

Media Content Analysis on Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Tourism Industry in Malaysia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

RECEIVED: 15-Aug-20

REVISED: 05-Oct-20

ACCEPTED: 26-Oct-20

PUBLISHED: 07-Dec-20

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has created a profound negative impact on the economy and society and the tourism industry has suffered gravely as well. It has changed human behaviour and social life and also the way businesses operate, especially in the context of tourism. This paper aims to review the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry in Malaysia. Dissemination of information is vital to comprehend the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and media content analysis is an alternative tool to provide such information. The media reports essential information on how COVID-19 affects the tourism industry and national economy, which shapes public perception on these matters. This paper highlighted the uses of media content analysis and the Leximancer software to interpret secondary data and to offer an alternative perspective for understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry in Malaysia through the media landscape, in a chronological manner from January to July 2020.

Keywords: COVID-19, impacts, Leximancer, Malaysia, media content analysis, tourism.

Introduction

The Novel Coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, is an infectious disease which began in Wuhan, China. COVID-19 is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and is instigating widespread repercussions around the world affecting everything, from public health to the global economy (WHO, 2020). The closure of borders, implementations of social distancing and travel restrictions have created barriers to international travelling and to the movement of people. Consequently, travel and tourism have been severely affected. News and media play a vital part in reporting the impact of COVID-19 and thus provide an understanding of how the tourism and hospitality industry, as well as the national economy, is being affected by COVID-19. However, the impact of COVID-19 on tourism from a

chronological standpoint is unclear, as is the severity of such an impact.

Travel is constantly affected by the spread of infectious diseases (Chan & King, 2020). Tourism is a primary global industry responsible for 10.4% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) and 10% of employment (Joppe, 2020). Travelling to and from China was disastrous due to COVID-19. Airlines have either cancelled all flights or drastically reduced flights, and Hong Kong had closed its borders (Joppe, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared COVID-19 a global health crisis and fears that this pandemic may affect the tourism industry in the long run due to the closures of the airport, cancellations of flights and closure of borders which may significantly impact the economy (Davies, 2020).

According to Quah & Alias (2020), China's GDP has suffered eight times more when compared with the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) (2020) claimed that it would take nine months for the situation to return to normal due to the scale of the pandemic. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be much more significant, as tourists from China are the major segment for Malaysia. Since 7 February 2020, West Malaysia has stopped all flights from Hubei and East Malaysia has announced a travel ban on all flights from China.

Reported cases of COVID-19 are presented in Figure 1 (Roser, Ritchie, Ortiz-Ospina, & Hasell, 2020). However, cases have reduced and the situation appears to be under control. The tourism industry was projected to be among the most affected industry by this pandemic (Permal & Jamal, 2020). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian government imposed a Movement Control Order (MCO) to decrease the risk of spread of the infection, putting the projected annual tourist arrivals of nearly 27 million in great uncertainty (Kaur, Kunasegaran, Singh, Salome & Sandhu, 2020). The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) even called off the Visit Malaysia Campaign 2020 (VM2020), and it is believed that the tourism industry has lost RM3.37 billion in the first two months of 2020 (Permal & Jamal, 2020).

Reflecting on the new phenomena of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper highlight the need to better understand this phenomenon by utilizing media content analysis and the Leximancer software to interpret secondary data to

offer an alternative perspective for understanding the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry in Malaysia.

Methodology

Media analysis was initiated by Harold Lasswell in the 1920s as a systematic technique to study mass media and propaganda and systematically explain the manifest content of communication (Macnamara, 2005). It is a type of qualitative content analysis which aims to be objective, precise, and general in describing what is said on a given subject in each place and time (Macnamara, 2005). This method enables the researcher to examine large data over a time period to identify discourses and their meanings (Macnamara, 2005). Media content analysis emphasizes on one explicit part of the media landscape such as editorial media, which consists of news articles, online sites, opinion columns, radio broadcasts, and social media.

For this paper, the media content analysis was utilized to provide narratives of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry in Malaysia (Albors-Garrigos, Haddaji & Garcia-Segovia, 2020). The media's representation of the issue may contribute to a better understanding of the social situation (Greeno & Hall, 1997; Leo & David, 2020). Since COVID-19 is a new disease and has created unprecedented times, this method of analysis will provide an analysis on online news that reflects the actual situation. The media content analysis

