



BUILDING RESILIENT AND EMPOWERED COMMUNITIES THROUGH HOMESTAY TOURISM: A SUSTAINABILITY CASE FROM PERAK, MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

There was limited integration between homestay tourism and TVET, particularly in Perak, where cultural heritage, natural attractions, and community participation shape the tourism landscape. Besides, there were insufficient studies on income generation; homestay initiatives offer opportunities for capacity building, skill enhancement, and the empowerment of local communities to engage more effectively in the tourism economy. This study examines the role of homestay tourism in fostering community-based products in Perak by integrating Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Adopting a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and field observations with eight homestay operators and community leaders in selected villages. Findings indicate that homestay participation nurtures hospitality, entrepreneurial, and interpersonal skills, while simultaneously strengthening community resilience and sustainable tourism practices. However, the study also identifies challenges, including limited access to formal training, resource disparities, and weak policy coordination and institutional support for homestay operators. It is argued that integrating structured training modules, such as knowledge transfer programs, into community-based tourism initiatives can enhance local capacity, improve service quality, and support the long-term sustainability of homestay tourism. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for aligning Malaysia's tourism development strategies with its national TVET agenda to advance inclusive and sustainable rural empowerment.

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Community Empowerment, Homestay Tourism, Income Generation, Knowledge Transfer Programs, Sustainable Tourism.



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Introduction

Tourism continues to be one of Malaysia's key economic pillars, contributing significantly to national income and employment while serving as a platform for cultural exchange and rural development. Within this sector, homestay tourism has emerged as a distinctive form of community-based tourism (CBT) that enables rural communities to showcase their heritage, culture, and lifestyle to visitors. Introduced by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) in the 1990s, the homestay programme was envisioned as a means of generating supplementary income for rural households, strengthening community participation, and enhancing socio-economic inclusion across diverse regions of the country. Over the years, it has evolved into an important driver of rural transformation, particularly in states such as Perak, where cultural heritage and local hospitality have become integral to the tourism experience.

While economic gains remain a central motivation for participation, homestay tourism has broader implications that extend beyond income generation. It plays a pivotal role in capacity building, skills development, and empowerment of local communities. Through involvement in homestay operations, community members acquire a range of practical skills, including guest management, food preparation, housekeeping, communication, and entrepreneurship. These competencies align closely with the objectives of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), which aims to equip individuals with the technical and soft skills required for employment, self-reliance, and sustainable livelihoods. As Malaysia continues to promote TVET as a strategic tool to meet the evolving needs of its labour market, examining the potential of homestay tourism as a small-scale tourism product that can contribute to the empowerment of the local community is increasingly important.

However, despite its potential, the integration of TVET principles within the homestay sector remains limited. Many homestay operators continue to rely on informal learning, personal experience, and peer knowledge rather than on structured training or certification programmes, including knowledge transfer programs. This raises critical questions about the extent to which homestay tourism can serve as a practical channel for skills development and whether such engagement translates into meaningful empowerment at the community level. The issue is particularly relevant in Perak, a state endowed with rich cultural and natural diversity, and local communities' capacity varies widely. Some operators demonstrate strong leadership, organizational capacity, and commitment to service quality, while others face challenges related to limited education, resource constraints, and lack of institutional support. These

disparities underscore the need to evaluate how homestay participation fosters, or fails to foster, readiness for structured skill development.

Globally, the relationship between tourism, education, and community empowerment has been increasingly emphasized in sustainable development discourse. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), highlight the importance of skills-based training and inclusive participation as drivers of equitable development. Homestay tourism, when effectively managed, can contribute to these goals by creating opportunities for experiential learning and local entrepreneurship, while promoting cultural preservation and environmental stewardship. Nevertheless, without deliberate integration with TVET frameworks, the potential of homestays to develop skilled, empowered rural entrepreneurs remains largely untapped.

In Malaysia, TVET is gaining momentum as a critical policy agenda under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025), which emphasizes human capital development through vocational and technical education pathways. Various ministries and agencies have been tasked with aligning TVET offerings with industry needs, including those in the tourism and hospitality sectors. However, there remains a noticeable disconnect between national TVET strategies and grassroots-level tourism initiatives. The homestay programme, though successful in generating socio-economic benefits, has yet to be fully recognized as an informal learning ecosystem that nurtures competencies such as entrepreneurship, hospitality management, and customer service. This gap presents an opportunity to explore how community-based tourism activities can complement formal education systems in building human capital for sustainable rural development.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the role of homestay tourism as a catalyst for community empowerment in Perak, Malaysia. Specifically, it seeks to understand how technical, vocational, and interpersonal skills contribute to the development of local operators; what factors facilitate or constrain readiness; and how such processes influence broader community empowerment outcomes. Using a qualitative research design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions with eight participants, including homestay operators, community leaders, and tourism stakeholders. Among the participants, only two demonstrated strong readiness and leadership rooted in established community structures, reflecting significant variation in preparedness and capacity across sites.

The findings of this study hold both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on community-based tourism and vocational education, providing insights into how informal learning environments within rural tourism can enhance outcomes. It also extends discussions on empowerment theory, particularly in how participation in tourism activities influences individuals' confidence, autonomy, and collective agency. In practical terms, the study highlights the importance of structured training, institutional partnerships, and policy alignment in strengthening community resilience through tourism. By identifying gaps in homestay operations, this paper proposes a model to integrate targeted training modules into community tourism initiatives, thereby fostering inclusive, sustainable, and skill-driven rural development.

