



## THE INFLUENCE OF CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) OUTBREAKS ON TOURIST'S DESTINATION CHOICE

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### ABSTRACT

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Little information about the impact of pandemic/epidemic on tourist's choice of destination. The current study aims to investigate the impact of six factors following the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on a sample of 504 Saudis who had a domestic /international travel experience was utilized to collect the data throughout the online survey. While respondents of the research display a high self-efficacy on travel, they demonstrate a moderate perception of tourism services, perception of susceptibility, perception of travel risk, a panic of crisis in destination, and perception of tourism activities in the destination. The finding of the study shows some significant differences between genders on perception of these six dimensions. The results express that even after the ban is lifted, Saudi tourists perceive domestic travel as risky as international travel. Females appear to be more travel avoidance than males because of the outbreak of (COVID-19) pandemic. In addition, females appear to have a higher panic of dying because of having coronavirus disease (COVID-19) during international and domestic travel.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study is one of the very few studies investigating the effect of coronavirus COVID-19 on a tourist's income as the main factor in choosing a destination, using conservation resource theory, and providing practical implications to tourism hospitality business for reopening the after the COVID-19.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In Wuhan, China, an infective primary atypical (viral) disease broke out in December 2019. The number of cases and deaths associated with COVID-19 significantly surpasses the other previous two coronaviruses (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus, and Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus), and the outbreak is continuing, which posed a considerable threat to the global public health and economics (Lin et al., 2020). The global air transport had transferred the virus to all the world, and by 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020, the virus had found in more than 210 countries, with 11,591,595 confirmed cases and 537859 deaths have been reported worldwide (WHO, 2020). Countries responded differently, including lockdown, social distancing, closure of schools/universities and non-necessary businesses, cancelling or postponing events, and bans on gatherings of people over specific numbers. International travel restrictions and staying-at-home procedures cause the most critical disruption of the global economy in the current century (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020).

The coronavirus is stifling the global economy, as in a few weeks, the highly deadly disease has forced the world to enter a recession more complicated than the 2008 financial crisis. For instance, Mrs. Kristalina Georgieva, stated that "just three months ago, we expected positive per capita income growth in over 160 of our member countries in 2020", however, "today, that number has been turned on its head: we now project that over 170 countries will experience negative per capita income growth this year." (BBC, 2020a). Thus, countries have acted vigorously to limit the economic difficulties made by the coronavirus crisis (OECD, 2020).

In Saudi Arabia for instance, instead of large-scale job terminating contracts of Saudi nationals during the coronavirus pandemic (Foxman & Omar, 2020) the Saudi Government announced on the 11th May 2020 measures to counter the economic impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. Saudi Arabia's public news agency said VAT would increase from 5% to 15% in 1st July 2020, and the living allowance will be discontinued from 1st June 2020 to support its economy (BBC, 2020b). This announcement made after the Government spending exceeds income, putting Saudi Arabia into 9 U.S billion dollars budget shortage in the first three months of the year (BBC, 2020b). These actions occur as part of further measures taken by the Saudi government as a reaction to the economic influence of the COVID-19 crisis, because of the drop in government income resulting from lower oil prices, diminished economic activities and increase expenditure on healthcare (Deloitte, 2020). The finance minister Mr. Mohammed al-Jadaan stated that "These measures are painful but necessary to maintain financial and economic stability over medium to long term, and overcome the unprecedented coronavirus crisis with the least damage possible" (CNBC, 2020).

The tourism industry in Saudi Arabia is one of the contributors to the economy of the country. According to the WTTC (2020) in 2019, the contribution of travel and tourism to Saudi's GDP added 9.5%, which is worth about 71 U.S billion dollars. One of Saudi decision is to suspend Umrah and pilgrimage services, for the first time in last the eight decades comes with a considerable cost to the economy, including the airline, public transport, hospitality sector, and adversely affects the employment.

