

Online Information Search Behaviour During Pandemic Covid – 19 among Young Travellers in Malaysia

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Abstract

During the Coronavirus illness (COVID-19) epidemic, young generations became accustomed to searching for travel and tourism information on the internet. As a result of the pandemic's limits on movement, Internet usage has risen dramatically. The developments in online information search related to travel and tourism must be investigated in order to aid the tourist industry's sustainability. During the Movement Control Order (MCO) period, this study looked at how young Malaysians searched for travel and tourism-related information online. The descriptive study was used to evaluate four variables: prior travel experience, online information participation, content, and travelling needs. An online poll was used to gather information from Malaysians across the country's 14 states. The replies of 348 people were analysed to see how the younger generation in Malaysia uses the internet to find information. According to the findings, nearly 90% of those surveyed have travelled at least once. Trivago.com is the most popular travel site, and Facebook is the most popular social networking platform, according to the statistics. In terms of content, the majority of searches are for travel destinations, although the majority of travellers' needs are for domestic travel. The findings of this research can be used to design marketing tactics for tourism products as well as recovery measures for the travel and tourism industry. This research can also add to our understanding of Malaysia's information search systems. This will assist Malaysia's tourism industry in making more informed decisions.

Keywords: Online Information Search, Travel Pattern, Young Travellers', Pandemic

Introduction

The information search process is crucial as it represents the primary stage at which marketers can influence consumers' decision-making process. The information that is obtained through the search process could be used to influence consumers' future travel behaviour intentions. The analysis of the online information search process or pre-purchase

behaviour is crucial in helping to generate positive perceptions held by tourists to ensure the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry.

The information search process typically requires online technology and is a required in digital and SMART tourism. Since March 2020, the world has been battling the coronavirus pandemic (also known as COVID-19). On 16 March 2020, the Malaysian Government enforced the Movement Control Order (MCO) to inhibit the spread of the virus in the country. During this period, travel and tourism-related activities were prohibited, and stay-at-home orders were imposed. As a result, housebound citizens turned to the Internet, which has become indispensable in connecting people, businesses, and the world. Therefore, how Malaysians search online for information about travel and tourism during the MCO period and their response to travel need to be explored as the data can be used to forecast the future of tourism in Malaysia. Accordingly, this study aims to explore information search behaviour among Malaysian travellers and tourists.

Previous studies on online information search behaviour have been undertaken, with a specific focus on several areas, including factors influencing online search information, determinants towards online search information, the role of information search and product knowledge, and usefulness of various information sources in collecting information (Dutta & Das, 2017; Grønflaten, 2009; Gursoy, 2019; Lo et al., 2013; No & Kim, 2015). In a study on the effect of prior destination experience on online information search behaviour, Lehto et al. (2006) proposed a conceptual framework that examines the relationship between prior experience with a destination and (i) online information involvement (offline information search and web user experience); (ii) degree of online search; and (iii) the content of the online search. In another study, Draper (2016) explored the differences in prior travel experience and tourist information sources. The study identified various types of information sources related to travel and tourism, including websites and social media, which affected tourist information search behaviour. As there are limited studies that focus on Malaysia, it is necessary to explore and understand consumer online search behaviour in travel and tourism in the country.

Online technology has become widespread among the younger generation. The findings of a study conducted to examine the travel patterns among the younger generation in Malaysia (Hamid et al., 2020) revealed that travel, regardless of domestic or international, has become a lifestyle choice among the younger generation. The study also found that these young travellers represent a powerful market as they regularly use social media platforms to share their experiences. Because of the pandemic and travel restrictions, it is useful to examine the online information search behaviour of young travellers in Malaysia.

This study aims to examine online search behaviour among young travellers in Malaysia during the MCO period. The outcome of this study on prior experience, online information involvement, online search content and travellers' requirements could be useful to forecast post-COVID-19 travel behaviour among Malaysians and the future of digital tourism in Malaysia. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study.

