

# Malaysian tourists' intention to travel during the Covid-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

This study aimed to analyse what drives the Malaysian population and the implications of decision-making on travel intentions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study addressed the modulating effects of decision-making, namely attitudes, perceived behaviour control (PBC) and social norms on the intention to travel by applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). The study also examined additional measures on the willingness to pay for safety measures during travelling amid the pandemic situation. The research process involved 330 respondents who filled online self-administrated questionnaires. The framework was tested using the Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) software. The PBC has the most notable effect on travel intention compared to other variables. Furthermore, the empirical results can contribute to developing safety measures in tourism services and designing effective actions to restore tourism. This study sets a significant of research agenda for future tourism research by understanding the mechanisms underlying crisis perceptions and tourist behaviour.

## Keywords:

Theory of planned behaviour; travel intention; decision-making; Covid-19; Malaysia

## 1 Introduction

Tourism is one of the most sensitive sectors and hardest hit by several problems, such as on health and safety problems, changes in the political situation, economic crises, epidemics (Chuo, 2014) and natural disasters (Cakar, 2020). Coronavirus disease

2019 (Covid-19) is one of crisis which brought an exceptionally challenging year for travel (UNWTO, 2020). The tourism sector has been significantly implicated due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020) highlighted a 20 to 30% decrease in number of tourist arrivals. These percentages are likely to decrease as the spread of coronavirus continues to escalate. On average, most of develop and developing countries show that the tourism sector accounts for 4.4% of gross domestic product (GDP) and 21.5% of services exports. For instance, in certain countries such as Spain, these figures rise to over 52% of total services exports and 11.8% of GDP (OECD, 2020b). Similarly in Malaysia, the spread of Covid-19 has exposed a major risk to tourism industry, especially on cancellation of many tours, which has already led to a large drop in the number of tourists in Malaysia (Foo et al., 2020).

Most of decision to travel involves risks, especially on the global pandemic because of the uncertainties surrounding the conditions that tourists might encounter in the destination and the potential adverse outcomes related to the decision taken (Ramli, Rahman and AlQershhi, 2021; Hanafiah et al., 2021). In terms of crises, there are several different groups of risk in tourism, including:

- Physical or health risk (food safety, epidemics, accidents, others)
- Equipment risk (equipment or organisational problems)
- Psychological risk (the tourist may not derive personal satisfaction from the trip)
- Financial risk (unexpected expenses)
- Social risk (change in the attitude of friends and relatives towards the tourist due to the trip)
- Time risk (the trip could be a waste of time)

Hanafiah et al. (2021) stated that continuous research in pandemics and travel is critical in providing the tourism industry with information that enables swift response to health-related crises, such as Covid-19. As reported by many scholars and media reporters, the scale of Covid-19 has shocked the global tourism industry with an impact similar to the First and Second World Wars (Hall et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). In the epidemic crises' context, previous tourism research has primarily focused on examining the recovery patterns after epidemic situation (Cheer, 2020) and analysing infectious diseases impact on the tourist movement and the number of tourist arrivals (Shi et al., 2020). Several studies investigated how different outbreaks alter travellers' lifestyles and preferences (Wen et al., 2020) or assessed the economic repercussions. However, the research of knowledge on tourists' intention to travel dan decision making in pandemic situations is still insufficient. According to Wen et al. (2020), the research on intention to travel in an environment with pandemic risk is currently scant.

According to Bakar and Rosbi (2020), gaining an insight into tourists' perceptions and perception changes is essential for effective crisis management, such as Covid-19. Several researchers highlighted that tourists' travel intentions and their decision making

to travel can be impacted by COVID-19 crises (Wong and Alias, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Hall et al., 2020). Hence, it is crucial to have a sufficient understanding of post-crisis travel intentions as a respond for the tourism industry towards crises. Therefore, several factors that drive and limit travel intentions have been studied separately. Examining tourists' perceptions will enable additional insight into tourists' intention to travel (Isaac, 2020). This form of analysis is crucial to facilitate the decision-making needed to revive the demand for tourism. Thus, the present study aimed to fill this gap and analyse the impact of perceived risk on intention to travel during a pandemic.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Travel intention**

