

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on small businesses in tourism and hospitality industry in Malaysia

Tourism and
hospitality
industry

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Sara Abhari

*School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Penang, Malaysia*

Alireza Jalali

*Department of Management, College of Economics, Management and Information
Systems, University of Nizwa, Nizwa, Oman*

Mastura Jaafar

*Quantity Surveying Department, School of Housing, Building and Planning,
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, and*

Reza Tajaddini

*Swinburne Business School, Swinburne University of Technology,
Melbourne, Australia*

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate the economic impacts of the current coronavirus disease, which is globally known as (COVID-19) pandemic, on small businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry, including food and beverages (F&B) industries in Malaysia during and after the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) and conditional (CMCO) with the emergence of new business models.

Design/methodology/approach – In this paper, the implemented methodology involved a secondary qualitative research design based mainly on the existing literature, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reports, the government's documents, in addition to online sources and observations regarding local business experiences.

Findings – The findings revealed that implementing effective strategies of recovery, shaping resilience solutions and supporting policies such as the National Recovery Plan, which is backed by the government played a pivotal role in avoiding the turndown of small businesses.

Originality/value – This critical review is submitted as an original research paper, which aims to provide important perspectives regarding the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the tourism and hospitality industry in Malaysia. This paper serves as a scholarly platform for further in-depth studies on various resilience solutions of small businesses.

Keywords Covid-19, Tourism industry, Food and beverages, Small businesses, Malaysia, Recovery plan and strategies

Paper type Viewpoint



1. Introduction

The world has witnessed a series of disease outbreaks over the past decades, such as SARS, MERS, Influenza type A (H1N1), Zika and the most recent COVID-19 pandemic, which inflicted a massive impact until today (WHO, 2020). These impacts have inflicted local and global health resources and caused economic disruption. The COVID-19 outbreak, which

causes a severe respiratory syndrome, was first reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The viral disease proved to be more unpredictable and dangerous than bacterial infections (Strielkowski, 2020). Within a short time, the virus has been rapidly spreading across borders and has adversely affected people's daily life worldwide. However, the virus consequences seem to be more intangible and untouched.

According to Mckibbin and Fernando (2020), the COVID-19 crisis has alarmed the world economy and created serious consequences because various businesses are facing massive losses due to their declining activities. In a similar human experience during the past decade, epidemics such as MERS and SARS, which mapped the infection curve and caused community control decisions, steered some affected countries on how to control such unprecedented situations (Foddai *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it is essentially imperative to address such severe effects, as well as consequences of the current pandemic on the world economy and the accompanying unpredictable future of many businesses. The major concerns, which are associated with the pandemic, are reflected in three dimensions:

- (1) the unknown dimension (e.g. the duration of the pandemic);
- (2) people's health and welfare; and
- (3) the business dimension.

The latter concern focuses on financial impacts, fear for declining services and consumers and socio-economic impacts (Alonso *et al.*, 2020).

The economic consequences across the world have led to severe changes in how businesses can cope with and/or adapt to the consumer's emerging consumption behaviour (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). Consumer behaviour patterns have changed regarding consumption, individual, and social identity (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020). Early detection and prevention of fast transmission are some crucial challenges to all the countries at risk (Gilbert *et al.*, 2020). According to Baker *et al.* (2020), during the COVID-19 outbreak, household financial data revealed growing levels in spending across some major categories, including credit card spending and purchasing of food items, which have risen sharply. However, a substantial decrease has been observed in overall spending.

Thus, early detection and effective prevention of rapid transmission represent decisive challenges, encountered by many affected countries in the world (Gilbert *et al.*, 2020). In the initial phase of curbing the virus outbreak, the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) across many countries has changed the way how individuals and businesses conducted their daily activities, which has led to significant socio-economic impacts. However, the execution of MCO has brought about a career shock for many people around the globe. In Malaysia, for example, the unprecedented economic shock, along with the enforcement of MCO resulted in business closures, firm departures and employee layoffs. According to Khalid (2020), the Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre (MaGIC) predicted that if the pandemic situation continues for an extended period of six months, about 40% of SMEs will have to cease their operations. The economic impacts of COVID-19 led to an extremely distressing experience for the Malaysian industries, which created a short-term alarming environment among small businesses in the tourism industry, including the F&B industries. Fear and anxiety have, in turn, influenced the world's global economy and the country's economy concurrently, which resulted in an array of estimated long-term uncertainty impacts. Consequently, many businesses and firms closed, and employees were dismissed. Moreover, massive job losses were recorded due to the paralysed employment system. Many employment contracts have been suspended (Baert *et al.*, 2020). The Star Malaysia reported that from a total number of 56,299 hotel-industry employees,

