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Review of Issues and Challenges Faced by Tourism Stakeholders in Malaysia Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The worldwide expansion of the COVID-19 virus has provoked a worldwide emergency, especially in the travel and hospitality industries. The aftermath of this crisis is potentially more significant than those caused by previous events such as 9/11, SARS, and the Great Recession of 2008. The pandemic has disrupted the supply chain within the tourism industry, affecting stakeholders in tourism destinations worldwide. Malaysia has been particularly impacted, with tourist arrivals dropping below what was recorded in 2000, almost two decades ago. This study examines the issues and obstacles faced by Malaysian stakeholders in the tourism industry due to the widespread occurrence of the COVID-19 virus and discusses its theoretical background and impacts. The paper concludes with managerial recommendations to overcome both short- and long-term challenges while minimizing the impact on the global economy.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Lockdown, Tourism Stakeholders, Recovery Plan, Malaysia, Travel Risk

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Introduction

As the largest contributor to world GDP at US\$ 2.9 trillion in 2019, the tourism industry accounts for 29% of global service exports and directly supports 300 million jobs worldwide (Gamage et al., 2020; UNWTO, 2020). The tourist industry contributes the most to emerging countries' economies (Hussain et al., 2017; Gamage et al., 2020). Regarding industries in developing and already developed nations, tourism is among the fastest-expanding industries; it recorded 1.4 billion worldwide visitors in 2018. However, the tourism industry severely impacts the economy because of COVID-19 (Shretta, 2020). Health and economic crises have also severely impacted the tourism industry. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) says that if the new coronavirus keeps spreading, it could cost up to \$1.1 trillion in export earnings, 100 million to 120 million jobs, and about 1.1 billion international tourists.

Since the World Health Organization established protocols to halt the further spread of COVID-19, the authorities in Malaysia have been closely monitoring the disease outbreak there. The evolution of Malaysia's travel and tourism sector results from its dedication to providing world-class amenities to its visitors. The friendliness of Malaysians and the country's dependable communication system are two reasons why visitors from other countries choose to vacation there. The outburst of COVID-19 has devastated the economy in Malaysia, in particular the sector of travel and tourism. The Malaysian government has suffered financial setbacks totaling 3.37 billion Malaysian Ringgit (RM) in just the first two months of 2020 (Dzulkifly, 2020). Cancellations are being made to tours and vacation packages, impacting the accommodations and air transport sectors (Aldaihani & Ali, 2018). This COVID-19 virus' most visible effect has been a decrease in the number of people traveling to Malaysia, one of the country's well-known destinations. The government of Malaysia estimates that the country's gross domestic product has decreased from RM 10.8 billion (0.8%) to RM 17.3 billion (1.2%). Apart from that problem, Malaysia has also

imposed entry restrictions on tourists coming from the majority of the countries that have been affected, including Italy, Iran, and South Korea.

Because of the widespread distribution of the COVID-19 virus, the Visit Malaysia Year 2020 (VMY2020) publicity was halted, and the government shifted its objective number of tourists to 30 million. Malaysia 2020 was a vision for the country (The Star, 2020). As a result of the imposition of a lockdown and the closure of international borders, all activities of the tourism licencing division were suspended (Rahim, 2020). During the quarantine period, tourists must remain in their rooms and place their food orders with room service. Despite this, it has been reported that vouchers for discounts worth RM 100 (approximately US\$ 22) per person are available throughout the pandemic.

Given that the government has set aside US\$ 113 million to aid the tourist industry, the Malaysian government will hand over US\$ 30 million to develop the country's tourist industry and give Malaysian Ringgit to the country's tourist board (Medina, 2020; Kumar & Garg, 2021). However, studies examining the effects of COVID-19 on the Malaysian situation, particularly in the travel and tourism sector, are scarce. It was difficult to track down a substantial research article that addresses the difficulties faced as an automatic consequence of the pandemic in the tourism industry. Moreover, research into how COVID-19 affects GDP growth is scant. However, the implications of COVID-19 for the travel and tourism industry have been widely documented in reports by UNWTO, WTTC, and UNCTD. Therefore, the most significant effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Malaysia's tourism industry have been identified, and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Malaysia's tourism industry has gotten the least attention from academics because there is not much relevant information. The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the various stakeholders in

Malaysia's tourism industry. In addition, the study investigated the difficulties and problems that all relevant contributors to the tourism industry in Malaysia experienced throughout the pandemic. It also intended to make specific recommendations on appropriate strategies for overcoming these short- and long-term challenges while mitigating the effects of global economic disturbances.

