

# Health and Tourism: Implications of COVID-19 Pandemic to the Malaysian Travel and Hospitality Industry

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**Abstract**—Outbreaks of diseases which are contagious and can pose serious health consequences have considerable impacts on the tourism and hospitality industry. This is reflected through past outbreaks such as foot and mouth disease (FMD), SARS, Ebola and Chikungunya. Due to the importance of health in the context of tourism, it is imperative to investigate the extent of the impact of COVID-19 health pandemic as it is considered one of the worst disease outbreaks globally. Thus, this paper aims to explore the implications of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry. After content analysing 63 newspaper articles published online from March to May 2020, it is uncovered that the Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry has been affected terribly by the enforcement of MCO in order to curb the spread of COVID-19 health pandemic. Stories associated with income and job losses, cancellation of Visit Malaysia 2020 campaign, closure of tourist attractions and closing down of countless of hotels were apparent in the reporting of online news. Yet, the analysis of this paper adds to the existing knowledge by revealing that despite encountering difficulty during this time of crisis, the Malaysian hospitality industry was able to show their appreciation towards medical frontliners who risk their lives to save COVID-19 patients. Some hotels demonstrate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) by offering free accommodation and other services to health personnel.

**Keywords**— *Health tourism, Covid-19 pandemic, hospitality industry, content analysis*

## 1. Introduction

Over the years the number of people travelling for leisure and tourism purposes has increased. The rising number of travellers visiting foreign countries is reflected through the yearly statistics published by the World Tourism Organisation [1]. In general, statistics show the total number of tourists crossing international borders or taking international holidays is on the rise from year to year. For example, it is published by the WTO that

tourist arrivals for 2019 increased by 4% since 2018 similar to previous years, which shows steady growth. It is claimed that destinations around the world received around 1.5 billion tourists last year [1]. This figure exceeds the previous year by 54 million tourists. Despite the growth rate being slightly lower than in 2017 (+7%) and in 2018 (+6%) growth was still recorded given many issues faced in 2019 [1].

Movement of large number of travellers can pose several health threats to human beings especially the spread of highly contagious diseases [2]. It is estimated by The Tropical and Geographic Medicine Center of the Harvard Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard University that around 20 to 70% of the people who travel become unwell and out of 1 to 5% of them would need medical services [3]. These figures show that travellers should be aware that they will be exposed to some health risks which may require them to seek medical help as they travel. The rapid growth of travel in modern era characterised by high volume of tourists, travellers exploring great distance in terms of geographical area and in reaching their destinations faster poses more risks in spreading communicable diseases in short period of time worldwide [4].

Although studies in the area of health tourism have been examined by several previous researchers, investigation in this field is useful as novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is considered one of the worst disease outbreaks in human history and relatively different from other past epidemics. Hence, it is significant to explore the implication of this outbreak in the context of tourism as this industry contributes greatly to Malaysian economy [5]. As tourism and health is intimately linked, it is therefore, vital to analyse the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on Malaysian travel and hospitality industry. The understanding of the degree of impact

from this current outbreak is crucial as the health threats are usually further intensified in the contexts of an epidemic and pandemic [6]. In fact, these health crises can pose considerable consequences not only on health sector but also on a country's economy including transportation, accommodation and tourism.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Health and Tourism

Based on the review of literature, it is identified that health and tourism has been studied by scholars in the context of travel motivation since a long time ago. It is well-cited in tourism literature that ancient people had been travelling to faraway places to find cure and health properties. Rabotic [7] states that one of the motivations for early travellers during Egyptian and Greek Empires was for healing purposes. Historically, health has a strong connection to tourism. The link between travel, tourism and health has been well-known as one of the early motives to travel or to take part in tourism activities. Motives such as improving human well-being and wellness and visiting places associated with health benefits were popular among early travellers [8]. In some ancient communities, travelling for health reasons was connected to their traditional spiritual beliefs [9] such as the ancient Greek Empire which was renowned for spiritual healing associated with gods and goddesses and their temples [7].

