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**Urban Ecotourism Destinations and the Role of Social Networking Sites;  
A Case of Kuala Lumpur**

by

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## **1. ECOTOURISM IN MALAYSIA**

One of the most mesmerizing lands to sample nature at its best in South East Asia is Malaysia. Malaysia has one of the most pristine and oldest rainforests of the world. Urban areas in Malaysia have grown alongside the rainforests providing the urban dwellers and tourists' opportunities to experience nature with easy accessibility and less time consuming trips. Urban centres in Malaysia like Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Taiping, Miri, Kota Kinabalu and Kuching are closely located to forested and natural areas where opportunities for nature-based tourism could be explored to a very large extent. Being the most populated administrative district of Malaysia with a population of 1.58 Million (Department of Statistics, Government of Malaysia, 2006) and also being the most industrialised and economically the fastest growing region of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur contrastingly provides a gateway to many natural areas in and around itself.

## **2. ECOTOURISM AND URBAN ECOTOURISM**

"Nature Tourism is the travel through and enjoyment of the natural world, its seasonal cycles and events, carried out in a manner that promotes the protection of natural and human communities and consideration for those who will inherit our world". (WDFW, 2009). Nature-based tourism encompasses areas like ecotourism, agro-tourism, rural and community-based which are again forms of sustainable tourism. Ecotourism has emerged as a nature-based manifestation of alternative tourism (Weaver, 2005). Ecotourism forms a major part of Nature-based tourism in the world today. Nature Tourism, often referred to as Ecotourism, was introduced to the tourist industry in the early 1980s (TIES). As per Patar, 2009, "Ecotourism in simple words mean, management of tourism and conservation of nature" (Patar, 2009). As per the Urban Ecotourism Conference 2004, 'Urban areas are cradles of civilisation, socio-political progress, examples of co-existence between diverse cultures' (planeta.com, 2004). Urban ecotourism can also be defined as "Ecological Tourism that takes place within a city (as opposed to in nearby natural areas). As a phenomenon, it includes those visiting, (as opposed to living in), a city for tourism, and those people, organisations, processes and facilities that serve them, as long as the same basic ecotourism criteria that apply for rural areas are met." (Petropoulos, B.A., 2004). The Urban Ecotourism movement is about creating and advertising more of green opportunities and inspiring city folks to take advantage of them (Waldorf, A.C., 2006). Higam and Luck (2002) in their study on urban ecotourism in New Zealand based on 3 case studies found that Urban ecotourism concept though contradicts the definition of ecotourism best represents the crucial facets and criterions of ecotourism in terms of environmental impacts, social impacts, interpretation and education, restoration of natural areas as well as financial viability (Higam and Luck, 2002). Okech (2009) in a study on Urban Ecotourism in Kenya came up with similar findings of Higam and Luck (2002) pertaining to the key elements of ecotourism like environmental impacts, social impacts, education, awareness for sustainability among urban tourists (Okech, 2009). Therefore the key attributes of urban ecotourism are environmental responsibility, local economic viability, cultural sensitivity and experiential richness (Dodds and Joppe, 2003; Okech, 2009).

### **2.1. URBAN ECOTOURISM IN KUALA LUMPUR**

Kuala Lumpur Eco-tourism has become extremely popular over the past few years. There are a large number of natural wonders located inside and around the city that one can check out when embarking on an eco - tour of Kuala Lumpur. Ecotourism in Kuala Lumpur means paying a visit to the numerous forest reserves, natural parks, the beaches and other natural wonders in and around the city. One can enjoy the natural beauty, green forests and embark on a number of adventure activities or take a look at the amazing wildlife. Most of the places, which support eco-tourism, are located in the outskirts of the city. Eco-tourism is increasingly being promoted in Kuala Lumpur as a means of protecting the natural environment that might otherwise be under the threat of development. The forest reserves at Bukit Nanas (11 hectares), Bukit Sungai Putih (7.41 hectares) and Bukit Sungai Besi (42.11 hectares),

ridges at Bukit Gasing and Bukit Dinding together with other undeveloped hilly areas such as part of Kampong Sungai Penchala, provide opportunities for eco-tourism development (DBKL, 2007).

