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COVID-19: Impact and consequences on Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industries

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Abstract

The outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), has caused a worldwide panic owing to its deadly nature. The Malaysian Government has instituted the Movement Control Order (MCO) to prevent the disease from spreading further. The Government's tourism campaign, that is Visit Malaysia 2020, had to be cancelled and all the guests who are currently staying in Malaysia have been advised to confine themselves in their hotel rooms until the MCO ends.

The explanatory research method is used to study the impacts by implying secondary data from newspapers, journals, articles and web resources. The major findings of the study have revealed some serious negative impacts on the sector concern. As a conclusion, this explanatory study could be used to assist the government in adopting precautions and the best policy should a similar viral pandemic arises in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine, Malaysian Association of Hotels, Malaysian Hospitality and Tourism Industry, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), social distancing, World Health Organization (WHO)

Introduction

The background of the study

The main objective of this study is to study and find out the impacts caused by the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Malaysia's Hospitality and Tourism Industry which is a substantial contributor to her Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The sector's GDP contribution was 15.2% in 2018. The study has produced many negative impacts on this sector which resulted in substantial revenue losses arising from the fear of contracting the disease in travelling.

The study has also revealed some gaps in which one of it is whether Malaysians are willing to embark on vacations again, both domestic and international, during post COVID-19, despite some Ministry of Tourism's hashtags advising the locals to stay home while saving some monies for holidays when the MCO ends. This is based on the negative local business sentiments and serious unemployment situations caused by the pandemic. Therefore, do the locals have the income and spending power to embark on vacations post COVID-19? Further research needs to be conducted on this issue in future.

By enforcing the MCO, the pandemic curve would be flattened in future. The hypotheses is will the MCO be able flatten the curve completely and has it been proven that the pandemic will not recur in future.

The pandemic has hit the South East Asian economy much harder than the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which was caused by currency devaluations some countries in this region, including Malaysia, will struggle to meet the needs of newly unemployed workers, which have been retrenched due to business disruptions during the MCO and lockdown periods.

Literature review

What is coronavirus?

It is a pneumonia outbreak of an unknown etiology (the cause of a disease) that took place in Wuhan, China in late December 2019.

It then began to spread widely throughout China, with the infected people developing an acute respiratory distress syndrome or failure which could lead to death (Nijuan *et al.* 2013). The Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC) identified a coronavirus gene called 2019-nCov, officially known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Gorbalenya *et al.* 2020), which is responsible for the disease

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and officially known as Coronavirus Disease 2019 or COVID-19.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared it a global pandemic in March 2020. As of 15 September 2020, it has affected 29,464,002 million people worldwide and left 933,121 deaths.

The virus causes infections in our respiratory and gastrointestinal tracts. An infected person will display fever, dry cough, tiredness and breathing difficulty, which are the disease’s symptoms. The person will also display a mild flu symptom. However, further investigation revealed that it was imported from elsewhere and began to spread in the market (Yu *et al.* 2020). The virus strain has not been previously identified in human and currently, there is no vaccine to cure it.

The virus was thought to have emerged from a wild animal whole sale market in Wuhan. Early studies also indicated that there is a possibility of animal to animal transmission (HTH) through saliva droplets or direct contact (Li *et al* 2020). There is even a possibility that the disease could be transmitted by asymptomatic ^[1] carriers, inhaling droplets (which carry the virus) in the air or touching an infected person.

Avoiding crowded places such as shopping malls, parties and events, are some of the preventive measures taken to prevent the spread of the disease. Wearing facial masks by a symptomatic ^[2] carrier could provide a barrier in the transmission of the disease on an asymptomatic person.

Research framework (Explanatory research)

The explanatory research frame work is use in my research with the main aim of establishing casual relationships between two variables, the dependent and independent variables. The main emphasis is to study a situation or a problem in order to explain the relationships between the variables. As an example, the COVID-19 pandemic or fear had caused many travel agencies from China and other countries affected by this disease to cancel their hotel bookings and tours in Malaysia since early 2020. The disease or fear is the independent variable and the exodus hotel rooms and tour cancellations are the dependent variables. From this explanation, we can further define that:-

- a. A variable is dependent – that is, it changes in response to changes in other variables.
- b. A variable is independent – that is, it causes changes in dependent variables.

