

# Sustaining Langkawi as a Premier Tourist Destination: A Rapid Response Management Strategy Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores stakeholders' insights on rapid response strategies aimed at revitalizing visitor arrivals on Langkawi Island, Malaysia. Despite being a top tourist destination, Langkawi has seen a persistent decline in arrivals, affecting the economy and residents. This research employed a qualitative approach, including in-depth interviews with eight key destination stakeholders and local community leaders. Thematic analysis with NVivo 14 software was performed to answer the research objectives. Results indicated challenges such as transportation accessibility, negative visitor perceptions, and service quality issues. Participants emphasized the importance of marketing diversification, collaborative stakeholder engagement, and infrastructure enhancement to restore the island's competitiveness. The study reveals that rapid response strategies such as expanding transportation networks, targeted marketing campaigns, and product innovation are critical to reviving Langkawi's tourism sector. By fostering collaboration among stakeholders and adopting sustainable tourism practices, Langkawi can reclaim its position as a sought-after destination. This research offers valuable insights for tourism players, policymakers, and stakeholders, contributing to the development of adaptable strategies for sustaining and growing tourism in island destinations facing similar challenges. This indicates that strategic interventions, including marketing diversification, enhanced stakeholder collaboration, and infrastructural improvements, are critical for rejuvenating Langkawi's tourism industry. It is then suggested that actions such as expanding transit networks and initiating focused promotional efforts are to be considered as part of encouraging the arrival of tourists. The study emphasizes the importance of stakeholder cooperation in crisis recovery efforts, as well as practical recommendations for policymakers and tourism industry players to ensure the possibility that Langkawi can regain its standing as a top-tier tourist destination by employing adaptable strategies.

**Keywords:** Rapid Response Strategies, tourism recovery, stakeholders' insights, post-covid

## INTRODUCTION

Langkawi Island, often known as the "Jewel of Kedah," has long been a top tourist destination in Malaysia, attracting both domestic and international visitors due to its diverse cultural heritage, pristine beaches, and world-class athletic events. Despite its prominence, Langkawi has experienced a notable decline in visitor arrivals, especially in the years following the COVID-19 outbreak. The pandemic had a devastating impact on the tourism industry, resulting in business closures, reduced transportation services, and decreased economic activity. Despite efforts to recover including lifting travel restrictions and organizing recent major events like LIMA 2025 the number of tourists remained below pre-pandemic levels. This loss raises serious concerns, as tourism is essential to the island's economy and a community's livelihood. Destinations heavily reliant on tourism, like Langkawi, are especially vulnerable to crises that disrupt travel flows and jeopardize economic stability. Ritchie's Crisis and Disaster Management Framework (2004) take a holistic approach to understanding how destinations may prepare for, respond to, and recover from disruptions, focusing on proactive planning, stakeholder collaboration, and adaptive recovery measures. This approach has been widely used in tourist crisis research and practice, demonstrating its ability to guide destinations through complex disruptions. This theoretical framework allows for a structured exploration of how Langkawi's stakeholders perceive and

implement rapid response strategies to restore the island's tourism sector, emphasizing the importance of coordinated multi-stakeholder engagement in fostering resilience and long-term recovery. Given these challenges, understanding stakeholders' perspectives on successful recovery strategies becomes critical. Stakeholders such as the Langkawi Development Authority (LADA), Langkawi Ferry Line Ventures Sdn. Bhd., and local community leaders who contribute to shaping the island's tourism industry. Their perspectives on transportation accessibility, marketing techniques, and service quality are useful for designing rapid response strategies to revitalize tourism. Previous studies have primarily focused on tourists' impressions and community awareness of Langkawi's attractions, leaving a gap in understanding how key stakeholders perceive and respond to the reduction in arrivals. Addressing this gap is necessary for developing realistic solutions that meet the demands of both tourism operators and local communities.

Considering these challenges and research gaps, the purpose of this qualitative study has explored the perspectives of key stakeholders regarding rapid response management strategies aimed at reversing the decline in visitor arrivals to Langkawi Island. Specifically, this research seeks (1) to analyze stakeholders' insights to identify and evaluate the key factors contributed to the decline in visitor arrivals to Langkawi. (2) to assess potential rapid response strategies proposed by stakeholders for effectively facilitating the recovery of visitor arrivals to the island. To meet this purpose, the study has been guided by the following research questions, which are intended to focus the inquiry and ensure alignment with the overall aim: What are the factors that contributed to the decline in visitor arrivals to Langkawi? And what rapid response management strategies can be implemented to reverse the decline in visitor arrivals to Langkawi? Addressing these issues will provide a broader understanding of stakeholder insights, as well as rapid management strategies for tourism recovery.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Langkawi Island offers a diverse array of tourism experiences, with its natural heritage serving as a major drawcard for ecotourism activities. Notable sites such as the Kilim Karst Geoforest Park and the Dayang Bunting Marble Geoforest Park offer ecotourism and adventure opportunities, including boat cruises through remarkable karsts and mangroves. These attractions draw both local and international visitors (Ramli et al., 2024). Literature emphasizes the vital role of conservation efforts in developing these natural tourist sites (Ramli et al., 2024). Langkawi Island is viewed as an acclaimed ecotourism destination, well-known for its biodiversity and geological formations (The Star, 2023). Furthermore, the island has elements of cultural heritage that attract tourists. For example, Mahsuri's Tomb and the Laman Padi Museum acknowledge the island's history and agrarian past through cultural experiences. As a result, these cultural elements complete the identity of Langkawi and are a significant part of the visitor experience (Hasyim et al., 2025). According to The Vibes (2024), cultural landmarks such as Mahsuri's Tomb attract visitors seeking to understand the island's heritage. Events like Ironman Langkawi and the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) contribute significantly to Langkawi's tourism revenue, enhancing the island's global stature and potentially increasing its notoriety among renowned international destinations (Anuar et al., 2024). Tourism has faced unprecedented obstacles because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence of this can be seen in Langkawi Island, Malaysia, where the changes in relationships and travel restrictions resulted in a momentous decline in arrivals. For example, 2020 saw the arrival of approximately 1.1 million tourists to Langkawi, a decrease of 71.8% from 2019 (Yusof et al., 2025). Many tourism-related businesses struggled to survive and subsequently increased temporarily and permanently closed and experienced consequential layoffs across the workforce. Furthermore, the economic impact on the island was significant, as many businesses could not survive operations without any revenue. The decline in the transportation sector was also iconic, with a 67.2% decline in aircraft movements and a 53.1% decline in passenger movements in 2020 (Yusof et al., 2025). The Movement Control Order (MCO) that was implemented in March 2020 restricted travel both within the country and to other destinations. It became more difficult to visit Langkawi, which heavily relies on tourism, and the economy began to feel severe strain. The Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) data shows that visitor numbers dropped by 54% from 3.92 million arrivals in 2019 to 1.8 million arrivals in 2020 because of MCO (LADA, 2020). The impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector in Langkawi had already started in January 2020 when the Langkawi Hospital quarantined a Chinese tourist who was suspected of having COVID-19. The potential spread of the virus and its impact on tourism were immediate concerns for everyone in the industry (The Star, 2020). The quarantine incident initiated several other instances that would greatly impact Langkawi, which thrives on tourism, beyond immediate

