The Influence of Social-Psychological Distance on Indian Tourists Travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Abstract

This research explores the way social-psychological distance is linked to destination selection and the motivations of Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In recent years, the literature has revealed that increasing number of people are willing to travel for various reasons. Most tourists travel to escape their daily routine and to rejuvenate. Some travel to spend quality time with their family and explore a destination, and a few travel to enjoy their retirement days with their loved ones. As the number of tourists has increased globally, the Indian outbound tourism market of India has also grown. In 2019, 27 million Indian tourists travelled abroad. Most Indian tourists now travel to Kuala Lumpur, because it is one the best budget friendly destinations offering world-class attractions.

The extent literature has focused on temporal and spatial distance rather than on social-psychological distance. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature in relation to how social-psychological distance influences a tourist's destination selection and motivation to travel. Recognising the importance of social-psychological distance, this inductive research was conducted to understand what influences Indian tourists to travel to Kuala Lumpur. Netnography was used to collect data from online travel websites such as TripAdvisor, Mouthshut.com, and Tourism Malaysia. The qualitative data obtained were coded and categorised using thematic analysis, which produced five major themes to answer the research questions.

The findings revealed that social-psychological distance positively influences the Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The Indian tourists in this study were willing to travel to Kuala Lumpur because in many ways, it is similar to India. Kuala Lumpur offers Indians a familiar culture along with similar food, good shopping options, and variety of attractions. However, Indian vegetarian tourists struggled to find vegetarian restaurants around Kuala Lumpur. This research offers theoretical and practical implications to improve the study of social-psychological distance and its influence on Indian tourists travelling to other international destinations.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Name: Pragya Sinha

Date: 16th June 2021

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing numbers of travellers were willing to travel around the world. According to the India Ministry of Tourism (2019), the number of Indian travellers taking an outbound trip has increased. Twenty-seven million Indian tourists took an outbound trip in 2019, which is 14 million more than in 2011. With the rapid growth of budget destinations, more Indian travellers than ever before were willing to travel around the world before COVID-19.

The Indian outbound tourism market has developed significantly, although India was relatively late in exploiting the economic significance of its tourism potential. Tourism globally has emerged as a major tool for economic development, societal upliftment, poverty alleviation, employment generation, and international understanding (Gaurav, 2019). There has been sudden growth in the Indian economy and disposable income (Gaurav, 2019), which has helped the middle class earn more. This combined with an improved disposable income has encouraged Indian tourists to use some of their money for outbound tourism (Datta, 2019). As a result, the Indian outbound travel and tourism market has developed, with increasing numbers of Indian tourists travelling to international destinations. Indian tourists have been taking more international trips due to better air connectivity and cheaper flight options for global travel (Gaurav, 2019). Air connectivity from India to overseas destinations has also developed dramatically over time.

First-time Indian tourists usually prefer visiting Asian countries due to their proximity and cost as compared to western destinations (Datta, 2019). Recently, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, have become favoured tourist destinations for Indians travelling to Asia, and the United States (USA) for those travelling to western countries (Datta, 2019). Kuala Lumpur the capital state of Malaysia has gained popularity as one the best budget friendly international destinations for Indian tourists, because of its proximity to India.

Much has changed since Indians travelled abroad mainly for obligatory reasons such as education, employment, and therapeutic interventions; now most Indians who travel, travel for leisure purposes. With many emerging budget friendly destinations, Indians (mainly the middle classes) are willing to travel to international destinations (Singh & Srivastava, 2019). In 2019, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Singapore, Dubai, and London were the most popular international destinations for Indian tourists (Booking.com, 2020).

More recently, Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia has gained popularity among Indian tourists. Malaysian society primarily comprises three major ethnic groups: Malays (61.9%), Chinese (22%), and Indians (6.7%). Each of these ethnic groups upholds its robust ethnic identity of cultural customs, practices, languages, values, and beliefs (Abu Bakar et al., 2018). *Social-psychological distance* is the perceived social and psychological distance between two individuals and indicates the level of familiarity experienced between local people and tourists (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). Social-psychological familiarity is one of the reasons Indian tourists travel to Kuala Lumpur. Indian tourists have found it comfortable to interact with the locals and travel around Kuala Lumpur. As Malaysia has a population of 6.7% ethnic Indians, Indian travellers like to travel to Kuala Lumpur because of the cultural familiarity, as they can find local people there who are similar to themselves which helps them feel comfortable and safe in Malaysia.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite the rapid growth in travel and tourism worldwide, social-psychological distance is a less known topic in the tourism literature. In particular, there is a lack of attention to empirical investigations into the relationship between contact and social-psychological distance in host-guest relations in tourism settings (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). A major obstacle is the shortage of information on social-psychological distance and a lack of information among tourists and tourism scholars. Social-psychological distance can impact tourists' perceptions about a particular destination. Interactions between local people and tourists may or may not influence travel experiences that are particularly dependent upon the destination. For example, tourists travelling to New York visit New York for the destination's popularity, as compared to those visiting emerging destinations such as Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, or Laos, who have other motivations. New York, Paris, and Switzerland are known for their scenic beauty and popularity. The reason Indian tourists travel to destination such as New York or Paris to explore the scenic beauty. Indian tourists do not seek cultural familiarity at these destinations. Social-psychological distance does not apply to the same extent at mature destinations, because the local people and cultures at those destinations are different to those of the travellers. Social-psychological distance can apply to many destinations but for mature destinations such as Switzerland and Paris, it has less influence.

The literature on social-psychological distance has mainly focused on spatial and temporal distance, and not so much on other aspects of social-psychological distance

(Aleshinloye et al., 2020). This research therefore aimed to address these research gaps with research objectives focusing on Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1.3. Research Purpose

This research aimed to explore the ways social-psychological distance influence Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. Several key aspects are considered: social-psychological distance, destination selection, motivation to travel to a destination, Malaysia as a destination, Indian tourists, social media, and Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur. This research provides insights into why Indian tourists are motivated to travel to Kuala Lumpur. The research objectives are as follows:

- to gain insights into social-psychological distance and any links between destination selection and social-psychological distance; and
- to explore the motivation of Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The researcher conducted qualitative research using an inductive and interpretivist approach, to meet the study's objectives. Netnography was used to collect data from online travel websites such as those of Trip Advisor, mouthshut.com, and Tourism Malaysia. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected from these online travel sites.

1.4. Summary

Travelling has become a common phenomenon globally – a phenomenon Indian tourists are part of. Before COVID-19, increasing number of travellers were willing to travel around the world to gain new experiences. Kuala Lumpur has emerged as one the best budget friendly international destinations in recent years because of its proximity to India. This research study is about social-psychological distance and its influence on Indian tourists. The researcher conducted qualitative research to find out how social-psychological distance impacts the destination selection process of Indian tourists.

1.5. Dissertation Structure

This dissertation started by introducing the research topic. The introduction gave a brief idea of its background, as well as providing a problem statement, and outlining the

research purpose. In Chapter 2, the researcher explores the key concepts in the literature to provide the academic background to the study. Next, in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3), the research design, and collection and analysis of secondary data are explained in detail. Thematic analysis was used to transform codes into main themes. Chapter 4 discusses the main themes and their relationships with each other and the core concept. The link between prior research and the findings of this study is presented to answer the research objectives, in Chapter 5, the discussion chapter. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed in chapter 6 (the conclusion chapter). This chapter also addresses limitations of the research, and future research considerations.

2. Literature of review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews academic literature to provide background information, a context to the study, and develop in a conceptual framework for the research. The chapter begins by defining "social-psychological distance" and "destination selection processes." The chapter also discusses motivations to travel to destinations, Malaysia as a destination, Indian travellers, and Indian travellers travelling to Malaysia (before COVID-19). The chapter concludes with an overview of the review.

2.2. Social-psychological Distance

Social-psychological distance is a concept that is rarely studied, especially in the tourism and hospitality context, although it was envisioned during the early decades of the 20th century. *Social-psychological distance* can be defined as the intensity of sympathetic understanding between persons or groups (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). Yilmaz and Tasci (2015) defined social-psychological distance as the level of familiarity of an individual or a group towards other unfamiliar individuals or groups. This implies that travellers feel more comfortable and safer around people from their race or ethnicity, when at an unfamiliar tourist destination.

Initially, the focus of social-psychological distance was between racially or ethically defined groups based on Bogardus' social distance scale (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). With the help of Bogardus' social distance scale Yilmaz and Tasci (2015) expanded the social-psychological distance definition. They proposed that the distinctiveness of other groups can be differentiated by several distinctive but naturally related factors such as religion, nationality, ethnicity, race, caste, social class, and residence. The social distance scale proposed by Bogardus proved to be long-lasting, as the scale became one of the most frequently used attitude scales for some decades (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). Lin and Xu (2017) suggested that social-psychological distance researchers believe that distance generates a distinct psychology towards other groups based on diverse ethnicities, gender, and sexual orientation.

Social-psychological distance perceptions about other ethnic groups can be prejudiced by familiarity and communication with a person among these ethnic groups (Lin & Xu, 2017). Aleshinloye et al. (2020) stated that social-psychological distance reflects the relationship between citizens and travellers, and if a destination does not appeal to a

traveller, this can negatively affect the destination selection process. The social-psychological distance concept measures a person's comfort with and understanding of those unacquainted with one's own group, in a diversity of backgrounds and types of social relations (Lin & Xu, 2017). The level of comfort and understanding between a local person and a tourist can be influenced by cultural familiarity. For instance, the level of comfort and understanding between local people in Kuala Lumpur and Asian tourists will be higher than that between the local people and tourists from Western countries.

The success of a tourist destination mostly depends on the relationships between locals and tourists (Aleshinloye et al., 2020). However, Aleshinloye et al. (2020) stated that this theory may not necessarily apply in some popular destinations such as Paris and all-inclusive Mediterranean resorts, where the success of the destination does not depend on the relationships between residents and visitors. However, the theory is widely accepted for most destinations under normal conditions. If travellers do not feel welcomed or connected to a destination and its local people, the probability of their return can be greatly reduced (Aleshinloye et al., 2020). Aleshinloye et al. (2020) suggested that Paris and Mediterranean countries are more mature destinations than many others; mature destinations do not depend on residents' and visitors' relationships for their success as much as do developing destinations (Aleshinloye et al., 2020). Thayne et al. (2018) found that a traveller's nationality was the most important element in determining local people's choices and patience with different tourist markets, with locals less welcoming of travellers who were physically or culturally different to themselves. For example, local people in Austria were more afraid to engage with more culturally different Asian travellers than with socially similar travellers such as Germans (Thayne et al., 2018). Social-psychological distance works well with locals from the same cultural background, race, or ethnicity. Tourists feel welcomed or connected to a destination and its local people when they find local people are from their own race, ethnicity, or cultural background. Tourists also travel to more mature destinations such as Paris, New York, or Switzerland where they do not seek cultural familiarity but visit the destination for its scenic beauty, historical monuments, and popularity.

Yilmaz and Tasci (2015) reported that having close friendships and familiarisation with locals seemed to be correlated with low social distance (high Affection and low Evasion) for both locals and travellers. However, the number of close friendships and a feeling of cultural familiarisation had a significant relationship only with the affection inclinations of travellers, whereas for locals it was statistically significant (Aleshinloye et al., 2018).

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Aleshinloye et al. (2020) concluded that social-psychological distance between locals and travellers can be reduced by the locals' familiarity, and their affection through interaction with one another. Tourists' familiarity with the local language at a destination plays an important role in decreasing social-psychological distance. If the local people speak the same language as the traveller, then the traveller feels more connected to the destination.

2.3. Destination Selection

Pre-trip planning is a long procedure that is frequently beset with unpredictability. During this period, travellers usually consider leisure travel constraints, such as financial and time limitations, any absence of a travel companion, and safety concerns, all of which affect their selection of a destination (Tan, 2020). *Destination image* in relation to tourism can be defined as an endless mental action in which an individual grasps a set of imitations, emotional thoughts, expectations, and biases about a destination (Kim & Chen, 2016). Govers et al. (2007) stated that in tourism, services are ethereal and images turn to be more crucial than is reality in the selection of a destination. A destination image is the global image travellers bear in their minds (Khan et al., 2017). Travellers prefer going through destination information before selecting or travelling to a particular destination, in order to become comfortable with the destination.