I have divided the dependent variables into five (5) sets of dependent variables, in which the COVID-19 ‘fear’ or pandemic remains as the independent variable. This is based after researching and analyzing news articles and journals both printed and from the websites. The five (5) sets of dependent variables are:

- a. Passenger Volume (air traffic).
- b. Airlines Industry.
- c. Tour Operators.
- d. Accommodation Industry.
- e. Tourism Campaign.

Below is a figure (Figure 1) which simply self explains the

casual relationships between the above-mentioned variables in the research framework.

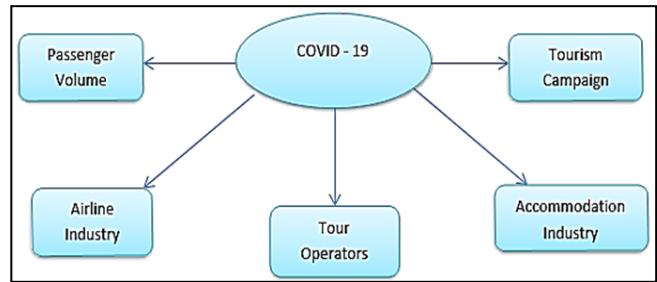


Fig 1: A chart denoting the variables casual relationship

Passenger volume (Air traffic)

As the fear escalates in the Human to human (HTH) transmission of the disease, the Malaysian Government has decided to bar foreign visitors from COVID-19 afflicted countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Indonesia, Bangladesh, South Korea, Iran and Turkey, to name just a few.

The pandemic has caused tourists and passenger arrivals from some European nations which are infected serious by the disease (example, Italy, Spain, UK and Germany), to decline. Malacca, or Melaka, the Historical City of Malaysia, experienced a total absence of tourists during Chinese Lunar New Year holidays then the pandemic was at its peak in Wuhan.

On top of that, Malaysian airports have experienced a 13% year-on-year (YOY%) decline in the first half of 2020 (1H20), according to the airport’s parent owner, Malaysia Airports Holdings Berhad (MAHB) statement. This is in view of the Pandemic’s fear, which was spreading rapidly around the globe, further causing a nose dive of tourist’s arrivals in Malaysia from the Middle East and Europe, China, and South Korea, as health fears keep more passengers grounded (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Comparison of passenger arrivals in Malaysian airports between February 2019 & February 2020

	February 2019	February 2020	YOY (%)
KLIA	4,813	3,646	-24.2
International	3,477	2,584	-25.7
Asean	1,642	1,238	-24.6
Domestic	1,336	1,062	-20.5
MAHB Airports	3,335	2,594	-22.2
International	710	361	-49.1
Asean	391	263	-32.8
Non-Asean	319	99	-69.1

This is in stark contrast when the Tourism Ministry registered 1.55 million China arrivals (1H19) as compared to early February 2020, when the Chinese Government ordered all Chinese travel agencies to suspend international tours in containing the spread of the virus.

MAHB’s airports registered a 59.4% (March 2020) decline in passenger volumes in comparison to March 2019. This simply translates to 4.8 million passengers (1.7 million international) and (3 million domestic). It saw a decline of 68.9% (international) and 50.8% (domestic) arrivals as compared to a year ago. The decline was also in a small way, attributed to the MCO, enforced by the government on 18 March 2020.

¹ An infected person showing no signs of a disease.

² An infected person showing signs of a disease.

Reline industry

The impact of the COVID-19 has even forced Malaysia's national and budget airlines (Malaysian Airlines and Air Asia) to plead for government financial support^[3]. Air Asia, on the other hand, is seeking government loans to cover her operations costs which could only last for another five (5) months (April – August 2020). It spent up to RM527 million (USD \$122 million) monthly to keep her flying (this include fuel hedge losses, fixed operations and financing costs). Air Asia's senior management staffs will take a 10% pay cut, in order to save the airline from falling into the red^[4].