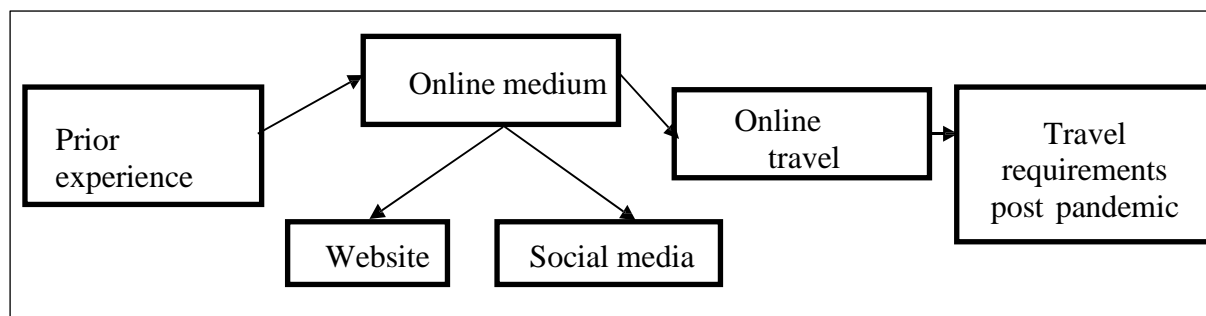


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model of Study Adapted from (Lehto et al., 2006)

Literature Review

This study extends the previous study by Lehto et al (2006) on information search behaviour by including travellers' requirements by young travelers in Malaysia. Prior travel experience is one of the factors that influence online information search. The study by Draper, 2016 found a significant relationship between prior travelling experience and information search. The study by Lehto et al. (2006) has shown that prior experience and knowledge of a destination influence both the content of the search and the degree of search that a traveller engages in online while planning a trip. Therefore, this study examines prior experience based on variables such as travel partner, travel frequency, and travel destination. All these components may influence the online travel information search behaviour.

The information search process is one of the most critical and complex components of the consumer decision-making process, particularly in the context of travel and tourism. The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a massive impact on the travel and tourism industry. In another study, Ranasinghe et al (2020) suggest that the price levels of many travel products may drop significantly to encourage visits and increase demand from potential market segments. Online information search data could be organised for the consumers to actively collect, utilise data, and create better buying choices. Social media platforms also facilitate travel information search. Furthermore, internet search engines connect travellers to travel service providers online through information search (Qian et al., 2015). This study analyses the trends of online information search involvement by examining websites and social media platforms used by customers to search for information.

In searching for information, several keywords are used by travellers when looking for tourism-related information about a specific destination. Several studies (Pan et al., 2007; Xiang et al., 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) have identified the following tourism-related keywords: accommodation, hotel, activities, attractions, parks, events, tourism, restaurant, shopping and nightlife. In their study, Jacobsen & Munar (2012) have identified factors other than the destination to include choice of accommodation, choice of activities at destination, choice of eating places and choice of packaged tours.

Meanwhile, Lehto et al (2006) classify travel content into three categories of information:

- a) experiential - tour operator, people's personal travel sites, travel guide sites, travel magazine sites, local travel company sites, and special-interest sites;
- b) logistic - destination, map, accommodation, local convention and visitors bureau (CVB); and
- c) transportation - car rental, airline, travel package.

Accordingly, this study examines the trends of online travel information search content (travel destination, accommodation, airline, tour package, theme park and food or gastronomic activities).

Travel will continue to change after the pandemic as travellers prioritise safety and health. Travellers could be advised to opt for domestic tourism instead of travelling abroad for the time being (Wen et al., 2020). Travellers are also now encouraged to purchase travel insurance when booking trips to ensure coverage against illness, including COVID-19 (Wen et al., 2020). In light of this, trends on travellers' requirements are also explored in this study.

