

EXPLORING WESTERN TOURISTS PERCEIVED RISK AND IMPACT ON WILLINGNESS-TO-TRY UNFAMILIAR LOCAL FOOD IN REDANG AND PERHENTIAN ISLANDS

NORSYAKIRA AHMADI¹, FATHILAH ISMAIL² and WAN-ZAINAL-SHUKRI, W.H^{2*}.

¹Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, University Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu, 23000, Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia

²Faculty of Business, Economics, and Social Development, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, 21030 Kuala Nerus, Malaysia

*E-mail: wanafiz@umt.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

Post COVID-19 pandemic, tourists remain eager to sample local food when visiting new destinations. However, being in a strange island environment and eating unfamiliar food, may enhance the feeling of uncertainty, thus increase Western tourists' perceived risk particularly with unfamiliar food and culture. International tourists may perceive unfamiliar foods as strange or even dangerous, which could affect the overall tourism experience. Western tourists' risk perception towards local island food in Malaysia remains unexplored despite the popularity of island destinations. The present study aims to explore Western tourists' perceived risk factors regarding local island food and their impact on willingness-to-try. Adopting a qualitative stance, semi-structured interviews were conducted between July and August 2020 involving nine Western tourists (two male, seven female) at various food outlets in Perhentian and Redang Island. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis and aided with Atlas.ti software. Results indicated the presence of perceived health risk, environmental and safety risk. Hedonism and the emotional connection remain a key attraction to the island-style dining experience.

Key words: Risk perception, unfamiliar local food, Western tourist, Perhentian, Redang, Willingness-to-try

INTRODUCTION

Today, the tourism industry has grown rapidly, and many destinations have explored and recognized their tourism niches to stay competitive in the industry. Island is among the famous tourism niche that offers an exclusive experience to tourists who are into it. According to Ng *et al.* (2017) island tourism has developed fast and has become one of the most popular types of tourism niches opt by tourists in global tourism. Tourism is seen as the main activity for many small islands such as Redang and Perhentian where most of the local community who lived on the islands depending on seas and tourism activities for their livelihood (Weng, 2009; Okumus *et al.*, 2013). With this reality, this study was conducted in Redang and Perhentian Island, Malaysia, since a study focusing on Western tourist's risk perception and willingness-to-try island local food is still scarce.

When traveling, local food is considered one of the essential destination products and experiences where people are sure to eat no matter what they want or not. Moreover, dining at the destination itself is a pleasurable sensory experience that satisfies the experiential part of a holiday experience that affects tourists' intention to revisit. Conceptually, local food is referred to any cuisine or meal that is locally produced and prepared locally (Mynttinen *et al.*, 2015; Choe & Kim, 2019). In the case of this study, local food in the context of the island represents the access to external food ingredients and products which then be a cook and prepare by people or chefs in the kitchen on the islands. Thus, eating local food is a way of encountering local culture and enhancing the tourist experience that promotes exploration especially for western tourists (Adongo *et al.*, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2019). However, post COVID-19 pandemic may potentially increase tourists' risk perceived particularly with local island food, which tourists may not be familiar with.

* To whom correspondence should be addressed.

Perception of risk is a key factor that influences travelers to make their travel decisions (Tasci & Sonmez, 2019). The perception of food is being differently viewed by tourists and they may perceive unfamiliar foods as strange or even dangerous, which could affect the overall tourism experience. Barberá *et al.* (2018) argued that higher risk prevented exploratory tendencies and lead tourists to choose familiar options rather than unfamiliar options. Nevertheless, the recent status of the COVID-19 pandemic that rapidly spread all over the world has caused a change in habitual tourists' eating behavior and perception (Renzo *et al.*, 2020). Tourists could face many uncertainties including fear of unidentified food, unknown taste, and danger (unsafe for consumption).

This clearly shows that the urgency to explore tourist's risk perceives factors among western tourists that travel to Redang and Perhentian islands and understand which factors influence the willingness-to-try local island foods. Poria *et al.* (2019) further assert on limited literature regarding uncertainty and risks perceptions towards travel dining experience on destinations that need to be examined. The findings from this study may help restaurateurs, resort operators, and tourism stakeholders at islands destination to have a deeper understanding of tourist's risk perception and boosting trust between tourists and local businesses on the islands' destination.

