

3rd Penang International Conference on Hospitality 2023 [Special Issue]. e-Academia Journal of UiTM
Cawangan Terengganu 12, 12-25, December 2023

Domestic Visitors' Travel Intention to Sabah Post COVID-19 Travel Restriction

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Submission date: 26 October 2023

Accepted date: 11 December 2023

Published date: 21 December 2023

To cite this article: David, M., Tangit, T. M & Mogindol, S. H. (2023). Domestic Visitors' Travel Intention to Sabah Post COVID-19 Travel Restriction. 3rd Penang International Conference on Hospitality 2023 [Special Issue]. e-Academia Journal of UiTM Cawangan Terengganu 12, 12-25, December 2023

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to study the intentions of Malaysian domestic travellers to visit Sabah after the COVID-19 travel restrictions were lifted by exploring the variables of fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, and risk attitude. This study utilizes the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to explore factors impacting travel intentions in a post-pandemic context. SPSS and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) were used to analyse the 303 online survey respondents. The study reveals diverse perceptions among Malaysian domestic visitors regarding travel to Sabah after COVID-19 travel restrictions. Fear of COVID-19 and risk attitude were found to have no significant impact on travel intentions. However, perceived behavioural control, subjective norms, and travel anxiety showed significant relationships with travel intention. The findings offer practical implications for tourism stakeholders to develop targeted strategies for attracting and accommodating domestic travellers in Sabah while contributing to existing knowledge in the tourism and educational field. This study incorporated the TPB model by adding more variables, resulting in a more powerful explanation of post-pandemic travel intentions.

Keywords: Domestic travellers; Malaysia; Sabah; COVID-19 travel restrictions; travel intention; Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is widely acknowledged as a significant contributor to a country's economy and international trade (UNWTO, 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 had a severe impact on various industries worldwide, particularly the tourism sector. To mitigate the spread of the virus, travel and tourism activities were temporarily halted, resulting in a decline in global economic development (Bakar & Rosbi, 2020). In Malaysia, the number of domestic tourist arrivals decreased from 131.7 million in 2020 to 66 million in 2021 (DOSM, 2022a). Similarly, domestic tourist arrivals in Sabah dropped from 10.3 million in 2020 to 3.8 million in 2021 (DOSM, 2022b). The Malaysian government implemented the Movement Control

3rd Penang International Conference on Hospitality 2023 [Special Issue]. Volume 12 : Year 2023
eISSN : 2289 - 6589

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Order (MCO) and National Recovery Plan, which included measures such as mandatory face mask usage, travel restrictions, and limitations on mass gatherings to control the spread of COVID-19 (Elengoe, 2020; PMO, 2020). As COVID-19 cases decreased, the Malaysian government declared a relaxation phase of COVID-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs) on May 1st, 2022, which involved reopening travel borders and allowing tourism activities to resume while still adhering to SOPs (WTC, 2022). During this period, Sabah received 9.42 million domestic travellers from January to October 2022 (WTC, 2022). Although the number of domestic visitors to Sabah increased, travelling post-COVID may differ from pre-COVID due to the presence of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty caused by the pandemic (Bidder et al., 2021). These factors can potentially influence travellers' intention to travel even after the lifting of travel restrictions (De Zwart et al., 2007; Yvette, 2005; Luo & Lam, 2020).

Previous studies have explored the impact of COVID-19 on travellers' intention to travel, but most of them have focused on other countries. For instance, Singh et al. (2020) have shown that many people in India are afraid of the pandemic, which caused them to change their perception of using public transportation for their daily commute. Moreover, as per a study conducted in Italy by Kamal and Othman in 2020, it was discovered that the majority of Italians experienced the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their mental well-being, including feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress. Yasa et al. (2021) also conducted research in Indonesia and discovered that the pandemic has altered how people's subjective norms influence their attitudes toward using medical masks more frequently. Similarly, Tran (2021) found that subjective norms play a significant role in shaping tourists' attitudes in Vietnam, subsequently affecting their intention to travel to Vietnam during the pandemic. Based on the statements above, many studies have been made focusing on the relationship between COVID-19 and travellers' behaviour. However, there is still a gap in studies examining the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and travellers' intentions to travel. Particularly, there is a lack of research concerning domestic travellers' plans to visit Sabah after the COVID-19 travel restrictions. Due to the gap, businesses have limited knowledge of how the pandemic influences travel behaviour.