### 2.2 Previous Studies on Health and Tourism

The relationship between health and tourism has also been reviewed based on the implications of travel to human health. Based on historical record it was documented travel and human migrations were among the primary reasons of the spread of epidemics in the past [10] [11]. Over the past three decades, topics related to health and tourism have been discussed, encompassing aspects such as the impacts of infectious diseases to tourism industry, health implications to tourists during holidays and the effects of diseases to local community. Previous scholars have studied several disease outbreaks which took place in different parts of the world and their consequences for different sectors of travel and tourism. One outbreak which considerably impacted the tourism industry was the foot and mouth disease (FMD). Findings of a research

carried out by Blake, Sinclair and Sugiyarto [12] claim that FMD outbreak caused larger impacts on the UK tourism industry rather than the agricultural industry. This outbreak had a serious implication to the UK economy as tourists' demand and expenditures declined and these affected the overall GDP. Similarly, the SARS outbreak from 2002 to 2003 had an impact on global tourism as WHO statistics show the number of tourist arrivals declined by 1.2% in 2003 [13]. The implication of SARS epidemic was greater in the East Asia region, which reveals tourist arrivals dropped considerably by 41% between April 1<sup>st</sup> and April 21<sup>st</sup> in 2003 as compared to the previous year during the same period [13]. Four of the Asian countries which were hit the hardest as a result of this outbreak were China, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Singapore [13].

Communicable diseases in tourist attractions can affect both the travellers and destinations [14]. Travellers are frequently exposed to communicable diseases as they are not aware of the risks they may be exposed to especially if they are visiting an unfamiliar environment [14]. From the perspective of tourists, it is argued that although the medical world has experienced tremendous growth in the past, infectious diseases still pose a danger to travellers [6]. Delivorias and Scholz [6] further elaborate that despite some infectious diseases associated with specific zone or known to spread in particular areas, there are others which can make the situation more serious and transform into epidemics or pandemics.

In the area of travel medicine, it is claimed that travellers are often subjected to different types of risks either from infectious diseases or other health threats to a certain extent while at the destinations or on their ways to and back from their holidays [15]. Concern over tourists' health sparked as the volume of travellers visiting far away destinations and developing countries particularly tropical destinations has risen significantly over the years [16]. Among health issues often associated with travellers visiting tropical and developing countries include diarrhoea, malaria and sexually transmitted diseases [16]. The majority of the infectious diseases are linked to consumption of unhygienic food and water and it is estimated around 40% suffered from diarrhoea while travelling [15]. However, tourists are claimed to be more exposed to certain types of health risks if they are visiting

tropical or developing destinations as a result of the living conditions and the lack of development in terms of basic facilities and the level of hygiene practiced in some of these countries.

However, in the context of SARS epidemic travellers were among the reasons of why many parts of the world were infected by this virus. This was because travellers were among the earliest to be infected by the outbreak of SARS virus and then the hotel and travel industry became the venues where the virus kept on spreading [13]. In the analysis of various infectious diseases including SARS, Chikungunya, Influenza and Ebola, it is claimed that infected travellers spread these harmful viruses to many parts of the world and this impacted the airlines industry and water transportation, and also posed health risk to the general public [4].

It is acknowledged that the majority of literature in the area of health and tourism mainly focus their works from travellers' perspective. It is claimed that there is a limited number of studies which have been carried out relating to the health of local community in tourism [10]. Cossar [10] provides a broad overview of the consequences of the development of tourism to the health of local community. Directly, it is possible for tourists to transmit diseases to local population from their country of origins. Other general impacts on host communities caused from tourism development are also discussed by Cossar [10] such as how local diets changed after exposure to tourists and tourism growth, accessibility to better health facilities and health risks associated with tour guiding to high altitude sites and adventure tourism activities among local guides.

