

Exploring the Post-Pandemic Impact on the Malaysian Business Events Industry

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the global business events industry, including Malaysia's thriving sector. This paper aims to explore the post-pandemic impact on the Malaysian business events industry. A qualitative methodology was adopted to collect primary data from semi-structured interviews to explore the post-pandemic impacts on the Malaysian business events industry, which focuses on the recovery strategies and challenges. The informants included ten industry experts from the Malaysian business events industry. The data collected were then grouped using ATLAS.ti (v.23) software for thematic analysis. Trustworthiness assessment was applied to ensure the rigour and increase the qualitative findings' credibility. The qualitative findings revealed the following final themes: hybrid event adoption, reduced international participation and financial constraints. This study zoomed in on the Malaysian business events and focused only on findings from the business event industry expert's perspective. In the future, further exploration may focus on other business event industry stakeholders such as destination marketing companies, airline operators, travel intermediaries, clients, suppliers, universities and the government. This qualitative research study will shed light on future research covering the newly identified inductive themes and offer holistic recommendations to better position Malaysia as a preferred business events destination post-pandemic COVID-19. Also, this study provides recommendations for the resilience and sustainable growth of the business events industry in a post-pandemic landscape. This is the first such study to date, which has never been explored in qualitative academic research. Thus, this study has substantial implications for various business events industry stakeholders in Malaysia.

Keywords: Business Events, Post-Pandemic, Qualitative Study, Inductive Theme, Malaysia

Introduction

Business events can be described as any organized event which enables professional interactions, knowledge exchange, networking and business opportunities between

businesses, industry professionals and stakeholders. They can be conferences, trade shows, exhibitions, seminars, product launches, corporate meetings and networking forums. They act as forums for decision-making, innovations, collaborations, and venturing into new markets. As defined by Davidson et al. (2023), business events are tactically planned encounters that gather industry pioneers, entrepreneurs, and professionals to share thoughts, establish partnerships, and help advance the economy. The summit is critical regarding knowledge sharing, brand exposure and industry-specific developments. Regarding the industry, the Events Industry Council ([EIC], 2024) describes business events as goal-oriented professional meetings that result in the creation of economic, intellectual, and social capital due to the interaction of stakeholders belonging to different industries, leading to innovation and commerce. Business events are essential undertakings in any organization and to ensure that businesses keep abreast with market forces and to offer real-time analysis of the progress of a company, informing decision-making and promoting business partnerships (Arslan, Munawar & Cruz, 2024), signalling growth potential and investment opportunities. According to the Business Events Council Malaysia (BECM) (2022), it can be described as an energetic ecosystem of expert meetings that promote trade, innovation, and international collaboration, which can help Malaysia achieve its goal of developing into a high-income country via business tourism.

In the global context, the business events sector had a worth of USD 1.6 trillion in 2023 and is expected to hit 2.0 trillion by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2024). Business events generate 15-20 per cent of the global tourism GDP and enable 26 million jobs around the globe (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2023). North America was viewed as the biggest market (35% share) in the United States, dominated by the U.S and Canada (UIA, 2023). According to the International Congress and Convention Association [ICCA] (2024), Europe was the location of a majority of the growth in the business events industry, which played host to 40 per cent of all association conferences worldwide in 2023. It is noted that most of the countries in the Asia Pacific, such as China, Singapore, and Malaysia were ranked as the fastest-growing region (CAGR of 12.3%) (PwC 2024). Also, Malaysia is among the top 10 destinations in the world in terms of international meetings (UIA, 2023), and it has an ambition to take 5 percent of the Asia-Pacific MICE market share by 2025 (MyCEB, 2023a), which targets Islamic finance, medical tourism, and tech expos, following global trends in the sector. These milestones point to the significance of business events as a driver to the economies of the US, the UK and of the Asian-Pacific.

