

## PLACE ATTACHMENT, HOST TOURISTS' INTERACTION AND RESIDENT WELCOMING ATTITUDE: A POST COVID-19 ASSESSMENT TOWARDS TOURISM RECOVERY IN LANGKAWI, MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** The most recent COVID-19 pandemic has posed a risk to the world economy that has never been seen before. Therefore, the welcoming attitude of the residents in tourist destinations has become a concern for post-COVID-19 tourism recovery. There seem to be many issues concerning the interactions of hosts and tourists as Covid-19 fear exists. Thus, this study aims to examine the role of place attachment and host tourists' attractions on the welcoming attitude of the residents in Langkawi, Malaysia. The researchers conducted a quantitative method and cross-sectional approach in this study. Researchers distributed 600 questionnaires to the respondents in Langkawi, Malaysia, and 461 usable questionnaires were returned and proceeded for further analysis. This study used structural equation modelling to use Smart PLS version 3 software. In structural equation modelling, the measurement and structural model of the study were reported. The study found that place attachment and host tourists interaction play a significant role in maximizing residents' welcoming attitude. The practitioners and academicians will be benefited from the outcome study while exploring tourism recovery strategies and post-Covid tourist arrival.

**Key words:** Place Attachment, Host Tourists' Interaction, Residents Welcoming Attitude, Post-Covid 19, Tourism Recovery, Langkawi, Malaysia

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### INTRODUCTION

Today, tourism is considered one of the most important economic activities in the world and is heavily dependent on foreign investment (Sthapit et al., 2018). Even though travel and tourism have always involved some level of risk, the primary concern for most tourists while visiting destinations or hospitality businesses is a health risk (Shin and Kang, 2020). In particular, the hospitality industry is proving to be the one that is being impacted the hardest by the COVID-19 epidemic (Nhamo et al., 2020; Popov, 2020). The severe health risks associated with travelling during and after the COVID-19 epidemic are to blame for the low takeup of air travel. As a consequence, the recovery of the hotel market is expected to be a long time in coming. Scholars are aware that rapid, sustainable tourism and the growth of new types of tourism may lead to tensions between tourists and locals (Quevedo et al., 2021; Tampakis et al., 2019; Wassler and Talarico, 2021). Tourist developments might cause people to feel uncomfortable, especially if they have a low degree of involvement in their community. Therefore, encouraging the local community to participate in tourist development is critical to ensuring the

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long-term development of the country's economy. However, the amount of research done to date is somewhat restricted. Noh et al. (2020) claimed that very few research projects are taking place globally. A strategy for tourist development that considers the desires of residents is essential to ensuring the viability of the island's tourism business (Li et al., 2021). Cognitive, affective, and behavioural attitudes are the most common three types. Yet, most research on residents' attitudes has concentrated on their behaviour alone, with little attention to their cognitive or emotional well-being.

Locals' attitudes toward tourism development are influenced by interactions between local inhabitants and visitors (Kim et al., 2020; Liang et al., 2021), as do tourists' spending and satisfaction at locations. Therefore, practitioners and researchers generally support efforts to foster pleasant interactions between locals and visitors. This is because researchers and practitioners regard residents' hospitality and goodwill toward tourists to be vital for tourism development (Lai and Hitchcock, 2017; Li et al., 2021). On the other hand, many of the encounters between locals and tourists might result in moderate to large annoyances for the locals (Jordan et al., 2021). According to observations made by Lai and Hitchcock (2017), locals may experience sentiments of aggravation due to mass tourism and the ensuing negative opinions of tourist development. Residents of those destinations will act as hospitable hosts toward tourists, regardless of the benefits that residents believe they will receive from local tourism development. Thus, this study aims to examine the role of place attachment and host tourists' attractions on the welcoming attitude of the residents in Langkawi, Malaysia. The study further investigated the mediating role of host tourists' interaction between place attachment and residents welcoming attitude.

