

**TRAVEL INTENTION TO MALAYSIA AMONG
CHINESE MILLENNIALS: MODERATING
EFFECT OF PERCEIVED CULTURAL DISTANCE
USING SOR MODEL**

JIA XINLIN

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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USING SOR MODEL**

by

JIA XINLIN

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LIST OF SYMBOLS

β	Path (β) coefficients
f^2	Effect size
Q^2	Predictive relevance
R^2	Coefficient of determination

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AVE	Average Variance Extracted
BC	Behavioural Characteristics
CB	Covariance-Based
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CMB	Common Method Bias
CMV	Common Method Variance
CNY	Chinese Yuan
CR	Composite Reliability
DMOs	Destination Marketing Organizations
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
eWOM	Electronic Word-of-Mouth
HTMT	Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio
IATA	International Air Transport Association
MATTA	Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents
MOTAC	Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia
MTA	Motivation to Travel Abroad
MYR	Malaysian Ringgit
OTC	Overseas Travel Convenience
P – P Plot	Probability – Probability Plot
PCD	Perceived Cultural Distance
PLS	Partial Least Squares
SC	Social Characteristics
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEM	Structural Equation Model
SOR	Stimulus – Organism – Response
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TI	Travel Intention
TIM	Travel Intention to Malaysia
TLS	Tourism Live Streaming
TPB	Theory of Planned Behavior
TR	Travel Risk

UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
USD	United States Dollar
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor
WHO	World Health Organization
WTTC	World Travel & Tourism Council

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**NIAT MELANCONG DALAM KALANGAN MILENIAL CHINA KE
MALAYSIA: KESAN PENYEDERHANAAN PERSEPSI JARAK BUDAYA
MENGUNAKAN MODEL SOR**

ABSTRAK

Dasar bebas visa antara China dan Malaysia telah membuka peluang baharu dalam sektor pelancongan, terutamanya dalam kalangan milenial China. Kajian ini meneliti faktor-faktor utama yang mempengaruhi motivasi melancong dan niat mereka untuk memilih Malaysia sebagai destinasi pelancongan dalam konteks dasar tersebut. Berpandukan kerangka Rangsangan-Organisma-Respons (SOR), kajian ini mengkaji bagaimana empat rangsangan—interaktiviti dan keaslian dalam penstriman langsung pelancongan, kemudahan melancong ke luar negara, dan risiko pelancongan — mempengaruhi empat dimensi motivasi melancong: pencapaian sendiri, pergaulan sosial, pencarian keseronokan, dan pelarian. Setiap motivasi dianalisis secara berasingan untuk mengenal pasti corak tingkah laku yang berbeza. Kajian ini turut meneroka peranan perantara bagi motivasi-motivasi ini serta kesan penyederhanaan jarak budaya yang dirasakan antara China dan Malaysia. Data dikumpul melalui tinjauan dalam talian (Wenjuanxing) yang menyasarkan milenial China (lahir antara 1981 – 1996) dan dianalisis menggunakan SPSS dan SmartPLS. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa keempat-empat rangsangan memberikan kesan signifikan terhadap pelbagai dimensi motivasi. Motivasi pencapaian sendiri, pencarian keseronokan, dan pelarian memberi kesan positif terhadap niat memilih destinasi, manakala motivasi pergaulan sosial tidak menunjukkan kesan yang signifikan. Analisis pengantaraan mengesahkan bahawa tiga motivasi tersebut (kecuali motivasi pergaulan sosial) menjadi pengantara yang signifikan antara

rangsangan dan niat destinasi. Analisis penyederhanaan jarak budaya yang dirasai—merangkumi pemeliharaan budaya, ciri sosial, dan ciri tingkah laku—menunjukkan kesan yang pelbagai, termasuk kesan positif, negatif, dan tidak signifikan. Dapatan ini menekankan interaksi kompleks antara pengaruh digital, kemudahan perjalanan, persepsi budaya, dan motivasi psikologi dalam membentuk tingkah laku pelancong. Kajian ini menawarkan perspektif pelbagai dimensi terhadap motivasi melancong dalam konteks dasar visa yang berubah, serta memberikan panduan penting kepada pemasar destinasi dan penggubal dasar dalam merangka strategi yang peka budaya dan dipacu motivasi bagi menarik pelancong dari China.

**TRAVEL INTENTION TO MALAYSIA AMONG CHINESE
MILLENNIALS: MODERATING EFFECT OF PERCEIVED CULTURAL
DISTANCE USING SOR MODEL**

