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The Impact of COVID-19 towards Tourism Sectors in Sabah: Operating in the Midst of Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Tourism industry provides livelihoods for all of the people around this world by supporting local business and boost the revenue of the economy in an impressive way. When the World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed the pandemic in 2020, this vital industry suffered significant losses. Therefore, this conceptual paper aim to determine the impact of COVID-19 towards tourism industry and how they operate in the midst of pandemic. This study uses a quantitative approach to collect primary data via an online survey, as well as a thorough examination of related literature from academics, online news portals, and online platforms. As a result, this paper finds that COVID-19 outbreaks cause job and revenue loss, declining in tourist counts and minimized operation in tourism related business. The travel ban order has resulting in cancellation of travel and tour packages as well as hotel and flights booking which lead to the massive drop in tourist arrival. The prohibitions during this pandemic affect the economy greatly because almost all business especially in tourism industry has to freeze their business. This paper will assist the policymaker and related business in tourism industry in planning their future operation during and after this pandemic end.

Keywords: Coronavirus disease; COVID-19; Tourism Industry in Malaysia, Sabah.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism sector is one of the key generator to the rapid growth of the economy and a source of employment globally. Accounted for providing about 300 million employments globally and 29 per cent of the exports in the world's services, it is undeniably that this sector is the major contributor to the income of all countries. But, the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China in December 2019 really hit the world. Most countries announced lockdown as a way in preventing the spread of the virus. The outbreak of COVID-19 impacts all sectors in the economy, such as tourism, manufacturing, financial, trade, service and transport. Cancellation of flights and hotel bookings, tours and revenue loss in tourism merchandise has put the economy in a critical state. Between April and May 2020, 100% of all worldwide destinations introduced travel restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, through the closure of borders for tourists and suspension of international flights (UNWTO, 2020).

Nowadays, Malaysia has been known globally because of the uniqueness of its multi-cultural citizen and beautiful tourist attractions. Malaysia's economy was boosted with a total of RM86.14 billion in tourist receipts of expenditure from 26,100,784 international tourists who come to visit Malaysia (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). In 2020, Malaysia faced a downfall of almost RM3.37 Billion due to COVID-19 (Wasiul Karim, 2020). In 2020, Ministry of Tourism will introduce the campaign of Visiting Malaysia in targeting the arrival of almost 30 million tourists but sadly has to be cancelled because of this outbreak. On 18th March 2020, Malaysia's

government implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO) to contain the virus. Many tourism business or practitioners has been greatly affected by this worst situation when they have to close their operation for a longer period depending on the pandemic situation. It is such a waste because each state in Malaysia has a lot of attractions to offer during the campaign including Sabah.

Sabah is among one of the state in Malaysia that become a popular tourism destination because of the beautiful natural wonders. In 2019, Sabah alone recorded 4.2 million total of tourist arrival domestically and internationally. Due to the Movement Control Order (MCO), tourism business owner facing a hard time in generating revenue and cannot afford to pay their employees. The most affected sectors by the COVID-19 outbreak in Sabah are: hotels, transportation, gifts and souvenirs, seafood business, entrance fee in tourism hotspots and also restrictions to visit public places such as theatres and supermarkets. As time passed, Sabah finally allows inter-zone tourism activities among locals with strict SOPs. Starting March 2021, travelers are allowed to travel across the zones but only by using registered tour companies (NST, 2020). Traveling is only allowed using tour vehicles registered with Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry and individual travel is banned. All tour companies which allowed to operate as usual have to apply for permission from the police and vehicle should not stop at non-designated zones. As a precaution during inter-zone tourism activities, Sabah has grouped the districts into six zones:

Table 1: Grouping of Districts in Sabah by Zones

Zone	District
Zone 1	Kota Kinabalu, Kota Belud, Ranau, Tuaran, Penampang, Putatan and Papar
Zone 2	Beaufort, Kuala Penyu and Sipitang
Zone 3	Kudat, Kota Marudu and Pitas
Zone 4	Sandakan, Beluran, Kinabatangan and Tongod
Zone 5	Tawau, Semporna, Lahad Datu, Kunak and Kalabakan
Zone 6	Keningau, Tambunan and Tenom

