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MASTER'S THESIS

**THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF MICE
TOURISM: THE CASE OF MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

The whole globe and different industries were taken by surprise by the emergence of COVID-19 and the declaration of the pandemic in 2020. The tourism sector is considered to be one of the most affected and as long as the virus situation is ongoing little seems to be changing that. This study explores the impacts caused by COVID-19 on the sustainability of a specific segment of tourism, MICE tourism. The aim of the research goes beyond the present situation and also looks into the future perspectives of the industry. In this manner, the destination of Malaysia was chosen to be inspected since it is considered fast-growing in terms of tourism and MICE. To achieve the purpose of the research, ten executive MICE stakeholders from the supply-side of the sector in Malaysia were interviewed and shared their views on the topic. The research, interviews and analysis of results are based on six attributes, namely economic, socio-cultural, natural-environmental aspects, socio-political environment, destination-based stakeholders and visitors. These attributes are introduced in the Sustainable-Responsible Tourism (SRT) model that is used to support the research. The results illustrate the main impacts for its aspect of the model giving valuable insight to practitioners and related stakeholders on the situation that MICE tourism is and will be facing due to COVID-19 and potential changes, strategies and trends that incorporate in the new normal.

Keywords: MICE Tourism, COVID-19, Impacts, Sustainability, SRT model, Malaysia

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List of Abbreviations

CO2	Carbon Dioxide
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
DMC	Destination Management Company
DMO	Destination Marketing Organizations
F&B	Food & Beverage
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IAPCO	International Association of Professional Congress Organiser
ICCA	International Congress and Convention Association
IT	Information Technology
MERS	Middle East Respiratory Syndrome
MyCEB	Malaysian Convention and Exhibition Bureau
RM	Malaysian Ringgit
MCO	Movement Control Order
MICE	Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions
MOTAC	Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PCO	Professional Congress Organiser
RGL	Reciprocal Green Lane
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRT	Sustainable-Responsible Tourism
TBL	Triple Bottom Line
UN	United Nations
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
USD	United State Dollars
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development
WHO	World Health Organisation

1 Introduction

Business events are a market that experiences a long growing trend (ICCA, 2019) and a big MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions) segment has been created within the tourism sector (Kizanlikli & Çivgin, 2019). According to the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), the number of international meetings in 2018 accounted for 12,937 while their expenditure exceeded 11 billion euros (2019). This indicates the size of the MICE industry which can create multiple benefits for destinations on an economic but also “intellectual” level (UNWTO, 2014, p.8). In 2019, the predictions about the overall business travel spending were getting very ambitious (Disimulacion, 2020), however, the COVID-19 outbreak created a challenging era, impacting the tourism sector in an unforeseen way (IFITT, 2020; UNWTO, 2020a). International tourism in 2021 has returned back to the levels it was thirty years ago and there is a huge drop in the demand due to the ongoing pandemic (UNWTO, 2021a). Accordingly, the international meetings industry has been greatly affected with a large number of meetings being cancelled, postponed, or adjusted (CIMERT, 2020), depending on the adopted measures, strategies and conditions in each destination.

Due to the fact that MICE activities entail the collaboration of multiple stakeholders (Disimulacion, 2020), the impacts of COVID-19 have also affected related actors of the industry (Ho & Sia, 2020). Therefore, the sustainability of the sector and its stakeholders has become controversial not only from an economic point of view but also in terms of other perspectives. According to Svagzdiene et al. (2020, p. 206), “it is necessary to study the effects of the pandemic on the tourism sector from different perspectives, because even after controlling the situation...it is important to apply the knowledge gained to increase the tourism sector's resilience”. In general, the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism have started to appear as a central concept for academic research. However, the focus on MICE tourism in connection to COVID-19 is rather limited with a narrow range of views on the pandemic impacts, technology solutions, recovery measures, challenges and opportunities (Disimulacion, 2020; Disimulacion; 2021; Ho & Sia, 2020; Rwigema, 2020; Disimulacion; 2021).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the impacts that COVID-19 brought on a significant part of tourism, the MICE segment. To explore these impacts the principle of sustainability is being used as a guide and the findings have been approached through the “Sustainable-Responsible Tourism (SRT)” model. The SRT model combines the concepts of sustainable and responsible tourism, introducing the term “responsustainable tourism” (Mihalic, 2016) and can enable the study of the impacts of COVID-19 to MICE tourism “from the perspective of the sustainability pillars or enablers” (Mihalic, 2020, p.6). Moreover, as the current pandemic brought up “the need to reconsider the future development of tourism” (Guglielmo & Parlatore, n.d. p.2), both present and future perspectives will be explored, while the focus will be on the supply stakeholders of the sector and their views on the topic, which has not previously been examined in depth.

Additionally, the current research is taking place in Malaysia -one of the biggest Asia's business event hubs- for which the aspects of the researched topic have not been covered before. On a worldwide scale, Malaysia is placed in the 33rd position in regards to the number of meetings it hosts and 26th based on the number of participants. At the Asia-Pacific region, it is at 9th place regarding meetings (ICCA, 2019). MICE industry is an important pillar of the country's economy (TPCSB, 2018) which makes it vulnerable due to

the COVID-19 crisis if the country fails to react and adapt to the situation (Ho & Sia, 2020). According to CIMERT (2020), the Asia Pacific region is alleged to be suffering the most on a worldwide scale in terms of the COVID-19 impact on the MICE sector, which implies a challenging period for its sustainability. Indeed, with tourism and MICE being at a standstill and the impact on the global economy the situation can be difficult but also favourable for further development. “The slowdown from the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for those in business tourism to not only plan for the future but also to develop and learn to come back stronger”, says the CEO of the Malaysian Convention and Exhibition Bureau (MyCEB) (MC, 2020, p.11).

All in all, the overall objective of this study is to explore and present the impacts that COVID-19 created for MICE tourism in Malaysia, under the concepts of sustainability and responsibility. The research on these impacts attempts to focus on two main periods, the pandemic period and the post-COVID era. The aim of this division is to explore the impacts at a current stage but also investigate post-pandemic scenarios and be able to offer a unique insight to the MICE practitioners for the changes that will accompany the pandemic and start preparing for the period that is to come. Thus, the research question is: What are the present and future impacts of COVID-19 on the sustainability of MICE tourism in Malaysia?.

In order to provide valuable insight into the topic and answer the research question, the researcher is following a qualitative approach, supported by deductive reasoning that is driven by the SRT model and covers all its six elements, namely economic, socio-cultural, natural, socio-political, destination-based stakeholders and visitors. The data collection has been conducted through online semi-structured interviews with executive stakeholders from the supply-side of the industry that provided a great load of information and perspectives regarding the research area. Later, the data were processed through a content analysis that allowed the detailed investigation of the collected material and the identification of additional elements that support the main six categories and respond to the research question.

Besides, the current research consists of seven main chapters in its structure, including the introduction and conclusion. The first and current chapter is the introduction and presents the rationale and research objectives behind the study. It gives a general overview of the topic, the purpose of the research, its significance and it introduces the main research question. The second chapter outlines a literature review of previous studies that are related to the researched topic and is divided into three subchapters that focus on the development of MICE tourism, the COVID-19 and its related tourism impacts and tourism sustainability and the SRT model. Moreover, the third chapter of the research is a presentation of Malaysia which is the case chosen to be explored and gives the background of the country as a tourism destination and its MICE tourism development. The fourth chapter covers the methodology of the current research, explaining the research approach, methods that were selected and the analysis process that is followed. Furthermore, the fifth chapter is the presentation and analysis of the findings of this research and is divided into six main parts in accordance with the dimensions of the SRT model, followed by a short discussion in the sixth chapter. Last but not least, the seventh chapter is the conclusion that includes a brief summary of the research findings, the limitations and implications for future research.

2 Literature Review

The current chapter provides insight on several concepts that are related to the researched topic and have been previously examined in other studies. Specifically, the development of

MICE tourism, its features, segments, structure, importance and market trends are presented as well as the progress of COVID-19 in connection with tourism, different scenarios and impacts and also the angle of tourism resilience. Furthermore, the concepts of sustainability and responsibility are explained before introducing in detail the SRT model that is selected to guide this research.

2.1 MICE tourism development

The meetings industry is a fast-growing sector of great importance for tourism and national economies in general (Banu, 2016; Kumar et al., 2014; Mistilis & Dwyer, 1999; Šilerova et al., 2013; UNWTO, 2006) and the role of events within the tourism sector is considered connected to a destination's competitiveness (Getz, 2008). Thus, many studies have been conducted to explore the aspect of MICE tourism and its importance to many destinations. The number of international association meetings has been increasing exponentially for several years and be still achieving a significant amount of growth in the last decade, while the average total expenditure of all international meetings is considered to be reaching 11 billion USD (ICCA, 2020). Data shows that almost 30% of the total tourism income is generated from the MICE sector (Kizanlikli & Çivgin, 2019). Consequently, the sector is characterised as “a primary contributor to the development of national economies in terms of jobs, taxes and gross domestic product (GDP)” (Chiang et al., 2012, p. 104; Smagina, 2017).

The literature on the MICE industry sets the emergence of this segment at the beginning of civilisation and trade. In ancient Greece, the purpose of meetings was considered the transfer of information and knowledge through the interaction of groups of people. Later, in the 1760s, the Industrial Revolution fostered the need for communication, knowledge exchange in line with the development of international trade (Schlentrach, 2008), but the first convention bureau was established only in 1896 in the United States of America (USA) (Ladkin & Spiller, 2000). No matter the multiple changes and the evolution that the sector has gone through, the objective of the events when taking place seems to be similar to the ones of their initial formation (Chiang et al., 2012; Schlentrach, 2008). The aspect of modern business and event tourism emerged relatively recently in the middle of the 20th century, followed by its rapid expansion (Getz, 2008; Ladkin & Spiller, 2000).

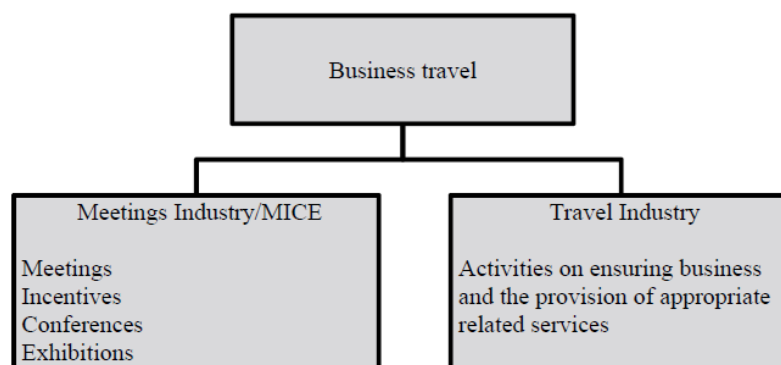
2.1.1 Definitions and main features of the MICE tourism industry

There is a number of terms used in studies to indicate the same sector. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2017, p.25), the MICE industry is alternatively known as the “the meetings industry”, the “conventions industry”; “business tourism”, “MICE Tourism”, “business events” or just “MICE” and also different names are used in different markets and regions (Giao & Son, 2018). The business industry is comprised of four segments, namely meetings, incentive travel, conferences and exhibitions (UNWTO, 2017). Based on these segments the term MICE has been introduced which is an acronym of the combination of all Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions (MICE) together. In some cases, the letter ‘E’ from the acronym is translated as ‘Event’, however this term can be a bit sensitive in this respect as it also includes festivals and public events that are not considered part of MICE (Janssen, 2017).

The MICE industry is considered an integral component of the tourism and hospitality industry in respect of business travel (Banu, 2016; Janssen, 2017; Smagina, 2017; UOU,

n.d.). This can be simply explained due to the fact that travel services (e.g. tickets, travel insurance, visa and passport processes) (UOU, n.d) but also accommodation and food services are required for the delegates (Banu, 2016), or because of the involvement of tourism entities, such as ministries or tourism offices (UNWTO, 2012). Getz (2008), in his study ‘Event tourism: Definition, evolution, and research’ explains in-depth the interrelations between tourism and event management that together cover both the market of events development and tourism destination growth. Besides, the services of the MICE industry have a starting point on leisure services and in a lot of cases, tourism products are accompanying business travel activities (UOU, n.d.). The connection between MICE and the travel industry can be explained through Figure 1 that depicts the structure of the tourism market.

Figure1: Business Tourism Structure



Source: Smagina (2017)

Chiang et al. (2012, p. 104), suggest that “business tourism may be defined as being concerned with people travelling for purposes which are related to their work”; “Consistent with this approach, MICE travellers are defined as ‘people who undertake personal or employer funded trips to attend meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions, both at home and overseas’”. Šušić and Mojić (2014, p.517) mention that “congress tourism is a form of economic sectors defined by the concentration of people in time and space surrounded specialized knowledge or topics that require multidisciplinary meetings”. Furthermore, Kizanlikli and Çivgin (2019) explain the connection of travelling, work, knowledge sharing and consumption of tourist products. Getz (2008, p. 411) states that “a defining element in business event tourism is the dominance of extrinsic motivators in explaining travel—it is necessitated to do business, to advance one’s career, or because it is required by one’s job”.

The MICE industry has unique characteristics that put the sector in the centre of attention. Three of the most significant features of MICE are its big potential for growth, the added value it brings and the opportunities it creates for the destinations and their revival (Giao & Son, 2018). To further elaborate on that, business tourism seems to have big potential due to the high average visitors’ expenditure, the non-seasonal character of the sector, the needs of the participants, the role that financial aspects play and the demand for quality and personalised services (Buhalis & Laws, 2001). Moreover, some of the most significant attributes that are especially related to the conference segment are the creation of employment that is not heavily transient, the urban development of a destination, the attraction of future business investment, the general tourism development of the destination, but also the socialisation of the participants, their unique potential and motivation to visit a

place (Šušić & Mojić, 2014). Another element related to MICE is that in a lot of cases business visitors combine their travelling with leisure purposes (Marvel, 2003), which brings even more potential to the host destination.

Based on the Gaining Edge Analysis, the UNWTO (2012, p.5) presents the major characteristics and approaches of the MICE industry as following:

- Audience: Associations and corporations' priority by head office location business centres and opportunities
- Supply Chain: Professional Congress Organisers (PCOs), Destination Management Companies (DMCs), Exhibition management companies, Event management companies, corporate agents, Incentive houses and Public Relations (PR) firms
- Product: Venues, Event Management, Accommodation, Transport, Technology plus tourism, Strength of local industry and host (local association)
- Motivators: Infrastructure, Capacity, Business to business opportunities, Professional development, Alignment with organisational goals
- Core competencies: Sales, Lobbying and promotion, Negotiation
- Participants: Delegates, Exhibitors, Trade visitors, High corporate achievers, Professionals and business people
- Market approach: Customer Relationship Management (CRM), Direct sales, Bid process, Media and PR, Event Promotion
- Relevance to government ministries: All government ministries

The nature of the features and variables presented holds out over time, nevertheless the industry is adapting due to dominating trends that evolve in the economy, technology, operational models, nature and environment and policies around the globe (Rojas Bueno et al., 2020).

Moreover, the MICE tourism is comprised of multiple stakeholders that need to cooperate and contribute in their own way to the sector. According to Freeman, who is considered the father of the stakeholders notion, stakeholders are groups or individuals that considerably affect or are affected by a firm's processes and activities (Freeman, 2010). In the case of business tourism, different authors and organisations have attempted to identify the actors of the industry and make their own distinctions. According to the Professional Convention Management Association Education Foundation (2007, as cited in Pearlman, 2008, p.96), "the MICE market has many stakeholders, including, but not limited to, convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs), convention centers, labour unions, trade associations, hotels, meeting planners, restaurants, travel attractions, and whole destination cities". The Uttarakhand Open University (UOU) (n.d.) furtherly mentions the government, the MICE employees, customers, suppliers, creditors, the local community, different unions, investors and owners and elaborates on the idea of key and secondary stakeholders.

Furthermore, Davidson and Cope (2003) divide the MICE actors into the groups of suppliers that are accommodation providers, caterings, transport providers (air, rail, sea, car-hire, taxes and supplementary services such as parking services, leisure and recreation providers, intermediaries that are separated in the ones working on behalf of buyers like travel agencies, Global Distribution System (GDS) for bookings, PCOs and meeting planners, conference production companies and venue finding agencies, DMCs and the ones on behalf of suppliers like Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), government, any other organisation that influences MICE, venues and clients that are organisations from public & private sector, travellers, bookers, decision-makers-usually executives. On the other side, business tourists

consist the demand side stakeholders whose spending power stimulates the local economy and employment (Folinas & Metaxas, 2020).

2.1.2 The different segments of MICE

As introduced previously the MICE industry is comprised of four segments, namely meetings, incentive travel, conferences and exhibitions. The UNWTO (2017) underlines that the different segments of business tourism include different characteristics, different target groups, different needs and requiring different strategies and approaches.

The first segment of MICE are the meetings. A meeting is defined as “a general term indicating the coming together of a number of people in one place, to confer or carry out a particular activity. This can be on an ad hoc basis, or according to a set pattern” (International Meetings Industry Glossary, 1993, as cited in Ladkin & Spiller, 2000, p.2). Meetings are usually organised by organisations that aim at gathering people to discuss on specific issues and share ideas and valuable information. The number of participants at the meetings is relatively small. The segment of meetings includes also seminars, workshops, lectures, panels, forums and training programs (Ladkin & Spiller, 2000). The meetings segment has been divided into three different types based on the purpose of the meeting, namely “information sharing and feedback”, “commitment building” and “problem solving” (UOU, n.d.). Most of the time corporate meetings are being conducted in a destination where the company has its headquarters, significant presence, key collaborating actors or an interest in that specific market (UNWTO, 2012; UNWTO 2017).

Furthermore, the second segment of MICE is the incentives. According to the Society of Incentive Travel Europe (1989, as cited in Ladkin & Spiller, 2000, p.2), incentive travel is “a modern management motivational tool to encourage or reward employees, production workers, dealers, distributors and support staff. It is pleasure travel fully or partially paid by the company for qualified employees, often as a bonus, and may be the reward for increased productivity or the attainment of corporate objectives. Incentives are non-cash rewards given due to the achievement of work-related goals. Typically, it is an event often held overseas and specifically designed to be a ‘perk’ or ‘reward’ for attendees”. In short, it is “a global management tool that uses an exceptional travel experience to motivate and/or recognise participants for increased levels of performance in support of the organisational goals”. Incentive travel became popular initially in the United States where it started in the 1920s and show rapid growth until the 1990s (Ladkin & Spiller, 2000). Nowadays, incentive programs are used not only as a motivating factor but also as a way to attract new talents, educate employees and create bonding relationships between the members of a company (UNWTO, 2017).

Conferences are the third segment and are alternatively referred to as congresses or conventions. A conference is defined as “an event used by any organisation to meet and exchange views, convey a message, open a debate or give publicity to some area of opinion on a specific issue. No tradition, continuity or periodicity is required to convene a conference. Although not generally limited in time, conferences are usually of short duration with specific objectives” (International Meetings Industry Glossary, as cited in Ladkin & Spiller, 2000, p.4). Conventions can have a regional, national or global character depending on the market they attract (UNWTO, 2012). The size and duration of a conference is usually a topic that causes debate among researchers. Therefore, the importance of planning it and creating the budget need careful attention. Conferences can be a remarkable source of

revenue especially for venues and hotels as they are the key actors in this segment (Wootton & Stevens, 1995).

Last but not least, exhibitions are the fourth segment of MICE and are else called trade shows, trade fairs or even expositions. They are related to the promotion of a product or a service usually of a certain industry to a specific market aiming at selling or informing about these goods. Exhibitions are considered as “a three-dimensional advertisement where the product can be seen, handled, demonstrated, even smelt and tasted where appropriate, and assessed” and they are “intended to provide a forum for sales leads, contact with influencers, gathering competitor intelligence and building an image to the customer” (Ladkin & Spiller, 2000, p.4-5). They are commonly defined as short-term events, usually lasting less than a week, that are scheduled on a regular basis and give the opportunity to actors of a specific market to gather in a face-to-face manner aiming at achieving the above-mentioned intentions but also share insights, innovative prospects, technical updates and network (Bettis-Outland & Guillory, 2018; Herbig et al., 1997; Lertkornkitja et al., 2020). One of the most important success factors for this segment is the availability of large facilities in destinations and areas that are easily accessible from buyers and sellers (UNWTO, 2012). Usually, the organisation of exhibitions requires creativity, good communication, various skilful actors, innovation, coordination of activities and investment in the personnel in order to produce a quality result and meet the needs of the customers (Lertkornkitja et al., 2020).

The MICE industry is not limited to its four segments, it also entails involvement in multiple associated fields such as “planning and managing corporate meetings, as convention department of hotels, conference centres or cruise ships, organizing international seminars and conferences of state and company, food and beverage management, private tour operations; incentive meetings; for professional trade organizations; tourism boards, tourism trade associations and far more” and services like “accommodation, transportation, corporate training, theme and costume management, technical support” (Jain & Jodhana, n.d, p.844). Also, the selection of the destination and the venue to host the business events is of prime importance and needs careful consideration. Ladkin and Spiller (2000) explicitly mention the aspects that need to be considered and their importance in regards to the process of choosing a venue. The total cost, the location and accessibility, the quality of the destination, the relevance of the travelling time and length of a conference and the image of the destination are all influencing the planning process and they are even more elements to be taken into account for the success of the organisation like the abundance of space at the premises, the offer of breakout rooms, the technological means or the control of the conditions in the facilities. Therefore, no matter the segment, MICE activities require focused and customer-oriented management to achieve the expected results (Kuznetsova and Silcheva, 2014).

2.1.3 Importance of the MICE industry

The MICE industry is associated with multiple beneficial aspects that explain its rapid expansion and growth and have produced a valuable number of studies. Ladkin & Spiller (2000) refer to the benefits of MICE divided into two categories the direct benefits that include the cooperation and investment of both the local government and the private sector, the increased amounts of delegate spending and the employment offers, and the indirect benefits that refer to the economic gains for the local community, the increase in hotel occupancy even in periods out of season, the development and enhancement of cities and areas and the attraction of publicity for the destinations. Lertkornkitja et al. (2020), agrees

and adds the blooming of a knowledgeable, technology-oriented and innovation-driven human capital. In a different manner, the Uttarakhand Open University (UOU) (n.d., p.23) is describing the importance of the industry as “characterized by three highs- high growth potential, high added values, and highly beneficial innovations”, offering “three larges - large output, large opportunities for employment and large industry associations” and ensuring “three advantages - the efficient utilization of human resources, technological know-how, and assets”.

The economic importance of the MICE sector has been examined in a lot of studies as it is a critical element regarding the potential gains that the industry offers. According to Kumar et al. (2014, p.2), the economic contribution of MICE can be divided into three categories, namely “direct”, “indirect” impacts and “induced” impacts which can be further explained as: “money spent by tourists, participants, delegates in the restaurants, hotels or in any of the tourism products can be referred as direct effect. Restaurants also use to buy products such as vegetables and other ingredients from other businesses, which can be called as indirect effect. Induced effect get occurs due to additional income of the restaurants and hotel employee and they spend money in the local economy by purchasing goods and services”. Therefore, we can claim that MICE does not only benefit the direct stakeholders of the industry but also their suppliers, the local community and other hidden actors. In fact, even in cases that MICE events are profitable for the host and organisers, it can be claimed that they are rewarding for the local community (Mistilis & Dwyer, 1999).

Another aspect of the contribution of MICE tourism is the advantages it brings to different groups. The Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC, 2012), outlines the benefits in two segments. The first is the return on investments for delegates and employees and the second refers to other delegates and host destination benefits. Nevertheless, the beneficial aspects of the industry can be demonstrated even for smaller groups of actors. For instance, the supply-side stakeholders benefit from the sales, the visitors from the knowledge, connections and leisure and the destination through the development of the local economy, investment, tourism, promotion (Ladkin & Spiller, 2000).

In terms of the hosting destination, the advantages are related to social and cultural aspects that include the distribution of ideas and information, technology adoption, creation of business connections and foster education and training (Mistilis & Dwyer, 1999) but also foster a sense of coherence unity and pride through the community (Lee & Taylor, 2005). Moreover, Kuznetsova and Silcheva (2014) in their study about Modern MICE-Tourism reveal that business events have a lot of advantages for the delegates, offering them valuable information and development of skills while creating a joyful experience. Usually, the delegates of such events are leading figures in their field which in turn results in the delivery of valuable knowledge and contribution to the local science (UOU, n.d). This confirms that the gains for the industry’s stakeholders are in a lot of cases interrelated, creating favourable results for everyone.

MICE also enforces the distribution of value to multiple related sectors and economy branches like hotels, restaurants, logistics, marketing services, telecommunication services, transport, trade, etc. (Lertkornkitja et al., 2020). Indeed, MICE enables a strong connection with many other entities and tourism products contributing to their growth. Wellness services, cultural activities, city tourism, wine and gastronomic experiences, shopping and even vacation tourism in the case of the incentive segment can all be considered as supplementary services. In general, business tourism is a mean for increased revenue,

customers and promotion of these tourism services and the destination and also involves non-tourism or hospitality sector such as agriculture (UOU, n.d.).