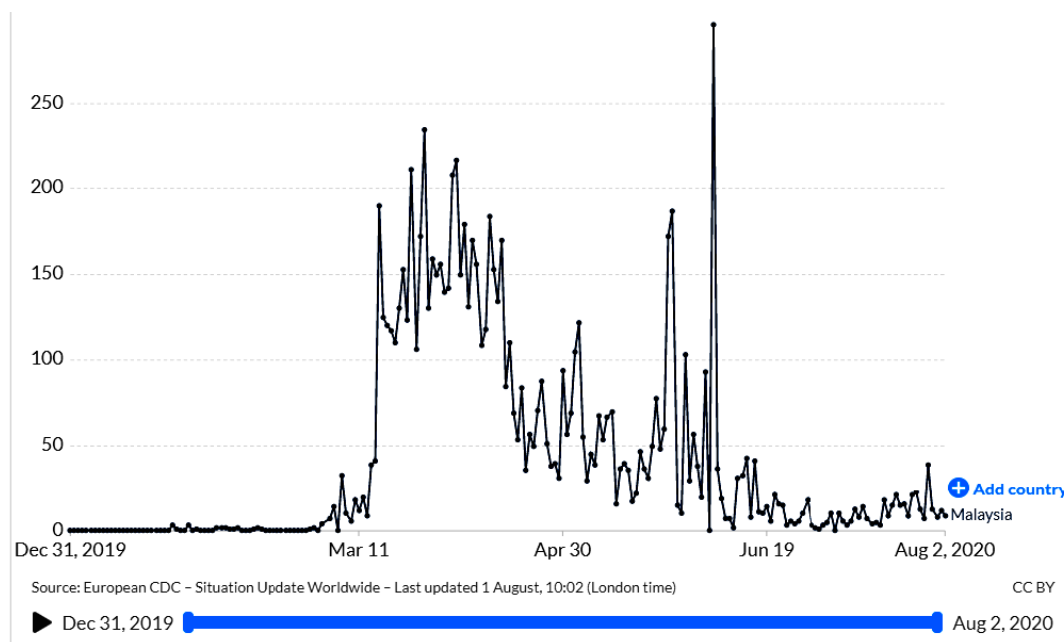


Figure 1: Malaysia confirmed COVID-19 cases.

in this paper focuses on local online news articles from The Star, BERNAMA, Malay Mail, Free Malaysia Today, and the New Straits Times.

Media representation on pertinent issues may contribute to a better understanding of how COVID-19 affects Malaysia’s tourism industry (Albors-Garrigos, Haddaji & Garcia-Segovia, 2020). This paper utilized search engine tools and a range of keywords (i.e., COVID-19, Coronavirus, Malaysia, Tourism, Hospitality) to identify online news articles on how COVID-19 impacts Malaysia’s tourism industry. This research was carried out from 1 January 2020–31 July 2020. Irrelevant and redundant information was removed through a team consensus.

The Leximancer software was used to analyze a large amount of qualitative data for media content analysis, as it is able to analyze qualitative textual documents, extract data, and display the results visually (Kivunja, 2013). The Leximancer software produces lists and relationships based on the text collected (Angus, Rintel & Wiles, 2013), thus is considered a reliable statistic. Different themes may arise utilizing computerized model list conception, as Leximancer employs occurrence and co-occurrence counts of words to extort significant conceptual and thematic content directly from the data text. This has created a tailored taxonomy as a concept map, indicating crucial concepts and interconnections between these concepts (Angus, Rintel, & Wiles, 2013). It shows relevant links amongst the key themes, as reported in Figure 2-7.

A total of 256 online news articles extracted from sources such as The Star, Malay Mail, Free Malaysia Today, New

Table 1: Google search results related to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry (1 January 2020–31 July 2020)

Month	Online News
January	38
February	53
March	38
April	38
May	30
June	33
July	26
Total	256

Straits Times, and BERNAMA (Table 1) were uploaded to the Leximancer software on a monthly basis. The results are presented in a conceptual map signifying the main concepts of each month within the data and their relationship. Each conceptual map offered a portion of the ranked concept list of the top-ranking concepts from Leximancer, and each concept is the words collected that commonly appear together throughout the data (Biroscak et al., 2017). The main concepts in each month are discussed in the results and discussions section below.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the impact of COVID-19 in January 2020 is presented in Figure 2. Based on the Leximancer result, it seems that the three highest hits are Coronavirus,

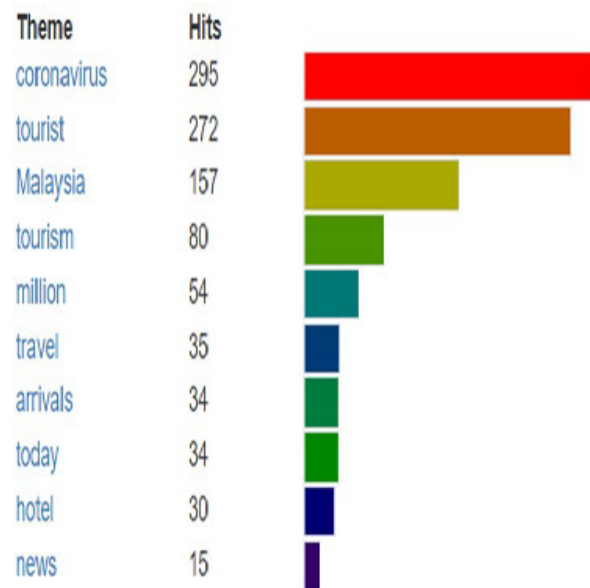
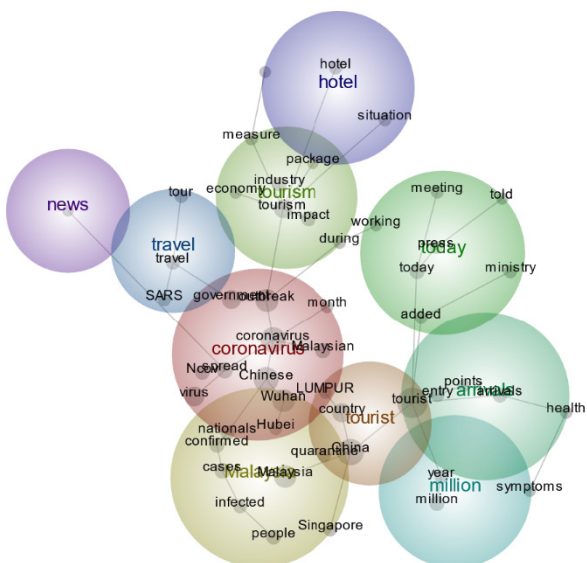


Figure 2: Leximancer results on media news in January 2020.

tourists, and Malaysia. The result shows that the central theme is Coronavirus, with 295 hits and related concepts such as Coronavirus, Chinese, outbreak, Wuhan, virus, spread, Malaysian, and nCoV. In January 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the term used by the media to describe the virus was “Coronavirus 2019 outbreak”, “nCoV” and “SARS-like virus”. The media was still focusing on the situation in China, specifically in Wuhan, where the virus was claimed to have originated from. On 31 January 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 as a global health crisis.