Moreover, most of the existing studies have utilised theories in their study, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Nevertheless, researchers have also identified that many of these studies have not incorporated important factors such as people's fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety and risk attitude. By not incorporating these variables, there might be a lack of studies that explain the effect of the pandemic towards travellers' travel behaviour, which might influence their future travel intentions. It was also mentioned by Rahmafritia et al. (2021) that more studies should be done on TPB by using different variables about tourism and the pandemic. By using the TPB framework, it would help us uncover the travellers' travel intention to travel to Sabah post COVID-19 travel restrictions. Hence, the use of this theory with variables such as travel anxiety, risk attitude and fear of COVID-19. The following are the objectives of the study:

- RO1: To determine the influence of fear of COVID-19 towards travellers' travel intention to travel post COVID-19 travel restrictions
- RO2: To determine the influence of travel anxiety towards travellers' travel intention to travel post COVID-19 travel restrictions
- RO3: To determine the influence of perceived behavioural control towards travellers' travel intention to travel post COVID-19 travel restrictions
- RO4: To determine the influence of subjective norms towards travellers' travel intention to travel post COVID-19 travel restrictions
- RO5: To determine the influence of risk attitude towards travellers' travel intention to travel post COVID-19 travel restrictions

The results of this study are able to benefit both managerial and literature perspectives. From a literary perspective, researchers stand to acquire new insights into the impact of the pandemic on travellers' psychology and their perception of travelling after the pandemic. The knowledge gathered could be a foundation for subsequent studies related to post-COVID travel. Additionally, the integration of new variables into the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) could help other scholars in understanding how

these factors would be able to influence travellers' intentions, which enhanced understanding can be a valuable resource for their future studies.

Furthermore, this research extends to the managerial perspective within the tourism industry, including travel agencies, hotels, and governmental sectors. The study's findings benefit practical insights for travel agencies and hotels to design effective promotional strategies that cultivate trust and confidence among domestic travellers heading to Sabah. Moreover, the government, particularly the Sabah state government, can benefit essential insights from this study. These insights could offer foresight into potential shifts in domestic travellers' intentions. The results might inform the future creation of travel protocols or restrictions. This aligns with the sentiments expressed by Dr. Mazlin Mokhtar at the World Tourism Conference (2022), emphasizing the primacy of safety and security for travellers. Consequently, the government can employ the findings to identify potential adjustments to ensure the safety of domestic travellers during their journeys.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Covid-19 and Its Impact Towards Tourism Industry

Since the pandemic began, experts have predicted a big impact on tourism (Skare et al., 2021). Some thought tourism spread the virus due to large crowds (Deep et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021). Global tourist arrivals fell 74%, causing a \$1.3 trillion loss (UNWTO, 2021). From January to July 2021, arrivals dropped 40%, still below pre-COVID levels (UNWTO, 2021). Apart from that, the pandemic has affected employment as well by affecting 100-120 million tourism positions (UNWTO, 2021). Focusing in Malaysia, tourism demand has fallen as travellers cancel their pre-planned trips (Baker & Rosbi, 2020). This has resulted for tourist arrivals to dropped from 4.33 million in 2020 to 134,728 in 2021 (Tourism Malaysia, 2022). Planned events such as Visit Malaysia Year 2020 were also cancelled (Karim et al., 2021; Rahim, 2020). As mentioned by Hassan (2021), the tourism industry in Malaysia was severely affected, which shows with the results of 95 agencies closed, and 5,000 tour agents were affected. Meanwhile, the pandemic has greatly affected the tourism industry in Sabah. The rise of the cases was mostly contributed by the political activities in Sabah, which contributed to 11,285 cases and 135 deaths (CNA, 2020; The Straits Times, 2020; Kee, 2020). According to Sabah Tourism Board (2021), statistics have shown that due to the pandemic, the tourists' arrivals to Sabah have dropped by 98.9% for international and 81.7% for domestics. Due to this, tourism stakeholders have suffered. For example, big hotels closed like Four Points by Sheraton in Sandakan (Jikur, 2020).