All in all, it can be stated that the MICE industry has a multiplicity of beneficial components for all the actors involved in the industry and from different perspectives like the economic or social, which illustrates the importance of the industry. However, these opportunities do not eliminate the adverse impacts that originate from the industry. Swarbrooke & Horner (2001), illustrate that the MICE infrastructure development usually requires public funding which might else have been used in a more purposeful manner for the locals, such as education, health, etc. Also, the participants' tourism behaviour is a factor that can limit the beneficial aspects of business tourism if they are ignorant or provocative to the local culture or in cases that they do not spend any money in local enterprises. Šušić and Mojić (2014), point out that the big number of delegates received in a place for a short length of time can cause traffic congestion at the roads, parking areas, restaurant and other visited places which can be viewed as contradictory to the statement that MICE tourism can battle the significant issue of seasonality, as it can bring visitors in a destination all year long (UOU, n.d.).

Nonetheless, the topic that causes the biggest concerns in regards to business tourism is the environmental footprint of the industry, especially since the establishment of the Paris agreement which aims at preventing climate change (UNFCCC, 2015). This stems from the fact that the MICE industry involves the consumption of a lot of energy and other resources, production of large amounts of waste and excessive travelling which is connected to carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions (Neelis et al., 2020; Toniolo et al., 2017; Zhong et al., 2020). Thus, careful attention should be given to factors influencing these environmental impacts such as the selection of destination, transport mode or accommodation (Neelis et al., 2020) but also the dedication of the organisers and other supply side stakeholders towards a “green event” (Zhong et al., 2020) that can assist the sustainable development of the sector and diminish its unfavourable side.

2.1.4 MICE industry and market trends

The MICE industry has a changing marketplace and changing customer expectations which make the investigation of trends significant for the development and monitoring of the progress of the industry and its competitiveness (UNWTO, 2017). Thus, the study of the trends and direction of the market is crucial and can provide valuable insight concerning the drivers, challenges and future of the MICE industry.

In the early stages of the appearance of the modern MICE segment, North America and Europe were dominant in the sector but also Asia joined with a fast development around 1980 becoming a popular business and leisure travel destination (Ladkin & Spiller, 2000). According to the statistics of ICCA for 2019, Europe is the leader of the MICE market, hosting more than 50% of all meetings, followed by Asia-Pacific that accounts for almost half the market share that Europe holds (2020). This ranking can be considered a trend in the market for the last 55 years. A report on the meetings industry exploring the period 1963-2017 indicates that Europe had consistently the biggest market share in terms of numbers of meetings. Asia and America are following, with Asia having increased its share by 10% over this period, causing a decline in Europe's share. Africa, Oceania and the Middle East are less popular destinations in terms of MICE events (ICCA, 2018).

In terms of country level, the USA, Germany, France, Spain and the United Kingdom consist the top five rankings regarding the number of meetings they hosted in 2019 but Italy replaces the United Kingdom when it comes to the estimated number of participants the same year. Furthermore, on a city level, Paris is the leading city in 2019 as far as the number of meetings is concerned, followed by Lisbon, Berlin, Barcelona and Madrid whereas Barcelona takes the first place in regards to the number of participants and Vienna enters the top five cities, moving Berlin in the sixth place (ICCA, 2020). Considering the above, it is obvious that Europe has a dominant position in the industry, although research indicates that the “global market share will be spread more evenly over time” (ICCA, 2020, p.13).

Apart from the total number of meetings and delegates, there are several indicators used to monitor the trends of the industry. Some of the most interesting facts concerning MICE is that the months June, September and October are the most preferable months for meetings, whereas December, January and February are not that popular. Additionally, medical science, technology and science are the most common agendas in MICE (ICCA, 2020). Moreover, the average duration of meetings is less than 4 days and more than half of the international meetings repeat every year. The average fee for every participant account for almost USD 500 and his/her expenditure for more than USD 2,000 which is else translated as an average income of more than USD 180,000 generated from delegates’ fees and more than USD 800,000 from total participants’ expenditure per MICE event. Last but not least, shifts in trends also include the type of venues preferred and the kind of destinations chosen (Ladkin & Spiller, 2000).

Based on the ICCA (2018, p.18-20) the major trends of the association meetings market (which covers multiple types of meetings) based on 55-years historical data are the following: “There is an exponential growth trend in the number of international association meetings continues, Europe remains the most popular regular region for meetings, the most popular countries and cities change in five-year period, the average number of participants per meetings decreases, as the meetings get smaller the overall number of participants rises, regional rotation remains a growing trend, technological meetings grow alongside societal developments, universities have become a popular venue choice, the duration of meetings is getting shorter and the number of annual meetings skyrockets over a 5-year period”. Besides these, the direction to value for money destinations, innovative teambuilding activities, meeting packages and tech-savvy solutions for registration, marketing and feedback purposes are illustrated (UOU, n.d.).

The UNWTO (2017, p.115) summarises the newest industry trends in regards to the improvement of participants’ experience and the industry in general, which are: a) Delegates are increasingly conscious about health and wellness. Besides offering quality meals, convention centres must be prepared to serve a diverse world audience that requires halal, kosher, vegan, gluten-free, allergen-free, low- calorie, low-salt and low-sugar options, etc.; b) Food can have an impact on concentration and energy levels; c) Interactive breaks that can be outdoors with fresh air and sunshine; d) Flexible space because venues need to accommodate events of various sizes and formats and maximise usage; e) Fast and accessible Internet connectivity so that digital tools can be used; f) Sustainability programmes which includes green building certification, sustainability initiatives and operations, certified green products and tracking event specific energy usage or water consumption; g) Offer different styles of seating and set-up that will add interest to the overall meeting experience; h) Networking space that will allow people to move around, meet each other and share ideas;

and i) Integrated facilities or proximity to local restaurants and attractions for post-event get-togethers.

The Institute of Confederation of Greek Tourism (INSETE) (n.d) in their “Business Action Plan for the promotion of Greek MICE tourism” strongly address the role of technology and participants experience in regards to the trends and prospects of the industry, Specifically, the recent increased demand for virtual conferences, webinars and hybrid events is illustrated, as well as the potential impact that this can have to the in-person business events. The tendency for live streaming to remote participants, use of social networks before, during and after a conference, access to presentations through electronic devices, use of virtual reality and participants holograms have emerged and are considered to be dominating the future of the sector. On the other hand, the significance of the MICE experience is in the spotlight in connection with the need for personalised experience, interactive activities, customisation of the offered service and the adjustment to the needs of the new more demanding generations which will soon might entail the use of infotainment and edutainment , motivation, involvement of the customer in the planning of activities, selection of inspiring destinations and focus on the sustainability and greening of the industry.

MICE providers and organisers need to take into account the international concerns about climate change and apply ‘green’ strategies to the industry. Water recycling, sensible consumption resources, the preference of suppliers with recycled materials, use of low-consumption lighting, reduction of carbon dioxide emissions or the digitalisation of promotional materials are some examples towards this goal (INSETE, n.d.). In this manner, a lot of guidelines are published to encourage the trend of the greening of the sector, such as the Green Meeting Guide by the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP, 2009), or the general sustainable development of the industry (which includes the environmental aspect) such as the Sustainable Events Guide (UNEP, 2012), the Sustainable events with ISO 20121 (ISO, 2012) or the Guidelines on organising sustainable meetings and events at the Commission (European Commission, 2018).

However, the future of MICE tourism and the abovementioned industry and market trends is likely to be very diversified and subjected to several changes due to the unexpected event of the COVID-19 pandemic that the world is currently facing (CIMERT, 2020). This creates an interesting debate as Gössling et al. (2021) points out that due to the interdependence of many vulnerable sectors on the MICE, MICE tourism might be one of the most hardly impacted tourism subsectors, whereas Giao & Son (2018) states that due to the beneficial aspects of MICE tourism, the development of the sector was used as a mean to overcome crises and bring economic prosperity to cities and destinations. Moreover, an interesting point by Getz (2012; 2013) is that the events industry can be even more resilient than tourism, which can be considered an important advantage for the MICE industry during this era.

2.2 COVID-19 and the tourism industry

COVID-19 has brought a big challenge to tourism and disrupted the industry in an unforeseen way (Gössling et al., 2021; IFITT, 2020; Maradze et al. 2020; Naumov, 2020; Sealy, 2020), causing serious financial losses for the actors involved (Sealy, 2020). The phenomenon of globalization, the transformation of traveling and the development of multiple connections between all different parts of the world have posed changes to the external environment of the tourism industry, making it more vulnerable to crises (Madinós

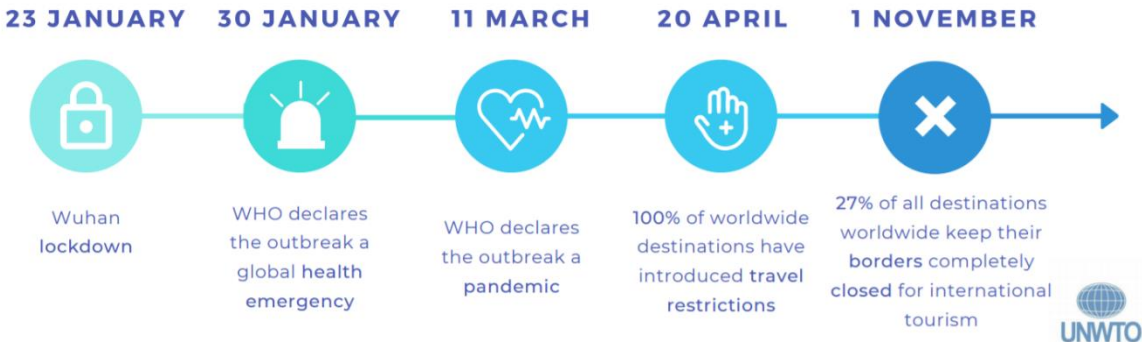
& Vassiliadis, 2008), such as the current pandemic. Besides, it can be stated that travelling is what enabled the spread of the virus on an international level (IFITT, 2020). The progress of the pandemic situation and the levels of the resilience of the tourism sector are crucial for the recovery and the future of the sector and a great deal of related information is presented in the coming subchapters.

2.2.1 The chronicle of the COVID-19 pandemic

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a “severe acute respiratory syndrome (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020, p.80), else known as SARS-CoV-2 virus (Naumov, 2020). The outbreak of this novel virus emerged in Hubei Province in Wuhan, China and was initially reported in 2019 (Gössling et al., 2021). The virus rapidly spread on an international level, forcing the World Health Organisation Emergency Committee to announce a global health emergency in January 2020 (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020; Velavan & Meyer, 2020), although the seriousness of the situation was not taken into consideration at the early stages of its appearance (Washington Post, 2020, as cited in Gössling et al., 2021). By the time Wuhan in China took the necessary measures such as lockdown, quarantine measures and managed to control the rising of the virus cases in mid-February, COVID-19 had already spread on a global scale creating an exponential number of new cases (Gössling et al., 2021).

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 situation as a pandemic. At that point, the confirmed number of COVID-19 cases was more than 118,000 and more than 4,000 people had lost their lives in 114 countries and the predictions were in favor of an even more rapid growth of these numbers (WHO, 2020b). The response to this pandemic was drawn through the measures taken by the national governments and mainly involved forms of nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPI) due to the novelty of the virus. Some of the most popular measures taken in order to prevent the pandemic harsh impacts were lockdown, home isolation, quarantine, mask-wearing, social distancing, testing, closure of educational institutions and non-essential businesses and workplaces, cancellation or postponement of events, conferences, festivals and even the summer Olympic games, bans on gatherings of people, travelling restrictions and borders closure (Gössling et al., 2021; Naumov, 2020; Sealy, 2020). A timeline of some important COVID-19 related events in 2020 is presented below (Figure 2).

Figure 2: 2020 COVID-19 Timeline



Source: UNWTO (2021a)

COVID-19 became a global phenomenon (Sealy, 2020) that does not only describe a public health emergency but an overall crisis affecting every sector (WHO, 2020b), society and livelihoods (UNWTO, 2020e) especially due to its long duration. In the first weeks of 2021,

the number of cases had climbed up to more than 106 million cases of COVID-19 including more than 2 million deaths on an international level. As of that time, the continent of America was the leading one based on the number of cases with more than 47 million cases, the majority of which came from the United States and Brazil, followed by Colombia, Argentina and Mexico. Europe was second on the list with more than 34 million cases and Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Italy being the most affected. Moreover, Asia had a total of more than 20 million cases, coming mainly from India, Iran and Indonesia. Africa had relatively fewer confirmed COVID-19 cases reaching almost 4 million with South Africa holding more than one-fourth of the total and Oceania was in the last position with 58 thousand cases, mainly originating in Australia and French Polynesia (ECDC, 2021a).

To fight the pandemic and its severe impacts, several research teams worked on inventing the COVID-19 vaccine. The process for developing and distributing a vaccine is complex, involving many different stages and usually takes several months. However, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines were approved a few months after the emergence of the virus (WTO, 2020). The vaccination was initialised in December 2020 with a few COVID-19 vaccines having received authorization (WHO, 2020a) and with the challenge of becoming available to everyone. At the time of the research the vaccination is still ongoing and the goal of WHO is to have distributed “2 billion doses by the end of 2021, with an allocation for every country equal to 20 percent of the population so as to cover prioritized target groups” (WTO, 2020, p.5). The focus is on protecting the groups of people that are considered ‘most at risk’ from severe disease, and reducing morbidity, mortality and the burden on healthcare systems. It is important to use the available vaccines to provide protection for those who are most vulnerable and for key workers (ECDC, 2021b).

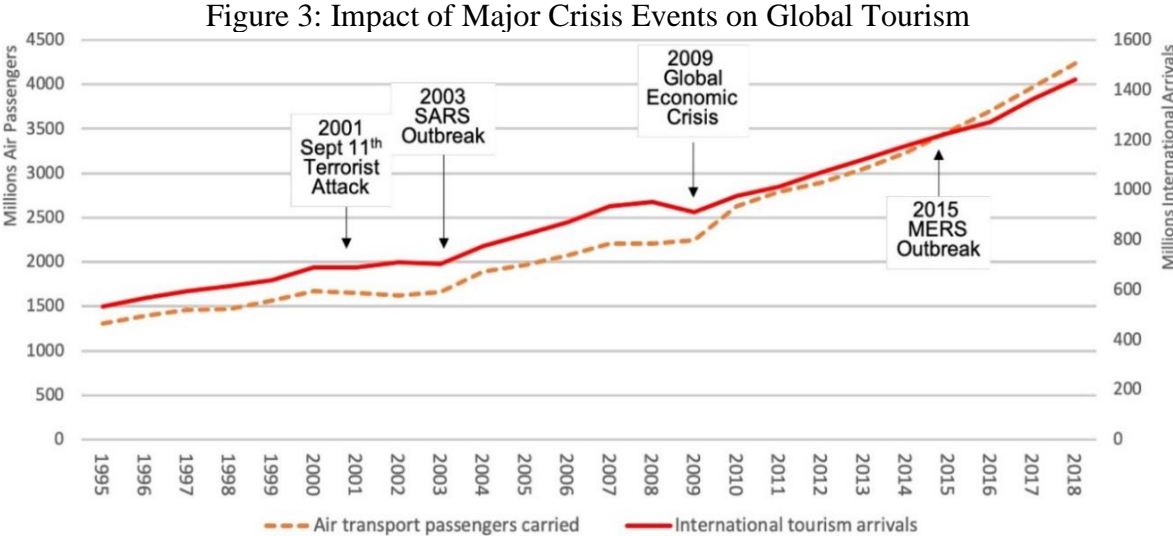
Regardless, the progress that has been made towards the mitigation of the COVID-19 spreading and cases, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (2021b) illustrates that there is still a level of high risk in the situation due to different new SARS-CoV-2 variants that raise concerns. A lot of aspects of these variants are still unknown, thus it is suggested that states will cautiously prepare for any scenario by continuing monitoring the situation, enhance their laboratories, systems and healthcare services and accelerate the vaccination process.

2.2.2 Previous crises and tourism resilience

A crisis can be considered as any unexpected or sudden change that can have impacts on the operation of an organization, affecting its values, aims and goals. The main characteristics of a crisis are “unpredictability and incapability of organization in terms of vision and measurement, threatening the presence and targets of organization, lack of source, information and time to find a solution to the problems, necessity to take immediate action and creating tension in the management” (Tarinc, 2017, p.52). In tourism, crises are defined as all kinds of disasters that can be originated from nature or humans and affect the industry (Tarinc, 2017). The different types of crises in tourism are according to Corina (2018): crisis of economic nature, crisis of political nature, terrorism crises, crisis of socio-cultural nature, crisis of a health nature and technological crises, including natural disasters. Breitsohl & Garrod (2016), claims that crises with a health nature can bring even more negative flows to tourism than terrorism does due to the infrequency and the rapid spread of epidemics.

The tourism industry has faced multiple economic, political and social crises in the past like cyclones, earthquakes, wars, terrorist attacks, stock market crashes and a global financial

crisis (Gössling et al., 2021; Naumov, 2020; Sealy, 2020). Gössling et al. (2021) gathered in one figure (Figure 3) the historical background of the number of air transport passengers and the number of international arrivals based on the World Bank. According to these data, in the last ten years there were a few significant events like the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, the global economic crisis in 2008 and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2015. Different crises have affected tourism and its supply and demand sides (Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016), however as the figure indicates the previous recent crises did not cause tremendous impacts in the tourism market, which supports the concept of the resilience of tourism throughout the time and the different situations (Butler, 2020; Korstanje & Ivanov, 2012; UNWTO, 2020e; WTTC, 2019b). Nevertheless, the expected consequences from COVID-19 do not seem to be that favorable.



Note: SARS: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, MERS: Middle East Respiratory Syndrome
 Source: Gössling et al. (2021)

Although there were multiple warnings in the past about new pandemics, the tourism industry and the globe, in general, had not prepared for such situations (Fan et al., 2018) and were certainly not ready for the COVID-19 outbreak. According to Maditinos & Vassiliadis (2008), “understanding crises and disasters, their lifecycle and potential impacts and actions can help in the development of strategies by organizations to deal with such incidents, and stop or reduce the severity of their impacts on business and society, despite their complexity”. In this manner, former crises can be a useful tool to comprehend the consequences of the current crisis and develop the necessary strategies.

Spanish influenza or Spanish Flu in 1918 infected almost one-third of the global population, causing millions of deaths and producing several new variants that were affecting the world for years (Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). China, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Singapore lost an estimated 20 billion USD in GDP and three million jobs in the tourism sector in connection to the SARS outbreak (Novelli et al., 2018). Furthermore, tourist traffic was decreased by 40 million in 2009 after the global economic crisis (Corina, 2018). During the outbreak of Ebola virus disease in West Africa in 2014-2016, not only the infected countries but the entire continent was affected with negative tourism flows (Novelli et al., 2018). In 2017, natural disasters caused by hurricanes in the Caribbean resulted in a serious loss of tourism arrivals, income and jobs (WTTC, 2019a).

The development of the right mechanisms and policies that battle a crisis are of prime importance for the restoration of the tourism sector and its resilience (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). Traditionally, tourism is considered as one of the industries that can overcome and progress much faster than other ones when experiencing a crisis (Sealy, 2020). Evidence from real past crises supports this argument. For instance, Puerto Rico that faced extreme hurricanes twice in a period of 4 months in 2017 was able to fully resume its tourism statistics within one year. Moreover, the recovery in Belgian tourism took only six months after the bombings in its capital in 2015 (WTTC, 2019a).

In November 2019, the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) (2019b) presented a study on the impact of 90 crises between 2001 and 2018 (of the 90 crises analysed – 32% were terrorism/security related, 13% were disease/outbreaks; 19% were political instability and 36% were natural disasters) and the recovery of the tourism sector which included the following key findings:

- “The Travel & Tourism sector is more resilient than ever – average recovery times have decreased from 26 months in 2001 to 10 months in 2018.
- Of the four crisis categories analysed, political instability proved the most challenging [with average recovery times of 22.2 months, minimum 10 months] while terrorist or security related incidents have the shortest average recovery time of 11.5 months (minimum 2 months).
- Additionally, the average recovery times for natural disasters and disease outbreaks were 16.2 months and 19.4 months respectively (minimum 1 and 10 months respectively).
- Public private partnerships and effective, transparent communications are critical for preparedness and prevention.”

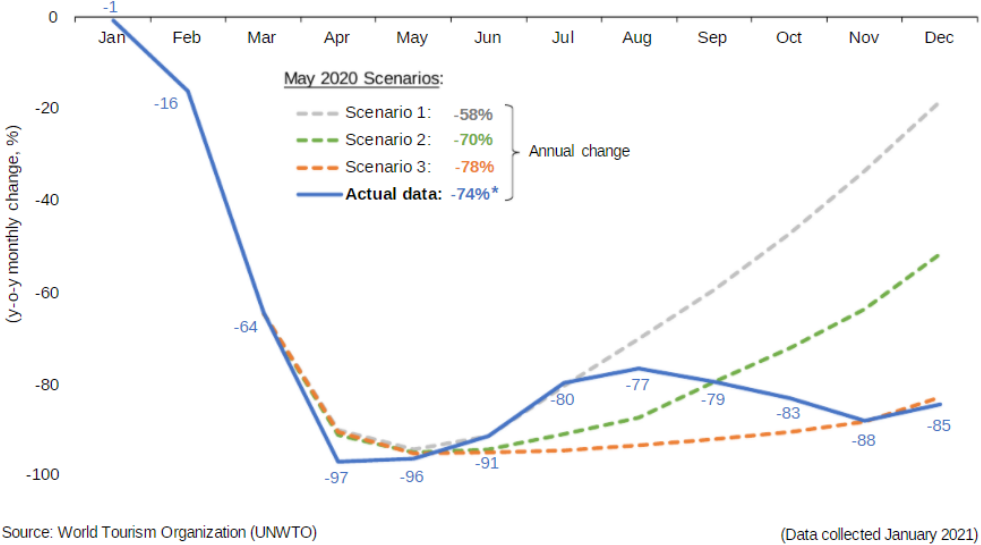
Sealy (2020) in her paper “A commentary on risk and resilience in the hospitality, tourism, aviation and events Industry: Responses to COVID-19 and lessons learned” presents the Resilience Framework which illustrates multiple initiatives and issues that can be considered in future crises. These are divided into categories namely: a) supply chain management which includes equipment and supplies, etc., b) cash conservation which entails insurance, investments, suspension of dividend payments, etc., c) government policy and support covering concessions, loans, country risk, regulations, etc., d) technology that encompasses software, data protection, virtual technologies, etc., e) media/ public relations containing timely and direct communications, fake news, guest, staff and community assistance, etc., f) staff- health and wellness that includes medical support, training, accessibility to equipment, facilities, etc., g) destination management that incorporates market recovering strategies, innovative packaging, technological applications, etc. and h) operational health/ safety & hygiene management that includes hygiene and cleaning protocols, collaboration of stakeholders, certification, etc.

In general, although the tourism sector is considered resilient, frameworks like this that can support the industry and need to be considered and continuously updated in order to be effective for similar situations in the future. Daniel Richards the Chief Executive Officer of The Global Rescue Companies highlights that “building resilience is a continuous process rather than an end-state, and the Travel & Tourism sector must constantly strive towards developing policies and building the tools and processes necessary to respond to the crises of tomorrow” (WTTC, 2019a). Indeed, COVID-19 indicated this need more than ever and the building of resilience in the tourism sector will encourage its control of the situation and survival in the long term.

2.2.3 COVID-19 facts and scenarios on the tourism industry

The tourism industry is one of the most affected sectors, as international travel was paused with airplanes not flying, borders being closed, hotels not operating (Gössling et al., 2021; IFITT, 2020; Sealy, 2020; UNWTO, n.d.). According to the latest statistics, the UNWTO (2021b) declared 2020 as “the worst year in tourism history with one billion fewer international arrivals” which is equal to a 74% drop in tourism arrivals caused by the strict travel restrictions imposed due to COVID-19. These numbers exceeded by far the predictions that were made at the first months of the pandemic that estimated a drop of 20-30% in tourism arrivals in 2020 (UNWTO, 2020c), which is explained due to the uncertainty of the situation and confirms the enormity of the pandemic, but undoubtedly overtakes the loss in arrivals caused by the economic crisis in 2009, the largest decline that tourism experienced in the past (UNWTO, 2021c). Below Figure 4 depicts that the actual annual data of tourism arrivals were between Scenario 2 and Scenario 3 (UNWTO, 2021a).

