DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILING AND MARKET SEGMENTATION OF SCUBA DIVERS ACROSS MALAYSIAN DIVING DESTINATIONS

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Abstract. SCUBA diving has shown a notable surge in popularity as a recreational pursuit within the Malaysian context. Tourism Malaysia and Malaysia SCUBA Diving Association highlighted SCUBA diving as one of the essential activities in promoting tourism destinations in Malaysia, and they advocate for SCUBA dive operators to actively promote their products and services to the respective market segments. Nonetheless, the absence of significant statistical data challenges SCUBA diving operators to strategize their marketing initiatives effectively. Thus, the main aim of this study is to identify the segmentation of demographic variables among SCUBA divers across Malaysian diving destinations. The researcher adopted the quantitative method by using an online survey of SCUBA divers who had visited diving destinations in Malaysia. The online survey was distributed via social media and the SCUBA divers' association. The usable responses were 321, and the data were coded and analysed using descriptive analysis in SPSS software. The implications of the research contribute to the empirical research on SCUBA divers' demographic profile, which helps in providing inputs for the stakeholders. This will also help the stakeholders, such as the government and diving businesses, in planning their marketing strategies and ensuring that these strategies are aligned and suitable with their target market.
Keywords: *SCUBA diving, demographic profiling, market segmentation, diving destination*

Introduction

Islands and beaches are the top attributes and priorities among tourist destinations in Malaysia (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). Based on Tourism Malaysia (2020), tourists voted for Islands and Beaches as the highest rank, with a total of 76.8%. It shows that natural beauty and water features are essential or pull factors among tourists in decision-making as their top list attributes in travelling. Therefore, it can be stated that domestic tourists prefer to visit natural beauty areas, particularly near water areas. Malaysia offers a variety of activities, from mass to adventure tourism. It promotes diverse cultural and natural activities such as white-water rafting, jungle trekking, mountain hiking, sailing, angling, snorkelling, and diving. Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board (Tourism Malaysia) highlighted SCUBA Diving as one of the significant components in promoting tourism destinations in Malaysia. Tourism Malaysia aggressively promotes places such as Sipadan Island and Tunku Abdul Rahman Park as world-class diving destinations (Zainal Abidin and Mohamed, 2014). Dive tourism has been integral to Malaysian domestic and international travel (Zainal Abidin and Mohamed, 2014). Ramli et al. (2011) point out that diving activity in Malaysia continues to grow in popularity and demand. This can be proven by the ongoing efforts of the Government and private agencies promoting SCUBA diving activities to domestic and international markets. Ministry of Arts, Culture and Tourism Malaysia (MOTAC) recognizes the

diving industry as one of the niche segments contributing significantly to the socio-economy. MOTAC's agency, namely Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, or Tourism Malaysia, keeps on aggressively promoting the diving destination in Malaysia as the top dive destination in the world (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). The recent promotional effort by MOTAC included participating in Moscow Dive Show 2021 in Russia and the Cuti Cuti Malaysia (CCM) 'Jom Dive' campaign launched by MOTAC in April 2021.

Scuba diving has shown a notable surge in popularity as a recreational pursuit within the Malaysian context (Emang et al. 2016, 2020; Musa et al. 2008; Ramli et al. 2011). Tourism Malaysia and the Malaysian Scuba Diving Association (MSDA) are entrusted with marketing and facilitating the development of diving tourism in Malaysia. Thus, both agencies are advocating for dive operators to actively participate in the promotion of scuba diving products and services tailored to specific market segments (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). Data pertaining to demographic profiling is relevant when categorizing domestic vacationers for marketing and promotional purposes (Dolinting et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the absence of those data poses a challenge for diving operators in their endeavour to strategize their marketing initiatives effectively (Hampton and Jeyacheya, 2015). The existing literature review indicates that there is a lack of current published statistical data pertaining to the diving industry, particularly in Malaysia. Thus, most small and medium-sized dive operators encounter challenges when it comes to formulating and organizing their marketing plans (Herbst, 2019).