concern. The impact of COVID-19 on tourism can be considered broadly, and as a result, it provides empirical evidence to highlight the contact-intensive nature of the tourism sector (Yusof et al., 2025). As businesses adjust to a changing landscape, transitioning to digital and technological solutions is essential in connecting with a dwindling customer base online (Wen, 2024). This importance of resilience and adaptability is critical in crisis management strategies for the tourism sector (Wen, 2024; Yusof et al., 2025).

The financial impact of the pandemic, the measures the government adopted to suppress the virus, and the subsequent behavior of consumers, when they travel, show that changes to the way consumers prefer to behave have occurred. Understanding the changes in behavior is fundamental for recovery strategies to be conceived for tourism-dependent regions and tourism destinations, such as Langkawi (Bursa et al., 2024). Langkawi saw 2,110,303 guests in 2024, showing a drop of 24.9% compared to the previous year, and Langkawi is not yet in recovery mode, but seeing improvement in efforts to impact key tourism actions benefitting recovery (LADA, 2024). Research supports the assertion that government-imposed emergency measures can impose changes in tourists' behaviors and intentions, even affecting their future travel choices and travel intentions (Bursa et al., 2024). Langkawi's tourism industry began to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the latter half of 2021. By December 2021, approximately 1.09 million total travelers visited the island, bringing in RM1.22 billion in tourism revenue (Yaziz et al., 2025). The government-promoted Langkawi Domestic Tourism Bubble program played a primary role in assuring safe travel ensuring safe travel within Malaysia (Anuar et al., 2024). In 2023, however, Langkawi saw a decrease in visitors, with reports showing there were fewer tourist numbers than previously, as well as a drop in total visitor goals, which displayed signals of the island's tourism vulnerabilities and economic health (Yaziz et al., 2025; Anuar et al., 2024). This decrease in visitation also displays the uncertain and volatile relationship within tourism-dependent economies and changing consumer preferences while also demonstrating competitive measures with near destinations, such as Phuket, Thailand. The economic forecasts for Langkawi are unfavorable due to the recent decline of tourism activity. According to LADA data, total visitor arrivals have decreased to an estimated 2.11 million in 2024, and the impact on local businesses and employment has been dire (Yaziz et al., 2025; Anuar et al., 2024). The literature suggests that specific action is needed to prevent the island from going into a permanent recession (Azmi et al., 2024).

Therefore, the island's economic future is focused on improving tourism product diversity and upgrading its existing infrastructure. As suggested by the evidence, Langkawi should look to apply the principles of product diversification within niche markets and improved marketing of the destination systems to compete against other markets for visitors (Yaziz et al., 2025; Anuar et al., 2024). Additionally, when developing unique experiences that showcase what is unique about the island, it will appeal to ecotourism and adventure tourists and thus bolster and market Langkawi as a destination for sustainable travel (Azmi et al., 2024). Further, active governance by fostering stakeholder cooperation will allow better and optimal resource management, and by drawing on successful examples globally, this is imperative for the future of Langkawi tourism (Hajar et al., 2024). The combination of strategies will be crucial to maintain Langkawi's appeal beyond the pandemic and economic recovery.

### **The Rapid Response Strategies**

The role of strategic management in improving destination competitiveness can be evaluated through the significance of clarifying objectives and the using of adaptive strategies to address evolving challenges. As suggested by the literature, crisis management in tourism is no longer a reactive process but a proactive approach. It is becoming increasingly important for destinations to be able to quickly adapt to the ongoing realities arising from unanticipated circumstances, including health crises (Leong et al., 2025; Marbawi et al., 2024; Hajilo et al., 2024). For example, the recovery of the tourism sector during the COVID-19 pandemic was only successfully achieved with the rapid implementation of recovery strategies that prioritized stakeholder partnerships, enhanced visitor experiences, and the use of digital marketing strategies (Seow et al., 2024; Cherian & Natarajamurthy, 2024; Dinçer et al., 2024). Langkawi Island can capitalize on the effective recovery strategies utilized in other destinations such as Bali and the Maldives. Bali promoted domestic travel through staycations and city activations, while the Maldives established 'air bridge' agreements with key markets like India for quarantine-free travel (Kuščer et al., 2024; Jiang & Phoong, 2024; Xu & Cheng, 2024). Such measures revived domestic tourism and provided destination competitiveness considering global uncertainties. For Langkawi, implementing focused marketing campaigns that reveal local cultural assets, facilitate improved transport accessibility, and

encourage partnership among stakeholders could revive travel (Malodia et al., 2024; Bardhan & Sarkar, 2024; Oli, Kim & Nadarajah, 2024). Furthermore, incorporating sustainable practices into recovery strategies is vital to ensure the long-term resilience of tourism destinations. Studies show that successful crisis adaptation is closely related to sustainability in tourism destinations, where strategies emerge from market requirements and environmental pressures (Geisemann & Geiger, 2024; Roget, Dorji, & Zhang, 2024; Barreira, & Cesário, 2024).

