

# Travel bubble: risk anxiety, risk attitude and intention to travel during Covid-19 outbreak

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the tourism industry in Malaysia decline drastically. The outbreak has continued for almost two years and has decreased local and international tourist arrivals. The declinations are put under the Movement Control Order (MCO) execution, and safety precautions were issued when travelling around. Nevertheless, the impressive rate of deterioration in pandemic transmission gives a new shade to domestic tourism. The Ministry of Tourism has put forward an initiative that can revitalise the economic sector in the country by introducing the travel bubble destinations among Malaysians. With that, the main purpose of this study is to explore the travel bubble risk anxiety, risk attitude, and intention to travel among Malaysian when COVID-19 is still plaguing the nation. A self-administered survey was conducted online using a snowballing technique. The collected data were keyed and analysed accordingly and answered the objective of the study. The main findings of this study highlighted that those respondents would feel anxious and worried about their safety when participating in the travel bubble. Statistical significance also revealed the respondents' intentions to travel during the COVID-19 outbreak. Further discussions of the findings were also highlighted to deliberate the implications of the study.

## Keywords:

COVID-19, Travel Bubble, Risk Anxiety, Risk Attitude, Intention to Travel

## 1 Introduction

The world tourism industry has been severely affected since the COVID-19 pandemic (UWTO, 2020). To date, almost all the tourism and hospitality sectors had a difficult time, including Malaysia. Hence, to revive the country tourism and hospitality sectors, the Malaysian government started to take the initiative to introduce Travel Bubble destinations after the Movement Control Order (MCO) was lifted, and there was a reduction in daily cases of infection (New Straits Times, 2021). Travel bubble is known as “*Travel Bridges*” or “*Corona Corridors*”. This initiative was first introduced by Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where the citizens from these countries were allowed to enter the borders without any quarantine restrictions (Reuters, 2020). Many countries have started to embark and introduce travel bubble destinations to their citizens to stimulate the national economy during the current pandemic situation (Leung, 2020; Locker, 2020). It can be seen as a recovery plan to revitalise the tourism and hospitality sectors.

World Health Organisation (WHO) has identified some safe countries to start with travel bubble destinations, for example, Brunei, Singapore and Thailand or ASEAN countries and the Asia Pacific countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Indonesia has given Malaysia the green light over a Reciprocal Green Lane/Travel Corridor Arrangement (RGL/TCA) travel bubble between both nations. This approval could be one opportunity to boost both nations economics after a series of lockdowns in the countries (MOTAC, 2021).

The current COVID-19 outbreak that was identified can have psychological and physiological effects on an individual. It will lead to worse outcomes such as anxiety when rumours or fake news spread in society. Past studies revealed that anxiety is an incurable sickness and will cause a determinant behaviour (Taylor, 2019). A study conducted has identified anxiety as a mental state of tension and worry about what will happen in the future (Banerjee, 2020). It is a signal to avoid taking risks (Smith, Ebert & Broman, 2016). People will get anxious about the pandemic situation and tend to take precautious actions by taking care of their hygiene, such as using hand sanitiser, social distancing and get vaccinated (Taylor, 2019). According to Asmundson and Taylor (2019), when anxiety occurs, people will overstock their food and daily supplies, conduct unnecessary medical check-ups, and misinterpret their minor symptoms as signs of severe disease. The pandemic causes chaos in people daily life by scaring them. It is crucial to understand to what extent this COVID-19 outbreak affects people mental health (Ahorsu et al., 2020; Gnoth et al., 2000). Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to explore the travel bubble risk anxiety, risk attitude, and intention to travel amongst Malaysians.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Tourist Behaviour**

Tourist behaviour should be the main focus of the tourism and hospitality sector to operate successfully. These industries need to know about the tourist choices in a destination, evaluate the destination and understand the intention of future tourist behaviour (Zhang et al., 2014). Mathieson and Wall (1982) posited there are five phases of tourist behaviour: 1) identify the importance of tourism; 2) collect tourism information; 3) making a decision; 4) taking a tour; and 5) trip evaluation. Demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, income, education, lifestyles, personal values, and motivation for tourism have a strong influence in determining tourist destinations. Therefore, research about these characteristics should be conducted to identify if these characteristics would also influence tourists' decision to travel for travel bubble destinations. In addition, the tourist also pays attention to a specific aspect of a tourist destination before they made any decision. The characteristics include tourist attractions, infrastructure, facilities, services and accessibility at the destinations. Situational factors such as weather, cultural heritage, and political stability were also identified to influence tourist behaviour in determining their destination choices (Wu, Zhang & Fujiwara, 2011).

