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Foreword

The recent COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented pressure and challenges on the tourism and hospitality industry. The extremely contagious novel coronavirus significantly affected the industry, raising serious concerns about its sustainability and prospects. One of the most hardest hit industry, the global tourism and hospitality sectors experienced the loss of millions of jobs and revenue as it struggled to stay afloat. In this regard, its rejuvenation in the post-COVID era is crucial to save it from collapsing.

In this context, the Langkawi International Research Centre for Tourism and Hospitality (LITH) under the School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management (STHEM) took the initiative to organise the 2nd Langkawi Tourism and Hospitality International Conference (LTHIC 2022). With the theme "Engaging Tourism and Hospitality in the Post-COVID-19 Era", this conference served as the platform for showcasing, sharing, and consolidating innovative ideas to promote tourism and tourism-related industries. Other areas like hospitality and tourism teaching and learning at higher education institutions were also included. With various stakeholders as keynote speakers, LTHIC 2022 provided a valuable opportunity to engage and discuss current issues in relation to the recovery and sustainability of the tourism industry and its components.

LTHIC 2022 was held virtually. Virtual conferences have emerged as a new frontier for global researchers, fostering idea-sharing and collaboration with the tourism, hospitality and event industry. The virtual conference enabled LTHIC 2022 to bring together educators, researchers, practitioners, and students from various countries and universities. From the virtual presentations, 14 full papers were selected for publication in this journal as a special issue.

Among the topics covered in this special issue are food safety practices for online platform takeaway food, adoption of Dotstorming to enhance practicum report writing, graduates employability, positioning Muslim-friendly spa and wellness, tourists' travel behaviour intentions post COVID-19, favourable service experience, leadership styles and the performance of the community-based homestay programmes, student's perception of COVID-19 effect on education in tourism, hospitality and event and future career, sustainable Marian pilgrimage climate after the COVID-19 pandemic, and factors for hotel survival during crisis.

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Surabaya's Tourism Icons and Sustainable Heritage Tourism

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to identify places that can be recommended as Surabaya tourism icons. Adopting a qualitative research design, thematic analysis was conducted on the data collected from interviewing three informants. Based on the results, Kota Tua of Surabaya, Tugu Pahlawan, and Jalan Tunjungan in the city of Surabaya were identified and proposed for tourism development, specifically for post-COVID-19 tourism. These Surabaya tourism icons can significantly popularise Surabaya and sustain its tourism industry.

Keywords: Colonial tourism icons, Indonesia, thematic analysis

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Introduction

Emerging from the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the badly affected tourism industry should focus on developing new and selective tourism products that prioritise tourist well-being, health and safety issues as well as sustainability (Bhati et al., 2021; Skryl & Gregoric, 2022; Ling et al., 2022). Many hospitality and tourism businesses are experiencing a surge in new demand although the business environment is not the same as it was pre-COVID. As hospitality and tourism businesses take cognisant and navigate their way through new travel norms post-pandemic, they will need to redesign their customer experience or offerings and find strategies to engage with them. Nevertheless, it is clear that after years of social restrictions, travel cancellations and event postponements, people are now seizing the opportunity to travel with great zest (Lee, 2021).

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Leveraging a region's cultural heritage and historical interest is important to augment the marketing of regional destinations and increase their economic value (Turnquest, 2022). According to Elgammal and Refaat (2021), most of the challenges faced by tourism destinations are management-related (heritage resilience, interpretation of cultural heritage attractions, accessibility, health and safety) and marketing-related (limited number of tourist destinations, use and promotion of technology).

Surabaya is a sprawling metropolis located in Java, Indonesia. Even though it is known as a metropolitan city, Surabaya has many historical buildings from the colonial era that are still standing strong today. Dirgantara (2022) studied the iconic designs of five historical buildings in Surabaya, including Heroes Monument, Surabaya Youth Hall, Surabaya City Hall, De Javasche Bank, and the Kebonrojo Post Office. In his conclusion, he recommended that these historic buildings are preserved as colonial icons.

Surabaya's tourism icons play an important role in positioning Surabaya in the global tourism industry and also form the basis for tourism development to attract tourists. The development of these tourism icons into a "tourism market" is important and should be incorporated into the government's development indicator. However, Surabaya's tourism icon have yet to be established.

This momentum can be interpreted as a signal to strengthen Surabaya's tourism through tourism icons which will then become the differentiator and competitive advantage for Surabaya's tourism. Baker (2007) mentioned that some variables can be used to determine the positioning of a destination. The combination or synergy of these variables can be a differentiator as well as competitive advantage for a tourism destination in competing against other destinations. These variables include, but not limited to architecture and design, tourism attractions, climate, history and culture, events, industry and local products, landmarks and icons, myths and legends, location and access, environment, and the people. Table 1 shows the number of visitors to the current heritage or tourism icons in Surabaya.

Icons are a crucial element in branding. An icon organically emerges from a brand because when a particular item or entity continuously becomes an object of interest and is substantially mentioned as well as favoured, it changes a brand into an icon (Holt, 2004; Przyborski & Slunecko, 2020). Hence, studying tourism icons is important for strategising the development of tourism destinations and tourist attractions. Currently, industry practitioners and academics in Indonesia (Permana Budi et al., 2022; Hendriyani et al., 2020; Sudiarta & Suardana, 2016) are paying particular notice on strategies to develop and market tourist attractions as well as tourist behaviour. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) stated that the reputation of heritage tourism destinations not only positively influences tourist consumption behaviour directly, but also indirectly through tourist memorability and the chain relationship

between tourist satisfaction and memorability. Based on this background, this study aims to contribute to this research topic by looking at tourism icons in the city of Surabaya, Indonesia.

Table 1. Tourist visits to Surabaya

	Sources	International Tourists	Domestic Tourists
1	Bandara Juanda	784,585	6,998,016
2	Pelabuhan Tanjung Perak	–	350,622
3	Kapal Pesiar	8,445	–
4	Obyek Wisata	245,747	5,528,285
5	Hotel dan Penginapan	27,431	220,795
6	Travel Biro	789	4,717
7	Tourist Information Centre	1,710	2,317
8	Kapal Wisata Artama	35	1,812
	Total	1,088,743	13,106.584

Source: Surabaya Tourism and Cultural Department

Icons and landmarks form important elements in the formation of characteristics and positioning of Surabaya's tourism. Thus, the research question asks what is the tourism icon of Surabaya? In this regard, the purpose of this study is to identify tourism icons in Surabaya in a comprehensive and relevant way, that can be easily recognised by the global community. The identification of Surabaya's tourism icons was carried out with the help of different stakeholders.

Literature Review

Tourist Icon

Numerous researchers have conducted research on tourist icons. For instance, Becken (2005) found that tourism markets can be distinguished using tourist icons. Tang et al. (2009) highlighted that an icon is readily accepted by the public when it is associated with the local history and culture as well as officially supported by the government. In the same study, they formulated the effectiveness criteria of an icon as a tourism attraction. There are three situational factors that affect the operational icon of a tourism attraction: cultural factors, history, and government involvement. They also suggested that tourist icons be evaluated using three aspects: characteristics, organisation, and impact (Figure 1). Further, Tang et al. (2009) classified icons into three eras: historical, modern, and contemporary. Historical icon refers to famous people or entity in the 17th century or earlier while the modern icon refers to

those famous in the 18th and 19th centuries. The contemporary icon represents individuals or entities famous in the 20th and 21st centuries.

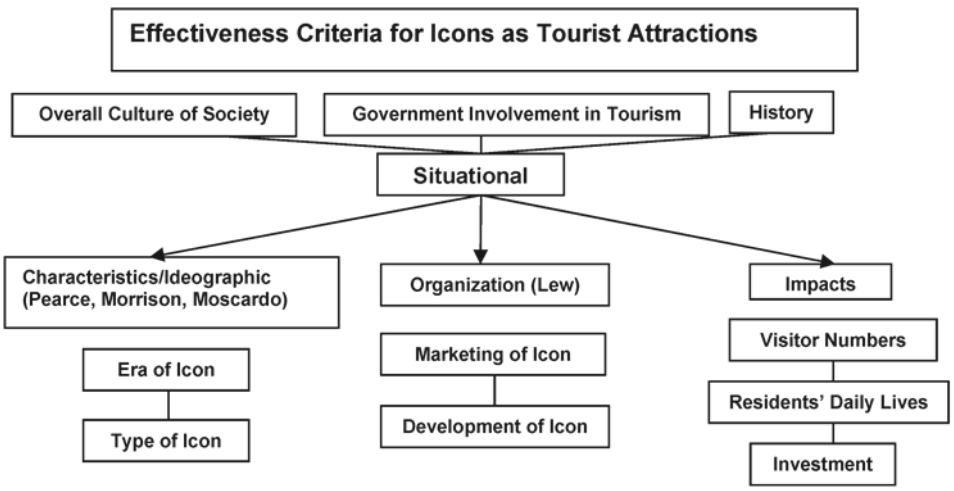


Figure 1. Effectiveness criteria for icons as tourist attractions (Tang et al., 2009)

Figure 1 shows the effectiveness criteria for icons as tourist attractions (Tang et al., 2009). The right tourism icon can increase tourist visits, make a significant economic contribution to the local community, and can increase the value of the tourism destination. However, the uniqueness of the icon is closely related to history, culture, government policy, and other external factors.

From the marketing perspective, the importance of the internet as an advertising and promotion avenue for a tourist icon cannot be stressed enough. In developing the marketing strategy for an icon, publicity is one of the main considerations, especially when the goal is to make the icon worldwide famous. Other than that, it is also very important to bring together all the related stakeholders and work on aspects such as resources, administration, marketing, and quality control. The stakeholders mentioned here, refer to private businesses, conventions, visitor bureaus or local tourism offices, local community as well as the local government.

Generally, three attributes can be used for city branding, namely image, uniqueness, and originality (Elhagla et al., 2020). Cities use iconic buildings to attract attention. These iconic buildings are famous because they possess a certain symbolic or aesthetic quality. Therefore, the impact of an iconic building as a branding tool that provides recognition and reputation can be immediately felt after its construction. In short, these buildings attract visitors and investors that contribute towards the economy, social life, and culture of the city (Sklair, 2006).

Castillo-Villar (2015) predicted that future city icons would be public spaces where residents can gather (for example, town squares, roads, and parks). Connecting city icons with a local identity as well as a narration is also an important element in turning an icon into an identity symbol. Thus, city icons also function as a generator of positive experiences.

In addition, Blood (1997) stated some icons occur spontaneously, usually as a result of a dramatic event. However, for the icon to form, the event needs to be rapidly and unambiguously associated with a particular theme or brand. The media is a source of potential icons through their use of dramatic photographs and emotive headlines.

Castillo-Villar (2015) explained that urban icons incorporate elements of the urban landscape (buildings, monuments, or natural elements) that serve as visual symbols (single and repetitive) capable of transforming the complexity of the urban experience into knowledge and meaning through representational practices. For that reason, urban icons have been considered important elements in urban regeneration and city branding strategies, especially in the transformation of the city image.

Urban Tourism

The definition of urban tourism has been one of the persistent challenges in literature (Romero-García et al., 2019). Urban tourism is commonly associated with activities or leisure time spent in the city (Ashworth & Page, 2011). Based on this perspective itself, general facilities in Surabaya, as well as in other cities can become a specialty tourism attraction in themselves. Tourism inside a city is usually free of charge. It is usually related to the common facilities in the city itself, including but not limited to traditional and modern markets, monuments, museums, and a city environment that is specifically designed for the comfort of its residents. In addition, city parks, sidewalks and green open spaces, general facilities and transportation, and maintenance of historical buildings (Ashworth & Page, 2011), are all part of the attractions that pull in visitors.

According to National Conference on Urban Tourism (Garbea, 2013), urban tourism is a set of resources or activities which are located inside the city and are available for tourists who visit the city for leisure, business, or other purposes. These days, more and more cities are becoming cultural centres, a place to relax, shop, meet with friends or relatives, or a place to spend free leisure time (Garbea, 2013). Urban tourism is not only a form of tourism but has become an integral concept and a part of city life itself. The attractiveness of a city as a tourism destination can be differentiated into two aspects: primary and secondary. Primary aspects concern the unique general facilities that are integrated into the life of residents such as art and culture elements, sports facilities, cultural events, and entertainment. Secondary

aspects refer to city facilities that support a specific tourism experience. This is where tourism icons find their relevance and role.

With regard to product offerings, urban tourism has a basic difference when compared to nature and culture tourism. Urban tourism relies on the creative aspects and modification of resources which exist in the city, for the city to be properly presented as a competitive tourism product. Further, the sensation of urban tourism is different from natural and cultural tourism. A city that is characteristically marked by high-rise buildings, modern shopping centres, and modern civilization itself, has its own set of charms to become a superior tourism destination.

Research Methods

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, while secondary data was obtained from documents archived by the municipal office of Surabaya. Data collection took place in two stages; first through a focus group discussion to determine icon candidates (Kota Tua of Surabaya, Tugu Pahlawan, and Jalan Tunjungan) and secondly, through interviews with three key informants to validate the icon candidates. We conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Walters, 2016) to analyse the collected data.

The three key informants included a member of the House of Representatives of Surabaya (VA), a heritage expert (FHI), and a tourism practitioner (NP). All three informants were based in Surabaya. Even though the number of informants was small, these three key informants were very relevant to the research topic because of their expertise and experience.

Results and Discussions

Surabaya as a metropolitan city has its share of responsibility and contribution towards Indonesia's tourism. The diversification of tourism products, with the emergence of attractive urban tourism, is needed to balance and provide tourism alternatives in Southeast Asia. Some benchmarks where city tourism continues to flourish through sophisticated marketing include Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Traveling does not necessarily involve exotic nature or interesting culture, although these two things are indeed a vital element in tourism products.

Using thematic analysis, we found five themes regarding the three selected tourism icons (Table 2). Firstly, a code was developed based on tourist perceptions. Next, similar emerging themes were derived from the interview data (expert validation), with key informants from Surabaya's tourism stakeholders. Perceptions of Surabaya tourism icons, which were grouped using the code, were validated through key informant interviews. These themes will be discussed in the following sections.

Table 2. Themes derived from the interviews

Icon	Themes
Kota Tua	– The uniqueness of the tourist attraction — colonial architectural buildings – Photography activities in tourist areas – Ease of access
Jalan Tunjungan	– Well-established icon in Surabaya for songs and past romances – Photography activities in tourist areas – Easy access
Tugu Pahlawan	– Historical destination during the colonial period – Ease of access

Ease of Access

This theme emerged for all three icons: Kota Tua, Tugu Pahlawan, and Jalan Tunjungan. Tourism destinations have four main components: attraction, accessibility, amenity, and ancillary services (Cooper, 2021). In this respect, all three icons are easily accessible and close together in an area that has heritage, historic and heroism characteristics. The following interview excerpts support this:

> *Kota Tua (old town areas) of Surabaya located across the western part of the red bridge is the characteristic of Surabaya. Kota Tua of Surabaya areas cross over to other areas, in the east there is the red bridge (the Chinatown areas, Ampel, Kalimas Udik, and the Kalimas traditional port), in the south there is Tugu Pahlawan, Surabaya's old Keraton and Tunjungan* (VA)

> *Tugu Pahlawan cannot be separated from the historical dots around it, in which the Kota Tua of Surabaya becomes the center. Around Kota Tua of Surabaya, together with Tugu Pahlawan, there is Memorial Park in front of Red Bridge Plaza, Jembatan Merah, and Majapahit Hotel that together build an oasis of heroism in Surabaya.* (NP)

> *Jalan Tujungan is located close to the center of business and government. Therefore, it is proper that the Jalan Tujungan becomes the heart of Tourism in Surabaya.* (FHI)

Uniqueness of Colonial Architectural Buildings

This theme was found only for the Kota Tua icon. Kota Tua is the ancient city of Surabaya, which is on the west side of the Jembatan Merah, a landmark of Surabaya. The Surabaya city government adheres to its heritage building laws and regulations,

namely Surabaya Regional Regulation Number 5 of 2005 and Surabaya Mayor Regulation Number 59 of 2007 which was changed to Surabaya Mayor Regulation Number 19 of 2011. The following excerpts highlight the uniqueness of Kota Tua's colonial architectural buildings:

> *Kota Tua of Surabaya is like a 'living museum' with a collection of colonial architecture buildings. The existence of this area which has its uniqueness deserves to be an icon of Surabaya tourism to maintain its sustainability.* (VA)

> *Kota Tua of Surabaya is the first city in Surabaya. The existence of this city which was founded by the Dutch is still sustainable until now, marked by colonial buildings that are in one location.* (NP)

> *Kota Tua of Surabaya must be preserved and preserved as a cultural heritage building area.* (FHI)

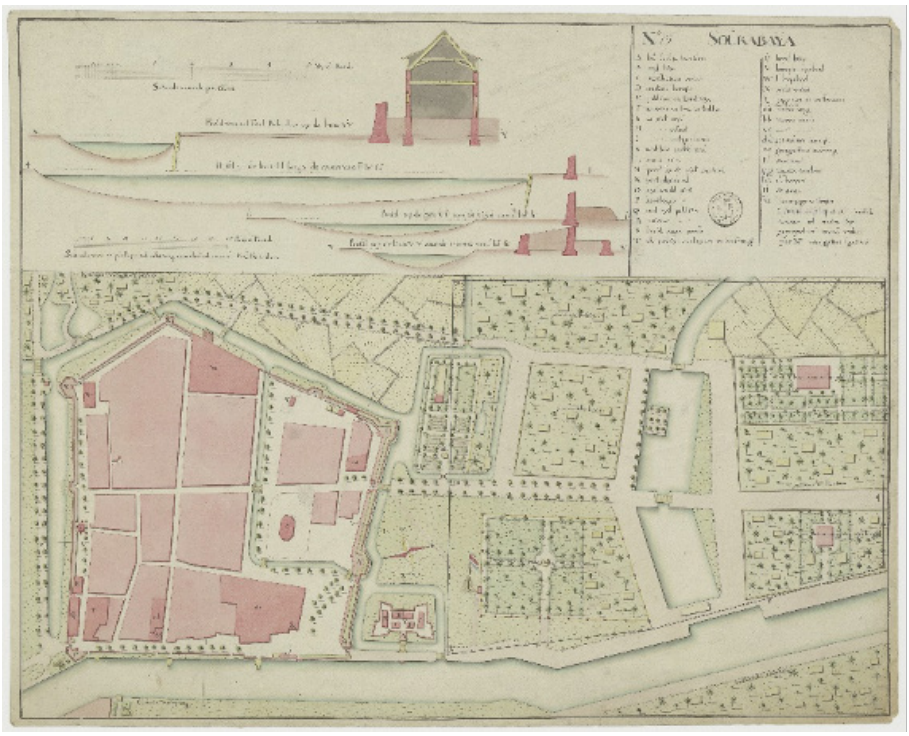


Figure 2. Map of Kota Tua (Surabaya Dutch Version) (Purwono, 2010)

Photography Activities in Tourist Areas

This theme emerged for the Kota Tua and Jalan Tunjungan icons. Kota Tua and Jalan Tunjungan offer tourists the opportunity to take photos with magnificent colonial building in the background. Further, the historic Jalan Tunjungan is also very memorable. Generally, tourists like to take photos at night because the night light gives a good image effect. The site is also famous as a location for wedding photos, community photos, and fashion shows.

This famous spot for taking photos has also helped boost the businesses of the cafes and restaurants on Jalan Tunjungan. Photo connoisseurs also get to enjoy local culinary delights at the café with friends, family, and communities.

> *The regulation of the old Surabaya, hopefully, this area can be a lot more interesting, and people will start to go there to take a selfie.* (VA)

> *The existence of Memorial Park in Kota Tua of Surabaya area can push tourism differentiation by walking through a historical building in North Surabaya and photo taking. For some people, walking is not as popular as cycling which has recently become booming. The sensation will be further felt when this walk is done during the evening. Other than leaving the impression, this walk can also optimize the existence of the abandoned old buildings.* (NP)



Figure 3. Colonial buildings of Kota Tua

Well-established Icon in Surabaya for Songs and Past Romances

This theme was found only related to the Jalan Tunjungan icon. There are approximately 70 buildings on Jalan Tunjungan. Some of these buildings have been designated as cultural heritage buildings and have undergone several rounds of renovations. Some have been partially converted while some others are still being treated to this day. The architectural style of the Dutch East Indies colonial era is very prominently reflected in these buildings.

An annual festival called *Mlaku-mlaku Nang Tunjungan*, organised by the Surabaya city government, is held in Jalan Tunjungan. More than 200 micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) participate in this festival to sell local products such as food, drinks, and crafts. The food sold here is diverse, from traditional local food to modern and fusion cuisines.

In addition, traditional dance performances, and fashion show parades using batik from local designers also take place. The performances that enliven the festival take place on a mobile stage erected in the middle of the road. The purpose of the *Mlaku-mlaku Nang Tunjungan* festival is to further promote Tunjungan area as a historical heritage icon. In addition, the festival also financially supports MSME businesses by bringing in tourists.

> *The concept of Mlaku Mlaku Nang Tunjungan is embedded in people's minds and is supported by the song "Rek Ayo Rek". Since the 20th century, it has become a commercial centre in Surabaya where many banks, electronic stores, hotels, restaurants, and Tunjungan shopping centres can be found.* (VA)



Figure 4. Jalan Tunjungan

Historical Destination during the Colonial Period

This theme was reflected for the Tugu Pahlawan icon. In the context of history, the construction of Tugu Pahlawan, in the aftermath of the 1945 battle in Surabaya, can

serve as an interesting tourist attraction. For those who understand and appreciate the historical value of a nation, the occupation of the Netherlands, Japan, and the Allies in Indonesia along with the traces of their heritage is an authentic tourist experience. Moreover, Tugu Pahlawan, which specifically commemorates and appreciates the services and sacrifices of the ancestors of the Indonesian nations, enkindles the curiosity of tourists to get to know the city better.

With more promotion and better development strategies, historical (heroism) tourism has the potential to supplant or match other types of tourism such as shopping tourism or nature tourism which is the current trend.

> *Tugu Pahlawan along with the surrounding museum needs to be interpreted not only as the central heroic landmark in Surabaya. But also, as the centre of heroism in Indonesia. Tugu Pahlawan can be appointed into Surabaya's Tourism Icon.* (NP)



Figure 5. Tugu Pahlawan (Kemdikbud, 2022)

This research can be replicated in the context of urban tourism which has a history of colonialism with historical buildings and past civilisations that were more advanced. This is in line with Baker (2007) who contended that the determination of tourist icons in urban tourism destinations must be based on history and landmarks.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the aim of this research and the findings, the following can be concluded:

1. Nominations for Surabaya's tourism icons include Kota Tua of Surabaya, Tugu Pahlawan, and Jalan Tunjungan, all of which are found in Surabaya's heritage area.
2. Tugu Pahlawan and Jalan Tunjungan can be pioneer icons to benefit from the reputation of Kota Tua's development. Subsequently, tourism can be expanded

to cover the 'belt' in the old town area which significantly impacts the northern part, the eastern part and the southern part of Surabaya.

3. The most dominant strategy for tourism development that is recommended in this research is the revitalisation of Kota Tua's ancient city atmosphere through additional infrastructure and its maintenance, as well as creating a stakeholder committee/group made up of Surabaya's cultural heritage experts and locals.
4. Further research also needs to be done to determine the feasibility and readiness of each of these icons to become a mainstay tourist destination, especially in terms of the capability of the local community and tourism actors, attractions, amenities, and related ancillaries.

Implication

This research contributes theoretically to advancing the literature of tourism, especially in terms of identifying tourism icons, in the context of city tourism destinations such as Surabaya.

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Building a Sustainable Marian Pilgrimage Climate in Indonesia after COVID-19

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Abstract: Even though COVID-19 as a global crisis is now declared over, Catholics' desire to undertake spiritual pilgrimages has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. This is a key issue that operators of Marian tourism destinations in Indonesia currently face. This study aims to help managers of Maria Cave pilgrimage destinations develop a sustainable Marian pilgrimage, particularly in Indonesia. The findings can provide valuable insights that can inform strategies to revitalise and sustain the Marian religious tourism sector in Indonesia post-COVID. Employing the case study method, the findings indicate that long-term development is critical for creating a sustainable Marian pilgrimage climate. Some of the key elements of the long-term development include pilgrimage destination managers being aware of pilgrims' needs and desires post-pandemic. Managers of tourist destinations too can no longer ignore pilgrims' demands for a safe environment free from health risks. Further, they must also take into account and address any negative or damaging aspects of these destinations. Additionally, social media marketing plays a pivotal role in the viability of pilgrimage destinations.

Keywords: Marian pilgrimage, COVID-19, e-WOM, Maria Cave, sustainable tourism

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Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably altered the world and the way we live. All countries and industries were affected, with tourism being the hardest hit (Gössling et al., 2021). This sector was completely paralysed, leading to colossal financial losses, salary cuts, job losses and even permanent closure of businesses. Although tourism was the most affected by the pandemic, it was also the last to recover after the pandemic. For example, in Indonesia, tourism activities have not fully recovered since the government relaxed pandemic regulations on outdoor activities (Zahara, 2022). Many people in Indonesia (and possibly around the world) are still hesitant to travel and visit destinations in their own country, let alone abroad (Jayani, 2021).

The Marian pilgrimage tour is one of those affected tourism segments in Indonesia. Maria Cave sites in Indonesia are currently very quiet and not as crowded as it was before COVID-19. The pandemic brought religious tourism to a halt and caused a decline unprecedented in recent times (Tsironis, 2022). Not only are the destinations deserted, but the local economies that depend on them have also collapsed (Huynh et al., 2021). Small businesses, lodging establishments, and parking lots around Maria Cave sites have lost a steady source of income. This source of income was supposed to provide the foundation for their lives during the pandemic and the new normal.

Collapsed or struggling tourism destinations is unquestionably one of the biggest challenges of the post-COVID-19 era. If the tourism industry is not revived quickly, it will undoubtedly hurt the economy of the country as a whole (Bagheri et al., 2022). Keep in mind that this sector is very reliable and is one of the main sources of foreign exchange for Indonesia. Thus, the government and the community must find effective and quick solutions to resurrect tourism activities that are safe and secure for people who have been disquieted by COVID-19. Certainly, it will not be easy to persuade people to embark on pilgrimages (Bailey, 2022; Kumar et al., 2022) when they are strongly concerned about their health (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2022).

This study looked into various approaches that could be used to revitalise and sustain the pilgrimage tourism sector in Indonesia following the pandemic. Specifically, the research question asks how stakeholders in Indonesia might develop a sustainable Marian pilgrimage climate after the pandemic. It is hoped that this study can assist the managers of Marian Cave pilgrimage destinations in developing a sustainable and robust tourism industry, particularly in Indonesia.

Literature Review

Marian Pilgrimage

One of the most popular spiritual pilgrimages among Indonesian Catholics is the Marian pilgrimage. In many developing countries, spiritual pilgrimage has become a popular activity. A spiritual pilgrimage is more prominent in the tourism industry than other types of tourism (Polus et al., 2022). Spiritual pilgrimage can be defined as activities undertaken by religious adherents to visit holy places, meet holy people, and attend religious events to fulfil their religious rituals or journey (Haq & Medhekar, 2022). The participants are generally active pilgrims looking for transcendental experiences such as "transformation, enlightenment, and change in life or awareness of an event" (Arceta, 2020; Collins-Kreiner, 2016).

Marian pilgrimage is a type of pilgrimage tourism that focuses on journeys to holy sites associated with the Virgin Mary (Nicoleides, 2016). The Roman Catholic Church (the main Catholic Church denomination in Indonesia) celebrates many holy days associated with Mary's sacrifice as a form of respect in the liturgy. Indeed, the gratitude, belief and love for the Virgin Mary by the Roman Catholic church is reflected in the hymns, folklore, art, and worship that are performed in each of their liturgies (Mylonopoulos et al., 2019). It is not surprising, then, that spiritual devotion and visits to Mary's holy sites are considered very important to Catholics (Belucio, 2019).

There are numerous Marian pilgrimage destinations in Indonesia, particularly in Java. But, unlike most Marian tourism destinations in European countries where Virgin Mary apparitions have occurred, all Marian pilgrimage destinations in Indonesia are not sites for Virgin Mary appearances. Instead, these sites are typically just a cave with a statue of the Virgin Mary, a small chapel for prayer or mass, and statues of the Way of the Cross surrounding it.

Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is a concept that revolves around the impact of tourism on the environment, society, culture, and economy for all local communities and tourists in the present and future (Font et al., 2023). In Indonesia, sustainable tourism encompasses four main pillars (Kemenparekraf, 2021), namely sustainable management (tourism business), long-term sustainable economy (socio-economy), cultural sustainability (sustainable culture), and environmental aspects (environmental sustainability).

According to Graham Miller, the development of sustainable tourism is related not only to environmental (physical and human) issues, but also to employment, financial leakage, customer aspects or level of satisfaction, and various other aspects

(2001). The motivation and satisfaction of tourists also has a significant impact on the development of sustainable tourism (Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021).

In order to meet tourist satisfaction, managers of tourist destinations, including pilgrimage sites, must understand the motivations of tourists or pilgrims to understand patterns or changes in their behaviour (Xu & Shukman, 2016). Additionally, motivation is essentially an internal factor that greatly influences tourist behaviour, particularly in terms of trip evaluation. This construct can be viewed as an important factor in the selection of tourist destination and deciding whether or not to visit (Hsu & Huang, 2009). Tourist motivation will have a significant impact on intention to visit, including whether or not their commitment to the environment, nature care, and conservation is consistent with a sustainable tourist destination management model (Hunter, 2000). Further, good tourism management, the use of clean and smart green technology, and sensitivity to local cultural heritage are critical for the development of sustainable tourism (Roblek et al., 2021).

Research Method

To achieve its research objective, this study included the various stakeholders of Marian pilgrimage such as destination managers, tour operators, and visitors. Grounded on a qualitative research design, the study comprised three stages : conceptualisation, data collection, and data analysis (Figure 1). Qualitative research allows researchers to conduct extensive data mining as well as interpret and comprehend the experiences of individuals regarding their social reality (Mohajan, 2018). In this respect, the present study intends to better understand how pilgrims and the surrounding community interpret Marian tourism using data collected in natural settings.

Case study was selected as the research method because it allows researchers to delve into the issue being studied (Haryono, 2020); in this instance, the Marian pilgrimage in Indonesia. Researchers can thoroughly investigate a program, event, action, process, or one or more individuals using the case study method (Creswell, 2003). Case studies necessitate a formal document outlining all of the steps involved in gathering empirical data (Yin, 1994). This is extremely useful for broadening the scope of studies while gathering evidence, analysing empirical data, and reporting case studies (Rashid et al., 2019). This study was carried out without the development of specific concepts or hypotheses, and no attempt was made to generalise the findings, focusing specifically on the case study on hand (Haryono & Wijaya, 2022).

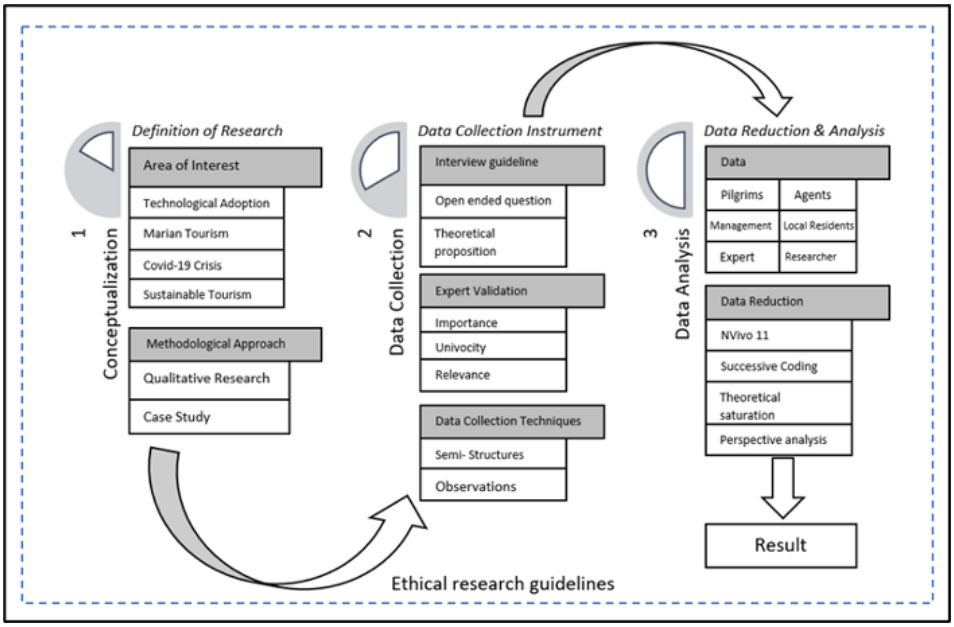


Figure 1. Research framework of study

Semi-structured interviews and observations were used to collect data for this study. This study included approximately 20 informants from five categories: pilgrims, managers, agents, residents, and experts. From October 2022 to January 2023, interviews were carried out at seven well-known Marian pilgrimage destinations on the islands of Java and Bali, namely: Sendangsono Maria Cave (DIY. Yogyakarta), Maria Kerep Cave (Ambarawa, Central Java), Poh Sarang Cave (Kediri, East Java), Watu Blencong Maria Cave (Boro, DIY. Yogyakarta), Travel Protector Maria Cave (Malang, East Java), Palasari Maria Cave, Bali and Air Sanih (Jembrana, Bali). The interviews were conducted with pilgrims, managers, and residents in each site. The collected data was analysed using NVivo 11, which allows us to easily read data based on text analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Endah et al., 2020) and employs successive coding, which includes open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Table 1 lists the study informants.

Table 1. Details about study informants

Category	Site	Informant
Pilgrimage travel agency 1	Jakarta	R1
Pilgrimage travel agency 2	Jakarta	R2

Table 1. (con't)

Category	Site	Informant
Pilgrim 1	The Cave of Holy Mary Kerep (Ambarawa)	R3
Pilgrim 2	The Cave of Holy Mary Kerep (Ambarawa)	R4
Pilgrim 3	The Cave of Holy Mary Poh Sarang (Kediri)	R5
Pilgrim 4	The Cave of Holy Mary Poh Sarang (Kediri)	R6
Pilgrim 5	The Cave of Holy Mary Sendangsono (Yogyakarta)	R7
Pilgrim 6	The Cave of Holy Mary Watu Blencong (Yogyakarta)	R8
Pilgrim 7	The Cave of Holy Mary Palasari (Bali)	R9
Pilgrim 8	The Cave of Holy Mary Air Sani (Bali)	R10
Manager 1	The Cave of Holy Mary Kerep (Ambarawa)	R11
Manager 2	The Cave of Holy Mary Poh Sarang (Kediri)	R12
Manager 3	The Cave of Holy Mary Sendangsono (Yogyakarta)	R13
Manager 4	The Cave of Holy Mary Palasari (Bali)	R14
Manager 5	The Cave of Holy Mary Pelindung Pejalanan (Malang)	R15
Local resident 1 (seller)	The Cave of Holy Mary Kerep (Ambarawa)	R16
Local resident 2 (seller)	The Cave of Holy Mary Poh Sarang (Kediri)	R17
Local resident 3 (lodging services)	The Cave of Holy Mary Sendangsono (Yogyakarta)	R18
Local resident 4 (seller)	The Cave of Holy Mary Palasari (Bali)	R19
Pilgrimage expert	Jakarta	R20

Results

Emerging from the Shadow of COVID-19

Even though the Indonesian government has lifted restrictions on outdoor activities, Indonesian Catholics are still hesitant to perform pilgrimage activities in the nearby

Maria Cave. Of course, this is a challenge for all parties to revitalise the Marian pilgrimage back to its pre-pandemic levels. In this regard, the motivation of pilgrims is important because it has a strong influence on their intention to visit (Hunter, 2000). Worries, anxieties, and fears amongst pilgrims must be eliminated as much as possible, as highlighted by one of the informants:

> *We encourage anyone… to share their photos and videos on social media. So that everyone knows you can now pilgrimage. Don't be scared.* (R13)

Of course, this is not a simple task. Convincing people to return to Maria Cave requires a strong strategy that restores public trust and confidence. One of the things destination managers have done is providing assurance that the destination is safe and all health protocols are still strictly maintained. Similar to the rest of the world, the pandemic has made Indonesians more conscious of safety and health issues. This is one of the positive outcomes of the recent pandemic. An informant suggested that managers of Maria Cave destinations must convince the public that these destination, are kept clean and strictly follow the government's health protocols:

> *Show the public that we make regulations so that pilgrims maintain cleanliness, and that they may not eat at the Goa Maria location. At Maria Cave, health protocols are still being followed.* (R12)

According to another informant, the pandemic itself was a divine blessing that brought ethereal meaning to worshippers. As a result, the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to Maria Cave after the pandemic is considered a blessing, which she seized. Some of the informants believed the pandemic has profoundly and significantly boosted their faith.

> *After the pandemic, I prayed more fervently at the Maria Cave...* (R6)

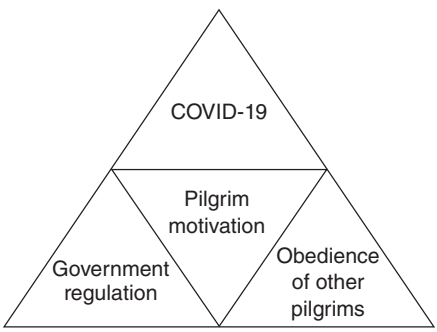


Figure 2. Pilgrim motivation after COVID-19

The findings show that the motivation of pilgrims to visit nearby Maria Cave sites was driven by several important factors (Figure 2), including their view of the ominous COVID-19 (which had a profound effect on the social environment and how humans interacted), and government provisions regarding health protocols (which have a direct or indirect impact on health conditions). As a result, health protocols that continue to be enforced in a consistent manner help guarantee pilgrim safety and comfort.

> *It is safe, but pilgrims generally require comfort and assurances that they will not be exposed to COVID-19 after the pilgrimage. That's all.* (R17)

The trauma of losing friends, relatives or family forced some respondents to reconsider their plans to gather with other pilgrims at Maria Cave. Pilgrims who are apprehensive should be given assurances that their destinations are safe. Pilgrimage tour operators continued to uphold health protocols for activities in public spaces when the government started allowing outdoor religious activities. As part of the activity restrictions, pilgrims were asked to keep a safe distance during the tour.

> *We adhere to the government's health protocols. We dare not break it.* (R11)

Pilgrimage tour operators admitted that it is difficult to persuade people to embark on pilgrimages. Very few Catholics in Indonesia now go on pilgrimages and virtual tour (as was common during the pandemic) remains a popular option for a pilgrimage to Maria Cave.

> *To be sure, COVID-19 has a greater impact than war. There are wars everywhere, and pilgrimages continue; however, as soon as COVID-19 struck, pilgrimage activities worldwide were paralyzed.* (R20)

Thus, tour operators and destination managers of Maria Cave need to strongly encourage and guarantee the comfort of Catholics who are afraid of going to public pilgrimage sites (Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021). Essentially, they hope to foster a positive and meaningful relationship between pilgrims (tourists) and the pilgrimage destination (Maria Cave). When the comfort and quality of service provided is maximised, tourist satisfaction and positive impressions will follow.

Tourism Players: Willingness to Take Risks

Post-pandemic, many tour operators have reintroduced religious tourism activities, such as pilgrimages to Maria Cave, even if many people are still afraid to travel. The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic was not something anyone had prepared

for. Specifically, tourism players lacked the right and sufficient resources to handle the challenges and aftermath of the pandemic. In crises like a pandemic, business leaders need transform into risk-takers while also making sound decisions (Figure 3). Further, businesses must adapt to rapidly changing situations and respond quickly as well. This sentiment is indicated in the following excerpt:

> *Leaders take the risk of perseverance and encourage employees to collaborate to find a solution to the crises they face.* (R1)



Figure 3. Strong leadership in crisis

It takes a strong resolve on the part of the leader to act decisively in uncertain situations as well as not being afraid to experiment with new business approaches or strategies "outside the box". This includes having the courage to implement critical innovations. Furthermore, the ability to plan effective crisis communications is critical. Leaders face the challenge of communicating effectively with both external (clients) and internal parties (staff) at the same time so that all parties are aware of and understand the difficult situation at hand. This management and leadership approach becomes even more vital in crises where decision making is made harder due to uncertainties and lack of information.