### **1. Theoretical underpinning**

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), developed by Ajzen in 1985, is one of the most influential examples of anticipating the behaviours of individuals based on the beliefs and attitudes of that individual. The theory of reasoned action (TRA), in which attitudes and subjective norms anticipate behaviour, served as the foundation for the original version of this idea. As a result, Ajzen (1985) added a new variable to the TPB, perceived behavioural control, because it lacks explanatory power for behaviours that are affected by numerous factors (Bae and Chang, 2021). According to the TPB, a person's behavioural intention is influenced by various factors, including attitude, subjective norms, and a sense of behavioural control. An individual's favourable or negative evaluation of a specific incident or behaviour is their attitude (Ajzen, 1985). Since it persists for a long time once it is created, an individual's attitude frequently serves as a reliable predictor of their behavioural purpose (Razali et al., 2020). Subjective norms focus on the social influences that promote or discourage individuals from engaging in a specific behaviour. Ajzen (1991) noted that when family or friends have a favourable attitude toward a specific behaviour, the likelihood of an individual performing that action to fulfil their expectations increases, and vice versa. Perceived behavioural control refers to an individual's view of his or her abilities in terms of the skills, time, and money necessary to carry out a specific action (Ru et al., 2012). It refers to a person's confidence that will be able to monitor a situation and effectively manage the resources necessary to carry out a specific task.

Numerous areas, including psychology, health, marketing, physical education, and tourism, have extensively used the TPB (Demirel and Ciftci, 2020; Choe et al., 2021). As several scholars have attempted, TPB's explanatory power can be improved by including more variables. The TPB has recently expanded to include risk-related variables. According to Newby et al. (2020), perceived danger and uncertainty have decreased interest in travelling to Australia. Their study found that visitors' perceptions of risk and uncertainty influenced their views, as did visitors' perceptions of behavioural control. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked the chaos, upset established standards, and prompted the need to anticipate travellers' future behaviour. The TPB model was supplemented with a new variable based on the COVID-19 crisis case data. Utilizing HBM, which emphasises how people tend to adopt health-protective behaviours when faced with perceived hazards, this new component of the TPB model may be rationalised. This study anticipated that people's risk perceptions about the COVID-19 problem prompted them to engage in untactful tourism behaviours. The study did not include particular HBM factors in our research design because the primary goal was to evaluate the association between COVID-19 risk perception and behavioural control toward tourism. Rather, the study employed eTPB variables to retain the focus of this investigation.

### **2. Place Attachment and Resident Welcoming Attitude**

Those are the two aspects that residents employ to set themselves apart from their place attachment. Previous research on residents' perspectives has been generally exploratory and descriptive. Residents' place connection is mostly influenced by residents' welcome attitude (ATT) (Soler et al., 2019). In a research of 418 Cape Verdeans, Khanra et al. (2021) discovered that their ATT effects substantially impacted their connection to their home.

According to Shen et al. (2015), Zhuhai City citizens' ATT strongly impacted their attitude toward tourism in China. Kamata (2022) studied the views of 300 Mauritius inhabitants about the impacts of tourism. Eusébio et al. (2018) discovered that people's opinions toward place marketing were favourably connected in tourist areas, using a sample of 766 people from three different destinations. ATTT research on residents' ATTT is critical since it focuses on the host-guest interaction (Tse and Tung, 2022). On the other hand, earlier research has mostly focused on the ATT of residents (Woosnam et al., 2018; Shen et al., 2021). According to Woosnam et al. (2018), emotional solidarity is influenced by one's level of identification with another person. The author also indicated that all three sub-dimensions of emotional solidarity highly influenced the ATT of residents. According to VG et al. (2021), ATT was a significant predictor of communities' openness to tourists. Meyer et al. (2021) also found that a resident's ATTT could influence their ATT. Existing studies don't have the capacity for this kind of research. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