Another central theme was tourist (272 hits), which is linked with concepts such as China, country, and quarantine. China announced a lockdown in Wuhan and other cities in Hubei on 23 January 2020. At this stage, the Malaysian government was still accepting tourists from China. However, on 27 January 2020, the federal government imposed a travel ban on Chinese tourists from the Hubei Province, while the two states in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), who have full control over their immigration regulations, imposed a travel ban on all Chinese tourists.

The results also show Malaysia as one of the main themes (157 hits), related to concepts such as Malaysia, cases, confirmed, people, and nationals. On 25 January 2020, Malaysia reported its first case of COVID-19, a 40-year-old tourist from Wuhan. At the end of January 2020, Malaysia reported eight confirmed cases.

The tourism theme has 80 hits with three related concepts such as tourism, impact, and industry. At the beginning of January 2020, most tourism sites remained open,

and the Malaysian Association of Tour & Travel Agents (MATTA) even stated that tourism had not been significantly affected by COVID-19. The Ministry of Tourism insisted on keeping the arrival target for Visit Malaysia 2020 (VM2020) despite challenges faced by industry players. However, as the SARS outbreak in 2003 profoundly affected Malaysia’s tourism and hospitality industry, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) had established a Tourism Recovery Committee responsible for offering guidelines to tourism operations (MOTAC, 2020). At this point, the government believed that it was still too early to gauge the impact on the tourism sector and to consider any stimulus package.

In January 2020, the media focused on the virus itself, countries and people affected in general, and less emphasis was given to the effects of COVID-19, as it was just the beginning of the pandemic. The results in February 2020 are presented in Figure 3, and the central theme with 318 hits is package, and associates with concepts such as package, stimulus, impact, economic, government, sector, year, and Malaysian. On 27 February 2020, the Malaysian government announced the first stimulus package (worth RM20 billion) to mitigate the economic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. By 28 February 2020, there were 25 confirmed COVID-19 cases.

To enhance domestic tourism, the government offered personal income tax relief for domestic tourism-related expenses and digital vouchers for hotel accommodation, rail tickets, and domestic flights (MFM, 2020). However, families will most likely avoid visiting public places entirely until COVID-19 comes under control.

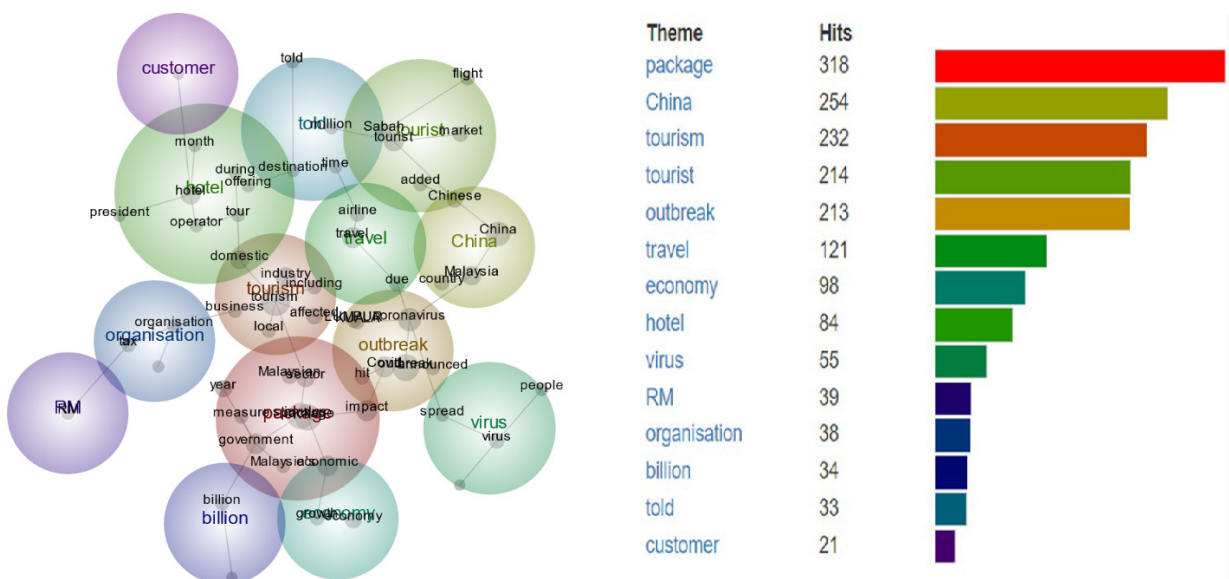


Figure 3: Leximancer results on media news in February 2020.

The government is making efforts to support the sector superficial (EIU, 2020).