(Source: New Straits Times, 2021)

The grouping of districts also has slow down tourism activities as tourist only permitted to travel among the districts in the zone group. Although permission has been granted, inter-zone tourism activities were only allowed via the travel bubble approach where application must be submitted first by the tourism operators to ensure that they can comply with the protocols. During the operation of tourism activities, tour operators are reminded to always comply with the SOP to ensure the safety of the tourists (Bernama, 2021). Resulting from this critical situation, the declining in the number of tourist arrivals from the travel restrictions order has seriously impacted the tourism industry in Sabah. Thus, this paper aim to present the COVID-19 effect towards tourism in Sabah and how they survive in this new norm.

COVID-19 outbreak

COVID-19 is a newly discovered infectious disease. Coronaviruses, which can affect humans, as well as a range of other mammals and birds, were first identified in 1965, and since then, they have been responsible for a number of disease outbreaks (John and Comfort, 2020). Coughs, exhales, and sneezes are the most typical symptoms of this virus. COVID-19 is a respiratory virus that easily transmitted from the saliva and mucus while coughing, sneezing, yelling and talking. Physical contact with contaminated objects or surfaces, shaking hands and also when touching mouth, nose and eyes will spread this disease. Coronavirus can live in the air up to 3 hours. Thus, breathing in the same air as the infected person increase the possibility

to be infected. This virus is vulnerable to old and young people with weak immune system, also who has preexisting breathing and cardiovascular illness where in some cases it may prove to be fatal.

This virus originated from China when a form of pneumonia with unknown causes reported in December 2019. Soon after that in January 2020, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified a seafood market in Wuhan as the suspected area of the outbreak and remain closed since then (Lee-Peng Foo et al., 2020). In Malaysia, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed on 25 January 2020, which involved three Chinese citizens, who had entered Johor Bharu, Malaysia via Singapore on 23 January 2020 (Lee-Peng Foo et al., 2020). On 30 January, COVID-19 declared as a global health emergency of global concern by the World Health Organization (WHO). Soon after that, this virus started to spread to all state in Malaysia including Sabah.

Sabah reported its first COVID-19 case on 12 March 2020 in Tawau, after a 58 years old man being monitored for the symptoms at Hospital Tawau tested positive for the disease (Afen Kee, 2020). The patient has a history of attending religious meeting at Masjid Jamek Seri Petaling in Selangor from March 3 to 5. On 10 March 2020, he was admitted to Tawau Hospital after developed some symptoms of fever and cough.

Malaysia is a well-known tourism destination because of the warm hospitality and communication system. Due to COVID-19, people from other countries has to cancel their advance travel plan to Malaysia as an act of concern on the COVID-19 outbreak. Apparently, this virus has severely affected many sectors in economy especially tourism (Idris et al., 2020).

Role of Tourism Industry

Tourism is a main instrument for country development as well as the fastest growing economic sectors. It falls within specific attributes of a service product which are inseparability, heterogeneity, intangibility, and perishability (Loke et al., 2018). This sector is responsible in promoting the uniqueness of arts and culture, reflects the beauty, nature and make a better image of Malaysia especially around the world. The tourism industry has seen tremendous growth in Malaysia and is one of the fast-growing sectors (Ahmad, et al., 2019). It contributes in generating income, earning substantial foreign exchange and creating job opportunities. Tourism is one of the most important sectors in the global economy, significantly contributing to the world's GDP (Gamage et al., 2017).

Within tourism industry, there are several supporting industries: accommodation, food and beverages, transportation, retail and culture, sports and also hospitality. The varieties of supporting sector are because tourism is not only for the purpose of visiting one place but also for leisure, work and business, education and also medical. In term of host destination, tourism also develops the infrastructure of a country and experiencing cultural exchange between foreigner and citizens. This purpose of visit created job opportunities not only in tourism sector but also may include the agricultural sector, health sector, communication sector and educational sector. Travelling for the purpose of cultural exchange is very profitable to the local restaurants, shopping centers and stores. But, all of this contribution has fallen deep when the COVID-19 occurs. The travel and tourism sector is more likely to get influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Shretta, 2020).