### 3. Host Tourists Interaction and Resident Welcoming Attitude

Social exchange theory states that residents who have a favourable view of tourism are more likely to participate in tourist-related activities. When citizens know that they would benefit from tourism without incurring extra costs, they will be more inclined to engage and contribute to community-based tourism development initiatives (Lo and Janta, 2020; Patwary et al., 2022). According to the research on tourism, the host-to-tourist interactions and their outcomes have received insufficient attention (Eusébio et al., 2018). Nevertheless, The number of articles published in this area has increased in recent years. Personal encounters between tourists and hosts in specific locations are often called host–tourist interactions (Alrawadieh and Kozak, 2019). Tourists and hosts may come into contact in many ways. In most tourist destinations, social contact between residents and visitors is brief and non-repetitive, open to deception and exploitation, superficial and commercial, and asymmetric in meaning for both performers (visitors and hosts) (Eusébio et al., 2018; Oxenswardh, 2018). Despite these traits, the literature on this topic shows that interactions between tourists and hosts can influence visitors' and residents' opinions and pleasure. While some research has focused on how host-tourist interactions affect host views about tourism, others have looked at the elements that may influence these interactions (Tabaeian, 2022; Patwary et al., 2020). According to a small number of studies, inhabitants' perceptions of the negative effects of tourism are linked to host-tourist interactions. Tu and Ma (2021) stated that inhabitants who interact with tourists frequently view tourism much more favourable. Based on this perspective, it is projected that residents' perceptions of favourable tourist benefits will be positively correlated with the intensity and pleasure of their social contacts. Various things can affect how residents and visitors interact socially. As shown in Figure 1, the research framework was developed basen on the literature on this topic which emphasises the importance of cultural differences and personal traits in influencing the outcomes of encounters between visitors and local people (Li et al., 2022; Rabiul et al., 2022; Tse and Tung, 2022).

#### RESEARCH METHOD

##### Sample and Data Collection

According to Thompson (2012), a sample size of 461 cases is considered adequate to test the hypotheses for an unknown population. Following the above suggestions, our sample size is 461 is sufficient as the tourists in Malaysia are unknown and vary yearly. Data were collected from September to December 2021. Previous research (e.g., Nulty, 2008) has suggested that a more than 50% response rate is satisfactory for a pen-paper survey. Therefore, 600 questionnaires were distributed to tourists using the purposive sampling technique to obtain at least 461 responses. Each questionnaire was directly handed to the participating tourists in a sealed envelope with a pencil. After removing incomplete questionnaires with missing data and outliers, 461 responses were considered valid for testing the hypotheses.

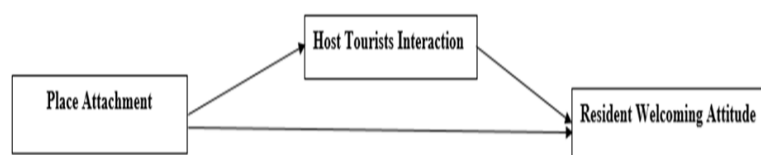


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

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#### DATA ANALYSIS

We have applied PLS-SEM, the appropriate tool to test theory and path analysis (Nitzl et al., 2016; Rasoolimanesh and Ali, 2018). SEM measures and accommodates observed variables to represent any ambiguity in a construct of latent variables and explains casual relationships among latent and observed variables simultaneously (Hair et al., 2020). Besides, some of the measurement errors prevalent in tourism resources can be solved using PLS-SEM with many latent variables (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015; Rasoolimanesh and Ali, 2018; Henseler et al., 2015).

#### RESULTS

##### 1. Outliers, Multicollinearity, and Normality

First, multivariate outliers were also checked out and deleted with a significance level of more than 0.001, as Lynch (2013) recommended. Given the single source of the data, both procedural and statistical remedies were applied to avoid potential common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Variable measurements were placed randomly in different places, such as corporate social responsibility, green human resource management, inclusive leadership, and proactive pro-environmental behaviour (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Further, Harman's single factor test was also applied, indicating a single factor explained only 16.54% out of the total variance of 63.23%. Since this value this less than 50%, it can be established that the data does not have a common method variance (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). To confirm no multicollinearity in the variables, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was checked in Table 1.

