strategy demonstrates a responsible attitude to environmental and human requirements. The national and local regulators influence an organization's sustainability-centred strategy and influence its CSR performance. CSR performance indicates improved economic performance and a firm's brand equity, this leads

firm's competitive advantage (Govindan, Shaw, & Majumdar, 2021). Social and environmental performance particularly influences a firm's standing and customer's perceived brand equity (Mena et al., 2019).

Firms adopting an environmental sustainability strategy are also pressured by regulators (at the national and local levels) (Mena et al., 2019). Numerous scholars had evidence that regulatory forces at the national and local levels drive the integration of environmental concerns into the firm's strategies (White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019). In comparing different stakeholders, regulators have the most influence on a firm's probability to execute an environmental plan (Seman et al., 2019). The environmental rules and regulations assist firms to introduce superior environmental procedures and boost their environmental performance effectiveness (Wang & Zhao, 2018) and strengthen their brand equity (Chuah, El-Manstrly, Tseng, & Ramayah, 2020).

The implementation of the principles of sustainable tourism development requires the engagement of stakeholder groups ranging from the public sector to local communities, with strong leadership, assistance and enforcement from local governments needed as well (Yrza, & Filimonau, 2021). In tourism firms, the sustainability-centred strategy is related to customer brand attitude. Rural community-based homestay's brand equity has a strong public policy dimension (Mena et al., 2019). At the local level, communities represented by local governments have the authority to enforce sustainable tourism development policies in tourism firms (Kapera, 2018). Government regulators are among the primary stakeholders, and so, in the case of sustainable rural tourism developments, local authorities are the primary stakeholders (Hamdan, Andersen, & de Boer, 2021). The local political authorities are more knowledgeable on the local sustainable issues than central governments, they can better address sustainable issues by mobilizing local stakeholders and by generating locally specific solutions

(Tevapitak & Helmsing, 2019). The local political authorities are closer to local people and entrepreneurs, they can effectively coordinate with other government agencies to instruct homestay operators to improve their sustainability performance and hence sustainable brand equity (Tevapitak & Helmsing, 2019).

Furthermore, at the local level, communities represented by local governments have the authority to support sustainable tourism development policies in tourism firms (Kapera, 2018). Similarly, the local government's political support motivates homestay tourism establishments to involve in environmental, economic, and social sustainable development and create a sustainable image and brand equity (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). So, considering the above discussion “Political support by Local Authorities” can be considered as a Moderator in the relation between the Economic, CSR and Environmental aspect of sustainability and homestay brand equity.

As illustrated below:

***H7: “Relationship between Economic Aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by Local Authorities”.***

***H8: “Relationship between CSR Aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by Local Authorities”.***

***H9: “Relationship between Environment Aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by Local Authorities”.***

The above operational framework highlights the main variables of interest and relationships between study variables. The model also highlights the direction of variables in the context of homestay accommodation services. In the process to create sustainable brand equity in tourism firms (homestay) research considered ICT competency, Sustainability marketing and Enforcement by local authorities. These components play a significant role in homestay brand equity. Inputs of ICT competency strengthen sustainability marketing practices of homestays, sustainability tourism marketing and enforcement by local authorities partner with each other in enhancing the brand equity of rural community-based homestays, where political support by local authorities acts as a moderator in the relationship.

## 2.6. Hypotheses summary

Table 5 below shows the relationship between the hypotheses formulated and the research questions. In the first column hypothesis is written and in the second column research questions to be answered are written. Hypothesis H1, H2, and H3 addressed research question 1. Hypothesis 4 addressed research question 2. Hypothesis H5 addressed research question 3. Hypothesis 6 addressed research question 4. Hypothesis 7, 8 and 9 addressed research question 5.

**Table 5: Hypothesis related to Research Questions**

Hypothesis	Research Questions
H1: ICT Competency positively affects Environmental Sustainability Marketing practices of Homestay.	1. What is the relationship between ICT competency and sustainability tourism marketing in Malaysian homestay Operations?
H2: ICT Competency positively affects the CSR practices of Homestay.	

H3: ICT Competency positively affects Economic Sustainability Marketing practices of Homestay.

H4: Economic aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.

H5: CSR aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.

H6: Environment aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.

H7: Relationship between the Economic aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by political support by Local Authorities.

H8: Relationship between the CSR aspect of Sustainability tourism Marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by political support by Local Authorities.

H9: Relationship between the Environment aspect of Sustainability tourism Marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by political support by Local Authorities.

2. What is the relationship between the economic aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?

3. What is the relationship between the CSR aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?

4. What is the relationship between the environmental aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?

5. What is the role of political support by local authorities in the relationship between sustainability tourism marketing and brand equity in homestay operations?

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## 2.6. Chapter Summary

The literature review has been done following the appropriate theoretical and empirical settings. The review aimed to contextualize the study and focus that is the relationship between Sustainability tourism marketing practices, ICT, political support by local authorities and Brand Equity of Homestays in Malaysia.

The ultimate objective of this literature review was to investigate available sustainability frameworks and related theories and their application in the Malaysian homestay tourism sector. Given that sustainable tourism is the main goal of Malaysian community-based rural homestays, the framework established by the researcher helped achieve the sustainability goal. All information from this review is summarized in a single diagram as shown in section 2.4, this framework is the exemplar. The following chapter presents the methodology of how this framework was tested in Malaysia.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

To attain the study objective, the study needs an effective methodology to highlight the study's theoretical foundation, explain the purpose of the study, and the research logic, and clarify the research procedure. The chapter discusses the methodological approach, the discussion of research methodology is one preliminary consideration before undertaking any research (Creswell, 2009). The research methodology discusses paradigms of inquiry, the research design, and the methods, this chapter is subdivided into Research Philosophy, Research design, sampling, and Data collection Method (Research instruments).

#### **3.2. Research Philosophy**

Philosophical assumptions guide the inquiry strategy by determining the particular research techniques and methods that transform the method into practice (Creswell, 2009). The researcher's ontological and epistemological views form research philosophy. The research methodology' philosophy seeks to resolve dual issues a) "HOW" and "IF" is it possible, to acquire knowledge? b) what types of ideas exist in the world? the former question relates to epistemology, and the latter question relates to the philosophy of ontology (Hughes & Sharrock, 2016).

In the field of social sciences, there are five paradigms of inquiry. These are critical theory, participatory, constructivist, positivism, and post-positivism. Positivists consider factual empirical truths (Kincaid, 1996). Regarding the development of theory, positivists believe in the possibility of creating social science theory centred on similar natural sciences principles (Howell, 2013). However, the positivism paradigm of inquiry in the social sciences is a relatively obsolete inquiry paradigm and changed to post-positivism. The term post-positivism paradigm criticises the fundamental knowledge truth (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Post-positivism pursues actual problems of the world by shifting narrow perspectives of positivism to a new broadway (Henderson, 2011). The post-positivist view is a change from a single interpretation to several explanations of truth (Howell, 2013) and it is perceived that theories do not hold for an eternity. Theories remain appropriate for a certain point in time and are interchangeable (Popper, 1963).

Both positivism and post-positivism recognize theory to find the relationship between abstract ideas and empirical findings, thus a realist theory development view. Post positivism view should not be viewed as a separate paradigm of inquiry rather it's a continuation of positivism (Howell, 2013). Current research is based on an epistemological philosophical view with attributes of a post-positivism worldview.

### **3.3. Research Approach**

The quantitative research is performed for testing the relationships between ICT competency and Sustainability tourism marketing on the brand equity of rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. The study design approach can be either a fixed point in time (cross-sectional) or varying points in time (longitudinal study). In the current, a cross-sectional design was used.

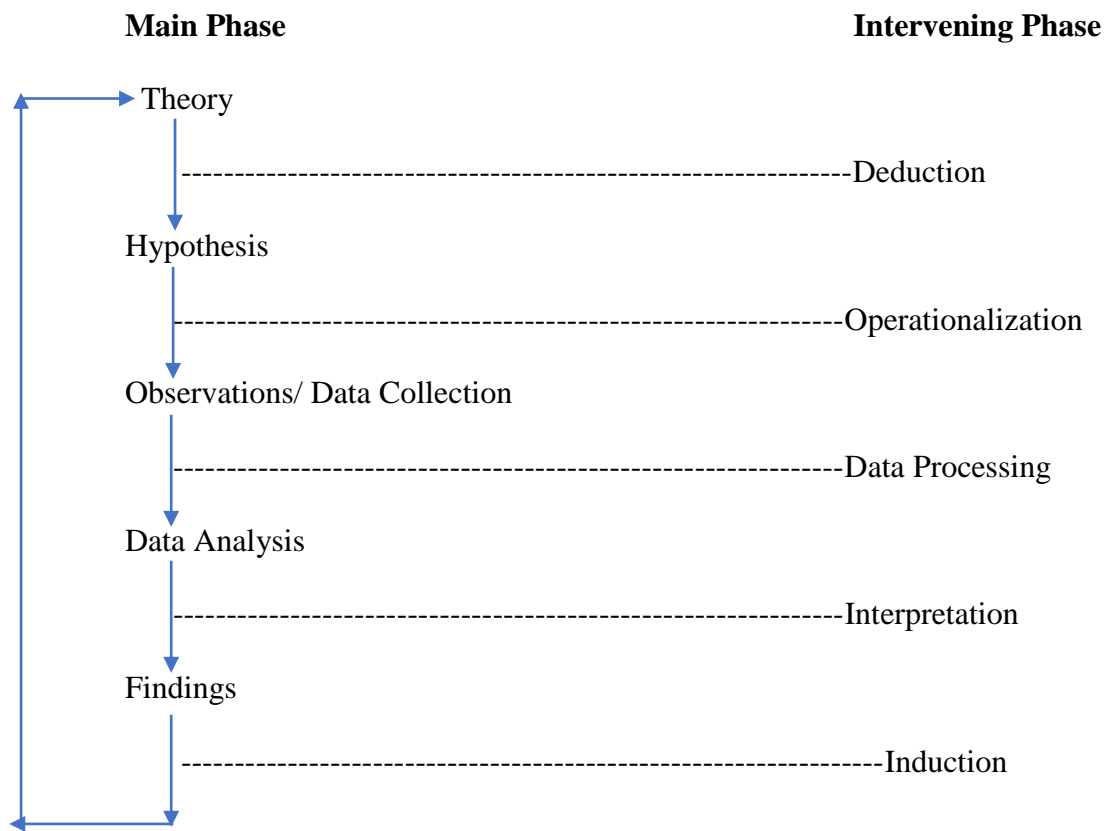
This sampling technique was appropriate in the context of this study, as the study objectives were to quantitatively examine the relationship pattern between variables (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The study took a deductive approach to the research design and addressed research questions. In quantitative research design, a deductive approach is the most used to analyse data using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2009). The current study entailed a deductive (quantitative) data collection method to optimise the results. Quantitative research methodology is used in research if it is intended for: a broad analysis of phenomena (Yilmaz, 2013); hypothesis testing and validation of theories; generalization of research findings to different populations and research settings; containing a large population and creating cause and effect relationships. Further conditions for quantitative technique selection are short time frames to collect and analyse data (Creswell, 2009). As objectives of current research can be achieved by quantitative research design, so it was applied.

### **3.3.1. Quantitative Research design of the study**

Bryman (2016) concluded that quantitative research design is carried out in phases, one is the main phase, and the other is the intervening phase. From theory, hypotheses are deducted, and after this step operationalization of important variables is done. This is followed by observations and a data collection phase then data processing is carried out. Data Analysis is carried out by software and different statistical tests are performed on data, findings from the analysis phase are used to make evidence-based decisions.

The steps followed in Quantitative design are shown in the figure below.



**Figure 2:** The logical arrangement of the quantitative research method.

The quantitative phase uses statistics to explain the differences or relationships among two or more variables (Yilmaz, 2013). Current research followed the steps shown in figure 2 above. In the current research deductive hypothesis testing approach was applied, it tested the relationship between ICT competency, Sustainable tourism marketing, Political support by local authorities and brand equity of homestays. It is very important for generalization and creation of theory as in long run more sustainable tourism business practices backed by ICT competency, and politically supported by local authorities are essential for profitability and brand equity of tourism businesses. Sustainability marketing practices in every industry (manufacturing/ services) are a must for the survival of our planet.

The present study investigated ICT competency and sustainability tourism marketing practices among rural community-based homestays registered with the Ministry of Tourism, arts, and culture (MOTAC), Malaysia. Moreover, the study also investigated political support by local authorities for homestays. Similarly, how ICT competency, sustainability tourism marketing and political support by local authorities enhance the brand equity of rural community-based homestays in Malaysia.

### **3.4. Target Population**

The target population was coordinators and owners of rural community-based homestays registered with MOTAC, Malaysia. Target homestays were in three states of Malaysia, these states are the top three in the number of domestic and international tourist arrivals, as per the official website of the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board (Tourism Malaysia) top three states and a federal territory in terms of the number of tourists (domestic and foreign) are Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur federal territory and Selangor state), Pahang and Pulau Pinang.

The researcher used the statistics web page of Tourism Malaysia's official website to calculate the number of tourists (overnight visitors), used the "My tourism Data portal" and calculated the total number of overnight visitors state-wise. After examining Tourism Malaysia's official website for calculating the number of tourists ~~state-wise~~ Klang Valley (Federal Territory Kuala Lumpur and Selangor state) topped with 17.98 million tourists in 2017, followed by Pahang with 10.98 and Pulau Pinang with 6.38 respectively. Details of overnight visitors are shown graphically in Table 6. The total number of overnight visitors can be calculated by adding foreign and domestic guests. The contact details of the study's target population are drawn

from the list of homestay operators of the entire Malaysia, available on the Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture official (MOTAC) website, in the download section.

According to the Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture (MOTAC) June 2018 report, the total number of registered homestays in Klang Valley, Pahang and Pulau Pinang is 991. So, the total population for the current study is 991, these homestays are in 83 different villages. In these homestays, the total number of rooms is 1408 rooms. The details are as follows, In Klang Valley (Federal Territory Kuala Lumpur and Selangor state) the total number of homestay operators is 434 with 694 rooms. In Pahang total number of homestays, and operators is 323 with 450 rooms. In Pulau Pinang, the total number of homestay operators is 234 with 264 rooms. These homestays are in different villages, In Klang valley homestays are in 34 villages, in Pahang, they are in 28 different villages and Pulau Pinang homestays are spread across 28 villages.

**Table 6: Summary of Target Population**

<b>Area</b>	<b>Total Villages</b>	<b>Rooms</b>	<b>Number of Over-night Visitors (Foreign and domestic in million)</b>	<b>Homestay Operators (Target Population)</b>
Klang Valley	34	694	17.98	434
Pahang	21	450	10.98	323
Pulau Pinang	28	264	6.38	234
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>1408</b>	<b>35.38</b>	<b>991</b>

Source: Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, Malaysia

### 3.4.1. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

#### I. Sampling Technique

The sampling technique for the research was quota sampling. A quota sampling technique was used to get unbiased information from the respondents. Quota sampling allowed researchers to give a maximum representation and avoid underrepresentation of the Malaysian state with the high number of tourists., this sampling technique is popular among tourism researchers. Like Schwartz, Stewart, & Backlund, (2012) conducted “Visitation capacity research”. Mansor, Ahmad, & Che Mat, (2011) researched “Tourism challenges in the state of Terengganu, Malaysia”, also “Social media effect on tourism” (Richardson & Morton, 2015).

The selected elements from ~~these states are~~ Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor) 77 (43%) respondents, Pahang 58 (32 %) respondents and Pulau Pinang 45 (25 %) respondents. As Klang Valley has 434 homestay operators, Pahang has 323 and Pulau Pinang has 234 operators. These details are provided in table 7 below. The main reason for choosing the quota sampling technique is because different states have different numbers of homestays and Tourists (foreign and domestic).

**Table 7: Summary of selected subjects**

Area	Homestay Operators (Target Population)	Homestays selected
Klang Valley	434	77
Pahang	323	58
Pulau Pinang	234	45

## ii. Sample Size

To quantitatively define attitudes, opinions and trends of a population, a sample is studied first, and sample results lead to generalizations and claims of the population (Creswell, 2009). The estimation of the sample size is very important for the researchers, so it is a crucial process for obtaining good results. The classification of the most appropriate/ minimum sample size depends on detailed and careful planning of all research stages from the research paradigm, data collection techniques, and data analysis methods (Delice, 2010). The sample size is selected considering the research topic, population, research aim, analysis techniques, the sample size in similar research, the number of subgroups in the sample (Davies, Williams & Yanchar, 2004), population variability and research design (Hedeker, Gibbons & Waterneux, 1999; Davies et al., 2004). The properties of estimates cannot be determined by sample size alone, a larger sample size does not necessarily relate to accurate estimates (Boivin & Ng, 2006; Bai & Ng, 2019).

The selection of an appropriate sample size depends on the data analysis, the model complexity and the characteristics of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2010). Hair et al. (2010), suggested minimum sample requirements for PLS-SEM models; a Minimum Sample size of 100 when the model has “Five or less latent constructs and each latent construct has more than three items”, Minimum Sample size of 150 when the model have “Seven or less latent constructs and each construct has more than three items”. The minimum sample size of 300 when the model has “seven or fewer latent constructs, some constructs have less than three items”. The minimum 500 sample size when the model has “more than seven latent constructs, some constructs have less than three items”. As suggested by social science researchers and



SEM literature, 150 sample respondents are sufficient for a study that is examining seven or fewer constructs. Table 9 summarizes the general guidelines of sample size for SEM literature below. But researcher kept the sample size at 180 for more authenticity and accuracy, from Klang valley 77 respondents were selected from Pahang 58 and from Pulau Pinang 45 respondents were selected.

**Table 8: General guidelines of sample size for SEM**

<b>Characteristics of Model (Number of latent constructs and items)</b>	<b>Minimum Requirement of Sample</b>
1. Five or fewer latent constructs. Each latent construct has more than three items.	100 samples
2. Seven or fewer latent constructs. Each construct has more than three items.	150 samples
3. Seven or fewer latent constructs. Some constructs have less than three items (just identified model).	300 samples
4. More than seven latent constructs. Some constructs have less than three items (just identified model).	500 samples

**Source: Hair et al. (2010, pg. 676).**

### **3.5. Data Collection Method and Analysis**

Research hypotheses were formed to test the proposed cause-and-effect relationship between variables of interest. This research applied the post-positivistic inquiry paradigm for hypotheses testing by following the questionnaire survey approach. The questionnaire survey was selected to minimize external influences on the participants and researcher subjectivity (Bryman, 2015). To test hypotheses and relationships between variables questionnaires are a recommended method (Creswell, 2009). The questionnaire survey methodology provides an inexpensive and timely form of data collection (Howell, 2013). Moreover, the reason for using

a questionnaire in current research is data generalisation from a sample of homestays located in Klang Valley, Pahang & Pulau Pinang.

In Malaysia Homestay operations are supervised by coordinators who have some villages and homestays under their jurisdiction (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019). Homestay coordinators are trained by MOTAC, and they are well informed and educated. MOTAC keeps a record of all coordinators, and their contact details are available on MOTAC's official website. The total number of coordinators in Klang valley is 15, in Pahang 16 and in Pulau Pinang 11. The researcher took all contact details of homestay coordinators from the MOTAC website, before visiting homestays researcher contacted the coordinator on phone and booked a room in a homestay, and during the survey, stayed in homestays. Coordinators provided all contact details and addresses of homestay owners, and they treated the researcher as a foreign tourist and even accompanied the researcher in some villages for data collection, the researcher visited homestay owners in person to collect data. The data collection was done from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2019 to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2019. During these three months, the researcher collected data from Pulau Pinang, Pahang and Klang valley. The data collection started from Pulau Pinang followed by Pahang and then Klang valley.

### **3.5.1. Research Instrument: Questionnaire Design and Construct Measurement**

#### **3.5.1.1 Questionnaire (Scale) design**

To achieve a high response rate quality questionnaire is important (Bryman, 2016). There are several ways to increase the quality of the questionnaire that including clear presentation, written inappropriate font size, easy to read and designed in proper order with clear and precise instructions (Dillman, 2007). Questions are divided into nominal, ordinal, interval and open-

ended (Chisnall, 2005). The current research questionnaire was divided into five sections, the first section covered the demographic profile of respondents, the second covered ICT competency, the third covered sustainability tourism marketing, the fourth covered political support by local authorities and the last one covered brand equity of homestay.

In the questionnaire data collection, technique plays an important part, so for data collection, the Likert scale was selected by researchers. Likert-type scales use fixed choice response formats and are designed to measure attitudes or opinions (Bowling & Hammond, 2008). Data from Likert-type scales becomes less accurate when scale points are more than seven or less than five (Johns, 2010). The five-point Likert scale is selected as it enables the investigator to utilize structural equation modelling as a statistical tool (Collis & Hussey, 2014). Response rate and response quality are increased, and respondents' frustration levels decrease when a 5-point Likert-type scale is used (Babakus & Mangold 1992). Likert scales ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' were selected in the current research. Likert (1932) suggested that "Agree to Disagree" scales should offer five points, in terms of quality of measurement, and the "Agree to Disagree" 5-point scale seems to be superior to an "Agree Disagree" 7- or 11-point scale and 5-point scales provide better quality data, hence using other than five categories in an "Agree Disagree" scale is not suggested (Revilla, Saris, & Krosnick, 2014). More than a five-point Likert scale offer a marginal advantage in terms of reliability (Collis & Hussey, 2014). In sustainability studies, prior researchers commonly used five Point Likert-Scales (Høgevold et al., 2015), which is why the five-point Likert scale was implied.

The scales are adapted to the context of the rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. Scales for each variable are discussed below.

### i. Measurement for the construct of ICT competency

ICT competency scale is adapted from (Tippins & Sohi, 2003), the adapted English language items are shown below, and the full questionnaire and BM scale are present in Appendix A.

**Table 9: Measurement items for measuring ICT competency**

Dimensions	Items	Author
ICT Competency	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We have employees who are knowledgeable in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (e-g. Computers, smartphones, printers etc.)</li> <li>2. We are very knowledgeable about the latest ICT used in accommodation services</li> <li>3. We know how to establish communication links with our current customers through the latest social media platforms (e-g. Facebook, Instagram etc.).</li> <li>4. We know how to establish communication links with our potential customers through the latest social media platforms (e-g. Facebook, Instagram etc.)</li> <li>5. We routinely access market information (tourist trends and requirements) from outside our databases (e-g. www.Agoda.com, www.Booking.com etc.).</li> <li>6. We have a set of procedures for collecting customer information from online accommodation sources (e-g Airbnb, Agoda etc.).</li> </ol>	Tippins & Sohi, 2003

7. We utilize decision-support systems (social media, mobile apps etc.) frequently when it comes to managing customer information.
8. We rely on the ICT (e-g. reservation software, property management software etc.) to store, and process information for our homestay accommodation.
9. We have employed an employee/ executive whose main duty includes the management of our ICT (reservation software, property management software).
10. We budget a significant amount of funds for new ICT every year (e-g. new reservation software, property management software if required).

**ii. Measurement for the construct of Sustainability Tourism Marketing**

The sustainability tourism marketing scale covering Social, Environment and Economic Aspects of the adapted English language items is shown below, and the full questionnaire and BM scale are present in Appendix A.

**Table 10: Measurement items for measuring Sustainability Marketing**

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Author</b>
<b>Social (CSR)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We provide stable job opportunities for employees.</li> <li>2. We provide job promotion opportunities for employees.</li> <li>3. We help to solve social problems (e-g. Eradicating poverty through the generation of employment opportunities, and income-generating activities for</li> </ol>	Singh, Sanchez, & del Bosque, 2008

women and rural folks socially and economically).

4. We have invested in our homestay seeing a better future for coming generations (e-g. underprivileged sections of the society such as fishermen, rural women etc.).

5. We make investments to create employment opportunities for future generations.

## **Environmental**

1. We protect the overall environment. Singh, Sanchez, & del Bosque, 2008

2. We communicate our environmental practices to our customers when they arrive.

3. We communicate our environmental practices to our customers during their stay.

4. We play a role in society that goes beyond mere profit generation (e.g., increasing awareness and understanding of environmental and natural resources conservation, water, and air pollution, and protecting rainforests).

5. We use renewable energy in a productive process compatible with the environment (e-g. solar panels for power generation and heating).

6. We participate in environmental certifications (e-g green label certification, eco-label etc.).

7. We target sustainable homestay growth (e-g. growth in social, environmental, political, and economic aspects of life in rural areas).

## **Economic**

1. We are committed to improving the welfare of the communities in which we operate (e.g., providing self-employment opportunities and reducing poverty by employment and business creation etc.). Turker, 2009

2. We actively participate in socio-cultural events (e.g., traditional games, traditional dances and performances, traditional cuisines, and traditional arts)
3. We encourage our employees to participate in voluntary activities.
4. We provide fair treatment of employees (without discrimination and abuse, regardless of gender, race, origin, or religion).
5. We provide training opportunities for employees

### iii. Measurement for the construct of political support by local authorities

Political support by local authorities adapted to English language items is shown below, and the full questionnaire and BM scale are present in Appendix A.

**Table 11: Measurement items for measuring political support by local authorities**

Dimensions	Items	Author
<b>Political support by local authorities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Local residents are encouraged to participate in the tourism planning process.</li> <li>2. Stakeholders are encouraged to collaborate in the establishment of tourism policies.</li> <li>3. Stakeholders (e-g. resident representative councils) are cooperating with the rural government (District Council) at every level of Tourism planning.</li> <li>4. We are involved in a public-private sector partnership (e-g. partnership between resident representative councils, NGOs, and District council).</li> <li>5. We are aware of the meaning of sustainable tourism.</li> <li>6. We are aware of the implications of sustainable tourism.</li> </ol>	Choi & Sirakaya, 2006

7. We collaborate during the execution of local ideas in community/ site management.
8. Most residents and the district council are involved in two-way communication.
9. Most residents are engaged in conservation projects at the local level.
10. Most residents are involved in conservation projects at the regional level.
11. Affordable funding resources are available for homestay operators (e-g. Special Tourism Fund (STF) or Tourism Infrastructure Fund).

**iv. Measurement for the construct of brand equity of homestays**

Homestay brand equity adapted scale covering dimensions of homestay brand awareness, brand image, brand quality and homestay brand loyalty is shown below, and the full questionnaire and BM scale are present in Appendix A.

**Table 12: Measurement items for measuring brand equity of homestays**

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Author</b>
<b>Brand equity of homestays</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tourists can recognize our homestay among other competing operators because of our environmental commitments.</li> <li>2. Tourists are aware of our homestay because of its environmental reputation.</li> <li>3. Tourists are aware of our intent to protect the environment and to ensure sustainability.</li> <li>4. Our homestay is regarded as the best benchmark of environmental commitments.</li> <li>5. Our homestay is preferred by tourists.</li> <li>6. Our homestay is well-known.</li> <li>7. Our homestay is professional about environmental reputation.</li> </ol>	Aaker, 1991; Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Keller, 2003.



8. Our homestay is successful in environmental performance.
9. Tourist prefers to stay in our homestay because of its environmental practices.
10. Our homestay is established on environmental concerns.
11. Our homestay is trustworthy about environmental promises.
12. The tourist intends to stay in our homestay again.

### **3.5.2. Pre-testing of Research Instrument**

In social science research, pre-testing of the questionnaire is trying out a particular research instrument (Treiman, 2014), it can be used as a feasibility study or trial run done in preparation for a major study (Polit et al., 2017). Pretesting is the stage in the development of a questionnaire that determines the potential effectiveness of the questionnaire, it is conducted before the final distribution of the questionnaire to the target population (Reynolds, Diamantopoulos, & Schlegelmilch, 1993). Pretesting is used to refine the questionnaire design and identify errors in the questionnaire. The questionnaire pre-test serves the same role in questionnaire design that test marketing serves in new product development' (Churchill, 2006). indeed, data collection should never begin without an adequate pre-test of the instrument' (Churchill, 2006).

Additionally, the items in the questionnaire ought to acquire the input of experts from both academia and industry to warrant content validity (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). Experts analyse the content and face validity of each item of the instrument, also, experts check the measurement items whether they matched the operational definition of constructs are not. In the current study, first, the original instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts each of whom had experience in sustainable tourism, community-based tourism, Information and

Communication Technologies, branding, and local and regional tourism policies. Each reviewer was provided with the introductory letter and survey instrument. Reviewers were invited to check each item for face and content validity. Face validity requires subjective judgement on the response accuracy through a logical valuation of predetermined questions (Zikmund et al., 2013). Meanwhile, content validity pertains to the degree to which the instrument fully assesses or measures the construct of interest (Polit & Beck, 2017).

The importance of content validity and its relevance with reliability, have made it an essential step in instrument development (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015). In social sciences research, the content validity index (CVI) is an important and most utilized method of instrument content validity (Polit & Beck, 2017). So, the current study used CVI for content validity evaluation. As suggested by Lynn (1986), the researcher computed two types of Content validity Indexes (CVIs). The first type involves the content validity of individual items (I-CVI) and the second involves the content validity of the overall scale (S-CVI) (Polit & Beck, 2017), in the current study researcher, applied the same procedure to calculate the CVI of the instrument. Polit & Beck (2017) suggest a panel of 8 to 12 experts panel for content validation, so ten experts from academia and two from the industry did content validation.

The experts were asked to rate instrument items in terms of their relevancy to the construct underlying study as per the theoretical definitions of the construct itself and its dimensions on a 4-point ordinal scale (1[not relevant], 2[somewhat relevant], 3[quite relevant], 4[highly relevant]) (Davis, 1992). Using a 4-point scale is beneficial as it avoids a neutral midpoint value (Polit & Beck, 2017). In the current study, an item level CVI (I-CVI) was computed by dividing; the total 3 or 4 (relevant) responses by experts by the total number of experts.

According to Polit et.al, (2017), an I-CVI near 0.78 needs revision and items with low I-CVI need to be deleted.

To calculate S-CVI/Ave, all relevant items (I-CVI above 0.78) were added and then divided by the total number of items. S-CVI/Ave of 0.90 is recommended by (Polit & Beck, 2017). In the current study, four items out of 54 were eliminated as their I-CVI scores were less than 0.78. Overall instrument's content validity score (S-CVI) / Ave was 0.94 more than 0.90 so the instrument was validated. The CVI process resulted in a total of 50 items. These process details are provided in Appendix B.

### **3.5.3. Questionnaire Translation**

The original questionnaire adapted was in the English language. For better understanding and efficient response from rural community-based homestay operators, a Bahasa Melayu (BM) edition of the instrument was designed. Questionnaire translation into a new language may trigger complications to control translation issues, Campbell et.al, (1977) suggested four techniques: (1) Bilingualist technique (bilingual take a language test in both languages) (2) Back-translation (3) Pre-test procedure (field testing of translation) (4) Committee approach (group of bilingual translators involved). The back-translation method was used by the researcher to ensure that the instrument is translated properly and that each item has the same meaning in the original and translated language. Translators were chosen who have proven expertise in both languages (English and Bahasa Melayu) and are certified by the Malaysian Institute of translation and books (ITBM).

The back-translation method involves two bilinguals' engagement, in this process, one translator translates from one language to the target language and the other translates back blindly to the original language (Brislin, 1970). This results in twin translations of the same language questionnaire. In the current study, a native BM speaker with fluency in the English language translated from English to BM. Then the same translated questionnaire was back-translated to English from BM by another native BM speaker. After this researcher tested the newly translated version with the original English language survey to test for any mistranslation or mistakes. After translation pilot study was carried out.

#### **3.5.4. Pilot Study**

The pilot study's purpose was to "test and refine" and validate the final questions (Yin, 2015). Particularly, the objective of the pilot study ensured that all questions were structured appropriately, understandable, and drew relevant participant responses (Yin, 2015). Before the final research pilot study acts as a test round and is used for questionnaire improvement by detecting and removing its weaknesses based on the responses. Additionally, the pilot study analyzed all questionnaire aspects including the sequence of questions, clarity of instructions, double-barrelled measurements, length of questions, and confusing wordings. The data collection method used in a pilot study is similar to the actual data collection procedure (Zikmund et al., 2012). Upon identifying the actual study population, the pilot study was conducted by administering the survey instrument to the target population. According to Hair et.al, (2014), a pilot study is vital for gathering opinions and feedback for survey questionnaire improvement (Hair et al., 2014).

Different researchers recommended different numbers of participants for the pilot study, 10 participants (Nieswiadomy & Bailey, 2018) or 10% of the final study size (Lackey & Wingate, 1997). The final decision is to be guided by cost and time constraints as well as by the size and variability of the population. So, in the current study researcher did a pilot study with 20 homestay operators in the state of Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. A pilot study was done to verify low response rate items and to understand if some questions or sections are skipped. The revised questionnaire based on the result of pre-testing was therefore piloted with 20 homestay operators and nothing out of the ordinary was picked up, no item received a low response from respondents. As the pilot study did not lead to any major changes in the questionnaire content, the ordering of questions, the instructions and the layout, or the wording, the data was considered appropriate for inclusion in the main research (Hassan, Schattner, & Mazza, 2006; In, 2017).

### **3.5.5. Pilot-Test Reliability Analysis**

As the CVI helped to improve the instrument's construct validity, the reliability of the instrument needs to be revealed (Kovacic, 2018). The measurement instrument's internal consistency aspect of reliability is estimated using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) coefficient, and this was done by reliability analysis of the pilot study data of homestay operators (n=20). This resulted in Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value of 0.86 for all items, which is well above the threshold value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). The summary of the reliability analysis is described in the table below.

**Table 13: Reliability Analysis of pilot study**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
All Constructs Combined	50	0.86
The economic aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing	05	0.73
CSR aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing	05	0.72
Environment aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing	07	0.71
ICT Competency	10	0.89
Political support by local authorities	11	0.71
Brand equity of homestays	12	0.84

*Note.* n=20

The table above shows high internal consistency between items. The questionnaire pre-testing and piloting resulted in an instrument that is set to be delivered to the respondents for a complete survey.

Data were collected from homestay operators registered with the MOTAC the collection was conducted from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2019 to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2019. The researcher personally visited each state and stayed in homestays and personally observed the operation of rural community-based homestays. The researcher used a self-administered data collection technique and collected data from all homestay operators. The researcher himself guided respondents (gave instructions when required), for a high response rate and no question remains unanswered. According to (Williamson, 2002), a self-administered is inexpensive compared to interviews, respondents participate anonymously, the response rate is high, covers a wider geographical area and large data in a short period, moreover, it allows the researcher to explain question answers to respondents. The study survey was carried out in Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor), Pahang, and Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.

### **3.6. Data Analysis Technique**

Covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) is an appropriate method when the research objective is theory testing and confirmation. In contrast, Variance based (PLS-SEM) is an appropriate method when the objective of the research is theory development and prediction. Because of its prediction orientation, PLS-SEM is the preferred method when the research objective is theory development and prediction, especially in the marketing and management information systems disciplines (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). A path diagram is used to evaluate the model on the significance of how the constructs are related to each other and determine the direction of the hypothesis.

The researcher aimed to analyse quantitative data by using non-linear regression-based PLS-SEM. In marketing research, SEM has become a standard to analyse the cause-and-effect relationships between latent variables (Hair et. al, 2014). It is a multivariate method that blends factor and regression analysis (Hair et.al, 2014). For concept and theory development in social sciences and predominantly in marketing SEM has become a method of choice (Hair et. al, 2011).

### **3.7. Measurement Model**

The measurement model deals with the measurement of latent variables of the PLS-SEM path modelling. Each latent construct of the model comprises multiple reflective observations. The assessment of the measurement model was conducted to ensure the quality criteria before proceeding to the structural model assessment. Uni-dimensionality, validity and reliability

were assessed before concluding the measurement model (Pillai & Rjumohan, 2020). As discussed below.

### **3.7.1. Uni-dimensionality**

The Uni-dimensionality implied that a single item factor loading for a newly developed item should be 0.5 or higher and for an established item at a threshold of 0.6 or higher. Therefore, based on this principle the deletion of an item will be imposed on those reported lowest factor loading. Before testing the significant relationship in the structural model, the measurement models were examined concerning validity and reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

### **3.7.2. Validity**

The structural model is deemed adequate with acceptable reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity confirmation. Additionally with hypotheses testing and validation of the research model. In the first step of model evaluation, the outer model results are presented to measure each construct's reliability and validity (Chin, 2010). Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were used to test the measurement model's internal consistency for reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Convergent and discriminant validity were used to examine the construct validity (Chin, Gopal, & Salisbury, 1997). Convergent validity is the construct's theoretical measure that would be related to one another, and discriminant validity is the construct's theoretical measure that would not be related to one another (Chin et al., 1997). The convergent and discriminant validity work collectively as subtypes of construct validity, both measures need to be acceptable to establish construct validity (Kim, Ferrin, & Rao, 2008). The item loadings and their related t-values were used to assess the convergent validity. The AVE



was used to evaluate the discriminant validity. Finally, the evaluation of the structural model was done using significance levels and standardized path coefficients for the confirmation of the study hypotheses.

### 3.7.3. Reliability

Reliability is achieved through the following technique: (1) Internal reliability, (2) Composite reliability and (3) Average Variance Extracted. Based on the review revealed that most of the studies testing the constructs' reliability using Cronbach's Alpha ranged from >0.5 to >0.8 acceptable level.

**Table 14: Reliability Technique used in Expectancy Disconfirmation Model**

Reliability technique	Threshold of acceptance	Authors
Internal Reliability	Cronbach Alpha >0.70	Ryu & Han, (2011)
	Cronbach Alpha >0.85	Kim et. al, (2016)
	Cronbach Alpha >0.6	Sekaran & Bougie, (2019)
	Cronbach Alpha >0.5	Fornell & Larcker, (1981)
Composite Reliability	CR coefficients ranging from .91 to .93	Bacon, Sauer, & Young, (1995)
Average Variance Extracted	AVE values exceeded the recommended value of .50	Fornell & Larcker, (1981); Ryu & Han (2011); Kim et al., (2016)

This adhered to Cronbach's alpha values for all the variables (Ryu & Han, 2011). The threshold is (0.70) which is considered acceptable reliability. In addition, the coefficient alpha value of 0.70 for exploratory measures indicates a strong item covariance or homogeneity (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

### **3.8. Structural Model**

The structural model describes the relationship among the latent variables in the PLS-SEM path model (Ahmed et al., 2017). PLS program generates *t*-statistics for significance testing of both the inner and outer model, using bootstrapping. In this procedure, many subsamples are taken from the original sample with replacement to give standard bootstrap errors, which in turn offers approximate *t*-values for significance testing of the structural path (Hair et al., 2014). The result of bootstrapping approximates the data normality. After completion of the bootstrapping procedure, the results are established. If the value of *t*-statistics is greater or equal to 1.96, this demonstrates the high significance of the outer model loadings, and the hypotheses can be accepted (Hair et al., 2014). In the current study, the same procedures for structural model analysis were applied. The complete structural model is shown in chapter 4.