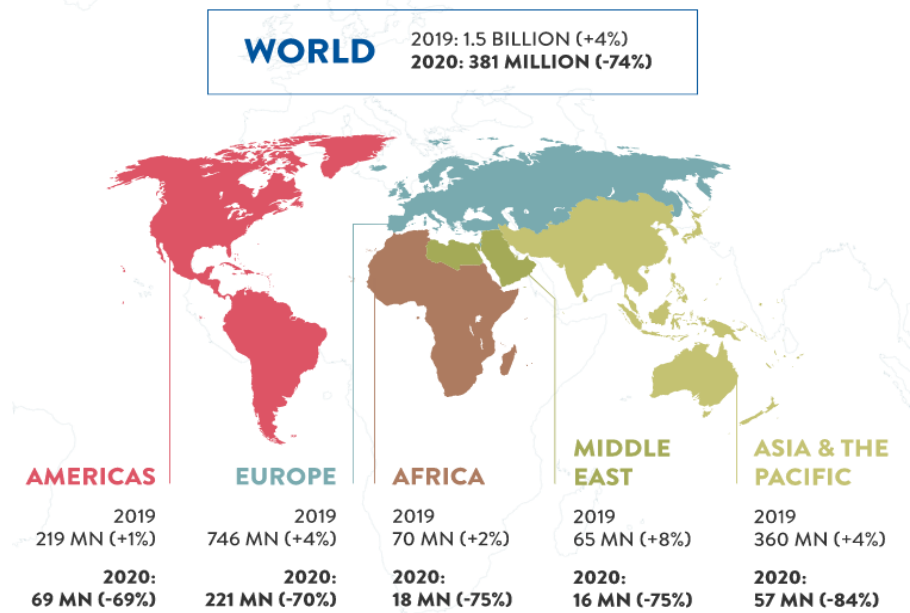
Figure 4: International Tourist Arrivals in 2020: Scenarios and Actual Results



Source: UNWTO (2021c)

As reported by the UNWTO (2021c), the loss due to the pandemic is estimated at 1.3 trillion USD in export revenues or else an economic loss of 2 trillion USD in direct tourism GDP, more than 2% of the world’s GDP. This loss is more than 11 times the loss recorded during the 2009 global economic crisis. Furthermore, millions of job positions in tourism are suffering and especially SMEs and women and youth groups. In regards to the tourism regions, Asia and the Pacific confronted the biggest decline with an 84% decrease in international arrivals in 2020, about 300 million less than in the previous year. The Middle East and Africa both recorded a 75% drop in arrivals while Europe faced a decline of 70%, representing over 500 million fewer international tourists, and in Americas there was a drop of 69% (Figure 5). On the bright side, domestic tourism seems to overcome the major difficulties and gradually starts to experience growth in some markets like China, France and India.

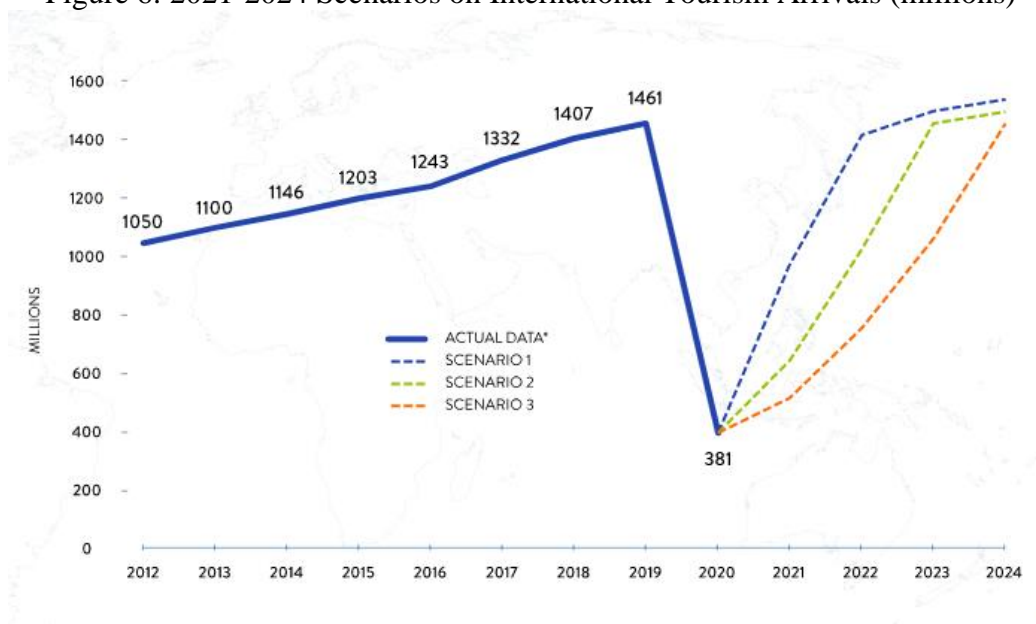
Figure 5: 2020 International Tourist Arrivals Per Region



Source: UNWTO (2021a)

The focus now falls on the future and the potential recovery of the tourism sector. According to the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer (2021c) which analyses the latest data on tourism destinations and markets and the UNWTO Panel of Experts survey, the predictions for 2021 are not very favorable. A percentage of 45% of the respondents believe that 2021 will bring better results than 2020 but at the same time 50% of the participants anticipate that the industry will not come back to its normal levels before 2022. In fact, most of the experts expect a bounce in 2023 and a percentage of 41% predict it for 2024 or even later. In that manner, the UNWTO (2021a; 2021c), presented the potential scenarios for the international tourist arrivals for the period 2021-2024, which indicate that it might take years for tourism to return to the 2019 levels (Figure 6).

Figure 6: 2021-2024 Scenarios on International Tourism Arrivals (millions)



Source: UNWTO (2021a; 2021c)

The most important factors influencing the recovery of the tourism industry seem to be the travel restrictions, slow virus containment, economic environment, lack of coordinated response among countries, low consumer confidence and slow flight resumption. However, the beginning of the vaccination against COVID-19 of the population is expected to “help restore consumer confidence, contribute to ease travel restrictions and slowly normalize travel during the year ahead” and “the recovery of tourism in 2021 will be determined by the pace of the vaccination rollout, the coordination among countries on travel procedures and the economic situation” (UNWTO, 2021c, p.7). If the vaccination process works smoothly this could boost tourism especially in the second half of 2021 and mainly in favor of domestic tourism and short-haul travel. However, there is still a lot of uncertainty in regards to the situation with the number of cases still increasing, the emergence of new variants, the continuation of restrictive measures and the future of tourism can still be unpredictable.

2.2.4 Tourism and COVID-19 impacts

The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought several consequences with tourism suffering “the greatest crisis on record in 2020 following an unprecedented health, social and economic emergency amid the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic “(UNWTO, 2021c, p.1). The novelty of the situation and its unexpected results resulted in the focus of a lot of studies on the impacts and the prospects of the pandemic. Vo and Tran (2021) present a research on “The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Global Trade”, Pollitt et al. (2020), focus on the economic aspect in their study “A Post-Keynesian approach to modelling the economic effects of COVID-19 and possible recovery plans”, while Deb and Nafi (2020), refer to the “Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism: Recovery proposal for future tourism”. Moreover, researches have been conducted in connection to different destinations, like the one in Africa by Masago et al. (2020) using “a Post-Keynesian approach to modelling the economic effects of Covid-19 and possible recovery plans”, other ones about Asian countries like the “Media Content Analysis on Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Tourism Industry in Malaysia” by Kele et al., (2020) or “Hospitality and tourism industry amid COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives on challenges and learnings from India” by Kaushal and Srivastava (2021), or even about whole continents like the paper of Bugeia (2020) titled as “COVID-19, the awakening of a continent?” which is oriented in Europe.

Further studies include more approaches on the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism such as “Workforce Perception Of The Impact Of Covid-19 (Novel Coronavirus) On Job Security Of Tourism Industry In Sri Lanka” (Dilshan & Toko, 2020), the “Social costs of tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic” (Qiu et al., 2020), “Covid-19 And Tourism Sector Dynamics In Africa: Challenges And Possible Solutions” by Maradze, Nyoni and Nyoni (2020), “The ‘low tide’ of tourist flows in the COVID-19 era. Insights into the economic and social shades of the ongoing phenomenon” (Cerutti & De Falco, 2020), “Socio-economic Impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic in South Asia” (Saha & Bhowmik, 2020) or “Tourism in a world with pandemics: local-global responsibility and action” (Jamal & Budke, 2020) and the “Environmental effects of COVID-19 pandemic and potential strategies of sustainability” (Rume & Islam, 2020) but also more general studies like “Covid-19 pandemic and global tourism” (Luković & Stojković, 2020) and “An opportunity to review existing grounded theories in event studies” (Seraphin, 2021).

All these studies point out several of the major impacts and consequences that emerged due to the pandemic and can be related to the tourism industry too. To begin with, economic

impacts are presented such as the big decrease in tourist arrivals, as well as the decline in global and national GDP, per capita income, foreign direct income (FDI), and capital flows, but also the loss of jobs, decrease in wages, financial instability and recession in many industries and countries. Also, revenue loss that will not be regained for main industries like aviation or hotels -due to the cancellations- is illustrated and for supporting tourism agencies indicating the importance for surviving of such businesses. In fact, the decline in demand has severe impacts on all related actors and poses the threat of poverty for some groups, like the employees that are laid off or take unpaid leave. Additionally, in terms of the economy and the supply chain, a lot of changes have been experienced with the majority of the budget being directed at the health sector.

Regarding the social & cultural aspect, the impacts of COVID-19 refer to cancellation of events, festivals, meetings and religious or social activities that usually work as a motivation for tourists. The social crisis originating from social distancing measures, closure of entertainment places and schools, livelihood threats, food deficiency due to the disturbance of supply chains, discrimination towards people that come from very affected places and especially China, as well as xenophobia, can affect tourism with people refusing or not be able to travel or deliver tourism services under poor psychological conditions. On the other hand, the labour crisis coming from the big unemployment rates caused by the crisis causes job insecurity and urges people to stop working for the tourism sector. This poses the threat of tourism having difficulties bouncing back due to a potential lack of experienced employees and limited development of social capital that are vital for the revitalization of a destination.

Nevertheless, it can be stated that COVID-19 also brought some favorable impacts in terms of the nature and environment that are a key aspect of tourism and were negatively affected by it (Dolnicar, 2020; Murphy, 1995). Studies reveal the reduction in greenhouse gas and CO₂ emissions during the pandemic due to the travel restrictions and the potential for nature to heal and wildlife to thrive due to the absence of tourists, their more even distribution in all seasons and the cessation of activities. However, at the same time there was an increase of waste generated by masks and other medical equipment and a decrease in recycling, elements that are not in favor of the environment or a sustainable development. In any case, the planning of the future of tourism needs to be carefully considered in order not to go back to the damages it created before COVID-19 and attempt to achieve the levels accepted at the Paris agreement against climate change (UNFCCC, 2015).

Furthermore, COVID-19 produced other types of impacts and disruptions too. It changed people's ability to travel, limiting their personal mobility and transportation choices but also posing the fear of contamination and other psychological factors. Moreover, it affected the standards of living of people or communities that are tourism-based. In other words, it brought destinations from overtourism to under-tourism by shifting tourists towards less busy destinations. Despite the adverse impacts, the pandemic can be characterised as an opportunity for innovation, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) growth and other technological advances, a shift to responsible and sustainable tourism, a revision of strategies, systems and planning of promotion and CRM that assist the development of a safe and secure image for a destination and the wellbeing of the community under the new circumstances.

Besides, an interesting approach is adopted by Barbier and Burgess (2020) that relate COVID-19 pandemic to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and indicates the

adverse impact of the virus on their implementation. This viewpoint is adapted from the United Nations (UN) (2020), and the major impacts are depicted in Figure 7 below.

Looking into the main industry stakeholders, the consequences of COVID-19 are obvious for every individual actor and subsector. The aviation industry is heavily hit with a massive reduction in the number of passengers and flights, followed by billions of revenue loss and governments' actions to bail out airlines. The accommodation sector is also experiencing severe impacts especially for countries that are closely related to tourism like Italy and Greece, and with a future full of challenges in regards to the industry regulations and their supply chains. In addition, the MICE industry is suffering from excessive cancellations of events. Moreover, food services are devastated due to closures or restrictions which make their recovery more difficult. In general, different stakeholders like hotels, restaurants, cafes, DMOs were forced to reduce their staff and had liquidity problems, with hotels and gastronomy being the most vulnerable (Gössling et al., 2021).

Figure 7: The Impact of COVID-19 on SDGs



Source: UN (2020)

It is a matter of fact that the final consequences caused by COVID-19 are still unknown and will haunt the globe for a long term, not only from an economic aspect but also in other intangible ways (Searly, 2020). A lot of studies highlight that the impacts of the pandemic on the tourism sector will be severe (Deb & Nafi, 2020; Sealy, 2020, Strielkowski, 2020), but it remains unclear how the situation will develop (Gössling et al., 2021) and what the future holds for the international tourism industry.

2.2.5 Implications for tourism's future

No matter the intensity and extraordinary impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, it is essential for the tourism industry to overcome the difficulties and recover. The recovery of tourism matters due to the significance and contribution of the industry as a sector on national and international levels. Maradze et al. (2020) highlights the importance of tourism based on UNWTO data, pointing out that tourism contributes to the development of destinations, their economic growth, peace and security, environmental protection, cultural preservations, as well as accounting for 10% of the global GDP, one out of ten job positions, 7% of global exports and 30% of services exports while holding the third position of the largest export categories. Taking into account these data, it is clear that recovery is crucial, thus effective crisis management is required in the sector to ensure its fast and efficient bounce back. Crisis management is an ongoing process (Santana, 2004) and the complexity of tourism attributes in connection with the unique and novel characteristics of a crisis can make the establishment and application of strategies a difficult and demanding process (Novelli et al., 2018) in order to ensure that the future of an industry is safe.

According to Sealy (2020, p. 89), the future of tourism and return to normal entails a lot of effort and the confrontation of the following major challenges:

- Ensuring health and safety at the destination to restore traveller confidence, trust and to mitigate risks.
- Assessing and supporting all stakeholders and tourism businesses of large and small capacity to adapt and survive.
- Developing or sustaining a domestic tourism product until a safe return to international tourism can be achieved.
- Providing clear communication to international tourists to limit uncertainty and negative destination image.
- Developing systems for the measurement of travellers' needs, satisfaction and control of disease.
- Building an ongoing system of resilience for the future, the sustainable survival of communities and the micro and macro economies.
- Building on other industries to provide alternative sources of income and foreign exchange which will create less dependency on international tourism in small economies.

In the same manner, the General Director of WHO (2020b) has pointed out that the nations need to take a “whole-of-government”, “whole-of-society” approach, and create a strong strategy to prevent the spreading of COVID-19, keep their citizens safe and minimize impact. Accordingly, he has mentioned main areas of focus, namely: “Prevention. Preparedness. Public health. Political leadership. And most of all, people” as well as innovation and learning. Another approach from the UNWTO (2020e, p.10-12), refers to a framework that contains three main phases, specifically the management of crisis and

mitigation of the impacts that includes the support of companies' liquidity, revision of taxes, charges and regulation impacting transport and tourism, protection of vulnerable groups and jobs, promotion of skills development, creation of crisis management mechanisms, inclusion of tourism in emergency packages, the provision of stimulus and acceleration of recovery which incorporates financial stimulus for tourism investment and operations, advance travel facilitation, promotion of environmental sustainability in recovery packages, comprehension of the market and restoration of confidence, enhancement of marketing and MICE, investment in partnerships, and the preparedness for the future which involves diversification of markets, products and services, digital transformation, reinforcement of tourism governance, inclusion of tourism in national emergency systems, investment in human capital and focus on sustainable tourism, circular economy and SDGs.

The focus on the future of the industry reveals that although in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic tourism was hit hard, there are a couple of opportunities that came to light due to this crisis. Tourism actors can now have the chance to reconsider their business model, innovate, undergo a digital transformation, have sustainability as a focal point and adapt to the 'new normal' (UNWTO, 2020a). These opportunities need to be taken into consideration and even become part of the recovery strategies. For instance, Le and Phi (2020) in their study "Strategic responses of the hotel sector to COVID-19: Toward a refined pandemic crisis management framework" ascertain that business innovation, transformation and services changes are becoming essential for the management of a hotel, accompanied by health and safety measures, recovery strategies and government policies. Moreover, another potential advantage that COVID-19 brought is that by eliminating overtourism (Naumov, 2020), it encouraged people to reevaluate the development of international travelling and consider a degrowth paradigm in tourism (Hall & Seyfi, 2021).

In general, given the changes that COVID-19 brought it is ambivalent that tourism will remain the same at least in the short term (Luković & Stojković, 2020). First of all, the travelers' behaviour is different, with mostly young people travelling, with last-minute bookings, showing a preference to nearby rural destinations and domestic tourism and especially nature, having health, safety and cancellation policies as their priorities and choosing authenticity and sustainable practices (UNWTO, 2021a). In fact, "experts foresee growing demand for open-air and nature-based tourism activities, with domestic tourism and 'slow travel' experiences gaining increasing interest" UNWTO (2021c). Also, there is a possibility that technological trends and the orientation towards the offer of special experience might be more resilient with studies already investigating the perspectives of virtual solutions and contactless capabilities (Rahimzhan & Irani, 2020; Rastati, 2020). In terms of the new trends that will be following the pandemic, Skift (2021) published a worth noticing report of the megatrends that envision the travel world in 2025 and the future of many subsectors (hotels, cruises, business travel, etc.), the role of technology, new business models and their efficiency evaluation and other tourism perspectives.

All in all, it is essential for tourism actors to actively focus on the recovery of the industry while building resilience and adapting to the new tourism paradigm that the pandemic imposed. Apart from the crisis response plans and the foundations for the future, it is notable to also realise the role of tourism in regards to the pandemics and try to limit its contribution, aiming towards its sustainable development.

2.3 Tourism Sustainability and the SRT model

Sustainability is a concept that has gained a lot of attention in the last years on an international level. This can be explained due to the rising concerns about the degradation of the global natural resources as a result of economic development (Mbaiwa, 2005), but also the publicity that the prevention of the climate change has attracted through the Paris climate conference (COP21) in December 2015 (UNFCCC, 2015) and the SDGs that consist the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development adopted by the UN the same year (UN, n.d). Tourism has become closely related to sustainability on both a local and global scale due to its resource-intensive character (Lu & Nepal, 2009). Moreover, responsibility can be considered a related term that refers to the requirements for making tourism more sustainable (Goodwin, 2014). Nowadays, the shift towards sustainability and responsibility has gained more ground in view of the crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic brought, which is considered an opportunity for the transition to a more sustainable future (Deb & Nafi, 2020; Luković & Stojković, 2020). A combination of sustainability and responsibility is achieved through the SRT model which will be presented in this section.

2.3.1 Sustainable Tourism

Sustainability was popularised by the World Commission on the Environment and Development's (WCED) report published in 1987 (Tosun, 2001), where the concept of sustainable development was outlined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p.42). However, the concept of sustainable development can be detected earlier in 1970 (Pezzoli, 1997) and more clearly in 1972 when the report "Limits of Growth" was published by the Club of Rome (Meadows, 1972) which gave aim to further exploration and discourses as the one at the conference of Stockholm the same year, the Belgrade Charter on 1975 and the International Conference of Tbilisi in 1977. Gradually the idea of sustainable development started to become more widespread and was eventually institutionalised in 1987 at the Brundtland conference (alternatively named by the Norwegian president of WCED that year) where the importance of sustainability was pinpointed by many researchers (Bebbington, 2001; Dixon & Fallon, 1989; Mebratu, 1998).

Sustainable tourism was introduced with the intention to decrease the downside impacts of tourism and bring prosperous results to the destinations (Lu & Nepal, 2009). Its definition has been grounded on the principles of sustainable development (WTTC, WTO & EC, 1995). Hughes & Morrison-Saunders (2018 p. 119-120) further updated the definitions of sustainable tourism to "Tourism that meets the needs of host communities and takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts while addressing wants of tourists and the tourism industry", which also acknowledges the role of the host community and illustrates the collaboration of all related actors. Mihalic (2020) highlights that sustainable tourism definitions might be subjected to continuous changes based on the new knowledge and approaches that arise.

There are four fundamental aspects in sustainability: "(1) the idea of holistic planning and strategy-making; (2) the importance of preserving essential ecological processes; (3) the need to protect both human heritage and biodiversity and (4) development based on the idea that productivity can be sustained over the long term for future generations" (WCED, 1987 as cited in Lu & Nepal, 2009, p.5-6). Moreover, in a lot of cases the concept of sustainability

is interrelated or even considered the same as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), although the connection of the two concepts has received a lot of criticism (Alhaddi, 2015; Carneiro et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2011). TBL is consisted of three dimensions namely the economic, social and environmental one or else known as profit, people and planet (Elkington, 1997), which can either align or sometimes conflict with each other (McDonald, 2009). A more recent definition of sustainable tourism as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (UNEP & WTO, 2005, p.12) aligns with the concept of the three dimensions. In general, it needs to be highlighted that sustainability involves all three aspects (Mihalic, 2016; Prihatinah, 2020; Raub & Martin-Rios, 2019) and sustainable tourism should not only aim at enhancing the economic aspect but also the quality of life of the local community and protect the nature of an area (Mitchell, 2008), the involvement of all the related stakeholders no matter if their interests are aligned or trade-off needs to be done (Lu & Nepal, 2009) and their benefit in a just, equal and ethical way (Becker, 2012;2011; Bramwell & Lane, 2008; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

The benefits of sustainability are outlined in multiple studies (Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Johnston & Tyrrell, 2005; Kiron et al., 2013; Lee, 2013), with Butler (1999) manifesting that it can bring such prosperous results and dynamics in tourism than no other element could offer. However, sustainability includes such complexity which in turn requires a full understanding of the notion in order to implement it (Butler, 1999; Lu & Nepal, 2009) and can create an “elusiveness” of its application (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). Müller (1994) suggests that the ideal situation stemming from sustainable tourism is ‘balanced tourism development’ where all objectives have the same significance and are placed together for contrasting effects. On the contrary, Lu and Nepal (2009) argue that in a world full of uncertainty, stability should not be the center of activity but an adaptive kind of management should be embraced in tourism firms. In this manner, currently there is an ongoing debate regarding the shift to a more sustainable tourism paradigm that will form as a basis for all the changes and actions that need to be done towards tourism development after the COVID-19 crisis (Oldekop et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Responsible Tourism

The concept of responsibility in tourism is not a new topic and in a lot of cases, responsible tourism follows the concept of sustainable tourism, causing difficulties in their distinction (Mihalic, 2016; Saarinen, 2014; Sharpley, 2013). The notion became very popular when the global focus turned on the adverse impacts of tourism because responsibility can be considered an encouraging way to improve the advantageous sides of tourism and mitigate the negative effects on economic, cultural, environmental and political aspects (Grimwood et al., 2015). Discussions on responsible tourism had initiated in the 80s, considering mostly the environmental and socio-cultural aspects of tourism (Sharpley, 2013). The notion was even connected to the second level of Maslow’s pyramid, the emotional and social needs that tourists would increasingly start to consider while travelling became more like a basic need (Krippendorf, 1987 as cited in Goodwin & Francis, 2003). Later, it was connected more to ethics, human rights and the benefits of all related actors (Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Sharpley, 2013).

There are several approaches to the meaning of responsibility in tourism. Responsible tourism can be defined as “making better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit” and “requires that operators, hoteliers, governments, local people and tourists

take responsibility, take action to make tourism more sustainable” (Goodwin, 2014, par. 2). Moreover, Sharpley (2013), is exploring different definitions and points out that it can be considered opposing to mass tourism and it offers a unique experience for both locals and visitors due to its ethical manner and awareness. Another point of view is that responsible tourism is tourism that intends to “minimise the negative and maximise the positive social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism in destination communities and environments by promoting ethical consumption and production among all stakeholders” (Saarinen, 2014, p.2). Furthermore, “the term tends to denote a process of planning, policy, and development that prioritizes community-level involvement, sustainable resource management, equitable distribution of benefits, and minimal negative impacts to local contexts” (Goodwin, 2011; Husbands & Harrison, 1996; Reid, 2003, as cited in Grimwood et al., 2015). Simply, responsible tourism is “an expression to describe tourism that is sustainable because it acts sustainably” (Mihalic, 2016, p.465), “based on more sustainable values” (p.467).

According to Goodwin (2014) and the Cape Town Declaration, responsible tourism takes a variety of forms, it is characterised by travel and tourism which:

- minimises negative economic, environmental, and social impacts;
- generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities, improves working conditions and access to the industry;
- involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances;
- makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world's diversity;
- provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues;
- provides access for physically challenged people;
- and is culturally sensitive, engenders respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence.

Furthermore, Petersik (2019, p.368) in his study ‘The responsibility of the destination: A multi-stakeholder approach for a sustainable tourism development’ points out the benefits that a network responsibility approach can bring to a destination. Such benefits are synergies, a positive effect on the external image of the destination, added value, financial resources, successful communication between the actors, economic diversification, target-oriented goals and substantial offers to the tourists. However, for these benefits to emerge the involvement of all stakeholders is crucial in order to shift from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to overall responsibility. As illustrated by Argandoña (2010, p.15 as cited in Petersik, 2019, p.363), responsibility needs to be diffused in many different levels, namely “responsibility for individuals, corporate social responsibility, sector responsibility, destination network responsibility” and cover the whole value chain. The accomplishment of responsibility across all levels requires a holistic approach. Besides, “it is important to take into account both, the views and interests of the local community and companies, as well as the views of guests and visitors” (Petersik, 2019, p. 364).

An interesting way of application of responsibility in tourism introduced by the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO) is presented by Goodwin and Francis (2003, p.5). The responsibilities outlined in the related guideline refer to the protection of the environment: flora, fauna, landscapes; the respect of local cultures: traditions, religions, built heritage; the benefits of local communities: economically and socially; the conservation of

natural resources; the minimisation of pollution: noise, waste disposal, congestion and can be achieved by establishing new policies and involving the staff, informing the clients about responsible tourism and encouraging their participation, collaborating with partners and suppliers to achieve responsibility, publicising good practice to spread the concept.