The abundance of nature spots around Kuala Lumpur is found to have extended close to the city and even sometimes within the city. The Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve and the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia are examples of nature pockets within, as well as close to the city respectively. Besides, parks and religious sites within/close to the city are also found to be based on the elements of nature-based tourism/ecotourism. The Perdana Lake Gardens and Batu Caves are examples of such spots where one can experience nature within the urban setting in Kuala Lumpur.

### **3. ICT TECHNOLOGIES; SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**

Information and communication technologies have been instrumental in transforming the modern travel and tourism industry (Buhalis & Deimezi, 2003; Buhalis & Law, 2008). ICT-enabled tourism or e-tourism has brought about the digitalization of all processes and “value chains in the tourism, travel, hospitality and catering industries” (Buhalis & Deimezi, 2003). Emerging internet technologies such as social media or web 2.0, which encompass UGC (User Generated Content) –enabled web applications, have further intensified the role and significance of electronic practices in tourism (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). The presence and impact of emerging social media technology in tourism is manifested through concepts such as Tourism 2.0 or Travel 2 0 (William & Martell, 2008; Carroll, 2008).

#### **3.1 Web2.0 and Social Networking**

Web 2.0 tools are made of social software that initiate interpersonal and community-based interactions and knowledge sharing (O'Reilly, 2005; Levy, 2005, Lew, 2007). Social networking is one of the significant facets of social media that helps in facilitating an online rendezvous for interactions between groups of people (Green, 2007; Butterman, 2008). In the travel and tourism industry, the use of social media and social networking has increased significantly as they offer more cost-effective and efficient ways of business for tourism enterprises (Green, 2007).

#### **3.2 Ecotourism and Web2.0**

Applications of ICT in ecotourism have been manifested through the use of Web2.0 (Mader, 2007). A suitable example of Web2.0 in ecotourism can be referred to Planeta.com, a website, enabled by User Generated Content (UGC), which facilitates communication/interaction, collaboration and sharing of information amongst users who share a common goal along the lines of the fundamental principles of ecotourism (Chai, 2008). The ecotourism explorer by TIES (The International Ecotourism Society), Planeta.com and ecoclub.com are sites using social networking features (Mader, 2010; Chai, 2008). Social networking mediums are also increasingly used by ecotourism consumers and activists. Social networking sites in tourism such as tripadvisor and User Generated Content (UGC)-enabled tools, such as blogs have replaced many traditional forms of feedback systems and rendered ecotourists an effective platform for information dissemination and trip research (Charters, 2009).

#### **3.3 Web2.0 and Tourism Destinations**

Gretzel et. al(2008) in their study on CGM(Consumer generated Media), a significant facet of web2.0, in the context of four major origin tourist markets, identified different patterns in the use and adoption of CGM by tourists. According to the study, CGM application need to be country specific due to various factors and the differences in terms of the adoption should be recognized. Miguens, Baggio and Costa (2008) in their study on the role of Tripadvisor as a social media tool in tourism destination destination image building found that web2.0/social media has a profound impact in destination image. The study also revealed that communities in the social media like Trip Advisor has significant bearing upon customer behavior in tourism in turn upon image of tourism destination and marketing activities of tourism service providers at the destination (Miguens, Baggio and Costa 2008). According to Wheeler (2009) “developing an understanding of the people and designing a strategy around interacting and engaging them through social networking/social media is the foundation for successful marketing for any tourism based business” (Wheeler,2009). Web 2.0 tools like social

networking sites enable tourists to interact and share their personal opinion, feelings and perception that emerge from their involvement in consuming a set of tourism service, with others in the network who potentially become future consumers of the same set /one or more elements in the set of tourism service (Wheeler, 2009). As per Wheeler (2009) “utilizing the personal experiences of visitors creates a sense of personalization. Other people see this as being the real deal and trust this type of content much more than the marketing material typically aimed at the traveller”(Wheeler, 2009). As per the report of findings of the Louisiana Office of Tourism Social Media Effectiveness Study, a majority of social networking site users who visited Louisiana were motivated, in terms of their travel decisions, by the information provided by the Louisiana Office of Tourism in Facebook and Twitter (Louisiana Office of Tourism, 2010). The report also found that the information provided in the social media sites on Louisiana tourism were highly useful and stimulating for the tourists travelling to Louisiana and social media has also brought organizational and destination competitiveness in terms of Louisiana Office of Tourism and Louisiana as a destination (Louisiana Office of Tourism, 2010). Schmallegger and Carson (2008) on their study on travel blogs as Web 2.0 tool tourism information exchange and destination marketing found that blogs have been used increasingly by tourism destination management bodies and businesses and are highly useful in in terms of the different key aspects of their operations(Schmallegger and Carson 2008).