### **3.9. Ethical Consideration**

Ethics are defined as the ‘norms or standards of behaviour that guide moral choices about our behaviour and our relationships with others (Cooper & Schindler, 2008, p. 34). Ethics in the research context means the researcher’s appropriate behaviour relative to the research participant's rights (Saunders et al., 2016). Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Malaysia requires formal research approval as per UTAR Research Ethics and Code of Conduct.

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the proposed research protocol was approved by the Chairman of the UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee. This research followed the key UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee principles of ethical research. The main points of the “UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee” for social sciences are as follows.

- 1. Research Integrity:** Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency. When gaining access to participants and collecting the actual data. In the current research, all participants were informed according to ethical guidelines.
  
- 2. Informed consent:** Informed consent consists of obtaining the research subject's agreement to participate in a research study, assessment, consulting, or therapy activity (American Psychological Association, 2010). Research staff and participants must normally be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved. In the current research, all participants were communicated the pros and cons before data collection.
  
- 3. Privacy and confidentiality:** The confidentiality of the information supplied by research participants and the anonymity of respondents must be respected. Privacy is the research participant's prerogative to control the scope and circumstances of the information sharing in the research project (Moreno, Goni, Moreno, & Diekema, 2013). Confidentiality relates to how the information is handled after it is shared (Moreno et al., 2013). These issues are especially critical in human subject research, where data is obtained from living subjects through the collection of identifiable private information or by direct interaction (Moreno et al., 2013). During the survey, the researcher took care of respondents' privacy and confidentiality.
  
- 4. Research participant's rights:** The study participants must voluntarily, free from any compulsion. The research participant's autonomy and dignity were assured by informing them about confidentiality and anonymity. Before requesting consent, the participant must be

allowed to ask questions regarding the research process (Doyle, Mullins, & Cunningham, 2010). The researcher strictly complied with the research participant's rights and all responses were voluntarily provided.

5. **Risk assessment:** Harm to research participants and researchers must be avoided in all instances. The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit. The researcher ensured this during the survey.
  
6. **Data handling and reporting:** When storing the data, the responses were stored in password-protected computers for the researcher's use only and after usage, it was securely deleted. Lastly, while reporting study results, the identities of individuals like names and associations were hidden and not recognisable in any study output. Access to research data is restricted to the researcher, the supervisory committee, and members of the UTAR review board. Access to the data was password protected. Data from the research was not stored in the university lab computers. Google Drive storage was used to store the survey data. After the project, the response data was downloaded onto a password-secured portable storage drive for long-term storage.

### **3.10. Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the methodology and design of the research study. The chapter provided a philosophical positioning of quantitative research and a description of the research design. The present study took the form of a quantitative method that started with a quantitative survey, data will be collected by questionnaire. This chapter further discussed the Introduction, Research Philosophy, Research design, sampling techniques, data collection methodology and

Analysis technique (Data Assumption, structural model) and Ethical considerations for the study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

#### **4.0. Introduction**

This section discusses the analysis of data and research discussion. The study developed an assessment model that assesses the relationship between ICT competency, sustainable tourism marketing, political support by local authorities, and Fhomestay brand equity. To achieve the study, aim and objectives, the study analysed questionnaire survey data and presented the findings. Also, various data analysis methods used in the study are discussed in this chapter. The various data analysis methods used in the study include “Descriptive statistics for respondents' demographics”, “Data processing to check the collected data quality, handling non-response”, “Inner and outer model analysis”, “Reliability Test”, “Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity” of all study variables. Additionally, the section shows the structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) results and the hypotheses confirmation. The chapter ends with a summary of the research findings. The chapter closes with the research findings summary.

#### **4.1. Response Rate**

In the current study, all questionnaires were self-administered. The researcher used a self-administered questionnaire for a better understanding of respondents and to minimize any chances of non-response. The total number of respondents for the study was 180, as the self-administered questionnaire technique was used, so the response rate was 100%; all details are mentioned in table 15.

**Table 15: Response Rate**

Questionnaires				Response rate (%)
Distributed	Received	Rejected	Usable	
180	180	0	180	100

#### **4.2. Examination of Data**

The quality of data can only be ensured by data screening, cleaning, and verification (Wang, Storey, & Firth, 1995). For this purpose, all the questionnaires (English and Bahasa Melayu) were printed on A4 size paper (Appendix A), and printing attention was paid to entering the data, with each questionnaire thoroughly checked. This process ensured no errors in data entry due to keystrokes.

#### **4.3. Data processing**

It is the process of extracting information from raw data. The steps are taken for data processing to ensure that all data is reliable. In the current study, the data collected through questionnaires were subjected to data editing, coding, transcribing, checking, and cleaning through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). SPSS statistics is one of the most commonly used statistical analysis tools because of its powerful features and robustness, SPSS is a popular tool for research, experimentation, and decision-making, as it manages and analyzes data and represents them in visually attractive graphical forms.

### **4.3.1 Data Checking**

It is used to check for any error, missing data, or omission to ensure all questionnaires are free from errors and completed (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019). Questionnaire checking was carried out to ensure data correction at an early stage. As the researcher was present during data collection to guide respondents and to clear any ambiguities, also the questionnaire was in the native language, so the chances of errors in responses were minimized. Even then researcher checked for completeness, consistency, accuracy, and legibility to ensure proper and complete data for statistical analysis.

### **4.2.2 Data Editing**

Data editing is used in questionnaires review to identify inconsistent, illogical responses or incomplete responses to the answers (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019). To improve the precision and accuracy of the data researcher observed the following processes.

### **Data distribution**

This research applied PLS-SEM so, the normality of distribution assumption is not required (Hair et al., 2014). PLS-SEM can deal with non-normal data because it uses a non-parametric bootstrapping and presumes the study sample is an accurate reflection of the study population (Hair et al., 2011b). Thus, the study didn't verify normal distribution.

### **Missing data**



It is essential to verify the data file for any missing responses. This research applies the Smart PLS software, so this software replaces the missing values with the factor's means/ column averages (Kock, 2013). However, during the research researcher was present during data collection to guide respondents, so no questionnaire was returned with missing data.

## **Outliers**

Like missing data, Smart PLS software effectively treats outliers without removing them and outliers must be removed if they arise due to measurement error (Kock, 2013). The researcher ignored this process as it was not required.

### **4.2.3. Data Coding and transcribing**

Coding is one way for data preparation for analysis purposes. It refers to assigning a unique number or code to represent a specific response. In this research, the questionnaire response is coded as proposed by (Sakeran & Bougie, 2019). In the question asking for the "gender", the answer "male" was coded as 1 while "female" was coded as 2. For the question regarding "How many homestay units do you own", the answer "one" was coded as 1, "two" as 2, "three" as 3, and "more than three" as 4. In the question regarding "The nationality of tourist who usually stays in your homestay", the answer "Local" was coded as 1 and "foreign" as 2. The question regarding "How long have you been in homestay business", the answer "less than 1 year" was coded as 1, "2 to 3 years" as 2, "3 to 4 years" as 3, "4 to 5 years" as 4, "More than 5 years" as 5. Regarding "Homestay Location", the answer "Klang Valley" was coded as 1, "Pahang" as 2 and "Pulao Pinang" as 3. For the question regarding "How many types of rooms do you

provide”, the answer “Single” was coded as 1, “double as 2, “dorm-type” as 2 and “Other” as 4.

After all these processes to improve responses, the data obtained from the survey questionnaires were transferred to the computer for further processing. SPSS software version 25 was used to process and analyse data.

#### 4.4. Respondent Profile Analysis

The researcher used SPSS 25 for the demographic profiling of the sample and descriptive statistics analysis of the collected data shown in table 16 below. Of the total homestay operators, 67% were female, 33% were male, 59% were local, and 41% were foreign tourists. 44% homestays were in Klang Valley, followed by Pahang 33% and Pulau Pinang 23%. 63.9% of operators owned one homestay, 25% owned two homestays, 10.55% of operators owned three homestays, and 0.55% owned more than three homestays. Room types offered by these operators were single (19 %), double (78%), Dorm type (3%) and others (1%). The business Duration of homestay operators was 2 to 3 years (21 %), 3 to 4 years (3%), 4 to 5 years (6%) and more than 5 years (70 %).

**Table 16: Respondent's Profile**

Demographic characteristics		Number of respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	67	37
	Female	113	63
Tourist Nationality	Local	106	59
	Foreigner	74	41

Homestay Location	Klang Valley	79	44
	Pahang		
	Pulao Pinang	60	33
		41	23
Homestay Owned	One	115	63.9
	Two	45	25
	Three	19	10.55
	More than three	1	0.55
Room Type	Single	34	19
	Double	140	78
	Dorm type	4	3
	Other	2	1
Business Duration	2 to 3 years	38	21
	More than 3 less than 4 years	5	3
	More than 4 less than 5 years	11	6
	More than 5 years	126	70

#### 4.4. Crosstab Analysis

For crosstab analysis author used SPSS 25, and first homestay brand equity was transformed into a categorical variable. All items of homestay brand equity were computed into their means and regrouped into these three categories, mean value (1-2.44: disagree; 2.45-3.44: neutral; 3.45-5.00: agree). Crosstab analysis results of categorical variable homestay brand equity with other demographic variables are shown in table 17.

To understand further the impact of demo variables on homestay brand equity, a cross-tabulation technique was employed. As tabulated in Table 17, the nationality of tourists who stayed in the homestay, gender of the homestay operators, location of homestay, number of homestays owned, total number of rooms available in the homestay and year of experience in the homestay business were used cross-tabulated against the homestay brand equity. Only, the

location of the homestay was found to have a significant relationship with the homestay brand equity. Additionally, it's concluded that despite having an insignificant relationship, the remaining variables were found to be agreeable with homestay brand equity due to the high-frequency count.

**Table 17: Crosstab Analysis**

		Homestay brand equity				Total	Chi-square	P-value	df	Cramer's V
		disagree	neutral	agree						
<b>Gender</b>	Male	0	2	64	66	3.369	0.186	2	0.137	
	Female	1	11	102	114					
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180					
<b>TouristNation</b>	local	1	6	99	106	1.608	0.448	2	0.095	
	foreigner	0	7	67	74					
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180					
<b>HomestayLocation</b>	Klang valley	0	3	74	77	18.155	0.001	4	0.225	
	Pahang	0	1	57	58					
	Pulao									
	Pinang	1	9	35	45					
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180					
<b>HomestaysOwned</b>	one	1	11	85	97	6.619	0.357	6	0.136	
	two	0	1	17	18					
	three	0	0	1	1					
	more than three									
	three	0	1	63	64					
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180					
<b>BusinessDuration</b>	2 to 3 years					2.836	0.829	6	0.089	
	3 to 4 years	0	2	36	38					
	years	0	1	4	5					

	4 to 5 years	0	0	11	11				
	More than 5 years	1	10	115	126				
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180				
<b>RoomType</b>	single	0	4	30	34	2.063	0.914	6	0.076
	double	1	9	128	138				
	dorm type	0	0	2	2				
	other	0	0	6	6				
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180				

To check the homestay brand equity and gender relationship, a crosstab analysis was conducted. Of the total 66 male homestay operators, 64 males agreed; 2 were neutral, and no male operator disagreed. Of the total 114 female homestay operators, 102 females agreed; 11 were neutral, and 01 female disagreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2(2) = 0.186$  with p-value = 0.186, shows insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and gender. Crosstab was also conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and tourist nationality. From a total of 106 local tourists, 99 agreed, 13 were neutral, and one disagreed, from a total of 74 foreign tourists 67 agreed, 7 were neutral, and no tourists disagreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2(2) = 1.608$  with p-value = 0.448, shows insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and tourist nationality.

Crosstab was also conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and homestay location. From a total of 77 homestays located in Klang Valley, 74 operators agreed, 4 were neutral, and no disagree response was recorded. From a total of 58 homestays located in Pahang, 57 operators agreed, 1 was neutral, and no disagree response was recorded. From a total of 45 homestays located in Pulau Pinang, 35 operators agreed, 9 were neutral, and 01 disagree response was recorded. Chi-square  $\chi^2(4) = 18.155$  with p-value = 0.001, shows

significant relationship between homestay brand equity and homestay location. Cramer's  $V = 0.225$  shows this relationship between homestay brand equity and homestay location has a small effect size (Cohen, 1988).

Moreover, Crosstab analysis was too conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and homestays owned by operators. Out of 97 single homestay owners, 85 operators agreed, 11 were neutral, and 01 disagreed; out of 18 homestay owners who owned 2 homestays, 17 agreed 1 was neutral, and no disagree response was recorded; 1 homestay operator owned more than two homestays, and this response agreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2(6) = 6.619$  with p-value = 0.357, shows insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and homestay ownership.

Crosstab analysis was likewise conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and business duration. Of the total, 38 homestay operators with a business duration of 2 to 3 years; 36 agreed that 2 responses were neutral with no disagree response. From five homestay operators with a business duration of 3 to 4 years; 4 agreed and 1 neutral response with no disagree response. From 11 homestay operators with a business duration of 4 to 5 years, all 11 responses were agreed upon. Of 126 homestay operators with a business duration of more than 5 years, 115 responses agreed, 10 neutral and 1 response disagreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2(6) = 2.836$  with p-value = 0.829, shows insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and business duration of homestay operators.

The crosstab analysis was also conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and room type provided by operators. A total of 34 operators provided a single room facility, 30 responses were agreed, and 4 were neutral with no disagree response. A total of 138

operators provided a double room facility, 128 responses agreed, 9 were neutral, and 1 disagreed, and the response from 2 dorm-type and 6 other room types provided by homestay operators agreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2 (6) = 2.063$  with a p-value = 0.914 shows the insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and room type offered by homestay operators to tourists.

#### **4.5. PLS SEM**

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) is comprised of the measurement and the structural model (Hoyle, 1995; Kline, 2008). The two components of a Structural Equation Model (SEM) are 1) The measurement model and 2) The structural model (Hoyle, 1995; Kline, 2008). The measurement model is used for indicator validation and used to measure the latent variables using confirmatory factor analysis (Chin, 2010). For the description of the causal relationship among study variables in the research model, a structural model is used (Hoyle 1995). Section 4.6 describes the measurement model and section 4.8 presents the structural model of study.

#### **4.6. Evaluation of Measurement Models**

For a valid measurement model, establishing satisfactory convergent and discriminant validities are necessary. The study's measurement model is presented in figure 3. Examining the structural and measurement model in PLS analysis is recommended, for this purpose, Smart PLS 3.0 is used as it assesses all the paths simultaneously (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). For each construct, a measurement model needs to be stated, as these constructs are not directly observed (Hair, 2014). PLS-SEM models are generally evaluated and interpreted in two sequences: 1) Reliability evaluation and measurement model validity and 2) structural model

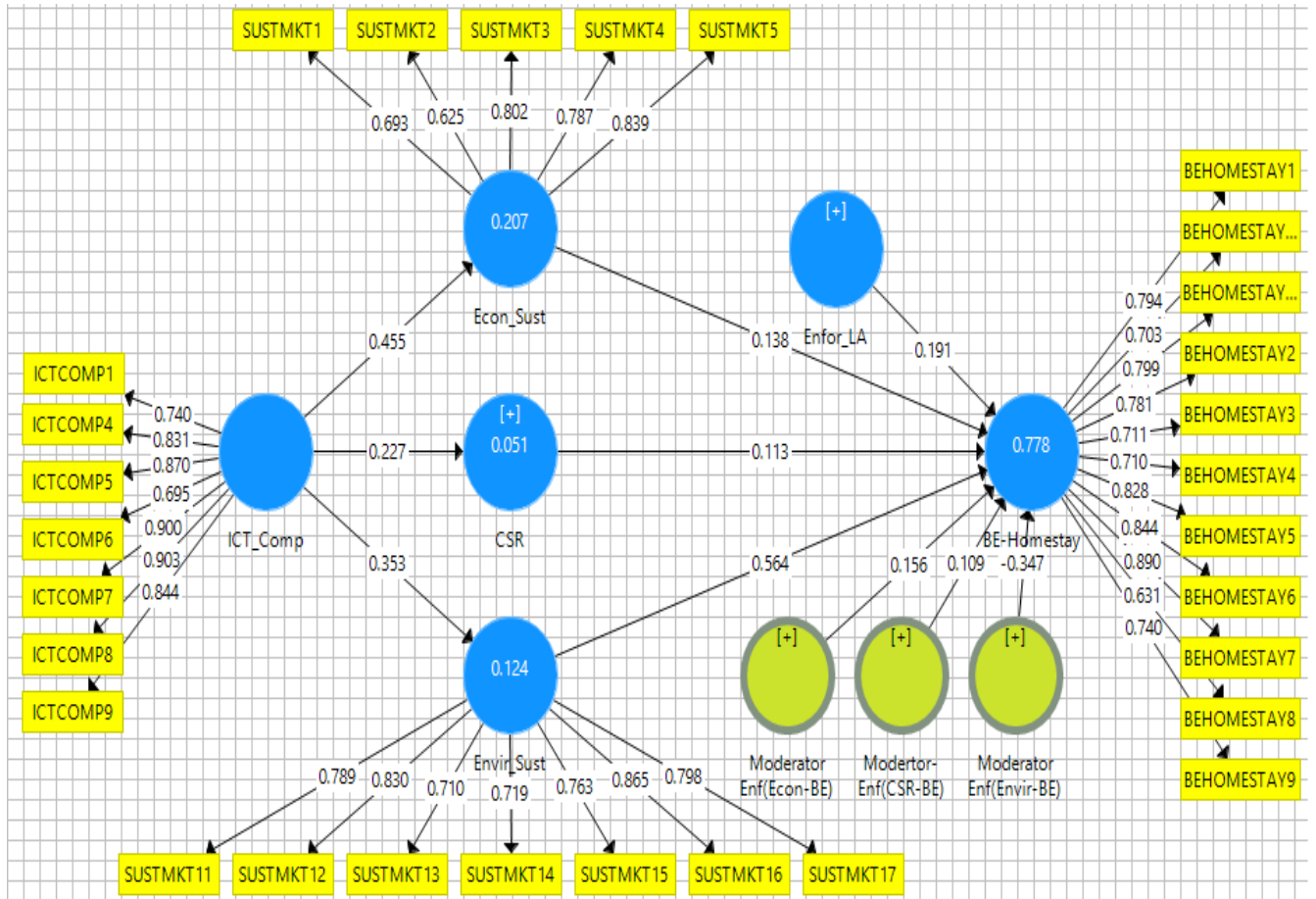
assessment. This sequence ensures reliable and valid construct measures before conducting the relationships of the constructs (Hulland, 1999). The measurement model acceptability is calculated by assessing the (1) internal consistency reliability, (2) convergent and (3) discriminant validity (Hulland, 1999; Hair, 2014).

The outer model comes with 50 items, which consist of ICT competency, which comes with (10 items), Economic sustainability marketing practices with (5 items), CSR with (5 items) and Environmental Sustainability marketing practices having (7 items). The moderating variable (Political support by Local Authorities) has 11 items, and the Brand Equity of homestays has 12 items. In the next step, the inner and outer models are analyzed. In the inner analysis output, the model shows a combination of coefficient paths, as well as the t-test. The path coefficient between ICT competency and Economic Sustainability Marketing practices is (0.460), ICT competency to CSR is (0.28), and ICT competency to Environmental Sustainability Marketing practices is (0.35). The path coefficient between Economic Sustainability Marketing practices, CSR, and Environmental Sustainability Marketing practices to Brand Equity of homestays is (0.14), (0.11) and (0.56), respectively. The path coefficient between moderator Political support by Local Authorities and Brand Equity of homestays is (0.19).

The next step is the removal of items with cross-loadings less than (0.50), Figure 3 shows constructs with item loading of (0.5 or more). All item loadings exceeded the recommended value of 0.5, as recommended by (Hair et al., 2014) Loadings  $\pm$ .50 or higher are considered practically significant. Loadings between 0.4 and 0.7 are considered acceptable if CR and AVE cross the threshold (Hair et al., 2014; Haghkhah, Rasoolimanesh & Asgari, 2020).



**Figure 3: Outer model**



#### 4.7. Validity and Reliability of Constructs

The model was initially checked for multicollinearity effect. The variance inflation factor (VIF) technique was used for this purpose. The VIF values indicate no evidence of multicollinearity as VIF values were below a threshold level of 5 (Hair et al., 2018). Harman’s single factor test was used to examine common method bias. All indicators were imported into SPSS and an exploratory factor analysis was performed with unrotated principal components. The results

produced one factor with a variance of 36.95%. This is below the value of 50%, thus common method bias was not an issue (Kock et al., 2021).

The latent variable's validity and reliability are necessary to complete structural model analysis. To ensure the research instrument's appropriateness reliability and construct validity were examined before testing the research hypotheses. The PLS-SEM analyses the composite reliabilities (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) to assess the construct's validity and reliability. The item reliabilities were examined from item loadings from the outer measurement model, represented by the latent variable and indicator correlation coefficients. The composite reliability of all construct values appears to be larger than 0.7 indicating a high level of internal consistency reliability (Hair et al., 2014). The average variance extracted (AVE) of each latent variable is evaluated to check convergent validity. The study followed Fornell & Larcker's (1981) method to confirm discriminant validity. The square root of AVE in each latent variable is applied to determine the discriminant validity if this value is larger than other correlation values among the latent variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

#### 4.7.1. Convergent Validity

To measure the convergent validity, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliabilities (CR), and Cronbach's Alpha were employed (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

**Table 18: Convergent Validity of Constructs**

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR
<b>Econ_Sust</b>	Item 1	0.693	0.809	0.569	0.868
	Item 2	0.625			
	Item 3	0.802			
	Item 4	0.787			

	Item 5	0.839			
<b>CSR</b>	Item 1	0.853	0.849	0.828	0.860
	Item 2	0.885			
	Item 3	0.934			
	Item 4	0.924			
	Item 5	0.949			
<b>Envir_Sust</b>	Item 1	0.789	0.809	0.613	0.817
	Item 2	0.830			
	Item 3	0.710			
	Item 4	0.719			
	Item 5	0.763			
	Item 6	0.865			
	Item 7	0.798			
<b>Polit_LA</b>	Item 1	0.882	0.869	0.758	0.872
	Item 2	0.870			
	Item 3	0.895			
	Item 4	0.875			
	Item 5	0.897			
	Item 6	0.839			
	Item 7	0.918			
	Item 8	0.839			
	Item 9	0.894			
	Item 10	0.871			
	Item 11	0.789			
<b>BE_Homestay</b>	Item 1	0.794	0.830	0.592	0.841
	Item 2	0.781			
	Item 3	0.711			
	Item 4	0.710			
	Item 5	0.828			
	Item 6	0.844			
	Item 7	0.890			
	Item 8	0.631			
	Item 9	0.740			
	Item 10	0.703			
	Item 12	0.799			
<b>ICT_Comp</b>	Item 1	0.740	0.823	0.688	0.839
	Item 4	0.831			
	Item 5	0.870			
	Item 6	0.695			
	Item 7	0.900			
	Item 8	0.903			
	Item 9	0.844			

The item reliabilities were assessed using item loadings from the outer measurement model. The item loadings are represented by the correlation coefficients between the latent and indicator variable. Hair et al., (2014), suggested acceptable composite reliability of benchmark of 0.70, all constructs exceed the threshold of 0.70. Likewise, all construct Average Variance Extracted (AVE) exceed the 0.50 threshold, as recommended by (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). AVE of constructs is highlighted in Table 18, confirming that the study research model meets convergent validity minimum requirements.

#### 4.7.2 Discriminant Validity for All the Measurements

Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2015), propose the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). It is a new and alternative method to evaluate discriminant validity in variance-based SEM because the Fornell-Larcker and cross-loadings criteria both have shortcomings in variance-based SEM. Voorhees et. al, (2016) recommended HTMT cut-off value of 0.75 while Henseler et al. (2015) recommended HTMT cut-off values of 0.90 or 0.85. Discriminant validity was tested using HTMT<sub>90</sub> criteria, if the HTMT value is higher than 0.90 then discriminant validity is a problem; nevertheless, no value exceeds the 0.90 thresholds. HTMT details are highlighted in Table 19 below.

**Table 19: Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT)**

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>BE_Homestays</b>						
<b>CSR</b>	0.507					
<b>Econ_Sust</b>	0.640	0.194				
<b>Polit_LA</b>	0.290	0.220	0.300			
<b>Envir_Sust</b>	0.878	0.542	0.559	0.199		
<b>ICT_Comp</b>	0.252	0.235	0.492	0.297	0.394	

#### **4.8. Structural Model Analysis**

Hair et al. (2014) recommended using a bootstrapping procedure with a resample of 5000, to observe  $R^2$ , corresponding  $T$ -values, and beta, besides effect sizes ( $f^2$ ) and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) need to be reported. The results of the study support hypothesis H1: ICT\_Comp ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect Econ\_Sust, H2: ICT\_Comp ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect CSR, H3: ICT\_Comp ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect Envir\_Sust. Moreover, H4: Econ\_Sust ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect BE\_Homestays, H5: CSR ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect BE\_Homestays, H6: Envir\_Sust ( $\beta = 0.56$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) have a positive relationship with BE\_Homestays. Econ\_Sust, CSR, and Envir\_Sust practices explain a 78% variance in BE\_Homestays ( $R^2 = 0.78$ ). Different researchers suggested different criteria for a model to be substantial. Cohen (1988) suggested  $R^2 = 0.26$ , Chin (1998) suggest  $R^2 = 0.67$  and Hair et. al, (2014) suggested  $R^2 = 0.75$  as criteria for a substantial model. The  $R^2 = 0.78$  of the current model is substantial for theoretical and practical predictions.

Next, the  $f^2$  was assessed as a p-value that indicates the only significance of the relationship, not the size of the effects, so both  $f^2$  and (p-value) need to be reported (Hair et al., 2014). For the effect size calculation, Cohen (1988) guidelines were used, for small effects ( $f^2 = 0.02$ ), for medium effects ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ), and for large effects ( $f^2 = 0.35$ ). Hypothesis H2, H3, H4, H5, H7 and H8 have a small effect as  $f^2$  values are between (0.02 and 0.15), hypothesis H1 has a medium effect as  $f^2$  value is 0.26, and H6 has a large effect as  $f^2$  value in 0.73. In the following step, the predictive sample reuse technique ( $Q^2$ ) was too calculated. A cross-validated redundancy procedure was used to calculate  $Q^2$ : if  $Q^2$  is greater than 0, the model has predictive

relevance; and lacks predictive relevance if  $Q^2$  is less than 0. Figure 7 indicates acceptable predictive relevance as  $Q^2 = 0.445$ .

**Table 20: Hypothesis Testing**

Hypotheses	Beta ( $\beta$ )	t-Value	p-Value	F Square ( $f^2$ )	Decision
<b>H1:</b> ICT_Comp $\rightarrow$ Econ_Sust	0.45	5.55	0.000	0.26	supported
<b>H2:</b> ICT_Comp $\rightarrow$ CSR	0.28	2.76	0.006	0.05	supported
<b>H3:</b> ICT_Comp $\rightarrow$ Envir_Sust	0.35	3.33	0.001	0.14	supported
<b>H4:</b> Econ_Sust $\rightarrow$ BE_Homestays	0.14	2.38	0.018	0.05	supported
<b>H5:</b> CSR $\rightarrow$ BE_Homestays	0.11	3.20	0.001	0.04	supported
<b>H6:</b> Envir_Sust $\rightarrow$ BE_Homestays	0.56	9.60	0.000	0.73	supported
<b>H7:</b> (Econ_Sust x Enfor_LA) $\rightarrow$ BE_Homestays	0.16	2.40	0.016	0.08	supported
<b>H8:</b> (CSR x Enfor_LA) $\rightarrow$ BE_Homestays	0.11	2.04	0.041	0.04	supported
<b>H9:</b> (Envir_Sust x Enfor_LA) $\rightarrow$ BE_Homestays	-0.35	4.01	0.000	0.25	supported

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

#### 4.8.1. Moderation Analysis

The study hypothesized "Polit\_LA" to have a continuous moderation effect on the relationships between Econ\_Sust, CSR, Envir\_Sust practices, and BE\_Homestays. The PLS product-indicator approach was used for analysis, as PLS offers added precise estimations of moderator effects of the projected relations and advances the theory validation (Henseler & Fassott, 2010). For the first moderation effect test, an interaction construct (Econ\_Sust \_ Polit\_LA) was created by multiplying Econ\_Sust (predictor) and Polit\_LA (moderator) to predict homestay

brand equity. To test the second moderating effect, the interaction construct (CSR \_ Polit\_LA) was created by multiplying CSR (predictor) and Polit\_LA (moderator) to predict homestay brand equity. To test the third moderating effect, an interaction construct (Envir\_Sust \_ Polit\_LA) was created by multiplying Envir\_Sust practices (predictor) and Polit\_LA (moderator) to predict homestay brand equity. The moderation effect of Political support by local authorities in the relationship between three antecedents of sustainable tourism marketing (Economic, CSR, and Environmental) and brand equity of homestays is shown in the figures below.

Figure 4 shows Political support by local authorities as a moderator in economically sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity relationship. Political support by local authorities positively moderates the relationship between environmental sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays. Moreover, moderator Political support by local authorities strengthens the positive relationship between Economic sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays.

**Figure 4: Political support by local authorities as a moderator in economic sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity**

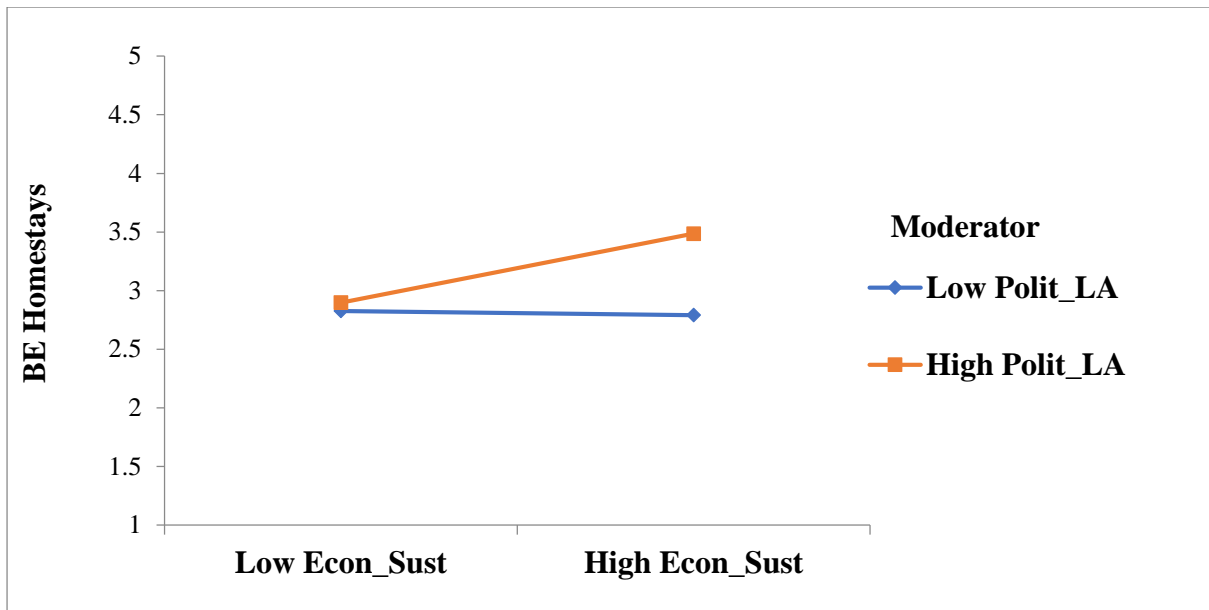


Figure 5 shows Political support by local authorities as a moderator in CSR and homestay brand equity relationship. Political support by local authorities positively moderates the relationship between CSR and brand equity of homestays. Moreover, moderator Political support by local authorities strengthens the positive relationship between CSR and brand equity of homestays.

**Figure 5: Political support by local authorities as a moderator in CSR and homestay brand equity**



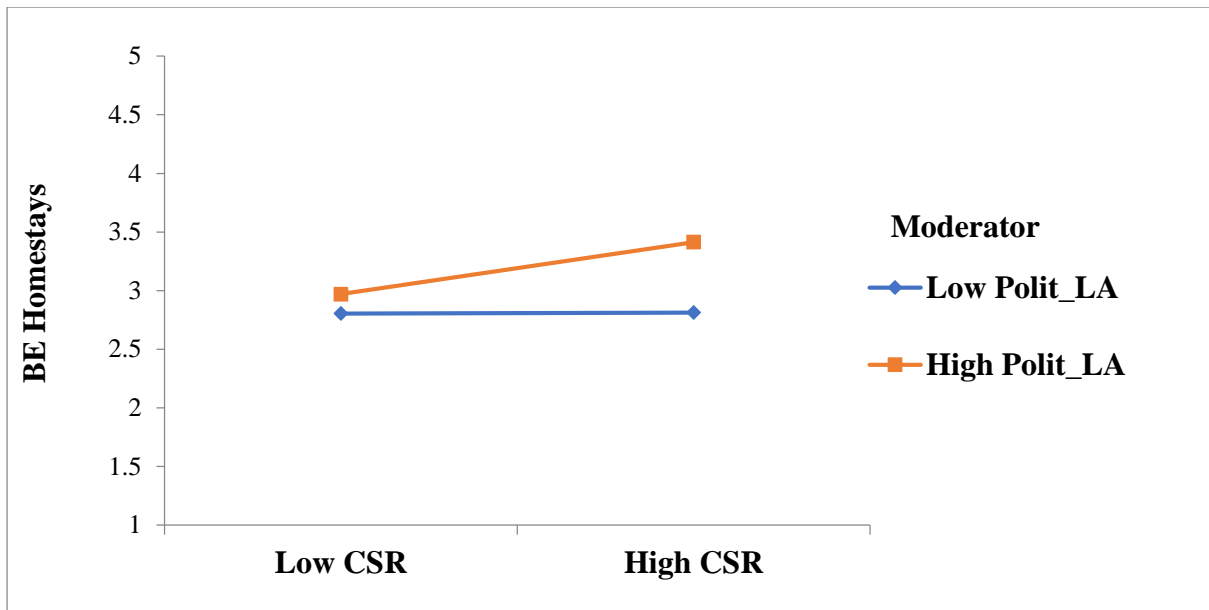


Figure 6 shows Political support by local authorities as a moderator in Environmental sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity relationship. Political support by local authorities negatively moderates the relationship between environmental sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays. Moreover, moderator Political support by local authorities dampens the positive relationship between environmental sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays.

**Figure 6: Political support by local authorities as a moderator in Environmental sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity**

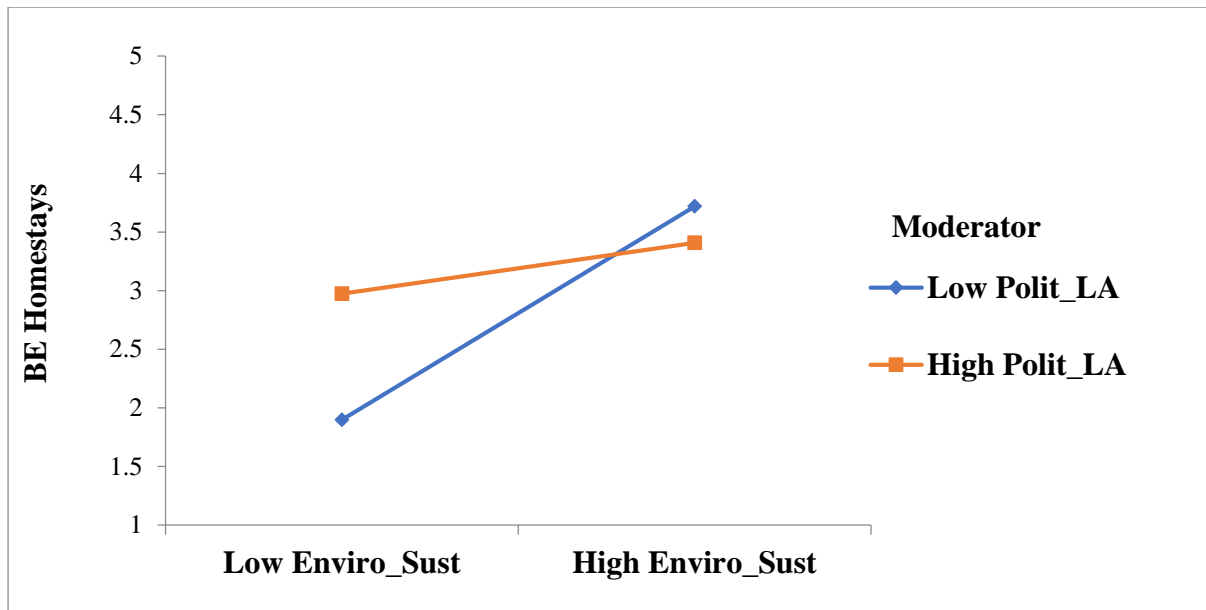
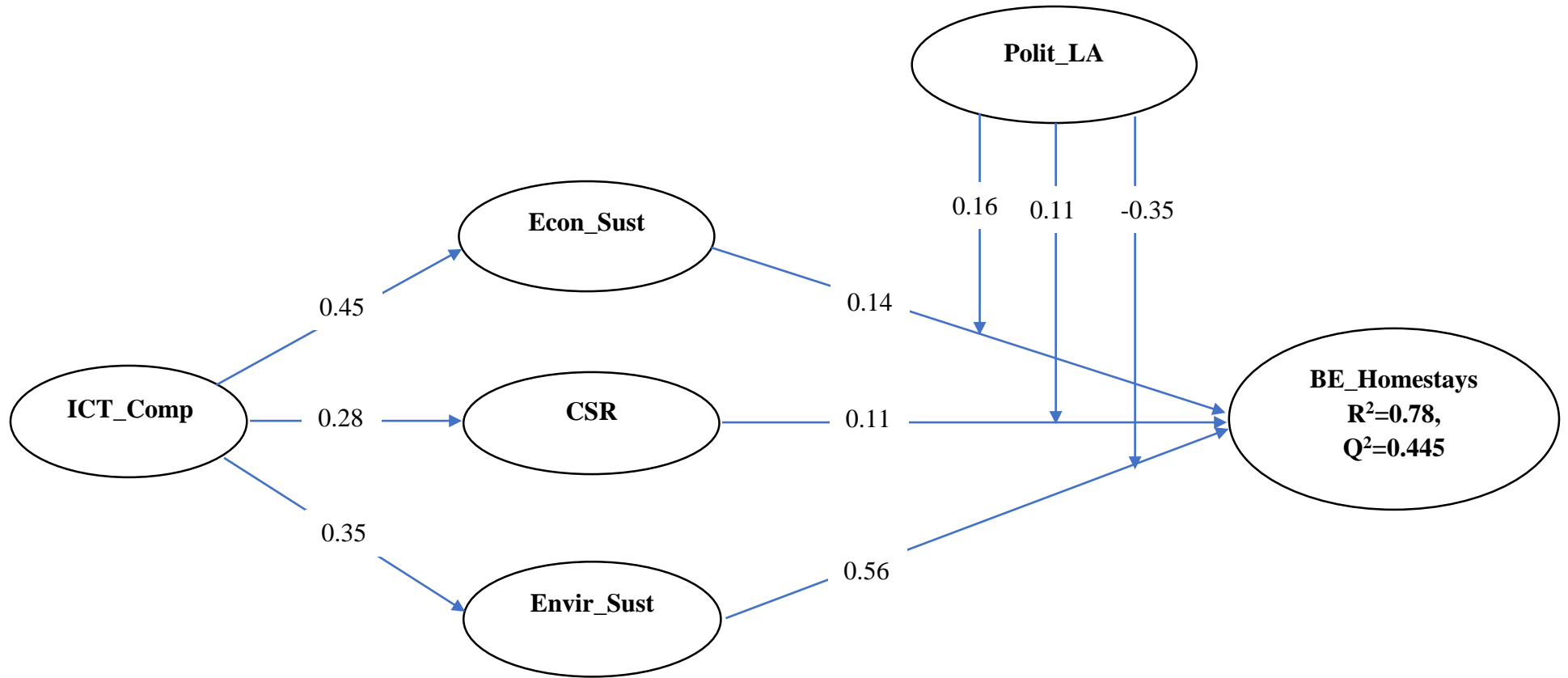


Table 20 demonstrates the estimated standardized path coefficients for the effect of the Polit\_LA (moderator) on Econ\_Sust practices ( $\beta=0.16$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), CSR ( $\beta=0.11$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), Envir\_Sust practices ( $\beta= -0.35$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) on the brand equity of homestays were all significant. It indicates that Polit\_LA moderates the relationship between three aspects of sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays.