Previous studies related to travel behaviour among the younger generation have been undertaken by several researchers (Dale & Ritchie, 2020; Cavagnaro, Staffieri, Hughes, Wang & Shu, 2015; Lim, Ramli, Yusof & Cheah, 2015; Ting, Chiu & Kayat, 2015; Faat, Nasir & Noor, 2017; Hamid et al., 2020). Motivation and barriers to travelling are significant factors to explore as the young travellers' segment has a high market penetration and plays an important role in the tourism market (Chiu et al., 2015). There are various motivation and barriers to travelling among young travellers in Malaysia (Hamid et al., 2020), but the pandemic that has affected the tourism industry which affected travel restriction. However, tourism industry need to survive and this highlights the need for digitalisation of tourism products. Hence, an analysis of young travellers' online behaviour during the pandemic could provide insights to help forecast the future of digital tourism marketing and capture this growing market.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design. The unit of analysis is Malaysian citizens across all 14 states of Malaysia. The population of this study refers to the population of Malaysia, which is 32.6 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Based on the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) sample size formula, the number of samples required for this population is 386. In this study, data were collected from 348 respondents via online data collection from 22 April 2020 until 1 May 2020 (2 weeks).

A structured questionnaire consisting of four sections was employed in this study. A pre-test of instruments was conducted with two academic experts to ensure content validity and reliability, followed by a pilot test from 2 April 2020 until 10 April 2020 with 30 respondents. The final data from 348 respondents were then analysed; in particular, a descriptive data analysis using minimum and maximum values, percentages and frequency, was applied.

Results

The first part of the results presents the demographic profiles of the respondents. Table 1 illustrates the demographic profiles of the 348 respondents.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristics		Percentage
Gender	Female	77
	Male	23
Age	18-23	53
	24-29	11
	30-35	9
	36-41	11
Locality	East Coast	50
	Central	24
	North	9
	East	2
	South	7
Occupation	Self employed	6
	Private Sector	14
	Government Sector	22
	Student	45

Out of 348 young travellers who participated in the survey, 77 per cent were females and 23 per cent, males. The dominant age group of the respondents was 18-23 years, which made up 53 per cent. Almost two-thirds of the respondents (60.2 per cent) were from the East Coast. Respondents from the Central region made up 25 per cent, and the rest were from the North (nine per cent), East Malaysia (two per cent), and the South (seven per cent). A large proportion of the respondents were students (45 per cent), followed by respondents from the government sector (22 per cent) and respondents from the private sector (14 per cent).

Prior Experience

Various variables have been used to examine prior experience. This study examines prior experience based on travel frequency, travel purpose, travel destination, and travel partner. Table 2 summarises the prior experience of the respondents.

Table 2

Prior Experiences of Respondents

Characteristics		Percentage
Travel Frequency	Once a year	39
	Twice a year	29
	Thrice a year	12
Travel Purpose	More than thrice	12
	Formal Purpose	8
	Leisure	51
	Family	26
Travel Destination	Study	16
	Domestic	71
	Both	27
Travel Partner	Alone	9
	Spouse	8
	Friend	25
	Family	47
	Colleagues	8
	Join Group	8

As presented in Table 2, 39 per cent of the respondents travel at least once a year, followed by 29 per cent who travel twice a year. Nineteen per cent of the respondents are frequent travelers whereas 12 per cent travel more than thrice in a year.

In terms of purpose of travel, leisure is the main reason cited by 51 per cent of the respondents, followed by family reasons (about 26 per cent) and study purpose (16 per cent). The least cited purpose of travel is “formal reasons” (38 respondents).

Another element of prior experience relates to travel destination. Seventy-one per cent of the respondents indicated that they had travelled domestically. Meanwhile, 27 per cent of the respondents had experienced both domestic and international travel.

