



## **Resilience and sustainability strategies of Malaysian homestay program during COVID-19 pandemic**

Nor Hafizah Selamat<sup>1</sup>, Khoo Suet Leng<sup>1</sup>, Premalatha Karupiah<sup>1</sup>, Zaireeni Azmi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Unit Penyelidikan Wanita dan Gender (KANITA),  
School of Social Sciences, University Sains Malaysia

Correspondence: Khoo Suet Leng (email: slkhoo@usm.my)

Received: 09 January 2022; Accepted: 19 May 2022; Published: 31 May 2022

### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019 has impacted all nations, societies, and industries globally due to the closure of international borders and strict travel restrictions. As one of the community-based tourism activities that have been viewed as a tool to stimulate rural community development, the Malaysian homestay program is no exception. This paper aims to explore the COVID-19 impacts, to examine how the homestay operators strived to be resilient and to understand the sustainability strategies adopted by them in reviving the industry post-COVID-19. By using a resilience-based framework, in-depth interviews with 10 homestay operators, one (1) state tourism official, and three (3) Homestay Chairman of the local homestay tourism association were conducted. Findings revealed that COVID-19 has affected the homestay operators' livelihoods, where they experienced a total loss of incomes due to booking cancellations and the complete halt of tourist arrivals. Operators began to re-visit their business models and mapped out the 'new norms of hospitality by leveraging technology and social media to promote their businesses online.' All these innovative strategies need to be undertaken collectively and therefore leadership and the formation of strong human resources proved to be the best solutions. Diversifying and venturing into other businesses as second income generation provides a safety net in sustaining their livelihoods. It is suggested that the creation of new business models and pragmatic community tourism policies will essentially determine the homestay program's chances of survival, particularly during crisis or disaster, by transforming it into a much more sustainable form.

**Keywords:** community-based tourism, COVID-19 impacts, homestay, Malaysia, resilience, sustainability

## Introduction

The potential of community-based tourism as a tool for rural economic development in harnessing cultural resources in rural settings has been widely established (Nair & Hamzah, 2015; APEC, 2009). It proved to be a viable strategy in providing employment opportunities to rural communities and fostering community development in the quest for inclusive and sustainable tourism (Khalid et al., 2019; Chapman & Randell, 2011). Unfortunately, in late 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all nations, societies and industries globally. The tourism and hospitality sector are amongst the worst hit when business activities came to a sudden halt, international borders closed, travels restricted and partial/full lockdowns were ordered (OECD, 2020). This has caused international tourist arrivals to plummet by 56 % and USD320 billion in tourism exports were lost in the first five months of 2020 (UN, 2020). The travel and tourism sector also suffered a loss of approximately USD4.5 – 4.7 trillion in 2020 with the GDP dropping by 49.1% (UN, 2020). A total of 62 million jobs were lost depicting a drop of 18.5% in 2020. Furthermore, new standard operating procedures (SOPs) in the hospitality industry have to be adopted to curtail the spread of COVID-19 (UN, 2020). In Malaysia, tourism is the third biggest GDP contributor after manufacturing and commodities, once contributing about 5.9% to total Malaysian GDP in 2018. In 2020, Malaysia launched the “Visit Truly Asia Malaysia 2020” campaign with the aim to receive 30 million tourists and RM100 billion in tourism receipts for 2020 (Hirschmann, 2020), but the campaign eventually had to be cancelled when international borders were closed. In 2020, international tourist arrivals have dropped by more than 83% from 26,100,784 in 2019 to merely 4,332,722, while tourist receipts plummeted by 85% from RM86.14 billion (2019) to RM12.69 billion in 2020. The average per capita expenditure has reduced 11.3% from RM3,300 (2019) to RM2,928 (2020) (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). The Malaysian homestay program considered as community-based tourism is part of the Malaysian government’s initiative to develop rural areas. The key characteristic of a Malaysian homestay program is its warm hospitality by the host family that normally resides in a rural setting when the guests are taken as part of their own family members, and eventually a foster family relationship is established. However, the current SOPs imposed by COVID-19 have an impact on these elements of ‘warm hospitality’ when the new norms that advocate physical distancing contradict the nature of Homestay businesses. The new norms challenge conventional homestay practices, and COVID-19 becomes a test to the Homestay program’s resilience and their business sustainability.