According to Makhdoomi and Baba (2019, p.38), travel intention can be seen as a form of behavioural intention. In other words, travel intention is *“an outcome of a mental process that leads to action and transforms motivation into behaviour”*. In contrast, the behavioural intention on travelling is *“the expectation to behave in a certain way with regard to different products and services or a particular destination”* (Makhdoomi & Baba, 2019, p. 38). Various factors affect the intention to travel that can either drive or limit travel intention (Makhdoomi & Baba, 2019). As discussed earlier, travel intention is impacted by crises, among others. For example, health crises can increase the demand for certain types of tourism (Wen et al., 2021). However, crises can limit travel intention (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2017; Senbeto & Hon, 2020) by perceiving risk related to crises (Wen et al., 2021; Altuntas and Gok, 2021).

### **2.2 The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)**

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is determined one of the major examples of predicting individuals' intention to engage in a behaviour. TPB is an extension of the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Park et al., 2017; Chaulagain et al., 2020), which predicted the behaviour by attitude and subjective norms. This theory is one of the most commonly used psychological models to explain and predict human behaviour as determinants of behavioural intention (Chaulagain et al., 2020) and has been extensively applied and tested in various contexts and disciplines, such as psychology, medicine, marketing education and tourism (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Steinmetz et al., 2016).

In this study, an attitude refers to the perceived desirability of specific actions to achieve an object or intention for certain purposes (Sandra et al., 2021). Some researchers substituted perceived desirability with personal attitude or attraction and found a positive relationship with entrepreneurial intention (Chualagain et al., 2020; Sandra et al., 2021). However, there were researchers found that attitude indirectly influence behaviour intention via desire (Meng & Choi, 2016). While social norms can be an essential driver of individual behaviour, entrepreneurial research lacks established knowledge or consensus on the impact of social norms on action (Isaac & Keijzer, 2020).

Social norms are related with individuals comply with or consider the action of significant referents, such as friends, family members, teachers, family elders, and others (Meng & Choi, 2016; Wang et al., 2020).

Perceived behavioural control (PCB) is related on individual's perceived capability to perform a behaviour and might generate and strengthen the behavioural intention to travel (Das & Tiwari, 2021). For example, if an individual has resources (time, money, opportunity) to travel during this pandemic of Covid-19, she or he is more likely to motivated to travel. In the present analysis, the intention is defined as the individual's inclination to travel in the short term, which implies assuming the risk from Covid-19 in this mobility. Therefore, the following three hypotheses were proposed from the TPB variables:

*H1: The more positive the respondents' attitude on the decision to travel during the Covid-19 pandemic, the stronger their intention to travel.*

*H2: The more positive the subjective influence norm on the decision to travel during the Covid-19 pandemic, the stronger the individual's intention to travel.*

*H3: The more positive the influence of the respondent's perceived behaviour control (PBC) during the Covid-19 pandemic, the stronger the individual's intention to travel.*

### **2.3 Willingness to pay towards intention to travel**

The willingness to pay is the central input for pricing and decision-making (Schuhmann et al., 2019). Several studies discovered that most of tourists are willingness to pay more on additional safety and hygiene factors as a response to the travellers' intention to travel during the pandemic situation, such as in terms of sanitising gel, safety distances, disinfection of furniture items, cleanliness, others (Hultman et al., 2015; Nunez et al., 2021; Sandra et al. 2021). Most of actors in tourism industry have been provided these additional safety and hygiene for their customers during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Schuhmann et al. (2019), the preference for group travel, obtaining travel insurance, and loyalty to the destination provide tourists with a sense of security and safety. Thus, they are willing to pay more for their intention to travel.