Aside from that, government support for pilgrimage tour operators and destinations should be strengthened as the industry recuperates from massive financial loss and revive itself.

> *The authorities (government) must, of course, secure. The government's role must exist for this industry to continue to exist. The government must put forth some effort.* (R2)

Maximising e-WOM

According to Roblek et al. (2021), future tourism development must prioritise the quality of tourism services, innovations that benefit the tourism sector, and sustainable development. When related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), sustainable tourism directly supports SDG-8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG-9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), SDG-12 (consumption and responsible production), and SDG-13 (climate change) (Tuomi et al., 2020).

In the context of tourism rejuvenation, communication becomes critical, particularly in addressing tourists' fears and concerns as well as restoring their trust (Chen et al., 2023). Destination managers and tour operators can encourage pilgrims to share about their visits and experiences on their social media accounts. By doing this, the pilgrims can help spread the word that pilgrimages are safe and sound. This method has proven to be quite effective as testified by this informant:

> *Be brave after seeing content on social media. It proved to be safe, and the location is also pleasant. They persuaded me to go on another pilgrimage.* (R7)

The sharing of experiences via social media has been extremely effective in encouraging and motivating Indonesian Catholics to return to pilgrimages. People reacted favourably to the dissemination of information via social media platforms which is considered practical and not "exaggerated" . This is referred to as the e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) power. e-WOM takes place rapidly in a crisis and can be positive or negative (Autant-Bernard et al., 2010). This is also inextricably linked to the fact that e-WOM does not necessitate a high level of expertise and anyone with access to mobile devices and internet connectivity can partake in e-WOM. During the pandemic, social media was advantageous to its users as it facilitated and helped users to stay in touch with others and keep abreast with the latest news.

> *Word of mouth from pilgrim testimonies is a powerful marketing tool for conveying the benefits (blessings, miracles, and so on) of pilgrimage visits to GMKA.* (R11)

Indonesians will seek references before making decisions because they live in a collective society that values listening and discussing. The two-way interaction made possible by e-WOM (Moran & Muzellec, 2017) appears to facilitate

Indonesians' habit of interacting and questioning the veracity of the information being disseminated. Thus, e-WOM can be used to raise "awareness" of Indonesian Catholics, motivate them and influence them to embark on pilgrimages (MajlesiRad & Haji pour Shoushtari, 2020).

> *Yes, I dare to go on a pilgrimage because someone posted a photo of a normal and safe pilgrimage. I did ask those who posted the question, and they persuaded me to go on the pilgrimage.* (R3)

Individual decision-making is influenced by a variety of factors, including events, changes in circumstances, wealth, needs, and even advertising (Hutter et al., 2013). Every person will look for various references to consider before making a final decision. As a result, sharing information or photos about Maria Cave and Marian pilgrimage via social media can have a significant impact on others who are considering. Positive content describing safe pilgrimage conditions after the pandemic will be critical in influencing the decision of Indonesian Catholics to embark on pilgrimages.

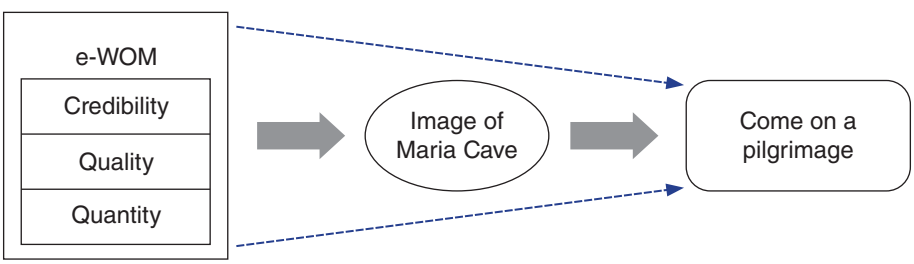


Figure 4. e-WOM on Maria Cave

Highly credible e-WOM with good quality content posted on a regular (frequent) basis can foster a positive image for Maria Cave (Figure 4). This is a part of marketing efforts to build and maintain the desired exchange relationship with the target audiences (Catholics) involving products, services, ideas, or other objects (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Positive e-WOM can have a significant impact on Indonesian Catholics' thinking, particularly in changing their attitudes and behaviours toward embarking on pilgrimages (MajlesiRad & Shoushtari, 2020).

E-WOM itself occurs through complex cultural processes and patterns; network co-production of marketing messages and meanings; and, in particular, through newer online community forums such as social networking sites (Kozinets et al., 2010). Content created by members of one's own community itself is more likely to be trusted and followed. Thus, social media content that depicts a safe and comfortable

environment during pilgrimage can act as a catalyst for other prospective pilgrims to overcome the fear that has been holding them back (Feldman, 2017). The knowledge and experiences shared through e-WOM inspires them to let go of their fear, enter a new state of awareness, and resume normal activities.

It is obvious that in the post-COVID-19 era, e-WOM has become an important tool for influencing community decision-making (Joshi & Singh, 2017). Many people rely on social media and the testimonies of other pilgrims about the current state of pilgrimage destinations to decide whether or not to make a pilgrimage. In short, for Catholics to return to pilgrimage, e-WOM is an important means or source of consideration in making decisions (Huete-Alcocer, 2017).

Safe and Healthy Tourism Destinations

In the post-COVID-19 era, healthy and safe destinations have become all the rage, similar to the green destination trend not long ago (Figure 5). Tourists now require a sense of security in the context of guaranteed safety and clean conditions. As a result, the destination manager's role in implementing health protocols is critical, as highlighted by the following excerpt.

> *We guarantee that the pilgrims who come will not form groups to avoid the transmission of COVID-19…, we are still implementing the health protocol.*
> (R15)

The Indonesian government had been and continues to be cautious in resuming activities in public spaces to avoid widespread transmission. Destination managers too must ensure that visitors do not contract any disease such as COVID-19 when they visit the destination. To achieve this, related health protocols and safety precautions should be implemented smoothly and visitors should be well-briefed so that they do not feel inconvenienced but reassured.

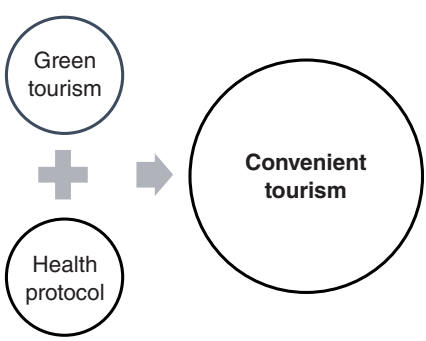


Figure 5. Promotion of green and health protocol-friendly destinations

Similarly, it is critical to manage digital publicity and marketing. Negative images or videos that circulate on social media or the internet, especially related to health and safety, should be sensibly handled or removed. For instance, many visitors still smoke in public places, which is one of the most common complaints. There are no regulations governing smoking restrictions at any Maria Cave. As such, this can generate negative publicity and contradicts the fundamental principles of tourism, which prioritises visitor comfort (Orîndaru et al., 2021).

> *Pohsarang's cleanliness needs to be improved, and a special mechanism is required to prevent smokers from smoking everywhere.* (R5)

Pilgrims are currently very cautious and sceptical of everything outside of their immediate environment. To regain public trust, destination managers must significantly improve hygiene conditions and ensure visitor safety. This is consistent with previously identified driving factors for tourism recovery (McKinsey, 2021), namely attractiveness of domestic destinations, accessibility, health and hygiene factors, business travel, and sustainability (Bhati et al., 2021; Ling et al., 2022). However, every visual aspect of a destination will influence visitors' desire or motivation to visit (Lee & Yan, 2021). As highlighted by an informant, destination managers should also look into damaged facilities at Maria Cave sites to prevent any discomfort to visitors as well as avoid bad publicity.

> *Several facilities, such as brokenwater faucets and filthy, poorly maintained toilets, are quite upsetting because they cause discomfort.* (R8)

It should be noted that public perceptions of a destination's attractiveness are heavily influenced by the psychophysical, ecological, and collaborative properties of the destination's landscape (Berlyne, 1972). As a result, managers should be concerned with more than just the rituals performed by pilgrims at the Maria Cave; they should also be concerned with the attractiveness and comfort of the Maria Cave landscape itself. Essentially, efforts to create or develop sustainable tourism can be realised when pilgrims as tourists and Maria Cave as tourist destinations have a positive and significant relationship (Pedersen, 2002).

Discussion

Based on research findings, to create a climate for sustainable spiritual pilgrimage in Indonesia, three important factors must be considered: the conditions of the pilgrimage destinations, the pilgrims themselves, and environmental issues (Figure 6). As previously stated, many pilgrims postpone their visit until the destination's conditions are safer and more comfortable. Even though it appears to be very

subjective, there is no exact measure of the sense of security and comfort that visitors expect. Safe and comfortable conditions generally refer to conditions that are free of COVID-19 transmission and that allows pilgrims to visit without being anxious or afraid.

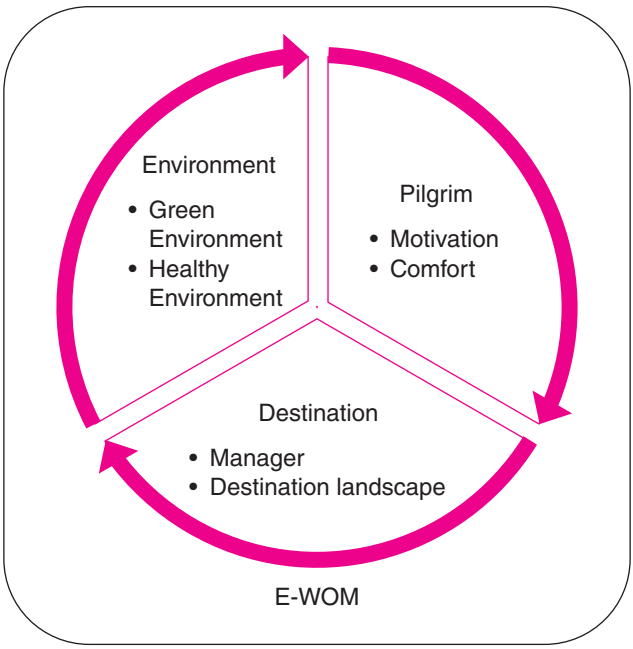


Figure 6. Establishing long-term Marian pilgrimage tourism

Destination managers must also be familiar with environmental preservation and visitor health insurance. While managers are no longer legally required to implement COVID-19 health protocols, they can continue to do so to ensure visitors are not exposed to this virus or other diseases. It is necessary to ensure that the destination is safe and free from health hazards.

Additionally, destination managers must capitalise on digital publicity and marketing to promote safe and comfortable Marian pilgrimages. Good publicity campaigns should harness technological advancements and keep abreast with the latest trends in advertising (Wilkes-Allemann et al., 2021). Good publicity about Marian pilgrimage destinations will have a significant impact on the public perception of these destinations. Thus, it is critical to encourage pilgrims to share their experiences in social media.

As previously stated, the visual aspects of a destination landscape will have a significant impact on encouraging tourists or pilgrims (Wengel et al., 2022) to

visit Maria Cave. In this context, a 'comfortable' and safe environment, as reflected through past pilgrims' social media posts, can help prospective pilgrims make the decision to visit these destinations. However, negative publicity can also cause prospective pilgrims to not visit. In today's era, no one can control over information and the rapid proliferation of information creates quick and widespread public opinion (Kim et al., 2004).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Basically, the key to the long-term development of the Marian pilgrimage post-pandemic is understanding the needs and desires of pilgrims. Managers of pilgrimage destinations must then heed the demands of pilgrims and address any damaging or negative aspects of the destination.

More and more pilgrims are now sharing their experiences or pilgrimage journey on social media, providing an avenue for prospective pilgrims to assess a pilgrimage destination before they make a decision. However, online publicity or e-WOM can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can promote a destination if it is positive, but on the other hand, it can also destroy the reputation of a destination if it is negative in nature.

The study recommends that managers of Marian pilgrimage destinations ensure that these destinations are proper, safe, and comfortable for pilgrims to visit. For instance, are the supporting facilities usable? Is the destination safe to visit, and does the destination fulfil the pilgrims' needs for praying and performing spiritual rituals? They must also safeguard and guarantee that the destination is safe and free from health hazards to keep the pilgrims' mind at ease.

As with all studies, this study has its limitations. As the study is confined to Marian pilgrimage destinations on the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali, the findings cannot be used to generalise other Marian pilgrimage destinations in other regions. Future investigations are necessary to validate the findings that can be drawn from this study. For example, by broadening the scope of research to be more global, or examining the long-term use of technology in the management of Marian pilgrimage destinations.

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Online Zakat Distribution during the Pandemic: Did Hotel Employees Find It Helpful?

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Abstract: Similar to many other countries, the recent COVID-19 pandemic raised the incidence of poverty in Malaysia. Many were affected, especially those in the private and tourism sectors. To help those affected by the pandemic, state and federal governments introduced many mitigation measures. In Kedah, the Zakat Kedah Board launched a special aid programme called "Zakat Khas COVID-19" or Special Zakat Fund for COVID-19. In light of the various movement restrictions in place, only online applications were allowed. Despite the large number of people affected financially, the Langkawi District Zakat Office only received a few applications. As such, this study investigated the effectiveness of online zakat distribution to poor hotel employees in Langkawi. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain data from 11 hotel workers in Langkawi. The findings reveal that four of the hotel workers have never applied for zakat aid online due to lack of awareness, two of the hotel workers' applications failed to go through, while others managed to get the special aid. The study also offers some suggestions to improve the effectiveness of online zakat distribution.

Keywords: Zakat, asnaf, technology, hotel, employee, well-being

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Introduction

Malaysia provides financial assistance to its poor citizens to cope with living costs, particularly during financial crises. This financial assistance is distributed through the Social Welfare Department and zakat institutions. Eligible Muslims are expected to pay zakat, which is obligatory in Islam. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Zakat Kedah Board or Lembaga Zakat Negeri Kedah provided financial assistance to those badly affected through a special programme called "Zakat Khas COVID-19" or Special Zakat Fund for COVID-19. The financial assistance was a one-off RM300 cash aid, made available to heads of eligible asnaf families who are Malaysian Muslims and have resided in the state of Kedah for at least one year (Zakat Kedah Board, 2021).

Asnaf refers to those who are eligible to receive zakat. Zakat is an Islamic financial term referring to a mandatory donation by all Muslim adults who are sane and possess a certain amount of wealth. Zakat is a religious obligation. In laymen terms, zakat is a form of tax collected from Muslims on yearly basis to be distributed to those who are poor. Muslims are required to pay 2.5% of their income, possessions, and savings as zakat according to a set amount (Zakat Kedah Board, 2021). Zakat is considered pure as it purifies people's wealth and discourages greed because a portion of the wealth is given to the needy and poor.

However, those who have been receiving monthly zakat or have a monthly household income of more than RM2,000 monthly were not eligible for the Special Zakat (Zakat Kedah Board, 2021). Malaysians are classified into three different income groups; T20, M40 and B40. T20 refers to the Top 20% of Malaysian household income or those whose household income exceeds RM10,920 per month. T20 is the high-income group, while M40 refers to the Middle 40% or those with a household income of more than RM4,851 but less than RM10,920 per month. B40 or Bottom 40% refers to the lower income category or those whose household income is less than RM4,851 per month (Romeli, 2024). Sadly, the significant financial repercussions of COVID-19 turned many T20 into B40 overnight.

In Malaysia, technological advancements and widespread internet access can be seen in every industry, field and function such as management and administration. The zakat institutions too have capitalised on technology and digital systems for zakat collection and distribution. Digital applications became even more crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing and mobility restrictions were imposed to curb the spread of the virus. In keeping with the procedures, the Kedah Zakat Board made the application of the Special Zakat online. However, according to Mohd Noor et al. (2020), online zakat distribution is only suitable for areas with appropriate infrastructures and IT literate communities.

Kedah is one of poorest states in Malaysia. In Kedah, the people of Langkawi, who mostly depend on the tourism sector were greatly affected by the pandemic. A total of 340 hotel workers had their wages cut, 902 were given unpaid leave and

92 people were laid off (Karim et al., 2020). There are still many villages in Langkawi that do not have the appropriate infrastructure for online zakat collection and distribution (Darus et al., 2021). In fact, it is questionable if the asnaf Gen X hotel employees from rural areas are IT savvy.

This leads to the main research question of this study which is "How effective is online zakat application and distribution to asnaf hotel employees in Langkawi?" This study is significant as it is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals agenda, specifically SDG 1 - No poverty and SDG 2 - Zero hunger. By explicating the contributing factors, it is hoped the findings can offer valuable insights to help zakat managers and administrators build public trust and enhance the effectiveness of the zakat system. Although the findings are focused on the Special Zakat, they are still applicable to the overall zakat system in the country.

Literature Review

Technology and its Role in Zakat Distribution

The Federal Territory Islamic Religious Council was the first to implement technology applications after it was corporatised in 1991. Other zakat institutions then followed suit, and today, their digital systems and operations enable the online collection and distribution of zakat, enabling transactions to be performed anywhere anytime with the help of mobile devices (Haziq-Mohamad & Wahid, 2017). This speeds up the transaction process and zakat payers no longer have to spend time, money or effort to physically visit zakat offices.

Zakat applications and distribution can also be done online. For example, zakat is distributed to asnaf students via e-wallet applications. Similarly, applications for the Special Zakat by the Kedah government were made online through its website: https://agihan.zakatkedah.com.my (Zakat Kedah Board, 2021). All zakat institutions in Malaysia have their own websites which provide complete details to the public regarding zakat, including payments and applications.

Past studies have shown that the distribution of zakat through the e-wallet application (kipplePay) to eligible Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) students has been highly efficient. Furthermore, payment through this method can help ensure that students use the zakat aid for the right purposes. The online distribution of zakat is suitable for people who are tech-savvy and have internet access as well as digital devices, making it one of the most common methods of distributing zakat in educational institutions (Mohd-Noor et al., 2020). However, not all asnaf are tech-savvy and there are still many rural areas that do not have internet access. Zakat Kedah Board has appointed several amils as agents in each district so that the number of asnaf who are overlooked can be reduced (Mohd-Noor et al., 2020). Amil refers to an individual who serves as an agent or intermediary between

zakat institutions and the asnaf group. Amil is responsible for the collection and distribution of zakat (Ab-Rahman et al., 2016).

Information about the Special Zakat programme was disseminated through the Zakat Kedah Board website, Facebook, word-of-mouth, national news, and amil of each district. The Langkawi district has 29 amils. However, the number of applications for the Special Zakat remained low. With online applications, the probability for asnaf who are weak, old and illiterate to be accidentally left out becomes higher. In addition to online publicity, zakat institutions still rely on conventional methods to disseminate information.

For effective distribution, zakat institutions use a comprehensive and diverse distribution method (Haziq-Mohamad & Wahid, 2017). There are different types of zakat distribution, among them are Livelihood Distribution Scheme, Monthly Livelihood Distribution Scheme, and Medical Distribution Scheme. The Johor Islamic Religious Council uses zakat to construct houses for asnaf or aqar property. According to Bunasir and Wahid (2017), the construction of aqar properties in Johor has benefited many asnaf. However, this type of zakat distribution is risky due to fundraising issues, the attitude of recipients, and the rising cost of building materials. The construction of an aqar property costs a lot of money. However, the selfish attitude of some recipients, such as the refusal to transfer accommodation assistance or their transit house to other asnafs who need it more, as well as the abuse of the assistance provided, has been disappointing. As a result, Bunasir and Wahid (2017) proposed that zakat aid to asnaf be supplemented with sermons to prevent the recipients from abusing or misusing it.

Negative Perception of Zakat System

According to Haziq-Mohamad and Wahid (2017), ignorance about the activities and procedures of zakat institutions can lead to negative publicity about the institution. Applicants for zakat aid must understand that zakat is the collection of wealth or money from the local community. If the collection for the state is small, then the amount of money that can be distributed is also small. Therefore, priority is given to asnaf who are more eligible or extremely poor. Negative perceptions arise as a result of a lack of transparency regarding the role of zakat institutions, their activities, and the measures they have taken to fulfil their responsibilities. Therefore, it is vital for zakat institutions to be more transparent of their activities, particularly in the distribution of zakat funds.

Zakat payers can choose whether they want give money to asnaf directly from their savings or through the zakat institution. To increase zakat collection, the confidence and trust of zakat payers in the efficiency of the system and distribution needs to be strengthened (Wahid, 2009). Apart from increasing the promotion and

publicity of the zakat office, it is also necessary to ensure that the medium used for zakat distribution is appropriate.

Hotel Employees' Well-being

Well-being refers to a psychological feeling and perception of one's own abilities to cope with life stresses, and its influence on mental health. It is an evaluation of self-emotions, including satisfaction with life, work, and physical appearance (Seligman, 2018). Employee satisfaction is influenced by wages, job security, work relationships and working conditions (Udayar et al., 2020). Well-being is also about emotions that are influenced by experiences. Ensuring employees' well-being is important because it relates back to a business' viability supported by its employees' high level of energy and enthusiasm, ability to focus on their work and service excellence (Uysal et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2024). However, employee engagement is strongly affected by the leader's or manager's recognition (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Therefore, it is important for hotel managers to give recognition to their employees, including being concerned about their financial difficulties which affect their life satisfaction, and find means to help them when they are in need. This is important to ensure their well-being is taken care of, which in turn, is crucial for organisational performance.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to obtain information from participants consisting of hotel employees in Langkawi who were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants (asnaf) were selected through purposive sampling with the help of a Muslim-friendly hotel manager, and the Langkawi Zakat officer who provided a list of zakat applicants and recipients. Purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling, is also known as judgmental sampling because researchers choose members of the population to participate in their study based on their judgement. The selected participants are in the best position to provide the information required to answer research questions due to their personal experience or expertise (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

An interview protocol with semi-structured questions was used to guide the interview process which took an average of 20 minutes per interview. Participants were interviewed individually to draw out nuanced rich information while allowing the researcher to have control over the line of questions. The availability of the participants was considered when setting the time and place convenient for the interviews. After interviewing 11 participants, no additional new information was obtained, which implies data saturation. Participants, who did not apply for the Special Zakat even though being eligible, were asked whether they were aware of a Special Zakat fund for COVID-19, why they did not apply, and what they think

of online zakat distribution. On the other hand, the Special Zakat recipients were asked how they knew about special aid, what they think of online zakat distribution, and how it can be improved into an effective zakat distribution for asnafs. All participants were also asked whether online zakat distribution should be continued. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

The collected data was analysed using thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data. It organises and describes datasets in detail. The method also offers flexibility and provides rich, detailed, and complex insights. Thematic content analysis is useful to summarise large data as it can highlight the differences and similarities across the data gathered. Furthermore, thematic analysis can elicit unanticipated information and it is useful for producing good qualitative interpretation of the situation or phenomenon being studied. Thematic content analysis also involves searching across data to find repeated patterns of meaning (Stemler, 2015).

Thematic content analysis begins with the familiarisation stage. To familiarise with the data, all the audio data was transcribed. The transcripts were reviewed again with the recorded audio to determine the accuracy of the transcribed data. The researcher noted all the initial ideas in the transcripts. Next, the transcripts were coded. After that, all the inter-related codes in the transcript were grouped under the same theme (Stemler, 2015). The theme identification and grouping were focused on finding the cause for missing out the Special Zakat application, as well as the effectiveness of the online zakat distribution and how it could be improved.

The fourth step in the analysis was reviewing the themes. The fifth stage was defining and naming the themes. The themes were read multiple times to ensure consistency. This is an ongoing process to refine the specifics of each theme until the researcher can generate clear names for each theme. This stage is also known as data reduction. It requires focus, and includes discarding data, sharpening, and organising data until the final conclusions can be verified. Finally, the themes were interpreted, and the report was produced. Data interpretation is a stage which involves researcher's understanding of the phenomenon as told by the participants. The researcher structured the interpretation to answer the research questions and produce a report of the analysis. Prior to confirming the interpretation, a co-researcher served as the second reader of the interview transcripts, coding, and themes. A second reader is needed to validate the accuracy and consistency of the interpretation.

Results

The participants of this study were divided into two groups. The first group (coded as G1) were employees of a Muslim-friendly hotel in Kuah, Langkawi. The second group (Coded as G2) were recipients of the Special Zakat Fund for COVID-19

obtained from the Langkawi Zakat Office. The first group consisted of six participants (R1–R6) and the second group, five (R7–R11). The participants' profiles are listed in Table 1. In addition to the 11 participants, a representative from Langkawi Zakat office was also interviewed for clarification.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Code Name	Age	Occupation	Household Income	Zakat Aid Received	COVID-19 Special Zakat Application	
					Experience	Opinion
G1R1	35-40	Hotel bellman	RM1500	None	Tried but failed	Difficult
G1R11	35-40	Hotel room attendant	RM2800	None	None	No comment
G1R3	20-25	Hotel room attendant	RM1500	None	None	No comment
G1R4	45-50	Hotel roo m attendant	RM1200	None	Tried but failed	Difficult
G1R5	35-40	Hotel linen attendant	RM1500	None	None	No comment
G1R6	20-25	Hotel technician	RM1300	None	None	No comment
G2R7	35-40	Hotel manager	RM5000	RM300	Succeeded	Satisfied
G2R8	35-40	Hotel supervisor	RM3300	RM300	Succeeded	Satisfied
G2R9	30-35	Hotel technician	RM1500	RM300	Succeeded	Satisfied
G2R10	30-35	Hotel technician	RM1500	RM300	Succeeded	Satisfied
G2R11	50-55	Hotel retiree	None	RM300	Succeeded	Satisfied

Five themes emerged from the content analysis of the interview transcripts: Unawareness and ethics as reasons for not applying to Special Zakat Fund for COVID-19, online zakat distribution benefiting tech-savvy hotel employees, mixed feelings about the effectiveness of online zakat distribution, necessity of screening questions and field visits, and finally, lack of IT skills and determination as causes for failed applications.

Unawareness and Ethics —Reasons for not Applying Special Zakat Fund for COVID-19

None of the participants from Group 1 (R1–R6) received the special zakat aid even though they were affected by the pandemic, and were all categorised as B40. Out of the six participants, only two were aware of the special aid. The main reason being the belief that there are many others who are more deserving of the aid. Even though their household income was classified as B40, they did not consider themselves as poor. G1R2 questioned her own eligibility to apply for the special aid. "*Am I eligible to apply? I think G1R3 can apply. She supports her mother and sister.*" G1R2 has four children. She earns RM1300 and her husband earns RM1500 monthly. Besides working as a room attendant, she also makes and sells cookies. Another participant who questioned her eligibility to apply for special aid was G1R6.

G1R3 is also a room attendant. She is single but supports her mother who is a stroke patient and her two younger siblings who are still schooling. When asked whether she applied for the special aid, she shook her head. When asked why, she looked down in shame, indicating that she was not aware of the aid given by the zakat office. G1R3 is not educated, and it is clearly reflected during the interview. It was also obvious that she is a kind person who deserved the special aid the most compared to the other participants.

Online Zakat Application Benefits Tech-Savvy Hotel Employees

Based on the primary data, online zakat application is very convenient for those who are tech-savvy. Participants from the second group were satisfied and acknowledged the effectiveness of online zakat distribution. All participants from the second group agreed with G2R11 who said, "*Zakat online makes it easier, information can be obtained from the Zakat website*." G2R10 added, "*I got to know about Special Zakat COVID-19 from the internet. The portal is good. It is more convenient. I am satisfied. It is easy.*"

Mixed Feelings about the Effectiveness of Online Zakat Application

Five participants recommended that online zakat distribution should be continued, four others were undecided because they had limited knowledge of online zakat, while two participants said it would be difficult for them. G2R8 said, "*It's good because now the kids are really good with the internet*." On the other hand, two participants who failed to apply zakat online were unhappy with the online distribution. G1R1 and G1R4 contended, "*It will be difficult for us to receive Zakat aid*". According to G2R7, online Zakat distribution is suitable for the younger generation but not for the elderly:

> *It's not good to distribute Zakat online because the people who need Zakat are usually the elderly. They don't even want to use all these gadgets. Right? So, it's not good. For them, it's better to fill in the form manually. Social media can be used for the young people, but for the old people, there would be a problem. Zakat should be distributed to them through the mosque.* (G2R7)

G2R9 was embarrassed to admit that he applied for the Special Zakat Fund for COVID-19. According to him, the application was made by his wife, and it would have been inappropriate to reject the money since it was already approved. He suggested that zakat aid be given only to those who really need it.

> *I have suggestion for improvement. Give zakat to those who really need it. Prioritize them. People like us, we are still young. We can work and earn money. But there were times we had difficulties. But during that time, many people were in difficulties. If possible, give it to those who really need it.* (G2R9)

Necessity of Screening Questions and Field Visit

All participants who successfully applied, and received the special zakat aid were satisfied with the system. Only three participants gave a few negative comments even though they were also overall satisfied with the online distribution. For instance, G2R7 found the screening questions troublesome.

> *I'm satisfied with online zakat distribution, but it requires answering difficult questions, all sorts of things we need to answer. It was the first time I applied for Zakat aid, and I got it. But that was during Movement Control Order period. I had no salary. During that time everyone does not have enough money. Now I'm okay. I guess others are okay too. It really helped.* (G2R7)

Similarly, G2R8 found the special aid distribution effective and very helpful. She said "*During the pandemic, my household income was only RM1000. It was not enough.*" G2R8 however, raised a pertinent issue regarding the applicant's honesty regarding eligibility. She said, "*With online applications, people can sometimes cheat.*" G2R8 suggested that zakat officers conduct field visits to check for themselves the veracity of the applicant's claims before approving. Besides identifying frauds, they can also discover deserving recipients.

Lack of IT Skills, and Determination Results in Application Failure

When applications for zakat was made online, there were poor hotel employees who missed out on the opportunity because they lacked IT skills. Aged between 30 to 50

years old, they faced difficulties in applying for zakat online. A check with the zakat office found that their applications did not reach the zakat office. G1R1 admitted that he was not satisfied with the online zakat application because of the difficulties he encountered when applying online. The system in the zakat office also did not receive his application, perhaps because it was not done properly or some important steps were missed out or the instructions were not followed correctly. G1R1 also mentioned other asnafs who missed out on applying the special zakat aid. He said, "*They are my friends who work as fishermen. We don't know how to do it.*" His colleague, G1R4 echoed the same sentiment and reflected poor determination.

> *I tried to apply for Zakat online. I went to the link. I didn't know the answer to the questions. It asks for the address of the nearby mosque. As for the income, I wasn't sure what it was asking for. I can't comprehend. After that, I didn't follow anymore. Let it be. We are not smart.* (G1R4)

Applicants needed to upload their salary slip to prove that their income is no more than RM2000, which is one of the conditions for applying for the special zakat aid. G1R1 and G1R4 applications were incomplete because they did not know how to upload their income statement. As for G1R5, she did not know how to apply. She explained "*I don't know how to apply Zakat online. My friend told me about the Zakat aid, but I didn't know how to do it.*" Perhaps, it was not made clear that Langkawi zakat officers were readily available to help asnafs who face difficulties in applying for zakat online. The Langkawi Zakat Officer stated, "*This online application makes it easier for people to apply with the help of their children and close relatives. If they can't fill it out online, they can call, and we will help.*" This is consistent with G2R11's statement. He said "*I tried to apply on my own twice but failed. Then, my son in law helped me with the application. I used the money to fix my roof. I want to apply for Zakat aid again.*"

Table 2. Themes identified from thematic analysis

No.	Themes	Mentioned by
1.	Unawareness and ethics — Reasons for not applying Special Zakat Fund for COVID-19	G1R2, G1R3, G1R6
2.	Online zakat application benefits tech-savvy hotel employees	G2R10, G2R11
3.	Mixed feelings about the effectiveness of the online zakat application	G1R1, G1R4, G2R7, G2R8
4.	Necessity of screening questions and field visit	G2R7, G2R8, G2R9
5.	Lack of IT skills, and determination results in application failure	G1R1, G1R4, G1R5

Discussion and Implications

The online application for the one-off special zakat aid was effective to in helping those who faced financial difficulties due to the pandemic, but only because they were tech-savvy. They were satisfied with the online application because it was successful. However, the findings show there were others who were more qualified or deserving but failed to apply due to lack of awareness or applications did not go through the system due to tech illiteracy. This finding is different from Mohd-Noor et al. (2020) who found that zakat distribution using mobile devices is effective. This could be attributed to the fact that the participants of the earlier study were university students (who are well-versed with digital devices) while the participants of this study were hotel employees who were mostly uneducated, low-income earners.

At this juncture, it is would be pertinent to admit that online application should be an option but not a replacement. The responses indicate that the conventional method of application is still needed even if the online option is available. The online application must be supplemented with the existing conventional method where the amil assists asnafs who are not computer literate. The inability to cope with technological advancements is prevalent among the older hotel employees. Previous studies have shown that there is a difference in digital technology adoption and use based on age and other demographic factors such as income level, location (rural or urban), and race (Charness & Boot, 2022; Nikou et al., 2020).

Zheng et al. (2023) suggested that enterprises transform technologies to be more senior-friendly and offer personalised technology for the elderly. However, this may come at a cost that may not be affordable to the elderly, especially asnaf. Therefore, the conventional method which involves processing applications and distributing zakat through the mosque's amil remains the more feasible option. The suggestion of using various channels to distribute zakat is consistent with Haziq-Mohamad and Wahid (2017) who suggested a diverse and comprehensive method of zakat distribution. In addition, zakat officers also need to make field visits to identify frauds and assist those who are unable to help themselves due to poor health, old age, technological illiteracy, and intellectual disability.

Continuous monitoring should be done so that there are no fraud cases or people abusing or misusing the status of asnaf. Some zakat payers do not go through zakat institutions to pay zakat because they believe they know who deserves zakat aid better. This perception increasingly became common as more and more people witnessed affluent people receiving zakat, including zakat for their children's education. There have been cases where students have reported that some of their classmates whose parents own luxury cars and frequently travel for pleasure receive zakat. These students then expressed their dissatisfaction to their zakat-paying parents.

To circumvent this weak point in the system, zakat applications should be linked to institutions that have access to salary information for private and government

employees such as the Employees' Provident Fund, the Public Service Department and the Inland Revenue Board. It should also be linked to other institutions such as the National Registration Department. This verification mechanism can help zakat offices weed out dishonest or ineligible applicants. Those who are self-employed such as contractors, need to provide an annual income verification letter. According to Abdul-Wahab (2017), there are other measures that can be undertaken by the zakat institutions to gain the trust of Muslims: (1) improve service quality, efficiency, and speed; (2) provide awareness and understanding about zakat, for example through religious talks; (3) publicise the benefits and effectiveness of zakat distribution to the local economy, and (4) showcase transparent zakat governance.

With regard to low-income hotel employees, as highlighted in this study, they can benefit from a close coordination between zakat officers and human resource managers. The hospitality industry is known for hiring those who are uneducated or lowly educated for low-skilled jobs such as cleaner and housekeeping attendant. Further, many hotels hire foreign labour to do these jobs because locals consider these jobs as dirty, dangerous, and demeaning (Ahmad & Scott, 2021). These jobs are very hard but the pay is low (Faria et al., 2024). Those who have sick parents to care for when they return home from work may not have the time to socialise, browse through the internet or use social media. As a result, they lack awareness, and miss their opportunity to apply for any government financial aids such as the Special Zakat programme.

The study suggests that zakat officers communicate regularly with human resource (HR) managers of hotels so that they can share information regarding zakat or any special aids. Then, the HR managers can disseminate this information to all the staff. In this way, the hotel management is supporting the well-being of its employees which is crucial for organisational performance (Agarwal, 2021). In addition, hotels can also invite zakat officers to train tech illiterate hotel employees on how to apply for zakat online, and to give them motivational talks on the need to move forward and adapt to technological advancements. Furthermore, the zakat office can organise mobile booths at hotels to help employees with online application or address any of their grievances relating to zakat. This suggestion is consistent with Abdul-Wahab (2017) who urged zakat institutions to gain the trust of Muslims by enhancing its services.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, we can conclude that online zakat application is effective, but only for those who are tech-savvy. However, it should be continued but at the same time, amils should be retained as they still play a significant role helping those not tech-savvy or the elderly who struggle with online application. In addition, zakat officers and family members who are more tech-savvy should continue to help with

online zakat applications. Most importantly, asnafs should be motivated to seek help from the zakat office, and the officers need to conduct field visits to identify those who are qualified and weed out those who abuse or misuse any zakat aid.

This study contributes to the theoretical knowledge by investigating zakat distribution among hotel employees, specifically during COVID-19. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study of its kind. The study provides some recommendations regarding the effectiveness of online zakat application that have practical implications for the zakat institutions. There are several limitations to this study that should be noted. First, the sample size is small, and all participants are concentrated in Langkawi. This limits the breadth of the findings. Second, due to the qualitative nature of this study, the findings cannot be generalised. Future studies may use a larger sample size and cover a broader geographical area using quantitative methods to allow generalisability.

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Trends in the Hotel Industry Post-COVID-19: A Webinar Analysis

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Abstract: Understanding emerging trends in the hospitality industry is essential to provide exceptional guest experiences, as guest preferences and needs are constantly evolving. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these trends and how experts perceive and observe them in the post-pandemic era remain relatively underexplored. This study employed a webinar analysis to examine expert insights on post-COVID-19 trends in the hospitality industry. Findings show that the pandemic has reshaped guest decision-making, with conscious business travel becoming a prominent consideration. Guests now prioritise informed choices and seek high-touch experiences. To remain relevant, hospitality operators must comprehend the evolving landscape and adapt to these changes. Through a new approach of webinar analysis, four publicly available webinars featuring industry experts were screened and analysed. This research contributes to the industry by identifying emerging trends and their implications for customer satisfaction. By understanding these trends, hospitality operators can enhance their services and foster resilient customer-focused strategies to withstand future crises.

Keywords: Post-COVID-19, trends, guest preferences, webinar analysis, hospitality industry

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Introduction

The hospitality industry encompasses a range of establishments that provide accommodations, dining experiences, resorts, and other services to cater to guests (Aksoy et al., 2022; Ubayawardhana et al., 2023). Together with the event sector, this sector is widely acknowledged as one of the vital components sustaining the tourism industry. The dynamic tourism and hospitality industry has proven to be a critical key driver for a country's economic recovery (Dogru & Bulut, 2018; Prajapati et al., 2022). However, like tourism, the hospitality industry is known to be fragile and easily affected, especially during crises (Aksoy et al., 2022). This has been proven true by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which was a financial nightmare for most business sectors, in particular, hospitality. Reports and studies show that the hospitality industry was the hardest hit compared to other sectors (Prajapati et al., 2022). Subsequently, COVID-19 completely changed the tourism and hospitality landscape, especially guests' expectations and preferences.

Reichheld et al., (2017) highlighted the need for hospitality operators to truly know their guests. Building upon this principle, this study aims to investigate the recent changes that have taken place within the hospitality industry, specifically in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also aims to elucidate future trends observed by hospitality experts that may be useful for the rejuvenation of the hospitality industry. In this respect, hospitality operators need to be alert and responsive in this post-COVID recovery phase in order to reconnect with guests and gain their trust back (Accor, 2023).