Literature Review

The Pandemic of COVID-19 and its Effects on the Tourism Industry

Tourism is a significant social, economic, and cultural circumstance, representing the largest mass migration in human history (Wyllie, 2011). Until 2019, the growth of international travel continued to exceed the world economy's growth (UNWTO, 2020). It is regarded as a capable engine of development (Khan et al., 2020) as tourism contributes to economic growth by generating revenue, jobs, investment, and exports (WTTC, 2013; Icoz & Icoz, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to maintain tourism sustainability to have long-term sustainability. This necessitates the cooperation of tourism stakeholders. The cumulative efforts towards the tourism experience by all stakeholders, including authorities, tourists, local communities, tourism businesses, and related sectors, govern the successful competitiveness of a destination (Swarbrooke, 2001). It is also confirmed in the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism that public and private stakeholders should work together for tourism development (Pololikashvili, 2020; Fathimath, 2015). Before the pandemic, the travel and tourism market accounted for 10.6% of all professions (334 million) and 10.4% of global GDP (US\$9.2 trillion), as stated by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) (2019). Additionally, this industry was responsible for creating one out of every four new jobs globally.

Meanwhile, the consumption of international visitors totaled US\$ 1.7 trillion in 2019. However, considering the tourism industry's rapid and severe hit, the pandemic of COVID-19 has

led to an all-time high calamity (OECD, 2020). Rahman, Gazi, Bhuiyan, and Rahaman (2021) used the pathogen-stress theory to discover that tourists presume COVID-19 has impacted their travel risk perceptions and regulations and caused tourists' health concerns, reducing their vacation intentions for specific destinations. Pahrudin et al. (2021) explored the shift in tourist perception, utilising the principles of the Theory of Planned Behaviour constructions to explain local tourist intention to visit a local place, with the result that the framework had a substantial effect on visitors' intention. Early positive approaches and attitudes are the two vital factors from Positive Psychology studies to aid the industry's and people's recovery, particularly regarding well-being and resilience (Pochinho et al., 2022).

COVID-19 is a new version of COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). The pandemic of COVID-19 has been framed as an opportunity for the tourist sector to rethink and reform how it considers and handles environmental and community impacts (Loannides & Gyimothy, 2020), signaling that a significant transformation in the industry's operations may be in order at this time (Prayag, 2020). In reality, the COVID-19 pandemic has been portrayed as a more momentous disaster than any previous one due to its global scope and influence on the industry (Desbiolles, 2021). COVID-19 grew fast throughout China and other Asian and Pacific countries until reaching a worldwide scale in December 2019 (UN, 2020). This virus was initially found in Wuhan, China, with more than 99% of the cases there (Lai et al., 2020). Even though the illness had reached hundreds of people in Wuhan by the start of January 2020, and about 11 million people were quarantined, the initial identification did not seem like it would have a terrible effect on the citizen's sphere (Woodward, 2021). The increasing number of people who were afflicted with the disease continued to rise throughout the month, and the World Health Organization 2020 declared it a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). As of the 11th of March 2020, it was formally

designated as a pandemic (WHO, 2020). Compared to the earlier public health emergency, COVID-19 is more prevalent and has a significantly longer duration of effects. The same patterns were observed in tourist studies conducted in 2003 for SARS, in 2009 for the H1N1 outbreak, and in 2015 for MERS. These studies were conducted on a smaller scale (Salman et al., 2022; Abdelrahman et al., 2020; Gossling et al., 2020).

The travel and tourism industry has been most sharply altered by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNCTAD, 2021). Because of the COVID-19 issue, Asia's economic growth will halt in 2020, according to the IMF, marking the worst performance in over 60 years (Rhee, 2020). Global leisure and internal tourism data revealed a 50% revenue decrease, quantifying up to a \$2.86 trillion loss (Abbas, Mubeen, Iorember, Raza & Mamirkulova, 2021). The pandemic is anticipated to decrease international tourist visits by 78%, creating a US\$ 1.2 trillion loss in tourism earnings and 120 direct tourism jobs (UNWTO, 2020; Salman et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the vulnerabilities and frailty of catastrophes; examples include pandemics of various diseases worldwide and the tourism industry (Liu et al., 2013; Seabra et al., 2013). Many moratoriums on tourism operations have been imposed by national governments, including foreign travel prohibitions and tourism facility closures (Matiza & Slabbert, 2021) since the new form of COVID-19's global expansion is due to increased global tourism mobility (Qiu et al., 2020). In worldwide tourism hubs, travel activities have declined by 80%–90% since then (UNWTO, 2020a), resulting in the region's tourism economy coming to a complete halt (Chan, 2021) and millions of jobs in the tourism industry being harmed (Tunsek et al., 2020). IATA estimates the current pandemic's consequences are far more severe than SARS in 2003 and double as severe as the Global Monetary Crisis 2008 (IATA, 2020) (Harchandani & Shome, 2021). According to a report by the Bureau in 2020, there was a 66% decrease in seats or a 74% decrease in passengers

from 2019 to 2020 and a 61-63% decrease in seats or a 72-74% decrease in passengers from 2019 to 2021. The reason behind this was the reduction in seats by 66% or passengers by -74% between 2019 and 2020 and the reduction in seats by 61-63% or passengers by -72% to -74% between 2019 and 2021, as stated by ICAO in 2021. By 2020, this devastating virus is anticipated to have wiped out over 81 million jobs (Salman et al., 2022). Tourism workers in Asia are expected to lose the most jobs, with 63.4 million jobs, or USD 1.041 billion in GDP (WTTC, 2020).