Furthermore, this research is timely given Malaysia's post-pandemic tourism recovery efforts, where rebuilding community capacities and ensuring service quality have become national priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities within the tourism ecosystem, particularly among small-scale operators dependent on limited external support. In the post-pandemic context, enhancing readiness through homestay participation can play a crucial role in revitalizing local economies and equipping communities with adaptive skills to navigate uncertainties. In Perak, where tourism development is closely linked to cultural authenticity and local engagement, leveraging these principles through homestay programmes can significantly contribute to the sustainability and competitiveness of the rural tourism sector. In summary, this study situates homestay tourism as both an economic and educational platform capable of nurturing technical and vocational competencies among rural communities. It underscores the need for stronger collaboration between tourism authorities, educational institutions, and community organizations to embed principles within tourism-based capacity-building initiatives. By doing so, Malaysia can advance its dual agenda of promoting sustainable tourism and strengthening human capital development in line with national and international development frameworks.

Literature Review

Community-Based Tourism and the Concept of Empowerment

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) represents a development approach that positions local communities at the centre of tourism planning, management, and benefit-sharing. According to Mohd Nor (2021), CBT arises from the recognition that local participation is essential for achieving equitable and sustainable tourism outcomes. Unlike conventional mass tourism, CBT emphasizes small-scale, locally owned enterprises that generate direct economic, social, and environmental benefits for the host community (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). In Malaysia and across Southeast Asia, CBT has been increasingly promoted as a strategy for poverty alleviation, rural diversification, and cultural preservation.

A central concept within CBT is empowerment, which refers to the process by which individuals and communities gain control over decisions and resources that affect their lives (Chan et al., 2021). Empowerment in tourism can be categorized into four interrelated dimensions:

1. **Economic empowerment**, which relates to income generation, employment creation, and local entrepreneurship.
2. **Social empowerment**, which involves strengthening social cohesion, gender equality, and participation in decision-making.
3. **Psychological empowerment**, which enhances community pride, confidence, and sense of ownership; and
4. **Political empowerment**, which concerns community influence over tourism policy and management structures.

Empowerment through tourism is not automatic. As noted by Cole (2006), it depends on the community's capacity, institutional support, and access to education and training. Without adequate skills and knowledge, communities risk remaining at the margins of tourism benefits. This underscores the critical role of education and capacity-building mechanisms, including

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), in transforming participation into genuine empowerment.

In the Malaysian context, CBT has been integrated into national development policies since the early 2000s, aligning with rural transformation and sustainable tourism agendas. Programmes such as the Malaysia Homestay Experience, the Rural Tourism Master Plan, and the Community-Based Tourism Strategic Plan (2021–2030) emphasize inclusivity, self-reliance, and sustainability. However, despite policy commitment, the effectiveness of these programmes often depends on the human capital readiness of local participants, which is directly linked to the provision and accessibility of targeted training.

Homestay Tourism in Malaysia

Homestay tourism in Malaysia was first formalized in 1995 under the Ministry of Tourism's initiative to promote authentic rural experiences for domestic and international visitors. Unlike urban accommodations or commercial guesthouses, homestays involve visitors staying with local families, participating in daily routines, and experiencing local traditions, cuisine, and culture (Kayat, 2009). This model reflects Malaysia's cultural diversity and aligns with CBT principles by encouraging local ownership, community participation, and cultural exchange.

The Homestay Program Certification Scheme, managed by MOTAC, ensures that participating villages meet basic standards of hospitality, safety, and cleanliness. By 2023, more than 200 homestay clusters had been registered nationwide, with Perak emerging as one of the most active states due to its rich heritage and strategic tourism corridors, such as the Lenggong Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Previous studies highlight several socio-economic contributions of homestay tourism. For instance, Hamzah (2020) found that homestay programmes provide income diversification, particularly for women and youth, while promoting social cohesion within rural communities. Similarly, Yusnita and Awang (2019) argued that homestay participation enhances entrepreneurship and environmental awareness, contributing to the broader goal of sustainable rural tourism. Nevertheless, other research points to persistent challenges, including inconsistent service quality, limited marketing capacity, and overreliance on government support (Bhuiyan et al., 2021).

In Perak, the success of homestay operations varies considerably across districts. Villages with strong community leadership, cohesive management committees, and established social networks tend to perform better, while those lacking coordination or training face difficulties sustaining participation. These patterns suggest that while homestay tourism provides opportunities for local development, human resource capacity remains the determining factor for long-term success.

Moreover, as the tourism industry evolves with digitalization, health protocols, and global competition, homestay operators require new skill sets ranging from online marketing to guest management and sustainable business practices. This creates a growing intersection between homestay tourism and the importance of a training module, where structured training can equip operators with competencies relevant to contemporary tourism demands.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Tourism and Hospitality

TVET plays a crucial role in building a skilled workforce to meet industry needs. UNESCO (2015) defines TVET as education and training that provides knowledge and skills for employment, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning. It encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal learning processes, making it particularly relevant to the tourism and hospitality sector, which values both technical proficiency and interpersonal competencies.

In Malaysia, the importance of TVET has been reinforced under national frameworks such as the Eleventh and Twelfth Malaysia Plans, which emphasize human capital development as a cornerstone of economic transformation. The Department of Skills Development (DSD) under the Ministry of Human Resources and the Ministry of Higher Education jointly oversee TVET implementation, including certification through the Malaysian Skills Certificate (Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia, SKM). Tourism and hospitality are among the priority sectors identified for TVET expansion, recognizing the growing demand for service quality, entrepreneurship, and innovation.

