

# EXPLORING THE INTERNET ADOPTION ON TOURISM SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (TSMES) IN MALAYSIA

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article reports the preliminary quantitative analysis findings of research conducted within Malaysia specifically in Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Pahang, Pulau Pinang and Sabah. This study explores the use of the internet by TSMES in Malaysia; specifically the objective is to identify the importance of internet on TSMES businesses. This study improves knowledge on the internet adopting among TSMES in Malaysia and its implication on business performance. Some strategies to assist TSMES in developing countries specifically in Malaysia to implement and improve the internet penetration are suggested.*

*Index Terms—Tourism small and medium tourism enterprises (TSMES), Internet, Tourism industry, Malaysia.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The development of Internet in the late 1990s, has transformed the way of business operations and strategic practices in tourism industry dramatically (Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005). Tourism industry can be seen as one of the first business sectors where business functions are almost exclusively using information and communications technologies (ICT) (Garzotto et al., 2004), thus Information Technology (IT) and ICT has played an important role in the development of tourism. The tourism industry is one of the more successful areas of e-commerce because it is largely consumer oriented and since services and the provision of information is at its centre. Werthner & Klein (1999) suggest tourism is a hybrid industry since even though it is dominated by the provision of information, essentially it is about a physical product. This requires the 'seamless integration of information and physical service, with flexible configurations of the physical and the informational parts" (Werthner

& Klien, 1999, p. 257). Penetration on ICT, facilitates this integration and enables customisation of tourism products to suit the needs of individuals. Now, the internet is believed to be the most cost-efficient tool for small and medium sized of tourism enterprises (TSMEs) to gain bigger markets and to attract potential customers to their tourism products, services and information (Salwani, Marthandan, Norzaidi, & Chong, 2009). This is in light with the advantages inherent in internet such as speed, user-friendliness, low cost and wide accessibility, which has allowed electronic commerce (e-commerce) to be increasingly diffused globally, bringing countries together into a global networked economy (Gibbs & Kraemer, 2004). Due to changes in consumer behaviour of the tourist the market is becoming more segmented with each potential consumer belonging to a number of market segments simultaneously. Then, this reflects the urgency of TSMEs to be aware of these changes and be equipped to respond, or better still, take a proactive approach based on the development of ICT globally.

In Malaysia, the increment numbers of internet users show high awareness on IT knowledge. It has been indicated that in 2011, number of registered Internet users in Malaysia totaled 17.7 million (Internet World Stats, 2011) and is believed the number will increase as the expansion is supported by technical innovations that have changed the seller-buyer relationship. This strong growth is due to the initiatives undertaken by the Malaysian government. For example, the Seventh Economy Plan (1996-2000) serves as testament to the country's serious attention on the necessary development of infrastructure and environment of ICT so as to ensure that they are in place to enable the country to move rapidly into the information age. In fact, investment in ICT in Malaysia has expanded at a rate of 9.2 percent per annum from RM 3.8 billion in 1995 to RM 5.9 billion in 2000 (Economic Planning Unit, 1996). Such efforts have been continued and expanded to the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2010) where various funds have been made available for ICT development in these enterprises (Economic Planning Unit, 2006). In addition, the National Information Technology Agenda was formulated in 1996 to help provide an ICT framework to develop Malaysia into an information and knowledge-based society by 2020.

The ICT industry received further boost when the Multimedia Super Corridor Malaysia (MSC Malaysia) project was conceptualized in 1996 to expedite the transformation process. (Khong Sin Tan, Chong, Lin, &

Eze, 2009). The MSC Malaysia offers an ideal growth environment for the ICT SMEs to transform themselves into world class companies through various incentives provided under the Promotion of Investment Act 1986. As of March 2008, there are 2,006 MSC Malaysia-status companies, in which more than 70 percent of them are locally-owned, largely SMEs (MCMC, 2012).

However, the penetration among SMEs in Malaysia only represent 14 percent from the total of SMEs establishments in the country (BERNAMA, 2012). This indicated level of awareness and readiness to adopt ICT are still low among Malaysia SMEs. Regardless, there are extensive efforts has been provided and concerted efforts has been made by the Malaysian government through the five year economic plans of Malaysia since 7th Malaysian Plan (1996-2000) until recently of the 10th Malaysian Plan (2010-2015) just to increase the awareness among SMEs through the financial and non-financial programs to support and encourage the ICT implementation in SMEs business.