ABSTRACT

The visa-free policy between China and Malaysia has created new opportunities for tourism, especially among Chinese millennials. The study investigates the key factors influencing their travel motivations and intention to choose Malaysia as a destination under this background. Guided by the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework, the study examines how four stimuli—interactivity and authenticity in tourism live streaming, overseas travel convenience, and travel risk—affect four dimensions of travel motivation: self-fulfillment, socializing, pleasure-seeking, and escape. Each motivation is analyzed separately to reveal distinct behavioral patterns. The study also explores the mediating role of these motivations and the moderating effects of perceived cultural distance between China and Malaysia. Data were collected via an online survey (Wenjuanxing) targeting Chinese millennials (born 1981–1996) and analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS. Results indicate that all four stimuli significantly influence different motivation dimensions. Self-fulfillment, pleasure-seeking, and escape motivations positively affect destination intention, while socializing motivation does not. Mediation analysis confirms that these three motivations (excluding socializing motivation) significantly mediate the relationship between stimuli and destination intention. Moderation analysis of perceived cultural distance—including cultural retention, social characteristics, and behavioral characteristics—reveals a mix of effects, including positive, negative, and non-significant moderating effects. These

findings highlight the complex interplay between digital influence, travel convenience, cultural perception, and psychological motivation in shaping tourist behavior. The study offers a multidimensional perspective on travel motivation under changing visa policies and provides valuable insights for destination marketers and policymakers in developing culturally sensitive and motivation-driven strategies to attract Chinese tourists.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

The global tourism industry has faced significant challenges in recent years, including Malaysia, with various factors influencing travel patterns and the economic landscape. China has long been a leading country for outbound tourism. As the world recovers from the pandemic and the global economy begins to rebound, there is an urgent need for destinations to regain travelers' trust and attract visitors, especially amid recent disruptions and economic uncertainty. Alongside the recent focus of countries on visa-free access to Chinese passports, this phase presents an opportunity for the tourism industry to re-strategize, emphasizing security assurances and engaging experiences to reignite visitor interest. Now is the time to innovate and adapt, ensuring the industry can meet the changing expectations of tourists in a world reshaped by recent events.

1.1.1 Chinese Outbound Tourism Recovery

Heading into 2024, the resurgence of Chinese outbound tourism heralds a promising wave of exploration and cultural exchange. Despite the precautionary measures taken by Chinese tourists to travel abroad last year, this year is showing hopeful signs, not only indicating a full recovery but also promising growth in Chinese outbound travel.

The resumption of administrative procedures for processing Chinese passports and visas is an important milestone. China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced in August 2023 that it would allow travel agencies to resume Chinese group tours to 138 countries, marking a significant step forward (China.org.cn, 2023). The increase in flights between China and other countries is a

clear sign of renewed confidence in international travel. Airlines are realigning their services to provide Chinese travelers with more options to explore all corners of the globe, offering enhanced connectivity at more affordable prices. Recent agreements to add routes between China and other countries are evidence of renewed confidence in global travel.

Effective December 1, 2023, the Chinese government has introduced a 15-day visa-free entry policy for Malaysian citizens holding ordinary passports. This arrangement applies to visits for business, tourism, family reunions, and transit, according to the Chinese Embassy in Malaysia. In return, Malaysia has reciprocated by granting visa-free entry to Chinese citizens for stays of up to 30 days, as announced by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The two nations are also pursuing deeper cooperation in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations in 2024 (Reuters). In May 2024, Malaysia extended the visa-free policy for Chinese citizens until the end of 2025 (The Star). Moreover, starting June 1, 2024, Chinese tourists have been granted access to self-service e-gates for immigration clearance, further facilitating smoother entry procedures (The Star).

Although domestic flights in China have rebounded strongly, international routes remain below pre-pandemic levels. In August 2023, the number of international flights in China was 20,940, significantly lower compared to less than 500 per week since the beginning of 2023, which was less than half the figure for the same month in 2019. The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) aims to reach 80 percent of pre-Covid-19 levels by the end of 2024, boosting optimism about increased connectivity and travel frequency (Reuters).

1.1.2 Changes in the Tourism Market: China and Malaysia

The easing of visa restrictions has reshaped the global tourism landscape, especially for Chinese tourists, a major market due to their increasing travel interest and economic influence. Southeast Asian countries—such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore—have responded by implementing visa-free policies to attract this demographic.

As of July 2025, Chinese passport holders can visit 80 countries and territories without a visa, up from 48 in January 2024 (VisaGuide.world, 2025). This expansion reflects China's commitment to encouraging outbound tourism and supporting economic recovery in destination countries.

Malaysia has extended its visa-free entry for Chinese tourists until December 31, 2026, allowing stays of up to 30 days (Malaysian Immigration Department, 2025). Initially introduced on December 1, 2023, the policy aims to boost Malaysia's tourism sector, a key contributor to its economy. The Malaysian Tourism Minister has defended the initiative, citing positive effects on hospitality, food and beverage, and logistics industries (Free Malaysia Today, 2025).

On July 17, 2025, Malaysia and China launched a mutual visa-free travel agreement. Malaysian citizens can now stay in China for up to 90 days within a 180-day period (The Star, 2025). Although some reports suggest the same 90-day allowance applies to Chinese visitors, official sources confirm that the 30-day limit remains in place (Malaysian Immigration Department, 2025). This agreement strengthens bilateral ties and enhances people-to-people exchanges.

The 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia in 2024 provided a strategic opportunity to showcase Malaysia's cultural diversity, natural landscapes, and modern infrastructure. While the visa-free policy has sparked

interest among Chinese travelers, Malaysia faces stiff competition from more established destinations like Thailand and Indonesia. In response, the Malaysian government is leveraging this diplomatic milestone through cultural events, business forums, and marketing campaigns aimed at Chinese tourists (Travel and Tour World, 2025).