### **Research questions:**

1. What is the perception of Kuala Lumpur as an urban ecotourism among urban ecotourists visiting KL in terms of visitor experience and biodiversity aspects?
2. What is the role of social media in the promotion of urban ecotourism attractions in Kuala Lumpur and to what extent do social media facilitate ecotourists in terms of information and decision-making?

### **Methodology:**

Methodology involves collection of data through quantitative methods covering a wider group of urban ecotourists using a structured questionnaire. About 100 respondents were selected for participation in the study through a random sampling method. Data collection was conducted near major urban ecotourism sites in and around Kuala Lumpur like Perdana gardens, Bukit Nanas, FRIM and Batu Caves.

The questionnaire was designed giving emphasis on two important aspects firstly, urban ecotourism tenets and elements and secondly, on the role of social media tools in information, awareness, promotional purposes and destination image in relation to Kuala Lumpur as an urban ecotourism destination.

The main key issues covered in the questionnaire are tourist motivations to visit nature-based areas, importance of nature-based areas in Kuala Lumpur as urban ecotourism and biodiversity sites, ecotourism experiences, sources of information and effectiveness of the sources with special reference to social media/web2.0 and effectiveness of different web2.0 tools as information provider, a medium of bringing awareness for biodiversity and sustainability. In most of cases the Likert 5-point scale was used to measure the perception of the tourists in terms of biodiversity and ecotourism aspects as well the effectiveness of the tools of social media in awareness, information and destination image.

### **Findings:**

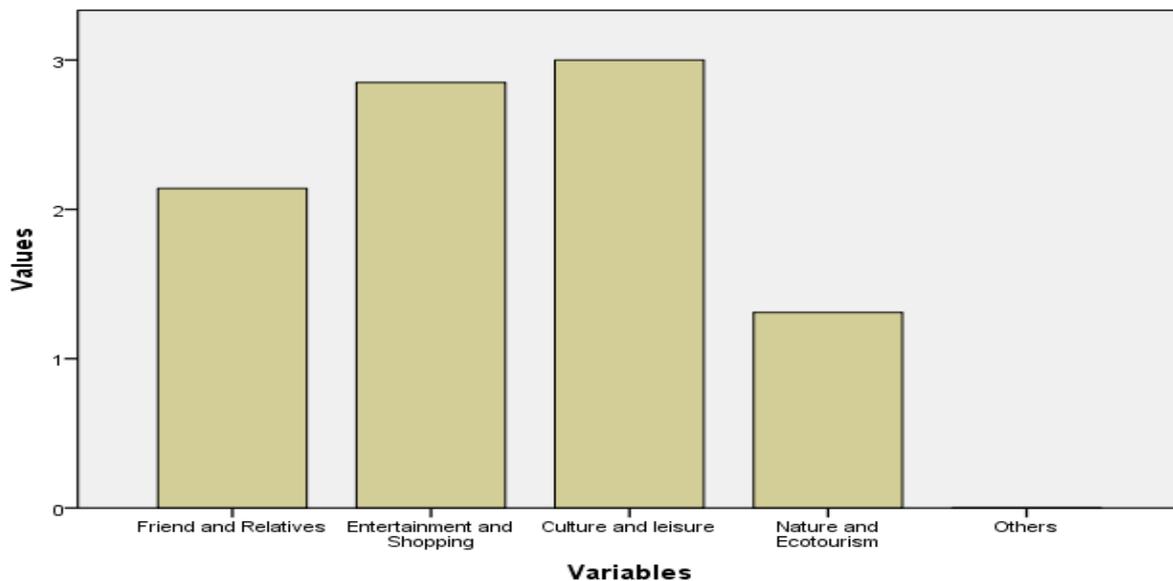
The findings revealed that most respondents (75%) visited Kuala Lumpur with friends and family and 70% of the respondents were in the age range of 26 to 45 years. About 71% of the respondents' duration of stay in Kuala Lumpur was 3-5 days while 72 % of the respondents fell in the income group of RM3000-5000 and 90% of the respondents had university qualifications.