Table 1. Collinearity diagnosis

	Host Tourists Interaction	Residents Welcoming Attitude	Place Attachment
Host Tourists Interaction	-	1.050	1.00
Place Attachment	1.000	1.050	-
Residents Welcoming Attitude	1.050	-	1.050

Table 2. HTMT (Heterotrait & Monotrait) ratio criterion for discriminant validity

	Host Tourists Interaction	Place Attachment	Residents Welcoming Attitude
Host Tourists Interaction			
Place Attachment	0.229		
Residents Welcoming Attitude	0.289	0.236	

## 2. Construct validity, reliability, and model quality

Figure 2 displays that all items in constructs were acceptable loadings between 0.766 and 0.926 (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015; Hair et al., 2020). Besides, AVE values were more than the suggested values of 0.50 (see Figure 2 in white circle). The CR values were for host tourists' interaction (0.894), place attachment (0.927), and residents welcoming attitude (0.914), respectively. Thus, all the constructs meet the criterion for convergent validity (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015; Hair et al., 2020). Further, to confirm discriminant validity, discriminant validity for all variables was found satisfied, as shown in Table 2. We measured standardized root mean residual (SRMR) and coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) to understand the quality of the model (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2020). SRMR is lower than 0.08 for the good model in PLS (Hair et al., 2020). Although  $R^2$  of 0.10 indicates satisfaction. Therefore, 0.045 and 0.85 indicate weak and moderate influence, respectively (Hair et al., 2020). Table 3 present the detailed values and evaluation of SRMR and  $R^2$  (Hair et al., 2020).

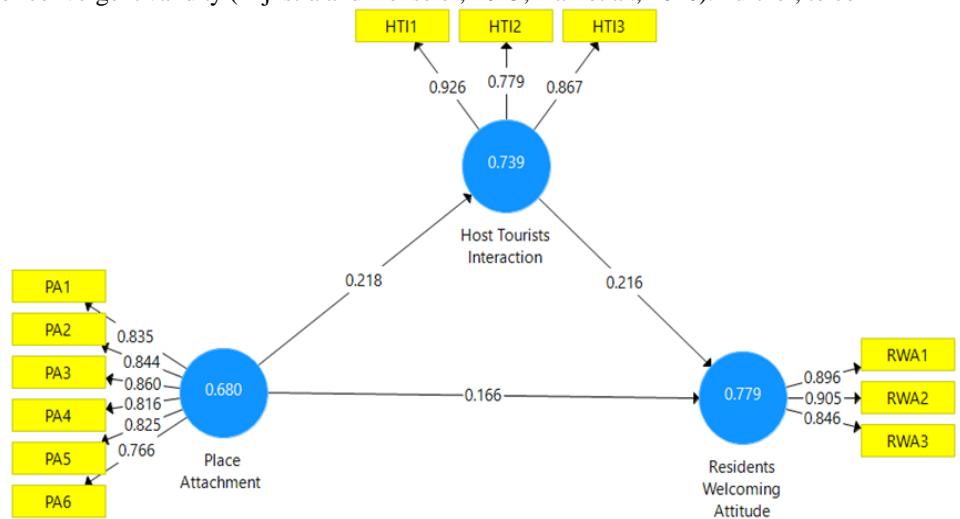


Figure 2. Measurement model (loading and AVE)

## 3. Hypothesis testing

The study has used statistical methods (i.e. p-values, t-values) and bootstrapping suggested by Nitzl et al. (2016), Zhao et al. (2010) and Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) to test the direct and indirect effects, as shown in Table 4 and Figure 3, host tourists' interaction ( $T=4.347$ ,  $P=0.000$ ) and place attachment ( $T=2.753$ ,  $P=0.006$ ) has a significant relationship with residents welcoming attitude. Besides, place attachment ( $T=4.009$ ,  $P=0.000$ ) also positively impacts host tourists' interaction. Therefore, all the hypotheses are supported. For indirect effect, Table 4 shows that the host tourist's interaction ( $T=3.030$ ;  $P=0.003$ ) is used as a mediator between place attachment and residents' welcoming attitude and H3 is also supported.