However, the link between TVET institutions and rural community tourism initiatives remains weak. As highlighted by the National TVET Council (Majlis TVET Negara, 2021), participation in formal TVET programmes is often limited to urban centres, leaving rural communities underrepresented. Homestay operators, who typically learn through practice or peer mentoring, seldom have access to structured skill development aligned with national competency standards. As a result, many remain unrecognized within formal qualification frameworks, despite possessing valuable experiential knowledge.

Recent studies by Masitah et al (2022) advocate for integrating TVET-based modules into tourism training programmes, focusing on hospitality management, customer relations, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship. Such integration not only enhances employability but also promotes community empowerment by formalizing and upgrading existing local competencies. For rural homestay operators, TVET readiness entails more than technical ability; it also involves motivation, awareness, and institutional linkages to translate skills into recognized qualifications and sustainable livelihoods.

Linking Homestay Tourism and TVET

The relationship between homestay tourism and TVET can be understood through the lens of experiential learning and informal education. Homestay activities such as hosting guests, managing bookings, preparing local cuisine, and organizing cultural events offer real-world experiences that foster the development of transferable skills. These experiences mirror competencies outlined in TVET curricula, including communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and customer service. Therefore, homestay participation can act as a living laboratory for TVET-oriented learning, particularly in rural settings where formal institutions are limited.

According to Zisan et al. (2021), experiential learning theory holds that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. When applied to tourism, this means that daily homestay operations can serve as contexts for learning by doing. Over time, operators refine their skills and adopt professional standards that align with industry expectations. However,

without formal recognition or structured guidance, such learning remains fragmented and may not lead to sustainable career progression or community-wide empowerment.

Empirical evidence supports this connection. In Thailand, for example, the “One Tambon One Product” and “Community Tourism for Education” initiatives have successfully merged tourism and vocational training to strengthen rural entrepreneurship (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2014). In Indonesia, community tourism programmes supported by vocational schools have enhanced both service quality and youth employment (Sugirhati, 2023). These regional examples demonstrate the potential of integrating TVET and tourism as mutually reinforcing mechanisms for local development.

In Malaysia, however, similar integration remains nascent. Studies by Kayat et al. (2022) reveal that while homestay operators possess informal skills in hospitality and business management, few receive structured training aligned with national TVET frameworks. Moreover, differences in educational attainment, access to resources, and community leadership contribute to varying levels of readiness among operators. These findings resonate with the present study’s observation that only a minority of participants with strong community backgrounds demonstrate readiness and leadership qualities.

Thus, TVET and homestay tourism can be conceptualized as a combination of three interrelated dimensions:

1. **Knowledge and skills readiness** (technical, entrepreneurial, interpersonal);
2. **Motivational and attitudinal readiness** (openness to learning, innovation, and collaboration); and
3. **Institutional readiness** (linkages with training providers, certification systems, and policy support).

Enhancing these dimensions requires targeted intervention through formal training, mentoring, and institutional partnerships, ensuring that local capacities are systematically developed rather than left to informal adaptation.

Community Empowerment through Skill Development

Community empowerment has long been recognized as both a goal and outcome of sustainable tourism. In the context of homestay tourism, empowerment is achieved when local people gain the confidence, skills, and resources to make decisions and manage tourism enterprises independently. As Scheyvens (2021) emphasizes, empowerment is multi-dimensional, involving not only material gains but also social and psychological transformation.

Skill development acts as the foundation of empowerment. When individuals acquire relevant competencies through tourism participation, they become more capable of negotiating with external stakeholders, innovating products, and maintaining service quality. Oriented capacity building strengthens this process by embedding learning in practical contexts. For example, training in digital marketing can help homestay operators attract a broader customer base, while certification in hospitality management can enhance credibility and customer trust.

Furthermore, empowerment through skills development extends beyond individuals to the collective community level. Effective homestay programmes rely on collaboration among households, village committees, and local associations. TVET frameworks can reinforce these networks by promoting leadership, teamwork, and shared governance as key aspects of social empowerment. In this sense, the integration of TVET within community tourism not only enhances employability but also deepens social capital and participatory governance.

Nonetheless, empowerment is often constrained by structural barriers such as unequal access to education, gender norms, and policy fragmentation. Studies in Malaysia by Hamzah (2020) noted that while homestay tourism increases awareness of self-development, limited institutional linkage and funding restrict long-term capacity growth. Thus, realizing empowerment through homestay tourism requires a supportive ecosystem that combines training, policy coordination, and continuous community engagement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that Community-Based Tourism (CBT), particularly through homestay programmes in Malaysia, plays a vital role in fostering community empowerment across economic, social, psychological, and political dimensions, yet its success depends heavily on the capacity and readiness of local participants. While homestay tourism offers significant opportunities for income generation, cultural preservation, and social cohesion, these benefits are not automatically realized without adequate skills, knowledge, and institutional support. The review highlights that although operators gain valuable experiential learning through daily tourism activities, the lack of structured training and formal recognition limits their ability to sustain and scale these initiatives effectively. In this context, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) emerge as a critical mechanism to bridge the gap between participation and genuine empowerment by enhancing competencies in areas such as hospitality management, digital marketing, and entrepreneurship. However, the integration of TVET into rural tourism remains limited in Malaysia, underscoring the need for stronger alignment between informal learning and formal training systems. Therefore, achieving sustainable community empowerment requires a holistic approach that combines targeted skill development, supportive policies, and strengthened institutional linkages, which this study aims to explore by examining homestay operators' readiness for TVET integration in the context of rural tourism development in Malaysia.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how homestay tourism contributes to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and community empowerment among rural communities in Perak, Malaysia. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of individuals involved in homestay operations, which includes elements that cannot be captured through quantitative methods alone. As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate when the research seeks to explore complex social phenomena in their natural settings and from participants' perspectives. Given the study's focus on human experiences and contextual factors, a case study was employed. This approach enables the researcher to investigate multiple dimensions of homestay participation, skill