**Figure 7: Structural Model**



#### **4.9. Confirmation and Evaluation of Hypotheses**

SEM through PLS was used to calculate the significance/insignificance and every path's strength in the structural model for hypothesis confirmation. The statistical significance/insignificance of hypotheses can be tested through PLS bootstrapping analysis and beta value ( $\beta$ ) to get the strength of each path. This analysis illustrates the paths of all variables and their relationships are significant. The hypotheses' confirmation results are presented in Table 20.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between ICT competency, Sustainable tourism marketing (Environmental, CSR and Economical) practices, political support by local authorities and brand equity in the context of rural community-based homestays. Findings from the analysis enabled the testing of hypotheses regarding these relationships. The proposed conceptual framework was tested, and the analysis and outcome supported all hypotheses. Significant relationships were found to exist between ICT competency and three dimensions of sustainable tourism marketing (H1, H2 and H3). These relationships are consistent with previous studies (Ali & Frew, 2014; Bifulco, Tregua, Amitrano, & D'Auria, 2016). The hypothesis (H4, H5, and H6) relates to sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestay relationships; all relations were supported. The relationship between Environmental sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays (H4) is consistent with previous studies (Landrum, 2018; Cowan & Guzman, 2020), and CSR and brand equity of homestays (H5) are consistent with previous studies (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016; Ben Youssef et al., 2018) and Economically sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays (H6), This outcome is also consistent with earlier studies (Wilkinson, 2012; Manhas et al., 2016).

The hypotheses (H7, H8, and H9) provide a unique contribution to the tourism body of knowledge. The analysis confirmed a significant relationship between moderator political support by local authorities, Environmental, CSR and Economic sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays (H7, H8 and H9). The antecedent consequent relationship suggested and tested in the current model proves that sustainable tourism marketing practices, when moderated by political support by local authorities construct affect brand equity of homestays.

#### **4.10. Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the Partial Least Squares (PLS) selection, as an appropriate statistical technique employed in conducting research. Additional, this section explained the research model validation, involving reliability, validity, discriminant, and convergent validity. This chapter too examined the structural equation modelling outcome. The PLS-SEM analysis demonstrated the entire structural paths are significant. Lastly, the chapter described the confirmation of hypotheses. The next chapter discusses the study findings.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

#### 5.1. Introduction

This section presents the closing comments and the research implications of the study findings. The chapter starts with the introduction, followed by significant results and discussion, theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research areas. This thesis started with the aim of developing a sustainable tourism marketing model in the Malaysian context. The study also explored the role of ICT competency in sustainable tourism marketing practices that ultimately enhance brand equity in rural community-based homestays. Moreover, the study discussed the importance of the novel construct of political support by local authorities in rural tourism and precisely in a rural community-based homestay.

Table 21 below shows the research question formulated to achieve the relevant objectives with corresponding hypotheses.

**Table 21: Research Questions, Objectives, and Hypotheses**

Research Questions	Objectives	Hypotheses
RQ1: What is the relationship between ICT competency and sustainable tourism marketing	RO1: To examine the relationship between ICT competency and sustainable marketing	H1: ICT Competency positively affects Environmental Sustainability Tourism

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(environment, social and economic) in Malaysian homestay operations. Marketing practices of homestay.

H2: ICT Competency positively affects CSR practices of homestay.

H3: ICT Competency positively affects Economic Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices of homestay.

RQ2: What is the relationship between the economic aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?  
RO2: To examine the effect of an economic aspect of sustainability marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity.  
H4 Economic aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity

RQ3: What is the relationship between the social aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and homestay operator's brand equity?"  
RO3: To examine the effect of a CSR aspect of sustainability tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity.  
H5: CSR aspect of Sustainability tourism Marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity

RQ4: What is the relationship between the environmental aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?  
RO4: To examine the effect of an environmental aspect of sustainability tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity.  
H6: Environment aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.

RQ5: How the role of Political support by local authorities affects the relationship between sustainability tourism marketing and brand equity in homestay operation

RO5: To examine the role of Political support by local authorities in the relationship between Sustainability Marketing and Brand Equity in homestay operations.

H7: Relationship between Economic aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities.

H8: Relationship between the CSR aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities.

H9: Relationship between the Environment aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities.

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## 5.2. Key findings and discussion

The proposed conceptual framework was statistically tested, and the analysis and outcome supported all hypotheses. Holistically, the study contributed to the existing knowledge of sustainable tourism, and notably, it helped rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. The study primarily emphasised sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity significance in Malaysian rural community-based homestays. Moreover, this study too highlights the pivotal role of "Political support by local authorities" in sustainable tourism marketing practices and



brand equity relationships, as local authorities are the key stakeholders in rural tourism and their role is vital in the sustainable transformation of rural tourism. The current study suggests that adopting TBL principles improve rural tourism stakeholders' relationship, formulate inclusive decision making, increase destination competitiveness and broaden market opportunities. Additionally, this study expands the TBL in the field of rural community-based tourism by specifically targeting homestays registered with MOTAC as rural homestay products are an effective way to achieve Malaysian and United Nations' sustainability goals.

This study postulated that ICT competency strengthens sustainable tourism marketing practices. Hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 addressed RQ1. The study found a positive relationship between ICT competency and Sustainable tourism marketing dimensions (environmental, CSR and economically sustainable tourism marketing practices). Hence, the following hypotheses are supported:

H1: ICT competency positively affects environmental sustainable tourism marketing practices of homestay.

H2: ICT competency positively affects CSR practices of homestay.

H3: ICT competency positively affects economically sustainable tourism marketing practices of homestay.

ICT competency facilitates sustainable tourism development challenges from local to global levels. ICT competency is a key tool for sustainability in tourism and contributes to the creation of innovative sustainable tourism development (Ramos-Soler, Martínez-Sala, & Campillo-Alhama, 2019). ICT competency not only benefits tourists and tourism service providers but has a significant role in entire sustainable tourism development (Naramski, 2020). ICT

competency not only aids homestay's business growth and development but is also associated with sustainable tourism development in the area (Singh, Sajnani, & Gupta, 2020). ICT competency not only facilitates the region's tourism businesses but also ensures a trade-off between tourism developmental activities and sustainability (Kisi, 2019). Likewise, in Malaysia, it provides vast opportunities for rural homestay operators to expand sustainably (Osman & Zakaria, 2020). ICT competencies accelerate the process of sustainable development at three levels, destination, visitor, and local communities level, ICT competency facilitates (i) long-term planning, the efficient management of resources; (ii) monitoring, transparency and participation, public-private cooperation, knowledge, innovation; (iii) communication, (iv) awareness; and (v) the improvement of the tourist experience (Guilarte & Quintáns, 2019). Likewise, ICT introduces a culture of quality customer care at a local level and is one way to up-sell the country from internal to international.

The structural model analysis of the study elucidated and proved the mechanism through which Malaysian community-based rural homestays enhance brand equity and can become more competitive in attracting local and international tourists. The hypotheses (H4, H5, and H6) related to sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestay relationships were supported. Hypothesis H4 addressed RQ2, H5 addressed RQ3, and H6 addressed RQ4. Hypothesis H4: Economic aspect of sustainable tourism marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity. The study results supported the strategic effect of economically sustainable tourism marketing practices on homestay's brand equity. These outcomes are consistent with earlier studies (Wilkinson, 2012; Manhas et al., 2016) which state that economic sustainable reputation is an integral component of brand equity (Heinberg, Ozkaya, & Taube, 2018), and directly affects the long-term brand equity (Cowan & Guzman, 2018) and increases the repeat visitation in rural community-based homestays. Brand equity on an

economic sustainability platform can create a competitive advantage. Profit and sustainability purpose need to go hand in hand for the homestay's survival and prosperity. Moreover, over-proactiveness towards the economic goal is an antithesis to the essence of the triple bottom line of sustainability, as more emphasis on the economic side may defocus social and environmental sustainability.

Hypothesis H5: CSR aspect of Sustainability Marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity. The study results supported the strategic effect of CSR on homestay brand equity, which is consistent with previous studies (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016; Ben Youssef et al., 2018). Social Sustainable brands demonstrate respect for the environment, and community and enhance the company's reputation (El Zein, Consolacion-Segura, & Huertas-Garcia, 2020). Moreover, CSR develops social brand equity, so, it needs to be viewed as a long-term investment (Loh, & Tan, 2020). Social brand equity is an asset, and homestays can derive additional economic value in the shape of repeat tourists' visitation. Homestay's social brand image can positively influence tourists' sustainable perception and attract international tourists. The study results show that a small number of foreign tourists stayed at rural homestays in Malaysia, so this socially sustainable perception of homestays can improve its image, and reputation and attract more international tourists.

Hypothesis H6: The environmental aspect of sustainable tourism marketing practices positively affects Homestay brand equity. The study results supported the strategic effect of the Environment aspect of sustainable tourism marketing practices on homestay's brand equity is also consistent with previous studies (Landrum, 2018; Cowan & Guzman, 2018). Sustainable brand equity through environmental sustainability leads to competitive advantages (Vesal, Siahtiri, & O'Cass, 2021), and establishes a credible, environmentally friendly homestay brand

image among tourists and other stakeholders (Blenkhorn & MacKenzie, 2017). These practices also increase the homestay's sustainable perception, positive word of mouth and peer recommendations by tourists. Homestay's sustainable brand equity can improve its reputation among tourists ultimately resulting in repeat visitation and new tourist arrivals. The results of the study also attested to environmentally sustainable tourism marketing practices as an essential antecedent of sustainable brand equity of homestays.

The success of rural community-based homestay products in Malaysia and elsewhere depends on the ability to acquire core competency in local cultural heritage, landscape resources, geographical features, agricultural products etc. (Kunjuraman, 2020). Furthermore, synergy in all aspects of sustainability practices is mandatory to achieve sustainable brand equity in homestays and other rural community-based products. The study's conclusion confirms a vital relationship between sustainable tourism practices and brand equity in the context of the rural community-based homestay.

Hypothesis H7: Relationship between the Economic aspect of sustainable tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities, Hypothesis H8: Relationship between CSR aspect of sustainable tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated Political support by local authorities. Hypothesis H9: Relationship between the Environment aspect of sustainable tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities. Hypotheses H7, H8, and H9 addressed RQ5.

Hypothesis H7's result is in line with the thoughts of previous researchers on the importance of local political authorities to support environmentally friendly, socially equitable, and

economically viable tourism marketing practices that enhance the brand equity of rural homestay products (Zhang & Zhang, 2018; Kapera, 2018; Khartishvili et al., 2019). Hypothesis H8's result is also in line with the prior researchers that the national and local regulators influence an organization's sustainability-centred strategy and influence its CSR performance. CSR performance indicates improved economic performance and a firm's brand equity, this leads firm's competitive advantage (Mena et al., 2019; Govindan et al., 2021). Notably, hypothesis H9 this new finding empirically validates the negative interaction of moderator political support by local authorities on the relationship. This relationship between the environmental aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays when moderated by political support by local authorities is strong, and significant but negative. The findings of this study are inconsistent with the findings of (Zhang & Zhang, 2018) that consider local authorities' political support positively impacts environmentally sustainable practices to increase homestay's brand equity (Zhang & Wang, 2021). The findings also contradict Wang et al. (2021) that local political authorities provided regularity guidelines to assist rural tourism firms to improve their environmental sustainability competitiveness and strengthen their sustainability competitiveness and enhance brand equity. Perhaps this interesting finding implies that rural homestay operators in Malaysia perceive local authorities' environmental policies as discouraging and demotivating. So, local political authorities need to work on this.

The antecedent consequent relationship suggested and tested in the current model proves that sustainable tourism marketing practices, when moderated by political support by local authorities construct affect brand equity of homestays. Adequate political support by local authorities is vital for regulating the tourism market, protecting destination brand image and sustainable tourism promotion (Liu, Dou, Li, & Cai, 2020), so the prosperity of sustainable rural tourism relies on the support of the local political authorities. Local authorities' political

support directs homestay operators in ways to reduce negative environmental and societal impacts, exploit and manage the positive impacts, and simultaneously stay competitive and economically sustainable (Liu et al., 2020). Local authorities also ensure homestay's proper legal compliance with environmental and social concerns, help to enhance networking between stakeholders and build improved relationships, especially with local administrative groups and regulators (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016).

The study also revealed that women homestay operators are more in number than men, this shows that women are important drivers of growth in the tourism economy in many ways and, certainly, tourism has become one of the areas where women have established successful tourism businesses. Besides this study's results highlighted inflexibility in MOTAC's homestay operators' licensing policy. Most homestay operators are from the old generation, perhaps MOTAC licensing policy is very rigid and discourages young entrepreneurs.

### **5.3. Theoretical Implications**

This study analysed ICT competency and sustainability theory in rural community-based tourism in conjunction with a novel construct of "political support by local authorities" and brand equity. This causal model was empirically tested and proved as sustainability tourism marketing practices, ICT competency, and political support by local authorities constructs are important homestay brand equity's explanatory variables. This study highlights that the triple bottom line theory can be explained broadly when employed in juxtaposition with brand equity, ICT competency and the new construct of Political support by local authorities. The triple bottom line theory appears as a significant framework for a rural community-based homestay product to enhance the social, economic, and environmental sustainability dimensions. The

theoretical model of study highlights the importance of the “ICT competency and Political support by local authorities” relationship with the three pillars of TBL, also the importance of these two in designing sustainable and durable rural community-based tourism brands. The model demonstrates high-level consistency between the theoretical design and the empirical results, contributing to a new insight into the sustainable tourism body of knowledge. This study offers a more comprehensive model by inclusion of political support by local authorities construct, as it is hardly possible to maintain a balance between the three traditional dimensions of sustainable tourism with the exclusion of the local political dimension. Also, this model is not restricted to a specific destination and tourism setting, which broadens the applicability of this causal model. Moreover, this integrated conceptual framework is an essential sustainable rural tourism development model and is related to the parental paradigm of sustainable development. This study provided valuable theoretical insights for rural tourism planners striving to achieve sustainability. Each path relationship proposed in the model was tested using structural equation modelling (SEM). The SEM analysis confirmed the statistically significant relationships between ICT competency and economically sustainable tourism marketing practices ( $\beta=0.45$ ;  $t=5.55$ ), ICT competency and CSR ( $\beta=0.28$ ;  $t=2.76$ ) and ICT competency and environmentally sustainable tourism marketing practices ( $\beta=0.35$ ;  $t=3.33$ ). The SEM analysis also confirmed the statistically significant relationships between Economically sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays ( $\beta=0.14$ ;  $t=2.38$ ), CSR and brand equity of homestays ( $\beta=0.11$ ;  $t=3.20$ ), Environmentally sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays ( $\beta=0.56$ ;  $t=9.60$ ).

The main contribution of the theoretical model relates to “Analysing how ICT competency improves sustainability tourism marketing and Inclusion of Political support by local authorities”. In addition to testing the theoretical model, the study also tested the moderating

effects of “political support by local authorities in the model. The SEM analysis also tested and confirmed H7, (Economic sustainable tourism marketing practices x political support by local authorities) → brand equity of homestays ( $\beta=0.16$ ;  $t=2.40$ ). H8, (CSR x political support by local authorities) → brand equity of homestays ( $\beta=0.11$ ;  $t=2.04$ ). likewise, (Environmental sustainable tourism marketing practices x political support by local authorities) → and brand equity of homestays ( $\beta=-0.35$ ;  $t=4.014$ ).

The empirical results of this study provided tenable evidence that the structural equation model was designed to consider simultaneously ICT competency, Economic sustainable tourism marketing practices, Environmental sustainable tourism marketing practices, CSR, the brand equity of homestays, and political support by local authorities was acceptable. So, it is believed that this study has a substantial capability for generating more precise applications related to rural community-based tourism, especially concerning sustainability.



## 5.4. Practical Implications

This section discusses possible implications based on the findings of this study for both practitioners and policymakers. Table 22 summarizes the key findings, implications for policymakers and practitioners, and resulting impacts on practitioners. It is evident that practitioners greatly benefit from academic studies which could furnish them with the necessary information for policy and business decisions.

**Table 22: Key findings, practical implications and impacts on policymakers and practitioners**

<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Implications for Policy Makers</b>	<b>Implications for Practitioners</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Strategic Importance of Sustainability in rural community-based homestays	Policymakers should enhance efforts like monetary support, continuous training, and development to achieve United Nations and Malaysian sustainable tourism goals.	Sustainable branding of homestays can be used to position and differentiate homestays from other tourism products. Practitioners should market homestays as a rural community-based sustainable tourism product and directly target international tourists using social media platforms (Facebook, Airbnb, Agoda etc.).	Effective sustainable positioning and differentiation of homestays impact greater visitor retention and loyalty. The sustainability branding of rural homestays also helps practitioners target a new market.

Female homestay operators are more in number than males.	Establish merit in homestay licensing criteria, and treat all gender equally.	Practitioners can make use of the female-centric theme in their promotion of e-g. homestay by the female for female tourists.	The female-centric homestays will improve the financial condition of rural women and the overall tourism economy will grow.
The inflexible homestay licensing policy of MOTAC	Policymakers should start entrepreneurial initiatives for Malaysian youth. Also, start homestay licensing for the educated younger generation.	Homestay coordinators should regularly highlight this concern to MOTAC officials. So, homestay permits of inactive license holders can be revoked.	The diversified and flexible homestay licensing policy involving young, educated homestay operators will improve employment and reduce poverty in rural areas.
Homestay operators' training and development	Allocation of funds or grants for homestay operator's training and development.	ICT competency and the latest social media knowledge improve the operator's overall business skills, so the policymakers and practitioners should also cooperate to face changing business environment, customer needs and preferences.	Training programs will produce knowledgeable tourism professionals, innovators, and skilled groups of tourism entrepreneurs in Malaysia.
ICT competency is the key antecedent of Sustainable tourism marketing.	Policymakers should aim to improve comprehensive ICT understanding and increase the number of ICT users in the rural tourism sector.	ICT competency creates ways to measure the sustainable behaviours of tourists and sustainable transformation of rural tourism products.	ICT presents invaluable opportunities to manage the visitor experience, foster innovative tourism products and develop creative marketing strategies. ICT competency impacts rural social

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and economic transformation, and lifestyle improvements.

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Sustainable tourism marketing is the key antecedent of homestay brand equity	Policymakers need to determine rural tourists' needs and expectations and adapt sustainable tourism products to better meet the needs and expectations of visitors.	Practitioners need to establish sustainable rural tourism brands, with a true reflection of the sustainable offerings, this will generate sustainable perception and positive word of mouth by tourists.	Effective sustainable tourism marketing impacts homestay branding, this brand equity ultimately results in a favourable experience, image, and loyalty.
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Importance of political support by local authorities	The local authorities have equal importance in both enforcing Sustainable tourism marketing practices and enhancing the brand equity of homestays.	The practitioners should use theoretical knowledge provided by this research to enforcement of sustainable tourism marketing practices in rural tourism.	The role of local authorities in partnerships and collaborative arrangements is very important. These partnerships, particularly between the tourism businesses, positively impact commercial success and local sustainable tourism development.
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The study findings set strategic directions for Malaysian rural community-based tourism product owners/managers/operators, local political authorities, and marketers to work on the following: 1) rural community-based homestays sustainability, 2) homestays licensing, 3) homestay operators training and development, 4) ICT training, 5) marketing and branding of homestays, and 6) tourism policies at the regional and local level.

#### **5.4.1. Strategic Importance of Sustainability in rural community-based homestays**

The study results demonstrate the vital implications for rural community-based tourism policymakers and practitioners. Policymakers should enhance cost-effectiveness (minimize economic cost), Environmental efficacy, Tourism policy (integration of environmental, social, and economic goals in tourism policies), and accountability and transparency to realize Malaysian and United Nations sustainable tourism goals. Practitioners should distinguish homestays by sustainable brand design (name, logo, slogan). They should market their homestays as a sustainable rural community-based tourism product. Like the European DEHESA agro-tourism brand, the term DEHESA is well recognised and appreciated by niche customers (Escribanoa, Gasparb, & Mesias, 2020), this concept can be incorporated in Malaysian rural community-based homestays. This sustainability concept embedded in homestays can make it more attractive to sustainability-conscious international tourists, especially from developed countries. Escribanoa et. al, (2020) stated that associating sustainability with a brand increases its value. Likewise, this strategy will improve sustainable positioning, revisitation, and tourist loyalty of Malaysian community-based rural homestays.

#### **5.4.2. Female homestay operators are more in number than males**

Female homestay operators are more in numbers than males; it shows a good sign for women's empowerment and poverty alleviation. Perhaps this strategy was used to get a homestay operator license from MOTAC. MOTAC must ensure homestays licenses taken in name of women must remain active if not MOTAC should cancel the license and allot it to a more deserving and motivated person. Education and training play a key role. As women are an important driver of growth in the tourism economy policy initiatives should focus on providing women entrepreneurs with greater levels of education and training. Practitioners can make use of the female-centric theme for homestay operation, a female-centric Malaysian homestay product like “Girlfriend getaways”, that is holiday trips taken by females with other females (Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, & Disegna, 2019). These tourism products provide females with the opportunities to escape everyday roles, stimulate female bonding, provide a break in daily routines and duties and are connected to well-being and health (Berdychevsky, Gibson, & Bell, 2013).

#### **5.4.3 The inflexible homestay licensing policy of MOTAC**

The Malaysian government’s homestay licensing policy needs to be flexible to encourage the younger generation; it is recommended that the Malaysian government devise ways to enhance the business environment to attract entrepreneurs into the rural tourism sector who operate following the sustainable development goals. This can be done by decreasing the barriers to starting a rural homestay by streamlining the processes for obtaining operational licenses and permits. The government needs to formulate policies that lead to a lower regulative burden and greater ease of

doing business. Improvement in homestay licencing policy and incentives will inspire the educated younger generation to become homestay operators. Moreover, the study also revealed that homestay operators lack the latest ICT knowledge. The latest ICT training and development is the need of the hour. ICT competency and the latest social media knowledge are key to a successful homestay business. ICT competencies improve operators' overall business skills.

#### **5.4.4. Homestay operators' training and development**

The focus of policies should be on facilitating entrepreneurial initiatives. The policy initiatives can also be directed toward mainstreaming entrepreneurship education and skills for young women and men in Malaysia. Training and development by relevant authorities (Ministry of Youth and Sports Training Institution, MOTAC and local governments) will produce tourism professionals and innovators in the sector. Moreover, training programs would develop a knowledgeable and skilled group of tourism entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The enhancement of business skills assists managers to develop appealing marketing strategies to entice customers. Government policy should encourage younger entrepreneurs into the tourism accommodation sector to facilitate the sustainable strategic development of the tourism industry. Additionally, encouragement and support for tourism and hospitality education and training of the youth will improve professionalism in the sector.

#### **5.4.5. ICT competency is the key antecedent of Sustainable tourism marketing**

The MOTAC should allocate a certain amount of funds or grants for the homestay operator's training and development that strengthen their ICT competency especially in using social media platforms for their business operations. Collaboration is required between the Ministry of Youth and Sports Training Institution, MOTAC and local government to champion the campaigns to secure budgets for ICT awareness, literacy campaigns, ICT equipment and training programs for rural homestay operators. Policymakers and practitioners should also cooperate to provide the required technological readiness to compete with international destinations. ICT competency and the latest social media knowledge are key to a successful homestay business. ICT competencies improve homestay operators' overall business skills. The enhancement of business skills assists homestay operators to develop appealing marketing strategies to entice customers.

The well-trained Malaysian younger generation can promote rural community-based homestays on social media platforms to encourage foreign tourists, as rural homestays have a unique Malaysian appeal. There is a need to establish linkages between homestay owners with technology and various tools of digital media to explore the possibilities of further growth and development in the rural homestay sector. The digitalization of the homestay business operations would enable the operators to promote their business and complete their transactions within a click away. The study also reveals that policymakers should aim to improve comprehensive ICT understanding through regular training thereby it will increase the number of ICT users in the rural tourism sector. The focus should be on transformative and transactional results in the wider community. It also promotes other rural tourism products like Agri-tourism.

#### **5.4.6. Sustainable tourism marketing is the key antecedent of homestay brand equity**

Sustainable tourism marketing is the key antecedent of homestay brand equity. The marketing of rural homestays must be a true reflection of the sustainable offerings, this will generate sustainable perception and positive word of mouth by tourists. These marketing policies are suitable for building homestays' business brands with local cultural attributes, so rural community-based homestays can employ these policies for their competitive advantage, likewise, policymakers can also use mass marketing for the holistic expansion of rural community-based homestays, in tourism exhibitions, governments official websites and Tourism Malaysia campaigns. Effective sustainable tourism marketing impacts homestay branding, this brand equity ultimately results in loyalty and trust with tourists that evokes a favourable experience and image.

#### **5.4.7. Importance of political support by local authorities**

Local tourism development policies and planning in Malaysia show a strong central government influence. local authorities familiar with these policies can cooperate with the central government in promoting sustainable tourism development. In addition, policy and planning also need to ensure a balance between the use of local resources and future tourism development to promote sustainable tourism. The local authorities help in local partnerships and collaborative arrangements. These partnerships, particularly between the tourism businesses, appear to be cooperative and positively impact commercial success and local sustainable tourism development. Homestay's social networking is also vital for its business success and local development. Tourists, homestays, and the local political authorities are major stakeholders of this social network.



## **5.5. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Despite the relevant theoretical and practical implications of the study, some limitations must be acknowledged. The selected constructs and variables were based on the literature review however this selection is somewhat limited, other critical variables and constructs may exist to achieve further insights. To increase the generalizability of the findings, more empirical studies by using a larger sample size can be conducted. In this manner, conclusions might be validated with new longitudinal research to identify changes over time and get more insights into cause-and-effect relationships. A better assessment of the relationships between ICT competency, sustainability marketing practices, Political support by local authorities, and brand equity of homestays could be accumulated if additional perspectives were looked at.

In the current study, the quantitative research method is used due to its numerous advantages, however, future studies can use the Qualitative research method as it is primarily inductive and explorative in its procedures. The use and acceptance of qualitative research can help towards a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political connectivity within and for tourism (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Moreover, qualitative inquiry provides more richness to tourism research (Botterill, 2001).

## **5.6. Future Research**

There are several areas of future research that researchers can pursue taking this study as the initial point. There are several opportunities to extend this study and investigate similar complex models.

This study suggests that there is a need to further investigate the effectiveness of the model by collecting data from other competitive cities and countries as the data of this study is limited to Malaysia. Further, the relationship between ICT competency, Sustainable tourism marketing (Environmental, CSR and Economic), Political support by local authorities and Brand equity of homestays were examined using SEM. Although SEM is known to be one of the powerful techniques in measuring the causal relations among latent and observed variables, future studies should examine the similar relationship using other techniques to see if a similar finding can be generated.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic had drastically impacted the tourism industry especially rural tourism, due to the immense and exceptional decline in tourism demand (Gössling et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020). Tourism is deemed to be the hardest sector hit by the pandemic (UNWTO, 2020). The current COVID-19 outbreak and the high risk of future pandemics have given rise to new challenges for sustainable tourism development (Streimikiene et al., 2021). In Malaysia, homestay income declined from RM. 29,662,211.60 in 2019 to RM. 9,124,122.66 in 2020 due to COVID 19 pandemic (MOTAC, 2021). Future studies should address governmental support and relief programs to support the quick recovery of small rural tourism enterprises including community-based homestays during and after post-COVID-19 crises, consequently contributing to sustainable tourism development. Also, studies on governmental nonfinancial support (training programs on strategic planning, business recovery, psychological handling of crises) for small tourism enterprises will be beneficial.

## **5.7. Summary**

This chapter started with recapping the research questions, objectives, and hypotheses. Further, this chapter discussed the key findings of the research. In key findings, theoretical and practical implications were thoroughly discussed. In the practical implications sections, the study provided Key findings, Implications for Policy Makers, Implications for Practitioners, and research impacts. Finally, the chapter provided Study's Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research.

The study mainly highlighted sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity importance in Malaysian rural community-based homestays. This study too highlights the pivotal role of "Political support by local authorities" in sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity relationships, as local authorities are the key stakeholders in rural tourism and their role is vital in the sustainable transformation of rural tourism.

The study outcomes suggest that adopting TBL principles improve rural tourism stakeholders' relationship, devises comprehensive decision making, increases destination competitiveness and broadens market opportunities. Additionally, this study expands the TBL in the field of rural community-based tourism by specifically targeting homestays registered with MOTAC as rural homestay products are an effective way to achieve Malaysian and United Nations' sustainability goals.

The main contribution of the study's theoretical model relates to "Analysing how ICT competency improves sustainability tourism marketing and Inclusion of Political support by local authorities". In addition to testing the theoretical model, the study also tested the moderating effects of "political

support by local authorities” in the model. The study findings set strategic directions for Malaysian tourism planners at the regional and local level, rural community-based tourism product owners/managers/operators, and marketers to work on:

- Tourism policies at the regional and local levels.
- Rural community-based homestays sustainability.
- Homestays licensing.
- Homestay operators training and development.
- ICT training.
- Marketing and branding of homestays.

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## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS IN ENGLISH

### PART A

#### RESPONDENT'S BACKGROUND

**1 Gender**

Male

Female

**4 How many homestay units do you own?**

One

Two

Three

More than three

**2 The nationality of the tourist who usually stays in your homestay**

Local

Foreign

**5 How long have you been in the homestay business**

less than 1 year

2 to 3 years

3 to 4 years

4 to 5 years

More than 5 years

**3 Homestay Location**

**6 How many types of rooms do you provide**

Klang Valley	<input type="checkbox"/>	Single	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pahang	<input type="checkbox"/>	Double	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pulao Pinang	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dorm type	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

**INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) COMPETENCY**

- 1 We have employees who are knowledgeable in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (e-g. Computers, smartphones, printers etc.)
- 2 We are very knowledgeable about the latest ICT used in accommodation services
- 3 We know how to establish communication links with our current customers through the latest social media platforms (e-g. Facebook, Instagram etc.)
- 4 We know how to establish communication links with our potential customers through the latest social media platforms (e-g. Facebook, Instagram etc.)
- 5 We routinely access market information (tourist trends and requirements) from outside our databases (e-g. www.Agoda.com, www.Booking.com etc.).
- 6 We have a set of procedures for collecting customer information from online accommodation sources (e-g Airbnb, Agoda etc.).
- 7 We utilize decision-support systems (social media, mobile apps etc.) frequently when it comes to managing customer information.
- 8 We rely on the ICT (e-g. reservation software, property management software etc.) to store, and process information for our homestay accommodation.
- 9 We have employed an employee/ executive whose main duty includes the management of our ICT (e-g. reservation software, property management software).

- 10 We budget a significant amount of funds for new ICT every year (e.g. new reservation software, property management software if required).

## **SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MARKETING**

### **MEASUREMENT ITEMS**

#### **Economic sustainable tourism marketing**

1. We are committed to improving the welfare of the communities in which we operate (e.g., providing self-employment opportunities and reducing poverty by employment and business creation etc.).
2. We actively participate in socio-cultural events (e.g., traditional games, traditional dances and performances, traditional cuisines, and traditional arts)
3. We encourage our employees to participate in voluntary activities.
4. We provide fair treatment of employees (without discrimination and abuse, regardless of gender, race, origin, or religion).
5. We provide training opportunities for employees

#### **Corporate social responsibility**

6. We provide stable job opportunities for employees.
7. We provide job promotion opportunities for employees.
8. We help to solve social problems (e-g. Eradicating poverty through the generation of employment opportunities, income-generating activities to women and rural folks socially and economically).
9. We have invested in our homestay seeing a better future for coming generations (e-g. under-privileged sections of the society such as fishermen, rural women etc.).
10. We make investments to create employment opportunities for future generations.

#### **Environment sustainable tourism marketing**

11. We protect the overall environment.
12. We communicate our environmental practices to our customers when they arrive.
13. We communicate our environmental practices to our customers during their stay.



14. We play a role in society that goes beyond mere profit generation (e.g., increasing awareness and understanding of environmental and natural resources conservation, water and air pollution, and protection of rainforests).
15. We use renewable energy in a productive process compatible with the environment (e-g. solar panels for power generation and heating).
16. We participate in the environmental certifications (e-g Green label certification, eco-label etc.).
17. We target sustainable homestay growth (e-g. growth in social, environmental, political and economic aspects of life in rural areas).

## **POLITICAL SUPPORT BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

### **MEASUREMENT ITEMS**

1. Local residents are encouraged to participate in the tourism planning process.
2. Stakeholders are encouraged to collaborate in the establishment of tourism policies.
3. Stakeholders (e-g. resident representative councils) are cooperating with the rural government (District Council) at every level of Tourism planning.
4. We are involved in a public-private sector partnership (e-g. a partnership between resident representative councils, NGOs, and the District council).
5. We are aware of the meaning of sustainable tourism.
6. We are aware of the implications of sustainable tourism.
7. We collaborate during the execution of local ideas in community/ site management.
8. Most residents and the district council are involved in two-way communication.
9. Most residents are engaged in conservation projects at the local level.
10. Most residents are involved in conservation projects at the regional level.
11. Affordable funding resources are available for homestay operators (e-g. Special Tourism Fund (STF) or Tourism Infrastructure Fund).

## **BRAND EQUITY OF HOMESTAY**

### **MEASUREMENT ITEMS**

1. Tourists can recognize our homestay among other competing operators because of our environmental commitments.

2. Tourists are aware of our homestay because of its environmental reputation.
3. Tourists are aware of our intent to protect the environment and to ensure sustainability.
4. Our homestay is regarded as the best benchmark of environmental commitments.
5. Our homestay is preferred by tourists.
6. Our homestay is well-known.
7. Our homestay is professional about environmental reputation.
8. Our homestay is successful in environmental performance.
9. Tourist prefers to stay in our homestay because of its environmental practices.
10. Our homestay is established on environmental concerns.
11. Our homestay is trustworthy about environmental promises.
12. The tourist intends to stay in our homestay again.

## QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS IN BAHASA MELAYU

### SOAL SELIDIK

#### LATAR BELAKANG RESPONDEN

**1 Jantina**

Lelaki

Perempuan

**4 Berapa unit inap desa yang  
dipunyai tuan/puan?**

Satu

Dua

Tiga

Lebih daripada tiga

<p><b>2 Kewarganegaraan pelancong yang datang ke inap desa</b></p> <p>Warga tempatan <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Warga asing <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p><b>5 Berapa lama tuan/puan berkecimpung dalam inap desa?</b></p> <p>Kurang daripada 1 tahun <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>2 hingga 3 tahun <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>3 hingga 4 tahun <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>4 hingga 5 tahun <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Lebih daripada 5 tahun <input type="checkbox"/></p>
<p><b>3 Lokasi inap desa</b></p> <p>Lembah Klang <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Pahang <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Pulau Pinang <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p><b>6 Jenis bilik yang ditawarkan</b></p> <p>Single <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Double <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Dorm <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Lain-lain <input type="checkbox"/></p>

**KEMAHIRAN TEKNOLOGI MAKLUMAT DAN KOMUNIKASI (ICT)**

- 1 Kami mempunyai pekerja yang berpengetahuan dalam Teknologi Maklumat dan Komunikasi (ICT) (contohnya komputer, telefon pintar, pencetak dsb.)
- 2 Kami mengetahui dengan mendalam tentang ICT terkini yang digunakan dalam perkhidmatan penginapan.