Despite the efforts to adopt responsibility and its development as a concept on global scales (Saarinen, 2014) and the potential due to the fact that “the responsible tourism product has one particular advantage over many other ethical products — the consumer will often experience the difference” (Goodwin & Francis, 2003, p.283), many critics have developed about responsible tourism. Sharpley points out the issues in fostering a united definition, its practicality, the groups it is addressed to and also the low success rates that a behavioural change can be easily achieved. Goodwin and Francis (2003) claim that consumers might not be willing to pay a bigger amount of money in return for a responsible labelled product or experience. Wheeler (1991) devoted a whole study under the name ‘Tourism's troubled times: Responsible tourism is not the answer’ while highlighting that the purpose of responsible tourism can be faded for the sake of promotion. Grimwood et al. (2015) support that and add that the way the concept is transmitted might also cause opposing reactions.

No matter the contradictions, increasing attention is now given to responsible tourism in light of the COVID-19 crisis and tourism restoration (UNWTO, 2020d). Deb and Nafi (2020, p.1491) suggest that responsible tourism can “revive life and livelihood by maintaining health guidelines, wearing the mask during, upholding social distance, tourists must protect themselves. The tourism business must consider all sorts of guidelines when reopening the business. That will protect tourists, businesses, society, and the world for a better future with a slogan Putting People First.”. Also, a responsibility approach can help towards the building or resilience of the industry (Petersik, 2019) towards future crises.

2.3.3 Sustainable Responsible Tourism Model

Both sustainability and responsibility towards its implementation are considered significant concepts for the present and future tourism industry. Mihalic first introduced a model that combines the concepts of sustainable and responsible tourism, introducing the term “responsustainable tourism” in her study “Sustainable-responsible tourism discourse- Towards ‘responsustainable’ tourism” in 2016. The SRT model offers the potential to consider tourism “from the perspective of the sustainability pillars or enablers” (Mihalic, 2020, p.6) and was designed to provide a way to comprehend, monitor and mitigate the potential challenges and threats against the implementation of sustainability (Mihalic, 2016; 2020). The evolution of the original model led to the table that is presented below (Table 1).

As depicted in Table1, the SRT model is divided into two main parts, sustainable tourism and responsible tourism, each of them consisting of three main attributes. Sustainable tourism’s attributes are the well-known sustainability pillars, namely economic, socio-cultural and natural pillars. The academic literature that focuses on these pillars is very broad and based on a small selection of researches (Carneiro et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2014; Martínez et al., 2013; Neelis et al., 2020; Ramkissoon, 2020) they are briefly explained: The economic dimension usually refers to financial issues, revenue, profitability, taxes, policies, general economic performance, economic impacts such as job creation and the contribution and relevant benefits of the stakeholders and the community. Moreover, the socio-cultural aspect entails aspects like job employment, actors’ satisfaction and protection, sense of community, respect for culture and traditions, intellectual development, non-exclusion,

focus on human rights. Last but not least, the natural or environmental element can be related to optimal consumption of resources, environmental and biodiversity protection, education, consideration on pollution, waste management.

Table 1: Development of the SRT Model

No.	Description category	Sustainable tourism	Responsible tourism
1	2	3	4
1	Core	Concept-pillars-centred	Concept-implementation-centred
2	Rationale	Idea of sustainable tourism	Making tourism sustainable
3	Theoretical/practical	Focus on understanding sustainability	Focus on sustainability implementation
4	Based on elements	Sustainability pillars 1. Economic capacity 2. Socio-cultural capacity 3. Natural (environmental) capacity	Sustainability enablers 1. Socio-political environment (awareness, ethics, norms, leadership, collaboration, consensus, critical mass, tourism agendas, governance, destination management, media, civil initiatives, political agendas...) 2. Socio-psychological capacity of destination-based stakeholders (locals, industry, networks) (supply side) 3. Socio-psychological capacity of visitors (demand side) Satisfaction and dissatisfaction (quality of life)
5	Measure/indicator focus	Positive and negative impacts	Irresponsible tourism
6	Opposite	Unsustainable tourism	... addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.'
7	Definition: old-new paradigm (text in italics added by author)	Old: 'Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, ... New: ' <i>Quality of life centred</i> tourism that takes full account of its current and future 1) economic, 2) socio-cultural and 3) natural impacts <i>and responsibly</i> addresses the 1) host communities and industry, 2) visitors <i>and</i> 3) socio-political environment.' (UNEP & WTO, 2005, para. 2; UNWTO, n.d.)

Source: Mihalic (2020)

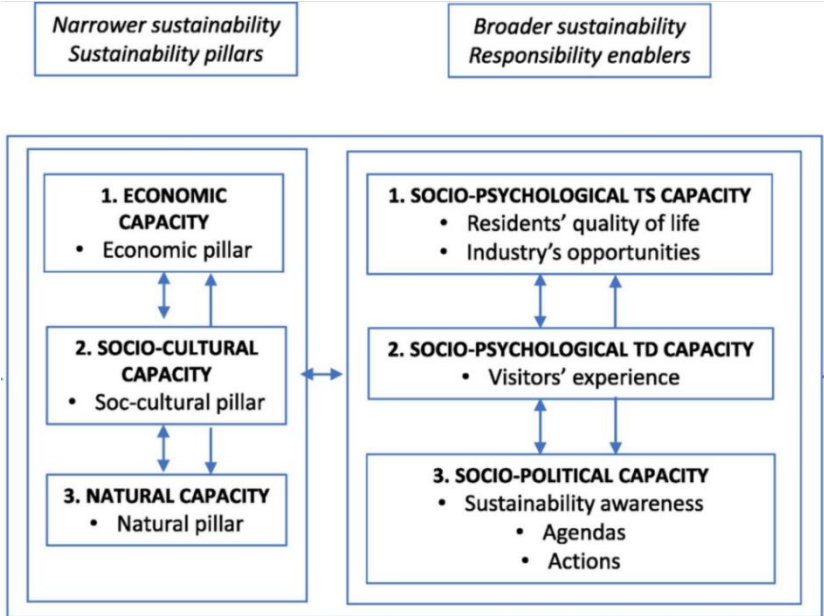
On the other hand, responsible tourism includes the sustainability enablers, specifically the socio-political environment, the socio-psychological capacity of destination-based stakeholders and the socio-psychological capacity of visitors. The significance of these triggers has been highlighted towards the effective expansion of sustainable development (Mihalic et al., 2021). To start with, the socio-political environment has been considered to be part of the concept of sustainability but this idea was never finalised. It includes aspects like ethics, norms, political leadership, involvement and collaboration, consensus, critical mass, tourism agendas, governance, ethics, destination management, media, civil initiatives, political agendas, with the main focus being on awareness, actions and agendas (Mihalic, 2020; Mihalic et al., 2021). In this case, agendas can be characterised by the shift from “a theoretical sustainability concept into a concept with specifically defined actions, meaning that it codifies the sustainability principles into a strategy and policy and offers policy instruments” (Mihalic, 2016, p. 467). Furthermore, the socio-psychological capacity of destination-based stakeholders refers to the supply side of tourism and specifically the local community and the industry itself. The focus here lays on the residents’ quality of life and the industry’s opportunities, whereas the last dimension which is the socio-psychological capacity of visitors refers to the demand side of tourism, meaning the visitors and their quality experience (Mihalic, 2020).

The last two attributes regard all the related stakeholders, their quality of life and their satisfaction (Mihalic, 2020). According to Moscardo (2009, p.162-163), quality of life is connected to “social capital” (networks, quality of relationships, opportunities to involve in groups), “human capital” (health, skills, knowledge), “physical capital” (infrastructure and facilities), “financial capital” (income, assets, savings) and “natural capital” (quality of natural environment, ecosystem). Moreover, satisfaction is strongly connected to the

elements that a destination has to offer and the quality of these elements and the overall experience. “Understanding what drives visitor satisfaction represents a good basis for increasing customer retention at the level of individual suppliers and the destination as a whole and is, as such, important input for destination strategy development and management improvements” (Žabkar et al., 2010, p.543). An alternative and clearer visualisation of the model is illustrated in Figure 8.

All in all, as previously mentioned the SRT model can be used as a framework to understand and monitor sustainability and its implementation. According to Mihalic (2020, p. 9), the aspects of the model provoke a new understanding of sustainable tourism as “quality of life centred tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, socio-cultural, and natural impacts and responsibly addresses destination stakeholders (host communities and industry), visitors, and the socio-political environment”.

Figure 8: The attributes of sustainability and responsibility- the SRT concept



Source: adapted from Mihalic (2020)

The SRT model is applicable to all kinds of tourism, destinations and entities of all levels, as sustainable tourism development through responsible actions and practices is addressed to all stakeholders (Mihalic, 2016). In addition, its potential is big as “it is clear that it will enhance the effectiveness of the implementation of sustainable tourism development and provide an improved approach against unsustainable tourism development caused by internal or external forces such as neoliberalism, climate change, and pandemics or other crises and disasters” (Mihalic et al, 2021, p.19). Thus, it can be concluded that the model can be used in the case of MICE tourism too and can assist the investigation of the impacts that COVID-19 brought to the tourism industry and the future perspectives in mitigating the adverse aspects and boost the advantageous ones towards the sustainability of the sector.

3 Presentation of the case-destination

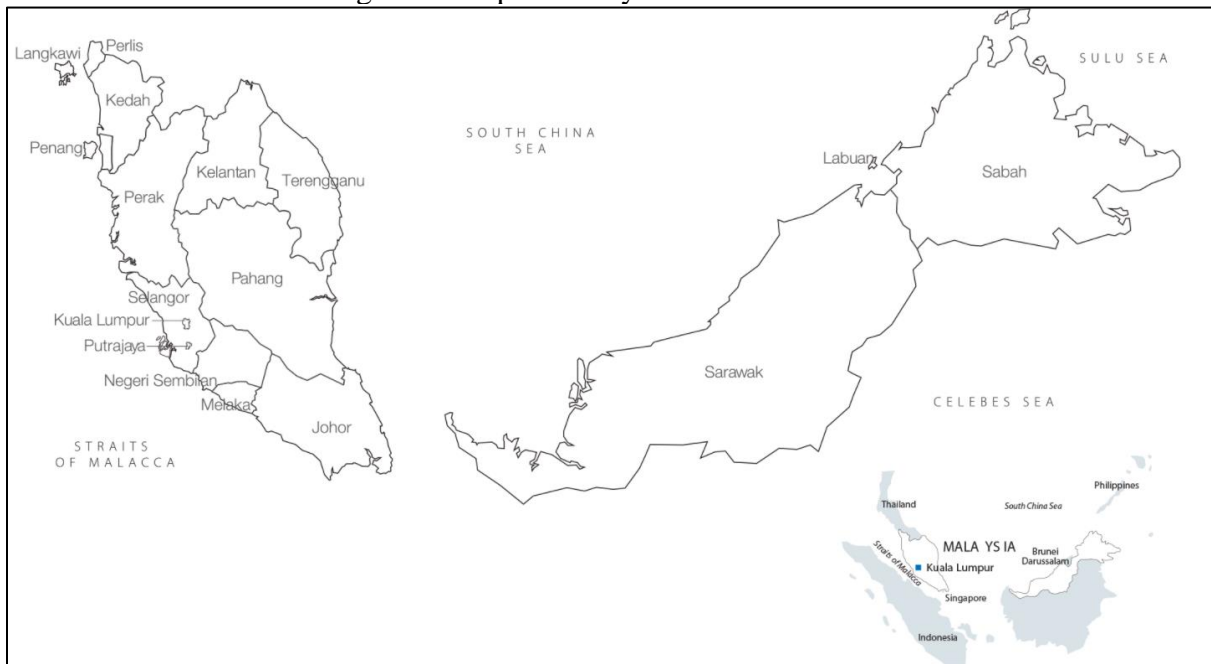
Malaysia can be considered an important business events hub in Asia due to its strategic location, high-quality facilities in all regions, the optimal combination of costs and quality

and destination authenticity. MICE Industry is an important pillar of the country’s economy (TPCSB, 2018) which makes it vulnerable due to the COVID-19 crisis if the country fails to react and adapt to the situation (Ho & Sia, 2020). Thus, the current research is focusing on the case of Malaysia and the current chapter aims at presenting valuable information for the destination and its MICE tourism.

3.1 Malaysia as a tourism destination

Malaysia is located in the Asia Pacific region and specifically in the South-East subregion in Asia. The country is comprised of five regions with total of thirteen states and three federal territories, specifically the Central region which includes Kuala Lumpur which is the capital city, Selangor, Putrajaya and Negeri Sembilan, the Southern region which contains Melaka and Johor, the Northern region that consists of Pera, Penang, Kedah and Perlis, the East coast region that includes Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan and the East Malaysia region which contains Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan. As indicated in Figure 9 below, the states of Sabah and Sarawak are separate from Peninsular Malaysia, thus the country is neighbouring not only to Thailand and Singapore but also Indonesia and Brunei (Tourism Malaysia, 2019).

Figure 9: Map of Malaysia and its States



Source: Tourism Malaysia (2019)

Malaysia has a population of almost 33 million people, accounting for 0.8% of the total Asian population (UNWTO & GTERC, 2020) consisted of Malays in the majority but also Chinese, Indians and other nationalities. Their national language is Malay, officially addressed as Bahasa Malaysia and the official religion is Islam. The climate in Malaysia is tropical with warm weather and two monsoon seasons. The Malaysian currency is the Malaysian Ringgit (RM) (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). Moreover, Malaysia has a GDP of USD 365 billion, according to the 2019 data (UNWTO & GTERC, 2020) and its economy is depending strongly on “manufacturing...while tourism and primary commodities such as petroleum, palm oil, natural rubber and timber are major contributors to its economy” (Tourism Malaysia, 2019, p.216). Specifically, according to the Department of Statistics

Malaysia (DOSM) (2020), the tourism industry contributed 15.9% of the GDP in Malaysia which equals to USD 58.41 billion and offering 23.6% of the employment in the country.

As a tourist destination, Malaysia managed to be among the top-visited destinations internationally in 2019, taking the fourteenth place in the rank and the fifth place in its subregion, South-East Asia. The statistics of that year that are provided by the UNWTO (2021c) show that Malaysia received 26.1 million tourists and USD 19.8 billion in international tourism receipts in 2019. The average duration of the stay is 6.5 nights with the vast majority of tourists coming from Asia, with Singapore leading the way and Indonesia, China, Thailand and Brunei following. In general, the Central Asian market was dominant in the tourist arrivals with a growth of almost 82% in 2018, while the growth for Africa was 49%, 26% for the Americas, 25% for West Asia and East Asia, 13% for South Asia and 8% for Europe. The provinces of the country that were the most popular among tourists in 2018 are the Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Putrajaya state, Melaka, Johor, Kedah, Penang, followed by Sabah, Sarawak and Pahang (Tourism Malaysia, n.d.).

Furthermore, in regards to the data for 2019, the greatest part of inbound tourism profit for the country came from shopping (33.4%), while accommodation and transport came at second and third place with 24.4% and 18.4% respectively (DOSM) (2020). Moreover, domestic tourism is also very important for the country’s economy, contributing 221.3 million visitors and USD 22,507 million in 2018. Nevertheless, the main reason why tourists are attracted to the destination is holiday (55.3%), followed by visiting friends and relatives (19.8%), shopping (13.4%), medical purposes (3.7%), business (2.4%), MICE (1.4%), education (0.6%) and honeymoon (0.6%). In addition, besides shopping, the major activities that tourists involve are sightseeing in the city, visiting historical sites, visiting islands and beaches, visiting museums, visiting theme parks, nightlife and entertainment, visiting villages, swimming, cultural events and festivals (Tourism Malaysia, n.d.). Community-based tourism is a significant segment for Malaysia supported by the National Ecotourism Plan 2016–2025 but also the Homestay Programme, led by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), which offers involvement of tourists in different experiences that are closely connected to the locals and their lifestyle (UNWTO & GTERC, 2020).

The main focus for the future of tourism in Malaysia was placed in 2018 on the attraction of a bigger number of tourists, bigger expenditure and duration of stay, engagement of domestic tourists but also the growth of the MICE market. The strategies towards these goals are displayed in Figure 10 and were aiming at the target of 30 million tourist arrivals and more than 24 billion USD in tourist receipts in 2020 (Tourism Malaysia, n.d.).

Figure 10: Strategic Directions of Tourism Malaysia



Source: Tourism Malaysia (n.d)

Along with its tourism growth in the last couple of years, Malaysia has been awarded multiple times on an international level. A few of this notable titles are: BestBrands Award – Nation Branding Award at the BrandLaureate BestBrands Awards 2017-2018, Best Performance Award at Taipei International Travel Fair 2018, Best Leisure Destination 2018 - The Favourite Destination of Tongcheng Tourists organised by Tongcheng Travel, Best Diving Destination – Sipadan Sabah at 2018 Nature Travel Awards, Best Tourism Publicity Award at the 21st Busan International Travel Fair, Best Family Travel Destination 2018 in conjunction with National Tourism Award China, Most Attractive Travel Destination in the World 2018 at the 8th Hong Kong Global City Forum and the city of Taiping was listed in “2018 Sustainable Destinations Top 100” by Green Destinations on 21 December 2018 (Tourism Malaysia, n.d), as well as: 16th in the world Most Peaceful Country Global Peace Index (GPI) 2019, 29th in the world for 'Travel & Tourism Competitive Index' The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019 by World Economic Forum, 5th in the world - Emerging Markets Will Dominate the Global Economy in The Next Decade by Business Insider 2019, AirAsia ranks 1st in the world for the 'World’s Best Low-Cost Airlines 2019’ as per SkyTrax Award 2019, No. 1 World’s Best Countries to Invest in or Do Business for 2019 by CEO World.Biz 2019 (MyCEB, n.d.a).

3.2 MICE Tourism in Malaysia

Malaysia is considered an appealing destination for business travellers, due to multiple reasons related to the weather, climate, scenery, political stability but also because of the fully-equipped MICE facilities that are present all around the country, in diverse surroundings (Tourism Malaysia, 2019) and its strategic position (UNWTO, 2017). On a worldwide scale, it is placed in the 33rd position in regards to the number of meetings it hosts and 26th based on the number of participants, while it ranks at the 9th place regarding meetings in the Asia-Pacific region (ICCA, 2019). As depicted below (Figure 11), in 2018 Malaysia managed to secure 152 business events, attracting more than 100 thousand international participants and reaching around 39 million USD (MyCEB, 2018). In terms of the different segments of MICE, Malaysia is considered a very strong player in the meetings’ segment but needs more effort on the exhibitions’ segment in order to be able to attract more exhibitions and trade shows (UNWTO, 2017).

Figure 11: 2018 Achievements in MICE for Malaysia



Source: MyCEB (2018)

Business Events were introduced in 2003 in Malaysia (Abd Hamid et al., 2012) and became a focal point not long before 2010 with the formation of MyCEB that committed in this area (UNWTO, 2012) and was later reinforced with city and states bureaus that were driven by the success of the first bureau in Sarawak (UNWTO, 2017). Since then, there is a continuous growth in the number of MICE events and their economic impact and a climb in the international rankings, although the competition from close Asian countries is quite fierce (MyCEB, n.d.b; UNWTO, 2012). Despite the challenges that also include limitations in infrastructure, development and planning, lack of support to the industry, lack of data and innovation, hindering government policies, etc., Malaysian actors have managed overtime to identify the opportunities of MICE and strive towards its establishment as a leader of the Malaysian economy which in turn could help the target of the country to be recognised as a developed state and a well-known business events hub (MyCEB, n.d.b). In Table 2 below a brief SWOT analysis of the MICE sector in Malaysia is presented.

Table 2: Malaysia SWOT Snapshot

Strength	Weakness
Establishment of new city/state bureaux to lead the development of meetings in the respective destinations and supported by new convention centres in Penang, Kota Kinabalu and Kuala Lumpur.	Shortage of specialist companies to keep pace with demand and innovative products to entice repeat visitors.
Opportunity	Threat
Business events have been recognized as a key contributor to the nation’s Economic Transformation Programme in line with the development of high yield visitors.	Challenge to develop products that keep pace with market trends, competitive behaviour and client demands.

Source: UNWTO (2017)

The MICE events can bring multiple benefits to the country. Big events that have taken place in the past have confirmed this potential, “such as the PATA Travel Mart 2018, which took place in Langkawi...which...attracted over 1,400 delegates from 70 global destinations. In addition, it was also attended by 17 media from 12 countries, including Canada, India, the Netherlands, UK, and the USA, who not only provided coverage to the event but also helped promote the wide variety of attractive tourism offerings in Langkawi and Malaysia.” (Tourism Malaysia, n.d., p.12). In general, the big potential of MICE for the country also lies on the fact that it can assist in the enhancement of the national workforce, the spread of knowledge, the community support but also it is linked to all the National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) (MyCEB, n.d.b), benefitting several different businesses (UNWTO, 2012), thus bringing multiplier benefits.

Therefore, Malaysia has launched different programs to support the business events like Kesatria, Twin Deal program, Association Development Program (MyCEB, n.d.a; UNWTO, 2017) and also MICE is included in major Malaysian strategies, such as the nation’s Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) (UNWTO, 2012), Malaysia’s Business Events Roadmap by MyCEB (n.d.b), studies regarding the development of tourism and also in its National Tourism Policy 2020- 2030. The latter specifically aims at the transformation of Malaysia as one of the top global destinations where MICE tourism is one of the focus areas while working towards “improving physical infrastructure, stakeholders collaboration and the professionalism of event organisers to position Malaysia as a leading business tourism destination” (MOTAC, 2020, p.37).

As far as its MICE facilities are concerned, Malaysia has 11 major convention centres in total. Some of the most popular venues are the Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition Centre (MITEC) which is the largest in the country and can host up to 50,000 delegates, the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC), the World Trade Centre Kuala Lumpur (WTCKL), the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Kuala Lumpur, the InterContinental Hotel Kuala Lumpur & Renaissance Hotel Kuala Lumpur, and the newly established Ipoh Convention Centre and Sabah International Convention Centre (SICC) (MyCEB, 2020), as well as the Setia SPICE Convention Center in Penang (UNWTO, 2017). Moreover, according to MyCEB (n.d.a), Malaysia has won multiple awards in regards to its MICE sector. In 2020, they were honoured with the title of ‘Best Conference & Exhibitions Destination (Asia) at the M&C Asia Stella Awards. Also, Malaysia was recognised as the 4th Most Expected MICE Destination for 2020 at the 13th China MICE Industry Golden Chair Awards.

Despite the continuous efforts and prosperous results, Malaysia still has not achieved to reach its vision regarding the future of MICE tourism. On one hand, it can be stated that COVID-19 has become an obstacle to its growth, but on the other hand, even previous studies identify that there was an “absence of proper understanding or awareness on the event management process and lack of marketing strategies among business events stakeholders in Malaysia” (Nasir et al., 2019, p.26), which can explain the delay in reaching the national goals.

4 Methodology

The current chapter provides an overview of the research approach and its connection to the research objectives, while it outlines the processes of data collection, sampling and the methods used to analyse the gathered information in order to fulfill the aim of the current study.

4.1 Research approach

As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic brought several challenges and affected the tourism industry in an abrupt way. While the pandemic is still ongoing, this study aims at exploring the impacts of this crisis on the MICE industry and the perceptions of the MICE supply stakeholders on its future through a sustainability viewpoint. Due to the fact that the pandemic is a new issue with relatively limited literature especially in connection to MICE tourism, the purpose of the present research is to generate further knowledge and conceptually contribute to the topic. In this manner, a constructivist research approach was adopted, which recognises the existence of multiple realities and implies some subjectivity since the data is collected and elaborated based on the participants' and the researcher's interpretation. Methodologically, constructivism implies the use of qualitative data (Guba, 1990; Jennings, 2001).

In this case, the decision to undertake a qualitative research approach was taken considering the degree of suitability towards the objectives of the research. The qualitative research approach intends to “describe lifeworlds ‘from the inside out’, from the point of view of the people who participate” and “seeks to contribute to a better understanding of social realities and to draw attention to processes, meaning patterns and structural features” (Flick et al., 2004, p.3). It can describe interactions and connections that are often complex and gives the chance to people to freely express a topic without necessarily guiding their answers (Sofaer, 1999). Thus, this approach was used to collect and analyse data collected from MICE

stakeholders, aiming to explore the impacts of COVID-19 in the industry and their perceptions regarding the future. The evolution of the research area and the valuable insights that have been provided through qualitative approaches have strengthened its potential and capabilities (Whipp, 1998). However, despite its consolidation and the benefits of this approach, a lot of attention was allocated to research ethics, principles, credibility, transferability and confirmability to avoid destructive criticism that qualitative researches can attract (Krefting, 1991; Moscardo, 2018).

4.2 Data Collection

The qualitative approach that this research is based on, enables an almost unconstrained collection of information and provides detailed data that can be analysed in-depth, without requiring a huge sample (Patton, 1987). The methods adopted for the data collection and the sampling process are furtherly explained in this section.

4.2.1 Methods

In order to construct this paper, both primary and secondary data were used. A preliminary literature review was carried out through desk research to gain a better insight into the main aspects of the study and assist the research process. To assure the quality of data, the researcher gathered secondary data from trustworthy, verified sources in the form of academic papers and researches, official documents, reports and statistics. Furthermore, primary data were later gathered through in-depth interviews with main MICE stakeholders which contributed as the main source of the research findings. Interviews are one of the most common methods used for data gathering in qualitative approaches (Sofaer, 1999; Moriarty, 2011) and are considered a strong tool because they can provide a lot of information in connection to the research topic and the perception of the interviewees (Moriarty, 2011). The specific type of interview used in this study was semi-structured interviews, which is aligned with the qualitative approach of this research. Semi-structured interviews are based on a structure but have more flexibility and can enable the free expression of thoughts from the side of the interviewee (Gillham, 2000) and can be guided through questions and follow-ups prepared by the researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2004).