As the tourism industry in Langkawi aims to recover, there is a necessity to adopt a sustainable model to reduce future risk and better meet the changing expectations of travelers - including the trend towards more sustainable travel (Broekema et al., 2024; Muresherwa et al., 2024; Darmawan et al., 2024). Likewise, urban sustainable tourism could be integrated into the attractions of the island, ensuring Langkawi remains a first-choice destination post-COVID-19 (Akaak et al., 2024; Morrison, 2024). In 2021, the important first step of the recovery was the Domestic Tourism Bubble in Langkawi, which assisted the growth of tourism. By the end of that year, Langkawi had around 1.09 million tourists and created RM1.22 billion worth of tourism income for the area (Yaziz et al., 2025; Anuar et al., 2024). The bubble was significant as it allowed travel to take place within Malaysia, therefore supporting local tourism to recover (Anuar et al., 2024). However, by 2023, Langkawi was beginning to record a decline in the number of visitors and a gap that was appearing over the projected number of visitors (Yaziz et al., 2025). This was compounded by competition external to Langkawi from locations nearby, such as Phuket, Thailand, and a change in the demand of consumers (Yaziz et al., 2025; Anuar et al., 2024). By October 2021, visitors to Langkawi's tourism bubble had created RM24.9 million in income, and 60,504 visitors had traveled to Langkawi, representing an average of 16 flights per day, clearly noting the significance of strategic planning of initiatives can keep destinations competitive (The Star, 2021). In addition, while many businesses still face challenges in adjusting to the COVID-19 environment, Langkawi's tourism industry was able to improve tourism figures, and park attendance reached approximately 2.11 million visitors in 2024, representing a 24.9% decrease from the previous year (LADA, 2024). The loss of visitors had a major negative impact on local businesses, hindering their recovery ability while also negatively impacting employment, which has economic sustainability impacts (Yaziz et al., 2025). Despite these issues, the implementation of targeted marketing and collaborating with multiple stakeholders offer the best strategies moving forward in this try-to-travel recovery (Malodia et al., 2024). The travel bubble program for Langkawi showed success with a significant economic contribution that created a positive outcome (The Vibes, 2021), but a degree of uncertainty and vulnerability remained present in the overall tourism sector. To ensure Langkawi's capacity to compete in the marketplace while being persistent in the tourism knowledge sector that remains vulnerable to external shocks, the management of Langkawi's recovery from tourism needs to initiate action now and sustainably to enable improved chances for recovery.

Ritchie's Crisis and Disaster Management Framework (2004) indicate an organized strategy for dealing with tourism problems, which includes pre-crisis planning, crisis response, recovery, and learning from previous crises. Risk assessments, stakeholder participation, and clear communication techniques are all essential for effective crisis management. During the recovery phase, marketing activities, infrastructure improvements, and trust-building initiatives are critical to restore tourist confidence. The third step stresses reflection and adaptation, ensuring that destinations strengthen their resilience to future upheavals. Using this concept, Langkawi can create a more solid, long-term crisis management strategy, allowing it to recover and maintain its status as a premier island destination. Stakeholders play an important role in influencing Langkawi's tourism growth and recovery initiatives. The Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) is the major government organization in charge of tourism planning, destination marketing, and crisis management. Although LADA has implemented a variety of recovery programs, research indicates that more proactive and coordinated solutions are required. Other stakeholders, such as The Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH), need to promote the hotel industry and work to improve service quality and lodging standards. However, the industry continues to face challenges such as low hotel occupancy rates and increased accommodation expenses. Ferry Line Ventures Sdn. Bhd., as the primary ferry operator, is critical to guaranteeing transportation access to the island. Limited ferry routes, service delays, and high travel expenses have all been recognized as significant hurdles to visitor arrivals. Local people, especially those in Kampung Bukit Tangga and Kampung Ayer Hangat, rely significantly on tourism for a living. Despite their economic reliance on tourism, their participation in tourist planning is minimal, emphasizing the need for increased community engagement. The success of Langkawi's recovery strategy is dependent on how well different parties work together to address these issues and implement effective solutions. Using Mitchell

et al. (1997) Stakeholder Salience Model, stakeholders can be classified based on their power, legitimacy, and urgency in decision-making. Dominant stakeholders, such as LADA and significant tourism operators, possess the most power over tourism regulations and funding. Dependent stakeholders, such as local communities, have strong legitimacy but lack authority, leaving them reliant on government assistance. Dangerous stakeholders, such as ferry operators, hold considerable power and urgency since service delays have a huge impact on tourism flows. Finally, specific stakeholders, such as government agencies and significant investors, play a critical role in establishing Langkawi's tourist strategy. Research reveals that an inclusive, stakeholder-driven strategy is required, as top-down policies alone have proven insufficient in addressing Langkawi's tourist difficulties.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore stakeholders' perspectives on future rapid response strategies for rebound visitor arrivals on Langkawi Island. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it enables an in-depth study of stakeholder perspectives, experiences, and recommendations on tourism recovery efforts. The study used semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a flexible and extensive analysis of significant issues while allowing participants to discuss their ideas openly. Participants for the study were chosen using a two-stage sampling procedure. In the first stage, cluster sampling was used to categorize possible respondents based on their organizational roles: government agencies, tourism operators, and community leaders. This grouping made sure that significant players from each sector were represented.

In the second step, purposive sampling was used to select individuals based on their expertise, experience, and capacity to contribute to the research objectives. Elfenbein and Schwarze (2020) stated that the purposive sampling technique ensured that participants could provide information and have expertise with the construct. Participants were required to be 25 years or older and have a minimum of five years of experience in the tourism industry. Purposive sampling was utilized to determine participants who had hands-on expertise in Langkawi's tourism management, and they represented key sectors such as government agencies, tourism operators, and community leaders with at least five years of experience. The sample size of eight proved acceptable for this exploratory qualitative study, which stressed depth over breadth to collect nuanced stakeholder perspectives on rapid responses strategies. The study sought for thematic richness through semi-structured interviews and inductive thematic analysis, rather than statistical representation or generalizability to larger populations. As a result, the findings are presented as context-specific insights into Langkawi's particular challenges and opportunities, with transferable lessons for similar island destinations rather than population-level generalizations. The final sample consisted of eight participants, which was determined to be sufficient based on data saturation, where no new or relevant data emerged from additional interviews. Several authors have provided the standard rules for how many interviews should be taken in a qualitative study to collect quality data. Kuzel (1992) suggested six interviews. Data saturation occurred when no new categories or themes were identified during collection and analysis (Malterud et al., 2017). Data saturation is a trustworthy indicator of the study's validity and sample adequacy (Walker, 2012). Interviews were conducted, and each session took approximately one hour to one hour and thirty minutes until no new data was discovered. The interview ended after the amount of data reached saturation. The study stopped interviewing six participants due to data saturation, indicating no additional input. Thus, it met the minimum requirement for qualitative research (Creswell, 2009; Kuzel, 1992). Creswell (1998) recommended a sample size of five to 25 for phenomenological research, while Morse (1994) encouraged at least six. These guidelines confirmed that the final number selected was sufficient to provide important insights while ensuring data saturation.