Perceived risk and dining experience

Consumers confront some degree of risk in every purchase decision in pursuit of various benefits (Bezes, 2016). Risk perception brought a mean of the perceived risk or benefit-risk that tourists accepted (Chang & Lu, 2018). In the tourism and hospitality context, tourism is an intangible service that is very hard to standardize, so the perceived risk of traveling is likely to be high (Le & Arcodia, 2018). Lee (2020) asserts that consumers' actions lead to a sense of risk because the possible unwanted outcomes of those actions cannot be predicted with certainty. In addition, the post-COVID-19 pandemic has left a huge impact, particularly on the tourism industry.

The global pandemic riots across the world, leaving a track of devastation and death which almost paralyzing normal economic activity and social life in every nation (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). Moreover, countries that are more dependent on tourism like Greece, Portugal, and Spain (more than 15% of GDP) and another country in Asia also will be more shaken by this crisis, possibly even losing 10 percent of GDP growth (Fernandes, 2020). Malaysia is one of the country's tourism sectors that also has been badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This can be proved by a statement from Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Nancy

Shukri stated that this year, only 4.2 million international tourist arrivals and RM12.6 billion in tourism receipts so far. It was a drop of 68.2 and 69.8 percent, respectively, compared with the same period last year (Perimbanayagam, 2020).

However, the Malaysian government decided to take an alternative by an emphasis on domestic tourism to help counterbalance the recession in the economy because of the lack of current foreign contributions (Idris, 2020). Many tourism-related businesses, economic activities including domestic travel safely restarted their operations following the new normal with strict hygiene practices and standard operating procedures to be followed (Amir, 2020). This time many local tourism industry players including western sojourners start to travel to various domestic places in Malaysia and islands become the main chosen destination for them to travel and spending time with family. According to the President of Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA), Datuk Tan Kok Liang said, "there had been "enthusiasm" among locals to travel domestically during the Movement Control Order (MCO) especially for destinations like Penang, Langkawi, Perak, Johor, Melaka, and east coast islands as well as Sabah and Sarawak" (Zainal & Chung, 2020).

The role played by food and dining in tourism could be widely variant and generally been recognized (Huang, 2017). Tourists may feel confused with the local island dining arrangements and find it difficult to order local food from the unfamiliar menu. Most Western tourists and sojourners appeared cautious in choosing restaurants or cafes and appeared confused to choose local island food. The dining place environment also changes drastically abide with strict pandemic rules and procedures at islands. The dining operations at Redang and Perhentian island change completely to Buffet style and guests need to abide by the procedure which limits the customer to touch or have contact with staff and foods. This is considered as hygiene measures and health initiative to reduce the risk of infectious disease. According to Bruinen de Bruin *et al.* (2020) hygiene measures tools and other protection are aiming to limit the risk of spreading the virus through direct or indirect contamination.

It is understandable that post-COVID-19 pandemic, tourists may perceive risk as higher. Previous research integrated a main variety of risk factors in destinations including environmental risk, financial risk, health risk, quality risk, and psychological risk (Al-Ansi *et al.*, 2018; Olya & Al-Ansi, 2018; Tasci & Sonmez, 2019; Chen *et al.*, 2020). These factors did largely affect tourists' dining experience and choosing a destination to travel to. Recently, the global impact of COVID-19 is seemed

to initiate more studies related to food safety and health risk perception (Karl *et al.*, 2020).

On other hand, some research indicated that risks of health due to infectious disease are more influential than the risk of terrorism in making decisions to travel and dining (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Besides that, results from Zhang's study showed that psychological risk and food images such as disgust, belief, and appearance of local foods also influence tourist's willingness to try and overall dining experience. According to Hwang and Choe (2020), noted that tourists perceive psychological risks like uncomfortableness, anxiety, and negative selection of products that affect consumer's peace of mind and make them unwilling to try.