- 3 Kami tahu bagaimana untuk berhubung dengan pelanggan semasa kami menerusi media sosial terkini (contohnya Facebook, Instagram dsb.)
- 4 Kami tahu bagaimana untuk berhubung dengan orang yang berpotensi menjadi pelanggan menerusi media sosial terkini (contohnya Facebook, Instagram dsb.)
- 5 Kami sentiasa mendapatkan maklumat pasaran (arah aliran dan keperluan pelancong) daripada luar pengkalan data kami (contohnya [www.agoda.com](http://www.agoda.com), [www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com) dsb.)
- 6 Kami mempunyai tatacara yang telah ditetapkan untuk mengumpul maklumat pelanggan daripada sumber penginapan atas talian (contohnya Airbnb, Agoda dsb.)
- 7 Kami menggunakan sistem yang menyokong keputusan (media sosial, app telefon pintar dsb.) dengan kerap apabila menguruskan maklumat pelanggan.
- 8 Kami bergantung kepada ICT (contohnya perisian membuat tempahan, perisian mengurus bangunan dsb.) untuk menyimpan dan memproses maklumat penginapan di inap desa kami.
- 9 Kami menggaji pekerja/eksekutif yang antara tugas utamanya adalah menguruskan ICT (perisian membuat tempahan, perisian mengurus bangunan dsb.)
- 10 We menetapkan jumlah belanjawan yang besar untuk membeli perisian ICT baharu setiap tahun (contohnya perisian membuat tempahan yang baharu, perisian mengurus bangunan yang baharu dsb.) jika diperlukan.

## **PEMASARAN KELESTARIAN**

1. Kami beriltizam untuk meningkatkan kebajikan komuniti di mana kami beroperasi (contohnya menawarkan peluang pekerjaan sendiri dan mengurangkan kemiskinan dengan mewujudkan peluang kerja, peluang perniagaan dsb.)
2. Kami melibatkan diri secara aktif dalam acara sosiobudaya (contohnya permainan tradisional, tarian/persembahan tradisional, juadah tradisional dan seni tradisional).
3. Kami menggalakkan pekerja untuk mengambil bahagian dalam kerja sukarela.
4. Kami memberikan layanan sama rata kepada semua pekerja (tanpa diskriminasi dan berat sebelah, tidak kira jantina, kaum, keturunan atau agama).
5. Kami memberikan peluang latihan kepada pekerja.
6. Kami memberikan peluang pekerjaan yang stabil kepada pekerja.
7. Kami memberikan peluang kenaikan pangkat kepada pekerja.

8. Kami membantu menyelesaikan masalah sosial (contohnya membasmi kemiskinan dengan mewujudkan peluang pekerjaan dan aktiviti menjana pendapatan dalam kalangan wanita dan penduduk luar bandar).
9. Kami melindungi alam sekitar secara keseluruhannya.
10. Kami menyampaikan maklumat tentang amalan melindungi alam sekitar kepada pelanggan sebaik mereka tiba.
11. Kami menyampaikan maklumat tentang amalan melindungi alam sekitar kepada pelanggan sepanjang penginapan mereka.
12. Kami memainkan peranan dalam masyarakat melampaui mendapatkan keuntungan semata-mata (contohnya meningkatkan kesedaran dan kefahaman tentang alam sekitar dan pemeliharaan sumber semula jadi, pencemaran air dan udara, dan melindungi hutan hujan).
13. Kami menggunakan tenaga diperbaharui dalam proses pengeluaran yang mesra alam sekitar (contohnya panel suria untuk menjana tenaga dan pemanasan).
14. Kami mengambil bahagian dalam persijilan alam sekitar (contohnya persijilan label Hijau, eko-label dsb.)
15. Kami menyasarkan perkembangan inap desa secara lestari (contohnya perkembangan aspek sosial, alam sekitar, politik dan ekonomi dalam kehidupan luar bandar).
16. Kami membuat pelaburan dalam inap desa dengan harapan melihat masa hadapan yang lebih baik untuk generasi akan datang (contohnya golongan masyarakat yang daif seperti nelayan, wanita luar bandar dsb.)
17. Kami membuat pelaburan untuk mewujudkan peluang pekerjaan kepada generasi akan datang.

## **SOKONGAN POLITIK OLEH PIHAK BERKUASA TEMPATAN**

1. Penduduk tempat digalakkan untuk melibatkan diri dalam proses perancangan pelancongan.
2. Pemegang taruh digalakkan untuk bekerjasama dalam menetapkan dasar pelancongan.
3. Pemegang taruh (contohnya jawatankuasa kampung/persatuan penduduk) bekerjasama dengan pihak berkuasa pada setiap peringkat perancangan pelancongan.
4. Kami terlibat dalam perkongsian awam-swasta (contohnya perkongsian antara jawatankuasa kampung/persatuan penduduk, badan NGO dan pihak berkuasa).
5. Kami tahu makna pelancongan lestari.
6. Kami mempunyai kesedaran akan natijah pelancongan lestari.
7. Kami bekerjasama semasa pelaksanaan idea tempatan dalam komuniti/pengurusan tapak.
8. Kebanyakan penduduk dan pihak berkuasa berkomunikasi secara dua hala.
9. Kebanyakan penduduk mengambil bahagian dalam projek pemuliharaan di peringkat tempatan.
10. Kebanyakan penduduk terlibat dalam projek pemuliharaan di peringkat serantau.
11. Sumber pembiayaan yang berpatutan boleh didapati untuk pengendali inap desa (contohnya Dana Khas Pelancongan atau Dana Prasarana Pelancongan)

## **EKUITI JENAMA INAP DESA**

1. Pelancong mengenali inap desa kami kerana iltizam kami dalam penjagaan alam sekitar berbanding inap desa pesaing.
2. Pelancong mengetahui tentang inap desa kami kerana reputasi penjagaan alam sekitar.
3. Pelancong sedar akan niat kami melindungi alam sekitar dan memastikan kelestarian.
4. Inap desa kami dianggap penanda aras terbaik dalam iltizam penjagaan alam sekitar.
5. Inap desa kami menjadi pilihan pelancong.
6. Inap desa kami sangat dikenali ramai.
7. Inap desa kami bersikap profesional dalam menjaga reputasi penjagaan alam sekitar.

8. Inap desa kami berjaya menunjukkan prestasi dalam penjagaan alam sekitar.
9. Pelancong memilih untuk menginap di inap desa kami kerana amalan penjagaan alam sekitar kami.
10. Inap desa kami ditubuhkan atas dasar keprihatinan terhadap alam sekitar.
11. Inap desa kami boleh dipercayai berkenaan janji kami menjaga alam sekitar.
12. Pelancong berhasrat untuk datang ke inap desa kami semula.

## APPENDIX B: ICVI TEST

Total Agreement=40, S-CVI/UA= 0.74

Item Description	Rater 1	Rater 2	Rater 3	Rater 4	Rater 5	Rater 6	Rater 7	Rater 8	Rater 9	Rater 10	Rater 11	Rater 12	Number Agreement	I-CVI	Interpretation	S-CVI/Ave
Item 1	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	0.94
Item 2	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 3	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 5	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 6	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 7	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 8	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 9	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 10	3	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	3	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 11	3	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	3	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 12	3	3	4	3	4	1	3	3	4	3	4	1	10	0.83	Appropriate	
Item 13	4	4	2	4	3	4	4	4	2	4	3	4	10	0.83	Appropriate	
Item 14	3	4	4	4	4	2	3	4	4	4	4	2	10	0.83	Appropriate	
Item 15	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 16	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 17	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	
Item 18	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate	



Item 19	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 20	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 21	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 22	4	2	4	2	4	4	4	2	4	2	4	4	8	0.67	Eliminated
Item 23	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 24	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 25	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 26	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 27	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 28	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 29	3	3	4	3	4	2	3	3	4	3	4	2	10	0.83	Appropriate
Item 30	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 31	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 32	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 33	4	3	4	2	4	4	4	3	4	2	4	4	10	0.83	Appropriate
Item 34	4	3	4	2	4	4	4	3	4	2	4	4	10	0.83	Appropriate
Item 35	3	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	12	1	Appropriate
Item 36	2	3	4	3	4	2	2	3	4	3	4	2	8	0.67	Eliminated
Item 37	3	3	4	3	4	2	3	3	4	3	4	2	10	0.83	Appropriate
Item 38	3	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	12	1	Appropriate
Item 39	3	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	12	1	Appropriate
Item 40	3	2	4	2	4	3	3	2	4	2	4	3	8	0.67	Eliminated
Item 41	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 42	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 43	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 44	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 45	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate

Item 46	4	3	4	2	4	4	4	3	4	2	4	4	10	0.83	Appropriate
Item 47	4	3	4	2	4	4	4	3	4	2	4	4	10	0.83	Appropriate
Item 48	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 49	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 50	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 51	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 52	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	12	1	Appropriate
Item 53	4	2	4	2	4	4	4	2	4	2	4	4	8	0.67	Eliminated
Item 54	4	3	4	2	4	4	4	3	4	2	4	4	10	0.83	Appropriate

## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

1. Janjua, Z. U. A., Krishnapillai, G., & Rahman, M. (2021). A Systematic Literature Review of Rural Homestays and Sustainability in Tourism. *SAGE Open*, *11*(2), 21582440211007117. (ISSN: 21582440, IF=1.356).
2. Janjua, Z.U.A., Krishnapillai, G. and Rehman, M. (2022), "Importance of the sustainability tourism marketing practices: an insight from rural community-based homestays in Malaysia", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, Emerald Publishing. Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTI-10-2021-0274>. (Indexed in Scopus, Emerging Sources Citation Index (Clarivate Analytics) (ESCI), and EBSCO databases. [ISSN: 2514-9792]).
3. Enhancing brand equity through sustainable tourism marketing: A study on homestays in Malaysia: **Accepted in “Asian Academy of Management Journal” By the Asian Academy of Management (AAM) And Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia. (Indexed in Scopus, Emerging Sources Citation Index (Clarivate Analytics) (ESCI), and EBSCO databases. [ISSN: 1394-2603 (Print) | 2180-4184 (Online)].**

4. How COVID-19 is shaping tourism industry: A Systematic Literature Review and Content Analysis. **Under review in SAGE open.**

### **Conference Proceedings**

1. Information and communication technology (ICT) competency and sustainable tourism marketing, 5th Asia International multidisciplinary conference, 9-10 April 2021. Malaysia. REF: AIMC-2021-EBM-227
2. Domestic travel intention post-COVID-19 pandemic – what matters the most to millennials? 5th Asia International multidisciplinary conference, 9-10 April, Malaysias

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Form Title: TURNITIN ORIGINALITY REPORT VERIFICATION FOR POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMME DISSERTATION/THESIS			
Form Number: FM-IPSR-PSU-022	Rev No.: 1	Effective Date: 06/12/2021	Page No.: 1 of 1

Name of Candidate	Zain ul Abedin Janjua
Candidate ID.	17ABD05658
Name of Main Supervisor	Dr Gengeswari Krishnapillai
Programme	Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
Title of Dissertation / Thesis	Enhancing brand equity through sustainability marketing and ICT: A study on homestays in Malaysia

The following are the required parameters of originality and limits approved by UTAR:

- (i) Overall similarity index is 20% and below
- (ii) Matching of individual sources listed must be less than 1% each
- (iii) Matching texts in continuous block must not exceed 8 words
- (iv) Parameters (i) – (ii) shall exclude quotes, bibliography and text matches which are less than 8 words

*\*Note: Attach a copy of the originality report with this form.*

### VERIFICATION BY MAIN SUPERVISOR

Overall similarity index (%)	<b>14%</b>	<b>Supervisor's Comments</b> (Compulsory if parameters of originality exceed the limits approved by UTAR)  <b>The parameters are within the limits set by UTAR</b>
Similarity by source (%):		
• Internet Sources	<b>9%</b>	
• Publications	<b>9%</b>	
• Student Papers	<b>5%</b>	
Number of individual sources listed with more than 1% similarity	<b>none</b>	



-----  
 (Signature of Main Supervisor)

-----22-09-2022-----

(Date)

### VERIFICATION BY INSTITUTE OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH (IPSR)

Parameters of originality and limits are in line with the requirements of UTAR    YES     NO

Signature:  \_\_\_\_\_

Name: Nurul Akmar

Date: 27/10/2022

# 12 Sept 22 (evening)

*by Zain Ul Abedin Janjua*

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**Submission date:** 12-Sep-2022 05:30PM (UTC+0500)

**Submission ID:** 1897907568

**File name:** Turnitin\_Report\_Zain\_ul\_Abedin\_Janjua.docx (383.03K)

**Word count:** 29198

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## ABSTRACT

### **6** ENHANCING BRAND EQUITY THROUGH SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING AND ICT: A STUDY ON HOMESTAYS IN MALAYSIA

**Zain ul Abedin Janjua**

Tourism stands to be gravely undermined by the effects of unsustainable growth; the tourism industry is still struggling to fully incorporate sustainable development in its practices. Addressing the concerns on sustainable rural tourism development, **2** this study examined the antecedent and consequent relationship between Information and communication technology (ICT) competency, sustainability tourism marketing, and brand equity in the context of rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. This study also examined the political support of Malaysian local authorities and how **49** this support benefits sustainable tourism marketing practices. A self-administered questionnaire was employed to collect responses, data were collected from 180 homestay operators. Homestay operators from Kuala Lumpur/ Selangor, Pahang, and Pulau Pinang, Malaysia participated in the study. **4** The purpose of using the questionnaire in the current research was to generalize data from a sample of homestays located in these three states. To test **15** research hypotheses a structural equation modelling approach was applied. **27** Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Smart PLS 3 software was used for statistical analysis. The study findings suggest that the antecedents (ICT competency, **1** sustainable tourism marketing), the consequent (brand equity), and the moderator (**1** political support by local authorities) have a significant relationship. The study likewise recommends sustainability tourism marketing as a strategic tool to promote sustainable rural tourism development. Tourism development acceptable

to all stakeholders that cover profit, people and planet aspect of sustainability is essential <sup>134</sup> in the new normal post-COVID-19 pandemic. Also, a synergy between three aspects of sustainability and ICT competency is vital for achieving longevity in tourist firms' brand equity. This study provides a unique contribution to the tourism body of knowledge by introducing <sup>1</sup> political support by local authorities as a moderator in <sup>2</sup> sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity relationship. Rural community-based homestays can employ tailor-made promotion policies for the development of homestays' business brands; likewise, policymakers can apply undifferentiated promotion policies for the holistic expansion of the sustainable homestay <sup>146</sup> market.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Research background

Sustainability marketing uses marketing skills and techniques to understand market requirements, in planning new sustainable products and identifying new credible means of communication to bring behavioural transformation (Font & McCabe, 2017). The marketing team can become an advocate for sustainability, they shape a corporate personality around sustainability and they communicate with strategic stakeholders in changing their perception and behaviour toward sustainability (Soat, 2018). Without taking steps toward sustainability, marketing will keep on driving worldwide emergencies connected to climate change, poverty, food deficiencies, oil depletion, and species elimination, rather than handling them (Martin & Schouten, 2015).

The execution of a sustainable policy remains difficult besides challenging due to some flaws such as the lack of clear objectives and policy instruments, and uncertainty linked with the perception of sustainability, making it critical <sup>9</sup> to communicate the idea in an accessible way, particularly for some stakeholders that have limited resources to integrate sustainability into their continuous operations (Fayos-Solà & Cooper, 2019). Firms are trying to integrate sustainability into their overall strategy, yet it is challenging for them to keep up with the sustainability viewpoint after some time because of issues including cost and competition pressure, changes in leadership and less knowledge at lower-level management <sup>40</sup> about the environmental and social impact of their activity (Soat, 2018).



Sustainable development practices are critical in empowering Malaysia is turning into a leading country in the 21st century. In October 2015 Malaysian stock exchange Bursa Malaysia launched a new sustainability system for its publicly listed companies. This commands every single listed company to issue sustainability reports in stages over three years. This is a strong sign of the progress made by Malaysian regulators in understanding and by applying the idea of sustainability in businesses, Malaysia can play its part in <sup>149</sup> the United Nations sustainable development objectives and succeed in the country's 11th Malaysia Plan (11MP). The tourism industry is a competitive, dynamic, and important industry in Malaysia. In 2019, 26.10 million tourists visited Malaysia with RM 86.10 billion in tourist receipts (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019, tourist arrivals decreased and in 2020 only 4.33 million tourists visited Malaysia with RM 12.7 billion in tourist receipts (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). <sup>71</sup> The outbreak of COVID-19 has hugely and adversely impacted Malaysia's tourism industry, due to <sup>79</sup> travel restrictions imposed by the Malaysian government. This downward trend is expected in 2021 also. however, after a successful vaccination roll-out, the tourism industry is expected to fully recover by end of 2022 (Mohd Halmee, 2021).

Before the outbreak, the Malaysian tourism accommodation sector performed an important function in both rural and urban tourism settings. As it is at the centre of tourists' exploration of urban and rural environments. The government extensively support rural community-based homestays product in rural Malaysia, as it is recognized as a rural tourism development tool. <sup>66</sup> Rural Malaysia is home to 7.3 million people, and they live in 26,400 villages across the country (Adnan, 2019). Under the rural tourism master plan and a national plan for rural development, the

Malaysian homestay programme is designed to motivate rural communities' participation in the tourism sector (Yu, Liu, & Chang, 2020). According to MOTAC, in the Malaysian homestay programme, operators provide tourists with a kampung or traditional village life experience. The kampung homestays provide a village-style living to tourists. Homestays are selected carefully and conform to strict MOTAC guidelines to instigate the finest Malaysian experience. All homestay tourism activities are authentically Malaysian like preparing traditional food, harvesting fruits, feeding animals, indulge in traditional games (kite flying, top spinning and congkak). Tourists can also explore natural surroundings, and join cultural events (traditional dances, mock weddings). The rural community-based homestay product is an element of the larger hospitality industry, having the special aspects of inseparability, variability, and intangibility making the shaping of brand equity especially pertinent (González-Mansilla, Berenguer-Contrí, & Serra-Cantallops, 2019; Cho, Bonn, & Jung, 2021).

## **1.2. Research problem**

Tourism positions to be extremely diluted by the effects of unsustainable development systems, with exceeding carrying limits, global warming, the centralization of wealth to a few and an uncertain future for other people (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Rosato, Caputo, Valente, & Pizzi, 2021). The tourism industry is still struggling to fully incorporate sustainable development in its practices, though there is a valuable line of research and practices in the marketing literature on responsible consumption and sustainable concerns (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has exaggerated this problem, and the health and economic calamity caused by this pandemic impact all activities and processes with unprecedented challenges and implications for

tourism industry sustainability (Vărzaru, Bocean, & Cazacu, 2021). Tourism has an array of well-documented destructive sustainability concerns (UNWTO & UN Environment, 2019, Gössling, 2020). Tourism development lacking sustainability possibly will cause damage to the atmosphere, culture, heritage, and economy (UNWTO & UN Environment, 2019). On one hand, tourism can be utilized for self-centred, exploitative, hedonistic and individualistic purposes and on the other hand, it is one of the enablers of learning, multicultural engagement, environmental gratefulness, and spiritual advancement (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Disregarding sustainability marketing in tourism <sup>132</sup> may result in producing permanent damage to the environment, culture, and society (Hatipoglu, Alvarez, & Ertuna, 2016). Similarly, exponential growth in the number of tourists has adverse environmental impacts caused by pollution, endangering natural heritage and irrational natural resource usage (Strugar, Boljevic, & Boljevic, 2017).

### **1.2.1. Malaysian rural tourism**

The rural tourism sector in Malaysia has shown remarkable growth and contributed to the country's economic growth, and local community's standard of living. In Malaysia, rural tourism products include indigenous tourism, ethnic tourism, agro-tourism, ecotourism, nature tourism, farm tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism and rural community-based homestays etc. (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, & Tangit, 2018). Malaysian rural tourism attracts both inbound and outbound tourists (Tan, Lee, & Fu, 2021). Rural tourism benefits the income of locals by providing employment opportunities, and also promotes the local products market, local's food and beverages, accommodation, transportation, and handicrafts (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2018). <sup>118</sup> In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, rural tourist destinations have gained new development

opportunities with a significantly lower risk of infection as compared to cities (Li et al., 2021),<sup>13</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive effect on rural tourism as an increasing number of tourists seek safe/low-risk destinations because of more secure travelling to non-dense rural tourism destinations compared to urban destinations (Seraphin & Dosquet, 2020; Vaishar & Štastna, 2020).<sup>54</sup> Rural tourism products provide an answer to the tourist's safety concerns<sup>54</sup> by offering open-air activities in non-overcrowded tourism destinations, and by allowing tourists to improve their mental and physical health (Huang et al., 2021). Likewise, rural tourism offers a significant number of products for post-COVID-19 sustainable tourism recovery e.g. Agro-tourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, heritage tourism, and cultural and nature-based tourism in rural destinations.<sup>38</sup> One of the most effective programs to expand rural community-based tourism is the homestay program (MOTAC, 2015; Janjua et al., 2021). It inspires<sup>6</sup> the rural community to get engaged in the tourism industry (Ma, Wang, Dai, & Ou, 2021). MOTAC has implemented several initiatives for rural tourism development (Chin, Law, Lo, & Ramayah, 2018).

### **1.2.2. Malaysian rural community-based homestay**

In spite of the immense growth of the Malaysian homestay program, this tourism product faces various new sustainability-related challenges (Ismail et al., 2016; Khan, Aziz, Saad, & Rahman; 2018; Pusiran, Janin, Marzuki, Boonyanmethaporn, 2021). Homestay offers available natural and cultural attractions to tourists (Ly, Leung, & Fong, 2021). Homestays are viewed as a significant part of community-based tourism (CBT) and signify an original locally run insight (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). CBT provides an alternative to mass tourism. Rural community-based homestay development is driven by the sustainable development principle (Pasanchay, & Schott, 2021).

Despite the significant role of homestays in CBT (Sen & Walter, 2020), and as a tool for sustainable rural development, so far there is a knowledge gap about the homestay's impact on rural sustainable development (Pasanchay, & Schott, 2021). Besides this many homestay establishments are difficult to withstand over time, as homestay operators lack the crucial marketing and branding knowledge, resources, and links to draw visitors (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019). Marketing and brand equity is a homestay's significant strategic asset (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017). By embedding, sustainability-oriented branding practices as an integral measure of their image homestays can draw customers (Vesal, Siahtiri, & O'Cass, 2021).

### **1.2.3. Tourism policies and Sustainability issues**

By and large, tourism firms solely focus on the economic side contrary to the “Triple bottom line” (TBL) concept which demands a uniform and balanced approach to environmental, economic, and social sides (Wise, 2016). In this sense, measures of improvement include indicators, for example, the number of tourist arrivals and economic receipts, without a more basic assessment of the genuine effects on the communities. Especially for developing countries, the tourism industry might represent “growth without prosperity”, where Government discusses the environment yet, importance is typically given to economic advancement over environmental well-being (Pandy & Rogerson, 2020). The existing tourism policies are lacking the requirement of sustainable tourism growth which is the community-building capability (level of competency, aptitude, and skills of the community) required collectively for positive sustained change (N'Dower, Moscardo, & Murphy, 2021).

#### **1.2.4. Stakeholders' participation in tourism policies**

The practice of stakeholder (public sector, private sector, tourists etc.) involvement as a facilitator for attaining sustainable tourism is naturally challenging due to conflicts over resource use between advocates of (economic wealth vs environmental conservation) (Hardy & Pearson, 2016). Today there is developing proof that sustainable market evolution is in progress, yet this change has not stayed up with the extending volume of scholastic research on sustainable tourism (Moyle et al., 2020). Dolnicar, Knezevic, & Grün, (2019) highlighted the percentage of tourists that purchase sustainable tourism products remains relatively limited.

The government regards tourism's economic contributions above all, what is considered a tourism approach is centred on how to expand incomes from tourists, and more particularly international tourists. Due to these deficiencies in public policies, the economic side of tourism has eclipsed the social dimensions of tourism by allowing tourism to be hijacked by those that pursue narrow agendas (Zolfani et al., 2015; Mihalic, Mohamadi, Abbasi, & Dávid, 2021). The tourism approach in Malaysia is centralized and it needs the efforts of the state and local levels to transform the strategy (Saad, Khalid, & Abidin, 2014). So, the lack of a durable approach for tourism promotion at the state level would influence the planning at the local level and may prompt the inability to operationalize the national tourism strategy (Saad et al., 2014).

Tourism is hardly at the front of public policy considerations as it is perceived as means to an end (i.e., backing to accomplishing these goals), not an end in itself (Walsh & Dodds, 2017).

### **1.2.5. Malaysian tourism policies**

Tourism planning at the national level does not clarify how the public's recommendations are incorporated into tourism policymaking processes (Marzuki, Hay, & James, 2012; Rasoolimanesh, Roldán, Jaafar, & Ramayah, 2017). The state and local government officials heavily control all decisions related to <sup>36</sup> tourism planning and development. In Malaysia, the involvement of public issues in the process of decision-making does not have considerable interest. The utilization of such practice is currently at the infancy stage (Marzuki et al., 2012; Balasingam, Bojei, Awang, & Radzi, 2017), only chances for community involvement occur in the preparation of the local and structure plans but still, the viability of community participation has been criticized (Marzuki et al., 2012; Hussin & Buchmann, 2019).

### **1.2.6. Tourism branding**

In the tourism business, the brand is the most powerful marketing weapon and an efficient brand strategy gives a key edge in increasingly competitive tourism markets. Execution of the <sup>2</sup> branding strategy is viewed as a defining moment for tourism firms (homestays) that endeavour to build a strong brand with a specific goal to enhance their market visibility, fortify competitiveness and boost economic efficiency (Mikulic, Milicevic, & Kresic, 2016). Sustainable tourism branding is an important brand equity driver (Gatti, Seele, & Rademacher, 2019). In the advent of the sustainable era, products' environmental performance to strengthen their brand equities has become more important for companies (Grubor & Milovnov, 2017). Consumer green sensitivities and likings, brand equity and the firms' sustainable practices are strongly related (Grubor &

Milovnov, 2017). Hence, sustainability marketing in tourism is a gateway toward the longevity of brand equity of tourism firms (homestays) (Liao et al., 2017).

### **1.2.7. ICT competency and tourism**

ICT provides an intrinsic dimension for an added reasonable sustainable, competitive economy and society (Janjua, Krishnapillai, & Rehman, 2021; Ramdani, Raja, & Kayumova, 2021). The development of ICT presents unprecedented opportunities for tourism and hospitality businesses (Law, Buhalis & Cobanoglu, 2014), ICT possibly produce a sustainable competitive advantage, however, not acknowledged as a “multi-functional tool” that can support practically every action in the industry (Šeric, Saura & Molla-Descals, 2016). Likewise, the role of ICT in facilitating tourism businesses to improve their abilities to address sustainability issues is less researched (Gouvea, Kapelianis & Kassicieh, 2018). The relationship between ICT and sustainable tourism has constantly drawn controversial views (Sigala, 2018). Because of the arguments that technological developments like (augmented reality, virtual reality, digital marketing etc.) make tourism a supporter or challenger of sustainability (Higgins-Desbiolles et.al, 2019). Despite that, many researchers are studying the relationship between sustainable tourism and the constructive effect of technological applications (Gossling, 2020). Still, these researches are limited in assessing how ICTs can cope with the existing and upcoming sustainable tourism challenges (Tham & Sigala, 2020), also tourism sustainability has become a challenge due to the emergence of <sup>139</sup>the COVID-19 pandemic (Fennell, 2021). Additionally, the presence of ICT in a high-level policymaking development is still scarce in numerous hospitality and tourism firms (Law, Buhalis & Cobanoglu, 2014; Janjua et al., 2021). The full utilization of ICT capabilities in tourism firms



is restricted because of management's motivation, approach, and financial condition instead of the technological limitations (Law, Buhalis & Cobanoglu, 2014; Hatefi Ardakani & Estehlaji, 2021).

### **1.2.8. Rural community-based homestays issues**

Most studies just examined the advancement of homestay, by and large, for example, homestay improvement, tourist homestay understanding, homestay operator's issues and other general viewpoints (Nor & Awang, 2018; Dey, Mathew, & Chee-Hua, 2020). The rural tourism positioning strategies have been developed from the point of view of a single stakeholder tourist and have neglected the local community's viewpoint; sustainable tourism is difficult to achieve when there is no support from the community (Artal-Tur et al., 2019). The sustainability aims are unattainable by targeting a single aspect or a specific stakeholder. It is necessary to note that sustainable tourism's definition includes the social, economic, and environmental aspects (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Malaysian public policies lack active involvement of communities in tourism development and homestay growth, and their impact on local communities following sustainable tourism standards (Falak, Chiun & Wee, 2014; Hanim et al., 2014; Balasingam, 2022).

Considering the community-based homestay businesses generally in the Asia Pacific and particularly in Malaysia, this study examined the relationship between ICT competency, sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. Also, the relationship between the Political support by Malaysian local authorities, sustainable tourism marketing practices and homestay brand equity were studied.

### 1.3. Research aim and objectives

#### 1.3.1. Research aim

The research aim underlined the obstacles to achieving sustainable tourism in Malaysia. Investigated the role of ICT in sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity in rural community-based homestays. The research also examined the local authority's political support in benefiting sustainability marketing and brand equity of homestays.

#### 1.3.2. Research questions

To address the research gaps discussed above following research questions were formulated.

- 1) What is the relationship between ICT competency and sustainability tourism marketing (environment, social and economic) in Malaysian homestay Operations?
- 2) What is the relationship between the environmental aspect of sustainable tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?
- 3) What is the relationship between the CSR aspect of sustainable tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?
- 4) What is the relationship between the economic aspect of sustainable tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity?
- 5) What is the role of political support by local authorities in the relationship between sustainability tourism marketing and brand equity in homestay operations?

### 1.3.3. Research objectives

The main objectives of the research are as follows.

- 1) To examine the relationship between ICT competency and sustainability tourism marketing practices in Malaysian homestay operations.
- 2) To examine the effect of the environmental aspect of sustainability tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity.
- 3) To examine the effect of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) aspect of sustainability tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity.
- 4) To examine the effect of the economic aspect of sustainable tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity.
- 5) To examine the role of political support by local authorities in the relationship between sustainability tourism marketing and Brand equity in homestay operations.

### 1.4. Theoretical significance

This research examined ICT competency, and the TBL sustainability theory in rural tourism in conjunction with brand equity and offered "political support by local authorities" as a novel construct. This integrated theoretical framework is a significant growth model for sustainable rural tourism and is associated with the idea of sustainable growth. This causal model is empirically tested to prove Sustainability marketing, ICT competency, and local authority's political support are vital instructive constructs of homestay brand equity. This research offered significant

theoretical understandings for tourism planners in rural areas determined to accomplish sustainability.

<sup>2</sup> This study allows us to better describe the triple bottom line theory when applied in juxtaposition with ICT competency, brand equity, and the newly introduced construct of Political support by local authorities. The triple bottom line theory appears <sup>138</sup> as a relevant framework to guide a rural community-based homestay product to enhance <sup>36</sup> the social, economic, and environmental sustainability dimensions. The theoretical model of study highlights the importance of the “ICT competency and Political support by local authorities” relationship with the three pillars of TBL, also the importance of these two in designing sustainable and durable rural community-based tourism brands.

<sup>2</sup> The model shows high levels of consistency between the theoretical design and the empirical results of its constructs, contributing to a new step in the tourism sustainability literature. The research presents a more complete model with “Political support by local authorities” construct inclusion, with the exclusion of this maintaining equilibrium, is hardly possible. Likewise, the model is not confined to a specific tourism setting and destination, this widens the causal model applicability. This research offered important theoretical understandings for the planners of rural tourism striving to accomplish sustainable tourism. This research added a significant theoretical contribution to Malaysian tourism where sustainability is being acknowledged as a valuable modern aspect.

### **1.5. Practical significance**

The tourism industry is interested in sustainable development that is acceptable to all stakeholders and covers profitability, people, and planet aspects of sustainability. Accomplishing sustainable tourism is a constant process and it involves continuous monitoring and employing the essential preventive and corrective measures whenever necessary. The research findings are in support of important implications for rural tourism policymakers and practitioners. Focus on cost-effectiveness, Ecological efficacy, Tourism policy incorporation (economic, environmental, and social goals), and accountability and transparency to accomplish Malaysian and sustainable tourism goals of the United Nations.

The study discusses Malaysian homestay licensing policies; For motivating the Malaysian youth flexibility is needed in the MOTAC's homestay licensing policy. This can be done by shortening the procedural delays in obtaining homestay licenses and permits. Targeted incentives and improvements in licensing policies will inspire Malaysian youth in starting rural homestays. Also, entrepreneurship education and skill development can be initiated in the Malaysian young generation.

To secure a budget for ICT equipment, training, and awareness programs for rural homestay operators cooperation between MOTAC, the Ministry of youth and the sports training institution is necessary. The rural community-based homestay marketing must provide a sustainable product image, this sustainable perception will produce personal recommendations by tourists. These sustainable marketing policies will help in creating a sustainable brand building for homestays, so operators can utilize sustainable branding for their competitive advantage. Similarly, tourism

policymakers can holistically expand by using mass marketing of homestays on governments' official websites, tourism Malaysia campaigns and tourism exhibitions.

In Malaysia central governments have a strong influence on local tourism development planning and policies. The local authorities and central governments can work together in sustainable tourism development, they also aid in collaborative arrangements and local partnerships. Particularly the cooperation between local tourism business create a synergy that results in commercial success and sustainable development at the local level.

Practically, this study contributed to policymaking as well as highlighted management practice implications for homestay operators. For long-lasting brand equity and performance synergy between all three aspects of sustainability and ICT competency is vital for homestay operators. So, this inquiry provided one of several ways to achieve long-term sustainable tourism development.

### **1.6. Research scope**

This study focused on the conceptual framework development, for <sup>2</sup> rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. This study also discussed homestays as an alternative form of rural community-based tourism product for sustainable development, homestays are more than (“bed and breakfast, or guest house”), where <sup>38</sup> the host’s culture become a new and unique experience for the tourists. Rural homestay variants include <sup>6</sup> farm stay, cultural homestay, leisure homestay, cottage homestay, agricultural homestay, and heritage homestay.

Rural community-based homestays registered with MOTAC stand for the social-economic development of the rural community, and they play an important part in sustainable tourism development. The study framework integrated knowledge from ICT, sustainable tourism marketing, and branding literature and was tested with homestay operators in Malaysia. The study was limited to data collection in Klang Valley, Pulau Pinang and Pahang, which are the topmost in the number of domestic and international tourists.

### 1.7. Definition of key terms

- Homestay: Rural community-based homestay registered with the MOTAC, Malaysia.
- CSR: Corporate Social Responsibilities by Tourist firms.
- Environment Sustainability: Homestays environment sustainability practices.
- Economic Sustainability: Homestays economic sustainability practices.
- Brand Equity: Homestays brand equity.
- Sustainable tourism marketing: Homestays sustainable marketing practices.
- ICT competency: Information and communication technology competency of homestays.
- Political support by local authorities: Political authority and responsibilities of local community representatives and government officials.
- TBL: Triple bottom line theory is a sustainability framework that measures a firm's success in profit, people, and the planet's key areas.
- RBV: Resource-based view, resources for competitive advantage
- TCE: Transaction cost economic perspective of a homestay.
- WTTC: World Travel and Tourism Corporation, Its international tourism body.

## 1.8. Thesis organization

The thesis organization section highlights study contents that are divided into five different chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the thesis subject and outlined the study's contextual background. <sup>11</sup> The study's research problem, study aims, and objectives were also provided. The study research approach adopted with theoretical and practical significance was highlighted. Chapter 2, introduced the theoretical foundation and important theories and discussed variables of interest and theoretical framework. Chapter 3 illustrated <sup>47</sup> the research methodology of the study. A suitable research approach was chosen from the proposed research philosophy. The quantitative research methods, questionnaire development, scale selection and data collection procedures are also outlined. Chapter 4 discussed the study results and findings.

The study developed an assessment model that evaluated the relationship between <sup>2</sup> ICT competency, sustainability tourism marketing, political support by local authorities, and homestay brand equity to achieve the study aims and objectives. This section also analysed survey data collected by questionnaires and presented the findings. Chapter 5 discussed key study findings and theoretical and practical implications. Moreover, also provided study limitations and future recommendations.

## <sup>4</sup> 1.9. Chapter Summary



This chapter outlined the thesis introduction. It introduced the study background and defined the research problem by focusing on research gaps from the extant literature. This chapter clarified the research problem, setting the research objectives as well as research questions to be achieved. Moreover theoretical, and practical significance and scope of research were discussed. Chapter two presents a literature review, all study variables are reviewed, and hypotheses development and research framework are discussed.

**LITERATURE REVIEW****2.1. Introduction**

Sustainability offers an enduring outlook of the future, one that stresses commitment to a set of moral ethics and principles, which direct responsibly and pleasantly acts, integrating the environmental, social and economic objectives. Sustainability is concerned with a balanced tactical approach with clear roles for all stakeholders, and also focuses on both present and future generations' right to the use of resources (Font & McCabe, 2017). Sustainability is defined as a procedure and tool to accomplish the expected sustainable development (Olawumi & Chan, 2018). There are challenges in achieving sustainable development due to the constraints forced by social concerns, technological innovation, and the capacity of the environment to accommodate human carbon footprints.

The United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 approved sustainability goals<sup>6</sup> “to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all as part of a new sustainable development agenda”, with detailed objectives to be completed by 2030. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 detailed objectives centre on “areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet”<sup>89</sup> (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) state that all countries should target economic, socio-cultural and environmental sustainability (UN, 2020). The development and administration of tourist destinations gradually need tools that permit a broader and fundamentally reasonable idea to categorize trends (Verma &

Raghubanshi, 2018) and encourage ventures for stable development (Torres-Delgado, Palomeque, Elorrieta, & Urgell, (2021). Consequently, it is impractical to devise a sole sustainable development plan for all countries or regions. Therefore, each country needs to develop localized sustainable development strategies and criteria but with an international objective in mind (Olawumi & Chan, 2018), according to standards set by <sup>14</sup> the United Nations.

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (UNWTO, 2005) classifies 12 distinct aspects of “sustainable tourism development” these aspects are associated with environmental, economic and social “pillars” of sustainability. Environmental sustainability requires managing and conserving non-renewable resources, likewise, minimizing air, water and land pollution and preserving the natural heritage and biological diversity. Economic sustainability represents making all economic activities cost-effective and creating prosperity at all levels of society. Likewise, creating a viable business environment for tourism businesses to flourish. Meanwhile, social sustainability means equal distribution of wealth, equal opportunities for all races and ethnic groups, and respecting human rights. Also, focusing on local communities’ development by respecting and recognizing different cultures and preventing all forms of exploitation.

The twelve aims for sustainable tourism marketing agenda are explained below:

- <sup>14</sup> **1) Economic Viability:** Safeguarding the suitability and attractiveness of tourism destinations and ventures.
- 2) Local Prosperity:** Expand the commitment that tourism income is utilized for the economic prosperity of host destinations; discourage financial leakage.