development, and empowerment processes in real-life contexts (Yin, 2017). The study aims to provide rich, contextualized insights that can inform policy and practice. The case study approach is also suited to identifying patterns of readiness and empowerment among small groups, thereby highlighting variations and underlying dynamics that shape community responses to tourism and training initiatives.

Study Setting

The research was conducted in selected homestay villages across the state of Perak, Malaysia, which is known for its diverse rural tourism offerings and heritage attractions. Perak's homestay clusters, such as those in Kuala Kangsar and Gopeng, represent a mix of mature and emerging community-based tourism destinations. These sites were chosen based on three key criteria: active participation in the official Malaysia Homestay Programme under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC); accessibility; and operators' willingness to participate in the study, as well as variation in operational maturity and community organization to capture diverse perspectives.

The selection of Perak as the study site is particularly significant because it mirrors broader national patterns of rural tourism development, where traditional communities engage in hospitality services as a means of economic and social empowerment. Moreover, the state's commitment to promoting heritage tourism provides a relevant backdrop for examining how homestay operators navigate the intersection of local culture, skill development, and vocational readiness.

Participants and Sampling

A total of eight (8) participants were purposively selected for the study. The sample comprised six registered homestay operators, two unregistered homestays, and one community leader who supports rural tourism initiatives. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants possessed firsthand experience and relevant knowledge concerning homestay management, community participation, and capacity-building efforts.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria had active involvement in homestay tourism for at least two years, had engagement in activities related to guest management, hospitality, or community training, and willingness to participate in interviews and discussions. The sample size was deemed adequate for qualitative exploration, as the aim was to achieve data saturation rather than numerical representation. Among the eight participants, two demonstrated high levels of readiness and community leadership, possessing structured management practices, proactive networking, and positive attitudes toward learning and innovation. The remaining six participants exhibited moderate to low levels of readiness, constrained by limited formal training, resource availability, and institutional support—this diversity of experiences provided valuable comparative insights into how TVET varies across individuals and communities.

Data Collection Methods

Multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed to enhance the credibility and richness of the findings, including semi-structured interviews and field observations. The

triangulation of these methods allowed for cross-verification of information and a deeper understanding of the research problem.

Individual interviews were the primary source of data. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Malaysia to ensure comfort and authenticity of responses. The interview guide comprised open-ended questions organized around three thematic areas: participants' experiences and motivations in homestay tourism, skill development, and learning processes related to hospitality and entrepreneurship; and their perceptions of TVET relevance, readiness, and empowerment outcomes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented with field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual details.

Direct observations were conducted during visits to homestay sites to capture operational practices, infrastructure conditions, and community interactions. Observational data provided a contextual understanding of how skills and knowledge were applied in day-to-day activities. The researcher adopted a non-participant observation role, recording field notes related to guest reception, cleanliness standards, local food preparation, and event management. The combination of these data collection techniques ensured methodological triangulation, strengthening the validity and reliability of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach as outlined by Creswell (2013), which involves systematic coding, pattern identification, and theme development. The process unfolded in five stages:

1. Familiarization with data – Transcribed interviews and observation notes were read repeatedly to identify emerging ideas.
2. Initial coding – Meaningful units of text were labelled based on recurring concepts such as “skill acquisition,” “training barriers,” “community leadership,” and “empowerment outcomes.”
3. Theme generation – Codes were organized into broader categories representing key dimensions of the research objectives, including *skill development through homestay*, training module, *institutional linkage*, and *empowerment pathways*.
4. Theme refinement – Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness, supported by illustrative quotes from participants.

Interpretation – Themes were interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework and existing literature, allowing for theoretical insights and practical implications.

NVivo 12 software was used to assist in organizing data, managing codes, and maintaining audit trails for transparency. Data triangulation between interviews, observations, and FGDs enhanced analytical depth and credibility.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure rigor, the study adhered to the four criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Cresswell (2013):

- **Credibility:** Achieved through triangulation of methods and sources, member checking, and prolonged engagement in the field to build rapport and validate interpretations.
- **Transferability:** Detailed descriptions of the study context, participants, and procedures were provided to enable other researchers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings.
- **Dependability:** A systematic audit trail was maintained, documenting data collection, coding decisions, and analytical memos to ensure transparency and consistency.

Confirmability: Researcher bias was minimized through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing with academic colleagues to cross-validate emerging interpretations.

These measures collectively strengthened the authenticity and reliability of the qualitative findings.

Limitations of the Methodology

While qualitative research provides rich insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size limits the generalizability of findings beyond the studied communities. Additionally, self-reported data may be influenced by participants' social desirability or selective memory. However, the use of multiple data sources and triangulation minimized these risks and provided a balanced understanding of the phenomenon. Future studies may adopt a mixed-methods approach to quantify the extent of homestay tourism and the promotion of community resilience through small-scale local products and validate qualitative patterns across larger populations.

