

Travel Intention To Sabah, Malaysia Post Covid-19 Travel Restriction: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the tourism industry. Travel border closures were implemented by the government, which affected tourist arrivals at a global scale, including Sabah. However, as the COVID-19 cases gradually decreased, some international travel borders have begun to reopen, allowing international travel to take place. Nonetheless, the pandemic has raised several psychological issues where travelers feel scared, anxious and worried about traveling under post-pandemic travel restrictions. Thus, traveling post-pandemic travel restrictions might not be the same as traveling before the pandemic. Therefore, this conceptual paper aims to study the relationship between fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety, risk attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control with travelers' travel intention. This study applies the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) with additional variables such as fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety and risk attitude to study the possible changes in travel intention to Sabah from domestic travelers'.

Keywords: travel intention, travel anxiety, fear of COVID-19, risk attitude, perceived behavioural control, subjective norm

1 Introduction

Tourism is known to be one of the biggest industries in the world that contributes to the world economy. In 2018, the travel and tourism industry produced 10.4% of the world's GDP and increased the employment rate [1]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected most industries worldwide, specifically tourism. This has resulted in the closure of international borders all around the world and tourism activities as it is a way of minimizing the spread of the COVID-19 virus [2]. Due to the travel border restrictions and the implementation of various other safety policies, there has been a decline in tourist arrivals. For instance, tourist arrivals in Malaysia dropped from 26.1 million to 4.3 million in 2020 [3]. Meanwhile in Sabah, tourist arrivals decreased from 4,195,903 in 2019 to 567,108 in 2020 [4]. As COVID-19 cases fell over time, the Malaysian government finally opened the country for international travel entry starting from April 1st, 2022, for fully-vaccinated travelers[5]. With the Malaysian travel borders

opened, it shows that the Malaysian government is trying to restart the tourism industry in the country. Even so, the existence of the pandemic has proven to induce psychological issues in travelers, such as a feeling of fear, anxiety and uncertainty [6], which might affect the travelers' intention to travel after the end of the pandemic.

There is an abundant of tourism research on the COVID-19 topic with relation to fear of COVID-19 [7], travel anxiety [8]–[10], risk attitude [11]–[13], subjective norm [14], [15], and perceived behavioural control [2], [5]. However, studies are lacking in focusing on how COVID-19 affects the relationship between fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety, risk attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control with travelers' intention to travel. Thus, to fill in the research gap, this study examines Malaysian travelers' intention to travel to Sabah post-COVID-19 travel restrictions. Studying domestic travelers and their intention to travel would offer a greater understanding of their travel behaviour and intention, whether for international or domestic travel. The results of this study will contribute to academic literature and provide managerial implications for tourism stakeholders. For instance, this conceptual paper applies the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). It incorporates additional variables: fear of COVID-19, risk attitude and travel anxiety, which may bring new information and knowledge to theoretical advancement. Moreover, this study will also provide managerial and marketing implications, where data from this study can be used to analyze possible shifts in travel behaviour. Thus, the research objectives are as below:

RO1: To determine the influence of fear of COVID-19 and travel anxiety toward risk attitude

RO2: To determine the influence of fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety, risk attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control towards travelers' travel intention.

RO3: To examine the mediating role of risk attitude between fear of COVID-19 and travelers' travel intention

RO4: To examine the mediating role of risk attitude between travel anxiety and travelers' intention.

The limitation that this study might encounter is the possibility of the survey not reaching the potential respondents, especially those living in rural areas in Malaysia with limited internet connection. In addition, the frequent changes in safety policies and information relating to COVID-19 might affect the research progress as unreliable sources might create some information.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The impact of COVID-19 pandemic towards tourism industry

The COVID-19 pandemic was first discovered in Wuhan, China 2019. It then spread fast and, eventually, affected the entire world. The severity of COVID-19 and its impact on global health has led to the world's first lockdown. As a result, day-to-day activities and businesses were halted, leading to businesses closure. For instance, more than 30 thousand companies in Malaysia closed due to bankruptcy [16]. The tourism industry has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic [17]. It was also said that the tourism industry is one of the main reasons for the high cases of COVID-19 as it relates to mass tourism, gatherings and huge crowds [18].

