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A Case Study on Factors Influencing Malaysian Tourists' Travel Behaviour Intentions Post-COVID-19

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Abstract: The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had tremendously impacted the tourism sector. The worldwide movement restrictions implemented during the pandemic had put a halt on international travel and changed tourists' travel behaviour. Tourism Malaysia reported a great drop in the country's tourism revenue for 2020 and 2021, resulting from the COVID-19 hit. To cope with the catastrophic effects of the pandemic on tourism performance, domestic tourism has been the main focus to draw local tourists' attention away from the hazards of uncertainty. In this context, the stakeholders' understanding of Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions following this catastrophe is vital to develop long-term recovery strategies and ensuring the sustainability of the tourism industry, moving forward. Studies which attempt to discover tourists' travel behaviour intentions, especially in light of COVID-19's unprecedented impact on Malaysians, are still very limited in number. This study, therefore, investigated the factors that affected Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions after the COVID-19 pandemic. Relying on the enhanced Theory of Planned Behaviour, the factors constraining travel such as attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behaviour control, and perceived risks, which are highly related to tourists' travel behavioural intentions, were selected. Through a quantitative research approach, questionnaires were distributed to Malaysian tourists. The total sample size was 300 respondents. The findings demonstrate that most of the Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions were affected by attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behaviour control, and perceived risks. However, perceived behaviour control was found to have the greatest impact on Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions, followed by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived dangers. It was revealed that their travel behaviour intentions were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, considering the travel behaviour intentions of the Malaysian tourists, a comprehensive plan must be devised to enable stakeholders involved in tourism recovery post-COVID-19 to develop focused marketing or promotional strategies to generate significant influence and return on investment in order to stimulate the performance of the tourism industry.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 virus, which was first discovered in Wuhan, China in 2019 (Zhu et al., 2019), became one of the biggest public health crises in history to have affected the tourism sector at both the global and local scale (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). According to a report by the United Nations World Travel Organization (UNWTO) published in May 2020, the COVID-19 crisis caused a 22% reduction in global travel in the first quarter of 2020. Travel was further reduced by another 60% up to 80%; the reduction costing at least USD80 billion in loss (UNWTO, 2020). The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) estimated that the GDP losses connected with travel and tourism might exceed USD5,543 billion in 2020, with a 75% decrease in foreign visitor arrivals compared to the previous seasons (WTTC, 2020). Early predictions that a vaccine or effective treatments would be developed within 6–12 months, enabling the tourism industry to resume its pre–crisis level, were entirely incorrect. In contrast to the 2.4% year-over-year rise in 2019, Malaysia's tourism income decreased by 85.3% in 2020 due to a significant drop in visitor numbers from 26.10 million in 2019 to 4.33 million in 2020 and a decline in tourist spending from RM86.1 billion in 2019 to RM12.7 billion in 2020 (Tourism Malaysia, 2021).

Today, in the post-COVID-19 period, awareness of every important factor that affects the tourism industry is vital for strategic planning that would attract tourists to travel after being faced with COVID-19 uncertainties (Francis et al., 2022). According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) model, the critical factors influencing tourists' travel behaviour include attitude, subjective norms, as well as perceived behavioural controls (Ajzen & Driver, 1992).

While post-COVID-19 tourism rebound depends on Malaysian tourists' behaviour, tourism practitioners and governments may need to subtly influence this behaviour (Hanafiah et al., 2021). This concern arises from the factors that affect Malaysian tourists' behavioural intentions after the pandemic. The behavioural intentions, in turn, determine the extent of their participation in tourism-related products or services. Industry players that gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that affect Malaysian tourists' behavioural intentions can potentially recover faster from the pandemic's impact. Thus, industry players and other stakeholders

must devise strategies that enhance Malaysian tourists' behavioural intentions and get them involved in touristic activities. In this respect, it is critical for tourism stakeholders to understand the factors that influence visitors' behavioural intentions when they continue to travel after the pandemic.