Most respondents' purpose of travel to Kuala Lumpur was for culture and nature followed by entertainment and shopping. Although the respondents were found in nature-spots in Kuala Lumpur, their prime purpose to visit the city was not because of nature and ecotourism but a part of their trip/urban tourism activity.

**Statistics**

	Friend and Relatives	Entertainment and Shopping	Culture and leisure	Nature and Ecotourism	Others
N Valid	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	2.1400	2.8500	3.0000	1.3100	.0000
Std. Deviation	.44992	.92524	.73855	.46482	.00000

**Statistics Mean**

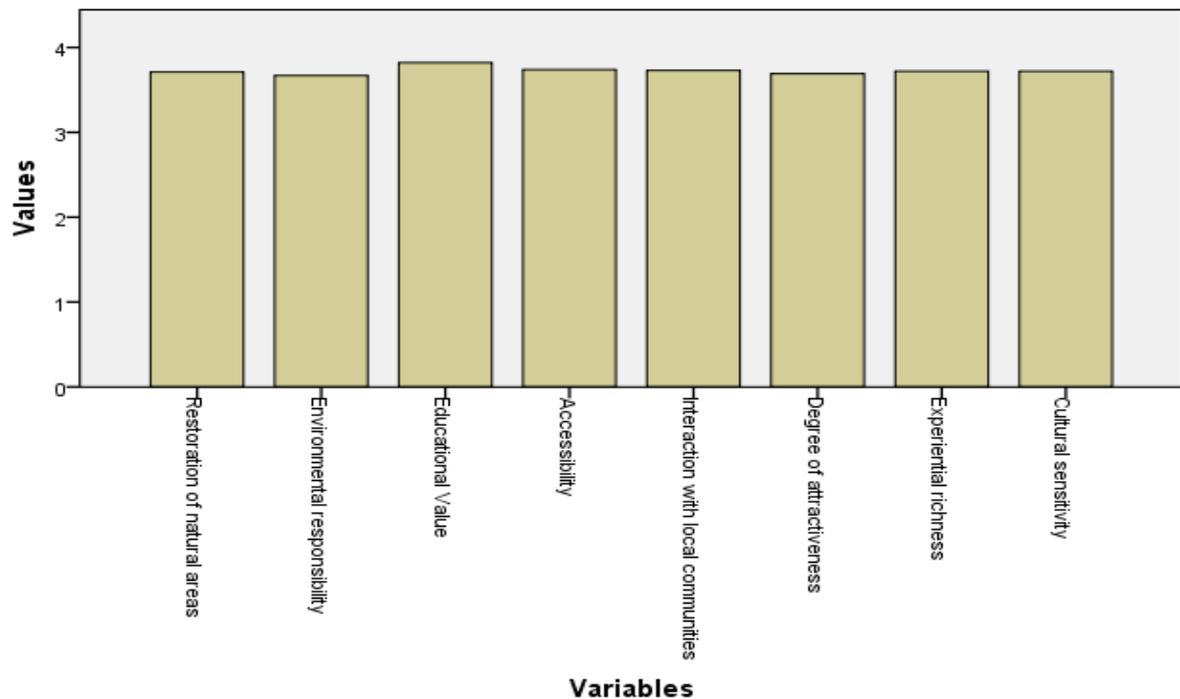


The Dark caves (Batu caves) and the FRIM (Forest Research Institute of Malaysia) were the two most visited urban ecotourism spots with 69% respondents visiting the Dark caves and 64% visiting FRIM while 57% of the respondents visited Bukit Nanas. With respect of motivations to visit nature-based areas in Kuala Lumpur, 85% of the respondents opined that factors like escape social and personal pressures were the main motivators while 70% opined that their main motivation was to enjoy nature, recreation and nature activities.

