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## **HERITAGE TOURISM: A DISABLED PERSON'S RIGHTS TO ENGAGE IN SOCIAL ACTIVITY**

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### **Abstract**

Heritage tourism is a growing sector in the travel industry. However, disabled persons often face barriers in accessing heritage sites due to physical, informational, and attitudinal barriers. This paper examines the right of persons with disabilities to engage in social activity through heritage tourism. Drawing on the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the paper argues that heritage tourism must be made accessible to all, regardless of their disabilities. The paper highlights the importance of disability-inclusive design and the need for heritage site managers to adopt a disability-inclusive approach. Additionally, this paper highlights the benefits of accessible heritage tourism for disabled persons, such as increased social participation, cultural enrichment, and improved well-being. This paper opted to use the go-along interview method to gain findings for disabled person's lived experiences pertaining to their rights to engage in social activity. Physical barriers and difficulties in negotiating those barriers in accessing heritage buildings and sites are among the significant hurdles for disabled persons to participate in social activities offered in heritage tourism.

**Keyword:** heritage tourism, rights, disabled person, social engagement

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Heritage tourism is a rapidly expanding contributor to the global tourist business that gives tourists the chance to discover a destination's cultural and historical landmarks (Strategic Planning Division Tourism Malaysia, 2019). However, physical, informational, and attitudinal barriers frequently make accessing these sites difficult for people with disabilities. In 2006, Malaysia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which affirms that individuals with disabilities have a right to equitable participation in social and cultural activities, including tourism.

Heritage buildings have recently gained popularity as tourism destinations for both domestic and foreign visitors. They have a keen interest in the historical narrative and distinctiveness of the architectural style that our forebears left behind. Tourism is becoming a social construct that influences people's daily lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has ceased the tourism industry globally, including in Malaysia. According to statistics, Malaysia welcomed 134,728 visitors in 2021 (post-COVID-19 pandemic), slowly bringing in RM238.73 million (MYR) ([www.tourism.gov.my/statistics](http://www.tourism.gov.my/statistics)). Thus, to gain more interest from local and global tourists, it is essential to offer high-quality services and facilities in order to welcome and draw more tourists to Malaysia.

Accessibility is a crucial component of facilities and services offered to visitors. How easy people can access a point of interest makes it easier for them to visit and enjoy the place. When discussing accessibility, it is frequently forgotten that some visitors may have disabilities. Disabled persons have the same wants and aspirations for travel as able-bodied (Gondos & Narai, 2019). However, their ability to participate in various social activities, including tourism, has been hampered by accessibility difficulties (Zahari et al., 2020). Compared to other disabled persons, in terms of accessibility, wheelchair users experience the most hurdles in their daily lives (Page & Thorsteinsson, 2018; Zahari et al., 2019). To participate in the social events around them, they travelled around on their wheels. However, they feel discriminated against because they are unable to access numerous locations, especially tourist hotspots.

## **HERITAGE TOURISM**

The tourism industry is becoming more competitive and globally diversified. Researchers started investigating the demographics, motivations, and experiences of individuals visiting historical sites and museums in the 1980s (Herbert et al., 1989). According to some observers, different nationalities seek out different types of heritage experiences, with Europeans generally being more knowledgeable about World Heritage Sites than other travellers and Chinese generally wanting cultural encounters at the increasing number of "ethnic theme parks" in China (Di Giovine, 2009; Li, 2011). In order to incorporate greater experiential depth and effects of visiting, modern scholars have pushed beyond

these more normative and descriptive interpretations of heritage demand. However, the motivations and experiences of heritage consumers as a niche tourist market have not yet been investigated. The degree of interest among tourists and how it translates into their reasons for going are valuable indicators of the general demand for cultural assets.