Against this background of the damaged caused by COVID-19 on the global economy, including the Saudi economy, we argued that Saudi outbound tourism might affect significantly, and following COVID-19, Saudi tourists may prefer to choose domestic tourism. One of the deficiencies of the tourism industry is that it is exposed to external environmental factors such as natural disasters and human-made crises. The natural disaster has a considerable impact on tourism, which cause decreasing tourism demand, and the number of tourists and their expenditure (Li, Blake, & Cooper, 2010). Further, the natural disaster increases tourists perceptions of psychological risks in travel, such as a fear of contracting a disease, and the consequence of the psychological risk, people are feeling anxious, insecure, and lack of health safety may lead them to decide to travel domestically (Li et al., 2010). Although the decision-making process varies among tourists who have different levels of income, the level of income is one of the critical external factors of the tourists' decision-making process when determining a tourism destination (Djeri, Armenski, Jovanović, & Dragin, 2014). Therefore, based on the Conservation Resources Theory, during an economic recession, some people may prefer to conserve their cash for essential consumer goods and necessities of life, such as security and family.

To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first that examines the impact of epidemic/pandemics on tourist choice of destination using Conservation Resources Theory. Therefore, this paper has four interrelated goals. First, to critically review the literature on the impact of previous pandemics on economic, and how a reduction in people income may affect their decisions in choosing a destination. Second, to review the literature on the impact of previous pandemics and crisis on tourists' behaviour and perception of travel risk, perception of tourism services, self-efficacy in travel, perception of susceptibility, a panic of crisis in destination, and perception of tourism activities in the destination. Thirdly, investigate the impact of gender on perception of these six dimensions following the pandemic of the COVID-19. Finally, provide practical implications for the tourism and hospitality sectors.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *The Effect of Income on a Tourism Destination Choice*

Tourism markets around the world are subject to the impact of concussions, such as crisis and disaster (Wang, 2009). A 'crisis' as defined by Senbeto and Hon (2020) effects or failures that are relevant to the internal environment, whereas a disaster is caused by an action in the external environment that may result in an immediate impact. Faulkner (2001) also note that failure to respond to a disaster makes a crisis. According to Senbeto and Hon (2020) natural disaster, such as pandemic has an abundant influence on the drop in tourist volume, the use of services and activities at destinations, unstable demand and supply, and tourist plans for travelling (Faulkner, 2001). In the occurrence of natural disaster, demand for tourism can fluctuate, and economic declines are absolute (Wang, 2009). Hence, the perception of safety and health plays a crucial role in traveller's behaviour and decision when a crisis befalls (Floyd, Gibson, Pennington-Gray, & Thapa, 2004). and maintaining demand for domestic tourism (Wang, 2009). Besides, crisis and disaster, including their effect on the tourism industry, they also have significant implications on tourist behaviour and expense patterns (Senbeto & Hon, 2020) as well as tourism services and activities.

Individual or family sometimes faces the decision of whether to travel for tourism, which is referred to as the engagement decision in tourists' demand for tourism (Eugenio-Martin & Campos-Soria, 2011). According to Song, Kim, and Yang (2010) the tourism demand for a particular destination can be defined as the amount of tourism products and services, that include tourists' expenditures in the destination and the cost of travel to it; and income levels of those potential tourists. However, the decision-making processes are not the same for all tourists as they have different levels of income, which is perceived as one of the critical external factors of the decision-making process when determining a tourism destination (Djeri et al., 2014). A study conducted by Eugenio-Martin and Campos-Soria (2011) in 15 European countries reveals a positive relationship between travelling decision and income; explained that when the income rises the possibilities of outbound travelling will increase too, and that is not the case of domestic tourism. Thus, in the time of disaster or crisis, fears and anxieties associated with risk may negatively impact tourists' intention to travel to a destination (Hon, Bloom, & Crant, 2014).

Both pandemics crisis and financial crisis are sometimes related, as pandemics very often cause damage to the globe economy or specific countries economy (Faus, 2020) whereas, the effect of a financial crisis is associated with the income that reduces travelling inclination (Papatheodorou & Pappas, 2017). This effect clearly is shown in the theory of conservation resource, which indicates that resources are sometimes not equally shared or obtained in some situations, and individuals who lack resources, such as income are more sensitive to additional losses (Hobfoll & Wells, 1998). The theory is based on the principle that individuals are motivated to obtain, retain, and protect the resources that are valuable to them (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014).