The novelty of the study is underpinned by its valuable insights pertaining to post-crisis management. Jaques (2007), through the Relational Model of Crisis Management (Figure 1), introduced four phases of crisis management: Crisis Preparedness, Crisis Prevention, Crisis Incident Management, and Post-Crisis Management. The Relational Model of Crisis Management was deemed best suited for this study because it predicates a holistic view of crisis management. Crises are unexpected, and the possibility of their occurrence is high. Failure in managing crises can potentially threaten the sustainability of an organisation (Jaques, 2007). The Relational Model of Crisis Management provides a clear framework, emphasising that businesses must always be prepared for crises. It is important to know how to deal with crises as the circle of crisis management is interrelated and never-ending (Jaques, 2007).

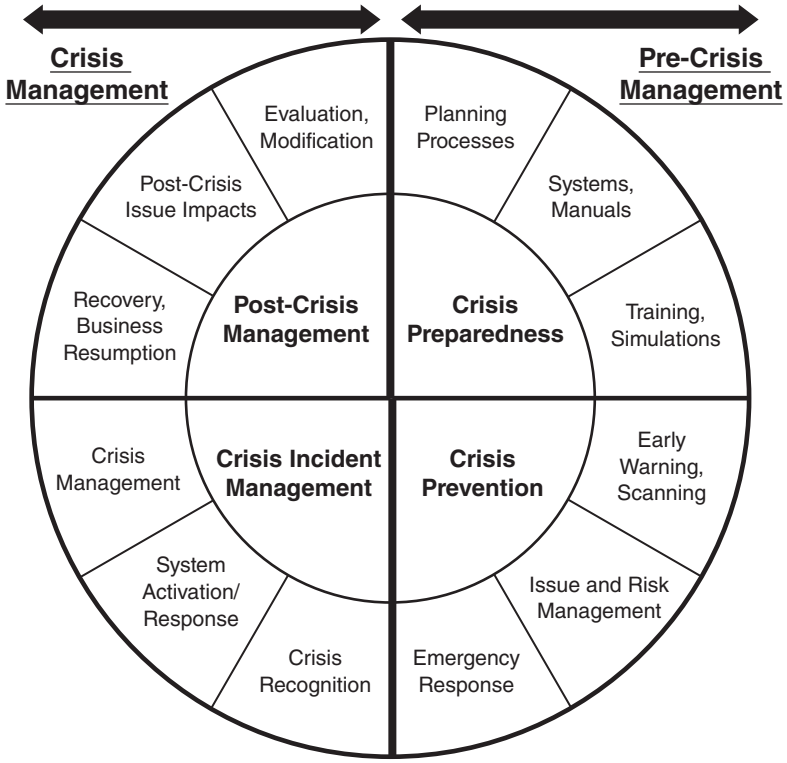


Figure 1. The Relational Model of Crisis Management (Jaques, 2007)

Rationale of Study

A thorough review of literature revealed that extensive research has been conducted on the first three phases of crisis management, while neglecting the last phase. For instance, Prajapati et al. (2022) focused on the reopening of the tourism and hospitality field in the near future, but failed to pay attention to post-crisis management. Hence, the current research aims to contribute to the understanding of post-crisis management, in the context of the hospitality industry. Hussain (2021) contended that actions taken by individuals during post-crisis are based on conscious decisions and a deeper level of awareness. Therefore, it is beneficial for hoteliers and hospitality operators to prioritise outstanding service delivery, environmental sustainability, and using new technology and social media to successfully adapt to the changing landscape (Prajapati et al., 2022). This study holds its own value as it provides measures for hospitality business recovery as suggested by industry experts in webinars. Implementing appropriate measures is crucial as it can help hospitality operators recover from the COVID-19 crisis and become more resilient (Prajapati et al., 2022; Abdul Razak et al., 2023).

Tourism is widely recognised as the engine for economic growth (Dogru & Bulut, 2018), validating the need for more studies on how to increase revenue from tourism-related businesses (Reichheld et al., 2017). In this regard, hospitality operators should diligently understand the latest trends as the hospitality sector is service-based by principle, and thus must understand its guests. Being aware of current prevailing guest preferences will facilitate in the delivery of exceptional guest experiences (Reichheld et al., 2017). Previous studies have examined trends in the hospitality sector from different perspectives. For example, Mangruwa et al., (2021) as well as Rahimizhian and Irani (2021) examined trends from guests' perspectives, while Prajapati et al. (2022) focused on analysing trends using secondary data, such as published papers, news stories, and articles. One study, in particular, examined trends from both academic and industry perspectives (Aksoy et al., 2022). The present study is based on current practitioners' perspectives. Thus, the discussion is industry-oriented, and meaningful because practitioners are primarily concerned with profit as it is crucial to recover from the financial implications of the pandemic (Aksoy et al., 2022). Hence, this study is regarded as complementary and enriching the existing knowledge base, providing valuable insights related to the hospitality sector.

Literature Review

While the objective of this study is to understand the trends occurring within the hospitality sector, it is also essential to provide an overview of the factors that contribute to the constant changes in the industry. Some of the most significant factors influencing hospitality trends include global crises, technological advancements, social trends, and economic trends (Aksoy et al., 2022). It is important to note that the discussion about trends is not limited to these major factors alone; there are countless other points that could be explored. However, for the purpose of this study, the discussion is limited to how the pandemic has changed the trends within the hospitality sector post-COVID-19. This study is distinctive because it focuses on the post-COVID-19 period, whereas existing literature has mainly concentrated on trends during the pandemic (see for example, Afliza et al., 2022; Canhoto & Wei, 2021; Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Rahimizhian & Irani, 2021; Wenzel et al., 2021).

In essence, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated disruptions to the global hospitality industry (Aksoy et al., 2022). Due to a series of travel restrictions and border closures, people had no choice but to cancel or postpone their trips. Consequently, many hotels and other hospitality establishments had to temporarily close their businesses, resulting in billions of dollars in losses (Afliza et al., 2022). Many studies documented how hospitality operators struggled through the pandemic. Their findings demonstrate that only a few were able to survive, while most had to permanently close their operations.

Grant Thornton (2020) highlighted several approaches used by hospitality operators during COVID-19, including liquidity management, reducing cash requirements, scaling down labour costs, and debt restructuring. Towards the end of COVID-19, researchers shifted their focus to business recovery strategies (see for example, Dayour et al., 2020; Mangruwa et al., 2021; Rahimizhian & Irani, 2021; Wahab, 2021). One of the most important findings unravelled during this period is that the operations of the hospitality industry before, during, and post-COVID-19 are entirely different (Grant Thornton, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for hospitality operators to fully understand these changes and trends to redesign their services or offerings according to the guest expectations. Today's guests expect value-added services, indicating that they expect hospitality establishments to go above and beyond in their offerings and services.

Methodology

This section describes the process of how this unique study used webinars as a source of information. Webinars are live online events that allow hosts to connect with audiences from all over the world. During webinars, hosts can share slides and conduct demonstrations, while guests and audiences can interact by asking questions through chat boxes or unmuted microphones (Moreau, 2017). The nature of webinars, which allows for two-way communication between hosts and audiences, makes them ideal for qualitative data collection. Consequently, papers that gather data from webinars are regarded as qualitative studies (Tiong & Fen, 2020).

The development of this paper involved exploring and understanding a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). It started with formulating research questions, and data was inductively built around particular general themes. The collected data was then appraised and coded, followed by data interpretation, which is presented in the results and discussion section. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of this study allowed the researchers to listen to participants and develop an understanding based on what was heard (Creswell, 2009). The interpretive research philosophy permits an in-depth investigation through webinars using a small sample size (Saunders et al., 2012). To fulfil the objective of the study, the researchers viewed and analysed webinars that were live-streamed and publicly posted on YouTube from October 2022 until March 2023. Four different webinars, that involved nine experts or panellists, were selected for this study.

The identification and selection of the webinars were conducted in three steps. Firstly, the researchers formulated research questions and determined the keywords relevant to the study. As the focus of this study was to explore industry experts' perceptions about the trends in the hospitality sector post-COVID-19, the keywords used included "trends," "hospitality," and "post-COVID-19." Second, since the study aimed to examine recent trends within the hospitality industry, only webinars

that were streamed after October 2022 were selected. Defining the exact period of "post-COVID-19" is challenging; hence, the decision to include only recent webinars aligned with the study's objective of exploring recent trends within the hospitality industry. It is important to explore the most recent trends as trends are constantly changing (Aksoy et al., 2022), and webinars are an effective platform to capture the most recent information. To comprehend further developments, additional studies were carried out. This assessment criteria was used to identify four suitable webinars on YouTube, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected webinars for analysis published on YouTube

Title	Date posted
2023 Hospitality Trends: What's the Impact to Hotel Operations?	Feb 10, 2023
Top 5 Review Response: Trends for Hotels and Hotel Groups in 2023	Dec 14, 2022
2023 Hotel Guest Trends to Help you Maximise Revenue	Mar 9, 2023
2023 Luxury Travel Trends	Oct 25,2022

Results

Nine experts participated as panellists in the four webinars. Their demographic profiles are presented in Table 2. To protect the anonymity of these experts, the researchers assigned pseudonyms, referring to them as "E" to signify the term "expert" and "nth" to indicate their respective turn in the webinar.

Table 2. Demographic profile of the industry experts

Expert	Gender	Position
Expert 1st	Female	Vice President
Expert 2nd	Female	Chief Revenue Officer
Expert 3rd	Male	General Manager
Expert 4th	Male	Director of Marketing
Expert 5th	Male	Managing Director
Expert 6th	Male	Director of Hospitality and Food
Expert 7th	Male	Vice President of Client Experience
Expert 8th	Male	Chief Executive Officer
Expert 9th	Female	Founder & Chief Executive Officer

Findings

Trends in the hospitality industry play a crucial role in shaping the way hotels, restaurants, resorts, and hospitality businesses cater to their guests. Trends

continuously evolve in response to various factors, including changes in consumer preferences, advancements in technology, industry innovations, and shifts in market demands. Additionally, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, also significantly change the way hospitality businesses operate. Using thematic content analysis, researchers identified ten trends that have emerged in the hospitality industry in the post-COVID-19 period. These trends are anticipated to persist through 2023 and beyond, significantly influencing how the sector operates and serves its clientele.

Theme 1: Innovations and Technological Advancements in the Hospitality Industry

The nine experts in the webinars unanimously emphasised the need for continuous innovation and technological advancements within the hospitality sector. The first expert (E1) said:

> *The voice of innovation is getting louder every year. Appropriate partners are required to translate this topic into a ready-to-use deliverable model.*

E3 further emphasised the importance of being innovative in managing customer expectations versus reality. Leveraging technology allows hotels to create better guest experiences efficiently. E3 asserted that "*every hotel has the same mission, which is to turn expectations into reality. To create better experiences, we are striving to have more efficient resources*". The experts admitted that mobile apps provide a more direct and personalised way of sharing information with guests, replacing the traditional approach of placing pamphlets on front desks. E3 commented:

> *With mobile apps, hoteliers can send information about the product directly to the customer, unlike before when most hotels placed all pamphlets on the front desk counter. Mobile apps can do more than just facilitate check-ins.*

E1 added, "*Importantly, the apps must be user-intuitive*."

Hotels are also recommended to maintain a customer database in order to understand their guests, their preferences and habits. According to E1 and E6, it is crucial for hoteliers to know how to translate this data into meaningful information that can be used for marketing purposes. E2 highlighted that hoteliers "*should not be overwhelmed by data*" and should instead focus on understanding the specific trend or pattern they wish to analyse from the data.

E2 commended the idea of online check-in, stating, "*brilliant online check-in, and so I checked in the night before; my keys were ready, and I went straight to my room at 9 am. I loved it, and I really appreciate it*". Further, in the aftermath of the pandemic,

innovative technologies that help reduce physical contact are increasingly preferred by guests.

Theme 2: Transparency within the Hotel Business

E4 emphasised that:

> *… guests want to see the hotel's unique personality and responses, whether apologetic or not. However, it is common for hotels to provide explanations rather than simple apologies.*

Further, E5 opined that a hotel's website should serve as more than just a booking platform; it should actively respond to everything, "*bad or good*." E2 suggested hospitality operators to use an app that can record and collate rewards and recognition points for their staff. This kind of transparency fosters employee engagement and motivation.

Theme 3: Social Media is Essential for Marketing and Promotion

Social media has revolutionised the way hospitality establishments market themselves, engage with guests, and manage their online presence. It has become an essential tool for these establishments to enhance their visibility, reputation, and ultimately drive bookings and revenue. Many experts (E4, E5, E6) agreed that social media functions as a vital marketing and promotional tool in the post-COVID-19 phase. Guest reviews have also proven powerful in influencing purchase decisions among other potential guests. E4 stated, "*Prospective travellers prefer to stay at a hotel that is famous and highly trending,*" and advised, "*Hotels should avoid using negative words that can tarnish their reputation*." E5 also emphasised the role of social media as a powerful engagement tool.

According to E5:

> *Hospitality operators must be content creators. Instead of direct selling, operators can create authentic content, gain more followers, drive high engagement, and indirectly become influencers.*

Theme 4: Travellers Crave for Private and Exceptional Travel Experiences

E3 stated that people nowadays "*crave for exceptional experiences.*" E5 noted that the advancements of technology can help hotel guests enjoy a private and personalised hospitality experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people coveted the privilege of privacy while still enjoying personalised and exceptional experiences. In this regard, E7 shared:

Luxury travellers prefer private aviation for safety and security, hence knowing these changes, aviation employees must be aware and focus on customers' preferences.

E3 added:

Having a user-friendly mobile app allows customers to directly order what they want from apps during their stay. If I want to order, I would do it on my mobile because it's so easy.

Theme 5: Hotel Guests are Becoming More Eco-conscious

According to E1, after COVID-19, people have started to appreciate the environment more and are now focusing on sustainable tourism and conscious travel. This is consistent with E8, who said:

[...]other than health and security focus, sustainability in hotels has become a primary consideration among guests.

This statement is further supported by E7, who suggested:

In 2023, people should make responsible choices and not choose providers solely based on publicity or the number of purchases. Travelers should be diligent and selective in their choices. It will benefit us in the long run.

E3 also corroborated this:

[…] sustainability aspects and all sustainability-related matters are very popular in the market nowadays.

Theme 6: Exceptional Experience Requires the Integration of Human Touch with Technology

E3 stated that "*the combination of technology and human touch is important during the comeback of the hospitality sector.*" The integration of human touch and technology can create a seamless and delightful guest experience that combines the convenience and efficiency of technology with the personal care and attention provided by hotel staff. E1 echoed the same sentiment by stating, "*I agree on technology, but human touch is still needed because it helps us form our memory while traveling*."

E2 agreed with E1, highlighting that technology cannot fully replace the role of humans in integrating information between the hotel's front and back of house.

Certain areas still require human involvement to synchronise the necessary elements. She said "*we need people to help connect the front of the house with the back of the house. Technology cannot detect room readiness and to what extent the room was cleaned.*"

E3 highlighted the importance of technology in training new employees:

> *Ninety-five percent of hotels are using contract labour; different people will come over; problems happen when new employees don't know how to make a bed according to hotel standards. So, technology such as recorded videos can help new team members learn how to do that right. Pictures and recorded presentations may also be helpful.*

Theme 7: Revenge Traveller vs Blended Traveller

E1 introduced the term "*revenge traveller*" and explained its significance. According to E1, revenge travellers are individuals who, after being restricted from travel during the pandemic, now have a strong desire to make up for lost time and explore new destinations. E1 stated:

> *There's been so much speculation since the pandemic, and for a few consecutive years, people's movement was forbidden. Hence, when the crisis ends, people started to travel, and we can consider them as revenge travellers.*

Revenge travellers are driven by a pent-up desire to travel and are likely to extend their stay in destinations because they have saved extra money during the COVID-19 pandemic. E1 anticipated, "*mid-sized markets are expected to grow more compared to before the crisis.*"

The term "blended traveller" was also discussed during the webinar. Blended travellers combine work and leisure, opting to work remotely while taking advantage of their new location to enjoy a few extra days of leisure. E1 said, "*Blended travel has come in. You go on to work and you take a couple of days of leisure.*"

Theme 8: Training and Empowerment for Exceptional Service

The experts unanimously agreed that staff training is a crucial element that must be prioritised. They stated, "*Training is important for standardization and maintaining business core values.*" As the pandemic brought about significant changes in hotel operations, it is essential to ensure that staff members are well-informed and aware of these changes. E3 emphasised the significance of training as a means of achieving standardisation and upholding the hotel's core values and excellence.

The experts also highlighted the impact of technology integration, and the need for employee training. According to them, additional training is required to equip

employees with the necessary skills to ensure that employees are proficient in using artificial intelligence or apps for the hotel's operations. E3 stated:

> *A lot of internal conversation and training must be made. This is to make sure everything works fast and efficiently. Employees must be aware and alert about the existence of artificial intelligence or apps within the hotel operations.*

The experts also emphasised the importance of staff empowerment. E5 stressed that all employees should possess extensive information about the hotel and its offerings. Even housekeepers should be capable of recommending products and services to guests. E5 explained:

> *All staff must have extensive information about the hotel. Even as a housekeeper, he or she must be able to recommend the best food at the hotel or spread the news about the special of the day!*

Theme 9: Guests are more Cautious about Their Health and Safety

E8 emphasised the pivotal role that hotel's health and security protocols play in the industry's recovery:

> *Health and security solutions provided by the hotel property play a big role in recovery. The seriousness of the hotel to focus on customer health and security determines whether customers will come back.*

Guests are more conscious about their safety conditions when choosing hotels and travel destinations. E8 further stated, "*Guests put conditions for a safe hotel and destination to visit as they are more aware about that.*"

According to E7, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a heightened appreciation for life and health. Further, E2 recommended hospitality operators to prioritise and adhere to SOPs to ensure customer health and safety. This is supported by E7 who said:

> *After the pandemic, clients are now purchasing with emotional intelligence. They focus on mental health, listen to others, and show high empathy.*

E8 also echoed that guests have high expectations for wellness during their travels:

> *Guests nowadays have high expectations on wellness. They focus on a healthy menu and a cozy room with better sleep. In fact, travel is a part of the journey*

> *to well-being. People tend to embark on health in their vacation. After vacation, they want to come back home with health and improved overall well-being. Travel becomes a catalyst towards a well-being journey.*

Theme 10: Employee Welfare—Nurturing the Workforce Post-COVID-19

As soon as the world entered the endemic stage, the hospitality industry started to become incredibly busy. According to E2, amidst the high demand, there is a significant staff shortage within hotel operations. E1 suggested investing in the right technology to automate repetitive tasks: "*Repetitive tasks that can be replaced with automation, let's have them automated.*" This was agreed by E3:

> *Due to high demand for accommodation-related services, it ended with too much work and over-reliance on front desk personnel. Technology adoption could eliminate stress on the employees. A stress-free employee can present their work in a better way, leading to a higher purchase rate.*

E2 encouraged hospitality operators to nurture strong cooperation and empathy among staff members. He stated, "*It is about how you make the lives of your team members better*"…and "*helping to connect the whole operation.*"

Discussion and Implications

As many past studies have highlighted, innovations and technological advancements are pivotal in shaping the hospitality industry, revolutionising business operations, and enhancing guest interactions and services. According to Prajapati et al. (2022) and Aksoy et al. (2022), technology should be made a long-term requirement within the hospitality industry. The advancements in social media have also made it easier for marketers and service providers to identify and understand their guests based on their platform, content, feedback and engagement (Reichheld et al., 2017). For example, older generations tend to use Facebook, while the youth are more active on Instagram. By adopting a content-focused approach, hospitality operators can establish a strong online presence, connect with their target audience, and foster brand loyalty (Kang, 2011). Hospitality operators must understand the types of customers they are dealing with and cater to their needs.

There is also an increasing trend of eco-conscious hotel guests (Aksoy et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a catalyst for increased awareness and understanding of sustainability among hotel guests. The worldwide movement control order (MCO) witnessed nature healing as exemplified by rivers becoming cleaner and wildlife returning to degraded habitats. This development has forced people to rethink of their actions that pollute the environment. Some guests even

contact hotel operators to verify whether they practice sustainability, indicating that people today are more environmentally conscious and value sustainability (Accor, 2023). This corroborates with Aksoy et al. (2022) who confirmed that environmental sustainability will increasingly become prominent in the future.

Many guests prefer to have human assistance or interaction for their travel (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020). While human touch remains essential for providing personalised interactions and exceptional service, technology complements and enhances guests' experiences in the hospitality industry. Thus, establishments need to integrate human touch with technology in order to create exceptional experiences for hotel guests (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020). It involves utilising technology as a tool to enhance and support the human touch, rather than replacing it entirely. Guests preference for private and exceptional travel experiences aligns with the findings of Pillai and Sivathanu (2020). In this regard, efficient apps allow for personalisation during travel, driving client engagement and fostering stronger brand love (Accor, 2023). Similarly, Prajapati et al. (2022) suggested adopting contactless hospitality and smart facilities.

Practising and maintaining health and safety protocols are essential for restoring public trust and preserving a brand's reputation. This is consistent with Accor (2023) who highlighted that guests desire healthy social connections in a safe and secure environment. Taking cognisant of this trend, hospitality operators should ensure the most conducive and safe environment for ease of mind and comfort of guests. In the post-COVID-19 era, hotels must proactively implement stringent health and safety protocols to reassure guests and create a secure environment for their stay. From enhanced cleaning and sanitisation measures to contactless check-ins and improved air quality, guests expect hotels to prioritise their well-being. By consistently demonstrating a commitment to health and security, hospitality establishments can instil confidence in guests to return as repeat guests.

The last theme talked about employee wellness, which hotel management or operators must prioritise. Employee wellness refers to proactive efforts taken by a business to support and promote the health and well-being of its workforce. To alleviate the burden and stress levels of employees, repetitive routines in hotel operations can be automated through technology. For instance, embedding a chatbox in the business website to answer basic customer questions can reduce the workload of customer service staff (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020). In addition to fostering teamwork, implementing strategies or programmes that take care of employee physical and mental well-being is essential. This can include providing access to healthcare resources, promoting work-life balance, offering stress management and mental health support, as well as creating a positive and supportive work environment. Furthermore, taking care of employee welfare becomes a strategic marketing approach for hospitality operators. Guests themselves prefer establishments that prioritise the well-being

of their employees. This highlights the importance of effective crisis management with employees (Jaques, 2007). Leveraging technology, fostering teamwork, and providing comprehensive wellness support are key strategies to supporting and retaining a healthy and motivated workforce, ultimately contributing to the success of establishments in the post-pandemic era.

Conclusion

This research delved into the emerging trends of the hospitality sector after COVID-19. The selected webinars not only discussed these trends but also offered insightful suggestions for hospitality establishments on how they can capitalise or learn from them. Providing exceptional guest experiences has become paramount, as consumers now expect more than just basic services; they seek personalised, meaningful interactions and experiences that resonate with their values and preferences. The post-COVID-19 hospitality landscape is witnessing a paradigm shift, driven by the convergence of various trends and the evolving outlook of both consumers and businesses. Adaptation to these trends and alignment with the dynamic demands of the market is vital for hospitality operators to succeed. As the sector moves forward, innovation, sustainability, and guest-centric approaches will likely remain at the forefront of hospitality industry trends, shaping a more resilient and customer-focused landscape. In conclusion, the heightened conscious level of customers when making decisions in their lives after the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a crucial signal for hospitality operators.

The study explored the emerging trends in the hospitality industry from the industry experts' point of view, as shared in webinars. It contributes to a better understanding of the post-COVID-19 hospitality landscape. Published articles based on recent webinars are scarce even though they are timely and beneficial. In terms of practical implications, the study provides hospitality operators or management suggestions on capitalising the changing demands of guests post-COVID-19. However, as the findings are confined to only nine industry experts, they may not represent the full picture as to how COVID-19 has impacted the hospitality sector. As such, future studies could be expanded to be based on human conscious levels, which could explore concepts such as Sigmund Freud's iceberg analogy and Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory.

Beyond the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, other factors like inflation and geopolitical considerations also contribute to the evolving trends in hotel guest preferences. As the hospitality industry continues to evolve, staying attuned to these trends and investing in guest-centric strategies will be key to a sustainable and thriving business. By embracing innovation and sustainability, hospitality operators can create a lasting and positive impact on their guests' experiences, thus carving a niche for themselves in the industry and staying ahead of competition.

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Linking Service Climate to Customer Satisfaction: A Multilevel Analysis of Muslim-friendly Hotels

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Abstract: Customer satisfaction is essential to a hotel's revenue, including Muslim-friendly hotels (MFHs). Amidst a plethora of studies that investigated customer satisfaction based on just customer perceptions, this study approaches the topic from a different angle. It examines both employee and customer perceptions of MFHs, particularly the relationship between service climate, service behaviour, and service quality on customer satisfaction. The integration of two theories known as the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the extended Service Performance (SERVPERF) model resulted in 55 questionnaire items. Two sets of surveys were designed to gather data from employees working at MFHs (organisational service climate and service behaviour) and customers who visited MFHs (service quality and customer satisfaction). A hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) software was used to analyse the collected data from 120 employees and 120 customers at 24 MFHs. The study found that most employees feel that they work in a favourable service climate in MFHs. In addition, customers rated service quality in MFHs positively and a significant relationship between sevice quality and customer satisfaction was established. These findings offer new insights into MFH management, based on responses obtained from two critical parties involved in service delivery.

Keywords: Service climate, service behaviour, customer satisfaction, service quality, Muslim-friendly hotels

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Introduction

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic caused a catastrophic impact on the world tourism industry. More than 7,000,000 people died as a result of this pandemic (World Health Organization, 2023). The World Tourism Organization (2023) reported that in 2021, there was a sharp decline in the number of foreign tourists, falling by 1 billion visitors and USD1.0 billion loss in total export earnings. In 2022, although international tourist arrivals increased tremendously by 172%, it was still 37% lower than in 2019. In this regard, it is important to increase travel activities to rejuvenate the tourism industry and recoup losses during the pandemic. Business surveys have revealed that the COVID-19 crisis had a severe impact on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with many small businesses facing significant disruptions and their proprietors expressing deep concern (Hanafiah et al., 2021).

Customer satisfaction is one of the crucial elements of service organisations such as hotels. Although it is not a new concept, since it has been widely discussed since the 1960s, it is still relevant in contemporary research (Paulose & Shakeel, 2022; Sánchez-Rebull et al., 2018). Cardozo (1965) described customer satisfaction as "satisfaction results when customers either conform their pre-purchase expectations for a purchase service or positively disconfirm (exceed) their expectations regarding purchased services" (p. 249). Customer satisfaction is also a key indicator of an organisation's performance. Numerous studies link customer satisfaction to various factors including profitability (Schneider & Macey, 2009), revisit intent (Sadeghi et al., 2016), loyalty (Thakur, 2019), and favourable word-of-mouth (Nasir, 2021). These connections demonstrate how important it is for a business to prioritise customer satisfaction.

Many studies have only collected feedback from customers regarding their satisfaction (Nunkoo et al., 2020; Paulose & Shakeel, 2022; Sun et al., 2022). Further, these methods of measuring customer satisfaction may be biased towards employees and organisations, who substantially influence how it is evaluated. The growing interest in decent work within the tourism industry highlights the increasing recognition of the need to address decent work issues in this sector (Faria et al., 2024). Employees are viewed as playing an equally significant role in encouraging service excellence (Gong et al., 2020; Simons et al., 2018). Thus, in order to determine customer satisfaction, this study looked at the perspectives of both employees and customers at Muslim-friendly hotels (MFHs).

Literature Review

Muslim-friendly Hotels (MFHs)

Accommodations that follow Islamic rules are known as Muslim-friendly hotels (MFHs) (Battour, 2018). To help Muslims fulfil their daily religious duties while travelling, MFHs provide a range of amenities (Stephenson, 2014). This study utilised

the term "Muslim-friendly hotels" as delineated by Muslim-friendly hospitality services standard (MS2610:2015). Such accommodations are also known as halal hotels, Shariah-compliant hotels, and Islamic hotels. The first standard issued by the Department of Standards Malaysia, MS2610:2015, aims to help the travel and tourism sector meet the needs and preferences of Muslim tourists.

These terms are all rooted in the Arabic term, *halal*. Al-Qardawi (2013, p. 352) defined halal as "something which is permitted, concerning which no restriction exists, and the doing of which the Lawgiver, Allah, has allowed." Thus, "halal" is referred as a "guide of all aspects of life" (Jafari & Scott, 2014, as cited in Arasli et al., 2021).

Compared to the conventional hospitality concept, which originated from the West, the Muslim-friendly concept is unique as it is linked to the Islamic faith. Although there are some debates about the level of enforcement within the premise itself, these accomodations offer Muslim-friendly facilities and services (Abdrakhmanova & Moghavvemi, 2022) and acknowledge the Qur'an as the divine guidance for their operations.

With MFHs, Malaysia's tourist sector has a lot of potential. The expectations and desires of Muslim travellers are catered to at MFHs (Mazlan et al., 2023); at present, non-Muslim travellers also find MFHs to be remarkable (Battour et al., 2018). Additionally, Malaysia attracted 5.3 million Muslim tourists in 2019, bringing in RM16.72 billion in tourism receipts (Tourism Malaysia, 2021).

Service Climate, Service Behaviour, and Customer Satisfaction

According to Schneider et al. (1998), service climate refers to "employee shared perceptions of practises, procedures, and behaviour that get rewarded, supported and expected with regard to customer service and customer service quality" (p.151). In other words, service climate refers to how employees view their workplace, which could impact how well they provide services. On the other hand, the variety of behaviours and demeanour displayed by employees is referred to as service behaviour (Peccei & Rosenthal, 1997).

The social exchange theory (SET) is suggested as a possible explanation for the association between service climate and employee service behaviour. Social exchange, according to Blau (1964, p. 61) is defined as "the voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do bring from others." Therefore, according to SET, this means that when organisations create a work environment that is beneficial to their employees, these individuals reciprocate with good work. This can be attributed to the fact that workers believe their organisations value the roles they play in the workplace (Elche et al., 2020). Employees anticipate essential training, support from coworkers, rewards, and personal resources such as hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy in a supportive working environment (Schneider et al., 1998; Wang et al., 2021).

Additionally, a supportive work climate or environment nurtures employees who recognise the value of excellent customer service to the organisation. According to Bae (2020) and Hong et al. (2013), creating a conducive work environment motivates employees to improve customer satisfaction. As such, customers are satisfied as a result of the employee's impression of the service climate which in turn, motivates the anticipated service behaviour.

These studies have been mainly multilevel research, as the nature of the service climate concept represents the organisational/group unit perceptions (higher level) (refer to Elche et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2013; Schneider & Macey, 2009). Since most of the aforementioned studies have been conducted in the conventional service industry, the findings may not be entirely applicable for MFHs. Therefore, for this study, four hypotheses are proposed in the context of MFHs:

H1: Service climate at the organisational level is positively related to customer satisfaction at the individual level.
H2: Service climate at the organisational level is positively related to service behaviour at the individual level.
H3: Service behaviour at the individual level is positively related to customer satisfaction at the individual level.
H4: Service behaviour at the individual level mediates the relationship between service climate at the organisational level and customer satisfaction at the individual level.

Service Climate, Service Quality, and Customer Satisfaction

The concept of service climate emerged in the 1990s. In its early introductory phase, Schneider and his colleagues often associated service climate with service quality and customer satisfaction in the United States' bank branches. Their seminal research disclosed that bank branches whose employees evaluated their branch's service climate with higher scores were also given positive reviews by customers (Schneider et al., 1998, 2005; Schneider & Macey, 2009). Although service climate was initially researched in the context of bank branches, the concept expanded quickly to other service organisations such as hotels, restaurants, and airlines (Elche et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2013; Sadeghi et al., 2016), and perhaps as a preference in MFHs.

In previous studies, service quality and customer satisfaction have been actively discussed in the MFH context. According to Bitner and Hubbert (1994), quality of service is determined by customers' evaluation. Furthermore, this concept is often linked to customer satisfaction (Padlee et al., 2019).

MFHs emphasise Muslim-friendly concepts as their uniqueness compared to conventional hotels. In MFHs, service quality has been positively and significantly associated with customer satisfaction (Jeaheng et al., 2019, 2020; Mohd Azmin et

al., 2021). Although many studies found that Muslim visitors are satisfied with the service quality offered by MFHs, they also have their preferences for facilities labelled as Muslim-friendly. According to Dinar Standard and Salam Gateway (2022), it is essential that Muslim-friendly products and services are reasonably priced. However, Muslim-friendly programs, halal food, and Muslim-friendly lodging must also be designed with an emphasis on relaxation and luxury.

The extended Service Performance model (SERVPERF) was mooted due to the inadequate Muslim-friendly dimensions in the original SERVPERF model developed by Cronin and Taylor (1992). The extended SERVPERF model has six dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, responsiveness, and Muslim-friendly concept. Thus, we also posit the following hypotheses:

H5: Service climate at the organisational level is positively related to service quality at the individual level.
H6: Service quality at the individual level is positively related to customer satisfaction at the individual level.
H7: Service quality at the individual level mediates the relationship between service climate at the organisational level and customer satisfaction at the individual level.

Conceptual Framework

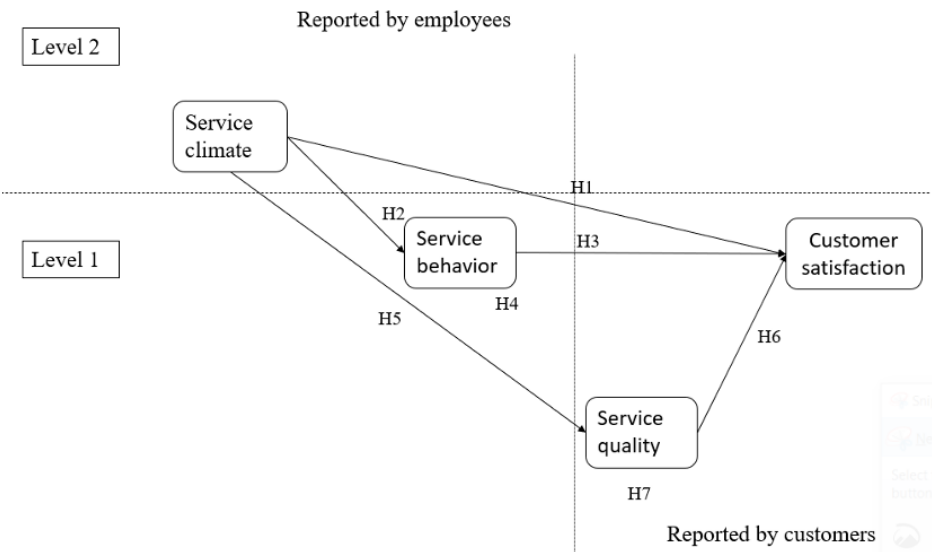


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Method

Research Design and Participants

The dyadic multilevel model was the quantitative approach adopted for this study. Aiming for a target of five employees and five customers for one MFH, the researchers reached out to 120 employees and 120 customers from 24 MFHs in Malaysia with a response rate of 8%. This figure was based on the rule of thumb proposed by Krull and MacKinnon (1999), who recommended that 20–30 organisations are sufficient to assess multilevel effects. Additionally, according to Mathieu and Taylor (2007), five people can represent one organisation.

To obtain the sufficient number of participants, simple random sampling and quota sampling were employed. Firstly, from the list of MFHs recognised by Salam Standard, a simple random sampling was conducted to identify 24 MFHs. The researchers then contacted the managers of these hotels for permission to conduct the survey. After obtaining the permission, quota sampling was used to obtain information from five employees and five customers in each MFH.

There were two categories of respondents for this study: employees and customers. Employees must be those who first interact directly with customers. This is because the study is focused on the interactions between customers and employees during service delivery in MFHs. As a result, the study looked into the perspectives of employees like wait staff, bellhops, and receptionists. The second group consisted of customers who have at least had one overnight stay or visited a MFH.

Of the total employee sample, 61.7% were female participants and 38.3% were male participants. Local (94.8%) Malay (84.2%) Muslims (87.5%) made up the majority. In terms of marital status, the percentage was almost equal for the single (51.7%) and married (45.8%). In addition, the majority of workers (85.5%) held permanent jobs and made less than RM4,000 (92.5%) per month. On the other hand, for the customer respondents, the number of males (45.8%) and females (54.5%) was almost equal. The majority of them were Malays (85.8%), Muslims (86.7%), and Malaysians (91.7%). With regard to occupation, most were self-employed (31.7%), followed by government employee (20%) and private sector (17.5%). Additionally, 71.7% of the respondents earned a monthly salary of RM4,000 or more.

Measurements

The MFH employees were asked about service climate and service behaviour. The 6-item Global Service Climate Scale created by Benjamin Schneider and his colleagues was used to evaluate service climate (see Schneider et al., 1998). Further,

two domains — the 5-item in-role and the 5-item Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB) — developed by Bettencourt and Brown (1997) were used to assess service behaviour. A 5-point Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), was used to measure each item.

Customers of MFHs were assessed on service quality and customer satisfaction. In order to assess service quality, SERVPERF statements from Cronin and Taylor (1992) with an additional dimension, Muslim-friendly concept, were used. On the other hand, items based on Susskind et al.'s work (2003) was used to gauge customer satisfaction. A 5-point Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) range, was used to measure these constructs.

Service climate was measured as Level 2 because this concept requires organisational perceptions while the other variables were tested as Level 1, reflecting individual perceptions.

Results

Aggregation Procedures

To ensure the accuracy of the scores' aggregate, service climate data was examined. For this study, the amount of intra-group agreement was measured using the rwg index, and the degree of reliability was assessed using intra-class correlation coefficients (ICC) (1) and (2), which demonstrate the proportion of a variation that can be accounted for by membership in a group. The ICC (1) and ICC (2) values produced were 0.93 and 0.88, respectively, and the rwg index was 0.893 (SD=0.65). Additionally, the ANOVA test revealed significant differences between the workgroup means with a F value greater than 1. Consequently, this established that the service climate was aggregated (Bliese, 1998).

Table 1. Aggregation procedure

Item	Mean (SD)	1		2		3		r_{WG}	Fstat. (*df*)	p-value[C]
		r-value	p-value	r-value	p-value	r-value	p-value			
1. Service climate	3.96 (0.65)	1.000						0.89	1.89 (25,103)	0.014

Correlation

The study's four latent variables — service climate, service behaviour, service quality, and customer satisfaction — are correlated, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between service climate, service behaviour, service quality, and customer satisfaction

Item	Mean (SD)	1		2		3		r_{WG}	Fstat. (*df*)	p-value[C]
		r-value	p-value	r-value	p-value	r-value	p-value			
1. Service climate	3.96 (0.65)	1.000						0.893	1.89 (25,103)	0.014
2. Service behavior	4.21 (0.63)	0.638	<0.001	1.000				1.139	1.58 (25,103)	0.058
3. Service quality	4.27 (0.60)	0.126	0.154[a]	0.076	0.389[a]	1.000		0.980	1.93 (25,103)	0.012
4. Customer satisfaction	4.12 (0.83)	0.104	0.239[a]	0.068	0.441[a]	0.889	<0.001[b]	0.845	1.89 (25,103)	0.014

Note: [a]Spearman's correlation; [b]Pearson's correlation; [c]One-way ANOVA test

Hypothesis Testing

The hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) software was used for the hypothesis tests. Level 1 shows individual data, while Level 2 depicts organisational data. The findings for service behaviour, service quality and customer satisfaction are shown in Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5, respectively.