Although past studies have shed some light on the extension of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on people's perceptions of risks in some contexts (Sjaarda et al., 2020), for example the risk perception of travel in the DACH region of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Neuburger & Eggar, 2020), there is much more to uncover with regard to how tourists' risk perceptions are linked to the COVID-19 crisis (Dryhurst et al., 2020).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine Malaysian tourists' behavioural intentions by applying additional elements, for instance, perceived risks based on the extended TPB. It also seeks to identify significant factors affecting Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions in the post-pandemic period. The focus is on factors that constrain travel, such as attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behaviour control and perceived risks, that may impact Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions. Essentially, it is crucial to understand Malaysian visitors' travel behaviour intentions post-pandemic to enable the construction of effective marketing strategies that can drive the recovery of the tourism sector.

Literature Review

The Pandemic Repercussions in the History of Tourism

The tourism industry is highly susceptible to disruptive events and crises, but no other event in recent history, not even terrorist attacks, MERS, and SARS, had caused such a colossal and long-lasting impact on the international tourism industry like COVID-19 (Gossling et al., 2021; Hall, 2010). According to Statista (2021a, 2021b), the Malaysian gross value added from tourism industries (GVATI) has been increasing steadily over time. However, the pandemic slashed it by around RM45 billion in 2020 to RM 199.4 billion. The movement restrictions and quarantines enforced throughout 2020 to curb the spread of COVID-19, resulted in the loss of more than 100 million domestic tourists in Malaysia.

According to official figures from COVIDNOW (2021), COVID-19 had caused more than 31,544 deaths in Malaysia. The fatalities and increased awareness of the pandemic's threat spurred changes to Malaysians' travel behaviour and intentions. Every tourism or hospitality product or service is affected by risk perceptions (Kim et al., 2016). Thus, the impact of a crisis on tourists' perception of risk is an important topic since their decision-making process is heavily influenced by their perception of risk and safety concerns (Kozak et al., 2007). Considering that tourists make

their choices based on perceptions rather than facts (Chakraborty & Rittichainuwat, 2009), multiple factors can influence their travel behavioural intentions.

Tourists' Behavioural Intentions Under Risk

Tourists' behaviours vary greatly based on many subjective and objective factors connected to the perceived risks. If travel is perceived to be unsafe, tourists may reconsider their travel decisions (Isaac, 2020; Kozak et al., 2007). Earlier studies of the aftermath of disease outbreaks were primarily focused on investigating the patterns of recovery (Cheer, 2020), assessing the impact of contagious diseases on tourists' patterns of movement (Shi et al., 2020), analysing how various incidents affect tourists' ways of life and choices (Wen et al., 2020), and examining their financial implications. However, in the case of a pandemic, studying the decision-making process and travel intentions is insufficient. Lee et al. (2012) explored visitors' intention to travel during the H1N1 outbreak using the TPB. This notion had just been applied in a fresh study.

Bae and Chang (2020) examined South Korean tourists' behavioural intention towards "intact tourism,", Li et al. (2020) focused on China's post-pandemic travel intent, whilst Wang et al. (2020) investigated Chinese citizens' intention to dwell in hotels after the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite its widespread applicability in a variety of industries, the TPB appears to be underutilised in the COVID-19 setting, with the exception of modelling intention variables in the discipline of medicine (Agarwal, 2014; Zhang et al., 2020), notably in Malaysia. When it comes to tourist profiles, ladies are more sensitive to possible health risks than males, according to Lepp and Gibson (2003). Similarly, Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2018) observed that teenagers who travelled had lower health risk perceptions than those who have not travelled, and those who want familiarity have higher health risk perceptions than those who seek novelty.

Factors Influencing Tourists' Travel Intentions

Attitude

The risk perception of an individual would affect their attitude towards travel. The mechanism of an individual's general attitude towards behaviour is his or her purpose to carry out the behavioural goal or specific activity towards a given product or service (Fishbein, 1967). In the same way, the response of a tourist to an intention is described as their attitude towards it, which may be positive or negative. A tourist's attitude towards a travel service or product is evaluated by examining his or her sentiments about the most important components of the service or product and how each element is appraised (Hsu & Lam, 2004). Thus, attitude influences tourists'

behavioural intention to execute specific behaviours, such as travelling during a pandemic or crisis (Bianchi et al., 2017; Hsu & Huang, 2009; Soliman, 2021).