With 254 hits and concepts such as China, Malaysia, Chinese, and country, China was revealed to be one of the main themes during February 2020. On 27 January 2020, the Malaysian government deferred visa grants for tourists from Hubei to curb the spread of COVID-19 and on 9 February 2020, travel restrictions were imposed for Chinese visitors from Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces (Karim et al., 2020).

Tourism, industry, domestic, and affected are related concepts for tourism theme with 232 hits. China has been the largest source of foreign tourists for Malaysia (EIU, 2020). MOTAC urged the ministry to rethink the strategy for VM2020 as the tourism industry had faced almost RM3 billion in deficits up to February 2020 due to COVID-19 (Dzulkifly, 2020). Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) reported that almost 96 000 bookings had been cancelled and MATTA reported over 3000 tour group cancellations. The issue of the dependency of Malaysian tourism on Chinese tourists was highlighted and on 4 February 2020, MOTAC suggested focusing on markets which were not affected at that time such as India, West Asia, and South Korea (Yusof, 2020). International travellers navigate via airports where millions of people convene in proximity and this is a significant safety concern. However, domestic tourism offers the alternative of families using private vehicles, which are deemed less risky

(Yusof, 2020). In addition, local business owners, travel companies, hotels, and restaurants have offered promotional packages to attract Malaysians. For example, five-star hotels have reduced their prices and formulated 'staycation' packages which include food and beverages deals (Chan, 2020).

In March 2020, the media started to focus on broader areas impacted by COVID-19. The government attempted to ease the pandemic's effect on the tourism industry by offering double tax deduction on employee training courses, deferring monthly income tax instalments and providing tax exemptions up to six months from March 2020.

The results in March 2020 are presented in Figure 4, and the central theme was COVID with 320 hits, in association with concepts such as COVID, travel, March, outbreak, Coronavirus, and measure. Malaysians did not initially realize how fatal COVID-19 could be, and in January 2020, while China had imposed a lockdown in Wuhan, the Malaysian government still displayed no intention of banning Chinese tourists. However, on 17 March 2020, as the number of confirmed cases reached 673, the Malaysia government announced a 14-day MCO starting on 18 March 2020. On 25 March 2020, the Malaysia government announced the first extension of the MCO from 27 March to 14 April 2020.

For March 2020, tourism and government were revealed to be significant themes with 259 and 218 hits, respectively.

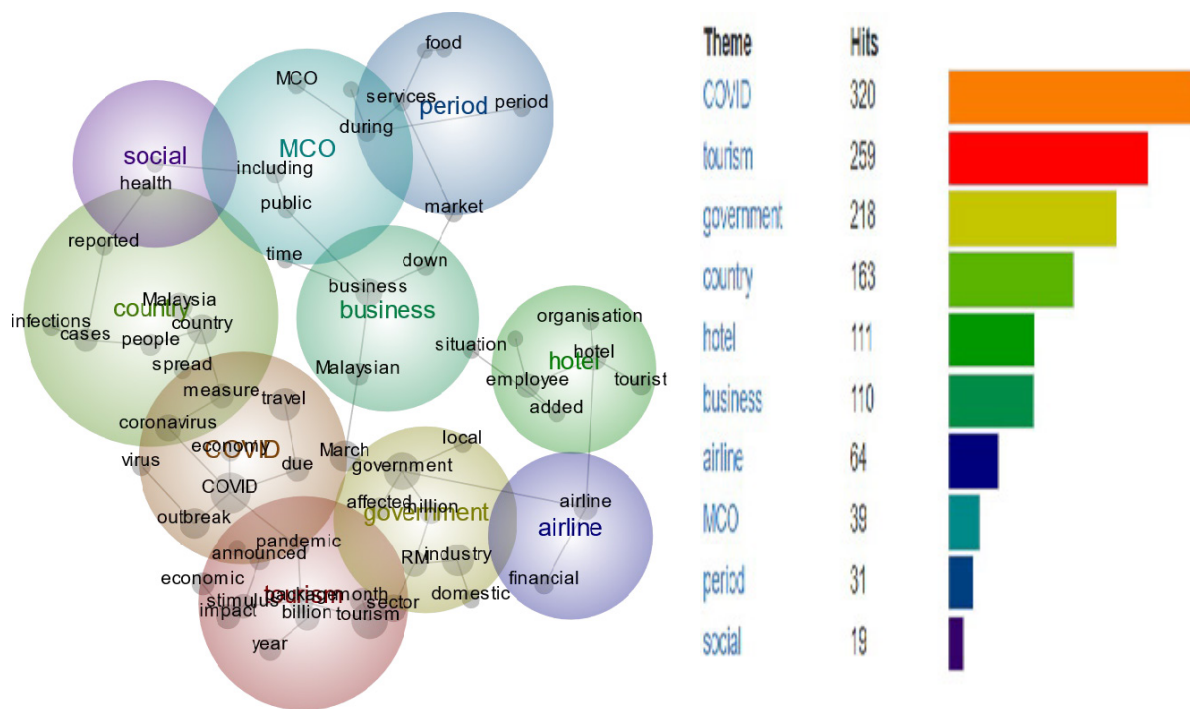


Figure 4: Leximancer results on media news in March 2020.