A majority of the respondents mentioned their family (248 respondents) as their travel companion, followed by friends (33 respondents). An almost equal number of respondents said that they had travelled alone (45 respondents), travelled with their colleagues (44 respondents) and travelled with their spouses (41 respondents). Only 13 respondents indicated that they joined group tours

Online Information Involvement

This study examines online information involvement based on the response that examines the search for information about travel and tourism during the MCO COVID-19. Figure 2 highlights the finding on the website that has been used to search for information about travel and tourism during the MCO COVID-19.

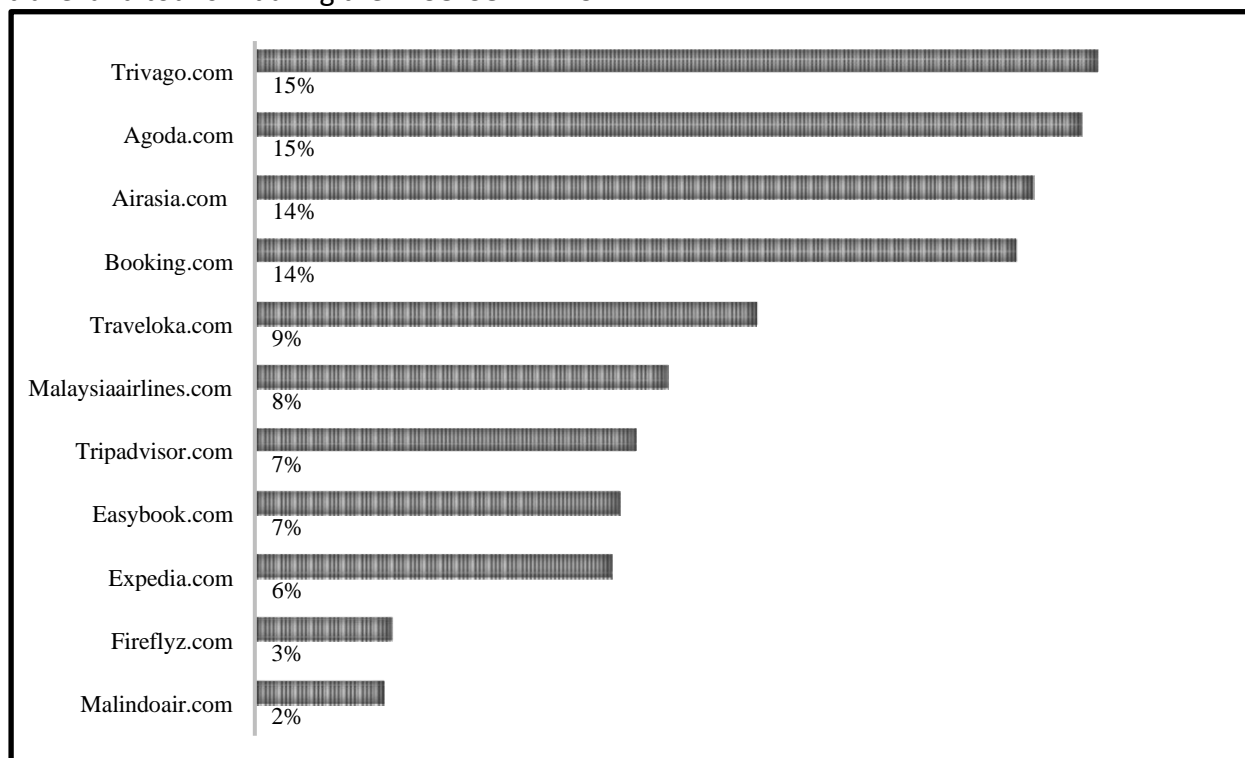


Figure 2: Website Used for Online Travel Search

The analysis of online information involvement included a review of the websites used or visited by the respondents to gather information about travel and tourism during the MCO period. The most popular travel websites visited by the respondents were Trivago.com and Agoda.com (15 per cent). This may be an indication that the respondents were searching for

accommodation promotions and rates comparison in Trivago.com for their future vacations. Only one respondent visited Redbus online and Tripeazy (0.01 per cent), making these websites the least popular.

