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THE IMPACT OF MEDIA FEATURES ON TOURISM: RECOVERING THE DESTINATION IMAGE IN THE AFTERMATH OF CRISIS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

Malaysia's tourism industry has experienced substantial disruption following recent crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly altered travel behaviour and weakened destination image. Given the crucial role of media in shaping public perception, this study examines how media attributes mediate the relationship between three key determinants trust, crisis management, and solidarity and tourism recovery in Malaysia. A quantitative approach was employed, gathering 384 responses from domestic tourists in Kuala Lumpur. Data were analysed using SPSS through descriptive analysis, correlation, multiple regression, and mediation testing. Results indicate that trust, crisis management, and solidarity each contribute significantly to tourism recovery, with solidarity emerging as the strongest predictor. Media attributes were found to partially mediate all relationships, highlighting the importance of strategic communication and positive media framing in post-crisis recovery. This study extends existing tourism recovery models by integrating media influence as a mediator and emphasises the need for coordinated communication strategies, enhanced crisis response, and stronger community messaging to accelerate tourism recovery.

Keywords:

Crisis Management, Media Influence, Tourism Recovery, Trust, Solidarity

Introduction

Tourism is a critical economic sector in Malaysia, generating substantial income, employment, and social development opportunities. However, the tourism industry is highly vulnerable to crises, including pandemics, natural disasters, economic disruptions, and political instability.

Such crises often reshape destination image, alter travel behaviour, and disrupt tourism flows, making effective recovery strategies essential for the industry's long-term sustainability.

Previous studies highlight the role of push & pull motivations in influencing travel behaviour (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; Klenosky, 2002), while also recognising that crises significantly alter tourists' perceptions of safety, trust, and destination attractiveness (Faulkner, 2001; Ghaderi et al., 2021). Post-pandemic tourism research has increasingly emphasised three dominant dimensions that shape travel intentions: trust, crisis management, and solidarity (Hall et al., 2020; Rastegar et al., 2021; Fancourt et al., 2020).

While scholars agree that media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions during crises, the mediating role of media attributes especially in the Malaysian context remains underexplored. Existing studies often examine the effects of crisis factors independently, with limited integration of media influence into a comprehensive recovery model (Chen et al., 2021; Parrey et al., 2019). Moreover, studies on solidarity remain limited in Southeast Asia, despite its emerging importance as a driver of community resilience and post-crisis support.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the effects of trust, crisis management, and solidarity on tourism recovery; and the mediating role of media attributes on these relationships. By focusing on Malaysia, this study offers timely insights for policymakers and destination managers seeking to enhance tourism recovery strategies and strengthen visitor confidence in the aftermath of crises.

Literature Review

Trust

Trust refers to tourists' confidence in the credibility, transparency, and reliability of information presented by authorities, tourism operators, and media during a crisis. High trust reduces perceived risk and increases the likelihood of travel resumption (Neuburger & Egger, 2021). When tourists believe that destinations are safe and health protocols are implemented effectively, their willingness to travel increases (Fancourt et al., 2020). In the context of Malaysia, trust in governmental communication and institutional responses is an essential determinant of tourism confidence and destination selection.

Crisis Management

Crisis management encompasses strategies, plans, and actions taken by tourism stakeholders to mitigate the impact of disruptive events (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). Effective crisis management promotes preparedness, minimises disruption, and accelerates recovery. Previous studies show that clear communication, rapid response, and coordinated actions significantly enhance tourists' perceptions of safety (Chew & Jahari, 2014; Ghaderi et al., 2021). Destinations with strong crisis communication frameworks are more likely to restore tourists' confidence and encourage post-crisis travel.

Solidarity

Solidarity refers to feelings of unity, shared responsibility, and collective resilience within a community during a crisis (Woosnam et al., 2020). Messages of empathy, cooperation, and community support can positively influence travellers' emotional perceptions of a destination

(Liu & Lee, 2022). Solidarity driven communication strengthens social cohesion and enhances tourists' trust, making it a powerful psychological construct in fostering tourism recovery.