The tourism theme was associated with concepts such as sector, impact, stimulus, billion, and economic, while the government theme was linked with concepts such as industry, RM, and million, with the latter two being interrelated. Since March 2020, Malaysia's tourism industry has suffered RM3.37 billion losses, with hotel room cancellations amounting to RM68 million, and MOTAC eventually cancelling VM2020. To aid the tourism industry, the Malaysia government revealed a second stimulus package on 27 March 2020, which allocated RM200 million micro-credit schemes for small businesses in the tourism industry. The previous stimulus package allows businesses in the tourism sector to suspend income tax payments for six months, while the second package allows banking institutions to convert credit card balances to long-term loans, offer six-month loan moratoriums and corporate loans restructuring. However, MATTA representatives claimed this was insufficient, as it did not address employee retention issues which are crucial, as it is predicted that there will be almost no tourism activity in April, May, and June 2020. Tourism businesses have indicated possible employee downsizing and many are hesitant about taking up any additional loans for fear that they would be burdened with more debt where recovery is in the long term only.

The lockdown had significantly affected restaurants and eateries across Malaysia, with strict regulations against dining in, allowing only takeaways and deliveries (Razak, 2020). According to Food Industry Asia (2020), the Malaysian government announced the Prihatin Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package 2020 on 27 March 2020 (worth RM1 billion) which offers assistance to local

fishers and farmers to increase production, to ensure food supply remains sufficient.

The results in April 2020 are presented in Figure 5, with the central theme being hotel (278 hits) which is linked with concepts such as Hotel, MCO, people, and operator. The prime minister declared a second extension of the MCO from 10 until 28 April 2020. On 23 April 2020, the prime minister declared a third extension until 12 May 2020 to provide time and space to healthcare employees who were fighting the pandemic and to avoid another wave of infections if the MCO is lifted too soon. The government had identified 63 hotel accommodations as quarantine centers for Malaysians returning from abroad. And fixed a sum of RM150 per day as the cost of hotel accommodation which includes room and food charges. The chosen hotels were offered sales and service tax (SST) exemption as an incentive which helped to ensure the survival of the chosen hotels. However, MAH representatives claimed that based on a survey they had done on 16 April 2020, around 15% of the hotels in Malaysia might have to close down. Some hotel operators stated that they might remain closed till the end of this year, while some will resume their operations after a vaccine is found. Hotels are prohibited from receiving new guests and have served only those who had already checked-in into the hotel before 18 March 2020. Many hotels such as Estadia Hotel and Hatten Place Melaka have issued a memo asking employees to take unpaid leave until 30 June 2020.

Another theme is COVID, which is highly associated with tourism, industry, pandemic, and impact. This is

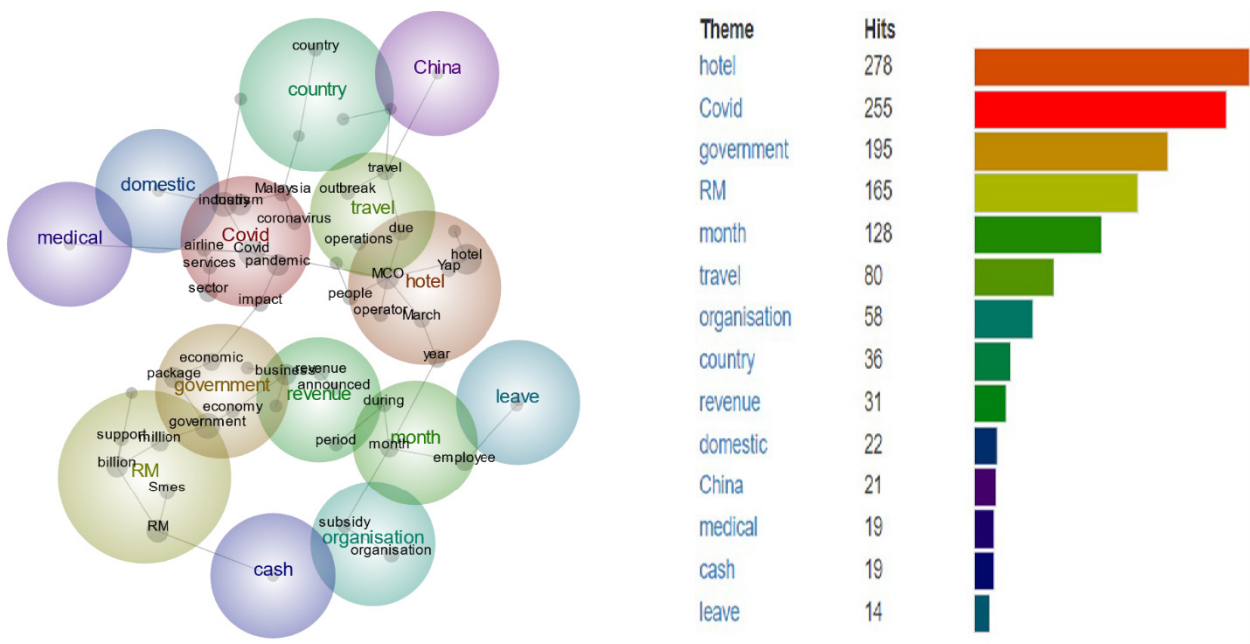


Figure 5: Leximancer results on media news in April 2020.

interrelated with the government theme which includes business, package, and economic concept. The Malaysian government had introduced the third stimulus package on 6 April 2020 (worth RM10 billion) to assist small and medium enterprises affected by the MCO. Nevertheless, MATTA requested the government to extend the wage subsidy programme for another six months or more, as recovery may take longer than expected. Moreover, airline companies such as Malaysia Airlines and AirAsia sought government assistance to secure funds for their survival. On 2 April 2020, AirAsia Group founder, Tony Fernandes, stated that he was working with the government to obtain a loan but has enough cash to last most of this year if sales return. MATTA representatives also urged the government to provide financial support for Malaysia Airlines to ensure it can survive post-COVID-19, as the aviation industry is the core of the entire industry ecosystem. Without airlines to enable the entering of millions of tourists into Malaysia, a domino effect would occur, affecting Malaysia’s economy as a whole. At the end of April 2020, Malaysia had reported 6002 confirmed cases of COVID-19.