Further, the study also recognizes another risk factor of hedonism (Adongo *et al.*, 2015; Tasci & Sonmez, 2019; Birch & Memery, 2020) and emotional connections among tourists (Choe & Kim, 2019) while dining at islands. Dining with family while enjoying food with the relaxing beach environments creates happy and memorable value. Some scholars also supported that good consumption of food leaves a good value of emotion and unforgettable memory (Tsai, 2016). Other than that, some research also indicated the value of money (Birch & Memery, 2020), taste, and quality risk (Al-Ansi *et al.*, 2018; Olya & Al-Ansi, 2018; Chen & Peng, 2018; Choe & Kim, 2019; Woolf *et al.*, 2019; Lee, 2020; Chen *et al.*, 2020; Hwang & Choe, 2020) of local foods also become the main factor perceived by tourists when dining out at a destination.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, a qualitative approach was adopted in exploring perceived risks factor and Western tourists' willingness to try local island food. Face-to-face interviews with participants were carried out at various restaurants and café during the fieldwork. A total of nine participants (two male, seven female) were recruited for this qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out between July and August 2020 during the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) period, focusing on restaurant settings at Redang and Perhentian Island, Terengganu.

Semi-structured questions were used during the interview session intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These questions were guided by recent studies in the tourism and hospitality field and modified to suit the present study. It is focused on how the participants made sense based on the experience they received. The interview guide questions were modified from recent studies in tourism dining (Table 1) and inter-reliability of data was carried out

by two experts in the food tourism field at the coding stage.

As the pandemic catastrophe continued to enhance tourists' anxiety and uncertainty, an interpretive lens is viewed as appropriate to increase our knowledge on how the current pandemic is affecting acceptance of unfamiliar food and willingness to try. As argued recently, the qualitative method is appropriate, since it offers critical insights into a qualitative stance of research (Packer-muti, 2009; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021).

Participants were mostly occupied with various activities, and the researcher need time to seek suitable time to approach participants. The intention was to reduce delays and reverts in getting other western participants. This is the main obstacle in approaching participants. To avoid such delays then, snowball sampling methods were carried out. For this study, snowball sampling was adopted when selecting key informants as representatives regarding perceived risks within unfamiliarity and uncertainty. Often, only one or two participants can be found initially and not every participant being approached was willing to participate. Some participants volunteered to enlist their friends or family and then ask those people to conscript. These steps were repeated until no further new information was obtained, indicative of data saturation.

All the interview sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed. Transcripts were content analyzed using ATLAS.TI 9.0, which were later coded by stages. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested, a rigorous thematic analysis can produce trustworthy and insightful findings. The narratives from the various interviews conducted, later formed specific themes for this study. The interview guide was key to ensure the researcher covered all relevant issues during the interview. Perhentian and Redang Islands were chosen primarily because these islands are frequently visited island by domestic and foreign tourists in Malaysia, particularly on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Mohamad *et al.*, 2016).

During the interview process, participants were expected to explain or respond to the question with their perception or idea to make data collection more depth. Furthermore, to gain richness in data and to maximize time allocated in every interview session, a list of open-ended questions and established as a set of guidelines for the interviewee to obtain specific information and focused on explored problem or point. An interview guide was specifically developed by the researcher, with factors and other relevant questions adapted from previous studies.

The interview session consisted of three phases. Phase one relates with the introduction part where questions regarding general knowledge, travel

Table 1. Examples of interview guide questions

Example of questions:	Sources:
Introduction: socio-demographic, travel motivations 1) What make you decide to choose Redang/ Perhentian in Malaysia as destination? Why? 2) How long are you going to stay here?	Modified from Choe and Kim, (2019).
Local food, dining experiences, Neophobia and Neophilia 1) Have you been to Malaysia before? If yes... how do you find the Malaysian food? If no...How do you like food so far? 2) From your opinion, is there any difference when dining out here and dine out at your hometown?	Modified from Chen and Peng, (2019) and Ji <i>et al.</i> (2016).
Risk perception and willingness to try 1) When you eat out, what could be the possible risks that you might face? 2) Do you feel confident in tasting new dishes/cuisine?	Modified from Olya and Al-Ansi, (2018) and Woolf <i>et al.</i> (2019).