However, international tourism illustrated a robust performance from January to September 2022, when the international borders were opened, and tourism stakeholders implemented various promotional strategies to attract tourists. As a result, tourist arrivals rose to 62%, with 700 million tourists in the first nine months of 2022 (UNWTO, 2023). In addition, the economic contributions from tourism illustrated an 18.75% rise in the year 2021 by achieving US\$ 1.9 trillion, compared to US\$ 1.6 trillion in 2020.

Case of Malaysia

Expressly, in Malaysia, as the consequences of the extent of COVID-19, tourism promotion in Malaysia for 2020, “Visit Malaysia Year 2020 (VMY 2020)”, was called off, despite the level of awareness held by the government regarding the pandemic sickness (Karim, Haque, Anis & Ulfy, 2020), and as a movement control order (MCO), all operations of the tourism licencing division as of March 18, 2020, have been informed that they will be postponed for the entirety of the MCO (Rahim, 2020). Movement Control Order (MCO) was issued by the government of Malaysia on March 18, 2020, to help combat the ongoing pandemic generated by the virus of COVID-19. The instruction was given to ensure people maintain social distancing and lower the virus transmission rate. The MCO was prolonged many times and later modified to the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), or Enhanced Movement

Control Order (EMCO) at different times. After finishing all the MCO phases, the National Recovery Plan came into operation on June 1, 2021. The National Resilience Plan is a four-step recovery strategy created to direct Malaysia away from the pandemic. The amount of COVID-19 cases that have been reported daily, the bed use rate in intensive care units, as well as the proportion of the total population that has received all recommended vaccinations are the three conditions that must be met before moving on to the next phase (Ministry of Health of Malaysia, 2022). On March 8, 2022, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, announced that Malaysia would allow entry to foreign visitors from April 1, 2022. Although the government made numerous efforts to limit the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak and its effects on Malaysian citizens, these efforts were rendered ineffective when movement restrictions threatened the country's economy (Khair et al., 2021).

This MCO caused Malaysia's travel industry receipts in 2020 to drop to RM 86.14 billion (85.3%) compared with 2019. The total of tourists arriving fell by 83.4% to 4.33 million from 26.1 million, and spending per capita fell by 11.3%, from RM 3.300 to RM 2.928 (Tourism Govt My, 2020). In 2020, the overall loss was expected to exceed RM100 billion (MATTA, 2021). This occurs in every aspect of the tourism sector: In March 2020, 20% of Malaysia's airline employees (Kang, 2020). The Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) predicted an RM560.72 million income loss as the occupancy rates hit an all-time low of 11% (Mahalingam, 2020), supported by statistics stating that 70-80% of hotel reservations are canceled. Event planners and museums have endured great financial losses as a result of venue closures and event cancellations (MOTAC, 2020), revenue losses for amusement and theme business parks are projected at RM 2.8 billion between March and December (MAATFA, 2020), and 95 tourism agencies and tourism activity providers have gone bankrupt (MATTA, 2020). Mustafa and Bagul (2020) and Chan (2021) added

tourist destinations, restaurants, and souvenir shops as the most impacted businesses in Malaysia, especially in the Sabah areas. The disastrous situation has also been announced that airline companies have ceased all activities involving travel because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in Malaysia (Karim, Haque, Anis & Ulfy, 2020), as well as the hotel industry, which has also halted operations. At the same time, the Malaysian government implemented several measures such as the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme, the Wage Subsidy Programme, and the Prihatin Special Grant for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises to support the tourism and hospitality industries as a part of National People's Well Being and Economic Recovery Package in 2021 (MOF, 2021; Masumi, 2022).

Despite this phenomenon, Malaysia remains the leading contributor, accounting for 68.1% of tourist arrivals (2,949,363) in ASEAN countries or the short-haul market (UNWTO, 2020). Although WTTC (2019) predicted that demand would only recover in 19.4 months after emergencies such as epidemics and outbreaks, 75.2% of Malaysian respondents said they already planned to travel domestically shortly as of October 2020; the MCO was lifted in June 2020. As over half of the world's population has imposed unprecedented constraints, the repercussions of this pandemic could affect tourism management as one of many areas of human life (Rahman, Gazi, Bhuiyan & Rahaman, 2021). Since tourism is such a large business in Malaysia, with connections to many aspects of the economy, both direct and indirect (Abbas, Mubeen, Iorember, Raza & Mamirkulova, 2021), it is urgent to highlight the need for tourists to foresee and control the actions of tourists in the aftermath of a disaster. Gursoy and Chi (2020) discovered that visitors would not feel as at ease traveling to a tourist destination, eating in a restaurant, or staying in a hotel as they did previously. Hence, more significant concerns about hygiene and safety must be

emphasised, only after 43.5% of Malaysians were willing to go on leisure excursions as of October 2020 (Hirschmann, 2021).