Business events (BEs) in Malaysia are professionally planned business meetings aimed at stimulating economic development, knowledge sharing, and business networking in the mainstream sectors of tourism, finance, technology, and Islamic business (MyCEB, 2023a; BECM, 2022). Such events (conventions, exhibitions, corporate meetings, incentive travel, and trade shows) contribute to the national development agenda of Malaysia through the Business Events Council Malaysia (BECM) and Tourism Malaysia-led initiatives that seek to establish the country as a MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions) destination on the global map (Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture [MOTAC], 2021; Razak et al., 2024). Business events including conferences, exhibitions and corporate meetings are a significant economic contributor in Malaysia with RM 9.6 billion contribution in 2019 (Malaysia Convention & Exhibition Bureau [MyCEB], 2020).

Razak et al. (2024) share the view that Malaysian business events act as a catalyst to foreign direct investment (FDI) and regional cooperation, especially Islamic finance and ASEAN trade.

Competitive MICE Destination, Malaysia has a strategic location, visa on arrival or friendly policies, and state-of-the-art venues which make it a competitive destination in the global MICE industry. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the industries around the globe, especially the ones that were based on human interaction, including the business events industry (Chun, Park & Kim, 2024; Skoko, Tomšič and Hlača, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the business events industry in Malaysia, with events being cancelled, postponed or transformed into virtual and hybrid formats (Kamel, 2020).

EIC (2023) further states that the pandemic dropped global business event revenue by 58 per cent in 2020-2021, and it will not reach pre-COVID levels until 2025 (p. 12). According to Park and Lee (2024), human interaction-based industries such as business events were 72 per cent more susceptible to lockdowns than other industries (p. 38). Malaysia, the figures in the country reached more than 60 per cent events cancelled or postponed in 2020-2021, and the losses accumulated to more than RM 3.2 billion (MyCEB, 2023b, p. 5). Moreover, according to Tan & Abdullah (2023), 84 per cent of Malaysian event businesses implemented a hybrid or virtual format as a temporary solution, with 65 percent of them experiencing reduced profitability" (p. 215). Thus, the aim of this research paper was to determine the post-pandemic effect on the Malaysian business events industry. The paper is divided into three major sections. The initial section is the literature review that concerns the theoretical background that motivates research. The second section is methodology and findings. The last section concludes with findings, implications, limitations and prospective research.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the international business events industry, comprising conferences, exhibitions, trade shows, and corporate meetings. Malaysia is one of the main actors of the business tourism in Southeast Asia, and all the measures in the form of lockdowns, travel bans, and health procedures caused substantial disruptions to the industry. As the industry enters a post-pandemic phase, it is essential to determine the recovery curve, trends, and long-term perspectives of the industry. This literature review studies the current body of knowledge on the impact of the pandemic on the business events industry in Malaysia, paying attention to the following main themes: digital transformation, economic recovery, sustainability, and the changing attendee expectations.

Pandemic impacts on the business events industry in Malaysia

Physical events were pushed to cancel or postpone worldwide due to the pandemic-induced unprecedented stop in their kind. The Malaysian Convention & Exhibition Bureau (MyCEB) (2021) noted that the nation has lost a significant amount of revenue as business events decreased by 90 per cent in 2020. The same tendencies were noticed in other countries of the world with the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (UFI) (2021) taking a 68 per cent decline in the revenues of exhibitions. A study conducted by Abdullah et al. (2022) emphasises that the business events industry in Malaysia, consisting of RM 13.4 billion of GDP in 2019, suffered enormously as a result of the restrictions on international travel and large events. This dependence on inbound business tourists (especially those travelling from China,

Singapore and Europe) implied that the closure of borders had a direct impact on event organisers, venues and hospitality providers (Tan & Lee, 2021).