Avoiding any travel activities has decreased worldwide tourist arrivals by 74% [19]. Like other countries, the tourism industry in Malaysia was also disrupted by the pandemic, which dropped tourist arrivals from 26.1 million in 2019 to 4.3 million in 2020 [3]. Sabah, a flourishing tourism state pre-pandemic, was also affected. According to the Sabah Tourism Board (2021), tourist arrivals in Sabah have decreased to 98.9% in international arrivals and 81.7% in domestic arrivals in 2021. Without a doubt, these statistics show that COVID-19 has affected the tourism industry globally.

2.2 Movement Control Order (MCO), Recovery Plan and Transition to Endemic Phase in Malaysia

From the first case of COVID-19 that was discovered in Malaysia, the government implemented a policy called the Movement Control Order (MCO) in 2020 [20]. During the implementation phase of MCO, several safety policies became compulsory. For instance, restrictions on mass gatherings, operations of schools, universities and non-essential services were at a standstill, including the prohibitions of traveling domestically and internationally [21]. The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin introduced the National Recovery Plan on June 15, 2021, and it includes four phases (Figure 1) with different SOPs in each stage [22]. The transition period from each step depended on the number of COVID-19 cases. This recovery plan was enforced to lead the country toward normalcy during the pandemic [23]. As the number of COVID-19 cases decreased over time, the government revealed that Malaysia would move towards the endemic phase from April 1, 2022, onwards [24]. In addition, the government enforced the ‘Malaysian’s COVID-19 SOPs relaxation’ on May 1, 2022, which allowed non-essential businesses to start fully operating, with certain parts of the SOPs being reduced. Even though it’s the endemic phase, it is still encouraged to wear face masks and avoid huge crowds. The government believes that implementing these new SOPs, would be a great strategy to restart the tourism industry in Malaysia [25]. Nevertheless, now that the travel restrictions are loose as the country is in the endemic phase will Malaysians start to travel domestically? This is what this study intends to discover.

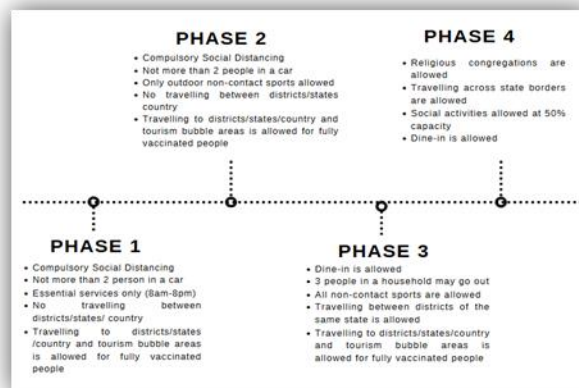


Fig 1. National Recovery Plan [26]

2.3 Theory of Planned Behaviour

This study will adapt parts of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which is an extended version of the Theory of Reasoned Action [27]. It is mainly used in tourism studies that focus on travelers' perception of traveling, in addition to travel behaviour and beliefs towards traveling [28], [29]. Using TPB to study individuals' travel behaviour will reveal how individuals' behaviour will eventually lead to performing a specific action. For example, COVID-19 has resulted in the emergence of psychological issues [30]. It may lead to changes in perception towards traveling and influence individuals' intention to travel in the future [31], [32]. Numerous studies apply TPB to how physical distancing impacts individuals' travel choices [33], [34]. In these studies, the researcher stated that there should be more studies applying TPB with different variables, especially in tourism and pandemic studies, as there is still limited research on the topic. TPB initially focused on three determinant variables: subjective norm, perceived behavioral control and attitude. However, this study will partly adopt the TPB model and include additional variables: fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety and risk attitude. Thus, this study intends to utilize TPB to demonstrate how fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety and risk mood will affect domestic travelers' intention to travel to Sabah, Malaysia post, COVID-19 travel restrictions.

