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When The New Normal is Not That New, Why Not Follow? Optimising e-Tourism and e-Marketplaces for Business Events

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ABSTRACT: The current study addressed two concerns about the effects of movement restrictions on business events: (1) how to continue with business events while face-to-face events are preferable but not always possible; and (2) how to maintain business events' market share post-pandemic. While the business events market remains niche, its promotion is consistently limited to a few methods that make no distinction between pre-and post-pandemic. It is assumed that new methods of promoting business events will be required at least intra-pandemic to capture several new norms. Therefore, an extensive literature review was conducted. The analysis disclosed the potential for introducing virtual reality into the e-tourism industry as a whole, with the capacity to serve at least four tourism markets: leisure, educational, events (MICE), and healthcare and wellness tourism. These markets were emphasised in light of the "new experience society" that events in the tourism industry are increasingly important in providing something artificial, transient, and unique in addition to the ongoing, long-term tourism products based on the past research outcomes. Additionally, website content analysis was performed to investigate the normality and potential of e-marketplace optimisation for e-tourism. The normalisation analysis was conducted based on the search results of the top 5 e-marketplaces in Malaysia, and the results supported the inference of abnormal distribution using these platforms. Another finding of market potential has lent credence to the existing idea through a firm's initiatives to sell on existing e-marketplaces with proven consumer support. To capture the market opportunities, the e-tourism normalisation model was introduced.

KEYWORDS: *Business events, e-tourism, normalisation, virtual reality, e-commerce, e-marketplaces*

1.0 Introduction

While the world embraces technological development and information advancement, businesses pursuit Internet of Things to stay connected with the people. The growing usage of the internet has

created numerous opportunities for the travel and tourism industry, especially through e-commerce techniques (Li & Suomi, 2007) to ease the travel agencies and traveller's information exchange activities. For instance, Klook and KKday platforms were widely used for selling holiday packages for individuals who prefer to plan their tour itinerary; Eventbrite for event booking whilst Booking.com and Airbnb were used in accommodation reservations. E-commerce has become a new intermediary in the tourism industry resulted in significant changes in consumer behaviour and attitude due to the growth of internet usage (Li & Suomi, 2007).

Moreover, Internet enable tourism consumers to search for information on tourism activities and make almost all types of bookings possible where the e-tourism unfold. E-tourism entails the digitisation of all tourism processes and value chains to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of the tourism activity (Buhalis, 2003); dictating the organisation's competitiveness through applying information technology to interact with their stakeholders and shareholders in all business functions (i.e. e-commerce, e-marketing, e-finance, e-human resources, e-proceedings) (Buhalis & Jun, 2011). Despite its people-centric, e-tourism enables tourism activity to operate at anytime and anywhere with the greatest extent of human contact avoidance, which opens up market potential during the pandemic particularly when human movement is restricted (Gretzel et al. 2020).

The concept of e-tourism in particular information technology is prevalent in the market for events. According to the infographic published by Bizzabo (2018), a one-stop event platform, before COVID-19 pandemic, many marketers has already embraced the idea of e-tourism by using social media for their events promotion. Of all respondents for the survey, 76 percent of event organisers use Twitter to advertise their events, 88 percent of businesses use social media to raise awareness before events, and 73 percent of marketers have increased the use of videos during event promotion. 40 percent of marketers said they thought email marketing was the best method for promoting an event. At the same time, 62 percent of marketers who promote their events through email marketing do so using event management software. It is interestingly no data shown e-commerce platforms or e-marketplace for event promotion.

The same data source by Bizzabo (2018) indicates that most event marketers think technology can significantly improve the success of their events. According to the statistics, event technology could help increase productivity by 27 percent, cut expenses by 20-30 percent, and increase attendance by 20 percent. Among all, most professional event planners working on business-to-business events rely the most on event management software. It is also notably that even if the marketers do not currently use event apps, majority of them intend to do so in the future. These marketers look for the top three features in an event app: content capture, in-app registration, and on-site registration. The statistic clearly showed that event marketers are utilising event technology and are likely to continue using or adopt it in the future. Due to this, the current researchers questioned which technological platform would be best for promoting business events following the new norms of the pandemic.