This paper overviews the Internet adoption among TSMEs in Malaysia to indicate the perception of the importance of internet towards their business performance. Furthermore, most of the empirical research is mainly focused on the Internet adoption among SMEs in manufacturing industry, and SME in fact are characterized by the lack of knowledge about the real advantages of ICT could add to their business (King and Teo, 1994; Palvia et al., 1994). After the discussion of Internet usage, conclusion is drawn along with significant recommendation to improve ICT utilization amongst TSMEs.

#### *Tourism industry in Malaysia*

Malaysia, like many tourism-focused countries elsewhere, has witnessed spectacular growth in the tourism industry. Tourism has become one of the fastest growing sectors in the Malaysian economy. The Malaysian tourism industry has become one of the key foreign exchange earners, contributing to economic growth and development, as well as investment and employment. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2008) claimed that the tourism industry in Malaysia has contributed about 13.2 per cent to gross domestic product (GDP), employed 11.2 per cent of the total labour force, and generated earnings of 10.7 per cent of total exports.

The resilience of the tourism industry in Malaysia stems from the government's drive to ensure active participation of both the public and private sectors through vigorous promotion and marketing, diversifying target markets, as well as improving competitiveness of tourism products and services in an effort to sustain tourists' interest among tourists towards Malaysia. This was done through a series of five year economic developmental plans since the country's independence in 1957. Prior to the Visit Malaysia Year (VMY) campaign in 1990, the country's tourism revenue from 1981 to 1988 was in the range of RM 1000 million to RM 2000 million. Tourist receipts rose by 39% to RM 2803 million in 1989 and by 61per cent during Visit Malaysia Year 1990 to RM 4500 million. By 1994, the country's tourism revenue increased significantly to RM 8298 million, boosted by Visit Malaysia Year II campaign. The industry since then is the second major contributor to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The growth in tourist arrivals brings positive impact on business activities, particularly in the services sector in Malaysia. Increasing tourist arrivals means increased tourist expenses on accommodation, food and drinks, transportations, entertainment, shopping and other leisure activities at tourist destinations. These contribute to the growth of tourism small and medium-sized enterprises (TSMEs), which account for about 85 per cent of tourism businesses in Malaysia. In 2011 Malaysia received 24.7 million tourist arrivals generating RM58.3 billion in tourist receipts (Tourism Malaysia, 2011). Since 2000, the tourism industry is the second largest contributor to the country's national income, behind the industrial sector, which contributed US\$60 billion (Tourism Malaysia, 2008b). This reflects the importance of the tourism industry and the rationale behind Malaysian government's agenda for promoting tourism as a means of achieving sustained economic growth.

### **Literature review**

#### *ICT usage of SMEs in Malaysia*

Generally, ICT usage among SMEs in Malaysia is relatively low on their business operations (Lee, 2003; Hamid and Baharum, 2004) and most Malaysian family-based SMEs penetrate their business in conventional way (Lim, 2006). Likes wise, Mansor and Amri (2010) reported low usage on the Internet or E-commerce for business dealings and majority entrepreneurs in Kelantan. They are not using the latest technology such as computers in business operations and have little knowledge on IT. According to the Malaysian Minister of Entrepreneurship and

Development, about 70% of SME owners in Malaysia are IT illiterate (Utusan Malaysia, June 19, 2002).

Regardless to that, most SMEs in Malaysia realize that ICT is critical to the productivity and performance of their companies. Likewise, Soh et al (1997) supported that Malaysian SMEs can market themselves to domestics and international market using ICT, in gathering business information and consumer feedback, providing customer support and conducting electronic transactions. However, the hindrances in penetrating ICT among SMEs are due to inability to handle, lack of ICT expertise, expensive, risky and complex procedure (Yeung et al., 2003; Chong et. al., 2001; Pires and Aisbett, 2001, Mansor and Amri; 2010).

#### *TSMEs in Malaysia*

SMEs in Malaysia are defined based on the number of full-time employees or the total sales or revenue. Table 1 summarises the definitions of SMEs in Malaysia which are categorised into micro, small and medium enterprises.

Table 1: Definition of SMEs in Malaysia

<b>Category</b>	<b>Micro-enterprise</b>	<b>Small enterprise</b>	<b>Medium enterprise</b>
Manufacturing, Manufacturing-Related Services and Agro-based industries	Sales turnover of less than RM250,000 or fewer than five full-time employees.	Sales turnover between RM250,000 and RM10 million or between five and 50 full-time employees.	Sales turnover between RM10 million and RM25 million or between 51 and 150 full-time employees.
Services, Primary Agriculture and Information & Communication Technology (ICT)	Sales turnover of less than RM200,000 or fewer than five full-time employees.	Sales turnover between RM200,000 and RM1 million or between five and 19 full-time employees.	Sales turnover between RM1 million and RM5 million or between 20 and 50 full-time employees

Source: SMIDEC (2011)

The above definitions of SMEs in Malaysia are authorised by the National SME Development Council (NSDC), a government agency primarily responsible for SMEs development. SMEs in Malaysia are defined differently according to sector, similar to practices in other countries such as Hong Kong, Japan and Thailand. This study adopts the definition of

SMEs by the National SME Development Council. In the context of this study, SMEs include micro-, small and medium enterprises in Malaysia.