Findings

This section presents the key findings derived from in-depth interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions conducted among eight homestay operators, community leaders, and tourism stakeholders across selected villages in Perak. The thematic analysis produced five major themes: (1) awareness and understanding of TVET concepts; (2) skill development through homestay operations; (3) community background and readiness levels; (4) barriers and challenges to TVET readiness; and (5) pathways toward empowerment and sustainability. Each theme is discussed in detail below, supported by excerpts from participants to illustrate their lived experiences and perceptions.

The study revealed that most participants possessed only a general or surface-level understanding of TVET and its relevance to homestay operations. While all operators were aware of training programmes organized by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) or local authorities, few could explicitly relate these initiatives to the broader framework of Technical and Vocational Education and Training. For many, "training" was perceived merely as short-term courses focused on customer service or cleanliness standards rather than a structured pathway toward professional development.

Participants P1 and P3 described their initial exposure to training as incidental rather than strategic:

“We attended some short courses organized by MOTAC, but it was more about how to greet tourists or keep the rooms clean. They never mentioned TVET or any formal certification.” (P1)

“For us, training means learning by doing. We improve as we go. Nobody explained that this is part of a bigger skills system.” (P3)

These statements reflect a general lack of awareness of TVET's potential as a formal mechanism for skill recognition and career advancement. Operators often viewed their engagement in homestay tourism as an informal learning journey driven by necessity and experience rather than an educational or vocational process.

Interestingly, two participants (P6 and P8) displayed a deeper understanding of the link between homestay activities and vocational skills development. Both were involved in local community associations and had prior exposure to structured training initiatives through collaboration with institutions such as the Centre for Instructor and Advanced Skill Training (CIAST) or local polytechnics. They recognized that TVET principles such as standard operating procedures, safety management, and customer engagement were embedded in daily homestay practices.

“When we talk about cooking for guests or managing bookings, that is already training in entrepreneurship and hospitality. If we could formalize it under TVET, more people would take it seriously.” (P8)

This difference in awareness suggests that readiness correlates strongly with exposure, education level, and community leadership involvement. Homestay operators embedded within organized networks or associations tend to demonstrate greater conceptual awareness and motivation to recognize formal skills.

Skill Development through Homestay Operations

A consistent theme across all interviews was the perception that homestay tourism provides a powerful platform for practical skill acquisition. Operators reported improvements in communication, hospitality management, food preparation, marketing, and financial management skills that align closely with TVET domains. The hands-on nature of homestay operations offered continuous learning opportunities, often enhanced by interaction with domestic and international guests.

“Before running the homestay, I did not know how to talk confidently to strangers. Now I can handle guests from different countries.” (P2)

“We learn to manage time, organize activities, and even use social media to promote our place. These are skills I never thought I would learn in the village.” (P5)

Field observations confirmed these claims, as many operators demonstrated strong interpersonal and problem-solving abilities developed through experience. For example, one operator in Kuala Kangsar innovatively used online booking platforms and digital marketing tools after observing guests' preferences, reflecting adaptive learning and entrepreneurial initiative.

However, the absence of systematic mentorship or structured assessment limits the translation of these experiences into formal vocational qualifications. Several participants expressed interest in obtaining certificates or recognition to validate their skills but were uncertain about how to access such opportunities.

“If there is a course that can certify what we already know, that would be good. We have the experience, but no certificate to show.” (P4)

The data indicate that homestay tourism acts as a “living classroom”, enabling operators to acquire and apply practical competencies in real-life contexts. However, without structured linkages to TVET frameworks, these competencies remain informal and unaccredited, reducing their potential to contribute to long-term employability or entrepreneurship development.

Community Background and Readiness Levels

Community background emerged as a decisive factor shaping community readiness and empowerment outcomes. Among the eight participants, only two (P6 and P8) demonstrated strong readiness, marked by well-organized community structures, established leadership, and prior engagement with external institutions. These communities displayed a clear division of roles, cooperative decision-making, and shared goals in managing homestay operations.

“Our community always works together. We have committees for food, activities, and cleanliness. That is why we can run programs smoothly and attract visitors.” (P6)

In contrast, the remaining participants described less cohesive arrangements, with limited coordination and dependence on individual initiative. Some operators reported challenges related to leadership conflicts, unclear responsibilities, and insufficient support from local authorities.

“Sometimes only a few of us are active. Others do not want to participate because they feel it is not profitable.” (P2)

This variation underscores the importance of social capital and organizational capacity in enhancing readiness for structured training and capacity building. Communities with established networks and leadership systems are better positioned to integrate TVET-oriented activities, access funding, and collaborate with training institutions.

Moreover, communities with strong backgrounds in cooperative movements or village development committees tended to exhibit higher adaptability and innovation. They viewed TVET not merely as an external policy but as an opportunity to enhance local capacity and foster intergenerational learning.

“Our youth are interested in learning cooking, guiding, and even photography. If TVET can be brought here, it will keep them involved and stop migration to cities.” (P8)

These findings affirm that community cohesion and leadership engagement are precursors to TVET readiness, influencing both the motivation and ability to participate in structured learning initiatives.

Barriers and Challenges to TVET Readiness

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the benefits of training, several challenges hindered the effective integration of TVET within homestay tourism. Four major barriers emerged: (1) limited access to formal training; (2) uneven resource distribution; (3) lack of institutional coordination; and (4) inconsistent policy implementation. Limited access to formal training was the most frequently cited issue. Participants expressed that most training programmes were held in urban areas or required travel to district centres, posing logistical and financial burdens. “The training is always far away. We cannot leave our homestay because guests might come. So, we miss many chances.” (P5)

Resource disparities were also evident between communities. Those with external support from NGOs or universities benefited from exposure and knowledge exchange, while others operated with minimal assistance.

