

TO TRAVEL OR NOT: TRAVEL INTENTION DURING POST-PANDEMIC TIMES

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the tourism industry in various ways, including tourists' travel intentions. Unlike previous studies that have focused on the dark side of the pandemic, this study adds the dimension of perceptions of information on COVID-19, social groups, and perceived travel risk to explore their influence on travel intention. A total of 250 valid questionnaires were collected from a sample of Malaysian private university students. The results showed that students' traveling intention for local or international destination in the forthcoming year following the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak is significantly high. In addition, the travel intention of Malaysian students was formed from the direct roles of COVID-19 information, social groups, and perceived travel risks. Perhaps, these students start travel plans when they feel the pandemic was under control by the government especially the statistics of affected people revealed by the Ministry of Health shows a decreasing trend. In addition, they might have the intention to travel since their family and friends have the same intention. However, students may choose destinations with less risk, and destinations that they perceive as risky may become undesirable. This study contributes to the understanding of the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism and of university students' travel intentions. It also offers implications for the tourism industry to formulate relevant recovery strategies after the pandemic.

Keywords: *travel intention, perception of information, social group, perceived travel risk*

Introduction

The future of the tourism industry is still questionable from both an economic and a behavioural point of views even after two years post-pandemic COVID-19 as the disease profoundly affected all facets of people's lives significantly (Dogramadjieva and Terziyska, 2022). As a direct result, several nations' borders, including Malaysia, remained closed for a prolonged period of time before being reopened. Even though the market has reopened and is operating normally with struggle, it is no longer as successful as it once was in the tourism sector. For instance, the number of domestic visitors in Malaysia is significantly decreased by 49.9 percent in 2021 when compared to 2020. Infections have, moreover, continued to swell in wave after wave, exacerbating people's fear and leading to tension, worry, and panic (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). Due to these circumstances, there are legitimate concerns about the tourism industry's future, and there is a lot of conjecture and even pessimism over the recovery of travel and tourism activity. The general consensus of these discussions is that travelers' traits and behaviours will play a significant role in the evolving landscape of travel and tourism (De Vos, 2020).

There have been significant changes in the way peoples carry out their daily chores during post-pandemic as a result of the special circumstances that this pandemic has brought about. It is yet unknown how and to what extent various people, especially students, have adjusted their travel habits in response to the situation surrounding the pandemic, despite the fact that such significant transitions have been documented in

many nations. During post-pandemics, most people still perceive a higher risk for all types of travel types and avoid traveling to places where they perceive a medium to high risk (Hotle et al., 2020). University students, on the other hand, tend to be young and “allocentric” travelers who tend to be risk-takers and crisis-resistant (Hajibaba et al., 2015). Some of them were excited to travel with friends when they came back to campus. Do university students’ risk perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic impact their travel intentions? If the COVID-19 information perception is positive, will they be willing to travel? Do their travel buddies make them willing to travel? This study aims to explore these questions. Due to the lockdown that has been implemented, university students have been forced to stay at home for a considerable amount of time. Their likelihood of traveling has decreased, and their travel motivation was suppressed. Consequently, they may be more eager to travel and pay closer attention to information related to the pandemic, particularly COVID-19 information. In addition, their relatives or friends might opt to travel again for leisure trip. However, little is known regarding student-level risk-aversion or plans for a post-pandemic travel (Shamshiripour et al., 2020). Thus, to understand whether university students are willing to travel during the post-pandemic period, this study explores the impact of perceptions of COVID-19 information, social group, and perceived travel risk on travel intentions.

Literature review

Travel intention

Intention is a person's behavior representing one's decisions (Conner and Norman, 2015). Shen et al. (2009) supported by saying intention is an individual's readiness to enact a behavior and is considered to be directly affected by behavioral antecedents. The intention in the context of Ajzen (1991) is to determine the motivational factors that can influence behavior, including an indication of how hard people try, and how much effort they plan to exert to carry out the behavior. In the context of this study, travel intention refers to the possibility to visit a certain destination in a certain period and in the future (Whang et al., 2016). Travel intention is a process of transforming travel motivation into travel behavior. Travel intentions depend on tourists’ degree of certainty toward the destination (confidence generation) and on inhibitors, which may cause tourists to respond differently from what their attitudes dictate (Lee et al., 2012).