The current study focuses on how event marketers use e-marketplaces for event promotion in light of the potential growth of e-tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism e-marketplace is typically represented by a single website or an aggregating tourism website. However, there is scant to no evidence of a link between e-marketplace and tourism-related commerce during COVID-19. Selling tourism products using an existing e-commerce platform that is not dedicated to tourism is, therefore,

presumed as an abnormal practice. This is a missed opportunity since online marketplaces have readied market share and infrastructure for immediate actions, which is crucial for pandemic recovery. Hence, the firm's attitude in normalising this so-called "new" type of tourism has warranted attention.

2.0 Problem Statement

Business events before and after COVID-19 differ in several ways. The previous study found that among the most critical elements enhancing the competitive advantage of Meeting, Incentives, Convention and Exhibitions (MICE) companies during the COVID-19 pandemic were their capacity to integrate new features with existing systems, information confidentiality, and tools and technologies used to ensure better management. Strategies that ensure consumer loyalty, innovation, and adaptation to the external environment, such as increased health and safety precautions, are the most promising ones in cross-border tourism (Aburumman, 2020). Virtual events are anticipated to play a significant role in MICE event recovery (Ho & Sia, 2020), but maintaining the physical experiences would be challenging.

Therefore, it is time to reconsider the experiences of business event delegates who participate virtually. Zarotis (2021) examined the relationships between leisure, tourism, and events using leisure time and had discovered that people made leisure the purpose of their lives. People now seek success and acclaim through their leisure activities and the work they do and have done. To maintain the physical experiences and give participants the chance to visit specific destinations and try products or services, virtual reality technology has been proposed, which can be a valuable tool for considering physical distance in tourism (Atsiz, 2021). The above findings revealed an important truth that business events, whether in person or virtually, will not be successful in solitary. Due to its close ties to other tourism-related products, the new norms should focus more on e-tourism as a whole rather than just e-business events.

Long ago before the COVID-19 pandemic, a wide array of researches have explored the area of e-commerce for tourism (Morrison & King, 2002; Werthner & Ricci, 2004; Mamaghani, 2009; Hua, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019), including those in Malaysia (Salwani et al., 2009). As postulated in the study of Werthner and Ricci (2004) and Mamaghani (2009), e-commerce is crucial for tourism industry because it has the potential to alter the industry's structure, and create new business opportunities. Regardless of the uncertainty caused by pandemic or simply the penetration into younger market segments such as generation Z, the availability of products and the online experience have become key components in consumers' decision to purchase tourism products or services online (Vieira et al., 2020) which created a new pattern of tourism.

Despite the argument over whether digital marketing or e-commerce is more crucial remains inconclusive, their importance in enhancing the competitiveness of the tourism sector is evident (Carvalho & Carvalho, 2019). Tourism e-commerce is typically represented by a single website (Lu et al., 2007) or an aggregating and a tourism website (Vieira et al., 2020). Little to no data show connection between e-commerce platforms of consumer product and tourism commerce during COVID-19 albeit most nations including Malaysia experienced e-commerce growth during the pandemic (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Selling tourism products using an existing e-commerce platform that is not dedicated to tourism is, therefore, presumed as an

abnormal practice. This is a missed opportunity since online marketplaces have readied market share and infrastructure for immediate actions, which is crucial for pandemic recovery.

The previous research looked into many aspects of tourism e-commerce adoption. However, research into the stereotype of tourism products consumption that is not part of daily routine; as well as its normalisation to be included in the existing e-marketplaces has been neglected. In the pandemic period that personal health safety and cost efficiency should be the top priorities, the current study emphasis e-tourism be normalised by optimising existing e-marketplaces such as eBay, Amazon, Shopee, Tmall, and Lazada as the main tourism e-commerce platforms. In addition to Gretzel's et al. (2020) suggestions on the potential transformation of e-tourism during the pandemic and the novelty of the current direction, the current study seek to develop a new e-tourism concept by:

1. Redefining tourism products;
2. Investigating the usage of e-marketplaces for e-tourism in Malaysian context;
3. Filling up practical gap through e-tourism normalisation model developed

3.0 Literature Review

The current study supports Zarotis's (2021) concept of "new experience society" that events in the tourism industry are becoming increasingly important in providing something artificial, transient, and unique in addition to the ongoing, long-term tourism product. Hence, the review of the literature sheds light on the potential transformation of e-tourism during and after the COVID-19 movement restriction. The integration of e-tourism and Augmented Reality was highlighted as below.