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

On March 16, 2021, the Malaysian government implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO) to combat the COVID-19 pandemic (Elengoe, 2020). During this time, various activities were restricted, including mass gatherings, operation of schools and non-essential services, as well as domestic and international travel (PMO, 2020). In June 2021, the National Recovery Plan was introduced, consisting of four phases with different Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for each phase (Liang, 2021). By December 2021, all states in Malaysia had transitioned to the fourth phase, indicating a decrease in COVID-19 cases (Free Malaysia Today, 2021). On April 1, 2022, the Malaysian government declared a transition towards the endemic phase but emphasized that the country was not fully in the endemic phase and urged adherence to SOPs (Schroeder et al., 2007). The transition continued with the "Malaysian's COVID-19 SOPs relaxation" starting on May 1, 2022, introducing new SOPs for both local and international travellers (Mohd Zim, 2022; Sabah Tourism Board, 2022).

As of May 2023, with COVID-19 no longer classified as a global health emergency by the World Health Organization, the Malaysian health minister is set to discuss updated SOPs (The Star, 2023). Effective July 5, the government has urged citizens to follow the updated SOPs, including a reduction in the quarantine period for positive cases from seven to five days from symptom onset. Wearing masks is still compulsory for positive cases, high-risk individuals, and in public transportation, crowded places, and poorly ventilated areas (Trisha, 2023).

2.3 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), is commonly used in tourism research to understand travellers' perceptions and predict their behaviours based on attitudes and beliefs (Ajzen, 1991; Bae & Chang, 2021; Kusumaningrum & Wachyuni, 2020). Many studies have employed TPB to analyse travel behaviour and factors influencing travel intention (Ang, Wei, & Arli, 2021; Hamid, Azhar, & Sujood, 2022; Kusumaningrum & Wachyuni, 2020; Li, Furuoka, Lim, & Pazim, 2020; Quintal, Lee, & Soutar, 2010; Sujood, Hamid, & Bano, 2021; Ullah et al., 2021). However, Rahmafritria et al. (2021) suggested the need for more studies utilizing TPB with different variables related to tourism and the pandemic. Therefore, this study aims to adapt and extend the TPB model by incorporating additional variables such as fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety, and risk attitude. The study intends to demonstrate how these factors, in conjunction with TPB, can influence travellers' intention to visit Sabah after the COVID-19 travel restrictions.

2.4 Fear of COVID-19

The pandemic has resulted the fear of COVID-19 and associated with depression, anxiety, and reduced mental well-being (Ahorsu et al., 2020). Ongoing concerns about new variants, such as Omicron, Delta, Alpha, Beta, and Gamma, further contribute to people's fear of COVID-19 and influence their future travel plans (WHO, 2022). Travellers are willing to change their or even cancel their pre-planned travel plans in order to avoid getting infected by COVID-19. It was proven that the spread of any influenza or diseases has influenced individuals to be afraid, resulting in them being more cautious in planning their travels (De Zwart et al., 2007). For example, according to Luo and Lam (2020), it has been proven that the people in Hong Kong are affected by the existence of the pandemic which influenced their intention to travel to the travel bubble destinations. Apart from the fear of getting infected while travelling, travellers were also proven to be afraid of COVID-19 as it has affected their finances negatively, affecting their travel decisions (Cvijanovic & Gajic, 2021). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: Fear of COVID-19 positively impact travellers' travel intention.

2.5 Travel Anxiety

Travel anxiety refers to the emotional reaction of stress or potential risks related to the travel environment (Luo & Lam, 2020). It is a common feeling among travellers who experience anxiety about traveling, especially when travelling an unfamiliar place (Kusumaningrum & Wachyuni, 2020). The existence of COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a new form of anxiety towards individuals known as *coronaphobia* or coronavirus anxiety, which has heightened travellers' concerns about travelling (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020; Nazneen, Hong, & Ud Din, 2020). Numerous studies have demonstrated that travel anxiety has a significant impact on travellers' intention to travel during and after the pandemic. For instance, Luo and Lam (2020) have proven that travellers' travel anxiety has enhanced due to the pandemic, which affected travellers intention to travel to travel bubble destinations in Hong Kong. Apart from that, due to the pandemic, travellers have become more health-conscious and more aware of their security to travel after the pandemic (Elsayed, 2020). On the other hand, some studies indicate that even if travellers are anxious about travelling during the pandemic, they still plan to travel after COVID-19 is under control. This is more likely if vaccines are accessible (Bidder et al., 2021) or if there are effective ways to handle pandemics (Angguni & Lenggogeni, 2021). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: Travel Anxiety positively impact travellers' travel intention.