Consequently, throughout an economic recession, some people may prefer to conserve their cash for essential life needs, such as shelter and family necessities, rather than to use it for travel (Papatheodorou & Pappas, 2017). Hence, potential tourists are not expenses sensitive but more concerned about a valuable travel experience (Rittichainuwat, Chakraborty, & Rattanaphinanchai, 2014). In such cases (Rittichainuwat et al., 2014) asserted that even discounts in prices sometimes do not make a difference in the people travel decisions, because people have their maximum level of expenses, and may only accept price variation within their price limit zone (Gupta & Cooper, 1992). A typical behaviour of tourists was that people still travel for leisure travel; however, with the least expenses, such as choosing cheaper destinations, shortening the length of stay, and tending to use low-rate services (Wen, Huimin, & Kavanaugh, 2005).

To the best of our knowledge, there is no study has investigated the effect of coronavirus COVID-19 on a tourist's income as the main factor in choosing a destination, using conservation resource theory, which we believe this is missing in tourism crisis literature.

## 2.2. Destination Image and Crises and Destination Choices

Image of the destination is an essential concept in tourism marketing literature. The importance of this image is comprehensively acknowledged because it influences the individual's perception and of destination choice (Pearlman & Melnik, 2008). Previous research on this area provides a various definition of destination image; one described it as people's belief, thought or impression about a destination or site (Pearlman & Melnik, 2008). Further, the image of a destination is described as rational pictures someone holds mind about a specific site from tourism elements, such as infrastructure, cultural, natural, and social attributes (Beerli & Martín, 2004).

In contrast, perception of risk is defined as tourist's perception about risk and unfavourable consequences of purchasing a product and service (Dowling & Staelin, 1994) or performing a certain activity in destination (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Perception of risk is fundamental in tourists' decision-making process as risk can change conscious decision-making concerning destination choice. The issue of safety and security in a tourism destination has become an important matter amongst tourists (Chew & Jahari, 2014). Nevertheless, one common issue shared by all the crisis or risk is that they influence destination image (Chew & Jahari, 2014).

A pivotal success determinant for tourism destinations is the ability to provide a safe, predictable and secure environment for tourist (Speakman & Sharpley, 2012). In general, tourists attempt to avoid risk at the destination, thus, any threat to their health, safety or security possibly influences their decision to travel to a particular destination (Lepp & Gibson, 2003). Hence, risk and uncertainty in travel play an important role in travel destination – choices (Kozak, Crofts, & Law, 2007) and tourists are not able to predict the circumstance at a destination before travelling, and hence they depend on information from other sources, such as media, friends and family members, or travel organizations (Karl, 2018). In this way, tourists form the destination image, and they change their plans if the anticipated situation is not pleasant or desirable for the tourists, Mansfeld and Pizam (2006). Therefore, Sönmez and Graefe (1998) declared that future travel behavior is generally influenced by perceived images of safety and risk.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Purpose of Research

At the time of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, this study was conducted grounded on the theory of the Conservation of Resources. The purpose of this empirical study is to get first-hand information regarding their Saudis perception to tourism services, self-efficacy on travel, perception of susceptibility, perception of travel risk, a panic of crisis in destination, and tourism activities in destination following COVID-19. The data was collected from Saudis who have previous experience in travelling, as well as they are experiencing now COVID-19. The findings of this study will enhance the tourism and hospitality literature and provide implications to help the tourism and hospitality industry leaders in developing crisis management strategies. The hypotheses developed for this study were drawing on the literature review of tourist behaviour and pandemic, hypotheses are:

*H1: COVID -19 has an impact on the perception of tourism services for Saudis, males and females.*

*H2: COVID -19 has an impact on the self-efficacy in travel for Saudis, males and females.*

*H3: COVID -19 has an impact on the perception of susceptibility for Saudis, males and females.*