Kani et al. (2017) explained that destination image is affected by a tourist's country of origin, and different countries have different heterogeneous cultural values. Cultural distance occurs between the host country and the tourists' country of origin and reflects inherent cultural values. Cultural values are important antecedents of destination selection (Kani et al., 2017). The psychological issues of tourists, such as cultural values for example have a significant impact on the selection process of a destination. Cultural values add a positive image of the destination and therefore, increase the likelihood of selecting a particular destination. Therefore, cultural values affect destination image (Kani et al., 2017). Govers et al. (2007) explained that destination image is the same as character, or what people consider about an individual or an organisation, rather than being its reputation, which is what an individual or an organisation has. Tourists feel safe and comfortable if they find people of a similar culture to that of their own at a new destination.

Khan et al. (2017) described *constant components* (such as ideas, beliefs, impressions, knowledge, emotions, and feelings) of an image as the physical, affective, and holistic aspects of a destination. The intellectual component is reflected in the intelligence and expectations of a destination explained by tangible aspects, whereas the affective image of a destination is reflected in the perceptions of a destination. In the tourism literature, intellectual and affective images are found to interpret travellers' attitudes and destination selection (Khan et al., 2017). Ghaderi et al. (2018) observed that destination selection by travellers is largely determined by the economic, political, cultural, psychological, and technological aspects of the destination. Therefore, the mentioned factors consist of the supply aspects of price, attractions, accessibility, safety and security, image, infrastructure, and visa restrictions. Motivation, visit purpose, lifestyle, time, self-knowledge, nationality, and eagerness to take risks add further influences on demand (Govers et al., 2007). Before selecting a destination, tourists tend to research a destination to form an image of that destination, and to become familiar with the destination and its people.

Tan (2020) examined the Big Five personality model (which is about Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability) for destination selection. The Big Five model affirms the properties of heritability, temporal stability, and the generalisation of personality attributes across genders and cultures. This model has been practised in different fields, such as in adolescent psychological resilience, beliefs in leisure activities, career success, and music appreciation (Tan, 2020). *Openness to experience* refers to a tourist's passion to explore new and exciting facts about the destination. *Conscientiousness* refers to the personalities of tourists who believe in precisely planning their trips in advance, and *extroversion* refers to the personalities of tourists who believe they should meet new people at a new destination and become friends with them. *Agreeableness* refers to the personalities of tourists who seek security at a new destination and try to avoid things that can cause trouble to them. Lastly, some tourists travel to find emotional stability, for example, to escape a monotonous life, find emotional stability, and rejuvenate (Tan, 2020). The different personalities of different tourists play a significant role in destination selection because tourists with agreeableness personality types will not want to visit a war disturbed country or somewhere they do not feel safe. Similarly, extrovert tourists might want to visit a country with a familiar cultural background, so that they can make new friends.

After considering different personality traits, Tan (2020) suggested that personalities, genders, and cultures, influence perceptions when selecting a destination. Travellers select a destination based on how safe they expect to feel at a particular destination, how much they can connect with local people, and what appeals to them in a particular destination. For example, travellers do not select a destination disturbed by war because of safety considerations, and most female travellers prefer a destination that is safe for them to travel alone. Travellers can choose destinations where they can find their local people of their own ethnicity or nationality, and with whom they want to connect. Tourists also travel to more mature destinations like Paris, New York, and Switzerland, where they do not seek cultural familiarity but visit the destination for its scenic beauty, historical monuments, and popularity (Kani et al., 2017). Kani et al. (2017) suggested that some tourists also travel to a different country for cultural immersion into a different culture and seek high social-psychological difference.

2.4. Motivation to Travel to a Destination

Rittichainuwat et al. (2008. p. 7) defined *motivation* as "a demanding factor that makes travellers undertake and pursue a desire, whereas a desire indicates a state of felt deprivation." It is made up of driving factors such as empathy, feelings, and intellectual actions structured to determine the purpose. Khan et al. (2017) defined *travel motivation* as the biological or psychological needs of the traveller that arouse, direct, and integrate a person's behaviour and action. Li and Cai (2012) suggested that motivation is the source of human action. It is a frame of mind or state of desire that drives travellers toward types of activities that can gratify those desires. Rittichainuwat et al. (2008) found that travellers are motivated by three factors: 1) desire, and a state of felt destitution which might be fulfilled by travel; 2) information, awareness, and/or feelings about the fulfilment of those desires; and 3) a positive belief that travel will fulfil the desires.

Rittichainuwat et al. (2008) explained there are two types of motivations: 1) physiological motivations arising from biological desires, such as food, water, and waste elimination; and 2) psychological motivations arising from desires built from a person's communal surroundings. Rittichainuwat et al. (2008) further explained that apart from these two types of motivations, two factors that affect travel motivations are the push and pull factors. Push factors are internal motivations that motivate person to travel such as the need for escape, the need for novelty, and the need for self-esteem (Rittichainuwat et al., 2008). The need for escape relates to the wish to change a monotonous routine and rejuvenate, and the need for novelty refers to the desire to explore an unknown

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destination, or discover new experiences, enjoyments, and adventures. The need for esteem relates to the desire for acknowledgement such as talking about a foreign trip to friends who have not visited that destination. Rittichainuwat et al. (2008) explained that pull factors relate to the attractiveness of a destination which motivates a tourist to travel. A traveller becomes attracted to a destination by pull factors such as scenic beauty, shopping, or entertainment. Pull factors stem from marketing advertisements, word-of-mouth recommendations, and referrals from friends and relatives. Push and pull factors work simultaneously when a traveller is choosing a destination (Rittichainuwat et al., 2008).

Li and Cai (2012) suggested that the terms "motivation" and "motive" are frequently used interchangeably because of the grammatical similarity between the two approaches. For example, a motive can be the source of many forms of action, or motivations as each action can be affected by a variety of motives. Hence, it is important to distinguish between "motive" and "motivation" (Li & Cai, 2012). Different travel motives and motivations have different backgrounds such as: growth and challenging measurements of travel motivation, motivation as a stimulator of real behaviour, differences in motivation based on ethnicity and culture, personal morals and motives, motivation and destination awareness, belief and contentment, motivation for niche tourism, and market segregation based on motivation. Researchers have argued that motivation is most important in travel behaviours such as destination selection and visit purpose (Khan et al., 2019). Khan et al. (2019) concluded that travellers' motivations depend upon their internal expectations, culture, and country of origin.

2.5. Malaysia as a Destination

The global awakening of travellers has become a worldwide phenomenon (Noor et al., 2019), and in Malaysia, the key cause is the tourism industry. Although Malaysia is a small country, the exclusivity, distinction, and privileges of the country are extraordinary (Noor et al., 2019). Malaysia is a multi-racial country in southeast Asia with multi-ethnic peoples that include native Malays, and those of Chinese and Indian ethnicity (Sudipta & Sarat, 2010). Geographically, the country is surrounded by Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand, and made up of two regions: peninsular Malaysia, which lies between Singapore and Thailand, and East Malaysia across the South China sea on Borneo Island (Mosbah & Saleh, 2014). With a mainland of over 300,000 square kilometres (see Figure 1), Malaysia is known for its capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Kuala Lumpur is the financial and business hub of southeast Asia. The city has beautiful

beaches, private islands, high hill stations, and United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage spots (The Crazy Tourist, 2019). Malaysia has a tropical climate and is usually warm all year with a temperature of between 21 and 32 degrees Celsius (Mosbah & Saleh, 2010). Kuala Lumpur has emerged as one of the best budget friendly destinations for Indian tourists in recent years. Many Malaysian Indians reside in Kuala Lumpur which is one of the biggest states of Malaysia (see Figure 1), which offers a familiar culture to those from India (Chandran, 2019).

Figure 1: *Malaysia Map*
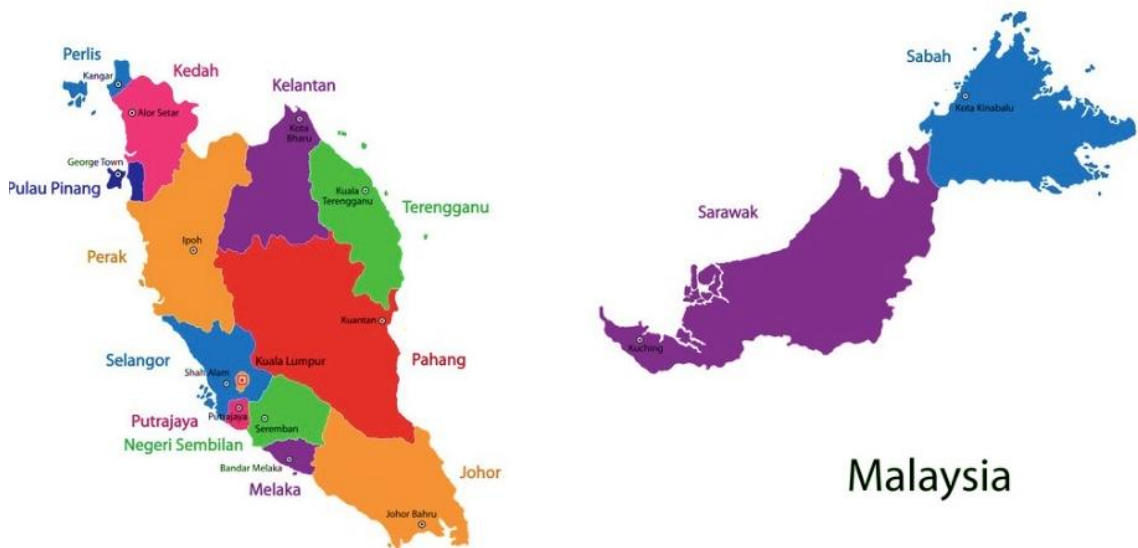
Note: *Figure 1.* **Malaysia's map. From "VectorStock Media" by Volina, n.d. (https://www.vectorstock.com/royalty-free-vector/map-malaysia-vector-1607161)**

Malaysia has recently emerged as a major destination for worldwide travel and tourism. Malaysia's key areas for activities in leisure and recreation tourism include entertainment, beach and island tourism, adventure and sports, and rural tourism in the form of homestay programmes that are offered widely throughout the country (Sudipta & Sarat, 2010). The diversity of culture and multi-culturalism are exceptional in Malaysia, so much so that travellers from different parts of Asia can at once be comfortable with the familiarity of Malaysia and still enjoy its differences. User-friendly first-class

expressway roads, contemporary airport services, high standards of accommodation and safety, and the major factor that English is broadly spoken all contribute to its growing popularity as a tourism destination (Mosbah & Saleh, 2014).

International tourism has become a major and essential economic part of the global economy, producing dynamic flows of people, commodities, and capital (Salman & Hasim, 2012). Tourism has been and continues to be a significant foreign exchange earner for numerous countries in southeast Asia (Salman & Hasim, 2012). In 2013, the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism became the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture. Its focus was to use culture and heritage to encourage worldwide tourism; hence, the slogan "Malaysia Truly Asia" was created (Hussin, 2018). The Malaysian Government received numerous proposals to attract tourists to the country, and in 2013, received 25.72 million tourists which brought RM65.44 billion (NZD21,819,518,500) to the Malaysian economy. In 2017, Malaysia received around 26 million global tourists who made a RM82.2 billion (NZD27,593,298,780) contribution to the country's income (Hussin, 2018). According to Hussin (2018) the Malaysian tourism strategy shows that Malaysia is open to visitors from all countries regardless of origin, race, ethnicity, and culture, but appears more welcoming to citizens from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other Asian countries (Hussin, 2018). The majority of travellers come from Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, India, and the United Kingdom (Salman & Hasim, 2012).

In Malaysia, the tourism sector is second most important after manufacturing in terms of contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP), even though the country is ranked amongst the top ten of the world's tourist destinations (Mosbah & Saleh, 2010). Before COVID-19, Malaysia had become one of the most vital tourist destinations in the world (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). According to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (n.d.) the Malaysian tourism industry in the first quarter of 2019 recorded a tourism spending increase of 16.9% to RM21.4 billion (NZD7,183,656,860) compared to RM18.3 billion (NZD6,144,766,806) in 2018. Around 4,500,546 tourists arrived in Malaysia in the first quarter of 2019, an increase of 2.7% in tourists' arrivals (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). Furthermore, Tourism Malaysia (2019) explained that the share of the medium-haul travel market during the first quarter of 2019 was 21.9%, an increase of 8.6% to 1,466,993 tourists; this was largely driven by tourism from China, Korea, Japan, India, and Pakistan. Since 2020, there has been a significant decline in tourism around the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic and all countries have closed their borders to international tourists. The pandemic has created a significant business loss in the

tourism and hospitality, and tourists are eagerly waiting to travel around the world again once the pandemic is over.