In 2005, there are total of 548,307 of SMEs operating in Malaysia. Table 2 shows the profile of SMEs in Malaysia, with SMEs services sector comprise 449,004 (86.6 percent) followed by SMEs in manufacturing with 39,376 (7.2 percent) and agriculture sector with 34,225 (6.2 percent). In terms of SMEs distribution in the services sector, majority of SMEs in services sector were in retail, restaurant, wholesale and other selected services. TSMEs only accounted for 2 percent compared to other SMEs in services. In spite of that TSMEs' play a crucial role in contributing income to the country through foreign exchange earning where Malaysia tourism industry as a whole is the second highest earner of foreign exchange (MOTOUR, 2011)

Table 2: Distribution of SMEs by Sectors

<b>Sector</b>	<b>SMEs</b>	<b>Proportion of SMEs (%)</b>
Manufacturing	39,376	7.2%
Agriculture	34,225	6.2%
Services	449,004	86.6%
-Retail	208,146	46.4%
-Restaurant	63,013	14.0%
-Wholesale	40,075	8.9%
-Other selected services <sup>1</sup>	37,082	8.2%
-Transport and Communication	27,980	6.2%
-Financial Intermediaries	19,108	4.3%
-Professional	11,120	2.5%
<b>-Tourism</b>	<b>10,940</b>	<b>2.0%</b>
-Real Estate Activities	8,779	1.9%
-Business & Management Consultancy	8,352	1.8%
-Health <sup>2</sup>	7,759	1.7%
-Education	7,618	1.7%
-Computer Services	1,095	0.2%
-Telecommunication	58	0.01%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>548,307</b>	<b>100% 86.6%</b>

Note: 1: Includes rentals services, advertising, research and development, business activities (e.g. labour recruitment, building cleaning, packaging services, duplication services, etc), other services (e.g. hair dressing services, funeral services, etc)

2. Includes hospital, medical, dental and veterinary services, homeopathy, foot reflexology, etc.

Source: Malaysian Department of Statistics, Census 2005 (2006)

More specifically, TSMEs are enterprises serve tourism products, which have unique characteristics compared to tangible manufactured products. Recently, international organisations such as the United Nations, the World Tourism Organization (WTO), Eurostat and the Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) introduced Tourism Satellite Accounts (TSA) that characterised tourism-specific products from suppliers' perspectives. This categorisation of tourism products are as follows:

- accommodation services,
- food and beverage serving services,
- passenger transport services,
- travel agency, tour operator and tourism guide services,
- cultural services, recreation and other entertainment services, and
- miscellaneous tourism services.

In Malaysia, TSMEs form the bulk of range from tourism operating business and agencies and transportation services, hotels to operators of camping sites, short stay accommodations, Meeting, Incentive, Convention and exhibition (MICE), museums, theme parks, national Parks and spa services (Department of Statistics, 2009). It is therefore not surprising that TSMEs play a significant role in creating jobs and contributing to the economic growth in Malaysia. Table 3 presents the distribution of TSMEs by business classification. MICE, which are highly promoted by Tourism Malaysia accounted approximately 70.6 percent of the total TSMEs, making it the largest number of TSMEs operators in Malaysia. This is followed by Hotels (2,490 or 22.8 percent), Personal Care and Salus Per Aqua (SPA) (491 or 4.5 percent), National Parks (91 or 0.8 percent), Camping Sites and other providers of short stay accommodation (73 or 0.7 percent), theme parks (57 or 0.5 percent) and finally, Zoo operators (14 or 0.1 percent).



Table 3: Distribution of TSMEs by Business Classification

<b>Business Classification</b>	<b>Number of Establishments</b>	<b>TSMEs</b>	<b>Proportion of TSMEs (%)</b>
Meeting, Incentive, Convention and Exhibition (MICE)	7,802	7724	70.6%
Hotels	2,733	2,490	22.8%
Personal Care & Salus Per Aqua (SPA)	-	491	4.5%
National Parks	92	91	0.8%
Camping Sites and Other Provision of Short Stay Accommodation	74	73	0.7%
Theme Parks	58	57	0.5%
Zoo	15	14	0.1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11,265</b>	<b>10,940</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Malaysian Department of Statistics, (2009)

### Research methodology

This research has applied a survey instrument to obtain information from TSMEs in Malaysia related to their awareness, receptivity and adoption of Internet in their business. This research involved 500 TSMEs located in Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Pahang, Pulau Pinang and Sabah. The survey area focused on these five localities were based on the highest tourist arrival compare to other states in Malaysia (Tourism Malaysia, 2008a) and due to limitation of the incomplete data of TSMEs population based on locations. Out of 500 questionnaire distributed, 346 (69.2 percent) of the returned questionnaires were used for the purpose of the study. The data of TSMEs were obtained from Tourism Malaysia and Malaysia Department of Statistic.