Recently, there has been a surge in research on the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism and hospitality in general (Persson-Fischer & Liu, 2021; Abbas, Mubeen, Iorember, Raza & Mamirkulova, 2021), post-Covid travel risk scenario (Villace-Molinero, Fernandez-Munoz, Orea-Giner & Fuentes-Moraleda, 2021), the resilience and transformation of community-based tourism in Brunei (Noorashid and Lee Chin, 2021) and some Malaysian Covid studies (Hanafiah et al., 2021; Azam Khan & Hashim, 2020; Karim, Haque, Anis & Ulfy, 2020; Fauziah, 2020). While these studies were devoted to the impact of COVID-19 on tourism and hospitality, few studies specifically addressed the Malaysian homestay program, and fewer addressed the impacts and resilience of Malaysian homestay entrepreneurs (Hanafiah et al., 2021; Azam Khan & Hashim, 2020; Karim, Haque, Anis & Ulfy, 2020). Hence, this study will fill this research gap with the aim to understand the impacts and the ways Malaysian homestay entrepreneurs are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by examining their resilience and sustainability approaches.

## Literature review

### *Homestay program as community-based program*

Community-based tourism (CBT) is a community development approach that enhances the ability of rural communities to plan and manage tourism resources whilst ensuring the involvement of the local community (Nair & Hamzah, 2015; APEC, 2009). Previous studies have shown how CBT acts as a poverty alleviation tool by creating employment opportunities, generating income, diversifying the local economy, conserving local/rural cultures, protecting the environment, mainstreaming gender in the workforce (Khalid et al., 2019; Chapman & Randell, 2011; see also Asian Development Bank's website) and creating alternative income sources for sustainable rural development (World Tourism Organisation, 2004; Zapata, Hall, Lindo & Vanderschaeghe, 2011; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2017). However, the Covid-19 pandemic has adversely impacted CBT. In Bolivia, due to COVID-19, its community-based tourism enterprises failed to generate incomes and 80% of them decided to change business sectors to stay afloat and unlikely will be in business anytime soon (Urrutia, 2021). In Thailand, the impact of COVID-19 is much lesser when the local communities were taught to treat the sector as a supplementary income stream, and to rely instead on their primary income through fisheries, agriculture and handicraft during the pandemic (Pacific Asia Travel Association, 2020).

In 1995, the Malaysian government established the homestay program as a mechanism for rural empowerment. A Malaysian homestay program is a form of experiential tourism where tourists live at the host family's house and immersed themselves in the local culture and lifestyle (Hamzah, 2020). Unlike homestay programs in other parts of Southeast Asia, homestay programs in Malaysia are mostly operated in rural settings, regulated by the government in terms of certification, training, monitoring and financial assistance (Hamzah, 2020); but are also challenged by the existence of commercial homestays operated by community in urban and rural areas (Kunjuraman, 2019) where the hosts do not necessarily live together with the guests. Ever since the Malaysian government imposed the first Movement Control Order (MCO 1.0) on 18 March 2020 and MCO 3.0 until June 2021, the road to recovery is slow. Regardless of the scale, nature and magnitude of the impacts of COVID-19, some forms of resilience and sustainability framework should be in place to brace community-based tourism against COVID-19 and other forms of future shocks.

### *Resilience-based framework*

Resilience is the ability of a system to withstand shocks and stresses whilst maintaining function, structure, feedback capabilities and identity (Walker et al. 2006). In turn, business resilience refers to the capabilities of an entity to adapt to the new environment in mitigating shock effects (Supardi & Hadi, 2020, Redman, 2014). It has been argued that resilience can be built, and therefore, building resilience into the economic, environmental and socio-cultural systems to counter shocks is not something new (UNCTAD, 2018). The tourism industry may have experienced various disasters before but not a disease-induced crisis on a global scale (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020). Various studies have emerged and several policy frameworks and recommendations have been suggested to revive and reconstruct the industry to be stronger and resilient against future shocks (Sharma, et al., 2021; Brouder, et al., 2020). Scholars such as Sharma et al. (2021) have proposed a resilience-based framework at the level of the industry, government and related stakeholders for

the tourism sector to build resilience. During the preliminary fieldwork (for this study), it revealed the significant importance of being resilient (*berdaya tahan*) as the COVID-19 affected homestay operators and how they strived on being creative in finding new sources of income generation during the homestay closure. The emphasis on being resilient justifies the selection of this resilience-based framework as it can be used to illustrate how the homestay operator finds an alternative pathway toward sustaining their businesses. Sharma et al., (2021) argue that this framework would be able to find transformative pathways towards sustainable tourism, enhancement of societal wellbeing, climate change mitigation and heightened engagement with local communities. Based on Resilience Theory, COVID-19 can be viewed as a shock to the equilibrium of the global tourism system (Hamzah, 2020). Scholars highlighted the importance of ICT and Smart Tourism to enhance capacity building in facing this new regime of tourism (Hamzah, 2020; Noorashid & Lee Chin, 2021).