3% were laid off, 17% were asked to apply for unpaid leave, and almost 10% received a pay cut (Table 1). Regarding the situation in different states in Malaysia, the tourism and hotel industries were the worst-hit businesses in Kuala Lumpur, while Sabah, Selangor and Penang experienced the highest losses and cancellations (Karim *et al.*, 2020). At this point, employees were concerned about losing their jobs, and employers were willing to keep staff employed without any bonus or overtime payment, which is difficult for smaller firms. This means that as most businesses faced sustainability issues, they were forced to lay off employees and downsize their staff between 70 and 90% (Thestar, 2020a, 2020b).

Tourism has recorded a significant contribution to Malaysia’s economy. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) 2018 report, the direct contribution of travel and tourism to Malaysia’s gross domestic product (GDP) was 4.8% in 2017, which has been projected to grow by 5.1% in 2028. The tourism industry’s gross value added has sustained double-digit growth of 10.3% in 2017 and 10.0% in 2018, along with 63.6%, which contributed by retail and F&B sectors. These two sectors are the main sectors, which provided job opportunities for about 3.5 million workers or 23.5% of the total employment in Malaysia (Dosm, 2020). Tourism small-medium businesses (TSMEs) represent the most vulnerable industries, which were affected by the enforcement of MCO. In this context, Chong (2020) asserted that reservations in hotels and restaurants have decreased significantly, i.e. between 80 and 95% on average. According to the Asian Development Bank, the tourism industry is expected to suffer huge losses between RM2.3 and RM5.7bn. In this regard, businesses, especially SMEs, are inevitably required to plan for their future business sustainability. Any massive pandemic crisis can be eventuated in a new business model due to a shortage of available resources, lack of interested consumers and new government policies.

This study aims to contribute to the available literature by providing useful insights and perspectives regarding several potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry during subsequent periods of the lockdown, the MCO and later the conditional movement control order (CMCO) in the Malaysian context. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing pieces of evidence on the F&B small businesses, which were drastically affected during MCO and CMCO orders in Malaysia. Moreover, such insights aim at bridging the knowledge gaps to elaborate key concerns, ways of coping and business adjustment, along with several viable recovery strategies that can aid SMEs in the tourism industry to survive in such a gloomy situation.

Upon reviewing the uniqueness of the COVID-19 outbreak, this study aims to address the most effective prescription for the most affected small businesses, which are financially more fragile like street food stalls, hawker-style businesses, food trucks, small budget hotels

State	No. of employee	Facing pay cut	Being laid off	Unpaid leave
Kuala Lumpur	17,826	2880	542	3645
Selangor	7981	134	248	1832
Penang	5549	240	85	430
Kedah	5006	340	92	982
Sabah	4934	893	177	1075
Sarawak	3488	175	92	258
Johor	3215	108	75	202

Table 1.
The pandemic
impact on hotel
industry employees
with highest number
of workers

Source: Malaysian Association of Hotel (MAH), 2020

and homestay. This study aims to critically review the economic impacts and consequences of the current COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses within the tourism and F&B sectors in Malaysia. The results will serve as an important input for all SME operators and tourism policymakers in creating a favourable environment and in devising efficient strategies for their businesses to sustain during harsh times. The following section reviews the literature to provide the theoretical justification to elucidate unforeseen consequences regarding the tourism and hospitality businesses in Malaysia.

1.1 Underpinning theory

The Chaos Theory is explained in the context of physical science. According to previous scholars, “chaos” is defined as a condition, while “Chaos Theory” is explained as a combination of useful methods to scrutinise unpredictable problems (Cambel, 1993). Chaos Theory guarantees effectiveness in a nonlinear dynamic system, which classifies with the emergence of a specific pattern in an indeterminate industry situation (Levy, 1994). The disastrous and unpredictable events in the tourism and hospitality industry have affected tourism mobility, which is considerably intertwined with the country’s economy.