Impacts of COVID-19 in Tourism Industry

COVID-19 outbreak has devastation impact on Malaysia's economy, especially in the travel and tourism sector. Many travel and tours package are cancelled, which affects mostly the airlines and hotel. The Movement Control Order (MCO) and border closure cause increase in

unemployment rate, revenue loss, declining in the tourists count and also affected the operation of tourism related business. In response to this situation, several experts voiced out their opinion.

Table 2: Experts Opinion on Tourism Sector during COVID-19

Expert	Opinion
Zied Ourlhazi, <i>Economist, Tourism Specialist</i>	"Depending on the size of the tourism sector within the economy, the lack of tourism in developing countries could impact macroeconomic stability and lead to political instability. Decreasing tourism demand could result in the closure of small and medium sized enterprises (SMSEs) operating in the sector, notably those that are least competitive, and a drop in production in other economic activities (agriculture, agri-food businesses, transportation, etc.) leading to the contraction of or negative economic growth. In such a situation, developing countries will register job losses jobs not only in the tourism sector but also in the other activities putting the pressure on governments especially those with limited fiscal space. In supporting the tourism sector and economic growth, governments may see their fiscal position deteriorating without reaching the expected outcomes due to the weak public financial management systems that are characteristic of most developing countries."
Brad Holland, <i>Communications and Marketing Business Consultant</i>	"Developing countries will experience direct economic impact in the transportation, tourism, hospitality and services sectors as well as the informal economy that is reliant on foreign visitors. All around the world, small fishing villages that transformed into coastal tourist towns are turning out the lights. The reality is that, in three months without tourism in developing countries, many people have already exhausted their savings, missed paying an energy bill and do not know when the next opportunity for work will come. Scores of families in developing countries are not earning money to buy basic daily items right now due to the lack of tourism."
Libby Owen Edmunds, <i>Senior Tourism Specialist</i>	"Countries are being affected differently depending on the relative importance of tourism to their economy and their overall ability to recover following the crisis. For example, for 22 developing countries tourism accounts for more than 10% of their GDP leaving them highly exposed to the impact – most of these are small islands. The impact on employment is similar – for 17 developing countries, tourism represents 10% of employment, hence unemployment will be high. Small and medium sized businesses will be impacted relatively more than larger businesses as they do not have the capacity, cash flows, diversity of markets or supply chains nor the resources to mitigate impacts."

(Source: Development Aid, 2020)

Employment

Tourism industry is extremely a significant source of employment. It is among the world 's top creators of jobs requiring varying degrees of skills and allows for quick entry into the workforce for youth, women and migrant workers (International Labour Organization, 2010). The most affected industry in term of employment are aviation and hotel industry. The travel restrictions order received quick response from all airlines. Many staff were laid-off, asked to take unpaid leave and also salary cut. Malaysia Airlines has acknowledged that the company is now in a "serious situation" and urged workers to take unpaid leave voluntarily (AFP, 2020).

Due to the quick development in tourism, hotel industry also is on rise as they make improvement in their customer services. This industry also makes a good move in providing *Shariah* complaint hotels as the number of Muslim travelers from Middle Eastern are rising (Haque, et al., 2019). As of March 2020, most of this industry staff also loss their job as they are required to take unpaid-leave, laid-off and wage cuts. During this outbreak, Sabah's economy suffered especially in the tourism sector as many businesses and shops in Sabah are forced to close down and many lost their job (Miwil, 2020). It is also estimated that out of around 500,000 people who are currently unemployed in Malaysia, 200,000 are from Sabah, and many of them are impacted by the tourism sector downturn (Yusof, 2020).

Revenue Loss

Malaysia has suffered great economic losses when COVID-19 spread because of the strong economic links with China. Tourism in Malaysia contributes 15.9% of the country's Gross Domestic Products (DOSM, 2019), where most of the tourists are from China. Among all segments in the economy, Tourism is one of the main sectors which impact the economy as many governments impose travel restrictions, travel bans, shutting down airports, and mass passenger cancellations. Thus, the tourism industry cost with a loss of over US\$ 820 billion in revenue globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ozili & Arun, 2020).