motivations, and socio-demographic such as country of origin, length of stay, mode of travel which modified from Choe and Kim (2019) to suit this study. Phase two relates to local food and dining experience which was adapted from Chen and Peng (2019) study. In this phase, some general questions have been asked relating to individual knowledge on local island food and identification of dining behavior involving food Neophobia and Neophilia among international tourists amended from Ji *et al.* (2016) study. The third phase more focuses on risk factors, revised from Olya and Al-Ansi, (2018) study and reason to eat or not to eat local island food (willingness-to-try) which was adjusted from Woolf *et al.* (2019) study. An example of interview guide questions for each instrument was explained in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Health and risk management to fight COVID-19

Health risk

Whilst on holiday abroad, Western tourists may avoid eating food or drinking water perceived to be unsafe or uncertain, to prevent themselves from falling ill. Understandably, findings showed participants reduce their willingness to try local island food. However, there is no specific 'fear' or uncomfortable behavior observed among the participants. Whilst some may appear to be extra cautious when dining out and perceive unfamiliar food as uncertain and risky. The previous scholar has identified that from five tourism risks of insurance uncertainty involving functional risk (mechanical, equipment, or organizational problem), physical risk (possibility of physical danger or injury), political risk (possibility of being caught up in political turmoil), crisis risk (possibility of natural disaster or terrorist

attacks) and health risk including the possibility of becoming sick or infecting certain kind of disease (Shin & Kang, 2020).

"...local handmade bread here upset my tummy, very sweet. I can eat it, but it just upset my tummy. I don't eat a lot. I preferred to buy sourdough bread and things since it is not sweet and no sugar in it." (Participant 3)

According to participant 3, most Western tourists tend to limit themselves from trying local island food that could upset their stomach, relating to his illness after sampling local bread. Other researchers supported that, tourist risk perceived toward health at destination plays a vital role in making a decision which also affects their quality of trip and health-preventive behavior (Huang *et al.*, 2020).

"...I am not sure the waiter or the waitress has properly sanitized the table and chair. It's the phobia at this moment due to the covid, we need to be extra careful and aware especially we are bringing our kids out. Their immune is not as strong as an adult." (Participant 5)

As for Participant 5, the COVID-19 pandemic did increase her risk perception to dine out and limits exploration on local island food, by saying she was worried about her children's safety and health awareness to avoid the spread of the pandemic virus. It is because, in the recent history of the previous pandemic, coronavirus lead to high infections and deaths in the region (Karabulut *et al.*, 2020). In addition, another study also highlighted that there is a high risk of COVID-19 to spread in the community and other disease-related to respiratory being transmit by travel within societies (Qiu *et al.*, 2020).

Risk management by local authority (new normalcy)

Looking up to the extent of the seriousness of the COVID-19 risk situation, local authority starts to implement risk management to mitigate and control the virus been spread and transmitted. According to Bruinen de Bruin *et al.* (2020) stated that by controlling the infection to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus was correctly be the only mediation that can be used for the current situation. Some westerners consider this Standard Operation Procedure (SOP) as a hassle for them to access local restaurants or café, unlike before the COVID-19 pandemic. As for Participant 6, the SOP did limit the intention and willingness to try other local island food and choose only to eat familiar food.

"...we cannot sit properly, social distancing thing, you can't touch or to hold and get something that you want by yourself, I just pick what I used to eat and limit my intention to try other food cause I hate to line up again, hate crowd just only to try new food." (Participant 6)

Participant 2 believed, everyone has to cooperate and abide by the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) as outlined by the Malaysian government, anticipating that this risk management might help to control the spread of COVID-19. Apart from a need to line up and wearing a mask, other risk management adhered to strict government regulations including wearing face masks, maintain social distancing, online registration at each business premise visited and limitation dine out in groups.