It is noteworthy that, due to the uncertainties of the global situation since March 2020 resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, the tourism sector around the world has been halted. Travel influences the disease's spread, making it particularly vulnerable to medical situations. The COVID-19 outbreak severely affecting the global travel and tourism industry when a significant number of potential visitors have revised or scrapped their travel plans. A survey conducted by Wolff et al. (2019) revealed that travelers commit the ‘home-is-safer-than-abroad’ bias, which states that travelers consider traveling in their home country safer compared to traveling abroad, while Boto-Garcia and Leoni (2022) revealed that individuals exposed to COVID-19 had a relatively higher willingness to travel. The Jakarta Globe (2020) study suggested that in the post-pandemic period, 80% of travelers are willing to pay more for safer accommodation, and 76% of respondents stated that their preferred travel destinations are countries that offer more travel experiences with restricted physical contact. Besides, on summer weekend in July 2020, there was an increase in the influx of foreign tourists at all border crossings into the country of European region despite the

ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Ging, 2020). These conditions prove that tourists' perceptions of tourism during a pandemic or after a pandemic are more flexible but still pay attention to health protocols.

Perception of COVID-19 information and travel intention

Since the pandemic has affected worldwide, the news has been found overwhelming. COVID-19 information is information posted on social media that causes the fear and stigma of the virus (Roy et al., 2020). Its coverage has caused the general public to feel dazed and even plunged into anxiety and panic. The news spreads faster through mobile phones, worsening the anxiety and panic of the public (Dong and Zheng, 2020). Studies on the nature of perceived risk demonstrates that people's risk judgments are often fallible partly due to media biases whereby information is disseminated (Slovic et al., 2016). For instance, in the case of countries where the total number of confirmed cases was much lower compared to China in April (Li and Ito, 2021), the majority might not feel affected and rely mostly on media to learn about the disease. When daily life was set back to normal in post-lockdown, however, people might start to feel distant from the disease. Consequently, the influence of external information might come back into play after the disease was under control.

Previous studies found the perception of COVID-19 information led to people intention to travel. For example, earlier study by Helfenberger et al. (2010) found that travelers would often seek for information regarding influenza which was an important factor which in determining their traveling behaviour and this was particularly so in pandemic regions. Abdelhafiz et al. (2020) found that the perception of COVID-19 information influenced a positive attitude and proper COVID-19 prevention measures, leading to an increase in travel intention. Dong and Zheng (2020) revealed that people's perception of COVID-19 information indeed negatively influenced their intentions to travel during the early stage of the pandemic. Based on this discussion, this study predicts that the travel intention is higher for students who get adequate COVID-19 information. Thus, the following hypothesis is conjectures.

H1: Perception of COVID-19 information has a significant influence on students' travel intention.

Social group and travel intention

Social group influence has a connection with the subjective norms that are discussed in the Theory of Planned Behaviour. It is related to the support given (or not) by social groups such as family and friends. In other words, it refers to the likelihood that important referent individuals or groups approve or disapprove of the performance of a specific behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Opinions regarding the relationship between social groups and behavioural intentions vary. Some studies found a significant relationship, while others did not. For example, a study by Ru et al. (2019) revealed that the social group significantly affects young people's intentions on fine particulate matter reduction in China. While Soorani and Ahmadvand (2019) finding showed that the intention to reduce household food waste is predictable by social group. Contrary, few studies came out with evidence that social groups have no significant influence on behavioural intention (Aboelmaged, 2021; Taufique and Vaithianathan, 2018). Due to conflicting

evidence, hence, it is necessary to investigate how social groups influence a person's behavioural intention.

Students are just like the rest of the population in which they have an interest in traveling. When it comes to making choices such as to travel, students comply with or consider the opinion of their social groups such as friends and family, as these groups have the power to influence a person's decision. According to a number of studies, social groups play a significant role in people's intentions. During COVID-19, for instance, Das and Tiwari (2021) discovered that people that are important to a person such as family and friends positively influence the person's travel intentions. Similarly, results from the study by Liu et al. (2021) showed that social groups have a significant positive effect on travel intention. Besides, Morten et al. (2018) discovered that people who are important to a person, would approve that person's behaviour and have a significant influence on the person's decision. Hence, based on the above discussion, this study further proposes the following hypothesis.