Booking cancellation of flight, hotel and travel and tour package contributing in the revenue loss. Kuala Lumpur experience 61,859 booking cancellation worth RM24.91 million losses during the period, Sabah with 33,769 cancellations worth RM11.79 million, Selangor with recorded losses of RM9.05 million and Penang with 18,476 cancellations worth RM8.96 million (Mahalingham, 2020). Tourism is an important economic driver and the third highest contributor to Sabah's economy after agriculture and manufacturing (Badawi, 2008). Sabah's tourism receipts for January-February 2020 period fell by 21.6 per cent or RM320 million year on year to RM1.16 billion (Bernama, 2020).

Tourist Count Decrease

Tourist arrival count has fallen about 300 million from January to May in 2020 compared to 2019 because of this pandemic. The increasing cases of COVID-19 in Singapore and China has led to the cancellation of many tours, which has already led to a large drop in the number of tourists to Malaysia (Lee-Peng Foo et al., 2020) as these countries is the most frequent travelers to Malaysia. Banned of inbound international travelers has resulted in a decline in passengers count. There is a noticeable week passenger demand across the globe and Malaysian airlines have observed less passenger demand to and from China (Tan, 2020).

In 2020, Tourism Malaysia aim to launch Visit Malaysia 2020 (VM2020) as an initiative to make Malaysia recognized globally. Featuring this campaign, Sabah participation is highly anticipated. Tourism Malaysia has introduced a special edition booklet entitled "Best of Sabah Holiday Packages 2019/2020" in supporting the campaign and also promoting Sabah's beautiful and exciting attractions to both local and international tourists (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). But, it has been cancelled by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture because of the COVID-19. It might impact the government's target to achieve 30 million arrivals during the

campaign of Visit Malaysia 2020 (MSN, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak and cancellation of Visit Malaysia 2020 campaign show sharp decline in the number of tourist arrivals in Sabah. According to the statistics in Table 2, number of tourist's arrivals to Sabah up to February 2021 and the same period as 2020 decline from 567,108 to 30,729 counts.

Table 2: Visitors Arrival by Nationality 2021 to Sabah

Nationality	(Preliminary)												2020				Growth (%)	
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total	Jan-Feb (a)	Feb (b)	Jan-Dec	Feb(a)/a	Feb(b)/a
ASIA	155	196	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	351	134,348	32,860	146,693	-99.7	-99.4
SOUTHEAST ASIA	110	125	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	235	31,209	12,868	41,215	-99.2	-99.0
Brunei	2	0											2	4,822	1,644	5,494	100.0	100.0
Philippines	28	38											66	5,384	2,270	7,274	-98.8	-98.3
Indonesia	73	76											149	16,800	7,295	22,790	-99.1	-99.0
Singapore	4	7											11	3,560	1,098	4,551	-99.7	-99.4
Thailand	2	4											6	751	461	960	-99.2	-99.1
Vietnam	1	0											1	232	100	335	-99.6	-100.0
NORTHEAST ASIA	45	71	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	116	103,139	19,992	105,478	-99.9	-99.6
China	20	51											71	45,297	1,460	46,123	-99.8	-96.5
Japan	10	10											20	3,295	1,751	4,095	-99.4	-99.4
Taiwan	2	0											2	6,552	2,622	6,983	-100.0	-100.0
South Korea	13	10											23	47,995	14,159	48,268	-100.0	-99.9
OCEANIA	4	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	4,938	1,567	5,623	-99.8	-99.7
Australia	3	3											6	4,424	1,423	5,023	-99.9	-99.8
New Zealand	1	2											3	514	144	603	-99.4	-98.6
EUROPE	17	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	27	13,698	7,519	17,111	-99.8	-99.9
UK & Ireland	6	2											8	5,262	2,828	6,769	-99.8	-99.9
Germany	1	2											3	2,345	1,697	3,782	-99.0	-99.9
France	0	0											0	660	369	915	-100.0	-100.0
Denmark	0	0											0	431	257	527	-100.0	-100.0
Finland	0	0											0	247	290	290	-100.0	-100.0
Norway	0	2											2	195	38	224	-99.0	-94.7
Sweden	0	0											0	443	202	549	-100.0	-100.0
Belgium & Luxembourg	0	0											0	231	112	287	-100.0	-100.0
Italy	0	3											3	385	207	460	-99.2	-99.6
Switzerland	1	0											1	311	145	385	-99.7	-100.0
Netherlands	2	0											2	653	364	854	-99.7	-100.0
Russia	3	0											3	700	173	831	-99.8	-100.0
Others Europe	4	1											5	1,835	900	2,745	-99.7	-99.9
NORTH AMERICA	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	5,450	2,384	6,048	-99.9	-99.9
U.S.A	3	1											4	3,854	1,673	4,279	-99.9	-99.9
Canada	2	1											3	1,596	711	1,775	-99.8	-99.9
India	8	9											17	743	350	1,077	-97.7	-97.4
Pakistan	14	11											25	328	138	411	-88.0	-91.4
Middle East	1	9											10	248	79	375	-96.0	-88.6
OTHERS	27	22											49	1,933	811	2,931	-97.5	-97.3
Total International	331	204	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	490	3,613,894	87,998	3,602,284	-99.7	-99.9
Total Malaysia	16,081	12,152											30,294	403,222	174,370	397,176	-97.2	-93.0
GRAND TOTAL (GROSS)	16,413	12,416	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	30,729	567,108	219,274	977,460	-94.6	-94.3