Subsequently, the Malaysian government, with the assistance of Tourism Malaysia, introduced several strategies such as enhancing the domestic tourism market, creative and digital marketing, mixed promotion, transformation towards emotional and sentimental-based promotion, building trust and confidence, shifting from a mass market to a customised market, converting the support and lead product, and strengthening Malaysia's tourism branding as a strategic marketing plan to stimulate the tourism and hospitality industries in 2022–2026 (Tourism Gov My, 2022). In line with this, RM 1.16 billion was announced by the former Prime Minister in Budget 2023 to rejuvenate the tourism and hospitality industry, which took a major hit from the pandemic.

Literature recommended that accommodations take a few steps, such as providing contactless services, having health condition monitoring systems, having a certified trainer instructing staff on the signs of COVID-19 and how to avoid it, and even doing different marketing based on potential guest needs (Abbas, Mubeen, Iorember, Raza & Mamirkulova, 2021; Chowdhury & Chhikara, 2020; MOTAC, 2020; Hamid, Hashim, Shukur & Marmaya, 2021., McInnis, 2020). Rahman, Gazi, Bhuiyan, and Rahaman (2021) mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic has a crucial impact on tourists' risk perceptions of travel as well as on consumption patterns (Toubes et al., 2021), as well as on variations in the impact of risks associated with various tourism activities (Matiza & Slabbert, 2021). As a result, comprehending psychological responses to COVID-19-related perceived safety of international travel can be beneficial (Zhang et al., 2020) so that people do not avoid visiting places after the pandemic (Mustafa & Bagul, 2020).

Methodology

This conceptual study was completed to meet the research goal, as well as to answer the research question, “What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry, particularly issues, and challenges that emerge for tourism stakeholders in Malaysia?” by looking at articles that were published in different academic journals and news stories about what impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had to the hospitality and tourism industries in Malaysia. The study, which is referred to as a post-crisis analysis in Malaysia based on recent and historical events, focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic and reveals ambiguities regarding the important outcomes of past events based on conceptual analysis (Prideaux et al., 2020), which is a detailed look at the most recent publications from scholarly journals, websites, and other internet platforms. The goal is to get the most up-to-date information from this occurrence. This approach provided a chance to comprehend the current issues, which led to the portrayal of some crucial policies to address the pandemic after the crisis had passed.

Findings and Discussion

The following session covered the statistics of covid-19 worldwide and in Malaysia, the epidemic’s impacts on the tourists’ arrivals, lodging industries, airline industries, tourism stakeholders, and entertainment industries (amusement and theme parks).

Covid-19 Cases Worldwide

Covid-19 has become the biggest challenge to all countries worldwide since it has spread rapidly from one country to another within a short period. When the cases reached 968 195, with a death rate of 45 482 in March 2020, most countries immediately announced a lockdown and closed their borders (Sarker et al., 2023). Although the movement restrictions have been executed strictly

globally, the number of affected cases and the death rate has shot up more than 1000% during the second quarter of 2020. Because of this, various preventative programs, including wearing face masks, sanitation, social distancing, and movement restrictions, were implemented to control the spread of viruses. However, all efforts illustrated negative results when the affected cases and deaths shot up to 83186458 and 1936735, respectively, at the end of 2020. This scenario increased pressure on the government and tourism authorities to manage and handle the pandemic. In 2021, there is a new hope to return to the daily routine when many countries agreed and supported the vaccination initiatives. Still, there was no improvement when the cases and deaths continuously rose by 54.6% and 52.3% in the first quarter of 2021. This is illustrated in Table 1.

Nevertheless, the government initiative positively responded in June 2021, when the affected cases decreased from 54.6% to 42.3%, and deaths declined from 52.3% to 34.9%. Various awareness efforts and strategies on vaccination speed up the prevention measures and support the decline in affected cases. This was proven by the recovery cases when the number increased to 167 688 965. These positive results boosted the government and tourism authorities to enlarge prevention efforts and strategies. As a result, the cases showed positive progress, movement control orders were lifted, and the international borders of several countries were opened. The public also advised backing to their routine with the new normal practices.

