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COVID-19 AND TRAVEL DECISION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON MALAYSIAN MILLENNIALS

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 crisis, several measures were implemented to limit the transmission of the virus including border control and movement restrictions. These measures have had a significant impact on the tourism industry and tourists' behaviour globally. This paper aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the travel decisions of Malaysian millennials, as the key contributor to the tourism industry. A qualitative research method was employed with semi-structured interviews were carried out on the selected millennials for the data collection process. From the transcribed data, themes were developed using the constant comparative method of analysis. The findings highlighted a significant change in travel behaviour whereby, Malaysian millennials prefer to travel to local low-density destinations as opposed to overseas in the advent of the pandemic. The study also established a conceptual framework explaining the changes in the travel decisions of millennials. The two key factors driving the changes are perceived travel risk and travel constraints.

Keywords: Covid-19, Malaysia, millennials, travel constraint, travel decision

1. Introduction

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has affected almost all countries, with more than 56 million infected and 6 million fatalities globally (World Health Organization, 2022). The unprecedented scale of the impact was primarily attributed to inter-country travel, with the virus spreading from its epicentre in Wuhan, China, into a global pandemic (Teeroovengadum et al., 2021). In response to the pandemic, many governments have enacted territorial approaches via lockdown and travel restrictions to curb the spread of the virus (OECD, 2020; Tang, 2022). Notably, the restrictions affected global economies, particularly in the tourism industry. The COVID-19 pandemic is shaping up to be the biggest challenge for the tourism industry as the spread of the virus is invariably linked to travel (Joppe, 2020).

The Malaysian government implemented strict border control and several movement control restrictions from March 2020 to March 2022, limiting both incoming tourists and domestic tourism (Hanafiah et al., 2021; Hashim et al., 2021). The pandemic caused a 96.9% drop in incoming tourists in 2021 against pre-pandemic years (Tourism Malaysia, 2022) and nearly RM130 billion less in internal tourism consumption compared to 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). As the country was preparing to enter the endemic stage, leisure travel was encouraged, border control was lifted, and the tourism industry was allowed to operate with strict operating procedures (Hanafiah et al., 2021). Globally, millennials have been recognised as a crucial player in the tourism industry (Azazi & Shaed, 2020; Gengeswari et al., 2021). In Malaysia, 40% of the tourists are millennials (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021), thus highlighting the segment's importance. A critical question in catalysing the recovery of the Malaysian tourism industry is how the pandemic has affected travel decisions among millennials.

This study aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the travel decisions of Malaysian millennials via a qualitative approach. By presenting the perspectives of Malaysian millennials, this study will add to the body of knowledge and assist policymakers and industry players in attracting more millennial travellers post-pandemic.

2. Literature Review

The unprecedented pandemic outbreak has caught the interest of researchers from all disciplines, especially in tourism and hospitality studies (Ahmad et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022; Mirzaei et al., 2023; Tergu et al., 2022). Mirzaei et al. (2023) investigated the changes in Iranian tourist behaviour post-pandemic and found that destination hygiene has become a motivating factor. Similarly, Shin et al. (2022) developed a framework explaining travel decisions. Nguyen et al. (2021) focused their study on the Vietnamese travel intention and concluded that the intention is influenced by perceived risk, perceived behavioural control, self-efficacy and subjective well-being. Among the most cited determinants of travel decisions are perceived risk (Bhatta et al., 2022; Fan et al., 2023; Tergu et al., 2022), perceived safety (Aebli et al., 2022; Md. Aris et al., 2021; Teeroovengadum et al., 2021) and structural constraint (Humagain & Singleton, 2021; Karl et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022).

Against the backdrop of the Malaysian context, limited studies were dedicated to understanding the changes in travel behaviour with the advent of COVID-19. Aziz and Long (2022) discussed the

interplay between travel constraints, perceived travel risk and travel intention among Malaysians after the global health crisis. A similar study by Hanafiah et al. (2021) concluded that perceived health risks negatively impacted travel attitude and future travel intention. Interestingly, Dias et al. (2021) found that married respondents prioritised travel factors differently from single respondents. Malaysian married couples consider cleanliness, social distancing and mask wearing mandate as essential factors in travel decision-making. Following the limited understanding of the mechanism of Malaysian millennials' travel behaviour change, this study aims to fill the gap with this exploratory research.