Media Attributes

Media Attributes refer to the characteristics of information presented through digital, online, and traditional media. They include message credibility, clarity, usefulness, informativeness, and emotional tone. Media Dependency Theory suggests that individuals rely heavily on media during crises to form judgments and make decisions (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Studies show that positive media framing, credible information, and transparent reporting significantly influence tourists' perceptions of destinations (Chen et al., 2021; Parrey et al., 2019). Thus, media acts as a critical information channel shaping public sentiment and post-crisis travel behaviour.

Tourism Recovery

Tourism recovery refers to the process by which the tourism industry regains stability, visitor confidence, and economic momentum after a crisis. Recovery is influenced by destination image, safety perception, emotional reassurance, and communication effectiveness (Hall et al., 2020). Scholars highlight that psychological and communication-based variables such as trust, solidarity, and media influence are increasingly central in rebuilding the tourism ecosystem (Rastegar et al., 2021; Beirman, 2020). Therefore, tourism recovery requires integrated strategies involving stakeholders, communities, and media networks.

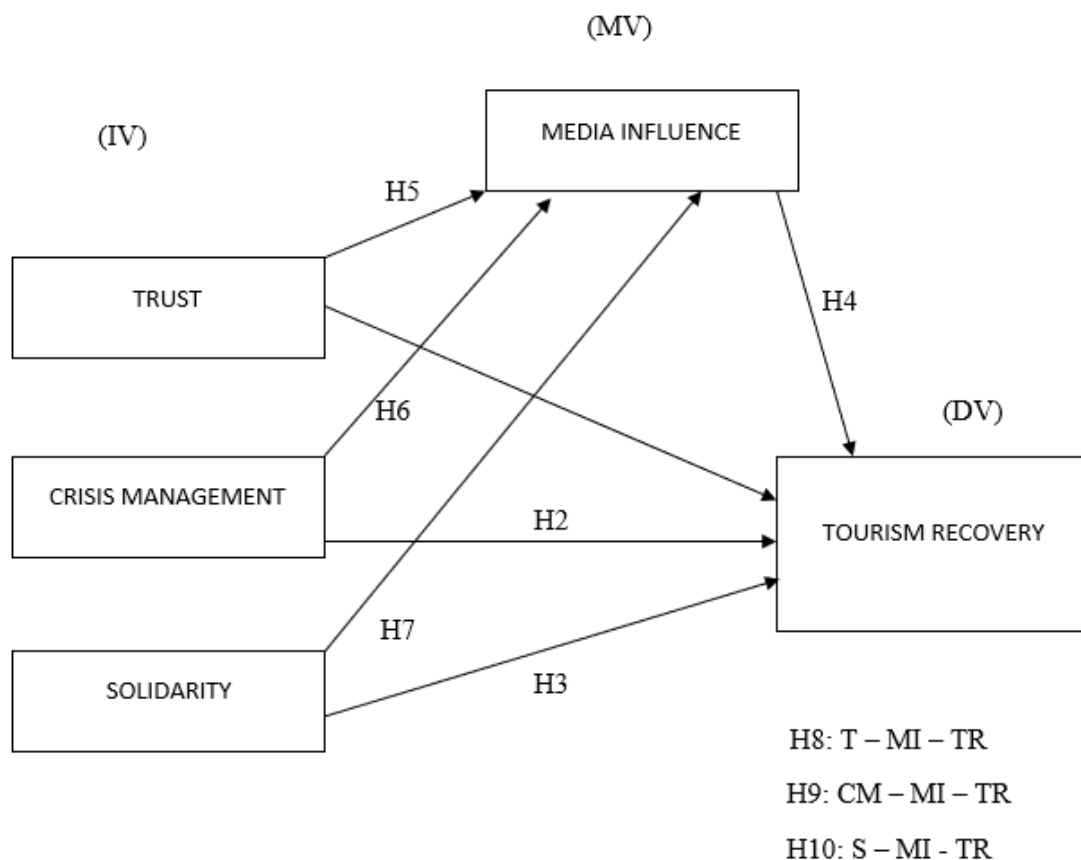


Figure 1: Study Framework

Source: Adapted from (Seyfi et al., 2023)