Thailand has long been a favorite among Chinese travelers. Platforms like Fliggy reported a surge in flight searches following Thailand’s visa-free announcement (Bangkok Post, 2024). However, recent safety concerns and economic issues—such as U.S. tariffs—have led to a slight drop in Chinese arrivals, potentially creating opportunities for Malaysia to increase its market share (Travel and Tour World, 2025). Indonesia also competes for Chinese tourists with its rich cultural heritage and natural beauty, though its visa process remains less convenient. Table 1.1 presents a comparison of visa-free policies and tourism competitiveness among key Southeast Asian destinations.

Table 1.1 Comparison of Visa-Free Policies and Tourism Competitiveness

Country	Visa-Free Duration for Chinese Tourists	Key Attractions	Challenges
Malaysia	Up to 30 days (until Dec 31, 2026)	Cultural diversity, eco-tourism, urban centers	Safety perceptions, competition from Thailand
Thailand	Permanent visa-free entry (since Mar 1, 2024)	Beaches, cultural sites, vibrant nightlife	Recent safety concerns, economic factors
Indonesia	Visa on arrival or e-visa	Bali, cultural heritage, natural landscapes	Less streamlined visa process

To stand out, Malaysia must emphasize its unique offerings—including multicultural festivals, eco-tourism experiences, and dynamic urban attractions like Kuala Lumpur.

1.1.3 New Trends and Preferences of Chinese Millennials

Chinese millennials (born ~1980–2000) and Gen Z (born ~1995–2010) are reshaping outbound tourism by favoring unique, personalized, and sustainable experiences over traditional sightseeing tours (China Trading Desk, 2024; Skift, 2025). Travel enthusiasm is particularly strong among the 15–35 age group, who actively use digital platforms such as Ctrip and Fliggy to seek travel inspiration and deals (China Trading Desk, 2024). In 2024, China’s outbound tourism market is projected to reach 130 million trips—nearly 90% of pre-pandemic levels—and is expected to hit 200 million by 2028 (Skift, 2025). This growth is driven by eased travel restrictions and improved global connectivity, aligning with younger travelers’ desire for adventure and cultural immersion.

Social media plays a pivotal role in shaping travel preferences. Platforms such as Douyin (China’s TikTok) and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) have become influential channels for short videos and user-generated content (TTG Asia, 2024; Skift, 2025). For instance, Xiaohongshu reported a 30-fold increase in searches for "urban walking" content in the first half of 2023 compared to 2019, with posts like “Guangzhou City Walk” receiving over 171,000 likes (TTG Asia, 2024). Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) further amplify this influence by sharing immersive, experience-based content that guides millennials’ travel decisions (China Trading Desk, 2025; EternityX, 2024).

Within China’s unique digital ecosystem—where platforms like Instagram and YouTube are inaccessible—WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu dominate the online travel landscape (iClick Interactive, 2023). These platforms integrate services ranging from itinerary planning to mobile payment, offering a seamless travel experience. OTAs such as Ctrip and Fliggy increasingly target high-

end travelers with customized packages. Moreover, emerging technologies—including AI-powered trip planning, real-time translation, and AR-based immersive content—are enhancing user experiences and setting new standards for convenience and service quality (iClick Interactive, 2023).

1.1.4 Attractiveness of Malaysia as a Tourist Destination

Malaysia has cemented its position as a top destination for Chinese travelers, thanks to its rich cultural heritage, natural beauty, vibrant urban centers, and proactive government policies. In 2024, the country welcomed 25.02 million international tourists—a 24.2% increase from 2023—with Chinese arrivals reaching 3.29 million, making China the third-largest source market after Singapore and Indonesia (Reuters, 2025).

This momentum carried into 2025. From January to April, Malaysia recorded 13.4 million international arrivals, including 1.4 million from China—a 37.8% year-on-year increase (Tourism Malaysia, 2025). Notably, Malaysia surpassed Thailand as the top Southeast Asian destination for Chinese tourists, driven by strategic visa policies and enhanced accessibility (Nation Thailand, 2025).

The tourism sector has shown strong post-pandemic recovery. Although the 2024 target of 27.3 million arrivals was slightly missed, the overall growth remains significant. In early 2025, Chinese arrivals alone rose 27% in Q1, contributing to RM27.5 billion (USD6.5 billion) in tourism receipts. Average spending per Chinese tourist reached RM4,300 (Belt and Road Portal, 2025).

Visa-friendly policies have played a crucial role. Malaysia has extended visa-free entry for Chinese citizens until December 31, 2026, with potential plans to continue through 2030 (Travel and Leisure Asia, 2025). These measures proved

especially effective during peak travel periods like China's Golden Week, when Chinese tourists spent RM9.05 billion from January to June 2024 (The Star, 2024).

Malaysia's cultural diversity—rooted in Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous influences—offers a uniquely immersive experience. Celebrations such as Chinese New Year, Deepavali, and Hari Raya provide rich cultural exposure. Research by Vu et al. (2020) highlights how such multiculturalism aligns with tourists' desire for authentic experiences. Cities like Kuala Lumpur and Penang's George Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, are particularly appealing to Chinese travelers due to shared cultural ties and diverse attractions.