3. Research Methods

This study aims to better understand millennials' travel decisions by using an interpretivism paradigm, which focuses on studying "how individuals see, comprehend, and interpret the world" (Patton, 2002). This study employs the qualitative research approach that allows the researcher to understand the impact of the unprecedented pandemic on travel decisions. The nature of the study, which focuses on the changes in human behaviour, also suggests that an exploratory methodology is the most appropriate approach (Schreier, 2012).

In this study, six semi-structured interviews were conducted between May and June 2022 via Zoom and Google Meet platforms, allowing researchers to gather information from participants by posing relevant questions. The virtual interview is the preferred data collection approach in the post- pandemic era because it helps to minimise face-to-face interaction and limit the transmission of the virus (Sutherland et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021). Secondly, this approach saves time and costs (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). However, the use of a virtual interview is not without its limitations. The interviewer will only be able to observe the interviewee and interpret the non-verbal cues to the extent to which the camera is positioned. Both parties must also have a stable internet connection with good quality microphone and camera (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). In this study, the participants have been informed of the technological requirements ahead of the scheduled interview.

The six participants for the study were chosen via a combination of purposive and convenience sampling methods. Purposive sampling is predominant in qualitative studies because it zooms into the parties involved with the phenomenon of interest (Tie et al., 2019). The inclusion criteria for the study were: millennials born between 1981 and 1996 (Lindner, 2017; Siddharthan, 2014) and have travelled before the onset of the pandemic. Due to resource constraints, millennials amongst the researchers' family and friends were identified to participate in the research which explained the use of a convenience sampling technique. Table 1 gives an overview of the participants' profiles.

Table 1. Details of Participants' Profile

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Position
Participant 1	Male	36	Head of HR & Admin
Participant 2	Male	40	Sales Executive
Participant 3	Female	38	Researcher
Participant 4	Female	35	HR Business Partner
Participant 5	Female	28	Customer Service Executive
Participant 6	Female	31	Sales Manager

The sessions were guided by open-ended interview questions, which helped to ascertain if there were any changes to the post-pandemic travelling pattern and its underlying reasons. The questions consisted of travel preferences and experiences both before and after the pandemic. Probing questions were also asked when the initial response to the question was insufficient. For documentation purposes, the study relied heavily on several online software, Scre.Io for audio-visual recording and Rev AI and Amberscript for verbatim transcription. The transcripts were later manually checked and amended where necessary to ensure the accuracy of information.

4. Data Analysis

This study follows the grounded theory approach by adopting the constant comparative method in analysing the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following the constant comparative method, data is dissected into smaller pieces in which they are continually evaluated for similarities and differences. Similar data are then grouped under the same conceptual category, and each category is further refined and finally consolidated around a core category. Corbin and Strauss (2015) posited that the core categories should be able to summarise the overall theme of the study. Data analysis was carried out through three constant comparative coding phases: open, axial, and selective.

In the first coding phase, each researcher studied the interview transcripts independently and assigned the open codes by scrutinising the transcripts line by line (Strauss, 1987). A comparison of the output revealed an extensive list of codes with huge discrepancies. Hence, the codes were revised through several discussions until consensus was obtained and the open codes were finalised. The procedure yielded a total of 40 open codes. O'Connor and Joffe (2020) highlighted that the number of codes identified must be controlled and should be aligned with the research questions. Extremely complex coding frames frequently include codes with a low frequency of occurrence, making it difficult for coders to become accustomed to the codes in assessing the data (Hruschka et al., 2004). MacQueen et al. (1998) suggested an upper limit of 30 codes, while Hruschka et al. (2004) suggested 20 codes. Following the recommendation, the open coding process was repeated to reduce the codes to 23.

Next, the open codes were re-examined to identify potential relationships and similarities. The open codes with similar concepts were grouped in axial categories, which resulted in six axial categories. Codes lacking explanatory value or similar meaning were eliminated (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The six axial categories are COVID-19 health policy, COVID-19 destination status, self-regulation, structural constraint, interpersonal constraint and intrapersonal constraint. Based on the constant comparative method, reiterative refinement was carried out continuously throughout the data analysis process. The final phase of coding was selective coding. This step was centred on linking the axial codes and identifying the core categories. As a result, the two most essential criteria for understanding the travel decision post-pandemic among Malaysian millennials were established.