H2: Social group has a significant influence on students' travel intention.

Perceived travel risk and travel intention

Perceived risks refer to the spirit cost associated with individual's behavior, which represents a kind of uncertainty about the future (Nguyen et al., 2021). Individual's perceived risk, in this study, could be travel risks, that refers to the tourists' perception about possible negative consequences during their stay in a tourist destination (Tsaour et al., 1997). Amongst determinants of travel intention, travel risks had been proved to be a critical factor hindering people's willingness to take a trip (Amaro and Duarte, 2013). Tourists will demonstrate resistance toward travel whenever they recognize potential risks. According to Wang et al. (2021), travel and tourism are more vulnerable to risk, therefore, travelers are more sensitive to safety issues and risks.

Previous studies suggest that perceived travel risk is related to the pandemic and were found to have direct and indirect effects on the travel behaviour of tourists (Şengel et al., 2023). In India, Gupta et al. (2023) found a positive correlation between the perceived travel risk associated with COVID-19 and travel avoidance. Similarly, Meng et al. (2021) observed that perceived travel risk was a greater predictor of perceived efficacy than felt anxiety or severity. When it comes to the COVID-19 outbreak, people are more concerned about staying safe than outbreak's severity, such as catching the disease. In the context of students at Macau's higher education institutions, Agyeiwaah et al. (2021) revealed that students feel that traveling during COVID-19 can cause unpleasant feelings and reduce travel intentions. In addition, respondents believed traveling was already risky since they perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as a highly risky disease. People feel less positive after hearing such a risky rating, which reduces their desire to travel. A study done by Perić et al. (2021) in Serbia, showed that travel risk perception has an impact on travel intentions, leading respondents to believe that they will reduce their travel plans during the pandemic. Their study's findings support the assertion that both domestic and international travel will be done in extreme care and travelers place a high value on health security, cleanliness in lodging facilities, a reliable healthcare system, and health insurance. Based on this discussion, this study assumes that students do not intend to travel outside of Malaysia because of perceived travel risk and unfavourable feelings about movements even after the pandemic COVID-19. Therefore, this study predicts the following hypothesis.

H3: Perceived travel risk has a significant influence on students' travel intention.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a quantitative approach with cross-sectional design as the data were collection at one point of time. The questionnaires were distributed to students pursuing their studies in private universities in Malaysia. A web-based survey was designed and administered in collecting the data. Screening questions were placed at the beginning of the survey to check whether the respondents have intention to travel either local or abroad during post-pandemic period. Participants who answered “yes” to all of the screening questions were asked to fill in the remainder of the survey. Unqualified participants denied further access. Adopting a convenience sampling method, approximately 250 responses were gathered. The data were analyses using IBM-SPSS version 26.0.

Measurement of the constructs

The measurement of constructs in this study were used pre-validated scales applied in the earlier studies to ensure the effectiveness of the contents, and appropriate amendments were made to fit the context of travel intention behaviour among students as presented in *Table 1*. The questionnaire included measurements of intention to travel, perception of COVID-19 information, social group, and perceived travel risk, as well as demographic information. The respondents were required to express the degree of agreement or disagreement with their descriptions of the measurement items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Table 1. Measurement of the construct and its sources.

Constructs	Items	Sources
Perception of COVID-19 information	6	Kement et al. (2020)
Social group	6	Sánchez-Cañizares et al. (2021)
Perceived travel risk	6	Abraham et al. (2020)
Travel intention	6	Kement et al. (2020)

Preliminary assessment

A preliminary analysis of the data was conducted and a reliability assessment of the constructs was carried out by calculating the values of the Cronbach's alpha for each construct separately. According to Pallant (2020), reliability coefficient test indicates how well the items in a set positively correlated from one another. Variables can be considered as reliable if the Cronbach's alpha value is set to be 0.7 and above (Pallant, 2020). *Table 2* depicts that all variables measuring travel intention (perception of COVID-19 information, social group, and perceived travel risk) are ranging from values 0.795 to 0.890. This result shows that the internal consistency of the scale is good and it has a high degree of reliability.