2.4 Fear of COVID-19 and Risk Attitude

Individuals have become more aware of the risk of the pandemic, which led to the fear of COVID-19 caused by the high level of anxiety [35]. The feeling of fear towards the virus has developed a risk attitude, known as the willingness to accept the risk in risky situations [36]. Risk attitude has made individuals practice more safety procedures [37], [38]. For instance, [39] revealed that Bangladeshis fear of getting infected with the virus led to more safety precautions such as wearing face-mask and avoiding crowded places. Similarly, [40] stated that fear and worry are usually the main factors that influence people to have a risk attitude because they tend to practice more safety measures. Thus, the hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Fear of COVID-19 positively impact risk attitude

2.5 Travel Anxiety and Risk Attitude

Travel anxiety is known to be one of the emotional reactions from the stress of potential risks from an environment [41]. Travel anxiety has also been stated to affect travelers' risk attitude. For instance, [42] mentioned that some individuals frequently practice safety precautions, and this attitude reflects high-level anxiety. In addition, [43] also revealed that having a high level of travel anxiety has resulted in travelers having a risk attitude which then influences decisions for travel. For instance, individuals who used to travel internationally have chosen to travel domestically due to anxiety. Therefore, this study proposes that:

H2: Travel Anxiety positively impacts risk attitude

2.6 Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC)

Perceived behavioural control (PBC) refers to the perception of individuals on how easy or difficult it is to perform a specific behaviour [27], which in this case, is the individuals' perception of how easy or difficult it is to travel during the pandemic [34], [44] has proven that risk perception has significantly impact travelers' PBC which also directly affect travelers' intention to travel. Another study by [45] revealed that due to the pandemic, travelers' PBC is limited and has directly affected their intention to travel. Additionally, PBC and safety measures influence travelers' behavioural intentions [46]. Thus, from the statements above, the following hypothesis is developed:

H3: Perceived behavioural control (PBC) positively impact travelers travel intention

2.7 Subjective Norms

Subjective norms refer to the influence of other individuals in performing a specific behaviour [27]. If the relationship between the individuals is closer, it is most likely that they will be more influenced to perform the behaviour [31]. Several studies have proven subjective norm does influence individuals' intentional behaviour. [45] study on Malaysian travelers revealed that personal criteria negatively affect the travelers' intention to travel. Moreover, concerning the choice to purchase, [47] has also proven that consumers' intentions to purchase are significantly affected by subjective norms. Thus, from the statements above, this study proposes the following:

H4: Subjective norms positively impact travelers' travel intention

2.8 Risk Attitude

Risk Attitude and travelers' travel intention

According to [38], risk can influence individuals' travel decisions. Various risks might affect travelers' intention to travel [28]. [11] has discovered that, even since the beginning of the pandemic, travelers traveled less, which is influenced by their risk attitude and, subsequently, their lower intention to travel [13]. This study proposes the following hypothesis:

H5: Risk attitude positively impacts travellers' travel intentions

Fear of COVID-19 and travelers' travel intention

The pandemic has influenced people to have negative feelings such as fear and anxiety, which has dissuaded the intention to travel [48]. According to [49], if the pandemic worsens, it will affect individuals' long-term mental health. In addition, [38] has revealed that the perception of travel risk has influenced individuals' fear of COVID-19, negatively affecting their travel behavior. Risk attitude was also developed from the cause of fear of COVID-19 which has influenced individuals to take more precautions and safety measures such as taking vaccines, wearing face masks, social distancing, and many more (Van Der Weerd, Timmermans, Beaujean, Oudhoff, & Van Steenbergen, 2011; Xu & Cheng, 2021) Thus, from the statements above, the study proposed:

H6: Fear of COVID-19 positively impact travelers' travel intention

H7: Risk attitude mediates the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and travelers' travel intention

Travel Anxiety and travelers' travel intention

According to [13], travel anxiety is an emotional reaction toward potential risks from a specific environment. Travel anxiety is common among travelers anxious about traveling, especially to a destination with possible risk [29]. There are various phobias known that affect travel anxiety. A new term of phobia known as coronaphobia or coronavirus anxiety has emerged due to the COVID-19 outbreak [52]. Regarding travel anxiety, [13] revealed that travel anxiety has negatively affected travelers' intention to travel to the travel bubble destinations in China. Another similar study by [53] showed that travel anxiety had affected the Egyptians' travel behavior post-pandemic. However, there are also studies that, despite travel anxiety, travelers

will still travel post-pandemic [29], especially if there are resources such as vaccinations [6] or coping strategies that can be used during the pandemic [54]. Travel anxiety has also influenced individuals to have a risk attitude, where most individuals isolate themselves due to high anxiety levels [55] and make changes to their vacation plans as a precaution from the pandemic [56]. Thus, from the statements above, the study proposes:

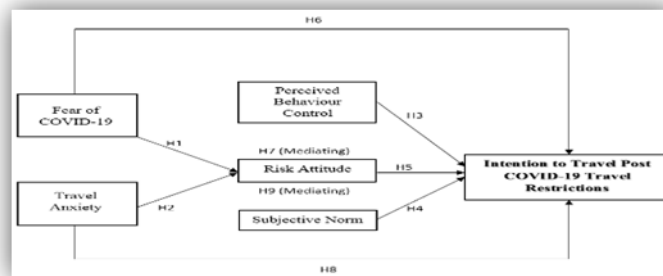
H8: Travel Anxiety positively impacts travelers' travel intention

H9: Risk attitude mediates the relationship between travel anxiety and travelers' travel intention

2.9 Travel Intention

Intention refers to individuals' willingness to perform specific actions, and performing these actions requires factors to motivate them. The higher the travel motivation, the better it influences them to have the intention to travel [57]. On the contrary, travel intention can be controlled by negative factors. For instance, negative news regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on businesses and the economy has made people anxious [13] and affected their intention to travel [29]. Thus, from the statements above, this study intends to examine the relationships between the variables by adapting the TPB. This study proposes a conceptual model that includes two more variables: fear of COVID-19 and travel anxiety. The conceptual model can be referred to in Figure 2.

Fig 2. Conceptual Model



The purpose of incorporating additional variables into TPB is to understand the relationship between these variables (fear of COVID-19 and travel anxiety) with travelers' intention to travel post-COVID-19 travel restrictions. The pandemic has influenced individuals' psyches and may induce negative perceptions towards traveling for fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus. Furthermore, from the results of previous studies, it can be seen that these issues have influenced travelers' intention to travel, as some travelers are avoiding international travel by canceling their trips [58], and some have no interest in travelling due to the possible risk of the pandemic [41], [59]

3 Research Methodology

This study will apply a quantitative and cross-sectional study approach. The targeted population is Malaysian domestic travelers who intend to travel to Sabah. The purpose of selecting Sabah for this study is its popularity as one of the topmost visited states in Malaysia, with domestic

tourists of 10.34 million in 2020 [60]. Moreover, this study will apply a purposive sampling technique under the non-probability sampling method. This study will use G*Power to determine the minimum sample size. Using the software's suggested settings [61], [62], it is stated that the minimum sample size is 85 respondents. However, the suitable minimum sample size for multiple regression analysis is 200-300 respondents. Thus, this study aims to collect 300 respondents using a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire is adapted from previous studies with minor modifications and will be in the English and Bahasa Malaysia language. The questionnaire is divided into six parts which will cover the respondents' demographics as well as the variables of the studies. A pilot test will be applied before distributing the official questionnaire, with a minimum of 30 respondents. This study will utilize social media platforms to gather potential respondents. Lastly, this study will use Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) software and the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique with Partial Least Square (PLS-SEM) in order

to analyze the descriptive analysis of the respondents' demographics as well as the variables of the study, the reliability test, and the relationship between all variables as well as to predict domestic visitor intention to visit Sabah post COVID-19 travel restriction.

4 Conclusion

COVID-19 has negatively impacted businesses, the tourism industry, and individuals. People are aware of the possible risks and damage the pandemic has created, resulting in negative emotions (e.g., worry, fear and anxiety). Due to the pandemic, travelers have avoided traveling during and even post-pandemic since they are scared of the possible risks they might face. Thus, this study examines the relationship between the fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety, risk attitude, subjective norms and PBC to travel post-COVID travel restrictions. This conceptual study adapts parts of the TPB by incorporating additional variables, which enables an in-depth examination of the changes in travel intention.

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