2.6 Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC)

Perceived behavioural control (PBC) is an important factor in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and refers to individuals' perception of how easy or difficult it is to engage in a specific behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of travel, PBC also relates to individuals' available resources that can influence their intention to travel (Sujood et al., 2021). Research has shown that individuals' risk perception of the COVID-19 pandemic (fear, anxiety, worries) can affect their PBC, affecting their intention to travel. Susanto et al. (2021) discovered that travellers' perception of the risk posed by the COVID-19 pandemic plays a role in raising their PBC, subsequently impacting their intention to adopt non-pharmaceutical preventive measures. This means that the risks they perceive lead to an increased sense of control over their actions, influencing their decisions to either avoid or delay their travel plans. A similar study conducted by Hanafiah et al. (2021) found that individuals are influenced by COVID-19-related constraints, such as, quarantine

requirements, which has reduced their ability to manage their actions, leading to a lack of confidence and discomfort when it comes to travel. Thus, from the statement above the following hypothesis is proposed:
H₃: Perceived behavioural control (PBC) negatively impacts travellers' travel intention.

2.7 Subjective Norms

Subjective norms are one of the key components of TPB, and they reflect how individuals are influenced by others when deciding whether to engage in a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). A study conducted by Hanafiah et al. (2021) concerning Malaysian travellers during the pandemic has revealed that subjective norms have an adverse impact on travellers' intentions to travel during the pandemic. This influence is largely attributed to the social environment surrounding the travellers, including the influence by family and friends. Several researchers also emphasized the importance of considering subjective norms in studies related to consumer behavioural intention. For instance, Ham et al. (2015) discovered that subjective norms play a significant role in shaping individuals' behaviour and intentions to buy specific products. Another investigation by Liu et al. (2021) demonstrated that the anxiety caused by COVID-19 affects customers' subjective norms, directly impacting their intentions to make purchases. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: Subjective norms negatively impact travellers' travel intention.

2.8 Risk Attitude

The presence of risks can influence individuals' travel decisions, leading them to avoid certain destinations due to various types of risks such as health, political instability, financial, psychological, and physical risks (Nazneen et al., 2020; Bae & Chang, 2021; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012a). On the other hand, risk attitude refers to individuals' willingness to take risks in risky situations (Xu & Cheng, 2021). Studies have differing opinions on whether risk attitude has a positive or negative influence on travellers' intentions. For instance, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a situation where travellers are willing to take on risks in order to visit destinations within travel bubbles (Luo & Lam, 2020). Despite the potential danger of contracting the COVID-19 virus, these travellers exhibit a significant propensity for risk, motivating them to undertake journeys during the pandemic. However, this perspective contrasts with findings from Langgat et al. (2021), who demonstrated that Malaysian travellers are not very likely to take big risks, which would encourage them to visit travel bubble destinations amid the pandemic. Research has also illustrated a downward shift in travellers' risk attitudes. During the pandemic's early stages, travellers have maintained a heightened risk attitude that influenced them to travel. However, this attitude substantially transformed as the number of COVID-19-related deaths increased, as highlighted (Chan et al., 2020). From the statements above, the hypothesis is proposed:

H₅: Risk attitude positively impacts travellers' travel intentions.

2.9 Travel Intention

Intention refers to people's willingness to engage in certain actions, and various motivating factors influence it. In the context of travel, intention to visit a desired destination is mostly driven by travel motivations (Alegre & Cladera, 2009). When travellers have high levels of travel motivation, they are more likely to have the intention to visit their desired destination (JooYeon et al., 2013). On the other hand, negative factors can also impact travel intention. For example, news about the negative impacts of COVID-19 on businesses and the economy can instil fear and anxiety in people, leading to a decrease in their intention to travel (Luo & Lam, 2020; Kusumaningrum & Wachyuni, 2020). When travellers feel fearful about potential health risks, they may choose to avoid traveling (Cahyanto et al., 2016).