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study used the resilience framework as proposed by Sharma et al., (2021) as the theoretical framework. Four dimensions were suggested for building resilience in the industry, namely, government response, technology innovation, local belongingness, and consumer and employee confidence. Government response such as subsidies is critical during a crisis to support those affected by the crisis (Sharma et al., 2021). Studies have shown massive government intervention in the working and operation of the tourism industry during the COVID-19 crisis. In terms of technology innovation, it has been argued that disasters can help in speeding up changes in technology. During COVID-19, people started to take seriously the benefits of technology and there is a surge of public's trust in technology and the increased readiness to use technology, and their willingness to change their attitudes toward technology. Resilience can also be determined by the feeling of belongingness among locals as that will dictate the revival of the tourism industry. Another factor of being resilient is to increase customers' confidence. The impact of COVID-19 can significantly influence customers' perception of tourism products and services. Therefore, the revival of the tourism industry will depend on boosting confidence in traveling and lessening the perception of risk involved. This framework will be used to analyze how the homestay operators deal with the impacts of COVID-19 on their homestay businesses. The subsequent discussions and narratives will be guided and informed by the aforementioned resilience-based framework as a coping mechanism towards recovery. Before discussing the findings, the next section will first outline the methodology of the study.

### **Method and study area**

The present study was based on a descriptive approach with a qualitative research design and in-depth interviews have been employed as the instrument. Using narrative inquiry, the interview explored deeply the respondent's perspectives, ideas and narratives. The experiences of COVID-19 may be rather challenging to most of the respondents, hence, in-depth interviews are deemed able to discover hidden meaning issues related to their business operations, seek clarity and unpack in-depth understanding of the issues discussed. The interview would be able to answer the "what" and 'how' of the issues as well. For this study, 10 homestay operators, three (3) Homestay Cluster's Chairmen and one (1) Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) officer were interviewed

(Table 1). These respondents were selected from three homestay clusters in the state of Penang, Kedah and Perak.

**Table 1.** Profile of respondents.

|     | <b>Name</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Years of experience<br/>as homestay<br/>operator</b> | <b>Position</b>        |
|-----|-------------|---------------|---|------------------------|
| 1.  | Nabiha      | Female        | 8   | Homestay Operator      |
| 2.  | Maziah      | Female        | 8   | Homestay Operator      |
| 3.  | Zulkifli    | Male          | 8   | Homestay Operator      |
| 4.  | Saniah      | Female        | 30  | Homestay Operator      |
| 5.  | Rashdan     | Male          | 8   | Homestay Operator      |
| 6.  | Tahir       | Male          | 8   | Homestay Operator      |
| 7.  | Sahidah     | Female        | 8   | Homestay Operator      |
| 8.  | Zaharin     | Male          | 10  | Homestay Operator      |
| 9.  | Mimi        | Female        | 6   | Homestay Operator      |
| 10. | Jalil       | Male          | 7   | Homestay Operator      |
| 10. | Long        | Male          | 30  | Homestay Chairman      |
| 12. | Aziz        | Male          | 12  | Homestay Chairman      |
| 13. | Meer        | Male          | 7   | Homestay Chairman      |
| 14. | Azmi        | Male          | 2   | MOTAC, Officer, Penang |

Source: Fieldwork (2020 – 2021)

Pilot study was conducted to test the interview questions and several questions have been amended to avoid jargon and the wordings were modified accordingly. The respondents were recruited by contacting the Chairman of Homestay clusters from these three states. Prior to the interview, the respondents were briefed on informed consent to ensure their confidentiality were protected. The interviews were conducted during the pandemic (2020-2021) and therefore, online in-depth interview was the only best and safest way to collect data. In between MCOs when inter district travel was allowed, several face-to-face in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted including with two Homestay Clusters Chairmen. Most of the interview took between 40-90 minutes. For the purpose of analysis, interviews were recorded for the entire conversation. All the interviews were later transcribed. The thematic analysis technique was used in analyzing the data which involved sorting, categorizing and data coding.

## **Research findings**

In exploring the experiences of COVID-19 and resilience strategies of homestay operators, the discussion will be categorized based on the four main factors as emphasized by Sharma et al., (2021), which are: government response, technology innovation, local belongingness, and consumer and employee confidence.