Generally, amid chaotic crises, global and local disruptions have more effects on small businesses and can damage them totally (Boukas and Ziakas, 2014). This study investigated the sophisticated tourism industry during the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on economic crises based on the Chaos Theory or butterfly effect. Business operators and managers are required to propose an alternative business model through the progressive stages of a crisis: the pre-stage, the during stage, and the post-crisis stage (Mckercher, 1999). Based on the United Nations [(UN) (2004)] reports, several frameworks and independent guides have been formulated for risk reduction, sustainable development and humanitarian action. In particular, they comprise awareness, preparedness, early warning and management recovery strategies (UN, 2004). Effective recovery strategies can help minimise the potential financial crisis scenario (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019; Hao *et al.*, 2020). However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry and its relevant businesses must develop a fundamental framework to better understand the new business environment, apart from implementing management recovery strategies (Sharpley *et al.*, 2021; Reddy *et al.*, 2020; Radic *et al.*, 2020).

The tourism crisis is a combination of economic and socio-political crises (Zenker and Kock, 2020). The Chaos Theory provides clarification regarding the unforeseen consequences for tourism and hospitality businesses by focusing on small changes and creating fundamental alternatives in their operations (Boukas and Ziakas, 2014). In this study, the Chaos Theory provides a theoretical strategy to better understand the dynamic evaluation of TSMEs and their complex interactions among unpredictable financial crises and uncertainty (Zenker and Kock, 2020). Typically, the Chaos Theory is simulated to the model to describe the interactions between all participants within the industry, including business owners, managers, suppliers and marketers (Cartwright, 1991; Levy, 1994). The Chaos Theory promises businesses to have intensive implications for what and how they plan for the difficult situation (Levy, 1994). For instance, the small business owner requires to consider various problems that could fail the business due to unlikely risks. Therefore, if something goes wrong as in the outbreak of a disease or virus, the business owner must respond actively by adapting to any changes.

For the Malaysian tourism and hospitality sectors, they have already entered the short-term recovery strategy with the conditional, progressive reopening of F&B outlets and domestic travels since June 2020. Nonetheless, to fully contain COVID-19 is still hard to predict. To step into the long-term recovery phase, many small businesses sought financial

aid from the Malaysian government, applying a self-save strategy to monitor their cash flow and minimising non-essential costs. Therefore, identifying the consequences and limitations of the contemporary crisis should be considered as a different management model for the TSMEs, which are the most vulnerable group in the tourism and hospitality industry.

2. Literature review

2.1 Impact of Covid-19 outbreak on tourism

SMEs are essential business sectors for economic development with contributions to tourism growth across nations (Jalali and Jaafar, 2019). In Malaysia, SMEs represent the backbone of the economy, especially in the tourism and hospitality sectors that are directly related to culture (Jalali *et al.*, 2020; Jaafar *et al.*, 2020). Based on the firm's characteristics and its size, small businesses seem to dominate the tourism industry in Malaysia. Well-respected small businesses have a significant role and provide reliable services to attract all kinds of travellers to Malaysia. The role of small businesses in the Malaysian economy is inevitable, especially in the tourism industry, which is a key source of Malaysia's GDP annually (Puah *et al.*, 2018; Azam *et al.*, 2018). The Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agent (MATTA) reported that the Malaysian tourism industry created 3.5 million jobs, i.e. 15.2% of Malaysia's GDP in 2019. However, there was an unsteady decline of up to 90% in March 2020, followed by a near-total loss throughout April, May, and June 2020 (The Star, 2020). In the ASEAN region, the total contribution of tourism to the ASEAN's GDP was reported around 12.5% in 2019. (Mastercard-Crescentrating, 2020). Besides, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand enjoy the top three intra-ASEAN travellers with around 74% of trips. Over the past few months, however, 78% of the trips were cancelled; changes in schedules, vacations, and business travel in Malaysia have created a dramatic situation for the tourism industry in this area.

According to the previous experiences during Ebola and SARS outbreaks, a negative relationship was established between tourism activities and an epidemic (Zeng *et al.*, 2005; Kongoley-Mih, 2015). Therefore, the tourism crisis is not a surprising phenomenon. Some well-known similar examples have negatively affected tourism flows around the world (Speakman and Sharpley, 2012). The UNWTO reported that international travel and tourist movements have severely slumped at 20–30% in 2020 when compared to 2019. The WTTC highlighted that more than one million jobs were lost worldwide within the tourism sector (Del Valle, 2020). In accordance with the latest report published by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2020), the COVID-19 outbreak will have short- and long-term massive impacts on society. Hotels are one of the most vulnerable sectors in the tourism industry; they were affected by unexpected catastrophes such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which required prompt action to address various challenges (Jiang and Wen, 2020).