Nunez et al. (2021) discovered that the most significant willingness to pay is perceived in public transport during the Covid-19 pandemic. They stressed that the tourists are more likely to take transportation that involved closed spaces and is operated by private companies during travelling on trips seriously during the current pandemic. This study analysed the potential traveller's willingness to pay for the provision of excellent hygiene and safety measures. The 'willingness to pay' construct was used as a behaviour variable within the TPB variables. Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

*H4: The greater the respondents' willingness to pay during the Covid-19 pandemic, the stronger their travel intentions.*

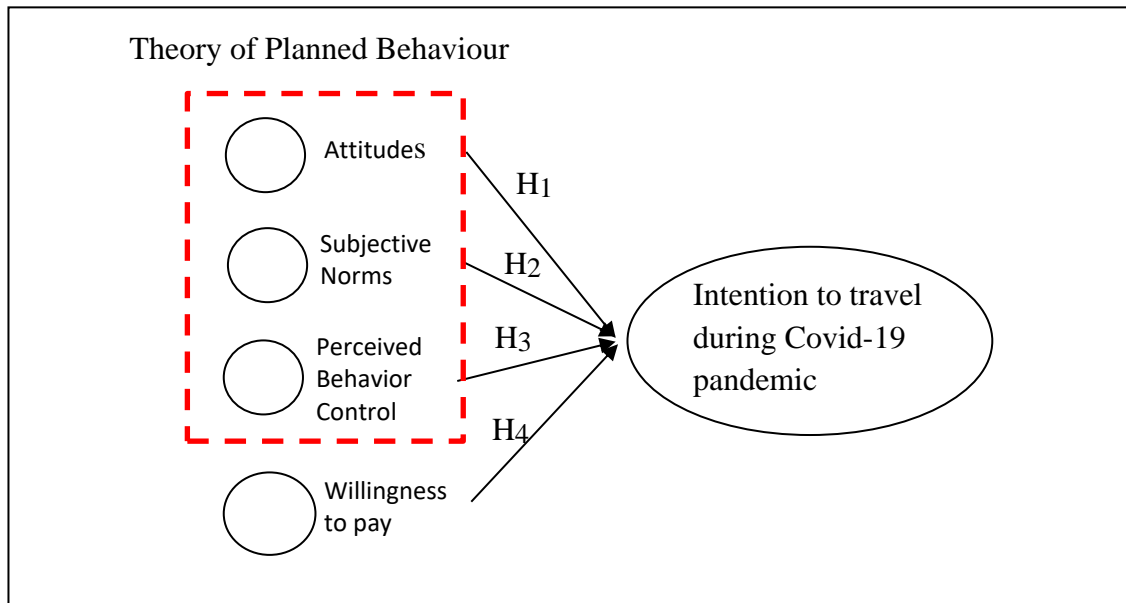


Figure 1: The research framework

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Research approach

This study is based on primary information captured through online survey designed to test the hypotheses from research framework (see Fig.1). This research is cross-sectional. The target population were Malaysian with an intention to travel amid Covid-19. An unrestricted, self-selected survey was conducted using online survey tool. The data for this study were collected in January 2021. A total of 330 completed surveys were collected. This study opted for convenience sampling methodology to collect the study data. The survey link was shared through social media platforms and emails to fill in the questionnaire. In the end, the total of questionnaire obtained are 330 valid responses. The incomplete or incorrectly questionnaires were removed during the final database.

#### 3.2 Survey instrument

Except for the demographic and geographic characteristics questions, all remaining questions were queried through a five-point Likert scale. The environment of the pandemic situation is the analysis context in this study. Besides, tourism specialists reviewed the survey instruments. Subsequently, the final questionnaire comprised three sections.

The first section involves to the respondent's socio-demographic data, including gender, age, education level, type of occupation, income level and travel plans during

Covid-19. The second section focused on TPB related to attitudes and intention to travel. Attitudes and subjective norm variables were operationalised with three items adapted from Agag et al. (2020), while the variable for intention to travel was adapted from Hsu and Huang (2012). Lastly, the third section investigated the respondents' willingness to pay related to travel safety and security, which measure with five items. The items in this section were adapted from Wei et al. (2018) and Agag et al. (2020).