The interview structure consisted of open-ended questions that were created as a key guideline for the interviews and enabled the unhindered share of views from both sides. The pattern used to structure the interviews was the tree-and-branch model, where “the trunk is the core topic; the branches, the main questions” and “the goal is to learn about the individual branches that frame the entire tree but still obtain depth and detail” while following a sequence (Rubin & Rubin, 2004, p.159). This design was selected by the researcher in view of the exploration of the impacts of COVID-19 through the sustainability approach that was adopted. Specifically, the questions were divided into six categories, according to the six elements that the SRT model is comprised of, namely economic, socio-cultural, natural, socio-political, destination-based stakeholders and visitors. Approximately, three questions were distributed to each element which were adapted or reinforced with sub-questions when needed. Also, two general questions were posed to the interviewees at the end of the interview, thus a total of twenty-one main questions on average were asked during each interview and some general information about its participant’s role was recovered. The sequence and wording of the questions were kept the same in each interview, which

according to Küşümler et al. (2020) can reduce the bias and subjectivity of the interviewer. The questionnaire that was used to lead the interviews is presented in Appendix A.

Interviews can be carried in different ways like face-to-face, through the telephone or by using the internet and all of them can have equally effective results (Opdenakker, 2006). In this research, they were carried out online due to the restrictive measures of the pandemic that burden the mobility of the author but also in accordance with the safety policies that encouraged social distancing and work from home for the majority of the businesses (Gössling et al., 2021). The main technological mean used was Zoom communication platform and in a few cases email. The interviews were conducted in a period of three months, specifically March 28th, 2021 until May 18th, 2021, with the majority of them happening in the first two months (see Table 3). Their duration was approximately 60 minutes and the discussions were recorded under the consent of the interviewees, while few notes were taken by the researcher. To secure the effectiveness of the interviews a pilot interview was first held which helped the researcher test the questions imposed, the clarity of the objectives, the data collected and adapt some elements if needed.

4.2.2 Sampling

Sampling is a significant part of a research process and especially the data collection and the quality of the sampling is interrelated to the quality of the end result (Robinson, 2014; Teeroovengadum & Nunkoo, 2018). Defining the whole population, the sampling frame, technique and sample size can ensure the success of a valuable sample (Teeroovengadum & Nunkoo, 2018). The population of this research was comprised of all the supply-side MICE stakeholders in Malaysia, including but not limited to MICE organisations, convention centers, trade associations, hotels, meeting planners, caterings, transport providers, as well as the government, DMOs, the local community and other supplementary services. Based on the objectives of the study that demand an overall awareness of the sector and the impacts that COVID-19 caused, as well as a good understanding of sustainability and its requirements, the researcher decided to target executive members from the managerial level of businesses, private and public organisations and the governmental sector, which can be considered to have some expertise in the MICE sector. In this way, the criteria set can assist the formation of a not very heterogenic sample that would make the data analysis complex (Robinson, 2014).

The strategy that was adopted to further decide on the sample was a non-probability sampling that corresponds to the qualitative approach of this research and specifically a purposive sampling. In purposive or judgemental sampling “respondents are chosen based on some criteria and the belief of the researcher that the chosen participants are the most suitable to provide the necessary data or information which is required by the study” (Teeroovengadum & Nunkoo, 2018, p.481-482). As mentioned before, the focus was drawn to executive members of the industry that can support the purpose of this study, with priority to government divisions, national tourism organisations, MICE associations and venues. Later, during the interview, these interviewees were asked to suggest other members of the industry that have the same level of experience and knowledge in the sector and could potentially offer their insight into this research. “The process of identifying other respondents, who in turn identify additional respondents, and so on, produces a snowball-like effect” (Teeroovengadum & Nunkoo, 2018, p.482). Thus, also a snowball technique was adopted to get in touch with more individuals that could offer a transparent and coherent view on the topic.

Table 3: Interviews' Related Information

Name of Interviewee	Job position	Business/ Organisation	Sector	Type of Interview & Duration	Date of Interview
Interviewee #1	Manager of Events	Convention & Exhibition Bureau	Governmental	Virtual Interview, 50 min	28/03/21
Interviewee #2	Senior Business Development Manager	MICE Organisation	Governmental	Virtual Interview, 40 min	29/03/21
Interviewee #3	Director of Marketing & Communications	Convention & Exhibition Bureau	Public	Virtual Interview, 50 min	30/03/21
Interviewee #4	Director of Tourism Promotion Board	DMO	Governmental	Virtual Interview, 55 min	31/03/21
Interviewee #5	Former Head of Sales	MICE related activities	Private	Virtual Interview, 75 min	02/04/21
Interviewee #6	General Manager	Hotel	Private	Virtual Interview, 15min & Interview by Email	06/04/21
Interviewee #7	Executive PR & Communication	Convention Center	Private	Virtual Interview, 60 min	07/04/21
Interviewee #8	President of Association	Association of MICE Organisers & Suppliers	Public	Virtual Interview, 40 min	07/04/21
Interviewee #9	Director of Business Development	Information Technology (IT) company/ Service Provider	Private	Virtual Interview, 45 min	10/04/21
Interviewee #10	General Manager	Convention Center	Private	Interview by email, -	18/5/21

Source: Own work

The recruitment process for the interviews took place in several stages and focused on participants that could be of great contribution to the study. First of all, emails were sent to all potential contributors and additionally some MICE entities were contacted through phone calls or social media such as LinkedIn and Facebook. This first contact enabled the introduction on behalf of the research aims and encouraged the organisation or company to propose suitable candidates based on their knowledge and availability. Afterwards, the selected interviewees were invited for an interview via e-mail which explained in detail the purpose of the research and gave information on the process. Based on the positive

responses, an interview followed and the total number of interviews conducted was ten. This number was based on the data saturation point, which can be explained as the point when the information gathered does not contain new elements anymore (Teeroovengadam & Nunkoo, 2018). The total number of interviewees consisted of five executives from the private sector, two from the public sector and three from the governmental sector. Finally, 20% of the interviews were organised through the snowball effect. Table 3 presents some details about the interviews and the participants while keeping their identity anonymous.

4.3 Data Analysis

In order to analyse the data that were gathered through the semi-structured interviews, a content analysis was applied. Content analysis can be defined as a research method that “emphasises an integrated view of speech/texts and their specific context” and aims at “examining meanings, themes and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 318). To conduct the content analysis the data recorded had to be transcribed into text in order to be interpreted. In this manner, the 'Zoom audio transcript' function assisted this process and the researcher had to go through the end text to ensure that the transcription was successful and contribute to some parts when needed.

Given the predetermined dimensions that were established at the interview's questions and were based on the SRT model, the analysis can be characterised as a ‘directed content analysis’. The directed content analysis allows the researcher to structure the initial categories on existing literature and establish the key components of the research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). According to Berg (2001, as cited in Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.319), “generating concepts or variables from theory or previous studies is also very useful for qualitative research, especially at the inception of data analysis”. In this research, the collected data was divided and presented in the six categories that are suggested by Mihalic (2020) in regards to the SRT model, namely economic, socio-cultural, and natural-environmental and socio-political impacts, as well as impacts related to destination-based stakeholders and visitors. Data that did not fit under any of these categories were not considered relevant to the purpose of this research, thus they were excluded from the analysis. This approach can be identified as a deductive-dominant qualitative content analysis with a deductive point of view arising from the model-based categories (Armat et al., 2018).

“The use of software can have a positive effect on studies using content analysis in the tourism field” (Camprubí & Coromina, 2016, p. 138), thus the analysis of the data was supported by NVivo 12 Pro software that is appropriate for qualitative analysis. The data collected were loaded in the software after the transcription and were organised by the researcher into the six pre-determined themes and later in sub-categories under each theme. A trial of the software took place after the pilot interview. In general, NVivo supported the sorting and management of the data and enabled their visualisation in different forms, giving the opportunity to understand better the major concepts and contribute to their analysis and interpretation. However, it should be stated that the role of the researcher is crucial even when using software and careful consideration needs to be given to the division of data into different categories in order to ensure the objectivity and credibility of results.

5 Analysis of Findings

Through the conduction of interviews, a lot useful information was collected regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism in Malaysia and in connection with the SRT model. The findings of the research are presented and analysed in this chapter categorised according to the dimensions that the model suggests which are aligned to the concepts of sustainability and responsibility. The views of the interviewees cover most of the chronicle of the pandemic in Malaysia from its beginning in March 2021 until mid-May 2021 and include future projections, demonstrating how the length of the situation made the impacts become more and more obvious for the MICE actors. An overall presentation of the impacts that were unveiled through this study appears on the table below (Table 4), while the detailed analysis of the gathered data is following in the next sections.

Table 4: The Impacts of COVID-19 on MICE Tourism in Malaysia, an SRT Presentation

Sustainability	Responsibility
Economic Impacts	Socio-political Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of revenue and cash flow • Shutting down of many businesses and striving of survival for other • Increase of costs and prices • Shift of demand towards different kind of events and suppliers • Introduction of strategies and actions against economic losses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adoption of new strategies • Changes on MICE settings • New Priorities • Sustainability awareness and actions • Reshape the future of MICE
Socio-cultural Impacts	Impacts on Destination-based Stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rise in unemployment • Changes in working conditions and lower levels of employees' satisfaction • Fear connected to health and safety • Limitations in social interactions through MICE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General impacts • Redirection to other activities and sectors • Collaboration & ideas exchange • Industry opportunities for some • Impacts on the local community
Natural-Environmental Impacts	Impacts on Visitors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No specific impacts on environmental agenda due to COVID-19 • Increase of waste • Indirect impacts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Reduction in CO2 emissions caused by travelling o Reduction in energy consumption o Paperless work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low levels of confidence in terms of travelling • Quality of experience • Attendance limitations • Future expectations and customer satisfaction

Source: Own work

5.1 Economic impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism in Malaysia

The outbreak of COVID-19 hit the MICE tourism industry causing multiple impacts connected to its economic performance and operation. “The damage is huge and we do not see it coming back before 2022” says Interviewee#6, while Interviewee#3 states that “this industry is the first to be hit and the last to recover”. Moreover, Interviewee#1 claims that

“if not for the pandemic a lot of people would not realise how big is the contribution of MICE and tourism for the economy of Malaysia”.

Based on the interview discussions with important stakeholders of the MICE in Malaysia, the main economic impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism are related to the:

- Lack of revenue and cash flow
- Shutting down of many businesses and striving of survival for other
- Increase of costs and prices
- Shift of demand towards different kind of events and suppliers
- Introduction of strategies and actions against economic losses

5.1.1 Lack of revenue and cash flow

Specifically, the lack of revenue and cash flow that has been previously addressed in other similar studies (Masago et al., 2020; Pollitt et al., 2020; Saha & Bhowmik, 2020) is related to many factors that the interviewees mentioned. Due to the pandemic, a big number of restrictive measures were implemented that impacted the operation of MICE activities. In Malaysia, the lockdown of each state independently worked as a barrier even for national events, although some domestic events were taking place and the situation had remained unchanged until the beginning of May 2021. Also, the reliance of some states on the Singaporean market for business tourism resulted in the rapid drop of their revenue and as time went by the situation was getting worse for them due to the prolongment of the lockdown. “Now with the COVID, things have changed, they have realized that they cannot depend on the Singapore tourist’s dollar anymore and they will have to look at other avenues”, says Interviewee#5.

In addition, the introduction of limitation in the number of attendants that can participate in an event up to 250 people per event, also prevents the conduction of exhibitions and conferences which require lots of participants and can usually generate more revenue. This is an impact that lasts more than a year and negatively affects the cash flow of the related actors. “We -the event industry- at all ways now for the past one year have been associated with mass gathering. So, this COVID pandemic is anti-mass gathering and because of that I think we are feeling the impact.” (Interviewee#8). Interviewee#1 mentions that “At least if we manage to recover half of what we have experienced before it will be good enough”, stressing in this way the heaviness of the impacts, and continues by saying “Actually everybody is badly affected, especially with regards to the companies their cash flow. For them to recover it will definitely take years.”

The closure of national and regional borders and the long duration of the pandemic hindered travellers from visiting Malaysia caused the cancellation and postponement of a great number of events. As MICE is considered a significant, multi-faceted economic contributor for destinations (Kumar et al., 2014), the impact from the cessation of its activities was big. According to Table 5, the number of events that were affected because of COVID-19 was 99 on a national level, comprised of 53 that were cancelled and 46 that were postponed, causing a tremendous economic impact which equals the value of more than 350 million USD. The loss of big amounts of money is common in cases of crises that affected tourism (Corina, 2018; Novelli et al., 2018). When the COVID-19 pandemic started and especially the first three months, the MICE activities began to be cancelled but a great effort was put towards their postponement to prevent the worse economic impacts.

Table 5: COVID-19 Impacts on MICE Segments: Number of Events, Number of Delegates and Estimated Economic Value

Type of MICE Event	Number of Events	Number of Delegates	Estimated Economic Impact Value (USD)
Cancelled	53	167,374	186,312,477
Meetings & Incentives	18	11,611	31,122,126
Convention	16	29,713	75,163,806
Trade Exhibitions	19	126,050	80,026,545
Postponed	46	119,007	180,637,546
Meetings & Incentives	3	800	2,885,954
Convention	31	27,362	68,146,472
Trade Exhibitions	12	90,845	109,605,120
Grand Total	99	286,381	366,950,023

Source: adapted from Interviewee#3

In general, “cancellations of events affect the whole industry badly” (Interviewee#1), posing threats for all related stakeholders.

“So economically it's a huge impact, it's not only for the venue providers, the hoteliers, it's also for the travel agent, the coach providers, the tour guides were suffering...So it had trickled down right from the top to the men on the ground, up to these tour guides and others, so the impact was this massive.” (Interviewee#5)

“The impact of COVID-19 has been devastating for our industry and the entire supply chain. For 2020 we faced some cancellations of smaller corporate events and exhibitions and had to move the majority of bookings to 2021...and then as lockdown was enforced the events fell under “Force Majeure” so no penalty was applicable anyway.” (Interviewee#10)

The impact of COVID-19 was so big that for instance hotels in one of the states (Johor) confronted cancellations that are estimated to have reached 20 thousand rooms until April 2020 and bus operators lost millions in USD. “MICE events used to represent more than 40% of our business. Now it is less than 1%.”, says a hotel’s manager (Interviewee#6).

All in all, having the borders closed and thus many cancellations resulted in a state in which the stakeholders of MICE tourism had to refund big amounts of money while facing a lot of losses due to the decrease in international tourism arrivals and MICE participants. “The closure of international borders is what has hit our entire industry and supply chain hardest and until now we have no indication when that might alter”, indicates Interviewee#10. “That is when a lot of pay cuts, layoffs in the industry started”, adds Interviewee#5. Moreover, the size of the economic impact in MICE is also attributed to the nature of the industry. “In the business events and hospitality industry, we are always the last sector to be opened, that’s why.”, explains an executive member of a Convention Center (Interviewee#7). “MICE tourism has totally collapsed due to the situation”, says Interviewee#1.

“For the event industry it is almost like a shutdown because we rely a lot on international travel, we rely on people to come into the country to participate in events, in conferences or in exhibitions and then that is not happening.” (Interviewee#8)

The MICE industry in Malaysia is estimated to have lost more than 90% of its expected revenue in 2020. This situation is extremely difficult for MICE tourism due to the travel restrictions and limitations and even domestic business activities are not bringing the desirable economic inputs. Regarding the future of MICE tourism and according to the interviewees, it seems that the loss of revenue and decrease in cash flows will be persistent. “If the border is open in June, I think we will be able to get some events coming in but not on a big scale” (Interviewee#1); “Once the country opens local small MICE have been booked but only represent less than 5% of what we used to have”; “So the majority of the events that we host is international events...and until now all the international events have been postponed and I heard they are actually postponing until 2025” (Interviewee#6). Thus, it turns out to be very difficult for the majority of stakeholders to remain economically sustainable.

5.1.2 Shutting down of many businesses and striving of survival for other

The pandemic and the big income losses for MICE tourism impacted the Malaysian stakeholders so much that some of them have already surrendered to the severity of COVID-19. A lot of businesses shut down and others are in a surviving mode. The hospitality industry seems to be affected a lot with a notable number of even well-known hotels and resorts in Malaysia being shut down and others striving to cover their operational costs. “...Our nearby hotel, previously our competitive partners, after about 30 years sadly they are closing... small boutique hotels, they are closing down, they are quite sad things to see for this business events sector” (Interviewee#7). Furthermore, bus tour operators have been selling an important amount of their fleet to get by, airlines are struggling since they cannot fly and tourism offices are closing. As a Director of the DMO (Interviewee#4) stated: “the impact of this situation for MICE was severe. They were all at the edge of collapsing...this COVID actually has totally damaged our economic system”. For the ‘lucky’ actors that were able to survive and had some savings, the focus is on survival, nevertheless, the way to recovery also seems long. These perspectives line up with the impacts of COVID-19 on SDGs regarding loss of income, suspension of activities, lower earnings and reduced working time (UN, 2020).

5.1.3 Increase of costs and prices

Another impact that COVID-19 entails for MICE tourism is the increase of costs that concerns the supply-side stakeholders and in turn of prices for the demand-side ones. This concern is mostly related to the future and is based on the predictions of the interviewees. Nonetheless, it is built on valid reasons that are related to the novel conditions that this pandemic introduced. First of all, the safety and hygiene concerns that exist nowadays require the focus on strict cleaning protocols, provision of sanitising products and adhering to other procedures that involve extra costs for the MICE premises. Also, the limitations in the maximum number of people that can enter a venue or travel in a plane, bus, etc. due to social distancing requirements will cause an increase in prices.

“The cost of space has increased and then the cost of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) have increased...[as well as] the cost of travel”; “we foresee the business instead of looking at volume like previously...now it's no more on volume, is more on quality. So that's why you will target on the quality visitor instead of a volume visitor.” (Interviewee#9)

5.1.4 Shift of demand towards different kind of events and suppliers

The lack of allowance of holding MICE activities and lack of demand due to the COVID-19 situation have created the circumstances for new ways of delivering events. “This condition clearly forces MICE event organisers to creatively think what they can do to adapt to COVID-19” (Interviewee#4). The alternative options of holding virtual or hybrid MICE events were occasionally adopted as a way of keeping the industry going. In this manner, new players appeared in the MICE sector such as technology service providers. It can be noted that the technology suppliers are considered to be if not the only, one of the few stakeholders of MICE to be benefitted from COVID-19, due to their rapid development that was assisted by the shift to online events.

However, the focus on organising hybrid or virtual events has created long debates regarding their economic sustainability. On one hand, it is stated that these forms of events can be a key towards resilience and survival. “At the moment the best approach for you to protect the interests of the venue, for you to protect the employment of the those who are involved in the venue, hybrid is the best” (Interviewee#3). On the other hand, it is claimed that virtual cannot economically replace face-to-face activities.

“We have actually the capability from before, from the past years, to turn our event into a virtual event, but we did not do that because there's more money, there's more commercial value in attending of physical events... they do not make any profit, or they don't make any money from this virtual.” (Interviewee#8)

“By having virtual or the involvement of technology, it becomes a trap to a destination, because why, because people don't travel, when people don't travel, actually it is a threat to the economy because people don't spend on definitely venue, don't have any businesses, (Food & Beverage) F&B no, no one buys food and drinks, the transportation will suffer and accommodation will suffer.” (Interviewee#3)

5.1.5 Introduction of strategies and actions against economic losses

A lot of actions and incentives were released under a collaborative spirit to rejuvenate the industry and stimulate the economy. The amount of effort put towards these strategies can be considered comparable to the importance of MICE for destinations and its potential in assisting the recovery from crises (Giao & Son, 2018). One of the most popular actions that were introduced in Malaysia by MyCEB was the “Meet in Malaysia” campaign which is divided into two sections, the “let's meet locally” which aims to support the domestic MICE tourism actors and the “let's meet tomorrow” which targets international delegates to choose this destination. The initiative was planned to be supported by roadshows that could assist the familiarisation of the stakeholders around the country with this initiative. Some other initiatives are the “Exhibition Enhanced Package”, the “Tactical Malaysia Twin Deal V”, the “Homegrown Event Support” focusing on domestic events. Additionally, the government launched some stimulus packages such as the “Permai”, the “Prihatin” and the “Pemerksa”. Details on the adopted strategies and actions can be found in Appendix B.

Generally, strategies were created for multiple purposes and trying to support different dimensions of MICE tourism. In particular, to protect themselves a lot of MICE actors followed a strategy of cost-saving and cost-cutting, trying in this way to avoid the most unfavourable impacts. “The initial strategy was cost-saving and we cut our ‘normal’ monthly

costs by 50% until we could save no more, then we were forced to put an Unpaid Leave practice into effect” explains Interviewee#10. Moreover, incentives were given to motivate people to travel and join events such as with the introduction of vouchers by associations and state governments to incentivise tourists to come to Malaysia. Furthermore, a great deal of governmental economic support was offered through the deferment of loans, discount on fixed costs (eg. electricity), funding for events, wages subsidisation, tax exemption for the companies and even financial support to smaller stakeholders like tour guides. In addition, a plan for involvement in big events to increase the visibility of the country and MICE players was followed by the DMO while a scheme of intensive marketing and promotion of packages through multiple channels was prepared for the time when the international borders would open. “These are among the initiatives communicated by the government...for the industry but definitely you will not be able to cover every single layer but at least it is a help to the industry”, says Interviewee#3.

5.2 Socio-cultural impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism in Malaysia

Apart from the big influence that COVID-19 had on the economic aspect of MICE tourism, it also affected the socio-cultural part of it. “I will say because MICE industry is about human”, says the manager of events of a convention bureau (Interviewee#1).

“I think the MICE or the business events industry is actually a face-to-face industry, needs to basically meet people, whether it's for exhibition or for conference or meeting, for anything to do with MICE...so if you take out that option of be able to conduct face-to-face, actually took off the whole aspect of the industry itself.” (Interviewee#8)

Despite this important social element of people, their contact and involvement in MICE, there are additional aspects strongly impacted by the pandemic that refer to the socio-cultural dimension.

The main socio-cultural impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism are related to:

- Rise in unemployment
- Changes in working conditions and lower levels of employees' satisfaction
- Fear connected to health and safety
- Limitations in social interactions through MICE

5.2.1 Rise in unemployment

In a lot of previous crises, the loss of jobs is one of the main impacts to hit the industries (Novelli et al., 2018; WTTC, 2019a). The cancellations of events, cessation of operation in MICE, loss of revenue and shutting down of many businesses related to MICE tourism provoked a serious rise in unemployment in Malaysia due to COVID-19.

“Yeah, there is a lot of unemployment because most of the hotels and resorts...they retrenched the workers, so we see for the hotels they try to maintain only the strategic departments, but they couldn't do much because their main source of income usually comes from business events, not from accommodation or things like that.” (Interviewee#1)

In this manner, more businesses tried to minimise their workforce and keep the best and absolutely necessary staff. “The main impact, of course, is job losses as we had to let go all our casual/flexible staff, as well as all our contract staff and all of our staff above a certain pay band have had a pay cut.”, explains Interviewee#10. The financial pressure arose from the refunds that had to be given and other factors resulted in a big number of layoffs in the sector. Some companies put effort into maintaining their employees but not all of them managed to achieve this and survive at the same time.

The second phase of lockdown for Malaysia was characterised as a cost-cutting phase that affected also employment. For instance, one of the interviewees (Interviewee#5) states that was one of the victims of COVID-19 and lost her job position. “I have about 18 years of experience in the hospitality industry and I would say more than half of it was in the MICE industry” she mentions, pointing out that the pandemic did not only affect the front line or inexperienced employees but also executive members of the sector. Indeed, the increase of unemployment consists of the sum of the people that lost their jobs in different MICE tourism segments and related sectors.

In regards to the future of employment in the sector in Malaysia, the shift towards online and hybrid events has created a controversial discourse. Some believe that it will affect employment in a negative way, although the human touch will still be required and will not vanish completely. This mindset is connected to the preference of the stakeholders towards hybrid events rather than online ones because in this way the employment will be partly protected and employees would still be needed for the offering of services during an event. On the contrary, other claim that employment will not be affected in the future. “Because there's always a demand for events no matter if it is a small capacity or a large capacity it's still there”, states Interviewee#7.

Besides, the increase of hybrid events can also encourage the people in Malaysia to focus more on technology and digitalisation, which are becoming prominent trends (Skift, 2021). “So, I believe that the pandemic is not too negative for us. It has created a new demand in employment”, says a director of a DMO (Interviewee#3). “It goes without saying that COVID-19 era is creating a high demand for employment opportunities in the digital and technology field to fulfil the demands or organising online and hybrid events” he continues. Thus, it can be stated that the online nature of events can also create new job positions and involve more people in different fields that support MICE that were not that popular before in Malaysia. This statement is supported also by a director of an IT service provider (Interviewee#9) that confirms that the demand for employment has increased for specific sectors like the IT one.