“Some villages get projects from universities, but others are left behind. We need equal opportunities.” (P3)

Institutional fragmentation further complicated capacity-building efforts. Participants described overlapping responsibilities between agencies such as MOTAC, the Ministry of Rural Development, and local councils, leading to confusion about where to seek guidance or funding.

“We do not know whom to approach. Every department says different things.” (P4)

Lastly, participants noted that the training content often lacked contextual relevance. Many workshops emphasized theoretical aspects or standard hotel practices rather than the unique challenges faced by rural homestay operators. This mismatch reduced engagement and perceived value.

“They teach things suitable for hotels, not for kampung homestays like ours.” (P1)

Collectively, these barriers illustrate that while interest and willingness to learn exist, structural constraints limit the translation of motivation into readiness. Without accessible, contextually grounded, and coordinated training opportunities, the integration of TVET principles into community-based tourism remains fragmented.

Pathways to Empowerment and Sustainability

Despite these challenges, the findings highlight clear pathways to enhance community empowerment through the integration of training and knowledge transfer. Participants envisioned structured collaborations between tourism authorities, educational institutions, and community organizations to develop contextualized training modules tailored for homestay operators.

“If polytechnics or colleges can come here to give short courses, that will make a big difference.” (P6)

Empowerment, in this context, was understood not only as economic self-reliance but also as psychological and social transformation in gaining confidence, leadership skills, and the ability to influence community development. Many operators described how their involvement in homestays improved their communication skills, decision-making capacity, and social networks.

“Before joining the programme, I was shy to talk to outsiders. Now I can speak at meetings and plan events confidently.” (P7)

Homestay tourism thus serves as a foundation for self-directed learning, where experience fosters both practical and emotional growth. Integrating formal pathways can reinforce this empowerment process by legitimizing local skills and enhancing employability within and beyond the tourism sector. Additionally, participants recognized that empowerment must be collective. Communities that shared responsibilities and profits exhibited stronger solidarity and resilience. In contrast, fragmented management often led to dependency on external support.

“When we work together, we can sustain. If everyone acts alone, the programme will not last.” (P2)

These findings echo the broader literature emphasizing collective agency as a cornerstone of sustainable community-based tourism. TVET frameworks can institutionalize such empowerment by embedding cooperative learning, peer mentoring, and local leadership development in homestay initiatives. Ultimately, integrating TVET principles into homestay tourism offers a triple benefit: enhancing individual capabilities, strengthening community cohesion, and promoting sustainable rural economies. However, achieving this requires deliberate policy coordination, long-term partnerships, and localized curriculum design that reflects the realities of rural tourism enterprises.

Summary of Findings

The study’s findings reveal that homestay tourism in Perak contributes significantly to experiential learning and community empowerment, yet the transition toward formal readiness remains uneven. Among eight participants, only two exhibited high readiness levels, supported by strong community structures and institutional linkages. The remaining participants displayed enthusiasm but faced systemic and contextual barriers.

The key insights are as follows:

1. Homestay tourism fosters informal learning and skill development, particularly in hospitality, entrepreneurship, and interpersonal communication.
2. Training and transferring knowledge awareness remain limited, with most operators equating training to short-term workshops rather than structured education.
3. Community leadership and cohesion determine readiness, as strong networks facilitate collaboration and learning.
4. Structural and logistical barriers persist, including limited access, resource inequality, and fragmented institutional coordination.

5. Empowerment arises through participation and collaboration, with potential to be strengthened through formalized TVET integration.

These findings underscore the potential of homestay tourism as a vehicle for rural empowerment when aligned with Malaysia's TVET agenda. The next section discusses these findings in relation to existing literature and proposes a conceptual synthesis linking homestay tourism, TVET readiness, and community empowerment.

Discussion

This section critically interprets the study's findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. It examines how homestay tourism functions as a platform for skill development, informal learning, and empowerment, while also evaluating the limitations that constrain its alignment with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) readiness. The discussion is organized around five key domains that emerge from the findings: (1) homestay tourism as a site of informal TVET learning; (2) the mediating role of community background and social capital; (3) structural and policy barriers to TVET integration; (4) empowerment processes through participation and skill acquisition; and (5) implications for sustainable rural tourism and policy integration. Together, these dimensions illustrate how community-based tourism in Perak embodies both the potential and challenges of linking informal tourism practices with formal vocational education and sustainable development objectives. This section critically interprets the study's findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. It examines how homestay tourism functions as a platform for skill development, informal learning, and empowerment, while also evaluating the limitations that constrain its alignment with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). The discussion is organized around five key domains that emerge from the findings: (1) homestay tourism as a site of informal TVET learning; (2) the mediating role of community background and social capital; (3) structural and policy barriers to TVET integration; (4) empowerment processes through participation and skill acquisition; and (5) implications for sustainable rural tourism and policy integration. Together, these dimensions illustrate how community-based tourism in Perak embodies both the potential and challenges of linking informal tourism practices with formal vocational education and sustainable development objectives.