2.6 Indian Tourists

As described by Brandequity.com (2019), there are different types of Indian travellers. Some travellers prefer short holidays, whereas others travel for a destination wedding. India is an expanded travel market which is significant for the development of the sector. Indian travellers consider that travel is no longer a luxury but rather a necessity with increasing numbers of Indian tourists willing to travel around the world (Brandequity.com, 2019). However, Shah (2018) considered that Indian travellers are not the best-behaved tourists, finding them not well mannered and often demanding. Indian tourists do not always want to pay more for services but expect high quality services. However, India is changing, and Indian tourists seem to be getting more courageous and lavish with their travel budgets. According to India Tourism Statistics (2019), the number of Indian citizens departed from India during 1991 was 1.94 million which rose to 26.30 million in 2018 with a compound yearly development rate of 10.54%. Indian citizens departed from India during 2018 registered a growth of 9.8% over 2017 as compared to 9.5% growth from 2016 to 2017 (Ministry of Tourism, 2019).

Brandequity.com (2019), and Shah (2018) described different types of Indian travellers:

1) The budget friendly travellers who usually take at least one international holiday every year, and travel with their spouse, or with family and children. These travellers focus on covering as many of a destination attraction as possible within the available time and budget (Brandequity.com, 2019; Shah 2018).

2) The convenience-seeker travellers who want everything to be deliberate and simple. These types of travellers' value convenience, comfort, and transparency in travel arrangements (Brandequity.com, 2019; Shah 2018).

3) The family memory builder traveller's objective is to create family memories and strengthen the bonds between its members. This type of traveller seeks a mixture of both exploration and flexibility (Brandequity.com, 2019; Shah 2018).

4) The explorer is the traveller who has a deprivation for authenticity. This type of traveller is specific about having a flexible journey including an extensive range of exceptional local experiences (Brandequity.com, 2019; Shah 2018).

5) The mellow vacationers are predominantly couples aged between 25 - 35 or 45 – 60, who travel without children. The goal of these travellers is to relax, unwind, and enjoy the trip as well as the destination (Brandequity.com, 2019; Shah 2018).

6) Senior tourists are usually older retired couples aged 55 years or older with a regular pension. With significantly additional free time on their hands, they are keen to travel with an ideal holiday involving relaxing at a peaceful location with their loved ones. These types of travellers want relaxation and comfort, along with exceptional experiences and in a hassle-free, comfortable trip on a relaxed journey (Brandequity.com, 2019; Shah 2018).

Shah (2018) observed that with the growth in the Indian GDP, growing income levels and changing lifestyles, increases in the middle class, and the obtainability of low-cost flight fares and various travel packages. India is quickly becoming one of the fastest growing outbound travel markets in the world, second only to China before the COVID-19 pandemic. The hospitality and tourism industry has collapsed due to the pandemic but is expecting to recover once the pandemic is over. Shah (2018) notes that before COVID-19, around 25 million tourists from India travelled overseas. Outbound travel from India increased 15% to 18% between 1991 and 2019. When travelling overseas, Indian tourists are amongst the world's highest spending tourists. A regular Indian tourist spends USD1,200 (NZD1,663) per visit compared with Americans who spend about USD700 (NZD970), and British travellers who spend USD500 (NZD693) (Shah, 2018). Shah (2018) found that the main motive for Indian tourists to have a holiday is to rejuvenate, followed closely by the motives of spending valuable time with family and taking time away from their monotonous life.

2.6.1 Indian Tourists and Social Media

The Indian outbound travel industry has been developing with a yearly rate of growth of 10.17% (starting 1991) by 2016. Before COVID-19, India was ranked second after China in terms of the fastest developing outbound market (Singh & Srivastava, 2019). The peak Indian leisure travel season falls between April and June because of school summer holidays, and again from October to January to coincide with festivals and holiday seasons.

Information and communication technologies have dramatically changed the tourism industry which has progressed from traditional ways of operation to interactivity leading to a swap of information (Singh et al., 2019). As an outcome of increased information

and communication technologies, social media has become an essential part of people's day-to-day lives (Singh et al., 2019). Tourists now like to have a short lead time for outbound tours and prefer word-of-mouth recommendations when planning of their tours. Social media can therefore influence motivations to travel more than can any other form of interaction (Singh & Srivastava, 2019).

Singh et al. (2019) defined *social media* as a collection of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological basics of web 2.0 and that permit the formation and exchange of user generated content. According to Singh and Srivastava (2019), the use of social media is no longer limited to information research but is quickly becoming an essential part of overall travel planning process. Indian travellers use social media to share opinions and experiences and create user-generated content that affects the travel selections of other tourists. Travelling to a new destination is frequently associated with danger which increases manyfold in the case of outbound tourism. Travellers' decision-making includes a high degree of doubt which translates to a need for information for which they turn to social media; thus, what is now known as "word of mouse" (i.e., computer generated word-of-mouth information) has major relevance for tourists (Singh & Srivastava, 2019).

With travellers sharing their travel experiences and making recommendations on social media applications, virtual travel groups have become a more trustworthy source of travel related information than are marketing advertisements (Singh et al., 2019). Virtual travel groups help travellers to gain information, interact with each other, and eventually make travel related decisions. Browsing user-generated content on social media websites not only inspires tourists to travel to a destination but also improves their travel confidence by reducing the risk of travelling (Singh & Srivastava, 2019). Views from friends and acquaintances drastically affect tourists' travel decision-making processes and may even modify their original plans. Electronic word-of-mouth on social networking sites significantly affects a destination's image. Similarly, online reviews make significant impacts on tourists (Singh et al., 2019).

Social media has an important role in influencing tourists. Contemporary tourists check comments and reviews on different online travel platforms before making their decisions, and different tourists write their experiences on social media which allows other tourists to plan properly. This research study used social media to collect data using netnography.

2.6.2 Indian tourists travelling to Malaysia

Ethnic Indians form the second largest minority group in Malaysia after the Chinese, comprising about eight percent of the country's population (Minority Rights Group International, n.d.). Most ethnic Indians live in peninsular Malaysia and are mostly Tamils (around 80%); others include Malayalee, Punjabi, Gujarati, and Sindhi (Minority Rights Group International, 2021). Ethnic Indians have been in Malaysia for over a thousand years, as Tamil and other Indian ethnicities emigrated from India, and introduced the Hindu religion and culture to Malaysia (Minority Rights Group International, 2021). People from diverse ethnic backgrounds have different manners, morals, and norms, all of which reflect their traditional culture (Abu et al., 2018).

Chandran (2019) wrote that socio-cultural aspects have always been viewed as one of the most fascinating and significant dimensions of the Malaysia-India relationship. Although the centuries old bond between India and Malaysia originated (and continued) in trade, the influence of the socio-cultural aspect was equally dominant in determining the multi-ethnicity and multi-façade of Malaysia (Chandran, 2019). Chandran (2019) described Malaysia as one of the largest and most important outbound travel markets in the world for Indian tourists due to its similarity of social and cultural environment. The outbound travel of Indian tourists to Malaysia doubled in the last five years (2014-2019) before COVID-19. India has therefore been an important country to Malaysia in terms of its contribution to Malaysia's tourism industry and was Malaysia's sixth top tourist generating market (Chandran, 2019). Mura and Tavakoli (2014) suggested that Malaysia is a plural civilisation that comprises three main ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. These three groups differ in terms of language, religion, customs, and culture, and make Malaysia a culturally diverse destination (Mura & Tavakoli, 2014).

Sudipta and Sarat (2010) suggested that Malaysia's culture in tourism is relatively varied. The country has much to offer from performing arts and handicrafts, to archaeological and historical sites. In Malaysia, tradition and culture has also been recognised as new niche products to be established as part of the tourism growth (Sudipta & Sarat, 2010). Sudipta and Sarat (2010) found that the purpose of visit for 22.2% of Indian travellers to Malaysia was the similarity of culture in Malaysia. Mura and Tavakoli (2014) suggested that Indian tourists prefer to travel to Malaysia because of similar cultural experiences. The similar culture gives Indian travellers a sense of comfort when travelling around Malaysia.

Given the overall positive growth in tourist arrivals from India to Malaysia, Malaysia is expected to be the first Asian country to benefit from the large tourism market in India (Chandran, 2019). Malaysia has many opportunities to attract tourists from India such as luxury, adventure, meetings, destination weddings, shopping, cuisine, conventions, and exhibitions (Chandran, 2019). In general, Malaysia's main attraction for Indian tourists is for individual families, especially those in the middle classes, young couples, and the business community. Outlook (2021) suggested that 57% of Indian tourists chooses to visit a destination because of its familiarity aspect. Arushi (2019) further suggested that Malaysia is considered budget friendly for Indian travellers.

According to the Deccan Herald (February 20, 2021) the Malaysian Government is ready to welcome Indian tourists as soon as international border reopens. Malaysian tourism however, explained that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia was not able to welcome Indian tourists. In 2019, 735,309 Indian tourists visited Malaysia – an increase of 631,000 tourists since 2018 (Decan Herald, 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, India was one of the largest tourist markets for Malaysia after China (Shah, 2018). Malaysian tourism would like to continue business with India once the pandemic is over.

2.7. Summary

Travelling is considered an essential part of life for many tourists. Some people prefer travelling domestically and others travel internationally for different reasons (e.g., leisure, business, family, and medical). India is the second largest market after China for outbound travel (Shah,2018). Social-psychological distance works well for destinations that were gaining attention before the COVID-19 pandemic. Social-psychological distance is not needed for more mature destinations such as Paris, London, New York, and Switzerland which are popular among tourists for their scenic beauty, historic monuments, and social media content. Contemporary tourists are influenced by reviews posted on online travel sites and decide to travel. Social media plays a significant role as tourists can use these to get an impression about a destination.

Destinations such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand have become popular recently with Indian travellers. These countries have similar cultures and cuisines and are considered budget friendly making them popular amongst Indian travellers who are keen to travel. This research is focused on Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Due to the destination's familiarity, and low social-psychological distance, Indian

travellers are willing to travel to Kuala Lumpur. The next chapter discusses the data collection, data analysis, and the different themes of this study.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter reviewing the literature revealed the research gaps to be addressed about social-psychological distance. This research study aimed to explore perceptions of social-psychological distance by conducting a qualitative study of Indian tourists visiting Malaysia. The chapter discusses the process taken to conduct this research; it explains the research aim and objectives and how a qualitative research approach was applied, the interpretivist paradigm adopted, and provides details of the inductive approach used. The chapter also discusses the use of netnography for collecting data from social media and online websites. Lastly, it discusses how the data were analysed, summarises the chapter, and offers the researcher's personal reflection of her journey.

3.2. Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research was to explore the factors influencing the social-psychological distance of Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. According to the extant literature, there has been limited research on social-psychological distance in a tourism and hospitality context. The research theme of social-psychological distance exists yet is not well known beyond temporal and spatial distance. Therefore, this research adopts an inductive approach which is most appropriate in this situation. This study acknowledges the influence of social-psychological distance on Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur and an inductive study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

1. to gain insights into social-psychological distance and any links between destination selection process and social-psychological distance; and
2. to explore the motivation of Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

3.3. Research Philosophy

3.3.1. Research paradigm

This study was based on an interpretive paradigm to study the influence of social-psychological distance on Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur. Based on the interpretations of numerous scholars, the *interpretive paradigm* is one that allows researchers to interpret the world through the insights and experiences of their participants (Thanh et al., 2015). Thanh et al. (2015) explained that interpretivist

researchers pursue approaches that allow them to comprehend the in-depth associations of human beings with their environments, and the part people play in weaving the social fabric of life. When seeking answers for the research questions, the interpretivist researcher who follows an interpretive paradigm uses experiences to create and understand the meaning in the collected data. Specifically, interpretivism supports scholars to discover their world by interpreting the understandings of individuals within it (Ponelis, 2015).

Scotland (2012) explained that interpretive research rejects the initial stage to finding knowledge, bringing into question its validity. Interpretive research cannot be judged with the same standards as used for a scientific paradigm (Scotland, 2012). Interpretivism's key principle is that research can never be accurately observed externally but must be observed internally through the direct experience of people (Mack, 2010). If reality is personal and differs from individual to individual then research participants cannot be expected to attain the same interpretations as researchers (Scotland, 2012). According to Thanh et al. (2015), interpretive research is more personal than is objective research. The goal of interpretivism is to value subjectivity. Thanh et al. (2015) believed that interpretivists are anti-foundationalists because there is no specific right or accurate path to knowledge, and no special technique that automatically leads to intellectual development. Interpretive researchers do not pursue answers to their questions in unbending ways. Instead, they approach reality through their subjects who are typically individuals who have had personal experiences and are of a specific group or culture (Ponelis, 2015).