Due to the fragmented nature of TSMEs type of business and the nature of available data, the sample is limited to TSMEs providing accommodation services and travel agency services, tour operator and tourism guide services. A pilot survey was conducted earlier to identify and eliminate potential errors and to determine the instruments solicits the type of information envisioned by the researcher (Polit and Hungler, 1997). As a result, numbers of minor changes were made to the wording of questions to improve reliability. Before the survey was dropped at the TSMEs premises, the respondents were contacted through phone to ask for participation in the survey. Then, the completed questionnaires



were collected by the researcher at the TSMEs premises. This personally administered approach helps in increasing the participations among the tourism entrepreneurs in Malaysia as the key informant for this study. At the same time, the respondents also being provided with consideration to the completed questionnaire via post to increase the freedom of participation's decision to participate in this research.

## **Results and discussions**

To analyse the adoption of Internet among TSMEs in Malaysia, a total of 346 tourism entrepreneurs were identified and 346 (69.2 percent) of the questionnaires can be used for analysing the data. These sections discuss the results based on the data provided in Table 2 which present the characteristics of TSMEs in Malaysia.

### *Profile of Malaysian TSMEs*

#### *Family business*

In reference to Table 2, out of 346 TSMEs, most of TSMEs in Malaysia is family owned (194 or 56 percent). This is consistent with Rachagan and Satkunasingam (2009) and Abdul Rahman's (2006) study. They also found out that companies in Malaysia are dominated of family owned company regardless of the industry involved.

#### *Ownership*

In terms of business registration pattern among TSMEs in Malaysia, TSMEs preferred to register their business as sole proprietorships (139 or 40 percent) followed by partnership (131 or 39 percent). The simplicity in establishing and terminating sole proprietorship and partnership compare to private limited company has made these two types of legal business structure to be the most common ownership found in Malaysia (SMECorp, 2012). Studies by Wibowo (2007) and Pidani (2010) found a similar pattern of SMEs ownership structure in Indonesia.

#### *Years of establishments*

Firm age in this study is gauged by length of time a firm has been in operation. Table 2 reveals that majority TSMEs in this study have been in operation in between year 2003 to 2009 with 150 firms or 43 per cent of the total sample, followed by 120 firms or 35 per cent have been in the industry in between 1992 to 2002. The best explanation on the distribution above can be related to the history of tourism policy in Malaysia during the 8th Malaysia Plan (2000-2005) and 9th Malaysia Plan (2006-2010).

During these periods, Malaysia government has emphasized lots of integrated approach and implementation on tourism planning which has increased the number of TSMEs establishments.

*Started adopting Internet*

Majority TSMEs in Malaysia adopted the Internet between the year 2001-2005 (162 TSMEs or 47 per cent). This was during the 8th Malaysian Plan (2001-2005) where one of the main agenda is to encourage SMEs in all industry including tourism to get on-line and to emphasize on ICT competencies. RM1 billion was allocated to increase SMEs business capacity through e-commerce activity (Economic Planning Unit, 2008) where the Internet helped TSMEs to offer virtual tourism products and build up relationships with their potential customer. Nevertheless, a few forward-looking TSMEs started using the Internet as early 1996 to 2000 (49 TSMEs or 16 per cent).

Table 4: Characteristics of TSMEs in Malaysia (n=346)

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Family business</b>		
Yes	194	56%
No	152	44%
<b>Ownership</b>		
Sole proprietorship	139	40%
Partnership	131	38%
Private limited company	76	22%
<b>Year of establishments</b>		
Before 1980	18	5%
Between 1981-1991	57	17%
Between 1992-2002	120	35%
After 2003	151	43%
<b>Started adopting internet</b>		
1996-2000	49	14%
2001-2005	162	47%
After 2006	135	39%

Source: Derived from survey

*The uses of internet*

It was identified that the most common adoption of Internet among Malaysian TSMEs are similar to large survey conducted by the Asia Foundation in 2002 on SMEs in Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, providing information to the customer (mean=3.78). This is followed by using Email (mean=3.70), looking for information (mean=3.61), receiving order from customer (mean=3.57) and to get information from supplier (mean=3.48) and to lesser extent as an advertisement to place for job vacancies (mean=3.01). According to Moodley and Morries (2004), Palmer (2000) and Lal (2005), those are the most common e-commerce practices adopted by businesses in both developed and developing countries. As in tourism industry, Internet is regarded as important means to communicate with customer particularly with international tourists and most cost-efficient tools (K.S. Tan, Chong, & Uchenna, 2009).