Sharma *et al.* (2020) reported that every premise needs to provide free hand washing to customers, keep the social distancing by limiting the number of customers on-premise and limit contact when making payments. In addition, there was also a need for food premises operators and all employees to wear gloves and wearing masks not only focus on just the customers (Klein, 2020). This was also highlighted by participants 2 and 8, based on their statements below:

"... we have to line up ad follow the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) before entering any restaurants and food premises. Wearing mask all time. All of us have to follow the rules for everything as ordered by the government to overcome the COVID-19 issue." (Participant 2)

"... we are five in family and most of the food premises are keep the social distancing and limits only four people for a table to eat due to rules and SOP command by the local authority. So, we couldn't stay and eat together to dine." (Participant 8)

Environmental and safety risk

Risk carries a potential of personal harm for every person either it is in terms of terrorism, crime, infectious disease, political disruption, or even in natural or human-caused disasters (Tasci & Sonmez, 2019). Hence it is more likely to trigger a negative emotional response during uncertainty, which enhanced participants' risk perception and affected their willingness to try. Participant 9 stated that travel and dining out with family, safety become the priority. This is important in ensuring the family members safe from any danger or risk is one of the emotional responses toward the current pandemic situation even if they must limit their exploration on local island food.

"... first things it should be safe and clean. I always brought my family to dine out, my parents and kids. They are considered a high-risk group to get infected by the virus. Their safety is important for me. Just because I love to explore unfamiliar food, I will not take the risk to bring out them everywhere just to try the foods." (Participant 9)

"...they scan body temperature and QR code at the jetty before you enter the restaurant and hotel. When you reach the reception and give a small card and write down the table number. So, after taking the food, you need to get back to your table only not where else. For me, it will be safer to dine like that." (Participant 5)

As participant 5 state, despite the pandemic challenges, which calls for a new type of normalcy, there is a need for safety precautions which can help to protect and reduce COVID-19 virus been transmitted which it will be more secure for them. Due to the sudden rapidly spread of infectious disease, it is vital for everyone aware and reduces the risk of safety while traveling. Besides, this also increases the sense of hygiene and physical activities among food premises operators to keep safe surroundings by regularly doing temperature checking and improved the safety and health risk (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021).

Hedonism and emotional connections*Eating together with family*

Participant 3 and Participant 8 admitted that during a vacation to an island destination eating and spending time together with family is valuable and creates positive emotional value. The communication value of the term "togetherness" like socializing with friends and family in food tourism research has been emphasized as an important utility that tourists

achieve during vacation (Choe & Kim, 2019). Another scholar also supported that tourists experience unexpected happiness and cherished memories about food when with their family members or friends (Tsai, 2016).

"...for me dining with family is precious, spending time to eat together not to be separated. It's such memorable experience to have opportunities dining out with them spend time together, play various beach activities and trying a lot of island food here.." (Participant 3)

"...in a day, we work at my kid's school. So, it is a good thing to bring them out for a beach vacation and eat together while watching the breathtaking view of crystal clear blue water. During the meals, time is a perfect time to spend with family as much as possible.haha." (Participant 8)

Island environment and Hedonism

Some participants admitted that vacation at these remote islands by enjoying the view of the beach and the great dining environment elicited positive emotions including pleasure, happiness, and self-indulgence. This was further supported by previous studies, where excitement and hedonism are one form the five motivational factors for tourists to consume local food and beverages in destination (Birch & Memery, 2020; Kim & Eves, 2013). In addition, positive feelings such as excitement; hedonic activities, pleasure, and happiness during tourist's food consumption activity also theorized to have emotional value and recollection of previous experiences (Tsai, 2016; Choe & Kim, 2019) especially involving with its positive image for beaches and water attractions (Tasci & Sonmez, 2019). According to Zhang *et al.* (2020) study stated that the island is full of marine entertainment and activities such as beach leisure, sea parachuting banana boating, and diving.

"We are happy to dine in the restaurant here. The staff is very friendly and very attentive, the food great. The water is so beautiful, so blue, and we enjoy it. Love the beach sitting view, really nice. Everything is nice." (Participant 4)

"This island is a very beautiful place and the view of the beach. Wow. I feel happy and relaxed here. If the foods here are not that good, it's okay since you are already at a beautiful and amazing place like this, even food can be good because of this great environment." (Participant 6)

Emotional connection

Emotional connection at a meaningfully attached place such as an island or beach setting represents

one of the key attractions among Western tourists. Interestingly, most participants considered the inability to make an emotional connection with the new and unfamiliar environment as a potential risk factor. Participant 4 expressed that it's important for Western tourists' emotions to feel the connection with a new place, making them feel meaningful, happy, and belong to that place. The presence of emotional connection could impact their overall tourism experience at the island. Other scholars indicated that tourists who link with place attachment establish strong emotional connections and belongingness to that place which perceived connection with the environment (Tsai, 2016).