Table 3. Hierarchical linear modeling for service behaviour

Effect	Service Behaviour			
	Null model		Random intercept model	
	B (SE)	p-value	B (SE)	p-value
Level 1				
Intercept	4.21 (0.06)	<0.001	4.21 (0.03)	<0.001
Level 2			0.77 (0.09)	<0.001
Service Climate				
Variance components				
Within-team (L1) variance (r)/σ	0.36		0.32	
Intercept (L2) variance	0.04		0.00	
Slopes (L2) variance				
Intercept-slopes (L2) covariance				

Table 3. (con't)

Effect	Service Behaviour			
	Null model		Random intercept model	
	B (SE)	p-value	B (SE)	p-value
Additional information				
Model comparison test			27.02 (1)	<0.001
ICC	0.09		0.00	
-2log x likelihood (deviance)	242.60		215.58	
Number of parameter	3		4	
Pseudo R	0		0.111	

Table 4. Hierarchical linear modeling for service quality

Effect	Service Behaviour			
	Null model		Random intercept model	
	B (SE)	p-value	B (SE)	p-value
Level 2				
Intercept	4.27 (0.07)	<0.001	3.26 (0.68)	<0.001
Service Climate			0.25 (0.17)	0.150
Variance components				
Within-team (L1) variance (r)/σ	0.06		0.05	
Intercept (L2) variance	0.06		0.05	
Additional information				
Model comparison test			2.12 (1)	>0.050
ICC	0.50		0.50	
-2log x likelihood (deviance)	16.73		14.61	
Number of parameter	3		4	
Pseudo R	0		0.127	

Table 5. Hierarchical linear modeling for customer satisfaction

Effect	Customer Satisfaction																	
	Null model			Random intercept model			Means as outcomes			Random intercept fixed slopes			Random intercept fixed slopes			Random intercept random slopes		
	B (SE)		p-value	B (SE)		p-value	B (SE)		p-value	B (SE)		p-value	B (SE)		p-value	B (SE)		p-value
Level 1																		
Intercept	4.12	(0.09)	<0.001	4.12	(0.09)	<0.001	4.12	(0.04)	<0.001	4.12	(0.04)	<0.001	4.12	(0.09)	<0.001	4.12	(0.09)	<0.001
Service Behaviour				–0.03	(0.10)	0.724							–0.03	(0.10)	0.724	–0.03	(0.10)	0.763
Level 2																		
Service Climate										0.003	(0.08)	0.964	0.32	(0.23)	0.167	0.30	(0.23)	0.208
Service Quality							1.26	(0.10)	<0.001	1.26	(0.09)	<0.001						
Variance components																		
Within-team (L1) variance (r)/σ	0.59			0.59			0.51			0.51			0.59			0.58		
Intercept (L2) variance	0.10			0.10			0.00			0.00			0.08			0.09		
Slopes (L2) variance																0.02		
Intercept-slopes (L2) covariance																–0.04		
Additional information																		
Model comparison test				0.07	(1)	>0.050	34.49	(0)	>0.050	0.00	(1)	>0.050	32.74	(0)	>0.050	0.66	(2)	>0.050
ICC	0.14			0.14			0.00			0.00			0.12			0.13		
—2log x likelihood (deviance)	310.87			310.80			276.31			276.31			309.04			308.38		
Number of parameter	3			4			4			5			5			7		
Pseudo R	0			0.000			0.111			0.111			0.006			0.008		

Only two hypotheses were validated out of the seven proposed: H2 and H6. First, H2, which asserts a direct positive connection between service climate and service behaviour. The outcomes support this effect (p-value 0.001; random intercept model (Table 3); γ _10= 0.77, SE = 0.09). Next, H6, which asserts a connection between high-quality service and customer satisfaction. The results (γ _10= 1.26, SE = 0.09, p-value = p-value 0.001 (see random intercept fixed slopes; Table 5)) support this association.

The other five hypotheses were not verified. First, H1 (see random intercept fixed slopes; Table 5) asserts a favourable link between service climate and customer satisfaction (γ _10= 0.003, SE = 0.08, p-value= 0.964). Second, H3 states that service behaviour and customer satisfaction are positively correlated (γ _10= -0.03, SE = 0.10, p-value = 0.724; see random intercept model, Table 2). Thirdly, according to H5 (see random intercept fixed slopes in Table 4), there is a direct and positive correlation between service climate and service quality. The tests on H4 and H7 were the fourth. According to Hair et al. (2014), the direct path needs to be important in order to prove any mediation. As a result, there is also no mediating effect because the direct instructions lacked strong supporting evidence.

Discussion

In the context of MFHs, the current study investigated the relationships between service climate and employee service behaviour, service quality, and customer satisfaction. The results established support for the H2 and H6 hypotheses.

The results for H2 indicate that employees were content with the service environment that MFHs promote. This finding demonstrates that employees perceive MFHs as a favourable workplace that provides them with customs, routines, and behaviour that are rewarded, encouraged, and expected in terms of service excellence. As a result, it inspires employees to act responsibly when serving consumers. A cross-sectional investigation by Elche et al. (2020) in Spain's hotel sector and a longitudinal study by Jiang et al. (2016) in 196 movie theatres in China, both reveal similar results.

Second, by establishing H6, this study demonstrates that the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is both positive and substantial. In short, one of the key elements in determining client happiness is service quality. The results are in line with those of Jeaheng et al. (2020), which showed that Muslim travellers to three well-known locations in Thailand were significantly more satisfied with the services and staff, facilities and physical environment, and food and beverages that are Muslim-friendly. In another study by Jeaheng et al. (2019), the researchers interviewed 12 Muslim tourists and discovered that the quality of services provided to Muslims affects their purchasing decisions.

These findings offer a fresh way of looking at the offerings of Muslim-friendly hotels. This study also presents a distinct point of view on how the performance of MFH might be impacted by the relationship between employees and customers.

Implications, Limitations, Recommendations and Conclusion

By examining customer satisfaction from the perspectives of two essential parties — employees and customers — this study adds to the body of scholarship on MFHs. The majority of studies acquired their data mostly through self-reports (see Arasli et al., 2021; Jeaheng et al., 2019, 2020; Mohd Azmin et al., 2021). Self-reporting can lead to biased conclusions because it ignores other service delivery participants, particularly staff. Based on the findings, MFH management and operators can better align their service delivery to meet employees' performance and consumers' expectations.

Additionally, by emphasising the connection between service climate, service behaviour, service quality, and customer satisfaction, this study offers new contextual insights into the SET and extended SERVPERF models. The study has major implications for human resource management, legislators, and hotel operators from a practical standpoint. For instance, MFHs may have to work harder to provide a supportive work environment to encourage staff productivity and high-quality services.

For this investigation, there are at least two limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the demographics of the respondents. As the respondents may have distinct requirements and expectations, the specific employees in this study who exclusively work in a particular department could have an impact on the results. Second, this study used a cross-sectional research design, which limited data collection to a single point in time. Although cross-sectional research appears to be common in Malaysia, Western scholars have long noted their flaws (Straw, 1975).

To validate these results, future studies may adopt interview, dyad interview, longitudinal, and shortitudinal approaches. As a large number of employees are also in charge of smaller teams, departments, or organisations, it is also crucial to look at how employees perceive themselves in relation to their roles inside an organisation. Overall, this study adds to our understanding of how customers and staff in Malaysia perceive MFH service interactions.

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Exploring Food Safety Guidelines for Food Vendors in Online Food Delivery Platforms

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Abstract: During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, various social and movement restrictions were enforced to contain the virus outbreak. As a result, both consumers and food vendors turned to online food delivery (OFD) platforms, which recorded significant growth and success in this period. However, there were concerns about food safety in these platforms as it is not clear if there are regulations in place or if existing guidelines are adequate. This conceptual paper aims to explore food safety practices and guidelines for food vendors in Malaysia that are relevant to OFD companies. Exploring these guidelines is crucial for OFD companies in establishing food safety for their customers. The findings will add to the existing knowledge base and offer practical implications for stakeholders, particularly the government and OFD companies, in establishing a secure and robust food safety management system.

Keywords: OFD, qualitative, food delivery, food safety, food guideline

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started with an outbreak in December 2019, raised people's awareness of the importance of personal hygiene and safe food (Altaher et al., 2021; Finger et al., 2021). During the pandemic, people were concerned about several things, including venturing outside to buy food and risk becoming infected. For those who did not cook, using online food delivery (OFD) apps or platforms was the best alternative. However, the OFD platform works differently from the usual

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food delivery by restaurants. From the order selection to the arrival of the order at the customer's location, there are many levels of involvement.

Although OFD companies are only intermediaries, they have the responsibility to ensure participating food vendors and their delivery workers are following proper food safety procedures. There have been several incidents involving OFDs around the world, especially after COVID-19, when purchases increased drastically (Jiang et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2020; Nguyen & Vu, 2020b). The foodborne disease outbreak in Shenzen, China, involving 21 people was caused by improper food handling and incorrect temperature control in food storage (Jiang et al., 2020). In Guangzhou, China, another outbreak involving a huge number of school students was caused by a norovirus found in take-out food from a food delivery app (Lu et al., 2020).

Meanwhile in Vietnam, an outbreak of 37 cases of coronavirus was detected at a public hospital in Hanoi due to a careless worker who prepared and delivered food to patients and visitors here (Nguyen & Vu, 2020b). The hospital was the focal point for COVID-19 cases and the outbreak was catastrophic for Vietnam during that crucial period. These are some of the significant outbreaks that are related to the process of food preparation and delivery. However, there could be many more poisoning incidents or foodborne disease outbreaks related to food delivery that were not reported. Given the context, it is important to study the process and procedures followed by food service workers, especially in the OFD sector.

Malaysia's commitment to food safety is evident from being a signatory to many regional and international agreements as well as having formulated various policies and laws on this issue. Malaysia first formulated the Food Safety Act 1983 (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2014) and then developed a national policy called the National Food Security Food Security Action Plan 2021–2025 (Daim, 2021). The National Food Security Action Plan was developed after taking into account several factors, including the food supply chain (Daim, 2021). In the action plan, food security is measured through affordability, availability, quality and safety, natural resources and resilience (Daim, 2021; "Food security", 2022).

Furthermore, The Food Safety and Quality Division of the Ministry of Health Malaysia, which acts as a unit to control and prevent any mishap related to food, has developed several guidelines such as Hazard Critical Control Point (HACCP) certification for food premises and food production, and Food Handler certification for food vendors. These regulations, based on the Food Safety Act 1983 and Food Handling Regulations 2019, came into force before the COVID-19 pandemic (FAO, 2014). However, it is not known whether the current guidelines are sufficient for the OFD system. Thus, the study intends to examine exisiting food guidelines developed by OFD platforms for their food vendors. The findings can hopefully shed light and offer valuable insights to academicians, related authorities and practitioners for a secure and safe OFD environment.

Literature Review

Food Safety

Food safety refers to the safe and proper handling, preparation and storing of food to prevent any risk of foodborne illnesses (Ababio & Adi, 2012). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022), safe food is food that is safe from any contamination at any point of production and distribution and is safe to consume. Many studies on food safety in relation to food handlers have been conducted with a quantitative approach (Limon, 2021; Nizame et al., 2019; Okojie & Isah, 2019). Meanwhile, in the context of consumer and food safety awareness, most studies adopted a qualitative approach (Murray, 1991; Young & Waddell, 2016). Grochowska (2014) explained that in order to define the concept of food security, it is important to take into account four different aspects, which are physical access, economic access, degree of utilisation and stability, to reflect a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

The first aspect, physical access to food or food availability refers to adequate food supply, which is determined by factors such as production, stock levels, as well as trade and aid. The availability and efficiency of agricultural land also plays a crucial role in ensuring food availability. The second aspect is economic access or food accessibility which pertains to the ability to buy food to meet nutritional requirements, and is dependent on consumer incomes, food prices, and other goods and services.

The third aspect is the degree of utilisation or food utilisation pertaining to how well food is being used to meet nutritional needs, with access to clean water, proper sanitation and healthcare being important factors. For example, even if someone has access to good food, they can still get sick if the food was not handled properly. Lastly, food stability which is connected to previous ideas and is related to time. It is important to differentiate between temporary shocks and ongoing cyclical events, as both have an impact on food security. This study will focus on food utilisation in relation to food security and safety among OFD vendors in Malaysia, using the definitions presented in Grochowska's (2014) work.

Food safety practices can reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses at any stage of food production. In the OFD sector, it is apparent that every stage of food handling, preparation up till delivery may pose a considerable amount of risk of foodborne illnesses (Zhang et al., 2021). However, it is not clear whether OFD vendors in Malaysia are required to adhere to any food safety rules or guidelines such as Hygiene Regulations (2009), as it is not clearly stated in any certification presented by the Food Safety and Quality Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia (2022). Furthermore, studies on food safety in the OFD sector in Malaysia are scarce, although this topic warrants attention due to the rapid growth and demand for OFD services.

Nevertheless, food handlers are required to practice personal hygiene and follow guidelines regarding separation of ready-to-eat produce, heating and refrigerating temperatures, expiration date, as well as selection of safe food and drinks. To ensure compliance, all food handlers, including OFD vendors, should be briefed about food safety and potential risks so they can implement measures to reduce those risks. The effectiveness of these measures can be evaluated by creating specific regulations for food safety among OFD vendors.

Food Safety Regulations in Malaysia

In terms of food safety regulations, Malaysia adheres to international standards of food safety that requires food service businesses such as cafeterias, canteens and restaurants to implement either mandatory or voluntary food safety programs or protocols such as Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) (Food Safety and Quality Division, 2022). The HACCP program was created in the 1990s for implementation in advanced food production systems. The HACCP principles are based on the seven principles of the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods (NACMCF). The seven principles of HACCP include hazard analysis, determining critical control points (CCPs), setting critical limits, monitoring procedures, establishing corrective actions, verification procedures and documentation.

The Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) works with stakeholders globally to harmonise and strengthen food safety standards with the aim of decreasing the risk of foodborne illnesses (Weinroth et al., 2018). GFSI was first developed in Europe, and was later adopted in the United States and elsewhere beginning 1983 (Weinroth et al., 2018). GFSI has helped reduce redundancy and systematise food safety standards. In the UK, the United Kingdom Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Foods, recommends that food business managers and supervisors receive training in food hygiene (Jiao et al., 2022; Powell et al., 1997). Nowadays, food business owners in the UK are obligated to receive proper instruction, supervision and training in food hygiene due to legislative changes (Powell et al., 1997). Furthermore, legislations and regulations on food safety are always updated to ensure the safety of worldwide communities (World Health Organization, 2022).

With regard to Malaysia, the food safety regulation was developed by the Ministry of Health (MOH) to ensure safe food for local consumption. The core food safety regulations are Food Act 1983, Food Regulations 1985 (FAO, 2014) and Food Hygiene Regulations 2009 (United Nations Environment Programme, 2009). The regulations require that the food handlers are trained and aware of food safety and hygiene issues (Food Safety and Quality Division, 2022). Strict regulations are necessary to ensure that food premises are clean and sanitised and that all stages of food preparation and handling are free from any contamination. However, it should

be noted that the Food Hygiene Regulations (FHR) 2009 does not specify any rules imposed on OFD companies as they only act as intermediaries (Food Safety and Quality Division, 2022), specifically the following regulations:

- Regulation 30 – Failure to comply with requirements relating to the training of food handlers
- Regulation 31 – Failure to comply with requirements relating to medical examination and health condition of food handlers
- Regulation 32 – Failure to comply with the requirements relating to the clothing of food handlers, and
- Regulation 33 – Failure to comply with the requirements relating to the personal hygiene of food handlers.

The Food Safety and Quality Division (BKKM) of the Ministry of Health Malaysia issues various certifications and guidelines, including HACCP, *Makanan Selamat Tanggungjawab Industri* (MESTI), Food Defense, and Food Handler certifications (refer to Table 1). In addition, Jabatan Agama Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) also issues certification to food handlers in Malaysia, but their focus is on ensuring compliance with Islamic procedures rather than food safety (Jabatan Agama Islam Malaysia, 2022). Further, JAKIM is not the expert in food safety management.

Table 1 displays certifications and guidelines that promote food safety and hygiene in food premises and establishments, but compliance with these guidelines is not mandatory. However, authorities encourage vendor participation in these programs to build consumer confidence in their products. With regard to OFD platforms, it is hard to discern which regulations or guidelines are applicable to the food vendors on the platform, as they focus more on food production, instead of food delivery. Thus, it is also crucial to examine how OFD platforms work in order to determine the appropriate regulations and guidelines for the industry.

Table 1. List of certifications for safe food in Malaysia

Certification/guidelines	Stakeholder	Function
Food Safety and Quality Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia		
Hazard Critical Control Point (HACCP)	Food premises and food production facilities such as food factory	To recognise industries that practice HACCP while meeting food safety and consumer requirements.
MESTI	Food production facilities such as food factory	To encourage safe practices for a facility that processes food to prevent harm to people
Food Defence	Food production facilities such as food factory	To ensure that food is safe to be used in the country and to be exported, especially to the United States

Table 1. (con't)

Certification/guidelines	Stakeholder	Function
Food handler certification	Food premises	To train and provide awareness to all food operators regarding food hygiene and safety, and further reduce the incidence of food poisoning throughout the country
Home-based guidelines	Home-based food handlers	To encourage home-based food vendors, to produce products that follow food hygiene and safety regulations
Bersih, Selamat dan Sihat (BESS)	Food premises	To encourage food premises to prepare healthy and safe food for customers
Trust Mycatering	Catering industry	
Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM)		
Halal food certification	Any food premises	To certify that every stage of food preparation and handling at food premises is halal and safe for Muslim consumers

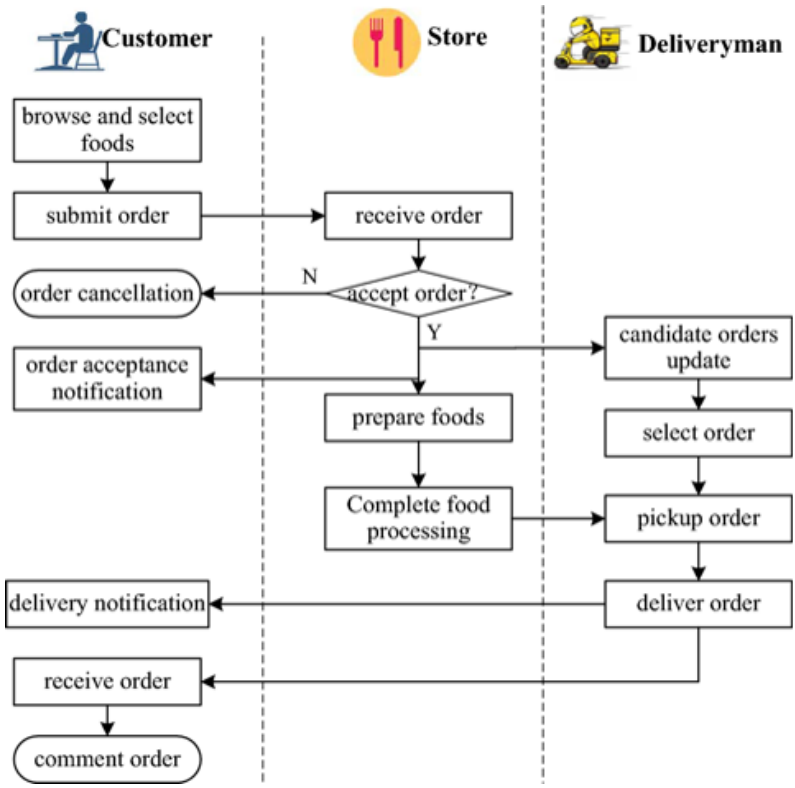
Source: Food Safety and Quality Division (2022) and Jabatan Agama Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) (2022)

Online Food Delivery (OFD) Operations

Due to busy lifestyles, many find that they do not have the time to cook, but still prefer to enjoy the relaxation of eating at home (Chai & Yat, 2019). Thus, the food delivery services offered by OFD platforms has become very popular (Meng & Ragavan, 2022). A OFD platform provides customers a one-stop directory to search for restaurants and meals for takeaway (Gunden et al., 2020; He et al., 2019). OFD companies such as Grabfood and Foodpanda have websites and mobile apps with a large directory of various food establishments from restaurants to mini marts to help consumers browse, select and order, and subsequently, have the orders delivered to their location.

The traditional way of ordering food directly from a restaurant involves consumers, stores and delivery persons or transporters (see Figure 1) (Gunden et al., 2020). The workflow starts when a customer browses any restaurant website to order food, submits the order and the food vendor or store will receive the order. The store sends a notification to the delivery person that there are orders to be delivered. After the food is cooked, the delivery person picks up the order and sends it to the customer's location. This direct distribution channel is clear as they have only one

store or food vendor, and they know their delivery person. Any risk of contamination can be prevented as the restaurant or food store is the one that handles the preparation of the food from the beginning until the end. Thus, it is mandatory for the restaurant to follow the guidelines outlined by the authorities.



Source: Zhang et al. (2021)

Figure 1. Workflow of traditional direct food delivery by restaurant or food store

However, since the advent of OFD platforms in the food service sector, the supply chain of food delivery has changed (He et al., 2019). People now use third-party distribution channels to order cooked food, instead of ordering directly from restaurants. Figure 2 presents the workflow of OFD operations starting from the customer's order until the order is delivered by the delivery person. The difference between traditional direct delivery and OFD is the layers of operation. The OFD model has more stakeholders involved in every stage and layer, with their respective responsibilities and tasks (Jiao et al., 2022). If there is any problem at any stage, it will affect other stakeholders or stages as well. The complexity of the delegation of

a task on OFD platforms starts after an order is received by the food vendor. The customer and OFD platform only supply information and receive information. The other two stakeholders, the food vendor and delivery worker, are involved in the hands-on tasks of OFD.

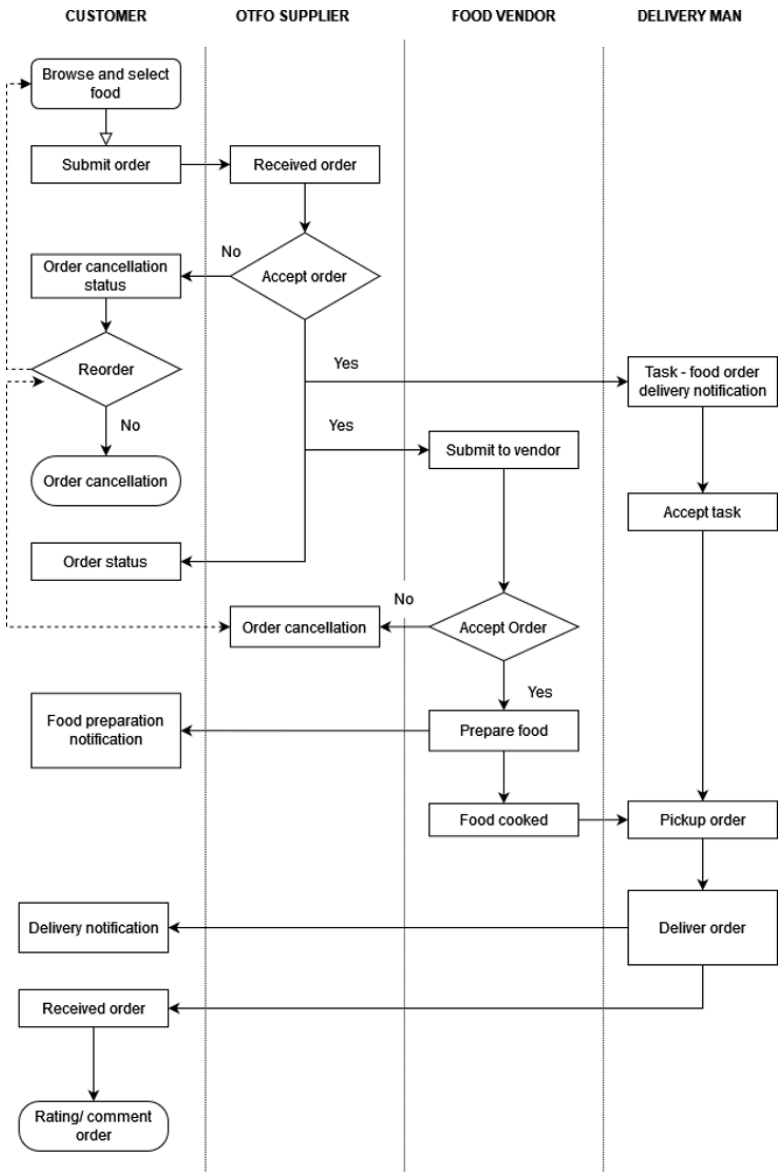


Figure 2. Operation workflow of OFD platform

During the COVID-19 pandemic, delivery workers faced a higher risk of getting infected by the virus (Nguyen & Vu, 2020a). Nonetheless, the OFD platforms put in place many prevention guidelines to remove or reduce the risk of virus transmission from the delivery worker to the consumer and vice versa (Nguyen & Vu, 2020a). Despite the lingering worry of potential risks, the delivery workers still relied on OFD as their source of income (Soon et al., 2022). Most importantly, all restaurants and food vendors heavily relied on OFD to continue sales and survive during the pandemic (Hong et al., 2021). However, food vendors still had to make sure that their operations were free from any potential risk of foodborne illness or virus transmission (Castillo, 2019). There are various risks related to food preparation from food source, food storage, food preparation method, food heating, food storage as well as between heating and consumption (Bryan, 1990). According to Limon (2021), most food vendors violate food safety practices even though they have been trained on the critical control points. In summary, to ensure food safety is maintained and to prevent foodborne illnesses, it is important to investigate the guidelines developed by OFD platforms.

Conceptual Framework

The current framework of food safety in Malaysia is depicted in Figure 3. The regulations pertaining to food safety only apply to food production facilities and food premises, as shown. Upon examining the OFD business websites, it is evident that each platform has its own set of guidelines. In this regard, it is crucial to review the guidelines established by the OFD platforms for their food vendors if they are adequate and compatible with Malaysia's current food safety regulations. Besides, the current regulations and certifications mainly concentrate on food premises, production facilities and vendors, but do not cover food transporters or delivery workers as well as OFD businesses. Therefore, this study suggests the framework below which incorporates OFD platforms in Malaysia's food safety regulations.

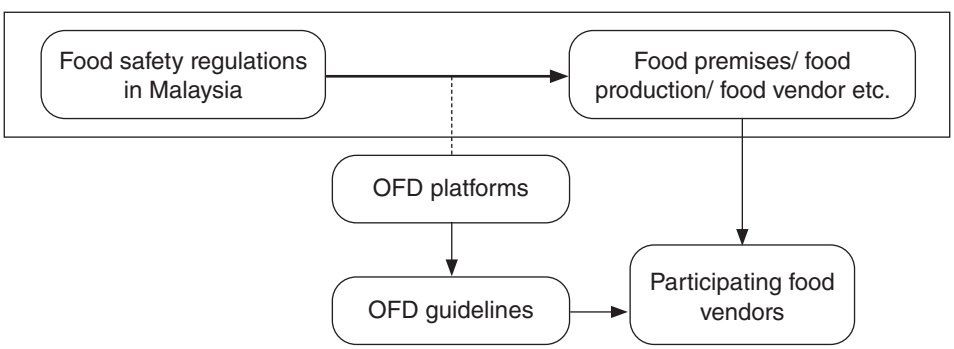


Figure 3. Conceptual framework

Conclusion

The Malaysian guidelines for food safety are crucial in guaranteeing the food safety of OFD platforms as well. Regulations such as Food Act 1983, Food Regulations 1985 and Food Hygiene Regulations 2009 have been instrumental in creating a secure food system in Malaysia. Despite being a third-party channel, it is unclear if there are any specific guidelines for OFD platforms. While they may have their own guidelines, it is ultimately up to the authorities to ensure these guidelines are adequate and meet the national food safety standards. This will help ensure a safe food delivery environment and increase consumer trust in OFD.

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Tourism, Hospitality, and Event Students' Perception of Future Careers Following Their Educational Experience during COVID-19

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Abstract: The disastrous impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry in Malaysia have been extensively discussed, especially in educational institutions that teach practical and hands-on skills. However, not many studies have looked at the pandemic's effect on students of higher education institutions (HEIs), especially regarding their education and future careers. The disruptions and changes in the tourism, hospitality, and event (THE) industry can potentially the perspectives of HEI students on their future careers. Therefore, the current study investigated students' perceptions of the effects of educational changes during COVID-19 on future careers. The study employed a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews with final-year students from a Malaysian public university that offers THE undergraduate programmes. The findings reveal that the majority of THE students struggled to excel in their studies in a remote learning environment, especially in acquiring the requisite industry skills, during the pandemic. Regarding future career plans, students became more aware of the industries' susceptibility and thus, were prepared for career alternatives. The study suggests HEIs devise alternative teaching strategies to provide a holistic learning environment during crises, while simultaneously developing effective career opportunities for their students.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, holistic education, perception, tourism and hospitality, student

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), with confirmed cases reaching over 630 million all over the world, brought global businesses in various industries to a halt (Zhu et al., 2020) with the implementation of movement restrictions (movement control order [MCO]), border closures, travel bans and quarantines. Many businesses were forced to enforce stringent health and safety protocols in order to continue business operations or ordered to close. One of the hardest hit industries was the tourism industry as travel plans, recreational activities and social gatherings were postponed or cancelled to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Tourism is one of the most important service industries in Malaysia, contributing to RM41.69 billion worth of revenue in the first half 2019 (Karim et al., 2020). During the pandemic, tourism businesses, including hotels and airline companies, had to resort to mass layoffs and salary cuts to offset the losses from cancelled bookings (Gössling et al., 2021). To illustrate, the total revenue loss due to the cancellation of hotel rooms reported during MCO was estimated at around RM68 million (Zubair & Shamsudin, 2021) causing the industry to adapt their management and operations to recover from the pandemic (Chan et al., 2023; Hanafiah et al., 2021).

Apart from tourism, other domains were also affected, including educational institutions. All educational institutions from kindergarten to university were ordered to close and shift to remote teaching and learning (Nambiar, 2020). While some studies demonstrated that students developed positive perceptions of remote learning (Thongsri et al., 2019), others exposed the adverse psychological effects of remote learning on students (Nambiar, 2020; Sundarasen, 2020) as remote learning is very different compared to the traditional learning methods (Fortune et al., 2011). For instance, remote learning involves limited exposure to the reality of learning and working life for students, putting them at risk of not attaining the requisite skills needed for their future career.

The unstable and fluctuating nature of employment in the tourism and hospitality industry, due to seasonal demands, also makes it difficult for some businesses to offer full-time jobs (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2015). This is one of the contributing factors that causes tourism and hospitality students to leave the industry after graduation (Grobelna & Skrzeszewska, 2019). Hence, understanding the demands of tourism and hospitality employment post-COVID-19 is crucial to meet the market needs of this industry. In fact, some countries that are facing a deficit of skilled talent in tourism and hospitality are undergoing economic stagnation and downturn.

The objective of this study is to understand students' perceptions of the effects of COVID-19 on their education and future career in order to suggest a holistic university environment support system. This study addressed two research questions: (i) How do tourism, hospitality, and event (THE) students perceive the effects of

COVID-19 on their education? and (ii) What effects does COVID-19 have on the future career development of tourism, hospitality, and event (THE) students?

Literature Review

Tourism, Hospitality and Event Education

The THE industry is a key economic driver in many countries in the world. The significance of this industry has led to a strong demand for a professional workforce (Edelheim, 2020). According to Hobson (2013), many countries including the USA, France, and Australia, are competing to provide the best THE education due to the high demand in this field. Nevertheless, many more Asian countries such as Malaysia, are emerging as world leaders in THE education.

THE is an industry that emphasises mostly practical skills. Past studies have argued whether the curriculums provided by colleges and universities cater to the needs of the industries (Gursoy et al., 2012; Lugosi & Jameson, 2017; Oktadiana & Chon, 2017; Wang et al., 2010). For instance, the THE curriculum has been criticised for lacking emphasis on important skills such as communication and problem-solving (Alexakis & Jiang, 2019; Millar et al., 2010).

Other arguments include universities and colleges requiring students to take general and non-course-related subjects such as research methodology and organisational behaviour (Lugosi & Jameson, 2017). These concerns suggest that the curriculum of THE courses is insufficient to meet industry requirements and have been developed instead to satisfy curriculum reviewers. However, this is from the perception of industry players and not that of students. Thus, it is important to understand the perception of THE students on whether the current THE curriculum meets the requirement, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they had to shift to remote learning.

The Effect of the Pandemic on THE Education

Thanks to the disruptive COVID-19 pandemic, many fields have adopted new norms and practices. For example, many businesses have now shifted to online platforms to sell products, restaurants use food delivery platforms to sell and deliver food to customers, and educational institutions have begun utilising remote learning for lectures. Nevertheless, adapting to the new environment remains a challenge for instructors and students. For example, instructors had to abruptly learn to use platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet to conduct remote classes as a substitute for face-to-face classroom at the beginning of the pandemic (Rahiem, 2020).

The change in the mode of teaching gave rise to new challenges related to technology and participation. Further, internet connectivity was an issue in many

countries, especially in rural areas and among lower-income families who could not afford electronic devices to support remote learning (Elsalem et al., 2020; Hasan & Bao, 2020). Malaysian educational institutions faced a similar situation. Students from all education levels had to switch to emergency remote learning during the pandemic (Bernama, 2020; "Digital divide", 2020). In higher education institutions (HEIs), blended learning had already been in practice before the pandemic. Most universities of college have also introduced online learning platforms or massive open online courses (MOOCs) such as Coursera and EDX to their students (Hone & El Said, 2016). However, these modes of teaching and learning were not fully utilised or integrated into the education system. For instance, THE students were only briefly exposed to online learning platforms as a part of their learning activities.

The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Students

A further concern regarding the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is the ability of diverse students in coping with learning, whose needs vary depending on their environment and heightened anxiety as a result of instructors failing to prepare them for their assessment (Elsalem et al., 2020). There are many types of learners, including those based on age, gender, or learner aptitude (Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). Past studies have demonstrated that educators need to manage remote learning based on student diversity, including their motivation, competencies, and personalities (Geisler-Brenstein et al., 1996).

Person-In-Environment Theory (PIE)

The study selected a theory commonly used in social studies, the person-in-environment theory (PIE), to understand student characteristics and their environment, in particular how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected them. The PIE theory is a theory developed by a group of researchers comprised of academicians and practitioners to understand individuals (Karls et al., 1997). The theory was developed based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Dybicz, 2015) with the purpose of evaluating an individual's environment and how it affects the individual. There has been an ongoing debate regarding the six principles developed in the PIE framework (Sin, 2010), as discussed by Karls et al. (1997). However, this study utilised all six principles factors as they offer clearer perspectives.

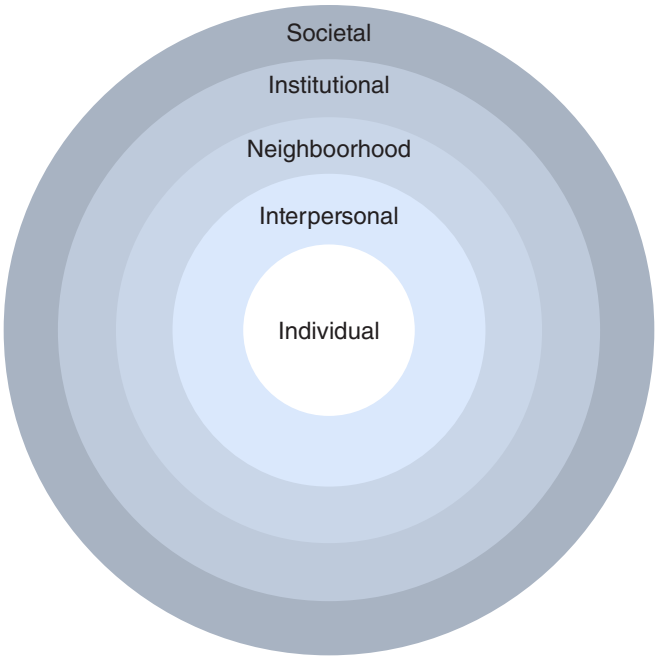


Figure 1. Person-in-environment framework (Sin, 2010)

The first principle refers to the individual as the centre of a study (Sin, 2010). The principle follows the user-centred paradigm and the individuality notion. PIE is used to study and analyse personal habits, behaviours, and characteristics, for example in studies related to students and their future career environments (Guan et al., 2021; Swanson & Fouad, 1999). Although there are various other theories used to examine student characteristics, PIE is suitable as it has been used multiple times and tested for validity on student studies (Dybicz, 2015; Karls et al., 1997, Swanson et al., 1999). The PIE framework was deemed appropriate for the current study as it recognises individual levels, including students at higher institutions who have developed characteristics in accordance with their educational aims as a student.

The second principle refers to environmental factors as an explanatory variable. The explanatory or independent variables in the PIE framework include social, cultural, political, economic and information environments. The PIE framework focuses on structural factors to ensure that there is no debate regarding agency. These factors are related to the basic recurring pattern in individual lives that are beyond the individual's control.

The third principle explains information as a significant element in the explanatory variable. Information helps evaluate the impact and effects of resources

on individuals. Next, the fourth principle states that interactionism between people and their environments is not a cause of any decision. This means that within the PIE framework, the environment is considered a variable that can affect individuals. The fifth principle describes no specific level of environmental factors is required to study an individual. For example, researchers studying at the neighbourhood or interpersonal level (see Figure 1), set their focus on how the environmental factors affect the study. Thus, it is recommended that the environmental factor level is the closest to the participants' daily life.

The last principle mentions the importance of having etic and emic perspectives (Sin, 2010). It is significant to have differing views from various parties and users, including third parties. From the perspective of students, it is crucial to view every angle of students' experience and environment, and how it affects them. Therefore, it was established that the study would be able to relate the effect of the environment on individual behaviour using the PIE framework.

Methodology

The researchers employed a qualitative approach for the study based on the interpretivism paradigm. The instrument used to collect the qualitative data was online semi-structured interviews. To ensure non-biased responses, interviews were conducted on an individual basis. Interviews were conducted with 16 final-year students pursuing three undergraduate degree programmes at School of Tourism, Hospitality, and Event Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia between Nov 1, 2020 and Nov 14, 2020. The participants were selected using convenience and snowball sampling.

The participants were expected to finish their studies in four years. However, due to the COVID-19 outbreak and rising cases in Malaysia from December 2019 until 2021, they had to shift to remote learning for two years or equivalent to four semesters. As such, the selected participants for this study had to undergo practical classes or courses that required hands-on attention online. Therefore, the participants selected for this study were valid.

The interview protocol was designed based on the objectives of the current study which was to investigate the perspective of THE students on their future career decision. Each session was conducted by the same interviewer using one set of questions presented in a casual manner to promote participation and openness (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The questions were divided into several topics, including their personal background and experiences of remote classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were also required to share their perceptions on whether they would like to work in the THE industry (Table 1).

Table 1. Interview questions

1.	Sociodemographic background check (i.e., age, educational background, family members' place of birth, and living area).
2.	Impact of COVID-19 on students' lives (i.e., emotions, ethics, and thinking).
3.	How did the COVID-19 pandemic change students' study environment? And how did students cope with the situational changes?
4.	Students' perspectives on their future careers affected by the pandemic (i.e., their future career plan).
5.	Alternative plans if not working in the field they wanted and reasons.
6.	Additional skills due to the limitation of remote learning.

The study carried out content analysis by manually coding data in Microsoft Word. Content analysis is an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic contents of all forms of recorded communications (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). Various studies have used content analysis to analyse secondary data such as newspapers, websites, and advertisements. Using this method of analysis, large textual information in which certain words, concepts, characters, themes, or sentences are present can be identified systematically (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The stages involved a detailed analysis of each theme based on the focus of the study, and then informative terms were adopted for each theme. The phrases transcribed were discussed among the researchers to confirm the themes before accepting them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The final phase comprised of analytical narrative, data extraction, and contextualisation.

Results

Living Conditions during the Pandemic

In the interview, the participants were asked about their background to ascertain whether it can explain the rationale for their viewpoints. The findings revealed that students lived within the university campus during the pandemic and most of them struggled to cope with the new norm and remote learning environment. Apart from the struggle to understand the course taught online, students also struggled with slow or no internet connectivity and massive data usage.

> *Friends are struggling in learning due to low bandwidth.*
>
> (Respondent 5 and Respondent 7)

Apart from negative perceptions of remote learning, students also encountered time management and health issues.