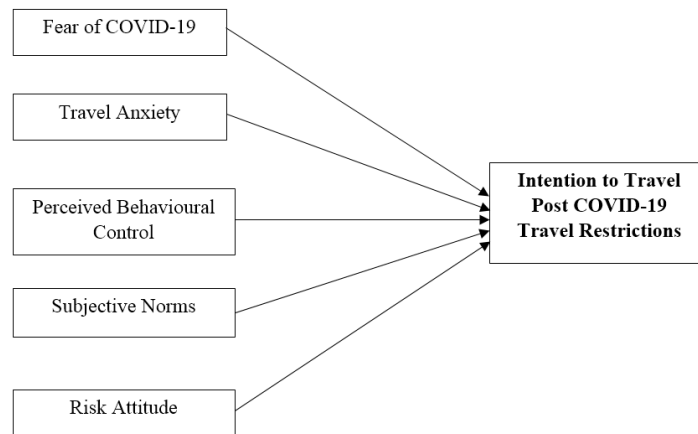


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative approach and a cross-sectional survey to collect data. The unit of analysis will be domestic travellers intending to travel to Sabah after the COVID-19 travel restrictions. Non-probability sampling was chosen due to the lack of a population sampling frame and the need for quick data collection. Purposive sampling was utilized to represent the intended population for the study. Moreover, G*Power software will be used to determine the minimum sample size, considering medium effect size, alpha, and power values (Gefen et al., 2011; Salkind, 2010)). The analysis indicated a minimum sample size of 85, but for multiple regression analysis, a sample size of 200-300 respondents is suitable (Hair et al., 2014; Israel, 1992). Hence, this research aims to collect 300 respondents. It will be adapted from previous research by Luo and Lam (2020) and Hanafiah et al. (2021) with minor modifications. The questionnaire will be available in both English and Bahasa Malaysia, using the "back-translation" method for translation and will be distributed using social media in Google Form. Furthermore, the questionnaire will consist of six parts, labelled as Part A to Part F. The items in the questionnaire will utilize a Five-Point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

A preliminary evaluation was conducted on April 17, 2023, with 22 respondents, before distributing the official questionnaire. The purpose of this pre-test was to identify and address any potential issues with the survey questions before administering them to the target respondents (Nixon et al., 2002). As part of the pre-test, an additional question was included to gather feedback on the respondents' experience with the questions. Feedback received highlighted grammatical errors and the use of similar wording in different questions. Therefore, based on this feedback, the researcher acknowledged the issues and made necessary amendments to ensure the respondents easily understood the questions. After the pre-test, a pilot test was done with 35 people, the quantity suggested by other scholars (Hill, 1998; Johanson & Brooks, 2010; Perneger et al., 2015). However, out of 35 respondents, only 30 respondents agreed with having the intention to travel to Sabah in the near future. The pilot test was distributed using social media such as, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The results of the trial are shown in Table 1. The results range from 0.700 to 0.900, which follows the suggested value of other scholars (Taber, 2018; Gliem et al., 2003).

Table 1: Results of Pilot Test (N=30)

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Fear of COVID-19	0.943
Travel Anxiety	0.953
Risk Attitude	0.863
Subjective Norm	0.800
Perceived Behavioural Control	0.777
Travel Intention	0.945

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Demographics

Table 2 presents the demographic profile of the respondents (N=303). Most of the respondents were female (60.7%), aged 22 to 30 (38.0%), and were single (64.7%). Most of the respondents show to have a university education background (81.8%). In terms of employment, more than a quarter of them were students (30.7%) and working in the government sector (25.7%).

