

# Are You Well-Informed?

## Evaluating the Information Signage at the Kuching Waterfront, Sarawak: A Preliminary Study

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### ABSTRACT

Sarawak is a place that everyone should visit as this state is one of the most unassuming regions, with an interesting blend of historical attractions. Kuching Waterfront is the primary location to visit in Kuching city. It is an esplanade that stretches for about 900 meters along the south bank of the Sarawak River. It attracts locals and tourists as it offers a variety of food stalls, museums, street entertainment, and excellent views. In this regard, well-informative signage allocated at Kuching Waterfront is crucial, and should deliver various types of information: historical details, maps, and other features. Therefore, this study's objective was to evaluate the information signage at Kuching Waterfront by interviewing visitors and through observation made by the researchers. The findings obtained revealed that there is a need to revise or upgrade existing information signage. The study also highlights the necessity for the information signage to be more readable, informative and attract readers or viewers who could be tourists or pedestrians along the Kuching Waterfront. Collaboration between related bodies of the state tourism board or other agencies and designers to build information signage can be taken into consideration to enhance the main attraction of the city and make it more informative and appealing.

**Keywords:** *Evaluation, Information Signage, Kuching Waterfront, Tourists, Sarawak*

### INTRODUCTION

The population of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Orang Asli, the numerous indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak and others make Malaysia a country with a great cultural and ethnic diversity (Department of Information, 2016). The state attracts local and foreign tourists. It was reported that Sarawak's tourist arrivals increased by 42.4% to 4.7 million tourists in 2016 compared to merely 3.3 million in 2010 (Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture, Youth and Sports Sarawak, 2017). This shows that Sarawak tourism is full of potential and indicates the need to ensure that the attractions offered by this state should be well-monitored.

Kuching, which in the local language means cat, is Sarawak's biggest city and the capital of this state. Kuching Waterfront is situated along the Sarawak River with magnificent views over features such as the Astana, the Court House, the Square Tower, the memorable Fort Margherita, and the Malay villages. The beautiful view of the 'cat city' is more noticeable at night with overflows of the night lights illuminating Kuching city, and this place is certainly fascinating to visit and to experience for everyone (Sarawak Tourism Board, 2020).

Historically, Kuching Waterfront was a busy maritime port in Sarawak and has been a focus area for the locals and outsiders. During the Brooke era, numerous colonial buildings were built in the city, many of which remain standing and are preserved by the government. They offer the "colonial look" to be enjoyed by everyone visiting Kuching city. The area of Kuching Waterfront can be measured from the riverside majestic crown plaza to the former Sunday wet market downtown situated in south Kuching. The Sarawak government made efforts to beautify the Sarawak River by creating profitable conditions for leisure and business, and finally Kuching Waterfront was officially opened to the public in 1993. To modernize Kuching Waterfront, the 900 meter-long esplanade was built to replace the unwanted warehouses. Beautifully-designed wooden benches were installed, with plenty of food stalls, restaurants, and other entertainment amenities. Moreover, attractive designs such as modern sculptures, colorful fountains and rest pavilions make the Waterfront a must-see place to visit (Table 1).

Signage is a combination of symbols and text. It should be non-language-dependent when dealing with users of various languages. Usually, pictograms, numbering, symbol systems and color-coding for either multilingual maps or computer information kiosks are used in public areas such as hospitals, stadiums, car parks, theaters and universities (Whitbread, 2009). There are two types of signage: internal and external. Internal signage is mostly utilized in booths and counters, walls, floors, ceilings, lifts and stairways that integrate a corporate identity. There are corporate typefaces, images and color schemes are often used. It might include logos or directional information in the floor or woven into carpets, or detailed or tiled into a mosaic. Moreover, objects and frames can be embedded or attached in all surfaces for display, information purposes or even storage. The selection of materials for internal signage is important as it deals with the impact of lighting and shadows, reflections, people obscuring the view and also extreme viewing angles on the clarity of the sign (Whitbread, 2009).

As for external signage, its two roles are to identify the sides of a building and street level and to determine directional signages in car parks, or on walkways and fences. The materials should be selected wisely to avoid shrinkage or expansion due to different weather conditions and temperatures. Nonetheless, difficulties remain for external signage because of poor lighting systems, shadows, and lack of clarity from a distance. Highway signage is a familiar example of such issues.