*H4: COVID -19 has an impact on the perception of travel risk for Saudis, males and females.*

*H5: COVID -19 has an impact on the perception of panic of crisis for Saudis in destination, males and females.*

*H6: COVID -19 has an impact on the perception of tourism activities in destination for Saudis, males and females.*

### 3.2. Design of the Questionnaire

Initially, the authors in this study adopted questionnaire developed by Cahyanto, Wiblishauser, Pennington-Gray, and Schroeder (2016) and adjusted through modifying, deleting, and increasing items according to the result of the interviews to be finally (26 items). To develop the survey of this study, some phone and online interviews were conducted with the tourism and hospitality experts and scholars. The developed 26 items, which categorized

into six dimensions, namely; Perception of Tourism Services (10 items); Self-efficacy on Travel (3 items); Perception of Susceptibility (3 items); Perception of Travel Risk (5 items), Panic of Crisis in Destination (3 items); and Tourism Activities in Destination (2 items). Except for demographic items, all the survey items were measured by using a 5-point rating scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

### 3.3. Data Collection and Analyses

The target population is the Saudis who have domestic and international travel experiences to measure the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) on the study dimensions. The survey conducted on 2<sup>nd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020, during the COVID-19 outbreak. Due to the critical situation of quarantines, we contacted our network, such as coworkers, family, friends, and relatives whom we know they have travel experience. The authors received 504 valid questionnaires from Saudis, for data analyses, factor analysis, mean comparison, standard deviation, Mann-Whitney Test & Kruskal-Wallis Test.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS

### 4.1. Index Verification

To ensure the validity of the constructs, factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to identify the loading factor of the 26 items of the survey. After performing the analysis, we found that all items were correctly loaded into six dimensions, which include perception of tourism services, self-efficacy on travel, perception of susceptibility, perception of travel risk, a panic of crisis in destination, and tourism activities in the destination. These results evidence and confirm that the six dimensions extract and generalize item data and are highly explorative and valid. Moreover, the Cronbach's alpha values for the six dimensions is 0.78, confirming the reliability. The Mann-Whitney results that reached an alpha level of  $p < .05$  are presented here.

### 4.2. Profile of Respondents

The online survey was completed by 504 respondents, males represented 49.1% of the sample, and females represented 50.9%. The age varied from 15 years old to 61 and above. Individuals of age who range from 21 to 30 and 31 to 40 represented the highest rate of respondents, 28.7%, 26.9%, respectively. Most of the respondents have a college degree, which represented 57.6% of the sample, and 25.3% have an advanced degree. Participants with monthly income between 2500 to 5000 Saudi Riyal (SR) represented 26.2% of the sample, and 4.7% of the sample made a monthly income of 30000 SR and above.

## 5. RESULT

### 5.1. Perception to Tourism Services

The results of the survey show that the respondents have a rational perception of the tourism services in Saudi Arabia with a moderate mean (3.39). From Table 1, we can see that Item 4 "I trust the procedures that taken by Saudi Arabia in all tourist and non-tourist cities to prevent the outbreak of Coronavirus" has the highest mean in the survey (4.18). Also, findings highlight as in Item 3 that respondents agreed that "after the ban is lifted, travel for tourism inside Saudi Arabia is a suitable alternative to international travel" with a mean (3.57). The results also show an agreement among Saudis that Saudi Arabia has sufficient tourism services as in Item 8 "Saudi Arabia has a diversity of landscapes, environments, and climates, and it will be a substitute alternative for international tourism during the period of coronavirus" with a mean (3.54). Item 9 "in general, Saudi Arabia has an excellent tourism infrastructure that meets the needs of my family and me" with a mean (3.50). Lastly, Item 10 "Saudi Arabia has a variety of tourism activities and entertainment programs that suit all family members" with a mean (3.38) respectively.