Digital transformation and hybrid events: New normal for event enterprises

In response to the pandemic, a key change in strategy was the widespread adoption of virtual and hybrid event models. According to research conducted by Musa et al. (2021), platforms such as Zoom, Hopin and Microsoft Teams were increasingly used by local Malaysian event organisers to keep people involved. Event organisers also used digital event management software to run virtual events. However, while these events provided uninterrupted continuity they also had limitations such as being tiring for participants and inhibiting networking. There were also occasional technological failures (Lim & Hassan, 2022). So 'hybrid events' which combine offline and online elements became an alternative that could enable continuance. Findings from MyCEB (2022) indicate that by doing this it is possible to increase global reach and deliver an even higher degree of accessibility. However, implementing hybrid technology is not cheap and the demand for skilled digital event managers will continue to act as a blockade for the majority of small Malaysian event companies (Rahim et al., 2023).

Economic Recovery and Government Support

The intervention of the government was needed to sustain the industry during the pandemic. The economic stimulus plans (Prihatin and PENJANA) in Malaysia included grants to aid in the digital event transformation and subsidies on salaries to be paid to the laid-off employees (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2021). This year, the Business Events Reboot Programme that MyCEB announced clock started to stimulate domestic events and entice international organisers (MyCEB, 2022). Regardless of whether these policies were a set of stopgap measures or not, as studies by Chen and Ooi (2023) point out, the future of recovery is predicated on whether Malaysia will be able to reclaim its international faith as a business event destination. The release of border relaxation in 2022 and introducing facilitation measures on issues related to visas was good but not all problems have been solved. However, there is still stiff competition from regional rivals like Singapore and Thailand (Wong et al., 2023).

Shifting Attendee Expectations and Sustainability Trends

Health, safety, and flexibility are the main considerations of event attendees post-pandemic. Event Industry News (2023) surveys indicate that participants in Malaysia are among those who currently anticipate higher levels of hygiene safety measures, the possibility of hybrid attendance, and more interactive forms of content. Moreover, the idea of sustainability has become more prevalent, and clients and organisers prioritise sustainable venues, minimised waste, and carbon-neutral events (Teh & Goh, 2023). According to research conducted by Ismail et al. (2023), green practices, including digital ticketing or sustainable catering, are becoming more common among event planners in Malaysia in an attempt to follow the global ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) trends. Full implementation is however, hampered by cost limits as well as the lack of awareness by local suppliers.

As highlighted in the literature by the Malaysian business events industry is in a transformative period following the pandemic. Even though new opportunities emerge through digitalisation and hybrid models, there are still challenges to tackle: economic

recovery, international competitiveness, and sustainability. Further studies ought to be conducted to determine novel mechanisms of promoting Malaysia as a premier business events destination within the ASEAN region.

Research Methodology

Given that the body of qualitative research in the business events industry is non-existent (Jones & Smith, 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Martinez, 2022), the research applied a qualitative case study approach, which encompassed observation, document (including a secondary MyCEB report) analysis, and semi-structured interviews in attaining methodological rigour. The repetition of interviews led to data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), and it was caused by the following central research question: What is the situation in the business events industry in Malaysia post-pandemic? In this study, the two-stage data collection plan was adhered to to give detailed information.

They conducted an explorative systematic review of the literature that consisted of scholarly journal articles, government policy papers (e.g., national strategic plans of business tourism in Malaysia), industry publications, and online databases (Tan & Ibrahim, 2021; Wong et al., 2023). This was an action that helped in contextualising the study within the broader theoretical and industrial view. The primary data was gathered through 12 months (December 2018-December 2019) of intensive face-to-face interviews with the industry experts before the COVID-19 pandemic situation that has crippled the business events industry in Malaysia. Its semi-structured format allowed flexibility and yet helped to keep the relevant themes in mind (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The depth is more important in qualitative research and not the sample size (Hennink et al., 2020). As implied by the principles of theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), the recruitment lasted until no new themes were being added. Despite 20 specialists being approached, 15 of them agreed to participate in the interview, which also meets the recommendation of Creswell (2014) of 5-15 interviews to achieve good qualitative data. The saturation can be achieved after 9-12 interviews, according to empirical research (Guest et al., 2020; Hennink et al., 2020). In saturation, the authors of the present study were confident that they had conducted 10 interviews, because of: data redundancy (no new data was being recorded), theoretical adequacy (they had enough depth to repeat the findings), and no more viable codes to apply (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thus, the stop of the recruitment, along with the rigour of the methods, was assured at 10 informants, without creating the redundancy that was not necessary (Fusch et al., 2018). The informed consent was provided, and the participants anonymity was assured in terms of the GDPR and the Personal Data Protection Act 2010 of Malaysia (Abdullah et al., 2021). Interview thematic analysis followed by transcribing (with permission) verbatim and audio-recording (Nowell et al., 2017).