> *Stuck in UUM at the beginning of MCO, having panicked attacks several times. Remote learning does not encourage students to go to class since there is no final exam but there are a lot of assignments. Always a last-minute work.'* (Respondent 2)

> *'Hate online but have to embrace.* (Respondent 8)

Student Adaptation to Remote Learning

When asked about their adaptability to remote learning, the participants admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic hoisted new unprecedented experiences that challenged them. Remote learning was the only available option for education during the pandemic. While some students could adapt easily to remote learning, many students from low-income families (B40) faced difficulties in adapting. Besides that, the willingness and cooperation of lecturers to assist in learning sessions were mentioned by most participants, suggesting that learning assistance is an important element for remote learning. Further, the way in which students perceived their lecturers' teaching methods, including the use of online platforms, educational tools, as well their guidance, had a direct effect on their learning interest.

> *If a lecturer just gave me a slide and voice record, I would not be interested to watch it. It is as if lecturers are not interested in teaching, they just expect us to learn by ourselves. It just put me more pressure to do all the work without guidance.* (Respondent 2)

> *I also got a lecturer that gave me WhatsApp and slides through online learning although it is a calculation subject like finance.* (Respondent 4)

Student Plans for Future Careers after Experiencing Pandemic

The repercussions of the pandemic is substantial based on the number of participants who admitted considering a career change. This implies that the pandemic has negatively influenced the career perspectives of THE students. The participants considered other career paths, such as entrepreneurship and healthcare businesses, due to the high demand for this type of work during the pandemic. Nevertheless, some participants still believed in the sustainability of THE industry, but were also prepared for alternatives, such as working in industries other than tourism and hospitality.

> *Trying to further in tour operator field for virtual but still be looking for an opportunity in entrepreneurship in any field as back up.* (Respondent 5)

In contrast, a number of participants were convinced that the industry would grow after the pandemic. With the right knowledge and skills, these participants stressed that they would continue to pursue careers in THE industry in the future. They also considered furthering their THE education, even though it has undergone massive transformation as a result of the pandemic.

> *I plan to continue my studies. If not studying, I will search for work in the tourism industry. I believe the industry will grow again.* (Respondent 3)

Discussion

The data analysis, using the person-in-environment (PIE) theory as the basis, revealed findings that are in line with the formulated theory. According to our formulated theory, any barrier to student development faced at educational institutions would result in negative implications for the student's continued interest in their field of study. The findings, with regard to the effect of COVID-19 on student interest in THE, is illustrated in Figure 2.

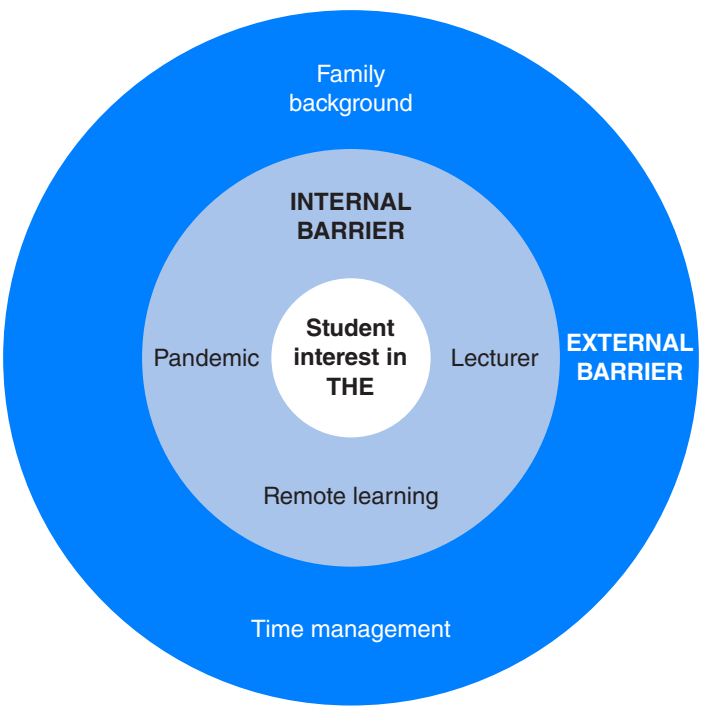


Figure 2. Effect of COVID-19 on student interest in THE

The current study found that barriers to student interest in THE can be divided into two categories: internal and external. From the challenges perceived by students, namely in regard to living conditions and remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic,, the pandemic itself, lecturers, and remote learning were identified as internal barriers. From the individual level in the PIE theory, the challenges to remote learning are related to the effectiveness of lecturers in using the right teaching methods to deliver lessons in class. This finding is consistent with Choi et al. (2021) and Means et al. (2014) who contended that students' learning experience is significantly affected by lecturers' skill set and teaching mode in class.

This study also found that the COVID-19 pandemic has a severe impact on students who perceived the crisis as a barrier to their continued involvement with the THE industry. According to Aristovnik et al. (2020), the majority of higher education students became confused and bored in class when they became very concerned about their future, which is similar to the findings of the current study. According to the PIE theory, students construct the outlook pertaining to their future careers based on their experience, which in this study refers to the pandemic, and its implications. Thus, lecturers must comprehend the difficulties faced by students in a challenging environment, such as the recent pandemic, on a case-by-case basis.

In short, the environment provided by HEIs plays an important role in the learning effectiveness and interest of students (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Furthermore, the current study identified family background and time management as external barriers to students' interest as well. This can be attributed to the fact that family background and lifestyle shapes an individual's perception or approach to challenges. Also, as remote learning necessitates electronic devices and internet connectivity, it proved to be unaffordable to students from B40 backgrounds. Further, unfamiliarity and low digital skills also engender the internalisation of remote learning as a barrier. Studies have shown that students with good financial support in a conducive environment were satisfied with their lives during the pandemic (Aristovnik et al., 2020), and were also partly influenced by family perceptions and expectations (Lambulira et al., 2022).

External barriers have an adverse effect on students' interest in their field of study. In general, the participants had less confidence in the tourism industry; but more for the hospitality sector, which is a part of the tourism industry. This suggests that THE students value the stability that the hospitality sector offers through its built establishments and facilities that caters to basic human needs, such as food and accommodation. It also suggests that students view hospitality differently from tourism in terms of career opportunities, as the former offers more options.

Entrepreneurship was considered as an alternative by THE students as their default career path, especially if the tourism industry failed to recover in the near future. Students also considered furthering their studies in fields such as accounting

once they graduated. Students who worked part-time jobs during the pandemic were also influenced by job stability, hence considering returning to the same job after graduation. This finding is consistent with Benaraba et al. (2022) and Lambulira et al. (2022) who revealed that tourism students are uncertain about their future with the THE industry and consider seeking alternative careers in the future. The challenges faced during the pandemic have reshaped their outlook of the tourism industry, especially regarding their future employment opportunities.

The theory also explains that students change their viewpoints regarding their future career are a result of personal growth due to the pandemic. Some may contemplate pursuing a new purpose in their professional lives, in tourism related or non-tourism related fields. Students who discovered new things about themselves from learning and experiencing life during global crises like the recent pandemic undergo identity development. These newfound beliefs may or may not determine their future decisions to continue with their current choices depending on their relationship with the environment post-pandemic. As we are currently witnessing, the THE industry is regaining its fortitude as a major force in both domestic and international economies. Therefore, perceptions of career paths might experience another change, either returning to the original perspective or adopting a completely new stance.

Conclusion

The present study was grounded on the person-in-environment (PIE) theory. This theory was selected because it allowed an examination into the characters of students after surviving a pandemic. The state of the environment merits investigating changes in students' future career preferences due to the impact of the pandemic on the THE industries. The findings presented are the culmination of exploration into the world of student development. The underlying theory predicted that students in higher education institutions would be influenced by their environments throughout their time in university. With that in mind, it was theorised that when a barrier partially blocks the development of students, this would influence their interests in their field of study as it pertains to their future career choices. The findings verify the theory.

Practical Implications

To make correct future decisions, it is important to ensure that students' mental health is in optimal condition. Thus, the management of higher education institutions (HEIs) and lecturers must look after students' mental health. For instance, HEIs should establish a counselling centre with certified counsellors who are ready and able to assist students. The centre and its counsellors could work in tandem with all schools in HEIs to monitor students' psychological development.

As lecturers play a significant role in student support, it is crucial that they disseminate health and mental information to their students in order to promote students' well-being (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Also, two-way reciprocal interaction between lecturers and their students must exist for positive outcomes. Students should also be proactive and progressive in response to their lecturers' fervour. HEIs must upgrade their facilities and infrastructures to match the evolving educational landscape. They must also equip the learning environment with up-to-date technological support, both hardware and software. These technologies can assist in the provision of alternatives to teaching and learning, in case of crises such as the recent pandemic. With the inclusion of the efforts listed above, the academic ecosystem created in HEIs can support holistic student development.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study can be replicated in the future to include psychological aspects, such as positive thinking and perceived hope (Zhong et al., 2021). This can help shed light on the influence of internal and external barriers on students' decision-making process. The findings of the current study reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the HEI students, particularly students in the tourism, hospitality, and event (THE) industry. Future studies can also look into the impacts of technology on class delivery for students post-pandemic, given that many HEIs have shifted to online learning, simulations, and other digital tools to assist students in developing practical skills and knowledge that are adaptable to the current needs of THE industry (Zubair & Shamsudin, 2021).

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Adoption of Dotstorming to Enhance Practicum Report Writing among Event Management Students

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Abstract: The traditional method of chalk and talk in a classroom setting is continuously being integrated with Web 2.0 to enhance learning for 21st century students. This study is an action research project that aims to investigate challenges in preparing practicum reports and to evaluate the Dotstorming web tool's suitability to enhance practicum report writing. Utilising multiple methods to collect data such as online feedback, Dotstorming participation analysis, and instructors' reflection, this study investigates the processes by which students develop their collaborative learning to improve their practicum report writing. The project comprised three main phases. In the first phase, a survey was conducted with 14 practicum students from the Bachelor of Event Management (BEM) program at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) to identify the issues they encountered while preparing their practicum report. Following this, in the second to fourth phase, three intervention cycles using Dotstorming were established to improve students' collaborative learning and report writing. The last phase involved an overall reflection of this digital tool for practicum report writing. The findings reveal students' positive feedback regarding the benefits of Dotstorming in assisting with practicum report writing, including help in generating and brainstorming ideas. The results of this study demonstrate the value of Dotstorming in promoting collaborative activities and its positive influence on students' learning outcomes. Outcomes from this study can help decision-makers, researchers, and academicians to understand the potential of using the Dotstorming tool in promoting knowledge sharing and critical thinking in students' knowledge construction.

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Introduction

The advancements of technology are making their way into the educational sector. Integration of technology in education is vital to keep abreast with global challenges and as an alternative to the "chalk and talk" pedagogy. Hence, it is a must for educators to be innovative as they teach using technology to enable meaningful learning for 21st century students. Technology-enhanced learning (TEL) has the potential to increase students' motivation, engagement, and academic achievement (Dunn & Kennedy, 2019). Students have to be trained and facilitated in different pedagogical approaches to correspond with Education 4.0 (explosion of IR 4.0 in education). Over the past years, many higher education institutions (HEIs) have integrated practicum experiences into the curricula to enhance learning. In practicum, the student engages in practical work for a considerable amount of time, to apply academic content and obtain experiential learning through real-world experiences (Rosier et al., 2016; Simons et al., 2012). During the practicum, the student carries out indirect and direct observations of work practices to compare with classroom lessons and produces a written report. Report writing is intended to enhance the theorisation of practice through the integration of experience, theory, and professional practice (Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2009).

Writing helps build appraisal skills, whereby students communicate knowledge through writing by making critical connections within subject areas. Writing emphasises not only grammatical and mechanical aspects, but also meaningful specific contexts. However, students in HEIs face some writing challenges including weak evaluation of theoretical assumptions, lack of critical thinking, lack of ideas, and disorganised presentation of thoughts (Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Benzie & Harper, 2020; Çavdar & Doe, 2012). These studies revealed that students have the tendency to focus on the mechanics of the report, rather than the substance of the writing. Hence, instructors in the 21st century ought to provide students with engaging approaches to aid them in writing and also to motivate them along the writing process.

Developing students' critical thinking and writing skills demands the use of writing tools that can cultivate these skills. Additionally, descriptions of phenomena written by students for their practicum reports demonstrate their critical thinking

ability (Amizera et al., 2023). One way of supporting and enhancing practicum report writing is through the adoption of technology. In this respect, this paper aims to investigate students' challenges in preparing practicum reports and to evaluate how Dotstorming as a technological tool can enhance practicum report writing. The current study explores the issues and benefits to practicum report writing based on two research questions: 1) What are the issues and challenges in preparing a practicum report? and 2) How does Dotstorming help to enhance practicum report writing? Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to examine the issues and challenges faced by internship students in preparing practicum report as well as to examine how effective is Dotstorming in enhancing their report writing performance.

Literature Review

Practicum in Higher Education

The goals of practicum in HEIs are to develop an understanding and in-depth knowledge of an education intervention area, establish links between theory and practice, as well as reflect on personal (self-evaluation), and other professional aspects (Simons et al., 2012). Students must be able to relate information from the field to previously learnt topics in order to benefit from practicum learning (Amizera et al., 2023). Apart from that, Lei (2023) indicated that practicum offers students the opportunity to acquire first-hand experience on the subjects they have studied in classrooms. During practicum, students will work under the supervision of the placement supervisor and meet regularly with a faculty member who serves as the practicum advisor. The practicum advisor guides students on the academic components of the course that include a daily journal in which they describe and reflect on what they learned at the placement and a practicum report.

Practicum aims to develop students' critical thinking, independent thinking, and reflective analysis. This is agreed by Abdul Razak (2021) who stated that the opportunity to gain practical experience during practicum certainly excites a lot of university and other higher education students since it allows them to apply what they have been learning for the past three to four years. This type of learning requires the student to adopt a proactive attitude and behaviour that requires them to not only reproduce knowledge, but also to reformulate and renew knowledge and skills (Amizera et al., 2023). It is important to acknowledge that the success of the practicum is shared by both supervisors and students. The instructor leads the learning process of the students, which necessitates significant effort on his or her part to adopt and utilise alternatives to traditional teaching methods. Otherwise, a potential risky outcome is that the students produce a very simple written work and do not develop the basic skills that will prepare them for lifelong learning. According to Nisa et al. (2018), practicum in HEIs demands higher order thinking skills (HOTS) where students

connect the elements of the real working environment with concepts that they have learned in classrooms. Apart from that, the curriculum that offers and covers a wide range of disciplines will effectively prepare students for job opportunities and can therefore satisfy industry demands (Abulikemu et al., 2024).

Technology Adoption in Higher Learning Institutions: Dotstorming as a Pedagogical Tool

The use of Web 2.0 as a pedagogical tool in classrooms is no longer uncommon. Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of the World Wide Web that offers an interactive and dynamic web experience. Web 2.0 includes web-based applications such as Padlet, Edmodo, Kahoot and other sites that have proven to be effective and shown positive effects on students' learning (Halim & Hashim, 2019). Additionally, Web 2.0 tools provide a platform where a learning network can be created, students can participate, and educators can share resources to engage students in their learning. Similarly, a learning environment is created in practicum to support reflective practice and meaningful participation with the integration of technology in problem-based learning, reflective writing, and simulations of professional practice (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2017; Zhou et al., 2023).

Dotstorming (https://dotstorming.com/) is a free web-based application that allows teachers and students to create an online bulletin-like board. The function of Dotstorming is similar to sticky notes, but the ideas and answers are shown on the wall inside the application. On this wall, users can post words, links, pictures, videos and other related materials which are viewable by anyone who has access to its link. These features allow students to brainstorm ideas on any assignments or activities (Desai et al., 2008). As an interactive platform, Dotstorming can also replace the traditional classroom discussion, but in online settings. Instructors can post discussion topics on Dotstorming and then instruct the students to engage in an online discussion (Brown & Vaughan, 2018).

Collaborative Learning Theory

The usage of online platforms can contribute to students' collaborative learning experience as students cooperate with their classmates when brainstorming ideas. Generally, collaborative learning is about students working together and it definitely shifts away from a teacher-centred approach (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). Collaborative learning is both social and intellectual in nature, and it encourages students to connect with one another and their learning. Many studies have examined the potential benefits of collaborative learning in education. For example, Scager et al. (2016) demonstrated that collaborative learning fosters positive interdependence, while Warsah et al. (2021) highlighted that it encourages critical thinking skills.

Thus, Web 2.0 tools can engender collaborative learning, as this strategy has the potential to enhance particularly online learning. Hence, collaborative learning activities that are well-designed can be beneficial to students.

Methodology

Study Design

The study aims to investigate students' challenges in preparing practicum reports and to evaluate the efficiency of Dotstorming in aiding report writing for the course GHZX4912: Practicum for Bachelor of Event Management. This course is designed for students in their last semester of the Bachelor of Event Management (BEM) programme where they are required to undergo industrial attachment for six months. Students are free to choose any company for their internship, but the company must be involved in event organisation such as event management, wedding planners, sound and equipment, logistics, caterers and others. Upon completion of the course, students will be able to fulfil all the Course Learning Outcomes (CLO) as stated in the syllabus.

This study employed the action research method which involved the dissemination of a survey form to identify students' problems in preparing practicum reports and a three-cycle intervention that included classroom strategy to assist students in learning. According to Wright (2012), academic intervention is a strategy used to teach a new skill, build proficiency in a skill, or encourage a child to apply an existing skill to new situations or settings. New settings will subsequently help students improve their learning and increase their understanding in class. Therefore, to measure the outcome of the intervention, an overall reflection was done by the instructor and also by the students through a survey form as the last cycle. The five phases of the action research are depicted in Figure 1.

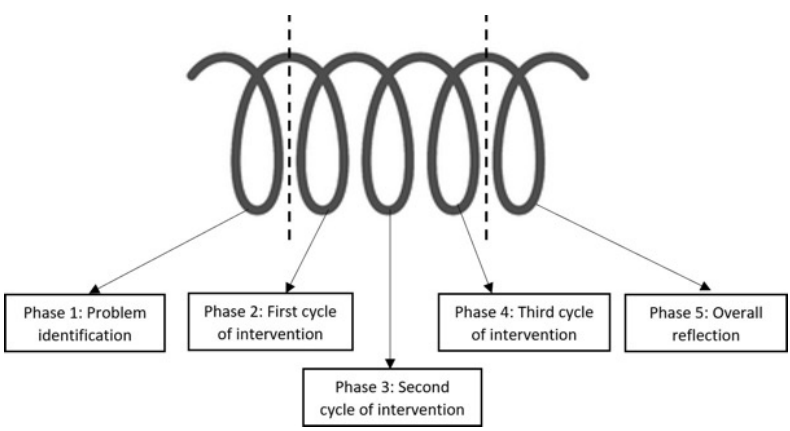


Figure 1. Action research process

Data Collection

Phase 1: Problem Identification

In the past, a few issues have been identified that resulted in low grades and complaints from instructors for the practicum course. First, the Bachelor of Event Management students were too busy handling events during weekdays and weekends, especially once the government started permitting large gatherings or events, as COVID-19 gradually subsided. Before organising an event, students need to do proper planning and preparation. During the event, they are usually fully occupied with handling the crowd, logistics, food and other matters. After the event, they need to follow up with vendors and clients and do a post-mortem with the participating organisation(s) or partner(s). Thus, the hectic cycle of event management has been leaving them tired and lacking the time to prepare practicum reports.

Once the internship period ends, students are given only two weeks to prepare and submit their final report. Owing to their inability to begin the writing earlier due to employment obligations, writing at the last minute results in simple or mediocre reports. Subsequently, they receive low grades for their reports, which account for 50% of their final grades. Their final grade will also be influenced by this significant percentage and the variety of information required in this assessment. Among the requirements and guidelines for the practicum report are introduction of the organisation, company analysis, task and duties performed, case analysis, reflection as well as references and appendices.

For this study, a survey form was disseminated to 14 students to identify their issues and challenges in preparing the practicum report. This survey helped the instructor to identify the problems faced by the students in preparing the final report as well as devising suitable interventions to address the issues. Aside from that, a list of students who obtained low marks for their practicum were also identified. Students normally receive an A-, A or A+ for practicum, while those who did not focus on report writing will receive a lower grade. Table 1 presents the breakdown of marks and grades for those who obtained lower grades for last semester's practicum.

Table 1. List of students who obtained low grades for practicum

Students	Marks for Practicum Final Report (50%)	Overall Marks (100%)	Overall Grade
Student A	15.5	64.3	B-
Student B	24	72	B+
Student C	29.5	73.5	B+
Student D	28	70.5	B+

Therefore, to help students improve their practicum report, an intervention using Dotstorming was suggested. Dotstorming has proven to be beneficial tool for students by not only encouraging their involvement in online group discussions, but also by helping them generate and share new ideas with classmates. Hence, this gives them access to more resources and ideas to prepare their report. Students can also use the Dotstorming interface to develop their own ideas from their classmates' insightful responses, thereby supporting student-led learning. Accordingly, this intervention was conducted for three cycles where each cycle was designed to help students become familiar with the application and help them actively participate in the discussion.

Phase 2: First Cycle of Intervention

The first intervention was conducted on March 15, 2022 with all 14 students. The purpose of this initial cycle was to help students familiarise themselves with the Dotstorming application. Students were asked basic questions to ensure that they understood how to utilise the Dotstorming application to help them prepare the final practicum report. The questions asked for this first intervention were:

1. How did you feel while attending the practicum session?
2. Did you encounter any problems or issues during the practicum?

Phase 3: Second Cycle of Intervention

After receiving feedback on the first intervention cycle with students, we proceeded with the second cycle. This cycle focused on and emphasised on key points to include in the final practicum report. In cycle 2, students were required to list down a few key points according to the requirement of each section of the report, namely introduction, company analysis, task and duties, case analysis and reflection. Every student was given their own column with their name to avoid redundancy and misarrangement in sharing the key points. This interactive intervention encouraged and helped other students to get some insights on what to write in their report as well as allowed them to share relevant information with others.

Phase 4: Third Cycle of Intervention

The general reflections and opinions of students' practicum were emphasised in the third and final cycle of our Dotstorming intervention. This section allowed students to reflect on what they had learned during the practicum period, identify challenges they faced and deliver their suggestions for further improvement. This last cycle generally requires HOTS among students to ensure that they fulfil all the Course Learning Outcomes (CLO). Questions included in this cycle were:

1. Can you describe the company's culture?
2. What are the main day-to-day responsibilities involved in this internship?
3. What are some essential qualities of successful interns?
4. What challenges did interns in this position typically encounter?
5. How do you evaluate performance in this position?
6. Are there opportunities for full-time employment or other advancements?

Phase 5: Overall Reflection

The last phase of this action research was to assess the instructor's reflection and evaluate students' overall reflection regarding the Dotstorming application which assisted them on the final report writing. In this phase, the instructor prepared an overall reflection for the three cycles of Dotstorming interventions and students were required to fill up a survey form in the embedded link to assess their reflection. The insights from this reflection can be used for future references and improvement in applying Dotstorming to generate ideas among practicum students.

Findings

This action research project focused on the challenges and ways to improve report writing using Dotstorming among the practicum students of GHZX4912, Practicum for the Bachelor of Event Management program. The findings, based on the five phases, are discussed next in the context of the research questions.

Phase 1: Problem Identification

Students were asked "What is your biggest problem in writing a practicum report?" Table 2 summarises the findings for Phase 1 and indicates that most students have problems writing the content for the report. They lacked ideas and information about the company where the practicum was held.

Table 2. Issues faced by students in writing the practicum report

Student	Problems
1	Keep delaying writing.
2	No problem.
3	Problems in all parts.
4	To get the company's details with permission.
5	To find the appropriate content for the report.
6	Perhaps SWOT.
7	Lack of technical knowledge.

Table 2. (con't)

Student	Problems
8	No time to keep the report up-to-date, as the daily work is too busy.
9	SWOT analysis.
10	I have got no time. I've got post-Covid symptoms that always make me feel unhealthily tired all the time. So, it is big honour if the due date of submission is extended a bit longer.
11	To come out with the case analysis.
12	Lack of ideas and points.
13	To write the background of the organisation.
14	Lack of information about the company.

Additionally, in this phase, the students' experience with Dotstorming was also examined. The results show that most of them were not familiar with the tools and approaches used in the past to help them in their writing. Table 3 lists down the alternatives given by the students to address their writing problem.

Table 3. Students' alternative ways in addressing report writing problem

Student	When you have difficulty in writing a practicum report, who do you usually discuss with?
1	Supervisor
2	With my teammates and also a lecturer
3	My friend
4	I will discuss this with our UUM lecturer
5	Supervisor, family and friends
6	Friends who also went for the practicum
7	Discuss with a friend and ask the supervisor some questions
8	Other friends who are undergoing practicum too
9	My supervisor and course mate
10	People at the office, friends and seniors
11	Friends
12	Friends and supervisor
13	Supervisor and friends
14	Friends and colleagues

Table 3 indicates that students prefer to ask their supervisors or lecturers and friends for help in writing their practicum report. This suggests that supervisors or lecturers should find helpful tools to help their students in their report writing. The results also show that none of them were familiar with Dotstorming and have never used it. This shows that the application of Dotstorming can potentially be a useful tool in guiding them on how to prepare for the final practicum report.

Phase 2: First Cycle of Intervention

This cycle concentrated on the students' initial Dotstorming experiences. Based on the initial responses, the students were appreciative and enthusiastic to participate in the project using this platform. Additionally, many admitted that using Dotstorming was challenging since this was their first time getting to know and using this application. However, the students also pointed out that there was no schematic depiction on the Dotstorming wall, which was perceived as unorganised. Hence, it made it quite difficult for them to indicate their ideas on the live whiteboard. The next cycle focused on improving their experience and skills in using Dotstorming.

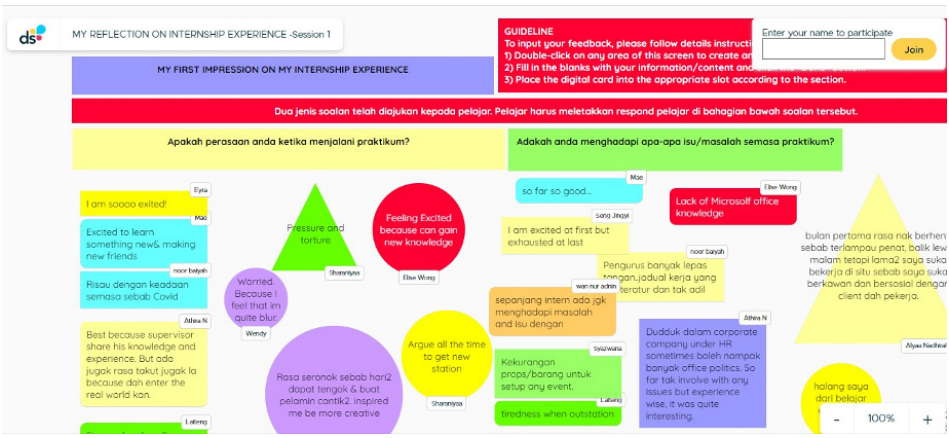


Figure 2. Screenshot of Dotstorming in Cycle 1 of intervention

Phase 3: Second Cycle of Intervention

The second cycle involved a more organised way of exchanging solutions within the Dotstorming application. Once the researchers included the names of the students in the final column, everything became more ordered. There were also no issues with cluttered or irregular formation. This step also helped students to generate ideas to write in their report, and at the same time, they could discuss the points with their instructors or supervisors. Students could also derive some ideas from their friends. Apart from that, there were no issues with plagiarism since all the students did their practicum in different organisations. The positive feedback from this cycle can be seen in the interesting visual display from the Dotstorming application (Figure 3).

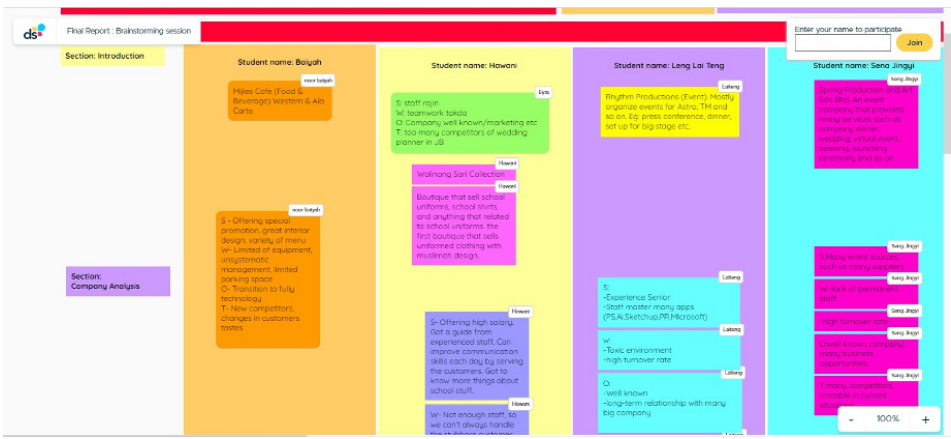


Figure 3. Screenshot of Dotstorming in Cycle 2 of intervention

Phase 4: Third Cycle of Intervention

By this stage, it can be deducted that students were more comfortable sharing their views and thoughts. Many of them shared a lot of information about their routine tasks during the internship and identified problems that occurred as well as their solutions. However, this phase was still guided by an instructor, which students found to be a highly beneficial, as they were still unclear about the types of issues or problems they needed to address during the practicum and in their final report. Students may also require the guidance of the instructor to ensure they do not inadvertently disclose confidential information or issues related to their practicum.

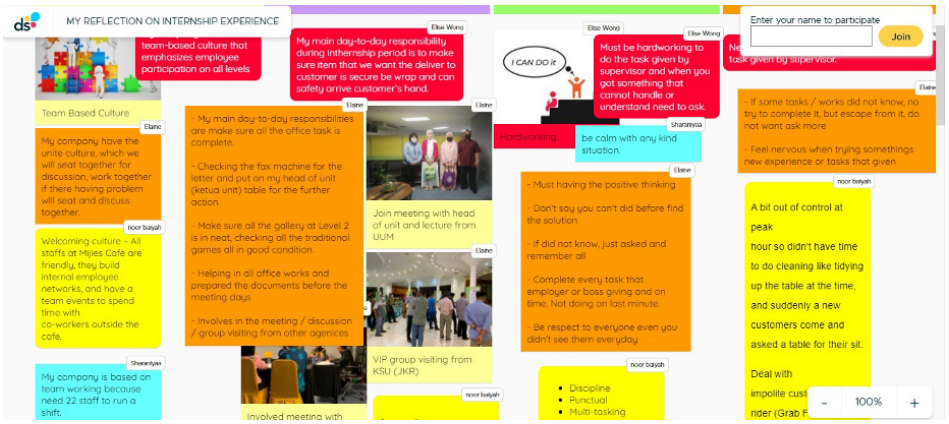


Figure 4. Screenshot of Dotstorming in Cycle 3 of intervention

Phase 5: Impact of Dotstorming on Students (Reflection)

In this phase, the researchers assessed and evaluated students' overall reflection of the Dotstorming application, in regard to helping with their final practicum report writing. Table 4 summarises the results. Based on the feedback, students found Dotstorming to be very useful and relevant to them. However, there were also interesting comments with regard to the number of students using the application and its features. One student suggested that the appropriate number of students to use the Dotstorming application at any one session should be less than 10. Others were concerned about the various shapes used by the students on the wall of the application.

Table 4. Summary of students' feedback on Dotstorming

Student	Feedback
1	I think this is good as it provides clearer guidance for us to prepare our report
2	By using Dotstorming as an educational tool, it is a good way for supervisors and students to interact with each other. Students can come out with their idea in point form and also share them with other students through Dotstorming.
3	It was easy to use and let us brainstorm to prepare for our report.
4	Make it easy for students to draft points for writing a report.
5	More friendly and independent, students can share their opinion.
6	It helps to generate new ideas from the ideas given by other students. Quite a practical tool to use as a virtual brainstorming platform.

Table 4. (con't)

Student	Feedback
7	Interesting but look messy when everyone uses different shapes, need to ask them to arrange them properly.
8	It is quite fun if the number of participants is less than 10 since it requires participants to drag their answers somewhere else.
9	The idea was great, it does help a lot.
10	Very useful and it is easier to generate an idea in writing the final report.
11	The use of Dotstorming makes it easier for students to understand the supervisor's explanations. It's easier, clearer and faster.
12	Easy and useful.

Discussion

Using the action research design, this study examined students' experiences of collaborative learning through Dotstorming and its implications for their practicum report writing. The findings demonstrate how Dotstorming facilitates collaborative learning and assists students in writing up their reports. Dotstorming encourages collaborative learning as students learned from each other's posts and comments, as well as the supervisor's feedback to improve their writing. This finding correlates with past findings on collaborative learning and the relevance of technology as an intervention (Pifarré & Martí, 2018; Rashid et al., 2019; Strauß & Rummel, 2020). Collaborative learning refers to an instruction method in which learners at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012).

The practicum students in this action research project unanimously reported a positive experience in using Dotstorming. Apart from being able to garner new ideas and collaborate with peers in preparing for practicum reports, the application also assisted the students with much-needed motivation and positive reinforcement. Meanwhile, it is also noteworthy that the ability to work in teams and coordinate with others corresponds well with the demands of the 21st century workplace (Rashid et al., 2019). Furthermore, students also reported fast feedback from lecturers or instructors as an upside of Dotstorming, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the study successfully demonstrates the effectiveness of Dotstorming in promoting collaborative learning as evidenced from the positive effects seen in student learning outcomes. The overall process and outcomes from this research is simplified in Figure 5.

Phase 1: Problem Identification	
Activity: Identify issues in practicum report writing from survey and practicum students who obtained low marks for their final report	Outcome: Issue identified include lack of time in completing report, resulting in low grades and complaints from instructors

Phase 2: First Cycle of Intervention	
Activity: This initial cycle is to help students familiarise themselves with the Dotstorming application. Students were asked basic questions to ensure that they understand how to utilise the Dotstorming application in helping them to prepare the final practicum report.	Outcome: Introduction of Dotstorming as the main discussion platform for practicum report writing. Familiarisation of students with Dotstorming.

Phase 3: Second Cycle of Intervention	
Activity: In this cycle, students were required to identify key points for report requirement namely introduction, company analysis, task and duties, case analysis and reflection. Every student was given a column with their names to avoid redundancy and misarrangement in sharing the key points.	Outcome: Encouraged and helped students to get some insights on what to write in their report as well as allowed them to share their own insights with others

Phase 4: Third Cycle of Intervention	
Activity: This cycle allowed students to reflect on what they had learned during the internship period, identify challenges they faced and deliver their suggestions for further improvement.	Outcome: Use of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) among students to ensure that they fulfill all the Course Learning Outcomes (CLO).

Phase 5: Overall Reflection	
Activity: During this phase, the researcher assessed and evaluated students' overall reflection on the Dotstorming application with regard to practicum final report writing.	Outcome: Students found the application very useful and relevant to them.

Figure 5. Overall process and outcomes

Implications of the Action Research

Action research is a research method that is commonly used by educational practitioners to examine and ultimately improve their practice. The insights generated from their inquiry is contextually specific to a classroom or community. This particular research offers theoretical implications with regard to the incorporation of action research in the Malaysian higher education context of practicum students and report writing. The findings demonstrate the need for students to improve and instructors to facilitate the practicum report writing.

As professionals, instructors can learn how to systematically adopt Dotstorming in the classroom and make informed decisions on the content of learning. As the findings of the study suggest, the Dotstorming interface could become disorganised if too many students join a particular session and do not arrange their comments properly. Hence, the next intervention cycles can be improved so that students can have their own comment space, and the interface can be coordinated. In terms of practical implications, the study demonstrates that instructors can adopt research skills based on problems identified in a classroom and engage in disciplined inquiry to generate insights and solutions that could guide or inform students, educators, and other educational stakeholders.

Research Limitations

The limitation of the study is the small number of student participants involved in the study. However, the small sample is deemed sufficient to achieve the objective of proving that Dotstorming can enhance practicum report writing. Apart from that, two students did not respond to the final overall reflection questionnaire. The instructor had reminded them a few times, but no action had been taken. Nevertheless, the feedback was collected and analysed as it is.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a need for educators to become acquainted with digital tools to stay relevant in the 21st century and more importantly, aid their students in their learning. This is more appealing to the new generation as evidenced by the findings. Since this study was carried out at Universiti Utara Malaysia and only involved a small number of practicum students from the same course, the findings cannot be generalised across the board. Thus, future studies can include different levels of students or courses to collect more comprehensive data on how this application can be better utilised to facilitate collaborative learning as well as its limitations. Building upon this, a comparative study can also be conducted to compare Dotstorming with other existing digital applications such as Padlet, Edmodo, or Kahoot! specific to

their usefulness in promoting collaborative learning. Findings from these studies can enhance this pedagogical approach.

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Choosy or Unqualified? The Employability of Graduates in Unrelated Fields. A Case of the Event Operation Certificate Program at Pasir Salak Community College

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Abstract: Graduate employability has received significant attention across Malaysia's higher education landscape, particularly post-COVID-19. There appears to be some education-job mismatch in the event management sector, which carries a negative connotation for students' educational investment and future workforce. This qualitative study explored the factors limiting Pasir Salak Community College's Event Operations Certificate graduates from working in event-related fields. Data was acquired via semi-structured interviews with seven graduates. The findings reveal that these graduates were indeed qualified for employment yet resorted to working outside their field for three reasons: workload and burnout, family obstacles, and low salary offer. Subsequently, this study proposes three strategies to increase graduate employability in the event management sector: active collaboration with industry players, specialised career counselling, and early exposure to career prospects.

Keywords: Graduate employability, higher education, field-of-study mismatch, Event Operation Certificate, event industry

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Introduction

Statistics show that higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia comprise a total of 20 public universities, 36 polytechnics, 105 community colleges, and 434 private institutions (Ministry of Higher Education, 2022a). Each year, both public and private universities in Malaysia produce numerous graduates across various fields such as science, technology, engineering, and social sciences. According to Hassan

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and Mat Halif (2022), an increase of 9.82% was reported in the number of graduates in 2021 (286,299) as opposed to 260,701 graduates in 2020. However, only 176,256 graduates managed to secure a job while the remaining 41,467 graduates were still unemployed (Ministry of Higher Education, 2022b). This indicates that while the massive number of graduates completing their studies is highly celebrated, graduates face significant competition and challenges to establish themselves in the job market (Shahidan et al., 2019).

A recent report by Labor Statistics Malaysia indicates that the local unemployment rate in April 2022 dropped to below 4.0% for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) standards, any country with an unemployment rate of 4.0% and below is recognised as having full employment. Such positive development continues following the transition of the country to the endemic phase in April 2022. However, this does not portray the actual reality where many graduates are facing difficulties in getting a job, especially in their field of study within a specific time frame, leading them to work in unrelated areas (Kadir et al., 2020). Thus, there is an increasing concern about the direction of graduates, including TVET graduates, in the job market after completing their studies at HEIs and how they may avoid unemployment and obtain employement in their respective fields of study.

The 2021 graduate tracer study by the Pasir Salak Community College showed that the marketability rate of Event Operations Certificate graduates was 47.1% while others furthered their studies. From the figure, only 12.5% managed to secure a job within the event industry while the remaining 87.5% worked outside their field (Kolej Komuniti Pasir Salak, 2022). This raises a pertinent question of whether the small percentage of the former category is caused by the graduates being choosy in job selection or whether they were deemed unqualified by employers. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, the Event Operations Certificate is only offered by the Department of Polytechnic and Community College Education at the Pasir Salak Community College. Therefore, there is a dire need to explore the real cause(s) of graduates not working in the event industry as it will help relevant stakeholders, particularly HEIs, in devising a suitable strategy or intervention to address this issue.