### 3. Method

In exploring how the Malaysian travel and accommodation industry has been impacted by COVID-19 health pandemic, this paper analysed the publication of online newspaper articles which feature news relating to this topic. Newspapers published online from March to May 2020 in both English and Malay languages were used as data for this paper. The assessment of these newspaper articles was done using content analysis method. Content analysis is "a research methodology to make sense of the (often unstructured) content of messages - be they texts, images, symbols or audio

data" [17]. As mentioned above, various forms of communication materials can be examined using content analysis method.

In general, previous scholars agreed that content analysis is a useful method in investigating printed and online media contents. As a matter of fact, the assessment of the media or online content is considered as a sub-category of content analysis which has been widely recognised [18] particularly with the proliferation of materials published on the Internet nowadays. Macnamara [18] further elaborates this method is commonly utilised to evaluate a wide range of textual materials such as interview transcripts, narratives and editorial and promotional sources like newspapers and magazines.

Content analysis method has been chosen to assess news related to the implications of COVID-19 to the Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry as reported by newspapers published online. It is a useful method to study the content of newspaper articles as historically, content analysis has been used to examine propaganda and media content [18]. Based on the review made by Gheyle and Jacobs [17] it is maintained that content analysis is a popular research methodology as it involves the assessment of some kind of contents.

Furthermore, in time of crisis like today where almost the whole world is facing a health emergency, content analysis is deemed a valuable way to carry out a research. This is because it is not possible for many social science researchers to go to field to carry out their studies presently due to safety reasons. With the utilisation of content analysis, researchers are able to obtain valuable inputs for their research topics. Thus, content analysis is adopted in the assessment carried out in this article. Using Google Search, online newspapers which published their articles reporting the situation concerning the impact of COVID-19 to the Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry were selected as sample. The evaluation in this paper was made on selected news articles published online as many newspaper companies have opted to publish in digital form these days [19] and many people especially youngsters prefer to read the news from the Internet. All articles published within the time frame (March to May 2020) were selected as sample. The individual news reported in the online newspapers relating to the impact of

COVID-19 to the Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry has been chosen as unit of analysis. After the newspaper articles relating to the investigated topic had been gathered, further review and analysis were performed to identify the key messages and themes of stories.

#### **4. Findings**

Overall, 63 online newspaper articles from March to May 2020 which reported news associated with how the Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry have been impacted by the COVID-19 health pandemic were identified. Further analysis of these articles detected that there are several categories of stories reported by online newspapers. Stories reporting losses suffered by tourism and hospitality businesses as a result of COVID-19 health pandemic is an apparent category of news. Themes of stories include hotel businesses showing appreciation and gratitude towards frontliners particularly medical staffs, the cancellation of Visit Malaysia Year 2020 Campaign, closing of tourist attractions and tourism services to tourists, hotels gazetted as quarantine stations and tourism and hospitality industry post-COVID-19 have been reported.

##### **4.1 Income and Job losses**

Huge losses suffered by tourism and accommodation industry is one of the main implications from COVID-19 pandemic reported in many newspaper articles during these three months. Out of 63 newspaper articles analysed, more than half mention income losses. Losses already suffered and losses of demand for future months have been reported since March 17 to middle of May. Even before MCO was enforced in Malaysia, losses have been reported by the tourism sector since the outbreak of this virus started in China and spread to several other countries. This has impacted the number of tourist arrivals to Malaysia. In fact, New Straits Times dated 13 March claims that Malaysia has lost RM3.37 billion in the first two months of 2020. Losses of tourism income is also mentioned by the Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin in the newspaper as it is estimated that Malaysia's domestic product (GDP) growth for 2020 will decline by 0.8 to 1.2%. Losses around RM17.3 billion is expected for 2020 (New Straits Times, 13 March 2020). It is indicated that the accommodation industry in the state of Pahang

lost RM500 million during the four stages of the enforcement of Movement Control Order (MCO) (Malay Mail, 6 May 2020). Furthermore, it is stated in the newspapers that the outlook for 2020 appears gloomy despite Tourism Malaysia having just released the number of tourist arrivals for 2019 which has increased by one percent from 2018 in March. It is reflected that tourism growth will experience challenging times as it is not easy to pick up and bounce back from this pandemic and it is described as being as severe as facing 'World War III' (New Sarawak Tribute, 4 April 2020).