Table 5: The Internet Application among TSMEs in Malaysia

<b>The uses of internet</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>s.d</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Information to customer	3.7791	1.08422	1
Email	3.7093	1.17671	2
Looking for information	3.6163	1.10834	3
Receiving orders from customer	3.5727	1.12510	4
Information from supplier	3.4855	1.11957	5
Internal communication	3.4390	1.09959	6
Sending purchase order	3.4012	1.17882	7
Service and market research	3.3924	1.21940	8
Offering online payment options	3.3779	1.23938	9
Contact with governmental agencies	3.3430	1.12941	10
Placing job vacancies	3.0174	1.31364	11

Source: Derived from survey

*Perception analysis on the importance of Internet towards TSMEs performance*

Analysis of this section is related to the performance of TSMEs on the importance of Internet to the business performance. There were five statements made on the importance of Internet. The responses scale is divided into five categories that is; 1 = 'Strongly disagree', 2 = 'Disagree', 3 = 'In between', 4 = 'Agree' and 5 = 'Strongly agree'. TSMEs perceived position is shown in Table 4.

Table 6: Perception on the importance of Internet

<b>Perception on Internet's items</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Mean scores</b>
	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	
The Internet is an efficient way of communicating with customers and/or suppliers	4.0	4.6	26.3	51.2	13.9	3.66
An organization can actually experience competitive advantage through Internet technologies	5.5	6.6	26.9	48.6	12.4	3.55
The Internet simplify your role as a manager	6.1	5.8	27.7	47.4	13.0	3.55
The Internet improves the organizational relationship with customers and/or suppliers	3.5	5.8	29.2	46.2	15.3	3.64
The Internet is an economic way of answering customer and/ or suppliers queries	6.6	4.0	29.5	46.8	13.0	3.55

Notes : 1 = 'Strongly disagree'; 2 = 'Disagree'; 3 = 'In between'; 4 = 'Agree';  
5 = 'Strongly agree'

Source : Derived from survey

There are 65.10 percent of TSMEs agreed and strongly agreed that Internet is an efficient way of communicating with customers and/or suppliers. This indicates that Internet is used as a communication tools between TSMEs and customers and/or suppliers. The second statement is on perception of Internet adoption will develop competitive advantage through Internet technologies. 61 percent is agreed and strongly agreed with the perceptions. A high percentage of respondents who agreed showed that through Internet adoption TSMEs will experience competitive advantage. 'The Internet simplifies your role as a manager' is the third statement in which 60.4 per cent have agree and strongly agree. While 39.6 percent not sure and disagree that Internet will help in managing the business. The fourth statement is 'The Internet improves the organizational relationship with customers and/or suppliers' 61.5 percent agree and strongly agree. However, 35.8 percent not sure and disagree that Internet will help to improve the relationship with the customers and/or suppliers. The statement of 'The Internet is an economic way of answering customer and/ or suppliers queries' has high percentage of agree and strongly agree with 59.8 percent.

In terms of the means scores, the perception of TSMEs on the importance of Internet adoption to the business performance is above 3.55 which indicated that TSMEs have a positive characteristic. Based on these findings, TSMEs are well versed on the huge potential of adopting Internet in their business operations. Thus, TSMEs should be able to fully utilise the advantages of Internet in tourism industry.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined the preliminary Internet adoptions by TSMEs in Malaysia, focusing on the adoption and use of Internet, perceptions on the importance of Internet on business performance, the demographic characteristics of tourism entrepreneurs and the level of ICT use across Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Pahang, Pulau Pinang and Sabah. Overall, ICT adoption among TSMEs in Malaysia can be improved and enhanced by utilising the huge advantage of Internet to the performance and growth of the business and simultaneously to the development of Malaysia tourism industry. The online market segment has huge potential for TSMEs to explore since there were vast opportunities for the e-commerce industry in tourism industry in Malaysia. This will bring Malaysian TSMEs to the global business. Furthermore, there are extensive programs provided by the Malaysian governments to encourage TSMEs in ICT adoption in business. There are financial and non-financial assistance available for TSMEs to adopt ICT usage.

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