3.1 New Concept of Tourism with the Integration of Virtual Reality

Virtual reality (VR) is a crucial area of information technology that has been widely used in the context of e-tourism (Nayyar et al., 2018; Castro et al., 2018). VR is a 3D computer-generated virtual environment (VE) that can be navigated and interacted through the Internet (Guttentag, 2009). As VR technology evolves, it will be a powerful tool for the tourism community to communicate their tourism planning by involving local communities, which can be fundamental to a destination success. Travellers nowadays are conformable to use different internet platforms to plan for their trips. They use the internet to make reservations for their accommodations (i.e. Expedia); search for information about places to visit (i.e. Google) and post their vacation experiences on social media to provide advice to the other travellers (Buhalis, 1998). In Stepchenkova's (2007) paper, the virtual travel community became the traveller's favourite area to share their travel diaries. Virtual Travel Community enabled people to stay connected by exchanging travel information, which facilitates travel-related decisions.

To the same extend that VR is used to plan and manage a holiday trip, it can also be used to market a destination (Guttentag, 2009). People can experience a virtual trip and enjoy the travel experience at the virtual destination without visiting the physical location during the movement restriction period (Gretzel et al., 2020). VR is especially suitable for the tourism sector as the consumers are unable to try the product in advance (Gratzer et al., 2004). Hence, many travel agencies started to take their steps applying VR in their tourism product promotion. According to Buhalis & Law (2008), using

computer mediated environment in VR to promote the destination is able to provide rich data for the potential travellers. The advanced Image Interactivity Technology which includes the 3D virtual model managed to increase the shopping enjoyment by lesser down the online shopping risk perception and improved the positive attitude towards the online retailers (Lee et al., 2010).

3.2 New Concept of Tourism with the Integration of Virtual Reality

Leisure Tourism. Guttentag (2009) posited that theme parks are the most logical attraction to offer VR in projecting certain objects onto a real environment to amuse the tourists. Along with the pandemic, the VR system does not only serve the tourism industry as one of the marketing tools. The experiences derived from VRs were found led to perceived value, contributing to virtual tourists' satisfaction that subsequently improves their subjective well-being (Li et al., 2021). VR could be the safest tourism alternative (Zeng et al., 2020), thus virtual tours tend to be the only product that the attractions could offer during the pandemic (El-Said and Aziz, 2021). For instance, La Tour Eiffel 2020 launched a virtual tour of the Eiffel Tower event on their website during the country lockdown; Singapore Tourism Board released "Experience Singapore Now, Travel Later" campaign by sharing images of Singapore's attractions on their website to enable instant tourism access during the pandemic.

Educational Tourism. Apart from entertaining, VR does appear as an educational tool (Guttentag, 2010). In Malaysia, educational tourism is one of the fastest expanding sectors (Irfan et al., 2017) which had significantly contributed to the country's economic growth in the short and long run (Matahir and Tang, 2017). When physical presence is not possible, lessons including laboratory experiments or practical activities requiring practical, spatial, or kinesthetic skills were found extremely favorable with support of VR adoption (Nesenbergs, 2021). Incorporated VR into learning had indeed enhanced the quality of learning (Mikropoulus, 2006), improved cooperation and communication across disciplines and provided valuable insights and experience to the students especially in the area of interprofessional training (Qiao et al., 2021). The VR's education can also be applied in museums, heritage areas and other tourist sites learning, serving as a useful tool for the educators (Bowman et al., 1999), which reflects tremendous potential in the tourism recovery plan.