The interview questions were adapted from Kamil et al. (2023) and adjusted in the context of Langkawi Island to answer the objectives of the study. The instrument went through face validity and content validity processes to ensure the questions were reliable and valid for use. Furthermore, the researcher conducted a pre-test and a familiarization review to ensure the questionnaire was relevant before being distributed to the participants in the sampling frame. The primary data collecting approach for this study was semi-structured in-depth interviews with stakeholders on Langkawi Island's tourism recovery initiatives. Depending on participant availability, the interviews were performed both in person and online (via Google Meet) and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. The interview questions were organized around three themes: participants' roles in the Langkawi tourism industry, perspectives on visitor decline, and potential rapid response strategies. To enhance participant comfort

and clarity, the interviews were conducted mostly in Malay, with limited usage of English. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

For data analysis, the study applied thematic analysis to discover recurring patterns and insights from the interviews. The transcripts were processed methodically to identify critical themes such as transportation accessibility, marketing tactics, stakeholder collaboration, and tourism infrastructure. An inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being pre-imposed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Descriptive Statistics

The table below presents the demographic profiles of respondents.

Table 1 Demographic profiles of respondents

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Years of experience
P1	Male	35	Head of Village	>10 years
P2	Male	45	Operation Manager, FLVB	<5 years
P3	Male	45	Manager, LADA	>10 years
P4	Male	35	Committee Representative	>10 years
P5	Female	44	Officer, FLVB	>5 years
P6	Female	40	Admin Officer, LADA	>10 years
P7	Female	38	Officer, AHL	>5years
P8	Male	40	Officer, LADA	>5years

N= 8

The findings are based on stakeholder perspectives regarding the decline in visitor arrivals to Langkawi and potential rapid response strategies for recovery. The research was directed to answer (1) What are the factors that contributed to the decline in visitor arrivals to Langkawi? and (2) What rapid response strategies can be implemented to reverse the decline in visitor arrivals to Langkawi? The insights were derived from interviews with government representatives, tourism operators, and local community leaders.

### Factors contributing to visitor declines

In response to Research Question 1; What are the factors contributing to the decline in visitor arrivals to Langkawi? Findings indicated several attributes that influenced visitor declines on Langkawi Island. The main attributes mentioned were visitor insights, travel challenges, and infrastructure development. Figure 1.0 illustrated the three themes that emerged from the interview transcriptions.

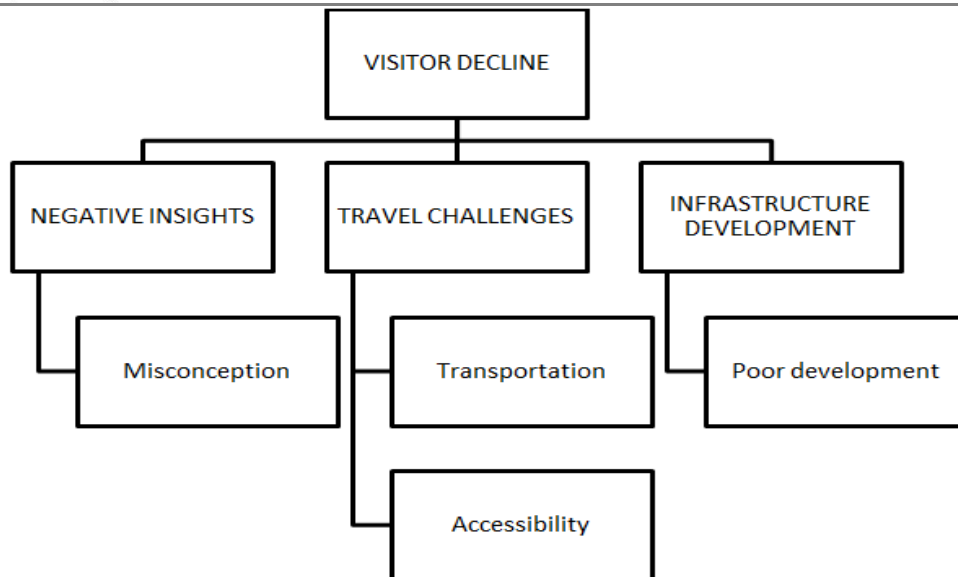


Figure 1.0: Summary attributes on factors of visitor decline

The first research question explores the factors contributing to the decline in visitor arrivals. The themes identified include negative visitor insights, travel challenges, and infrastructure development. Stakeholders noted that changing visitor perceptions, concerns misconceptions regarding affordability, and limited accessibility contributed to the decline. As indicated by participants, some tourists perceived Langkawi as an expensive destination, even though affordable options were available.

Stakeholders described tourists perceiving Langkawi as “*expensive*” despite affordable options (P1, P4, P7): “*tourists...are bombarded with inaccurate news...the issue of expensive food*” (P4). This reveals the island specific information asymmetry where physical isolation amplifies social media rumors, extending Buhalis (2000), destination competitiveness theory while confirming The Star, (2024) on Langkawi “lost lustre” from online misconception and Rahim et al. (2025) findings indicate that destination image drives loyalty reduction. Unlike urban destinations with apparent competition, Langkawi requires immediate response with real-time TikTok/Reels ads that highlight local prices in rebuilding confidence faster than traditional marketing.

