

The Practices, Issues, and Challenges of Cultural Tourism in Museum Institutions Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the institution of the museum has changed its dominance to become increasingly focused on visitor attractions. The equivalent of 4.0 revolution museum institutions worldwide implemented a paradigm shift in demonstrated that it remains relevant for the eyes of the public (visitors). The displacement of the museum is strengthened as a digital platform, cultural tourism, and online learning for the global community. This study presents a conceptual framework of museum which relevant to the community through three (3) aspects such as digital platforms, cultural tourism, and online learning. This study focused on three aspects that reflected the changes in the perspectives of professional museums rather than served as a traditional museum (focused on custodial care) to more current (focused to educate and entertain the community).

Keywords: Museum Institutions in Malaysia, Cultural Tourism Museum in Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Initially, museums were institutions primarily associated with the preservation and presentation of art history. Over time, however, their role has expanded significantly, becoming increasingly important to national development, particularly in the areas of tourism and non-formal education, including the advancement of scientific and institutional knowledge. Historically, the emergence of museums in Europe reflected social identity and symbolized the status of European societies (Susan, 1999). In general, a museum is defined as a permanent, non-profit public institution that serves communities and nations over the long term (Birtley, 2002). Museums function as spaces that foster intellectual growth and promote awareness of national culture through exhibitions and public programmes. As such, museums have the potential to serve as exemplary models within the education system.

In addition, museums also function as destinations for cultural tourism. Cultural tourism seeks to highlight and promote the cultural practices and heritage of local communities. It encompasses a wide range of preserved museum types, including history museums, ethnology museums, cultural museums, as well as science and technology museums, among others (Mohd Yusof, 2013). Cultural tourism is commonly presented through exhibitions that showcase the cultural expressions of a community. Community culture can be broadly categorized into tangible and intangible forms. Tangible culture refers to human-made creations that possess value and are utilized within a society, whereas intangible culture includes practices, belief systems, ways of thinking, and shared values among community members.

Cultural tourism is derived from the integration of two concepts, namely “culture” and “tourism.” Tourism generally refers to the activity of travelling and experiencing attractions or services that provide enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation to individuals (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2016a). Culture, on the other hand, relates to the development of intellect and mindset within a civilization, as well as the advancement of individual behaviour and the physical and social progress of a society or nation (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2016a).

Seyfi et al. (2019) describe cultural tourism as a component of the tourism sector that encompasses a wide range of destinations and provides visitors with opportunities to experience and engage in the cultural diversity of different societies or civilizations. In this context, museums are recognized as institutions that represent and

embody cultural identity. Cultural tourism involves travel to particular destinations that offer cultural attractions such as historical sites, as well as artistic and cultural events and performances. The primary purpose of such travel is to gain knowledge and meaningful experiences that contribute to the intellectual development and personal growth of visitors (Lew et al., 2014).

The World Tourism Organization (2003) defines cultural tourism as a form of tourism that encourages visitors to explore, understand, experience, and engage with both tangible and intangible cultural attractions at a destination. These cultural attractions are deeply connected to the distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional characteristics of a community. They encompass elements such as art, architecture, heritage, history, cultural practices, culinary traditions, literature, music, creative industries, and living culture, all of which represent the lifestyle, values, and emotional expressions of a society.

In the contemporary millennium, the image of museums has evolved through the introduction of activities and programmes that emphasize digital elements for public engagement. These digital components function as platforms for knowledge development, channels for knowledge dissemination, and attractive features that enhance cultural tourism experiences for visitors.

The Practices of Cultural Tourism Across Museum Institutions

Museum institutions play a significant role in contributing to cultural heritage tourism activities, as they are fundamentally grounded in the history, heritage, and culture of a particular place or community. For example, the Singapore Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) has expanded its role beyond that of a conventional exhibition space, creating the perception of a vibrant and dynamic museum environment. The picnic programmes organized by the museum offer visitors immersive experiences, such as camping-like activities and participation in various events held at a national monument in Singapore. These activities include guided walking tours around the Kampung Gelam area that explore the historical narratives of traders, nighttime gallery visits, and opportunities to sample traditional Malay cuisine (Irwan, 2021, October 21).