This research adopted an interpretive paradigm. By taking an interpretive view, the researcher generated several points of view on how social-psychological distance can impact tourists and their travelling behaviours. From an interpretivist's perspective, the researcher understood that every tourist's experience is subjective. Studying and examining online travel and government websites such as tourism Malaysia and TripAdvisor (e.g., using reviews, comments, and statistics) helped the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Data were collected from four well known online travel sites (Mouthshut.com, Make my trip, Agoda, and TripAdvisor) and two government websites (Tourism Malaysia and Ministry of Tourism, India).

3.4. Research Methodology

3.4.1. Qualitative Research Approach Strategy

Qualitative research views a research enquiry as a human-centred or uncompromising approach. Qualitative methods are used to comprehend people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviours, and interactions, all of which create non-numerical information (Pathak et al., 2013). Johnson et al. (2020) suggested that in qualitative studies, the researcher is often the main tool for data collection. Any researcher prejudice not sufficiently addressed, or faults in judgements can affect the quality of information and subsequent research results. Silverman (2020) suggested that the important factor in qualitative research lies in the idea that meaning is socially created by people in their interactions with the world. In qualitative research, the world or reality is not secure, single, agreed upon, or an assessable phenomenon that is expected to be positivist. Instead, Merriam (2002) believed that there are multiple constructions and understandings of reality that are fluid therefore can change over time. Qualitative researchers are absorbed in understanding what those interpretations are at a specific point in time and in a specific situation. Learning how people experience and network with the social world is considered as an interpretive qualitative approach. According to Fossey et al. (2002), qualitative research methods can help researchers interpret data more extensively. Qualitative study methods focus on interpretations and require the shaping of a problem, selection of samples, collecting and analysing data, and writing up the findings.

According to Merriam (2002), interviews, observations, and documents are the three main sources of data collection for a qualitative study. Fossey et al. (2002) noted that qualitative research has its origins in varied disciplines including anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Furthermore, they suggested that qualitative research queries focus primarily on three areas: 1) linguistic, as means to discover procedures of communication and patterns of interaction within specific social groups; 2) description and interpretation of personal meanings attributed to circumstances and actions; and 3) theory building through learning patterns and connection in qualitative data. Based on this studies' aims and previous studies that adopted netnography, documents were considered the best way to collect data for the study. Documents consist of written, oral, visual (such as photographs), or cultural artifacts, public records, personal documents, and physical materials (Merriam, 2002). Data for this study were collected from public records, and personal documents available online.

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3.4.2 Inductive Approach

According to Liu (2016), the inductive approach is a qualitative research approach that has become a developing trend in qualitative scholarship. The important feature of the inductive approach is its methodological flexibility. An inductive approach is appropriate for any recognised qualitative methodology such as grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, narrative research, or case study (Liu 2016). Thomas (2006) explained that the *inductive approach* is a systematic process that can be used for the examination of qualitative data in which the investigation is directed by detailed research of the objectives. The inductive approach mostly requires comprehensive readings of raw data to originate ideas, themes, or a model through interpretations made by an evaluator or researcher. The primary drive of the inductive approach is to guide research findings that arise from the frequent, dominant, or important themes inherent in the raw data without the restraints forced by organised methodologies (Thomas, 2006). The purpose of using an inductive approach for this study was to develop new themes by observing and studying reviews and comments of Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

3.4.3 Netnography

Costello et al. (2017) suggested that netnography is a relatively new qualitative research methodology that uses ethnographic techniques to study cultures and societies developing through digital networks. They defined *netnographic findings* as transcribed explanations resulting from research studying the culture and societies that arise from online, computer-mediated, or internet communications in which both the research and the written explanations are informed by the qualitative approach used in customer research, cultural anthropology, or cultural studies. Whalen (2018) explained that both ethnography and netnography need methodological complexity for the interpretation of the methods and traditions of cultural anthropology. Netnography needs metaphorical, hermeneutic, and analytic understandings of the data which emphasises the vital role of the researcher in appropriately assessing the research.

Tavakoli and Wijesinghe (2019) considered that netnography is less conspicuous and more realistic than old-fashioned ethnographic methods. Netnography offers data about customers' patterns of virtual behaviour and has proven popular among scholars. The increase in online communities has generated a new dimension of cultural subjects which have a significant effect on the choices of different stakeholders (Tavakoli &

Wijesinghe, 2019). Tavakoli and Mura (2018) considered that the growth of netnographic methods is primarily due to the development of the world-wide web and the rise of virtual groups on numerous digital platforms. For instance, tourists, by sharing their experiences on social media platforms and giving impulsive opinions can directly impact destination marketers and potential tourists. Cybercultures have compounded within our day-to-day lives, reinforcing old-style relationships among numerous actors in society. Virtual groups contribute to the building of cybercultures which have improved the level of communication among stakeholders from different sections of society both nationally and internationally. Due to the rapid expansion of web technology, interest in undertaking netnographic research has been enhanced (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019).

The purpose of using netnography for this research was to analyse online reviews and comments of travellers. Using netnography, the researcher explored the different influences on Indian travellers travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia such as gastronomical delight, similar cultures, budget friendly, luxury, adventure, shopping, natural beauty, meetings, exhibitions, conventions, destination weddings, visiting theme parks, historical buildings and monuments, and families. These 14 purposes of travel formed the basic codes and at later stage were converted into key themes using a thematic analysis technique.

3.5. Data Collection

The emergence of various social media and virtual travel sites on the internet offers qualitative researchers a new view of people's outer and inner worlds, and their experiences and understandings of various phenomena. There is an abundance of qualitative information pouring into the internet every day on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Expedia.com, blogs, and wikis, all of which can be retrieved, analysed and examined by a qualitative researcher. However, the researcher still had to adhere to ethical standards and protect the identity of online users while collecting data (see McKenna et al., 2017).

Im and Chee (2006) considered that the use of the online data collection approach in a research project permits individuals in different geographical areas to interconnect and exchange their experiences and feelings without long-distance travel. Among numerous electronic data collection approaches, virtual forums (e.g., web message boards) are prominent forms of asynchronous communications through which participants can join and comment about the discussions at their ease unlike other approaches demanding

synchronous communications. In this research, data such as online comments, statistics, descriptions, narratives, and reviews, were collected as secondary data. Data were collected from popular travel websites such as Trip Advisor and Mouthshut.com. Data were also collected from the official tourism websites of India and Malaysia. The research was focused on the influence of social-psychological distance on Indian tourists and on Malaysia as a destination. The online data were collected in English which is widely spoken in both Malaysia and India (see Table 1 for details on websites selected for this study).

Table 1: *Online Travel and Government Websites Selected for the Study*

Number	Website Name	Website Link
1	Tourism Malaysia	https://www.tourism.gov.my
3	MouthShut.com	https://www.mouthshut.com/product-reviews/Kuala-Lumpur-reviews-925021793
4	TripAdvisor	https://www.tripadvisor.co.nz/ShowTopic-g298570-i7008-k11101104-Best_Location_to_stay_in_KUALA LUMPUR_for_tourist_as_a_Indian-Kuala_Lumpur_Wilayah_Persekutuan.html

3.6. Data Analysis

3.6.1. Thematic Analysis

Themes are the key product of data analysis that yields practical results in the field of study. There are two types of data analysis in qualitative research study: content analysis and thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Vaismoradi et al. (2016) suggested that there are numerous resemblances between qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, for example, cutting across data, logical background, consideration to both description and interpretation in data analysis, attention to context of data, and searching for themes. Thematic analysis is an influential yet flexible approach for analysing qualitative data and can be used within a diversity of paradigmatic or epistemological orientations (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), thematic
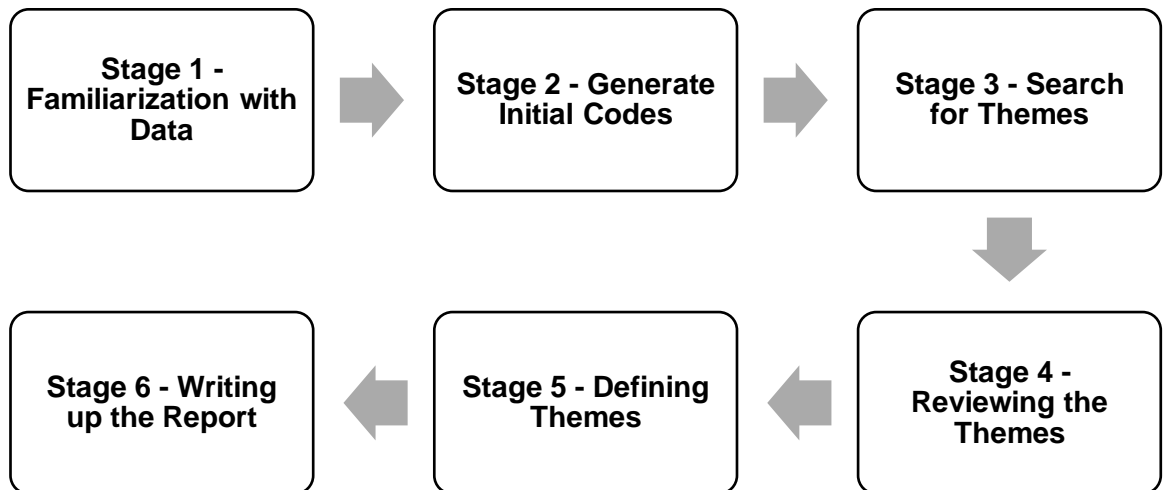
analysis is a suitable technique of analysis when looking for an understanding of experiences, opinions, or behaviours across a data set.

Thematic analysis is a procedure of classifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Clark and Braun **(**2014**)** suggested that *thematic analysis* is a technique for methodically classifying, organising, and offering an understanding of patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Through concentrating on meaning across a data set, thematic analysis lets the researcher see and make sense of shared or collective meanings and experiences (Clark & Braun, 2014). Maguire and Delahunt (2017) suggested that thematic analysis offers an essential way to conduct numerous other kinds of analysis. They also noted that thematic analysis is not like other qualitative approaches as it is not tied to a specific epistemological or theoretical viewpoint. This makes thematic analysis a flexible technique that lets the researcher concentrate on the data in numerous different ways (Clark & Braun, 2014). Clark and Braun **(**2014**)** suggested that an inductive approach to data coding and analysis is a bottom-up method and is determined by what is grounded in the data. This means that the codes and themes originate from the content of the data themselves – so what is charted by the researcher during the analysis closely matches the content of the data.

To answer the research objectives, the researcher went through various reviews and comments posted on the online travel sites (see Table 1) to understand the experiences of Indian travellers travelling to Kuala Lumpur. Data were collected from diverse Indian travellers such as families, young couples, businesspeople, seniors, and individuals, travelling to Kuala Lumpur for different purposes. The purposes of travel of different travellers varied such as to see similar culture, for luxury, shopping, adventures, gastronomical delights, meetings, conventions, exhibitions, weddings, visiting families, natural beauty, theme parks, historical buildings and monuments, and a budget friendly destination. The researcher went through various reviews and comments to gain a deep understanding of different purposes and experiences. The sample size of the research was 40 detailed comments, all of which were analysed using thematic analysis.

The researcher adapted Clark and Braun's **(**2014**)** six-phase approach to thematic analysis to analyse the data (see Figure 2). The purpose of using Clarke and Braun's six-phase approach was to identify important themes in the data obtained from the online sites. The researcher tried to create a clear and transparent study process with the help of thematic analysis to obtain a valid result.

Figure 2: *Adaptation of Clarke and Braun's Six-Phase Framework for Thematic Analysis*

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┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│   Stage 1 -     │      │ Stage 2 - Generate │    │ Stage 3 - Search │
│ Familiarization with │ ─▶ │  Initial Codes   │ ─▶ │   for Themes    │
│      Data       │      │                 │      │                 │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
                                                          │
                                                          ▼
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│  Stage 6 - Writing │    │ Stage 5 - Defining │    │   Stage 4 -     │
│   up the Report   │ ◀─ │     Themes      │ ◀─ │  Reviewing the   │
│                 │      │                 │      │     Themes      │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
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Stage 1: Familiarisation with Data

Common to all forms of qualitative analysis, this stage included becoming submerged in the data by reading and rereading the written data (e.g., comments, reviews, statistics) (Clark & Braun, 2014).