### **2.2 Travel Anxiety**

Anxiety defined as a fear of negative consequences (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988). Fear occurs when an individual responds to stress, likely to encounter any risks that will or will not happen (Dowling & Staelin, 1994). As an extended definition by McIntyre and Roggenbuck (1998), anxiety includes being nervous, apprehensive, stressed, vulnerable, uncomfortable, disturbed, scared or panicked. The current COVID-19 pandemic has caused anxiety in an individual. The pandemic, which has lasted for almost two years, caused concern in everyone. Fear has enveloped when the number of cases has reported that lead to fatality. Some are worried and think they have been infected with COVID-19, even though it is just a common sickness. Also, the degree of fear and anxiety increases when there are updated cases about the infections (Ahorsu et al., 2020). Thus, travelling to travel bubble destinations would also cause anxiety to the tourist. They might feel the destination is dangerous and unsafe to visit, especially during outbreaks. The intentions to travel to a destination were influenced by the level of travel anxiety and the perceived level of security (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2015).

### **2.3 Risk Attitudes**

Risk attitudes are identified as risk-taking behaviour in people under an uncertain or risky situation (Hillson & Murray, 2017). People will tend to act rationally and carefully calculate the potential risks they might encounter (Maser & Weiermair, 1998). Travelling during the COVID-19 outbreaks will put the tourists in extra precaution in determining their destinations. During this pandemic moment, risk perception in a destination allowed the tourist to carefully make any judgment about the travel bubble destinations

(Yavas, 1987). Meanwhile, it is argued that tourists dare to take any risks by considering the benefits and losses that they might receive when visiting an unsafe destination. These tourists consider that they will be safe as long they obey the rules and standard operation procedures (SOPs) (Sarin, 1993).

## 2.4 Travel Intention

The desire to taking a trip to a destination is also known as travel intention. People have the desire to travel to their preferred destination. However, the choice of destination depends entirely on the safety of the current situation of a destination. The tourists will be researching the destination before making a decision. The travel bubble initiative is introduced to promote destinations with fewer COVID-19 cases to tourists, but it is still a potential risk. Risk and safety aspects are determined to be the most important than an attractive aspect in a destination. Tourists will choose less risky destinations in their travel (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Zhu & Deng, 2020). Destinations that have higher COVID-19 cases will see as unsafe and dangerous destinations to be visited. The destination will create a negative perception from the tourist (George, 2003). The tourist will not be visiting a risky destination because it will create anxiety about the possibility of them might get infected during the trip (Wachyuni & Kusumaningrum, 2020).

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Questionnaire

The survey instruments used in this study were adopted from Luo and Lam (2020) and consisted of six sections. The respondents' demographics profiles were placed in the first section of the questionnaire. The respondents' travel preferences were asked in the second section. Furthermore, section three to section six of the questionnaire asked the respondents' agreement on travel behaviour, travel anxiety, risk attitude and travel intention for travel bubble. These constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The gathered data were analysed with descriptive and ANOVA tests to reveal the findings.

### 3.2 Data Collection and Sample Characteristics

A quantitative approach was employed in this study. A survey questionnaire was formulated in a Google form and distributed using snowballing technique among the respondents. Apart from reaching great numbers, online data collection was more convenient and safer, especially during the current pandemic status in Malaysia (Han and Kim, 2009; Kim and Canter, 2010). The summary of the sample characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profiles of Survey Respondents ( $N = 173$ )

Demography	Percentage (%)
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Gender	Male	39.3
	Female	60.7
Age	18 – 20 years old	1.7
	21 – 30 years old	36.4
	31 – 40 years old	41.0
	More than 41 years old	20.8
Education	SPM	3.0
	Diploma	11.0
	Bachelor Degree	53.2
	Postgraduate Degree	30.6
	Others	4.0
Occupation	Student	30.6
	Private Sector	31.8
	Government Sector	20.8
	Self Employed	13.9
	Others	2.9

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Travel Preferences

Table 2 below highlights the respondents travel preferences during COVID-19 pandemic cases were in control. About 77.5 per cent of the respondents indicate that they will travel if the instances of COVID-19 under control, while 20.8 per cent said they might be and 1.7 per cent will not go. The results show that most respondents will go for the travel bubble if the disease were controlled. Furthermore, the respondents were also asked about their preference tours after the pandemic under control. The result also showing about 55.5 per cent of the respondents preferred to go for a domestic and overseas trip. About 58.9 per cent of the respondents intended to travel less than six days, whereas 70 per cent planned to have less than six days of desired trip time.