Employee income losses are also reported in the online newspapers. As tourism and hospitality industry is one of the most affected by the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, those working in this area faced serious consequences as well. From economic perspective, the spread of this pandemic has resulted many employees in tourism and hospitality sector to either stop working temporarily, to work from home or to suffer-from losing their jobs. MAH details out the number of employees affected by publishing that 2,041 hotel employees had been laid off, 9,773 were asked to take unpaid leave and 5,054 employees experienced pay cut (Malaysiakini, 25 March 2020).

##### **4.2 Cancellation of VMY 2020 and Closure of Tourism Services and Attractions**

With the announcement of MCO by the federal government, the Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Datuk Seri Hajah Nancy Shukri released a statement of the cancellation of the Visit Malaysia 2020 Campaign. Several online newspaper articles such as Malay Mail, Borneo Post Online and Dayak Daily have reported this news on March 18, the first day of the enforcement of MCO in Malaysia. Visit Malaysia Year 2020 Campaign has been cancelled as many tourist attractions, sites and services are closed starting from March 18. This cancellation was part of the spirit to support the measure taken by the federal government to reduce further spread of COVID-19 by enforcing MCO in Malaysia. It is told in these newspapers that the Visit Malaysia 2020 Campaign was cancelled immediately. In addition, The Borneo Post Online asserts that one of the sectors which will be impacted significantly from the cancellation is the airlines industry.

It is told in several newspaper articles that various tourist attractions and sites have been closed for visitors with the start of MCO in Malaysia. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture is one of the agencies which had announced the closure of several well-known attractions in Kuala Lumpur as the cases of COVID-19 was on the rise in March. Among the attractions closed to visitors include the National Art Gallery, Muzium Negara, Malaysia Tourism Centre (MaTIC), Kompleks Kraf Johor and Kompleks Kraf Langkawi (The Star, 16 March 2020).

Moreover, several tourist sites encompassing beach resorts, recreational centres and highland resorts have been closed as part of the Movement Control Order (MCO). One of the attractions which have stopped operating temporarily includes Resort World Genting. The closure encompasses all hotel premises, food and catering outlets, casinos, recreational and entertainment sites and shops located within Resort World Genting (Malay Mail, 17 March 2020). In fact, it is stated that Kuantan Municipal Council has stopped visitors from going to beaches and other recreational areas until MCO is lifted. Visitors are not allowed to visit several sites such as Balok Recreational Centre, Teluk Cempedak Beach, Batu Hitam Beach as well as Teruntum Mini Zoo (New Straits Times, 17 March 2020). It is apparent that visiting tourist attractions and enjoying outdoor recreational activities at natural, cultural and manmade sites are strictly prohibited during the MCO period. This is one of the responsible acts by the federal and state authorities in Malaysia to further curb the spread of COVID-19. As a matter of fact, visiting tourist and cultural attractions and recreational sites are not considered essential while experiencing health crisis especially because these sites and attractions are often packed with visitors.