Table 3. Quality of the model

Variables	Adjusted $R^2$ (coefficient of determination)	SRMR (standardized root mean residual)
Host Tourists Interaction	0.045	
Residents Welcoming Attitude	0.085	0.062 (good)

Table 4. Direct hypotheses

No	Hypothesis	$\beta$	Std. Dev.	t-values	p-values	Supported
H1	Host Tourists Interaction -> Residents Welcoming Attitude	0.216	0.050	4.347	0.000	Yes
H2	Place Attachment -> Host Tourists Interaction	0.218	0.054	4.009	0.000	Yes
H3	Place Attachment -> Residents Welcoming Attitude	0.166	0.060	2.753	0.006	Yes
<b>Indirect hypotheses</b>						
H4	Place Attachment -> Host Tourists Interaction -> Residents Welcoming Attitude	0.047	0.016	3.030	0.003	Yes

Note: \* $p < 0.001$  or  $t \geq 3.29$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$  or  $t \geq 2.58$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.05$  or  $t \geq 1.96$ ;  $\beta$  = path coefficient. ns = not significant

Figure 3 describes the structural model of the study. T-values show high efficiency in the structure of the model. The relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable is significantly positive. To examine the direct effects, the bootstrapping method was performed in Smart PLS 3.

## DISCUSSION

In this research, a structural model is developed and tested for the impact of host-tourist interactions, place attachment, and perceived tourism impacts on residents' views toward tourism development. The model contains factors that have gained little attention from scholars and managers alike (such as the relationship between hosts and tourists and devotion to a particular

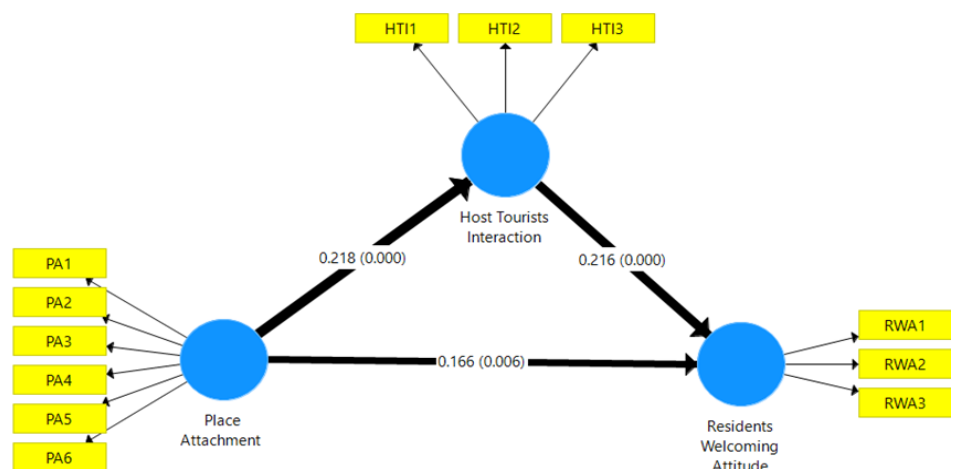


Figure 3. Structural model (p-values and path coefficients)

region). It was tested and found that research is scarce compared to the remarkable performance of tourism (Nian et al., 2019). Findings of hypothesis one suggests that host tourists' interaction is positively related with residents welcoming attitude.