These developments have generated both beneficial and adverse effects on the quality of life of local communities (Anwar et al., 2021). From a local standpoint, tourism represents the second-largest source of foreign exchange revenue for the state of Selangor. This contribution is reflected in the increasing number of international tourist arrivals, which reached 1,505,614 in 2006, rose to 1,783,343 in 2007, increased further to 2,075,735 in 2008, and peaked at 2,398,680 in 2009 (Dewan Negeri Selangor, April 12, 2010).

The tourism industry creates an effective strategy by taking into account the local community’s interests so that every development made can increase their income, generate new job opportunities, and increase the diversity of basic facilities in order to improve the quality of life of the local community (Anwar et al., 2021). A study by Marzuki et al., (2021) reported that Dataran Merdeka, Kuala Lumpur is a significant heritage location that attracts local and international tourists. The cultural heritage factor (cultural heritage products) has become the primary influence on the arrival of visitors to Kuala Lumpur. Thus, the uniqueness and glory of the cultural and historical heritage in Kuala Lumpur is the most crucial element in attracting domestic and foreign tourists. Therefore, stakeholders should consider its importance by planning appropriate preservation and conservation strategies for various cultural heritage tourism products in Malaysia. Table below shows the practices of cultural tourism across museum institutions.

Table 1.0: An Overview of Cultural Tourism Practices in Museum Institutions

Name of Researchers	Year	Practices	Indicator of Practices			
			HT	VP	LE	QL/LC
Irwan	2021	Among the contributors to cultural heritage tourism activities are museum institutions. This is because museums are mainly founded on a place or community's history, heritage, and culture. For instance, the	/	/		

		Singapore Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) has changed its function as an exhibition institution and gives the impression that the museum is alive. The picnic activities held by the museum provide an opportunity for visitors to have the experience of camping and doing various activities at Singapore's national monument. Among the activities include a walking tour of the Kampung Gelam, Singapore area while going through the history of traders, visiting exhibitions in the gallery at night, and tasting Malay cuisine.				
Marzuki	2021	Dataran Merdeka, Kuala Lumpur is a significant heritage location that attracts local and international tourists. The cultural heritage factor (cultural heritage products) has become the primary influence on the arrival of visitors to Kuala Lumpur. Thus, the uniqueness and glory of the cultural and historical heritage in Kuala Lumpur is the most crucial element in attracting domestic and foreign tourists. Therefore, stakeholders should consider its importance by planning appropriate preservation and conservation strategies for various cultural heritage tourism products in Malaysia.	/			/
Anwar	2021	This subsequently has both positive and negative impacts on the quality of life in the local community.				/
		The tourism industry creates an effective strategy by taking into account the local community's interests so that every development made can increase their income, generate new job opportunities, and increase the diversity of basic facilities in order to improve the quality of life of the local community	/		/	/
Dewan Negeri Selangor	2010	From the local perspective, tourism is the second largest contributor to the state of Selangor's foreign exchange earnings. The presence of 1,505,614 foreign tourists' evidence this to the state in 2006, 1,783,343 foreign tourists in 2007, 2,075,735 foreign tourists in 2008, and 2,398,680 foreign tourists in 2009.	/			
TOTAL			4	1	1	3

Indicators:

HT : Heritage Tourism

VP : Various of Program

LE : Generate Income to Local Economy

QL/LC: Quality of Life/Local Community

The Issues of Cultural Tourism Across Museum Institutions

The integration of new technologies with cultural heritage provides multiple benefits, including faster documentation processes (Campa et al., 2019), enhanced and diversified access to cultural heritage experiences (Gaitatzes et al., 2001; Kersten et al., 2017), and closer engagement with cultural artefacts through detailed digital representations (Styliani et al., 2009). Technology also supports promotion, audience development, and improved accessibility, particularly for individuals with limited mobility or financial resources (Costa & Melotti, 2012; Kersten et al., 2017; Tschirschwitz et al., 2019). Additionally, it offers alternative modes of exhibition beyond traditional museum spaces (King et al., 2016) and effective educational tools, such as edutainment, to enhance knowledge dissemination (Mortara et al., 2014).

Cultural tourism in Malaysia is thriving, driven by the nation’s rich heritage, culture, and arts. The rapid growth of digitalisation has significantly influenced this sector, offering numerous benefits through the integration of new technologies. However, studies highlight challenges such as insufficient cultural policy support, limited promotional strategies, and gaps in technological advancement in Malaysia (Rex, 2020; Wang et al., 2021).