Table 2. Reliability assessment results.

Constructs	Cronbach alpha	No. of items
Perception of COVID-19 information	0.795	6
Social group	0.890	6

Perceived travel risk	0.812	6
Travel intention	0.835	6

Results and Discussion

The demographic characteristics of the samples are shown in *Table 3*. Out of the 250 students, 55.6% of them were female, whereas 44.4% were male, which reflects the gender gap issues in the higher learning institutions enrolment in Malaysia. Further, *Table 3* shows that the majority of respondents are in the age group of between 21 and 23 years old (41.2%), followed by those between 18 and 20 years (27.2%). In terms of educational level, undergraduate students made up the majority of respondents (55.6%), followed by postgraduate students (32.8%), and foundation students (7.2%). Finally, for the marital status of the students, 80.8% of the respondents were single and 19.2% were married.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of the samples (N=250).

Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	111	44.4
Female	139	55.6
Age group (Years old)		
18-20	68	27.2
21-23	103	41.2
24-26	31	12.4
27-29	35	14.0
>30	13	5.2
Education background		
Foundation	18	7.2
Undergraduate	139	55.6
Postgraduate	82	32.8
Other	11	4.4
Marital status		
Single	202	80.8
Married	48	19.2

Descriptive statistics of the variables

Table 4 shows the mean values for all constructs in this study. The mean result of 4.4793 for travel intention indicates that students' traveling intention for local or international destination in the forthcoming year following the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak is significantly high. Further, among the independent variables, the highest mean value is shown by social group (4.0207), perceived travel risk (3.8673), and perception of COVID-19 pandemic (3.8527).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of variables.

Constructs	Mean value
Perception of COVID-19 information	3.8527
Social group	4.0207
Perceived travel risk	3.8673
Travel intention	4.4793

Factors influencing travel intention

This section reports and discusses the findings of the study which is to identify the factors influencing travel intention among students during the post-pandemic period. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between perception of COVID-19 information, social group, and perceived travel risk with travel intention. The correlation coefficient results between the variables are indicated in *Table 5*. All the independent variables show at least some positive relationship with the travel intention, and the r-values are less than 0.7. With reference to *Table 5*, result shows that the relationship between perception of COVID-19 information and travel intention is moderately positive ($r=0.230$; $p=.000***$) and it is statistically significant at 1% level. Therefore, this finding leads to the acceptance of H1. This signifies that correct perception of COVID-19 information were positively associated with the intention to travel by students. Perhaps, students seek for information regarding COVID-19 in planning their traveling during post-pandemic and they might feel distant from the pandemic when statistics released by the government, especially the Ministry of Health (MoH) shows a decreasing trend of those affected with COVID-19. Consequently, they start to plan for travel when they feel the pandemic was under control by the government. This result is consistent with previous studies such as Abdelhafiz et al. (2020) and Helfenberger et al. (2010) whereby they found that the perception of COVID-19 information led to people intention to travel. In addition, Kement et al. (2020) provide similar finding whereby the perception of COVID-19 information is significantly and positively influence behavioral intention.

Table 5. Factors influencing travel intention.

Hypothesis	r value	p value	Results
H1: Perception of COVID-19 informtion → Travel intention	0.230	.000***	Supported
H2: Social group → Travel intention	0.266	.000***	Supported
H3: Perceived travel risk → Travel intention	0.173	.000***	Supported

*Note: Correlation is significant at *** 1% level, ** 5% level and * 10% level, respectively, using two-tailed tests.*