All variables were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The framework and hypotheses presented were tested using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) procedure. The reliability and validity of the framework was tested by the individual indicators through their loadings. As suggested by Carmines and Zeller (1979), most of the outer loading for each variable are exceeds the cut-off value of 0.707 as shown in Table 2.

## 4 Result

### 4.1 The result of demographic data

The complete data set consisted of 330 respondents. The socio-demographic data of the sample are presented in Table 1. First, the female respondents slightly outnumbered the male respondents. The respondents' predominant age range was between 20 to 29 years old, while the sample from university respondents shows more than half percentage and public employees or salaried employees show the highest percentage. From the 330 respondents, 63.9% of respondents intended to travel during the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost 77% of respondents chose to travel to domestic destinations rather than international destinations.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Categories	Percentage
Gender	Male	42.3%
	Female	57.7%
Age	20 – 29	36.7%
	30 – 39	33.3%
	40 – 49	30.0%
Education	Secondary school	13.6%
	Degree	54.5%
	Master/PhD	31.9%
Employment	Government	24.8%
	Private company	27.0%
	Student	25.8%
	Self-employed	15.2%
	Unemployed	7.2%
Intention to travel	Yes	63.9%
	No	36.1%
Travel destination	Domestic	77.6%
	International	22.4%

Table 2: Model measurements.

Variables and items	Standard loadings	Mean	Standard deviation
<b><i>Attitude (Att)</i></b>			
Att_1: The travel would be nice in short/ medium trip during this pandemic	0.879	3.671	1.573
Att_2: Travel trip would be plan in the short/ medium trip during this pandemic	0.911	3.788	1.677
Att_3: Travelling during this pandemic would be positive in the short/medium trip	0.899	4.324	1.845
<b><i>Perceived behaviour control (PBC)</i></b>			
PBC_1: I have all resources to travel during this pandemic	0.814	2.718	1.822
PBC_2: The plan travelling during this pandemic is entirely up to me	0.788	2.556	0.912
PBC_3: The decision to travel during this pandemic is based on my decision	0.816	2.801	1.949
<b><i>Subjective norms (SN)</i></b>			
SN_1: The decision to travel would be influenced by my family's opinion during this pandemic	0.677	2.116	0.911
SN_2: The decision to travel would be influenced by my friends' opinion during this pandemic	0.615	2.887	1.766
SN_3: I would be influenced by government information to travel during this pandemic	0.711	2.911	1.811
<b><i>Willing to pay (WTP)</i></b>			
WTP_1: I am willing to pay above the standard price for my travelling activities during this pandemic	0.788	3.580	2.265
WTP_2: I am willing to pay for addition safety in accommodation during my trips	0.823	2.911	1.667
WTP_3: I am willing to pay more on addition safety on transport during my trips	0.791	2.845	1.812
<b><i>Travel intention (INT)</i></b>			
INT_1: I intend to travel as soon as I can during this pandemic	0.774	2.557	0.995
INT_2: I intend to travel for work in short/ medium trip during this pandemic	0.826	3.776	1.766
INT_3: I intend to travel for leisure in short/ medium trip during this pandemic	0.883	3.667	1.823

\*\*\*All loadings of the reflective measurement model are significant, >0.01.

## 4.2 Hypothesis testing

Based on Table 2, as hypothesized, attitudes, subjective norms, PBC and willingness to pay positively influenced the intention to travel. According to the analysis, the PBC ( $\beta = 0.396$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) showed that who the individual can control the variables, she or he will show greater intention to travel. Besides, the path associated with attitude registered a value slightly lower than PBC ( $\beta = 0.367$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). However, the result on subjective norm shows the weak numbers of referents' opinion on influence tourists' intention to travel during pandemic despite the result still showing a positive and statistically significant path ( $\beta = 0.136$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the path associated with the individual's willingness to pay above the standard price for more extensive security and safety factors on travel intention during this pandemic was statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.358$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ). Therefore, all the hypotheses on this study (H1, H2, H3 H4) were accepted as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Path coefficients and t-value for hypotheses