#### **4.3 Showing Appreciation to the Frontliners and Love to the Public**

Another prominent theme reflected in the published online newspapers is hospitality industry showing gratitude towards the frontliners involved in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of their appreciation, a number of hotels have allowed medical frontliners to rest at their premises. For example, the health frontliners from the Sarawak State Health Department in Kuching have been invited to stay at the Riverside Majestic Hotel. This

hotel has allocated 50 rooms from its Astana Wing for the medical staffs. Even transportation from the hospital to the hotel has been arranged for safety reasons (New Straits Times, 26 March 2020). It is reported in the newspapers that there are two other hotels which have offered accommodation to frontliners as well. These hotels are Tune Hotel and OYO Hotel. Tune Hotel offers staff working at the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital (HKL) free lodging after their shifts at their branch located at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) (New Straits Times, 24 March 2020). It is cited in the newspaper that the management of this hotel has offered overnight stays as some of the medical staffs were found resting in the hospital corridors after their exhausting shifts. Medical staffs from HKL can stay at all rooms at the premises and they will be provided with complimentary breakfast too. OYO hotel is another lodging property which offers free accommodation to staffs working in healthcare industry dealing with COVID-19 patients. The Malay Mail dated 25 March details out that OYO Malaysia has opened their three partner hotels to health personnel from Kuala Lumpur Hospital, Shah Alam Hospital and Tuanku Jaafar Hospital Seremban. Additionally, several hotels and buildings in the capital city of Sarawak have lighted up their premises with heart shaped designs to show love to the public during this difficult time.

Overall, the medical frontliners battling the COVID-19 outbreaks in Malaysia do not only receive support from public and corporate organisations. Accommodation industry in this country also shows their gratitude to them. This effort is manifested through offering free lodging and other services such as transportation to the lodging premises and complimentary breakfast to the medical personnel fighting COVID-19. Therefore, hotel management companies are able to promote their good image to the public through corporate social responsibility towards those who need their help while fighting this health crisis.

#### **4.4 Hotels Gazetted as COVID-19 Quarantine Stations**

The designation of hotels as quarantine centres are mentioned in several newspaper articles during the second phase of the MCO period. Hotels become part of the sites selected as quarantine centres after the Malaysian government gazetted 63 premises for

this purpose. Actually, a number of five-star hotels around Malaysia have been designated as sites of quarantine (Malay Mail, 5 April 2020). It is listed in the Malay Mail that these well-known accommodations are Palace of the Golden Horses, Tanjung Rhu Resort in Langkawi, Grand Millenium Kuala Lumpur, Hilton Kuala Lumpur and Dorsett Subang (Malay Mail, 5 April 2020). The selection of commercial accommodation such as hotels as quarantine centres for Malaysians coming back from other countries will be able to generate income for this industry. This is regarded as positive as the lodging industry has been significantly impacted from the spread of COVID-19 pandemic (Bernama, 19 April 2020). The initiative by MOTAC and National Security Council to appoint hotels as quarantine sites has been supported by MATTA which enables hotels to resume their operations during MCO (New Straits Times, 5 April 2020).

#### 4.5 Closing Down of Hotels

However, as COVID-19 keeps on spreading and the MCO period has been further extended, the situation is unfavourable for the hotel industry. Since the end phase four of MCO, there are 12 newspaper articles reporting that several hotels in Malaysia have been closed down. The Sun Daily dated 25 April mentions that VHM Hotel Management Group revealed that a number of hotel properties located in Penang and Ipoh will be closed down. One of the hotels involved is Jazz Hotel. According to the management, the hotel has not been making money for months even before the virus spread to this country. The enforcement of MCO and its extension has made it even worse for their business and the company has no other choice other than to stop its operation (The Sun Daily, 25 April). Another hotel reporting closure is Ramada Plaza Hotel in Melaka. The owners have decided to close the business of the hotel for now because it is no longer viable (News Straits Time, 29 April 2020). From tourism perspective this is very unfortunate as this hotel is one of the oldest and it represents an important landscape of central Melaka. Not only this hotel is important to tourists visiting Melaka, local community also uses it as venue for various events.