Literature review

SCUBA diving in tourism industry

SCUBA diving has attracted many individuals to participate in the activity. One piece of evidence is that certified divers grow annually (PADI, 2019). Some destinations possess outstanding natural environments, beautiful beaches, and crystal-clear water that may benefit the local economy regarding employment opportunities, business development, and promoting conservation and research. Although diving is well-known as a sports activity, it is a niche market in the tourism industry that deals with different categories of divers (Lemke and Olech, 2011). SCUBA diving is categorised in many ways by scholarly work (Dolinting et al., 2015; Mapjabil et al., 2015; Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Cummins, 2008). Zajadacz (2016) has categorised SCUBA diving as "sports tourism" because it involves some physical activity, fitness level, training requirement, and travelling activity.

SCUBA diver profile

Most tourism research, especially on tourist motivation, satisfaction, and behaviour, is the most investigated due to the continuity of the tourism product and services (Gursoy and Gavcar, 2003). Understanding general SCUBA diver profiles is significant for planning, managing, and marketing for stakeholders such as tour operators, travel agents, dive centres, and related government agencies. Typical criteria for demographic segmentation are broad population statistics and include age, gender, marital status, education, occupation, and income, to name a few. It is believed that these factors are popular to use for market segmentation (Dolnicar et al., 2018). Various researchers have listed those profiles in their studies, particularly in SCUBA diving motivations, such as (Neto et al., 2020; Herbst, 2019; De Brauwer et al., 2017; Bentz et al., 2016; Fuchs et al., 2016; Mapjabil et al., 2015; Geldenhuys et al., 2014). Generally, the total number of

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male divers is more remarkable than female, supported by research by Lucrezi et al. (2013) and Queiroz Neto et al. (2017). Their study collected demographic characteristics, including age, gender, marital status, educational level, occupation, and country of residence. Lucrezi et al. (2019) have categorized their sampling from novice to professional certified divers, whereby Queiroz Neto et al. (2017) in their study have categorised divers into three (3) levels of certification (supervised diver, autonomous diver, and dive leader) and two (2) level of instructor certification (level one and level two), moreover, in their study used the number of logged dives to differentiate the level of divers' experience. According to them, this method was reliable in getting the experience result compared to the level and years of certification data. A diver might certify for 20 years but only possess 20 logged dives compared to a diver certified for two years but possessing 100 logged dives.

SCUBA diver segmentation

Market segmentation is a widely explored subject of interest among researchers across various academic disciplines. The topic is also beneficial for SCUBA diving operators and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) since it enables them to gain insights into the profile and characteristics of SCUBA divers for marketing purposes based on their motivations (Albayrak et al., 2021). Previous studies have indicated that the selection of SCUBA diving destinations among divers is influenced by their demography and level of diving experience (Queiroz Neto et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2023). Several measures were used to categorized SCUBA divers according to their level of experience, as identified in their characteristics such as level of certification, years of diving, and number of logged dives (Queiroz Neto et al., 2017). According to PADI (2021), SCUBA divers are categorized according to their certification and experience level from youth, beginners, continuing education, and professionals. As early as ten years old, a person is qualified to enrol for a beginner SCUBA diving certification program known as the Open Water Diver (OWD) Course. The beginner course will take about 3 – 4 days to complete all the programs, and if the diver completes the program, a certification card will be awarded to the diver. After the OWD course, the diver can enrol for Advance Open Water Diver (AOWD) Course to advance their diving knowledge and skills. However, many researchers have categorized divers' experience levels according to the number of logged dives, years of diving, and the highest SCUBA diving qualification (Lucrezi et al., 2013). In contrast, a study by Queiroz Neto et al. (2017) used only the total number of logged dives to determine different diving experience levels.