In Malaysia, hotels are fundamentally considered as long-term-hold investment assets with a minimum of a 10-year holding period (Hoisington, 2020). Generally, financial fragility in small businesses depends on how much cash is available, as well as savings the owners can access (Bartik *et al.*, 2020). This means that businesses with more cash are more confident about their future. The tourism industry in Malaysia has projected a specific plan for the year 2020, with the slogan "Visit Truly Asia Malaysia", VMY2020. The program has been initially planned to celebrate year-long events to offer in terms of Malaysian culture, cuisine, natural beauty and heritage (Tourismmalaysia, 2019). According to MAH, 4880 hotels and budget hotels were registered in Malaysia (Thestraitstimes, 2020). Most hotels have hoped for lucrative business during Visit Malaysia 2020 with a large amount of investment in their operations, which has been cancelled. The COVID-19 outbreak not only

affected the large franchise hotel industry or restaurants; rather most local businesses were severely hit during the MCO and CMCO period.

According to the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH), 15% of hotels in Malaysia will be closing for good or remain closed until the end of 2020 (Justin, 2020). For instance, Penang tourism has been suffering huge losses due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Five hotels in Penang have closed, and it is expected that more hotels in Penang will slow down operations due to the global pandemic (Basyir, 2020). Besides, the restriction of international travel, some high-risk countries, including China, Italy, Japan and Iran, have been banned from entering Malaysia, regardless of nationality (Jr, 2020). All inbound tourist activities in Malaysia were reduced significantly. The main tourist attraction is the fair travel packages, which include budget hotels, local food and transportation offered by small tourism businesses (TourismMalaysia, 2019). The pandemic has, therefore, affected the tourism supply chain harshly, especially small businesses in the tourism sector.

In battling the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian government has cancelled all crowd-gathering events and social activities until the end of 2020. Since March 2020, all tourism activities in Malaysia, such as hotels, tour guides and cruise operations, have halted their services. The tourism industry and all TSMEs experienced a drastic market crash due to the declining number of tourists visiting Malaysia. Some hotel owners even sold off their properties due to the huge losses in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Augustin, 2020). Such an environment is, in fact, devastating for TSMEs as they are unable to predict when the outbreak stress and crisis will end to resume normal operation.

The economic and non-economic impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrated greater responsibility by residents and business operators, directing more attention to those who are suffering more. Due to the physical distancing policy and the lockdown rules implemented in many countries, countless hotels, restaurants, cafés and small food operators were closed to avoid the unnecessary crowd. However, the factors that may influence small F&B and tourism-related businesses in Malaysia, such as rental fees, taxes and late payment, should be identified to devise appropriate recovery strategies after this circumstance (Kathirasen, 2020).

Although the post-COVID-19 improved situation might have brought some relief to the tourism industry, the tourist crowds cannot be the same, and social distancing is bound to control the mass travel to well-known tourist destinations, such as Langkawi and Penang (Malaymail, 2020). Evidence has recently revealed that many tourism businesses have lost confidence in resuming businesses even after this current outbreak will come to an end eventually as after six consecutive weeks of MCO, the MAH predicted a total of RM6.36bn losses for the 2020 revenues in the hotel industry (Theedgemarkets, 2020). The Malaysian Government has provided economic stimulus packages for the tourism and hospitality segments to provide temporary breathing space for tourism stakeholders and related businesses, which were impacted by the current pandemic, mainly the TSMEs (Foo *et al.*, 2020), as illustrated in Table 2.

Nevertheless, income security and flexibility should matter to employees in the tourism industry. Martins *et al.* (2020) asserted that the post-COVID-19 model of tourism and hospitality workforces will require training to learn sector-transferrable skills and service transmission to move between services not only in the context of the pandemic but also to address workforce resilience. Ever since the entry ban to Malaysia, all hotels and tourism-related businesses have been struggling to survive with cut wages and unpaid holidays, but often, these strategies are impractical for smaller hotels and firms (DW, 2020). The Malaysian Government has pledged to support a number of hotels by using their hotels as quarantine centres to temporarily accommodate passengers returning from abroad.