Additionally, participants highlighted drastic ferry service reductions from Kuala Perlis and Kedah from hourly (7am-7pm pre-pandemic) to just 5 to 6 daily trips post-COVID directly diverting mainland tourists to Thailand. P4 explained “*when there is a reduction in ferry services, tourists from Kuala Kedah or Perlis decide to go straight into Thailand.*” Participant 3 confirmed Russia falling from top 5 to 7 markets due to sanctions blocking direct flights, “*planes not being able to enter Langkawi directly from Russia.*” Even Kuala Lumpur to Langkawi flights cost more than Kuala Lumpur to Ho Chi Minh despite shorter distance (P6).

This demonstrates island-specific supply chain fragility, in which borders geography and shallow water constraints convert brief logistical delays into immediate competitor leakage, as compared to mainland destinations with redundant access options. With 70% of arrivals relying on ferries (Mail, 2026), service cuts are severe; direct flight gaps from important markets aggravate the crisis (Mail, 2023). The finding extends Ioannides and Gyimothy's (2020) COVID recovery models, which are typically demand-driven, by demonstrating that islands require supply stabilization first. Priority for rapid response: Before engaging in demand-side marketing, the government must fund at least 12 daily “lifeline” ferries and organize 2 to 3 direct flights from Russia, India, and Middle East. Without baseline connectivity, advertising initiatives waste resources by targeting tourists who are physically unable to arrive.

Another issue resorted to the decline of tourists is believed to be related to the infrastructure development in Langkawi. Participants highlighted the untapped tourism potential of Ayer Hangat, particularly areas such as Black Sand Beach and Tanjung Rhu Beach, which remain relatively under-visited despite attractions like the largest night market offering Thai-Thai cuisine variety (P1): “*Rarely do people come to Ayer Hangat.*” Participant 4 confirmed no substantial infrastructure development occurred in the past five years, describing

progress as "normal, not drastic," reflecting a spatial tourism imbalance where peripheral areas receive significantly less attention than established zones.

In contrast, Bali's Kuta and Nusa Dua demonstrate how concentrated infrastructure investments strategic beachfront boardwalks, eco-resort clusters, and congestion management sustain 20-year tourist appeal through enhanced visibility and diversified flows (Astono, 2025). Langkawi's scattered, incremental development fails to achieve similar post-COVID market refresh, leaving UNESCO gems like Ayer Hangat underutilized. Therefore, secure government tourism infrastructure funding for targeted Ayer Hangat renovations to eco-trails, signs, and visitor attractions within 18 months to redistribute tourist flows over the island and prove a reinvestment commitment to stakeholders.

### Rapid Response Strategies for Langkawi

The second research question focuses on future rapid response strategies to revive visitor arrivals to Langkawi. The findings indicated four strategies, themed as economic considerations, recovery and development, stakeholders' dynamics and tourism strategies.

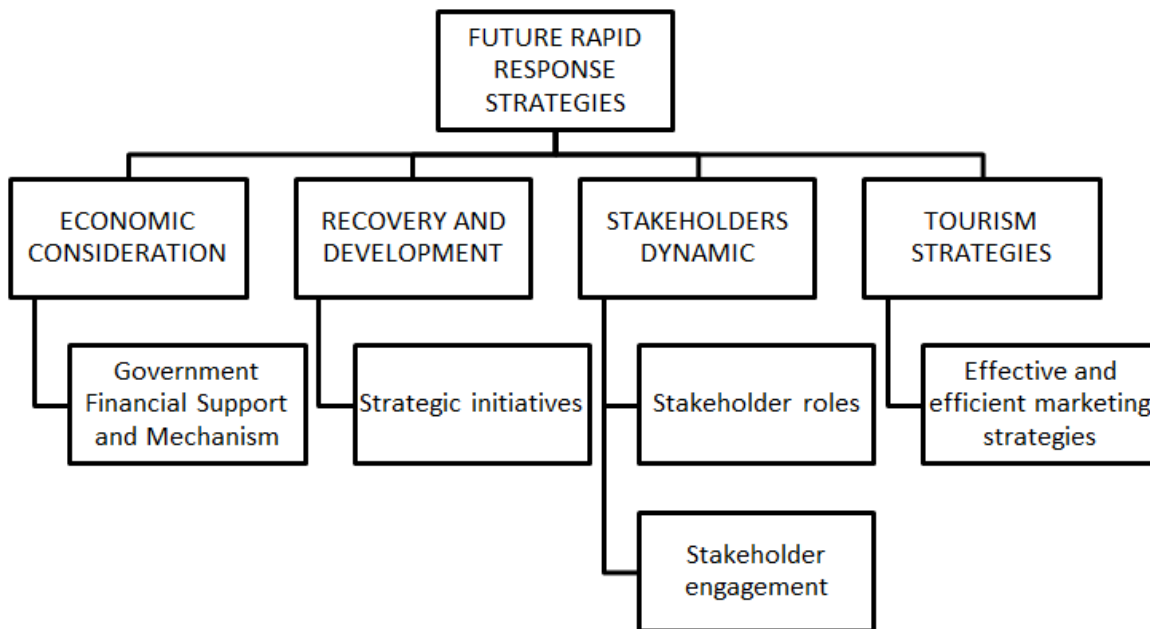


Figure 2.0: Summary of attributes formed on Rapid Response Strategies

The government's financial support system is needed to revitalize the tourism industry, especially in face of the post-pandemic's impact. Stakeholders emphasized federal funding as essential for Langkawi's 70% tourism-dependent population recovering from post-pandemic impacts. Participant 1 urged the Federal Government to "invest money...not play politics," highlighting repeated mud dredging failures at Kuala Perlis or Kedah jetties where "ferry cannot dock at low tide" due to sedimentation reaccumulating. This reveals a classic maintenance trap where biannual operational fixes divert scarce resources from permanent infrastructure solutions critical for reliable island access.

The finding shows sequenced recovery failure where modern jetties must precede demand stimulation efforts, challenging general tourism recovery model that emphasize marketing over physical connectivity. Without federal coordination extending beyond state budgets, peripheral island destinations remain trapped in reactive cycles rather than planned growth. To address this issue, it is recommended to secure RM100 million federal allocations in the 2026 Budget for the development of permanent all-weather jetties, thereby eliminating dredging dependency within 24 months and restoring baseline accessibility.