### **a. Government response**

The tourism and hospitality industry as service sectors are among the major contributor to boosting the economies of countries through the provision of employment opportunities (Fizza and Mohd Farid, 2021). In the hospitality industry, homestay falls under the category of lodging services which also include hotels, motels, guest houses, guest rooms, and hostels. It has been argued that

continued government support during pandemics is critical to ensure the survival of tourism business sectors (Amran, 2020; Sharma, 2021). Describing the emotions during the first wave of COVID-19, all the respondents were of the view that the COVID-19 would only be a temporary situation. Their previous experiences with SARS and HINI had seen a drastic reduction of visitors and cancellation of bookings. A similar case happened during the first few weeks after the first announcement of MCO 1.0 in March 2020. However, the reality hit home when the homestay program continued to be closed down for more than one year now. The first MCO was imposed by the government on 18th March 2020 and later the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) phase until 31st December 2020. Bookings were canceled and homestay operations completely stopped. Most respondents were not sure of what to do and they were just waiting for directives from the government. The situation got worst when the government announced MCO 3.0 in June 2021. Sharing his first feeling when COVID-19 hit home, Meer, the founder and Homestay of Labu Kubong Cluster's Chairperson said,

*"...when government announced the closing of all economic sectors, I was thinking ... we are done. People [tourists] don't come anymore. Homestay is all about being intimate, living and eating together. COVID-19 won't allow that to happen. The SOP, social distancing will make homestay impossible to operate. That's it. We are done!"*

The other Chairman of Kg. Raga Homestay Clusters, PakLong, went further to state,

*"...at that time [the first announcement], we [all the homestay operators] thought that COVID-19 is only temporary to stay, within months we can resume our homestay. You see...it has been a year now and the cases have been drastically increased. How to start again [homestay]? It's tough, [we] have to accept it. Nothing much can be done. They experienced total lost, zero income from homestay activities. So, some women operators just stay at home, others are focusing on other income generation activities".*

The immediate effect of COVID-19 was booking cancellations. According to PakLong, after the announcement of total lockdown MCO 1.0 in March 2020, the Homestay Cluster of Kampung Raga's loss of "committed" income amounted to almost RM22,000. "Committed" income refers to the amount of money that has been promised by potential guests based on the bookings. Being one of the famous homestays in the northern region where many of its clients are from government agencies and international tourists, PakLong who is considered as the mediator, contact person, or "the man" that brings money to Homestay Kg. Raga, claimed that he received three (3) bookings from government agencies prior to COVID-19. This "committed" income was not only for him but also for other homestay operators who would be receiving the guests. At the time of fieldwork, the cases have reached over 20,000 cases daily. Saniah who has been in the business for nearly 30 years also experienced a sudden loss of income. As a housewife, she has to depend fully on her husband's income as a chicken seller when the business stopped. Another homestay operator, Fatimah, is one of the active and dedicated homestay operators in Kg. Raga argued that income is not the main motivation to participate in homestay business, as she has other sources of income, i.e. selling frozen curry puffs. However, she lost between RM 2000 – 3000 per month from homestay business during COVID-19. She usually used the money to pay for her children's tuition fees and schooling expenses but now she has to depend on the frozen curry puff business as the main income for the family.

Meer, the Chairman for Homestay Cluster of Labu Kubong argues that the pandemic has affected almost 20 other homestay operators in the village. During the first MCO, his homestay

clusters lost almost 70% of potential income. Meer as the homestay founder in the village has a good business connection with government agencies where the homestay has been awarded a special contract to receive potential clients through government agencies and travel agencies. In 2020, Meer received a total homestay booking of between RM100,000-RM200,000. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, all the bookings were canceled. However, he was still grateful that the contract can be renewed once business resumed. As for Sahidah and Maziah, they used to receive 40-60 tourists per week from different parts of the world including Europe, Japan, Korea, and ASEAN countries. In order to sustain their livelihoods, many of them decided to have supplementary income and to put more time into producing food products such as banana crisp, handcrafts, and *bedak sejuk*.

#### b. Technological innovation

Social media allows low-cost and effective management of information exchange online, marketing of products, brands, services, and social networking. In this study, the affected homestay operators, especially the younger generation are following this trend. Nabiha is the youngest daughter of Meer, joining her father's homestay business in 2018, and she strongly believes social media is an important tool for the business. Unlike her father, she uses various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and Whatsapp to network with her potential clients. Nabila said that technology, through mobile applications, promotes business marketability. For her, participating in exhibitions is important but technology will bring potential customers to her. Even during MCO, she still received bookings from domestic guests as she kept promoting her homestay through Facebook and Instagram. She received fewer guests but in order to maintain the physical distancing, she placed the guests at her KampungStay. The guests will stay in a separate house and do their own activities. The normal gathering was not allowed at the time being. Most of the communication was done through mobile technology including reservations. She said mobile technology can also maintain the connection between host and guest even after the program has ended. PakLong, for example, keeps maintaining contact with his former guests - or he simply referred to "my foster children" - mostly through Whatsapp. The technology seems to be able to maintain and nurture existing relationships. In this case, all respondents agree that mobile technology is important for their homestay businesses where constant interaction with potential guests or former guests is becoming more critical.