Table 2.
Malaysia economic
stimulus for tourism
businesses

Packages/Discount	Relevant businesses
15% discount on monthly electricity bills	All Tourism related industry
Double taxes deduction on expenses	Tourism-related training
Up to RM100m on matching grant to HRDF and fund an addition to 40,000 employees	Tourism and other affected sector
Exempted from making payment to the Human resource development (HRDF)	Hotel and travel-related companies
Postponement of income tax and monthly tax installment	Tourism-related companies
Exempted from paying 6% service tax	Hotels (between March and August 2020)
Employer are allowed to defer or reschedule the EPF	For six months

Source: Malaysian Association of Hotel (MAH), 2020

However, small-budget hotels that typically accommodate foreigners and backpacker travellers have drastically suffered. Most of these small properties are long-term tenants that face an unprecedented financial crisis.

Previous studies showed the trends and impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak in search of viable scientific facts and practical precautions to contain the spread of the virus, which might help people resume normalcy (Jamal and Budke, 2020). However, small businesses in the tourism industry, such as budget hotels and homestays, are limited or have been shut down due to the MCO policies executed in Malaysia since March 2020. For rural tourism, Community-based Tourism Enterprise (CBTEs) is an important tourism project for the development of the Lenggong World Heritage site in Malaysia (Jaafar et al., 2020). After the pandemic period, CBTEs will potentially grow to support tourism development in the rural part of Malaysia. Resuming domestic and international travel can help optimise growth in different tourism sectors. Towards a new recovery phase, all small businesses and organisational functions should prioritise their spending or postpone any tasks and events that do not bring any value to the current situation because even when the challenges are successfully addressed, this will not guarantee any promising future (Gursoy and Chi, 2020). Hence, they should be alerted about the available survival strategies to sustain them throughout this unforeseen circumstance and in the future (Baker et al., 2020; Peeri et al., 2020).

2.2 The impact of Movement Control Order on F&B businesses

Based on the current epidemiological reports, Shahidi (2020) believed that there has not been any report on COVID-19 transmission through food and the virus is not a foodborne category, which has yet to be confirmed. Due to heat treatment, well-cooked food should be safe since no virus is transmitted during the packaging or delivery procedure. In light of the importance of food safety, good hygiene practices help in keeping safe the food supply and delivery.

There are strands of evidence that the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt in the long term, along with financial impacts. The feeling of anxiety may lurk amidst the public and population, including those not at high risk (Montemurro, 2020). Distress and anxiety have hindered people from performing their routine activities, such as dining out or walking in public places. Malaysians typically dine out due to the broad range of food and beverages sold at reasonable prices. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the Malaysian food industry are expected to be devastating and will affect small businesses.

The unprecedented disruption has heavily affected the routine behaviour and activities of Malaysians. Malaysians avoided take-away meals before the pandemic. After the MCO, however, spending on restaurants and takeaway meals declined. Grocery shopping has increased approximately thrice. The local cuisine has become a trend to promote its tourism. Hence, because of COVID-19, Malaysian tourism arrivals were affected. More people preferred cooking at home while restaurants and food caterers have been advancing their services to keep their regular customers.

The only solution for food business operators is to close or dismiss staff and focus on online takeaway orders. Some food operators have changed their business model although with fewer sales and benefits for sustainability. Such emerging models, however, are ineffective for businesses that depend on crowds and a large number of turnovers. Moreover, 646 bars and clubs, which are visited by tourists and ex-pats, have been banned. Thousands of restaurants have temporarily shut down their businesses and some may even face bankruptcy (DW, 2020).

Speedy online food delivery services are necessary to ensure a successful business, along with strong communication strategies (Mohd Hanafiah and Wan, 2020). Upon merging all active food delivery businesses with franchise food brands, such as Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), McDonald's and Pizza Hut; the F&B operators have offered speedy food delivery services, obeying hygiene etiquettes. Local food businesses suggested several recommendations and new menus, which are limited but convenient to order. However, food delivery has been the solution for many businesses, while it is not a sustainable answer for small restaurants or cafés that rely on consumer turnover. Thus, digital and intelligence services transformation in both supply and demand is a key necessity (Hao *et al.*, 2020).

The Ramadan fasting month between 24th April and 24th May 2020 was one of the most important times for Muslim businesses in Malaysia, especially for small and home businesses. Ramadan Bazaar is very popular in Malaysia during the fasting month, but it was cancelled in Ramadan 2020 due to the enforced MCO to prevent crowd gathering (Thestraitstimes, 2020). Hence, some business operators sold their products online via social media promotion. For instance, the Food Panda delivery in Penang announced that its delivery service was able to collaborate with the Ramadan Bazaar businesses during the third phase of MCO as E-Bazar. The Food Panda E-Bazar service helped the local food vendors, who usually sell food and products during the fasting month of Ramadan (Law, 2020).