5. Results and Findings

The data analysis process was driven by the quest to answer how Covid-19 has impacted the travel decision of Malaysian millennials. An in-depth data analysis highlighted two ways the travel decision has

changed. First, the millennials are more inclined to travel within Malaysia. Below are the extracts of verbatim conversations with the participants.

"Before the pandemic, my travel history is a combination of domestic and international travel. Now, my travel pattern has changed where I only look into domestic destinations." [Participant 1]

"Typically, I travelled both locally and internationally. But for the time being, I prefer travelling domestically." [Participant 3]

"Before the pandemic, I travelled domestically six times and internationally once a year. Now, my travel decision has not changed and remained the same." [Participant 5]

"With COVID-19, I travelled more domestically because I trust the SOP in Malaysia." [Participant 6]

A survey by Tourism Malaysia (2020) also found that 71.3% of Malaysians favour domestic travel over international travel with the advent of COVID-19. Similar studies from various countries have come to the same conclusion, evidence that the finding is not limited to the Malaysian context. For example, Machová et al. (2021) found that the Slovaks predominantly prefer to travel domestically in the future as in the case of the Dutch (Isaac & Keijzer, 2021), Nepalese (Bhatta et al., 2022) and Korean (Lee & Han, 2023). Among the factors contributing to the change in travel preference are cost consideration and lower perceived risk (Machová et al., 2021; Yusof, 2021).

The second noticeable trend in the travelling behaviour of Malaysian millennials is the inclination to select destinations with a lower tourist density that are nature related. As highlighted by Participant 6, "I notice after COVID-19, I tend to go to places that I've never been before since the famous places like Penang and Malacca are very crowded, so I went to nature destinations". Participant 5 also agrees, "Instead of going to the city centre, I will choose a nature destination with fewer people that are less crowded". The preference for less crowded places has also been highlighted by several other post-pandemic tourism studies (Aydin et al., 2021; Bhatta et al., 2022). The data analysis shed light on the factors contributing to the changes in travel decisions, namely perceived travel risk and travel constraints. The selective codes and their subcategories are discussed further in the following section. All figures and tables should be referred to in the text and numbered in the order in which they are mentioned.

5.1. Selective Code 1 – Perceived Travel Risk

The first selective code identified following the data analysis is perceived travel risk. It is the tourist's perception of uncertainty and potential adverse outcomes at a travel destination (Gupta & Sajnani, 2019; Gupta et al., 2023; Matiza, 2022). Three axial codes were grouped from the coding process to form 'perceived travel risk'. The better the extent of COVID-19 health policy, COVID-19 status at destination and self-regulation, the lower the perceived travel risk is.

5.1.1. COVID-19 Health Policy

The most important consideration for the interviewed millennials was the national COVID-19 health policy, which reflects the extent to which the government enforces policies to limit the transmission of COVID-19. Should the government manage the pandemic well, the perceived travel risk will become lower, and tourists will be more inclined to visit the destination. One participant stated that the local government's stand would be considered when planning to travel overseas. Participant 6 travelled more domestically because *"I trust the SOP in Malaysia. The government is very strict with MySejahtera check in so I felt more secure".* Another aspect often mentioned is the public vaccination mandate and mask- wearing policy.

5.1.2. COVID-19 Destination Status

An extension of the previous sub-category, COVID-19 destination status refers to the perceived protection at the potential travel destination facility. One indication is the number of active COVID-19 cases in the locality. Several participants mentioned that they would only consider travelling to destinations with low COVID-19 cases. Participant 1 highlighted that the option to travel internationally would only be contemplated if *"it is 100% sure that COVID-19 numbers had decreased at the potential destination".* As part of COVID-19 destination status, Participant 6 mentioned the importance of vaccinating staff members to help tourists feel safer. In certain countries where COVID-19 vaccination is not mandated, tourism market players often have the entire fleet of staff vaccinated as a promotion to attract more tourists (Shah Alam et al., 2023). The final aspect of this sub-category is the enforcement of COVID-19 standard operating procedures (SOP) at the destination, as stated by Participant 6, *"I know social distancing is not enforced anymore by the government but if I see places that still practice it, that is definitely a plus point.".* Destinations that adopt COVID-19 SOP are preferable for Malaysian millennials.