By May 2020, it is reported in a newspaper article that Malaysian hotels should be buried (Sinar Harian, 9 May 2020) as the situation for the hotel

industry is really critical. It is claimed that the health pandemic has prompted 18 hotels to close their operation. Some have to close down for good and some have to close down temporarily. Among hotels which are permanently closed down include Hotel Shah Alam Beach and Shah Village Petaling Jaya while hotels which are facing temporary close-down are Westin Langkawi and Andaman Langkawi (Sinar Harian, 9 May 2020). It is claimed that the future of the hotel industry in Malaysia is uncertain. The longer the enforcement of MCO, the greater its impact to this industry.

#### 4.6 Tourism and Hospitality Industry Post COVID-19

Several tourism organisation leaders are already talking about post-COVID-19 travel trends. For example, the CEO of LADA is already discussing the trends to Langkawi Island after COVID-19. He mentioned that tourist arrivals to the primary tourist destination in Malaysia Langkawi Island will not be as high as it used to be. Some of the reasons cited include the lasting fear of the COVID-19 virus and social distancing which will still be practiced by the public and tourists (Malay Mail, 10 May 2020). Some even predicted that the trend of mass tourism will not be popular anymore. Various tourism scholars and practitioners propose that the development of tourism post-COVID-19 will be focusing more on domestic market rather than international tourists. For example, it is stated that it so crucial for Malaysians to travel domestically post-COVID-19 (The Star, 18 April 2020). Recovery of the tourism industry will also depend on the economic stimulus packages introduced by the federal government of Malaysia.

### 5 Discussion

Although the number of tourists travelling internationally have been increasing over the past years as reported by WTO, an outbreak of diseases which are contagious can seriously affect the world of travel and tourism. It is reflected through past studies in the contexts of FMD [12], SARS [13] and other outbreaks such as Chikungunya and Ebola [4] that the spread of communicable diseases have negatively impacted the tourism industry. Findings of this paper support the results of previous studies. Thus far, the analysis of the implication of COVID-19 to tourism and hospitality industry in Malaysia has shown a bigger

impact. One of the reasons this industry is experiencing significant impact is because of the enforcement of MCO in Malaysia and similar measures taken by many other countries. As human health and safety are the main priorities during this health pandemic, participation in travel and tourism activities have to be stopped temporarily not only in Malaysia but also in various parts of the world with many airlines having drastically reduced the number of their flights.

The extent of the impact of this health pandemic to the Malaysian travel and hospitality industry is much wider. It is manifested through income and job losses as the number of tourist arrivals declines because the spread of the virus has gotten worse since its outbreak in Wuhan, China and the situation transformed into an epidemic and then declared by WHO as a global pandemic. With some other previous health crises, tourists voluntarily avoided countries and destinations associated with health issues for a while. However, with COVID-19 health pandemic, the public and tourists are not permitted to travel either domestically or internationally for leisure and recreational purposes. In fact, international tourists are not allowed to enter this country during the MCO period. It is important to acknowledge that the Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry has suffered tremendously as both demand and supply associated with this industry have been affected by this health crisis. It is predicted that this industry will be struggling to recover from this pandemic. However, we have to know tourism and hospitality industry in other countries and some other industries have also experienced something similar. Hopefully, tourism and hospitality businesses can pick up the pieces and bounce back by mid of next year as projected by key analysts in the industry.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper has analysed the impacts of COVID-19 health pandemic to the tourism and hospitality industry through the assessment of 63 newspaper articles using content analysis method. Findings of this paper reveal that the Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry has been hit substantially by this health crisis like never before. The extent of the impact ranges from income and job losses to the cancellation of Visit Malaysia Year 2020 Campaign to the closing down of numerous hotels and several other negative implications. However,

despite this bleak situation presently, some positive impacts also transpired based on the analysis of the newspaper articles such as the effort made by the hotel industry to show their appreciation and gratitude towards the medical frontliners. The declaration of several hotels as quarantine centres by the federal government also aids these hotels to generate income. Overall, findings of this paper enhance the understanding of the relationship between health and tourism by demonstrating that an outbreak of an extremely contagious disease like COVID-19 have impacts on various sectors of tourism and hospitality industry.

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