In terms of the tourists' view about biodiversity aspects in the ecotourism sites in Kuala Lumpur, the aspects about which the respondents were extremely satisfied were educational value of the ecotourism spots in and around Kuala Lumpur and accessibility. Most of the ecotourism spots are well connected from prime tourist areas of Kuala Lumpur by different modes of public transport. Most respondents were reasonably satisfied with the other aspects like restoration of natural areas, environmental responsibility, interaction with local communities, degree of attractiveness, experiential richness, and cultural sensitivity. The average mean for all the aspects was above 3.5.

	Restorat ion of natural areas	Environmental responsibility	Educatio nal Value	Accessibil ity	Interaction with local communiti es	Degree of attractivene ss	Experiential richness	Cultural sensitivity
N Valid	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	3.7100	3.6700	3.8200	3.7400	3.7300	3.6900	3.7200	3.7200
Std. Deviation	.49838	.63652	.67240	.67600	.70861	.67712	.68283	.69747

**Statistics  
Mean**

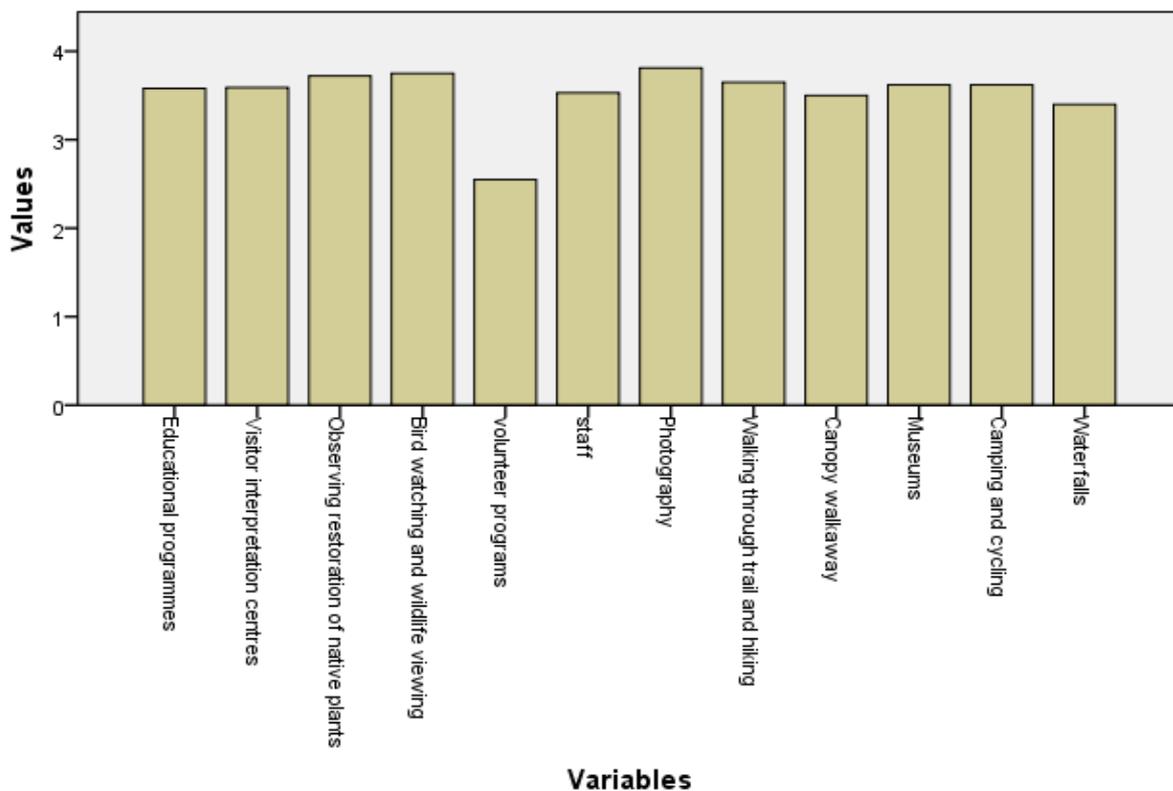


With regards to the ecotourism experiences of the tourists, the activities that brought most satisfaction to tourists were photography, followed by bird watching and wildlife viewing and observing restoration of native plants. Activities like walking through trail and hiking, visiting museums and arboretums as well as camping and cycling brought reasonable satisfaction to the respondents.