According to Garcia et al. (2012), essential tourist development challenges include quality, sustainability, image, innovation, and accessibility. Sustainability encompasses economic, social, cultural, and environmental facets, with a social component emphasising eradicating poverty and advancing human rights, equality of opportunity, political freedom, and self-determination (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). The tourism industry has been paying more attention to the needs and requests of tourists with disabilities, acknowledging that these people have the same needs and desires for travel as others, which has given rise to the concept of accessible tourism from the perspective of promoting human rights and equal opportunity (Yau, McKercher, & Packer, 2004).

## **JUSTICE AND DISABLED PERSON'S RIGHTS TO ENGAGE IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES**

Accessibility has emerged as a pressing issue in modern societies, where everyone has the right to a life free of physical or mental impediments (Yakob et al., 2022). According to Rahman et al. (2018), disabled person's home must be in close proximity to facilities that allow them to move around with minimal supervision. However, disabled persons still desire to visit other places for a variety of reasons. Freedom of movement is one of the basic lists of social primary goods (Rawls, 1999). According to Sen (1993), the capability approach views that humans have varying needs based on various circumstances and environments, which affect their capacity to function. To achieve a similar result in life, disabled persons might require a different number of resources. The capability approach seeks to alter the conceptions of human well-being and the evaluations of deprivation, equality, and claims of justice and injustice (Day, 2018). The "good life" is a life one chooses for themselves, not what is forced upon them (Sen, 1993), as disabled persons usually receive. Thus, it is argued that an accessible environment may provide disabled persons with significantly more opportunities for empowerment and inclusion. Without any restrictions on physical access, disabled persons can fully enjoy and participate in society as they wish, with complete control over where they can be as opposed to where they are only permitted to be.

Meanwhile, the idea of procedural justice emphasises the participation of citizens in decision-making that has an impact on people's lives (Faburel, 2012). Individuals are more likely to view decisions as just when they are given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process (Cohen, 1985). By providing disabled persons with the opportunity to participate in the process of

promoting heritage tourism, procedural justice can increase their chances of being heard as citizens (and receiving recognition). Hence, to effectively address issues on heritage tourism, disabled person's feedback on issues related to accessibility seems vital.

The UNCRPD is a human rights instrument (Lid, 2022). Disabled persons have the same rights as others to engage in social and cultural activities. The rights of disabled persons to participate in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport is expressly recognised in Article 30 of the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006). Article 30 covers access to cultural heritage buildings and sites, as well as participation in other heritage tourism activities. However, visiting historic buildings and sites might be difficult for those with impairments. These barriers can be both physical (such as staircases, limited entrances, and uneven surfaces) and informational (such as a dearth of readily available site information). Furthermore, stigmatising and unfavourable opinions regarding impairments may be a barrier for disabled persons (Reeve, 2014). This paper holds that when promoting heritage tourism, disabled persons should be recognised by having their participation in decision-making. Moreover, disabled persons are experts in barriers since they confront them daily (Kamarudin et al., 2022).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper opted to use a qualitative method to achieve its aim. The go-along interview was explicitly used to evaluate the social activity engagement of disabled persons. Unlike traditional interview methods, this approach allows the researcher to evaluate not just the participants' spoken responses but also their expressions, bodies, and voice tones as they transmit their experiences when visiting a facility, such as their joy or irritation (Zahari et al., 2019, 2018). Self-reports revealed people's perceptions of many parts of the built environment, their features and the sentiments they elicited. The data were arranged around walkers' self-reported background emotions (well-being, stress, security, and insecurity) and principal emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, wrath, and disgust). They revealed which built environment components and attributes influenced walkers' "walking moods" positively and adversely (Herrmann-Lunecke et al., 2021). The go-along interviews, also known as walking interviews, have recently been shown to be beneficial in studies where, for example, "understanding primarily depends on knowing how participants perceive their environment" (Garcia et al., 2012)