Diving destination in Malaysia

Malaysia is blessed with beautiful beaches and crystal-clear seawater. Several dive destinations can be found in Malaysia, especially on the northwest and east coasts of Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, especially in Sabah. The most popular dive destinations are in the island areas, such as Pulau Payar, Pulau Redang, Pulau Perhentian, Pulau Tioman, Tunku Abdul Rahman Parks, Pulau Mabul, and Pulau Sipadan. These islands have been gazetted as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). The federal government manages some MPAs, and the state government manages some. Those MPAs managed by the federal government under the Fisheries Department are known as Marine Parks. Currently, there are 42 Marine Parks in Malaysia, thirty-nine

(39) islands in the Peninsular, and three (3) islands in Labuan. However, in Sabah, the Marine Parks are managed by the state government known as Sabah Parks. There are six (6) major Marine Parks in Sabah: Tunku Abdul Rahman Parks, Pulau Tiga Parks, Turtle Islands Park, Tun Sakaran Marine Park, Sipadan Island Park, and Tun Mustapha Park. Thus, this study will focus on Dive Destinations in Malaysia, particularly the islands under the management of the Fisheries Department and Sabah Parks.

Materials and Methods

Data for this research were gathered over six (6) months to get adequate respondents to collect the questionnaires for analysis and answer the research questions. As this study is in a broad Malaysian context, it was convenient to distribute the questionnaire via an online platform to obtain a large number of responses from Peninsular and East Malaysia. The link to the questionnaire was generated and disseminated via the official email of the dive centre as well as various social media platforms, including a Malaysian diver-specific Facebook group. Additionally, responding to the survey questions is simple; only a mobile phone is required, and it can be done at any time and in any location that is convenient for the respondent. However, there are a few drawbacks to gathering the sample through a social media link, which represent the limitations of this study. For instance, there might be a sampling bias whereby only people who use social media and see the survey were likely to participate. Besides, duplicate or careless responses might emerged. For example, some respondents may also complete the questionnaire quickly without carefully considering the questions. The initial number of respondents who participated in the part survey was 474. After the screening process, the final number of respondents was 321 for the analysis. The sample size was determined according to the guidelines and sample size table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), as cited in Sekaran and Bougie (2016).

Research analysis

The questionnaires were distributed, completed, and returned through the online platform. The data recorded in the platform were retrieved into Microsoft Excel and statistically analysed and further analysed and processed of information using the Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS). Two analysis methods were deployed, which are Cronbach Alpha's values in the pilot test and descriptive analysis. Descriptive statistics convey quantitative data comprehensibly (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). It summarises the respondents' demographic characteristics (Jonas et al., 2019). It comprises collecting data concerning items, persons, individuals, events, and circumstances and organising, tabulating, illustrating, and describing the result. Based on Lucrezi et al. (2019) study, descriptive analysis was applied to identify the divers' demographic and experience profile to present the data in frequency tables and break up the data to compare variables descriptively. Thus, the researcher tabulated the respondents' demographics and characteristics using frequency tables, means, and percentages in this study.

Results and Discussion

In this study, the divers demographic profile was based on age, gender, education level, monthly income, job position level, and residing state (*Table 1*). 59.5% of respondents were male, and 40.5% were female. A study result from Ong and Musa (2012) indicated that the respondents were 57.6% male, which was more than female at 42.4%. It illustrates that the contrast in statistics between all genders was not too far apart for both studies. However, there were significant differences between males outnumbering females in SCUBA diving activities for studies outside Malaysia, according to the findings of other studies such as Albayrak et al. (2021), Neto et al. (2020) and Geldenhuys et al. (2014), resulting in 62% male over than female by 38%. Based on the above statistics indicates that males are dominant in SCUBA diving activity. Upon comparing the analysis results of the study with the previous research paper, it was shown that men exhibited higher participation rates in scuba diving activities across all levels, ranging from beginners to professionals. Nevertheless, the disparity in the degree of male dominance compared to women is rather narrow, ranging from approximately 60% to 70%. This phenomenon is mostly attributed to the fact that women's engagement in scuba diving tends to diminish after marriage and starting a family, as their priorities shift towards family management.

