

Review Paper

Rising to the Challenges of the Malaysian Business Events Industry from Experts' Perspective: Emerging Themes during COVID-19

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Abstract: The recent COVID-19 pandemic posed extraordinary circumstances to the vulnerable business events industry. The extremely contagious coronavirus substantially disrupted the Malaysian business events industry, prompting critical concerns regarding the industry's current and potential survival. This paper explores the challenges of the Malaysian business events industry during COVID-19. A qualitative methodology was adopted to collect primary data from semi-structured interviews. The informants included 12 experts from the Malaysian business events industry. The data collected were then grouped using ATLAS.ti (Version 8) software for thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was applied to increase credibility and ensure the rigor of the qualitative findings. Final themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of interview responses related to the COVID-19 pandemic were condensed and then presented. The findings reveal the following challenges: the rise of COVID-19 and three inductives: recovery plan, virtual event, and hybrid event. The findings support the holistic concept of the future business events industry post-COVID-19. Critically, this study explored prominent topics in view of current literature arguments and focused on the implications for various business events industry stakeholders in Malaysia. The limitations of the current study and scope of future studies are also highlighted.

Keywords: Business events, challenges, COVID-19, qualitative research

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Introduction

Business events consist of meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions, commonly known as MICE (Mair & Jago, 2010). This event is classified as a minor event and is typically driven commercially (Wagen & White, 2018). The business events industry is one of the leading sectors in the fast-growing global tourism industry (Saayman & Saayman, 2012). A business event is also rapidly seen as a means for socio-economic development, contributing much beyond monetary and tourism benefits. The business events industry is highly competitive and dynamic in the global context. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2015) projected business event travel at USD1,175 trillion in 2014, reflecting 23.4% of global travel and tourism spending in the MICE market. The International Congress and Conference Organisation (ICCA) (2012) acknowledged that more than 6,000 events occurred in 2002, but almost doubled to 11,156 by 2012. Over the next decade, business growth was forecasted at 3.2% (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2015). This has prompted many cities and countries to invest aggressively, positioning their country as enticing business event destinations. Thus, this argument stresses the significance of business events as an economic driver for many countries, including Asia.

In the Malaysian context, the business events industry is widely recognised as critically important. For the past three decades, the Malaysian government has acknowledged the business events industry as a catalyst for its economic development and social well-being. According to the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) (2015), the business events industry was a significant driver of Malaysia's economic transformation through all twelve (12) critical sectors outlined under the National Key Economic Area (NKEA) Economic Transformation Program (ETP). Malaysia's business events industry has grown markedly in recent years. A total of 1,025 business events took place in 2019 compared to 1,014 business events the year before (Aramai, 2020). In 2020, business events were expected to contribute marginal RM3.9 billion Gross National Income (GNI), 16,720 jobs, and 2.9 million visitors (5% to 8%) of overall visitor arrivals (MyCEB, 2016, 2019). In terms of ranking, Malaysia is one of the key players in this industry (MyCEB, 2018), ranked 33 out of 114 countries worldwide (ICCA, 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising that, since the mid-1990s, the Malaysian government has strongly supported the growth and viability of this industry right till today.

Recently, the global business events landscape underwent significant disruptions, as stakeholders faced the pressing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coronavirus is a broad family of viruses infecting animals or humans, and COVID-19 is an infectious disease triggered by a newly identified coronavirus in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Madrday, 2020). In March 2020, it was declared a global human pandemic. The virus usually spreads through tiny droplets released from the nose or

mouth when a person with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes, or talks (Madray, 2020). Before the vaccine was developed, the only mitigation available was precautionary and safety measures, including social distancing (standing at least one metre away from others), isolating sick people (especially those with respiratory disease), wearing mask, and washing hands regularly (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020). In addition, in adhering to bans on social or mass gatherings, hundreds of events were cancelled globally since this outbreak started, and awakening to reports of postponements and cancellations became the new normal (Team, 2020). The Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition Organizers and Suppliers (MACEOS) revealed that 1,250 business events in Malaysia were either postponed or cancelled, resulting in an enormous economic loss of over RM1.75 billion with several business events industry stakeholders having zero income since the beginning of 2020 (Kamel, 2020). The MACEOS President further commented that COVID-19 had halted the industry's growth, where business events or MICE drew 540,000 international business travellers and added RM9.2 billion to the national economy in 2019. This was the onset of the unprecedented issues that made the Malaysian business events industry very challenging 2020 onwards. In this context, this paper explores the challenges of the Malaysian business events industry as a result of COVID-19.