In examining online information involvement, the study also looked at the social media platforms used for information search. Figure 3 lists the social media platforms used for online information search.

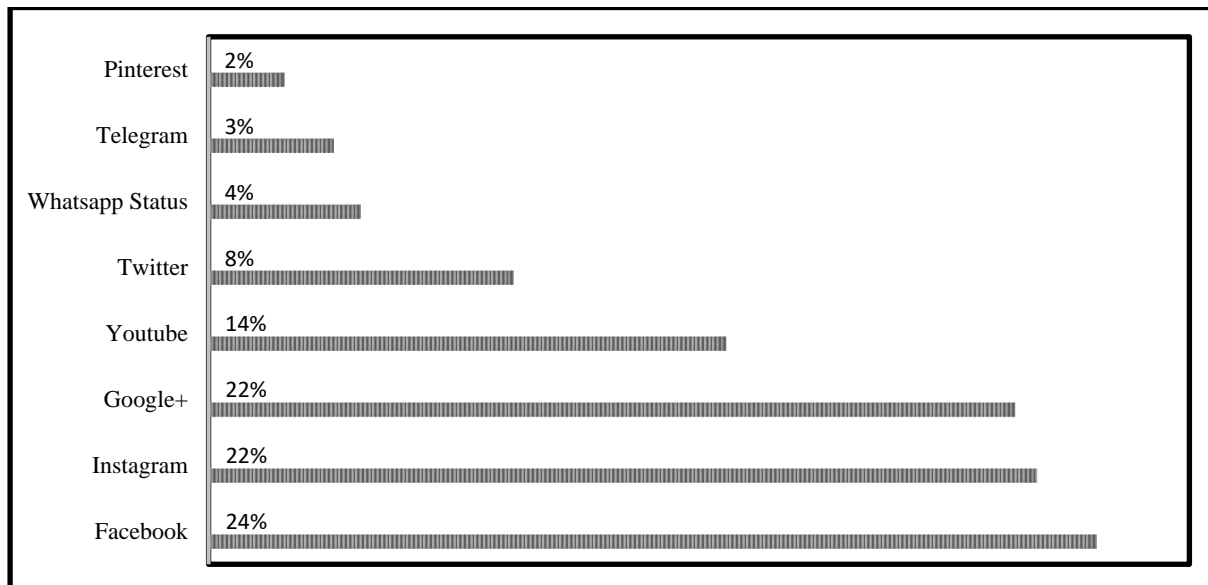


Figure 1: Social Media Used for Online Information Search

Based on the results, 24 per cent of the respondents prefer to use Facebook as their platform to search for travel and tourism information, followed by Instagram (22 per cent) and Google+ (22 per cent). The least popular platform is LinkedIn, with only 3 respondents (0.1 per cent) who use it.

Content of Online Information Search

This study examines the content of online information searched by Malaysian travellers. Figure 4 sets out the content of online information searched.