Homestay Tourism as a Site of Informal TVET Learning

The findings demonstrate that homestay tourism serves as a rich and dynamic site for informal learning, where operators acquire practical competencies in hospitality, entrepreneurship, communication, and cultural management through experiential engagement. These competencies mirror the objectives of TVET, which emphasize skill-based, hands-on education oriented toward employability and productivity (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2017). However, unlike formal TVET institutions, the homestay environment offers learning through observation, imitation, and problem-solving within authentic community contexts. This aligns with the concept of *situated learning* proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), in which knowledge is constructed through participation in social practice rather than through formal instruction.

In Malaysia, homestay tourism has long been recognized as a tool for rural development, yet its educational function remains underexplored. Studies by Musa et al. (2022) highlight that homestay operators develop valuable operational and interpersonal skills that enhance employability and entrepreneurship. However, these skills often remain unaccredited, leaving operators outside the formal skill-recognition system. The present study extends this

understanding by showing that, while operators indeed engage in TVET-like activities such as guest management, food preparation, and financial literacy, they rarely perceive these practices as vocational learning due to limited awareness and institutional linkages.

The low conceptual awareness of TVET among participants mirrors findings from Chia et al. (2022), who note that many rural entrepreneurs in Malaysia primarily associate training with short-term workshops rather than structured certification. This highlights the need to bridge informal and formal learning systems by recognizing community-based tourism as a complementary learning ecosystem. As identified in this study, participants with prior exposure to educational partnerships or local associations displayed higher readiness, suggesting that awareness and motivation are enhanced through social and institutional connectivity.

Hence, homestay tourism may be conceptualized as a grassroots TVET ecosystem in which informal learning environments can be systematically linked to formal frameworks through recognition of prior learning (RPL), modular certification, and collaborative curriculum development. Such integration can transform homestays from passive income sources into active training grounds for local entrepreneurship, hospitality professionalism, and community resilience.

The Mediating Role of Community Background and Social Capital

The study reveals that the degree of readiness is closely tied to community background, specifically the strength of local leadership, organizational capacity, and social cohesion. Communities with established leadership structures, cooperative management, and prior engagement with government or academic institutions displayed greater readiness and sustainability. These findings support earlier research by Goodwin and Santilli (2009) and Okazaki (2008), which emphasizes that social capital and participatory governance are critical determinants of success in community-based tourism.

In Perak, two communities (represented by participants P6 and P8) exemplified this dynamic, demonstrating effective teamwork, participatory planning, and a shared sense of purpose. Such communities mirror what Scheyvens (1999) describes as *empowered communities*, those that exhibit both psychological and social empowerment through collective decision-making and self-reliance. Conversely, communities with weak leadership and fragmented participation reflected limited readiness for structured capacity-building and training, echoing findings from Kayat (2022) on the uneven development of homestay programmes in Malaysia.

Social capital thus acts as both a mediator and enabler of TVET readiness. Where trust, cooperation, and leadership exist, communities are more inclined to engage in structured learning and institutional collaboration. This finding reinforces the argument of Murniati et al (2023), who assert that sustainable tourism development depends on the community's capacity for collective learning and adaptive governance. In this study, operators who worked within cohesive networks exhibited not only better operational performance but also stronger motivation to pursue training, suggesting that community-driven structures can stimulate intrinsic motivation to learn, an essential precursor to engagement.

From a theoretical standpoint, these dynamics align with *empowerment theory* (Wardhani & Susilowati, 2023), which conceptualizes empowerment as a multi-level process encompassing individual, organizational, and community dimensions. Homestay tourism enables

empowerment when individuals gain personal skills and confidence (individual empowerment), when groups develop organizational capacity (organizational empowerment), and when communities enhance collective control over their resources (community empowerment). The presence of these multi-level linkages determines the extent to which tourism can transition from being merely an economic initiative to becoming a developmental and educational platform.

While the potential for TVET integration within homestay tourism is evident, several structural barriers hinder its realization. Participants consistently identified issues such as limited access to training, unequal resource distribution, and fragmented institutional coordination. These constraints echo national challenges reported in Malaysia's TVET Transformation Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2018), which highlights the persistent disconnect between grassroots needs and formal training delivery mechanisms.

Resource disparity is another critical issue. Communities with strong external partnerships, whether with universities, NGOs, or local councils, enjoy better access to training and marketing resources. This supports findings by Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2014) in Thailand and Aref et al (2010) in Malaysia, both of whom argue that institutional linkages and external facilitation are key predictors of successful community-based tourism initiatives.

Perhaps most significantly, the study identifies policy fragmentation as a structural weakness. Homestay tourism falls under the purview of multiple agencies, such as MOTAC, the Ministry of Rural Development, and the Ministry of Education (for TVET), with overlapping but uncoordinated mandates. This creates ambiguity, duplication, and inefficiency. As participants noted, they were often unsure which agency to approach for training or funding, leading to disengagement and missed opportunities.

The lack of coherent inter-ministerial coordination undermines Malaysia's otherwise progressive policy frameworks, such as the *National TVET Roadmap (2021)* and *Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025)*, both of which emphasize inclusive human capital development. The present findings suggest that, to unlock readiness in rural tourism contexts, Malaysia must institutionalize cross-sectoral collaboration by establishing clear pathways linking community-based tourism initiatives to formal training institutions and accreditation bodies.

One promising mechanism is the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) approach promoted by the Department of Skills Development (DSD). By mapping homestay competencies onto the Malaysian Skills Framework (MySF), operators could gain formal certification for their experiential learning. This approach would not only validate existing skills but also motivate further participation in structured training, thereby embedding TVET principles within the everyday practices of rural tourism.