“It's going to be a shift for the economy, from here you'll be shipped on that side. So, the people here need to reclaim and to find a way on how to innovate and move on to the other side as well [because there will be more demand of people working on the IT part but less staff needed in the convention center, etc.]” (Interviewee#5)

5.2.2 Changes in working conditions and lower levels of employees' satisfaction

Apart from the increase in unemployment, many more impacts were caused regarding the employees and their working conditions. In a lot of cases, businesses in MICE tourism proceeded with pay cuts, unpaid leave and in general more flexible terms in the contracts. Moreover, the option for a Voluntary Separation Scheme (VSS) was given in some cases,

giving the decision to the employees to decide if what they can offer right now is valuable and can assist the situation. “COVID-19 has impacted [the people in MICE industry] quite badly in a sense that some have lost their jobs, some of them are going through pay cuts. So, some of them have decided to move on to other industries”, mentions Interviewee#5. The encouraging future aspect is that when it will be possible for events to take place, stakeholders foresee a demand for at least part-time employees.

Furthermore, the circumstances and the focus on cutting costs are creating a need for multitasking by the employees in different businesses because the small number of staff that is maintained has to be optimised and cover different positions. In cases that some positions (eg. security) were previously covered by outsourcing, MICE entities had to shift and cover everything with their staff in order to reduce their costs and try to maintain their workforce. “Our colleagues have been doing a multi-tasking job like including myself...service crew has been doing a housekeeping job as well...clean-up...gardening...security...everyone has been fighting for reducing the operational costs”, says an executive of a Convention Center (Interviewee#7) and explains how this enabled them not to retrench any permanent staff. Aside from multitasking, a lot of businesses in the MICE industry and tourism have started focusing on alternative things to maintain employment, while people working in the industry were forced to start an extra job to make ends meet. “And so, you'll find out that a lot of them are doing like home cooking and uber drivers and everybody is doing two-three jobs although in Malaysia normally people don't do two-three jobs”, explains Interviewee#5.

Another rapid change for Malaysians in the sector was the initiation of working from home. This step was taken in order to protect the employees from unnecessary commute, follow the restrictions of social distancing and the maximum number of people in a room but also because it works as a cost-saving process. No matter the advantages, not all businesses in the private sector attempted to follow it. Working from home was something completely new for Malaysians and thus challenging. “There was an announcement by the prime minister, by the government that he is now considering work from home...they will allow work from home, but the mechanism will be announced later”, explains Interviewee#3 while stating that this can be an advantage for the future: “about the future, there might be a balance of working from home, and this is also an advantage for the ladies...be at home, taking care of the children while working...rather than you send your children, to the nursery in”.

To support the difficulties that the limited staff is facing and enhance their professional capabilities, skills development opportunities were introduced, such as the ‘International Association of Professional Congress Organiser (IAPCO) webEDGE platform’. According to Interviewee#3: “this pandemic is actually an opportunity for the employees...they need to venture into or explore a new skill that is technology-based”. Also, some state governments provided free training to MICE tourism employees and especially the ones that had experienced a pay-cut, aiming at upskilling them for better positions. Besides, the whole change in working conditions was a chance for many employees and employers to adapt to technological means that they have never used before and improve their skills and knowledge while finding alternative channels for completing their work.

The entire conditions, uncertainty and changes in the MICE tourism sector have caused a sense of dissatisfaction and scepticism by the employees of the sector. Dilshan and Toko (2020), have characterised job insecurity as a social cost introduced by the pandemic. “I will say that they (employees) are not satisfied, but they couldn't ask for more. They couldn't demand, because they know that the source of income is being affected so they are mostly

grateful to have proper employment”, mentions Interviewee#1. Understanding the difficulties is key now for everyone. “Whether they are employer or employee, they are not happy with the situation definitely... It's a hard time for them, it's a hard time for everybody” states Interviewee#3. In overall, the “loopholes in the system” (Interviewee#5) unfortunately allow some employers to take actions that are not very pleasant for the employees. However, efforts are made by different actors in order to minimise the impacts in the future.

5.2.3 Fear connected to health and safety

Moving on, the unpredictable and unique situation of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the importance of health and safety for everyone and how this has affected the distinctive actors of MICE tourism in specific. The nature of tourism and MICE activities generate a feeling of fear and increased levels of stress nowadays, due to the caution that exists around gatherings, contagiousness and the act of social distancing. Indeed, a part of MICE activities or workload in Malaysia has been transferred online for safety reasons, even though it did not necessarily involve international arrivals or a big number of people. “Everybody is still afraid of conducting any sort of business event, to be honest”; “people don't feel they are safe”; “so it's quite challenging for us actually to restart this industry...to build up the confidence is actually the biggest challenge”, says Interviewee#1. “Business will take a little bit longer until the customer will get more confident on the possibility of traveling”, adds Interviewee#6.

“There is a lot of misinformation and unnecessary fear...we never know actually what we have fear about today, we have fear of COVID-19 because we cannot see it and this thing is making it even harder for MICE tourism to operate like before, causing big losses.” (Interviewee#4)

Sealy (2020), stresses that the restoration of health and safety can be challenging but needs to be a primary goal for destinations. In Malaysia, multiple measures have been implemented to fight this feeling of insecurity, with SOPs being dominant everywhere after the emergence of COVID-19. People are “adapting to the new norm, to what we have now...wearing mask, hand sanitizer, etc. and how can we minimize the risk in COVID-19”, explains Interviewee#3. Also, the Malaysian government has put extra effort into the implementation of the safety measures and holds a strict position towards it and so that people will get familiar with these standards. “I don't think that any business organizations would have compromised on the safety measures, because of the stand that the Malaysian Government has taken to fight COVID out there”; “and so, when you go to an establishment and if you feel that the establishment is not clean or whether they're not practicing SOPs, people have voiced out and people had refrained from going there”, explains Interviewee#5. “We prepared for re-opening in early July 2020. All staff was tested with a PCR test and then trained in the application of the SOPs' prior to resuming normal working duties”, indicates Interviewee#10.

Furthermore, the beginning of vaccination has been encouraging against this fear, but people are still preoccupied since it is still in the process. “We hope that this destination will be only covered by the end of the year. So, by end of the year, hopefully the people will have the confidence to come out, confidence to participate in events”, says Interviewee#8. However, the uncertainty develops also because of the international delegates that the MICE sector involves. “Because when you receive international business delegates, you never know their background, what they have been going through” explains Interviewee#1 pointing out that

hybrid events could be more suitable to the future of MICE and until the uncertainty vanishes.

As safety became the main concern in the industry, the MICE stakeholders are taking many steps to ensure the security of their visitors as well as their employees. According to Interviewee#5, the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) has achieved to gain quick access to vaccines for their members. Also, Interviewee#7 explains how their convention center has established social media campaigns to communicate to the visitors the different measures and restrictions that are taking place and reviews about them. These are some of the ways that can reduce the fear, stress of people, although the prolongment of this situation poses a threat to mental health. “The process is still ongoing and it will be ongoing the process of building securing events will always continuously happen” stresses Interviewee#3.

5.2.4 Limitations in social interactions through MICE

The limitations that are imposed on multiple layers of the sector also impact the socio-cultural aspect of MICE activities. The restrictions on MICE and travelling, the postponements and cancellations, the settlement of a maximum number of 250 per event, the strict SOPs, the social distancing, the shift towards online settings and other reasons, all hinder the social aspect of MICE gatherings, have minimised networking and the cultural exchange. This result is serious on a social-cultural level (Vo & Tran, 2021). Due to the pandemic “now you are already not allowed to have contact too much so that limits quite a lot of things”, says Interviewee#9. It is “not easy for you to hold more events, especially on the cultural side”, explains Interviewee#3.

Moreover, even the gradual lifting of some measures did not entirely release the socio-cultural aspect. In the beginning, due to the lockdown, there was no conduction of events, later the events could be conducted with a maximum number of 250 people and at some point, it was only restricted by physical distancing, explained the president of a MICE association (Interviewee#8).

“But if next year the situation is better, I think we will be recovering in a very good momentum because people when they have been confined for quite some time they tend to go and explore...and meet people...So business events like conferences, seminars, exhibitions are something that people are looking forward to.” (Interviewee#1)

However, the limitations that are predicted to stay for longer and will cause the increase of prices in MICE -as explained before- also affect the social aspect of these events and there is a possibility of a smaller number of people choosing to attend them.

“It will become much more expensive. It's no longer like what it used to be. Because for the venue providers there will be the same space, less number of participants and your revenues lesser and the number of people that will attend these kinds of events will also be lesser.” (Interviewee#5)

5.3 Natural-environmental impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism in Malaysia

As it seems, the pandemic of COVID-19 changed drastically several aspects of tourism and MICE. According to some literature, attention was drawn to the fact that this situation can be a great chance for tourism actors to shift towards sustainability (Rume & Islam, 2020; UNWTO, 2020e). Nevertheless, no matter the efforts of the MICE tourism associates to adverse the negative economic and socio-cultural impacts that emerged because of the pandemic, the results reveal that less stress was put on the natural-environmental aspect. In fact, according to the majority of interviewees, some of the effects that took place are not necessarily introduced by COVID-19, although the circumstances seem to support their implementation and acceleration.

The main findings about the impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism related to the natural-environmental aspect are:

- No specific impacts on environmental agenda due to COVID-19
- Increase of waste
- Indirect impacts:
 - Reduction in CO₂ emissions caused by travelling
 - Reduction in energy consumption
 - Paperless work

5.3.1 No specific impacts on environmental agenda due to COVID-19

The environmental strategies of MICE tourism businesses have not been substantially affected by the pandemic. Besides, sustainability initiatives including green certificates, energy consumption tracking, etc. had already become a trend for business events in the pre-COVID-19 era, driven by the concerns for the environmental footprint of the industry (Neelis et al., 2020; UNWTO, 2017; Zhong et al., 2020). Interviewee#1 and Interviewee#2 mention that the natural-environmental dimension is not directly in their aims, although a balance is pursued and explicitly mention that they do not consider COVID-19 as a drastic changing factor towards this direction.

“During these years, I think yes [it will be the same, there will be no focus on environmental strategies], but I don't know in the future. If the industry is recovering fast, I think we need to venture into green, we need to have some green elements in our MICE industry but currently if the industry is recovering, I think it will be...just a normal MICE event.” (Interviewee#1)

On the contrary, Interviewee#5 explains that there are MICE stakeholders in Malaysia focusing on the environment, however, she agrees that this movement is not directly affected by COVID-19: “It's already happening”; “whatever that was put in place is still in place, people will still be taking care of the environment”, she explains. Furthermore, the representative of a convention center (Interviewee#7) describes in detail its environmentally-friendly features, how fascinating they are to customers and how they are used in marketing strategies to attract people, however as she mentions “so far there is no impact for the COVID-19” regarding this specific aspect. Last but not least, Interviewee#10 states that “we began enhancing our environmental efforts roughly three years ago in earnest and used the periods in lockdown to examine new initiatives we could undertake to be more meaningful”, implying in this way that the situation might have played a small role regarding their environmental agenda.

5.3.2 Increase of waste

One thing that is identified as an impact of COVID-19 towards the natural-environmental aspect is the increase in the use of packaging materials that accompany the individual concept of food that is demanded due to safety reasons. “When the COVID-19 impact no buffet is allowed in our center, everything must be packed”, explains Interviewee#7. In this manner, some stakeholders use biodegradable packing and other ways to reduce their environmental impact. “So that's how we go for biodegradable packing. For drink we actually have a...water tank...and we have a water station...and our crew will assist in refilling the water for you”, Interviewee#7 continues. Nevertheless, Interviewee#5 points out that although such initiatives are already taking place, it is difficult for everyone to follow because: “for Malaysia itself that is an expensive part”.

Moreover, actions like recycling and even a plan for composting to tackle food waste were mentioned, which can help the environment and fight against the big amount of waste that the individual food packaging will reinforce. However, even in these cases, the motivation towards such initiatives was not initiated due to COVID-19. “These initiatives were started earlier” states Interviewee#7. From a point of view, this situation increased the use of some environmental actions because of the rise in waste. Nonetheless, apart from the materials connected to the provision of food during MICE activities, the personal protective equipment (PPE) that is needed due to the pandemic conditions also entails a lot of waste and requires attention, as Interviewee#6 warns. This perspective corresponds to the study by Rume and Islam (2020) that point out the negative results of careless disposal of PPE.

5.3.3 Indirect impacts

Although the direct connection of COVID-19 and natural-environmental agendas was hard to be identified during the interviews, different indirect impacts were spotted regarding MICE tourism because of the pandemic. One of these impacts is the reduction in CO₂ emissions due to the drop in flights and travelling. Indeed, the environmental footprint that business travellers create due to their commuting and choice of accommodation is one of the considerations regarding the industry (Neelis et al., 2020). The strict restrictions that accompanied COVID-19 resulted in fewer people travelling, fewer fuels used and fewer emissions caused. Even when the MICE activities started or will start taking place again, the reduction in CO₂ emissions will be a fact due to the digital nature that MICE adopts. “With this, you can minimise the carbon footprint and still participate. You don't have speakers to be generally there, to be transported, they can present their representation from wherever they are” points Interviewee#8. So, in the future, even the hybrid events can support the reduction in CO₂ emissions caused by travelling and this can be considered an impact caused by COVID-19 that supported the advancement of the virtual part of MICE.

In addition, an impact of COVID-19 on MICE events is the reduction in energy consumption. It seems that the cessation of operation due to COVID-19 supported an environmental approach, although the extension of this predicament in the future cannot be guaranteed. The digitalisation of work and events resulted in lower levels of energy used in the MICE infrastructure.

“It will take some years in order to focus on the environmental aspect but being digital now is already taking care of that partially, because [there is] less consumption

of resources...so when you go on, that has been already taking care of that.” (Interviewee#5)

“If there is at all an environmental impact that has affected the MICE tourism due to COVID-19, it has allowed sustainability to be practiced more as hotels reduced their costs on utilities and overhead costs which in turn reduced the need to contribute to the CO2 impact that hotels generate despite practicing sustainable efforts.” (Interviewee#6)

Another interesting statement that concerns the environmental dimension of MICE relates to the transition to a paperless mindset when working. With the shift to working at home and improvement in digitalised processes, this habit can be adopted and can potentially support natural protection in the future.

“I realized that nowadays I become paperless...It is very hard...But with this COVID-19 pandemic...everything I have to read is on my desktop or laptop or through my phone and all signature became e-nature or approval became e-approval, everything is inside the system, so nowadays I get used to this too actually.” (Interviewee#7)

All in all, the pandemic seems to affect MICE tourism minorly in terms of its natural-environmental aspect, provoking some adjustments but without pushing the focus of the stakeholders towards this path. “We should be doing much more of what we are doing- unfortunately”, notes Interviewee#6. This idea is aligned with what the UN (2020, p.12) describe as a “reduced commitment to climate action” due to COVID-19 no matter the presence of indirect contributions.

“The knowledge on the environment and preserving...in Malaysia is not mature. It has not trickled down into the lower levels. It is there in terms of the big cities, the hotels and everyone is practicing it already, it’s there, but the one that actually needs to take care of the environment, pollution is the man on the street, it has not come to that level yet. The government is trying and they have lots of campaigns, but the education level has not trickled to that level yet.” (Interviewee#5)

Thus, more effort needs to be put towards the realisation of the importance of this aspect to achieve natural sustainability in MICE tourism.

5.4 Socio-political impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism in Malaysia

The situation that was formulated due to COVID-19 in Malaysia and regarding MICE tourism was very hard. “Due to the pandemic, international travels continue to run at a low despite all governments’ efforts to contain the virus. Many events are still on hold, international travels for leisure ceased and businesses are greatly affected.” (Interviewee#3) and the necessity of taking action, create new strategies and adapt to the changing conditions has become apparent. According to many of the interviewees (Interviewee#1, Interviewee#2, Interviewee#3, Interviewee#5, Interviewee#8, Interviewee#9), COVID-19 created a “new norm” in MICE tourism in Malaysia. This new norm affected a lot of aspects of the sector, such as the strategies, actions, awareness, leadership, priorities, initiatives which are all elements of the socio-political environment (Mihalic, 2020; Mihalic et al.,

2021). The changes in such elements were forced by the difficulties of the situation, targeting survival and continuation of MICE tourism in the country.

“Don't waste a crisis...use it as an opportunity for us to change, to make our industry more resilient, to make our industry more skeptical in case...there is a future pandemic, or whatever, we need to be are ready, we are going to be better this time.” (Interviewee#8)

The main socio-political impacts of COVID-19 on the Malaysian MICE tourism are related to:

- Adoption of new strategies
- Changes on MICE settings
- New Priorities
- Sustainability awareness and actions
- Reshape the future of MICE

5.4.1 Adoption of new strategies

A lot of strategies were put into place aiming at the continuation of the operation of MICE activities and the survival of the actors. The principal actors that supported the industry were the national government and MOTAC, the states' governments, regional associations and tourism councils, as well as MyCEB, the national DMO but also the industry players themselves. The main goals were to keep the industry operating, protect MICE stakeholders and attract or maintain future events in Malaysia. Thus, a lot of actions and incentives were released under a collaborative spirit to rejuvenate the industry and stimulate the economy.

First of all, different incentives were introduced to boost MICE activities not only on the states' level but also on the international level. “We plan to actually incentivize the industry...to get them to conduct the events in Johor”, mentions Interviewee#1 in general. The focus on homegrown events is consistent and supported by different packages (Interviewee#2). Moreover, it seems that the country's DMO is taking steps to promote MICE on a wider scale by participating in big events such as in Dubai.

“It is a big event for Malaysian travel agents to participate because arrivals from Middle East to Malaysia is one of the highest and their spending power especially Saudi and Dubai is high...and Tourism Malaysia is coming in to support the industry by taking part in this kind of events and getting the industry players to come in and participate...and with a certain payment.” (Interviewee#5)

Also, the involvement in Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) is considered another excellent initiative.

“That was the first test case that Malaysia had done in terms of going digitally internationally...so what they had done is they had a period of four months, and there were a lot of mistakes that they made because it's digital so it's a new platform, but they experienced it, but they were happy because they had a contact at 65 countries.” (Interviewee#5)

“...and with that at least they were still able...to reach the Malaysia business or the Asian business to global...and there is where we learn how we make use of the technology to actually serve even further.” (Interviewee#9)

No matter the geographical coverage, the goal is to strengthen all the segments equally and not put more effort only into one side (Interviewee#3). Most of the initiatives created to mitigate COVID-19 impacts on MICE, such as the “Meet in Malaysia”, “Homegrown Event Support”, “IAPCO webEDGE platform”, “Permai”, “Prihatin”, etc. were already presented before and details can be found in Appendix B. As Interviewee#3 specifies the main purpose of the several actions can be well described through the “Pemerksa” initiative in five key points namely “1. Controlling the COVID-19 outbreak, 2. Spearheading Economic Recovery, 3. Strengthening The Nation’s Competitiveness, 4. Ensuring Inclusivity, 5. Transforming The Economy”. The interpretation of these points confirms the statement of Ritchie and Jiang (2019), regarding the importance that strategies can play against a crisis.

Other than the approaches that the MICE actors decided to follow, the industry was affected by strategies that were implemented by the government, the Ministry of health and other related entities in face of the pandemic, “like Malaysia movement control order (MCO)...and enforcement of restriction on community activities...and another restriction like the travel scheme to stop COVID-19”, says Interviewee#4. From a different viewpoint, IT companies encouraged the government and all MICE segments to grab the opportunity to go online or even adopt different channels and new targets via using the power of big data and the trends that those revealed.

“Some of the city hotels that were facing a very low occupancy now and then we say hey, why don’t you create your niche and then make it...something different instead of just the business hotel during the weekend or whatsoever and then, yes, we saw that some hotel did that and then the business increase a little bit.” (Interviewee#9)

Moreover, different actions were put into place to secure the avoidance of cancellations. “As an organisation, we remain in contact with our clients and as flexible as possible with client requirements”, says Interviewee#10. Additionally, Interviewee#3 describes how some of the popular, national MICE activities can be held at specific times of the year in order to attract more people and urge them to stay longer:

“We are going to have more programs and subprograms under the Malaysian business events week...we will do it near to our National Independence Day...So that’s how we can draw more international delegates to stay longer in Malaysia during our event and post our event.”

Another perspective given by Interviewee#6 regards the focus on “the local market; the short term; appealing offers; price and added values; small or mid-size business” while Interviewee#7 adds the customisation of packages for each organiser and guests and cross-selling of services and experiences for the delegates and their families and refers to the ‘work from hotel’ package that some implemented.

Furthermore, the introduction of the “Malaysia Business Events Strategic Marketing Plan 2021-2030” is also an initiative taken in accordance with COVID-19 and points at optimisation, foresight and competitiveness. “It is a living document...aligned with the market situation or marketing mind...and this is how we guide the MICE industry in

Malaysia to follow the guidelines in order for us to face the challenge of this pandemic”, says Interviewee#3. In general, marketing is considered a vital part of the strategies for the revitalisation of MICE (UNWTO, 2020e), although COVID-19 has interrupted even this field for some time. “Marketing for last year wasn't so successful because everyone doesn't want to see your Center...so we re-strategize our center marketing plan to second quarter of next year.”, says Interviewee#7. “We are waiting at least for international border to open...then we will put maximum effort in terms of marketing and promotion of their packages through paper, online social media platform, television talk show, radio talk show...”, claims Interviewee#4. Also, social media communication is an important strategic tool, as media and direct communications can bring positive effects against a crisis (Sealy, 2020). “If you look through our social media and also YouTube, we have our own SOP reviews, where there’s the temperature checking daily, the distance, sanitization by housekeeping” and even the number of participants that visit an event in regards to the limits, describes Interviewee#7.

One more interesting strategy that is mostly promoted by the government and the related ministry is the introduction of agreements between countries so that their residents will be able to travel within these areas. The potential of this action is big and could partly release travelling which is directly related to MICE.

“The Ministry of Tourism had discussions with other Ministries and regional governments about RGLs or Reciprocal Green Lanes but each time a new spike has prevented the ability to try the process out. The Convention Bureau has a promotion for national events, and one ready for external clients but again the borders and state borders closure has prevented any trial or level of success.” (Interviewee#10)

The implementation of the RGLs takes time and careful consideration:

“We already pushed our idea to the government, actually to thing on green lane reciprocal travel arrangement...both countries need to set up a committee to look into the things that we need to look into, like numbers of cases, a vaccine either provided and on.” (Interviewee#4)

5.4.2 Changes on MICE settings

Apart from the abovementioned actions that had to be adopted as a result of the pandemic, COVID-19 impacted MICE tourism from different perspectives. The process of organising an event is not typical anymore. “COVID-19 affects program schemes really bad because they are so much changed from offline to online agenda event. Another thing it affected on whom to invite, what to make, and how the agenda will run”, explains Interviewee#4.

“Originally our business was very much in international and then when this happened most of the projects had to actually slow-down in the international area and now move into the local. So, you can see the demand of each target and the way of how people do business as well, even communicate and the demand in the market and everything has changed.” (Interviewee#9)

Besides, due to the pandemic MICE events are not allowed to serve buffets as usual and individual packing is required. The size of the events and the number of delegates were also affected. Interviewee#7 describes how big is the difference in the number of delegates for

their convention center. “They have controlled the size of the events and I think its maximum is 200 or 250 and then later they changed it to half the capacity”, mentions Interviewee#5.

Nonetheless, all the adopted strategies had to take into consideration the measures that were introduced regarding health and safety in the sector, which in some cases were contradictory to the main purpose of fully supporting business events. “Once we launch it [homegrown events], of course, we have to make sure they adhere to SOP and also the state government policy and even for federal government policy”, explains Interviewee#2. “And then we also have quarantine time [for visitors], for example, if they are checking a temperature and the temperature is more than 37 degrees or 37.5 there will be quarantine aside and they will not be allowed to enter the building.”, states Interviewee#7. For safety reasons, “we try not to conduct any kinds of event...we just do virtual”, says Interviewee#1 indicating the changes due to COVID-19. “We are trying very hard...on how actually to use everything and make our online event interested to attract people”; “We have to ensure...that everything must be in order, good coverage area, handling of the online application, a new health protocol, a lot of things it'll involve.”, adds Interviewee#3. While for some the shift towards online or hybrid events was part of their new agenda, for others that is not aligned to their plan. Even though some actors have organised some virtual events, they want to avoid the online path that would prevent the tourism aspect of MICE in the post-COVID era (Interviewee#3; Interviewee#8).

Also, COVID-19 affected a lot of things that before were considered normal, especially in the case of MICE tourism. “It's the way people are reacting to certain events. Even...going to a place where there are a lot of people around also causes some trauma because they asked to stop going to crowded places”, states Interviewee#1. This fact can heavily affect MICE.

“We as an industry had appealed to the Ministry of Tourism to be excluded from the general classification of “mass gatherings” and we further appealed to be allowed to draft our own SOPs, to be applied once we could re-open. We were successful on both counts.”, stresses Interviewee#10 pointing out the importance that these attributes have for the sector.

In any case, adherence to the SOPs is crucial in providing safety to both participants and the staff and it is every industry player’s responsibility to practice it and enhance it based on the given needs.

“We have formulated the SOPs to...make sure that this industry will be safe in the future. So, we came up with the MICE SOP which was endorsed by the Malaysian Government under the National Security Council, and also Ministry of Health.” (Interviewee#3)

On the other hand, this pandemic also forces towards upgrading changes in the sector that need to be included in the formation of strategies.