Table 1. *Respondent descriptive analysis (N=321).*

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Age				
18 to 24	22	6.9	6.9	6.9
25 to 34	92	28.7	28.7	35.5
35 to 44	127	39.6	39.6	75.1
45 to 54	66	20.6	20.6	95.6
55 to 64	12	3.7	3.7	99.4
65 to 74	2	0.6	0.6	100.0
Education				
High school (SPM, SPMV & Equivalent)	62	19.3	19.3	19.3
Diploma/STPM/Matriculation/Foundation/A Level	94	29.3	29.3	48.6
Bachelor’s degree	104	32.4	32.4	81.0
Master/PhD	60	18.7	18.7	99.7
Other (please specify)	1	0.3	0.3	100.0
Monthly income				
Less than RM2,500	79	24.6	24.6	24.6
RM2,500 - RM3,169	38	11.8	11.8	36.4
RM3,170 - RM3,969	27	8.4	8.4	44.9
RM3,970 - RM4,849	28	8.7	8.7	53.6
RM4,850 - RM5,879	32	10.0	10.0	63.6
RM5,880 - RM7,099	32	10.0	10.0	73.5
RM7,110 - RM8,699	21	6.5	6.5	80.1
RM8,700 - RM10,959	21	6.5	6.5	86.6
RM10,960 - RM15,039	19	5.9	5.9	92.5
RM15,039 OR MORE	24	7.5	7.5	100.0
Job position				
Worker/Entry Level	71	22.1	22.1	22.1
Supervisor/Crew Leader	38	11.8	11.8	34.0
Junior Manager/Lower Management	36	11.2	11.2	45.2
Senior Manager/Middle Management	74	23.1	23.1	68.2
CEO/Shareholders/Upper Management	21	6.5	6.5	74.8
Owners	34	10.6	10.6	85.4
Other (please specify)	47	14.6	14.6	100.0
State of origin				
Perlis	20	6.2	6.2	6.2
Kedah	21	6.5	6.5	12.8
Pulau Pinang	76	23.7	23.7	36.4
Perak	8	2.5	2.5	38.9
Wilayah Persekutuan	60	18.7	18.7	57.6
Selangor	81	25.2	25.2	82.9
Negeri Sembilan	7	2.2	2.2	85.0
Melaka	6	1.9	1.9	86.9

Johor	17	5.3	5.3	92.2
Terengganu	9	2.8	2.8	95.0
Kelantan	4	1.2	1.2	96.3
Sarawak	4	1.2	1.2	97.5
Sabah	8	2.5	2.5	100.0

The established age range significantly differs from the respondent's age for this study. One criterion for respondents to participate in this survey is at least eighteen years of age and above. However, there is no age limit to engage in SCUBA diving. However, there were some differences in respondents' age in previous research compared to this study, such as Neto et al. (2020); the results of their respondents aged between 46 – 55 years old as the majority 27.4%, followed by 26 – 35 years old (24.2%), and the least were between 18 – 25 years old by 8.1%. There were also studies whereby most respondents were younger, which is between 18 – 30 years old, and the least were over 50 years old (Albayrak et al., 2021; Geldenhuys et al., 2014; and Ong and Musa, 2012). The average age was between 34 and 36 years old for this study. Thus, based on the above findings, the most active age group engaging in SCUBA diving was between the 20s and the '40s, with an average age between 34 and 36. Concerning the comparison between this research work and prior studies, the average diver falls between the age range of twenty and forty years and is classified as middle-aged. Within this age group, individuals are deemed to possess greater economic capacity and physical fitness to engage in this particular activity. This is the reason why the number of ages indicated above exceeds that of other age categories.

Referring to *Table 1*, most of the respondents earned below RM2,500 per month (24.6%), followed by respondents' second-level earnings between RM2,300 – RM3,169 per month (11.8%). The highest respondents' monthly earnings were RM15,039 or more, about 7.5% of the total respondents. This shows that although most Malaysian divers earned the lowest income level, they still went diving as part of their preferred activity. According to the statistics *Table 1*, there were two (2) most job position levels possessed by the respondents: i. the Worker/Entry level by 22.1% and ii. Senior Manager/Middle Management by 23.1%. Therefore, this statistic also justifies the result in respondents' monthly income indicated above. The least respondents' position level was from CEO/Shareholders/Upper Management (6.5%). Therefore, it shows that a group of Malaysian SCUBA Divers can be among those lower-level to the highest-position staff or business owners. *Table 1* indicates that most respondents primarily reside in major cities in Malaysia. However, research so far could not find any related previous research papers indicating statistics on SCUBA divers residing in states. Most papers indicated the country of residence of the respondent's profile.