Events Tourism. According to Mistilis & Dwyer (2000), there is a need for more information exchange between MICE organisers and suppliers, intermediaries, and contact tourists, which necessitates the use of information technology because accelerated access and response to information is a critical component of service and competitive advantage. A case study conducted in Bali revealed an increased in event virtual organisation throughout the movement restriction period, demonstrating the relevance of VR to the point where practitioners constantly market their MICE products, meeting rooms, and accommodation using VR (Subawa et al., 2021). The virtual MICE idea is being creatively promoted to the tourism market as the new normal for MICE. For example, Tourism Malaysia launched the "Truly Asia ASEAN Virtual Hunt 2020," which united nine Southeast Asian nations and took place on the Zoom platform for a two-and-a-half-hour virtual treasure hunt (Tourism Malaysia, 2020).

Healthcare and Wellness Tourism. Countries in Asia like Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea are a few famous health care destinations for the foreigners seeking health care services (Chandran et al., 2020). VR application in healthcare has demonstrated promising potential abilities to address cognitive, psychological, motor, and functional impairments; and its ability to share data via communication networks and electronic health records makes it appealing for clinical practitioner training and education (Aziz, 2018). This is supported by Tabbaa (2021) that "Bringing the outside

in”, VR engaged cognitively, retained attention, promoted patient wellbeing, reduced difficult behavior, and provided a unique channel for caregivers and patients to develop therapeutic rapport. With a plethora of research providing the utility of VR in healthcare and well-being applications, the Malaysian government recognised its potential and announced a budget allocation for the virtual medical tourism in the hopes of assisting in the economy’s revitalisation (Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council, 2020).

3.3 Tourism e-Marketplace

The concept of tourism e-marketplace emerged decades ago, and Barradas & Pinto-Ferreira (2004) argued that it is one of the best platforms for connecting buyers and sellers for trading because peer-to-peer technology is more flexible, strengthens trust between partners, and allows participants to interact on an equal footing.

3.4 e-Tourism Normalisation Model

This study emphasises e-tourism as it is predicted that there will be a significant relationship between tourism demand and business events. Considering the potential development of existing e-marketplaces and the relevance of VR in various types of tourism products, Figure 1 below proposes a model integrating Internet of Things, Information Technology with Virtual Reality Technology, to distribute all types of tourism products through existing e-marketplace, aiming at normalising tourism e-commerce and contributing to various tourism growth.