Power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee can considerably impact the types of data obtained in every interview context. When interviewing socially excluded people, for example, the fact that researchers are often more educated and wealthier creates an unequal relationship that risks making respondents hesitant to share their ideas for fear of looking silly. Movement adds another dimension to these tangled concerns of power. Walking interviews are an

excellent method for investigating topics concerning people's relationships with space (Burns et al., 2020). One of the primary goals of go-along or walking interviews is to analyse a participant's relationship with the environment, yet, spatial location is frequently dealt with coarsely. The go-along interview approach is a variety of qualitative interviewing techniques that can be used alone or in conjunction with other methods to explore and improve understanding of people's experiences in their local home context (Carpiano, 2009; Samatar et al., 2021). After a sit-down interview, the participant accompanies the researcher on a walk around sites that they initially described in the sit-down interview, providing further details while (re)experiencing the place (Polkinghorne & Carlson, 2017).

Four impaired volunteers volunteered to participate in this study. These four participants are physically challenged and use a wheelchair to get from their homes to the location where the go-along interviews were held (at three distinct heritage tourism sites) to share their perspectives on their accessibility. Participants must be at least 18 years old in order for the material to be presented calmly and maturely. The individual must enjoy travelling and exploring other places in order to provide rich information on the accessibility of a facility that they have entered.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

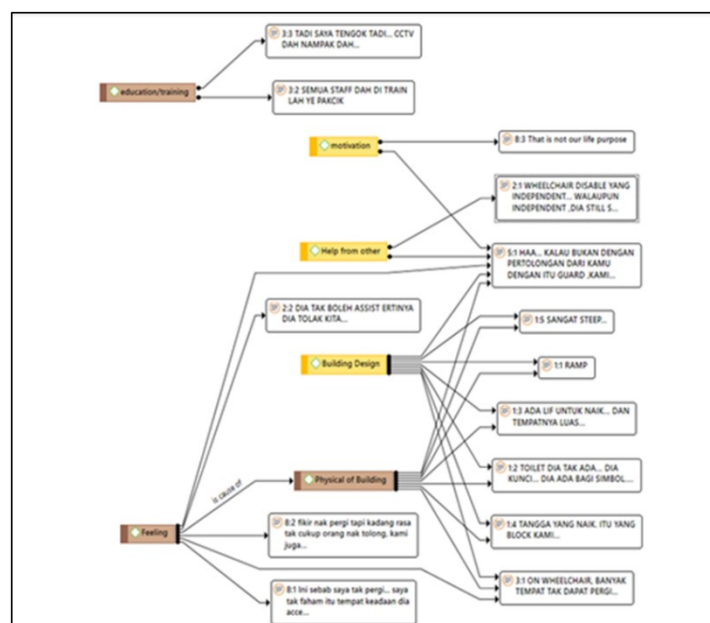


Figure 1: Transcribed respondents' statements diagram

Based on Figure 1, transcribed statements were used based on four participants. These statements were selected based on statements considered different from other general statements made by the participants. The following Table 1 shows the translation of these transcribed statements:

**Table 1:** Translation of selected transcribed respondent statement

Respondent	Statement Number	Original Statements (Malay)	Translated (English)	Researcher's Evaluation
1	1	Ramp (Tanjakan)	Ramp	The way for wheelchair users used to access buildings or higher grounds.
	2	Toilet dia tak ada. Dia kunci, dia ada bagi simbol...	The toilet is not available. They locked it, but there is a symbol...	Referring to buildings that do not allow wheelchair users to use toilets even though the facility is available.
	3	Ada lift untuk naik... dan tempatnya luas...	Lift available for ascend... and the place is spacious...	Referring to the lift facility available in the building available for wheelchair users.
	4	Tangga yang naik... itu yang block kami	Upward staircases... it blocked us...	There are stairs inside the building that is not accessible for wheelchair users.
	5	Sangat steep...	Too steep	Referring to the ramps being too steep for ascending.
2	1	Wheelchair disabled yang independent... walaupun independent, dia still...	Wheelchair users is independent... Even though independent, they still...	Referring to the fact that wheelchair users still need to be assisted even though they are independent.
	2	Dia tak boleh assist maknanya dia tolak kita...	They cannot assist, which means they rejected us...	Referring that there is no service to entertain or accept wheelchair users.
3	1	On wheelchair, banyak tempat tak dapat pergi...	On wheelchair, many places can't be reached	Referring to the fact that wheelchair users are unable to access many places.