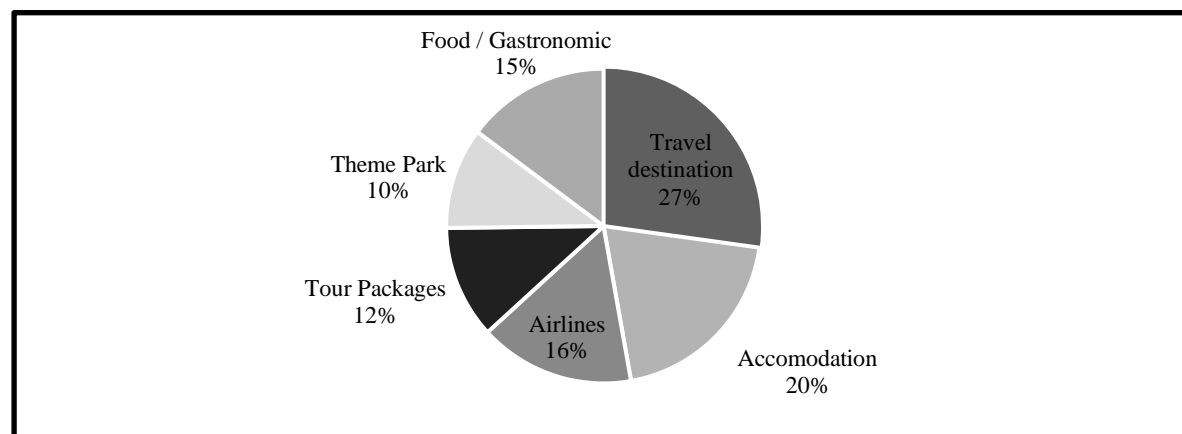


Figure 4: Content of Online Information Search

Based on the results, the content most searched for by Malaysians is information on travel destinations (27 per cent), followed by information on accommodation (20 per cent).

Respondents also searched for information on airlines (16 per cent), food or gastronomic activities (15 per cent), tour packages (12 per cent), and theme parks (ten per cent).

Travel Requirement

The findings on travellers' requirements reflect Malaysian travellers' expectations post-COVID-19. The results are summarised in Figure 5.

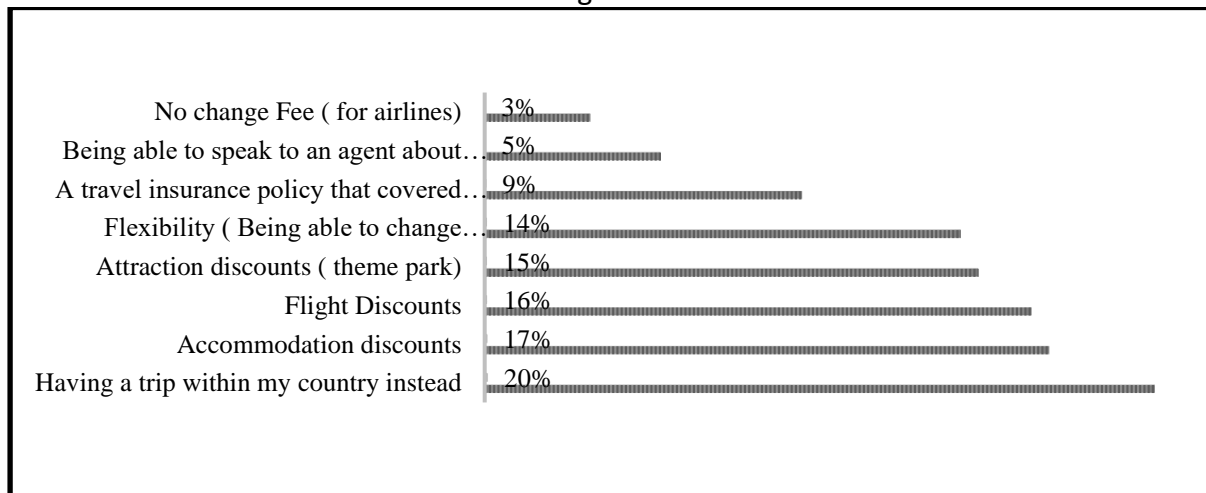


Figure 2: Requirement for Travel

Figure 5 shows that 20 per cent of the respondents require domestic travel, whereas only 3 per cent of the respondents require a “no change fee” policy for flights. The results also reveal that attractive offers such as discounts on accommodation (17 per cent), flights (16 per cent), and tourist attractions (15 per cent) may encourage travel among Malaysians.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to look at the information search behaviour among young travellers in Malaysia during the MCO or conditional MCO (CMCO) periods. The respondents in this study were aged 18-40 years. The outcome of this study is significant as many of the travellers in Malaysia, especially domestic travellers, are from the younger generation.