This paper is divided into five parts. The first part examines the literature on the emergence and development of COVID-19 challenges faced by the Malaysian business events industry. The second part discusses this study's methodology, while the third part highlights the crux of this study, which are the findings. The discussion which attempts to determine the relationship between the findings and the literature comprises part four, and the last part concludes this paper.

Literature Review

Asia has become an attractive business event destination experiencing unprecedented growth over the past decades (Ahmad & Daud, 2016). Scholars have reiterated that Taiwan, India, and Malaysia have been recognised as “the best business event locations” (pp.70). For the past three decades, Malaysia's business events industry has grown sharply. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture established Malaysia Convention and Exhibition Bureau (MyCEB) in 2009 to “reinforce and position Malaysia as a preferred destination for global MICE and major events” (MyCEB, 2017, p. 5). Over the past decade, the bureau has developed Malaysia's role as Asia's Business Events hub, positioning Malaysia as the top 35 countries for many meetings worldwide, while Kuala Lumpur was placed top 10 for Asia Pacific according to the 2018 International Congress & Convention Association (ICCA) report (Aman, 2020; Jasmi, 2020). MyCEB and its industry partners effectively supported 331 business events in 2019, which contributed approximately RM3.1 billion to

Malaysia's economy, representing the significant value of the business events industry to the country (MyCEB, 2018). In 2020, MyCEB secured 42 business events, including MICE. The events would significantly pull together more than 65,000 delegates, mainly from the healthcare, telecommunications, research, and technology sectors, adding an approximate RM645 million in economic impact (MyCEB, 2020a). However, the projections and Malaysia's future position as Asia's business events hub were adversely impacted by the coronavirus outbreak.

Table 1. Business events postponement and cancellations in 2020

No.	Type of business event	Event name	Status
1	Convention	ACI Airport Economics & Finance Conference & Exhibition	Postponed
2	Convention	AICI Asian Image Conference 2020	Postponed
3	Convention	Hydro Asia 2020	Postponed
4	Convention	Corporate Directors Conference Asia-Pacific 2020	Cancelled
5	Convention	International Congress on Infectious Diseases -ICID- 2020	Cancelled
6	Convention	Asian Pacific Digestive Week -APDW 2020	Postponed
7	Convention	Asia Turbomachinery & Pump Symposium 2020	Postponed
8	Convention	9th World Congress Endoscopic Surgery of the Paranasal Sinuses, Skull Base, Brain & Spine	Postponed
9	Convention	ACI Airport Economics & Finance Conference & Exhibition	Postponed
10	Convention	Pan Ocean Remote Sensing Conference - PORSEC 2020	Postponed
11	Convention	World Congress - World Federation of Hemophilia	Cancelled
12	Convention	Asia Turbomachinery & Pump Symposium 2020	Cancelled
13	Convention	IEEE Asia-Pacific Conference on Communication (APCC) 2020	Cancelled
14	Convention	Asia Pacific Glaucoma Congress (APGC) 2020	Postponed
15	Convention	Radiodays Asia 2020	Postponed
16	Convention	Congress of the Asian Pacific Society of Atherosclerosis & Vascular Disease (APSAVD) 2020	Cancelled
17	Convention	16th Asia Pacific Management Accounting Association Conference 2020	Cancelled
18	Exhibition	BETT Asia 2020	Cancelled

Table 1. (con't)

No.	Type of business event	Event name	Status
19	Exhibition	Malaysian International Furniture Fair (MIFF)	Postponed
20	Exhibition	SEMICON Southeast Asia 2020	*Hybrid
21	Exhibition	Export Furniture Exhibition (EFE 2020)	Postponed
22	Exhibition	Asiawater Expo & Forum 2020	Postponed
23	Exhibition	International Beauty Expo (IBE) 2020	Postponed
24	Exhibition	Electronics Manufacturing Expo Asia (EMAX) 2020	Cancelled

Source: MyCEB (2020b)

Table 1 shows that ten conventions were postponed and seven were cancelled, while three exhibitions were postponed, and three were cancelled, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Only SEMICON Southeast Asia 2020 was carried out as a virtual programme or hybrid event. A recent study showed that due to the significant reduction in income attributable event cancellation /postponement, more than half of all those polled (60%) indicated that these business event companies would cease to exist if the pandemic prolonged till 2021 (Mohd Kodri et al., 2022).