	2	Semua staff dah di train lah ye pakcik...	All staff had been trained, uncle...	Referring to the satisfaction of services for staff at the building.
	3	Tadi saya tengok tadi... CCTV dah nampak dah...	I watched just now... I saw in CCTV.	Referring to the facility that was alert with arrivals of wheelchair users.
4	1	Maa... kalau bukan dengan pertolongan dari kamu dengan itu guard, kami...	Maaa... if it's not with the help from you and the guard, we are....	Referring to gratitude towards help from the staff.
	2	Ini sebab saya tak pergi ... saya tak faham itu tempat keadaan dia accept...	This is the reason I don't go... I don't understand the place's situation or acceptance...	Referring to the mixed feeling about visiting the building.
	3	Rasa nak pergi tapi kadang rasa tak cukup orang nak tolong kami juga...	Felt like visiting but were afraid that there were not enough people to help us...	Referring to the fact that not many staff are trained to assist wheelchair users.
	4	That is not our life purpose...	That is not our purpose...	Referring to the motivation that wheelchair users have when it comes to accessibility issues.

The majority of these establishments had granted admission at their own risk without providing complete help. Disabled persons must heal for themselves, or their company (friends or relatives) will be left to care for them alone. However, one of these heritage buildings provided full assistance to wheelchair users from the moment they arrived at the main gate. This heritage tourism site is extremely helpful and follows the group during their visits to ensure that they have a pleasant experience. As depicted in Figure 2 and Figure 3 as the example below, most heritage tourism sites have limited access for disabled persons. Thus, indirectly, social activity engagement is limited.



**Figure 2:** Difficulties to enter a heritage building  
*(Source: Zahari, 2022)*



**Figure 3:** Unsuitable material used for the route to the accessible toilet  
*(Source: Zahari, 2022)*

Heritage tourism is a cultural and social activity that is supposed to offer people a chance to interact with their past, cultural ties, and social context. It provides opportunities for social interaction, education about one's cultural heritage, and the growth of a feeling of self and belonging, including for disabled persons. Due to a number of physical and social barriers, however, many areas of heritage buildings and sites have not been accessible to disabled persons. Inadequate infrastructure, a lack of accessible features, and unfavourable attitudes from society are just a few of the difficulties that disabled persons have while trying to visit heritage tourist destinations. However, the study noted some successful attempts to increase accessibility in heritage tourism, including using adaptive technology, accessible transportation, and inclusive tour guides.



## CONCLUSION

It is significant to recognise heritage tourism as a legitimate form of social interaction for disabled persons. Heritage sites must be made accessible to all visitors to enjoy any activities offered to the fullest. When promoting historic buildings, monuments and places, it is suggested that the management takes into account the requirements and preferences of disabled persons by adopting universal design concepts within the specific site. In addition to providing accessible material like Braille or audio guides, providing accessible facilities such as accessible parking, restrooms, and ramps are valued by disabled visitors. Managers of heritage sites must also take an inclusive approach to serving disabled visitors by making sure that staff members have received the necessary training to comprehend the requirements of disabled visitors and to be able to offer the right help and support. It also involves implementing policies and practises that encourage disability inclusion and the participation of disabled persons.

Input from disabled persons is critical in developing policies that affect them, including in heritage tourism. Generally, they will be able to contribute valuable ideas based on their life experiences to the planning and design of buildings, infrastructures, facilities, and services. Moreover, participation as in procedural justice is viewed as improving the quality of life for disabled persons, where the ability to contribute to society is valued as freedom as in the capability approach. With disabled person's participation in the development of heritage tourism taken into account, they may be able to freely access heritage buildings and sites and have more opportunities for inclusion that will empower their lives.

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