The researcher went through different comments and reviews posted by different Indian travellers about different activities (e.g., adventures, luxury, food, shopping, and business meetings), and familiarised herself with the different activities to gain an understanding of the data.

Stage 2: Generating Codes

Stage 2 of the thematic analysis approach begins with a methodical analysis of the data through coding. Codes form the constructing blocks of the analysis (Clark & Braun, 2014).

In this stage, the researcher reviewed each comment to find trends, such as similarities and differences, emotions, and purpose of visits. For example, "melting pot of culture,"
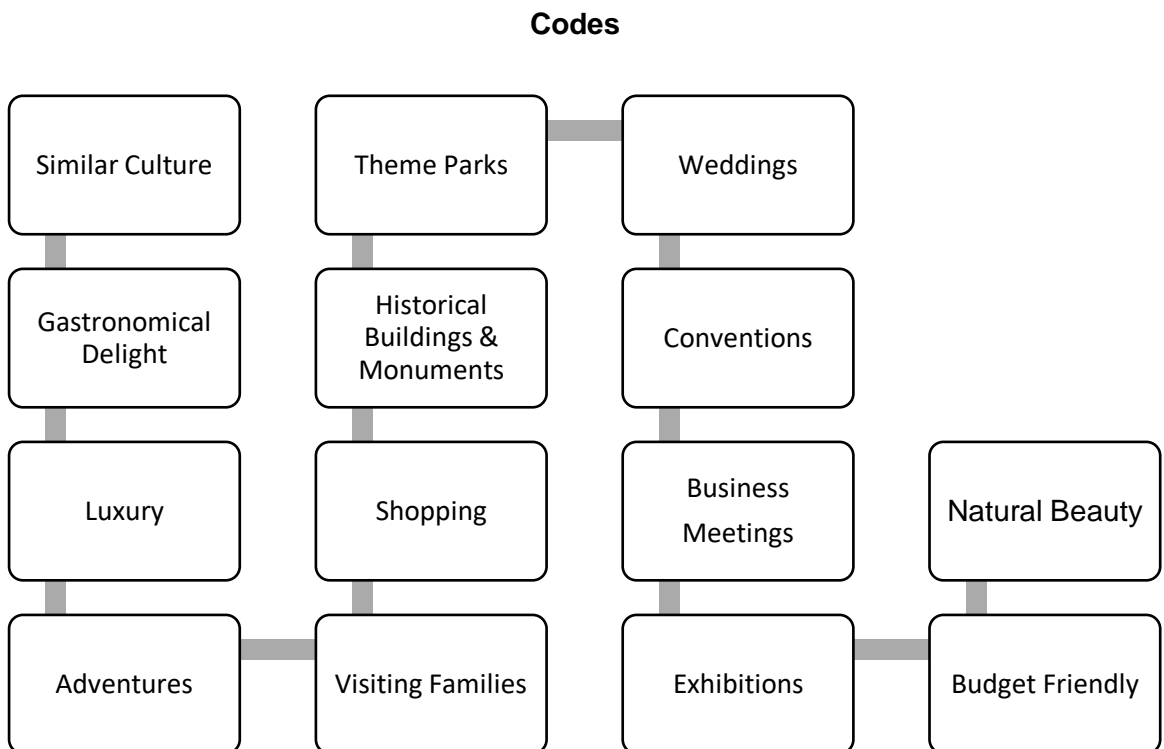
"budget friendly," and "food," were coded and appeared often in the comments. The codes were created at this stage.

Stage 3: Searching for Themes

In this stage, the analysis starts to form as the researcher shifts the codes to themes. A theme captures significant data in relation to the research question and signifies some level of patterned answer or meaning within the data set (Clark & Braun, 2014).

In this stage, the researcher analysed the codes and grouped similar codes to gain a better understanding of reviews and comments posted on the travel sites and government websites. The researcher then analysed similar codes and converted them into themes (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *The codes generated through online reviews and comments at the netnography stage.*

Codes

Similar Culture	Theme Parks	Weddings	
Gastronomical Delight	Historical Buildings & Monuments	Conventions	
Luxury	Shopping	Business Meetings	Natural Beauty
Adventures	Visiting Families	Exhibitions	Budget Friendly

Stage 4: Reviewing the Themes

This stage involves a recursive procedure in which the evolving themes are studied in relation to the coded data and the entire data set (Clark & Braun, 2014).

In this stage, the researcher reviewed themes in relation to the coded data and the data obtained from the reviews and comments. The reviewed themes provided enough information for the researcher to answer the research questions.

Figure 4: *Codes that were converted into basic themes.*

Basic Themes

Similar Culture	Gastronomical Delight	Sightseeing	Shopping	Budeget Friendly	Business
• Native Malay • Chinese • Indian • Visitig Familes • Weddings	• Indian Food • Chinese Food • Malay Food • Malaysian Cuisine	• Theme Parks • Natural Beauty • Adventures • Historical Buildings & Monuments	• Luxury	• Budget Destination	• Meetings • Conventions • Exhibitions

Stage 5: Defining Themes

This stage includes the deep logical work involved in thematic analysis, and the vital shaping up of analysis into fine-grained detail (Clark & Braun, 2014).

At this stage, the researcher analysed themes more deeply using thematic analysis to reveal the answers to the research questions. The themes that emerged are mutually related to one another and can be regarded as the findings of the research. This research concluded with five main themes: 1) similar culture; 2) cuisine; 3) budget friendly; 4) shopping; and 5) sightseeing.

Key Themes Influencing Indian Tourists Travelling to Kuala Lumpur

Figure 5: *Thematic framework of the study.*

Similar Culture	Cuisine	Shopping	Budget Friendly	Sightseeing

Stage 6: Writing up the Report

The last stage of the analysis is to produce a report such as a journal article or dissertation. The purpose of producing a report is to offer a convincing story about data based on the analysis (Clark & Braun, 2014).

To complete the thematic analysis, the codes that formed the basic and key themes were defined and examined. Using the basic themes and reviews from the online websites, this stage enriched the relevancy of the constructed basic and main themes. This information helped the researcher write up the findings; quotations from the reviews and comments are used to support the themes.

3.7. Personal Reflection

The personal reason for choosing this topic was related to my dream to drive to Malaysia from India and to drive around all the states in Malaysia to explore. Ever since I started driving, I have been fascinated with the idea of making long road trips around the world; driving and travelling around became my dream. After coming to Auckland, I drove to Coromandel, Tongariro National Park, Lake Taupo, Manukau Heads lighthouse and the Bay of Islands. I met my best friend at the AUT accommodation, and who happened to be from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. We talked about how pretty our home countries are. The diversity and similarity of people and food of each country was very fascinating. Eventually we decided to visit both our home countries one day to see the beauty and experience the gourmet delights of each country. The idea of a drive from India to Malaysia and exploring Malaysia on wheels made us excited, so we decided that in five years' time we will make our dream come true.

The second reason I became interested in the topic of social-psychological distance was because of my hospitality marketing class. Social-psychological distance is a lesser-known topic in the hospitality and tourism industry, and while going through different literature, I gradually learned about the topic. As an Indian traveller myself, this topic fascinated me, so I wanted to dig deeper into it. As a traveller, whenever I see someone from my hometown or country, I feel excited and comfortable in those surroundings, and that is what social-psychological distance is about. I was amazed at how social-psychological distance works, so I decided to embark on my personal research journey. I found qualitative research and thematic analysis the most suitable way to do my research. Despite having fewer specific findings on social-psychological distance, the data retrieved from websites were enough for the study.

3.8. Summary

This study adopted qualitative research to examine in-depth detail of social-psychological distance using a set of data collected from three online travel and government websites (TripAdvisor, Mouthshut.com, and Tourism Malaysia). The research was based on an interpretive paradigm with qualitative research methods to gain an understanding of the topic. Using netnography and thematic analysis, the researcher collected and analysed data from written, verbal, and visual communication messages on social-psychological distance, Indian tourists, and Malaysia as a destination. Thematic analysis was used to convert codes generated from online reviews and comments at the netnography stage, into the main themes. The findings chapter presents the results of the data analysis undertaken in accordance with the technique of thematic analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the results of collecting and analysing 40 positive and negative reviews and comments by Indian travellers, posted on Trip advisor, Tourism Malaysia, and Mouthshut.com between 2014 and 2019 (i.e., before the COVID-19 pandemic). The study used netnography and a thematic analysis framework to analyse comments and reviews. The 14 initial themes were subsequently reduced into five key themes. The five key themes were: "similar culture," "budget friendly," "cuisine," "shopping," and "sightseeing." Quotations from the travellers' reviews were used to support these themes. The researcher used fictional names to protect the identity of the users who posted reviews and comments on online sites (see Table 1).

4.2. Similar Culture

The findings revealed that similar culture played an important role for Indian travellers travelling to Kuala Lumpur as they found the city similar to other cities in India. The similar culture and people of Kuala Lumpur made these Indian travellers feel at home. Kuala Lumpur is a melting pot of different cultures; the different ethnicities are native Malay, Chinese, and Indians. Indian travellers who reviewed Kuala Lumpur wrote about its similar, colourful, and warm culture. Travellers mentioned that Kuala Lumpur is a destination away from India that reminds them of India. Some travellers also mentioned that they wanted to return to Kuala Lumpur because it felt like home away from home – in other words, it felt comfortable and friendly.

Just a fortnight back, I visited Kuala Lumpur after a gap of over 9 years. I found the city full of positive vibes with very clean, comfortable, and friendly environment. You feel at home and feel safe. People are friendly and helpful. - Alex (TripAdvisor)

Very nice warm & friendly city. - Maria (TripAdvisor)

When going through the reviews and comments, the coexistence of Indian culture along with the native Malay and Chinese cultures made this destination popular among Indian travellers. At least four out of ten Indian travellers mentioned the familiar culture they found in Kuala Lumpur.

Kuala Lumpur is the stunning capital of Malaysia. The city, defined by its colourful culture and rich natural reserves, is also Malaysia's largest city. - Roger (TripAdvisor)

Nice clean liberal city and country. Clean, homely, fun, safe. Good, helpful, and mannerly people. Spells out for a good family holiday. - Serena (Mouthshut.com)

With the help of the reviews and comments of Indian travellers who had already visited Kuala Lumpur, many travellers had decided to travel there themselves. Prior reviews and comments helped the new travellers choose Kuala Lumpur as their destination. As one of the ethnicities in Kuala Lumpur is Indian, the travellers mentioned the friendly and homely people there which made the destination easy to travel around. Therefore, the presence of the Indian people in Kuala Lumpur and around Malaysia made the destination more appealing to Indian travellers as they were able to feel "at home."

So, if you are in Malaysia enjoy its diversity as it is melting pot for many cultures and as they say it's "truly Asia" as you will find Chinese, Malays, Tamils, Sikhs and many more living and mingling effortlessly here. – Josh (Mouthshut.com)

Looking for an Indian break away from India? Destination Kuala Lumpur is one of the most happening places. - Novak (Mouthshut.com)

Some travellers wrote that Malaysia is a getaway from India to India because Kuala Lumpur is so similar to India. Travellers mentioned that there were Indians settled in Malaysia from different parts of India which made Kuala Lumpur a "getaway" destination. A familiar culture, language, food, and local people made Malaysia a desirable destination among Indian travellers.

You will see mosques in every corner of the city, but there are other religions too, and you will be able to see a few of the other religious centres too. We can just conclude that Kuala Lumpur is a mixture of different cultures. This is the situation when I wondered if this place also features "unity in diversity" like India does. – Derek (Mouthshut.com)

Just like Singapore, we have Little India as well as China Town. Both will seem to be different from the other city areas, but the city of Kuala Lumpur still has some similarities to many of the Indian cities. – Albert (Motuhshut.com)

Overall, the Indian tourist market to Kuala Lumpur is large and growing because of the similar culture amongst the local people. The Indian travellers in this study were willing to return to Kuala Lumpur for this reason. The social-psychological distance found between the Indian tourists and the residents of Kuala Lumpur played an important role for initial motivation to travel there and wanting to return to Malaysia.

4.3. Cuisine

Food has always been an important part of a traveller's journey. Different cuisines and food are gaining in popularity now and play a significant role in tourists' travel experiences. Contemporary travellers are well informed about everything a destination has to offer from its cuisine, local attractions, and local culture. Food offers a gateway into other cultures through taste, food preparations, and the eating environment. Food can offer lifelong memories for a tourist travelling to a destination.