Table 2: Demographics of Respondents

Variables	Items	N	%
Gender	Female	184	60.7
	Male	119	35.3
Age	18 - 21 years old	61	20.1
	22 – 30 years old	115	38.0
	31 – 40 years old	60	19.8
	41 – 50 years old	38	12.5
	51 – 60 years old	15	5.0
	61 years and above	14	4.6
Marital Status	Single	196	64.7
	Married	107	35.3
Education level	No formal education	1	0.3
	Secondary school	45	14.9
	University/college/institution	248	81.8
Employment	Others	9	3.0
	Student	93	30.7
	Self-employed	39	12.9
	Government sector	78	25.7
	Private sector	69	22.8
	Retiree	20	6.6
	Others	4	1.3
State	Selangor	30	9.9
	Perak	10	3.3
	Kelantan	8	2.6
	Kedah	3	1.0
	Johor	19	6.3
	Pahang	14	4.6
	Negeri Sembilan	10	3.3
	Terengganu	14	4.6
	Perlis	10	3.3
	Melaka	17	5.6
	Penang	18	5.9
	Sarawak	74	24.4
	Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan	38	12.5
	Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur	18	5.9
Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya	20	6.6	

4.1 Variable Descriptive Analysis

This section discusses the descriptive analysis of the variables, specifically focusing on their mean and standard deviation values. The variables' descriptive analysis was conducted using SPSS, resulting in different mean and standard deviation values. For the variable "Fear of COVID-19," the highest item is FOC3 (mean=4.60, σ =0.782). The researcher found that for travel anxiety, TA1 has the highest mean value (mean=3.50, σ =1.364). Next, for risk attitude, RA1 (mean=4.62, σ =0.721) demonstrates the highest mean value. Concerning subjective norms, SN4 (mean=4.64, σ =0.655) exhibits the highest mean value, indicating that most respondents agree with the statement that their family and friends are eager to travel to Sabah after the lifting of COVID-19 travel restrictions. For perceived behavioural control (PBC), PBC4 (mean=4.54, σ =0.744) has the highest mean value, indicating that respondents mostly agree with the statement that traveling to Sabah is entirely within their control. Lastly, for travel intention, TI3 (mean=4.70, σ =0.640) has the highest mean value, suggesting that most respondents have plans to travel to Sabah once the travel restrictions are lifted. These results can be illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Variables' Descriptive Analysis

Code	Items	(\bar{x})	(σ)
FOC1	I am most afraid of COVID-19 virus	4.38	0.891
FOC2	I feel uncomfortable to think about the COVID-19 virus	4.22	1.081
FOC3	I am afraid of my family and myself getting infected by COVID-19 virus	4.60	0.782
FOC4	I feel afraid and nervous when I watch news about the COVID-19 virus	3.99	1.182
TA1	I still feel uncomfortable after thinking of going for a tour in Sabah even after the travel restrictions have been lifted	3.50	1.364
TA2	I feel an irregular heartbeat when I think of going on a tour in Sabah after the travel restrictions have been lifted	2.81	1.492
TA3	I still feel panic about going for a tour to Sabah even after travel restrictions have been lifted	3.08	1.423
TA4	I still feel that I am not physically fit in planning tourism activities in Sabah after the travel restrictions have been lifted	2.97	1.524
RA1	If I travel to Sabah, I will use face mask and prepare hand sanitizers as a precaution	4.62	0.721
RA2	If I travel to Sabah, I will avoid any mass gatherings and crowded places	4.57	0.806
RA3	Due to the pandemic, I prefer to avoid travelling to Sabah post-COVID travel restrictions	3.13	1.436
RA4	Due to the pandemic, I prefer to shorten my duration of potential trips to Sabah post-COVID travel restriction	3.62	1.373
SN1	Most people who are important to me think, I should travel to Sabah after travel restrictions have been lifted	4.30	.963
SN2	I intend to travel for leisure with my friends and family to Sabah after travel restrictions have been lifted	4.61	.719
SN3	I am influenced by celebrities and social media influencers to travel to Sabah after travel restrictions have been lifted	4.25	1.214
SN4	My family and friends are eager to travel to Sabah after travel restrictions have been lifted	4.64	.655
PBC1	I am financially available to travel to Sabah after travel restrictions have been lifted	4.45	.922