#### c. Local belongingness

The involvement of all parties in the successful economic agenda can be accomplished through social entrepreneurship. These social entrepreneurship elements have been practiced by PakLong, Meer, and Aziz as the Homestay Cluster's Chairman. Meer narrated how he started the homestay program in 2014 by inviting her fellow villagers who are interested in his ideas. He eventually managed to get 15 villagers, they got together and established a homestay committee to be registered with MOTAC so that they could access a special training program. This sense of togetherness has created a sense of local belongingness that became the backbone of their strength to embark into homestay business. Recently, with the establishment of a new business cooperative, his group believes that this sense of togetherness has helped them to face uncertainties in their businesses, particularly during the pandemic. They started refocusing on the activities that were previously considered as their supplementary income. Meer was one of them. According to Meer,

his vast experience as a homestay operator and after going through many hardships especially during the haze, SARS, and H1N1, he realized second income generation is necessary to build a more resilient business and community. Meer said, utilizing KampungStay is a way forward. In Labu Kubong homestay, the majority of homestay owners are also KampungStay owners. Fatimah, who sells frozen curry puffs was very grateful that she can still earn income particularly during MCO 1.0 when her homestay business stopped operating and her husband did not receive any salary due to the temporary closure of the store where he worked. In fact, the demand for her curry puff was higher during MCO as local people were looking for curry puffs during tea time. Saniah was also grateful that her husband still receives a salary as a chicken seller. The experiences described show that to be resilient is to have a strong sense of solidarity and to have supplementary income as the government assistance may not be able to sustain homestay operators especially during this long period of MCO.

#### d. Consumer and employee confidence

This COVID-19 pandemic may eventually come to an end but all respondents interviewed believe that the homestay industry will never return to the “old norm” since the “close contact activities” can trigger the spread of COVID-19, especially with the emergence of new variants. Thus, COVID-19 has brought the confidence of safety to the lowest point (Hamzah, 2021). As in the case of Malaysia, the short notice of the MCO announcement can reduce the guests’ confidence in making early bookings (Berita Harian, 2021). The last-minute announcement of MCO in Selangor state for example has led to the last-minute cancellations of bookings due to an inter-district travel ban when the MCO 3.0 was announced right before the Eid ul Fitr festival in Malaysia. The majority of respondents seem to agree that increasing the level of tourists’ confidence is the only way to revive tourism. Traditionally, homestay businesses emphasized the creation of intimacy between the ‘host and the guests’ through the concept of ‘foster children’. However, after COVID-19, they argued that these methods in creating intimacy may have to change.

Talking about gaining tourists’ confidence, Meer shared the glory days of his village homestay program that has earned praises from tourists and tourist agents alike such as Destination Asia, a famous travel agent that brings European tourists, using the Eastern & Oriental Express services (train services that travel from Singapore – Bangkok - Thailand) to the village. Kuala Kangsar becomes the stopover station and tourists can stop by in Kuala Kangsar for 4 hours. There was one time, Meer narrates, with the help of MOTAC, a group of 60 tourist agents from international agencies was brought to Labu Kubong and stayed for 3 days and 2 nights to experience Labu Kubong homestay program. The travel agents were satisfied and confident with the services provided by the homestay. Since then, various groups of international tourists came and stayed at the homestay. Post-COVID-19 is very challenging for Meer and his homestay operator’s members but they aim to continuously regain the confidence of their potential clients/tourists while enhancing sustainability and preserving the environment as best they could.