Studies found that the tourist's attitude is the most influential factor affecting their decision to travel (Hsu et al., 2010; Hsu & Lam, 2006) and having a significant effect on core behavioural models (Hsu et al., 2010). The Theory of Planned Behaviour model posits that attitude positively influences people's purpose to engage in an action (Hsu & Lam, 2006). As a result, the mindset of the tourist influences their intention to travel following the pandemic. It is difficult to have a positive outlook on travel in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. However for tourists with a favourable attitude towards travel, his or her motivation to travel will increase, and this rekindled motivation will be translated into actual travel. Based on TPB, people's explained intentions to engage in a behaviour are influenced by their views towards the action (Lee et al., 2012). Yuzhanin and Fisher (2016) also found that attitude is a substantial predictor of behavioural intention to visit a place (Chien et al., 2012; Hsu & Huang, 2012; Seow et al., 2017).

Subjective Norms

Subjective norms are societal influences that either support or prohibit specific actions (Bae & Chang, 2020). In regard to travel, this refers to a traveller's perception regarding social normative pressures from family, friends, peers, others' beliefs, and other social forces. In other words, social norms refer to a tourist's perception of what those who matter to them think their behaviour should be (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975; Koundinya, 2019). TPB predicts behavioural intention based on subjective norms. It evaluates the reference groups' importance and others' willingness to accept their travel decisions, attitudes, and opinions (Moutinho, 1987). The intensity of one's motivation to adopt what one's referents perceive as normative is judged (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Social pressure helped contain the spread of COVID-19 to a certain extent, through the widespread practices of wearing mask, washing hands, and isolating oneself. Social responsibility is unavoidable (Bae & Chang, 2020). If a person's family or peers approve of a behaviour, the likelihood of that person adopting it to meet expectations increases, and vice versa (Bae & Chang, 2020). If relatives or friends are enthusiastic about travel during the pandemic, travellers will travel to meet their expectations, and vice versa. Thus, subjective norms improve behavioural intention, according to several studies (Hsu & Lam, 2006).

Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC)

PBC or perceived behaviour control measures people's perception of the difficulty of an activity or behaviour, such as COVID-19-related travel (Hsu & Lam, 2006). PBC

includes resource accessibility (Ajzen, 2002; Buess, 2012) and action ability (Soliman, 2021) as well as the confidence to finish a task. It modulates TPB decision-making (Ajzen, 1991; Lee et al., 2012; Todd & Taylor, 1995) and helps establish intention (Ajzen, 1991; Lee et al., 2012). During the pandemic, travellers assumed they could control the situation and manage the resources needed for a successful trip. Based on behavioural purpose, PBC is more obvious when attitude and subjective norms in action are stronger (Ajzen & Driver, 1992). Thus, perception of behavioural control has been proven to positively affect behavioural intention (Hsu & Lam, 2004).

Perceived Risks

Tourism research has shown that perceived risks is a multifaceted phenomenon (Chien et al., 2017). Every decision involves risk, but tourism amplifies it (Staelin & Dowling, 1994). Due to its intangibility, tourists must pay deposits without knowing what they will get (Minnaert & Inkson, 2012). International tourism exposes people to health and safety risks (Chakraborty & Rittichainuwat, 2009; Gibson & Lepp, 2008). Danger perceptions shape tourists' behaviour. Tourists' opinions of health risk, which is synonymous with a location's perceived risks, affect their decision to travel (Dolnicar, 2005; Reichel & Fuchs, 2010; Rossello et al., 2017). Tourists avoid areas or behaviours they perceive as posing excessive risk to their social or physical well-being (Sonmez et al., 1999), make risk-informed decisions by equipping themselves with the right knowledge (Weidermair & Maser, 1998) or take precautions like insurance (Balaz & Williams, 2013).

Perceived hazards drive the trip planning, information dissemination, and decision-making of tourists (Dholakia, 2001). Many studies have shown that perceived danger and behavioural intentions are negatively impacted by overseas travel (Mavondo & Reisinger, 2005) or unexpected major events such as terrorist attack (Gibson et al., 2004), disease outbreak, or nuclear disaster (Jahari & Chew, 2014). Despite growing scholarly interest in perceived risks in tourist environments, individuals' perceptions of danger is still understudied (Sharifpour et al., 2014).