Hypothesis	Expected sign	Path	t-value
H1: ATT $\rightarrow$ INT	+	0.367	7.336**
H2: SN $\rightarrow$ INT	+	0.136	3.116**
H3: PBC $\rightarrow$ INT	+	0.396	9.472**
H4: WTP $\rightarrow$ INT	+	0.358	2.258**

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

The result showed that the proposed research framework in this study are fits with empirical data well and all hypotheses were statistically significantly supported. Parallel to earlier research by Trends and Tourism (2020a), the current result showed that most respondents are likely to go on domestic destination during this pandemic. This finding is supported by Issac and Keijzer (2020), and Najjar et al. (2020), who found that most tourists do not prefer travelling to a destination with high risk as most of them are highly likely to travel domestically.

The second objective of this paper focused on analysing the influence of TPB variables (attitudes, PBC, and social norms) and willingness for pay from the recent Covid-19 pandemic on the intention to travel. This study is confirmed the Theory of Planned Behaviour model in the context of tourism amid a major crisis. According to the results, PBC is the variable that has the most notable effect on intention. The current result shows that who the individual can control the circumstances of the trip despite the pandemic situation, the individual's intention to travel will be significantly greater. These findings align with Shen et al. (2009) and Hsu and Huang (2012), who found that the circumstances factors had influenced tourists' intention to travel during crises.

The second result shows that attitudes play an essential role in the tourists' intention to travel. Nevertheless, the direct effect was only slightly lower than PBC. This



result supported by Yuzhanin and Fisher (2016), who have evaluated 15 studies that applied TPB to analyses the tourists' intention to travel or not to travel to specific locations in different setting variables. Those results from 15 studies by Yuzhanin and Fisher (2016) shows that not entirely consistent, but three of these studies found that the three antecedent variables were significantly related to intention (Han et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2012). Besides that, the current study shows the subjective norm on travel intention is much less critical, rather than attitudes and PBC. This result accordance to Shen et al. (2009), who discovered that the subjective norm had the slightest effect on the intention to travel.

In addition, the study analysis discovered that the respondents were willing to pay during this crisis of Covid-19 for their extensive safety and security measures during travelling activities, such as on transport, accommodation, foods, and others due to the respondents' intention to travel. Previous studies have confirmed the significant role of the willingness to pay having a positive influenced on the travel intention during a pandemic. For example, Hultman et al. (2015), who found that positively result between tourists' willingness to pay for their experience towards the intention to engage in a favourable behaviour on tourism activities. Nevertheless, this result differs from the findings of Agag et al. (2020) showed this factor are not supported the intention to travel. In their study, the researchers have concluded that willingness to pay should be explain by a combination of several variables, such as with demographic variables, values, normative influence, and travellers' personality traits.

Having said that, the results of this study also suggested the different actors in the tourism sector will be able to develop marketing strategies focused on the elements that exert the most significant influence by identifying the factors that affect the intention to travel in the pandemic context. Understanding what can increase travel intention and demand even during a pandemic, tourism organization should focus on providing information towards the potential tourist's sense of control, since this result showed the most notable effect on intention were PBC and attitudes. Tourists are crucially perceived the pandemic situation has not diminished those resources that they have, in terms of capacity, resources, and willingness to travel. Besides, the Malaysian tourism board and Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) in Malaysia are recommended to collaborate with Ministry of Tourism, Art, and Culture (MOTAC) The parties involved should launch marketing campaigns focusing on the safety of travelling in this country targeted towards the Malaysian population after the Covid-19 risks are minimal, and the destinations are safe to travel.

Although this research note serves its purpose in delivering early insights into travel intention during a pandemic, the research carried out remains limited studies. First, the research sample does not represent the entire Malaysian population when observed from the demographic characteristics of ages as the respondents were primarily young people. Thus, using a probability sample was not possible. Further research is required to validate the conclusions drawn. Future studies should use a different sampling frame and survey method to represent the Malaysian population better. Moreover, future

studies should focus on the methodology and expand the research by adopting other data collection methods.

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