While the host and tourists have got more interaction, the residents most likely to welcome the tourists more. The findings also in line with previous studies of Joo et al. (2018). The second hypothesis triggered that place attachment of the tourists is positively related with host tourists' interaction. The tourists with more place attachment with the destination is likely to increase their interaction with the hosts. The findings also in aligned with previous findings of Patwary et al. (2020) and Sthapit et al. (2017). Third hypothesis found that place attachment has positive and significant relationship with residents welcoming attitude. This finding reconfirms the previous findings of Aleshinloye et al. (2020) and Alom et al. (2019). For the mediating relationship in this study, the findings of hypothesis found that, host tourists' interaction significantly mediates the relationship between place attachment and residents welcoming attitude. The mediating role of host tourists' interaction was previously investigated by Jensen (2010). The people who live here have a strong sense of place attachment. These findings indicate several recommendations that may be useful to implement in the tourism development model. A tourist destination's residents are one of its most significant assets. As a result, it must give more advantages than expenses to gain local support for tourism growth. The kind and welcoming nature of the residents should be incorporated into the Langkawi island's tourism development plans. To ensure the long-term viability of the tourism industry, residents should be involved in the planning process.

## CONCLUSION

Residents and tourists alike will be happier if they can interact in pleasant ways. As a result, tourism development should be done in tandem with and for the local population. According to Woosnam et al. (2018), the development of destinations necessitates the coordination of efforts by the actors involved in preparing and promoting beneficial connections between residents and visitors. To break this loop, the tourism development model must be adjusted immediately. The implementation of concepts of sustainable development is directly linked to the success of this tourist attraction. As a result, all stakeholders must participate in this monumental undertaking.

### 1. Theoretical contributions

COVID-19 has a significant impact on the behaviour of travellers in this exceptional epidemic. It has various theoretical implications based on the precise data gathering and analysis at the pandemic's peak. This study aims to analyse a subject that is currently roiling global society and the lives of individuals. The second wave of COVID-19 is anticipated this fall following a temporary respite from the global spread. This study's findings are critical for future longitudinal studies looking at visitors' short and long-term behavioural alterations, as proposed by Gössling et al. (2020). A unique pattern of behaviour among visitors was seen during the pandemic, which was explained by applying the notion of tourism.

Third, this study added risk perception to the notion of planned behaviour. Despite earlier studies that mostly examined it from a technological standpoint, it was proposed to represent a new normal in tourism behaviour, satisfying people's residual desire to travel even amid the pandemic while decreasing their perceptions of disease risk. It was done in this report post-corona research that could focus on people's non-tactile behaviours employed for health-protection goals. The findings of this research will help us better understand how tourists behave when there is an outbreak of an infectious disease.

### 2. Practical Implications

The findings of this research have practical implications for both the domestic and international tourism industries. Health authorities have highlighted the second wave COVID-19 crisis. They also stated that environmental changes would lead to recurrences of diseases like COVID-19 every four to five years (Kim et al., 2020). To meet the needs of both travellers and tourism professionals, tourism may need to be considered a new paradigm. It's not just about getting rid of service encounters. Instead, it might be a high-end service with a lot of customizability built-in. Customers usually used to flock to the breakfast buffets at high-end hotels, but room service garnered no attention.

In contrast, room service of the buffet breakfast has been increasingly popular since the onset of COVID-19, as customers seek to protect their areas. Most tourists would rather reserve a spot in a small group for specific tours. To protect the safety of its guests, hotels may need to offer a room that is tailored to their specific needs. Services, locations, and rigorously approved programmes for their protection would suit the growing demand for untactful tourism.

### 3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The findings of this study are not without flaws. Cross-sectional data is the first type of data examined in this study. After the conclusion of Covid-19, the pandemic's behavioural aim may change. For a long-term study of the issue, scholars would need to discern data over some time. In this scenario, examining the relationship between a person's stated intentions and their actual actions might also be done. This study's results were based on Malaysian people, and the research model needs to be tested in various settings to ensure that the findings are accurate. For instance, to evaluate the outcome, it is necessary to grasp the specific Malaysian environment in which strong pressure to comply with social standards has been exerted. There was a tremendous surge in confirmed cases and a huge social cost, which sparked public outrage and a fear of social shame for not cooperating with authorities. Third, in this area of tourism, more research is needed. As a starting point, researchers would need to categorise tourism based on its relationship to technology and its components. In addition, it's important to dig further into what makes tourism so appealing. The COVID-19 epidemic necessitates a wide range of perspectives from travellers, industry, and academia to better understand this alternate kind of tourism.

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