5.1.3. Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the affinity of an individual to voluntarily comply with COVID-19 measures such as wearing a face mask, though the government has lifted the requirement. Due to the increased awareness, several participants said they voluntarily wear the face mask and will continue to do so. Other examples of self-regulation include doing a periodic COVID-19 self-test and using a hand sanitiser. Below are the extracts of verbatim conversations with the participants.

"I do travel locally but with a lot of considerations. We have our PPE, our face mask is always on and the hand sanitiser is always with us". [Participant 1]

"For me, I will still wear a mask since I strongly agree that a face mask is important in minimising the risk for COVID-19." [Participant 4]

"For precautionary purposes, I will always do RTK. I will also ask my husband to do RTK as well." Participant 6]

5.2. Selective Code 2 - Travel Constraints

The second factor influencing the travel decisions of Malaysian millennials is travel constraints. It is the factors that inhibit individuals from choosing a destination, spending more time at the destination, or reaching the desired level of satisfaction (Humagain & Singleton, 2021; Mei & Lantai, 2018; Shin et al., 2022). Based on the interview, three sub-categories of travel constraints were identified: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. The findings are aligned with the Leisure Constraints Theory by Crawford and Godbey (1987), in which the factors impeding participation in leisure activities were explained.

5.2.1. Intrapersonal Constraint

The first sub-category of travel constraints is an intrapersonal constraint which refers to an individual's psychological state that manifests in behaviour or the physical state that may influence travel decisions (Karl et al., 2021). The first aspect of intrapersonal constraint is travel risk perception. The risk perception was manifested in many ways by the participants, including;

"I do have a one-year-old daughter which I consider falls into the high-risk group. That is part of the consideration when travelling." [Participant 1]

"I have three kids and two of them are below two years old and do not have vaccines. I will be more cautious whenever travelling because of my kids." [Participant 3]

"If I go somewhere for vacation, my family and I will wear face masks, but what about others? I am not sure if other people are having illness or COVID-19." [Participant 4]

Another aspect of intrapersonal constraint is attitude and preference. The advent of COVID-19 has made the general public more aware of hygiene. Many participants expressed their preference for destinations with good hygiene practices;

"I prefer destinations with good hygiene and cleanliness. Before this I didn't really mind about hygiene and everything but now I need to be more careful, hygiene is my priority now; hygiene and cleanliness." [Participant 3]

"COVID-19 has made me take more precautions, taking hygiene more seriously." [Participant 6]

5.2.2. Interpersonal Constraint

An interpersonal constraint is formed by social interactions and relationships with other individuals such as friends, families and colleagues that influence the preference for leisure activities. Specifically, the interpersonal constraint is the peer pressure that drives the travel decision. Participant 6 mentioned that peers influence the decision to travel, "As more and more peers travel, one will be inclined to travel, too." As shown by Xie and Ritchie (2018), the extent of the interpersonal constraint

depends on many factors, including age. The findings show that millennials are influenced by peer pressure in making travel decisions.

5.2.3. Structural Constraint

The content analysis of the participants' transcripts also highlighted structural constraints or the intervening physical factors that inhibit actual travelling after the destination preference has been formed (Shin et al., 2022). First, all participants attested that social distancing practice is a critical consideration when choosing a destination and prefer to travel to a less crowded one. The importance of crowd density was highlighted by all participants "I will choose the location which is less crowded", "Now we even go to staycation nearby our house but still we look for places that are less crowded", "For domestic travel, I will go to places that are less crowded" and "I notice after COVID-19, I tend to go to places that I've never been before since the famous places like Penang and Malacca are very crowded". The change in travel decisions is understandable since social distancing practice will be able to minimize the crowd and lower the risk of COVID-19 transmission (World Health Organization, 2022).