- 3) Employment Quality:** Support the tourism-related jobs to locals, with an equal level of pay, providing services and accessibility to all with no bias by sex, ethnicity, or disability.
- 4) Social Equity:** Look for equitable allocation of social and financial gains from tourism through equal distribution of income, services accessible to the poor, enhancing opportunities, income and benefiting the whole society.
- 5) Visitor Fulfilment:** Deliver a satisfying, safe, and fulfilling experience for guests, accessible to all with no distinction based on sexual orientation, ethnicity, and disability or in different ways.
- 6) Local Control:** Empower and involve local stakeholders in tourism administration and future tourism decision-making in their regions.
- 7) Community Wellbeing:** Prevent any form of mistreatment and social deprivation of locals. Preserve and reinforce the local community's quality of life, including access to assets and life support systems, and social structures.
- 8) Cultural Richness:** Regard and improve the history, true culture, customs, and uniqueness of locals.
- 9) Physical Integrity:** Preserve and upgrade the tourist sites in urban and countryside and avoid both visual and physical environment degradation.
- 10) Biological Diversity:** Conservation of wildlife and natural habitats.
- 11) Resource Efficiency:** Reduce the usage of rare and non-renewable resources during the execution and expansion of hospitality and tourism services and facilities.
- 12) Environmental Purity:** Reduce water, air and land contamination. Decrease waste generation by tourists and tourism firms.

According to (UNWTO, 2018) these sustainable tourism development aims are a combination of social, economic and environmental issues and impacts. The economic viability strongly advocates helping local people while preserving the local environment. Visitor fulfilment is providing tourism opportunities and meeting tourists' needs (a social intention), but it has importance in economic sustainability. Cultural richness is a social sustainability domain, but it has an environmental feature when dealing with construction and site-building. Community wellbeing is a social sustainability aspect however it is strongly linked to environmental resource management (e-g. freshwater access). Employment quality and social equity issues, directly relate to both social and economic issues (e-g. poverty alleviation).

## 2.2. Underlying theories

The important theories related to the study are discussed in subsequent sub-sections.

### 2.2.1. Transaction cost economics theoretical perspective

Transaction Cost Economics theory is an approach used to estimate the cost-effectiveness of institutional arrangements (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975). Transaction cost economics theory has remained an introductory theory for forecasting when businesses will commence tasks under their order or when they will leave the tasks to be executed in the marketplace (Williamson, 1975). From the customer's viewpoint, transaction cost economics issues are serious predictors of an individual's recognition and liking for e-commerce, purchase and repurchase transactions and loyalty to the transaction partner (Che et al., 2015; Hossain, Akter, & Rahman, 2021). An

organizational pledge to tourism sustainability provides access to different markets and clients (Connelly, Ketchen, & Slater, 2011).

Transaction cost economics theory recognizes the existence of expenses of undertaking a transaction, whether through the market or within a firm and states that the organizational method that will succeed is the one that reduces those transaction costs (Calveras & Orfila-Sintes, 2019). Transaction cost economics, in theory, describes why an individual or firm involved in a transaction selects a specific transaction partner instead of others (Che et al., 2015). According to the transaction cost economics perspective, <sup>40</sup> information and communication technologies (ICT) and procedures that decrease the expense of execution of sustainability activities will improve the probability of their adoption (Liang, Lin, & Hou, 2021).

### <sup>100</sup> 2.2.2. Theory of triple bottom line (TBL)

The idea of "Triple Bottom Line" (TBL) presented by Elkington (1998), proposed the requirement for a legitimate balance, among <sup>13</sup> the three parameters environmental, social, and economic to accomplish sustainability in organizations. As per the "Triple bottom line framework", the sustainability marketing dimensions are 1) people (social) and the planet (environment) and Profit (Economic) (Taylor & Hochuli, 2015). The execution of the theory of triple bottom line is a nonstop and iterative procedure that involves trade-offs between environmental, social and economic motivating forces and influences judgments within organizations and their business systems, and in the market and society (Nosratabadi et al., 2019). <sup>124</sup> The theory of the triple bottom line is a unique and novel belief, it makes companies responsible for their overall <sup>13</sup> impact on the

**environment and society**. The theory of triple bottom line negates traditional frameworks that focus only on the profit aspect, likewise, it motivates companies to inform their impact on “profits, people and the planet” aspects and adopt this integrated framework (Goh, Chong, Jack, & Faris, 2020).

Methodologies based on the “triple bottom line theory” are extensively acknowledged by academics, organizers, and companies in tourism. While preparing for future sustainable tourism policies methods based on TBL are well adapted and applied (Wise, 2016). The theory of triple bottom line dimensions is the fundamental sustainability pillar (Chalermchaikit & Kozak, 2021). UNWTO set up a tourism sustainability path by addressing environmental, economic and social obligations (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). According to the TBL, firms have to ensure their businesses respect society and the environment while making a profit (Elkington, 1998; Wise, 2020). The “theory of triple bottom line” embraces an added emphasis on profitability, to highlight the economic gains that resulted from <sup>117</sup> sustainability.

### **2.2.3. Institutional theory**

The **institutional theory** is an approach to realising management and organizational practices because of social as opposed to financial pressures. It has turned into a famous point of view in management theory due to its ability to explain organizational behaviours’ that challenge economic rationality (Kessler, 2013). According to Institutional theory, acceptance and preservation of numerous organizational practices are frequently more reliant on social demands for compliance and legality than on practical economic performance pressures (Kessler, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> For institutional scholars, "sustainability" is a socially built idea (Jennings & Zandbergen 1995; Kouhizadeh, Saberi, & Sarkis, 2021). Its significance and techniques are objectified and refined from time to time, and organizations become partners in this practice through their policies and approaches. <sup>8</sup> Pioneers in the development to execute sustainable practices will be influential in characterizing what legitimate is (Miska, Szócs, & Schiffinger, 2018). <sup>8</sup> Businesses that are accustomed to the altering nature of regulatory components as they identify with sustainability will be better situated to accommodate and may even have the capacity to be a part of establishing standards in the first place (Connelly et al., 2011).

According to Institutional theory, Businesses can develop their capability to continue and succeed by being conscious of and compatible with evolving industry developments and policy shifts around sustainability. There may be significance in imitation of effective sustainability advantages that a difficult to model by competitors. The external institutions affect "going sustainable" practices (Nguyen, 2021). Specifically, the institutional (norms and rules) outline the tourism firm's sustainable strategies and subsequently their sustainable performance (Stumpf & Swanger 2017).

#### <sup>8</sup> 2.2.4. Resource-based view (RBV) of the firm

"Resources" are defined by RBV scholars in numerous ways, but can include human, organizational, financial, and technological resources (Hofer & <sup>8</sup> Schendel 1978). <sup>8</sup> Marketing resources consist of market intelligence, customer networking, <sup>8</sup> brand equity, customer equity, and



channel relationships (Day 1994; Srivastava et al., 1998); and marketing communications, pricing, selling, and product development capabilities (Vorhies & Morgan, 2005).

RBV supports an 'inside-out' procedure. The procedure starts with an inside analysis that concentrates on firms' possession of different forms of resources and abilities which facilitate them to cultivate differing schemes (Javidan, 1998; Bianchi & Saleh, 2020). Competitive advantage is built on the possession of firm-specific resources (Lockett et al., 2009; Dagnino, Picone & Ferrigno, 2021), which take several features in that they must be: valuable; rare; inimitable, and non-substitutable ('VRIN') (Barney, 1991). Researchers studied RBV in different Tourism settings e-g Tourism firms (Romão, & Nijkamp, 2019), and destination competitiveness (Tseng, Lin, Lin, Wu, & Sriphon, 2019). Culinary tourism (Yousaf & Xiucheng, 2018). Destination Marketing Organization (Line, Runyan, & Gonzalez-Padron, (2019). etc.

According to RBV, Tourism RBV viewpoint, sustainability advantages that exist at the intersection of social, environmental, and economic concerns provide more competitiveness with the greatest chance of success hence market opportunities (Connelly, Ketchen, & Slater, 2011; (Lee, Che-Ha, & Alwi, 2021) Sustainability practices can deliver sustainable competitive advantage, it can be created through both internal and externally driven structural resources such as government financial support. Moreover, the branding and promotional efforts from local and central governments can create a sustainable competitive advantage in niche tourism products like rural homestays (Campbell & Kubickova, 2020). As organizations have limited resources, sustainability efforts must reflect that the resources are sustained and improved over time.

## 2.2.5 Application of theories

### 2.2.5.1. Transaction cost economics (TCE) theory

According to a TCE viewpoint, firms are expected to involve in product development, quality improvement and marketing with the least negative effects on society and the environment when economic justification is clear (Rudawska, 2018). ICT is included as an antecedent of sustainability initiatives by a tourist firm if it reduces the transaction costs of its adoption and implementation (Connelly et al., 2011). Many researchers emphasize using Transaction cost economics theory in different circumstances few are highlighted in table 1 below, showing TCE's importance.

**Table 1: Summary of past literature with TCE theory**

Study Title	Significant Arguments	Reference
Transaction Costs and Information Systems	The transaction cost economics (TCE) approach describes ICT as a tool that stands for information essentials, providing added information and information management control.	Cordella, 2006
	TCE method is a dominant theory that defines the perspective of information technology to increase information flow and decrease transaction costs, in this manner improving the productivity of the economic system.	Cordella, 2006
Multinational enterprises, internal governance, and industrial organization	The TCE theory has been a prominent example in the multinational firm evaluation, mainly to respond to the question of whether undertake an activity or not.	Teece, 1985

<p>33 The impact of information and communication technology adoption on multinational firm boundary decisions</p>	<p>ICT provides cost-effective means to access and process market information. So, a firm can directly reduce Market transaction and external coordination costs.</p>	<p>Chen &amp; Kamal, 2016.</p>
<p>A response to “Transaction Cost Economics on Trial Again”</p>	<p>TCE is the dominant analytical framework for IT Outsourcing research.</p>	<p>76 hermann et. al, 2016</p>
<p>The Impact of IT–Coordination Costs on Firm Size and Productivity: Transaction Cost Perspective</p>	<p>TCE is extensively used in describing organizational structures, markets and governance in diverse fields primarily due to the determinations of pioneer researchers.</p>	<p>Chen, Su, &amp; Hiele, 2017</p>
<p>Supply Chain Collaboration in Tourism: A Transaction Cost Economics Analysis</p>	<p>TCE has been applied to hospitality Supply Chain Management scenarios to explain the decision process of whether to implement in-house operations or outsource the operations instead.</p>	<p>Piboonrunroj &amp; Disney, 2015</p>

Table 1 above discussed important past studies and justified the adaptation of ICT in a different industrial setting, the importance of ICT competency is ratified by many past TCE research. The TCE, viewpoint guides tourism firms to adopt ICT in their operations. Moreover, the integrated use of ICT solutions increases a firm’s efficiency and sustainability, enriching the tourist experience and boosting the firm sustainable competitiveness (Yang, Lau, Lee, & Cheng, 2020).

### 2.2.5.2 Institutional theory

According to institutional theory, organizations are open systems deeply influenced by the external environment. The institutional environment includes rules & regulations, norms, and social beliefs that have considerable control over an organization's decision-making, goal setting and performance-making indicators (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Many researchers emphasize using Institutional theory in different circumstances few are highlighted in table 2 below, showing Institutional theory's importance.

**Table 2: Summary of past literature with institutional theory**

Study Title	Significant Arguments	Reference
3 Corporate social responsibility reporting in the cruise tourism industry: a performance evaluation using a new institutional theory-based model.	Corporate Social Responsibility can be theorised using institutional theory in the cruise industry.	de Grosbois, 2016.
95 Environmental sustainability and competitive advantage in a wine tourism micro-cluster	How institutional and appropriate resources impact the sustainable competitive advantage of "green" clusters situated in rural areas. With the value-adding framework on tourism micro-clusters.	Grimstad & Burgess, 2014.
83 Effects of formal institutions on the performance of the tourism sector in the	The study draws from institutional theory which incorporates the neo-institutional economic outlook and sociological outlook of institutions.	Roxas & Chadee, 2013.

Philippines: The mediating role of entrepreneurial orientation

Institutional context and hotel social responsibility	The connection between institutional theory and CSR in hotels with three, four- and five-stars categories situated in the Northern region of Portugal and Galicia (Spain).  The framework of the institutional theory has been verified in public organizations, such as municipalities, higher education sectors and hospitals.	Sanchez-Fernandez, Vargas-Sanchez, & Remoaldo, 2014.
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Table 2, above discuss important past studies and justifies firms adopting environmental, social, and economic sustainable practices. Due to the presence of institutions that influence goals, objectives, and performance indicators of organizations (e-g environmental institutions, NGOs etc.), tourism firms adopt sustainability. Likewise, the fundamental principles of competitiveness and sustainability and the extension of institutional regulations on social and environmental cohesion add value to the tourism industry's sustainable development (Estol, Camilleri, & Font, 2018).

### **2.2.5.3 Triple bottom line (TBL)**

A firm emphasis on sustainable marketing is now acknowledged as necessary for long-term societal and customer goals, organizations follow sustainable marketing strategies to balance social, environmental and economic goals to guarantee lasting growth, contribute to society and attract customers (Höckert, Rantala, García-Rosell, & Haanpää, 2020; Dyck & Manchanda, 2021). Many researchers emphasize using TBL in tourism settings few are highlighted in the table below.

**Table 3: Summary of past literature with TBL theory**

Study Title	Significant Arguments	Reference
<p>63 The Triple Bottom Line: A Framework for Sustainable Tourism Development</p>	<p>The triple bottom line (TBL) framework is adopted by Tourism development organizations to enhance sustainability.</p> <p>The TBL is a contemporary rational orientation, whereby firms not only apply a traditional economic growth strategy but also incorporate environmental and sustainable strategies.</p>	<p>Stoddard et. al., 2012.</p>
<p>32 The Practice of Triple Bottom Line in the Sustainability of Tourism: A Gender Perspective</p>	<p>Especially in sustainable tourism development in rural areas TBL is being increasingly used as an important framework.</p>	<p>Chalermchaikit &amp; Kozak, 2021.</p>
<p>90 The Triple Bottom Line: What Is It and How Does It Work?</p>	<p>Many profits and non-profit organizations and governments at federal, state, and local levels have adopted the TBL sustainability framework to evaluate their performance.</p> <p>TBL frameworks are also used by regulators for their actions or inactions to make society more sustainable.</p>	<p>Slaper &amp; Hall, 2011.</p>
<p>A sustainable tourism planning model: components and relationships</p>	<p>Sustainable tourism guidelines and sustainable management practices are applicable in all destinations, and tourism forms (mass tourism or various tourism segments) (WTO, 2007). All stakeholders in society are required to get involved in achieving a sustainable tourism process. Identification of important stakeholders is a must for sustainable tourism planning.</p>	<p>Padin, 2012.</p>
<p>Domestic tourists' mindset towards responsible tourism management: a case</p>	<p>Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) should consider TBL factors for the improvement</p>	<p>Amin, 2017.</p>

study on Cox's of tourists' positive attitudes to rural tourism  
Bazar, Bangladesh development.

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Table 3, above discusses past studies and highlights the importance of TBL theory in tourism and other industrial settings, TBL is the main theory in current research and emphasis using three (social, economic, and environmental) bottom lines for increasing performance hence homestays brand equity.

#### 2.2.5.4 Resource-based view (RBV)

According to the RBV firm's resources are limited so, competitive advantage can be provided by sustainability practices. How firms can maintain or renew resources through sustainability efforts is crucial (Connelly et al., 2011). Brand equity is an important source of competitive advantage. Many researchers emphasize using RBV in different organizational settings few are highlighted in the table below, showing RBV's importance.

**Table 4: Summary of past literature with RBV**

Study Title	Significant Arguments	Reference
Exploring a developing tourism industry: a resource-based view approach	The RBV underlines that firm capabilities and resources provide the crucial source of enduring competitive advantage when they are valuable and expensive to copy.  In the field of tourism, various studies emphasize the significance of coordination and capabilities, including marketing (Brand Equity, promotion,	Alonso, 2017

	3	distribution etc.), innovation, human, and quality capabilities as sources of competitiveness for tourism firms.	
3	The effects of quality and environmental management on competitive advantage: A mixed-methods study in the hotel industry	Environmental quality management provides a sustained competitive advantage.	72 Molina-Azorin, Tari, Moliner, Gamero & Ortega (2015)
15	Doing good to do well? Corporate social responsibility reasons, practices and impacts in small and medium accommodation enterprises	72 Sustainability measures have a positive effect on the financial performance of small and medium accommodation enterprises.	Garay & Font (2012)
3	Impacts of Positive and Negative Corporate Social Responsibility Activities on Company Performance in the Hospitality Industry	137 CSR actions have a positive impact on a firm's financial position.	Kang, Lee & Huh (2010)
	Antecedents and Outcomes of Brand Management from the Perspective of Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory	Internal brand management based on RBV is crucial in brand equity building and management as without supportive internal processes no brand objectives can be accomplished.	Gisip & Harun, (2013).

Table 4, above discusses past studies and highlights the importance of attaining a competitive advantage. RBV stress enhancing tourist firm brand equity to gain a competitive advantage. Homestays can achieve a competitive advantage and develop brand equity by embedding



sustainability in their operations. Sustainable branding is a structural competitive resource in the RBV context, if properly leveraged. In the milieu of RBV rural tourism firms can develop sustainability as their unique branding resource (Campbell & Kubickova, 2020). In the current study ICT competency can act as a tool for sustainability (environment, social and economic) initiative of tourism firms as per the TCE theory viewpoint. <sup>40</sup> Information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital procedures reduce <sup>13</sup> the expense of executing economic, social, and <sup>70</sup> environmental sustainability practices. In the TCE context, tourism firms will adopt ICT competency to gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

Meanwhile, in line with the Institutional and Triple bottom line theories, tourism firms can implement environmental, social, and economic sustainability practices. The governmental institutions, NGOs, regional and local authorities, residents, and tourists make up the external environment of tourism firms. In the case of rural community-based tourism, local political authorities are key stakeholders. These institutional forces shape the environmental, social, and economic sustainable strategies and practices of rural tourism firms.

The UNWTO derive global tourism growth policies around “Triple bottom line dimensions” and sets its sustainable goals and performance targets. This study refers to RBV which views that tourism firms can create sustainable and competitive resources and sustainable brand equity under RBV. The sustainable orientation of tourism firms enhances their brand equity, sustainable features should be integrated into the organization's capabilities to obtain a competitive advantage and develop sustainable brand equity.

## 2.3. Review of study variables

### 2.3.1. Brand equity of tourism firm

A brand is a “Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers” (American Marketing Association, 2015). A brand is a firm’s asset that is rare, valuable, and imperfectly imitable (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). A brand is a source of creating economic value and enables firms to create a competitive advantage (Rahman, 2020). This competitive advantage creates brand equity, it reflects various strategic advantages of the brand compared to competitors (Rahman, Rodríguez-Serrano, & Faroque, 2021).

In addition, Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers. Brand equity serves as a product’s competitive advantage and conveys added value to the “branded” as opposed to “non-branded” product (Peco-Torres, Polo-Pena, & Frías-Jamilena, 2020). Effective branding strategy is a turning point for tourism destinations, that strive to build a strong destination brand to strengthen competitiveness, enhance market visibility, and improve economic efficiency (Mikulić et al., 2016). Destination branding has become more important because of the ever-increasing number of tourism destinations, increased destination substitutability and a lack of destination differentiation (Mikulić et al., 2016).

Moreover, brand equity development communicates tourism destination attributes, culture, values, norms and destination personality to tourists (Wu & Liang, 2020). Tourism brand equity plays a

pivotal role in establishing product characteristics, tourist loyalty and market segmentation, vitally boosting tourism industry revenues (Chou et al., 2020). Aaker proposes four dimensions of brand equity: brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand associations/ Image and Brand (perceived) quality. Explained below.

### <sup>80</sup> 2.3.1.1. Brand awareness

Brand awareness refers to “the ability of a potential buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category” (Aaker, 1991). Awareness is an important component of the brand equity conceptual model. Due to the brand's high brand awareness, a high level of purchase is expected. Because customers buy brands, they are aware of it also enhances the firm's sales and profitability (Baldauf et al., 2003; Koshksaray, Ardakani, Ghasemnejad, & Azbari, 2020).

<sup>115</sup> Brand awareness is the main component of brand equity and a catalyst of consumers' purchasing decisions in hospitality and tourism (Liu & Jiang, 2020; Keller, Geyskens, & Dekimpe, 2020). Brand awareness is the most important element and valuable antecedent of brand equity and customer value (Liang, Choi & Joppe, 2018; Piancatelli, Massi, & Vocino, 2021). Moreover, it contributes to the tourism firm's performance (Górska-Warsewicz & Kulykovets, 2020).

### 2.3.1.2. Brand loyalty

A customer's attachment to the brand is called "brand loyalty" (Aaker, 1991). According to Aaker's model, brand loyalty reduces marketing expenses and leverages trade this increases the firm's value (Ray, Bala, Chakraborty, & Dasgupta, 2021). Loyal customers spread positive word of mouth and entice others to use the brand. <sup>69</sup> Brand loyalty is an effective way to manage brand equity as it increases the probability of brand choice (Pitta & Katsanis, 1995; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Customer <sup>98</sup> brand loyalty is the core of brand equity (Aaker, 1991). Jeon & Yoo (2021), <sup>45</sup> stated that brand equity stems from superior customer confidence in the brand. This confidence results in customers' <sup>101</sup> loyalty and their readiness to pay a price premium for the brand.

<sup>44</sup> Brand loyalty is the primary source of customer-based brand equity, the major goal of brand management is the ability <sup>39</sup> to create brand loyalty (Keller, 2003; Harits & Yuliati, 2021). Brand loyalty is considered either an attitude or behaviour (Foroudi, 2019). Tourism <sup>127</sup> brand loyalty is a tourist's unique preference for a particular destination brand. Tourists' loyal attitudes and behaviours lead to destination recommendations to others (Chou et al., 2020).

### **2.3.1.3. Perceived brand quality**

Brand quality and perceived quality are interchangeably used by customers (Zeithaml, 1988; Aaker, 1991). Brand quality is one of the key <sup>88</sup> dimensions of brand equity (Lassar et al., 1995; Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003). Brand performance is an important aspect of brand quality, in tourism branding destination service infrastructure and environment are <sup>45</sup> considered in destination brand performance (Buhalis, 2020; Chou et al., 2020). Perceived quality adds value to consumers' purchases as it is at the centre of strong brands (Peltier, Dahl, & VanderShee, 2020). In tourism

perceived tour quality positively impacts tour value. Likewise, perceived tourists' destination quality is positively related to the perceived value of the destination (Mohaidin, Wei, & Murshid, 2017). Meng & Cui, (2020) stated that in tourism, brand quality is the main customer-based brand equity dimension.

#### **2.3.1.4. Brand image**

Brand image is also an important brand equity source (Keller, 2003; Lassar et al., 1995). Brand image is related to customers' brand memory and is possibly the most important aspect of brand equity. The brand image incorporates product lines, consumer uses, product features, competitors, countries, and lifestyles. A brand image helps buyers to make purchase decisions as it helps consumers process, manage, and recover product information (Aaker, 1991).

In tourism effectiveness measurement of a destination or product is based on brand image (Perkins, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, 2020; Hanna, Rowley & Keegan, 2021). Tourism and hospitality brand image has been considered the main dimension of brand equity (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril, & Gázquez-Abad, 2020). Perkins, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, (2020) postulated that in the destination branding model brand image is an important component.

#### **2.3.1.5 Sustainable brand equity**

The market is witnessing shifts in sustainability awareness and business's role in sustainability (Khan et al., 2019). Sustainability awareness has driven marketers to concentrate on customers'

sustainability desires (Khan et al., 2019). Pursuing the environmental, social, and economic dimensions is an effective approach to building a corporate reputation (Sheth & Sinha, 2015; Vural, Baştuğ, & Gülmez, 2021). <sup>140</sup> One of the most important responsibilities of a marketer is <sup>135</sup> brand building; by which a firm develops the value of the brand or the brand equity (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017). Brand equity is a tourist firm's significant strategic asset. To maximize long-term company performance brand equity needs constant monitoring and support (Hanssens, Rust, & Srivastava, 2009; Rust et al., 2021). Tourism branding needs consideration, given the sensitivities connected to this activity, the understanding of such characteristics permits marketers to develop a point of competitive advantage and sustainable differentiation (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017).

From a sustainability viewpoint, researchers recommend embedding sustainability concerns to create differentiation (Connelly, Ketchen, & Slater, 2011; Taoketao, Feng, Song, & Nie, 2018). Consumers form a solid emotional relationship with a brand and seek sustainable brand differentiation (Kurowska, 2003; Ferreira & Fernandes, 2021). For current sustainability-oriented customers firms can better appeal to them by embedding; sustainability branding practices in their operations, also, by transforming sustainability associations as an integral part of brand image, likewise communicating sustainability practices to customers and gaining a sustainable competitive advantage (Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014; Vesal, Siahtiri, & O'Cass, 2021). <sup>60</sup> Managers responsible for brand management should lead to sustainability concerns from a marketing perspective as they create differentiation for brands (Gupta, Czinkota & Melewar, 2013; García-Muiña, Medina-Salgado, Ferrari, & Cucchi, 2020).

### 2.3.2. Sustainability marketing <sup>30</sup>

Sustainable Marketing is the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital is preserved or enhanced throughout (Martin & Schouten, 2014). <sup>43</sup> As a derivative of sustainable development, Sustainable marketing extends the theory of marketing to ensuring ecological, social (equity and equality), and economic balance in time and space. <sup>19</sup> Sustainability marketing in the view of micro marketing is to change both consumer and producer behaviours in the long-term, while macro marketing's approach emphasizes three basic principles that are ecological, social, and economic also known as 3Ps profit, people, and the planet (Belz & Peattie, 2013).

Meanwhile, Peattie & Belz (2013) <sup>10</sup> gave the concept of 4C's and tried to mould traditional 4P's (Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) into 4C's i.e., Customer solution, Customer cost, Convenience, and Communication. These are very much related to the 4Ps of marketing given by (McCarthy, 1960). The 4Ps are converted to 4C's to include sustainability criteria in a marketing strategy.

#### Traditional Marketing Mix

Product
Price
Place
Promotion

*Transformation*



#### Sustainability Marketing Mix

Customer Solution
Customer price
Convenience
Communication



### Figure 1: McCarthy's 4P Approach Vs Peattie and Belz's Sustainability Marketing Mix

Belz & Peattie (2013) postulated a two-part sustainability marketing explanation: <sup>47</sup> Planning, organizing, implementing and controlling marketing programmes and resources to satisfy consumers and to meet corporate objectives considering environmental, social, and economic criteria. Also, emphasize <sup>94</sup> maintaining sustainable relationships with the customers, and the natural and social environment. Sustainability can be defined in several terms to describe some or all of its components, including green business, corporate citizenship, <sup>112</sup> corporate social responsibility (CSR), environmental management, sustainable development and the triple bottom line (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014).

Firms that do business with a larger public-interest factor pledge themselves to business activities that support environmental, economic, and social benefits to people (Vesal et al., 2021). From a variety of sustainability definitions, it embraces economic, social, and environmental aspects referred to <sup>1</sup> as the triple bottom line (Brundtland 1987; Elkington 2004). According to the “Triple bottom line framework” the sustainability marketing dimensions are 1) people (social) and the planet (environment) and Profit (Economic) (Taylor & Hochuli, 2015).

The tourism industry is dependent on its resources like no other industry. The tourism industry's long-term economic success is closely affiliated with the preservation of the environment, culture and local community success (Wise, 2016). Marketing can play a crucial role in changing the behaviour of tourists and tourism suppliers by further developing sustainable tourism products, for an environmentally prosperous and responsible tourism industry, one that acknowledges all



stakeholders (tourists, residents, and industry) requirements to achieve positive, successful, and long-term outcomes (Font & McCabe, 2017).

The following sub-sections discuss in detail each dimension of sustainability marketing in the context of tourism firms.

### **2.3.2.1. Economic (profit) aspect**

Economic sustainability implies that a firm makes profits to stay in business and benefit the local and international economic system (Rasoolimanesh et.al, 2020). In simple terms a firm ability to stay in the business. The traditional marketing paradigm is fundamentally unsustainable as it only focuses on the economic side (Noo-urai & Jaroenwisan, 2016). Economic indicators bring progress and change, so economic development should not only reflect income generation but how economic indicators create new employment opportunities and drive positive socio-cultural changes for locals (Tosun, Dedeoğlu, Çalışkan, & Karakuş, 2021).

In addition, the economic sustainability dimension pursues long-term planning to report to all stakeholders, equal distribution of economic benefits, stable employment opportunities and a competitive business environment (Crespi-Vallbona, Pérez, & Miró, 2019). Sustainable economic tourism not only considers visitor spending but local's employment and business opportunities resulting from increased service demands due to increased tourist following (Kersulić, Perić, & Wise, 2020). Moreover, offer stable employment and income-earning prospects to reduce absolute poverty and inequality in local tourist destinations (Zhang & Zhang, 2019; Lai et al., 2020).

Incorporation of the economic aspect, with CSR and environmental aspect, broadens the sustainability scope and constructs a superior stakeholders value (Lloyd-Walker & Walker, 2011). Independently, economic sustainability refers to profit margins, sales, working capital, assets and taxes (Alzubaidi, Slade, & Dwivedi, 2021); environmental sustainability emphasizes waste minimization, reduction of material used, recycling, energy consumption and pollution prevention (Lukman, Omahne, Sheikh, & Glavič, 2021). Social sustainability refers to a firm's social activities and the advantages it receives in a competitive marketplace (Amatulli, De Angelis, & Stoppani, 2021).

#### **2.3.2.2. CSR (people) aspect**

Carroll (1979) contends that CSR involves society's philanthropic or voluntary, ethical, economic, and legal prospects for businesses. Müller, Habel, & Stierl (2017) describe CSR as "the company improving the well-being of society" and "following high ethical standards". Moreover, CSR is an essential characteristic of sustainable marketing (Sanclemente-Tellez, 2017; Anwar & El-Bassiouny, 2020). Firms pursuing CSR focus on marketing activities that positively influence society such as supporting education, advocating community relations, and sponsoring charities (Mamo, Agyemang, & Andrew, 2021).

Firms that aim at societal well-being build excellent customer relationships (Mamo et al., 2021; Holiday, Hayes, Britt, & Lyu, 2021). CSR has a positive impact on multiple stakeholder relationships, CSR creates positive firm relationships and an increased commitment to do business

with, invest in and work for (Ji, Tao, & Rim, 2020). The firm's CSR activities are to encourage cohesive community member involvement and alter societal attitudes and outlooks to develop individual and social capital (Gentle, Thwaites, Race, & Alexander, 2013; Gannon, Rasoolimanesh, & Taheri, 2021). The social sustainability dimension relates to societal and social marketing; in social marketing social <sup>19</sup> issues are used as tools for designing marketing strategies and achieving the objective of societal well-being (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Tkaczynski, Rundle-Thiele, & Truong, 2020).

The implementation of environmentally sustainable tourism practices is directly linked to the implementation of the primary CSR concept (Svensson et.al, 2018). Management of multifaceted and perhaps challenging fundamental sustainability requirements (economic stability, social awareness, and environmental care) has execution difficulties (Gupta et al., 2020). Scholars have suggested a synchronized emphasis on all sustainability aspects with the coordinated implementation of sustainability programmes by all business spheres (Machado, Winroth, & da Silva, 2020). Achieving sustainability by adopting only one sustainability aspect does not result in great advantages for the organization (Eagle et.al, 2019).

### **2.3.2.3. Environmental (planet) aspect**

Environmental security not only considers the physical environment, but as well as includes cultural landscapes and historic sites conservation, promoting societal values, and so, a shift from shareholder capitalism to responsible capitalism (Wise, 2016). Embracing social and environmental responsibility, and increasing shareholders' value is essential for sustainability

(Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). Researchers have investigated the environmental sustainability impact on firm performance. Hameed, Nisar, & Wu, (2021), postulated that greater environmental performance is related to higher profitability, as revealed by their better return on assets. This is higher in firms operating in fast-growing industries (Hameed et.al, 2021).

Sustainable tourism can be achieved by optimal use of environmental resources (Yin, 2016; Lesar, Weaver, & Gardiner, 2020) by conservation of local environmental resources, biodiversity, and ecological processes as they constitute key elements in tourism development (Yusoff, Nejadi, Kee, & Amran, 2020; Hosseini, Stefaniec, & Hosseini, 2021). Tourism firms embracing environmentally sustainable contributions correspondingly profit with growth in sales (Ramirez, Gonzalez & Moreira, 2014; Schiavone & Simoni, 2019). Such firms benefit from higher sales through direct and indirect product demands, in addition to building strategic partnerships with environmentally sustainable partners (Ranta, Keränen, & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2020). Contemporary firms are aware that their environmentally sustainable products and cost-saving pursuits are non-mutually exclusive activities (Ramirez, Gonzalez, & Moreira, 2014; Prior & Keränen, 2020). Likewise, corporate's environmental sensitivity is on the rise (Gupta, & Barua, 2017). Firms implementing an environmentally sustainable approach to doing business benefit from this business methodology (Ramirez, Gonzalez & Moreira, 2014; Mousa & Othman, 2020).

However, there are not many <sup>78</sup> commercial tourism firms with positive triple bottom lines, as environmental and social dimensions are constrained to marketing, <sup>78</sup> legal compliance, political manoeuvring, and public relations (Sharpley, 2020). Firms that consider higher environmental mandates to meet stakeholders' environmental expectations <sup>15</sup> show less unsystematic risk compared

to firms that consider low environmental legitimacy (Duque-Grisales, & Aguilera-Caracuel, 2021).

### <sup>15</sup> 2.3.3. Information and communication technology (ICT) competency

The United Nations Organizations (UNO) presented its <sup>57</sup> 2030 agenda for sustainable development (SDGs) with 17 goals and 169 targets. UNO highlighted the pivotal <sup>133</sup> role of ICT in promoting sustainable economic development and the achievement of SDGs. The accessibility and application of ICT and innovations are vital for achieving the national and international SDGs. ICT is acting as a vector of environmental, social and economic changes globally, likewise, it's changing the nature of environmental, social and economic relationships (Jabbour, Foropon, & Filho, 2018; Akande, Cabral, & Casteleyn, 2019). Thus, ICT is an essential dimension of a nation's desire for a more reasonable, comprehensive, competitive, sustainable society and <sup>33</sup> economy (United nations conference on trade and development UNCTAD, 2015; Vrontis et al., 2021). The emergence and ubiquitous accessibility of ICT, and the parallel social media rise, signifies the single major shifts in the international tourism structure over the past years (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Lee & Xue, 2020). ICT fits very well with the ideology of sustainable tourism (ST) (Luc, Tejwan-Bopp & Szmanda, 2016). The role of ICT in tourism has comprehensively shifted from an offstage support tool to an important tactical tool (Melián-González, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2021) also as a helping tool for sustainable tourism development. ICT has increasingly developed a vital foundation of sustainable competitive advantage, predominantly in the areas of promotion, distribution, development, organization, and delivery of hospitality products (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021). The increasing demands of sophisticated customers, besides

the tourism industry's intensive need for information, are leading managers to adopt ICT, to meet current and future business requirements (Gonzalez, Gasco, & Llopis, 2020).

ICT competency is described as an organization's knowledge and effective utilization of ICT to manage information within the organization. ICT competency conceptualization also includes the firm's ICT objects (e-g. IT personnel, hardware, software). Cumulatively, the ICT competency dimensions represent specific resources that imply the firm's ability to realize and employ ICT instruments and procedures to handle customer and market information (Tippins & Sohi, 2003). ICT competency covers ICT Knowledge, Objects and Operations. ICT knowledge is conceptualized as the extent of an organization's technical knowledge of computer-based systems (Tippins & Sohi, 2003). ICT operations are conceptualized as the extent of organizations' utilization of ICT to manage customers and market information (Tippins & Sohi, 2003). The IT objects are conceptualized as computer-based IT personnel, software and hardware (Tippins & Sohi, 2003).

#### **2.3.4. Political support by local authorities**

In 2005, the UNWTO and the UNEP released the *Making Tourism More Sustainable: A Guide for Policy Makers* report, which defines sustainable tourism as. Tourism is responsible for its present and future environmental, social, and economic impacts, focusing on the needs of all important stakeholders (tourists, industry, host communities, and the environment) (Edgell, 2019). Sustainable tourism development involves the informed participation of all important

stakeholders, and solid political leadership to guarantee broad participation and consent-developing.

Sustainable <sup>9</sup> tourism policies cannot work in isolation, because different sectors such as government (national, regional, and municipal), <sup>9</sup> communities, SMEs and large companies, and non-governmental organizations should all be involved and need to be consulted in the development and implementation of strategies and policies related to sustainability (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005a; OECD, 2010). The role of stakeholders is essential because they can generate synergy among the parts and promote partnership between the public and private sectors and even among private companies (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005a). Researchers have recognized five key stakeholders in tourism: government officials (policymakers), residents, tourists, industries, and NGOs (Miller & Twining-Ward, 2005; Chilembwe & Mweiwa, 2019).