The impacts of COVID-19 would have been more profound and longlasting, particularly in the absence of an imminent vaccine to create immunity in the common masses (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2020). COVID-19 was disruptive to the Malaysian business events industry due to the perpetuity and state of uncertainty exhibited by the outbreak. The repercussions will remain for a longer duration, and industries that thrive on social contacts such as business events need to embrace for tumultuous times ahead. Thus, with COVID-19 still remaining in the picture, this study seems significant in understanding the challenges faced during the pandemic.

Methodology

This study aims to explore the challenges of the Malaysian business events industry from the perspective of experts. It utilised a qualitative research methodology to gain a deeper understanding of the informants' perspective in regard to the study topic (Silverman, 2016). Data collection of primary and secondary data was divided into two phases.

The first phase of the data collection was the library-based research or literature review (Bell & Hay, 1987; Hamin, 2019). The secondary data collected and analysed at this point included the primary source of the government's strategic plan, *Malaysia's Business Events Roadmap: Charting Malaysia's Journey to 2020 and Beyond*, and secondary sources such as academic journal papers, textbooks, government reports, and online sources. As indicated by Merriam (2002), secondary data serve to validate

findings based on other evidence. The second phase of data collection was fieldwork, whereas primary data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with informants who were the industry's experts.

Based on Creswell (2002), the optimum number of informants for any qualitative research to collect sufficient data to reach the saturation point is four to five. Initially, the researcher approached 20 experts in the Malaysian business events industry. However, only 15 were available for interview. As postulated in Guest et al. (2006) by Bertaux (1981), the scholars mentioned that 15 was an adequate sample size for any qualitative research. According to Guest et al. (2006), data saturation often occurs around 12 informants in homogeneous groups. This was consistent with another scholar's experience during a recent CEO study where saturation occurred around 11 informants (Latham, 2013). This study's saturation point thus was met at 12 informants. These 12 informants were selected from the Malaysian business events industry comprising Presidents, Vice Presidents, Directors, and Chief Executive Officers (CEO)/Chief Operating Officers (COO).

The selection of informants was done using purposeful sampling based on their respective roles in the Malaysian business events industry (Creswell, 2012). The informants were briefed on the study context before the interview, and each interview lasted one to two hours for them to check and answer the questions, offer their opinions and ideas based on their industry practice and work experience. Table 2 exhibits the summary of the informants' profile.

Table 2. Informants' profiles

Informant	Gender	Title	Total work experience	Type of business events industry
I1	Male	Vice President	25 years	Hotel operations
I2	Male	Director	18 years	Venue provider
I3	Male	Vice President	15 years	Industry's Association
I4	Male	COO	20 years	Event organiser
I5	Female	Director	20 years	Venue provider
I6	Male	Director	20 years	National Convention Bureau
I7	Female	Director	20 years	Professional Conference Organizer (PCO)
I8	Male	President	30 years	Industry's Association
I9	Male	Vice President	20 years	Hotel operations
I10	Female	CEO	12 years	Event organiser
I11	Male	Director	16 years	Event organiser
I12	Female	Director	15 years	Venue Provider

The informants were business events industry experts offering various services or products in the business events industry, including meetings/conventions/conferences (60%) and exhibitions (40%). Results showed that male informants surpassed female informants, eight males (75%) and four females (25%). All of them were top management (100%) with job experience ranging from 15 to 25 years in the industry. This indicates that the informants are considered very mature in the industry, highly knowledgeable, and experienced in their work. According to Libakova and Sertakova (2015), expert interviews provide significant advantages over other data collection methods. For example, if informants are highly qualified, it eliminates the need for additional screening and clarifying questions to unearth pure, valid answers from the informants. This method also allows the collection of reliable data as the informants' expertise is vast (Dorussen et al., 2005). For this study, the researcher identified key informants in the business event industry using the MyCEB and MACEOS databases.

The informants were contacted via phone, email, and WhatsApp before the interviews and provided the contact information of the researchers such as email and phone number. A copy of the letter of consent was also provided. Based on the interview protocol (Yin, 2009), the researchers briefly explained to the informants that their involvement was voluntary, and each informant was asked to sign a consent form. The protocol involves a variety of issues to gauge the informant's views on the research subject. After signing the interview protocol form, which is done before the interviews start, the informants were asked for their permission for audio recording. The interviews were either conducted in the informants' office or a public place. The researchers also ensured that the informants' information will remain confidential and anonymous throughout the process. The excerpts from the interview transcripts were coded with pseudonyms to protect informants' anonymity.