However, Saudis have almost a reasonable belief that prices of tourism services and activities are affordable and reasonable (Item 6, mean =3.02). Further, Saudis have also moderate response as in Item 7 that "they have to travel domestically for tourism during the period of Coronavirus, although the prices of tourism services and activities in Saudi Arabia are high compared to other countries" with a mean (3.16). Interestingly, Saudis responded below the mean (2.78) for Item 1 "the cost of travelling for tourism and leisure in Saudi Arabia is suitable and affordable for all society members".

**Table-1. Factor analyses and mean comparisons / different responses between male and female.**

Items of Hypothetic Dimensions	Factor Analyses						Mean	S.D	Gender		Sig
	1	2	3	4	5	6			M	F	
Perception of Tourism Services							3.39	0.380	2.43	2.61	.181
Item 1	0.635						2.78	1.288	2.54	2.49	.688
Item 2	0.612						3.53	1.199	2.57	2.46	.368
Item 3	0.664						3.57	1.186	2.55	2.48	.622
Item 4	0.441						4.18	0.976	2.49	2.54	.729
Item 5	0.799						3.24	1.178	2.31	2.71	.001
Item 6	0.802						3.02	1.244	2.39	2.63	.055
Item 7	0.468						3.16	1.192	2.58	2.45	.311
Item 8	0.687						3.54	1.192	2.57	2.46	.368
Item 9	0.708						3.50	1.152	2.44	2.58	.265
Item 10	0.675						3.36	0.989	2.31	2.71	.001
Self-efficacy on Travel							4.05	0.195	2.56	2.49	.595
Item 11		0.783					4.26	0.900	2.49	2.54	.643
Item 12		0.777					3.87	0.959	2.60	2.43	.175
Item 13		0.843					4.03	0.969	2.56	2.47	.461
Perception of Susceptibility							3.13	0.289	2.79	2.26	.000
Item 14			0.637				3.03	1.222	2.69	2.35	.006
Item 15			0.774				2.90	1.314	2.74	2.30	.001
Item 16			0.601				3.45	1.091	2.59	2.44	.213

In terms of gender, the findings of Table 1 depict that there are significant differences in the "perception of tourism services" dimension average between males and females ( $p = 0.181$ ). From Table 1, we can see significant differences that females agreed to Items 5 (with a mean of 2.31 compared to 2.71; respectively; with  $p = 0.001$ ); and Items 6 (with a mean of 2.64 compared to 2.40; respectively; with  $p = 0.055$ ). Similarly, females stated a high agreeable to Item 10 that points out that "Saudi Arabia has a variety of tourism activities and entertainment programs that suit all family members" than males (with a mean of 2.71 compared to 2.32; respectively; and  $p = 0.001$ ).

### 5.2. Self-Efficacy on Travel

From the results of the survey, respondents of the research display a strong self-efficacy on travel with the highest mean among other dimensions (4.5). In Table 1, we can recognize that Items 11,12 and 13 in the second dimension "self-efficacy on travel" have means above 3.86 with a small standard deviation. The findings show that Saudis have a strong agreement about their confidence to understand the health instructions related to coronavirus prevention before, during, and after travel (Items 11 = 4.26). Also, the response to items, which stated that tourists are capable of identifying the symptoms of coronavirus, and they are aware of what should be done if suspected infection of coronavirus (see Items 12 and 13 with the mean of 3.87 and 4.03 respectively). As illustrated in Table 1, there are no significant differences between males and females in the dimension of "self-efficacy on travel" ( $p = 0.595$ ). The results further express that Saudi males can identify the symptoms of coronavirus if they infected during their travel more than females (with a mean of 2.60 compared to 2.44; respectively; with  $p = 0.175$ ).