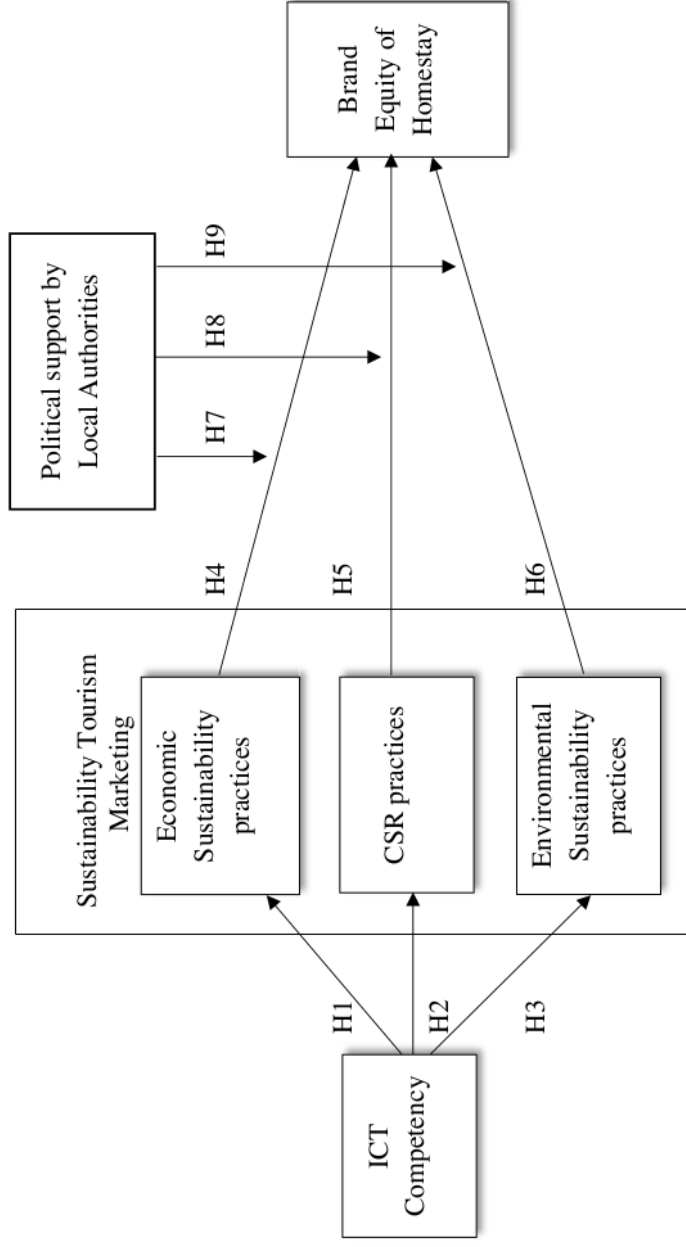
Sustainability is increasingly getting researchers, companies and policymakers' attention, as they are identifying the opportunity and necessity of employing sustainable practices in their operations. It is the public sector's job to approve and implement policies and regulations, to safeguard and conserve the urban environment to minimize the negative impacts of developments (Wise, 2016). Moreover, policy programs for improving residents' well-being through tourism planning, events, and leisure activities (Poczta et al., 2020). Timely and prudent government decisions are a basic criterion for a sustainable transformation of society towards sustainable consumption. Political support by local authorities plays a significant part in this transformation (Prothero et al., 2011).

At the local level, local community representatives and government officials are normally allocated authority and responsibilities as well as those related to tourism sector development. The local authorities collaborate with political and non-political entities at the local and international levels to do their job more efficiently (Kapera, 2018). An important partnership consists of tourists, residents, and the public sector (Phuc, & Nguyen, 2020). The local political authorities seem to be the natural leader with two main tasks improving local living standards and local resource management (Kapera, 2018; Phuc, & Nguyen, 2020).

The national and local regulatory procedures have the main role to play in sustainability transition. This practical transition can alter practices and attitudes towards sustainability (Sautier, Legun, Rosin & Campbell, 2017; Bilali, 2020). At the local community level, sustainable tourism requires a natural-environmental policy, a development-control policy, and a tourist safety policy (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). Likewise, land zoning and development regulations, Legal compliance regulations (imposed with fines and punishments). Implementation of both objective and subjective sustainable tourism indicators by local authorities can help to create strong policy monitoring and enforcement (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006).



#### 2.4. Proposed research framework



## 2.5. Hypotheses Development

### 2.5.1. <sup>1</sup> ICT Competency and Sustainability tourism marketing

Acknowledging <sup>1</sup> the relationship between ICT and sustainability tourism marketing is significant for the tourism industry's growth and development (Ali & Frew, 2014; Tham & Sigala, 2020). ICT is a key tool in implementing and acquiring innovative sustainability marketing techniques. Likewise, ICT and sustainability marketing innovations are positively associated with one another (Divisekera & Nguyen, 2018).

ICT support for sustainability marketing will substantially increase sustainability awareness among tourists and their impact on sustainability (UNWTO, 2017). ICT integration in tourism enterprises has a positive impact on sustainability marketing. ICT provides tools as Sustainable tourism requires constant education (social and environmental understanding), monitoring and collaboration (ecological resources and energy usage) (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Lee, Hong, Chung & Back, 2021).

ICT competency can be utilized for partnerships to manage sustainability tourism marketing (Ali & Frew, 2014; Lee et al., 2021). As it provides managers with the necessary information to do crucial decisions regarding sustainable tourism marketing (Ali & Frew, 2014; Tham & Sigala, 2020). ICT positively influence the prospect of employing sustainability marketing innovations by tourist firms like homestays. Undoubtedly, the acceptance and utilization of ICT are among the key drivers of the sustainable development of the tourism industry, likewise, the marketing and promotion of tourism products depend heavily on ICT (Divisekera & Nguyen, 2018).

Knowledge about environmental sustainability is needed to make ICT an important enabler of environmental sustainability (Ojo, & Fauzi, 2020). ICT improves homestays' resource use efficiency and helps homestays to engage in environmental sustainability (Antoni, die, & Abareshi, 2020). Likewise, ICT can convert a homestay marketing strategy into an environmentally sustainable process (Wang, Chen, & Benitez-Amado, 2015). ICT competency assists homestay's environmental management performance.

ICT-centred services also make the systems and processes efficient. ICT also make CSR information more readily available to stakeholders, moreover, it creates new technical possibilities to link company information with other sources to create synergy (Uyar et. al, 2020). The innovative application of ICT leads to economic benefits and tourism marketing sustainability for rural tourism operators by creating a destination competitive advantage (Gretzel et.al, 2020). ICT is connected with rural tourism in supporting economic sustainability (capacity building, stable employment, local prosperity and economic viability) (Tham & Sigala, 2020), social sustainability (host community well-being, social equity, local control and cultural richness), and environmental sustainability (physical integrity and virtual substitution of travelling, resource efficiency, biological diversity, and environmental purity).

So, by considering the arguments above subsequent hypotheses are developed.

***H1: ICT Competency positively affects Environmental Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices of Homestay.***

***H2: ICT Competency positively affects the CSR practices of Homestay.***

***H3: ICT Competency positively affects Economic Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices of Homestay.***

### **2.5.2. Economic Aspect and Brand Equity**

It is an essential part of brand equity, through economic sustainability sustainability-oriented brands are made and organizations enjoy the recognition that follows (Loučanová et.al, 2021). This economic aspect creates a positive perception among customers and leads them toward the brand, thus the organization's long-term performance is increased (Sivarajah, Irani, Gupta, & Mahroof, 2020). Economic sustainability procedures also deliver indirect benefits to the stakeholders, this increases the brand equity of the organization (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Loučanová et.al, 2021). This approach provides business opportunities to different organizations, with brand equity as a marketing tool for superior performance (Sivarajah et.al, 2020).

The application of economic sustainability-based actions by rural tourism firms (homestays) benefits the firm's brand equity. Economic sustainability improves <sup>154</sup> a firm's brand equity, thus the firm's financial indicators (Ghezal & Khemakhem, 2020). Sustainability gives rich meaning to brand image, deeper emotional bonds and consequently differentiation (Ferreira & Fernandes, 2021). Sustainability centred approach form brand image and brand value propositions that impact the performance of firms (Mena, Hult, Ferrell & Zhang, 2019). Business economic performance and brand are connected, the higher levels of brand equity produce substantially superior market share (Mor, Bhardwaj, Singh, & Sachdeva, 2019). According to (Keller, Parameswaran & Jacob, 2015), economic performance affects brand equity positively by making its image strong, favourable and unique.

Sustainability characteristics have now become important elements in brand equity valuation, linking economic sustainability with brand image and performance is now a leading way to differentiation (Mor et.al, 2019; Fung, Chan, Choi, & Liu, 2021). Thus, with economic sustainability at the centre of its philosophy, brand management has become an even more central and dynamic business procedure (Fung et.al, 2021). Consumer green perceptions and preferences, a Tourist firm's (homestay's) sustainable economic practices and homestay brand equity are related (Grubor & Milovanov, 2017).

So, after presenting the above arguments the subsequent hypothesis is developed.

**H4: Economic <sup>1</sup> aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.**

### **2.5.3. Social Aspect (CSR) and Brand Equity**

CSR policies positively influence brand performance and equity (Shou, Shao, Wang, & Lai, 2020). Baalbaki & Guzmán (2016) recognize sustainability and CSR as fundamental brand equity elements, likewise, CSR leads to enhanced brand image, brand preference and brand awareness (Kang & Namkung, 2016). Rural community-based homestays can incorporate social orientation in firms' business strategies to diminish harmful effects on local communities and the natural environment (Martínez & Nishiyama, 2019). CSR promotes a firm's positive image while retaining current customers and attracting potential customers, so CSR increases the firm's brand equity (Sung, Tao, & Slevitch, 2020).

CSR strategies build brand equity (Hur, Moon, & Kim, 2020). while developing brand equity tourism firms (homestays) need to know the customer's value system, particularly about the customer's preference related to CSR (Saurage-Altenloh & Randall, 2020). CSR activities connect firms with ethical values like respect, honesty, and sustainability, these ethical values provide valuable content to brand associations (Martínez & Nishiyama, 2019). Contemporary customers expect firms not just to make profits but to act as good corporate citizens (Ahn, 2021). CSR has long-term economic value genuine CSR systems are an effective way to generate competitive advantage and, ultimately, brand equity and superior performance in rural community-based homestays (Kavita & Saarinen, 2016; Cristófol, Cruz-Ruiz, & Zamarreño-Aramendia, 2021).

So, after presenting the above arguments the subsequent hypothesis is developed.

**H5: CSR <sup>1</sup> aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.**

#### **2.5.4. Environment Aspect and Brand Equity**

Environmental sustainability is a crucial antecedent of brand equity (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021), and imperative for homestays' sustainable branding. Environmental sustainable homestay products have a critical part in rural sustainability (Li, Liu, Zhu, & Zhang, 2018), and increase brand equity besides providing additional income to communities and employment (Dinis, Simões, Cruz, & Teodoro, 2019). Likewise, customers tend to prefer brands that develop green sustainable products (Feng et al., 2018) which leads <sup>113</sup> to an increase in brand equity.

Due to the vibrant growth of the homestay business, individual operators develop brand equity to enhance business performance and compete efficiently (Shen & Liu, 2015). Homestay's brand equity based on the future tourists' requirements and society's future requirements will make homestay brands more appealing to tourists (Foroudi et al., 2020). Homestay's sustainability practices can enhance the homestay's sustainable image and create sustainable brand equity (Janjua, Krishnapillai, & Rahman, 2021). The brand-building journey through sustainability marketing is likely to be challenging because for most firms the sustainable brand equity route is not only economic but comprises their environmental and social contribution (Sheth & Sinha, 2018).

In homestay businesses, environmental sustainability is a significant element that shapes brand equity (Shen & Liu, 2015; Dressler & Paunovic, 2021). Tourism firms (homestays) adopting environmental initiatives create sustainability associations (environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and morality) and impact organization brand equity. So, by sustainability initiatives, homestays can create sustainability-oriented brand equity (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Coelho, Bairrada, Simão, & Barbosa, 2020).

So, after presenting the above arguments the subsequent hypothesis is developed.

***H6: Environment aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.***

**2.5.5. Moderating role of “Political support by Local Authorities”**

The brand equity of tourism firms associated with sustainability influences customers' perceptions of the firm (Xie, Bagozzi, & Grønhaug, 2019). The sustainability-centred methodology simultaneously delivers environmental, economic, and social benefits (Kushwah, Dhir, & Sagar, 2019). Sustainability-focused and stakeholder-centred marketing approaches have arisen as an alternate marketing performance nexus (Mena, Hult, Ferrell & Zhang, 2019).

To achieve long-term sustainability, the development of rural community-based homestay tourism products requires cooperation among local political authorities and communities in planning and management developments (Khartishvili et al., 2019). Wang, Zhang, & Wang, (2021) found that regulators have the greatest effect on a company to sustainability strategy realization. Moreover, these monitoring guidelines assist tourism organizations to develop their sustainability by strengthening brand equity. Local political authorities and rural community-based homestay products are indivisible. The local political authorities assist economic viable, socially equitable, and environment-friendly rural homestay products (Zhang & Zhang, 2018).

Regulators make sustainability-centred public policies, these approaches are instrumental in focusing on financial performance and community wellbeing (Mena et al., 2019). Sustainability as a strategy appears in forefront of holistic business policy and specific branding strategies (Wadera & Kaur, 2019). Also, this strategy demonstrates a responsible attitude to environmental and human requirements. The local and national officials influence an organization's CSR performance by guiding sustainability-centred strategies. CSR performance indicates the economic growth and brand equity of a firm, leading to the firm's competitive advantage (Govindan, Shaw, & Majumdar, 2021). Social and environmental performance particularly influences a firm's standing and customer's perceived brand equity (Mena et al., 2019).



Firms adopting an environmental sustainability strategy are also pressured by regulators (Mena et al., 2019). Numerous scholars had evidence that regulatory forces <sup>57</sup> at the national and local levels drive the integration of environmental concerns into the firm's strategies (White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019). In comparing different stakeholders, regulators have the most influence on a firm's probability to execute an environmental plan (Seman et al., 2019). The environmental rules and regulations assist firms to introduce superior environmental procedures and boost their environmental performance effectiveness (Wang & Zhao, 2018) and strengthen their brand equity (Chuah, El-Manstrly, Tseng, & Ramayah, 2020).

The implementation <sup>122</sup> of the principles of sustainable tourism development requires the engagement of stakeholder groups ranging from the public sector to local communities, with strong leadership, assistance and enforcement from local governments needed as well (Yrza, & Filimonau, 2021). In tourism firms, the sustainability-centred strategy is related to customer brand attitude. Rural community-based homestay's brand equity has a strong public policy dimension (Mena et al., 2019). At the local level, communities represented by local governments have the authority to enforce sustainable tourism development policies in tourism firms (Kapera, 2018). Government regulators are among the primary stakeholders, and so, in the case of sustainable rural tourism developments, local authorities are the primary stakeholders (Hamdan, Andersen, & de Boer, 2021). The local political authorities are more knowledgeable than central governments on the local sustainable issues, they can better address these issues by activating local stakeholders and by generating locally specific solutions (Tevapitak & Helmsing, 2019). The local political authorities are closer to local people and entrepreneurs, they can effectively coordinate with other government agencies to instruct

homestay operators to improve their sustainability performance and hence sustainable brand equity (Tevapitak & Helmsing, 2019).

Furthermore, at the local level, communities represented by local governments have the authority to support sustainable tourism development policies in tourism firms (Kapera, 2018). Similarly, the local government's political support motivates homestay tourism establishments to involve in environmental, economic, and social sustainable development <sup>1</sup> and create sustainable equity and brand image (Zhang & Zhang, 2018).

So, after presenting the above arguments the subsequent hypotheses are developed.

As illustrated below:

***H7: “Relationship between Economic Aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by Local Authorities”.***

***H8: “Relationship between CSR Aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by Local Authorities”.***

***H9: “Relationship between Environment Aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by Local Authorities”.***

The above operational framework highlights the main variables of interest and relationships between study variables. The model also highlights the direction of variables in the context of homestay accommodation services. In the process to create sustainable brand equity in tourism

firms (homestay) research considered <sup>2</sup> ICT competency, Sustainability marketing and Enforcement by local authorities. These components play a significant role in homestay brand equity. Inputs of ICT competency strengthen sustainability marketing practices of homestays, sustainability marketing and local authorities enforcement partner with each other in enhancing the brand equity of <sup>32</sup> rural community-based homestays, where political support by local authorities acts as a moderator in the relationship.

## 2.6. Hypotheses summary

Hypothesis H1, H2, and H3 <sup>5</sup> addressed research question 1. Hypothesis 4 addressed research question 2. Hypothesis H5 addressed research question 3. Hypothesis 6 addressed research question 4. Hypothesis 7, 8 and 9 addressed research question 5.

## 2.7. Chapter Summary

The literature review has been done following the appropriate theoretical and empirical settings. The review aimed to contextualize the study and focus that is the relationship between <sup>2</sup> Sustainability tourism marketing practices, ICT, political support by local authorities and homestay brand equity.

The ultimate objective of this literature review was to investigate available sustainability frameworks and related theories and their application in the Malaysian homestay tourism sector. Given that sustainable tourism is the main goal of Malaysian community-based rural homestays, the framework established by the researcher helped achieve the sustainability goal. All information from this review is summarized in a single diagram as shown in section 2.4,

this framework is the exemplar. The following chapter presents the methodology of how this framework was tested in Malaysia.

## 11 CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Introduction

To attain the study objective, the study needs an effective methodology to highlight the study's theoretical foundation, explain the purpose of the study, and the research logic, and clarify the research procedure. The chapter discusses the methodological approach, the discussion of research methodology is one preliminary consideration before undertaking any research (Creswell, 2009). The research methodology discusses paradigms of inquiry, the research design, and the methods, this chapter is subdivided into Research Philosophy, Research design, sampling, and Data collection Method (Research instruments).

#### 3.2. Research Philosophy

Philosophical assumptions guide the inquiry strategy by determining the particular research techniques and methods that transform the method into practice (Creswell, 2009). The researcher's ontological and epistemological views form research philosophy. The research methodology philosophy seeks to resolve dual issues a) "HOW" and "IF" is it possible, to acquire knowledge? b) what types of ideas exist in the world? the former question relates to epistemology, and the latter question relates to the philosophy of ontology (Hughes & Sharrock, 2016).

In the field of social sciences, there are five paradigms of inquiry. These are critical theory, participatory, constructivist, positivism, and post-positivism. Positivists consider factual empirical truths (Kincaid, 1996). Regarding the development of theory, positivists believe in the possibility of creating social science theory centred on similar natural sciences principles (Howell, 2013). However, the positivism paradigm of inquiry <sup>4</sup> in the social sciences is a relatively obsolete inquiry paradigm and changed to post-positivism. The term post-positivism paradigm criticises the fundamental knowledge truth (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Post-positivism pursues actual problems of the world by shifting narrow perspectives of positivism to a new broadway (Henderson, 2011). The post-positivist view is a change from a single interpretation to several explanations of truth (Howell, 2013) and it is perceived that theories do not hold for an eternity. Theories remain appropriate for a certain point in time and are interchangeable (Popper, 1963).

Both positivism and post-positivism recognize theory to find the relationship between abstract ideas and empirical findings, thus a realist theory development view. Post positivism view should not be viewed as a separate paradigm of inquiry rather it's a continuation of positivism (Howell, 2013). Current research is based on an epistemological philosophical view with attributes of a post-positivism worldview.

### **3.3. Research Approach**

The quantitative research is performed for testing the relationships between <sup>2</sup> ICT competency and Sustainability tourism marketing on the brand equity of rural community-based homestays in Malaysia. The <sup>35</sup> study design approach can be either a fixed point in time (cross-sectional) or varying points in time (longitudinal study). In the current, a cross-sectional design was used.

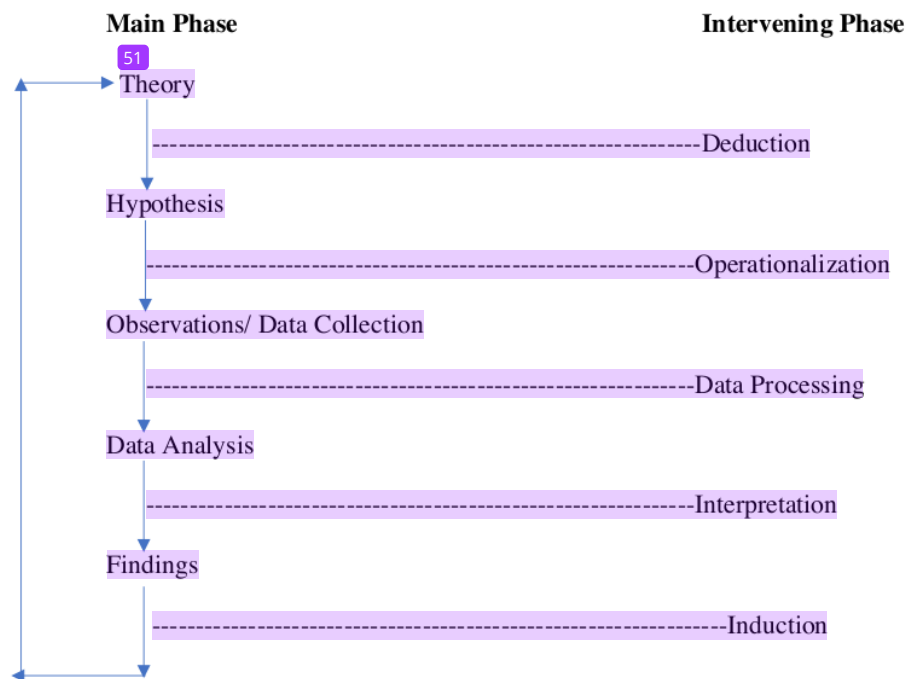
This sampling technique was appropriate in the context of this study, as the study objectives were to quantitatively examine the relationship pattern between variables (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The study took a deductive approach to the research design and addressed research questions. In quantitative research design, a deductive approach is the most used to analyse data using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2009). The current study entailed a deductive (quantitative) data collection method to optimise the results. Quantitative research methodology is used in research if it is intended for: a broad analysis of phenomena (Yilmaz, 2013); hypothesis testing and validation of theories; generalization of research findings to different populations and research settings; containing a large population and creating cause and effect relationships. Further conditions for quantitative technique selection are short time frames to collect and analyse data (Creswell, 2009). As objectives of current research can be achieved by quantitative research design, so it was applied.

### **3.3.1. Quantitative Research design of the study**

Bryman (2016) concluded that quantitative research design is carried out in phases, one is the main phase, and the other is the intervening phase. From theory, hypotheses are deducted, and after this step operationalization of important variables is done. This is followed by observations and a data collection phase then data processing is carried out. Data Analysis is carried out by software and different statistical tests are performed on data, findings from the analysis phase are used to make evidence-based decisions.

The steps followed in Quantitative design are shown in the figure below.



**Figure 2:** The logical arrangement of the quantitative research method.

The quantitative phase uses statistics to explain the differences or relationships among two or more variables (Yilmaz, 2013). Current research followed the steps shown in figure 2 above. In the current research deductive hypothesis testing approach was applied, it tested the relationship between all variables. It is crucial for generalization and creation of theory as in long run more sustainable tourism business practices backed by ICT competency, and politically supported by local authorities are essential for profitability and brand equity of tourism businesses. Sustainability marketing practices in every industry (manufacturing/ services) are a must for the survival of our planet.



The present study investigated ICT competency and <sup>116</sup> sustainability tourism marketing practices among rural community-based homestays registered with the MOTAC, Malaysia. Moreover, the study also investigated political support by local authorities for homestays. Similarly, how <sup>2</sup> ICT competency, sustainability tourism marketing and political support by local authorities enhance the <sup>2</sup> brand equity of rural community-based homestays in Malaysia.

### 3.4. Target Population

The target population was coordinators and owners of rural community-based homestays registered with MOTAC, Malaysia. Target homestays were in three states of Malaysia and the Kuala Lumpur federal area, as these are the top three in the number of domestic and international tourist arrivals. The researcher used the statistics web page of Tourism Malaysia's official website to calculate the number of tourists (overnight visitors), used the "My tourism Data portal" and calculated the total number of overnight visitors state-wise. After examining Tourism Malaysia's official website for calculating the number of tourists Klang Valley (Federal Territory Kuala Lumpur and Selangor state) topped with 17.98 million tourists in 2017, followed by Pahang with 10.98 and Pulau Pinang with 6.38 respectively. Details of overnight visitors <sup>33</sup> are shown graphically in Table 5. The total number of overnight visitors can be calculated by adding foreign and domestic guests. The contact details of the study's target population are drawn from the list of homestay operators of entire Malaysia, available on the official website of the ministry, in the download section.

According to the ministry's June 2018 report, the total number of registered homestays in Klang Valley, Pahang and Pulau Pinang is 991. So, the total population for the current study is 991, these homestays are in 83 different villages. In these homestays, the total number of rooms

is 1408 rooms. The details are as follows, In Klang Valley (Federal Territory Kuala Lumpur and Selangor state) the total number of homestay operators is 434 with 694 rooms. In Pahang total number of homestays, and operators is 323 with 450 rooms. In Pulau Pinang, the total number of homestay operators is 234 with 264 rooms. These homestays are in different villages, In Klang valley homestays are in 34 villages, in Pahang, they are in 28 different villages and Pulau Pinang homestays are spread across 28 villages.

**Table 5: Summary of Target Population**

<b>Area</b>	<b>Total Villages</b>	<b>Rooms</b>	<b>Number of Over-night Visitors (Foreign and domestic in million)</b>	<b>Homestay Operators (Target Population)</b>
Klang Valley	34	694	17.98	434
Pahang	21	450	10.98	323
Pulau Pinang	28	264	6.38	234
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>1408</b>	<b>35.38</b>	<b>991</b>

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Source: Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, Malaysia

### **3.4.1. Sampling Technique and Sample Size**

#### **I. Sampling Technique**

The sampling technique for the research was quota sampling. A quota sampling technique was used to get unbiased information from the respondents. Quota sampling allowed researchers to give a maximum representation and avoid underrepresentation of the Malaysian state with the

high number of tourists., this sampling technique is popular among tourism researchers. Like Schwartz, Stewart, & Backlund, (2012) conducted “Visitation capacity research”. Mansor, Ahmad, & Che Mat, (2011) researched “Tourism challenges in the state of Terengganu, Malaysia”, also “Social media effect on tourism” (Richardson & Morton, 2015).

The selected elements were from Klang Valley with 77 (43%) respondents, Pahang with 58 (32 %) respondents and Pulau Pinang with 45 (25 %) respondents. As Klang Valley has 434 homestay operators, Pahang has 323 and Pulau Pinang has 234 operators. These details are provided in table 6 below. The main reason for choosing the quota sampling technique is because different states have different numbers of homestays and Tourists (foreign and domestic).

**Table 6: Summary of selected subjects**

Area	Homestay Operators (Target Population)	Homestays selected
Klang Valley	434	77
Pahang	323	58
Pulau Pinang	234	45
<b>Total</b>	<b>991</b>	<b>180</b>

## ii. Sample Size

To quantitatively define attitudes, opinions and trends of a population, a sample is studied first, and sample results lead to generalizations and claims of the population (Creswell, 2009). The estimation of the sample size is very important for the researchers, so it is a crucial process for obtaining good results. The classification of the most appropriate/ minimum sample size

depends on detailed and careful planning of all research stages from the research paradigm, data collection techniques, and data analysis methods (Delice, 2010). The sample size is selected considering the research topic, population, research aim, analysis techniques, the sample size in similar research, the number of subgroups in the sample (Davies, Williams & Yanchar, 2004), population variability and research design (Hedeker, Gibbons & Waterneux, 1999; Davies et al., 2004). The properties of estimates cannot be determined by sample size alone, a larger sample size does not necessarily relate to accurate estimates (Boivin & Ng, 2006; Bai & Ng, 2019).

The selection of an appropriate sample size depends on the data analysis, the model complexity and the characteristics of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2010). Hair et al. (2010), suggested minimum sample requirements for PLS-SEM models; a Minimum Sample size of 100 when the model has “Five or less latent constructs and each latent construct has more than three items”, Minimum Sample size of 150 when the model have “Seven or less latent constructs and each construct has more than three items”. The minimum sample size of 300 when the model has “seven or fewer latent constructs, some constructs have less than three items”. The minimum 500 sample size when the model has “more than seven latent constructs, some constructs have less than three items”. As suggested by social science researchers and SEM literature, 150 sample respondents are sufficient for a study that is examining seven or fewer constructs. Table 8 summarizes the general guidelines of sample size for SEM literature below. But researcher kept the sample size at 180 for more authenticity and accuracy, from Klang valley 77 respondents were selected from Pahang 58 and from Pulau Pinang 45 respondents were selected.

**Table 7: General guidelines of sample size for SEM**

<b>Characteristics of Model (Number of latent constructs and items)</b>	<b>Minimum Requirement of Sample</b>
1. Five or fewer latent constructs. Each latent construct has more than three items.	100 samples
2. Seven or fewer latent constructs. Each construct has more than three items.	150 samples
3. Seven or fewer latent constructs. Some constructs have less than three items (just identified model).	300 samples
4. More than seven latent constructs. Some constructs have less than three items (just identified model).	500 samples

**Source: Hair et al. (2010, pg. 676).**

### **3.5. Data Collection Method and Analysis**

Research hypotheses were formed to test the proposed cause-and-effect relationship between variables of interest. This research applied the post-positivistic inquiry paradigm for hypotheses testing by following the questionnaire survey approach. The questionnaire survey was selected to minimize external influences on the participants and researcher subjectivity (Bryman, 2015). To test hypotheses and relationships between variables questionnaires are a recommended method (Creswell, 2009). The questionnaire survey methodology provides an inexpensive and timely form of data collection (Howell, 2013). Moreover, the reason for using a questionnaire in current research is data generalisation from a sample of homestays located in Klang Valley, Pahang & Pulau Pinang.

In Malaysia Homestay operations are supervised by coordinators who have some villages and

homestays under their jurisdiction (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019). Homestay coordinators are trained by MOTAC, and they are well informed and educated. MOTAC keeps a record of all coordinators, and their contact details are available on MOTAC's official website. The total number of coordinators in Klang valley is 15, in Pahang 16 and in Pulau Pinang 11. The researcher took all contact details of homestay coordinators from the MOTAC website, before visiting homestays researcher contacted the coordinator on phone and booked a room in a homestay, and during the survey, stayed in homestays. Coordinators provided all contact details and addresses of homestay owners, and they treated the researcher as a foreign tourist and even accompanied the researcher in some villages for data collection, the researcher visited homestay owners in person to collect data. The data collection was done from September 1 to November 30, 2019. During these three months, the researcher collected data from Pulau Pinang, Pahang and Klang valley. The data collection started from Pulau Pinang followed by Pahang and then Klang valley.

### **3.5.1. Research Instrument: Questionnaire Design and Construct Measurement**

#### **3.5.1.1 Questionnaire (Scale) design**

To achieve a high response rate quality questionnaire is important (Bryman, 2016). There are several ways to increase the quality of the questionnaire that including clear presentation, written inappropriate font size, easy to read and designed in proper order with clear and precise instructions (Dillman, 2007). Questions are divided into nominal, ordinal, interval and open-ended (Chisnall, 2005). The current research questionnaire was divided into five sections, the first section covered the demographic profile of respondents, the second covered ICT competency, the third covered sustainability tourism marketing, the fourth covered political support by local authorities and the last one covered brand equity of homestay.

In the questionnaire data collection, technique plays an important part, so for data collection, the Likert scale was selected by researchers. Likert-type <sup>73</sup> scales use fixed choice response formats and are designed to measure attitudes or opinions (Bowling & Hammond, 2008). Data from Likert-type scales becomes less accurate when scale points are more than seven or less than five (Johns, 2010). The five-point Likert scale is selected as it enables the investigator to utilize structural equation modelling as a statistical tool (Collis & Hussey, 2014). <sup>93</sup> Likert scales ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' were selected in the current research. Likert (1932) suggested that "Agree to Disagree" scales should offer five points, in terms of quality of measurement, and the "Agree to Disagree" 5-point scale seems to be superior to an "Agree Disagree" 7- or 11-point scale and 5-point scales provide better quality data, hence using other than five categories in an "Agree Disagree" scale is not suggested (Revilla, Saris, & Krosnick, 2014). More than a five-point Likert scale offer a marginal advantage in terms of reliability (Collis & Hussey, 2014). In sustainability studies, prior researchers commonly used five Point Likert-Scales (Høgevoid et al., 2015), which is why the five-point Likert scale was implied.

The scales are adapted to the Malaysian rural homestays context. Scales for each variable are discussed below.

#### **i. Measurement for the construct of ICT competency**

ICT competency scale is adapted from (Tippins & Sohi, 2003), the adapted English language items are shown below, and the full questionnaire and BM scale are present in Appendix A.

**Table 8: Measurement items for measuring ICT competency**

Dimensions	Items	Author
ICT Competency	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We have employees who are knowledgeable in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (e-g. Computers, smartphones, printers etc.)</li> <li>2. We are very knowledgeable about the latest ICT used in accommodation services</li> <li>3. We know how to establish communication links with our current customers through the latest social media platforms (e-g. Facebook, Instagram etc.).</li> <li>4. We know how to establish communication links with our potential customers through the latest social media platforms (e-g. Facebook, Instagram etc.)</li> <li>5. We routinely access market information (tourist trends and requirements) <a href="#">143</a>m outside our databases (e-g. <a href="http://www.Agoda.com">www.Agoda.com</a>, <a href="http://www.Booking.com">www.Booking.com</a> etc.).</li> <li>6. We have a set of procedures for collecting customer information from online accommodation sources (e-g Airbnb, Agoda etc.).</li> <li>7. We utilize decision-support systems (social media, mobile apps etc.) frequently when it comes to managing customer information.</li> <li>8. We rely on the ICT (e-g. reservation software, property management software etc.) to store, and process information for our homestay accommodation.</li> </ol>	Tippins & Sohi, 2003



9. We have employed an employee/ executive whose main duty includes the management of our ICT (reservation software, property management software).
10. We budget a significant amount of funds for new ICT every year (e-g. new reservation software, property management software if required).

**ii. Measurement for the construct of Sustainability Tourism Marketing**

The sustainability tourism marketing scale covering Social, Environment and Economic Aspects of the adapted English language items is shown below, and the full questionnaire and BM scale are present in Appendix A.

**Table 9: Measurement items for measuring Sustainability Marketing**

Dimensions	Items	Author
Social (CSR)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We provide stable job opportunities for employees.</li> <li>2. We provide job promotion opportunities for employees.</li> <li>46 We help to solve social problems (e-g. Eradicating poverty through the generation of employment opportunities, and income-generating activities for women and rural folks socially and economically).</li> <li>4. We have invested in our homestay seeing a better futur46 for coming generations (e-g. underprivileged sections of the society such as fishermen, rural women etc.).</li> <li>5. We make investments to create employment opportunities for future generations.</li> </ol>	Singh, Sanchez, & del Bosque, 2008

## Environmental

1. We protect the overall environment. Singh, Sanchez, & del Bosque, 2008
2. We communicate our environmental practices to our customers when they arrive.
3. We communicate our environmental practices to our customers during their stay.
4. We play a role in society that goes beyond profit generation (e.g., increasing awareness and understanding of environmental and natural resources conservation, water, and air pollution, and protecting rainforests).
5. We use renewable energy in a productive process compatible with the environment (e-g. solar panels for power generation and heating).
6. We participate in environmental certifications (e-g green label certification, eco-label etc.).
7. We target sustainable homestay growth (e-g. growth in social, environmental, political, and economic aspects of life in rural areas).

## Economic

1. We are committed to improving the welfare of the communities in which we operate (e.g., providing self-employment opportunities and reducing poverty by employment and business creation etc.). Turker, 2009
2. We actively participate in socio-cultural events (e.g., traditional games, traditional dances and performances, traditional cuisines, and traditional arts)
3. We encourage our employees to participate in voluntary activities.
4. We provide fair treatment of employees (without discrimination and abuse, regardless of gender, race, origin, or religion).

5. We provide training opportunities for employees

**iii. Measurement for the construct of <sup>1</sup> political support by local authorities**

Political support by local authorities adapted to English language items is shown below, and the full questionnaire and BM scale are present in Appendix A.

**Table 10: Measurement items for measuring political support by local authorities**

Dimensions	Items	Author
<b>Political support by local authorities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Local residents are encouraged to participate in the tourism planning process.</li> <li>2. Stakeholders are encouraged to collaborate in the establishment of tourism policies.</li> <li>3. Stakeholders (e-g. resident representative councils) are cooperating with the rural government (District Council) at every level of Tourism planning.</li> <li>4. We are involved in a public-private sector partnership (e-g. partnership between resident representative councils, NGOs, and District council).</li> <li>5. We are aware of the meaning of sustainable tourism.</li> <li>6. We are aware of the implications of sustainable tourism.</li> <li>7. We collaborate during the execution of local ideas in community/ site management.</li> <li>8. Most residents and the district council are involved in two-way communication.</li> <li>9. Most residents are engaged in conservation projects at the local level.</li> <li>10. Most residents are involved in conservation projects at the regional level.</li> </ol>	Choi & Sirakaya, 2006

11. Affordable funding resources are available for homestay operators (e-g. Special Tourism Fund (STF) or Tourism Infrastructure Fund).

iv. Measurement for <sup>152</sup>the construct of brand equity of homestays

Homestay <sup>44</sup>brand equity adapted scale covering dimensions of homestay brand awareness, brand image, brand quality and homestay brand loyalty is shown below, and the full questionnaire and BM scale are present in Appendix A.

Table 11: Measurement items for measuring brand equity of homestays

Dimensions	Items	Author
Brand equity of homestays	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tourists can recognize our homestay among other competing operators because of our environmental commitments.</li> <li>2. Tourists are aware of our homestay because of its environmental reputation.</li> <li>3. Tourists are aware of our intent to protect the environment and to ensure sustainability. <sup>4</sup></li> <li>4. Our homestay is regarded as the best benchmark of environmental commitments.</li> <li>5. Our homestay is preferred by tourists.</li> <li>6. Our homestay <sup>4</sup> well-known.</li> <li>7. Our homestay is professional about environmental reputation.</li> <li>8. Our homestay is successful in environmental performance.</li> <li>9. Tourist prefers to stay in our homestay because of its environmental practices.</li> <li>10. Our homestay is established on environmental concerns.</li> <li>11. Our homestay is trustworthy about environmental promises.</li> <li>12. The tourist intends to stay in our homestay again.</li> </ol>	Aaker, 1991; Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Keller, 2003.

### 3.5.2. Pre-testing of Research Instrument

In social science research, pre-testing of the questionnaire is trying out a particular research instrument (Treiman, 2014), it can be used as a feasibility study or trial run done in preparation for a major study (Polit et al., 2017). Pretesting is the stage in the development of a questionnaire that determines the potential effectiveness of the questionnaire, it is conducted before the final distribution of the questionnaire to the target population (Reynolds, Diamantopoulos, & Schlegelmilch, 1993). Pretesting is used to refine the questionnaire design and identify errors in the questionnaire. The questionnaire pre-test serves the same role in questionnaire design that test marketing serves in new product development (Churchill, 2006). indeed, data collection should never begin without an adequate pre-test of the instrument' (Churchill, 2006).