**Statistics**

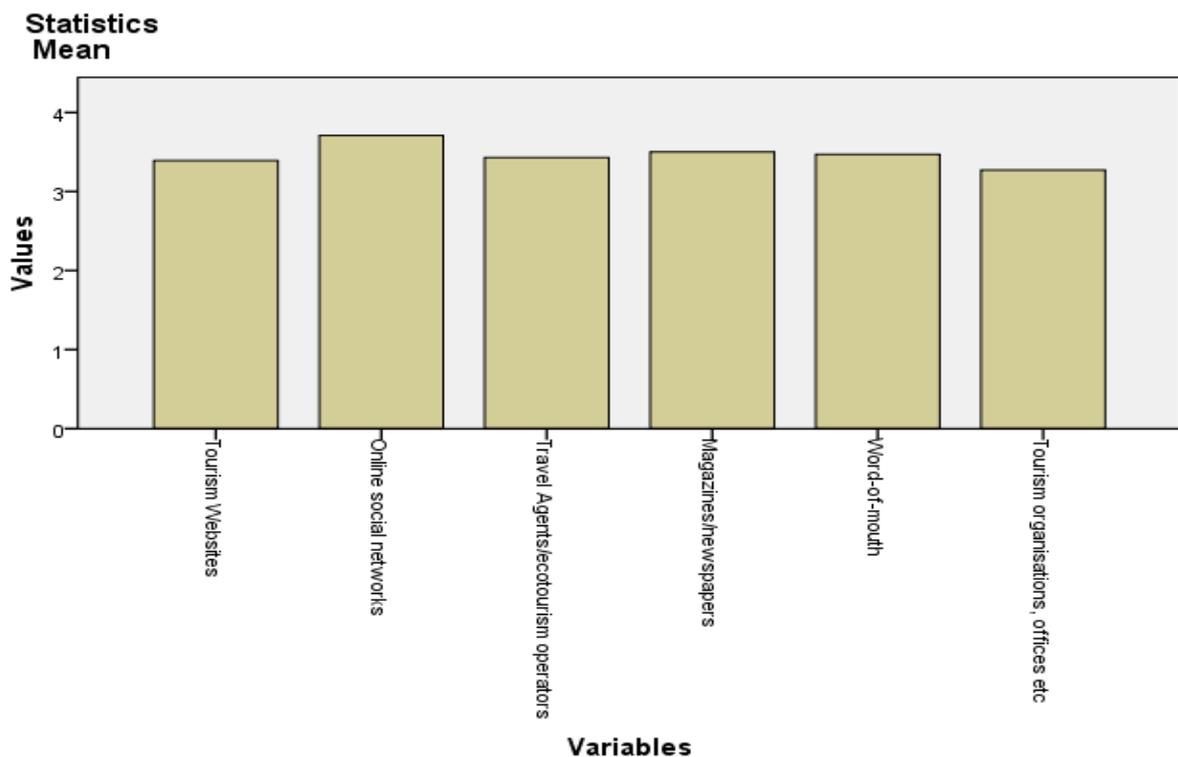
	Educational programmes	Visitor interpretation centres	Observing restoration of native plants	Bird watching and wildlife viewing	volunteer programs	staff	Photography	Walking through trail and hiking	Canopy walkway	Museums	Camping and cycling	Waterfalls
N Valid	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	3.5800	3.5900	3.7200	3.7500	2.5500	3.5300	3.8100	3.6500	3.5000	3.6200	3.6200	3.4000
Std. Deviation	.57172	.53362	.60436	.51981	1.31330	.71711	.84918	.59246	.74536	.58223	.85019	1.31041

**Statistics Mean**



In terms of sources of information about urban ecotourism resources of Kuala Lumpur, 96% of the respondents found internet as the most important source of information. In terms of the effectiveness of the source of information, the most effective source was online social networks which got the highest approval of the respondents with a mean of 3.71. Online social networks refer to sites like Facebook, Twitter, travel/ecotourism related sites like Trip Advisor, Planeta.com and travel blogs as well as other social networking sites.