### 5.3. Perception of Susceptibility

The descriptive result of the survey demonstrates that the respondents have a moderate perception of susceptibility to travel following coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The finding in Table 1 highlight that Saudis have a higher intention to more likely they would travel inside Saudi Arabia for business after the ban is lifted (Item 16, mean =3.45). However, Saudis response below the mean as in Item 15 "after the ban is lifted, it is likely I would travel inside Saudi Arabia for tourism and leisure" (mean =2.90), followed by almost moderate mean for Item 14 "after the ban is lifted, I would feel very comfortable when travelling inside Saudi Arabia" with mean (3.03). Males stated that they would be more comfortable to travel than females (with a mean of 2.70 compared to 2.35; respectively). Also, there was a variance among the 504 respondents in Item 15 with a mean of (2.90). Table 1 illustrates that there are significant differences between males and females in the dimension of "perception of susceptibility" with ( $p = 0.000$ ). The result shows that males are more likely to travel domestically after the ban is lifted for tourism and leisure purpose unlike females in Items 14 (with a mean of 2.69 compared to 2.35; respectively; with  $p = 0.006$ ), and Item 15 (2.74 compared to 2.31; respectively; with  $p = 0.001$ ).

### 5.4. Perception of Travel Risk

As illustrated in Table 2, respondents show that COVID-19 disease has a significant influence on Saudi travellers (mean =3.35; relatively high). The highest mean in this dimension was for Item 19 "after the ban is lifted, international travel will be risky because of the outbreak of Coronavirus" with a mean (3.85); followed by Item 21 "after the ban is lifted, it is preferable to travel by car inside Saudi Arabia because of the outbreak of coronavirus" with a mean (3.44). Nevertheless, Saudis show almost reasonable belief that "after the ban is lifted, domestic air travel should be avoided because of the outbreak of Coronavirus" with a mean (3.03). The results express that even after the ban is lifted, Saudi tourists would perceive domestic travel as risky as international travel (see Item 18 with a mean =3.20). Also, it is noticed from Table 2 that there is no significant differences between males and females in the dimension of "perception of travel risk" with ( $p = 0.909$ ). However, the results of this dimension show significant differences between males and females, where females appear to be more travel avoidance than males because of the outbreak of (COVID-19) pandemic with ( $p = 0.009$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ,  $p = 0.002$  and  $p = 0.110$ ).

### 5.5. Panic of Crisis in Destination

Respondents of the survey agreed that the outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has a natural panic of crisis in a tourism destination with a mean of 3.13. To illustrate, Table 2 shows that Saudis agreed that coronavirus is a very risky disease (see Item 8 with a mean of 3.67). As seen in Table 2, Saudis show little concern for Item 24 "when I travel domestically; I am afraid to die because of having Coronavirus" with a mean (3.27). Nevertheless, it seems that they are less likely to be afraid of dying from getting the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) during their domestic travel (see Item 23 with a mean of 2.57). Also, the results show significant differences between males and females in the dimension of "panic of crisis in destination" with ( $p = 0.000$ ).

Table 2 further reveals that Items 23 and 24, display that females appear to have a higher panic of dying because of having coronavirus disease (COVID-19) during both international and domestic travel compared to males for (Item 23 mean =2.28, and female mean =2.75, item 23; respectively; with  $p = 0.000$ ). While Item 24 (males mean =2.30, and females mean =2.72; and  $p = 0.001$ ).

### 5.6. Tourism Activities in Destination

From the results of the survey, we can see in Table 2 that the sixth dimension, "tourism activities in destination" has the lowest mean (3.07) among the six dimensions. Table 2 also indicates that respondents demonstrated almost moderate perception of tourism activities the Saudi destinations (see Item 25, mean =3.09; and Item 26, mean =3.06 respectively). Moreover, findings indicate that no significant differences between males and

females in the "tourism activities in destination" dimension with ( $p = 0.611$ ). Nevertheless, males show more rejection to the thought in Item 26 "I am aware that tourism and leisure activities in Saudi Arabia are not enough; however, I have to travel domestically for tourism during the period of Coronavirus" higher than females (mean =2.64, and mean =2.41 respectively; with  $p = 0.057$ ).