Malaysian Airlines will embark on the same measure as Air Asia on her senior management staff, including the cancellation of allowances. The worst scenario will be Malindo Air, another local budget carrier, who has forewarned her staffs to brace for a 50% pay cuts in months to come, in addition to 15 days work reduction per month.

These predicaments, that is flight cancellations (dependent variables), are considered as direct results or impacts amid the COVID-19 fears (independent variable) spreading further if no border controls are enforced. Malaysian Airlines has removed 71% of her flights capacity through the cancellation of more than 1600 flights, up to April 2020)^[5].

Air Asia X, which operates Air Asia's international long haul flights, saw its number of passengers carried declined by 25% y-o-y (Year on Year) to 1.14 million passengers. The significant drop in its passengers carried is a result of the severe impact from the COVID-19 outbreak which has affected travel demand globally. The airline has temporarily grounded its entire fleet of A330 aircrafts (24) as at end March 2020 in order to contain its operation costs and the adverse effects of the pandemic.

Tour operators

Local tour operators received 3,000 tour group cancellations early 2020 as a result of the pandemic fears of travelling. This figure rose upwards when the Chinese Government issued a travelling ban on her citizens since the beginning of the Chinese Lunar New Year when the pandemic was its peak. As a consequence, it led to a massive hotel room's cancellation from the Chinese tour groups, according to a source from the Malaysian Association of Hotel (MAH).

Accommodation industry

While Malaysia's hotel average occupancy rate is geared to grow to 32% in 2020, the sector could see up to 15% of hotels closing down their business permanently due to the pandemic's impact. The Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) foresees that 48 hotels would close down permanently, while 114 hotels intend to shut down temporarily. Of the hotels that will close temporarily, 27% will close until the MCO is lifted, 15% still undecided and 2% are planning to either sell off their properties or renovate. MAH is projecting a total revenue loss of RM6.36 billion (USD\$1.46 billion).

As of end March 2020, a total of 2,041 hotels staffs have

been retrenched, 9,778 given unpaid leave and 5,054 have opted for pay cut according to MAH sources. The highest numbers of lay-offs were in Malacca (15%), Johor (12%), Perak (12%) and Negri Sembilan (11%). States with the highest number of staffs taking pay cuts were Langkawi (33%), Johor (32%), Selangor (32%) and Perak (30%).

Tourism campaign

In view of the COVID-19 fear, the Tourism Ministry had to cancel the on-going Visit Malaysia Year 2020 Campaign. It will impact the government's target of achieving 30 million tourists' arrivals if the campaign was held. As the MCO has been enforced since the middle of March 2020, all tourism activities which require permits from the Ministry's licensing division will remain frozen (Rahim *et al.* 2020).

Research problems

While reading the various available resources on the research topic, there are a number of gaps pertaining to the aspects of medical science and economics posed by the pandemic.

OW effective are the COVID-19 drugs which are currently being tested on COVID-19 patients?

Malaysia has been selected by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the "solidarity" trial, an international effort to test several COVID-19 drugs. The Malaysian Health Ministry has identified nine (9) public hospitals and five (5) groups of patients for this trial. The drugs for the treatment are Remdesivir, Lopinavir/Ritonavir, Interferon Beta, Chloroquine and Hydroxychloroquine.

Although there are non-Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved drugs to treat COVID-19, a number of promising novel drugs, (Remdesivir) and re-purposed pharmacologicalvi agents (Hydroxychloroquine and Azithromyain), have displayed results of inhibiting the growth SARS-Cov-2 *in vitro* which is the virus name for COVID-19 (Giudicessi, Noseworthy *et al.* 2020)^[6].