This study is focused on the factors that affect tourists' travel behavioural intentions after COVID-19. It is vital to revise the attitudinal aspects affecting travel intentions that have been the general rule in past studies, due to the emergence of the "new normal" after COVID-19 (Kock et al., 2020). The enhanced version of the TPB theoretical framework with additional elements such as perceived risks (Figure 1) was used. This model was developed by evaluating the key elements that are influential on tourists' travel behaviour intentions. Despite the fact that TPB has been widely used in past research, it remains relevant in investigating tourists' travel behavioural intentions after the COVID-19 pandemic.

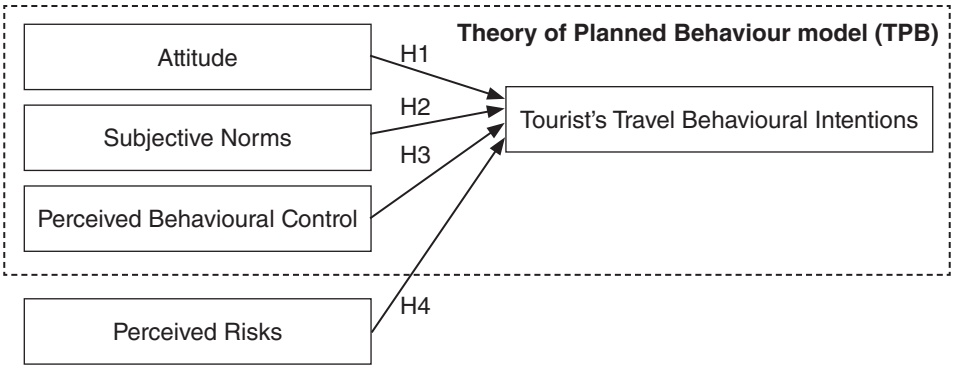


Figure 1: The research framework based on the theory of planned behaviour model (TPB)

The following hypotheses were formulated in accordance with the conceptual framework:

H1: Attitudes will affect Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions in the context of COVID-19;

H2: Subjective norms will affect Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions in the context of COVID-19;

H3: Perceived behavioural control will affect Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions in the context of COVID-19; and

H4: Perceived risks will affect Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions in the context of COVID-19.

Methodology

This study adopted the quantitative approach to examine Malaysian tourists' behavioural intentions. A study questionnaire was distributed to a total of 300 respondents who were Malaysian tourists with travel experience through an online platform in early 2022. The questionnaire was divided into four segments and consisted of 38 questions (Appendix 1). Part A contained eight questions about the respondents' demographic profiles; Part B contained questions about the respondents' understanding of the factors influencing Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions, and Part C contained questions on the respondents' travel behaviour intentions.

The non-probability convenience sampling technique was utilised in this investigation. Respondents were selected from the Malaysian community in order to truly comprehend the current tourism market demand post-COVID-19. Descriptive statistics was utilised to characterise the demographic features of the respondents as well as their travel behaviour intentions. The Pearson correlation analysis was carried

out to look at the links between Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions and the following variables: attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and perceived dangers. Lastly, multiple regression analyses determined the most significant travel intention component.

Results

Demographics of Respondents

Of the 300 respondents, the majority were female (55%). Most of the respondents were under the age of 24, accounting for 43%, followed by those between the ages of 24 and 29, accounting for 26.3%. About 22.3% of them were between the ages of 30 and 35, while 3.3% were above the age of 47. The remaining 2.7% and 2.3% were between the ages of 36 and 41, and 42 to 47, respectively. In terms of education level, the majority of the respondents (71.7%) held a bachelor's degree, 22.3% held a high school diploma or equivalent, 5.7% held a master's or doctoral degree, whilst 3.0% had a foundation certificate.