Table 1 Global Covid-19 Cases

Months	Total cases	Deaths	Recovered
31 March 2020	968 195	45 482	184 625
30 June 2020	10 952 189	573 305	6 670 039
30 September 2020	34 937 370	1 108 185	27 267 469
31 December 2020	83 186 458	1 936 735	66 116 783
31 March 2021	128 642 442	2 950 213	111 084 952
30 June 2021	183 056 984	3 980 889	167 688 965
30 September 2021	234 584 734	4 793 862	211 363 436
25 August 2022	606,684,189	6,490,220	582,537,691

Source: WHO (2022)

COVID-19 Incidence in Malaysia

In Malaysia, COVID-19 became the main concern when the number of affected cases suddenly increased after a religious event in Sri Petaling. Table 2 presents the statistics of affected cases, deaths, and recovery in Malaysia from March 2020 to August 2022. The pandemic was a bigger challenge to the Malaysian government when the situation prolonged for more than two years, forcing the authorities to implement several Movement Control Orders (MCOs) and close international borders (Shah et al., 2020). In addition, several financial aids and stimulus packages, such as tax breaks, deferred repayment to banks, loan restructuring, the National COVID-19 Immunization Programme, Wage Subsidy Programme, and Prihatin Special Grant for micro, small, and medium enterprises were provided to support the tourism stakeholders who were severely affected (Foo et al., 2021; MOF, 2021; Masumi, 2022). However, all these efforts were only effective temporarily and did not overcome the struggles and problems that the tourism stakeholders must overcome in the long term. This is proven by the higher number of affected cases and deaths by the last quarter of 2020, as shown in Table 2. Like other countries, Malaysia also adopted the vaccination initiative as a preventative measure to overcome the pandemic. The implementation of several phases of vaccination and various awareness campaigns successfully declined the affected cases and deaths to 205.7% and 170.1%, respectively, by March 2021. The effective implementation of vaccination caused 70.6% of the citizens to complete both doses (fully vaccinated), and 77.3% were partially vaccinated (completed one dose) by October 2021 (Ministry of Health of Malaysia, 2022). As a result, there is a drastic improvement in the recovery cases.

Table 2 Covid-19 Cases in Malaysia

Months	Total cases	Deaths	Recovered
31 March 2020	2 766	43	537
30 June 2020	8 639	121	8 354
30 September 2020	11 224	136	9 967
31 December 2020	113 010	471	88 941
31 March 2021	345 500	1 272	329 624
30 June 2021	751 979	5 170	682 680
30 September 2021	2 245 695	26 335	2 054 824
25 August 2022	4,778,140	36,206	4,710,366

Source: Ministry of Health of Malaysia, 2022

COVID-19’s Impact on International Tourism: Tourist Arrivals and Receipts

The number of tourists who visit from other countries and the revenue they bring in play a significant part in the overall growth and progress in every aspect of an economy. Whenever a country receives more international tourists, the national income will rise and support the development of the country. The COVID-19 pandemic, which sparked an unprecedented crisis, significantly affected all industries globally, including tourism and hospitality. The government’s immediate actions, such as restrictions on travel and the shutting down borders across the world, home quarantine, and stagnation of business operations to prevent the virus from spreading further, led to severe damage to these industries. A drop in international tourists affected 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (UNWTO, 2021). A similar situation happened in Malaysia, where the outbreak caused a downturn of 83.4% in the arrivals of international tourists and losses of 85.2% in 2020 (Abhari et al., 2022). The situation worsened in 2021 when the travel restrictions were prolonged until 2021. Table 3 illustrates the arrivals and receipts of international tourists to Malaysia from 2018 to 2021. While figure 1 shows tourist arrivals by month for the year 2021. Besides implementing vaccination as a preventative measure, the Malaysian government also introduced various recovery strategies, such as promoting

Malaysia as a family-oriented shopping destination, initiating short-haul tourism packages, and introducing niche tourism products in the Strategic and Marketing Plan for Tourism Malaysia for the years 2022 to 2026 to attract international tourists from neighbouring countries such as Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines (Azuar, 2022). This strategy showed a positive response when the total number of tourists from other countries increased to 1 million in mid-year 2022, of which 600,000 were from Singapore (Bernama, 2022). In addition, Tourism Malaysia focuses its domestic tourism promotional activities to boost international tourist arrivals. In line with this, promoting domestic tourism, forming smart partnerships or alliances, strengthening both online and offline travel promotion, enhancing media engagement together with strategic communication, executing the travel bubble, and implementing strategic transformation were identified as six strategic plans to boost domestic tourism (Tourism Gov My, 2022). Hence, strategic planning and effective execution support Malaysia to enhance international tourist arrivals while fostering domestic tourism.