Hydroxychloroquine and Chloroquine are anti-malarial drugs and possess an anti-viral property called '*in vitro*'. The anti-viral agent will attack the virus by interfacing its attachment to our protein cells thereby preventing its replication in our body. They act on the early entry and post-entry stages of the disease. These two (2) drugs are still pending clinical trials and with early mixed results of their effectiveness. Hydroxychloroquine is still undergoing clinical trials in Minnesota, United States by the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. In the meantime, the conventional way of preventing COVID-19 is by washing hands with soap and adopting physical distancing (Giudicessi, 2020)^[6]. There is currently no vaccine to treat COVID-19 (Pei *et al.* 2005).

Remdesivir underwent clinical trials in China when a patient in the Unites States responded well to it. But the drug was taken off when the eighteenth (18th) patient displayed side effects to the drug. As such the results of the test were inconclusive although it has the potential benefit if it is administered in its early stage.

The gap as revealed in the above literature is have these two (2) drugs (Hydroxychloroquine and Chloroquine) exhibited their effectiveness in treating COVID-19 patients and will it lead to the development of a new drug to eliminate the disease? Researchers are still carrying out "empirical" research by using these drugs to treat COVID-19 patients.

³ Malaysia said to explore debt measures, mergers and acquisitions, to bail out airlines,' Starbiz, pp1., (26 March 2020)

⁴ Malaysia said to explore debt measures, mergers and acquisitions, to bail out airlines,' Starbiz, pp1., (26 March 2020)

⁵ Malaysia said to explore debt measures, mergers and acquisitions, to bail out airlines,' Starbiz, pp1., (26 March 2020)

At assurances are there that Malaysia's tourism sectors will stabilize post COVID-19?

Firstly, will the Government support the tourism stakeholders in reviving back their business operations post COVID-19 through bailout package? This information is unavailable at present and is difficult to see how the Government with a narrow fiscal space could afford to do so (Kravchenko A, 2020) ^[7]. The Government has recently announced various financial packages to individuals and business entities with the aim of helping the nation through this period of MCO.

Is there any clear indication that we can safely pack our bags for our next holiday trip? The questions to ask are:

- a. How long will the pandemic last?
- b. What is the severity of social distancing restrictions?
- c. What are the magnitude and effectiveness of government stimulus packages? (Kravchenko A, 2020) ^[7].
- d. Will Malaysia continue to impose border restrictions and closures to international visitors to ward off imported cases?

As the world slowly revert back to normality, it is obvious that overseas travelling restrictions will be in force for a while to avoid a spike in the disease (Kravchenko A, 2020) ^[7]. The affected countries may continue with such restriction orders and instead encourage domestic tourism as a substitute.

Secondly, even the MCO periods are lifted; will the locals have the financial capability to continue travelling post COVID-19? The Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) estimated that unemployment could hit around two (2) million (13%) people this year, higher than Malaysia's Central Bank (Bank Negara Malaysia) projected figure of 629,000 people (4%).

The MEF sources stated that there are 500,000 people who are currently unemployed, not discounting the fact that could be another 500,000 new entrants in the labor market (Bardan S, 2020). Small and Medium Scales Industries (SME) president revealed that most employers have frozen hiring and a majority of SMEs' has initiated retrenched exercise (Michael K, 2020). No employers were hiring at the moment and are considering undertaking retrenchment exercises (Bardan S, 2020).

Alternatively, among other measures to preserve employments were to freeze headcounts, institute unpaid leaves, forced annual leaves, reduction of working days and hours, and reduction in the collective agreement for unionized companies. The Malaysian Government also launched the Wage Subsidy Programme (or 'Bantuan Prihatian') amounting to RM7.9 billion (USD\$1.79 billion) to assist employers in retaining their workforce during the crisis. Unfortunately, the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) revealed in its survey that 74% employers commented that the subsidy was inadequate to retain their staffs for the next six (6) to eight (8) months without enforcing any pay cuts and retrenchments. Another 78.7% companies surveyed would have to retrench their 30% of their workforce to stay afloat (Thian Lai S, 2020).