Empowerment through Participation, Skill Acquisition, and Collaboration

Empowerment emerged as a central process linking homestay tourism to homestay tourism resilience. The study revealed that participation in homestay operations enhanced operators' confidence, communication abilities, and sense of agency. Even without formal certification, the experiential learning embedded in tourism activities fostered both *psychological* and *social empowerment*.

Scheyvens (2018) identifies four dimensions of empowerment, which are psychological, social, economic, and political, which were evident in varying degrees among participants. Psychological empowerment was reflected in increased self-confidence, public speaking, and decision-making abilities. As one participant noted, her involvement in homestays helped her overcome shyness and gain respect within the community. Social empowerment is manifested through strengthened community bonds and cooperative management structures. Economic empowerment, though modest, was achieved through additional income and entrepreneurial opportunities. However, political empowerment, in terms of influence over policy or development planning, remained limited, largely due to top-down decision-making and weak institutional representation for homestay associations

The empowerment outcomes observed in this study align with the broader literature on community-based tourism, in which participation fosters self-efficacy and collective action (Su & Wall, 2014). However, empowerment in the context of readiness requires an additional layer of institutional recognition and capacity building. Without formal pathways to accreditation or continued training, empowerment risks stagnation at the psychological or social level, failing to translate into structural or economic transformation.

Collaboration thus becomes the bridge between informal empowerment and formal education. When local communities collaborate with educational institutions, NGOs, or government agencies, they access not only resources but also legitimacy and visibility. The two communities in this study that demonstrated strong readiness had existing partnerships with local polytechnics and tourism associations, enabling them to co-design training activities and improve service standards. This finding reinforces the idea that empowerment is relational, dependent on the ability to forge partnerships and negotiate access to external knowledge and resources (Timothy, 2007).

Moreover, empowerment must be sustainable and intergenerational. The inclusion of youth in homestay operations through mentorship and digital literacy training can ensure continuity and innovation. TVET frameworks can play a vital role in this process by institutionalizing youth engagement through structured apprenticeship or community-based training models, thereby transforming homestays into incubators of local talent and innovation.

Implications for Sustainable Rural Tourism and Policy Integration

The integration of TVET within homestay tourism carries far-reaching implications for sustainable rural development. As the findings demonstrate, homestay participation inherently nurtures many of the competencies promoted by TVET, such as technical, entrepreneurial, and interpersonal skills. However, the absence of formal structure limits their developmental impact. Embedding TVET principles into community-based tourism could therefore address multiple national priorities: rural income diversification, human capital development, and sustainable tourism management.

From a sustainability perspective, the fusion of TVET and tourism supports three pillars of sustainability:

- Economic Sustainability: through skill-based entrepreneurship and improved service quality.
- Social Sustainability: through inclusive participation, community cohesion, and empowerment.

- Environmental Sustainability: through training that integrates environmental awareness, resource management, and cultural preservation.

These synergies underscore the role of education as the foundation of sustainable tourism, echoing the UN's call for education as the "great enabler" of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2022).

Finally, the Perak case exemplifies how localized, community-driven models can contribute to national objectives. By recognizing the educational dimension of homestay tourism, policymakers can leverage existing community structures as partners in human capital development. This bottom-up approach ensures that TVET is contextually grounded, culturally sensitive, and socially inclusive, serving as a key principle for achieving Malaysia's vision of shared prosperity and sustainable growth.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of homestay tourism as a catalyst for homestay tourism resilience and community empowerment in Perak, Malaysia. Through a qualitative exploration involving interviews, observations, and focus group discussions with eight homestay operators and community stakeholders, the study provides rich insights into the complex dynamics linking informal tourism practices with vocational skill development and empowerment processes at the community level.

The findings affirm that homestay tourism serves as an experiential learning ecosystem in which operators acquire hospitality, entrepreneurial, and interpersonal skills that align with TVET competencies, such as training and knowledge transfer. However, this learning occurs largely in informal and unstructured ways. Only two of the eight participants exhibited strong readiness and community leadership, reflecting disparities in access to training, resources, and institutional networks. The research also demonstrates that community empowerment through tourism is multidimensional. Empowerment in this context extends beyond economic benefits; it encompasses psychological confidence, collective identity, and enhanced participation in local governance. Operators who were actively engaged with local associations and tourism agencies displayed greater confidence, leadership, and entrepreneurial drive. This suggests that empowerment is both a prerequisite and an outcome for a cyclical process in which skill development reinforces agency, and agency motivates further learning.

At a broader level, this study contributes to the theoretical discourse on sustainable community-based tourism (CBT) by framing homestay operations as embedded sites of informal TVET learning. The findings align with literature emphasizing that skill-based community participation enhances the sustainability of tourism enterprises, provided there is consistent institutional support. In the Malaysian context, where the government prioritizes both TVET transformation and rural tourism development under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025), integrating these agendas can yield long-term socio-economic benefits, particularly for rural communities in states such as Perak.

However, the research also underscores persistent challenges that limit this potential. The lack of structured coordination between TVET providers, local tourism offices, and community leaders results in fragmented efforts that fail to reach grassroots operators. Financial limitations, generational disengagement, and the absence of digital literacy further constrain

readiness. These systemic barriers indicate that empowerment through homestay tourism cannot rely solely on community motivation; it requires institutional scaffolding, policy coherence, and sustained capacity-building programs. In conclusion, the study establishes that homestay tourism possesses significant but underutilized potential as a platform for TVET-oriented community empowerment.

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