Nature is another cornerstone of Malaysia's appeal. With destinations like Taman Negara and Langkawi, the country promotes ecotourism as a key strategy. Studies such as Liyushiana et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of sustainable tourism in attracting eco-conscious travelers, particularly Chinese millennials (Market Me China, 2024).

Government initiatives support this vision. The Tourism Malaysia Strategic Plan 2022–2026 prioritizes ecotourism, cultural experiences, and luxury travel. The Visit Malaysia 2026 campaign, launched in January 2025, targets 35.6 million international arrivals and RM147.1 billion (USD33 billion) in receipts, focusing on sustainability and inclusivity (Skift, 2025). Efforts like sales missions to Beijing and partnerships with Chinese agencies further reinforce Malaysia's visibility in the Chinese market, backed by RM10 million allocated for 2025 promotional activities (Reuters, 2025).

1.1.5 Reasons for Chinese Millennials' Travel Intention to Malaysia

Malaysia has become a top destination for Chinese millennials due to a mix of cultural familiarity, convenience, affordability, and safety. In 2024, the country

welcomed 3.29 million Chinese tourists, a 24.2% increase from the previous year. Between January and April 2025 alone, 1.4 million Chinese visitors arrived, marking a 37.8% year-on-year growth (Tourism Malaysia, 2025; Reuters, 2025). This surge is particularly evident among millennials. Malaysia's multicultural society, with ethnic Chinese accounting for 23.2% of the population, fosters a sense of familiarity (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). The presence of Chinese communities—descendants of immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong—brings shared language and traditions, such as Mandarin and Cantonese, Chinese New Year celebrations, and cuisine. This blend of cultural comfort and diversity appeals to millennials seeking both familiarity and novelty. Cultural hubs like George Town in Penang and Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown offer immersive experiences that resonate deeply with Chinese visitors.

Malaysia has also tailored its tourism infrastructure to meet the preferences of tech-savvy Chinese millennials. Chinese-language services, including signage and tour guides, as well as the availability of authentic Chinese cuisine, enhance the visitor experience. Compatibility with mobile payment platforms like Alipay and WeChat Pay aligns with millennials' digital habits (Zhang et al., 2022). Moreover, partnerships with platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin support personalized, tech-driven trip planning (Channel News Asia, 2025). These features contribute to Malaysia's growing popularity. Chinese tourists spent 9.05 billion ringgit (about USD 2.1 billion) in the first half of 2024 alone (The Star, 2024). In addition, Malaysia's political stability and low crime rates attract safety-conscious millennials. With a violent crime rate of one homicide per 100,000 people, it is considered safer than regional competitors like Thailand, where concerns have led to a 34% drop in Chinese arrivals since 2019 (Travellers Worldwide, 2023; Nation Thailand, 2025).

Research highlights that perceived safety and stability are especially influential for younger travelers (Konak, 2022). Although localized risks remain in areas like eastern Sabah, Malaysia is largely seen as a secure and stress-free travel option.

The visa-free policy for Chinese nationals, introduced in December 2023 and extended until the end of 2026, has further boosted travel. It allows up to 30-day stays, reducing barriers and encouraging longer visits (Reuters, 2023). The policy's success is reflected in the 160% surge in Chinese arrivals during the first eight months of 2024, totaling 2.29 million. Projections estimate 5 million Chinese visitors in 2025 (The Star, 2024; Xinhua, 2024). The "Xin-Ma-Tai" route, which connects Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, makes Malaysia an easy stop for Chinese tourists entering from Singapore (Malay Mail, 2024). More direct and charter flights from China have also enhanced accessibility (The Star, 2024). For millennials seeking personalized and culturally rich experiences, Malaysia offers diverse options. These include eco-tourism sites like Taman Negara and cultural destinations like Melaka. The country's commitment to sustainable tourism aligns with millennials' values. As part of the Visit Malaysia 2026 campaign, Malaysia aims to attract 35.6 million international tourists and generate 147.1 billion ringgit in receipts (Skift, 2025; Nikkei Asia, 2025). Initiatives such as appointing Chinese actress Fan Bingbing as Melaka's tourism ambassador also help strengthen emotional and cultural ties with young Chinese travelers (Channel News Asia, 2025).

Past experiences and personal connections with local communities also influence millennials' intentions to revisit. Emotional bonds—formed through cultural festivals, local interactions, and meaningful travel moments—foster a strong sense of attachment (Wang & Lee, 2022). Events like the Penang Chinese New Year Celebration offer familiar cultural elements, enhancing a sense of belonging (Xinhua,

2024). These experiences are particularly valued by millennials, who prioritize authenticity and emotional engagement. In addition, Malaysia’s affordability and pro-business policies attract young travelers interested in combining leisure with lifestyle exploration or business opportunities (ThinkChina, 2024). With average spending of 4,300 ringgit (about USD 1,000) per trip, Malaysia appeals to budget-conscious tourists (Belt and Road Portal, 2025). Its location along the “Xin-Ma-Tai” route further boosts accessibility, with projections estimating that Chinese tourism spending could exceed 30 billion ringgit by 2025 (Malay Mail, 2024). These combined factors—economic value, cultural depth, and convenience—make Malaysia an increasingly attractive destination for Chinese millennials. Table 1.2 summarizes the key reasons behind Chinese millennials’ travel intentions toward Malaysia, highlighting the interplay of emotional, economic, and strategic factors.