Moreover, according to Cao *et al.* (2020), the increasing anxiety disorder during the lockdown is bound to worsen due to poor interpersonal communication and mistrust. Because of fear, all local food vendors and small businesses, such as hawker food stalls, food trucks and seafood sellers have closed. A critical overview of small businesses uncovered the pathway in which the sector has been devastated financially and psychologically. The MCO has influenced the food supply chain, such as the fresh fish and shellfish market, as well as local fruit suppliers. In this crisis, Food Industry Asia (FIA) announced a stimulus package to support businesses, people's welfare and the economy of worst-hit countries by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addressing food shortage issues, the Malaysian Government has allocated RM1bn for all food sectors and the domestic food supply chain (Fia, 2020). As many businesses are struggling to cover their expenses during this difficult period, the Malaysian government provided support through a range of financial aid packages. For instance, the government offered discounts on utility bills, extended the income tax submission deadline, withdrawal from Private Retirement Scheme (PRS) (Sidhu, 2020), and an automatic six-month loan moratorium for SMEs and TSMEs (Cimb, 2020). Therefore, innovation and skills, together with crisis management, must be considered to provide

maximum benefits (Hadi and Supardi, 2020). Based on the Chaos Theory, as the F&B businesses were adjusted to the new normal, they can create a quick reactive response if any risks occur. The continuous monitoring and adjustment will help all small F&B sectors to bounce back their businesses economically. The significance of F&B entrepreneurs and TSME remains as important and challenging as ever, although the Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically changed their business status.

3. Methodology

The provided perceptions in this study are taken from secondary data, which is based on original or published data (Church, 2002; Hanafiah and Zulkifly, 2019; Vartanian, 2010; Davahli *et al.*, 2020). This information has been extracted from the existing resources that focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on Malaysian tourism and F&B businesses (Nan, 2020; Faisal and Dhusia, 2021; Kumar and Nafi, 2020; Karim *et al.*, 2020). The data were collected from the available literature, the WHO reports, the government's documents and online news and websites. The most recently published studies were examined and updated media sources across the globe were analysed. To achieve the objectives of the study, a comprehensive literature review has been conducted. Also, recently released reports from WHO and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provided an efficient future preparedness plan and a critical evaluation of the risk factors during the pandemic situation. After the data collection phase, the obtained perceptions were systematically analysed, and all key findings were summarised to provide insights into a better understanding of COVID-19 impacts, which constitute valuable lessons that should be learned from the ongoing pandemic crisis in Malaysia. The observations, which were made regarding the present situation encountered by tourism and F&B businesses, revealed valuable implications to be carefully considered at both regional and local levels.

4. Discussion

The uncertainty brought by COVID-19 to the tourism and food-related small businesses has resulted in anti-pandemic and post-pandemic strategies (Hao *et al.*, 2020). Tourists and restaurant diners are coping with the pandemic's new norms and future changes (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020). The phrase "a new normal" indicates how one should digest the current situation and initiate a business growth pattern (Prideaux *et al.*, 2020). Returning to the pre-pandemic business pattern will take time and depends on the government's response to the population health and socioeconomic demands arising due to the pandemic (Carr, 2020). Tourism and F&B business operators are expected to make fundamental adjustments to their operations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). According to the latest report of *Mastercard-CrescentRating at the end of 2020* and early 2021, the new Travel Readiness Framework (TRF) can analyse three sets of drivers that contain Health, Economy and behavioural management (Mastercard-Crescentrating, 2020). Based on these drivers and Chaos Theory, the multi-pronged strategies could make up the small businesses with several recovery methods and different perspectives. The key coping strategy and the way to adjust to the pandemic demand further elaboration. Coping with COVID-19 can be explained as preparing for new packages, changes in revenue, reduction in working hours, or the worst-case scenario, discontinued operation and awaiting new protocols (Alonso *et al.*, 2020). While the work-based adjustment dimensions have been extended by implanting changes, such as working from home and changes in activities with a narrowed focus on compliance.

In Malaysia, F&B outlets are allowed for dine-in during the conditional movement by executing social distancing, as well as the gradually decreasing restrictions on inter-state

and domestic travel (Gursoy and Chi, 2020). Although the F&B industry is slowly recovering, the impacts of COVID-19 on some businesses are prevalent, especially street food vendors. Small businesses, such as souvenir shops, budget hotels, and restaurants that rely on revenue from international tourists, should consider locals as potential customers (Brouder *et al.*, 2020). Eventually, from a positive perspective, the pandemic will make both business operators and tourists more aware of their nearby destinations, thereby increasing support for local and small businesses.