### **Discussion and research implications**

The narrative provided above shows how being resilient is critical for homestay operators to ensure the continuity and sustainability of their homestay program particularly for the rural economic development and Malaysian tourism in general. Several frameworks and proposals, as directed by



the tourism ministry and agencies, are being established to revive and reconstruct the business in order to make it stronger and more resilient to such disasters in the future. The four dimensions of resilience argued in this study demonstrate the steps that have been taken by respondents in reviving their homestay businesses with the assistance from the local tourism authorities. The narrative shows that government response is important but having supplementary income is even more critical. Malaysian government have introduced various efforts to cushion the blow of COVID-19 on the tourism industry. Several Economic Stimulus Packages have been introduced including the PRIHATIN package, National Economic Recovery Plan, and Kita PRIHATIN Package worth almost RM305 billion, to weather the impact of COVID-19. The Ministry of Tourism also attempted to revive the tourism and cultural sectors through domestic tourism campaign, which began in June 2021, to face the post-movement control order (MCO). Besides the stimulus packages, the government is now turning to domestic tourism to offset the fall in international arrivals by introducing several measures, such as personal income tax relief, digital vouchers and rail travel and hotel accommodation (Lee-Peng Foo et al., 2020). However, the respondents strongly believe that having a supplementary income is one way to be resilient as they cannot depend solely on government stimulus packages and interventions to sustain their livelihood, not to mention to revive their homestay operations. Social entrepreneurship method, as argued by Ismail (2020) can be utilized to make the homestay industry more competitive after the coronavirus illness (COVID-19) outbreak. Hanafiah et al., (2021) also suggested that tourism operators and destinations must adjust their products to the changing travel habits of their customers. As a result, this is a great opportunity to rethink the plans and engage stakeholders such as hoteliers, tour operators, food and beverage entrepreneurs, and the media as well.

Studies have shown how technological advances have changed the travel industry, affected both industry players and also travelers (Akhtar et al., 2021; Gretzel, 2020). These new developments promise an interactive and exciting experience. During COVID-19, technology seems to be the best medium to network with others. As reported by Google Travel study, 74% used the internet to plan their trips while only 13% used travel agencies (Singh, 2019). Together with technology, social media have considerably changed service industries, such as the hospitality and tourism industries. Thus, the way the homestay program was previously arranged needs to be restructured and digital communication should be the way forward. However, the data shows that respondents have limited technological skills, and that need to be enhanced such as communicating through other online platforms such as Google Meet and Webex where they can eventually stream their homestay activities online. More efforts should be made to empower local women operators, who constitute the majority of homestay business owners. Recently, in an effort to revive domestic tourism and to help homestay operators that have been badly affected by COVID-19, Tourism Malaysia has developed a digital KampungStay promotional package. The discussion shows how technology helps homestay businesses to be visible, not only through word of mouth but through the reviews shared by their former guests.

Community participation and local involvement are the main key factors in ensuring the success of community-based tourism such as homestay programs (Hussin & Kunjuraman, 2014 and 2017; Soh, 2014) and achieving the empowerment of the local community (Ericsson, 2016). Recent literature on COVID-19 has suggested that promoting CBT is an alternative way to boost the capacity and contribution of the local economy in respective countries (Adam & Allarifi, 2021). It is also suggested that more strategic approach should be explored to ensure that community has sufficient knowledge on the vulnerability of pandemic such as Covid-19 and thus increasing their community resilience. During the phase of post-COVID-19, homestay guests

would expect much higher standards of hygiene and emphasize a high level of contactless services. Thus, the way the program was previously arranged needs to be restructured. For survival, embracing new business models that enhance hygiene, promote social distancing while at the same time provide guests with warmth and personalized experience should be the new norms. The new standard in operating homestays does bring some job stress and performance for the operators, although minimally (Boyd et al., 2020). However, these new norms can foresee the challenges in getting the trust of homestay guests but restoring tourists' confidence is the key in reviving the homestay industry post COVID-19. Ismail (2020) suggested that existing resources should be used to assist homestay enterprises. MOTAC, universities, and travel agencies can all help homestay entrepreneurs. MOTAC must lead a social entrepreneurship project to improve the country's homestay business as a government organisation in charge of the tourism industry. The homestay program will be the major factor in moving towards the post-COVID-19 phase by preserving their uniqueness and strengthening their sense of belonging. For future plans, the homestay operators must establish a clear framework of health and safety requirements, as well as encourage tighter engagement with diverse stakeholders as a bridge to community resilience.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 has a huge impact on the homestay program, as discussed above. This study managed to fill the research gap by investigating Malaysian homestay businesses' resilience and sustainability initiatives to identify the implications and their strategies in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is significant based on their resilience, 'new norms approach' and new business models that will ensure the livelihoods and survival of their homestay businesses. This study contributes new knowledge in the Malaysian context, particularly the impact of COVID-19 and the resilience in homestay programs as to how their strategy in building resilience is still limited. This study emphasizes the importance of building resilience during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study echoed the recommendations of the Ministry of Tourism to build a resilient industry by concentrating on safety and sustainability.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge and thanked Ministry of Education for the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme with Project Code: FRGS/1/2019/SS04/USM/02/1 which this paper is based on.