The study sample entailed the major players in the business events sector in Malaysia. The sampled individuals were determined based on the purposive sampling relative to the professional roles and importance to the research purposes (Etikan & Bala, 2023). To be more precise, the type of purposive sampling the expert sampling was used to invite the participants who possess the special expertise in the field (Campbell et al., 2020). The application of this strategy was deemed appropriate because of the exploratory study as the expert sampling allows knowing about a topic of new research interest and allows determining the practicability

of a possible large study (Palinkas et al., 2023). The different stakeholder groups that were relied upon to access the informants included players in the industry who are members of MyCEB (Malaysia Convention & Exhibition Bureau) and MACEOS (Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition Organisers and Suppliers). This strategic decision reflected major components of the business events ecosystem, which increased the validity of the study (Fletcher & Watson, 2022). The summary of the profile of the informants is exhibited in Table 1.

Table 1
Informants' profiles

Informant	Pseudonyms	Job Title	Total Work Experience	Types of Business Events Industry Stakeholders
1	A5	President	40	Association & Institutional
2	P1	Vice President	25	Professional Conference Organiser
3	P2	Director	20	Professional Conference Organiser
4	E1	Vice President	18	Event Organiser & Industry Partners
5	E2	Chief Executive Officer	15	Event Organiser & Industry Partners
6	V1	Director	25	Venue Provider
7	V2	Director	30	Venue Provider
8	V3	Director	18	Venue Provider
9	D1	Managing Director	45	Destination Marketing Company
10	H2	Vice President	30	Hotelier (Hotel Operations)

It was carried out using the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which allowed generating new, inductively developed themes that went beyond existing scholarly discourse. Data triangulation was also used to increase the strength of results, combining insights about the Malaysian business event industry stakeholders collected during interviews, observational data, and documentary analysis (Guetterman et al., 2023). The systematic analysis of all themes was performed to answer the research question, and the ATLAS.ti (v.23) software was used to organise methodological data, coding, and managing themes (Friese, 2022).

As Friese (2022) emphasises, with the help of ATLAS.ti, the categorisation of themes becomes automated, which allows segmenting data efficiently. Raw data were then systematically collected, grouped, coded and sorted using theme identification functions of the software after transcription of the interviews. To achieve additional credibility, the investigator assumed the role of an immersive participant-observer (Creswell & Poth, 2023) along with the iterative observation and triangulation (Nowell et al., 2023), thus addressing the bias and supporting analytical rigour.

Findings and Discussions

Three themes emerged in data analysis and they are use of hybrid events, international participation decline and financial restrictions as the factors that characterise the effects of COVID-19 on the business events industry in Malaysia.

Experience of hybrid events: Hybrid event adoption

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred the shift toward a hybrid model of events (a mixture of physical and online main and side events) that may become one of the most important adaptive measures in the business events industry of Malaysia. According to the recent research, 78 per cent of event organisers in Malaysia have recently stated that hybrid capabilities are important to support business continuity (Malaysian Convention & Exhibition Bureau [MyCEB], 2023c). Larger events have increasingly become the epicentre of the use of AI-based tools for matchmaking and the implementation of virtual reality display halls (Abdul Rahman et al., 2023). This is indicated clearly by the excerpt captured in the interview below:

The first half of the pandemic saw a 300 per cent growth in demand for the use of hybrid event platforms. Customers were demanding turnkey products that would cope with physical as well as virtual aspects with ease. (H2)