In conclusion, could the locals afford to spend as they did before the pandemic for their vacations, given the discouraging unemployment figures? Firstly, the gap reflects on the ambiguity of our locals who may have financial difficulties to spend for holidays in order to revive

our domestic tourism post COVID-19. Secondly, will there be any public bailout funds to the tourism providers in assisting their business revivals? These two (2) gaps require further research and it depends whether they would be tested out to close and answer the gaps. The turning point is the quicker the solution to end the pandemic will determine the speed of recovery of this sector.

How should the hotel industry operate and survive post COVID-19 in embracing the new norm?

The COVID-19 pandemic and the impending global recession as a result of it, have caused uncertainties to the hotel business. Today, most Malaysian hotels are empty except for in-house long term guests, stranded tourists (who were stranded prior to the MCO) and those which have been designated as quarantine centres for the locals returning from abroad.

Drastic measures have to be adopted for hotels to survive. Revenue maximization is not the priority but cost-cutting measures are probably the only available options for survival (Hanley C, 2020). This is indeed a wake-up call for many hoteliers, and they must adopt changes the way they operate in order to move forward post COVID-19.

Pay-cuts and retrenchments are unavoidable and a lean structure, the keys pillars for each department in the hotel (for examples, the Rooms Division and Food and Beverage Department) must be identified and preserved. One such pillar is staff development, by providing opportunity to pursue further academic qualification. It is a way to earn employee loyalty and a retention strategy for the hotels.

Malaysian hotel general managers (GM) are popular in demand abroad as they are multilingual and versatile. There are hundreds of them working overseas on expatriate packages and do not intend to come back to Malaysia as local hotels do not pay them well. On the contrary, local hotels are willing to pay higher remunerations to foreign general managers than Malaysians. Local hotels should review and consider offering our local GMs' competitive remuneration plus a gross percentage of the hotels gross operating profits.

Malaysian hotels generally have a staffing ration of 0.8 to 1.5 or even 3 to 3.5 in premium hotels. These numbers are rather high compared with hotels in developed countries and it means that staff productivity is low. Multi-tasking is the only way to improve staff's productivity and optimize staff ratios to guests. Smaller hotels, for example, can operate with the GM and to department heads – the head of front of house (FOH) and the back of house head (BOH). The FOH can take care of all guest touch points such as the front office, housekeeping, food and beverage, security and marketing while the BOH will oversee non-guest contact areas such finance and other administrative functions of the hotel. They could even opt to work from home.

Working hours should be revised from the normal eight (8) hours per shift to four (4) hours as it would be more appealing and creates a larger pool of workforce, as many prefer more predictable and stable working hours.

It must be acknowledge that the hotel business will never be the same again post COVID-19. Mass gatherings such as seminars, conventions, in-house dining, party events will be prohibited for the next six (6) to twelve (12) months. To embrace these changes, the gaps have posed another set of ambiguities which have yet to be tested out for their ultimate results.

Research questions

There are three (3) research questions in relation to my research topic:

- What are the impacts and consequences posed by COVID-19 on the Malaysian Hospitality and Tourism Industry?
- To what extent or extents COVID-19 has affected the industry in discussion?
- Are there any significant effects of the anti-malarial drugs discovered eighty (80) years ago in treating COVID-19 patients?

Research objectives

Research questions could be used as a base to write out a set of research objectives. Objectives are more generally acceptable to the research community as evidence of the researcher's clear sense of purpose and direction. We contend that research objectives are likely to lead to greater specificity than research or investigative questions. The objectives of my research are listed down in a straight forward manner:

- To examine the impacts and consequences of COVID-19 on the local hospitality and tourism industry.
- To determine the extent COVID-19 has affected the hospitality and tourism industry in terms of revenue and operations.
- To establish whether the anti-malarial drugs (Remdesivir, Hydroxychloroquine and Chloroquine) are effective in treating COVID-19 patients.