Additionally, the items in the questionnaire ought to acquire the input of experts from both academia and industry to warrant content validity (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). Experts analyse the content and face validity of each item of the instrument, also, experts check the measurement items whether they matched the operational definition of constructs are not. In the current study, first, the original instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts each of whom had experience in sustainable tourism, community-based tourism, Information and Communication Technologies, branding, and local and regional tourism policies. Each reviewer was provided with the introductory letter and survey instrument. Reviewers were invited to check each item for face and content validity. Face validity requires subjective judgement on the response accuracy through a logical valuation of predetermined questions

(Zikmund et al., 2013). Meanwhile, <sup>53</sup> content validity pertains to the degree to which the instrument fully assesses or measures the construct of interest (Polit & Beck, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> The importance of content validity and its relevance with reliability, have made it an essential step in instrument development (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015). In social sciences research, <sup>3</sup> the content validity index (CVI) is an important and most utilized method of instrument content validity (Polit & Beck, 2017). So, the current study used CVI for content validity evaluation. As suggested by Lynn (1986), the researcher computed <sup>21</sup> two types of Content validity Indexes (CVIs). The first type involves the content validity of individual items (I-CVI) and the second involves the content validity of the overall scale (S-CVI) (Polit & Beck, 2017), in the current study researcher, applied the same procedure to calculate the CVI of the instrument. Polit & Beck (2017) suggest a panel of 8 to 12 experts panel for content validation, so ten experts from academia and two from the industry did content validation.

<sup>12</sup> The experts were asked to rate instrument items in terms of their relevancy to the construct underlying study as per the theoretical definitions of the construct itself and its dimensions on a 4-point ordinal scale (1[not relevant], 2[somewhat relevant], 3[quite relevant], 4[highly relevant]) (Davis, 1992). Using a 4-point scale is beneficial as it avoids <sup>85</sup> a neutral midpoint value (Polit & Beck, 2017). In the current study, <sup>3</sup> an item level CVI (I-CVI) was computed by dividing; the total <sup>3</sup> 3 or 4 (relevant) responses by experts by the total number of experts. According to Polit et.al, (2017), <sup>3</sup> an I-CVI near 0.78 needs revision and items with low I-CVI need to be deleted.

<sup>85</sup> To calculate S-CVI/Ave, all relevant <sup>12</sup> items (I-CVI above 0.78) were added and then divided by the total number of items. S-CVI/Ave of 0.90 is recommended by (Polit & Beck, 2017). In the

current study, four items out of 54 were eliminated as their <sup>145</sup> I-CVI scores were less than 0.78. Overall instrument's content validity score (S-CVI) / Ave was 0.94 more than 0.90 so the instrument was validated. The CVI process resulted in a total of 50 items. These process details are provided in Appendix B.

### 3.5.3. Questionnaire Translation

The original questionnaire adapted was in the English language. For better understanding and efficient response from rural community-based homestay operators, a Bahasa Melayu (BM) edition of the instrument was designed. Questionnaire translation into a new language may trigger complications to control translation issues, Campbell et.al, (1977) suggested four techniques: (1) Bilingualist technique (bilingual take a language test in both languages) (2) Back-translation (3) Pre-test procedure (field testing of translation) (4) Committee approach (group of bilingual translators involved). The back-translation method was used by the researcher to ensure that the instrument is translated properly and that each item has the same meaning in the original and translated language. Translators were chosen who have proven expertise in both languages (English and Bahasa Melayu) and are certified by the <sup>1</sup> Malaysian Institute of translation and books (ITBM).

The back-translation method involves two bilinguals' engagement, in this process, one translator translates from one language <sup>4</sup> to the target language and the other translates back blindly to the original language (Brislin, 1970). This results in twin translations of the same language questionnaire. In the current study, a native BM speaker with fluency in the English language translated from English to BM. Then the same translated questionnaire was back-translated to English from BM by another native BM speaker. After this researcher tested the

newly translated version with the original English language survey to test for any mistranslation or mistakes. After translation pilot study was carried out.

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#### 3.5.4. Pilot Study

The pilot study's purpose was to "test and refine" and validate the final questions (Yin, 2015). Particularly, the objective of the pilot study ensured that all questions were structured appropriately, understandable, and drew relevant participant responses (Yin, 2015). Before the final research pilot study acts as a test round and is used for questionnaire improvement by detecting and removing its weaknesses based on the responses. Additionally, the pilot study analyzed all questionnaire aspects including the sequence of questions, clarity of instructions, double-barrelled measurements, length of questions, and confusing wordings. The data collection method used in a pilot study is similar to the actual data collection procedure (Zikmund et al., 2012). Upon identifying the actual study population, the pilot study was conducted by administering the survey instrument to the target population. According to Hair et al., (2014), a pilot study is vital for gathering opinions and feedback for survey questionnaire improvement (Hair et al., 2014).

Different researchers recommended different numbers of participants for the pilot study, 10 participants (Nieswiadomy & Bailey, 2018) or 10% of the final study size (Lackey & Wingate, 1997). The final decision is to be guided by cost and time constraints as well as by the size and variability of the population. So, in the current study researcher did a pilot study with 20 homestay operators in the state of Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. A pilot study was done to verify low response rate items and to understand if some questions or sections are skipped. The revised questionnaire based on the result of pre-testing was therefore piloted with 20 homestay



operators and nothing out of the ordinary was picked up, no item received a low response from respondents. As the pilot study did not lead to any major changes in the questionnaire content, the ordering of questions, the instructions and the layout, or the wording, the data was considered appropriate for inclusion in the main research (Hassan, Schattner, & Mazza, 2006; In, 2017).

### 3.5.5. Pilot-Test Reliability Analysis

As the CVI helped to improve the instrument's construct validity, the reliability of the instrument needs to be revealed (Kovacic, 2018). The measurement instrument's internal consistency aspect of reliability is estimated using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) coefficient, and this was done by reliability analysis of the pilot study data of homestay operators (n=20). This resulted in Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value of 0.86 for all items, which is well above the threshold value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). The summary of the reliability analysis is described in the table below.

**Table 12: Reliability Analysis of pilot study**

Variables	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
All Constructs Combined	50	0.86
The economic aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing	05	0.73
CSR aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing	05	0.72
Environment aspect of Sustainability Tourism Marketing	07	0.71
ICT Competency	10	0.89

<sup>1</sup> Political support by local authorities	11	0.71
Brand equity of homestays	12	0.84

Note. n=20

The table above shows high internal consistency between items. The questionnaire pre-testing and piloting resulted in an instrument that is set to be delivered to the respondents for a complete survey.

The collection of data <sup>1</sup> from homestay operators registered with MOTAC was done between (September 1 to November 30, 2019). The researcher personally visited each state and stayed in homestays and personally observed the operation of this tourism product. The researcher used a self-administered data collection technique and collected data from all homestay operators. The researcher himself guided respondents (gave instructions when required), for a high response rate and no question remains unanswered. According to (Williamson, 2002), a self-administered is inexpensive compared to interviews, respondents participate anonymously, the response rate is high, covers a wider geographical area and large data in a short period, moreover, it allows the researcher to explain question answers to respondents. The research survey was performed in Pahang, Pulau Pinang and Klang Valley, Malaysia.

### 3.6. Data Analysis Technique

Covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) <sup>17</sup> is an appropriate method when the research objective is theory testing and confirmation. In contrast, Variance based (PLS-SEM) <sup>91</sup> is an appropriate method when the objective of the research is theory development and prediction. <sup>52</sup> Because of its prediction orientation, PLS-SEM is the preferred method when the research objective is theory development and prediction, especially in <sup>96</sup> the marketing and management information

systems disciplines (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). A path diagram is used to evaluate the model on the significance of how the constructs are related to each other and determine the direction of the hypothesis.

The researcher aimed to analyse quantitative data by using non-linear regression-based PLS-SEM. In marketing research, SEM has become a standard to analyse <sup>4</sup> the cause-and-effect relationships between latent variables (Hair et. al, 2014). It is a multivariate method that blends factor and regression analysis (Hair et.al, 2014). For concept and theory development in social sciences and predominantly in marketing SEM has become a method of choice (Hair et. al, 2011).

### <sup>2</sup> 3.7. Measurement Model

The measurement model deals with the measurement of latent variables of the PLS-SEM path modelling. Each latent construct of the model comprises multiple reflective observations. The <sup>62</sup> assessment of the measurement model was conducted to ensure the quality criteria before proceeding to the structural model assessment. Uni-dimensionality, validity and reliability were assessed before concluding the measurement model (Pillai & Rjumohan, 2020). As discussed below.

#### 3.7.1. Uni-dimensionality

The Uni-dimensionality implied that a single item <sup>7</sup> factor loading for a newly developed item should be 0.5 or higher and for an established item at a threshold of 0.6 or higher. Therefore, based on this principle the deletion of an item will be imposed on those reported lowest factor

loading. Before testing <sup>130</sup> the significant relationship in the structural model, the measurement models were examined concerning <sup>155</sup> validity and reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

### 3.7.2. Validity

The structural model is deemed adequate with acceptable <sup>48</sup> reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity confirmation. Additionally with hypotheses testing and validation of the research model. In the first step of model evaluation, the outer model results are presented to measure each construct's reliability and validity (Chin, 2010). <sup>56</sup> Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were used to test the measurement model's internal consistency for reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Convergent <sup>119</sup> and discriminant validity were used to examine the construct <sup>11</sup> validity (Chin, Gopal, & Salisbury, 1997). Convergent validity is the construct's theoretical measure that would be related to one another, and discriminant validity is the construct's theoretical measure that would not be related to one another (Chin et al., 1997). The <sup>58</sup> convergent and discriminant validity work collectively as subtypes of construct validity, both measures need to be acceptable to establish construct validity (Kim, Ferrin, & Rao, 2008). The item loadings and their related t-values <sup>3</sup> were used to assess the convergent validity. The AVE was <sup>153</sup> used to evaluate the discriminant validity. Finally, the evaluation of <sup>11</sup> the structural model was done using significance levels and standardized path coefficients for the confirmation of the study hypotheses.

### 3.7.3. Reliability

Reliability is achieved through the following technique: (1) Internal <sup>114</sup> reliability, (2) Composite reliability and (3) Average Variance Extracted. Based on the review revealed that most of the

studies testing the constructs' reliability using <sup>3</sup> Cronbach's Alpha ranged from >0.5 to >0.8 acceptable level.

**Table 13: Reliability Technique used in Expectancy Disconfirmation Model**

Reliability technique	Threshold of acceptance	Authors
Internal Reliability	Cronbach Alpha >0.70	Ryu & Han, (2011)
	Cronbach Alpha >0.85	Kim et. al, (2016)
	Cronbach Alpha >0.6	Sekaran & Bougie, (2019)
	Cronbach Alpha >0.5	Fornell & Larcker, (1981)
Composite Reliability	CR coefficients ranging from .91 to .93	Bacon, Sauer, & Young, (1995)
Average Variance Extracted	AVE values exceeded the recommended value of .50	Fornell & Larcker, (1981); Ryu & Han (2011); Kim et al., (2016)

This adhered to Cronbach's alpha values for all the variables (Ryu & Han, 2011). The threshold is (0.70) which is considered acceptable reliability. In addition, the <sup>41</sup> coefficient alpha value of 0.70 for exploratory measures indicates a strong item covariance or homogeneity (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

### <sup>2</sup> 3.8. Structural Model

The structural model describes the relationship among the latent variables in the PLS-SEM path model (Ahmed et al., 2017). PLS program <sup>20</sup> generates *t*-statistics for significance testing of both the inner and outer model, using bootstrapping. In this procedure, many subsamples are taken from the original sample with replacement to give standard bootstrap errors, which in turn offers approximate *t*-values for significance testing of the structural path (Hair et al., 2014).

The result of bootstrapping approximates the data normality. After completion of the bootstrapping procedure, the results are established. If the value of *t*-statistics is greater or equal to 1.96, this demonstrates the high significance of the outer model loadings, and the hypotheses can be accepted (Hair et al., 2014). In the current study, the same procedures for structural model analysis were applied. The complete structural model is shown in chapter 4.

### 3.9. Ethical Consideration

Ethics are defined as the ‘norms or standards of behaviour that guide moral choices about our behaviour and our relationships with others (Cooper & Schindler, 2008, p. 34). Ethics in the research context means the researcher’s appropriate behaviour relative to the research participant’s rights (Saunders et al., 2016). Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Malaysia requires formal research approval as per UTAR Research Ethics and Code of Conduct.

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the proposed research protocol was approved by the Chairman of the UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee. This research followed the key UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee principles of ethical research. The main points of the “UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee” for social sciences are as follows.

1. **Research Integrity:** Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency. When gaining access to participants and collecting the actual data. In the current research, all participants were informed according to ethical guidelines.

<sup>92</sup>  
2. **Informed consent:** Informed consent consists of obtaining the research subject's agreement to participate in a research study, assessment, consulting, or therapy activity (American Psychological Association, 2010). Research staff and participants must normally be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved. In the current research, all participants were communicated the pros and cons before data collection.

<sup>108</sup>  
3. **Privacy and confidentiality:** The confidentiality of the information supplied by research participants and the anonymity of respondents must be respected. Privacy is the research participant's prerogative to control the scope and circumstances of the information sharing in the research project (Moreno, Goniu, Moreno, & Diekema, 2013). Confidentiality relates to how the information is handled after it is shared (Moreno et al., 2013). These issues are especially critical in human subject research, where data is obtained from living subjects through the collection of identifiable private information or by direct interaction (Moreno et al., 2013). During the survey, the researcher took care of respondents' privacy and confidentiality.

4. **Research participant's rights:** The study participants must voluntarily, free from any compulsion. The research participant's autonomy and dignity were assured by informing them about confidentiality and anonymity. Before requesting consent, the participant must be allowed to ask questions regarding the research process (Doyle, Mullins, & Cunningham, 2010). The researcher strictly complied with the research participant's rights and all responses were voluntarily provided.

5. **Risk assessment:** Harm to research participants and researchers must be avoided in all instances. The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit. The researcher ensured this during the survey.
  
6. **Data handling and reporting:** When storing the data, the responses were stored in password-protected computers for the researcher's use only and after usage, it was securely deleted. Lastly, while reporting study results, the identities of individuals like names and associations were hidden and not recognisable in any study output. Access to research data is restricted to the researcher, the supervisory committee, and members of the UTAR review board. Access to the data was password protected. Data from the research was not stored in the university lab computers. Google Drive storage was used to store the survey data. After the project, the response data was downloaded onto a password-secured portable storage drive for long-term storage.

### 3.10. Chapter Summary

This chapter described the methodology and design of the research study. The chapter provided a philosophical positioning of quantitative research and a description of the research design. The present study took the form of a quantitative method that started with a quantitative survey, data will be collected by questionnaire. This chapter further discussed the Introduction, Research Philosophy, Research design, sampling techniques, data collection methodology and Analysis technique (Data Assumption, structural model) and Ethical considerations for the study.



## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS AND FINDINGS

#### 4.0. Introduction

This section discusses the analysis of data and research discussion. The study developed an assessment model that assesses the relationship between all constructs. To achieve the study, aim and objectives, the study analysed questionnaire survey data and presented the findings. Also, various data analysis methods used in the study are discussed in this chapter. The various data analysis methods used in the study include “Descriptive statistics for respondents' demographics”, “Data processing to check the collected data quality, handling non-response”, “Inner and outer model analysis”, “Reliability Test”, “Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity” of all study variables. Additionally, the section shows the structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) results and the hypotheses confirmation. The chapter ends with a summary of the research findings. The chapter closes with the research findings summary.

#### 4.1. Response Rate

In the current study, all questionnaires were self-administered. The researcher used a self-administered questionnaire for a better understanding of respondents and to minimize any chances of non-response. The total number of respondents for the study was 180, as the self-administered questionnaire technique was used, so the response rate was 100%; all details are mentioned in table 14.

**Table 14: Response Rate**

Distributed	Questionnaires			Response rate (%)
	Received	Rejected	Usable	
180	180	0	180	100

## 4.2. Examination of Data

The quality of data can only be ensured by data screening, cleaning, and verification (Wang, Storey, & Firth, 1995). For this purpose, all the questionnaires (English and Bahasa Melayu) were printed on A4 size paper (Appendix A), and printing attention was paid to entering the data, with each questionnaire thoroughly checked. This process ensured no errors in data entry due to keystrokes.

## 4.3. Data processing

It is the process of extracting information from raw data. The steps are taken for data processing to ensure that all data is reliable. In the current study, the data collected through questionnaires were subjected to data editing, coding, transcribing, checking, and cleaning through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). SPSS statistics is one of the most commonly used statistical analysis tools because of its powerful features and robustness, SPSS is a popular tool for research, experimentation, and decision-making, as it manages and analyzes data and represents them in visually attractive graphical forms.

### 4.3.1 Data Checking

It is used to check for any error, missing data, or omission to ensure all questionnaires are free from errors and completed (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019). Questionnaire checking was carried out to ensure data correction at an early stage. As the researcher was present during data collection to guide respondents and to clear any ambiguities, also the questionnaire was in the native language, so the chances of errors in responses were minimized. Even then researcher checked

for completeness, consistency, accuracy, and legibility to ensure proper and complete data for statistical analysis.

#### **4.2.2 Data Editing**

<sup>5</sup> Data editing is used in questionnaires review to identify inconsistent, illogical responses or incomplete responses to the answers (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019). To improve the precision and accuracy of the data researcher observed the following processes.

#### **Data distribution**

This research applied PLS-SEM so, <sup>4</sup> the normality of distribution assumption is not required (Hair et al., 2014). PLS-SEM can deal <sup>4</sup> with non-normal data because it uses a non-parametric bootstrapping and presumes <sup>4</sup> the study sample is an accurate reflection of the study population (Hair et al., 2011b). Thus, the study didn't verify normal distribution.

#### **<sup>4</sup> Missing data**

It is essential to verify the data file for any missing responses. This research applies the Smart PLS software, so <sup>4</sup> this software replaces the missing values with the factor's means/ column averages (Kock, 2013). However, during the research researcher was present during data collection to guide respondents, so no questionnaire was returned with missing data.

#### **Outliers**

Like missing data, Smart PLS software effectively treats outliers without removing them and outliers must <sup>4</sup> be removed if they arise due to measurement error (Kock, 2013). The researcher ignored this process as it was not required.

#### 4.2.3. Data Coding and transcribing

Coding is one way for data preparation for analysis purposes. It <sup>5</sup> refers to assigning a unique number or code to represent a specific response. In this research, the questionnaire response is coded as proposed by (Sakeran & Bougie, 2019). In the question asking for the “gender”, the answer “male” was coded as 1 while “female” was coded as 2. For the question regarding “How many homestay units do you own”, the answer “one” was coded as 1, “two” as 2, “three” as 3, and “more than three” as 4. In the question regarding “The nationality of tourist who usually stays in your homestay”, the answer “Local” was coded as 1 and “foreign” as 2. The question regarding “How long have you been in homestay business”, the answer “less than 1 year” was coded as <sup>158</sup> 1, “2 to 3 years” as 2, “3 to 4 years” as 3, “4 to 5 years” as 4, “More than 5 years” as 5. Regarding “Homestay Location”, the answer “Klang Valley” was coded as 1, “Pahang” as 2 and “Pulau Pinang” as 3. For the question regarding “How many types of rooms do you provide”, the answer “Single” was coded as 1, “double as 2, “dorm-type” as 2 and “Other” as 4.

After all these processes to improve responses, the data obtained from the survey questionnaires were transferred to the computer for further processing. SPSS software version 25 was used to process and analyse data.

#### 4.4. Respondent Profile Analysis

The researcher used SPSS 25 for the demographic profiling of the sample and descriptive statistics analysis of the collected data shown in table 15 below. Of the total homestay operators, 67% were female, 33% were male, 59% were local, and 41% were foreign tourists. 44% homestays were in Klang Valley, followed by Pahang 33% and Pulau Pinang 23%. 63.9% of operators owned one homestay, 25% owned two homestays, 10.55% of operators owned three homestays, and 0.55% owned more than three homestays. Room types offered by these operators were single (19 %), double (78%), Dorm type (3%) and others (1%). The business Duration of homestay operators was 2 to 3 years (21 %), 3 to 4 years (3%), 4 to 5 years (6%) and more than 5 years (70 %).

**Table 15: Respondent's Profile**

Demographic characteristics		Number of respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	67	37
	Female	113	63
Tourist Nationality	Local	106	59
	Foreigner	74	41
Homestay Location	Klang Valley	79	44
	Pahang	60	33
	Pulao Pinang	41	23
Homestay Owned	One	115	63.9
	Two	45	25
	Three	19	10.55
	More than three	1	0.55
Room Type	Single	34	19
	Double	140	78
	Dorm type	4	3

	Other	2	1
Business Duration	2 to 3 years	38	21
	More than 3 less than 4 years	5	3
	More than 4 less than 5 years	11	6
	More than 5 years	126	70

#### 4.4. Crosstab Analysis

For crosstab analysis author used SPSS 25, and first homestay brand equity was transformed into a categorical variable. All items of homestay brand equity were computed into their means and regrouped into these three categories, mean value (1-2.44: disagree; 2.45-3.44: neutral; 3.45-5.00: agree). Crosstab analysis results of categorical variable homestay brand equity with other demographic variables are shown in table 16.

To understand further the impact of demo variables on homestay brand equity, a cross-tabulation technique was employed. As tabulated in Table 16, the nationality of tourists who stayed in the homestay, gender of the homestay operators, location of homestay, number of homestays owned, total number of rooms available in the homestay and year of experience in the homestay business were used cross-tabulated against the homestay brand equity. Only, the location of the homestay was found to have a significant relationship with the homestay brand equity. Additionally, it's concluded that despite having an insignificant relationship, the remaining variables were found to be agreeable with homestay brand equity due to the high-frequency count.

**Table 17: Crosstab Analysis**

Homestay brand equity		Total
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		disagree	neutral	agree		Chi-square	P-value	df	Cramer's V
<b>Gender</b>	Male	0	2	64	66	3.369	0.186	2	0.137
	Female	1	11	102	114				
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180				
<b>TouristNation</b>	local	1	6	99	106	1.608	0.448	2	0.095
	foreigner	0	7	67	74				
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180				
<b>HomestayLocation</b>	Klang valley	0	3	74	77	18.155	0.001	4	0.225
	Pahang	0	1	57	58				
	Pulao	1	9	35	45				
	Pinang	1	9	35	45				
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180				
<b>HomestaysOwned</b>	one	1	11	85	97	6.619	0.357	6	0.136
	two	0	1	17	18				
	three	0	0	1	1				
	more than three	0	1	63	64				
	three	0	1	63	64				
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180				
<b>BusinessDuration</b>	2 to 3 years	0	2	36	38	2.836	0.829	6	0.089
	3 to 4 years	0	1	4	5				
	4 to 5 years	0	0	11	11				
	More than 5 years	1	10	115	126				
	5 years	1	10	115	126				
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180				
<b>RoomType</b>	single	0	4	30	34	2.063	0.914	6	0.076
	double	1	9	128	138				
	dorm	0	0	2	2				
	type	0	0	6	6				
	other	0	0	6	6				
<b>Total</b>		1	13	166	180				



To check the homestay brand equity and gender relationship, a crosstab analysis was conducted. Of the total 66 male homestay operators, 64 males agreed; 2 were neutral, and no male operator disagreed. Of the total 114 female homestay operators, 102 females agreed; 11 were neutral, and 01 female disagreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2(2) = 0.186$  with p-value = 0.186, shows insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and gender. Crosstab was also conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and tourist nationality. From a total of 106 local tourists, 99 agreed, 13 were neutral, and one disagreed, from a total of 74 foreign tourists 67 agreed, 7 were neutral, and no tourists disagreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2(2) = 1.608$  with p-value = 0.448, shows insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and tourist nationality.

Crosstab was also conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and homestay location. From a total of 77 homestays located in Klang Valley, 74 operators agreed, 4 were neutral, and no disagree response was recorded. From a total of 58 homestays located in Pahang, 57 operators agreed, 1 was neutral, and no disagree response was recorded. From a total of 45 homestays located in Pulau Pinang, 35 operators agreed, 9 were neutral, and 01 disagree response was recorded. Chi-square  $\chi^2(4) = 18.155$  with p-value = 0.001, shows significant relationship between homestay brand equity and homestay location. Cramer's  $V = 0.225$  shows this relationship between homestay brand equity and homestay location has a small effect size (Cohen, 1988).

Moreover, Crosstab analysis was too conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and homestays owned by operators. Out of 97 single homestay owners, 85 operators agreed, 11 were neutral, and 01 disagreed; out of 18 homestay owners who owned 2 homestays, 17 agreed 1 was neutral, and no disagree response was recorded; 1 homestay

operator owned more than two homestays, and this response agreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2(6) = 6.619$  with p-value = 0.357, shows insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and homestay ownership.

Crosstab analysis was likewise conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and business duration. Of the total, 38 homestay operators with a business duration of 2 to 3 years; 36 agreed that 2 responses were neutral with no disagree response. From five homestay operators with a business duration of 3 to 4 years; 4 agreed and 1 neutral response with no disagree response. From 11 homestay operators with a business duration of 4 to 5 years, all 11 responses were agreed upon. Of 126 homestay operators with a business duration of more than 5 years, 115 responses agreed, 10 neutral and 1 response disagreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2(6) = 2.836$  with p-value = 0.829, shows insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and business duration of homestay operators.

The crosstab analysis was also conducted to check the relationship between homestay brand equity and room type provided by operators. A total of 34 operators provided a single room facility, 30 responses were agreed, and 4 were neutral with no disagree response. A total of 138 operators provided a double room facility, 128 responses agreed, 9 were neutral, and 1 disagreed, and the response from 2 dorm-type and 6 other room types provided by homestay operators agreed. Chi-square  $\chi^2(6) = 2.063$  with a p-value = 0.914 shows the insignificant relationship between homestay brand equity and room type offered by homestay operators to tourists.

#### **4.5. PLS SEM**

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) is comprised of the measurement and the structural model (Hoyle, 1995; Kline, 2008). The two components of a Structural Equation Model (SEM) are 1) The measurement model and 2) The structural model (Hoyle, 1995; Kline, 2008). The measurement model is used for indicator validation and used to measure the latent variables using confirmatory factor analysis (Chin, 2010). For the description of the causal relationship among study variables in the research model, a structural model is used (Hoyle 1995). Section 4.6 describes the measurement model and section 4.8 presents the structural model of study.

#### **4.6. Evaluation of Measurement Models**

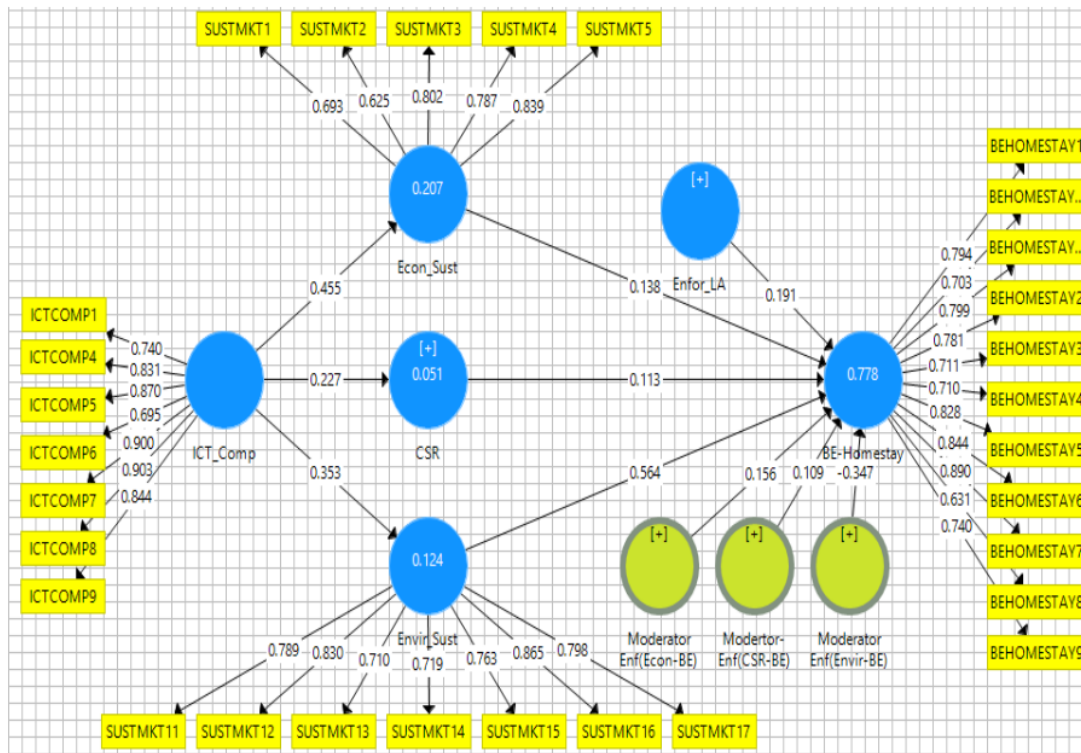
For a valid measurement model, establishing satisfactory convergent and discriminant validities are necessary. The study's measurement model is presented in figure 3. Examining the structural and measurement model in PLS analysis is recommended, for this purpose, Smart PLS 3.0 is used as it assesses all the paths simultaneously (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). For each construct, a measurement model needs to be stated, as these constructs are not directly observed (Hair, 2014). PLS-SEM models are generally evaluated and interpreted in two sequences: 1) Reliability evaluation and measurement model validity and 2) structural model assessment. This sequence ensures reliable and valid construct measures before conducting the relationships of the constructs (Hulland, 1999). The measurement model acceptability is calculated by assessing the (1) internal consistency reliability, (2) convergent and (3) discriminant validity (Hulland, 1999; Hair, 2014).

The outer model comes with 50 items, which consist of ICT competency, which comes with (10 items), Economic sustainability marketing practices with (5 items), CSR with (5 items) and Environmental Sustainability marketing practices having (7 items). The moderating variable

(Political support by Local Authorities) has 11 items, and the Brand Equity of homestays has 12 items. In the next step, the inner and outer models are analyzed. In the inner analysis output, the model shows a combination of coefficient paths, as well as the t-test. The path coefficient between ICT competency and Economic Sustainability Marketing practices is (0.460), ICT competency to CSR is (0.28), and ICT competency to Environmental Sustainability Marketing practices is (0.35). The path coefficient between Economic Sustainability Marketing practices, CSR, and Environmental Sustainability Marketing practices to Brand Equity of homestays is (0.14), (0.11) and (0.56), respectively. The path coefficient between moderator Political support by Local Authorities and Brand Equity of homestays is (0.19).

The next step is the removal of items with cross-loadings less than (0.50), Figure 3 shows constructs with item loading of (0.5 or more). All item loadings exceeded the recommended value of 0.5, as recommended by (Hair et al., 2014) Loadings  $\pm 0.50$  or higher are considered practically significant. Loadings between 0.4 and 0.7 are considered acceptable if CR and AVE cross the threshold (Hair et al., 2014; Haghkhah, Rasoolimanesh & Asgari, 2020).

**Figure 3: Outer model**



#### 4.7. Validity and Reliability of Constructs

The model was initially checked for multicollinearity effect. The variance inflation factor (VIF) technique was used for this purpose. The VIF values indicate no evidence of multicollinearity as VIF values were below a threshold level of 5 (Hair et al., 2018). Harman's single factor test was used to examine common method bias. All indicators were imported into SPSS and an exploratory factor analysis was performed with unrotated principal components. The results produced one factor with a variance of 36.95%. This is below the value of 50%, thus common method bias was not an issue (Kock et al., 2021).

The latent variable's validity and reliability are necessary to complete structural model analysis. To ensure the research instrument's appropriateness reliability and construct validity

were examined before testing the research hypotheses. The PLS-SEM analyses the composite reliabilities (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) to assess the construct's validity and reliability. The item reliabilities were examined from item loadings from the outer measurement model, represented by the latent variable and indicator correlation coefficients. The composite reliability of all construct values appears to be larger than 0.7 indicating a high level of internal consistency reliability (Hair et al., 2014). The average variance extracted (AVE) of each latent variable is evaluated to check convergent validity. The study followed Fornell & Larcker's (1981) method to confirm discriminant validity. The square root of AVE in each latent variable is applied to determine the discriminant validity if this value is larger than other correlation values among the latent variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

#### 4.7.1. Convergent Validity

To measure the convergent validity, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliabilities (CR), and Cronbach's Alpha were employed (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

**Table 18: Convergent Validity of Constructs**

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR
<b>Econ_Sust</b>	Item 1	0.693	0.809	0.569	0.868
	Item 2	0.625			
	Item 3	0.802			
	Item 4	0.787			
	Item 5	0.839			
<b>CSR</b>	Item 1	0.853	0.849	0.828	0.860
	Item 2	0.885			
	Item 3	0.934			
	Item 4	0.924			
	Item 5	0.949			

<b>Envir_Sust</b>	Item 1	0.789	0.809	0.613	0.817
	Item 2	0.830			
	Item 3	0.710			
	Item 4	0.719			
	Item 5	0.763			
	Item 6	0.865			
	Item 7	0.798			
<b>Polit_LA</b>	Item 1	0.882	0.869	0.758	0.872
	Item 2	0.870			
	Item 3	0.895			
	Item 4	0.875			
	Item 5	0.897			
	Item 6	0.839			
	Item 7	0.918			
	Item 8	0.839			
	Item 9	0.894			
	Item 10	0.871			
	Item 11	0.789			
<b>BE_Homestay</b>	Item 1	0.794	0.830	0.592	0.841
	Item 2	0.781			
	Item 3	0.711			
	Item 4	0.710			
	Item 5	0.828			
	Item 6	0.844			
	Item 7	0.890			
	Item 8	0.631			
	Item 9	0.740			
	Item 10	0.703			
	Item 12	0.799			
	<b>ICT_Comp</b>	Item 1			
Item 4		0.831			
Item 5		0.870			
Item 6		0.695			
Item 7		0.900			
Item 8		0.903			
Item 9		0.844			

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The item reliabilities were assessed using item loadings from the outer measurement model. The item loadings are represented by the correlation coefficients between the latent and indicator variable. Hair et al., (2014), suggested acceptable composite reliability of benchmark of 0.70, all constructs exceed the threshold of 0.70. Likewise, all construct Average Variance

Extracted (AVE) exceed the 0.50 threshold, as recommended by (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). AVE of constructs is highlighted in Table 18, confirming that the study research model meets convergent validity minimum requirements.

#### 4.7.2 Discriminant Validity for All the Measurements

Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2015), propose the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). It is a new and alternative method to evaluate discriminant validity in variance-based SEM because the Fornell-Larcker and cross-loadings criteria both have shortcomings in variance-based SEM. Voorhees et. al, (2016) recommended HTMT cut-off value of 0.75 while Henseler et al. (2015) recommended HTMT cut-off values of 0.90 or 0.85. Discriminant validity was tested using HTMT<sub>90</sub> criteria, if the HTMT value is higher than 0.90 then discriminant validity is a problem; nevertheless, no value exceeds the 0.90 thresholds. HTMT details are highlighted in Table 19 below.

**Table 19: Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT)**

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>BE_Homestays</b>						
<b>CSR</b>	0.507					
<b>Econ_Sust</b>	0.640	0.194				
<b>Polit_LA</b>	0.290	0.220	0.300			
<b>Envir_Sust</b>	0.878	0.542	0.559	0.199		
<b>ICT_Comp</b>	0.252	0.235	0.492	0.297	0.394	

*Shaded boxes report HTMT procedure.*

#### 4.8. Structural Model Analysis



Hair et al. (2014) recommended using a bootstrapping procedure with a resample of 5000, to observe  $R^2$ , corresponding  $T$ -values, and beta, besides effect sizes ( $f^2$ ) and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) need to be reported. The results of the study support hypothesis H1: ICT\_Comp ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect Econ\_Sust, H2: ICT\_Comp ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect CSR, H3: ICT\_Comp ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect Envir\_Sust. Moreover, H4: Econ\_Sust ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect BE\_Homestays, H5: CSR ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively affect BE\_Homestays, H6: Envir\_Sust ( $\beta = 0.56$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) have a positive relationship with BE\_Homestays. Econ\_Sust, CSR, and Envir\_Sust practices explain a 78% variance in BE\_Homestays ( $R^2 = 0.78$ ). Different researchers suggested different criteria for a model to be substantial. Cohen (1988) suggested  $R^2 = 0.26$ , Chin (1998) suggest  $R^2 = 0.67$  and Hair et. al, (2014) suggested  $R^2 = 0.75$  as criteria for a substantial model. The  $R^2 = 0.78$  of the current model is substantial for theoretical and practical predictions.

Next, the  $f^2$  was assessed as a p-value that indicates the only significance of the relationship, not the size of the effects, so both  $f^2$  and (p-value) need to be reported (Hair et al., 2014). For the effect size calculation, Cohen (1988) guidelines were used, for small effects ( $f^2 = 0.02$ ), for medium effects ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ), and for large effects ( $f^2 = 0.35$ ). Hypothesis H2, H3, H4, H5, H7 and H8 have a small effect as  $f^2$  values are between (0.02 and 0.15), hypothesis H1 has a medium effect as  $f^2$  value is 0.26, and H6 has a large effect as  $f^2$  value in 0.73. In the following step, the predictive sample reuse technique ( $Q^2$ ) was too calculated. A cross-validated redundancy procedure was used to calculate  $Q^2$ : if  $Q^2$  is greater than 0, the model has predictive relevance; and lacks predictive relevance if  $Q^2$  is less than 0. Figure 7 indicates acceptable predictive relevance as  $Q^2 = 0.445$ .

**Table 20: Hypothesis Testing**

Hypotheses	Beta (β)	t-Value	p-Value	F Square (f <sup>2</sup> )	Decision
<b>H1:</b> ICT_Comp → Econ_Sust	0.45	5.55	0.000	0.26	supported
<b>H2:</b> ICT_Comp → CSR	0.28	2.76	0.006	0.05	supported
<b>H3:</b> ICT_Comp → Envir_Sust	0.35	3.33	0.001	0.14	supported
<b>H4:</b> Econ_Sust → BE_Homestays	0.14	2.38	0.018	0.05	supported
<b>H5:</b> CSR → BE_Homestays	0.11	3.20	0.001	0.04	supported
<b>H6:</b> Envir_Sust → BE_Homestays	0.56	9.60	0.000	0.73	supported
<b>H7:</b> (Econ_Sust x Enfor_LA) → BE_Homestays	0.16	2.40	0.016	0.08	supported
<b>H8:</b> (CSR x Enfor_LA) → BE_Homestays	0.11	2.04	0.041	0.04	supported
<b>H9:</b> (Envir_Sust x Enfor_LA) → BE_Homestays	-0.35	4.01	0.000	0.25	supported

Note: Critical t-values. \*1.96 (P < 0.05)

#### 4.8.1. Moderation Analysis

The study hypothesized "Polit\_LA" to have a continuous moderation effect on the relationships between Econ\_Sust, CSR, Envir\_Sust practices, and BE\_Homestays. The PLS product-indicator approach was used for analysis, as PLS offers added precise estimations of moderator effects of the projected relations and advances the theory validation (Henseler & Fassott, 2010). For the first moderation effect test, an interaction construct (Econ\_Sust \_ Polit\_LA) was created by multiplying Econ\_Sust (predictor) and Polit\_LA (moderator) to predict homestay brand equity. To test the second moderating effect, the interaction construct (CSR \_ Polit\_LA) was created by multiplying CSR (predictor) and Polit\_LA (moderator) to predict homestay brand equity. To test the third moderating effect, an interaction construct (Envir\_Sust \_ Polit\_LA) was created by multiplying Envir\_Sust practices (predictor) and Polit\_LA

(moderator) to predict homestay brand equity. The moderation effect of Political support by local authorities in the relationship between three antecedents of sustainable tourism marketing (Economic, CSR, and Environmental) and brand equity of homestays is shown in the figures below.