Table 2: Travel Preferences ( $N = 173$ )

Items	Percentage (%)	
Will you travel during the Pandemic COVID-19 outbreak under control?	Yes	77.5
	No	1.7
	Maybe	20.8
The tour you want to visit after Pandemic COVID-19 under control?	Domestic	36.4
	Overseas	8.1
	Both	55.5
How long after Pandemic COVID-19 ends do you intend to travel?	0-3 months	26.0
	3-6 months	32.9
	> 6 months	41.0
Desired trip time?	1 - 3 days	30.1

4 - 6 days	39.9
> 6 days	30.1

This study revealed the respondents travel preferences when the COVID-19 situation is under control, and fewer cases were reported. Despite the current situation, it can be seen that the respondents still have the intention to support the tourism and hospitality sectors. Therefore, looking at these findings, the government should carefully refine the travel bubble program, ensuring tourist safety while visiting a destination. Hence, the tourism and hospitality sectors should cooperate with the government when imposing the travel bubble program to benefit both industries.

Table 3 below shows the results of the respondents travel behaviour towards the travel bubble. Most of the respondents stated that they would visit fewer COVID-19 destinations ( $M = 3.95$ ), travel to a less affected country ( $M = 4.02$ ), choose travel depending on the health and safety of the destination ( $M = 4.45$ ), will take extra hygiene precautions during travel bubble ( $M = 4.69$ ), will avoid crowds ( $M = 4.60$ ) and no longer attend crowded events ( $M = 3.83$ ).

Table 3: Travel Behavior ( $N = 173$ )

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Visit fewer COVID-19 destination	3.95	1.1120
Travel to a less affected country	4.02	1.0966
Choose travel to depend on the health & safety of the destination	4.45	.8450
Take extra hygiene precautions during TB	4.69	.6414
Avoid crowds	4.60	.6615
No longer attend crowded events	3.83	1.044

The findings above indicate that the respondents will carefully choose a destination when participating in a travel bubble. COVID-19 pandemic influences the changes in tourist behaviour nowadays. Tourists take a serious approach to be more careful as this virus was known to be very dangerous and life-threatening (WHO, 2020). This behaviour will probably become a new norm among travellers to be more selective when choosing a destination (Wen, Kozak, Yang & Liu, 2020).

The respondents' travel anxiety was revealed in Table 4 below. The respondents informed that they felt uncomfortable with the travel bubble during the pandemic ( $M = 3.50$ ). Meanwhile, the majority of the respondents indicate that they neither agree nor disagree about being panic when travel bubble during the pandemic ( $M = 3.38$ ), having

irregular heartbeat when travel bubble during the pandemic ( $M = 3.16$ ), fear of losing a life when travel bubble during the pandemic ( $M = 3.02$ ) and feel nervous or anxious when watching news and stories about COVID-19 ( $M = 3.28$ ).

Table 4: Travel Anxiety ( $N = 173$ )

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Uncomfortable for TB during the pandemic	3.50	.9978
Panic when TB during the pandemic	3.38	1.0316
Irregular heartbeat when TB during the pandemic	3.16	.9689
Fear losing a life when TB during the pandemic	3.02	1.1124
Nervous or anxious when watching news and stories about COVID-19	3.28	1.0374

From the results, it can be seen that most of the respondents do not feel at ease when they travelled during COVID-19 even though the government allow them to do so. The tourist felt that they might get infected during their trip. Thus, they would not enjoy and experience the tours as they wished. Besides that, the results also highlighted that the respondents still felt unsure about their psychological factors when they participate in a travel bubble during this pandemic situation. The COVID-19 pandemic is still new to all; hence the respondents still do not have a deep understanding of travelling, especially in the travel bubble during this situation.

Table 5 below highlights the respondents risk attitude towards the travel bubble. The majority of the respondents did not agree about not accepting travel bubble with family and friends ( $M = 2.95$ ), local friends and relatives to travel bubbles destinations ( $M = 2.80$ ), believing friends and relatives follow SOPs during the travel bubble ( $M = 2.91$ ), accommodation and facilities used in travel bubble were sanitised properly according to SOPs ( $M = 2.84$ ) and believe other tourists at travel bubble destinations follow the SOPs ( $M = 2.96$ ). However, the respondents also indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed about not gathering with friends and relatives after their travel bubble ( $M = 3.21$ ).