**Table-2. Factor Analyses and Mean Comparisons /Different Responses Between Male and Female.**

Items of Hypothetic Dimensions	Factor Analyses						Mean	S.D	Gender		
	1	2	3	4	5	6			M	F	Sig
Perception of Travel Risk							3.35	0.315	2.51	2.53	.909
Item 17				0.386			3.23	1.152	2.35	2.68	.009
Item 18				0.519			3.20	1.165	2.37	2.66	.019
Item 19				0.613			3.85	1.030	2.44	2.59	.231
Item 20				0.583			3.03	1.156	2.31	2.71	.002
Item 21				0.676			3.44	1.184	2.62	2.42	.110
Panic of Crisis in Destination							3.17	0.555	2.28	2.75	.000
Item 22					0.585		3.67	1.199	2.45	2.58	0.273
Item 23					0.764		2.57	1.159	2.28	2.74	.000
Item 24					0.833		3.27	1.272	2.30	2.72	.001
Tourism Activities in Destination							3.07	0.021	2.55	2.49	0.611
Item 25						0.747	3.09	1.025	2.52	2.51	.954
Item 26						0.685	3.06	0.972	2.63	2.40	.057

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Previous infectious disease outbreaks such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or H1N1 influenza pandemic have had far-reaching impacts on travel and tourism, specifically with enhanced health screenings and increased travel delays due to the shutdown of airline travel. However, COVID-19 outbreak has much greater damage to the tourism and hospitality industry than all other previous crisis in terms of cases infected (WHO, 2020).

Most of the respondents of our sample indicated that they have a concern regarding travelling during COVID-19. One of the most interesting finding and always debatable in Saudi Arabia are the perception of tourism services and tourism activities. Even though Saudi has a fabulous natural attraction, diversity of landscapes, environments, and climates in many destinations, especially all northern part of the country. We still very often we come across such statements that: 1) the country has tremendous tourism potential, but no development is taking place in this regard; 2) there has been a fall in tourism arrivals, especially from the Gulf region; 3) destination is no more an attraction the way it used to be; and 4) prices are much higher than other countries; 5) we have lack of quality of services.

These statements were clearly shown in the results of the current study, where Saudis showed a preference for travelling internationally. Findings of this study reflect the view of Saudis toward the tourism services and activities, as they scored low for items 5, 6, and 7, and always exaggerate prices of services and activities compared to other countries is their concern. This finding is also confirmed by the relatively low scores in items 2, 8 and 10, as Saudis believe that even though, their salary may reduce in the coming months or years because of the economic recession, and the high expenses the Government made on implementing precautionary measures, Saudis still believe that the domestic tourism is not the best alternative. This finding consistent with the theory of Conservation of Resources, where a low score could be because of their fear of losing saved money.

The findings show that most respondents trust the procedures taken by the Saudi Government to prevent spreading the virus for tourist and non-tourist cities with a mean (4.18). This trust perhaps is because the Government transacts the pandemic seriously, by spending billions of dollars to prevent spreading the virus and implementing precautionary measures. Meanwhile, the Government ensured free of charges treatment for any person infected with COVID-19, either is citizen, resident, or even illegal resident in the country. An acceptable



ratio with a mean (3.50) of respondents believes that domestic tourism would be a suitable alternative to international travel even during the epidemic. This score is higher than expected because most Saudis prefer outbound tourism; for instance, Saudis spent in 2017 more than U.S 26 billion dollars; however, this finding possibly because of two reasons.

First, the ban that made on international travel, and there is no other option for Saudis but domestic travel. Second, the precautionary measures are taken by the Government, and the stress put on people due to quarantine for months would cause for Saudis to decide to travel inside the country. Nevertheless, this decision is not with full comfort, as finding shows a moderate response to the item that local tourists feel comfortable when travelling inside Saudi Arabia. This result is consistent with Cahyanto et al. (2016).

The Saudi government led an intensive awareness campaign since early March 2020, and this campaign increased the awareness of Saudis with COVID-19, and how to deal with it if they have suspected infection. Thus, Saudis now are highly aware and educated of COVID-19, which perhaps led them to have a high feeling of self-efficacy, and then show a preference for travelling either domestic or internationally, after the ban is lifted. Cowling et al. (2010) indicated that individual who reported higher feelings of self-efficacy reported lower levels of susceptibility in acquiring transmissible diseases. This finding could be explained by the fact that this local tourist may firmly believe that since they have control over behaviour choices associated with an ailment, they are at a lower risk for transmission.