Furthermore, a thorough review of the existing literature indicates a scarcity of research that concentrates on the issue of education-job mismatch within the field of event management, particularly in Malaysia. This is aligned with Rukadov et al. (2019) who stated that horizontal (field-of-study) mismatches are less explored than vertical (qualification) ones, mainly owing to the lack of relevant data on graduates' field of study that can create a statistical survey of mismatch and the lack of self-evaluation data on job-education matching. Additionally, horizontal mismatch can greatly affect graduates in terms of wage and job satisfaction, subsequently, waste human capital (Kaki et al., 2022).

Literature Review

Field-of-Study Mismatch

Previous studies have examined the mismatch between education and employment among graduates in the labour market in regard to prevalence, causes, and effects (Bender & Roche, 2013). While Alzubaidi (2022) identified vertical (qualification) and horizontal (field-of-study) as two types of education-job mismatch, other researchers (Albizu et al., 2022) highlighted three types of mismatch, namely vertical mismatch, horizontal mismatch, and skills mismatch. Skills mismatch or skills gap describes a situation where employers view employees as not possessing the necessary competencies to complete their existing duties and functions satisfactorily (Albizu et al., 2022).

Following the rapid expansion of higher education, field-of-study mismatch has been extensively examined in countries like Saudi Arabia (Alzubaidi, 2022), Spain (Albert et al., 2021), Switzerland (Schweri et al., 2020), Russia (Rudakov et al., 2019), Malaysia (Shahidan et al., 2019), Thailand (Pholphirul, 2017), Europe, and Japan (Verhaest et al., 2015). Aside from limiting the proper utilisation of abilities, education-job mismatch wastes time and money invested in education. According to Pregoner et al. (2020), individuals working outside their areas of expertise are incapable of maximising their potential, abilities, and profits through their work, thus putting their skills to waste. This subsequently affects employee productivity and reduces their wages and work efficiency. Therefore, education-job mismatch should be addressed as it negatively impacts individuals (employees), employers, and society.

Currently, numerous educational programmes are offered by various HEIs that enable students to further their studies after high school. Many believe that graduates often select their field of study based on the initial exploration of job opportunities that can provide the best return of investment after graduation. This notion is supported by Domadenik et al. (2013) who stated that the selection of a field of education is commonly motivated by the desire to attain a job that will reward specific expertises acquired through the said education. Researchers posit that most graduates prefer to work in their field of study since it allows them to utilise their full ability at work (Lee & Sabharwal, 2016). However, upon entering the job market, there is no assurance that they will acquire a career within the designated field and are left with a lower pay offer than expected, leading to less satisfaction with the job. Consequently, graduates will change employment or take a job unrelated to their field of education (Domadenik et al., 2013).

According to Robst (2007), field-of-study mismatch is more prominent among graduates with generic skills like Humanities, Social Sciences, and Liberal Arts than those with specific expertise like Medicine, Computer Science, Engineering,

and Technology. Previous studies found that science and technology programmes specialise their graduates to work in the field and prepare those who are capable of specific jobs only (Alzubaidi, 2022). Hence, these graduates are unlikely to find employment outside their profession. On the contrary, educational programmes in social and behavioural sciences are usually generic (Robst, 2007) and equip students with a comprehensive set of abilities applicable for various jobs, including those outside their field (Somers et al., 2019). In this respect, event management belongs to the social science field (Andrews & Leopold, 2013) where the graduates may experience horizontal mismatch in the job market (Rudakov et al., 2019).

Past research reported that many graduates are holding jobs that do not align with their field of study (Lee & Sabharwal, 2016). Among the reasons for education-job mismatch include labour market factors, self-motivation, personal concerns, s alary, job satisfaction, venturing into new careers, and the acquisition of new skills outside formal education (Kadir et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Alzubaidi (2022) identified the trifecta of field-of-study mismatch as socio-demographic characteristics, educational background, and job characteristics.

The New Employability Challenge for Graduates

Employability is a set of achievements (skills, knowledge and understanding), and personal traits that enable graduates to secure a job and demonstrate competence, which eventually will benefit themselves, the workforce, society, and the economy (Thirunavukarasu et al., 2020). According to Bonesso et al. (2019), employability is a complicated psycho-social phenomenon, described as the constant fulfilling, gaining, or generating of employment through the optimal application of competencies. Employability is more than getting a job; it concerns a broader set of skills and characteristics that allow graduates to succeed throughout their working life (Yorke, 2006).

The rapid technological advancements of the 21st century require a highly trained workforce to meet industrial demands (Owusu-Mintah & Kissi, 2017). As the working environment evolves, employability becomes increasingly difficult and complex for the current generation of graduates to enter the labour market. The competition is made worse by the growing global population, which is projected to reach 8.5 billion in 2030 (United Nations, 2024). Aside from having to keep abreast with ever-evolving technological advances and upgrading their digital knowledge, graduates need to improve their cognitive and non-cognitive skills as well as master soft skills like critical thinking, and social and emotional skills (OECD, 2021).

According to Taguma et al. (2018), formal education alone is insufficient for students to survive in the 21st century. They must also be skilled in problem-solving, teamwork, and communication, which can be gained through social and emotional learning. Furthermore, a combination of social and emotional competency as well

as mastery of traditional skills can prepare students for the rapidly evolving digital economy. Eventually, 21st century talents comprise three categories: learning and creativity capacity, digital literacy knowledge, and life and career skills (Taguma et al., 2018). In the context of event management, Walters (2018) highlighted the need for graduates to acquire both "hard" and "soft" skills to strengthen their employability and fulfil industrial demands. Hard skills are knowledge and technical abilities that are specific to a profession or discipline while, soft skills describe general interpersonal abilities like communication, cooperation, problem-solving, reflection, and self-management. This indicates that the event management sector recognises the importance of experienced, skilled, and well-trained workers (Walters, 2018).

The rapid expansion of the event management sector consequently raises the demand for a qualified and efficient workforce (Abulikemu et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2008). The event industry has undergone a substantial transformation post-COVID-19 (Jaafar & Khan, 2022) and witnessed an extraordinary pace in innovation, and technology acceptance (Mohd Nasir et al., 2023; Yung et al., 2022). Indeed, COVID-19 has had disastrous effects on the events industry globally that, led to massive unemployment. The massive changes and disruptions that have and continue to take place in the event management sector necessitate graduates to acquire new skills that can safeguard their employability, such as technological skills, soft skills, and entrepreneurial skills (Shariff & Abidin, 2022).

Moreover, the characteristics of the event industry signify that this field is challenging and requires employees who are emotionally and physically fit. Chan (2015) contended that event management is a highly-stressful profession that presents employees with an abundance of tasks, tight deadlines, mental exhaustion, as well as outdoor and overtime work. The high workload is equivalent to a high stress level that will, ultimately impact work-life balance, hence forcing employees to seek employment elsewhere (Chan, 2015).

However, Nizam and Kam (2018) believed that event planning is often made challenging and stressful by high expectations from the clients. Work assignments are commonly assigned ad hoc thus placing event management professionals under severe pressure. This will eventually result in job dissatisfaction that leads to high turnover and poor social life (Nizam & Kam, 2018). Additionally, extended and unpredictable working hours are expected among event management professionals (Chan, 2015), making it a diffult option for those who value a balanced career and social life.

The Job Expectations of Generation Z

Generation Z refers to those born between 1997 and 2013 (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022). They are known for having unique work expectations, yet share some behavioural traits with the millennial age (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022). In recent years, there has been a massive influx of fresh Generation Z talents entering the

job market. Schroth (2019) asserted that organisations can recruit and manage inexperienced youths by comprehending the expectations of Generation Z job searchers. Unlike the preceding generations, Generation Z graduates prefer jobs with a flexible schedule, management that provides equality, less work pressure, and compensation that commensurates with their efforts (Schroth, 2019). In other words, they are more prone towards work-life balance and have realistic expectations for their profession (Lee & Sabharwal, 2016).

Nguyen Ngoc et al. (2022) discovered that Vietnamese Generation Z prioritises work-life balance when making career decisions. They equally divide their time between the office and other places, and spend half of their time resolving problems in their personal lives. Moreover, Schroth (2019) found that Generation Z display moderate to severe mental health issues compared to previous generations. Half of the respondents believed in their capability of managing stress well while 25% admitted struggling. Also, anxiety was the second most common diagnosis among Generation Z after depression.

Researchers believe that the behaviour and emotions of Generation Z are mainly influenced by the current state of the evolving world, including economic recession, high unemployment, and the growth of the internet and mobile devices (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022). Apart from being accustomed to interacting within an interconnected world, many Generation Z youths were raised by overprotective parents who inadvertently robbed their opportunities to learn life skills (Schroth, 2019). This interferes with their social, emotional, and intellectual development, making it difficult for them to become autonomous adults and face challenges both in life and at work. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Generation Z graduates look for jobs with less pressure, prefer to work independently outside their routine, and are more interested in flexible work rules (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022).

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach to understand the reasons for field-of-study mismatch among Event Operations Certificate graduates from the Pasir Salak Community College and the challenges experienced during their practical training in the event-related industry. In-depth interview was used as the data collection technique as it is a common data-gathering method in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). As researchers are often the primary tool of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the researchers played the role as interviewers in this study.

Purposive sampling was used to select the informants with "graduates not working in event-related fields at the point of this study" as the inclusion criteria. From 53 graduates who fit the inclusion criteria, 7 graduates voluntarily agreed to be in the study while the others either refused to participate due to time limitations or could not be contacted. The informants comprised six females and one male who

graduated with Event Operation Certificate between 2018 and 2021. The interviews were conducted from May to September 2022. With the informants' permission, all interviews were recorded in various locations according to their convenience, and approximately 15 to 30 minutes of the semi-structured interviews were led by the informants.

The interview data were manually analysed. All recorded interviews were transcribed followed by a content analysis where the researchers read, annotated, and classified the texts according to the emergent problems within the empirical contexts of the study. The transcripts were used to extract key themes and issues. Finally, the researchers categorised the codes into relevant themes that can provide answers to the research questions.

Results

Table 1 presents the informants' profiles according to the set criteria.

Table 1. Informants' profiles

Informants	Year of Graduation	Gender	Age (Years)	Occupational Industry
GR1	2019	Male	23	Automotive
GR2	2020	Female	22	Education
GR3	2019	Female	23	Healthcare
GR4	2021	Female	21	Food
GR6	2018	Female	25	Gas station
GR6	2020	Female	22	Water services
GR7	2021	Female	21	Retail

The researchers further examined the reasons for graduates not working in the event industry. Of the varied responses, several common themes including workload and burnout, family obstacles, and low salary offer emerged as the main reasons for them to work in unrelated fields.

Workloads and Burnouts

Event management is well-known as a highly demanding industry with high staff turnover for various reasons, including long working hours, lack of job satisfaction and motivation, poor working conditions, and demanding customers (Chan, 2015). The data analysis revealed that some graduates rejected job offers from employers after finishing their industrial/practical training. Five informants stated that they could not manage the heavy workload and never-ending exhaustion during practical training. One informant said:

> *(…) the boss of the practical training place offered me a job, but I refused. It's not because of pressure from the employer, but because of the uncertain work in terms of time. Sometimes I work two days straight and don't sleep much because I do an outdoor event.* (GR1)

Meanwhile, another informant received a job offer right after practical training but decided to resign after eight months due to work-related burden and tiredness. She also frequently returned from work late at night, which she felt uncomfortable and unsafe as a woman.

> *(…) the employer offered me a job, which I accepted because, at that time, I had no source of income, but after eight months of work, I decided to quit because I was burnout due to the workload I had to bear.* (GR7)

This finding implies that graduates who experience a heavy workload and burnout during practical training will resort to other employment opportunities as an exit plan. Chan (2015) admited that some employees may find it tough to work on multiple tasks, which might lead to burnout and health-related concerns like muscular discomfort, exhaustion, and insomnia. Although six informants were qualified to work in the event industry, they were willing to choose jobs outside the field due to the associated workloads and burnout. This suggests that Event Operation Certificate graduates are indeed qualified for employment in the event industry, but industrial training experience caught them by surprise. This is exemplified in the following response:

> *(…) before undergoing industrial training, I thought the work given had focused on a specific task, but it is not as I thought; I have to perform various tasks, not to mention when there is a staff shortage.* (GR5)

Furthermore, female graduates (three informants) consider event management is more suitable for men because it involves handling heavy and bulky technical equipment. According to them:

> *(…) most of the tasks involve technical work and require physical strength to lift, install and store the equipment before and after the event. I think this task suit only for men.* (GR2)

> *(…) although I had to carry out events while studying, I never thought I would do heavy tasks like what I experienced in the industry, which is not suited to my physical strength. I think this job is too heavy for women.* (GR7)

These responses show that event-related tasks and activities are mostly incompatible with the physical capability of female graduates, especially when it involves lifting and handling of heavy equipment. They believe that such tasks are better suited for men. Also, they seem to be in shock of the actual working conditions of the event industry which were not made clear to them until they started their industrial training.

Family Obstacles

Several graduates faced difficulties in obtaining their family's approval to work in the event management industry after graduation (four informants). Therefore, they had to deny job offers from event management companies because most event locations were far from their homes and required travelling. One informant shared:

> *(…) the event company called me for an interview, but I couldn't make it because the place was far from my home, and my grandfather wouldn't be allowed me because there was no one there to take care of me.* (GR3)

Additionally, some informants had to opt out of an event management career due to family issues. Given the opportunity, several female graduates (four informants) were still keen to work in the event industry; however, they had to fulfil their commitments and responsibilities to their family. These informants had this to say:

> *(…) I had to survive working in a restaurant close to home to gain experience and help my desperate family to earn money. At the same time, I need to take care of them.* (GR4)

> *(…) I worked as a cashier at a gas station near home because my mother was ill then, and I had to take care of her.* (GR5)

> *(…) the practical training employer offered me to continue working there, but I had family issues at the time, so I couldn't continue.* (GR2)

These statements imply that the informants were unable to work in the event industry due to family commitments. They perceived family as a priority and dependant, and had to make sacrifices as needed.

Low Salary Offer

All informants agreed that salary is an important consideration when accepting a job offer. Following their experience in the event industry, these informants realised that

they would be spending a lot of time at work instead with family or have a social life, therefore, the salary should compensate for such effort and time. Unfortunately, many employers offer a low salary. Two informants lamented:

> *(…) the boss is ok, but because the salary is low and I don't think it's worth working there.* (GR7)

> *(…) after the practical training at the wedding boutique, I intended to continue working there, but since the salary was too low, I had to cancel it.* (GR6)

The study also found that graduates with no family obstacles could afford to reject a job offer from the event industry if the salary offered is low and not worth the hard work. However, those who were desperate to be close to their family have had to accept whatever job opportunities available, even if they were unrelated to their field of study and the salary is not up to their expectations.

> *(…) I accepted this low-paying work not because I enjoyed it but because I needed to get through it because I had to be close to my family.* (GR5)

Our findings also revealed that not all graduates (two informants) perceived money as the primary determinant of job satisfaction. Although it is deemed essential, they did not have the option to make it a priority. For them, it is gratifying to help lighten the family's burden and sustain themselves financially without troubling their family members. Moreover, some graduates (four informants) did not view education-job mismatch as a serious issue because they believe the additional skills gained can prepare them to work in the event industry. One informant made the following positive comment:

> *(…) even though my current job is less related to my field of study, it is very challenging, and I consider it my best preparation for entering the field of events, if possible, one day.* (GR6)

This statement suggests that informants currently working in unrelated fields are still interested to work in the event industry. They believe that their current job, despite being a mismatch with their field of study, provides the opportunity to gain more experience and enhance their understanding about the nature of working in the event industry, which requires physical and mental strength.

Discussion and Implications

This study explored the reasons that impeded Pasir Salak Community College's Event Operations Certificate graduates from working in the event industry after graduation. The findings proved that these graduates are indeed qualified to be employed in the event industry as many of them were offered a job immediately after completing their industrial training. However, some of them rejected the offer, which raises the next question - "Why?".

Past studies have identified several factors of education-job mismatch among graduates, including job market, self-motivation, personal problems, revenue or work satisfaction, venturing into a new field of work, acquiring new skills outside formal education (Kadir et al., 2020), socio-demographic factors, educational background, and employment characteristics (Alzubaidi, 2022). This study found that some Event Operation Certificate graduates worked in fields not related to events for three reasons: workload and burnout, family obstacles, and low salary offer. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies that looked at family economic problems, women workers (Robst, 2007), type of educational fields such as social sciences, low education level, contract workers, low wages, less work experience (Alzubaidi, 2022), and lack of work-life balance (Nizam & Kam, 2018) — all of which contibute to the horizontal mismatch of working in an unrelated field.

Other studies also reported that individuals in education-job mismatch will misuse their skills and fail to fully utilise their talent, capabilities, and returns in their work (Pregoner et al., 2020). This will negatively impact employee productivity, lower their salary and work performance, and they will likely switch to better-matching jobs (Somers et al., 2019). In these studies, graduates who completed industrial training were more enthusiastic about joining their industry; however, the opposite is true for most Event Operations Certificate graduates. Such situation is worrying because they are the apprecentices of the skilled and semi-skilled workforce in the event industry. Moreover, the event industry is considered a crucial tourism sector and economic contributor (Getz, 2008) with nearly 1.5 billion people visiting corporate events worldwide (Jaafar & Khan, 2022). In Malaysia, business events are anticipated to draw 5.9 million participants, providing an estimated RM42.12 billion in economic effect and creating approximately 25,833 jobs by 2030 (Mardhiah, 2022). Therefore, training providers are the main pillar in meeting the labour needs of the event management sector.

Following our findings and a review of past literature, this study proposes three strategies to increase the marketability of event management graduates and reduce their migration to other non-event industries. First, training providers offering event management programmes should actively collaborate with industry players to expose their students to real-world job experiences (Barron & Leask, 2012). Thus, students

can serve as part-time or volunteering event crews to obtain actual experiences in the industry. The collaboration between training providers and employers will create a mutually beneficial relationship based on the needs of the event industry (Barron & Leask, 2012).

Second, there should be more mentorship activities that can inspire event management students to work in the event industry. This includes organising counselling sessions immediately after their practical training. Plus, career counselling can help students to better comprehend the job market, eventually strengthening their perception of the world and setting reasonable goals for their careers (Omar et al., 2022). Their guardians should also be invited to the counselling sessions so that they can understand and support their children's careers. As the primary social support system, family significantly impacts how youths develop their careers and influences their employment decision-making and occupational status (Whiston & Keller, 2004).

While parents from higher socioeconomic status are more likely to understand and support youths' career exploration and provide relevant knowledge and resources for their career planning, youths from lower-income households frequently feel pressured to contribute financially to the family and pursue goals to achieve better financial stability than their family (Xing & Rojewski, 2018). As a result, they typically perceive more obstacles and less family support in the job development process than those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Likewise, many informants in this study were unable to pursue a career in the event industry due to family-related restrictions. This is mainly prominent among female graduates as women are more prone to experience education-job mismatch due to family-related reasons (Robst, 2007).

Third, HEIs offering Event Operations Certificate must provide students with early exposure to event-related career prospects, including positions, job duties, salary estimates, challenges, and benefits. Pitan and Atiku (2017) noted that early exposure to career-related programmes will substantially improve students' planning for future career skills, self-efficacy, and career maturity. This suggestion is specific to education providers and stakeholders (employers, parents, and students) in comprehending the challenges faced by graduates to prepare for a career in the event industry. The information shall complement the efforts by both the government and industry players to deal with education-job mismatch, thus reducing its implications toward job uncertainty and graduate productivity (Arifin, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, education-job mismatch among Event Operation Certificate graduates happens for three reasons: workloads and burnouts, family obstacles, and low salary offers. All stakeholders, particularly HEIs, should acknowledge these issues by re-

evaluating and improving the existing programmes through continuous collaboration with industry players and professional organisations. Our findings are also significant for the industry as it carries prominent impact on the graduates' work-life balance and work-related affairs like leave policies, workload, salary, benefits, and financial initiatives. Additionally, parents and families should form part of the support system for students in their event management career development.

It is worth highlighting that this study only involved Event Operation Certificate graduates from the Pasir Salak Community College. For better generalisability of the findings, future research should include graduates from other public or private universities. Since this study is limited by the small sample size and its reliance on qualitative method, future research can further explore this topic using a quantitative design that can provide more accurate data.

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Factors of Hotel Survival during Wartime: A Case Study of IBB Hotels – Yemen

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Abstract: The hospitality sector is extremely sensitive to economic and political crises, particularly during war, as it significantly affects hotels. Political and economic crises substantially impact the survival of hotels, especially during war. The war in Ibb City, Yemen, has increased homelessness, deflation, unemployment and fewer tourists visiting the city. Given the context, this research aims to identify the factors that help hotels in Ibb City survive during times of crises. The study employed a qualitative case study method. Experts in hospitality management, specifically the general managers of four-star hotels in Ibb City, were interviewed in-depth and face-to-face. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the collected data. The findings show that the factors that contribute to the survival of hotels are a strategic location, a grand opening, customer loyalty, a good reputation, quality service, experienced staff, pricing policy, and ownership of property. Furthermore, the study reveals the importance of hospitality managers identifying new target markets during a crisis and then adjusting their hotel's business strategy accordingly. In addition, hospitality managers must implement strategies compatible with the prevailing environmental conditions to survive and sustain. In conclusion, the study results yield useful theoretical and practical insights to guide the managers in the hospitality industry toward business adaptation for survival by highlighting the critical factors that hotels need to survive and the long-term implications of these factors for hotel performance.

Keywords: Hotel, crisis, wartime, survival, adaptation

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Introduction

Tourism is one of the most significant economic sectors on which a country relies. In Yemen, the tourism industry contributes 3% of the country's GDP. The income generated by tourism is the country's second-largest source of income after oil (AL-Najjar & Ishwara, 2018). Despite its steady and promising growth, the travel and tourism industry is quite sensitive to crises, including terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and outbreaks of diseases (Hanafiah et al., 2021). The tourism industry is also inevitably susceptible to natural and man-made disasters (Ritchie, 2004; Türkcan & Erkuş-Öztürk, 2020).

The tourism industry in Yemen is in a serious crisis at the moment, with the collapse of local and international tourism due to many issues. The political unrest that began with "the revolution" in 2011 and escalated through the civil war in 2014 and the war in 2015 that is still ongoing, involving many countries and al-Qaeda attacks in many areas, are the most significant ones (AL-Najjar & Ishwara, 2018; Transfeld, 2016). According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2019), the "revolution" that began in the fourth quarter of 2011 was the beginning of the decline of the tourism industry due to a lack of security. This political turmoil and revolution triggered the Yemen Civil War in 2014, prompting the Arab Alliance to intervene in Yemen at the end of 2015, which is ongoing. Thus, this led to the collapse of Yemen's tourism and hospitality industry, including Ibb City.

The hospitality sector significantly contributes to tourism, and its growth depends on tourism (Backer & Ritchie, 2017). The tourism industry has lost USD4.5 billion in the last three years, reflecting a depletion in tourism revenues in Yemen (AL-Najjar & Ishwara, 2018). The loss of approximately 4.5 million visitors led to a loss of tourism tax on flights of USD10.8 million. The loss of tourist agencies is USD9 million. As a result, the hotel industry revenue suffered a loss of USD6,666 million, which is just the operating loss (UNWTO, 2012). The hotel sector is highly susceptible to environmental changes and suffers from disease outbreaks, political unrest, military conflicts, and economic crises (Brown et al., 2018). However, the capabilities of hotel management become even more restricted when dealing with situations of emergency like war (Henderson & Ng, 2004).

The hotel industry in Ibb City, Yemen, suffers from the country's political and economic crises (political unrest, civil war, and war involving many countries) (Transfeld, 2016). Hotel occupancy rates decreased during the war. Occupancy rates are occasionally as low as 5%, resulting in a decline in Yemen's competitiveness relative to other nations (Saif Alnasser Mohammed, 2019). Hotel occupancy and survival depend on both internal and external factors (Abdullah & Hamdan, 2012;

Fatoki, 2013; Türkcan & Erkuş-Öztürk, 2020). The external factors include hotel location, economic, technological, political, and demographic issues. The internal factors are service quality, hotel management challenges, pricing and fees, variety and quality of food, accommodation, entertainment and facilities (Abdullah & Hamdan, 2012). Key determinants of a business' survival include vision and strategy, customer relationships, product and service quality, human capital, stakeholder relationships, adaptability, flexibility, management competence, the application of technology, the choice of physical location, and the willingness to take risks (Fatoki, 2013).

During crises and downturns, businesses strive to survive (Breier, 2022; Türkcan & Erkuş-Öztürk, 2020). Surviving and recovering from unprecedented crises and disasters will require adopting similarly unprecedented actions (Gossling et al., 2021). In recent years, the concept of sustainability has gained rapid attention in global initiatives, including in research endeavours where concerns over sustainability remain key. Notably, the hospitality sector has jumped on the bandwagon of sustainable development (Reem et al., 2022). According to Rivera (2020), this situation necessitates crisis management research and planning in order to mitigate challenges that arise from a complex situation. Further, identifying critical organisational factors will allow recovery from the crisis (Sigala, 2020). In regard to Yemen, it is beneficial to investigate the strategies used by its surviving hotels. In the hotel industry, operations must be adaptable and resilient to survive any form of disruption (Neumeyer & Santos, 2018; Rivera, 2020). Since 2019, the global hotel industry suffered significant loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is widely acknowledged that empirical research is needed to help hospitality sector to withstand crises such as the recent pandemic and recover to become more resilient (Herédia-Colaço & Rodrigues, 2021; Lai & Wong, 2020). However, the impact of war is significantly much more disastrous compared to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

While strategic and management literature has reviewed survival factors, no study has focused on hotel survival factors during wartime. The closest study was by Türkcan and Erkuş-Öztürk (2020) in Antalya. Their study investigated the influence of economic and political factors on tourism-related businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies. The findings reveal that company size, age, and legal structure are the most influential factors influencing the survival of tourism companies. Although the study acknowledged the susceptibility of the hotel sector in political crises, the study did not investigate the factors that helped hotels survive in crises resulting from war. Therefore, to address the highlighted research gap, this study seeks to identify the factors that enable hotels in Ibb City to endure adversity (political, Coronavirus, and economic).

Literature Review

Tourism and Hotel Industry in Ibb City, Yemen

On the Asian continent, Yemen is situated south of the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia to the north, the Arabian Sea to the south, and the Aden Gulf to the west (Yemen Tourism Promotion Board [YTPB], 2010). Yemen and Sultanate Oman share a border on the east, and the Red Sea is to the west of Yemen. Yemen covers 527,970 square kilometers of land and its capital city is Sana'a (YTPB, 2010). Ibb is one of Yemen's most beautiful cities and serves as the country's tourism capital (Berghof Foundation, 2020).

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2021), "state of war," refers to a time of hostility and fighting between two or more nations or groups or an open, antagonistic military confrontation between states or nations. Yemen's hospitality sector was devastated by the ongoing conflict that devastated Ibb City. This led to a rise in unemployment, an increasing number of people sleeping on the streets, deflation, and huge losses for the hospitality industry (AL-Najjar & Ishwara, 2018). Its effects extend to all tourism-related commercial enterprises, including airlines, hotels, catering establishments, and industries supplying intermediate and final goods (YTPB, 2010). Yemen's hotel and tourism industries have been hit hard by the country's ongoing conflicts (Transfeld, 2016). It is widely believed that Yemen and the City of Ibb are unsafe tourist destinations due to the destruction of their transportation and tourist facilities.

Factors that Influence Hotel Survival during Crises

The primary objective of any hotel in today's competitive environment is survival, especially during a crisis, as it relates to the hotel's ability to provide essential services under abnormal conditions. Several factors influence the likelihood of a hotel exiting the market, including hotel size, financial strength, resources, and geographic location (Gemar et al., 2016). Further, Lado-Sestayo et al. (2016) stated that the activity, size, profitability, and financial stability of a hotel increase its survival probability.

However, the implementation of survival strategies also depends on a variety of factors, including resources (Wang & Richie, 2012). Every business has physical, financial, human, and technological resources (Khan et al., 2020). Simons (1994) emphasised the importance of human resources, and the skills of a company's workforce should be recognised as its most valuable asset. In addition, the perceptions and attitudes of managers regarding crises and risks affect disaster and crisis management response and planning strategies (Wang & Richie, 2012). Similarly, AbuKhalifeh et al. (2013) supported the significance of human resources in the hotel industry for development and survival.

Additionally, Joshi and Naik (2018) stressed the importance of training for a hotel's development and survival. Service quality is also important for hotel survival because it leads to customer satisfaction in the highly competitive market (Kandampully et al., 2017). The significance of high-quality service to a company's success is widely acknowledged. According to Abdullah and Hamdan (2012), the quality of service provided to guests is among the most important factors in determining whether a hotel is successful. Thus, increased guest satisfaction and potential for repeat business will result from improved customer service.

The location of a facility determines its success or failure and survival (Turkoglu & Genevois, 2020). Similarly, a hotel's location is crucial to investors because it affects occupancy and survivability. A location analysis comprises all location-related information, including service centers, airport proximity, topographical descriptions, tourist attractions, and other popular sites. Building regulations and limitations are also considered in the location analysis. Along with location, price is another significant variable influencing how well hotels perform in a crisis (Kim et al., 2019). In the hospitality industry, customer perception of quality is influenced by price (Ladhari, 2009; Lado-Sestayo et al., 2020). When a guest pays more, they expect better service. According to Uzir et al. (2020), a significant positive relationship exists between perceived price and perceived quality. Conversely, Setiawan and Achyar (2013) argued that perceived price can negatively affect perceived customer value. They contended that guest satisfaction comprised multiple factors including room cleanliness, maintenance, staff friendliness, and attentiveness.

Methodology

This study utilised a qualitative methodology. The perspectives, perceptions, and comprehension of the ongoing war were gathered from the management of Ibb City hotels. The study was conducted in Ibb City hotels because Ibb is Yemen's tourism capital and one of the cities affected by the war.

Qualitative research is used when an issue or problem needs to be thoroughly understood and is exploratory, delicate, or complex (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln., 2011; Zikmund et al., 2013). It provides an understanding of the problem or issue within particular contexts or settings. Qualitative research comprises five main tasks (Merriam, 2009). Firstly, researchers need to understand the problem from the participants' point of view, not their own. The second task requires the researcher to physically collect data from the participants. Third, the researcher functions as a tool for data collection and analysis. Fourth, qualitative researchers foremostly use an inductive research strategy. Finally, unlike quantitative research, the outcome of a qualitative study is richly descriptive, rather than numerical.

Purposive sampling is used to choose small samples for a qualitative study. It is a powerful way to choose participants from whom rich and detailed information can be gathered and the researcher can gain a deep understanding of the issue being studied (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Twelve general managers of four-star hotels were interviewed in September and November of 2021 to understand how the war affected their hotels and what helped them to stay open. General managers were chosen as participants because they are the decision makers on handling crises and sustainability. Also, people in higher positions tend to understand better and are well-versed about crisis management than those in lower positions. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) highlighted that qualitative research uses two main data collection methods: individual interviews and focused group discussions.

An interview guide was the primary data collection instrument in this study. The interview questions were semi-structured and comprised general and open-ended inquiries. It covered topics investigating the factors that enabled hotels in Ibb City, Yemen, to survive during the war. Each interview averaged about 30 minutes and each participant had an average of 10 years of experience as a general manager.

The interview data was then subjected to a thematic content analysis. In qualitative research, data is analysed to identify noteworthy trends that can answer the research questions (Yin, 2014). The sequential approach of the analysis involves organising, transcribing, classifying, and presenting data (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). The participants' native language, Arabic, was used to conduct and analyse the interviews. When representing reality, the participants' actual language and the context in which it is expressed are taken into account (Yin, 2014). The data were then translated into English by an expert translator. Additional information was obtained from secondary data sources such as newspapers, magazines, and websites. To ensure the data's accuracy and reliability, the interviews' findings were triangulated by comparing them to the information obtained from the secondary sources.

Results

The participants stated that throughout the past decade, Yemen has endured several debilitating crises that have directly and indirectly affected the tourism and hospitality sectors. These include political crises, economic crises, and the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these crises contributed to the collapse of the tourism industry in Yemen, including Ibb City. Given the context, the research uncovered factors that helped hotels in the City of Ibb to survive during these crises.

Strategic Location

Based on the analysis results, the location of hotel is one of the most significant factors contributing to its survival during the war. Participants discussed the significance of

location in terms of accessibility and proximity to service centers, particularly during economic and political crises.

> *One of the strengths and factors for our hotel's survival during the War is its strategic location. Its location is centered in the heart of Ibb city, on the main line for travelers, and at the same time, it is close to the services. It is close to commercial markets, parks, entertainment venues, restaurants, hospitals, and universities, and the guest is now looking for a hotel that is close to all his needs and at the lowest cost. What helped its stability also is that no other buildings and residential buildings cover the view of the hotel from all directions. So the hotel is considered unique in terms of its location, and therefore the impact of the site may reach 40% for the hotel's occupancy rate and income during the war.* (Participant 2)

> *The most significant factor in our hotel, from my point of view, is a strategic location. It has a sight of a garden and a valley. This factor makes the hotel special in Ibb City. Thus, the demand for the hotel has increased and helped us in terms of income, and then, survive the hotel during the war.*
> (Participant 1)

A few participants in the study revealed that the location of their hotel had been crucial in its ability to survive the war, as hotels located near government facilities, in contact zones, or in border districts of hostile nations are highly susceptible to destruction. During the war, the risk of destruction was lower for hotels located in city centers and far from vital government facilities.

Grand Opening

The hotel's grand opening is another factor contributing to its survival during the war. The opening of the hotel by well-known national figures in conjunction with the commemoration of a national holiday is one of the main factors that significantly affected business and occupancy. Furthermore, the marketing and media involved in the hotel's grand opening also play a vital role in its survival during the war.

> *One of the most important factors and strengths is the hotel's Opening in a strong and timely manner. For instance, we opened the hotel during the National Day of Yemeni Reunification on May 22, which was held in Ibb in 2007. This occasion was held in Ibb with the presence of the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the hotel was promoted at that time in a very large way because the hotel was opened by dignitaries and in the presence of ministers,*

> *thus, making many people know the hotel. This is perhaps one of the most important factors that helped us to work actively now and then survive.* (Participant 10)

Good Reputation

The participants mentioned that the good reputation of the hotels in the market helped generate hotel occupancy during the war. They explained:

> *The second factor is that our hotel is considered one of the oldest and best hotels in the city of Ibb. Although there are now some strong competitors, our hotel still has a good reputation in the market. This is a result of the good treatment of guests, especially the old employees of the hotel, who have been working in the hotel since 2008. The employees have customers who come for them because they know their requests and also know how to deal with them. This aspect helped us a lot to work, especially during the War and during the absence of foreign tourists, thus, survival.* (Participant 1)

Customer Loyalty to Hotel

Customer loyalty to hotel was considered another critical factor which helped hotels survive the war. The mutual confidence between the hotel's guests and the hotel was the result of a long period of excellent service provided by the hotel during normal times. Thus, customer loyalty helped the hotel to survive during the war.

> *Customer loyalty and trust in the hotel is one of the strengths and main factors that helped us survive during this crisis and War. This loyalty may result from the hotel's long-term staff dealing well with the guests. It means that there is a good relationship between the hotel and the guests, and they only come to stay in our hotel and nowhere else. For example, if there was no loyalty from the guests to the hotel, we would have been closed like some hotels that were closed during the War. Therefore, loyalty mainly helped us to survive through these crises and internal and external wars.* (Participant 5)

Experienced, Skilled and Competent Employees

The findings indicate that the hotel's human resources was among the factors that positively impacted hotels' occupancy rate and survival during the war because all levels, operations, and management were staffed with knowledgeable and efficient employees. Furthermore, experienced hotel management played a crucial role in managing crises, allowing the hotel business to survive.

Among the factors that help us to survive is the staff experience. To clarify, when the employees have great work experience in the hotel sector and management, they can handle troubles they might face during the crisis and control the situation to overcome the economic upheavals they undergo. For instance, as a hotel manager with about twenty years of experience in the field, I gained the capability to understand all the details of the hotel business. Therefore, the well-experienced managers would have the ability to control the economic and political crises impact, which would assist the hotels in surviving.

(Participant 9)

The hotel staff, especially those who had been working for a long time in the hotel, developed good relations with the guests and coordinated external celebrations during the war. This helped the hotels to increase their occupancy rate.

We have had some employees working for us since the very beginning of the hotel business (opening stage). They have great relations with our customers, including government offices and international organizations. Thus, this factor helped us to increase the occupancy rate and revenue during the political and economic crisis, specifically during the war. (Participant 1)

In addition, excellent staff training assisted the hotels in achieving goals such as higher occupancy and good reputation, thus ensuring the hotel's survival.

The staff also had a vital role as we conducted an intensive training program that taught them hotel service and work skills. I assume that if the hotel did not provide the staff with the required training, they would not be qualified enough to provide the guests with services in a highly well-mannered way. Thus, the employees' proficiency has helped us survive the crisis.

(Participant 9)

Quality of Service

Service quality of the highest standard leads to guest satisfaction, which in turn contributes to higher occupancy rate and revenue. Furthermore, it builds a good reputation for the hotel. The quality of service and the integration of various services was a major competitive advantage as they helped the surviving hotels attract new markets.

Several factors considered as strengths in the hotel affected the hotel's survival during the War. Perhaps the most important of these factors, based on my administrative experience and my management of the hotel, are, first of

> *all, the services provided by the hotel in terms of their integration, level and quality. It is the main factor in increasing occupancy. With the quality and integration of the services provided by the hotel, we were able to attract organizations and companies and maintain the hotel's reputation in the market. For example, when providing room services, food and beverages were provided with high quality. There is also high-speed internet, laundry, car park, and sports channels.* (Participant 9)

Prices of Hotel Rooms and Services

The hotel room prices were one of the biggest strengths for surviving Yemen's economic and political crises. The hotels modified their prices based on their target markets and the quality of services.

> *The prices in the hotel were the main factor that helped us continue our business during the wartime. The price is very sensitive and important during crises, particularly the economic crisis. Obviously, the War's effect was great on the people in Yemen and in Ibb City. It included stopping the salaries of government sector employees in Yemen in general due to the economic effects of the War. Hence, in terms of financial status, ninety per cent of the people are so exhausted that most of the guests cannot afford high hotel service prices. Therefore, we adjusted our prices based on target markets and the quality of services. We facilitate flexibility to our guests in terms of prices. This enabled us to continue and survive through the crisis.* (Participant 7)

Ownership of Property

During the economic downturn, hotel managers were able to cut out the high costs of rentals because they owned the hotel building. This savings enabled the hotel to implement other measures to survive during the war such as lowering prices, retaining personnel, and delivering high-quality services. Other hotels that were renting the property had to cut cost by reducing the number of employees and services provided.

> *The fourth and final factor which helped us very much to not close and survive during this War is that the hotel is owned, not rented. Honestly, if the hotel is rented, we might be closed. Actually, we would not be able to bear the effects of the War, especially from 2015 to 2018, due to the absence of essential services provided by the government during this period. It was completely non-existent; electricity, water, diesel, etc., and we used to buy it from the black market for very large sums.* (Participant 1)

> *The first factor for the hotel's survival during the War is the facility's ownership as the rent costs load on the hotel operation expenses. Some of the rented hotels have been closed because they could not bear the costs during this period, and the most expensive thing for the hotel is the rent.* (Participant 10)

The data analysis reveals a number of factors that helped the hotels in Ibb to survive during the war. These include strategic location, grand opening, good reputation, flexibility of prices, and customer loyalty to hotels. In addition, experienced, skilled and efficient staff, including a management that is well-versed with crisis management, also helped the hotels survive.

Discussion

The factors identified in this study, that helped hotels in Ibb city survive during the war, such as strategic location, experienced, skilled and competent employees, quality of service, pricing policy, good reputation, and customer loyalty, are similar to those found in previous studies (Abdullah & Hamdan, 2012; Alvarez-Ferrer et al., 2018; Eason et al., 2015; Joshi & Naik, 2018; Kandampully et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2019; Ruff & Aziz, 2003; Turkoglu & Genevois, 2020). In addition, this study also discovered two other important factors: ownership of property and grand opening.