The results in May 2020 are presented in Figure 6. Tourism, COVID-19, and travel are the central themes which are linked with concepts such as industry, sector, Pandemic, Malaysia, jobs, impact, business, airlines, and affected. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the private sector is significant, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), who constitute 98.5% of total firms, and who will be severely affected

as they have less financial capital to absorb an economic shock. Those employed in the tourism sector such as in hotels and airlines have experienced losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as they have gone on unpaid leave, experienced pay cuts, and some have lost their jobs. The owners of some of Kuala Lumpur’s finest hotels had to put their properties up for sale as revenues had all dried up due to travel restrictions across the world. At least ten hotels have shut down permanently since May 2020.

As the MOH managed to flatten the curve, on 4 May 2020 the Malaysian government announced a Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) to last till 9 June 2020. The MOH representatives announced that the CMCO showed signs of success as the authorities had managed to keep daily new cases of COVID-19 in double digits with the condition that the public continues to follow the standard operating procedures (SOP) given. Subsequently, MATTA representatives saw the opportunity amid chaos to highlight Malaysia as a safe destination. Nevertheless, the entry bans and border closures have still affected tourism, particularly the aviation industry. MOTAC had initiated recovery plans by focusing on domestic tourism. Penang is planning a survey aimed at gauging the effects of COVID-19 and gathering input from the industry’s stakeholders to establish current and post COVID-19 recovery plans, while Melaka is planning special packages to revive tourism activities. At this stage, tour agents were permitted to operate, but no tourism activities were allowed. At the end of May 2020, Malaysia had reported 7819 confirmed COVID-19 cases.

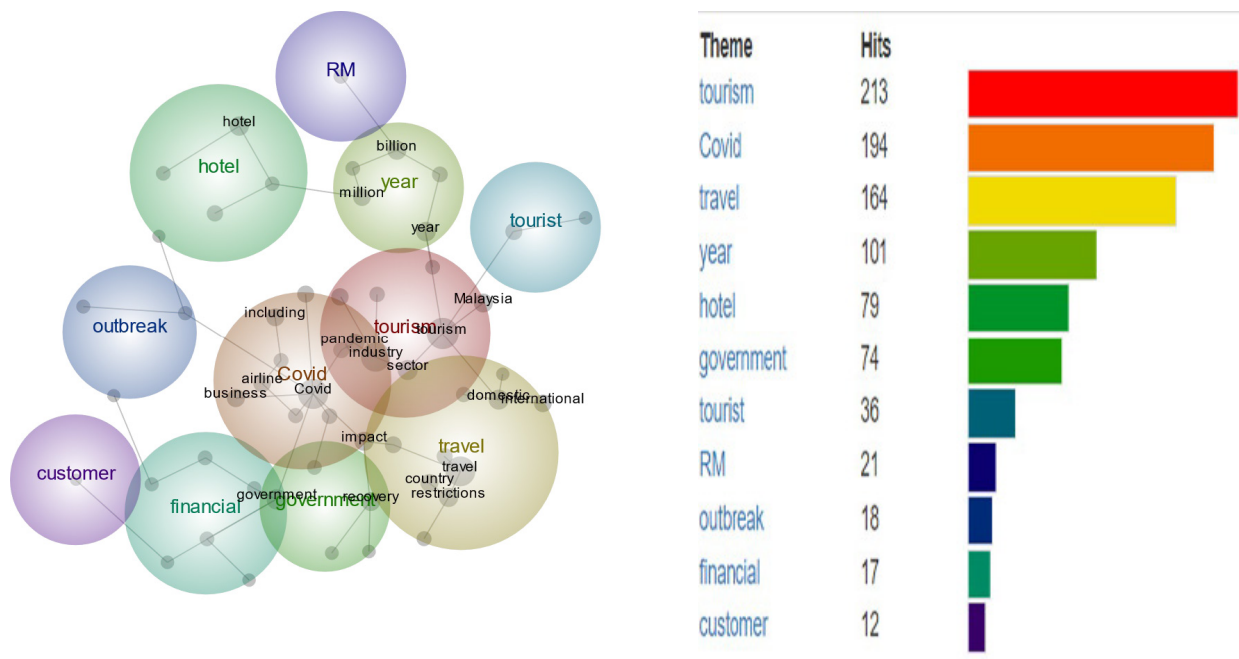


Figure 6: Leximancer results on media news in May 2020.