As for marital status, 71.0% of the respondents were unmarried, while 28.0% were married. With respect to monthly income, 52.7% of the respondents were earning between RM2,001 and RM3,000, 28.7% of the respondents were earning less than RM1,000, 12.0% of respondents were earning between RM1,001 and RM2,000, 3.7% of the respondent were earning RM6,000 or more, while 5.3% of the respondents had no income. All of the respondents do have travel experiences, whereby 50% of them travel at least once a year while 44% of them travelled 2–3 times a year.

Factors Affecting Malaysian Tourists' Travel

To identify the factors that affect Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the mean of the factors constraining travel (attitude, subjective norms, perceived behaviour control, and perceived risks) was employed. The responses were collected using a Likert scale of one to six, with one indicating strong disagreement and six expressing strong agreement. The average values for the variables limiting the travel of Malaysian visitors were 3.96 for attitude, 4.27 for subjective norms, 4.35 for perceived behaviour control, and 3.93 for perception of control (perceived risks). This shows that the majority of visitors from Malaysia agreed that perceived behaviour control, attitude, and subjective norms are all factors which affect their travel behaviour intentions.

The Relationships between Studied Factors (Attitude, Subjective Norms, Perceived Behaviour Control, and Perceived Risks) and Malaysian Tourists' Travel Behavioural Intentions

The Pearson correlation analysis was carried out to study the relationships between attitude and Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions, subjective norms and Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions, perceived behaviour control and Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions, and finally, perceived risks and Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions. From the results, perceived behaviour control showed the strongest relationship with Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions (0.880), followed by subjective norms (0.820), attitude (0.721), and perceived risks (0.645).

As indicated by the positive Pearson correlation value of 0.721 ($p < 0.05$), attitude affects Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions; thus, establishing H1. This means attitude positively impacted Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour or in other words, positive visitors have good travel behaviour goals. Subjective norms correlated strongly with Malaysian visitors' travel behaviour intentions ($p < 0.05$), as reflected by a Pearson correlation of 0.820. This means subjective norms enhanced Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions, thereby supporting H2.

The Pearson correlation between perceived behavioural control and Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions was 0.880 ($p < 0.05$). The favourable Pearson link between perceived behavioural control and Malaysian visitors' travel behaviour intentions is encouraging. Thus, H3 is supported, that is, Malaysian visitors' travel behaviour intentions would increase if they perceived behavioural control. The Pearson correlation for perceived risk was 0.645, at $p < 0.05$, indicating significance and confirming H4. Thus, perceived risks or threats influence Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour and intentions. When risk is low, Malaysian tourists travelled more.

The multiple regression analysis determined the most important factor affecting visitors' travel behaviour. Perceived behaviour control (0.580) generated the highest β coefficient, followed by subjective norms (0.214), attitude (0.142), and perceived risks (0.034). Thus, Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions are most influenced by perceived behaviour control. When Malaysian tourists see behaviour control positively, their travel behaviour intentions will increase.

Discussion and Implications

From the analyses, attitude was found to be positively connected with Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions. This suggests that if someone has a positive attitude, they will more likely travel. Yuzhanin and Fisher (2016) pointed out that "there is nothing in the Theory of Planned Behaviour implying that all the elements of the model must contribute substantially and identically to behavioural intentions,"

which is similar to prior studies such as Hsu (2013) and Al Ziadat (2015). Indeed, while the impact of attitude and perceived behavioural control are similar in magnitude in the developed framework, the significant and positive effect of subjective norms on intention is significantly less essential. Thus, tourism promotion efforts in Malaysia should tackle tourists' attitudes in order to lessen negative perceptions and increase positive, pleasant feelings about their travel experience. Stakeholders can focus on improving safety and hygiene, brand reputation, and tourism quality to reduce the psychological obstacles that Malaysian tourists faced during the pandemic.

Findings demonstrate that subjective norms had an effect on Malaysian visitors' travel behaviour intentions ($r = 0.820$, $p < 0.05$). It is possible to deduce that a person's travel purpose or decision can be influenced by his or her family or friends' opinions (Sánchez-Caizares et al., 2020). Nevertheless, subjective norms appear to have the least impact on travel intent (Shen et al., 2009). However, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, subjective perception plays an important role in the decision to travel overseas. This explains why, in the aftermath of the pandemic, global travel requires more social assistance than domestic travel.