PBC2	I will have the availability in my schedule to go on with my holiday to Sabah after the travel restrictions have been lifted	4.39	.966
PBC3	I have enough information on COVID-19 virus	4.51	.763
PBC4	Travelling to Sabah post-COVID travel restrictions is entirely within my control	4.54	.744
TI1	I intend to travel to Sabah after travel restrictions have been lifted	4.68	.691
TI2	I am confident enough to travel to Sabah after travel restrictions have been lifted	4.62	.761
TI3	I plan to travel to Sabah after travel restrictions have been lifted	4.70	.640
TI4	I will travel to Sabah after travel restrictions have been lifted	4.66	.704

4.2 Reflective Measurement Model

Table 4 shows the result of the reflective measurement model analysis. Other researchers suggest that Cronbach's alpha values for all variables are in the good to excellent range (0.7 - 0.9). Travel Intention has the highest value ($\alpha = 0.958$), indicating strong internal consistency, while Risk Attitude has the lowest value ($\alpha = 0.737$), which is still considered acceptable. These results align with the statements on Cronbach's Alpha made by other researchers (Yudhistir, 2022; Adamson & Prision, 2013), confirming the reliability and trustworthiness of the measurement.

Table 4: Reflective Measurement Model Analysis

Latent Variable	Indicators	Outer Loadings	Composite Reliability	AVE	(α)
FOC19	FOC1	0.925	0.923	0.750	0.888
	FOC2	0.892			
	FOC3	0.823			
	FOC4	0.818			
PBC	PBC1	0.745	0.880	0.647	0.824
	PBC2	0.807			
	PBC3	0.850			
	PBC4	0.811			
RA (RA3 REMOVED)	RA1	0.882	0.863	0.680	0.757
	RA2	0.902			
	RA4	0.671			
TA	TA1	0.889	0.943	0.806	0.920
	TA2	0.888			
	TA3	0.925			
	TA4	0.887			
SN	SN1	0.780	0.900	0.692	0.851
	SN2	0.857			
	SN3	0.811			
	SN4	0.876			
TI	TI1	0.936	0.969	0.887	0.958
	TI2	0.927			
	TI3	0.934			
	TI4	0.970			

4.3 Variable Path Coefficients

According to Schmidt & Osebold (2017), significance levels for p-values are categorized into four groups: $p > 0.05$ (not significant), $0 \leq 0.05$ (significant), $p \leq 0.01$ (very significant), and $p < 0.001$ (highly significant). The significance of the relationships between variables, represented by the path coefficients, is assessed using t-values obtained from bootstrapping. Table 4 shows that most of the path analysis p-values fall within the very significant to highly significant range (0.01 – 0.001), except for H1 and H5, which have p-values greater than 0.05. These hypotheses are therefore rejected, as they do not meet the threshold value established by previous studies. This can be seen in Table 5

Table 5: Reflective Measurement Model Analysis

H ₀	Path Analysis	Path Coefficient (β)	T-Statistic	P-Values
H ₁	FOC19 -> TI	-0.127	1.75	0.080
H ₂	TA -> TI	-0.166**	3.076	0.002
H ₃	PBC -> TI	0.376***	4.453	0.000
H ₄	SN -> TI	0.482***	5.579	0.000
H ₅	RA -> TI	0.114	0.96	0.337

5.0 DISCUSSION

The study aimed to analyse the impact of fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety, perceived control, subjective norms and risk attitude on domestic travellers' intention to visit Sabah after COVID-19 travel restrictions. The study's findings suggest that COVID-19 had an impact on travellers' wellness in several ways (Ahorsu et al., 2020; Suppawittaya et al., 2020). For instance, previous research has proven that fear of COVID-19 has affected travellers' fear, which negatively influenced their intention to travel (De Zwart et al., 2007; Luo & Lam, 2020; Ornell et al., 2020). However, the result of this study contradicts with the previous studies, which show that fear of COVID-19 does not significantly affect domestic travellers' travel intention to Sabah post COVID-19 travel restrictions. This means that, even though the travellers are scared, they still intend to travel to Sabah after the travel restrictions have been lifted. Moreover, travel anxiety was found to significantly influence travel intention, with participants expressing discomfort about travelling to Sabah post COVID-19 restrictions. The findings of this study have aligned with previous studies (Luo & Lam, 2020; Elsayeh, 2020; Kusumaningrum & Wachyuni, 2020; Bidder et al., 2021; Angguni & Lenggogeni, 2021).