Tanga (2021) notes that political and business stakeholders in Sarawak are hesitant to support local economic development for direct financial gain. Additionally, longhouse communities in Sarawak are often unwilling to invest in extended stays at distant locations to promote heritage and creative arts. Similarly, homestay initiatives in Malaysia face challenges in promotional strategies, stemming from a lack of strong brand identity and limited support from local communities (Lopes & Hearn, 2020).

Interestingly, the challenges encountered in cultural tourism mirror those in Muslim-based tourism, where promotion is hindered by limited support and concerns over Muslim participation in the sector (Rex, 2020). Rex (2020) also highlights the potential benefits of technological development, though limited access to modern technology due to financial constraints can pose difficulties for Muslim tourism businesses. Overall, cultural tourism in Malaysia is frequently affected by insufficient support from various stakeholders, including local communities and government agencies. A lack of backing for promotional activities remains a central barrier to leveraging cultural tourism for economic and social development. The table below provides an overview of the key issues facing cultural tourism in museum institutions.

Table 2.0: An Overview of Cultural Tourism Issues in Museum Institutions

Name of Researchers	Year	Issues	Indicator of Issues			
			HT/EC	NT/FI	EE/ED	PR/AD
Tanga	2021	Political and business parties in Sarawak are reluctant to support the economic development of the locals for direct economic return.	/			
Wang et al.	2021	Cultural tourism in Malaysia is blooming due to the heritage, culture, and arts that the country owns. The dramatic developments in digitalisation have impacted cultural tourism. There are extensive benefits associated with the synergy between new technology and cultural tourism. Studies conducted in this regard have found a lack of support for cultural policy, a lack of promotional strategies, and an advancement of technology in Malaysia.	/	/		/
Rex	2020	Cultural tourism in Malaysia is blooming due to the heritage, culture, and arts that the country owns. The dramatic developments in digitalisation have impacted cultural tourism. There are extensive benefits associated with the synergy between new technology and cultural tourism. Studies conducted in this regard have found a lack of support for cultural policy, a lack of promotional strategies, and an advancement of technology in Malaysia.	/	/		/

Lopes & Hearn	2020	The behaviour of the Sarawak communities that stays in the longhouse refused to invest to stay in a distant place for longer to promote the heritage and creative art in Sarawak. Surprisingly, homestays in Malaysia also poses similar issues with promotional strategies due to a lack of brand identity and support among the local community.	/			/
Rex	2020	The issues faced are similar to Muslim-based tourism, which poses issues in promoting Muslim tourism due to a lack of support and sentiments on Muslim involvement in tourism.	/			/
		Raised concerns about technological development that provide extensive benefits in many ways. However, the accessibility to the latest technology with limited financial resources could be an issue for Muslim tourism-based businesses.	/	/		
Champa et al.	2019	There are a number of benefits associated with the synergy between the new technologies and cultural heritage: accelerating the documentation methods.	/	/		
Tschirschwitz et al.	2019	Offering greater accessibility to cultural heritage.	/			
Kersten et al.	2017	Improving and diversifying the way cultural heritage is accessed by complementing and enhancing the experiences offered.	/		/	
Kersten et al.	2017	Offering greater accessibility to cultural heritage.	/			
King et al.	2016	Particularly for people with limited financial means or mobility, and providing alternative environments of display and engagement with to the confines of traditional museums.		/		
Mortara et al.	2014	Providing educational tools to enhance both teaching and learning experiences, for instance through so-called 'serious games' designed for educational objectives (edutainment), which allow for a new kind of knowledge dissemination.			/	

Costa & Melotti	2012	Supporting with promotion, audience development, and attracting new visitors.				/
Styliani at al.	2009	Bringing the cultural visitor very close to the essence of the cultural works, providing details challenging to see in a gallery or a heritage site.	/			
Liarokapis et al.	2002	Providing educational tools to enhance both teaching and learning experiences, for instance through so-called 'serious games' designed for educational objectives (edutainment), which allow for a new kind of knowledge dissemination.			/	
Gaitatzes et al.	2001	Improving and diversifying the way cultural heritage is accessed by complementing and enhancing the experiences offered.	/		/	
TOTAL			12	5	4	5