Going through various comments and reviews on online sites, the researcher identified various reasons for Indian tourists to travel to Kuala Lumpur. The travellers wrote reviews about how easy it was to find similar food that is found in India. The food in Kuala Lumpur was cheaper and reminded travellers of home.

Food has variety and reasonably priced. – Alex (TripAdvisor)

Food is excellent. Variety for all no matter whichever country you belong to there is the food of your choice available everywhere. – Alexander (TripAdvisor)

Previously, the researcher had found that culture played an important role in destination selection for Indian travellers. Similarly, the researcher discovered that cuisine also played an important role in destination selection. Kuala Lumpur is a destination of three mixed cultures where travellers can find all three different cuisines (i.e., Indian, Chinese, and Malaysian). These different cuisines could be found in fine dining restaurants, hawkers' stalls, and *mamak* (pronounced as "mama") shops. *Mamak shops* are local street food stalls run by local Indian Malaysian people. The shops are generally open 24 hours and seven days a week and serve different varieties of Indian food as well as Malaysian and Chinese dishes.

Food did not appear to be the main reason Indian tourists travel to Kuala Lumpur. However, the presence of local Indians in Kuala Lumpur made it a desirable destination. The presence of local Indian cuisine was considered an influence on destination selection as Indian travellers could feel that they were in India when travelling around Malaysia. As food is a physical necessity for life, the local Indian cuisine enhanced the experiences of Indian travellers in Kuala Lumpur.

You can find south Indian hotels at all important places. – Tomas (TripAdvisor)

You can find people of mixed culture (Malay, Indian, Chinese). Hence food is not a problem. Also, since it's a popular travel destination across the world, you will find food joints of every variety. – Tina (Mouthshut.com)

The Indian population in Kuala Lumpur consists of Tamils, Malayalees, Punjabis, Gujaratis, and Sindhis. As described in online reviews and comments, there were some vegetarian restaurants around Kuala Lumpur. As Malaysia is an Islamic country, the Indian food offered there mostly includes meat, so vegetarian travellers have fewer options for vegetarian food. Most restaurants are halal which means there is pork in the food. As Malaysians mostly consume meat and seafoods, the vegetarian options in Kuala Lumpur are reduced and hard to find. According to one Indian tourist's review, it was hard to find any vegetarian options even on a McDonalds menu. Kuala Lumpur appears to be a food paradise for non-vegetarian travellers, but Indian vegetarian travellers found it difficult to find suitable food options. Vegetarian food is important for Indian tourists because of their religious beliefs; some Indian travellers follow their religious beliefs very strictly, and never eat meat or meat products.

Joints to suit every pocket and palate can be easily found in KUALA LUMPUR. Just follow your nose and keep your eyes open. Otherwise, food courts in malls are a good, cheap (relatively) and safe place to try local cuisine. – Stan (Mouthshut.com)

Malaysia is a heaven for non-veggies, but it is difficult to get "pure" vegetarian restaurants in KUALA LUMPUR. – John (Mouthshut.com)

Overall, food appeared not to influence destination selection but played an important role in creating lifelong experiences for the Indian travellers. Food is a necessity for every human being and finding a cuisine similar to that of one's home country can create a positive destination image for a country. As Indian travellers were becoming aware of their surroundings where they were travelling, they kept themselves updated with every tiny detail of that destination. In the case of Kuala Lumpur, four out of ten travellers chose Kuala Lumpur for their holidays because of similarities of culture, cuisine, and language. Indian travellers feel safer and more at home if they can find their local food and people of a similar culture and can have their dietary preferences met.

4.4. Budget Friendly

To travel on a budget is a daunting task for many travellers, and unfortunately can deter some prospective travellers from experiencing the world. Travellers on a budget need to plan their trips in advance, so that they can estimate their spending at a destination. Travellers on a budget look for budget friendly destinations, cheap flights, hostels instead

of hotels, and try to save on food and accommodation as much as they can. Contemporary travellers have limited time and money to think about travelling. With the growing trend of budget friendly tourist destinations, Indian travellers think about travelling to Kuala Lumpur as it is appealing to budget conscious travellers.

Malaysia is one of the budget friendly tourist destinations. - Tina (Mouthshut.com)

Overall KUALA LUMPUR is worth a visit and could turn out rather cheaper than other countries around the globe. - Suga (Mouthshut.com)

On different reviews and comments on online travel sites, travellers mentioned Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, as budget friendly countries with affordable shopping centres, attractions, food, and accommodation. Some Indian travellers also mentioned that Malaysia is one of the cheapest countries around the globe to travel to. The Indian rupee against the Malaysian ringgit was considered affordable before COVID-19 which made Malaysia one of the most desirable foreign countries to travel. With the growing popularity of Malaysia amongst Indian travellers due to the similarity of culture and budget friendly prices, an increase of Indian travellers willing to travel to Malaysia.

Good affordable and reasonable rates against the Indian rupee...be it shopping, hotels or anything else. Great value for money. - Taehyung (Mouthshut.com)

Great value for money. My money's in Malaysia being the next hotspot for Indians, and deservedly! - Hope (Mouthshut.com)

Overall, Kuala Lumpur offers a homely and safe environment and was considered a low budget destination. More youths, families and senior citizens are travelling to Kuala Lumpur to experience a foreign destination because of its perceived affordability.

4.5. Shopping

Shopping is becoming an essential part of tourists' travel experiences. Shopping has become a determining factor for tourists choosing a destination that enhances their travel experiences. Indian travellers can explore the local culture in Malaysia by shopping souvenirs, local clothing, and traditional items to remind them of their visit. Shopping is one of the preferred activities for Indian travellers. According to the reviews, three out of four travellers enjoy shopping, and are willing to spend more money on shopping than on their accommodation.

As the promotion arm of Tourism Malaysia, Secretariat Shopping Malaysia's mission is to promote Malaysia as a world-class shopping destination to overseas and domestic tourists. – Tourism Malaysia.

A popular pastime in Kuala Lumpur and most of Malaysia as well as many parts of Asia Pacific is the night market. They are held in different areas of the city on different days. People go in large numbers, as family, as couples or alone to stroll through the stalls, eat snacks or a meal, buy household needs or some trinket. – Hermione (Mouthshut.com)

After you are through with the site seeing (sic) around (Suria KLCC [KUALA LUMPUR city centre]), time for shopping at the arcade at KLCC. After having gone through these treats, you may wish to pick up some "genuinely fake" merchandise at Petaling Street popularly called China Town. If you want to gift your friends with Rolex, this is the place to pick it up. You can bargain here as much as you want but before you pick that piece, ensure that it's a Rolex & not Roulex. – Remus (Mouthshut.com)

Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore have recently gained popularity as one of the world's main tourist shopping centres (TripAdvisor, n.d.). Travellers can find any items from low budget to luxurious products at these destinations. Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore are mixed culture countries consisting of the native populations of the country as well as Chinese and Indians. According to the reviews, three out of four travellers are willing to spend money shopping. Indian travellers found Kuala Lumpur a good shopping destination because they found items that were not available in India. Some items were of better quality and cheaper in Kuala Lumpur than in India. Shopping became a therapy for some travellers, and for others it added value to their travel experience.

Pavilion mall visit is a must to enjoy the arena whereas those into value shopping. – Murray (TripAdvisor)

Shopping malls are everywhere in Kuala Lumpur, starting from budget type to the top brands. – Austin (TripAdvisor)

A good shopping experience. I was lucky to be there when it was sale time and during a month long stay, I shopped virtually every day after coming back. Luckily, I was staying in a hotel which was adjacent to KUALA LUMPUR's biggest mall as well... "Mega Mall" 5 floor mall with all big supermarkets and one could find anything one wishes to buy. – Dobby (Mouthshut.com)

Indian travellers are not limited to exploring their destination. For Indian travellers, "shopping abroad" means more than just purchasing a product. Shopping has become a travel experience in which travellers prioritise the quality of the products when buying gifts for their loved ones. In the various reviews and comments, Indian travellers

mentioned that shopping had become compatible with other motivations for travelling to Kuala Lumpur such as the similar culture, and that it was budget friendly. As there are several malls being constructed in Kuala Lumpur offering a variety of products from make-up and electronics to basic house accessories, the Indian tourists could find them all at one place. The Tourism Malaysia motto reflects the aim of making Malaysia a world-class shopping centre for overseas and domestic travellers, and this appeals to Indian tourists.

Multiple shopping options. Berjaya times square is the best shopping destination for clothes/accessories /makeup products shopping. - Taehyung (Mouthshut.com)

For those interested in electronics, you can get great IT products at great prices at Plaza Low Yat. - Jungkook (Mouthshut.com)

Numbers of malls ranging from horrendously expensive (Suria KLCC [KUALA LUMPUR city centre]) to places where shopping won't cost you a fortune (Sogo). Jalan Petaling is good place to buy authentic looking "fakes." - Namjoon (Mouthshut.com)

Bargain shopping can be had at Bukit Bintang (BB) Plaza. Garments, souvenirs, handicrafts etc. – Draco (Mouthshut.com)

Overall, Indian travellers found Malaysia a great destination to shop in for their loved ones and for themselves, along with enjoying a similar culture and cuisine. The travellers mentioned in the reviews that there are many malls in Kuala Lumpur which give them many options for shopping. Some mentioned that there were separate markets for different items which made shopping easier for them. For example, there was a footwear market where travellers could find varieties of footwear, and separate shopping areas for electronics, make-up, DVDs, denim items, and many more. Further to its familiar culture and cuisine, Kuala Lumpur is considered a desirable destination for Indian travellers because of the variety of shopping centres there.

4.6 Sightseeing

Contemporary travellers seek different experiences such as relaxation, discovery, enjoyment, and knowledge. One of the main purposes of travel for such travellers is to escape from their daily routines and monotonous life (Shah, 2018). For tourists, sightseeing is a new experience as they can explore new places in a country by sightseeing. Through sightseeing, a traveller can learn about the historical background of a country or a particular place, the architectural designs of famous buildings or different places, natural beauty, or simply have fun at a theme park. Sightseeing has

been always an important part of travelling and is a way of learning and attaining knowledge about a particular destination. Sightseeing enhances travellers' experiences and knowledge (TripAdvisor, n.d.).

Petrosian Museum at Petronas is amazing in terms of education value as well as entertainment alike for kids and adults. Those who like visiting historical towns may prefer Malacca. A visit to KUALA LUMPUR Bird Park is better than Jurong Bird Park in Singapore. – Murray (TripAdvisor)

The must-see places are KUALA LUMPUR Bird Park (need about 2-3 hours), Twin Towers with KLCC below it, Aquaria (inside KLCC), the park behind Twin Towers, Central Market, Tugu Negara (National Monument - something like the freedom statue in New Delhi). – James (Mouthshut.com)

Visit Museum of Speed: If you are crazy about cars and speed, a place to spend hours making cars with Lego sets or chancing your arm with a cricket ball or other gizmos. – Hagrid (Mouthshut.com)

Kuala Lumpur has various well-known places such as the Petronas Twin Towers, Aquaria KLCC, Kuala Lumpur Bird Park, Batu Caves and Shiva temples, Kuala Lumpur Tower, Sky Bridge, KLCC Park, Kun Yam Thong Temple, and the Asy-Syakirin Mosque. Malaysia is a country with cultural diversity and the Indian tourists found it to be a destination with world class tourist attractions. In the reviews and comments, many Indian travellers described different places such as KLCC Park, Kuala Lumpur Bird Park, the Twin Towers, Batu Caves and many more attractions to visit. The travellers revealed that a city tour and sightseeing helped them gain an insight into Malaysia's history and different enjoyable learning experiences. One such traveller explained that one could see Kuala Lumpur's night beauty from twin tower which was mesmerising. Another traveller described the Kuala Lumpur Bird Park as being world class, and superior to the Singapore Bird Park. Various travellers described the beautiful temples and mosques which helped them to observe and experience their religious customs even in a foreign land. For these Indian tourists, Kuala Lumpur tourist attractions were all in one package as most of the attractions' entry tickets were reasonably priced and offered a variety of tourist attractions from temples and historic monuments and buildings to natural beauty sites. The tourist attractions can be enjoyed by all ages from children to senior citizens. As suggested by one Indian traveller, Kuala Lumpur is a destination for everyone offering everything for every tourist.