The central theme in June 2020 (refer to Figure 7) is tourism with 409 hits, linked to concepts such as industry, travel, COVID, domestic, government, recovery, economic, and impact. On 5 June 2020, the prime minister unveiled the RM35 billion National Economic Revitalisation Plan (PENJANA) to regenerate Malaysia's economy. PENJANA aims to lessen the impact of unemployment, increase investor confidence and sustain the tourism industry. The deferment of tax instalment payments for the period from 1 April to 30 September 2020 has also been extended for another three months until 31 December 2020 for tourism-related organizations. On 9 June 2020, the prime minister announced the end of CMCO and implemented the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) until 31 August 2020. Under this new phase, interstate travel is permitted, but international travel is not, as Malaysia's border remains closed. Domestic tourism is allowed and encouraged, and flight and public transport are allowed to operate at full capacity to facilitate this.

The hotel theme, which is related to concepts such as business, Malaysian, and tours, had 202 hits. The tourism industry faced losses of around RM45 billion in the first half of 2020 due to the pandemic, with the most affected workforce being the services sector, such as hotel, food and beverage, arts, entertainment, and recreation. On 10 June 2020, Malaysians returning from abroad were no longer required to stay at a quarantine centre for 14 days; instead, home quarantines were introduced. Thus, hotels chosen as quarantine centres could now only depend on domestic tourists for survival. MAH and MATTA representatives urged for borders to be reopened to travellers

from 'low-risk' nations sooner to help boost Malaysia's tourism industry in the long run. However, due to many countries being similarly affected by COVID-19, this may not be the best solution currently. At the end of June 2020, Malaysia reported an increase of 820 confirmed COVID-19 case compared to May 2020.

As presented in Figure 8, tourism was still the central theme for July 2020, but with slightly different concepts such as recovery, border, and MCO. MOTAC representatives stated that the tourism industry is expected to begin recovery in the second quarter of 2021. The ministry has also made a nationwide tour to identify domestic tourism products as part of its initiatives to boost domestic tourism. In July 2020, the MICE sector and SPAs resumed operations as part of the recovery plan. Even though Malaysia's border will be closed until 31 August 2020, it has been open for medical tourists since 1 July 2020. Hotel reservations had also increased up to 30.74%, compared to 9.63% in May 2020. The aviation industry also showed signs of revival as AirAsia Airlines stated that 180 000 seats were sold for travel between July and September 2020 through domestic travel promotions. However, international tourist arrivals and stay are expected to decrease by 75% compared to 2019 and projected losses are more than RM31 billion. On 25 July 2020, it was announced that Malaysia Airlines and Japan Airlines had partnered up to offer joint venture flights. Malaysia Airlines representatives stated that the partnership aims to establish a travel bubble between Malaysia and Japan, which will ease restrictions for cross-border travel and facilitate commerce, trade, and boost tourism

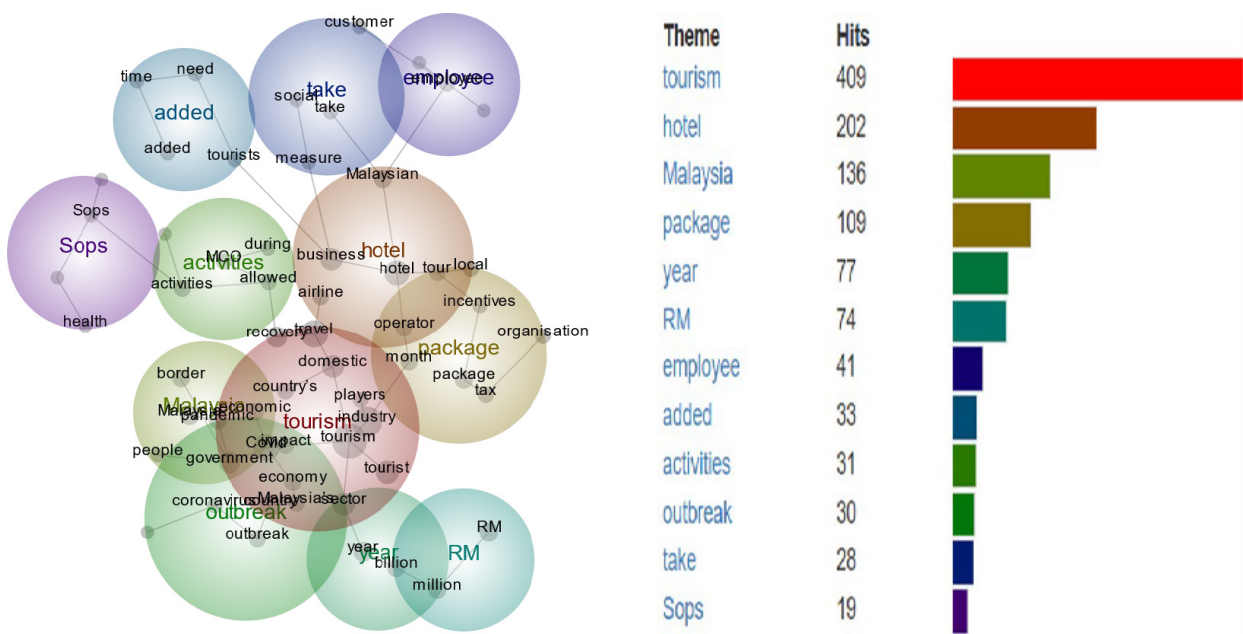


Figure 7: Leximancer results on media news in June 2020.