Table 3 International Tourists Arrivals and Receipts 2018 to 2021

Years	Tourists Arrivals in millions	RM Receipts in billion
2021	0.1	0.24
2020	4.3	12.7
2019	26.1	86.1
2018	25.8	84.1

Source: Abhari et al. (2022)



Figure 1. Tourist Arrivals by Months

Source: Abhari et al. (2022)

Lodging/ Hospitality Industry

The accommodation and hospitality sectors were also significantly influenced by this global pandemic. The outbreak of the pandemic recorded a loss of RM 5 million in the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) when the travel restrictions were prolonged for more than two years (Sharen, 2021). For every two weeks of MCO in 2020, the industry announced a loss of RM 300 million, with 80% of losses occurring between June and September of the same year (Nst et al., 2021). Moreover, the global pandemic derailed all initiatives from Tourism Malaysia, Shoppe, and MAH in branding Malaysia as a travel destination with RM 466,000 in subsidised hotel packages (Sarpong & Alarussi, 2023). This led to the temporary shutting of 86 hotels, the complete closure of 55 hotels nationally, and the sale of certain owners' properties to real estate investors (Promnil & Polnyotee, 2023). As a result, 800 workers in the hotel were laid off, and the remaining staff were given wage reductions and unpaid leave (Othman et al., 2021), as shown in Table 4. While Figure 2 indicates the average hotel occupancy level for the year 2021.

Subsequently, the Malaysian government initiated several strategies, such as cost-cutting, declaring the hotel as a quarantined hotel, and a pricing policy to sustain the industry (Deraman et

al., 2021). On another note, MAH also recommended several ways for the Malaysian government to help the hotel industry. These recommendations were categorised into three distinct parts, such as short- or immediate-term (including the cost-effectiveness of hotel utilities through providing discounts and waiving for water and electricity bills, reducing the employer's offering to the Employee Provident Fund (EPF), wage subsidy to staff, a waiver for loan interest, hotel tax exemption or reduction, hotel quit rent and assessment waiver, and a temporary exemption for Music Rights Malaysia (MRM) fees), mid-term (such as the revision of the tourism tax, fees for aircraft parking, and other airport services are being reduced, and a temporary waiver of fees) and long-term (such as the establishment of a special public-private partnership tourism marketing fund (Dewan, 2020). Although most of the strategies and initiatives assisted the hotel industry to survive temporarily, the actual impact was illustrated when the travel restrictions were lifted and international borders opened. As a result, the hotel occupancy rate increased by 60% in August 2022 (Nour, 2022). Hence, it proved the success of government strategies in surviving 70% of the hotel sector during a pandemic and boosting businesses by the end of 2022.

Table 4 Devastating Impact of Covid-19 on the Hotel Industry

States of Malaysia	Total Employees (Sample)	Pay Cut	Unpaid Leave	Layoff
Johor	3 215	108	202	72
Kedah	0	340	982	92
Kelantan	560	76	157	0
Kuala Lumpur	17 826	2 880	3 641	542
Melaka	1 872	65	191	85
Negeri Sembilan	1 452	0	179	130
Pahang	1 464	0	150	231
Penang	5 549	240	430	84
Perak	1 654	91	595	245
Sabah	4 934	893	1 075	177
Sarawak	3 488	175	258	92
Selangor	7 981	134	1 812	238
Terengganu	1 298	52	101	53
Total		5 054	9 773	2 041

Source: Malaysia Association of Hotels (2021)

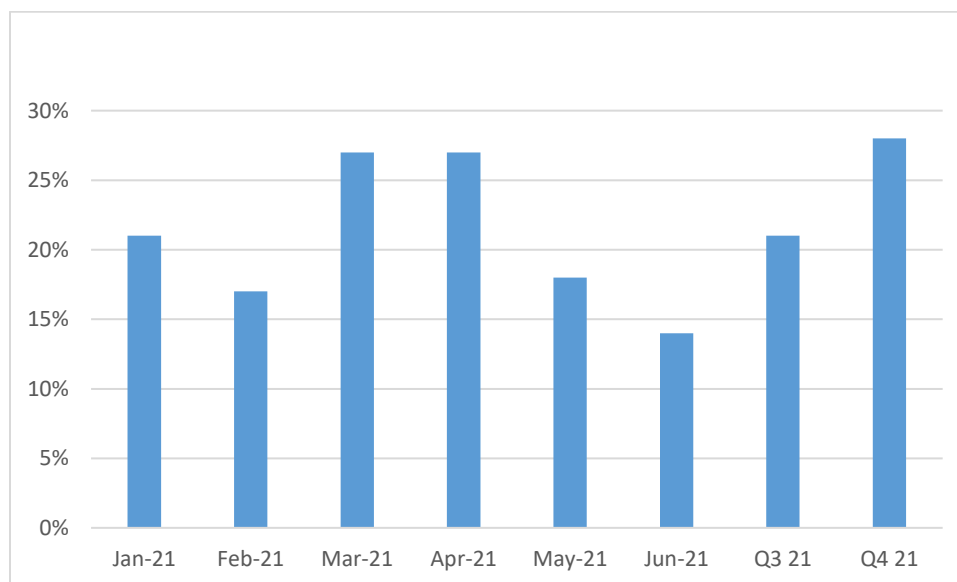


Figure 2: Average Hotel Occupancy Level

Source: Malaysia Association of Hotels (2021)