(Source: Sabah Tourist Arrivals, 2021)

Operations of Tourism Industry during COVID-19 Outbreak

The prohibitions during this pandemic urge many tourism-related businesses to shut down their business as they have no income to pay the employees. Less demand in passenger caused Malaysian airlines to operate fewer than 50 flights a day because of the globally imposed travel ban to prevent the spread of the deadly virus (Yusuf, 2020). Hotels are allowed to run their business for the purpose of quarantine but strictly has to follow the Standard Procedures (SOP). The shortage of manpower due to the termination of staff has to be endured as the business also needs to be run.

Operating in the midst of COVID-19 outbreak

Operating in the midst of COVID-19 outbreak create awareness to all related party as this pandemic really hit the industry. Operating with a new norm is allowed as the current situation is still under recovery and preventing. While struggling in containing the spread of this virus, tourism related business in Malaysia also increase the investment in healthcare. Before this, the operation of business is with the absence of vaccine. After almost a year battling with this virus, the vaccines finally touched down at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) at 9am on Saturday (Feb 27) on flight MH319 which operated by MASKargo (The Straits Times, 2021). The immunization programme will runs through three phases, starting from front-liners, high-risk groups and senior citizens aged 60 and above, and lastly the rest of Malaysian population aged 18 years and above.

The Malaysian Government has unveiled a stimulus package to provide some respite for the stakeholder who are severely affected by the outbreak, especially in tourism industry (Lee-

Peng Foo et al., 2020). The tax incentives, postponement of repayments to bank and restructuring of loans to ease the struggle of tourism industry players. To curb potential rising unemployment, a wage-subsidy programme has been introduced and subsidizes RM600 per month for each retained employee for a maximum of three months. Up to 17 May, the government had approved application for 128,000 employees (Ministry of Finance, 2020b).

As little is known where and when is the end of this pandemic, tourism practitioners have to come up with their tourism recovery plan as well as crisis management plan. As the pandemic has had staged impacts globally, some countries have started to implement response and recovery plans for the tourism sector, based on guiding recommendations and policies issued by the various travel industry bodies (WTTC, 2020a). This is important for the resilience of the business and sustainability.

RESEARCH METHOD

In developing this conceptual paper, systematic literature review method is used. A systematic review collects all possible studies related to a given topic and design, and reviews and analyzes their results (Kang, 2018). This study applies quantitative approach in collecting primary data through online survey. The study mainly uses comprehensive review on COVID-19 and its impacts towards tourism sector in Sabah from academic writing, online news portal and also online platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this paper highlighted some impacts resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak all over the world. COVID-19 gives negative impacts to the economy, especially tourism industry as this virus affect the employment rate, revenue loss, declining in tourist count and also slow down the tourism related business operation. All of these components are the key success in the development of tourism as well as economy. Operating by practicing a new norm and also stimulus package introduced by the Malaysian Government helps tourism practitioners to withstand in this current situation. Thus, this COVID-19 era really hit the tourism sector hard.

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