Research methodology

Quantitative research

Due to the MCO in forced, it was impossible on my part to obtain data using the qualitative approach. I had to rely on the quantitative (secondary) approach in sourcing for data, in particular from commercial information sources such as news articles, journals (medical and health), on-line journals and related-information from the websites. The data in the literature review contain selected and summarized information by writers and researchers (Kervin, 1999).

Hypothesis

A hypothesis is used in an experiment to define the relationship between two variables and to find an answer to a question. The hypotheses to this research topic are:

- By introducing the MCO, the pandemic curve will be fully flattened to zero. A hypothesis to this statement is will this control order be able to flatten the pandemic to 'ground zero'. Has it been proven that the pandemic will not recur in future?
- The World Health Organization has selected Malaysia in its clinical trial for its COVID-19 drugs and by doing so; it would provide a curing hopes to the local COVID-19 patients. The hypothesis is how effective are the outcomes of the results and to what extent in terms of scientific research that it could eliminate the disease.
- By introducing the stimulus financial packages by the Government (examples, Wage Subsidy Program, Employees Provident Fund monthly withdrawal and special payouts to the bottom and middle income groups), employees will be able to meet their monthly household expenses until the MCO is ended. The hypotheses is will these programs be able to provide

adequate financial support irrespective of the family size during this period.

- By basing on the findings of genomic (human genes) investigation and the presence of some bats and live animals in the Wuhan Market, COVID-19 'may have' originated from bats or bat droppings associated with contaminated materials in the market or surrounding region (CC Lai *et al.* 2020). This statement is a hypothesis since there is no clear evidence to prove this theory on the link. Whereas both SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV were of zoonotic origin, the origin of COVID-19 is still debatable (JS Ji, 2020).

Significance of the study

Findings

- In Malaysia, more than one-third ($\frac{1}{3}$) of confirmed COVID-19 patients have recovered, compared to less than 3% and 8% in the Philippines and Indonesia, respectively. Although thousands of cases in the three (3) countries are still active, this suggests the healthcare system in Malaysia is far better equipped to handle the crisis than those in the Philippines or Indonesia. (Malaysia - 4,484 recovered (total cases – 6,353); Indonesia - 1,954 (total cases – 11,587) and Philippines – 1,315 (total cases – 9,485)). These latest figures were based at the time of typing on 5 May 2020.
- COVID-19 will hit South-east Asia harder than the 1997 financial crisis.
- South-east Asia's existing welfare provisions, including Malaysia, will struggle to meet the needs of newly unemployed workers in the informal sector (example the construction industry). Many of these workers have become unemployed because of disruptions to businesses caused by the imposed lockdowns.
- The Malaysian Government's financial stimulus packages worth RM260 billion (USD \$60 billion) was implemented to provide financial support to affected small and medium scales industry, wage subsidies for the affected workforce and cash handouts to the lower and medium income groups. The combination of a rapid economic slowdown and a collapse in global oil prices means it will be increasingly difficult for state oil company Petronas (National Petroleum) to provide a special dividend to support the stimulus spending.
- Social distancing has been implemented globally and is a measure to prevent the spreading of the disease from one individual to another. It is a new terminology which means avoiding the crowd (Singh J, 2020). In Europe and Australia, the term 'lockdown' means people confining to their homes and not permitted to venture out into the streets. It has caused much social problems such as domestic violence within the homes, loneliness, anxiety, depression and mental disorders- a negative impact on the society as a whole.
- To revive the local economy post COVID-19, the business and non-business sectors need to adopt new working practices. For companies that are heavily dependent on labor, they need to reduce their dependence and focus more on automation and the use of technology. The aim is to reduce human contact within the business premise in containing the pandemic.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this research is to examine the

impacts and consequences of COVID-19 on the local hospitality and tourism industry. Due to the MCO enforcement, my research methodology is based on secondary (quantitative) research which requires an in-depth study in future through a mixed-research mode in order to close the gaps and find the answers to the hypotheses. There could be some unanswerable questions with the regard to the topic of my research which I am looking forward to provide the closest answers to it.

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