Tan and Ng (2023) support educational material by presenting the results of research that suggest that, in Malaysia, successful hybrid events currently make 40-60 per cent of the revenue earned in digital environments compared to less than 10 per cent before the pandemic. The change of hybrid events formed new revenues and disrupted the old models. An experienced representative of a destination marketing company pointed out the following view:

Our pricing strategy was to be rethought totally. Some of the physical booth sponsorship revenues were lost, but we earned new revenues in virtual exhibitor packages and electronic advertisement. (D1)

On the other hand, recent labour market analyses reveal that 65% of Malaysian event professionals underwent some form of digital skills training during 2020-2022 (Department of Skills Development, 2023). Therefore, the transition required significant upskilling, with one informant stating:

Conversely, according to the latest poverty, labour and social analysis, two-thirds of Malaysian event professionals received some type of digital skills development in the period 2020-2022 (Department of Skills Development, 2023). Thus, the transition was great upskilling, and one of the informants said:

The technology was not our major problem, but we had to train our people to think digitally. We needed to acquire new talents and needed to retrain current ones at the same time, which was stressful on our resources. (V3)

From being a crisis drive, the adoption of hybrids has become a strategic drive. According to a recent survey by MyCEB, 82 per cent of Malay organisers of future events wish to keep hybrid content of the future events because of the increased reach and better accessibility. The theme indicates that the business events industry in Malaysia has not only succeeded in overcoming the disruption caused by the pandemic but also is in its full swing, taking to the option of a hybrid model to emerge with more resilient and inclusive event opportunities in the future. The change has particularly been pronounced in international conventions and

trade fairs, where the mixed solutions have been able to support the sustainability of Malaysia as a MICE hub in the region, despite the travel ban.

Fewer International Involvement

The Malaysia cross-border business events were emphatically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the drastic drop in the number of international visitors, exhibitors, and sponsors. It is this theme that puts to the fore two vital dimensions, namely, travel restrictions and border closures and geopolitical and economic reluctance. Foreign visitors could not come as the government ordered lockdowns and quarantine (e.g., Malaysia: Movement Control Order) massively shoveled large-scale conventions (Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture [MOTAC], 2022). One manufacturing analyst said:

Before the pandemic, we had a 60 percent attendance of international guests. In 2020 it fell to 5%. In spite of the opening of borders, the recovery progress is slowed by visa procedures as well as health issues.

(P1)

Moreover, the analysis has found that business tourism in Malaysia has lost RM 3.2 billion of MICE events in 2021 (Hamid et al., 2023). Increased travel expenses (increase in air travel pricing, etc.) and company budget-reduction activities hindered the process of re-entry of international players despite more relaxing measures (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2023). Another informant unveiled the following passage with the support of Tan and Lee (2024):

Hybrid events were partly successful in referring to some of the losses, but they did not have equal networking value when compared to the in-person interaction.

(V2)

Besides that, the other informant filed other notes that were in concurrence with the statement quoted by Abdullah et al. (2023):

Local event organisers shifted to local alliances (e.g. events targeted at the ASEAN) as well as to state grants such as MyCEB Bid Support Programme in order to target smaller yet high-quality delegations.

(V1)

Financial Constraints

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a harsh financial impact on the business events industry in Malaysia where the stakeholders experienced revenue losses, the escalations of costs, and difficulties with liquidity. Three major dimensions substantiate this theme as being revenue loss and event cancellations, increased operational cost and liquidity and debt problems. When the live events were abruptly discontinued, most organizers lost revenues disastrously. Said the next informant:

In the year 2020 our revenue decreased by 80 per cent. When corporate clients returned, their budgets were further reduced and many of them chose smaller scale local events in lieu of international conferences.