Indicators:

HT/EC : Heritage Tourism or Cultural Heritage/Economic

NT/FI : New Technology/Financial Investment

EE/ED : Enhancing Experience/Education

PR/AD : Promoting

The Challenges of Cultural Tourism Across Museum Institutions

Heritage museums often face challenges in both production and visitor engagement due to technological shifts associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the preservation of traditional cultural patterns (Serravalle et al., 2019). While maintaining classical and traditional elements is essential to uphold the value of heritage culture, integrating digital technologies into daily operations and visitor interactions remains a significant challenge (Abu Bakar et al., 2020; Bertacchini et al., 2019; Richards, 2018). Research on cultural transformation also highlights a heavy dependence on physical visitors for economic activity, limited skills in managing such activities, and constraints posed by restricted physical spaces (Tanga, 2021).

To attract physical visitors, museum institutions must first understand their preferences and identify activities that foster active engagement. Ahmad et al. (2018) found that visitors to Malaysian museums expect interactive virtual exhibitions that complement artefact collections within informal learning environments. The integration of technology and the development of engaging programs can enhance the quality of visitor experiences. However, in Malaysia, attracting visitors still largely depends on physical exhibitions that rely on static photos, illustrations, and textual displays (Rosli & Kamaruddin, 2020). The limited use of digital media and a lack of skills in creating innovative content reduce the appeal of museum governance and overall visitor engagement (Vardopoulos, 2022).

The second challenge in cultural tourism relates to the lack of skills necessary for conducting economic activities in both traditional and digital contexts. Traditionally, craft makers often have limited abilities in sales, communication, and product knowledge, resulting in unstable income due to difficulties in attracting visitors (Ahmad et al., 2018). In the digital context, museum staff require creative thinking and basic digital literacy to

develop and share content effectively on digital media platforms (Ahmad et al., 2018; Rosli & Kamaruddin, 2020; Vardopoulos, 2022).

A third challenge in cultural practices in Malaysia stems from traditional layout designs, limited exhibition space, and minimal artefact displays. Similar issues with artefact management have also been reported in countries such as Singapore and China (Centorrino et al., 2021). Restricted exhibition space limits museums’ ability to showcase their full collections. The adoption of new technologies, including Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), 3D modelling, and multimedia content, can help overcome spatial constraints. In contrast, museums in France face no such building capacity issues, allowing them to display physical artworks more freely (Zamora-Kapoor et al., 2020). The table below provides an overview of the main cultural tourism challenges in museum institutions.

Table 3.0: An Overview of Cultural Tourism Challenges in Museum Institutions

Name of Researchers	Year	Challenges	Indicator of Challenges			
			TE	MC	EC	PS/PV
Vardopoulos	2022	The absence of digital media technology in creating creative content with limited skills makes the museum’s governance makes it less attractive.	/			
		In a digital context, the museum’s staff must have creative thinking and basic digital literacy skills to create digital content and post the content on digital media platforms.	/			
Tanga	2021	Context of cultural changes have found high reliance on physical visitors as the primary source of economic activities, a lack of skills in performing economic activities, and challenges in limited physical space.			/	/
Marx et al.	2021	Malaysia is due to the traditional layout plan and limited exhibition space, and minimum displays of artefact collections. Interestingly, other countries like Singapore and China also encounter issues managing their artefact collections.				/
Centorrino et al.	2021	Malaysia is due to the traditional layout plan and limited exhibition space, and minimum displays of artefact collections. Interestingly, other countries like Singapore and China also encounter issues managing their artefact collections.				/
Rosli & Kamaruddin	2020	Looking into the current landscape in the way Malaysia attract visitors solely relies on physical exhibitions, which are entirely based on static photos, illustration, and textual documents.				/
		In a digital context, the museum’s staff must have creative thinking and basic digital literacy skills to create digital content and post the content on digital media platforms.	/			
Zamora-Kapoor et al.	2020	Limited space in the exhibition impacted the ability of the museums to display all artefacts collections owned. Therefore, utilising new	/			/