The demographic profile indicates that SCUBA diving participants in Malaysia come from diverse backgrounds; however, several dominant characteristics emerged that are useful for market segmentation. The results show that male divers (59.5%) outnumber female divers (40.5%), which is consistent with previous Malaysian and international studies. Although male participation remains dominant, the relatively narrow gender gap suggests that female participation is substantial and represents an important market segment with potential for future growth. This indicates that dive operators should continue targeting male divers while developing marketing strategies and diving packages that encourage greater female participation.

In terms of age segmentation, the largest proportion of respondents were 35–44 years old (39.6%), followed by 25–34 years old (28.7%) and 45–54 years old (20.6%). The average respondent was approximately 34–36 years old, indicating that the primary

market consists of economically active, middle-aged adults. Individuals within this age group generally possess greater purchasing power, career stability, and physical capability to participate in recreational diving. Therefore, marketing efforts should primarily target working professionals and middle-aged adventure seekers while also developing entry-level programmes for younger adults aged 18–24 years. The educational profile demonstrates that Malaysian SCUBA divers are generally well educated, with 32.4% holding Bachelor's degrees and 18.7% possessing postgraduate qualifications. This suggests that divers are more likely to appreciate technical information, environmental conservation initiatives, safety standards, and professional certification programmes. Consequently, educational and environmentally focused marketing messages may be particularly effective in attracting and retaining this customer segment. Although respondents represented all income categories, the largest proportion earned less than RM2,500 per month (24.6%), while many others were distributed across middle-income categories. This finding indicates that SCUBA diving is not exclusively an activity for high-income individuals. Instead, the market consists of both budget-conscious recreational divers and higher-income enthusiasts. From a market segmentation perspective, dive operators should adopt differentiated pricing strategies by offering affordable beginner packages alongside premium diving experiences, liveaboard trips, specialty courses, and luxury dive tourism products.

With regard to occupational segmentation, respondents were employed across various organisational levels, with the largest groups comprising Senior Managers/Middle Management (23.1%) and Worker/Entry-Level employees (22.1%). This diversity suggests that the diving market includes both professionals with higher disposable income and younger working adults seeking affordable recreational activities. Marketing strategies should therefore include flexible pricing, seasonal promotions, and premium packages tailored to different occupational and income groups. Geographically, respondents were primarily concentrated in Selangor (25.2%), Pulau Pinang (23.7%), and Wilayah Persekutuan (18.7%), indicating that the core market originates from Malaysia's major urban and economic centres. These locations provide higher population density, stronger purchasing power, and easier access to transportation, making them ideal markets for promotional campaigns, dive exhibitions, certification programmes, and travel packages.

Conclusion

Overall, the demographic profile identifies the primary target market for the Malaysian SCUBA diving industry as well-educated, economically active adults aged between 25 and 44 years, predominantly male, residing in urban areas, and employed across professional and managerial occupations. Nevertheless, the presence of female divers, younger adults, lower-income earners, and respondents from various occupational backgrounds highlights several secondary market segments that present opportunities for market expansion. By applying demographic market segmentation, dive operators, tourism agencies, and policymakers can design more targeted marketing strategies, customized diving products, pricing structures, and promotional campaigns that better address the needs and preferences of each customer segment while supporting the sustainable growth of Malaysia's SCUBA diving tourism industry. One main limitation of this study is that it excluded other respondents who engaged in SCUBA diving activities, such as tourists who were trial divers or tourists who took an

Introduction to SCUBA Diving Course. This study only included qualified SCUBA divers in the sample. As for future study, the researchers would explore psychographic segmentations and diving preferences, including diving experience, number of logged dives, preferred diving centers, and preferred diving gear. In addition, more in-depth analysis will be utilized, such as ANOVA and factor analysis, to measure the dimensions of push and pull motivation for SCUBA diving activity and identify the emerging clusters according to the motivation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts, and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

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