According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1980), people are more likely to travel if they perceive that their travel decisions are supported by others. This demonstrates that social support is crucial in boosting pandemic travel. Other researchers believe that there is a significant relationship between an individual's desire to travel and the opinions of that individual's family or friends (Martin et al., 2011). Industry stakeholders must consider how multidimensional subjective norms affect Malaysian visitors' travel behaviour intentions. Therefore, industry players can engage in strategic communication to convince Malaysians of the perceived sense of control, convincing them they have the capacity, resources, and incentive to travel. Tourism stakeholders may also engage in product differentiation to improve market positioning.

Based on the results, perceived behavioural control has a direct and positive influence on Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions ($r = 0.880$, $p < 0.05$). This is consistent with the work of Shen et al. (2009) as well as Hsu and Huang (2012), who discovered that Malaysian tourists' perceived behavioural control influences their travel behaviour intent. This indicates that if a person believes that he or she can manage the travel circumstances in a pandemic, then the chance of travelling increases considerably. Studies have however, shown that perceived behaviour control only has a minimal influence on trip decisions (Hsu & Huang, 2012). According to this study's findings, self-assurance in one's skills and the perceived availability of required travel capacities are not important determinants in deciding whether or not to travel during the pandemic. Since Malaysian visitors are concerned about the difficulties of planning vacations during the pandemic, improving visitors' feelings of control will improve their travel behaviour and intentions.

Perceived risks was found to have a positive but small impact on Malaysian visitors' travel behaviour intentions ($r = 0.645$ and $p > 0.05$). This finding contrasts with the findings of Sönmez and Graefe (1998), who discovered that risk perception impacts travel intentions. It is consistent, however, with the findings of Lee et al. (2012), who discovered no significant impact of perceived risks on travel intentions in their enhanced TPB model because "potential travellers had some adaptive behaviour in mind which lowered the disease threat to a level that is acceptable to them." This finding suggests that Malaysian visitors' risk perceptions only have a minor impact on their travel behaviour and intentions, implying that the direct relationship between perceived dangers and travel intentions is weak. Thus, the theory was dismissed. To put it another way, a lack of desire to travel do not always imply a low regard for perceived risks. This discovery should be examined further in terms of its implications for tourist management. Even though they only have a minor impact on travel intentions, perceived risks do affect tourism performance in the event of a pandemic. This is consistent with the findings of Dholakia (2001). To reduce the impact of risk perception, governments or industry players may undertake promotional programmes such as familiarisation visits or release reports from independent professionals or health groups reaffirming the health and safety of tourist products or places. Closed travel packages with a pre-arranged route map may also give tourists assurance and a sense of control.

The results of this study have demonstrated that perceived behaviour control has the greatest impact on Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions, followed by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived risks. Despite the fact that perceived risks is weakly related to Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions, the findings reveal that their travel behaviour intentions are influenced by the pandemic. As a result, a comprehensive plan must be devised to enable the relevant stakeholders to develop focused marketing or promotional strategies on the points that generate significant influence and return on investment in order to stimulate the tourism industry's recovery and performance post-COVID-19.

Conclusion

This study investigated tourists' travel behaviour intentions against their attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behaviour control, and perceived risks post-COVID-19. The findings reveal that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behaviour control influence Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions in a favourable and substantial way. Furthermore, perceived behaviour control was found to be the most important element determining Malaysian tourists' travel behaviour intentions, while perceived risks was the least influential factor. Results from this study might be useful for policymakers, legislators, and other relevant parties to formulate tourist revival plans. With these valuable insights, industry players may become better at

adapting to challenges posed by crises such as the recent epidemic and discover new opportunities for tourism's recovery along the way.

However, the results serve as a reflection of tourists' travel behaviour and intentions only at certain periods of time. Other variables may need to be investigated further in the future. For example, the connection between attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and perceived risks with Malaysian tourists' travel behavioural intentions, as well as individual demographics, like gender, age, education, revenue, and cultural practises should be considered as major determinants. Further, the evolution of travel perception in different geographical locations and periods should be taken into account. For future research, it is also recommended to include users who are not tech-savvy so that the findings can be generalised to the broader community.

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