“We need to be more creative...in this industry. But being creative, being innovative, we also need to be realistic enough to rebuild the industry... So, all methods need to be taken care of. You need to see your current situation, you need to actually leverage all the stakeholders, it's very challenging but it can be done. But it might take some time, it might take some time for us to recover.” (Interviewee#1)

“So, what we do is we continue to enhance and make the whole online experience more interesting to carry the whole event and we are still searching...we want more and we are doing more, putting more animation, putting more of the real-life experience and as much as we can. As mentioned, we still feel that we're still very far for us to go and there is a lot, a lot more and try to achieve as much as we can.” (Interviewee#9)

5.4.3 New Priorities

COVID-19 also impacted the priorities that the stakeholders of MICE tourism focus on. The number one priority for Malaysia is the survival of the actors and the recovery of the industry which have been quite challenging at the moment. “We just wanted the industry to recover that's all. That's good enough if the industry could survive”, claims Interviewee#1. Interviewee#4 stresses the effort being made in order for the industry players not to give up and focus on how to keep up their operation in alternative ways in order to attract people. “As much as possible we want to make sure everybody travels to Malaysia. We want to be the host and we want everybody to be in Malaysia, experience Malaysia” states Interviewee#3. “Survival is the name of the game”, mentions Interviewee#6 regarding the situation in the sector, while Interviewee#2 and Interviewee#9 agree that this is the priority now.

In terms of recovery, however, survival is not enough. Therefore, the health and safety of everyone in the sector is also considered a priority because of COVID-19 and requires new adjustments for MICE tourism. “I think the first step that we need to do is build up the confidence back...you need to create the trust and then you need to have people feel safe”, says Interviewee#1.

“One of the main priorities is to let people know that you are safe to have a meeting, that your country is safe and that you can actually conduct the meetings, you can actually bring the people back again”; “So the most important thing is at least majority of the people in the industry or the citizens in the country must be vaccinated. That's one of the main things and you got to get the message out that you're safe, your number of infections is low and how much you have managed to control and then after getting all this done, then you revise the meeting industry, and look at your great training of all your staff, also following the new norms and practicing the high hygiene standards and then it's possible for you to bring it back, but there's a lot of work that needs to go in.” (Interviewee#5)

Moreover, Interviewee#7 explains that safety is the priority that can assist the feeling of confidence of the visitors and that since this is also the responsibility of the MICE actors, they have kept some of their infrastructures closed to protect their visitors. Furthermore, Interviewee#8 stresses the importance of safety for a destination and how COVID changed things:

“A destination would not just be matched, will not engage by the value for money, or in terms of the attractiveness or what we call the offerings. So, one of the factors that will be concerned is safety. So, safety was something that's been recapped, I mean we are here to the bottom line...now need to move to the top.”

Thus, the MICE infrastructure is focusing on how to implement safety mechanisms regarding the transmission of the virus, such as air sanitisation and different filters. In fact, the expectations are that there will be a safety index for venues and other areas. “And those countries or destination that can prove themselves to be safer, they will get the first business, they will be the first that recovers” (Interviewee#8).

5.4.4 Sustainability awareness and actions

The pandemic has been characterised as an opportunity for the sector to improve and step forward, also by focusing on the aspect of sustainability (UNWTO, 2020a). Nonetheless, it can be noted in the previous section that sustainability is not one of the priority criteria of MICE stakeholders in Malaysia. “Currently I think things are so bad in the MICE industry that not much of the effort is put on what we wanted to do for SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), we just want the industry to recover, that's all”, explains Interviewee#1. Interviewee#10 describes that “there was a rise in awareness before COVID-19 hit us”, however, the situation might have advanced the level of sustainability awareness of millennials he adds.

“Yes [MICE is willing to change in terms of sustainability and responsibility] but because survival is the name of the game, I believe that workforce is more focus on that than on sustainability”, states Interviewee#6, adding later that it seems that the sector is not yet doing enough for sustainability. On the contrary, Interviewee#5 describes how COVID-19 has impacted the sustainability awareness of the MICE industry:

“I think that this industry is already aware of that [that this is not the last pandemic] and they are moving in terms of making sure that it is viable to continue”; “people in the industry know how important this industry is and they will do the necessary steps to make sure the continuity and the viability of it to move in the future. And as you can see like in Malaysia, as soon as the COVID have come in, everybody had gone on digital platforms and things like that...And so they're not going to be quiet in a sense of just let it go, they are still going to keep on doing things to make sure that this industry is viable and that it will sustain, but it will go in a different direction and it's not like in the same direction as what it is right now”.

Furthermore, Interviewee#7 explains that a lot of initiatives for MICE tourism were provoked by COVID-19 and aim at the economic sustainability of different actors that were financially struggling and that now their convention center takes into consideration the customer's side. “We have customised some of the events to suit the costings, to suit the budget of your organisation or the delegates, the visitors”, she mentions. Invariably, the director of an IT company (Interviewee#9) indicates that “the pandemic allows you to even put more emphasis in the area of sustainability” and that as the industry needs assistance due to the situation their company focuses on how to boost it rather than the financial return and hope that in the future, they will be able to get something back.

“I personally believe so [that post-COVID-19 MICE business will be different] as I believe there will be a demand from our clients in the future that not just the centre and the hotels but also the destination will need to have an environmental and sustainable policy which is verifiable.” (Interviewee#10)

5.4.5 Reshape the future of MICE

In terms of the socio-political environment and the future of MICE tourism, COVID-19 became a disruptive ingredient. Even though tourism has been proved to be resilient (Sealy, 2020; WTTC, 2019b), some actors are convinced that the sector will be different, but predictions cannot be easily formed.

“We have no idea of what to expect in the future. The entire industry and supply chain is in dire need of assistance or of re-opening which seems highly improbable in the short to medium term”; “The common consensus for the industry at the moment is that all the crystal balls are broken. Recovery or ‘the third wave’ is different all over the globe in terms of rates of recovery, rates of infections and it is almost impossible to predict the future. The main thing we have learned from COVID-19 is that you have to react quickly and change as required...also a need to provide low to no risk solutions to our clients through contracting and pricing models will most probably be a requirement in the future.” (Interviewee#10)

In any case, it is a common belief that the industry needs and will need support in the long term and that the vaccination progress might be one of the leading factors for the future, although the presence of the variants is still causing uncertainty (ECDC, 2021b). “Once the COVID is no longer here, we will be able to build the industry back.” Mentions Interviewee#1. “It is probable we will not know until the vaccine roll-out has been successful and also depends on the variants that are currently springing up globally”, disagrees Interviewee#10.

“After people get vaccinated, of course, there'll be another set of rules, may be set by the Federal Government, as well as the state government for them whether they can travel, how they can travel within Malaysia and even outside the country. So that's why I'm quite confident if everyone or most of us have been vaccinated.” (Interviewee#3)

In Malaysia, some actors have reacted fast and managed to secure the majority of their events for the future (2022-2026), while they realise that it will take time until they prepare the industry to fully operate again. Also, the Strategic Marketing Plan that has been designed aims at improving future action plans and enforcing innovation, digitalisation, sustainability and progress (Interviewee#3). However, the understanding of the potential of the sector could boost MICE in Malaysia even more in the future.

“Unfortunately, with the exception of a few countries where the governments really understand the true value of Business Events i.e. not just the revenue generation but the trade and investment opportunities, knowledge exchange and community development improvements to name just a few, I do not see our industry getting much federal or ‘provincial/state’ support.” (Interviewee#10)

Moreover, the future of MICE has been impacted due to the necessity of the feeling of safety, which requires the building of confidence to encourage delegates to attend MICE activities (Sealy, 2020) and the creation of proper agendas. “After COVID, MICE business definitely will be very different, because people...are very concerned of the health, the safety, the hygiene.”, explains Interviewee#1.

“We have to build up the confidence of people that it's okay to come out, it's okay to meet, and we have to kind of like tell to people there's a need to meet”, explains Interviewee#8. Destinations’ safety will be one of the core criteria for people when choosing to travel somewhere, thus “there's a lot of spotlights on Asia because they foresee that Asia would be the one that recovers” (Interviewee#8), which can foster MICE recovery in Malaysia too.

Apart from the changes that have already been discussed, more of them will be present regarding the future operation of MICE. “MICE business post-COVID-19 will be different because there will be new protocol event scheme and rules to follow strictly and in order to avoid another wave of COVID-19.”, explains Interviewee#4. In addition, “there will be people who will be retrained to take in other positions and to kick up other things to move ahead and have a balance of hybrid events” (Interviewee#5). At the same time the increase of costs due to the cost of space and SOPs (Interviewee#9) will be an obstacle for some people, so “only 70% at 60% of what the capacity of before will be able to travel” (Interviewee#5). And “Five-star hotels will have face longer impacts because those are the ones where the international traveller would stay. Local travellers will remain or at least go for a lower rate like four-star or even stay in the budget hotel.” (Interviewee#8). Therefore, the focus now will need to be on the quality and unique selling points, not the quantity which is turning multiple actors towards the value of experience (Interviewee#8; Interviewee#9). The superior role of innovation, creativity and technology with the exploitation of data or artificial intelligence, use of animation and other new elements is also one of the keys in the future of MICE that according to Sealy (2020) can serve as a factor of resilience in upcoming crises.

One of the big and controversial debates regards the nature of the future MICE events and the dominance of either hybrid, virtual or face-to-face events.

“The global economic growth...still very much depends on international trade, and this is why more people start to actually look into virtual”; “they also notice that with or without pandemic this is something that will help them grow even faster.” (Interviewee#9)

Hybrid events have gained ground especially in terms of international events. “I think the prospect of the future events is hybrid, is always hybrid”; “People will definitely prefer to have virtual and also the face-to-face business event”, assures Interviewee#1. “We might venture into more hybrid events in the future”, predicts Interviewee#2, while Interviewee#3 states “what we want is to have hybrid so at least there's a movement. So, if you ask me, we want to have at least hybrid not total virtual”. “We do see that by putting the physical together with the virtual, this thing helps everyone to grow further and the exchange of product becomes more effective”, explains Interviewee#9.

“This cannot be answered yet, there are too many unknowns...yes, there will probably be an increase in hybrid events regionally with reduced international and long-haul flights for a period but what is really in-store in the future no one can predict right now.” (Interviewee#10)

On one hand, virtual solutions provide security but on the other, they can bring unfavourable impacts for some stakeholders. “I doubt that small meetings will happen because it's going to go digital.” (Interviewee#5); “So maybe we will see that the medium convention centres are popular and the very large ones less” (Interviewee#10) due to the hybrid nature that

events adopt. Moreover, the proliferation of digitalisation hinders the cash flow and value that MICE tourists would bring when attending events physically. “You need to ferry the whole organizers to your country and only then they can spend their money right regards to MICE events” (Interviewee#4). Indubiously, the advantages and disadvantages exist on both sides, but depending on the situation that MICE will face in the future the stakeholders might need to adjust multiple times.

5.5 Impacts of COVID-19 on destination-based stakeholders of MICE tourism in Malaysia

The COVID-19 situation affected MICE tourism and thus the industry’s actors in Malaysia, confirming the theory that stakeholders can affect and be affected by their related sector (Freeman, 2010) and underlining their importance. This pandemic impacted all types of stakeholders that can be related to MICE tourism in Malaysia and certainly the local community.

“I think definitely COVID-19 affects badly all the stakeholders, be it you are resort owners, hotel owners, even the transportations, the tourist guide, whoever is in the ecosystem- it definitely affects everybody.” (Interviewee#1)

“So, economically it's a huge impact, it's not only for the venue providers, the hoteliers, it's also for the travel agent, the coach providers, the tour guides, the tour guides were suffering... We are always looking at the mainstream, the tour operators, the professional conference organization and things like that, but there are other layers of people that are also affected because of this. So, even when you talk about artists, the artists who are in the performances are affected. Every layer of the community is affected, those people in the food industry, those people who provide the food and restaurants. You don't get your tourists, you don't get your MICE businessmen, you're going to be affected.” (Interviewee#5)

The main impacts of COVID-19 on the destination-based stakeholders of the Malaysian MICE tourism are related to:

- General impacts
- Redirection to other activities and sectors
- Collaboration & ideas exchange
- Industry opportunities for some
- Impacts on the local community

5.5.1 General impacts

Most of the impacts that have been already discussed concerning the sustainability of MICE tourism in Malaysia in face of COVID-19 also affected the relevant stakeholders of the destination, which relates to the statement by Gössling et al. (2021) that the interdependency of many actors in MICE can create a vulnerable environment for them. The economic impacts that the industry confronted and caused operational struggles, difficulties in maintenance of staff and unemployment and a general striving for survival were faced by the involved MICE actors. Thus, it can be stated that the service provided by the stakeholders has slightly been affected and in a lot of cases is based exclusively on the domestic market.

“The major impact felt by the destination stakeholders have had a domino effect as their business relied on the needs of key tourist towards the country. As the borders had remained shut to international travel most local companies have seen a decline in the need for service and as a result in stimulating the tourism economy. And having said that the competition for hotels also declined as the supply is now more than the demand.” (Interviewee#6)

“COVID-19 has impacted [the people in the MICE industry] quite badly in a sense that some have lost their jobs, some of them are going through pay cuts. So, some of them have decided to move on to other industries. Travel agents who have been always doing international business are now refocusing on domestic business and taking care of domestics and they have looked at the government. Businesses that they did not consider before okay, or they did not touch, but now they are looking at this business, they've all come back domestic. So, they know they cannot get any more international so they are all concentrating on domestic. So, they have trained themselves to look at other avenues on where the business is coming from. Because it's survival mode.” (Interviewee#5)

In any case, the pandemic and the new norm that dominates the sector necessitates the adjustment of the stakeholders to the novel circumstances and the focus on the restoration of health and security, that entails strict protocols, SOPs, limitations in the number of attendants, safety distancing, individually packed food, adoption of digital solutions, etc. Despite the increase of costs and prices that these changes create, causing problems to the related actors, they are considered a measurement of quality. Besides, safety has become the priority for every stakeholder in view of the recovery of the destination and its MICE and the creation of the feeling of safety.

“It will take a long time to recover and then for you to build up confidence or you to build up trust. It is very challenging, very challenging and it takes the whole community, the operator, the government, it takes everybody's effort to actually rebrand and rebuild the industry.” (Interviewee#1)

“So, everyone is still trying to suit themselves and find the area on how actually they can survive or how they can grow. So, it's a new norm and...the demand in the market has shifted tremendously...from what we notice now, a very small percentage of the industry has found how they can survive and grow, but a lot of them is still stuck and everyone is still searching.” (Interviewee#9)

5.5.2 Redirection to other activities and sectors

Although for some stakeholders the COVID-19 outbreak was destructive, for others the pandemic gave no other choice but to act constructively and move on to alternative operational models. Facing the income losses and the possibility of collapsing a lot of MICE stakeholders in Malaysia realised that there was no economic potential at the business events and focused on other sources of income that can adapt to the situation. For instance, some venues and hotels have started dedicating their premises to weddings rather than having MICE events. Other hotels have converted to quarantine hotels because in this way their income comes straight from the government that subsidises these accommodations. Conference centers are examining the option to become vaccination centers. Travel agents have included transportation services from the airport to the quarantine hotels and some are

even selling products online. “Our plan has been to focus on domestic market with different products geared to locals such as local staycation. We have tried virtual event and F&B delivery but this last two with small results”, mentions a manager of a hotel (Interviewee#6). “So, these are actually a source of income for every man currently”, says Interviewee#2 about the activities that some tourism stakeholders have turned to.

The redirection to alternative operations was beneficial for some stakeholders, however, the big rise in loss of jobs in MICE and redirection of job force to other sectors created as a result another problem that was unexpected by the industry’s players, the elimination of available workforce for MICE.

“A concerning factor is that many have left the industry. We are now on MCO 3 and in the brief periods intervening MCO 1. 2 & 3 when we did need to hire some casual workers it has been extremely difficult to do so, as many have found alternative employment or temporary work elsewhere. We think this is going to be a major problem when we finally begin to recover.”; “There has been a moratorium on employment due to the cost-cutting but this too has caused an impending problem as we have lost staff to other organisations that have not been as badly affected as ourselves which bodes badly for the future especially if recovery is reasonably swift. I think this situation is true for the majority of our industry and supply chain.” (Interviewee#10)

5.5.3 Collaboration and ideas exchange

A positive impact that COVID-19 created for the destination-based stakeholders of MICE tourism in Malaysia is the encouragement of their collaboration given their common difficulties and aiming at protecting their sector. MICE has been characterised before as a nourishing factor of unification (Lee & Taylor, 2005) and in a lot of cases that address the pandemic, the government, MICE associations, venues, hotels, IT providers, organisers, suppliers and other actors have united to achieve their goals. For instance, the creation of SOPs and other measures, the formation of packages, the incentivisation of the industry are results of a collaborative effort. “This situation would need everyone in the industry or in this tourism sector to work together as one for us to re-strategize and for us to adapt with the situation”; “Malaysia is leading the way when it comes to regional business events (BE) recovery, largely thanks to collaborative efforts by a number of key industry players” states Interviewee#3.

“After the pandemic outbreak, MyCEB along with the Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition and Suppliers (MACEOS) and Business Events Council Malaysia (BECM) developed a new MICE SOP which was endorsed by the Malaysian government and was able to roll it out quickly to implement the new norm measures together with the local industry’s concerted effort.” (Interviewee#3)

“Previously everyone was competing with each other but during the COVID-19 pandemic I can see that all these business event industries gather together fighting for one thing and they become cooperative and collaborative.” (Interviewee#7)

Furthermore, Interviewee#10 analyses in-depth how the big impact of the pandemic towards the MICE stakeholders enforced their collaboration pointing at the re-opening of the sector, the production of SOPs and the exclusion of the sector from the ‘mass gathering’ category,

as well as the demonstration of MICE activities in a test mode. Another common target that he mentions, is the increase of the level of confidence which is difficult to be accomplished due to the repetitive lockdowns that the country is experiencing and affects the destination-based stakeholders. On the other hand, Interviewee#5 stresses the information exchange and the discussions between MICE actors that have been provoked by the pandemic in order to help the sector, which is affirmed by Interviewee#8 who mentions the conduction of meetings even between MICE associations of other Asian countries.

“I think they exchange a lot of ideas, they collaborate more, and I see a lot of information flying on all my groups on what's going on. The interviews that they give in newspapers, they share information, they'll tell you what's going on and things like that. So, in that sense they do have a better synergy right now...a few players have actually come and had regular meetings to discuss about overall issues. Because different organizations have got different issues, to discuss overall issues that are being faced by the industry and how best they can assist them on this.” (Interviewee#5)

Moreover, in regards to the post-COVID era of MICE, collaboration is considered a useful upshot that has been initiated due to the pandemic. “For sure partnership with MICE stakeholders on promotion digitally the destinations will be a must” (Interviewee#6). Also, with the help of others and the information exchange, new opportunities appeared for some actors. “There are a lot of smart and brilliant people out there and when we started exchanging ideas...we found out how we can use virtual and can enlarge the whole community (of MICE)”, indicates Interviewee#9. Conversely, it is implied that the fact that synergies are thriving at the moment does not necessarily mean that they will last.

“We have to collaborate with other partners and other hotels, also to help the industry because at that point of time there's no method of competitions anymore, it's more on to collaborations, helping each other, helping other people's, helping other factors to survive.” (Interviewee#7)

5.5.4 Industry opportunities for some

Apart from the opportunities that collaboration created during the pandemic, some stakeholders were particularly favoured by the situation. The MICE tourism actors in Malaysia had to start being more creative, think out of the box, use innovation, encourage different types of packages and experiences, focus on alternative segments to leverage the conditions. The digitalisation of the sector can also be considered as an opportunity from a specific point of view that relates to the upgrade of the services and the audience reach. Specifically, some businesses managed to prosper more than others in the specific area, with IT providers earning a significant advantage.

“When it goes that way one group of people will benefit, of course, the other group of people is going to lose up. Those people on the ground, transport providers, hoteliers, agents, tour guides, golf...so all these will be affected. But the MICE industry itself will carry on because they have already looked at the avenue on how to.” (Interviewee#5)

“The virtual events only benefit the technology supplier. They're the ones making money because they're converting all the options...so only those very few selected

industries are on right time, they actually benefit from COVID. But the general community, talking about the ecosystem, the booth contractor, the hotel, the travel agents, the retail, the F&B, those are the ones that's actually suffering because of not having a physical event. And that as well goes towards the local economy, to the casual worker in the convention center, the assurers, people that work part-time, taxi drivers, they will definitely suffer because they don't have the work or the commercial value of events coming to the destination.” (Interviewee#8)

“Luckily, we involved in this at a quite early stage, so the next thing we always find that things can be enhanced and then getting more interesting...So what we do is we continue to enhance make the whole experience in the online more interesting to carry the whole event and we are still searching. Our latest platform has B2B, B2C and then you can even try and share, but we want more and we are doing more, putting more animation, putting more of the real-life experience and as much as we can. As mentioned, we still feel that we're still very far for us to go and a lot, a lot more and try to achieve as much as we can” (Interviewee#9)

Generally, all stakeholders need to see the potential in the sector which can be connected with their own gain (Ladkin & Spiller, 2000; Mistilis & Dwyer, 1999) and support its survival and further development. The training of the staff in MICE tourism, the focus on digitalisation and innovation that can broaden the audience, as well as the market research can unveil new opportunities for some stakeholders.

“Because of this [pandemic], everyone is searching for new opportunities and new ways of doing things...So a lot of thinking and a lot of research has gone down to all different areas and as long as you can find it, the shift in the pandemic is there. Then you will start to look where you can transact, what you can get more attention at from the shift.” (Interviewee#9)

“You revise the meeting industry, and look at the training of all your staff, also follow the new norms and practice the high hygiene standards and then it's possible for you to bring it back, but there's a lot of work that needs to go in.” (Interviewee#5)

“But they will have still got the hybrid model or the virtual version, and then a virtual version will be available at a lower participation rate and instead of having 3,000 people that were needed before, the virtual version may have a participation of 10,000. So, the audience has grown, but the audience will be more towards virtual. And there will be a difference because, in whatever we do in our event industry, the key factor is experience, is that experience that matter.” (Interviewee#8)

5.5.5 Impacts on the local community

The COVID-19 outbreak affected MICE tourism in such a way that the impacts on the local community were unavoidable due to the relation that the sector creates for the two parts. MICE is an important segment for the local economy as its activities can bring money and customers to a variety of different industries (Ladkin & Spiller, 2000), thus it “gives a substantial multiplier effect to the economy” (Interviewee#1).

“Our industry and industry chain are a major source of employment when working at full or normal capacity. The industry is also a major revenue contributor through

direct and indirect earning as well as bringing in a good foreign currency contribution to government coffers. In addition, there are the beyond the revenue benefits that the industry brings with the trade and investment stimulus, education and knowledge exchange, country and destination recognition, pre and post tourism, community benefits and others.” (Interview#10)

In this manner, it can be claimed that COVID-19 affected the prosperous elements that the industry brings to the community due to the cessation of its activities. The pandemic has negatively impacted local economies (Seraphin, 2021) and interstate linkages are encouraged (Carneiro et al., 2016). Accordingly, in a lot of cases, MICE stakeholders are setting the priority to the local people and aiming at bringing value to them by employing them and involving them as much as they can in the related activities, but even this is hard during this situation. Interviewee#5 stresses that all levels of the community have been influenced, explaining that a lot of segments of locals are struggling because of the absence of MICE tourists even in remote areas.

“A lot of locals were providing transport services. And artists were giving traditional cultural performances and then also food manufacturers even till today make Satti...Satti is one of these foremost menus in Malaysian food. So, if you go for buffet, you must have a Satti on the counter, it's a must. And many of the hotels don't do the Satti by themselves, they actually cater it from the people from home. So, you have these aunties, who have a home business, they are the ones who are actually doing all these Sattis and they produce this thing for you, to give it to the hotels. So, hotels actually buy the traditional Malay cakes and all that which is actually put on the buffet for all these events, from the people that are from cottage industries and home industries. So, these people are affected, the transport guys are affected, the guides will be affected and then...people who are working in the golf courses are affected. There are many many many layers of people that were actually working for the MICE in the tourism industry. Many layers. Up to even the cleaners, the people who clean, up to even those people. So, it's hitting right to the community down.” (Interviewee#5)

In terms of the future, MICE can serve as a supportive factor for the community but this depends on various elements. “I think the best thing we can do to protect the local communities is to make sure we deliver employment right”, mentions Interviewee#6. “MICE will contribute so much for local wellbeing especially for people that live around the tourist destination or attraction. They can directly get the impact of the tourists actually or MICE travellers that come into their place” says Interviewee#4. Moreover, Interviewee#8 explains that physical events can contribute more to the local community: “I mean if you do virtual, who are the ones that are going to benefit?”. Lastly, Interviewee#5 indicates that the trainings that are offered by the government to the locals in the COVID-19 period can upgrade the quality of their life in the future due to the skills they will have obtained.

5.6 Impacts of COVID-19 on visitors of MICE tourism in Malaysia

COVID-19 impacted also the visitors and participants of MICE activities that cannot travel and attend events in Malaysia due to the circumstances. The loss of visitors who represent the demand side for the destination is substantial due to their high potential for the tourism industry (Buhalis & Laws, 2001; Marvel, 2003). Therefore, the impacts on this group

regarding MICE tourism need to be examined to understand the relation with the sustainability of the sector.