Due to the great influx of tourists to Kuching, well-informative signage placing is very important. An informative sign is a highly legibly printed and noticeable placard that informs people of the purpose of an object or gives them instruction on the use of something. It may come in artistic forms, as exhibited at Kuching Waterfront itself. There are many historical types of information signage at this location.

Historical information about Sarawak as well as Kuching that is delivered by the signage is at risk of not reaching the tourists since its rich information is not well-maintained. Beautiful and appealing information signage at the location might be neglected by visitors or tourists. Art is a strong medium for channeling information to both literate and nonliterate societies and can be clearly understood by a broad spectrum of people. The artistic function is not limited to aesthetics but includes a variety of purpose such as to inspire, beautify, inform, persuade, entertain and transform, and indirectly enable society to see things differently. However, visitors would not be able to channel information if it is not user friendly to viewers. Therefore, this study evaluated the information signage at Kuching Waterfront by interviewing visitors and through some observation by the researchers.

**Table 1 Visual Representations of Kuching Waterfront, Sarawak**



Dewan Undangan Negeri Sarawak (across the waterfront)



The pedestrian walkway of Kuching Waterfront (view 1)



The waterfront



The waterfront pedestrian walkway of Kuching Waterfront (view 2)







The pedestrian walkway of Kuching Waterfront (view 3)



The tourist cruise landing at the waterfront jetty

**Table 2 Visual Representation of the Signage at Kuching Waterfront**

Type of Signage	Criteria
	The signage was placed at irrelevant locations.
The signage at Kuching Waterfront	
	They lacked visual support and unattractive colors were used. Not much illumination was installed, causing the information signage to be unreadable at night. Furthermore, small font sizes caused difficulties in reading the information.
The closer look at the historical signage at the waterfront	
	
The History Walk	
	
The Kuching-Location map	

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, an observation was performed to gather qualitative information. Marshall and Rossman (1989) defined observation as the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study. Observations enable the researchers to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a written photograph of the situation under investigation (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Careful observation was made of the existing information signage at Kuching Waterfront covering several points: its design, typography, colors, materials, dimensions, and contents. The importance of conducting an observation is to gain rich information uncontaminated by self-reporting bias (Sekaran, 2003).

A survey was also conducted to obtain visitors' opinions on the information signage. Several questions were developed to meet the objective of the study. The cross-sectional survey was distributed to  $N = 200$  respondents at Kuching Waterfront in January 2017. Participants were local tourists from Sarawak and other states, and foreigners. A key chain was given to those who participated as respondents of this survey.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Observation

The observation revealed that most of the information signage was placed in irrelevant locations with a lack of visual support, unattractive colors were used, and small font sizes caused reading difficulties. In addition, unappealing designs caused viewers to lose interest in reading the information. Finally, a lack of illumination caused the information signage to be unreadable at night. The information signage was rich with historical information, with words and figures to illustrate the stories and facts about the city and the state. However, since most of the signs were unappealing, the purpose of the signage was missed. Some signs were placed on the pedestrian walkway along the esplanade, and visitors did not realize their existence (Table 2)

### Survey

Two hundred respondents participated in the study, consisting of 107 males (53.7%) and 93 females (46.5%). Most of them were aged from 18 to 25 (117 (58.5%)). Sixty-eight (35%) were aged between 26 – 35. Only 15 (7.5%) were aged 36 and above. Most of the respondents were Malays (116 (58%)), while 50 (25%) were Dayaks (Iban and Bidayuh), 17 (8.5%) were Chinese and 17 (8.5%) were foreign tourists. In terms of education level, 34% were certificate holders, while 27% were bachelor's degree holders. The others were diploma holders (19.5%) and master's degree holders (1%).

A descriptive statistical analysis was utilized to describe the items in the survey (Table 3). 7 items were asked based on the perceptions of the respondents on information signage at the Waterfront. Almost half of them understood the meaning of the information signage as channeling the information (49%), while some agreed that the signage is used to alert (19.5%) and as a symbolic item (15.5%). Only a few agreed that the information signage is for announcements and decoration. The majority of them agreed that it was important to place the information signage in the focused area (95.5%), while a few felt that there was no need to do so because it was not helpful (1%) and the information sometimes was not written correctly (3.5%). Most respondents strongly disagreed (45.5%) and disagreed (40%) that the colors used in the current information signage locations were appropriate. Some agreed (15%) and strongly agreed (2.5%) with the current colors used.