"...LADA and the Langkawi Municipal Council give incentives... including financial support, publicity, and promotion... successful programs are later included in the annual activity planner." (Participant 3).

According to the findings, government financial support mechanisms play a crucial role in facilitating tourism development in Langkawi, particularly through structured incentives such as funding, promotion, and event support. This reflects a broader pattern identified in previous studies, where tourism growth in Langkawi is strongly associated with substantial governmental investment in infrastructure and development projects. (Jaafar et al., 2015) The provision of such financial assistance not only encourages tourism activities but also contributes to local economic sustainability, as residents are more likely to support tourism development when tangible economic benefits are evident. (Shariff & Tahir, 2020) Furthermore, these mechanisms may indirectly enhance stakeholder participation, which has been identified as a key factor influencing tourism outcomes in Langkawi. (Jaafar et al., 2015).

Despite the existence of these financial support systems, the findings indicate that their impact remains limited when not complemented by long-term infrastructural investment, resulting in an imbalance in the overall tourism development of Langkawi. As a result, a rapid response strategy is required to prioritize long-term infrastructure development, which is critical for improving accessibility and ensuring the sustainable development of tourism in the island.

Recovery and development emerged as second theme under rapid response strategies in Langkawi, highlighting the importance of structured and sustainable tourism planning. Strategic initiatives provide a clear direction for addressing tourism disruptions, optimizing recovery opportunities, and ensuring alignment with long-term sustainability goals.

A key aspect of this recovery strategy is institutional support for event-based tourism. As highlighted by Participant 4:

*“LADA and the Langkawi Municipal Council give incentives to the organizers if they wish to hold any cultural events and sustainable practices on the island. For example, support or help in terms of finance, publicity, promotion...”*

This demonstrates that the Langkawi Development Authority and local authorities actively facilitate tourism recovery by reducing barriers for external organizers through financial and promotional assistance. Such mechanisms not only encourage event participation but also contribute to destination diversification and local economic stimulation. This aligns with the Langkawi Tourism Recovery Plan (T-REC), which emphasizes coordinated measures such as market reopening, tourism rebranding, and operational readiness to restore visitor confidence and strengthen destination resilience. (Bicycle, 2021)

In relation to transport recovery, the optimization of ferry services was identified as a practical approach to improving operational efficiency and environmental sustainability. Although reduced service frequency may appear to limit tourist accessibility, it enhances passenger load efficiency per trip and reduces emissions through higher capacity utilization. This is consistent with island tourism literature, which highlights transport efficiency as a key determinant of destination accessibility and competitiveness (Omar et al., 2014) Similarly, recent observations of Langkawi’s ferry system indicate that connectivity remains a significant factor influencing visitor flow and travel behaviour. (Mukhtar, 2025)

In addition, efforts to strengthen air connectivity further demonstrate Langkawi’s strategic recovery approach. Collaboration with international airlines, including proposed expansion routes from Europe, reflects a deliberate strategy to diversify tourist markets and enhance international accessibility. This is consistent with tourism recovery literature, which emphasizes that air transport plays a central role in post-crisis destination recovery and market expansion (Graham & Dobruszkes, 2019). In particular, island destinations are highly dependent on aviation access due to geographical constraints, making air transport a critical determinant of tourism development (Mazzola et al., 2022) Similar patterns can be observed in island destinations such as Bali and Phuket, where the restoration and expansion of international flight routes were essential in rebuilding tourist arrivals and diversifying source markets following periods of disruption (Gurtner, 2023; Budhi et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with broader tourism recovery literature, which highlights that air connectivity is a critical factor in post-crisis destination recovery and market expansion (Sugishita et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings show that recovery and development efforts in Langkawi are characterized by a multifaceted approach involving transport optimization, improved connectivity, and institutional support mechanisms. While these initiatives reflect proactive efforts to enhance tourism performance and strengthen destination competitiveness, their long-term effectiveness is dependent on sustained infrastructure investment and integrated planning. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive recovery framework to ensure long-term destination resilience and sustainable tourism development.

The next theme is stakeholder dynamics, which entails that the dynamic among stakeholders in sustainability efforts and cultural events was critical to determining their success and long-term viability. The findings indicate that stakeholder dynamics play a central role in shaping the effectiveness and sustainability of tourism development initiatives in Langkawi. Effective collaboration among government agencies, local authorities, and industry associations is essential in ensuring coordinated decision-making, improving governance efficiency, and sustaining tourism programs over time. This is supported by Waligo et al., (2012), who argue that stakeholder involvement is fundamental to sustainable tourism development, particularly through effective engagement and understanding of stakeholder perspectives, which aligns with broader governance perspectives emphasizing collaborative approaches.

Institutional leadership, particularly by the Langkawi Development Authority, was identified as a key driver in coordinating tourism development and addressing industry challenges. Participant 4 emphasized this long-standing role, stating:

*“LADA... has played an important role since the beginning of Langkawi.”*

This reflects the importance of strong institutional governance in providing continuity and direction in tourism development. Previous studies in Langkawi also support this finding, highlighting that government-led coordination significantly contributes to tourism sustainability by ensuring structured planning and implementation of development initiatives (Jaafar et al., 2015). This suggests that institutional leadership remains a foundational element in sustaining tourism competitiveness and resilience.

In addition, stakeholder engagement extends beyond government institutions to include municipal councils and industry associations such as the Langkawi Tourism Association. Participant 5 highlighted ongoing collaborative efforts:

*“We are planning a discussion between LADA, the Municipal Council, and industry players...”*

This illustrates the existence of a multi-stakeholder governance network aimed at strengthening coordination and improving tourism promotion strategies. Such collaboration is particularly evident in joint promotional activities and participation in tourism fairs, where coordinated efforts are used to enhance destination visibility and attract potential visitors. However, while multi-stakeholder collaboration contributes positively to tourism promotion and sustainability efforts, its effectiveness is highly dependent on the level of coordination and alignment among actors. Without strong integration mechanisms, stakeholder initiatives risk becoming fragmented, potentially limiting their long-term impact on tourism development and governance efficiency in Langkawi.