Table 5: Risk Attitude ( $N = 173$ )

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
I cannot accept TB with family & friends	2.95	.9872
I cannot accept local friends and relatives to TB destinations	2.80	.9863
Will not gather with friends and relatives after their TB	3.21	1.0773
I cannot believe friends and relatives follow SOPs during TB	2.91	1.0278

Cannot accept accommodation & facilities used in TB were sanitised properly according to SOPs	2.84	1.0138
I cannot believe other tourists at TB destinations follow the SOPs	2.96	1.0831

The results above were indicating the respondents' risk attitude above participating in the travel bubble. The outbreak does not prohibit the respondents from mixing around with their friends and relatives. They believe that everyone is taking extra precautions by complying with the SOPs and regulations set by the government and the Ministry of Health. In addition, with the existence of the travel bubble, they also believe the operators who are managing the travel bubble package would fully comply with every procedure that has been set up. It includes stakeholders such as tourism and hospitality operators. Hence, it convinces everyone that the travel bubble is safe to participate.

The respondents' travel intentions also presented in Table 6 below. The majority of the respondents agreed to take travel bubble during a pandemic is safer ( $M = 3.09$ ), became excited when seeing other people taking travel bubble ( $M = 3.20$ ), travel to travel bubble destinations in the future ( $M = 3.90$ ), prefer to travel bubble destinations compared with other forms of tourism ( $M = 3.69$ ) and will recommend travel bubble destinations to relative or friends ( $M = 3.79$ ).

Table 6: Travel Intention ( $N = 173$ )

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Taking TB during a pandemic is safer	3.09	.9898
Seeing people TB, I became excited to do the same	3.20	.9720
I want to travel to TB destination in the future	3.90	.7795
I prefer to travel to TB destination compared with other forms of tourism	3.69	2.4428
Will recommend TB destinations to relative or friends	3.79	.8300

The results above discussed the respondents have an intention to travel with the travel bubble. The respondents believe that using a travel bubble to travel during this pandemic outbreak is safer. It is because the government has made a risk assessment before introducing this initiative to the people. All SOPs and rules have been detailed to take care of the tourists, and all stakeholders will surely abide by each law. In addition to having the intention to participate in this travel bubble, respondents will also introduce this initiative to their friends and other family members. Promoting this travel bubble to others will restore the tourism and hospitality sector in our country.



The findings of this study were further analysed using One Way ANOVA tests. A statistical difference in travel anxiety between gender were identified ( $F = 7.964$ ,  $p = .005$ ). Table 7 below highlights the results of the test.

Table 7: Gender and Travel Anxiety ( $N = 173$ )

Item	Gender	Mean (SD)	F-Value	P-Value
Will panic when travelling during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Male	3.11 (.938)	7.964	.005
	Female	3.56 (1.055)		

The result shows significant differences between gender and travel anxiety:  $M_{Male} = 3.11$  vs  $M_{Female} = 3.56$ . These findings indicate that women would experience travel anxiety compared to men when travelling during COVID-19. Women tend to have panic disorder, and this would ruin their travelling experience. Even though the government promotes the Travel Bubble concept, the women tourists would feel insecure about participating. With that notion, having insecure feelings would result in bland experience bland and monetary waste. Hence, the government need to give assurance that the travel bubble is safe. Apart from that, all tourism and hospitality industry operators must work together to ensure that this target felt safe when travelling.

Meanwhile, the ANOVA test also revealed significant differences between gender in their travel intention ( $F = 4.750$ ,  $p = .031$ ). Table 8 below indicates the results.

Table 8: Gender and Travel Intention ( $N = 173$ )

Item	Gender	Mean (SD)	F-Value	P-Value
Taking Travel Bubble during a pandemic is safer.	Male	3.29 (.898)	4.750	.031
	Female	2.96 (1.027)		

The findings show a significant difference between gender and travel intention:  $M_{Male} = 3.29$  vs  $M_{Female} = 2.96$ . The result shows that men think that taking a travel bubble during the pandemic is safer. These findings indicate a correlation with travel anxiety, where men were found not to have high travel anxiety compared to women. Women think it is unsafe to travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also because women have a great concern about the current pandemic situation. Therefore, if this pandemic still hits the world, the government should develop a strategy for the travel bubble to ensure the tourism and hospitality sector sustains and continues to operate. With such effort, the tourist will feel secure and safe, especially when travelling within the country.