As for the opinion of the respondents on the information given in the signage, most strongly agreed that it was correct (64%), 20% agreed and a few disagreed (8%) and strongly disagreed (6%). The majority of the respondents found that the information given in the signage was not interesting (87.5%). Some were neutral about it (11.5%) while only few agreed that it was interesting (1%). When respondents were asked what they wanted more information about, the culture and heritage of Sarawak (70.5%) was the highest choice. Some of them wanted to know about Sarawak history (18.5%) and a few wanted to know about Kuching history (11%). The majority strongly agreed that the current signage at the waterfront should be revised (77.5%), while a few were neutral (8.5%) and some disagreed (14%).

**Table 3 The description of the information signage by the respondents (N = 200)**

Items	n (%)
1. Means of information signage	
i. Channeling information	49 (98)
ii. Announcement	9.5 (19)
iii. Decoration	6.5 (13)
iv. To alert	19.5 (39)
v. As a symbolic item	15.5 (31)
2. Importance to place the information signage in the focus area	
i. Yes. Strongly needed	169 (84.5)
ii. No need. It is not helpful	2 (1)
iii. No need. The information sometimes not written correctly	7 (3.5)
iv. Maybe	22 (11)
3. The color used in the information signage located is appropriate	
i. Strongly disagree	91 (45.5)
ii. Disagree	80 (40)
iii. Neutral	-
iv. Agree	30 (15)
v. Strongly agree	5 (2.5)
4. The information given in the information signage located is correct	
i. Strongly disagree	12 (6)
ii. Disagree	16 (8)
iii. Neutral	4 (2)
iv. Agree	40 (20)
v. Strongly agree	128 (64)
5. The information given in the information signage located is interesting	
i. Strongly disagree	175 (87.5)
ii. Disagree	23 (11.5)
iii. Neutral	2 (1)
iv. Agree	-
v. Strongly agree	-
6. What do you want to know more about in the signage?	
i. Sarawak history	37 (18.5)
ii. Kuching history	22 (11)
iii. The culture & heritage of Sarawak	141 (70.5)
7. Do you think that the current signage at the waterfront should be revised?	
i. Strongly disagree	-
ii. Disagree	28 (14)
iii. Neutral	17 (8.5)
iv. Agree	-
v. Strongly agree	155 (77.5)

Based on the findings, it was agreed that the main role of information signage is for channeling information, to alert and as a symbolic item. Therefore, revised information signage should include information that is useful and interesting for audiences to read. Most respondents wanted more information on the culture and heritage of Sarawak. This culture could be in the form of the traditional costume, art and music, entertainment, races and food of Sarawak. This is a remarkably interesting finding. The respondents felt that it was particularly important to place the signage in the focused area. The focused area is surrounded by souvenir and food stalls. This is the main reason for tourists to come to visit this place, besides the wonderful scenery of old buildings and the Sarawak River.

Furthermore, the current information and signage colors are not appropriate. This relates to the reason why the respondents felt that the information signage should be revised and replaced by new interesting and informative signs even if they felt that the information given was correct. Some respondents were unsure if the information was correct. A similarly unfortunate finding was revealed in a study of the UNESCO World Heritage sites, Melaka and Georgetown (Abdul Hamid, Abdullah & Teo, 2019). Researchers found that brand signals were unnoticed, while choices of font and color were poor. Therefore, revision of the information signage is needed but with more relevant information, especially about the culture and heritage of Sarawak.

## CONCLUSION

This study has evaluated the information signage at Kuching Waterfront by observation and also a cross-sectional survey among the visitors. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the existing information signage needs to be refined by giving it a new look with more appealing colors and placing it at more strategic or appropriate spots. Culture and heritage information should become the main purpose for establishing the signage. It is hoped that this study will give insights into designing useful and appropriate information signage for tourism. Collaboration with the Sarawak Tourism Board (STB) or other agencies with designers to build effective and appealing information signage in Kuching Waterfront, Sarawak is highly recommended.

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