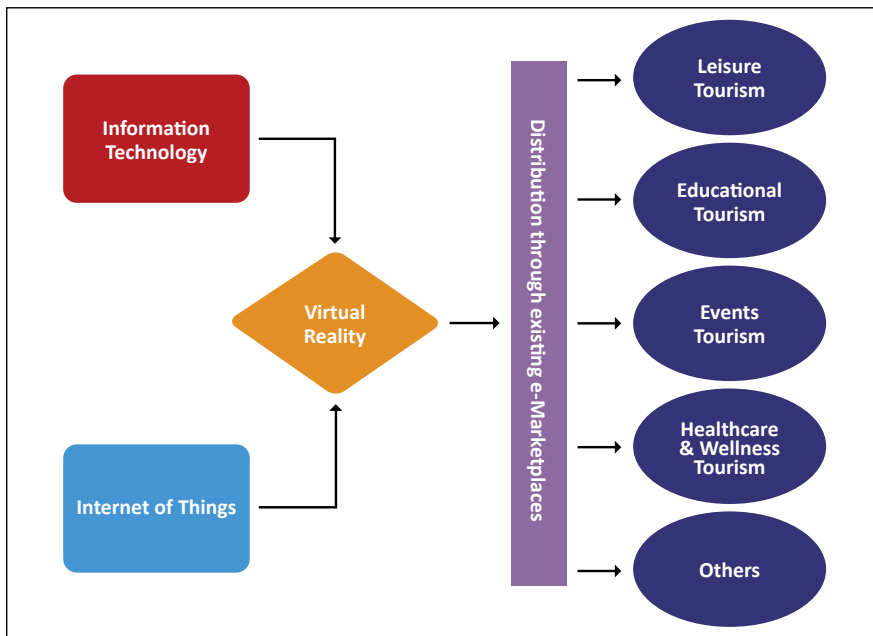


Figure 1: e-Tourism Normalisation Model

4.0 Methodology

The qualitative method was carried out to collect data. First, an extensive literature analysis was undertaken to address the new trend of e-tourism during the pandemic, allowing the latest definition of e-tourism to be justified. Extensive literature review is especially encouraged to address specific topic in a timely manner which remain fragmented (Snyder, 2019). The literature has been systematically searched, critiqued, and combined to reveal gaps in the existing research (Aveyard, 2010). For the second objective of investigating the use of an e-marketplaces for e-tourism in the Malaysian context, website content analyses were conducted on the top six Malaysian e-commerce sites. The current study adopted Holsti’s (1968) approach of exploring content by forming inferences by systematically and objectively identifying keywords of “Tourism” and “Holiday” to assess the optimisation of the current e-commerce site for e-tourism.

The top e-commerce sites were determined by comparing online traffic data from three different online sources: (1) Statista.com; (2) Marketingsignallab.com; and (3) SimilarWeb.com. As each online source provided monthly online traffic for a different period of 2020, the total monthly traffic was summed to find the greatest number of monthly clicks. In addition to the inconsistent findings of the three sources, online marketplaces that were listed as the top e-commerce sites in Malaysia by at least two sources were retained. To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, all online marketplaces that concentrate on the consumer-to-consumer (C2C) business model and non-consumer goods industries; or search results cannot be categorised according to states were all excluded from the list. As a result, only six e-commerce platforms were chosen, these sites are: Shopee, Lazada, PG Mall, Lelong, and GoShop.

Table 1: Top E-commerce sites in Malaysia based on monthly traffic

Online Marketplaces	Business Model(s)	Industry	Per Thousands Clicks			
			Statista	Marketing Signal Lab	Similar Web	Total
Shopee	C2C and B2C	Consumer goods	47332.80	10880.00	27820.00	86032.80
Lazada	C2C and B2C	Consumer goods	14777.07	31290.00	12440.00	58507.07
PG Mall	C2C and B2C	Consumer goods	7086.33	n.a	715.57	7801.90
Lelong	B2C	Consumer goods	530.39	5470.00	1300.00	7300.39
GoShop	B2C	Consumer goods	564.71	n.a	1270.00	1834.71

*C2C indicates consumer-to-consumer model; B2C indicates business-to-consumer model

5.0 Findings and Discussions

The researchers introduce VRs adoption as one of the opportunities for reforming tourism during movement restrictions whereas optimising existing e-marketplaces as another. To address the knowledge gap, website content analysis was used to show the degree of normalisation of employing existing e-marketplace for tourism trading, as well as its potential for these activities.

5.1 Descriptive Analysis – Normality Test

The search results from Malaysia's top five e-marketplaces have revealed the theoretical and practical gaps as discussed earlier. Despite the fact that prior researches have proposed integration of e-commerce with tourism, the practical relevance of the recommendation as compared to the current e-marketplaces is asymmetric. The search activity on all e-marketplaces encompassed all 11 states in West Malaysia, two states in East Malaysia, and all three Federal Territories of Malaysia. However, only a total of 4820 products found using the keyword "tourism". Table 2 below shows the descriptive analysis of the "Tourism" keyword search.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of "Tourism" Keyword Search on Malaysia's E-commerce Site

	Mean	Std. D	Kurtosis	Skewness
Distribution by e-Marketplace				
Shopee	48.25	50.66	-2.20	0.09
Lazada	3.38	12.97	15.97	4.00
PG Mall	1372.13	1903.11	0.08	1.24
Lelong	0.00	0.00	-	-
GoShop	0.00	0.00	-	-
Distribution by States				
Selangor	11.20	25.04	5.00	2.24
Pahang	766.00	1712.83	5.00	2.24
Johor	11.20	33.54	5.00	2.24
Kedah	51.40	83.11	2.50	1.68
Perak	11.20	84.77	1.31	1.25
Melaka	920.20	1997.80	4.99	2.23
Penang	11.20	1550.08	4.98	2.23
Negeri Sembilan	9.60	21.47	5.00	2.24
Terengganu	11.20	49.40	-2.37	0.78