Further, as it can be observed from the results in *Table 5*, social group was moderately and positively related to students' travel intention during post-pandemic ($r=0.266$; $p=.000***$) and it is statistically significant at 1% level. Hence, H2 was supported. This result indicates that family and friends are capable of influencing the travel intentions of university students since they communicate with each other and socialise frequently after they return to campus. Since the students have been forced to stay at home for a considerable amount of time and relied on the online learnings for their lessons, they may take the chances of traveling together when they can socialize. Besides, the travel-related content exposure on social medias such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok posted by family members or buddies may stimulates the students' intention to visit the same travel destination. This finding validated the empirical result of previous studies, such as Das and Tiwari (2021), Liu et al. (2021), and Morten et al. (2018) whereby they revealed that social groups have a significant positive effect on travel intention. Finally, finding in the *Table 5* shows that perceived travel risk has a significant weak effect on the students' travel intention during post-pandemic ($r=0.173$; $p=.000***$) and it is statistically significant at 1% level. Therefore, this result led to the supporting of H3. This finding indicates that among students who

are willing to travel in the wake of the COVID-19 incident, the associated perceived travel risk is likely to have an impact on their intention to go. As a result, it can be said that the desire to travel and perceived travel danger are significantly related. However, students may choose destinations with less risk, and destinations that they perceive as risky may become undesirable. This finding confirms the study by Perić et al. (2021) that showed travel intention is significantly related to travel risk perception, whereby travelers in both domestic and international travel will be done in extreme care and travelers place a high value on health security, cleanliness in lodging facilities, a reliable healthcare system, and health insurance.

Conclusion

The tourism industry is one of the most susceptible industries to crises and natural disasters. It is particularly vulnerable to health crises, given the fact that travel affects the spread of the epidemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest challenge of the 21st century and it is causing enormous damage to the global tourism industry. Travel restrictions have caused potential tourists to move or cancel their travel plans. The way that COVID-19 is seen by tourists, especially students have altered their travel behaviour as well as the landscape of the tourism industry. To sum up, this study investigates the impact of perceptions of COVID-19 information, social group, and perceived travel risk on travel intentions of university students during the post-pandemic period. The result reveals that students' traveling intention for local or international destination in the forthcoming year following the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak is significantly high. According to the findings, perception of COVID-19 information, social groups, and perceived travel risk undoubtedly have an impact on university students' intentions to travel in Malaysia.

The study of students' travel intention is the basis for understanding the knowledge, social groups influence, and behavior of students regarding risks and it provides an opportunity for travel agencies and tourism organizations to formulate a strategy for risk management in tourism. Accordingly, it is necessary to take appropriate measures. Firstly, even during post-pandemic, tourist destinations need to make stronger complete risk management and control, in order to successfully moderate perceived risk among potential tourists. Since perception of COVID-19 information significantly affect students' travel intention, travel agencies must develop communication strategies for disseminating information through social networks. Hence, potential students who intend to travel should not only be provided with the latest information on COVID-19 status, but also information on hygiene and health safety, as well as on cancellation, refund or travel delay policies. Secondly, travel agencies must manage the travel arrangement in such a way that accommodate the travel needs of a tourist in a group, considering that the student may travel with their family or buddies. Third, travel agencies also must ensure that the exposure to uncontrolled risk determinants is minimized, which is to a level at which it is possible to participate in tourist travel without any limitations, especially taking into account the details about high hygiene standards. Since the students' traveling intention during post-pandemic period is significantly high, therefore, tourism organizations can develop strategies for attracting student tourists. This is especially true for domestic destinations, given the fact that tourist trips will be directed within the country. Therefore, it is important to promote domestic tourism as a short-term measure for the recovery of the domestic tourism

industry on the one hand, and to point to the importance of hygiene in accommodation facilities on the other hand, as well as all other activities that will make tourists feel safe, which will reduce the perceived risk.

This research is not without its limitations since the variables undertaken in this study are still limited, such as perceived COVID-19 information, social groups, and perceived travel risk. Future research is expected to study other variables such as motivation, attitude, risk knowledge, and desire. In addition, there are limitations of sample size because the respondents are only university students. Thus, future research is expected to cover respondents from other occupations. Next, the self-reported behaviour on which this study relied are vulnerable to response bias. There is an uncertainty regarding the accuracy of responses because self-reports of travel intention may be less accurate. To reduce response bias, it is suggested for future research to use in-depth techniques applied to secondary data sources such as interviews or observations. This might help researcher to explore certain aspects that cannot be discovered using survey questionnaire.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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