The main impacts of COVID-19 on the visitors of the Malaysian MICE tourism are related to:

- Low levels of confidence in terms of travelling
- Quality of experience
- Attendance limitations
- Future expectations and customer satisfaction

5.6.1 Low levels of confidence in terms of travelling

One of the major impacts that COVID-19 introduced is the fear and insecurity that people have regarding the virus (Jamal & Budke, 2020) and as a result of travelling. “The process of building secure events is still ongoing and it will be ongoing”, says Interviewee#3. This enormously affects MICE tourists as well who are dealing with this uncertainty and reconsider virtual options although they might have a preference in physical attendance. In fact, people’s willingness to travel has pivoted after COVID-19 emergence and especially in regards to popular visited destinations (Cerutti & De Falco, 2020). Thus, the restoration of the visitors’ confidence is of great importance for every destination and given MICE tourism that usually takes place in big city hubs. The future of a tourism destination depends on its safety and building of trust (Sealy, 2020). “How many of the corporates will attend if they are going to travel at their own risk?”, wonders Interviewee#5. This is considered a big challenge, therefore particular focus is being put towards SOPs, vaccination and other means that can support the levels of safety in Malaysian MICE. “A lot of hotels and resorts will definitely need to put extra costs to build up confidence”, states Interviewee#1.

“The people that attend this kind of events expect and want to feel safe. If I want to come, I want to feel safe. Hence the establishment must give the assurance to the participants that they are safe. The organizers of the event will give the assurance and they will make sure that the venue provider provides this kind of safe environment.” (Interviewee#5)

“The question is right now is if you would travel...There it depends on how you perceive this scenario; some people would say this is a very intimidating thing and they will not travel... they will put leisure travel and leisure visit as non-essential...but if it is business-related it is essential travel... So you look at the matter, would you travel for leisure or bring your family out to this destination if you're not sure whether they are safe or not, or would you go alone because it's business, thinking: ‘I have to attend and make sure I’ll be super good and stay in a hotel room after the conference and don’t go anywhere’ kind of stuff.” (Interviewee#8)

“We are working with the national convention bureau and our industry association to produce the 'Malaysia: a safe destination event planning guide' which combines industry sectors compliance with SOPs’ and Bureau Veritas certification of safety measures and hygiene standards as well as a guide for all the permits and permissions required to host events at present. This guide runs through all the major supply chain components such as the airport, transport, hotels, venues and off-site venues and is designed to provide a degree of confidence in the destination while assisting in making it an easier visit at the same time.” (Interview10)

From another perspective, the pandemic assisted the creation and sharing of a big amount of information to the public through online channels which did not happen before and could help the restoration of security confidence for some visitors.

“But over here now we notice that people are trying to add more online information as they can’t travel and the content has actually increased and improved a lot. So that actually gives very meaningful information for anyone who would like to travel in the coming time. So, if you actually notice certain countries, especially...when you go into Asia country you can see that they put in very detailed information and maybe previously you may not have liked it but sometimes that gets you a lot of very good information and they are really particular. So, things like that have compiled and increased, can help for those who really want to know more...” (Interviewee#9)

5.6.2 Quality of experience

Usually, MICE tourism constitutes a cheerful experience consisting of memories regarding the destination, people and elements of the activities (Kuznetsova and Silcheva, 2014; UOU, n.d.). However, the termination of travelling and physical events due to COVID-19 impacted this experience tremendously eliminating in this way one of the most important parts for the visitors. The MICE experience has changed a lot, as people cannot go to Malaysia, enjoy the destination, get to know the culture and traditions, meet people, communicate and network.

“We have had no visitors since March 2020 when our borders closed and the penultimate event due to take place just before lockdown went virtual at the last minute, so there has been and there is no visitor experience until we have no idea when.” (Interviewee#10)

“I think it definitely affects the visitors because previously you have the privilege of actually going to so many places, with so many people, but right now, you cannot do that, and then you cannot explore that anymore like before. So, I think the quality of experience that the visitors have was affected badly after COVID hit us. Because last time you could actually explore, go to the beach, go to the island, go shopping and to the outlets, so many places you could explore. But now I think everybody is trying to avoid crowded places. So, things like that are actually making the industry smaller. The opportunity for you to explore certain places is limited not like before.” (Interviewee#1)

“It is similar to watching a football game. If you go to the stadium, you will feel the vibes of it. People shouting there and giving the support. But at home you're just shouting in front of your TV, that’s not the same on your flat screen.” (Interviewee#3)

The importance of experience in MICE tourism is obvious in the discussions with the different stakeholders where it is indicated that visitors receive unique attributes of the activities when attending physically. Besides, Ladkin & Spiller (2000) describe exhibitions as a demonstration of products that might require the involvement of senses. “Tourism is about seeing, is believing. You have to come and experience by yourself, you have to see by your own eyes, you have to step foot in that place”, elaborates Interviewee#4.

Moreover, although it is proven that good services can bring business visitors back to a destination as leisure tourists (UOU, n.d), in the specific period it is difficult to predict how the experience will change and how COVID-19 restrictions will continue to affect the sector.

“MICE is based on service, the service provided to the participant to the delegates. For example, if they come in for the conference, they reach the hotel and even there are some greetings. A warm greeting from the hotels, to make sure that they get and feel that they are at home. So, it's a different experience. And even at a point, during the arrival, we can actually go there to sell the booth, to welcome the delegates and then really make sure they feel warm when they visit us. And maybe can change their mind to revisit us again in future. Then, when they revisit us might be not for business tourism but for leisure tourism, maybe with the family, the friends. That's why for me service is very, very important. Of course, you cannot ignore the product, this comes with product services, but for me service is absolutely important.” (Interviewee#2)

Besides the difficult situation, there are still some means that can help the stakeholders of Malaysian MICE to enhance the participants' experience, although it is difficult to reach the pre-COVID levels. “As long as COVID is around I think nothing much they could do about the experience. Because everything is restricted, everything is limited.”, says Interviewee#1. Nonetheless, the role of technology has become dominant but its potential in assisting the side of experience in MICE is debatable. “I believe that turning to hybrid is an alternative, but hybrid is always an alternative, green screens or virtual are an alternative, but people still want physical events, they want a physical contact.”, supports Interviewee#7. However, Interviewee#3 believes that “A hybrid event allows the speaker and participants, no matter attending physically or virtually, to interact in real-time.”.

“Technology plays a very important role because with it we can suddenly have a virtual meeting, conference...but we still miss the touch. This industry is all about experience. You are actually trying to get people to have that experience because that experience will create memory, that is what people are looking at actually. So be in MICE, hybrid is good, virtual is good, but to a certain extent. I still believe the touch of the human can give the experience that you wanted to have. You wanted to explore the experience of being physically in certain destination...” (Interviewee#1)

“You can only use the virtual to talk or to discuss, but you can't really move in to do more...besides the discussion or meeting then everything else has stopped. So, what we are trying to do over here is figure out how to continue to enhance or encourage the whole industry, especially in the MICE area.” (Interviewee#9)

An interesting observation from Interviewee#9 that is engaged in IT development is that people might be excited to join a virtual event and might enjoy it but this cannot last in the long term especially when people need to repetitively participate in events with a similar form. Consequently, effort is now put in enriching the online services with some elements of experience, as the combination can improve the end result (Rahimizhian & Irani, 2020). For instance, since a meal cannot be offered by virtual means, some organisers choose to offer to the delegates vouchers that can be used in Malaysian restaurants in different places in the world. In this way, the participant can receive one part of the experience and be more engaged.

Furthermore, another remark that is related to the part of experience is that incentives will be the MICE segment to be most impacted by COVID-19 and in turn the incentive participants. This segment cannot be easily covered through online means due to its nature; thus, the pandemic has minimised it.

“I think that part of it will be grossly affected in terms of incentive. Because incentive is an experience, people are awarding you for your work and it's 100% experience. So that part of the MICE now I think it's going to be very, very affected unless people are very confident that it is safe to send these people to this destination for an experience.” (Interviewee#5)

5.6.3 Attendance limitations

Due to the safety measures that were adopted because of the pandemic, multiple limitations appeared regarding the attendance of MICE delegates. For instance, the number of participants has been reduced to half capacity, there are social distancing barriers, quarantine requirements, temperature checks, etc. These elements are not encouraging for MICE visitors and can result in a drop in the number of participants. “Due to social distancing, visitors are unable to have proper networking sessions during the event”, remarks Interviewee#6 on the discouraging conditions that have evolved. Furthermore, the cost that the SOPs entail can also be an obstacle for some participants if they are affecting the price they have to pay. “If you can't afford to participate because of the time, or because of resources, then you participate at the virtual format”, claims Interviewee#8. “Yes of course visitation will be affected, because of the cost of the SOP, the cost of travel...is going to increase”, confirms (Interviewee#9).

“The number of visitors would drop. A company that maybe sent ten people to attend a conference will now send only five because you need to go for because of the business, need to go because you need to meet people, but they may not send as many people as they used to before the COVID. So, the number of participants will definitely drop.” (Interviewee#8)

Consequently, these limitations may have a positive impact regarding the quality of the participants in MICE, meaning that only people that are specifically interested in the touched upon areas will join and enhance the value of the events.

“I want to see what is the participation of the people that are actually going for summits, because usually when you go for the actual fair, the participation of these summits is low because people are busy at the booths and things like that.” (Interviewee#5)

“So, when you do an online event then you see the participation has reduced, but the good thing is that you actually attract those people who really want to buy, those people who really prepare, because they are not looking at the advantage, they're looking at 'yes, I do need the product'. So that makes a difference that we noticed when we launched this certain online event.” (Interviewee#9)

5.6.4 Future expectations and customer satisfaction

In terms of the post-COVID era, it seems that there will be MICE participants that are willing to travel and experience events and the destination, no matter the existing hesitations. The development of the right communication strategy, evaluation of needs and satisfaction can support the restart of inbound tourism (Sealy, 2020). Certainly, there will be new expectations from the tourists' side and new ways to improve customer satisfaction from the suppliers' side, based on the new norm and depending on how effectively the industry will respond to the challenges. "The most relevant issue for our industry is to achieve the often talked of "herd immunity" so that international travel can begin again with a certain degree of safety and confidence.", indicates Interviewee#10.

Some actors believe that the digitalised means can work as a minimising factor for the insecurity and attract delegates but not visitors. "Definitely you need a virtual set up, a virtual platform for all those who do not want to travel", explains Interviewee#2. "I foresee that hybrid events might become more common and numbers might be lower than previously and there might be a move to more regional than international meetings with events being supported by streaming and other technologies", states Interviewee#10. Nevertheless, others believe that the nature of the events itself will stimulate delegates to attend as usual and not follow virtual solutions.

"The physical events will still be required...because the engagement of physical event is much more than virtual event...if I want to attend the conference right on a subject matter, I could move around and meet with a lot of people and I could network. The main reason for events is actually the ability to network, to meet people and also not to just take knowledge or find out programs but also to meet people and to network for business and such." (Interviewee#8)

Moreover, emphasis is put on the progress of the pandemic in relation to the future of the MICE experience, customer satisfaction and essential or non-essential travelling. "The way that visitors experience will change will depend entirely on what the legacy of COVID-19 is and what rules, laws, restrictions are enforced post-COVID-19", explains Interviewee#10. "For post-COVID-19 when Malaysia is safe, a lot of exciting programs like golf tourism, easier flight scheme, Malaysia as filming a country, wedding, honeymoon destination can be arranged and apps to certain tourist destinations", expresses Interviewee#4.

"I think if everybody worked very hard to upgrade their skills and also focus on the customer satisfaction, then of course they will be very satisfied after the visit, but this all depends on how the industry can react to all these after the pandemic." (Interviewee#2)

"When coming to the future it seems now that there will be always just distance. However, the actual experience of meeting the people, really speaking to the right people in front of you, instead of just using video like you and me now, it makes a lot of difference. So, we foresee and we believe it will come." (Interviewee#9)

"My personal feeling is that we will need to or at least should take precautions for some considerable time to come. I would see that whilst taking precautions might annoy or concern some, a business trip or leisure break to Malaysia would still be a good experience." (Interviewee#10)

6 Discussion

The results of the current research prove that the impacts of COVID-19 were severe for MICE tourism and its related stakeholders in Malaysia, affecting its present and future sustainability. No matter the massiveness of the negative aspects, there are also some positive elements driven by this difficult situation, such as the ongoing and close collaboration between several public and private MICE actors, the prompt initiation of different strategies and actions, the development of alternative technological solutions and upgrading of skills and even the reduction in the environmental footprint of the sector even though that was not related to any commitment.

Furthermore, attention needs to be given to the importance that some dimensions had for the interviewed actors in comparison to others. Although the questionnaire that the interview was based on addressing evenly all the six pillars of the SRT model, namely the economic, socio-cultural, natural-environmental, socio-political aspects, destination-based stakeholders and visitors, it seems that more attention was given to some aspects than others from the interviewees' side. Specifically, based on the analysis and categorisation of the data with the assistance of Nvivo software into different nodes, it is visible that the economic as well as the socio-cultural and socio-political dimensions have gathered more material than the other three categories.

The unequal reference between the examined pillars can be justified based on the intensity that each of them has on each stakeholder at the given time. Definitely, the economic dimension for the MICE sector that has been badly influenced by the pandemic is an issue of prime importance for the stakeholders as it affects them directly or indirectly and brings the fight for survival and recovery to the forefront. In addition, the socio-cultural impacts of COVID-19 have become a significant matter because of the rise of unemployment and job insecurity that the pandemic created and can affect everyone in the community including the interviewed parts and due to the fear for health and safety that dominate the new reality. Lastly, it seems that the socio-political environment is the one receiving greater attention. This can be explained due to the seriousness that the development of the right strategies, actions, as well as the adaptation to changes and new priorities have at the moment, which stems from the big length of the pandemic and the inevitable courses of action that is required for the resilience of the sector.

On the other hand, the natural-environmental, destination-based stakeholders and visitors dimensions were addressed fewer times during the interviews. This does not indicate that they are not equally important or are less affected by the pandemic. Indeed, the findings suggest the prime role of destination-based stakeholders, however, interviewees were more abstinent in expressing their view regarding the visitors, as they believed that only the future can tell what the direction is going to be since until now Malaysian MICE tourism had very few chances to operate and is still adjusting. Moreover, the commitment to natural-environmental strategies does not seem to be a priority at the moment for the Malaysian MICE tourism players whose focus is now on finding ways to survive, recover and adjust to the new conditions.

Another interesting aspect to be discussed regards the future of MICE tourism in Malaysia. Many of the interviewees shared their opinions on how COVID-19 has already created or will create impacts for the sector in the post-pandemic era, although some mentioned that specific aspects are hard to be predicted due to the unexpected conditions that the virus can

create. In fact, the country came across its third lockdown in May which was not foreseen even a month before from the stakeholders that were earlier interviewed. Thus, it can be stated that it is difficult to estimate if and when the unfavourable COVID-19 impacts will be overcome, how the situation will further affect MICE and tourism in Malaysia and create to the point recommendations that can help the stakeholders move forward in a responsible manner that could potentially minimise the negative economic, social, cultural impacts, support the local community and stakeholders, enhance the experience of the visitors and balance the situation.

7 Conclusion

To conclude, the main purpose of this research is to investigate the impacts caused by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sustainability of MICE tourism in terms of its present and future. In this manner, a qualitative approach is followed and ten interviews have taken place with public, private and governmental executive stakeholders of the supply-side of Malaysian MICE tourism. The interviews were guided by questions that were developed based on the SRT model and its six dimensions that cover the sustainability pillars and responsibility enablers, namely the economic, socio-cultural, natural-environmental aspects, the socio-political environment, the destination-based stakeholders and the visitors. The same dimensions were used for the presentation and analysis of the findings in order to answer the research question through the use of the selected model.

The findings of the current study show that MICE tourism in Malaysia is significantly affected by COVID-19 concerning its sustainability and despite the efforts of its stakeholders the continuation of the pandemic will be crucial for the future of the sector. Specifically, the research reveals that the pandemic has affected economically the industry, introducing negative revenue flows to the sector, provoking the closure of many businesses, increasing operational costs and prices, shifting the demand to different actors and establishing new agendas against economic losses. Furthermore, on the socio-cultural level, the impacts of COVID-19 refer to a rise in unemployment, changes in working conditions, fear regarding health and safety and restricted social interactions through MICE. Also, the natural-environmental aspect does not seem to be directly impacted on a wide scale, except for the rise in produced waste and packaging due to the exceptional conditions and equipment that is required. However, a lot of indirect positive actions regarding environmental protection were enhanced due to the pandemic.

Additionally, in relation to the socio-political environment, COVID-19 affected MICE tourism in Malaysia in ways that resulted in the creation and adoption of new strategies, the evolution of new priorities and sustainability awareness, as well as changes regarding the future of MICE. Moreover, the destination-based stakeholders have been influenced in several ways due to the pandemic, which pivoted them to new activities and opportunities, boosted their collaboration but also impacted the local community. Lastly, concerning the aspect of the MICE visitors, findings indicate that COVID-19 has negatively impacted their travel confidence, altered the experience offered by business travel, produced attendance limitations and shifted the expectations for the future and the customer satisfaction standards.

All in all, it can be stated that the purpose of the research has been achieved and the findings clearly answer the research question, indicating the impacts that COVID-19 brought on the sustainability of MICE tourism in Malaysia for the current as well as the post-pandemic era. On that account, this study contributes to academic knowledge by providing novel insights

regarding the COVID-19 pandemic that has recently hit the globe and affected the tourism sector in an unanticipated way. Moreover, the study specialises in the specific tourism segment of MICE creating value for the sector and can be a useful tool for its practitioners and stakeholders now and in the future. From another perspective, the current research is focusing on the sustainability pillars and enablers of MICE, giving unique offerings regarding this paradigm and its importance for tourism segments in connection to the pandemic.

Moving on, it is important to take into account that the findings of this research are subjected to some limitations. First of all, due to the restrictions and the unfavorable situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher was not able to conduct the interviews in a face-to-face manner and explore MICE in Malaysia as planned. It is considered that under different circumstances the visit to the destination would have generated a deeper insight into the matter, although the data collection process was successfully conducted online. Moreover, time constraints appeared regarding the data collection mainly because of the Ramadan that the majority of people in Malaysia celebrate and as illustrated it hindered the conduction of interviews from April 12th, 2021 until May 12th, 2021. Also, it can be stated that the study is focused on the supply-side of MICE supported by the point of view of executive members which was considered most appropriate for this study, thus it overlooks the demand-side or the opinions of subordinate MICE positions.

In addition, from a theoretical perspective, the general research approach that is adopted in this study and entails qualitative data might be prone to the bias of the researcher which is related to the skills and personal experience. Furthermore, the deductive approach that is applied based on the SRT model produces the risk of overemphasis on the theory due to the fact the interviews were based on the dimensions of the model. However, this bias was attempted to be minimised by using the model as a guideline to create themes that could support the sustainability and responsibility viewpoint of the topic. Besides, this approach was beneficial in fighting another limitation of the study which is the limited knowledge of some participants on the term sustainability and might have affected the findings, even though the concept was explained by the researcher in detail and further questions and clarifications assisted when needed.

In terms of future research, it can be suggested that similar researches can be replicated in diverse destinations, especially because the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic is still quite recent and unforeseeable for the global MICE tourism stakeholders. It should be noted that due to the uniqueness of each destination, comparison studies between tourism destinations can also flourish. There are also considerable potentials in exploring the impacts of COVID-19 individually or including the different perspectives of the demand-side stakeholders or non-executive members. Moreover, this paper can stand as a starting point for future studies to explore the impacts that COVID-19 brought on the sustainability of other sectors or under a different approach and attributes. Last but not least, the findings of this study regarding the future of the sector imply the formation of a divergent normal which can host further research regarding the trends, development of MICE tourism and can potentially confirm the predictions made in this research. Besides, depending on the progress of the pandemic the new research findings might be focused in different directions, especially if the unfavourable conditions and restrictions continue for a long time.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Main Questions:

- Economic Impacts

1. What are the economic impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism and your business/organisation? How many MICE events were cancelled or postponed and what was and will be the impact created?
2. Which strategies/ changes did you apply in the face of income losses due to the pandemic?
3. Did the government or other actors support the industry? What actions are taken for the future?

- Socio-cultural Impacts

4. What are the socio-cultural impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism and your organisation
5. What is the impact of the pandemic on the employment and working conditions currently and in the future?
6. Is the increase of online or hybrid events in the COVID and post-COVID era impacting employment in MICE? How?

- Natural- environmental Impacts

7. What are the environmental impacts of COVID-19 on MICE tourism? How did COVID-19 affect your environmental agenda?
8. What do you think will be the effects to your environmental agenda and the sector in the post-COVID-19 era?

- Impacts on the Socio-political Environment

9. How did COVID-19 impact the sustainability awareness of the MICE industry?
10. Will the post-COVID-19 MICE business be different, in the context of sustainability (more, less, how)?
11. What changes (if any) did the pandemic bring, and what changes will bring for the post-COVID-19 business? What are the priority criteria?
12. What actions/ strategies have been implemented to mitigate and prevent the COVID-19 effects between the pandemic and after? Who is leading them?

- Destination-based Stakeholders

13. How did COVID-19 impact the stakeholders in the MICE industry and their collaboration and relationships?
14. What issues become relevant in the post-COVID-19 era for the stakeholder of MICE?
15. What are the relations between the local community and MICE industry and how were they affected by COVID-19?

16. Are there any plans in regards to these relations now and in the post-COVID-19 era?
How can MICE contribute to the quality of life of locals?

- Visitors

17. How did COVID-19 impact the quality of experience and satisfaction of the visitors-participants of MICE events?

18. How will their experience change in the post-COVID era?

19. What are the plans in regards to visitors' experience and satisfaction during and after COVID-19?

General Questions:

20. Do you perceive the pandemic as a threat for the future of MICE? Is the industry prepared to face a similar crisis in the future?

21. How can innovation and ICT (Information & Communication Technology) that develop during the pandemic impact MICE now and in the future?

Appendix B: Strategies-Initiatives introduced for Malaysian MICE because of COVID-19

According to Interviewee#3, these are most of the existing strategies, established by different MICE actors:

- MyCEB has come up with initiatives such as the Meet in Malaysia campaign that encompasses 2 initiatives, which are Let's Meet Locally and Let's Meet Tomorrow. There are also other initiatives such as Exhibition Enhancement Package (EEP), Tactical Malaysia Twin Deal V (TMTDV) and Homegrown Event Support. The main objective of this campaign is to keep encouraging the industry players to not stop planning for future business events for Malaysia.
- MyCEB introduced online activities such as the IAPCO webEDGE platform. MyCEB worked together with Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre in supporting the IAPCO. The IAPCO webEDGE platform is specifically designed for the business events industry professionals with relevant conference and meeting experiences, which will provide specific and focused educational content that aims to further develop the professional and digital capabilities of PCOs in Malaysia.
- There are few initiatives that have been introduced by the Government. Recently, the Government announced additional stimulus measures worth RM15 billion under Permai which comprises 22 initiatives in order to combat the pandemic, while also safeguarding the welfare of people and businesses. Among the measures to the workforce are:
 - a) Wage subsidy programme 3.0 – RM1 billion
 - b) RM 500 one-off assistance to tourist guides and drivers of taxis, tour buses and e-hailing vehicles, among others – RM66 million
 - c) Special tax relief for business premises rental reduction of at least 30%
 - d) Electricity bill support – 10% discount for 6 affected sectors and up to 9% bill reduction for all users
- All these were on top of the earlier stimulus announced in 2020, such as KITA Prihatin worth RM10 billion, Prihatin Stimulus Package of RM260 billion and Penjana Stimulus Package of RM35 billion where RM1 Billion has been allocated for the tourism financing.
- In total, the stimulus measures introduced to offset the negative impact of the pandemic have now reached a total of RM320 billion or about 20.4% of GDP.
- The current MCO sees more economic activities being allowed to operate, and therefore does not have the same drag on the economy as the previous MCO in 2020.
- The government has also introduced new initiatives and extended existing ones for tourism, retail and other sectors that are affected by COVID-19 under the PEMERKASA stimulus package announced by Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.
- PEMERKASA has an allocation of RM20 billion, with a new fiscal injection of RM11 billion from the government. It is comprised of 20 key initiatives across five

key focuses, namely to control the Covid-19 outbreak, to steer economic recovery, to strengthen the nation's competitiveness, to ensure the inclusivity agenda, and to transform the economy.

Focus 1: Controlling The Covid-19 Outbreak

Focus 2: Spearheading Economic Recovery

Focus 3: Strengthening The Nation's Competitiveness

Focus 4: Ensuring Inclusivity

Focus 5: Transforming The Economy

- The 20 strategic initiatives that will be rolled out under this programme are:

- 1 COVID-19 Immunisation Programme
- 2 No More Nationwide MCO Implementation
- 3 Having A Stricter And More Transparent Law Enforcement
- 4 Implementing Small Projects Nationwide
- 5 Special Grants 3.0 (Geran Khas Prihatin 3.0)
- 6 Micro-Credit Financing Facilities
- 7 Job Retention And Employment Incentives
- 8 Revitalising The Tourism And Retail Sectors
- 9 Reducing Company Burdens And Empowering Cooperatives
- 10 Strengthening Our Business Environment
- 11 Automation And Digitalisation
- 12 Reducing The Digital Gap
- 13 Encouraging Investments And Export Markets
- 14 Encouraging Sustainable Funding
- 15 Assisting With Income Loss
- 16 Improving The Urban Vulnerable Assistance Program
- 17 Women's Welfare
- 18 OKU's Welfare
- 19 Youth's Welfare
- 20 Continuation Of Subsidies To Reduce Cost Of Living