	Tourism Websites	Online social networks	Travel Agents/ecotourism operators	Magazines/newspapers	Word-of-mouth	Tourism organisations, offices etc
N Valid	100	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	3.3900	3.7100	3.4300	3.5000	3.4700	3.2700
Std. Deviation	.52982	.60794	.55514	.57735	.64283	.58353

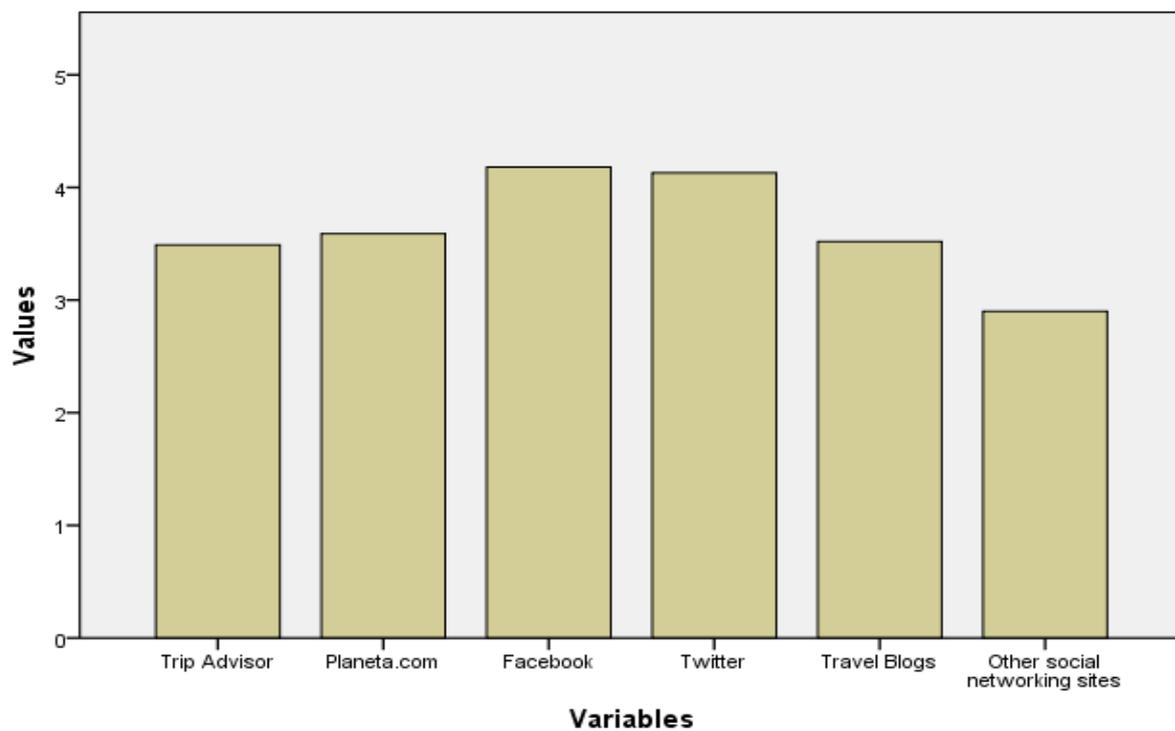


In terms of the effectiveness of online social networks, the most widely used and effective tools as opined by respondents were facebook followed by Twitter with a mean of 4.18 and 4.13 respectively

**Statistics**

		Trip Advisor	Planeta.com	Facebook	Twitter	Travel Blogs	Other social networking sites
N	Valid	100	100	100	100	100	100
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.4900	3.5900	4.1800	4.1300	3.5200	2.9000
Std. Deviation		.54114	.63715	.70180	.77401	.62732	1.02986