Another structural constraint quoted by the participants is service availability. In the face of the pandemic, many businesses succumbed to the pressure and closed their businesses. On the other spectrum, the business is still operating with limited services. Participant 6 pointed out, "I have a few favourite restaurants that I like to eat at when I go to Kuantan, but now they are closed". Similarly, Participant 1 mentioned that not all facilities are available for use. The third sub-category is financial constraint. During the pandemic, many services charged higher to recoup revenue losses. The entry procedures for some destinations include quarantine and medical tests, which increase the overall cost. The excerpts below further stressed the point;

"Looking at the budget as well because, during this off-pandemic season, all prices hike up." [Participant 2]

"I will choose a country with fewer COVID-19 procedures because for some countries you need to do a PCR test and I will avoid those countries because it is costly." [Participant 5]

"If I want to go overseas, the flight tickets are very expensive nowadays." [Participant 6]

6. Conclusion

This study explored the impact of COVID-19 on the travel decision of Malaysian millennials. The findings indicated that the tourism trends among Malaysian millennials has shifted towards new domestic attractions that are nature related with less crowd. This is in line with several other studies conducted outside of Malaysia (Lee, 2021; Spalding et al., 2021). More importantly, the study also established a conceptual framework for millennials' travel decisions. Factors influencing travel decisions have been identified, perceived travel risk and travel constraints. The framework is depicted in more detail in Figure 1.
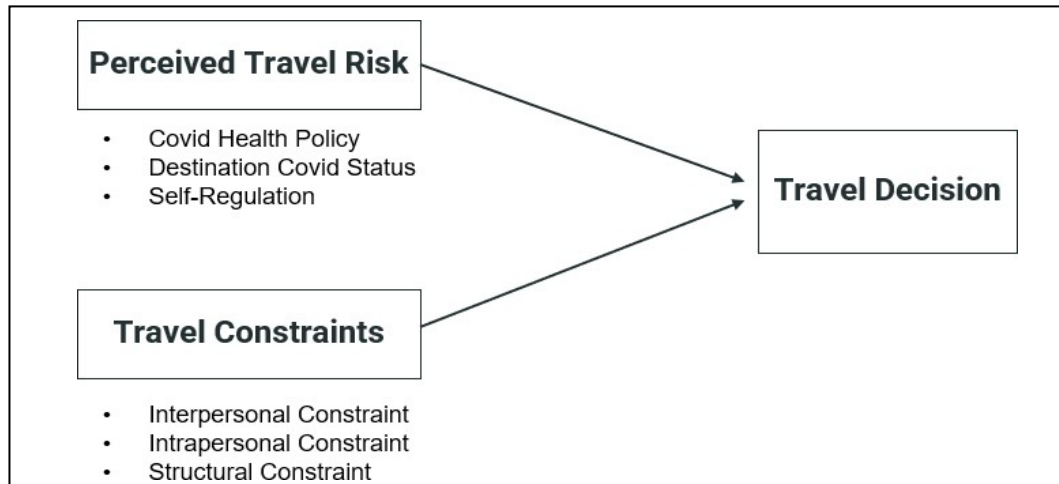
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Millennials' Travel Decision

These findings complemented the evidence-based research on the effects of COVID-19 on travel decisions. From a practical standpoint, it has highlighted the factors the millennials are considering regarding travelling. This enables the industry player to cater to the needs and preferences of the millennials and ultimately boost the tourism industry in Malaysia.

This study is subject to several limitations, all of which must be considered. First, the research is based on a qualitative design that incorporates responses from several Malaysian millennials and may not necessarily allow generalisation of the results. This study, however, offers a compelling argument by taking an exploratory posture to inspire more empirical research. In order to assess the pandemic's effects on the tourism industry and the millennials' response, robust empirical research is required. Future studies may operationalise the two core categories and their subcategories to enhance the literature further. Although some similar studies have focussed on the impact of health outbreaks on tourism behaviour, the magnitude of the present pandemic is almost unheard of in this century. Therefore, it is highly advised that measurement be developed to examine the effects of the outbreak and the corresponding changes in tourism behaviour.

The second limitation is the scope of the study, which was limited to Malaysian millennials. The findings may not be applicable in different contexts, and more factors may emerge that were not established in the current study. Future studies could fill this gap by expanding the target participant to cover the entire population or even based the study on a different geographical context. It is also crucial to keep in mind that the pandemic situation is continuously developing and that factors that are relevant now—such as the mandatory face mask policy or contact tracing mechanism, might not be as significant in the future. As a result, investigations that consider the temporal shift are more critical. More studies devoted to the COVID-19 pandemic would undoubtedly be needed in the future to ensure that literature accurately reflects its evolution and suggests strategies to lessen its effects.

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