Airline Industry

The Airline industry is also one of the travel industries severely affected by this outbreak pandemic. Most airline firms were compelled to cease operation during the pandemic and recorded losses of RM 13 billion in 2021. As a result, most Malaysian airline companies, such as AirAsia, Malindo Air, and Malaysia Airlines, imposed 10%–100% salary deductions and unpaid leave based on income range and position (Foo et al., 2021). Similarly, Malaysian Airline Berhad (MAB) suggested a voluntary retirement plan to Malaysia Aviation Group (MAG) as part of the COVID-19 recovery and restructuring plan. At the same time, the fourth quarter results for AirAsia Group Berhad showed a net loss of RM 2.44 billion by December 2020. Subsequently, voluntary retirement with three months' salary was provided to Malaysian workers 45 and older who have worked for the corporation for at least ten years (including time spent with Malaysia Airlines) (thestar.com, 2021; Shao et al., 2022).

Similarly, the MAG Early Retirement Plan was offered to MASwings, MAB Kargo, AeroDarat Services, Hijrah Biru, Firefly, and MAB Academy (Ya Shak, 2021). In line with this, Malindo Air and AirAsia laid off 2647 and 2400 personnel, respectively, with minimum wage, unpaid leave, and voluntary retirement (The Star, 2021). AirAsia followed this, where 1900 cabin crew members, including crew, pilots, and engineers, were laid off in 2020 (The Star, 2020). Besides that, in its Economic Stimulus Packages for 2020, the government of Malaysia promised residents a 15% reduction in their monthly electricity bills, rebates on airport premises rental, landing, and packing fees, and a six-month delay on monthly tax installments as a precautionary measure (Shah et al., 2020). Malaysian Airlines Holding Berhad also received discounts on parking and landing fees and space rental at airports (Shah et al., 2020). Hence, it is justified that the government initiatives provided minimum help to support the airline industry. Even though no

specific financial aid was allocated for the airline industry during the pandemic, the affected employees were encouraged to utilise unemployment benefits, government training, and job-hiring programmes (thestar.com, 2021). However, the situation has changed since the government opened domestic and international travel borders. As a result, the demand for air transportation rose by 15.5% annually in October 2022, compared to just 5.1% in the previous months (The Malaysia Reserve, 2023). This is a good sign for the growth of the airline industry. Furthermore, the former cabin crew, flight attendants, and pilots laid off during the pandemic were rehired at the end of 2022 (Ainin, 2022). Unlike other travel industry sectors, the airline industry grew slowly but steadily when the industry was revitalizing.

Travel Agents/ Operators/ Online Travel Agents

Furthermore, the pandemic has severely impacted key players in the tourism industry, including tour operators, travel agents, and tour guides. The implementation of several MCOs and a complete shutting down of all international borders caused the cancellation of travel reservations and losses to tour operators, travel agents, and tour guides (Rahim, 2020). These key players had the hardest time handling clients or customers demanding an immediate refund during the pandemic. As a result, most of them shut down their businesses. According to Sulthana, Evangelin, and Vasantha (2021), 95 travel companies, including tour operators and guides, were significantly affected by the global pandemic, as reported by the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA). In addition, MATTA also requested that the Malaysian government provide an automatic loan moratorium, a wage subsidy, and financial aid to the impacted travel agencies (Chester, 2021). During the same period, MATTA encouraged tour operators and travel agencies to develop corrective measures (significantly diversifying their business models, marketing

strategies, and marketing segmentation) without compromising health and safety standards to reclaim foreign tourists once the various travel warnings and restrictions were lifted (MATTA, 2020, Sulthana, Evangelin & Vasantha, 2021). Similarly, Karim, Haque, Anis, and Ulfy (2020) asked the travel agency to offer appropriate products and packages to support Malaysia's tourism business after the pandemic. Meanwhile, the government also initiated more specific efforts such as licence fee exemption, 40% discount for compound payments, 10% discount for electricity bills, one-off special assistance of RM 3000 for 5335 tour operators, one-off financial assistance of RM 500 for 5877 tour guides, one-off financial assistance of RM 600 for 2861 homestay operators, and wage subsidies to support these key players (MOTAC, 2021). The Wage Subsidy Programme and the Sarawak government's Sia Sitok Campaign were considered effective initiatives to support tour operators and travel agencies to offset some labour costs and helped to generate some revenue before the borders opened (Masumi, 2022). Hence, it proved that the wage subsidy and promotional campaigns supported the revival of travel companies such as tour operators and agencies in 2023.