Implementing intelligent and digital technologies can improve the operational efficiency of TSMES, apart from reducing cost. Online services through digital tools ensure contactless operations on the business side, while convenient service provision on the customer's side (Hao *et al.*, 2020). The pandemic has significantly influenced market competition in the tourism industry, especially in the post-pandemic world. This COVID-19 pandemic promotes the reshuffling of TSMES, such as budget hotels that are expected to upgrade their services. According to Del Valle (2020), concerns for hygiene and health will continue during the post-pandemic era. Therefore, small hotels and F&B outlets need to exhibit their high competitiveness with new product designs and investment preferences. For instance, budget hotels and homestays should ensure physical distancing with private space to reduce close contact, thus preventing guests from getting infected by the virus. By identifying proper injectors based on the business characteristics, TSMES can understand the recovery path that allows them to target their market accurately. During the current pandemic time, TSMES will force their businesses to continue selling products and services with more creative manners.

4.1 Theoretical implications

The obtained perspectives highlighted the significance of identifying and implementing recovery strategies, as well as coping strategies based on the Chaos Theory for the TSMES in battling the COVID-19 pandemic that has led to economic and financial crises. More importantly, the pandemic disruption has not exerted an equal impact on all businesses (Le Nguyen and Kock, 2011). Due to the business differences in response to the crisis duration, TSMES operators and entrepreneurs need to measure the existential threat based on the pandemic duration (Bartik *et al.*, 2020). As such, TSMES workers and employees are too vulnerable to this uncertain situation (Brouder *et al.*, 2020). This study suggested that innovative recovery actions, in addition to developing alternative business models and risk reduction strategies can all minimise the current financial crisis of the chaotic situation of COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic (Hao *et al.*, 2020; Ritchie and Jiang, 2019).

Therefore, small businesses must propose various strategic alternative business models even periodically. Changes in some businesses are inevitable, especially for small businesses that are more vulnerable to this situation – innovative ability plays a key role in crisis recovery (Zenker and Kock, 2020). As such, the pandemic has raised unexpected risks, which called for improving various extenuation business models with more sustainable plans. In chaotic situations such as the ongoing pandemic situation, long-term strategy and planning are very difficult, while short-term predictions are possible. Due to the tourism demand shock, the financial crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic has affected SMEs. According to the Chaos Theory, systems are dynamic, and the relationship between cause and effect does not follow constancy (Guo *et al.*, 2009). In other words, chaotic systems are very sensitive to small changes in the industry structure, which can cause dramatic impacts on performances (Doherty and Delener, 2001). The level, which is called the edge of chaos, is typically explained, whereby innovation and creativity will happen (Le Nguyen and Kock, 2011). Therefore, small businesses in the tourism and F&B sectors need to identify the chaos

level of their environment as a new business opportunity. Second, due to the unpredictable status, businesses require instant innovative moves and act quickly with flexibility. Accordingly, it might be helpful that business owners learn from their first moves and continuously update the implemented recovery strategies, as well as the renewal of their products and services based on what feedback they receive (Ghobadian *et al.*, 2008). From another perspective, to survive in a chaotic environment in the post-crisis period, the Chaos Theory principals formulated a model to manage the survival of the TSMEs concerning transition economy (Le Nguyen and Kock, 2011).

However, the theoretical tourism crisis management model can display some weaknesses and gaps, which may limit some recovery strategies and their impacts on the future of the tourism industry. Mapping the complexities of the post-COVID-19 pandemic would enable a better understanding of the critical factors and strategies, which can respond to the crisis (Hynes *et al.*, 2020). After all, the pandemic crisis as an external shock to all TSMEs and business shutdown could provide market entry opportunities to employ and develop new business models, which will be made by adopting Chaos Theory and the butterfly effect (Postavaru *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, following the underlying theory, it is time to create alternative business patterns to understand and theorise future world status after the pandemic.