The Batu Caves Murugan Temple & the Lord Shiva & Lord Vishnu temples are worth visiting. – Bob (TripAdvisor)

A very soothing experience as we climbed up the never-ending steps of this Hindu temple in the caves. The sounds of temple bells and prayers echoing in our ears. – Rose (Mouthshut.com)

Batu Caves: This is one of the most pious Hindu temples, the culmination points of famed Thaipusam procession. You have to climb some 300 stairs before you reach the temple. – Sirius (Mouthshut.com)

You will see mosques in every corner of the city, but there are other religions too, and you will be able to see a few of the other religious centres too. – Ron (Mouthshut.com)

Masjid Negara is the national mosque of Malaysia, and it is also one of the largest mosques in east Asia. - Dumbledore (MouthShut.com)

Another famous attraction happens to be the Batu Caves, which involves a number of cave temples. – Snape (Mouthshut.com)

The Indian travellers travelling to Kuala Lumpur tended to visit various places at the destination. Indian travellers mentioned museums, aquariums, the twin towers, temples, mosques, and theme parks in their reviews and comments. While going through the reviews and comments, the researcher found that most travellers wrote about the Batu Caves, Shiva temples and Vishnu temples. For Indians, temples and gods are important even when on holiday. Hindu worship which is known as "*puja*", usually takes place in the *mandir* (temple) (History, 2019). Followers of Hinduism can visit a temple at any time they please and visit mostly because of religious feelings and historic significance. Several shrines in Kuala Lumpur are devoted to different gods and goddesses. The giving of offerings is a significant part of Hindu worship, so it is a common exercise to present offerings, such as flowers or oils, to a god or goddess. Numerous Hindus take pilgrimages to shrines and other sacred places in India every year (History, 2019). Visiting and learning about temples in a foreign land makes the destination more appealing to Indian travellers.

Go the KUALA LUMPUR Tower (not Twin Towers) at about dusk and see the whole of KUALA LUMPUR just before dark and then after dark when the magnificent lights come on over the city. You can also have a good side view of the Twin Towers. – Jimin (Mouthshut.com)

We visited The Petronas Twin Towers which is a great sight when you check it out in person. Aquaria KUALA LUMPURCC was also a great experience, a fish aquarium with world class facilities and not too expensive either. - Suga (Mouthshut.com)

Sky Bridge: View from connecting bridge (Sky Bridge) at level 41 and 42 between Twin Towers is fabulous. - Jin (Mouthshut.com)

Furthermore, the Indian travellers were fascinated with all the attractions they found in Kuala Lumpur. Kuala Lumpur offers world class attractions for Indian travellers for whom budget considerations are one of the greatest constraints when travelling abroad. The growing population of Indian travellers wants to travel to a foreign destination once in his/her lifetime to gain a foreign country experience. Kuala Lumpur is considered to offer world class attractions and cultural diversity which makes it one of the best foreign destinations for Indian travellers. Social-psychological distance played a significant role for Indian tourists who travelled to Kuala Lumpur. The psychological distance between the local people and Indian tourists was low, meaning local people were welcoming to Indian tourists. Indian tourists were familiar with the culture in Kuala Lumpur and found similar to India.

4.7 Summary

The five main key themes of "similar culture," "cuisine," "shopping," "budget friendly," and "sightseeing" were discussed in this chapter. With the help of the various reviews and comments posted on online websites, insights were gained into these key themes. The familiar culture played a significant role as the Indian tourists were willing to travel to Kuala Lumpur more than once. Shopping, cuisine, budget friendliness and sightseeing were considered advantages along with the familiar culture. Indian tourists found similar Indian cuisine due to the familiar culture in Kuala Lumpur, and were intrigued by the cheaper options for make-up, electronics, footwear, and other items. Kuala Lumpur offered world-class attractions for every age group of Indian tourists at an affordable price. In the next chapter, the research questions are answered with the help of the extant literature and research findings from this study.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This research aimed to examine the influence of social-psychological distance on Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Adopting an interpretive research approach, this research used thematic analysis to discover the main influences social-psychological distance has on Indian tourists. Several key areas were explored using netnography such as social-psychological distance, destination selection, motivation to travel, Indian tourist behaviour, and Malaysia as destination. This chapter compares the researcher's findings with those in the literature.

5.2. Understanding the Link Between Social-Psychological Distance and Destination Selection

The first objective of this research was to gain an understanding of social-psychological distance and how it is linked to destination selection. This research objective was answered by using two key themes which were "similar culture" and "budget friendly." According to the findings, many Indian tourists travelled to Kuala Lumpur due to the perception of a similar culture at this destination. Around four participants out of ten wrote in their online reviews about similar cultures. Therefore, the familiarity of Indian tourists with the local Indian Malaysian culture created a low social-psychological distance (high Affection and low Evasion). The *high Affection* of both the local people and tourists meant there was more likelihood of an attraction towards each other. *Low evasion,* tourists do not have to imagine whether local people will like them or not, and vice versa. For example, low Evasion tourists do not have to think about what food they can have at a foreign destination (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015), as local people with a familiar cultural background may know the local language of India and it will be easy for them to communicate. Similarly, food in Malaysia were the same style as the food in India.

The reviews of the Indian tourists on the online travel websites stated that having familiarisation with local people helped them to choose a destination (see Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015) and they repeatedly chose to travel to Kuala Lumpur. The reviews by tourists agreed with Lin and Xu's (2017) research, that tourists in Kuala Lumpur experienced a measure of comfort and understanding towards the unfamiliar locals which were from a similar cultural background. The Indian tourists commented that the local people in Kuala Lumpur were friendly and helpful, irrespective of their cultural background. It was also mentioned in the comments that Malaysia is melting pot of cultures which made it easier

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to mix and mingle with the local people of different ethnicities. Both Aleshinloye et al. (2020) and this study found that Kuala Lumpur was considered an appealing destination for Indian tourists because Indians found Kuala Lumpur to be similar to India. The temples, mosques, and culture made the Indian tourists feel comfortable with the local people which elevated Kuala Lumpur as a successful destination.

However, according to Thayne et al. (2018), and various reviews from Indian tourists, a tourist's nationality has an important role. Malaysian local people were more welcoming to Indian tourists than they were to Western tourists in this study. The Indian tourists felt at home and welcomed in Kuala Lumpur because of the local people's acceptance of them. As Thayne et al. (2018) explained, a tourist's nationality is important in local people's behaviour towards different tourist markets. In this study, the Malaysian local people were more friendly to similar Asian tourists than they were to others as described in the tourists' comments. One of the Indian tourists explained that he had visited Kuala Lumpur after a gap of nine years and found the country was still the same, and the local people were still friendly, making him feel comfortable, safe, and at home. Therefore, social-psychological distance played an important role for the Indian tourists when they were visiting Kuala Lumpur. In general, Kuala Lumpur, as a city of three different ethnicities was perceived as welcoming to Indian travellers.

In relation to the first objective, the researcher found that there were various reasons for Indian tourists to select Kuala Lumpur as their travel destination. A key consideration was revealed in the theme "budget friendly." As emerged in the findings of this study and suggested by Tan (2020), financial constraints influence tourists' selection of a destination. As the findings showed, Kuala Lumpur is considered one of the best budget friendly international destinations for Indian tourists. According to some Indian tourists, Malaysia is one of the cheapest countries in the world and offers good shopping centres, attractions, food, and accommodation. According to Ghaderi et al. (2018), destination selection is influenced by the economic and psychological aspects of a destination. The reviews on the online websites agreed with Ghaderi et al.'s (2018) findings, that Kuala Lumpur was attractive to Indian tourists because it was considered affordable and had a familiar culture. Consequently, Kuala Lumpur is becoming one of the most desirable international destinations for Indian tourists because of its affordability and familiarity.

According to Ghaderi et al. (2018) and Khan et al. (2017), destination selection is related to what a tourist thinks of a destination. Destination selection is a crucial stage in decision-making about a destination. According to the reviews by Indian tourists in this

study, Kuala Lumpur is considered a good destination for Indian tourists. The reviewers created a positive destination image of Kuala Lumpur online by suggesting positive word-of-mouth recommendations for potential Indian tourists. The comments posted by them stated that Kuala Lumpur is similar to Indian cities and an attractive destination to visit. According to Chandran (2019) and the findings of this study, Kuala Lumpur is emerging as one of the most visited outbound destinations due to two important aspects: it has socio-cultural distance, and it is budget friendly.

It was intriguing to note that due to the similarity of the cultural and social environment to that in India, outbound travel of Indian tourists to Kuala Lumpur had doubled in the last five years (2014 - 2019) before the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings were consistent with those of Mura and Tavakoli (2014); the shared experiences of a familiar culture of Indian local people in Kuala Lumpur added value to the Indian tourists' experience. They were also consistent with those of Govers et al. (2007) and Khan et al. (2017), who suggested that people's beliefs, ideas, impressions, knowledge, emotions, and feelings play an important role in the destination selection process. The online comments suggested that similar cultural beliefs, religious feelings, and emotions encountered in Kuala Lumpur allowed the Indian tourists to feel at home. One tourist also mentioned that Kuala Lumpur is a place of unity in diversity, just like India. India is a nation of different religions (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism), and therefore similar to Kuala Lumpur. The shared experiences of a familiar culture made a significant impact on the Indian tourists in this study because they could find temples, mosques, churches, or *gurdwara* (a place of worship for of Sikhs) (History, 2019). As the findings suggest, Indians have strong religious beliefs and are emotionally attached to their religion, so encountering a similar atmosphere in Kuala Lumpur makes it a desirable destination for them.

Kani et al. (2017) suggested that destination image is affected by a tourist's country of origin and cultural values. They also suggested that cultural value is one the most important antecedents in destination selection and affects the destination selection process as it is related to tourists' psychology. As the findings showed, the Indian tourists felt connected to Kuala Lumpur and the local people because they experienced familiar cultural values. Therefore, sharing experiences that have same cultural value made a positive impact on Indian tourists choosing Kuala Lumpur as a destination.

In summary, there is a clear link between social-psychological distance and destination selection, and it can be established that social-psychological distance influences Indian

tourists when they travel to Kuala Lumpur. Indian tourists were willing to travel to Kuala Lumpur to encounter the culture there and experience one of the most budget friendly international destinations. As the outbound tourist market of India grows, so does the popularity of budget friendly international destinations. The key difference between other budget friendly destinations and Kuala Lumpur was the similarity of culture found in Kuala Lumpur along with various activities and attractions at reasonable prices. However, the theory of social-psychological distance helped explain why the tourists and local people connected well as both tourists and local people were willing to connect with each other and the local people were very welcoming to Indian tourists.

5.3. Motivations of Indian Tourists Travelling to Kuala Lumpur

The second objective of this research study was to explore the motivations of Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur. This research objective was achieved by using three key themes: "cuisine," "shopping," and "sightseeing." Apart from the familiar culture and budget friendliness, the Indian tourists found Kuala Lumpur a good destination for shopping, great food, and local sightseeing. Cuisine, shopping, and sightseeing played an important role for Indian tourists choosing Kuala Lumpur as their travel destination.

The outbound travel market of Indian tourists had increased significantly before the COVID-19 pandemic. As the economy of India is growing, Indians are earning more, and have more disposable income to spend. Contemporary Indian tourists are becoming more aware of spending their disposable income on travelling abroad. Potential Indian tourists have different motivations for travelling to different countries. For example, Shah (2018) and Brandequity.com (2019) explained that budget conscious travellers have international holidays to spend quality time with their family and explore destinations, whereas other travellers are eager to experience authenticity (sightseeing, buying souvenirs and exploring the local delicacies). The motivation of family travellers is to create a stronger bond with their family and go sightseeing. Aziz et al. (2018) explained that there is a trend for families to have a holiday together to be active together and have authentic experiences on their holiday. The motivation of senior citizen travellers is to spend money on shopping and sightseeing, and to relax (Brandequity.com, 2019; Shah, 2018). As the findings suggested, various Indian tourists have different motives for travelling to Kuala Lumpur, such as shopping, sightseeing and food, along with the similarity of culture.

Chandran (2019) suggested that one of the reasons tourists travel to Kuala Lumpur is because it is known as a food paradise. The findings suggest that Indian tourists found it easier to locate Indian food in Kuala Lumpur which made them feel at home. However, some Indian tourists did not have a good experience with food in Kuala Lumpur. India has the highest number of vegetarians in the world. According to Ramesan's (2021) a survey in India showed that between 23% and 37% of the Indian population is vegetarian which equates to around 400 million people who consume no meat. Many people in India are vegetarians because of their religious beliefs. The root of vegetarianism in India is due to the caste system and Brahmanism as various spiritual leaders insisted that their followers to abstain from meat which will bring a solution to all their problems (Ahuja, 2020). In contrast, another study suggested that in Hindu mythology, every living being has the right to live on this earth which stops people from eating meat and meat products (Ramesan, 2021). Ahuja (2020) suggested that food habits depend upon food availability in different cities and areas of a country. For example, in Kerala, India, people consume beef, pork, chicken, and mutton because most of the population is Catholic. However, in Varanasi, India, most people do not consume meat or meat products because Varanasi is considered to be one of the holy places in Hindu mythology (Ahuja, 2020).