"... we already attach with this place, love the scenery of the beach and the restaurant. The surrounding is different compared to the city. It's different, feeling great staying here. The surrounding did amaze me." (Participant 4)

"...Redang is a very beautiful place and yes not too noisy quiet and I feel so close with this island. Relaxing, the feeling is varying when we came here, eating together with family, so good." (Participant 8)

Value of money, taste, and quality

Worthiness to pay for island food

Price or worthiness to pay become one of the main risk factors that western tourists perceive while traveling. As Participant 7 highlighted, taste acceptance of food they tried, affected their perception of whether what they pay and consumed was value for money. According to equity theory and distributive justice, consumers will perceive inequality when they realize, they are paying more than what they are comparable to get and this will develop a negative response of emotions (Gelbrich, 2011).

"I ate the rice with fish. Nasi Dagang. It is very nice to get it here as one of their best local food to try. It's worth paying, I will buy it again. I went to Perhentian before and the price is very expensive there. Here in Redang is okay." (Participant 7)

"...the seafood here is good. The best island food to try here. The seafood is fresh and the steamboat at the restaurant is great. We don't have a steamboat in Brazil. We have tried it and it was really good. Worth for to pay for such good food here." (Participant 6)

Value of taste and quality

Some participants highlighted that taste and quality of foods was an important factor, this further

increase their perceived risk when traveling to an unfamiliar destination. Some scholars revealed that key drivers of increasing interest in purchasing local food including better local taste, supporting local producers, freshness, and better quality (Birch & Memery, 2020), and the most essential food choice factors among international consumers were a taste, smell and appearance relate to sensory (Mynttinen *et al.*, 2015).

"I have tried a dish last night, local people here called it 'Ikan Bakar Berempah'. The paste is unique, the combination of local taste with sweet, sour, and spicy flavor. The food needs to be fresh and has a good flavor so that it is worth trying."(Participant 8)

" I don't like much the foods here. It's too strong, a lot of sauces the taste is strong with herbs and spices and at a time it's sweet. The combination of strong and sweet. I ate the pasta with carbonara sauce and it's worst. Too sweet. It seems the taste is adapted to local taste here." (Participant 6).

CONCLUSION

The present study provided insight into risk factors perceived by western tourists that visit Redang and Perhentian Island into three main factors which are health and risk management during pandemic, hedonism and emotional connections and value-for-money, taste, and quality. Due to increasing cases of COVID-19 infections, health and risk management to fight the virus is seen as crucial and the implementation needs to be improvising by the local authority and other parties involved such as restaurateurs, resort operators, and stakeholders to reduce the risk perceived by tourists. From the results of our study, there is a loss of rules and SOP strictness at certain places, especially at island destinations. Western tourists expressed doubt on the effectiveness of risk mitigation measures by the government, due to undisciplined restaurateurs, food premises operators, and others who did not follow the rules.

Besides, local authorities especially Tourism Ministry should promote domestic travel, particularly at island destinations since the results show that most tourists seen attached more to hedonic activities and their emotional connections with the island during this pandemic period. This could help boost and improve our tourism industry and economies in the future. Furthermore, tourists also perceive the risk to try local food at the destination through the value of money, taste, and quality. These factors did affect the tourist's whole experience and their willingness to try unfamiliar local food. Local

authorities involve should cooperate in offering the best quality of service and local cuisine to rise our local food specialty and tourism industry in the eyes of the world. Despite this, the findings of this study also provide insightful information for tourism marketers, hospitality businesses in developing their gastronomic products and services in the future.

As for the limitation, this study poses several challenges in getting Western tourists to participate in this study due to restrictions of travel imposed by the government and other countries around the world. Most of the participant were western sojourners that stay in Malaysia for a certain period. However, using the snowball sampling method help researcher to get the participant through a suggestion from a previous participant. Besides, due to Movement Control Order (MCO) from March until June, the data collection in April has been postponed to July and August after government announce for Restrict Movement Control Order (RMCO) which allows people to travel and go out. Despite this, there is still not much study regarding risk perceived factors relate to the dining experience at islands setting.

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