Another key theme under rapid response strategies is tourism strategy, which highlights the importance of structured and adaptive planning in enhancing destination competitiveness, supporting economic growth, generating employment, and preserving cultural and environmental assets. Effective tourism strategy enables destinations such as Langkawi to remain resilient and competitive during periods of uncertainty by aligning development initiatives with changing market demands and tourist preferences. This is consistent with tourism area life cycle theory, which suggests that destinations must continuously diversify their tourism products to avoid stagnation and maintain long-term sustainability (Butler, 1980).

Marketing and promotional strategies were identified as critical components of tourism development, as they influence destination visibility and visitor distribution. However, the findings indicate that current marketing efforts tend to focus on established attractions, resulting in underutilization of secondary tourism areas.

Participants highlighted the potential of sub-districts such as Ayer Hangat, which offer natural attractions including Black Sand Beach and Tanjung Rhu Beach but remain relatively under-promoted. Participant 7 noted:

*“Ayer Hangat night market is very different from the night markets in Langkawi, more variety... but lacking in terms of marketing and promotion...”*

This suggests that insufficient promotional coverage limits the visibility of emerging tourism areas, leading to uneven spatial distribution of tourists. Previous studies support this issue, indicating that destination marketing plays a crucial role in shaping tourist flow, and inadequate promotion can result in overconcentration in established tourism zones (Pike, 2008). Therefore, strategic marketing diversification is essential to ensure balanced tourism development across the island.

In addition, community-driven tourism initiatives were identified as an emerging strategy for utilizing underdeveloped government land for eco-tourism and sports tourism activities. Participant 2 stated:

*“We have a lot of government land in Langkawi that is abandoned... Let’s do eco-tourism. We can grow crops for eco-tourism.”*

Similarly, Participant 1 added:

*“We can do sports tourism. We can do all sorts of things to bring life to the area.”*

These findings indicate a shift towards participatory and diversified tourism development, where local communities play an active role in transforming underutilized spaces into tourism assets. This aligns with previous studies on Langkawi, which emphasize that community participation enhances sustainable tourism development and strengthens local economic benefits (Hashemi et al., 2024). It also reflects broader island tourism literature, which highlights the importance of diversification in maintaining destination resilience (Butler, 1980).

Furthermore, the identity of Langkawi as the first UNESCO Global Geopark in Southeast Asia strengthens its positioning as a unique tourism destination. The Geopark Management Plan (2024–2028) adopts a multi-stakeholder approach that integrates conservation, education, and sustainable tourism development, reinforcing the island’s global significance in geopark governance.

In terms of international tourism strategy, efforts to enhance air connectivity further support Langkawi’s market expansion. Participant 6 stated:

*“We will get a direct flight also from Bangalore, India to Langkawi... and from Tashkent, Uzbekistan to Langkawi.”*

Participant 3 further highlighted ongoing collaborations with international airlines and charter operators aimed at expanding access from key markets such as India and China. These initiatives reflect a deliberate strategy to diversify tourist markets and improve accessibility, particularly in preparation for Visit Malaysia Year 2026. This is consistent with transport and tourism literature, which emphasizes that air connectivity is a critical determinant of destination competitiveness and international tourism growth (Prideaux, 2000).

## DISCUSSION

This paper has explored stakeholders’ perspectives on the underlying causes of visitor decline and the proposed rapid response strategies for Langkawi. Each theme is analyzed to understand its significance within the broader context of tourism recovery and destination competitiveness. The first theme emerged is factors that contribute to visitor declines is visitor insights. The perception of Langkawi as an expensive destination significantly impacted tourism numbers, with visitors increasingly seeking alternative, cheaper destinations. Many visitors had stated that the cost of vacationing in Langkawi, including hotel, food, and transportation, had grown too expensive. According to Leong (2023), locals complained that the cost of food and lodging in Langkawi had risen, and foreign tourists had also felt the squeeze. While there were claimed about higher expenses of going to

Langkawi, the stakeholders affirmed that Langkawi had various options for different budgets and that with good planning, visitors can find reasonable accommodation and dining options. These findings highlight the vital necessity for effective destination image management and proactive communication strategies to address misconceptions. Tourism stakeholders can positively influence visitor behavior, rebuild confidence, and strengthen the destination's competitiveness in a market that is becoming more competitive by addressing false perceptions effectively.

The second theme emerged is travel challenges to visit the island. The disrupted ferry services resulted in decrease in frequency complicates travel planning for tourists is believed to be likely reducing spontaneous or short-term visits to Langkawi by tourists. These environmental and infrastructure difficulties lead to a poor travel experience, which could discourage visitors and reduce the destination's accessibility. Understanding these challenges was essential for stakeholders to develop effective plans to boost Langkawi's tourism economy.

In addition, the infrastructure development as another theme that emerged that contributed to visitor declines in Langkawi Island. This calls for better planning and good practice to implement sustainable tourism infrastructure that incorporates eco-friendly design and resource efficiency, minimizing environmental impacts while supporting tourism growth in protected natural areas around Langkawi. Investment in sustainable infrastructure may promote tourism and local economies without resulting in over tourism, a balance that Langkawi could achieve by carefully developing areas like Ayer Hangat while protecting its natural beaches and cultural assets. Addressing such concerns are critical to enhancing the overall visitor experience and boosting the island's tourism recovery efforts. However, by improving accessibility and fostering sustainable development can attract a broader range of visitors while also supporting long-term gains in tourism numbers.

As for the rapid response strategies, focus on economic considerations, which reflect the community's urgent call for long-term, depoliticized funding emerged as important aspect factor to consider. This calls for government assistance can give key resources for infrastructure renovation, marketing campaigns, and business support, all of which are necessary for regaining tourist trust and demand during a crisis (Ritchie and Jiang 2019). Similarly, Gössling et al. (2021) argue that effective public sector involvement is critical to creating resilience and providing equal economic advantages in tourism-dependent communities. In the context of Langkawi, where tourism is the backbone of the local economy, government support not only helps to stabilize the economy but also addresses social issues like unemployment and community well-being (Chauhan & Khan, 2024). However, as participants' remarks imply, the efficiency of such assistance is dependent on minimizing political interference to guarantee that resources are efficiently distributed and recovery efforts are inclusive and sustainable.