According to Chandran (2019), Indian tourists travel to Kuala Lumpur to experience the cuisine as well. Kuala Lumpur is a place of gastronomical delights where tourists can find a variety of cuisines such as Indian, Chinese, and Malaysian and at reasonable prices. As the findings suggest, Kuala Lumpur is excellent for meat lovers but finding vegetarian food was perceived as difficult by the vegetarian tourists. Restaurants and street food in Kuala Lumpur mainly serve meat and meat products in accordance with the local people's preferences leaving few vegetarian options. Therefore, as Kuala Lumpur is considered a food paradise for meat lovers, vegetarian tourists must research to find non-meat food options before travelling to make their trip memorable. As food is a necessity, cuisine played an important role in influencing Indian tourists to travel to Kuala Lumpur. The presence of Indian descendants in Kuala Lumpur was one of the reasons for having similar food which was an advantage for Indian meat-eating tourists helping them feel at home in Kuala Lumpur. However, the vegetarian tourists had difficulty finding vegetarian food options. Kuala Lumpur is an Islamic city in which local Indian people use meat and meat products in their food.

The other key motivation of the Indian travellers was reflected in the "shopping" theme. The findings suggest that Indian tourists could buy items in Kuala Lumpur which were

not available in India, and that some products were cheaper than in India. According to Chandran (2019), shopping is activity Indian tourists are attracted to. Kuala Lumpur is known for its luxury and budget shopping which adds value to travellers' visits. Some travellers suggested that they could find everything they wanted at a single place because malls offered everything from make-up, electronics, homewares to clothing and basic jewellery. There are around 50 shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur which provides Indian tourists many opportunities to roam and bargain for products (Wonderful Malaysia, n.d.). According to Rittichainuwat et al. (2008), there are two factors that influence tourists' motivations - the push and pull factors that work simultaneously to motivate tourists to travel. Push factors are internal motivations such as the need for escape, the need for novelty, and the need for self-esteem which drives tourists to travel and explore. In contrast, pull factors are external motivations such as the attractiveness of a destination, which motivates tourists to travel there. The findings suggest that Indian tourists were motivated by both push and pull factors.

Pull factors such as shopping, scenic beauty, and entertainment, motivated the Indian tourists in this study to choose Kuala Lumpur as their travel destination. Push factor such as the need for self-esteem and novelty also motivated Indian tourists to travel to Kuala Lumpur. The findings suggest that the tourists were eager to explore an unknown destination. The presence of Indian local people in Kuala Lumpur made it safer for first time Indian tourists. The tourists mentioned that they felt safe and comfortable at an unknown destination due to the presence of the Indian local people. The need for recognition in society was another reason for Indian tourists to travel to Kuala Lumpur (see Rittichainuwat et al., 2008). Kuala Lumpur is considered one of the best budget friendly destinations in the world offering everything from gastronomic delights to attractions which is why Indian tourists chose to travel to Kuala Lumpur. The findings suggest that the Indian tourists travelled to Kuala Lumpur because it was perceived as budget friendly and helped them satisfy their needs for self-esteem.

The last key motivation of the Indian tourists was captured in the theme "sightseeing." Chandran (2019) suggested that Kuala Lumpur's main attractions are adventure, activities, theme parks, natural beauty, and various other attractions. The findings of this study suggest that the Indian tourists were fascinated with Kuala Lumpur's attractions. The reviewers commented that Kuala Lumpur has a lot to offer to various tourists including children, adults, and senior citizens. Rittichainuwat et al. (2008) suggested that pull factors made the tourists explore and discover new attractions in Kuala Lumpur. As

the findings confirms, there are plenty of attractions in Kuala Lumpur with various temples and mosques attracting Indian tourists. Indians are considered sentimental and having strong religious beliefs. Even on holiday, Indian tourists like to visit religious places because of their religious beliefs. Religious places in Kuala Lumpur played an important role in attracting the Indian tourist market. Therefore, along with world class attractions, religious places played an important role in creating a familiar cultural environment for Indian tourists in Kuala Lumpur.

In summary, the familiar culture of Kuala Lumpur had an important role along with being budget friendly, and having great food, shopping, and opportunities for new adventures. The push and pull factors worked simultaneously to attract Indian tourists to Kuala Lumpur. They were motivated by both internal and external factors; for example, the attractiveness of the destination encouraged the tourists travel to an unknown country. The desire to be recognised in society also motivated Indian tourists chose Kuala Lumpur as it is considered one of the best budget friendly international destinations with a familiar culture. Some tourists who needed to escape from their daily routine returned to Kuala Lumpur several times because of the familiar culture, great food, reasonably priced shopping, and variety of attractions.

5.4. Summary

This chapter linked findings from the literature with those from this study to discuss the answers to the research questions and identified many similarities between the literature and this study. One finding was that low social-psychological distance does influence Indian tourists. Indian tourists were willing to travel to Kuala Lumpur because of the familiar people and culture along with a variety of shopping, food, and attractions. Although vegetarian tourists had problems finding vegetarian food in Kuala Lumpur, their experience was otherwise good for them. The presence of religious places was an advantage because Indian tourists want to stay connected with their religious beliefs. Therefore, low social-psychological distance played a significant role in influencing Indian tourists to travel to Kuala Lumpur. The next chapter discusses the theoretical and practical implications of this study along with its limitations and future opportunities for research.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Introduction

This study aimed to understand the ways social-psychological distance influences Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur using netnography and thematic analysis. By collecting and analysing data, the study aimed to produce insights into social-psychological distance and any links with destination selection from online reviews and comments by Indian tourists on Trip Advisor, Mouthshut.com, and Tourism Malaysia. This study was able to show how the Indian tourists were influenced by low social-psychological distance and identified which elements played a significant role in influencing their destination choice.

6.2. Aims and Objectives Revisited

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into how social-psychological distance is linked to destination selection and to explore the motivations of Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur. The researcher adopted netnography and thematic analysis to explore insights into social-psychological distance, destination selection, and travel motivations of Indian tourists. The researcher discovered several key findings from the key themes;

- Kuala Lumpur is a melting pot of different cultures. The different ethnicities in Kuala Lumpur are native Malays, Chinese and Indians.
- Kuala Lumpur offers a colourful, and warm culture along with a friendly and comfortable environment similar to that of India which reminds Indian tourists of India.
- Indian tourists liked travelling to Kuala Lumpur due to the familiar culture which gave them a sense of safety and feeling of home.
- Indian tourists felt that Kuala Lumpur was a replica of India. Kuala Lumpur has a similar unity in diversity culture to India.
- Indian tourists mentioned that Kuala Lumpur was a food paradise and they found similar food as in India. However, Indian vegetarian tourists found it difficult to find vegetarian food or restaurants.
- Compared to Thailand and Singapore, the Indian tourists found Kuala Lumpur cheapest of all three destinations.
- Indian tourists found Kuala Lumpur a good shopping destination because of its variety of products and affordable prices.

- Kuala Lumpur was considered an attractive destination because it offers various attractions such as religious places, and historical monuments and buildings.

- The Indian tourists in Kuala Lumpur found that although away from India, they could observe their religious customs as Kuala Lumpur offered different religious places.

- Kuala Lumpur offered world class attractions at reasonable prices for everyone, from children to senior citizens.

- Due to the familiar culture in Kuala Lumpur, Indian tourists found it easier to travel there. The familiar culture helped the Indian tourists find familiar food, get along with local people, and travel around Kuala Lumpur comfortably.

- Indian tourists are willing to return to Kuala Lumpur due to the low social-psychological distance found between the local people and Indian tourists.

These insights were able to answer the research questions and provide insights from the tourists' perspectives to address some of the gaps in the literature.

6.3. Implications

In terms of theoretical implications, this study developed new perspectives on social-psychological distance. The study found that the reason for low social-psychological distance between local people and Indian tourists was due to the cultural similarity between them. Some Indian tourists and local people spoke a similar language, the food was similar, and the religious beliefs and culture were similar which helped create a low social-psychological distance. A wide range of studies has been conducted on temporal and spatial distance, but social-psychological distance is a less studied topic in the tourism literature (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). Some research was conducted on the links between social-psychological distance, word-of-mouth recommendations, and motivations but only limited research is available on social-psychological distance and its link with destination selection. By investigating the link between destination selection and social-psychological distance and how it influences tourists, this study has provided theoretical contributions to further understand the topic of social-psychological distance and its influence on tourists. The inductive nature of this study provided new themes that can now be tested on a larger scale through surveys.

In terms of practical implications, the results of this study showed that social-psychological distance influenced Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The social-psychological distance between the local people and tourists was considered

low due to the presence of a familiar culture. Liu and Xu (2017) observed that tourists feel more comfortable around familiar people at an unfamiliar destination. The presence of Indians in Kuala Lumpur made the Indian tourists feel comfortable to travel there. Several tourists on online reviewers mentioned in their comments that Kuala Lumpur is considered safe, friendly, and comfortable due to the presence of Indians and the Indian culture.

The other practical implication of this study showed that Kuala Lumpur must increase awareness of vegan and vegetarian food as eating vegan and vegetarian food has become a global trend. Some people become vegans or vegetarians due to climate change and sustainability concerns and others are vegetarians due to their religious beliefs (Ramesan, 2021). The online reviews and comments showed there were few vegetarian options available in Kuala Lumpur. As the vegetarian trend is increasing in popularity, tourism and hospitality agencies should promote more vegan and vegetarian options for potential travellers. Therefore, the tourism industry of Malaysia should take this into consideration in order to develop appropriate marketing campaigns to their target market.

6.4. Limitations and Future Research

Firstly, several studies covered social-psychological distance along with word-of-mouth recommendations and motivation. However, only a few studies addressed the link between destination selection and social-psychological distance, or how tourists are influenced by social-psychological distance. The researcher considered only one aspect of the social-psychological distance, cultural familiarity, and did not explore other unfamiliar aspects in this study. Secondly, the online reviews and comments reflect the perceptions of only a few Indian tourists. These comments and reviews do not represent the perceptions of all Indian tourists travelling to Kuala Lumpur. Because there were only limited reviews available on online websites, the researcher was unable to collect detailed data on this topic. By conducting interviews and surveys, the researcher might have developed a better understanding of the topic. However, this was not possible, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study was limited to one state of Malaysia as the researcher had limited resources for collecting more data on the topic. Future research should conduct a larger study such as a survey to gain a better insight into the topic. Future studies should also be conducted in the other states of Malaysia that might have a different culture to India. Such studies

can be conducted at destinations other than Malaysia, to gain more insights on social-psychological distance relating to Indian tourists. Future research should also be conducted at mature destinations such as Paris, New York, or Switzerland to discover why some tourists are not influenced by low social-psychological distance and instead seek a high social-psychological distance.

As a researcher, this study was a way to find out more about social-psychological distance. I became curious about the topic in marketing classes and wanted to know more. Everything about the topic was new but relevant to me, and being a traveller myself, it was easy to relate to the topic. This topic helped me understand the different psychological motivations of different tourists and local people I have met, so it will be easier in the future to connect with people and understand them and myself better while travelling.

6.5. Concluding Remarks

Social-psychological distance is a segment of construal level theory that has provided few insights in the travel and tourism literature. This qualitative interpretive research involved secondary data collection of reviews and comments posted on online travel websites and used a netnographic approach. The research objectives were achieved by analysing the online reviews and comments and comparing the findings with those in the literature. The results drawn from the findings and literature suggested that Indian tourists were influenced by low social-psychological distance. It emerged from the analysis of the online reviews and comments that Indian tourists choose to visit Kuala Lumpur because the city reminds them of India. As such, Kuala Lumpur served as a gateway from India to India at a popular international destination.

The Indian outbound tourist market had been growing rapidly until COVID-19 pandemic happened, with increasing numbers of Indian tourists wanting to travel overseas at least once in their lifetime. The first-time international travellers want to visit Asian countries before travelling to Western countries due to the cultural familiarity in Asia. Therefore, it is evident that low social-psychological distance plays a significant role in outbound travel because even at an unknown international destination tourists can find a familiar culture and friendly locals, giving them a sense of relief.

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