Although the current study did not show significant differences between males and females in self-efficacy on travel. However, the findings show that Saudi women are more panic than men of having coronavirus disease (COVID-19), and they may die during both international and domestic travel. This finding perhaps is because of psychologically female in general has more "ethic of care" and responsibility than male, and having more concern with becoming sick or having their loved ones become sick (Cahyanto et al., 2016). Further, ordinarily Saudi woman culturally is responsible for taking care of their children, the elderly, and all family member; thus, she maybe feels scared of travelling because if she was affected with COVID-19, then she may transfer the disease to her family members. Another possibility is that Saudi women who perceive risk from infectious diseases may be more likely to act upon those preventive measures adding to increased feelings of self-efficacy. This finding is consistent with (Otoo & Kim, 2018; Wen et al., 2005).

Moreover, this study shows that Saudis are more likely to be afraid of dying during their international travel than domestic travelling. Saudis respondent scored high for trusting the procedures taken by the Saudi government. In construct, they do not trust other countries procedures, especially those who do not even have a competent health care system and that would be the reason of why Saudis show more panic of dying during their travel internationally than domestically. Overall, depending on age, sex, destination, and region-related travel experience people perceived the risk differently (Leggat & Franklin, 2012).

Interestingly, when comparing domestic travel for trade or business purpose and travel for tourism and leisure purpose, we found that Saudis, especially males responded higher for trade or business purpose (Item 16, mean =3.45 compared to mean =2.90). This finding is compatible conservation theory, and probably due to Saudis believe that although travel for tourism and leisure is essential, it is not more important than travelling for increasing income, especially in this critical time. Further, Saudis possibility believe that travelling for leisure is not worth it because of the lack of domestic tourism services and activities.

### 6.1. Managerial Implications

Understanding the perceptions and the reactions of the Saudis toward destination choice during Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the following has several managerial implications. According to Kim, Chun, and Lee (2005) the only way to turn a crisis into an advantage is to quickly recognise what is happening and trigger predetermined plans to prevent the crisis. Thus, the findings of this research provide valuable insight to

policymakers, tourism organisations, and managers in several ways. First, the findings show a significant concern of Saudis about the contract of COVID-19; hence, promoting safety practices must be the primary strategy of marketing to enhance the tourist's perceptions toward security and certainty of the destination. Further, to increase the domestic tourism, destinations need to gain the trust of the tourists by demonstrating the health procedures that have been taken by the organisation to maintain the safety of the visitors.

Second, based on the findings of this research, we suggest that the policymakers investigate whether the quality of the tourism products and services is compatible to the purchasing price and meet the tourist's expectations; if not, an immediate correction should be made. Third, due to the reduction in individuals income that may occur because of the government's financial procedures, intensive marketing and attractive promotions, such as vouchers, loyalty offers, and price discounts are vital tools to attract tourists and activate destinations, especially the tourists' segments that are price-sensitive and looking for a variety of tourism activities and destinations.

Fourth, in order to boost the tourism demand, the authorities in Saudi Arabia not only need to launch festivals and tourism seasons in various regions; but also they should pay attention whether the tourism products and services are suitable to all society and meet all family members needs such a family who has a child with special needs. Finally, and most importantly, we recommend that tourism organizations adopt creative initiatives and solutions to motivate domestic tourist, such as activating electronic services to reduce direct personal contact among individuals who may enhance the flow of the tourists to the destination.

## 6.2. Limitation and Future Research

Even though this study has several contributions, it also has some limitations. The first limitation of this research is that the data collected during the COVID-19 outbreak, at a time, fear and anxiety of the infection is too high among people; thus, this feeling may affect responses. Therefore, it is suggested for future research to repeat this empirical research following the pandemic in a different context. Second, this study was conducted in Saudi Arabia; thus, future research should investigate other country or geographic areas. Finally, Saudis having domestic and outbound travel experiences were the population target; future research should target people having travel experience and non-travel experience for comparison.

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