The importance of strategic location corresponds with Turkoglu and Genevois (2020), who discovered that a facility's location is one of the most crucial and strategic decisions determining its success. Furthermore, Alvarez-Ferrer (2018) asserted that location is a critical factor that influences hotel occupancy rates. When a hotel is located close to other service centers, such as those for entertainment, shopping, conferences, and the city, it is considered to be in a strategic location, consequently increasing its occupancy rate and financial return.

The significance of customer service is consistent with Abdullah and Hamdan (2012), who suggested satisfying customers to gain customer loyalty and maintain long-term relationships. According to Eason et al. (2015), since the business environment is increasingly competitive, maintaining loyal customer relationships remains a crucial component of business success. Kandampully et al. (2017) too emphasised that dedicated attention to customer loyalty is necessary for the survival of hotel or hospitality establishments. Moreover, customer loyalty results in recommendations through positive word-of-mouth. This contributes to new customers, increased occupancy rate and long-term viability, especially during crises.

The importance of having experienced and well-trained staff is in line with Ruff and Aziz (2003), who stated that managers of hotels should consider their staff to be their most valuable asset and critical factor to the hotel's survival, growth, and sustainability. Additionally, Joshi and Naik (2018) emphasised that training is vital for a hotel's growth and survival. Wang and Richie (2012) also highlighted that

employees' experiences, skills, judgments, intelligence, as well as perceptions and attitudes towards risks influence their crisis and disaster management strategies.

The importance of a good pricing strategy and policy is consistent with Wangui et al. (2018), who revealed the significance of adjusting hotel prices to the market situation to increase market share. During crises, customers become more price sensitive and tend to switch to cheaper options (Sharma & Sonwalkar, 2013). Crises also lead to intense price competition among hotels (Kim et al., 2019). Therefore, hotels should review and adjust their pricing policies to ensure that they offer a competitive rate, taking into account the prevailing economic situation. Hotels also need to be flexible and sensitive to the market needs and forces.

Implications and Conclusion

This study explored the factors that helped hotels in Ibb, Yemen survive during the war, addressing a vital reseach gap in hotel business survival, specifically during wartime. The factors identified include strategic location, customer services and its quality, customer loyalty and good reputation, ownership of property, grand opening, experienced staff and training to handle crises, as well as a flexible price policy that can adapt to economic conditions during crises or war.

The study also demonstrates the necessity for adaptation and resilience in hotel operations and management. The valuable insights can guide hotel owners and investors in making the right decisions about their investments in the hospitality industry by focusing on the factors which affect the hotel's survival, specifically during crises. The limitation of this study should be noted. Although the study unravalled business survival factors during wartime, it did not specicify which factor is the most important. Thus, there is a need for future research to quantitatively examine the extent to which the factors identified in this study ensure business survival during crises. It is also recommended to extend the current study to cover all hotels in all cities in Yemen.

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Exploring the Positioning of Muslim-Friendly Spa and Wellness Centre in the Tourism Industry

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Abstract: As more tourists adopt healthy lifestyles while on vacation, the spa and wellness industry continues to expand. The rising demand for Muslim-friendly spa can be associated with the growth of halal lifestyles today. The Muslim-friendly spa is a newly emerging niche market segment that focuses on Islamic teachings and shariah-compliant services to cater to the needs and preferences of Muslim tourists. Given that Malaysia is a leading Muslim-friendly tourism destination capable of providing a wide range of halal services and products to tourists, Muslim-friendly spas have been identified as one of the essential services that should be included in tourism supplies. However, this industry is often overlooked and not much research has been done to examine its growth and position in the tourism industry. This conceptual paper identifies various conceptualisations of Muslim-friendly spas and wellness centres, before posing an argument that the aspect of interest is best addressed in terms of concepts or theories. Other than that, a SWOT analysis was carried out to examine the positioning of Muslim spas and wellness centres in the tourism industry, particularly in Malaysia. The findings of this paper will add to the body of knowledge and may pave the way for further research into the application of the Muslim-friendly spa concept. Lastly, the paper offers several suggestions and recommendations on how to position Muslim spa and wellness centres to boost Malaysia's tourism industry.

Keywords: Wellness tourism, spa tourism, Muslim-friendly spa, Muslim-friendly tourism, Malaysia

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Introduction

The wellness and spa industry is a service-oriented industry concerned with the well-being of its customers. It provides facilities where people go to receive health and beauty treatments that can help them restore, refresh, and rejuvenate their bodies. Besides, the services provided also assist customers in dealing with stress, alleviating depression and achieving good mental and physical health (Jamaluddin et al., 2018). Likewise, the World Health Organization (WHO) claims that demand for spa products and services is increasing as people become more conscious of the importance of a healthy state of mind, body and social well-being (Abdul Halim & Mohd Hatta, 2017). Spa services are viewed as one of the most significant services in Malaysia, whereby healthy individuals are required to navigate a developing nation, not just for tourists but also for its residents. This is in line with the government's aspirations in 11th Malaysia Plan, aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which is enhancing everyone's well-being in order to create a Malaysia that is socially advanced and its people of all ages are healthy (Economic Planning Unit, 2021).

On the other hand, the tourism industry has tremendous economic potential (Salee et al., 2022). Tourism is one of the 12 prioritised economic sectors in the National Key Result Area (NKEA) where tourism is regarded as both a leisure and business industry that includes the following sub-sectors: accommodation, shopping, and tourism products (i.e. ecotourism, cruise tourism and other related activities such as spa and wellness). To enhance the development of the spa industry in Malaysia, the government has established Theme 5: Business Tourism in NKEA tourism consisting of EPP9a which refers to the development of local expertise and better regulation of the spa industry (PEMANDU, 2010). In this respect, the Malaysian government has spent more than RM85 million (USD20 million) in 2022, an increase of RM24 million from 2021, to assist tourism operators, which include travel and adventure companies as well as spa and health centre operators (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, 2022).

Cummings and Bentley (2018) stated that wellness is a crucial construct that underpins efforts to enhance health, well-being, and quality of life. They also stated that wellness is necessary, precious, guarded, delicate, elusive, arduous, attainable, and affirming. Individuals' perceptions of their overall sense of well-being are influenced by feelings of loneliness or sadness. The spa market is expanding and becoming popular post-pandemic as people's concerns about their health and well-being has increased. Spirituality may also play a role in the link between depression and health (Hodge et al., 2015). Nonetheless, Othman et al. (2019) argued that the distinctiveness of the wellness and spa business has mostly been overlooked in terms of shariah compliance to meet Muslim needs.

As reported by the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), Muslim travellers are forecasted to reach 280 million by 2028 compared to 160 million in 2019 (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2023). Therefore, it is relevant that the Muslim-friendly tourism

supply-demand be strategically planned. In addition, there are limited studies on Muslim-friendly wellness and spa since spa and health is a new emerging sector of Muslim-friendly tourism hospitality and services that must be segmented (Hodge et al., 2015; Othman et al., 2015). Thus, this field necessitates ongoing studies (Cummings & Betley, 2018). The ability to effectively position Muslim wellness and spa in the tourism industry depends on having a thorough understanding of its development, implementation and challenges in order to provide appropriate recommendations and strategies. Therefore, this study examines these aspects in an effort to support the government's strategy to effectively expand the Muslim-friendly spa sector in this country.

Literature Review

Spa, Wellness and Tourism Industry

Spa, wellness and tourism is a relatively new trend that is evolving rapidly (Marican et al., 2021). According to Global Wellness Institute (2014, 2018), the spa industry has been growing annually by 7.7%, from $60 billion in 2007 to $94 billion in 2013, whereby Asia has surpassed Europe as the region with the largest number of spas at 48, 679. It also defined wellness tourism as "travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one's personal well-being" and spa as "establishments that promote wellness through the provision of therapeutic and other professional services aimed at renewing the body, mind and spirit". Hotel spas and day spas are rapidly growing and becoming more established as supporting services to attract more tourists.

Spas in Southeast Asia are closely associated with its unique cultural and heritage values, and Malaysians have long been exposed to the types of spas found in neighbouring countries, namely Indonesia and Thailand (Yaman et al., 2012). The spa industry has been identified by the Malaysian government as one of the tourism products that can be sold through a variety of tourism-related prospect areas, including spa and wellness tourism, medical tourism and health tourism. It appears to be a wise strategy, given the importance of travel and tourism as one of the main contributors to the Malaysian economy.

On top of that, Malaysia is listed in the top 10 wellness tourism markets in Asia Pacific with expenditures amounting approximately RM20.5 billion (5 billion US dollars) and 8.3 million trips with a growing trend for wellness vacations and packages in the country. In 2011, the National Spa Council was founded to oversee and regulate the spa business. The council developed the Star Spa Rating System which is now used by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC). The government's goal is to rate and accredit spas in order to uplift and regulate the booming spa industry (Jamaluddin et. al., 2018). To augment the potential of the

spa and wellness tourism sector, the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Association of Malaysian Spas (AMSPA). This collaboration aims to strengthen and promote Malaysia's wellness tourism to be on par with other wellness destinations in Asia such as Bali and Thailand (Tourism Malaysia, 2019).

Spa and wellness tourism also allows destinations to lessen seasonality in visitor flows and appeals to travellers seeking a more serene setting in which to destress or escape (Global Wellness Institute, 2018). The wellness and spa industry provides assorted services and treatments encompassing massage, facial, body treatment, hair treatment, manicure, pedicure, reflexology and aromatherapy (Faidah et al., 2021; Abdul Halim & Mohd Hatta, 2017). There are various types of spas depending on their functions. Faidah et al. (2021) developed a scheme for halal spa consisting of medical spa (for the purpose of rehabilitation), wellness spa (for the purpose of revitalization/rejuvenation) and health spa (for the purpose of relaxation). In addition, ASEAN (2016) categorises six types of spa as follows:

i. Day spa: Does not provide accommodation and is easily be found in commercial buildings, airport terminals, homes or malls. It is a stand-alone business and provides a short service in the range of 1–5 hours.
ii. Club spa: Located in a hotel or resort that offers massage, workout, steam therapy, and sauna to hotel guests. This type of spa does not have any accommodation but offers membership in a club environment. It focuses on treatment including enhancing well-being and yoga.
iii. Hotel/resort spa: Located in a hotel or resort with major services inclusive of massage, sauna, steam therapy and exercise. It usually provides services mostly for hotel guests and no accommodation is provided.
iv. Mineral spring spa: A healing hot spring spa or mineral spring spa, whether natural or manufactured. Some mineral spring spas have been turned into resorts, and this form of spa is regarded as a leisure and recreation destination.
v. Cruise ship spa: This spa is aboard a cruise ship that specialises in pampering and beauty treatments, but may also include exercises, fitness or other well-being activities.
vi. Destination spa: This spa offers a wide range of treatments. It offers customers individualised therapy to improve their lifestyles through a variety of activities and services, such as a lifestyle guide and a well-balanced diet. This sort of spa offers lodging, spa services as well as healthy and nutritious meals.

Aside from day spa and hotel/resort spa, Yaman et al. (2012) added another type of spa which is the medical spa. The medical spa provides both traditional and supplementary medical services, all of which are provided by medical professionals. Some of these spa types offer accommodation while others do not. It focuses

on providing comprehensive medical and wellness care in a spa atmosphere, incorporating spa services, therapies, and treatments. Likewise, the International Spa Association (ISPA) classified spas into day spas, club spas, cosmetic spas, cruise ship spas, destination spas, mineral spring spas, medical spas, resort or hotel spas and shariah-compliant spas (Abdul Halim & Mohd Hatta, 2017). Each type of spa attracts specific types of tourists depending on their preferences.

The Emergence of Muslim Spa and Wellness

Spas have grown in popularity and become key revenue generators, especially in the hotel industry (Othman et al., 2018). In Islam, Muslims are encouraged to portray their beautiful appearance as well as maintain a healthy lifestyle including physical, mental, emotional and physical health. The Holy Quran also highlighted the importance of beauty, health and strength as in Surah Al- Araf verse 31:

> *"O Children of Adam! Dress properly whenever you are at worship. Eat and drink, but do not waste. Surely, He does not like the wasteful"*

A healthy believer is also considered better than an unhealthy believer, according to Al Khayat (1997). Given that Muslims account for 63.7% of Malaysia's population (Country Meters, 2021), Muslim-friendly spa and wellness centre is one of the newest spa products that carries great market potential. The emergence of Muslim-friendly spas can be attributed to a growing understanding of Islamic teachings and a demand for Islamic- based products and spa services (Abdul Halim & Mohd Hatta, 2017; Yaman et al., 2012). This is in line with the rising demand for shariah-compliant products and services, which is now on the rise (Marican et al., 2021).

On the other hand, an online resource platform for the spa industry called Spafinder Wellness 365, named the Islamic concept as one of the Top 10 Spa and Wellness Trends for 2015. They also predicted an increase in the use of traditional Islamic and natural ingredients such as camel's milk, mud, sand, black seed oil, turmeric, frankincense, baobab fruit, and harissa (Spafinder, 2015). In the coming years, many more are likely to seek out the nutritional, beauty, and spa practices that are essential to Islamic cultures such as the use of hammam and argan oil (Skininc, 2015). Marican et al. (2021) and Othman et al. (2015) concurred and highlighted that the emergence of the Muslim-friendly spa began with the simple use of traditional Malay interior design and shariah-compliant spa products.

Every woman aspires to be beautiful and healthy, and many believe that visiting a spa can help them achieve this goal. In addition to health, they are also concerned about appearance and pleasant personality, which propels them to constantly look

for ways to improve themselves (Azam et al., 2019; Yaman et al., 2012). As a result, Muslim women seek out spas that aligns with their religious beliefs while supporting a healthy lifestyle (Othman et al., 2015). As more people become aware of the need to embrace Islamic teachings as a way of life, women spa operators and entrepreneurs are taking on the challenge of promoting spas with an Islamic concept (Othman et al., 2015). Due to the demand for Muslim women and their special requirements, such as covering their awrah (covering all parts of their body except their face and hands), Muslim-friendly spas have steadily grown (Yaman et al., 2012).

Characteristics of Muslim Spa and Wellness

The Western world is unfamiliar with Islamic health and wellness practices. In the West, wellness emerged as a result of the evolution of the biomedical field (Marican et al., 2021; Westgate, 1996). However, religious beliefs and practises have a significant impact on spirituality and wellness practises at spas. Islamic spas and wellness centres are places where products and services are provided in accordance with Islamic laws (Othman et al., 2015). Moreover, the influence of religions can be seen in the spa services provided (Marican et al., 2021).

The "Muslim-friendly" term is globally associated with the halal concept which serves as a guide for safe and high-quality products for Muslims around the world (Abdul Aziz, 2018). Muslim customers are prone to look for halal products that are shariah-compliant throughout their travel. There are two more terms used in this study which are "Islamic tourism" and "shariah-compliant" which refers to hospitality service for Muslim customers including halal food, and Islamic standards management operation and products or services that adhere to the Islamic and shariah laws accordingly (Marican et al. 2021). Othman et al. (2021) suggested that the idea of a Muslim-friendly spa should go beyond the services provided and incorporate elements of the Al-Quran into the business' operations, such as the usage of verses that align with Malaysia's position as the global leader in the halal industry.

According to Jamaluddin et al. (2018), the success of running a Muslim-friendly spa depends on the operations that adhere with shariah principles and Islamic teachings. Customers who require beautician services from spa providers must follow Islamic teachings such as having a good intention (*niyah*) in everything they do, emphasising modesty, and avoiding unlawful exposure of beauty (*tabarruj*), vanity (*ujub*), harm or affliction (*fitnah*). Aside from that, segregating the spa room between men and women is critical in implementing the Muslim-friendly spa concept. Shariah-compliant spas are increasingly being used as a key component of marketing campaigns in Malaysia's travel and wellness industry. This is consistent with the current trend of rising demand for goods and services that take Islamic law into consideration (Marican et al. 2021). Table 1 summarises the Muslim-friendly spa characteristics highlighted by previous studies.

Table 1. Characteristics of Muslim-friendly spa

Author	Characteristics
Marican et al. (2021)	1. Use of ablution or *wudhu*-friendly skincare products and other ingredients for treatment 2. Products must be safe and not harmful to the user's health, such as products containing carcinogens or cancer-causing substances. 3. Adapt elements from *Maqasid Shariah* (protection of religion, life, intellect, progeny or dignity and property).
Jamaluddin et al. (2018)	1. Use of halal products and ingredients. 2. No *haram* activities in the spa premises such as gambling, dancing, karaoke and entertainment show. 3. Gender-segregated, where female guests will only receive treatment or service from female therapists and vice versa. 4. Staff needs to cover their *awrah* and not neglect their prayer times. 5. Muslim spa owners must pay zakat, while non-Muslim owners may be involved in any sponsorship or social responsibility. 6. Design decor of spa must be shariah-compliant, whereby there should not be any pictures or sculptures of living beings.
Othman et al. (2018)	1. Therapists are segregated by gender. 2. In terms of space, the waiting and treatment areas should be separated by gender to provide security and safety for Muslim women to cover their *awrah*. 3. Legal as long as the services and administration adhere to Islamic guidelines. 4. Provide products and ingredients that are shariah-compliant. 5. In terms of architectural design, aside from privacy settings, spas should focus on safety and hygiene initiatives to enhance the premise's quality. 6. To enable its Muslim guests to fulfil their religious requirements, spas should include facilities such as *Musalla* or a place for prayer. 7. Ramps, Braille instructions, and special bathrooms should be made available for the disabled.
Abdul Halim & Mohd Hatta (2017)	1. Prohibit any services and treatments that can change the creation of Allah. 2. Use safe and halal ingredients for spa products. 3. Always hygienic and clean. 4. The space and design of spa must adhere to Islamic teachings such as segregation of male and female.

Table 1. (con't)

Author	Characteristics
Yaman et al. (2012)	1. Provide segregation for men and women clients including beauty therapists, use of rooms and other services. 2. Materials and ingredients are derived exclusively from natural resources to facilitate the treatment. 3. The design and space plan should be closed and hidden from non-*Muhrim's* view. 4. Spa interior design or space should not have any sculpture or statue. 5. All women employees are required to wear a scarf or hijab to cover their *awrah*. 6. Use verses from Al-Quran during its operation.

Marican et al. (2021) suggested that shariah-compliant wellness and spa should also adhere to five elements of the *Maqasid Shariah* comprising of protection of religion, life, intellect, progeny or dignity and property. For the protection of religion (*Al-Diin*), spa operators should use Muslim-friendly products and ingredients during the treatment where it is permissible to perform prayers. As for the protection of life (*Al-Hayah*), customers should be able to take, utilise, and consume spa products and services without fear of harm. Spa owners and employees need to ensure that the products do not contain high levels of mercury that can cause damage to the kidney and the nervous system. Next, is the protection of intellect (*Al- 'Aql*) which requires spa owners to ensure that their products do not contain any illegal substances such as alcohol or drugs to maintain the mental balance of the clients. Protection of dignity (*Al- Muru'ah*) refers to the practice of spa operators providing gender-segregated services in respect of customers' *awrah*. Lastly, the protection of property (*Al-Mal*) refers to spa owners protecting their wealth by preparing the appropriate number of facilities and not being involved in any wasteful activities. Faidah et al. (2021) extended the major criteria for halal spa in Indonesia as shown in Figure 2. However, they did not include premises' designs, decoration and concept that are shariah-compliant.

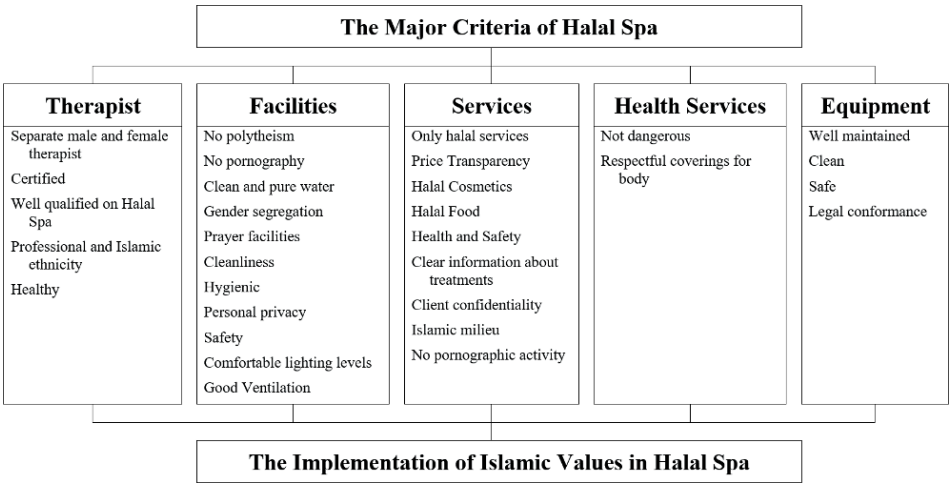


Figure 1. The major criteria for halal spa in Indonesia

Methodology

The data for this study was retrieved from journal articles (secondary sources) published from 2010 to the present on Google Scholar. The relevant data, citations, authors and high-impact journals were taken into consideration when choosing the articles. The publications that examined Muslim-friendly/halal/shariah-compliant/ Islamic tourism and spa in Malaysia and other countries were analysed to understand better the sector and derive strategies to position it in the tourism industry. The contents were thematically analysed and tabulated into a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats) analysis table. The analysis is significant in assisting spa operators and management find ways to promote Muslim- friendly tourism products and services in Malaysia (Ahmed & Akbaba, 2018).

Discussion and Recommendations

This paper examines the connection between wellness and spa operations and shariah-compliant services, as well as how to position this sector within the global tourism industry, notably in Malaysia. As illustrated in Table 2, a SWOT analysis was conducted to analyse the positioning of the Muslim-friendly wellness and spa in the tourism industry. Although spas in Malaysia are heavily influenced by elements from Bali and Thailand, the Malay massage technique remains distinct, because it is gentler and softer, more decent and not excessive. Instead of incorporating elements of concept and design from Thailand and Bali, spa operators should borrow concepts from Middle Eastern countries, using appropriate lighting and decoration to appeal

to the Muslim community as well as foreign tourists, notably the increasing number of Middle East tourists coming to Malaysia (Yaman et al., 2021).

According to the 2022 Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), due to the impact of the pandemic, 140 million Muslims were anticipated to travel worldwide in 2022, and 160 million in 2024 (McConnor, 2022). This is a very good opportunity for Malaysia to market spa services as one of its tourism products. In this regard, Muslim-friendly spas that are shariah-compliant can be widely developed and promoted to cater to the needs of Muslim tourists. It will also aid in the promotion of the Islamic spa industry in both the domestic and international tourism markets.

As Malaysia moves forward as a halal hub, the country can brand and market halal spas as a trademark to compete with other conventional spa operators (Yaman et al., 2012). As a country that strongly adheres to halal pharmaceuticals, logistics, foods and ingredients, halal products such as oils and skincare can be easily found in the spas here. In addition, Malaysia is the top Muslim-friendly travel destination (Tourism Malaysia, 2021; "Malaysia is the top country", 2020), according to recent studies, and is closely rivalled by Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in terms of halal services and goods supply (Biancone et al., 2019). Thus, halal and Muslim-friendly branding is vital in developing Muslim-friendly spas to meet customer needs and preferences that adhere to the shariah law. These advantages can help Malaysia expand the Muslim-friendly spa sector not only in Malaysia and Asia, but also throughout the globe.

Halal or Muslim-friendly spa is also a unique product that aims to eliminate negative stereotypes about the business and raise positive awareness. People are more likely to visit a wellness and spa facility as health and well-being are increasingly gaining attention, especially from professionals, both male and female (Jamaluddin et al., 2018). Nu'della Malaysian Holistic Spa was the country's first Malay spa concept to apply and develop its own Islamic Spa Practices (ISP) approach which adheres to shariah-compliant aspects such as the use of halal products, gender segregation in treatments and procedures, and physical construct elements.

In addition, some procedures are prohibited in ISP, for example, shaving the eyebrows, wig treatment and ignoring prayers (Jamaluddin et al., 2018; Marican et al., 2021; Yaman et al., 2012). As a result, wellness and spa centres that are shariah-compliant can raise awareness among women and men while still allowing them to relax their bodies with massage, treatment and therapy in a Muslim-friendly way. This will improve their quality of life while promoting social responsibility, especially among Muslim tourists who emphasise on gender segregation when seeking wellness and spa services.

Table 2. SWOT analysis of Malaysia's Muslim-friendly spas

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
1. Malaysia with a 63.7% Muslim population (Country Meters, 2021) can target this niche market. 2. Malaysia is the world's leading halal hub which has numerous halal products and ingredients that can be used in spas. 3. Malaysia is the top destination for Muslim-friendly tourism and this can help boost the marketing for Muslim-friendly spa. 4. Various associations of spa: Spa and Wellness Industry Association of Malaysia (SWIAM), Malaysia Association of Wellness and Spa (MAWSPA) and Association of Malaysian Spas (AMSPA).	1. The most significant obstacles hindering potential growth are skill requirements and service quality. 2. The price might be costly to certain demographic profiles because of its premium services and ingredients.
Opportunities	**Threats**
1. Spa demand is increasing as people's lifestyles change, allowing them to relax and revitalise to take care of mind, body and soul. 2. As the international Muslim tourist arrival in Malaysia is increasing, spa operators may adopt Middle Eastern concepts and designs to attract this lucrative market to wellness and spa facilities. 3. Post-pandemic may influence the demand for more private and mobile spas, including spa at home.	1. Fraud spa operators who may deceive customers about genuine shariah-compliant spa products and services. 2. Due to the 2008 ban on hiring foreign semi-skilled workers, hiring international spa therapists is difficult. 3. Competition from other popular spa destinations, particularly from China, Indonesia and Thailand.

Malaysia has several associations that support the spa and wellness industry. For example, the Spa and Wellness Industry Association of Malaysia (SWIAM) launched by the then minister, YB Datuk Dr. Ng Yen Yen, Malaysia Association of Wellness and Spa (MAWSPA) which is a non-profit organisation and Association of Malaysian Spas (AMSPA) which is Malaysia's first and longest established spa association in Malaysia, also known as "Voice of Wellness". These associations aim to promote and develop the spa and wellness industry in Malaysia as well as provide training for spa operators and ensuring its professional standards. It would be preferable if all these groups could collaborate with the related government agency or tourism associations to develop Muslim-friendly spas more successfully and effectively. They can also add spa and wellness packages as one of the tourism products to sell to tourists. It is hoped that moving forward, Muslim-friendly spas can access numerous options and

platforms to promote their businesses, services, and treatments not only in Malaysia but also around the world.

A successful wellness and spa business provides excellent service, uses high-quality products, and provides a pleasant environment (Yaman et al., 2012). Accordingly, the price offered might be costly to certain demographic profiles because of its premium services and ingredients. The high overhead and operating costs could have attributed to the high pricing, which may thwart potential clients, particularly those who seek halal products, which are considered to be expensive. In this respect, spa operators may provide basic affordable family packages for relaxation and treatment with added values. The premises can also diversify into other services such as massage, hair salon, food and beverage, manicure, fish pedicure and many more.

Due to the recent pandemic, demand for mobile spas has grown in tandem with growing health concerns. In this regard, customers who are worried about risk of infections can take solace with Muslim-friendly spas due to the protection of *awrah* and stringent safety precautions (Ahmad et al., 2021). Further, the lack of skilled therapists among Muslims in Malaysia is another weakness that the Muslim wellness and spa sector should address. To resolve this issue, private training centres can help produce more local therapists. Each year, there are thousands of nursing and physiotherapy graduates who are unable to secure any jobs in the medical sector. This cohort would make an excellent workforce for this industry as physio spa is now growing in popularity.

Due to the stringent criteria of using only halal products, some spa operators may promote their facilities as shariah-compliant when they are not. To address this threat, government agencies can conduct certification or accreditation programs to support spa owners' efforts on establishing Muslim-friendly spas. Instead of borrowing concepts from Balinese, Thailand or even Middle East style, spa operators may also adapt our own Malaysian cultural concepts into their service packages as well as internal decor. The country also has a variety of wellness treatment methods influenced by Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Borneo cultures. Bamboo, river stone, arts, and treatments associated with the Malaysian heritage can be used in spa services to highlight the country's uniqueness while avoiding the cultural appropriation of other countries.

Conclusion

This concept paper analysed and synthesised concepts and characteristics of Muslim-friendly wellness and spa in Malaysia. Muslim-friendly spas offer the same services and treatments as conventional spas but with an emphasis on privacy, halal products and shariah compliance. Future studies can expand the findings of this study by analysing the perspectives of spa providers and relevant authorities with regard to how this sector can be positioned in the tourism industry. In conclusion, as Muslim-

friendly wellness and spa is still in its infancy, there is currently no single standard, rule, or regulation governing this sector (Abdul Halim & Mohd Hatta, 2017). Thus, it is critical to set guidelines or a comprehensive framework to oversee the operation of Muslim-friendly or halal spas. Further, this sector can be promoted and branded as one of the tourism products that the country can offer, to not only Muslim clients but also those who love Muslim-friendly services and facilities.

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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.

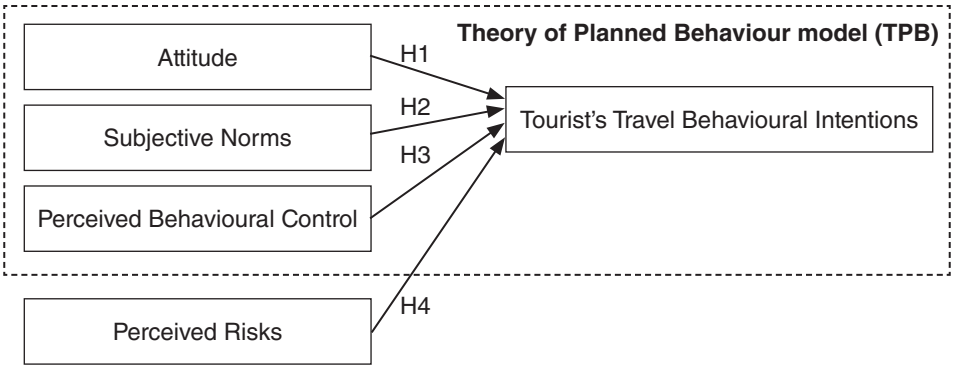


Figure 1: The research framework based on the theory of planned behaviour model (TPB)

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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Recommendations for a Favourable Accommodation Service Experience: The Perspective of International Muslim Tourists in Malaysia

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Abstract: The service provided by hoteliers has a significant impact on the service experience of international Muslim tourists, which is also related to loyalty behaviour. Some hoteliers have noticed that they get less attention from international Muslim tourists because existing services may have failed to satisfy their needs. Therefore, there is a good opportunity, particularly for Malaysian hoteliers, to draw in the global Muslim tourist market by fulfilling their needs. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to investigate international tourists' visit experiences in terms of understanding their needs, as this is one of the factors that contribute to loyalty. Consequently, recommendations for improvement to meet these needs are also discussed. For this study, 15 international Muslim tourists were interviewed using a qualitative method. The data gathered was analysed using thematic content analysis. According to the analysis, the majority of foreign Muslim tourists prioritise cleanliness and accessibility to facilities when travelling. The participants also emphasized the need to enhance the services provided to meet their growing needs. These improvements include improving the hotels' facilities and amenities, improving cleanliness and quality of services provided, and taking action on customer feedback. This paper offers suggestions that hoteliers can undertake in order to satisfy guests and directly encourage their loyalty to the hotel for their travels, which will ultimately increase the hotels' profit and boost the country's tourism.

Keywords: International Muslim tourists, service experience, favourable experience, recommendations

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Introduction

Halal tourism is a well-known trend in the tourism industry (Aziz et. al. 2018). Halal tourism refers to travel that adheres to Islamic principles and values in terms of activities, goods, and services. Muslim tourists are drawn to the halal industry because it meets their wants for leisure and satisfaction while upholding their religious obligations (Jia & Chaozhi, 2020). Halal tourism is expected to expand rapidly in the global travel sector and reach USD225 billion with 230 million arrivals by 2028 (Bahardeen, 2023).

The high demand for halal tourism services has resulted in intense competition between travel destinations (Jia & Chaozhi, 2020). In this regard, competing in this potential halal tourism sector requires an understanding of the concept of the visitor experience and how it affects satisfaction and loyalty (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019). Muslims are noted for being selective and having particular needs for certain tourist products and services to uphold their religious beliefs. Thus, the success of halal tourism businesses and the growth of positive halal tourist behaviour depend on meeting these needs (Jia & Chaozhi, 2020).

However, to date, research on the favourable service of international Muslim tourists has been scarce. Favourable service can be defined as services given by service providers which are helpful and beneficial and have a positive impact on the customers' experience. Favourable service should be seen as an important element is guest satisfaction and thus, loyalty creation. Therefore, this study aims to explore the favourable services experienced by international Muslim tourists in Malaysia.

In understanding better the favourable services sought by this market segment, hoteliers can then improve their services. Recent findings from Fahham (2017) indicate that services provided for international Muslim tourists are given less attention because most hotels do not really know their needs. Suhartanto et al. (2021, 2022) as well as Vargas-Sánchez and Moral (2018) pointed out that halal accommodations and halal amenities contribute to tourists' halal experiences and ultimately, encourage customer loyalty. Yaghmour (2024) further supported the notion by adding that accommodation enhanced with technology will influence customer loyalty.

This study was carried out to investigate the positive service experiences of foreign Muslim visitors in Malaysia, with two research objectives as follows:

i) To identify the most sought-after services provided by hoteliers as viewed by international Muslim tourists.
ii) To gather feedback from international Muslim tourists in order to enhance the level of service provided by hoteliers in Malaysia.

Background of Study

Halal Tourism

According to Jaelani (2017), the phrase "halal tourism" has been used in literature interchangeably with other terms such as Islamic tourism, Shariah tourism, and halal-friendly tourism. Vargas-Sanchez and Moral (2020) claimed that halal tourism is growing in popularity due to its expanding scope and popularity in the global tourism market. Additionally, halal tourism is a type of religious travel that adheres to Islamic teachings (Vargas-Sánchez & Moral, 2020). Halal tourism is a complementing sector that does not supplant conventional types of tourism. The objective of halal tourism is to encourage visitors to seek pleasure and blessings from God. Further, the goal of halal tourism is to enhance domestic and international tourist visits to Islamic-themed tourist destinations and attractions (Ratnasari, 2020). The demand for Islamic goods and services continues to grow in tandem with the growing number of Muslim tourists throughout the world (Zainol & Mustafa, 2021).

Service Experience by International Muslim Tourists

Experiences happen "when a company intentionally uses services as the stage and to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event," according to Pine and Gilmore (1998), who were the first scholars to propose customer experience as a construct (p. 98). Hussein (2018) claimed that an experience is singular, a response to a stimulus, and frequently the result of an individual individually taking part in a tourist activity. The experiential response can be divided into cognitive and emotional responses, both of which can affect a visitor's future behavioural intentions (Suhartanto et al., 2021).

Jia and Chaozhi (2020) conducted interviews with 32 foreign Muslim tourists and discovered that they desire good accommodations, food, entertainment, shopping, restrooms, transportation, and service personnel. But in order to satisfy their needs, international Muslim visitors especially want specific areas for their worship, bathrooms with bidets, cosy lodging, and the availability of halal food (Suhartanto et al., 2021). This discussion indicates that although international Muslim tourists' experiences have been examined in previous studies, there is still a lack of comprehension with regard to their most preferable services during their travel. Thus, an in-depth assessment of international Muslim tourists' experiences is necessary (Suhartanto et al., 2021).

Hotel Facilities and Accommodation

Buildings, items, equipment, or services that are offered for a specific purpose are all considered as facilities. First-class facilities are crucial for attracting visitors in the tourism and hospitality industries (Nooripoor et al., 2021). Thus, some hotels, like the PNB Darby Park Hotel, Grand Bluewave Hotel, and De Palma Hotel, have increased their marketing reach by creating Muslim-friendly facilities (Hidayat et al., 2017).

In tourism, price is the sum of money with an exchange rate that influences a person's decision to stay at a hotel in order to make money from purchasing or utilising a good or service (Annishia & Prastiyo, 2019). Vargas-Sanchez and Moral (2018) further claimed that the two most crucial factors for foreign Muslim travellers are food and lodging.

Methodology

In this study, the interpretivism approach was employed to answer the research questions. The qualitative approach was deemed ideal to acquire as much information as possible regarding the study topic (Bresler, 2021). The present study investigated favourable service experiences sought by international Muslim tourists in Malaysia to derive effective recommendations for hoteliers. According to Galvin (2015), 15 participants would be enough to reach data saturation in terms of generating the relevant themes to describe the issue of concern. Figure 1 illustrates the research design for this study.

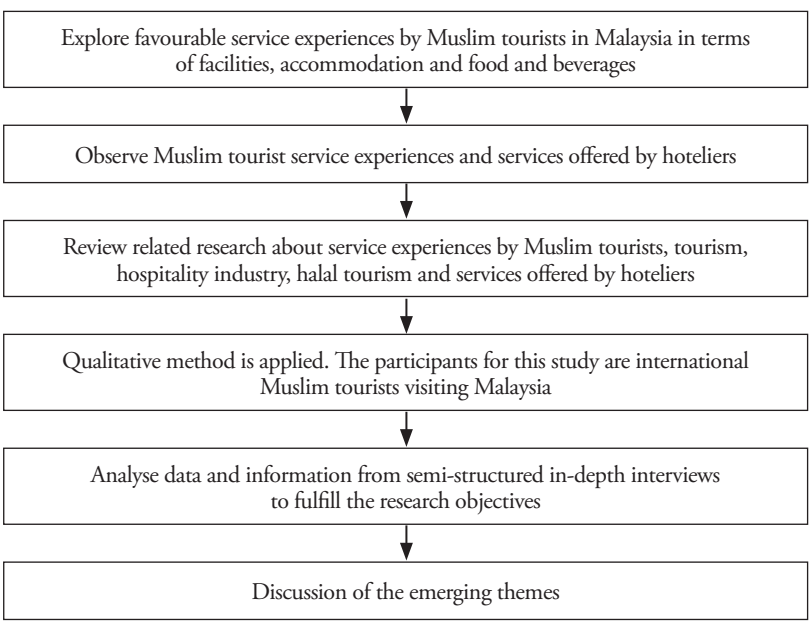


Figure 1. Research design

In this study, the targeted population refers to international Muslim tourists visiting the northern region of Malaysia, as they are best portrayed as popular halal tourism destinations (Zainol & Mustafa, 2021). The sample of international Muslim tourists chosen were those who have experienced using hotel services in Malaysia in terms of food and beverages, and facilities. The sample consisted of participants of different ages and backgrounds which helped the researcher gain various nuanced responses to fulfil the research objectives.

To gather pertinent information from the participants, semi-structured interviews were undertaken. Face-to-face interview is suitable for this study and can be the most effective method for gathering high-quality data (Lobe et al., 2020). Participants can directly respond to the questions asked by the researcher, and can be more spontaneous when answering compared to focus group and observation (Howlett, 2021).

Each interview with the participants was scheduled ahead of time to ensure their availability. The same set of questions were posed to all participants in order to avoid bias and to obtain a variety of viewpoints and information of their service experiences. The interview process allowed participants to share their thoughts and feelings on the hotelier's service and their own service experience.

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the interview data, which was then arranged according to the themes that emerged through the coding process (Bengtsson, 2016). It is a study technique which involves examining written materials and artifacts of recorded human communication in a range of formats, such as messenges, text, audio, and other kinds of recorded human communication. Conceptual analysis is determined by analysing the existence and frequency of ideas in human communication (Buldur & Güvendi, 2020).