	Mean	Std. D	Kurtosis	Skewness
Kelantan	44.60	61.52	-2.95	0.67
Perlis	11.20	492.27	5.00	2.24
Sabah	84.80	138.98	2.77	1.74
Penang	11.20	1550.08	4.98	2.23
Negeri Sembilan	9.60	21.47	5.00	2.24
Terengganu	11.20	49.40	-2.37	0.78
Kelantan	44.60	61.52	-2.95	0.67
Perlis	11.20	492.27	5.00	2.24
Sabah	84.80	138.98	2.77	1.74
Sarawak	11.20	92.69	0.52	1.30
Kuala Lumpur	1122.40	2509.76	5.00	2.24
Putrajaya	11.20	8.05	5.00	2.24
Labuan	422.00	943.62	5.00	2.24

**Std. D indicates standard deviation*

As demonstrated in Table 2, the product distribution is skewed, with the majority of tourism-related products provided through PG Mall offering from the states of Pahang, Melaka, Penang, Perlis, Kuala Lumpur, and Labuan. The perfect normal distribution is always represented by the number of 0 for both Kurtosis and Skewness analysis. For small sample size ($n < 50$; current $n = 5$), absolute kurtosis and skew values larger than 1.96 is considered as non-normal distribution (Kim, 2013). Table 2 shows a majority of the Kurtosis values are 5 and the skew values are mostly close to 3. **Thus, it justifies the current argument that distribution of tourism products through the existing e-marketplace is not a normal practice.**

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the tourism product distribution is also inconsistent with the number of destination’s tourist arrival, which destination with higher tourists receiver supposed to signals more numbers of attractions and tourism products available. According to DOSM total number of domestic visits in 2019, Pahang is the sixth most visited state, with Melaka ranked eleventh, Penang ranked seventh, Perlis ranked fourteenth, Kuala Lumpur ranked second, and Labuan ranked lowest – sixteen (DOSM, 2019). Figure 2 below shows the tourism products distribution versus domestic visitors arrival by state from March 2020 to February 2021.

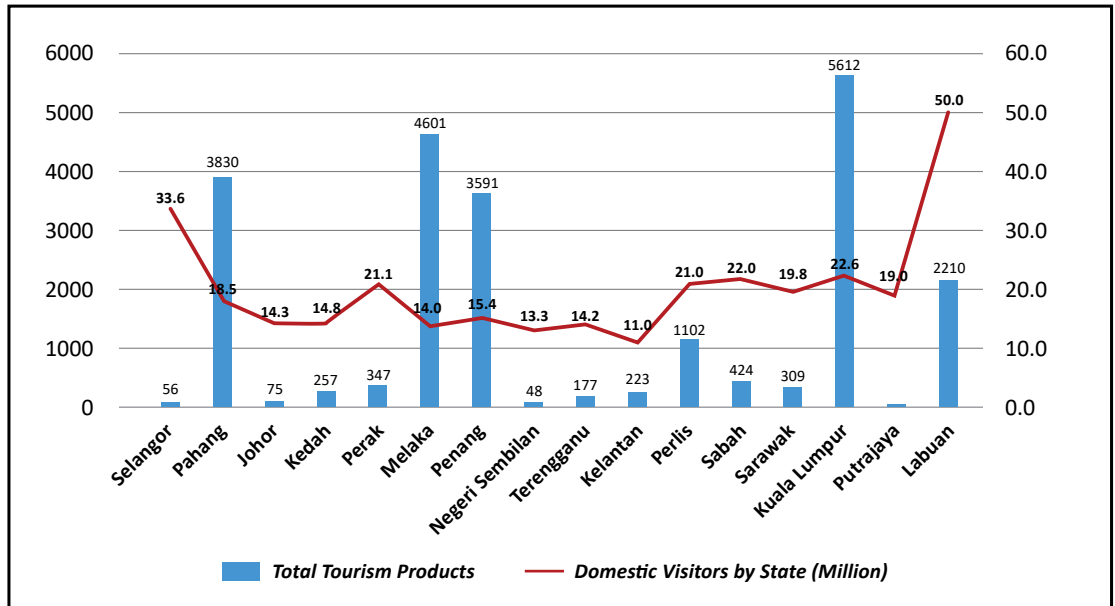


Figure 2: Tourism Products Distribution Versus Domestic Visitors Arrival by State