Table 1.2 Key Reasons for Chinese Millennials’ Travel Intention to Malaysia

Reason	Description	Impact on Chinese Millennials
Cultural Familiarity	23.2% ethnic Chinese population, shared festivals, and cuisine	Creates a sense of home while offering diverse experiences
Tailored Infrastructure	Chinese-language services, cuisine, and digital payment compatibility	Enhances convenience and aligns with tech-savvy preferences
Political Stability and Safety	Low crime rate, stable political environment	Provides security in a globally uncertain climate
Visa-Free Policy	Extended to 2026, allows 30-day stays	Simplifies travel, boosts arrivals to 3.29 million in 2024
Sustainable Experiences	Eco-tourism and cultural attractions like Taman Negara and George Town	Meets demand for meaningful, eco-conscious travel
Economic Advantages	Affordable travel, high spending power (30 billion ringgit projected by 2025)	Appeals to budget-conscious and high-spending millennials

1.1.6 Risks and Challenges

Malaysia's tourism industry has experienced robust growth, particularly among Chinese tourists, who accounted for 3.29 million arrivals in 2024 and 1.4 million from January to April 2025—making Malaysia the leading Southeast Asian destination for this segment (Tourism Malaysia, 2025; Nation Thailand, 2025). However, sustaining this momentum requires addressing several key risks: safety concerns, regional competition, evolving tourist preferences, and logistical barriers. This section explores these challenges, their implications, and why resolving them is essential for long-term sustainability.

Safety perceptions play a critical role in destination choice among Chinese tourists. While Malaysia is generally considered safer than Thailand—where high-profile incidents contributed to a 34% decline in Chinese arrivals since 2019 (Nation Thailand, 2025)—localized safety issues persist. For example, a street robbery in Kuala Lumpur in 2025 went viral on Douyin (Travel Daily News, 2025). Heightening safety concerns despite Malaysia's low violent crime rate of one homicide per 100,000 people (Travellers Worldwide, 2023). Such incidents underscore the importance of strengthened safety protocols and timely, transparent communication to reassure travelers.

In the post-pandemic era, Chinese tourists—especially millennials—tend to favor domestic or budget-friendly international travel due to economic uncertainty and previous negative experiences, such as telecom scams and casino fraud (Reuters, 2023). According to Market Me China (2024), this demographic increasingly values sustainability and immersive experiences. Malaysia must respond by offering secure, culturally rich, and environmentally conscious travel options—leveraging strengths such as multicultural festivals and natural attractions like Taman Negara.

Despite visa-friendly initiatives, practical obstacles remain. The global aviation industry has yet to fully recover to pre-2019 levels, limiting flight availability and raising costs (South China Morning Post, 2025). Furthermore, incidents such as Chinese tourists reportedly being detained at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in 2023 can deter potential visitors (The Star, 2023). Improving air connectivity and border efficiency is therefore essential to ensuring a seamless travel experience.

Addressing these challenges is vital for Malaysia to maintain its competitive advantage in the Chinese market, which contributed RM9.05 billion in spending from January to June 2024 alone (The Star, 2024). Ignoring safety issues may erode trust and reduce high-value tourism. Competing effectively requires continual enhancement of service quality and differentiated offerings. Catering to evolving preferences, particularly among millennials, allows Malaysia to attract travelers seeking meaningful and sustainable experiences. Lastly, tackling logistical constraints boosts convenience—a crucial factor in traveler satisfaction. Proactive strategies in these areas will not only strengthen Malaysia's appeal but also support its tourism industry, which employs over 2.3 million people and significantly contributes to GDP (South China Morning Post, 2025).

1.2 Problem Statement

The global tourism landscape has undergone significant transformations, driven by bilateral agreements between the People's Republic of China and Malaysia, signed on April 16, 2025, and effective from July 17, 2025, allowing mutual visa exemptions for up to 30 days per entry within a 180-day period (The Star, 2025). This builds on Malaysia's unilateral visa-free policy for Chinese nationals,

initiated on December 1, 2023, extended to December 31, 2026, and potentially to 2030 (Malaysian Immigration Department, 2025; Travel and Leisure Asia, 2025). These agreements have reshaped travel dynamics, boosting Malaysia's tourism sector, with 3.29 million Chinese tourists in 2024, a 160% increase from 1.4 million in 2023, though falling short of the 5 million target (Reuters, 2025). From January to April 2025, Malaysia welcomed 1.4 million Chinese visitors, a 37.8% year-on-year increase, surpassing Thailand as the top Southeast Asian destination for Chinese tourists (Tourism Malaysia, 2025; Nation Thailand, 2025). However, these policies necessitate a reassessment of destination marketing strategies and service offerings to address practical challenges such as inadequate multilingual services, regional infrastructure disparities, and cultural misunderstandings that hinder Malaysia's ability to fully capitalize on this opportunity (Jiang et al., 2024).