## References

- Adam, N., & Alarifi, G. (2021). Innovation practices for survival of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the COVID-19 times: The role of external support. *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 10, 1–22.
- Abbas, J., Mubeen, R., Iorember, P.T., Raza, S., & Mamirkulova, G. (2021). Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on tourism: transformational potential and implications for a sustainable

- recovery of the travel and leisure industry. *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, 2, 100033. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2021.100033>
- Akhtar, N., Khan, N., Mahroof Khan, M., Ashraf, S., Hashmi, M.S., Khan, M.M., & Hishan, S. S. (2021). Post-COVID 19 tourism: Will digital tourism replace mass tourism?. *Sustainability*, 13, 5352. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13105352>
- Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) (2009). Handbook on community based tourism “How to develop and sustain CBT”. Prepared by Tourism Planning Research Group, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Secretariat.
- Assaf, A., & Scuderi, R. (2020). COVID-19 and the recovery of the tourism industry. *Tourism Economics*, 26(5), 731-733. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1354816620933712>
- Azam Khan, M. A., & Hashim, H. (2020). The effect of COVID-19 on tourism and hospitality industry in Malaysia, resurgence in the post-pandemic era: A conceptual criterion. *International Journal of Tourism & Hospitality Review*, 7(2), 54-62.
- Boyd, S., Sylviana, I., Shareen, D., Leanne, M., Silverina, A., Christy, B., Spencer, H., & Muhammad Zulhazmi, A. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 standard operating procedure for businesses on job stress and job performance in lodges and homestays of Sukau, Kinabatangan. *ESTEEM Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(1), 1-12.
- Brouder, P., Teoh, S., Salazar, N. B., Mostafanezhad, M., Pung, J. M., Lapointe, D., & Clausen, H. B. (2020). Reflections and discussions: Tourism matters in the new normal post COVID-19. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 735-746, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1770325>
- Chapman, J., & Randell, S. K. (2011). Women’s empowerment through community-based tourism and cultural exchanges. Occasional Research Paper 7, Centre for Gender, Culture and Development, Kigali Institute of Education, Rwanda.
- Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) (n.d.). Supporting sustainable tourism development in least developed countries amid the COVID-19 recovery. Policy Brief, Geneva, Switzerland: EIF.
- Fauziah, C. L. (2020) The geography of accessibility: Assessing the Malaysian approach to COVID-19 pandemic management. *GEOGRAFI*, 8, 66–91.
- Fizza, Z., & Mohd Farid, S. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 on tourism and hospitality industry of Malaysia. *Journal of Postgraduate Current Business Research*, 6(1), 6. <http://abrn.asia/ojs/index.php/jpcbr/article/view/105>
- Hirschmann, R. (2020). Travel and tourism in Malaysia – statistics & facts. Statista.
- Gretzel, U., Fuchs, M., Baggio, R., Hoepken, W., Law, R., Neidhardt, J., Pesonen, J., Zanker M., & Xiang, Z. (2020). e-Tourism beyond COVID-19: A call for transformative research. *Inf Technol Tourism*, 22, 187-203. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-020-00181-3>
- Giampiccoli, A., & Saayman, M. (2017). Community-based tourism, responsible tourism, and infrastructure development and poverty. *African Journal of Hospitality Tourism and Leisure*, 6(2), 1-28.
- Hamzah, A. (2020). Amran Hamzah on community-based tourism in Malaysia and building resilience in the aftermath of COVID-19. Sustainability leaders project. Celebrating world’s sustainable tourism leaders and changemakers. <https://sustainability-leaders.com/amran-hamzah-interview/>
- Hanafiah, M., Balasingam, A., Nair, V., Raziff, M., Salehuddin, M., Mohd Zahari, M. S., & Jamaluddin, M. (2021). Implications of COVID-19 on tourism businesses in Malaysia:

- Evidence from a preliminary industry survey. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Innovation in Hospitality and Tourism*, 10, 81-94.
- Hussin, R., & Kunjuraman, V. (2014). Pelancongan mapan berasaskan komuniti (CBT) melalui program homestay di Sabah, Malaysia. *Geografia–Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 10(3), 160-174.
- Ismail, M., & Daud, N. (2020). Post Covid-19: Developing a homestay business by adopting a social entrepreneurship approach. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(9), 33-43.
- Karim, W., Haque, A., Anis, Z., & Ulfy, M. A. (2020). The Movement Control Order (MCO) for COVID-19 crisis and its impact on tourism and hospitality sector in Malaysia. *International Tourism and Hospitality Journal*, 3(2), 1-7.
- Kelvin, Y., & Ramraini, A. H. (2018). The relationships between social media marketing and entrepreneurial success: A conceptual study on homestay business in Sabah, Malaysia. *Review of Integrative Business and Economics Research*, 8(1), 25-33.
- Khalid, S., Ahmad, M. S., Ramayah, T., Hwang, J., & Kim, I. (2019). Community empowerment and sustainable tourism development: The mediating role of community support for tourism. *Sustainability*, 11(22), 6248, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11226248>.
- Kunjuraman, V. (2019) Kajian terhadap syarat dan fenomena semasa dalam pembangunan program homestay di Malaysia. *Geografia-Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 15(1), 84-97.
- Kunjuraman, V., & Hussin, R. (2017). Challenges of community-based homestay programme in Sabah, Malaysia: Hopeful or hopeless?. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 21, 1-9.
- Lee-Peng Foo, Mui-Yin Chin, Kim-Leng Tan & Kit-Teng Phuah (2020) The impact of COVID-19 on tourism industry in Malaysia. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 24(19), 1-5.
- Nair, V., & Hamzah, A. (2015). Successful community-based tourism approaches for rural destinations. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 7(5), 429-439.
- Noorashid, N., & Wei, L. C. (2021). Coping with COVID-19: The resilience and transformation of community-based tourism in Brunei Darussalam. *Sustainability*, 13, 8618 <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13158618>
- OECD (2020, December 14). Rebuilding tourism for the future: COVID-19 policy responses and recovery.
- Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) (2020, October 14). Sustainable tourism and community-based tourism development. “The future of tourism” Interview Series. <https://crc.pata.org/sustainable-tourism-and-community-based-tourism-development/>
- Persson-Fischer, U., & Liu, S. (2021). The impact of a global crisis on areas and topics of tourism research. *Sustainability*, 13(2), 906, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13020906>.
- Redman, C. L. (2014). Should sustainability and resilience be combined or remain distinct pursuits? *Ecology and Society*, 19(2), 37. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-06390-190237>
- Sharma, A., Thomas, A., & Paul, J. (2021). Reviving tourism industry post-COVID-19: A resilience-based framework. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 37, 2211-9736.
- Supardi & Hadi, S. (2020). New perspective on the resilience of smes proactive, adaptive, reactive from business turbulence: A systematic review. *Journal of Xi'an University of Architecture & Technology*, XII(V), 1265-1275.
- Singh, R. (2019). Technology – A game changer in Travel Industry. Entrepreneur India. Retrieved from <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/334952>.

- Soh, N. (2014). *Kualiti kepimpinan dalam kalangan penyelarass homestay: Perspektif pengusaha homestay* [Master's thesis, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia]. Institutional Repository UTHM.
- Tourism Malaysia (2021). International tourist arrivals to Malaysia plunge 83.4% in 2020. Tourism Malaysia Corporate Site. <https://www.tourism.gov.my/media/view/international-tourist-arrivals-to-malaysia-plunge-83-4-in-2020>
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2018). Building resilience to multiple shocks affecting people and sustainable development. Trade and Development Board. Sixty-fifth session, part 1, Geneva, 4-12 June 2018.
- United Nations (UN) (2020, August). Policy Brief: COVID-19 and Transforming Tourism.
- Urrutia, S. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 on community-based tourism. [https://isto.international/cp\\_news/impact-of-COVID-19-on-community-based-tourism/](https://isto.international/cp_news/impact-of-COVID-19-on-community-based-tourism/)
- Villace-Molinero, T., Fernandez-Munoz, J.J., Orea-Giner, A., & Fuentes-Moraleda, L. (2021). Understanding the new post-COVID-19 risk scenario: Outlooks and challenges for a new era of tourism. *Tourism Management*, 86, 104324.
- Walker, B., Gunderson, L., Kinzig, A., Folke, C., Carpenter, S., & Schultz, L. (2006). A handful of heuristics and some propositions for understanding resilience in social-ecological systems. *Ecology and Society*, 11(1), 1-15.
- World Tourism Organization (WTO). (2004). *Tourism and poverty alleviation. Recommendations for action*. Madrid, Spain: WTO.
- Zapata, M. J., Hall, C. M., Lindo, P., & Vanderschaeghe, M. (2011). Can community-based tourism contribute to development and poverty alleviation? Lessons from Nicaragua. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 14(8), 725-749.
- Zielinski, S., Jeong, Y., Kim, S., & Milanes, C. B. (2020). Why community-based tourism and rural tourism in developing and developed nations are treated differently? A review. *Sustainability*, 12, 5938, doi:10.3390/su12155938.