Hence, the assumption was made either (1) e-commerce help the destination to grow via e-tourism; or (2) the keyword of “tourism” was misused. However, the current research refers to another assumption that most of the business sellers use the existing e-marketplaces to tackle outbound tourists who are planning to or going to travel soon. This assumption was made due to the tourism products available in the marketplaces were mostly outfits for certain seasons, travel-friendly apparel, conversion plugs, tourism-related books and some other travelling kits. Only minority of the sellers sell souvenir such as fridge magnet, key chain, the statue of local destinations; while other are selling souvenir of the overseas destinations, for instance, the fridge magnet of China, Dubai, London and so on.

Further to this, another keyword “Holiday” was searched to identify the potential of e-marketplaces optimisation for e-tourism. Out of 5 top e-commerce sites in Malaysia, only Lazada and Shopee were found to provide favourable results. Other e-marketplaces either have mostly the same search results as “Tourism” (i.e. PG Mall and Lelong) or 0 items found (Go Shop). Lazada is more organised in terms of the product categories that there were 3558 items found for keywords “Holiday package, whereby, Shopee does not specify the search for “Holiday” nor “Holiday package”. Yet, Shopee has more sellers and a better-sold number per item if compared to Lazada. Table 2 below demonstrates alternative keyword search results for market potential identification.

Table 3: Alternative Keyword Search Results

e-Marketplace	Total Search Results	Number of Tour Operator(s)	Number of Hotel Operator(s)	Number of Best Sold Items
Shopee	>30000	13	1	166
Lazada	3558	4	9	154

Some pioneer firms have seized these possibilities, and some customers are aware of the existence of tourism products on the existing e-marketplaces, as evidenced by the items sold. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that the existing e-commerce site be optimised for the distribution of all sorts of tourism products.

6.0 Conclusion

- i. Investigating the usage of e-marketplaces for e-tourism in Malaysian context;
- ii. Filling up practical gap through e-tourism normalisation model developed

Based on the literature review, the e-tourism product is potentially redefining to “virtual tourism” since VR adoption is on the rise and is likely to be the only safer choice for the tourist sector to survive the current pandemic. VR has been used in the planning, management, promotion, education, and creation or transformation of tourist experiences (Loureiro et. al., 2020). Furthermore, it provides an authentic experience on users’ cognitive and affective responses, which influences their intention to visit a destination in VR (Kim et al., 2018). It is also possible for business events to go VR, and the gadgets play an important role as wearing virtual reality headsets was found to increase delegates’ sense of presence (Pazour et al., 2018). In the inter or post-pandemic era, events or tourism businesses can use virtual facilities to remain in touch with existing or potential customers without putting themselves at risk through personal contact. Although the VR and actual experiences may differ, it is indeed easier and provides tourism experiences for someone to visit the destinations via VR during the country’s lockdown and movement restrictions.

The supply chain is always associated with the e-marketplace, and thus system for selling tourism products to consumers through a partnership between small- and medium-sized travel agencies and wholesalers has been referred to as the tourism supply chain (Ku, 2022). E-marketplaces are crucial components of an efficient supply chain that enable practitioners to sense, shape, and respond to the constantly shifting needs of both tourists and the business world (Ku, 2022). Surprisingly, the findings of this study indicate that there are not many people utilised e-marketplace for consumer goods on the tourism products. However, the analyses demonstrated the possibility of normalising e-tourism through the operation of existing e-marketplaces. The findings led to the conclusion that, while online purchasing is expanding, commercialising tourism products in the existing online marketplace should be normal practice. Therefore, when the new normal is not that new, why not follow?

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