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey to examine the relationships between trust, crisis management, healthcare systems, solidarity, media influence, and tourism economic recovery. A structured questionnaire was developed and distributed to domestic tourists visiting Kuala Lumpur. This design is appropriate as it allows the measurement of perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural intentions using statistical techniques such as correlation, multiple regression, and mediation analysis. The target population comprised domestic tourists travelling within Malaysia. Based on official reports from Tourism Malaysia, an estimated 221.3 million domestic tourist movements were recorded (Tourism.gov.my, 2018). Referring to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a minimum sample of 384 respondents is considered sufficient for large populations. Thus, 384 usable responses were collected and analysed. This sample size is adequate for regression-based mediation analysis and meets the minimum threshold recommended by statistical guidelines.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into how key crisis-related variables of trust, crisis management, and solidarity shape tourism recovery in Malaysia, with media attributes playing a central mediating role. Consistent with previous studies, trust emerged as a significant predictor of post-crisis travel behaviour. When tourists perceive government information and destination safety measures as credible and transparent, their willingness to travel increases (Fancourt et al., 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2021). This study reinforces that trust remains a critical psychological driver in restoring tourism confidence following crises.

Crisis management also significantly influenced tourism recovery, supporting the notion that effective crisis response and clear communication strengthen destination resilience (Chew & Jahari, 2014; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). This indicates that tourists evaluate destinations not only based on attractions but also on institutional preparedness, response speed, and post-crisis recovery strategies. Malaysia's fragmented SOP enforcement during the pandemic previously generated confusion (Baum & Hai, 2020), but this study demonstrates that coordinated crisis management can greatly contribute to recovery perceptions.

Solidarity was found to be the strongest predictor of tourism recovery. This aligns with studies suggesting that community unity, empathy-based messaging, and social cohesion enhance emotional attachment and support for destinations (Woosnam et al., 2020; Liu & Lee, 2022). During a crisis, solidarity driven behaviour such as community-level support, safety compliance, and empathetic communication creates a favourable emotional climate, improving tourist confidence.

The mediating role of media attributes is a major contribution of this study. Media influence partially mediated the effects of trust, crisis management, and solidarity on tourism recovery. This confirms assumptions from Media Dependency Theory and Signal Theory, suggesting that tourists rely on media to interpret crisis information, assess risks, and form destination perceptions (Chen et al., 2021; Parrey et al., 2019). Positive media coverage amplifies trust, communicates crisis readiness, and showcases community solidarity leading to stronger tourism recovery. Conversely, negative or sensationalised reporting may weaken these relationships. Overall, the results highlight that tourism recovery is not solely shaped by

management or structural factors but also by how these efforts are perceived through media channels.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of trust, crisis management, and solidarity on tourism recovery in Malaysia, while assessing the mediating role of media attributes. Using data from 384 domestic tourists and analysed through SPSS, the findings confirm that all three crisis related factors significantly contribute to tourism recovery. Solidarity was identified as the strongest predictor, suggesting that emotional and social cohesion plays a central role in revitalising the tourism sector after crises. The study further demonstrates that media attributes partially mediate the relationships between the predictors and tourism recovery. This highlights the pivotal role of media in shaping perceptions, communicating safety measures, and influencing tourists' decisions. The integration of media as a mediator contributes to the theoretical expansion of crisis recovery models in tourism literature. Overall, the study provides a comprehensive perspective on how crisis related determinants interact with media influence to shape tourism recovery in Malaysia. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, destination managers, and industry stakeholders seeking to strengthen recovery strategies and improve post-crisis resilience.

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