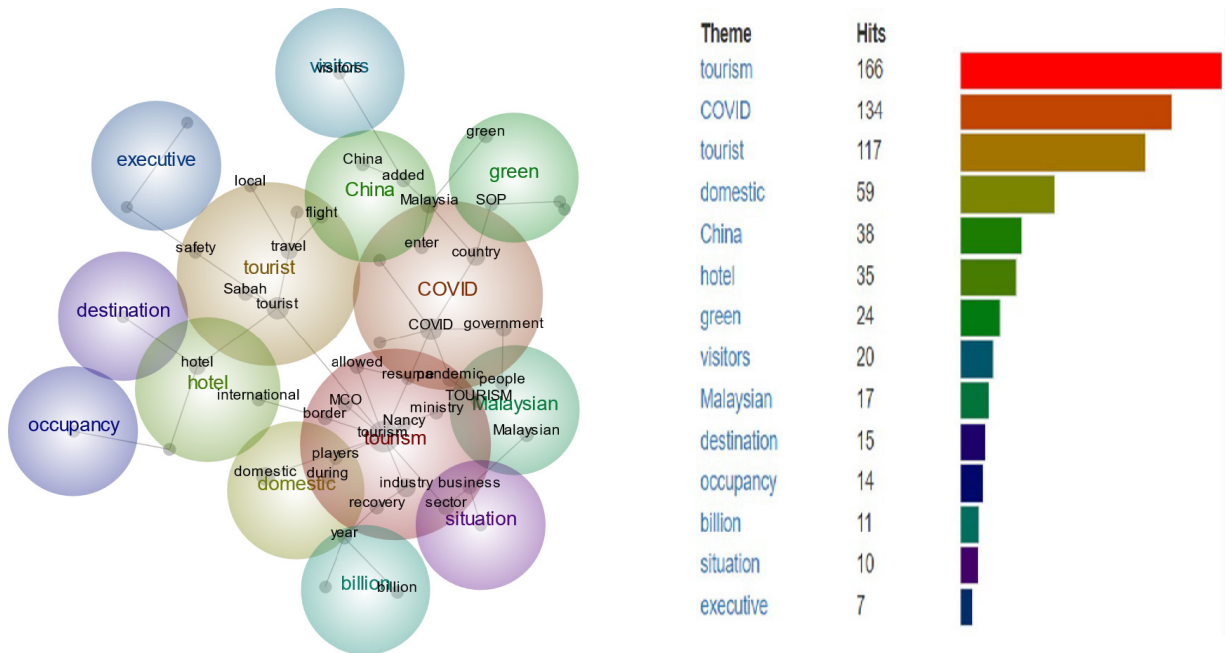


Figure 8: Leximancer results on media news in July 2020.

for both countries. To combat the COVID-19 crisis, the Malaysian government has encouraged the merging of the national airline, Malaysia Airlines, and low-cost Asia Airlines (Bertke, 2020). At the end of July 2020, Malaysia had reported 8976 confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Conclusions and Contributions

The paper contributes to an insightful understanding of the chronological development of the COVID-19 pandemic impact on the tourism industry in Malaysia- a novel contribution in terms of utilizing media content analysis and Leximancer software to provide a sound and deeper narrative of the situation. COVID-19 has impacted the demand and supply of tourism products and service worldwide (Bakar & Rosbi, 2020). The demand for medical assistance, food, and other critical products and services has increased, but the demand for non-critical products and services such as tourism has decreased tremendously during the pandemic. Thus, the impact on the small-scale especially the tourism industry is likely to be dramatic (Khan & Yasmine Khan, 2020).

At the beginning of the pandemic, the government and tourism industry stakeholders downplayed the pandemic showing limited concern about the consequences for the tourism industry, and perceived the COVID-19 pandemic to be similar to the SARS virus, thus not expecting the fatality of the outbreak. In March 2020, with an increasing number of confirmed cases and the casualties involved by referring to other countries that downplaying the pandemic. In

Malaysia, when COVID-19 spiralled to pandemic level, the political narrative was unified and the focus was on fighting the pandemic (Kumar, 2020; Morais, 2020). Malaysian government took drastic measures by implementing the MCO, closing borders and offering stimulus packages to ease the economy. In July 2020, reaping the benefits of reacting early to the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia started to recover by focusing on domestic tourism.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry became heavily dependent on the government (Shah et al., 2020). Even though the stimulus package does not benefit the tourism industry directly, but the government had built a good foundation by effectively controlling the spread of COVID-19, making Malaysia one of the top five countries to have successfully contained COVID-19.

This paper provides a review of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry in Malaysia through the media landscape in a chronological manner from January to July 2020. This paper has identified, evaluated, and synthesized the media content to create a summary of current narratives that can contribute to the media content analysis literature about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry in Malaysia.

Competing Interest Statement

All authors have read and approved the manuscript and take full responsibility for its contents. The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by the Universiti Malaysia Sabah under the Research Code SDK0138-2020 research grant titled – Impacts of Coronavirus and movement of control on tourism and hospitality industry in Sabah.

The authors would like to thank the reviewers and editors of this manuscript.

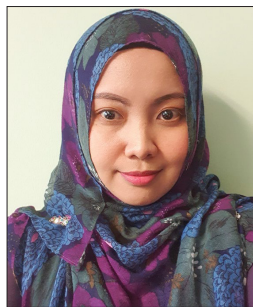
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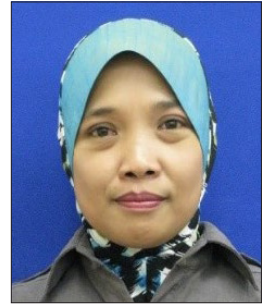
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