Understanding the factors influencing tourists' travel intentions is critical, encompassing personal experiences, service quality, and emotional connections (He et al., 2022; Hu & Xu, 2021; Şahin & Güzel, 2020). Conversely, perceived risks, past dissatisfaction, or the allure of alternative destinations like Thailand and Vietnam, which also saw significant Chinese arrivals in 2024 (South China Morning Post, 2025), can deter travel intentions (Addo et al., 2020; Najar & Rather, 2023). Malaysia, a multicultural nation blending Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous cultures, shares cultural commonalities with China, making it an appealing destination. However, studies highlight that inadequate multilingual services, insufficient marketing on Chinese social media platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu, and inaccurate cultural or religious guidance limit its appeal to Chinese tourists, particularly millennials seeking personalized and sustainable experiences (Jiang et al., 2024; Market Me China, 2024). The study aims to explore

how these preferences shape tourism marketing strategies, product innovation, and service delivery to enhance Malaysia' s competitiveness.

The mutual visa exemption has facilitated travel, contributing to 27.5 billion ringgit (6.5 billion USD) in tourism receipts in Q1 2025, with Chinese tourists spending an average of 4,300 ringgit per person (Belt and Road Portal, 2025). Yet, challenges persist, including the risk of illegal work due to relaxed entry, requiring enhanced enforcement (Free Malaysia Today, 2025), and the need to align infrastructure with the influx of visitors. Cultural misunderstandings, such as misinterpretations of local customs, further complicate tourist experiences, particularly for Chinese millennials who value authentic cultural engagement (Fan et al., 2023; Li & Kwortnik Jr, 2021). Geopolitical shifts and evolving diplomatic relations may introduce uncertainties, affecting perceptions of visa-free policies and complicating communication (Song et al., 2017).

In tourism live streaming, discrepancies between Malaysia ' s portrayed image on platforms like Douyin and actual tourist experiences pose a significant challenge, potentially lowering satisfaction and deterring repeat visits (Liang et al., 2024). For instance, Xiaohongshu is a primary platform for nearly half of Chinese tourists to obtain destination information (TTG Asia, 2024), with around 38% using it during the booking process. Social media overall accounts for over 50% of travel inspiration sources (Dragon Trail, 2025). As such, misaligned content portrayals can easily lead to a mismatch between tourists ' expectations and actual experiences. The rapid evolution of tourist preferences, particularly among Chinese millennials who prioritize sustainability and experiential travel, adds complexity to maintaining a relevant destination image (Skift, 2025). Chinese travelers heavily rely on online reviews and peer-shared content when planning their trips. Failure to meet their

expectations may lead to negative feedback online, potentially harming Malaysia's destination image and tourism reputation. (PhocusWire, 2024).

Convenience is pivotal in attracting international tourists, but catering to diverse needs remains challenging. Malaysia's varied offerings, from luxury resorts to local homestays, struggle with inconsistent service standards across regions, particularly in less-developed areas like Sabah and Sarawak (The Star, 2025). Differing perceptions of convenience among Chinese tourists, accustomed to seamless digital ecosystems like WeChat and Ctrip, demand high-quality, integrated services (iClick Interactive, 2023; Shahijan et al., 2018). In 2024, many Chinese tourists expressed dissatisfaction with Malaysia's digital booking systems, citing issues such as slower payment processing and less user-friendly interfaces compared to China's OTAs. This highlights a gap in digital integration between the two markets (China Trading Desk, 2024).

Perceived risks, such as safety concerns amplified on social media, health protocols, or economic uncertainties, significantly influence travel decisions (Hu & Xu, 2023; Konak, 2022; Norris et al., 2021). In Malaysia, concerns about petty crime and inconsistent safety measures have been noted by some Chinese tourists and online commentators, potentially deterring future visitors despite Malaysia's overall reputation as a safe destination (South China Morning Post, 2025). The lack of transparent travel and health guidelines exacerbates these concerns, leading to hesitation in trip planning (Çevik, 2020; Fengmin et al., 2022). For example, In 2025, Malaysia temporarily surpassed Thailand in attracting Chinese tourists, driven by proactive visa policies and airline capacity improvements. While Thailand saw a 34% year-on-year drop in Chinese arrivals, Malaysia's relative gains highlight the

importance of seamless travel procedures and perceived safety (Nation Thailand, 2025).

Chinese millennials' travel decisions are shaped by a complex interplay of personal desires, societal expectations, and practical realities. Their preference for "Special Forces travel" — maximizing experiences in short trips — requires Malaysia to offer diverse, high-intensity itineraries (Travel Weekly Asia, 2024). However, navigating cultural, social, and economic barriers, compounded by rapid technological changes and social media influence, complicates their decision-making (Abdulla et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Perceived cultural distance between China and Malaysia, if not addressed through culturally sensitive marketing, can hinder meaningful engagement (Fan et al., 2023).

The absence of a comprehensive framework to assess Chinese tourists' visit intentions in the visa-free era poses a significant challenge. While factors like convenience, safety, and cultural appeal are recognized, integrating them into a cohesive strategy remains difficult. For instance, destinations focusing solely on visa-free convenience without addressing health risks or cultural nuances may fail to attract discerning travelers (Fengmin et al., 2022; Norris et al., 2021). In 2025, Malaysia's tourism sector faces the risk of losing market share to regional competitors such as Thailand, which has experienced a surge in Chinese tourist arrivals driven by aggressive digital marketing strategies (South China Morning Post, 2025).