The first finding of this study reveals the trends of prior experience among young travellers. The majority of young travellers in Malaysia travel once a year, followed by those who travel twice a year. The findings reflect the different travel patterns among Malaysian travellers, with some travelling several times annually and some undertaking proper travel planning. When it comes to travel purpose, most of the respondents travel for leisure, followed by respondents who travel to visit family. The findings of this study are inconsistent with the statistics released by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, which show that most respondents travel to visit friends and family, whereas travelling for leisure comes in third place after shopping. However, the discrepancies could be attributable to the differences in the demographic profiles of the respondents. In terms of travel destination, both domestic and international destinations are popular choices among young Malaysian travellers. Finally, most Malaysian young travellers tend to travel with their family, followed by friends.

The second finding of this study relates to the trends of online information involvement in Malaysia. According to a study on the impact of online content on European tourism, online content, including operator websites and social media content, is a major source of travel

information (Oxford Economics, 2020). The results of this study reveal that the most popular tourism and travel websites are Trivago.com and Agoda.com. Statistics from Trivago.com show that in the year 2019, there were 120 million travellers worldwide. According to the Trivago 2019 Report (2019), the top filters were price, star rating, guest rating and top amenities, indicating that price, hotel quality and amenities provided were the most important factors in deciding the ideal hotel. This study revealed that most Malaysian travellers use Facebook as their preferred social media platform to search for information. A previous study has found that Facebook communication of hotel groups regarding special promotion and recommendation of destinations is more likely to influence customers to engage more actively with their Facebook posts (Yoo & Lee, 2017). Based on statistics on social media in Malaysia, the most used social media platform is Facebook (80.23%). This study confirms that most Malaysian travellers use Facebook to search for information relating to travel and tourism.

The third finding of the study is on the trends of travel and tourism information search content. The previous study by Lehto et al (2006) has indicated that most travellers look for experiential and logistic information when undertaking online searches. This study shows that most Malaysian travellers search for information that is related to travel destinations and accommodation.

The fourth finding of the study relates to the trends of travellers' requirements. In this study, most respondents chose to go for trips within the country after the pandemic. It has been reported that travellers would prefer domestic destinations before venturing out to regional destinations (Liang-Pholsena, 2020) like Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand. Also, it would seem that discounts offer an incentive to return to travel (Elliott, 2020). This is in line with the present study's results, which show that the respondents require discounts on accommodation, tourist attractions (theme park), and flight fares after the pandemic.

Conclusion

This study has identified travel and tourism information search trends among Malaysians. The results of this study indicate that most Malaysians travel either once a year or twice (with proper planning). Also, the respondents travel more for leisure and family-related purposes and tend to travel with their family members and friends. The findings also conclude that the respondents lean toward Trivago.com and Agoda.com as their preferred websites and Facebook as their preferred social media platform for information search on travel and tourism. Meanwhile, the results also show that most respondents searched for content related to the travel destination during the MCO period in Malaysia. Finally, this study also highlights the requirements of Malaysian travellers after the MCO or CMCO period in Malaysia, with most of them preferring to travel domestically and be offered discounts for accommodation.

However, this study is merely a preliminary analysis of the trends of information search behaviour among Malaysian travellers. A causal analysis might require examining how each of these trends affects the travel patterns among Malaysians after the end of the MCO or CMCO period in Malaysia. Further, this study can be extended to include more samples and be conducted over a longer period to generalise the result, especially since one of the limitations of this study is that data collection (preliminary analysis) was undertaken over a short period of two weeks.

Hence, the results of this study could be used by stakeholders in the travel and tourism industry to forecast the progress of tourism in Malaysia and provide insights to help the industry players develop the right marketing strategies for business recovery. In conclusion, the Internet should be used effectively by the industry players as a medium of online communication to promote the travel and tourism business in Malaysia.

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