**Statistics  
Mean**

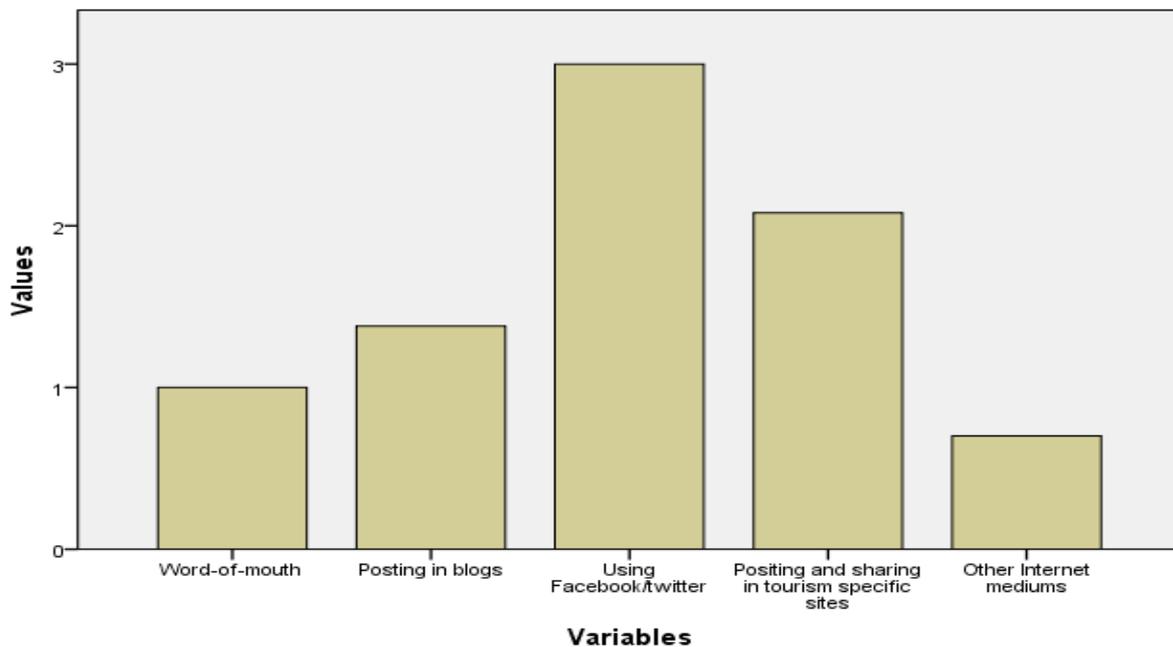


With regards to means of sharing post-visit experience, the most highly opted medium was Facebook/Twitter with a mean of 3.00

Statistics

		Word-of-mouth	Posting in blogs	Using Facebook/twitter	Positing and sharing in tourism specific sites	Other Internet mediums
N	Valid	100	100	100	100	100
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		1.0000	1.3800	3.0000	2.0800	.7000
Std. Deviation		.00000	.92965	.00000	2.00847	1.74368

Statistics Mean



**Discussion:**

The study revealed that the respondents were reasonably satisfied with the ecotourism experiences and biodiversity aspects in the ecotourism spots in and around Kuala Lumpur though their purpose to travel to Kuala Lumpur was not specifically for nature and ecotourism but for leisure, entertainment, shopping etc. The areas that brought maximum satisfaction in terms of biodiversity aspects and ecotourism experiences were educational value and accessibility of the ecotourism spots in and around Kuala Lumpur and photography, bird watching and wildlife viewing and observing restoration of native plants respectively.

The study also revealed that internet is the most important source of travel information for the respondents with respect to ecotourism spots in Kuala Lumpur and the most effective and reliable tool as source of information was social media technologies/social networking sites. Moreover, the most effective social networking sites were Facebook and Twitter in terms of being information provider, awareness creation and as a promotional tool for the ecotourism spots in Kuala Lumpur. Most respondents opined that they will recommend Kuala Lumpur to friends and relatives as an ideal urban ecotourism destination and the medium which they will adopt their ecotourism experience of Kuala Lumpur is by using facebook/twitter. Therefore social media/social networking sites play a very important role in the promotion, destination awareness and information dissemination with respect to Kuala Lumpur as an ecotourism destination and also are a facilitator in decision-making aspects of future ecotourists in visiting Kuala Lumpur's ecotourism/nature spots.

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