In summary, Malaysia's tourism industry faces multifaceted challenges in leveraging the China-Malaysia visa exemption to attract Chinese tourists, particularly millennials. Addressing inadequate multilingual services, infrastructure disparities, cultural misunderstandings, and digital marketing gaps is critical to meeting the 35.6

million tourist arrival target for Visit Malaysia 2026 (Skift, 2025). The study is essential to understanding these dynamics, offering insights to enhance Malaysia's appeal, boost tourism revenue, and strengthen bilateral ties with China through tailored policies and strategies.

1.3 Objectives of The Study

The intent of this empirical research is to address the following research objectives:

1. Examine the impact of Tourism Live Streaming (interactivity and authenticity) on Motivation to Travel Abroad (self-fulfilment, socialising, pleasure-seeking, and escape).
2. Test the effects of Overseas Travel Convenience on Motivation to Travel Abroad.
3. Examine the effects of Travel Risk on Motivation to Travel Abroad.
4. Determine the influence of Motivation to Travel Abroad on Travel Intention to Malaysia.
5. Investigate the mediating role of Motivation to Travel Abroad in the relationship between external stimulus factors and Travel Intention to Malaysia.
6. Assess the moderating effect of Perceived Cultural Distance (cultural retention, behavioural characteristics, and social characteristics) in the relationship between Motivation to Travel Abroad and Travel Intention to Malaysia.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated to guide the empirical investigation:

1. Do the interactivity and authenticity of Tourism Live Streaming influence Motivation to Travel Abroad (self-fulfilment, socialising, pleasure-seeking, and escape)?
2. Does Overseas Travel Convenience affect Motivation to Travel Abroad?
3. Does Travel Risk have an effect on Motivation to Travel Abroad?
4. Does Motivation to Travel Abroad influence Travel Intention to Malaysia?
5. Does Motivation to Travel Abroad mediate the relationship between external stimulus factors and Travel Intention to Malaysia?
6. Does Perceived Cultural Distance (cultural retention, behavioural characteristics, and social characteristics) moderate the relationship between Motivation to Travel Abroad and Travel Intention to Malaysia?

1.5 Scope of The Study

The study aims to identify the factors influencing the willingness of Chinese millennial tourists to travel to Malaysia in the context of the new visa-free policy in China and other countries. Specifically, it focuses on Tourism Live Streaming, Overseas travel convenience, Perceived Risk factors.

The study targets Chinese millennial travelers born between 1981 and 1996. It will test various hypotheses regarding the positive and negative impact of these factors on the willingness of Chinese tourists to visit Malaysia.

The sample consists of Chinese tourists who have previously traveled using travel agencies. The electronic questionnaire was distributed through these travel agencies, targeting individuals who have previously utilized their services. The aim was to collect Chinese tourists' perceptions of Tourism Live Streaming (TLS), Overseas Travel Convenience (OTC), Perceived Risk (PR), Motivation to Travel

Abroad (MTA), and Perceived Cultural Distance (PCD), among other factors. However, the study did not consider other potential factors extensively studied by other scholars, such as destination image, travel experience, and service quality.

Its findings may not apply to visitors from other countries or destinations outside Malaysia. This geographical limitation was intentional and based on several justifications. First, Malaysia and China have recently established a mutual visa exemption policy, offering a timely and policy-relevant context for exploration. Second, Malaysia remains one of the most popular destinations for Chinese tourists due to cultural familiarity, geographical proximity, and a large ethnic Chinese population, making it a strategic and representative case for understanding millennial travel motivations under visa facilitation. Third, narrowing the scope to Chinese tourists traveling to Malaysia allows for a more focused analysis of the interaction between convenience, digital engagement, and travel intention. Therefore, the study specifically aims to explore the factors that affect Chinese tourists' willingness to visit Malaysia under the new visa-free policy.

1.6 Significance of The Study

The study provides both theoretical insights into tourist behavior and practical guidance for strengthening travel intention and developing effective tourism strategies.

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

The study makes a meaningful theoretical contribution by adopting the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model as the primary conceptual framework—supported by the Push-Pull theory and classical destination choice models—to investigate Chinese millennials' travel intentions toward Malaysia in the context of

the visa exemption policy. The integration of these frameworks provides a comprehensive explanation of how external tourism-related stimuli interact with internal psychological mechanisms to shape travel behavior in a digitally mediated and policy-driven tourism environment.

The SOR model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) serves as the overarching structure, offering a causal pathway from environmental stimuli (S) to internal psychological processing (O) and ultimately to behavioral response (R). In the study, the external stimuli are defined as perceived pull factors that influence tourists' internal states even before travel occurs. These include Tourism Live Streaming (TSL), capturing the perceived authenticity and interactivity of digital travel content; Overseas Travel Convenience, representing tourists' perception of ease in planning and executing international travel; and Perceived Travel Risk, reflecting concerns over health, safety, and destination stability. These constructs function simultaneously as SOR stimuli and as pull factors in the Push-Pull framework, as they describe external attributes that make Malaysia more (or less) attractive to travelers.