Figure 4 shows Political support by local authorities as a moderator in economically sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity relationship. Political support by local authorities positively moderates the relationship between environmental sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays. Moreover, moderator Political support by local authorities strengthens the positive relationship between Economic sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays.

**Figure 4: Political support by local authorities as a moderator in economic sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity**

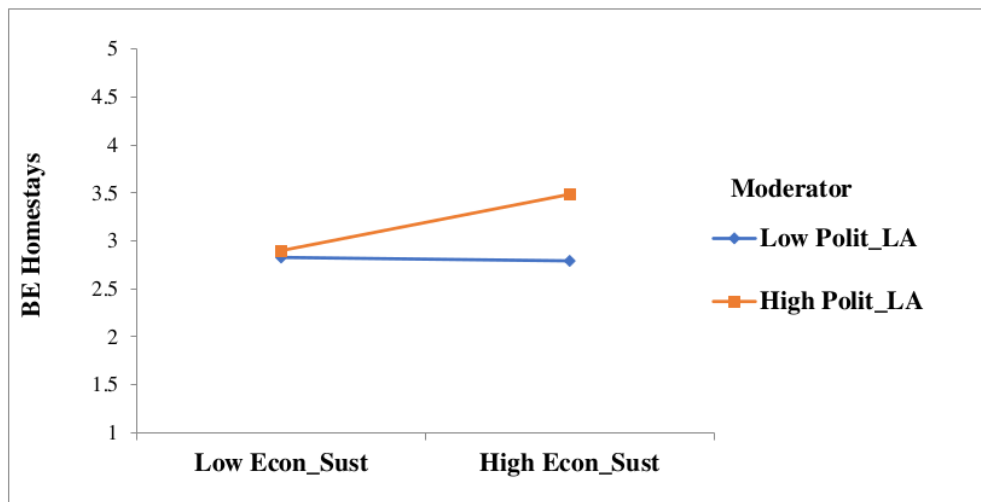


Figure 5 shows Political support by local authorities as a moderator in CSR and homestay brand equity relationship. Political support by local authorities positively moderates the relationship between CSR and brand equity of homestays. Moreover, moderator Political support by local authorities strengthens the positive relationship between CSR and brand equity of homestays.

**Figure 5: Political support by local authorities as a moderator in CSR and homestay brand equity**

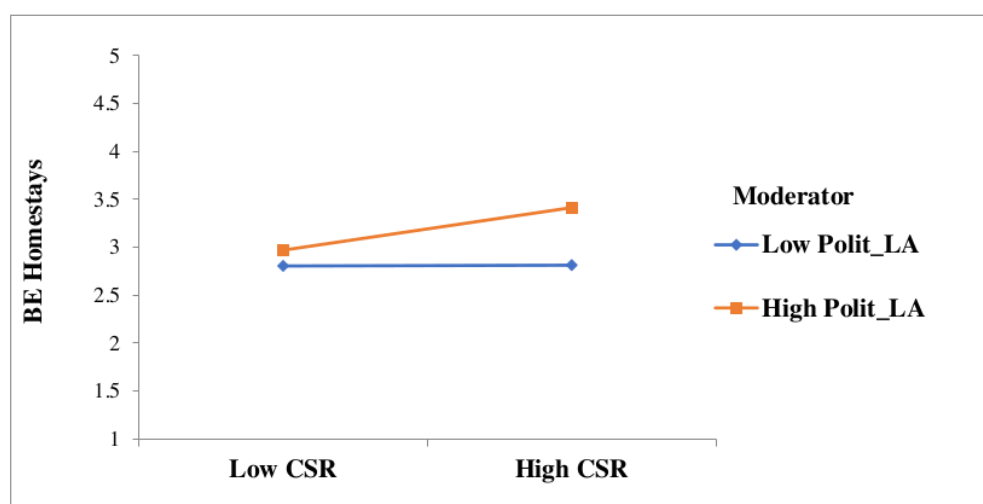


Figure 6 shows Political support by local authorities as a moderator in Environmental sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity relationship. Political support by local authorities negatively moderates the relationship between environmental sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays. Moreover, moderator Political support by local authorities dampens the positive relationship between environmental sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity of homestays.

**Figure 6: Political support by local authorities as a moderator in Environmental sustainable tourism marketing and homestay brand equity**

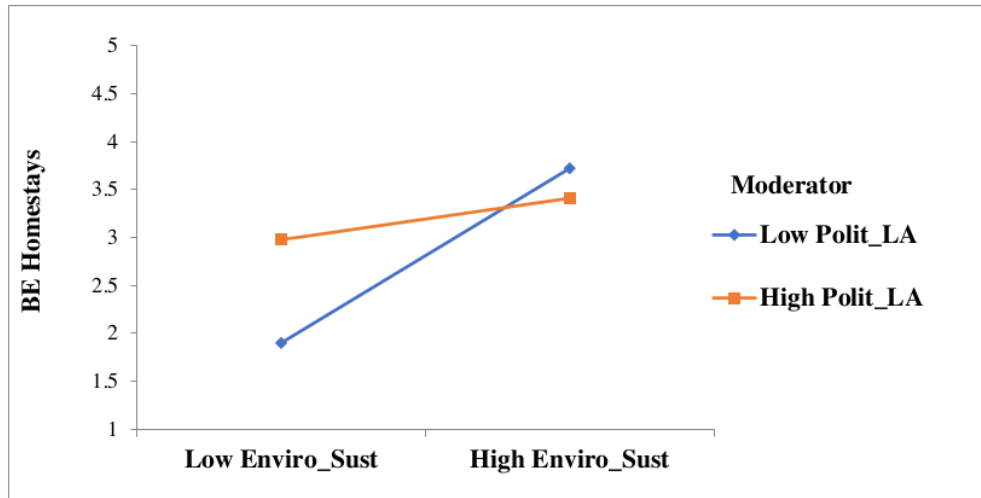
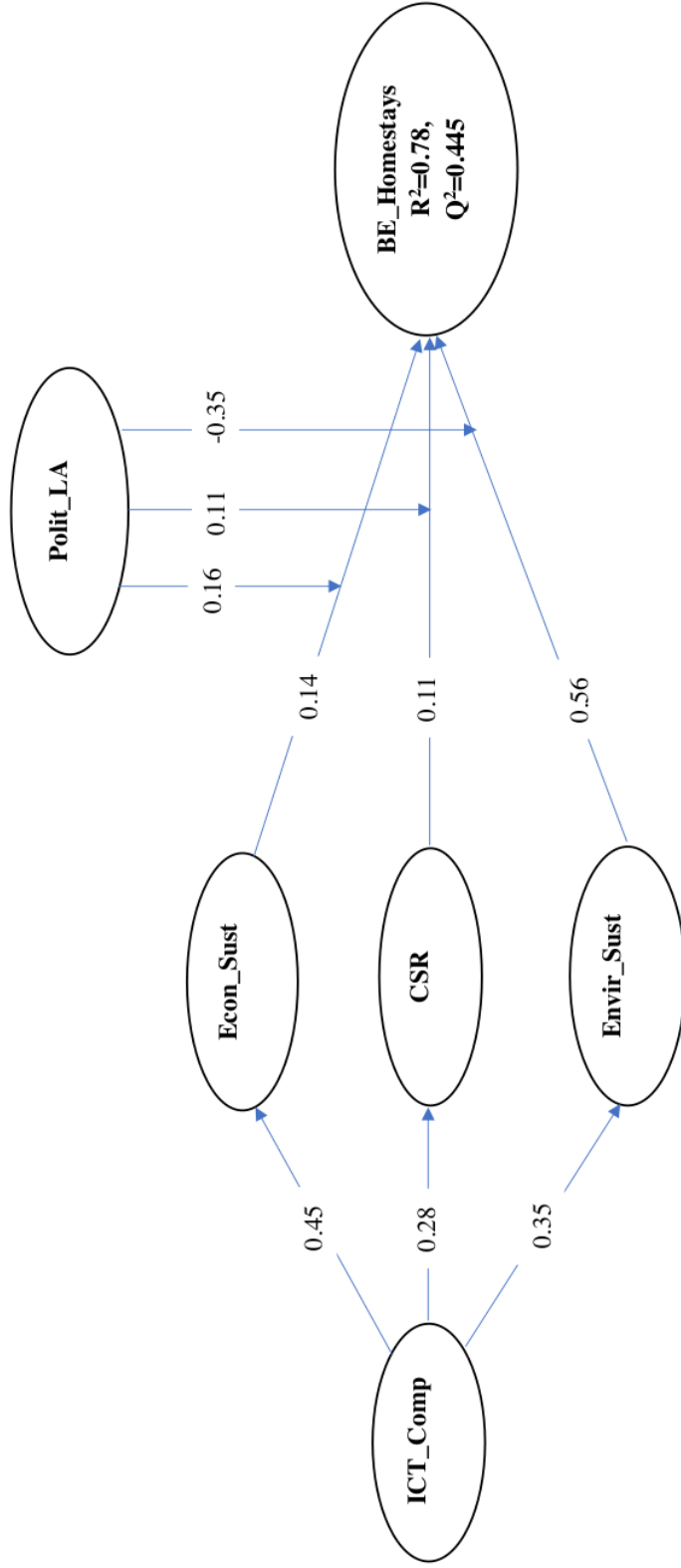


Table 20 demonstrates the estimated standardized path coefficients for the effect of the Polit\_LA (moderator) on Econ\_Sust practices ( $\beta=0.16$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), CSR ( $\beta=0.11$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), Envir\_Sust practices ( $\beta= -0.35$ ;  $p <0.05$ ) on the brand equity of homestays were all significant. It indicates that Polit\_LA moderates the relationship between three aspects of sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays.

Figure 7: Structural Model



#### **4.9. Confirmation and Evaluation of Hypotheses**

SEM through PLS was used to calculate the significance/insignificance and every path's strength in the structural model for hypothesis confirmation. The statistical significance/insignificance of hypotheses can be tested through PLS bootstrapping analysis and beta value ( $\beta$ ) to get the strength of each path. This analysis illustrates the paths of all variables and their relationships are significant. The hypotheses' confirmation results are presented in Table 20.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between ICT competency, Sustainable tourism marketing (Environmental, CSR and Economical) practices, political support by local authorities and brand equity in the context of rural community-based homestays. Findings from the analysis enabled the testing of hypotheses regarding these relationships. The proposed conceptual framework was tested, and the analysis and outcome supported all hypotheses. Significant relationships were found to exist between ICT competency and three dimensions of sustainable tourism marketing (H1, H2 and H3). These relationships are consistent with previous studies (Ali & Frew, 2014; Bifulco, Tregua, Amitrano, & D'Auria, 2016). The hypothesis (H4, H5, and H6) relates to sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestay relationships; all relations were supported. The relationship between Environmental sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays (H4) is consistent with previous studies (Landrum, 2018; Cowan & Guzman, 2020), and CSR and brand equity of homestays (H5) are consistent with previous studies (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016; Ben Youssef et al., 2018) and Economically sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays (H6), This outcome is also consistent with earlier studies (Wilkinson, 2012; Manhas et al., 2016).

The hypotheses (H7, H8, and H9) provide a unique contribution to the tourism body of knowledge. The analysis confirmed a significant relationship between moderator political support by local authorities, Environmental, CSR and Economic sustainable tourism marketing practices and brand equity of homestays (H7, H8 and H9). The antecedent consequent relationship suggested and tested in the current model proves that sustainable tourism marketing practices, when moderated by political support by local authorities construct affect brand equity of homestays.

#### **4.10. Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the Partial Least Squares (PLS) selection, as an appropriate statistical technique employed in conducting research. Additionally, this section explained the research model validation, involving reliability, validity, discriminant, and convergent validity. This chapter too examined the structural equation modelling outcome. The PLS-SEM analysis demonstrated the entire structural paths are significant. Lastly, the chapter described the confirmation of hypotheses. The next chapter discusses the study findings.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

#### 5.1. Introduction

This section presents the closing comments and the research implications of the study findings. The chapter starts with the introduction, followed by significant results and discussion, theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research areas. This thesis started with the aim of developing a sustainable tourism marketing model in the Malaysian context. The study also explored the role of ICT competency in sustainable tourism marketing practices that ultimately enhance brand equity in rural community-based homestays. Moreover, the study discussed the importance of the novel construct of political support by local authorities in rural tourism and precisely in a rural community-based homestay.

Table 21 below shows the research question formulated to achieve the relevant objectives with corresponding hypotheses.

**Table 21: Research Questions, Objectives, and Hypotheses**

Research Questions	Objectives	Hypotheses
RQ1: What is the relationship between ICT competency and sustainable tourism marketing	RO1: To examine the relationship between ICT competency and sustainable marketing	H1: ICT Competency positively affects Environmental Tourism

(environment, social and practices in Malaysian Marketing practices of economic) in Malaysian homestay operations. homestay. homestay operations?

H2: ICT Competency positively affects CSR practices of homestay.

H3: ICT Competency positively affects Economic Sustainability Tourism Marketing practices of homestay.

RQ2: What is the relationship between the economic aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity? RO2: To examine the effect of an economic aspect of sustainability marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity. H4 Economic aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity

RQ3: What is the relationship between the social aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and homestay operator's brand equity?" RO3: To examine the effect of a CSR aspect of sustainability tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity. H5: CSR aspect of Sustainability tourism Marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity

RQ4: What is the relationship between the environmental aspect of sustainability tourism marketing and homestay operators' brand equity? RO4: To examine the effect of an environmental aspect of sustainability tourism marketing in achieving homestay operators' brand equity. H6: Environment aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices positively affect Homestay brand equity.

RQ5: How the role of Political support by local authorities affects the relationship between sustainability tourism marketing and brand equity in homestay operation

H5: To examine the role of Political support by local authorities in the relationship between Sustainability Marketing and Brand Equity in homestay operations.

H7: Relationship between Economic aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities.

H8: Relationship between the CSR aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities.

H9: Relationship between the Environment aspect of Sustainability tourism marketing practices and Homestay Brand Equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities.

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## 5.2. Key findings and discussion

The proposed conceptual framework was statistically tested, and the analysis and outcome supported all hypotheses. Holistically, the study contributed to the existing knowledge of sustainable tourism, and notably, it helped Malaysian rural community-based homestays. The study primarily emphasised sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity significance in Malaysian rural community-based homestays. Moreover, this study too highlights the pivotal role of "Political support by local authorities" concerning brand equity of homestays and

sustainable tourism marketing practices relationship, as the local authority's role is key in rural tourism's sustainable transformation. The research outcome implies that the relationship between rural tourism stakeholders is improved by adopting TBL principles, likewise, it expands market opportunities, strengthens destination competitiveness and creates inclusive decision-making. Additionally, this research expands the TBL in rural tourism by specifically targeting homestays registered with MOTAC as rural homestay products are an effective way to achieve Malaysian and United Nations' sustainability goals.

This research suggested that ICT competency strengthens sustainability practices. Hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 addressed RQ1. <sup>1</sup> A positive relationship between ICT competency and sustainability tourism marketing (economic, environment and CSR) dimensions was observed. So, the <sup>1</sup> H1, H2 and H3 hypotheses are supported. Likewise, it accelerates the development of sustainability to international levels. ICT competency is a key tool for sustainability in tourism <sup>13</sup> and contributes to the creation of innovative sustainable tourism development (Ramos-Soler, Martínez-Sala, & Campillo-Alhama, 2019). ICT competency not only benefits tourists and tourism service providers but has a significant role in entire sustainable tourism development (Naramski, 2020). ICT competency not only aids homestay's business growth and development but is also associated with sustainable tourism development in the area (Singh, Sajjani, & Gupta, 2020). ICT competency not only facilitates the region's tourism businesses but also ensures a trade-off between tourism developmental activities and sustainability (Kisi, 2019). Likewise, in Malaysia, it provides vast opportunities for rural homestay operators to expand sustainably (Osman & Zakaria, 2020). ICT competencies accelerate the process of sustainable development at three levels, destination, visitor, and local communities level, ICT competency facilitates <sup>17</sup> (i) long-term planning, the efficient management of resources; (ii) monitoring, transparency and participation, public-private cooperation, knowledge,

innovation; (iii) communication, (iv) awareness; and (v) the improvement of the tourist experience (Guilarte & Quintáns, 2019). Likewise, ICT introduces a culture of quality customer care at a local level and is one way to up-sell the country from internal to international.

The study's structural model analysis explained the mechanism by which Malaysian homestays can enhance sustainable brand equity and attract visitors. The H4, H5, and H6 hypotheses associated with brand equity of homestay and sustainable tourism marketing practices relationships—were supported. Hypothesis H4 addressed RQ2, H5 addressed RQ3, and H6 addressed RQ4. The study outcomes endorsed the strategic impact of economic sustainability marketing on homestay brand equity. The conclusions are coherent with previous findings (Wilkinson, 2012; Manhas et al., 2016) which state that brand equity's integral part is the economic sustainable reputation (Heinberg, Ozkaya, & Taube, 2018), and it impacts the brand equity in long-term (Cowan & Guzman, 2018) and increases the repeat visitation in rural community-based homestays. Brand equity on an economic sustainability platform can create a competitive advantage. Sustainability and profit objectives need to work together for the survival and prosperity of the homestay. Likewise, over-emphasis on the economic side is in contrast to the spirit of a triple bottom line, as extra weight on the economic side can derail environmental and CSR activities.

<sup>1</sup> Hypothesis H5: CSR practices positively affect Homestay brand equity. The results are <sup>59</sup> consistent with the previous studies that supported the strategic effect of CSR on the brand equity of homestays (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016; Ben Youssef et al., 2018). Social Sustainable brands demonstrate respect for the environment, and community and enhance the company's reputation (El Zein, Consolacion-Segura, & Huertas-Garcia, 2020). Moreover, CSR

should be viewed as a long-term investment as social brand equity is developed by CSR (Loh, & Tan, 2020). It is an asset, and homestays can derive additional economic value in the shape of repeat tourists' visitation. The social brand image of homestays can attract international tourists by creating a positive sustainable perception. The study results show that a small number of foreign tourists stayed at rural homestays in Malaysia, so this socially sustainable perception of homestays can improve its image, and reputation and attract more international tourists.

<sup>1</sup> Hypothesis H6: The environmental aspect of sustainable tourism marketing practices positively affects the brand equity of homestays. This result also demonstrates uniformity among the earlier findings (Landrum, 2018; Cowan & Guzman, 2018). Environmental sustainability leads to sustainable brand equity and establishes an environmentally friendly, credible brand image of homestays among all stakeholders especially tourists this leads to sustainable competitive advantages (<sup>123</sup> Blenkhorn & MacKenzie, 2017; Vesal, Siahtiri, & O'Cass, 2021). These practices also increase the positive word of mouth and peer recommendations by tourists because of the homestay's sustainable perception. Homestay's sustainable brand equity can improve its reputation among tourists ultimately resulting in repeat visitation and new tourist arrivals. The results of the study also attested to environmentally sustainable tourism marketing practices as an essential antecedent of sustainable brand equity of homestays.

<sup>121</sup> The success of community-based homestay rural tourism products in Malaysia and elsewhere depends on the ability to acquire core competency in local cultural heritage, landscape resources, geographical features, agricultural products etc. (Kunjuraman, 2020). Furthermore, to realize sustainable brand equity in rural tourism products especially homestays its mandatory to create synergy in all sustainability practices aspects. The study's conclusion confirms a vital

relationship between sustainable tourism practices<sup>2</sup> and brand equity in the context of the rural community-based homestay.

Hypothesis H7: Relationship between the Economic<sup>1</sup> aspect of sustainable tourism marketing practices and homestay brand equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities,

Hypothesis<sup>1</sup> H8: Relationship between the CSR and homestay brand equity is moderated by Political support by local authorities. Hypothesis H9: Relationship between the Environment<sup>1</sup> aspect of sustainable tourism marketing practices and the Brand Equity of Homestay is moderated by<sup>1</sup> Political support by local authorities. Hypotheses H7, H8, and H9 addressed RQ5.

Hypothesis H7's outcome is consistent with prior researcher's views on the local political authority's importance in supporting the viable economic, equitable socially and friendly environmental tourism marketing practices to develop rural community-based homestay product brand equity (Zhang & Zhang, 2018; Khartishvili et al., 2019). Hypothesis H8's<sup>131</sup> result is too consistent with the previous findings that the authorities at the local and national levels impact an enterprise's CSR performance and sustainability strategy.<sup>24</sup> An organization's CSR strategy specifies the organization's economic performance and brand equity and develops a competitive advantage (Mena et al., 2019; Govindan et al., 2021). Particularly, hypothesis H9 validates the moderator political support by local authority's negative interaction on the relationship. This relationship is strong but negatively significant. The study findings are not in line with the previous results (Zhang & Zhang, 2018) and (Zhang & Wang, 2021). This result also challenges the findings of Wang et al. (2021). Possibly these exciting results indicate that Malaysian homestay operators perceive the environmental policies of local authorities as discouraging, So, the authorities need to look into this.



The antecedent consequent relationship suggested and tested in the current model proves that sustainability practices, when moderated by <sup>1</sup> political support by local authorities construct affect <sup>1</sup> homestay brand equity. Adequate political support by local authorities is vital for regulating the tourism market, protecting destination brand image and sustainable tourism promotion (Liu, Dou, Li, & Cai, 2020), so the prosperity of sustainable rural tourism relies <sup>1</sup> on the support of the local political authorities. Local authorities' political support directs homestay operators in <sup>65</sup> ways to reduce negative environmental and societal impacts, exploit and manage the positive impacts, and simultaneously stay competitive and economically sustainable (Liu et al., 2020). Local authorities also ensure homestay's <sup>148</sup> proper legal compliance with environmental and social concerns, help to enhance networking between stakeholders and build improved relationships, especially with local administrative groups and regulators (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016).

The study also revealed male operators of homestays are fewer in number than women, this shows <sup>25</sup> that women are important drivers of growth in the tourism economy in many ways and, certainly, tourism has become one of the areas where women have established successful tourism businesses. Besides this study's results highlighted inflexibility in MOTAC's homestay operators' licensing policy. Most homestay operators are from the old generation, perhaps MOTAC licensing policy is very rigid and discourages young entrepreneurs.

### 5.3. Theoretical Implications

This research examined the sustainability theory and ICT competency in conjunction with a new construct of "political support by local authorities" and brand equity. This theoretical



model was empirically tested and verified as <sup>2</sup> sustainability tourism marketing practices, ICT competency, and political support by local authorities constructs are important homestay brand equity's explanatory variables. This study highlights that the triple bottom line theory can be explained broadly when employed in association with <sup>2</sup> ICT competency, brand equity, and the new <sup>136</sup> construct of Political support by local authorities. The <sup>136</sup> triple bottom line theory appears as a significant <sup>36</sup> framework for a rural community-based homestay product to enhance the social, economic, and environmental sustainability dimensions.

The theoretical model of study highlights the importance of the "ICT competency and Political support by local authorities" relationship with the three pillars of TBL, also the importance of these two in designing sustainable and durable rural community-based tourism brands. The model demonstrates high-level reliability in its theoretical design and practical outcomes and contributes to a new insight into the sustainable tourism body of knowledge. The research proposes a broader model with the presence of <sup>1</sup> the "Political support by local authorities" because it's difficult to keep an equilibrium <sup>157</sup> among the "Economic, social and environmental" dimensions with the elimination of the "Political support of local authorities". This causal model is broad in its applicability as it is not restricted to a specific tourism setting and destination. Furthermore, this cohesive causal model is an important rural sustainable development model associated with <sup>13</sup> the sustainable development paradigm. The study offered sustainable rural tourism planners with valuable theoretical understandings. Each path relationship proposed <sup>109</sup> in the model was tested using structural equation modelling (SEM). The SEM analysis confirmed the statistically significant relationships <sup>1</sup> between ICT competency and economically sustainable tourism marketing practices, ICT competency and CSR, <sup>1</sup> ICT competency and environmentally sustainable tourism marketing practices. The SEM analysis also confirmed the statistically significant relationships between Economically sustainable

tourism marketing practices and <sup>1</sup> brand equity of homestays, CSR and homestays brand equity, and Environmentally <sup>2</sup> sustainable tourism marketing practices and homestays brand equity.

The main contribution of the theoretical model relates to “Analysing how ICT competency improves sustainability tourism marketing and Inclusion of Political support by local authorities”. <sup>23</sup> In addition to testing the theoretical model, the study also tested the moderating effects of “political support by local authorities” in the model. The SEM analysis also tested and confirmed H7, H8, and H9.

The research empirical outcomes demonstrated that the SEM model was intended to concurrently study sustainable tourism marketing practices (Economic, CSR and Environmental). ICT competency, <sup>32</sup> political support by local authorities and homestay brand equity were acceptable. Thus, this research has a significant aptitude for making more detailed <sup>1</sup> applications related to sustainable rural community-based tourism.

#### 5.4. Practical Implications

Table 22 summarizes the key findings, implications for policymakers and practitioners, and resulting impacts on practitioners. It is evident that practitioners greatly benefit from academic studies which could furnish them with the necessary information for policy and business decisions.

**Table 22: Key findings, practical implications and impacts on policymakers and practitioners**

<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Implications for Policy Makers</b>	<b>Implications for Practitioners</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Strategic Importance of Sustainability in rural community-based homestays	Policy makers should enhance efforts like monetary support, continuous training, and development to achieve United Nations and Malaysian sustainable tourism goals.	Sustainable branding of homestays can be used to position and differentiate homestays from other tourism products. Practitioners should market homestays as a rural community-based sustainable tourism product and directly target international tourists using social media platforms (Facebook, Airbnb, Agoda etc.).	Effective sustainable positioning and differentiation of homestays from other impact greater visitor retention and loyalty. The sustainability branding of rural homestays also helps practitioners target a new market.

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Males are fewer in number than female homestay operators. Establish merit in homestay licensing criteria and treat all gender equally. Policy-makers can adopt the female-centric theme in their promotion of e-tourism. Improve the financial condition of rural women and the overall female tourists. g. homestay by the female for rural women and the overall tourism economy will grow. female tourists.

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The inflexible homestay licensing policy of MOTAC should start entrepreneurial initiatives for Malaysian youth. Also, start homestay licensing for the educated younger generation. Homestay coordinators should regularly highlight this concern to MOTAC officials. So, homestay licensing policy involving young, educated homestay operators will improve employment and reduce poverty in rural areas.

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Homestay operators' training and development Allocation of funds or grants for homestay operator's training and development. ICT competency and the latest social media knowledge improve the knowledgeable operator's overall business skills, so professionals, innovators, and the policymakers and practitioners skilled groups of tourism should also cooperate to face entrepreneurs in Malaysia. changing business environment, customer needs and preferences.

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ICT competency is the key antecedent of Sustainable tourism marketing. Policymakers should aim to improve ICT understanding by increasing ICT users in the rural tourism sector. ICT competency creates ways to measure the sustainable behaviours of tourists and transformation of rural tourism products. ICT presents invaluable opportunities to manage the visitor experience, foster innovative products and develop creative marketing strategies. ICT competency impacts rural social

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and economic transformation, and lifestyle improvements.

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Sustainable tourism marketing is the antecedent of brand equity

tourism is the key antecedent of brand equity

Policymakers need to determine rural tourists' needs and expectations and adapt sustainable tourism products to better meet the needs and expectations of visitors.

Practitioners need to establish sustainable rural tourism brands; this marketing will generate sustainable perception and positive word of mouth by tourists.

Effective sustainable tourism impacts homestay branding, this brand equity ultimately results in a favourable experience, image, and loyalty.

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Importance of support by local authorities

The local authorities have equal importance in both enforcing Sustainable tourism marketing practices and enhancing the brand equity of homestays.

The practitioners should use theoretical knowledge provided by partnerships and collaborative this research to enforcement of sustainable tourism marketing practices in rural tourism.

These partnerships, particularly between the tourism businesses, influence sustainable rural tourism development and commercial success of businesses.

The research outcomes provide strategic guidelines for the Malaysian rural tourism stakeholders like “Marketers, local political authorities, managers, owners and operators” to work on “licensing of homestays, training and development of homestay operators, ICT training, homestay marketing and branding, regional and local level tourism policies, and sustainability of rural community-based homestays”.

#### **5.4.1. Strategic Importance of Sustainability in rural community-based homestays**

The research demonstrates the vital suggestions for rural tourism policymakers and practitioners. They must minimize economic cost (cost-effectiveness), Ecological efficacy, Tourism policy (improving tourism policies by integrating the economic, environmental, social goals), and accountability and transparency to realize United Nations and Malaysian sustainable tourism goals. Practitioners should position and market homestays as sustainable rural tourism product by designing a unique sustainable brand (logo, slogan, and name). Like the Agri-tourism brand DEHESA, the European DEHESA is well known niche customer’s brand (Escribanoa, Gasparb, & Mesias, 2020), This branding strategy can be adopted in Malaysian rural community-based homestays. This sustainability concept embedded in homestays can make it more attractive to sustainability-conscious international tourists, especially from developed countries. Escribanoa et. al, (2020) stated that associating sustainability with a brand increases its value. Likewise, this strategy will improve sustainable positioning, revisitation, and tourist loyalty of Malaysian community-based rural homestays.

#### 5.4.2. <sup>1</sup>Female homestay operators are more in number than males

Female operator's ratio is more than male operators, it is a mark for poverty alleviation and women empowerment in rural areas. Possibly this tactic was initially applied for the homestay license from MOTAC. Yet MOTAC need to make sure licensing is fair and partial and women homestay operators must remain active else allocate the license to a more interested and worthy individual without any gender bias. <sup>25</sup> Education and training play a key role. Focus on greater women entrepreneurial training and development as they are an important part of tourism economy and driver of growth in the sector. Tourism policy makers can use female-centric positioning strategy for Malaysian homestay operation like "Girlfriend getaways" (Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, & Disegna, 2019). In this strategy female accompany females in holiday and hosted by females. These tourism products provide females with the opportunities to escape everyday roles, stimulate female bonding, provide a break in daily routines and duties, and are connected to well-being and health (Berdychevsky, Gibson, & Bell, 2013).

#### 5.4.3 The inflexible homestay licensing policy of MOTAC

The rural community-based homestay licensing policy in Malaysia needs to be flexible so younger generation is encouraged to become part of rural tourism. MOTAC needs to decrease start-up barriers for a rural homestay by restructuring the permitting and licensing processes. The greater ease of doing business and lower regulative burden is needed in tourism policy making. This will inspire and motivate the educated youth in becoming homestay operators. Moreover, the study also revealed that homestay operators lack the latest ICT knowledge. The latest ICT training and

development is the need of the hour. ICT competency and the latest social media knowledge are key to a successful homestay business. ICT competencies improve operators' overall business skills.

#### **5.4.4. Homestay operators' training and development**

The Malaysian tourism policy focus should be on easing entrepreneurial initiatives. This can be achieved by mainstreaming entrepreneurship skill development, training, and education. MOTAC, local governments, Ministry of youth and sports training institution can join hands in this cause by training Malaysian young men and women. This entrepreneurship skill development and education project will create innovators and professionals in rural tourism sector. <sup>34</sup> The enhancement of business skills assists managers to develop appealing marketing strategies to entice customers. <sup>22</sup> Government policy should encourage younger entrepreneurs into the tourism accommodation sector to facilitate the sustainable strategic development of the tourism industry. Additionally, encouragement and support for tourism and hospitality education and training of the youth will improve professionalism in the sector.

#### **5.4.5. ICT competency is the key antecedent of Sustainable tourism marketing**

To compete with other international rural tourism products partnership is required between the local governments, MOTAC and the Ministry of Youth and Sports Training Institution to ensure funds for ICT equipment and training, awareness, and ICT literacy programs for rural homestay operators. These funds should be utilized for the current homestay license holder's ICT education especially performing business operations on social media platforms, likewise, all-important



tourism stakeholders should cooperate to provide technical readiness to contest with the international destinations. ICT competency and the latest social media knowledge are key to a successful homestay business. ICT competencies improve homestay operators' overall business skills. <sup>34</sup> The enhancement of business skills assists homestay operators to develop appealing marketing strategies to entice customers.

The well-trained Malaysian younger generation can promote rural community-based homestays on social media platforms to encourage foreign tourists, as rural homestays have a unique Malaysian appeal. <sup>31</sup> There is a need to establish linkages between homestay owners with technology and various tools of digital media to explore the possibilities of further growth and development in the rural homestay sector. The digitalization of the homestay business operations would enable the operators to promote their business and complete their transactions within a click away. Policymakers should focus on transactional and transformational outcomes in the wider community. This can be done by delivering complete ICT training, that will increase ICT competency in the rural tourism sector. It also promotes other rural tourism products like Agri-tourism.

#### <sup>1</sup> 5.4.6. Sustainable tourism marketing is the key antecedent of homestay brand equity

It is the important homestay brand equity antecedent. The rural community-based homestay marketing must provide a sustainable product image, this sustainable perception will generate personal recommendations by tourists. These sustainable marketing policies will help in creating a sustainable brand building for homestays, so operators can utilize sustainable branding for

product differentiation. Likewise, a mass marketing strategy can be used by policymakers for the holistic expansion of homestays, tourism Malaysia campaigns, tourism exhibitions, and official websites. For the holistic expansion of rural community-based homestays, a mass marketing strategy can be used in tourism exhibitions, tourism Malaysia campaigns and governments' official websites. Effective sustainable tourism marketing impacts homestay branding, this brand equity ultimately results in loyalty and trust with tourists that evokes a favourable experience and image.

#### **5.4.7. Importance of political support by local authorities**

The Malaysian central government have a strong impact on local tourism development planning and policymaking. A knowledgeable local authority and central government can cooperate in sustainable tourism development. In addition, sustainable tourism promotion policy and planning also need to ensure a balance between the use of local resources and future <sup>1</sup>tourism development. The local political authorities aid in local collaborative arrangements and partnerships. These collaborations, specifically between the tourism businesses, cooperate and positively impact local sustainable development and commercial success. The networking between major stakeholders of tourism social networks is important for local development and homestay's commercial success. The major stakeholders are the local political authorities, tourists, and homestays themselves.

#### **5.5. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Despite the relevant theoretical and practical implications of the study, some limitations must be acknowledged. The selected constructs and <sup>150</sup>variables were based on the literature review however this selection is somewhat limited, to attain additional understanding of other variables and

constructs that may exist. More practical studies with larger sample sizes can be conducted to generalize findings. To find more insights, to find changes over time in these cause-and-effect relationships, new longitudinal research can be conducted to validate conclusions. A better assessment of the relationships between <sup>2</sup> ICT competency, sustainability marketing practices, Political support by local authorities, and brand equity of homestays could be accumulated if additional perspectives were looked at.

The quantitative research methodology has numerous advantages so it's used in the current research, however, in future studies, the qualitative methodology can be used because of its primarily explorative and inductive procedures. The use and acceptance of qualitative research can help <sup>64</sup> towards a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political connectivity within and for tourism (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Moreover, qualitative inquiry provides more richness to tourism research (Botterill, 2001).

## **5.6. Future Research**

The researchers can pursue several research areas considering these findings as a starting point. To expand this analysis and examine similar complex models this study provided several opportunities. As this study was carried out in Malaysia, there is a further need of investigating this model in different competitive countries and important cities. Further, the relationship between the study variables was examined by SEM. Though it is a powerful technique when measuring the cause-and-effect relations among variables, other techniques can be used to examine similar relationships and to observe the similarity in results.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic had drastically impacted the <sup>6</sup> tourism industry especially rural tourism, due to the <sup>79</sup> immense and exceptional decline in tourism demand (Gössling et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020). Tourism is deemed to be <sup>6</sup> the hardest sector hit by the pandemic (UNWTO, 2020). The current COVID-19 outbreak and the high risk of future pandemics have given rise to new challenges for sustainable tourism development (Streimikiene et al., 2021). In Malaysia, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the income of homestays declined from RM. 29,662,211.60 in 2019 to RM. 9,124,122.66 in 2020 (MOTAC, 2021). Future studies should address government relief and support programs for the swift recovery of rural tourism enterprises from current and future pandemics, this will also support governments' sustainable tourism development policies. Likewise, research on the government's nonfinancial care for small tourism enterprises will be useful, these studies can include business recovery, psychological crises handling, and business recovery.

## 5.7. Summary

This chapter started with recapping the research questions, objectives, and hypotheses. Further, <sup>41</sup> this chapter discussed the key findings of the research. In key findings, <sup>125</sup> theoretical and practical implications were thoroughly discussed. In the practical implications sections, the study provided Key findings, Implications for Policy Makers, Implications for Practitioners, and research impacts. Finally, the chapter provided Study's Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research.

The study mainly highlighted <sup>2</sup> sustainable tourism marketing and brand equity importance in Malaysian rural community-based homestays. This study too highlights the pivotal role of "Political support by local authorities". The research outcomes suggest that implementing TBL principles improve rural tourism stakeholders' relationship, devises comprehensive decision making, increases the attractiveness of destination and broadens market opportunities. Additionally, this research expands the TBL in the rural tourism field by specifically targeting homestays registered with MOTAC as rural homestay products are an effective way to achieve Malaysian and United Nations' sustainability goals.

<sup>23</sup> The main contribution of the study's theoretical model relates to "Analysing how ICT competency improves sustainability tourism marketing and Inclusion of Political support by local authorities".

<sup>23</sup> In addition to testing the theoretical model, the study also tested the moderating effects of "political support by local authorities" in the model. The findings of the study offer strategic directions for important tourism stakeholders (Tourism marketers, destination managers, tourism planners at the regional and local level, and rural tourism product operators/ owners) in Malaysia to work on the following:

- Tourism policies at the local and regional levels.
- Rural community-based homestays sustainability.
- Licensing of homestays.
- ICT training of homestay operators.
- Homestays marketing and branding.

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