According to Friese (2019), ATLAS.ti allows researchers to create data categories and themes automatically. Therefore, once the interviews were transcribed, the data collected were coded and categorised using the Atlas. ti (Version 8) identification software. The researcher utilised theme validation, including dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability as the trustworthiness criteria to ensure the rigor of the findings (Blaikie, 2010; Bryman, 2008; Guba, 1981; Schwandt et al., 2007). Data were collected through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data, and theory triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and the researcher's role was an active study participant (Creswell, 2015). All four elements were used to increase this study's credibility.

Results and Analysis

The study aimed to explore the challenges of the Malaysian business events industry and found one main theme and three inductives, derived from the interviews with

experts which emerged throughout the thematic analysis process, as depicted in Figure 1 below.



Fig. 1. The final theme and inductives

The main theme is the rise of COVID-19 and three interesting inductives, including recovery plan, virtual event, and hybrid event. The themes will be explained next using the informants’ narratives.

The Rise of COVID-19

The global landscape changed dramatically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and business events stakeholders were driven to making tricky decisions promptly and with minimal information. The pandemic also impacted many lives and livelihoods worldwide (MyCEB, 2020b), as indicated by the following excerpt.

Undeniably...the Covid-19 pandemic hindered industry growth... (I8)

The interviews with I3 and I12 revealed that:

[...] if, there is one theme guiding today’s debate between the business event industry stakeholders, and it must be rising to the challenges of COVID-19. (I3)

[...] the industry was strongly affected by COVID-19. Hundreds of events have been canceled nationwide since the start of the outbreak, and waking to the news of events’ cancellations or postponements has become the new normal, pretty sad! (I12)

The excerpt below also reflected the growing COVID-18 pandemic which merited attention:

With COVID-19, preparedness and crisis management should be integral aspects, and all industry stakeholders must adhere to the new SOP.. (I5)

The three inductives are discussed next through the narrative view of the informants.

The Recovery Plan

In today's fast-changing world, preparedness and crisis management should be central to the event management industry (Team, 2020). Findings revealed the recovery plan is inductive through the interpretation of informants' perspectives, as shown here:

All the industry partners need to work together and develop a good recovery plan along the process. (I1)

We witnessed the catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic to the business events industry recently. However, slowly, we see the light at the tunnel's end. Some countries are already easing lockdowns, and the first events and conferences will soon be online. We need to include this as part of the on-going process. A proper plan we must have! (I10)

Virtual Event

Another interesting inductive theme that was identified was virtual event based on the following excerpts.

We should not expect a "back to normal" moment to happen anytime soon. We can expect events to look and feel different in a post-COVID globe. The idea of the virtual event seems ideal. (I11)

I think it is evident that everything is going on virtually now, and I think this is the trend we are going to expect in the coming months or early 2021. (I2)

One of the upraising challenges for any business event stakeholders is to keep up with the advancement of technology in hosting the events. (I7)

Hybrid Event

According to the informants, this theme is crucial for the rejuvenation of the Malaysian business events industry as the future ahead becomes even more challenging.

We need to quickly develop an effective plan by restoring the business events industry stakeholders' confidence towards the new adaptation of a perfect solution in organizing or hosting business events – onsite and virtually. (14)

Many people would soon be suspicious about attending conferences. Although the virus recovery timeline is still not optimistic, events can not stay frozen. The industry must quickly recover by looking at other options such as a hybrid activity, perhaps? (16)

Hybrid activities could be the way forward for business events soon, with industry leaders proposing the probability and viability of virtual site inspection and industry bidding. (13)

The combination of live and virtual becomes the new norm for us, yet challenging! (19)

These themes were identified as the Malaysian business events industry's challenges from the experts' perspectives. The findings suggest that industry stakeholders should consider a new and fresh approach or strategy to rejuvenate and safeguard their businesses from future crises. Sadly, the number of studies or literature on COVID-19 and its challenges in the context of the business events industry remains scarce and validates more attention.

Conclusion

It is evident that the critical corpus of literature on Malaysian business events industry challenges or issues can be linked back to the findings of this study. In conclusion, the Malaysian business events industry's challenges include the rise of COVID-19, its recovery plan, as well as virtual and hybrid events.

These findings have significant implications for the Malaysian business events industry stakeholders who should pay close attention to the valuable insights disclosed by the experts interviewed. However, as this study only looked at top management representatives, future research can consider including other players such as travel intermediaries, airlines, accommodation providers, travel and hospitality students, and even different levels of employees. The findings, however, add to scholars' and

practitioners' understanding of the rising challenges unleashed by COVID-19 so that future fallouts in the Malaysian business events industry can be mitigated or avoided.

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