There are several critical challenges in developing Langkawi's tourism infrastructure, underlining the need for significant federal investment rather than political maneuvering. For example, the frequent mud dredging mentioned by respondent is not helping the industry; hence this problem must be prioritized. Langkawi in need for major infrastructure upgrades, if they want to rejuvenate tourism. Accessibility remains a critical need for attracting and retaining visitors. The Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) and Langkawi Municipal Council's proactive involvement in recognizing cultural events and sustainable practices exemplifies a comprehensive approach to tourism development that promotes long-term partnerships and community engagement. Parta & Maharani (2023) emphasize the importance of stakeholder collaboration in ensuring the effective implementation of heritage preservation efforts, as well as the establishment of laws and regulations that promote the long-term management of cultural tourism resources. In addition, to support sustainable growth, the government is encouraged to learn from successful provinces, strengthen infrastructure, promote culture and ecotourism, and invest in human capital to improve service quality and efficiency (Hasayotin et al., 2023). In this context, Langkawi could implement these measures to strengthen its tourism sector and remain competitive in the regional market.

Recovery and development emerged as the second theme under rapid response strategies. Stakeholders emphasized ongoing efforts to acquire new air travel routes from major markets including India, China, and Uzbekistan. Proactive steps are needed for example, in establishing alliances with international airlines to encourage significant increases in tourist arrivals after resuming direct connections (Cele & Zou, 2025). In Langkawi's case, these strategies are critical for diversifying the visitor base and aligning with national tourism

aims, particularly in view of Visit Malaysia Year 2026. Establishing and sustaining direct flight links can significantly improve Langkawi's standing as a competitive and connected international destination. The similar is indicated for ferry service optimization and expanding air connectivity aligns with recovery models adopted by other island destinations.

The next theme is stakeholder dynamics, which entails that the dynamic among stakeholders in sustainability efforts and cultural events was critical to determining their success and long-term viability. According to Amoako et al. (2021), four major players in tourism development are the tourist, the business supplying tourist goods and services, also known as the entrepreneur, the government of the host community or area, and the host community, or the locals. Each of these stakeholders contributes significantly to the success of tourism efforts. This is supported by the findings of Erlandia et al. (2023), who emphasize stakeholder collaboration in sustainable tourism development and improves overall destination outcomes. Building a sustainable tourism industry requires a holistic approach that involves the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the destination. Therefore, collaborative efforts between Langkawi's tourism authorities and private sector players are essential for long-term growth

Another important theme that emerged under rapid response is tourism strategy, which ensured that destinations stayed competitive and strong. According to Lin et al. (2023), successful campaigns involve advertising, supporting services, cooperating, educating, and measuring financial outcomes. To compete with other countries in revitalizing their tourism industries, Langkawi Island must prioritize future strategic initiatives to maintain its global relevance and growth. Langkawi's tourism strategy can improve from a targeted marketing approach that emphasizes not only its well-known attractions but also lesser-known regions like Ayer Hangat, which has pristine beaches and community-driven eco-tourism programs. In addition, Langkawi, like Lake Toba, may increase its appeal as a destination by incorporating its UNESCO Global Geopark status and rich cultural offers into advertising campaigns. Both destinations faced logistical issues, such as accessibility and infrastructure, that necessitated strategic planning and investment to ensure visitor satisfaction and return visits.

The decline in visitors to Langkawi is influenced by perceptions of high costs, reduced ferry services, and infrastructure challenges, which affect accessibility and visitor experience. However, the island is actively responding through strong stakeholder collaboration, strategic marketing, and efforts to improve connectivity, such as partnerships with airlines and promotion of lesser-known areas like Ayer Hangat. Learning from other destinations like Phuket, and Lake Toba, Langkawi can enhance its tourism recovery by addressing misconceptions, investing in infrastructure, and diversifying its offerings. With continued focus on sustainable development and effective promotion, Langkawi has the potential to regain competitiveness and secure long-term growth as a leading island destination. Overall, the discussion underscores the urgent need for integrated and adaptive rapid response strategies to reposition Langkawi as a desirable tourist destination.

## CONCLUSION

The study has successfully provided critical insights into the factors contributing to the decline in visitor arrivals to Langkawi and proposed rapid response strategies for recovery. Findings revealed that key challenges included negative visitor perceptions, travel accessibility issues, and inadequate infrastructure. Stakeholders, including government agencies, ferry operators, and local communities, highlighted that Langkawi's tourism sector required a more strategic approach to address these concerns. It was evident that improved marketing strategies, better transportation services, and more diversified tourism offerings were essential in restoring Langkawi's status as a leading travel destination. The study's implications extend to multiple stakeholders. The government must take proactive steps to improve infrastructure, particularly ferry and air connectivity, while ensuring sustainable tourism growth. LADA should enhance digital marketing efforts and collaborate with industry players to promote lesser-known attractions. Ferry operators like Ferry Line Ventures Sdn. Bhd must modernize their services to improve visitor experiences, and local communities should be more actively involved in tourism development through cultural and eco-tourism initiatives. Encouraging partnerships between businesses and local communities can lead to more inclusive and sustainable tourism growth. This study employed a qualitative research approach, conducting in-depth interviews to obtain key stakeholders' perspectives on rapid response strategies for tourism recovery. The findings emphasize the necessity of diversifying marketing activities, enhancing transportation networks, and encouraging stakeholders to collaborate. These initiatives are critical for

restoring Langkawi's competitiveness. Langkawi's competitiveness in the tourism industry and for ensuring long-term success. By providing insights into effective recovery actions, this study helps to design adaptable strategies that not only improve tourism resilience in Langkawi but also serve as a model for other island destinations facing similar issues. For future research, expanding the geographical scope to compare Langkawi with other regional tourist destinations would provide a broader perspective on effective tourism recovery strategies. Incorporating a mixed-methods approach could also strengthen findings by combining qualitative insights with quantitative data. Additionally, involving more stakeholders, including NGOs and tourists, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of tourism challenges and opportunities. By addressing these gaps, future studies can contribute to a more effective and resilient tourism framework for Langkawi.

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