Entertainment, Theme Parks, Casinos

The tourism industry includes amusement and theme parks, and the Malaysian Association of Amusement Theme Parks and Family Attractions (MAATFA) reported losses of RM 2.8 billion between March and December 2020. This was due to a drop in tourist numbers from 40% to 90%. As a result, 18 amusement and theme parks were permanently closed, resulting in 2543 job losses (Sulthana, Evangelin & Vasantha, 2021). Although the amusement and theme parks were closed during this pandemic, it does not mean the operation will be zero cost. The owners were still burdened with salary payments, rent, and essential utility maintenance. Hence, it provided the

hardest time for amusement and theme park operators (Haykal et al., 2022). The Movie Animation Park Studio (Ipoh), Puteri Harbour Theme Park, Sentoria Theme Parks & Resort (Bukit Gambang), Bukit Merah Resort Sdn Bhd (Taiping, Perak), Desa Waterpark (Kuala Lumpur), and Wet World Adventure Park (Penang) were listed as more affected companies during this pandemic (Zakaria et al., 2022). Although another tourism sector was allowed to operate and revive their businesses, it was not applicable for amusement and theme park until the adult vaccination reached 90%. In addition, the execution of new norms and safety and hygiene measures were strictly monitored at these destinations (Govarts et al., 2023). In line with this, the Selangor state government consented to a five-year reduction in the entertainment tax from 25% to 5% on each admission ticket to the theme park in Selangor, effective January 1 of next year and lasting until December 2026 (Malaymail, 2021).

Furthermore, MAATFA recommended that amusement and theme parks digitalise their services (including cashless ticketing and ride reservation systems) in the post-pandemic era (Sulthana, Evangelin & Vasantha, 2021). The government's wage subsidy and permission to operate in mid-2022 with new normal practices supported amusement and theme park businesses to revive them. As a result, KinZania recorded RM 6.46 million seven months after the business resumed in 2022 (Free Malaysia Today, 2023). Similarly, Genting Malaysia recorded MYR 2.18 billion in profit within three months (Blaschke, 2022). Hence, it proved that the wage subsidy and discount in entertainment tax helped the amusement and theme parks survive during a pandemic. However, it showed good growth when the travel restriction was lifted.

Conclusion and Implications

This study aims to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the tourism sector in Malaysia, which has suffered greatly from the pandemic. Due to movement control orders and border closures, many travel-related businesses have had to close, which has led to job losses and big financial losses. Domestic tourism also suffered greatly, with losses exceeding 80% during certain months. The country's economic situation has worsened dramatically because of the pandemic and has raised concerns about poverty and social welfare. The government has provided financial aid to support affected communities and enhance healthcare services, but more strategic planning is needed to ensure long-term recovery. The pandemic has served as a wake-up call about the connection between health and economic expansion and development, highlighting the significance of both.

This study can assist tourism authorities in comprehending the consequences of COVID-19 and devising suitable policies. Furthermore, it can aid travel agencies in offering appropriate packages and products to enhance Malaysia's tourism sector. The aviation industry can convey the current state of the COVID-19 situation and promote fundamental safety controls such as social distancing, hygiene practices, and regular hand washing. Tourism companies must adjust to the new normal by revamping their business models. For instance, hotels can offer long-term stays for those who need to work from home, while tour operators can focus on domestic tourism and offer customised travel packages for families or small groups. The industry should upskill employees through training programmes to implement health protocols and develop new competencies to meet changing tourist needs. Prioritising the customer experience by offering personalised services and leveraging technology is crucial to attracting and retaining customers. Collaborating with industry partners can lead to innovative solutions that benefit all parties, while investing in

sustainable tourism practices can promote eco-friendly tourism activities and support local communities. By adopting these managerial implications, not only is it possible for the tourism industry to bounce back from the pandemic, but it will also thrive in the long run by adapting to the changing needs of tourists and promoting sustainable tourism practices. Overall, the tourism industry should adopt a strategic approach to conquer the challenges brought about by the pandemic. By collaborating with the government, diversifying tourism products and services, emphasising health protocols, strengthening domestic tourism, emphasising digitalisation, and conducting future research, the industry can mitigate the pandemic's impact and recover faster.

This study has some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the study only examines tourists' arrivals, lodging and airline industries, tourism stakeholders, and entertainment industries. It does not fully cover economic growth and development. Secondly, the findings of this research are based on the data obtained from data released by the Malaysian government and the WHO. Hence, future studies should be conducted by focusing on the impacts of the outbreak pandemics on economic growth and development and using other sources for the data. In addition, future studies should include the recent statistics on covid-19 since most of the neighbouring countries declared the endemic phase in 2022.

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