The internal "organism" component is conceptualized as a second-order construct of travel motivation, representing push factors rooted in individuals' psychological needs. This multidimensional construct comprises four key motivational drivers: self-fulfillment, socializing, pleasure-seeking, and escape. Together, they reflect the internal desires prompting individuals to seek international travel experiences. These motivations act as mediators that convert external stimuli into intention, enriching the psychological depth of the SOR framework by capturing how individuals process and personalize tourism-related stimuli.

The behavioral response in the model is defined as travel intention, representing the likelihood and willingness to visit Malaysia. As the final outcome in the SOR framework, travel intention connects external exposure, internal motivation, and planned behavior into a coherent decision-making process. This alignment allows the model to explain how digital experiences, logistical ease, and perceived risks stimulate personal desires and translate into concrete travel plans.

While the SOR model provides the structural logic for causality, the Push-Pull theory serves a complementary function by categorizing the study's key variables. Push factors explain internal psychological drives (e.g., the four motivation dimensions), while pull factors identify destination features (e.g., TSL, convenience, risk) that influence tourist preferences. However, Push-Pull theory alone does not explain how or why these variables influence behavior—its explanatory power is descriptive rather than predictive. The SOR model, by contrast, introduces a psychological mechanism that bridges stimulus and response. Thus, combining both frameworks enhances the conceptual clarity and explanatory capacity of the study.

To strengthen the behavioral component, the study also incorporates insights from classical destination choice models, such as the General Model of Destination Choice, to contextualize how activated motivations influence the evaluation and selection of Malaysia as a destination. This layered approach bridges motivational theory with practical decision-making in the visa-exemption context.

Further extending the SOR framework, the study introduces Perceived Cultural Distance (PCD) as a moderating variable, adding complexity and cultural sensitivity to the behavioral model. While prior studies often treat cultural distance as a background factor, the study conceptualizes it as a boundary condition that shapes

the strength of the relationship between internal motivation and behavioral intention. PCD is measured through three dimensions: cultural retention (perceived continuity of one's cultural values abroad), behavioral characteristics (norms, habits, and conduct), and social characteristics (interpersonal dynamics and societal expectations). These factors help assess how cultural familiarity or unfamiliarity affects the likelihood of translating motivation into action.

By modeling PCD as a moderator, the study contributes to a more context-sensitive application of the SOR framework, revealing under what cultural conditions internal motivations become behaviorally effective. This responds to calls for more nuanced, cross-cultural approaches in tourism research and offers insights into how Chinese millennials, in particular, navigate cultural considerations when making international travel decisions.

In sum, the study extends the theoretical application of the SOR model into a novel policy and media-driven travel context, clarifies the complementary role of Push-Pull theory in structuring motivational content, and enhances cross-cultural understanding through the inclusion of PCD as a moderator. This integrative framework offers a robust explanation of how digital exposure, policy shifts, cultural perceptions, and personal desires converge to shape contemporary international tourist behavior.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

In the context of the Malaysia – China visa exemption, the study offers timely and practical insights into how Chinese millennial tourists form travel intentions based on external stimuli and internal motivations. As this group increasingly dominates the outbound tourism market, understanding their behavioral drivers is critical for Malaysia's tourism sector to attract and retain them effectively.

The findings provide tourism authorities and destination marketers with a clearer understanding of what motivates Chinese millennials—such as their desire for self-fulfillment, socialising, pleasure-seeking, and escape—while highlighting the influence of digital content (e.g., tourism live streaming), travel convenience, and perceived travel risk. These insights enable more targeted and personalized marketing strategies, including content creation that emphasizes authenticity and interactivity, simplified service delivery, and reassurances about health and safety.

From a destination management perspective, the study offers evidence-based guidance for designing tourism products, promotional campaigns, and service innovations that align with the expectations of this digitally native and experience-driven demographic. Moreover, by identifying the moderating role of perceived cultural distance, the study also highlights the need for culturally sensitive services and inclusive communication strategies to enhance destination resonance and reduce psychological barriers to travel.

For policymakers, the results support the development of visa, safety, and infrastructure policies that enhance travel convenience and address emerging travel concerns. These efforts are essential not only for sustaining the momentum of the visa exemption policy but also for ensuring the long-term resilience and competitiveness of Malaysia's tourism sector in a post-pandemic, digitally mediated tourism landscape.

In sum, the study serves as a practical reference for stakeholders seeking to navigate the evolving travel patterns of Chinese millennials, offering actionable strategies to boost tourism appeal, enhance visitor satisfaction, and ensure sustainable tourism development in line with global trends and national goals.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

In order to ensure clarity and understanding of the terminology used in the research, the following key terms have been defined and explained:

Millennials: Also known as Generation Y, are typically defined as individuals born between 1981 and 1996. (Pew Research Center)

Tourism Live Streaming (TLS): The phenomenon where tourists use live streaming platforms to share their tourism-related activities, document destination landscapes, and engage in real-time interaction with their audience.(X. Liang et al., 2024)

Overseas travel convenience (OTC): The perceived ease and efficiency with which travelers can plan, book, and complete their international travel experiences, encompassing aspects such as accessibility of information, booking simplicity, and ease of navigation. (Shahijan et al., 2018)

Travel Risk (TR): The potential hazards or dangers that individuals may encounter while traveling, including but not limited to health risks, safety concerns, political instability, natural disasters, and security threats. (Hasan et al., 2019)