4.2 Practical implications

In this study, various perspectives provided some practical implications to recover TSMEs performances during and post-Covid-19 pandemic. It has been evidenced that Malaysian small businesses in the tourism industry tend to seek more efficient self-save strategies, such as reducing non-essential costs and rearranging operation hours by adhering to the recently enforced order, i.e. Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs). The Malaysian Government and policymakers should offer stimulus packages and healing frameworks for small businesses. By improving access to available resources, small businesses may effectively adopt new online and smart technologies like Grab food-delivery, Food Panda and other existing smart services in Malaysia. Budget hotels and homestays, on the other hand, are required to reshuffle their business platforms by focusing on local or medical tourism. In preparing for a better business environment and minimising the pressure of financial loss, TSMEs should manage their cash and redesign their proposed projects (Bartik *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the importance of a sustainable economy, in addition to a planned public health policy, represents the most significant concept in the tourism industry during the post-pandemic era (Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to push the tourism industry and its operation to transform (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Enabling normality has been identified as a transformational moment that opens possibilities for setting back the tourism and affiliated industries.

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes an unprecedented and new experience, and its consequences have substantially affected almost all aspects of human life and economies worldwide. This deadly, fast-spreading pandemic has caused panic among the tourism and hospitality segments globally. Trauma due to losing jobs, recovery for early-stage small businesses and covering financial suffering may take time in the post-COVID-19 era. The COVID-19 pandemic showed the level of vulnerability of Malaysian tourism and F&B businesses. The F&B and tourism industries are intertwined and, therefore, when the F&B industry faces adversity, this will affect the tourism industry. Hence, any small business destruction can augment an aggravating recession in the tourism and hospitality industries

in the long run. It has been demonstrated that public worries have a significant role in changing one's decision-making in the future of travel plans, eating habits, and overall lifestyle. The severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforcement of the MCO/CMCO rules have increased panic and created an alarming situation among local and foreign consumers alike. In other words, the upcoming challenges in the tourism and hospitality industries are not simply economic; they also involve psychological and financial support as the main concern. The TSMEs will inevitably experience a slowdown period after the pandemic, hoping that the changes may provide opportunities to reshape tourism and hospitality segments into a model that promotes sustainability. The COVID-19 pandemic situation emphasised that maintaining the safety of travellers and consumers requires innovative and sufficiently useful tools. The aim is to preserve and control those factors of the current struggle in the short term and adopt more flexible operations in the future.

An effective long-term recovery strategy by business operators, government and other policymakers can help in managing the economic sectors in the tourism and hospitality industries. Therefore, supporting local small businesses has a strong multiplier impact on the local economy. The Malaysian Government has devised several recovery strategies, such as turning to optimal fiscal policies, preventing small firm exits, and controlling insurance payments of affected workers as the first-best allocation. However, it has been quite difficult for the Malaysian Government to keep all businesses informed about the best supporting strategies in the post-COVID-19 period to manage the inevitable downturn. All strategies and policies are required to address the most effective solution in curbing and containing the spread of COVID-19. The resilience of small businesses, especially in the tourism industry, greatly depends on concerted efforts and support from both the government and policymakers.

Therefore, awareness of the consequences of the post-COVID-19 era, particularly in the tourism and the relevant F&B sectors in Malaysia, should be further investigated. Furthermore, further in-depth tourism and hospitality studies should focus on generating achievable solutions to tackle serious circumstances like the current COVID-19 situation. Scholars should respond to critical doubts, such as "How and when businesses will be ready to run in the new normal?", "What will new normal look like?" and "What exactly will make them ready for normal operations?" Thus, it is essential is to provide new insights into the management of small businesses within the tourism industry and the inevitable transformation of operations to achieve sustainability and ensure survival. However, after nearly one year of incomparable changes in human lifestyle and social norms, there are still several accompanying limitations regarding new challenges, particularly after the implementation of wide-ranging vaccination campaigns in many countries worldwide. Therefore, efficient roadmaps are required to maintain an effective recovery policy and normalisation based on the market size of tourism and the country's situation during the pandemic period. Furthermore, the country's travel limitations have not been adequately investigated because of a noticeable gap in implementing vaccination programmes. Therefore, there are constraints to manage the unprecedented economic and health concerns. These limitations should be thoroughly addressed, including resource allocation and support, along with social adjustment, which will enable SMEs to remain resilient during ever-changing business circumstances and alarming health situations not only in Malaysia but also in the ASEAN region. The suggested recovery strategies in this study as an alternative business model based on the Chaos Theory revealed the existence of some limitations to the proposed business model. Accordingly, in a chaotic setting, the business model demonstrates randomly effective success as a crisis management strategy.

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Corresponding author

Alireza Jalali can be contacted at: arjiaa@yahoo.com

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