In analysing the qualitative data, the presence, meaning, and linkages of words and concepts were quantified and analysed by the researcher. The qualitative data analysis consisted of the following steps: data transcription, data codification, and the formulation of themes based on the coded data. To further aid in the construction of categories, the conceptual analysis was also offered for open and axial coding (Shafiee et al., 2019). This facilitates the identification and creation of defining qualities, differentiating traits, and circumstances that support critical thinking (Shafiee et al., 2019).

Transcription of Data

The transcription of data is the first step in the qualitative analysis. Data transcription is the process of taking an audio recording of an interview and converting it into a written report for a closer examination (Moore & Llompart, 2017). Transcribed data makes it easier for the researcher to read, analyse, and comprehend information since it is clear, concise as well as easily understandable (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Codification of Data

The coding was carried out after the transcription. Coding involves identifying within the text interesting or salient features of the data that connect to the study questions or objectives (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). At the basic level, coding is carried out by the researcher who examines the words acquired and codes them in accordance with the words that were transcribed. It primarily entails the fundamental procedure of identifying significant chunks in research data and assigning them a code (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Formulation of Themes

The analysis then proceeded to the next step in the analysis process, theme development, which is the most crucial task in qualitative research, topic identification (Guest et al., 2020). To put it another way, the purpose of themes is to elicit the essence of the participant's experiences. The researcher then groups the data into themes and this procedure depends on the researcher's capacity for understanding and data analysis. Additionally, it is helpful for summarising significant aspects because it compels the researcher to handle materials in a well-structured manner, resulting in a report that is well-organised and clear.

Results and Analysis

A total of 15 participants were interviewed to fulfill the research objectives. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 40 years old. Among the participants, 86% were between the ages of 21 and 30, while 13% were between the ages of 31 and 40. In addition, the educational backgrounds of each participant varied, ranging from bachelor's degree to master's degree and PhD. After careful deliberation of the scientific processes to analyse the qualitative data as mentioned above, the analysis on the raw data was performed.

To answer the research objectives, the interview protocol asked the following questions:

1. What did the participants think about the services provided and what are the services they want from hoteliers during their travel?
2. How can your service experience help hoteliers improve their service?
3. In your opinion, what makes services more effective and kindly provide your suggestions for improvement?

Requested Services from Hoteliers

In addressing research objective one, the participants were asked about the services provided by Malaysian hoteliers and what other services they seek during their travel.

Two themes emerged: a) Convenient facilities for Muslims, and b) Emphasis on cleanliness.

Convenient Facilities for Muslims

Most participants (67%) agreed that convenient facilities for Muslims should be provided in hotels. As Informant 4 stated:

> *I want a good facility which separates the facilities for male and female such as swimming pool. This is because as Muslims we are not comfortable sharing same facilities with men.*

This notion was supported by Informant 10 whereby she concurred that hoteliers should provide comfortable facilities, especially for female travellers, for example providing separate facilities such as spa for female and male. Thus, hoteliers can allocate gender-segregated facilities for their Muslim guests.

Apart from that, Informant 10 also stated that convenient facilities, especially for female Muslim tourists should be considered. According to the majority of informants, they are looking for a hotel or accommodation provider that can support them in fulfilling their religious needs.

Emphasis on Cleanliness

Another theme that was highlighted by most of the participants (33%) was cleanliness, saying they want clean and comfortable facilities that can help them perform their religious obligations. Informant 3 explained :

> *I want hotels to provide a safe and comfortable place for praying, because mostly in hotel they have dirty and smelly prayer room.*

Suhartanto et al. (2021) claimed that religious beliefs play a significant role on how Muslim tourists worldwide perceive services when traveling. Apart from that, Informant 6 echoed the same sentiment as Informant 3:

> *I want a comfortable prayer room since some of the hotels cannot provide a good prayer room for Muslim tourists. I meant in terms of bad smell and so on.*

Moreover, Informant 14 also stressed the same issue by clarifying, "*I want service that can fulfil the needs of Muslim such as clean facilities for prayer and related to the Muslim need*". All these responses are related to cleanliness, which is essential to satisfy Muslims' religious obligations. Aside from keeping the prayer rooms safe and

pleasant to use, the hoteliers must also make sure they are clean. Figure 2 illustrates the services sought by international Muslim tourists.

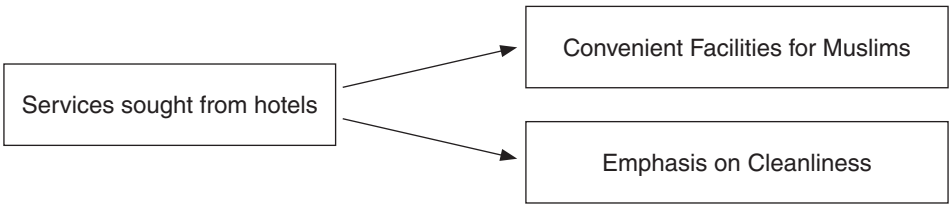


Figure 2. Services sought from hotels

Improvement of Services by Hoteliers

The second objective is to gather feedback on the level of service provided by hoteliers in Malaysia and how it can be improved. There are many hotels in Malaysia, but only a few provide Muslim-friendly facilities and amenities. Thus, there is a lot of potential for hotels to meet the needs and wants of Muslim tourists. This section looks at suggestions for improvement to aid hoteliers in providing better services.

Service Improvement

To address the the second objective, participants were asked how Muslim tourists how hoteliers can improve their service quality. Based on the feedback, three themes were identified: a) Improving hotel facilities, b) Improving cleanliness and quality of services, and c) Analysing customer feedback.

Improving Hotel's Facilities

The majority of participants mentioned that the refurbishing or restoring hotel's facilities is essential to ensure they are in working condition and offer a safe and comfortable environment. According to Informant 3:

> *Providing prayer rooms helped the hotelier to give comfortable service to the tourists as we know that prayer room is one of the important service facilities towards Muslim tourists.*

Informant 2 added that for Muslim travellers, prayer room is the most important aspect that is considered while travelling. Further, he also added that hotel staff should be well-trained, especially those who handle guests directly, such as the front desk service.

Moreover, participants were confident that improving facilities can enhance the travel experience and satisfaction of Muslim tourists. Informant 15 highlighted another suggestion that hoteliers can take up to improve their facilities:

> *I will try to give them an honest review for better improvement especially for Muslim tourists and the part to improve is food and facilities. For the food maybe they can try to separate the kitchen and material or equipment from non-Halal and Halal food. Then for the facilities, I think there are a lot they need to improve especially about prayer room and equipment.*

P7 further mentioned that:

> *Facilities is the most important thing during travel and it is encouraged to get feedback to help them improve their service. Thus, they also can get feedback from Muslim tourists too by providing form or etc.*

Improving Cleanliness and Quality of Services

The participants believed cleanliness and quality of services provided is highly critical in a hotel. According to Informant 3:

> *It will help if they can improve the cleanliness of the prayer room in terms of good smell and etc.*

Similarly, P8 shared:

> *I think hoteliers should improve on their maintenance quality as the reason hotelier must improve the cleanliness and service quality because it is one of the religious needs.*

Informant 2 stressed that front desk staff are the ones responsible for first impression of a hotel to guests. Thus, they should be well-trained and carry a pleasant demeanour to leave guests with a lasting impression and unforgettable service experience:

> *As I mentioned earlier, the part that I suggest can help the hotelier make the customers feel more comfortable and feel more appreciated. As we know, the person in charge of this service play important role as they also affect our first impression.*

Other than that, some participants also suggested to obtain feedback from Muslim tourists regarding their service experience. Informant 11 highlighted, "*Our experience will give hoteliers ideas to improve their service to be better. Then, they also can get honest review from other Muslim tourists too*". This is a relevant practice that hoteliers can adopt to that they can cater to the needs and preferences of guests.

Analysing Customer Feedback

Ignorance of the needs of the international Muslim tourists may result in significant profit loss as this is a growing market segment. Given that Malaysia has a diverse population of various races and religions, some hoteliers may feel that they should exercise caution when catering to the needs and desires of Muslim visitors. According to the Informant 13:

> *It will be more effective if they can improve the service by improve all the suggestion by their customer through the review or feedbacks. This also help them in fulfil the need and wants of Muslim tourists during their travels.*

Informant 14 also added:

> *By considering all the comments from the customers, hoteliers can make improvements based on the comments.*

The responses suggest that customers feedback is vital and can help hoteliers improve their services, especially to capture new markets such as international Muslim tourists. For example, based on Informant 2's response, front desk staff play important role in the first impression of a hotel. Thus, hoteliers should ensure that the staff is well-trained to make sure their customer service is exceptional. The first impression of guests will result in repeat visits and higher revenue for the hotel. Figure 3 illustrates the responses of the participants with regard to areas of improvement for hotels.

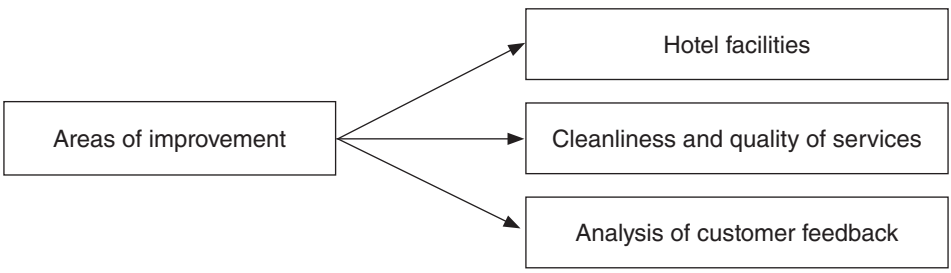


Figure 3. Areas of improvement for hotels

Discussion

The thematic analysis findings provide some insights into how international Muslim tourists perceive what hospitality providers, especially hotels, should offer to enhance their travel experience. The major themes that emerged were improving facilities, improving cleanliness and service quality and analysing customer feedback. The participants felt facilities that are well-maintained or refurbished can increase the satisfaction level of Muslim tourists. This is supported by Hidayat et al. (2017), who found that improvement of facilities is a determining factor that impacted tourists' decision to stay.

Other than that, hoteliers should also improve cleanliness and the quality of their service to attract customers (Shin & Kang, 2020). As for Muslims, a prayer room is one of the most important facilities that they look for during travel. Furthermore, the environment and the equipment in this area must be clean (Ambali & Bakar, 2014). Thus, hotels that ensure their facilities are clean and practise good customer service can attract international Muslim tourists.

Next, the participants shared a range of satisfaction levels with the services that they have encountered, from feeling satisfied with the service, to good. Hussain et al. (2015) asserted that service quality, guest satisfaction, and experience are all interconnected.

The participants were also asked about the types of service that Muslim tourists seek in hotels when they travel. Two themes were identified: cleanliness and facilities that are convenient for Muslims. Literature indicates that Muslim visitors are very cautious and look for convenient amenities and services that adhere to Islamic principles (Küpeli et al., 2018). Meanwhile, a number of participants have stated that they expect the highest standards of cleanliness from the hotels they stay.

Satisfaction is always related to positive feedback from guests. Kastenholz et al. (2018) highlighted that Muslim tourists' experiences are subjective and their satisfaction level differs depending on the service offered. Suhartanto et al. (2021) stated that tourists' halal travel can result in customer loyalty. According to Yeo et al. (2017), the quality of service offered in hotels determine both the satisfaction level and experience of guests.

Furthermore, analysing customer's feedback was also highlighted as being critical in helping hoteliers understand better their guests' preferences and needs. This finding concurs with Samori and Rahman (2013), who stated that customer reviews are critical to help businesses identify shortcomings to address and get new ideas to differentiate their service or product from their competitors.

Apart from that, well-trained staff is the mainstay of any hotel's service quality. This is in line with Hashim and Mohd Fauzi (2022) who identified operating concepts and other related issues in Muslim-friendly hotel operations. The aforementioned suggestions can help hoteliers improve their services to meet the needs of Muslim

tourists, resulting in a more favourable service experience and in the long run, customer loyalty and increased revenue.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study sheds light on the services sought by international Muslim tourists during their travel. The findings may potentially be used to guide future research on similar issues, including the facilities and services that Muslim tourists prefer, the value of cleanliness and good service to customers, Muslim tourists' perceptions, and other relevant topics. Thus, this study is significant because it adds to the knowledge base of hotel operations management as well as experience management.

Moreover, it is hoped that hoteliers will take note of the insights gleaned from the findings to increase their awareness of the needs and preferences of international Muslim tourists. Further, hoteliers can use the suggestions in this study to guide them in improving their existing services and operations (Suhartanto et al., 2021). The study also contributes to the literature on halal tourism, specifically regarding the services in the context of Malaysia. Battour (2018) also mentioned that the services and suggestions given by Muslim tourists are also applicable for non-Muslims. In meeting the needs of international Muslim tourists, Malaysia can potentially capture the emerging Muslim tourism market (Salleh et al., 2014).

Recommendation for Future Studies

Research on service experiences sought by international Muslim tourists is limited. As with all studies, this study too has its limitations which should be taken note of. Since it was carried out in the northern part of Malaysia (Kedah), future research should expand the same study to other parts of Malaysia, especially those that receive many international Muslim tourists. Other studies could improve on the findings of this study by conducting quantitative surveys to capture larger respondent samples, with more objective and tailored questions. Furthermore, non-Muslims' opinions and perceptions about the services offered for Muslim tourists should also be explored. The perceptions of Muslim tourists' and non-Muslim tourists' can be compared to identify differences and similarities that can contribute further to the knowledge base.

Conclusion

The study findings demonstrate that the majority of participants have favourable opinions and perceptions of hoteliers who provide a good service experience. Most of the participants agreed that the services offered can be improved by fulfilling their needs, and improving the facilities and services offered. The implications of the research for practice, society, and the economy as well as the study's limitations

and recommendations for future research were also discussed. The findings would be useful to tourism industry players and government agencies intent on boosting and recovering the industry post-pandemic, in particular for the growing Muslim tourist market.

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Leadership Styles and The Performance of Community-based Homestay Programmes in Langkawi Island

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Abstract: The community-based homestay programme (CBHP) in Malaysia is aimed at encouraging social inclusivity and economic prosperity through voluntary active participation among the rural communities. This initiative by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) serves as a platform for the rural community to promote their villages and the surrounding attractions to both domestic and international tourists, and in return, they gain supplementary income. The hosts of CBHP in Langkawi Island, however, were unable to generate lucrative supplementary income. This caused some of them to exit from the programme, thus affecting the sustainability of this programme. The CBHP performance relies on the leader, who also lives in the homestay village, to lead and influence the homestay hosts. This qualitative study explored the leadership styles practised by the leaders and the performance of three active CBHP in Langkawi—Homestay Desa Wang Tok Rendong (HWTR), Homestay Kampung Padang Lalang (HPL), and Homestay Pulau Tuba (HPT). Thirteen respondents (ten hosts and three leaders) were selected via purposive sampling. A semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted to gather primary data, while relevant supplementary documents were analysed as secondary data. The outcomes reveal that vision of leaders, decision-making process, and leader-host relationship are linked with the leadership styles adopted by the leaders. Through their leadership, the CBHP performance in their villages is indicated by cooperation and networking, efficient use of resources, as well as tourist arrivals and total income. Therefore, homestay training, courses, and seminars organised by government agencies for hosts should embed a leadership module that highlights suitable leadership styles to enhance CBHP performance and sustainability. Such initiatives from relevant government agencies can substantially contribute to the success of CBHP in Malaysia in general and specifically in Langkawi Island.

Keywords: Community-based homestay programme, leadership style, performance, rural community, qualitative

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Introduction

The community-based homestay programme (CBHP) initiated by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) encourages the rural community to participate in tourism activities. Via CBHP, tourists can participate in daily activities and spend at least a night with host families (MOTAC, 2022). This homestay programme aims to: 1) increase the income and living standards of the rural community, 2) develop small and medium entrepreneurs in the field of tourism and culture, 3) boost community-based tourism (CBT), 4) preserve the identity and heritage of the community, and 5) enhance the quality of joint venture with private and public sectors (MOTAC, 2020a).

The homestay programme began in the early 1970s at a Cherating village located in Pahang, when a local woman by the name of Mak Long Teh offered a group of "drifters" meals and a place to stay (Hamzah et al., 2017). The MOTAC established the operation of the official homestay programme in the country in 1995. The first official homestay programme in the country is the Desa Murni village in Pahang. The programme focuses on villagers dwelling in rural areas. Apart from the privilege of managing the homestay programme, the local community makes decisions on the best attractions and products that can attract tourists to visit their village. CBHP encourages the rural community to positively use the existing natural resources, as well as cultural and heritage assets available in the village (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019). A vast range of natural resources, such as lakes, rivers, caves, and fruit orchards, is included in the activities offered to tourists. Villagers can gain supplementary income by participating in the homestay programme. Imminently, the CBHP can eradicate poverty and offer the rural community employment opportunities (Abas & Abd Halim, 2019). This programme is a platform for villagers to promote and market tourism attractions and products to local and foreign tourists (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019).

The involvement of MOTAC and other government agencies (e.g., Institute of Rural Advancement [INFRA]) ascertains that CBHP runs smoothly. This programme was established by MOTAC to assist the rural community achieve economic progress via entrepreneurship (Mohd Nor et al., 2021). The ministry provides the directions, guidelines, and policies that the homestay participants must follow. In addition, MOTAC awards grants to homestay participants to improve the facilities and landscape of the villages. For instance, the government granted a loan of RM50,000 to homestay programmes to carry out projects to improve amenities in a village (MOTAC, 2020c). Meanwhile, INFRA provides training and seminars to homestay participants. Before accepting guests to stay at their homes, homestay participants who have passed MOTAC's home inspection must attend the three-day Basic Homestay Course organised by INFRA.

The statistics on tourist arrivals and total income for homestay programmes in the country in 2017 revealed a drastic slump to 134,017 and RM9,124,122.66, respectively. In 2021, the statistics portrayed 38% and 33% decrease to 82,758 and RM6,126,302.14, respectively (MOTAC, 2020b). The significant decrease was due to the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the closure of state borders, and the movement restrictions that adversely affected tourism activities.

As for the performance of homestay programmes on Langkawi Island, the island welcomed 95 tourists in 2020 and 88 tourists in 2021 (MOTAC Kedah, 2022). However, the period of January until June 2022 recorded 986 tourists who participated in the homestay programme on the island. Of these, 980 tourists visited Homestay Desa Wang Tok Rendong (HWTR), while six tourists visited Homestay Kampung Padang Lalang (HPL). The drastic increase of tourist arrivals to these homestays is ascribed to the announcement made about the transition to the endemic phase that boosted domestic tourism (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). However, Homestay Pulau Tuba (HPT) recorded zero tourist arrival in 2020 and 2022. This uncertain scenario in the homestay programmes on the island caused some homestay participants to feel disappointed. Hence, some participants had the intention to exit from the programme. This situation calls for effective leadership styles among leaders to assist and motivate the homestay hosts (Abas & Abd Halim, 2019). As such, this study looks at the leadership styles of the leaders to ensure the successful performance of three active homestay programmes established in Langkawi Island — HWTR, HPL, and HPT. The two research questions formulated for this study are: 1) What leadership styles were adopted by the homestay leaders in Langkawi homestay programme? and 2) What were the indicators of the performance of Langkawi homestay programme?

Literature Review

Leadership Styles of Homestay Leaders

The local champion concept lacks clear definition in the literature especially within the context of local community and their involvement in tourism activities. A leader in a local context is a dedicated individual and volunteer appointed by the government or an NGO, or a representative for all villagers (Abas & Abd Halim, 2019). A leader can also be a single person or more, group(s) or association in a community. In CBHP, the leader should be from the local community (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017).

Within the context of homestay programmes, the leader is an important person who ascertains the success of the programme. The performance of the programme is influenced by the local champion (Abas & Abd Halim, 2019; Atan & Nik Mahmood, 2019; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). Some of the common issues faced by homestay

participants are limited tourism resources (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017), insufficient capital to sustain the programme (Nor & Awang, 2017), and poor leadership (Nor & Awang, 2017). Limited assets and access can dampen local participation in tourism activities. Fostering trust, and subsequently, recognising the goal of a village homestay programme becomes even more difficult when it turns into an aspect that contributes to homestay challenges, especially when the villagers do not wish to continue supporting the homestay programme (Abas & Abd Halim, 2019).

The growth of CBHP is significantly associated with the effective role of the leader to facilitate the local community. According to Abas and Abd Halim (2019), through encouragement, the local champion (leader) can provide a platform to upskill the villagers. However, poor leadership can affect the performance of CBHP in Malaysia (Abas & Abd Halim, 2019; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017; Nor & Awang, 2017). Notwithstanding the label of famous island in Malaysia, the leadership styles of leaders from HWTR, HPL, and HPT remain understudied. Therefore, this study examines the leaders and the leadership styles to ensure the homestay programmes on the historic island are successful.

The leadership style of a homestay leader is crucial to the success of CBHP (Donny Sita & Mohd Nor, 2021). According to Akpa et al. (2021), leadership style is related to the long-term outcomes and future goals of an organisation, as well as the shared passion, vision, and direction between leaders and followers towards achieving organisational performance. In light of homestay programmes, Rabu et al. (2020) noted that homestay hosts display the attitude and quality of a leader. Turning to this present study, the homestay leaders were authorised to make choices, assign duties, and persuade homestay hosts to participate in decision-making process. Despite the importance of homestay studies, inclusive of the role of homestay leaders, researchers have neglected insights from homestay participants (homestay leaders and hosts) on the appropriate leadership style that can lead to programme success, specifically in Langkawi, Kedah. Insights captured from homestay participants can unveil ways to enhance programme performance (Rabu et al., 2020). Hence, homestay operators were included in this present study to determine the performance of the selected homestay programmes.

Homestay Programme Performance

Organisational performance is initiated with non-financial view such as leadership and staff performance (Madanchian & Taherdoost, 2017), as well as financial view such as profit level, and quality of product in comparison to rivals from the similar industry (Akpa et al., 2021; Obiwuru et al., 2011). The performance of CBHP in Malaysia has successfully achieved the objectives of improving the living standard of the local community. Through extensive promotion, a recognised homestay will definitely increase tourist arrivals (Abas & Abd Halim, 2019). The money spent

by tourists on village products during their stay not only contributes to the growth of the national economy, but also revitalises the economy of the rural community (Mapjabil et al., 2011; Rabu et al., 2020). Apart from aiding the rural residents to earn additional income, the establishment of CBHP is meant to promote and introduce homestays at the global scale.

Some tourism-related studies in Asia have investigated the following success dimensions for CBHP (see Abas & Abd Halim, 2019; Rabu et al., 2020; Witchayakawin et al., 2020; Zulkefli et al., 2021). According to Rabu et al. (2020), environmental conservation efforts made by homestay operators are an indicator of a successful homestay. Zulkefli et al. (2021) assessed the aspects of successful performance of the Malaysian homestay programme via in-depth interviews. They interviewed 10 important informants, including community leaders, CBT operators, and marketing personnel. The gathered responses led to the following seven "very important" indicators for success: leadership, community engagement support, effective marketing and promotion, facility and utility maintenance, collaboration and networking, market environment, as well as product and package uniqueness. Zulkefli et al. (2021) also reported leadership as a performance indicator for CBHP in Malaysia.

Prior studies have linked a good leader with an ideal leadership style for better homestay programme performance. Similarly, Witchayakawin et al. (2020) identified leadership as a performance indicator for CBHP in Thailand. In the Malaysian context, Rogos et al. (2021) found that poor leadership was one of the 12 factors that affected the efficacy of a homestay programme in Padawan, a sub-district in Kuching, Sarawak. Poor leadership exerted a strong impact on tourism success in the studied locations. For instance, a study revealed that the locals refused to accept the homestay programme in a village due to weak leadership, and hence contributed to the poor performance of the homestay programme (Abas & Abd Halim, 2019). A good leader ensures that the local people reap profit (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019). However, Abas and Abd Halim (2019) remained sceptical about the extent to which leadership style, which comprises of a leader's characteristics, qualities, knowledge, and training, may lead to a successful homestay programme. Thus, it is crucial to identify leadership style and its impacts on homestay performance.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative study investigated the leadership styles of leaders in achieving the successful performance of the homestay programmes in Kampung Desa Wang Tok Rendong, Kampung Padang Lalang, and Pulau Tuba. Kampung Desa Wang Tok Rendong is a village inhabited by *kampung* folks who are mostly farmers, as well as small-scale entrepreneurs who run grocery stores and food stalls. Most of the women in the village participate in preparing traditional *kuih*, playing kompang — a Malay

traditional musical instrument, and cooking in large quantities if a programme or an event was held in the village. Meanwhile, Kampung Padang Lalang is mostly comprised farmers and fishermen. The homestay hosts are mostly widowed older people. The locals in Pulau Tuba are mostly fishermen, taxi drivers, and entrepreneurs of small businesses (e.g., food stalls and grocery stores). Some of the hosts ride motorboats to transport the tourists to various tourist attractions.

Semi-structured in-depth interview sessions were conducted from August 10 to September 2, 2019 (two weeks). The interview questions were adopted and adapted from the literature revolving around leadership style and performance of small and medium enterprises. By deploying the purposeful sampling method, 13 homestay participants (ten hosts and three leaders) were interviewed. As suggested by Adler and Adler (2012), the leader assisted in selecting and identifying the target respondents based on the following three criteria: (1) the informants are plentiful and approachable, (2) the informants are detectable in the village, and (3) the informants comprehend the leadership styles practised by the leaders towards achieving the successful performance of the Langkawi homestay programmes. Relevant documents, including guidelines for Malaysian Homestay Programme, training modules by INFRA, statistical reports prepared by MOTAC, financial records, attendance sheets, minutes of meetings, homestay programme brochures, and photocopies of certificates for attending homestay courses or training, were also analysed.

A set of interview questions was designed, whereby the questions were derived from the literature on leadership style and performance of small and medium enterprises. The interview questions were translated from Malay into English by a certified and professional language translator. The gathered data was analysed using the ATLAS.ti application for effective data handling. Five steps were involved in the data analysis. First, data was collected from the leaders and hosts of HWTR, HPL, and HPT. Second, data was verbatim transcribed from Malay to English. Third, the interview transcripts were read and the selected data were coded. Fourth, the relationships among themes were explained and the findings were interpreted. The write-up process was the final step.

To measure the trustworthiness of the data, several strategies were deployed. For credibility, engagement at the research site was prolonged. Besides, methodological triangulation and data triangulation were employed. Transferability of this study was examined via thick description and purposive sampling. Dependability was determined via code-recoding strategy, methodological triangulation, and data triangulation. Lastly, confirmability involved a reflective journal activity as the researcher observed the activities of the informants (e.g., gestures and emotions) during interviews.

Results

This section presents the results retrieved from analysing the data gathered from the semi-structured in-depth interviews with respondents from the selected three active CBHPs in Langkawi Island.

A Sense of Vision

A sense of vision emerged as the first theme to describe how the leaders of HWTR, HPL, and HPT guided the hosts and managed the homestay programme. The leader of HWTR claimed that the homestay programme had enhanced the quality of living among the local villagers. The homestay programme benefitted both homestay hosts and non-host villagers. The HWTR leader explained:

> *For example, during the Hari Raya feast, we do not only focus on the hosts. We focus on other locals too because the homestay programme is not only for hosts. We focus on the villagers. More importantly, we want to do everything for the villagers.*

The HPL leader concurred that homestay programmes had greatly assisted small business owners. He elaborated:

> *My friend is not a homestay operator, but he owns a stingless bee farm in this village. He can use the homestay programme as a platform to promote stingless bee honey to tourists when homestay-related events are held in this village.*

The leaders believed that the programme could run better in their villages if the hosts continued supporting and participating in the programme. Cooperation from the younger generation, who are familiar with IT, was crucial in promoting the programme. The HPT leader claimed:

> *We expect the children of homestay operators to use the internet to promote our homestay.*

Decision-Making Process

Decision-making process is the second theme that explained how the leaders guided the hosts and led the homestay programme. Leaders of HWTR and HPL, who are democratic in their leadership style, emphasised on the involvement of the hosts to make decisions when resolving host-related issues. The leader of HWTR explained that he could act promptly, especially when making decisions before the tourists arrived. He asserted:

> *For example, this host is supposed to receive guests tomorrow morning. Suddenly, tonight he informs me that he cannot receive guests due to personal problems. So, I have to find someone else (to host guests) immediately.*

In terms of how information was disseminated among hosts, the HWTR leader reported that a computer-typed letter was appropriate to disseminate pertinent information to hosts. The leader of HPL, on the other hand, chose a simpler approach by just making telephone calls to the hosts to inform them of the incoming arrival of tourists due to the small number of homestay participants. As for HPT, the leader "walked from one host house to another" to disseminate information due to the short distance between the houses there.

Leader-Host Relationship

The third theme refers to the leader-host relationship in the homestay programme. The significance of working well with the hosts was highlighted by the leaders of HWTR and HPL alike. The HWTR leader enjoyed a good relationship with the hosts. When the HWTR leader responded to the difficulties faced by hosts, the two-way communication between leader and hosts had facilitated the leader to communicate with the hosts. He elaborated:

> *I let him finish the statement. Let him say what he needs to convey. He wants to weep or get upset; I tell him to complete the story first. After that, when we start to fix the issues, I just give him some advice.*

The HPL leader focused on getting to know the tourists when he was asked about his relationship as a leader with the hosts. The leader clarified, "*when I make a mistake, the hosts inform me too*." During the interview session, the HPL leader acknowledged his own shortcomings and claimed that they were normal acts as a human being. He explained:

> *I'm going to tell them if it is wrong. They do not have a problem with that. That's natural, isn't it?*

On the contrary, the HPT leader acted sternly towards the hosts, reflecting the authoritarian style in his leadership. He emphasised on the lack of support given by the hosts. Therefore, "punishment" was imposed by the HPT leader if the hosts did not cooperate while running the homestay programme.

The performances of HWTR, HPL, and HPT were linked with several categories grouped into three themes, namely: cooperation and networking, effective use of resources, as well as tourist arrivals and total income generated from the programme.

Cooperation and Networking

In explaining the first theme, the leaders of HWTR, HPL, and HPT highlighted that effective networking with pertinent organisations and ministries as crucial for securing financial support so that the homestay programme could be better executed. The HWTR leader, who was also the Chairman for Langkawi Homestay Association at the time of this study, emphasised on the value of keeping strong connections with key tourism players, such as the ministries, as well as the state, federal, and NGO sectors, in order to "*make it easier for (any) application to be approved.*"

Since neither the HPL nor HPT leader held any managerial position in the Langkawi Homestay Association, both leaders of HPL and HPT wished that their homestay programmes would gain more attention and support from the ministries. The HPL leader claimed, "*the homestays here really depend a lot on the ministry.*" Meanwhile, the leader of HPT expressed his hope that the homestay programme on the island would continue receiving support from appropriate agencies to ensure that the programme on the island would continue running. He explained:

> *But like us, at a low level, if you cannot share a lot, share a little bit to beautify these spaces if there is no direct (financial assistance) then that is the homestay situation here. If possible, please do a homestay brochure here, and then we can put it in locations like airport and hotels.*

Effective Use of Resources

As for the second theme, the leaders and hosts of HWTR, HPL, and HPT concurred that the homestay programmes used tangible resources, such as local products (i.e., traditional foods and cakes) and culture to attract tourists, apart from the natural attractions (caves and beaches).

At HWTR, the leader not only encouraged tourists to participate in cultural activities, but also promoted the local villagers to join in such events as "a traditional village feast." The HWTR leader described in depth how these cultural events were appreciated by the guests:

> *We have a cultural group called Briged Kesenian, consisting of the children of homestay operators. This group has performed both at the national and international levels... including Japan, Indonesia and Singapore, and they have also joined the Ministry of Tourism to promote tourism in Malaysia.*

When probed on the resources in HPL, he highlighted the value of "story-telling" to tourists:

> *For overseas tourists, we also want to demonstrate our society and our lifestyles. We also have tales to share about our traditions and customs.*

In HPT, the village no longer had skilled players who could play traditional musical instruments due to health issues and lack of support from family members. As a result, they "*could not present cultural shows to the tourists who visited.*" Thus, cultural development and festivals, along with local people engagement, appeared to be at the lowest level. Guests who visited HPT did not get to enjoy traditional local performances. As explained by the HPT leader, the homestay programme there was best suited to get the visitors closer to the nature, from hills to beaches:

> *Yes. We just wander around the village area and nearby attractions. We cannot present cultural performances to the tourists.*

Tourist Arrivals and Total Income Generated from the Programme

The leaders of HWTR, HPL, and HPT claimed that the homestay hosts and the local villagers benefitted from the money they received from the homestay programme. As for the total income, the leaders mutually agreed that apart from renting out rooms to homestay guests, the villagers earned more from the local handmade products sold to the visiting tourists.

As for the third theme, arrival of tourists and total income generated from homestay programme, all HWTR, HPL, and HPT leaders asserted that they had been receiving fewer tourists at the time when the interviews were conducted. In HWTR, the leader elaborated, "*there are fewer people coming in here because they (tourists) first ask where the place is*."

Lack of other tourist attractions in the area surrounding HPL made the homestay programme less appealing to tourists. The leader of HPL added, "*the response here (tourist arrivals to HPL) is slower because this village is not surrounded by tourist attractions.*" Further investigation into HPT unveiled that the programme there struggled to welcome more tourists to the island. The HPT leader asserted:

> *Tourists who plan to go here will first telephone me. They will ask about the location of the homestay. How far is the journey? If they know the distance and how to get here, they will cancel the plan.*

Discussion

As disclosed in the study outcomes, the leaders of HWTR, HPL, and HPT asserted that the ongoing support received from their homestay hosts was crucial so that the leaders could continue running the programme smoothly and influence the hosts

to make more profits effectively. A leader with good leadership style who guides his subordinates is imminent in organisational endeavours to achieve the objectives outlined by the Malaysian CBHP (Ibrahim & Abdul Razzaq, 2010; Mapjabil et al., 2011; Nor & Awang, 2017). A good leadership style facilitates the homestay hosts to earn lucrative profits and encourages them to participate continuously in the homestay programme (Rabu et al., 2020; Zulkefli et al., 2021). Similarly, Hoang et al. (2021) emphasised the significance of the cooperation between homestay hosts and leaders, whereby it is integral for the homestay hosts to offer their endless commitment and support.

The freedom given to homestay hosts not only benefits them substantially, but also makes the tourism industry more alluring through the diversification of products and attractions to tourists (Nor & Awang, 2017). The HPL leader delineated the importance of two-way communication between him and his homestay hosts, besides highlighting the value of his constant physical presence amidst his hosts as far as the homestay programme was concerned. Hoang et al. (2021) asserted that leaders in small- and medium-sized tourism organisations not only function as team leaders, but also as supporters in attaining goals and overcoming obstacles. The leader of HWTR believed in the talents displayed by each of his homestay hosts while describing his role as an "advisor" to the hosts when they sought assistance to address any emerging problem. The leaders of HWTR, HPL, and HPT involved their homestay hosts in each decision-making process to overcome hindrances faced by the hosts. When hosts are given the responsibility to manage homestays, they would eventually conjure a stronger free will, tap into their thoughts, and embark on creative processes (Hoang et al., 2021).

The findings unveiled a list of performance indicators from HWTR, HPL and HPT. The leaders of HWTR, HPL and HPT viewed the homestay programme as an excellent platform to promote their villages at both national and global levels. Interestingly, HPT differed from other homestays on Langkawi Island by turning the distinctiveness and variety of seafood delicacies, which are readily available on the island, into tangible resources. To mention briefly, HPT accentuated the distinctiveness of seafood as a product to lure tourists, which is in line with that highlighted by Kunjuraman (2019). His study that revolved around the homestay programmes in Malaysia uncovered that the homestay operators promoted other attractions that made their homestay programmes stand out from the others, in which unique and exotic food is a major tourist attraction.

Balasingam and Bojei (2019) explained that appealing products and tangible resources, such as exotic flora and fauna found in an area, make a village unique and such interesting features can draw throngs of tourists to that village. Therefore, natural resources should be integrated into CBHP. Homestay programmes are offered in rural areas across Malaysia due to their abundant natural resources that are

viewed as unique to both local and international tourists. This programme offers a chance for tourists to experience the daily activities and the lifestyle of the villagers. Similarly, prior studies exemplified that the primary goal of the homestay programme is to familiarise tourists with the local village and its rural community (Hairal & Hussin, 2021; Kunjuraman, 2019; Mohd Ramli et al., 2016). The findings of this study bridge the gap identified by Nor et al. (2019), who noted a poor emphasis on preserving and protecting the environment in the homestay programmes of Malaysia.

This study offers several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretical implications discuss how the study outcomes may facilitate in devising effective training modules for homestay programmes in general and homestay operators in specific. On the other hand, practical implications outline the approaches that MOTAC, INFRA, homestay leaders, and homestay hosts can adopt to enhance the performance of homestay programmes. For instance, courses, training, and workshops pertaining to leadership styles are crucial for both homestay leaders and hosts, and not just limited to leaders only. This is because homestay hosts should also acquire the necessary information and skills to run their homestay programme successfully. Further, intensive training regarding digital sales and marketing via the internet, in collaboration with government agencies, private sector, and academia, is crucial to market homestay programmes in this digital era. Such an initiative can effectively enhance the performance of homestay programmes by enabling more homestay participants to promote their programmes using the internet platform to reach a broader audience.

Several limitations are noted in this study. Given that this study concentrated only on the leadership styles of homestay leaders in Langkawi, the reported findings do not represent all homestay leaders and registered homestays throughout Malaysia. Future studies on homestay operators, inclusive of both leaders and hosts, may delve deeper into the perspectives of homestay operators on the leadership styles of the respective leaders to ascertain the exceptional performance of homestay programmes in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Overall, the study findings unveiled that the homestay leaders focused on their vision for the programme, were capable in making decisions, and appreciated their relationship with the hosts. Upon visioning the future of the homestay programme, leaders of HWTR, HPL, and HPT considered the progress of local villagers, the efforts to promote the village, the focus to generate extra income among villagers, and the future of the homestay programme. They led the programme consistently with their decision making, especially when solving issues with hosts during meeting prior to arrival of guests, when disseminating relevant information, as well as when

assigning tasks to hosts. These leaders led the homestay programme and influenced the hosts based on their relationship with the hosts, their reaction to problems faced by hosts, and the degree of freedom given to hosts.

The study outcomes amplify that effective leadership style is imminent for a successful homestay programme. However, no one ideal leadership style should be applied to run the homestay programme. The homestay leaders lead teams by employing several leadership styles and this is supported by the reality of heterogeneity in the adopted leadership styles (Franco & Matos, 2013). The leadership styles practised by HWTR, HPL, and HPT leaders were effective as the hosts continued generating additional income from their active participation in the homestay programme.

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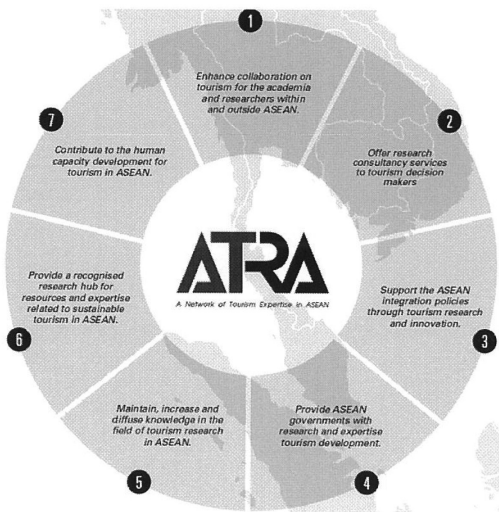
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- Developing links between ASAEAN researchers in tourism with common projects.
- Providing a recognized multi-site resource and expertise related to ASEAN Tourism.
- Contributing to the development of the Tourism Human capacity for ASEAN Countries.
- Supporting the ASEAN integration policies.

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Scope of Activities

In pursuance of the aims and objectives defined above the Association shall:

- Carry out research related to tourism in ASEAN.
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