The analyses also further tested across the age groups and travel behaviour. Significant differences were found between age groups and travel behaviour ( $F = 2.674$ ,  $p = .049$ ). Table 9 highlights the result.

Table 9: Age Groups and Travel Behaviour ( $N = 173$ )

Item	Age	Mean (SD)	F-Value	P-Value
Visit fewer COVID-19 destinations.	18 – 20 years old	3.33 (.577)	2.674	.049
	21 – 30 years old	4.04 (1.141)		
	31 – 40 years old	3.73 (1.120)		
	More than 41 years old	4.30 (.980)		

The findings show a significant difference in travel behaviour across the age groups:  $M_{18-20\text{ years}} = 3.33$  vs  $M_{21-30\text{ years}} = 4.04$  vs  $M_{31-40\text{ years}} = 3.73$  vs  $M_{\text{More than 41 years}} = 4.30$ . From the results, 41 years and above respondents were more likely to visit fewer COVID-19 destinations. However, the other age groups would visit a destination that has minimal COVID-19 cases. It is because most of this age group take a precaution measure when travelling. Therefore, they will choose a destination that is fewer cases to ensure they are safe during and after the travelling.

Furthermore, the results also indicate that although this age group will participate in the travel bubble, the family's safety is their priority when travelling. They do not want to become the spreader of the disease when returning from the trip. Thus, destinations that will become a tourist choice for the travel bubble should come out will a strategy to control the crowd. A standard operation procedure (SOPs) when travelling to a destination needs to be introduced. It will encourage the traveller to comply with the SOPs to ensure their safety and the other tourists.

Table 10 below show the findings of the respondents' risk attitude across age groups. The analyses show a significant difference between the age groups and risk attitude ( $F = 2.893$ ,  $p = .037$ ).

Table 10: Age Groups and Risk Attitude ( $N = 173$ )

Item	Age	Mean (SD)	F-Value	P-Value
I cannot believe friends and relatives follow SOP during TB.	18 – 20 years old	3.00 (.000)	2.893	.037
	21 – 30 years old	2.63 (1.082)		
	31 – 40 years old	3.00 (1.055)		
	More than 41 years old	3.22 (.796)		

As depicted in the table above, there is a significant difference in the risk attitude across the age groups:  $M_{18-20\text{ years}} = 3.00$  vs  $M_{21-30\text{ years}} = 2.63$  vs  $M_{31-40\text{ years}} = 3.00$  vs  $M_{\text{More than 41 years}} = 3.22$ . The results show that the age group of 41 years old and above is curious

if their friends and relatives follow standard operating procedures during travel bubbles. These findings were also found correlated with their travel behaviour where they intent to visit fewer cases destination when they go for travelling.

Furthermore, the results also revealed that other age groups were concerned if their friends and relatives were complying with SOPs when travelling. It can be seen through infection among friends and families who were returning from other places. Hence, it is the individual responsibility to maintain personal safety and comply with each SOPs to reduce the risk of infection to the community. Moreover, all tourism and hospitality operators should always remind their tourists and guests to always adhere to SOPs when travelling. On that point, complying with SOPs will reduce the rate of infection and revive the tourism and hospitality industry in a destination.

## **5 Conclusion**

Empirical findings were explored through this study to predict the tourist travel behaviour, travel anxiety, risk attitudes and travel intention to travel bubble destinations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study could be used as extended literature for the tourism and hospitality industries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. There are seven significant findings were revealed from this study about the tourists: 1) will become more careful in choosing their travel bubble destinations, 2) will feel anxious when travelling to COVID-19 destinations even there are fewer cases, 3) will have a positive attitude about their friends and families who visited travel bubble destinations, 4) will recommend to their relatives and friends to visit travel bubble destinations, 5) women tend to have travel anxiety; 6) men have an intention to visit travel bubble destinations, 6) individual age 41 years old and above will visit fewer COVID-19 cases, and 7) concern if friends and families following standard operation procedures (SOPs). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly influences people psychology and physiology.

Besides that, the findings of this study also identified the possible ways that the government should consider when introducing a travel bubble to tourists. In revitalising the national economy, the government must carefully research this travel bubble initiative. Many aspects should be emphasised where the COVID-19 virus is threatening human lives for almost two years since 2019. The tourism and hospitality sector was hugely affected, and Malaysia has lost its earnings from this source. Therefore, introducing tourists to visit travel bubble destinations is a wise action. However, proper plans and standard operation procedures (SOPs) must be thoroughly reviewed. All stakeholders must play an important role to ensure this initiative can be implemented and run smoothly.

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