(E2)

According to the testimony of yet another informant, the same problem was reported as follows:

The industry reports forecast that Malaysia was losing RM 4.6 billion in the MICE industry in the highest pandemic years. (P2)

The hybrid and virtual events have also created new costs such as the investment in IT (e.g. streaming sites, cyber protection), figuring out how to prepare their employees to manage digital events, and adherence to health/safety regulations (e.g. sanitisation, tests). Here, an informant pointed out:

Investments in hybrid technology were a must, whereas increasing of prices paid by the attendees was not an option. There were a loss of profit margins. (E1)

In line with the claims suggested by the Bank Negara Malaysia (2023), another informant also revealed that:

Most companies have counted on government grants (e.g., PENJANA tourism funds) or funds or loans to stay afloat and recovery is still not evenly distributed.
(A5)

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic was a deep shake-up and a sudden trigger of change in the business events industry in Malaysia (Abdul Rahman et al., 2023). Due to a thorough analysis of these three major themes, namely Hybrid Event Adoption, Reduced International Participation, and Financial Constraints, this paper finds not only the short-term hardships but also their long-term evolutionary processes experienced in the Malaysian MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions) industry.

The hybrid event type (Theme 1), which has been imposed due to the pandemic, has radically changed the way the industry works and has established what can now be deemed as a paradigm shift (Tan & Ng, 2023). Although it was originally adopted as an emergency measure, the use of virtual and physical elements has proven to be essential when it comes to increasing the reach of the audience and the level of accessibility (MyCEB, 2023). Indeed, according to the 2023 analysis results of MyCEB, 82% of Malaysian event organizers expect to maintain hybrid components, meaning that this mode has turned into a positioning necessity rather than a short-term improvisation. Coupled with the challenging technological change, Malaysia has been at the edge of ASEAN region digital innovation through the event professionals (Abdul Rahman et al., 2023).

The radical decrease of the international participation (Theme 2) also revealed the excessive focus of the industry on international events on the one hand and enabled the development of national markets and region cooperation on the other hand. A loss of RM 3.2 billion in business tourism revenues reported (Hamid et al., 2023) is indicative of the harsh effect of travel restriction, but the fact that the sector shifted towards the focus on ASEAN based events casts light on the remarkable resilience. Such reorientation proposes the possibility of a more balanced mixture of audience development, still based on renewed international

connection, but possibly formed with greater emphasis on regional networks after the pandemic (World Bank, 2023).

Financial limits (Theme 3) also could be deemed as one of the most pressing and dramatic difficulties, as some stakeholders experienced drops in revenue as high as 80 per cent (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023). Yet these forces were also the motivation to powerful business model and cost structures. According to Tan and Ng (2023) the appearance of digital revenue streams demonstrates how the industry is also financially flexible even when facing life-or-death circumstances.

The future of the Malaysian business events industry seems to be on the threshold of a mutated development with the past pandemic being one of the teachers and conventional advantages grafted to itself. The crisis speeded up the process of digital transformation, required a reconsideration of market dependencies in different countries, and motivated more diversified businesses. Government assistance schemes such as the Bid Support Programme that are offered by MyCEB has been instrumental in helping this transition.

There are three recommendations that can be made based on these findings: Further investment in the hybrid events infrastructure and development of digital skills, synergy of international and regional market focus strategic re-balance of international and regional market focus and the creation of financial resilience plans to be used in future crises.

The pandemic has finally acted as the catalyst of modernization in the business events of Malaysia. As the road to a complete recovery continues, the adjustments in this time of need form the basis of a more creative, stronger, and diverse industry. Malaysian experience can provide lessons to the world when undergoing a post-pandemic renewal in the sphere of business events market by showing how the crisis can become an opportunity to innovate when accompanied by a strategic perspective and a collaborative approach.

In the words of one of the industry leaders, it was not a transformation of choice, but one that has been taken up. The events we host today are literally superior to what we proposed in 2019 they are more affordable, more environment-friendly and more valuable to the participants." This feeling summarizes the mixed legacy of COVID-19 as the business events industry of Malaysia - a painful and, in the end, a progressive shock.

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