Next, this study shows that perceived behavioural control was positively associated with travel intention, indicating that respondents felt in control of their travel plans and had the necessary resources (Sujood et al., 2021). Subjective norms also show positive significant towards travel intention, as participants were influenced by the enthusiasm of their family and friends. This result aligned with previous studies which proved travellers are more sensitive and more open to listen to their family and friends about traveling after the pandemic (Hanafiah et al., 2021; Ham et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2021). Lastly, Risk attitude significantly influenced travel intention. Travellers still show high intention in traveling even after the pandemic, which shows travellers are willing to take risk and influenced them to practice more safety precautions such as washing hands, social distancing and wearing facemasks (Luo & Lam, 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Langgat et al., 2021). These findings provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between psychological factors and travel intention during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlighted the feelings such as fear and anxiety, as well as the influence of others which can impact our wellness during and before our travels.

Completing this study revealed several limitations. One challenge was the difficulty in collecting respondents, which required using social media platforms for distribution. While travel groups on platforms like Facebook helped reach specific respondents, some potential participants may have missed the survey

posts, leading to a longer data collection period. Additionally, the ever-changing nature of COVID-19 information and policies posed a challenge as it could impact the research progress, requiring adjustments along the way.

For future research, it is recommended to explore additional variables that could influence travel intentions, such as financial factors, accessibility, and convenience. Alternative theoretical frameworks, like the Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) could also be considered instead of solely relying on the Theory of Planned Behaviour. By applying other theories, such as PMT, it could broaden more the information regarding what variables motivate travellers to travel post COVID-19 travel restrictions. Other than that, as mentioned by previous research that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected individuals to become stressed, depressed and anxious (Ahorsu et al., 2020). Future studies can focus more on the long-term effects of the pandemic on travellers and provide possible recommendations for overcoming these negative effects. Next, the government has estimated that the tourists' arrivals in Sabah will reach 1.7 million arrivals by the end of 2023 (Muguntan Vanar, 2023). Therefore, future research can focus more on investigating the travel intentions of international travellers visiting Malaysia, particularly their willingness to travel to Sabah after COVID-19 restrictions, as this study only focused on domestic travellers of Malaysia. By studying the intention of international travellers to visit Sabah would be able to offer a broader perspective on post-pandemic travel trends and preferences, thereby contributing to the global body of tourism-related knowledge.

Furthermore, investigating the intention of international travellers to visit Sabah post COVID-19 can provide valuable insights for travel companies and the government of Malaysia. Understanding the current travel behaviour of travellers would be able to help improve travel promotions that can build trust with potential travellers. The findings from this particular study can also be a recommendation for the managerial perspectives, whereby, the results regarding the perspective of domestic travellers in Malaysia regarding post-COVID-19 travel can help travel companies and government understand current travel trends. This knowledge can guide the development of travel strategies, travel protocols and travel promotions that align with domestic travellers' preferences after the pandemic, for example, travel packages that are more private to avoid mass gatherings or travel packages that focus more on sustainability.

6.0 CONCLUSION

In summary, this study examined how various factors influence the travel intentions of Malaysian domestic travellers to visit Sabah after COVID-19 travel restrictions. The study focused on the effects of fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety, perceived behavioural control (PBC), risk attitude, and subjective norms on travellers' intentions. The findings suggest that the pandemic has indeed affected travellers' intentions, as they have become more cautious and take extra safety measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission.

Despite experiencing anxiety and fear, travellers still maintain a strong intention to visit Sabah once travel restrictions are lifted. However, it is important to note that travellers also recognize the importance of adhering to safety measures such as frequent handwashing, wearing face masks, and maintaining physical distance. Overall, this study has successfully addressed the research questions and objectives regarding the impact of fear of COVID-19, travel anxiety, PBC, subjective norms, and risk attitude on domestic travellers' intentions to visit Sabah post COVID-19 restrictions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is an on-going Masters research (HM751) and funded by the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Research Grant: 600-RMC/GOT 5-3 (002/2021)

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eISSN : 2289 - 6589

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