		technology, such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR) and Three-Dimension Modelling (3D), and multimedia content, may help the museum institutions overcome the issues related to museum building capacity. Contrarily, the museum in France does not have issues related to building capacity. Therefore, museums can fully display the physical arts freely.				
Abu Bakar et al.	2020	Even though heritage museums need to maintain the classics, and traditional personalities to maintain the value of the heritage culture, most of the authors admit that cultural tourism poses significant challenges in integrating digital technology with routine lifestyles and engaging with visitors in the digital environment.	/	/		
Bertacchini et al.	2019		/	/		
Serravalle et al.	2019	Heritage museums often face significant challenges in production and consumption due to technological changes brought by Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the nature of the culture that portrays traditional patterns as they should be.	/			
Richards	2018	Even though heritage museums need to maintain the classics, and traditional personalities to maintain the value of the heritage culture, most of the authors admit that cultural tourism poses significant challenges in integrating digital technology with routine lifestyles and engaging with visitors in the digital environment.	/	/		
Ahmad et al.	2018	visitors expect Malaysian museums to create interactive virtual exhibitions related to artefact collections in the informal learning environment. Integrating technology and creating attractive programs positively impact the quality of visitors' experience.	/			
		The lack of skills in performing economic activities in both traditional and digital environments. In a traditional context, the craft makers have limited skills in selling, communication, and knowledge, leading to unstable income due to the inability to communicate well to attract visitors.	/		/	/
		In a digital context, the museum's staff must have creative thinking and basic digital literacy skills to create digital content and post the content on digital media platforms.	/			
TOTAL			11	3	2	6

Indicators:

TE : Technology

MC : Maintain Cultural Heritage Value

EC : Economic

PS/PV : Physical Space/Physical Visitor

Awang (2001) defines data collection as the process of designing and gathering information relevant to specific research questions. In this study, a qualitative research design was employed, with data collected through interviews and a review of existing literature. Museums under the Jabatan Muzium Malaysia (JMM) were selected based on visitor attendance statistics from 22 institutions, excluding temporary exhibitions. Interviews served as the primary data collection instrument, with written consent obtained for audio or video recording.

Creswell (2011) suggests that qualitative studies typically involve four to ten informants, with recruitment ceasing once data saturation is achieved—when additional interviews no longer yield new information and responses begin to repeat (Polit & Beck, 2017; Richards & Morse, 2013). Similarly, Hennink and Kaiser (2021) recommend interviewing nine to seventeen informants to reach saturation. Following these guidelines, this study conducted interviews until data saturation was reached, which occurred after seven informants.

According to Creswell et al. (2007), a research group should comprise three to fifteen participants with relevant experience. The seven informants provided sufficient data to construct a research framework addressing the practices, issues, and challenges faced by JMM regarding digitalisation, cultural tourism, and online museum learning, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. Additionally, the study proposes a novel formula for the sustainability of museum institutions in Malaysia. The museums included in the study are listed in Table 4.0.

Table 4.0: Presents the List of Museums included as Informants in this Study.

Informant	Museum	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
High Visitor Arrival						
1	Muzium Seni Kraf Orang Asli	112,684	198,393	74,160	98,987	105,608
Medium Visitor Arrival						
2	Muzium Arkeologi Lembah Bujang	176,367	180,509	162,475	204,997	152,424
3	Muzium Marin Labuan	144,439	131,761	141,557	133,334	126,443
Low Visitor Arrival						
4	Muzium Sungai Lembing	70,965	80,574	71,745	64,964	63,254
6	Galeria Perdana	109,081	82,323	78,756	89,503	108,892
7	Muzium Adat	70,614	80,923	86,116	88,262	77,685

Source: Jabatan Muzium Malaysia (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019)

The findings from the interviews, along with insights from the literature review, are presented in the following results section.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study adopts a conceptual framework rather than a formal theoretical framework. While a theoretical framework is typically grounded in established grand theories that explain causal relationships among variables, the present research is exploratory and practice-oriented in nature. Therefore, it does not aim to test or extend a specific existing theory.

Instead, the study develops a conceptual framework based on three interrelated dimensions: digital platforms, cultural tourism, and online learning. These dimensions were derived from an extensive review of literature and preliminary observations of museum practices in Malaysia. The framework serves as an analytical structure to

examine how museum institutions adapt to digitalisation while sustaining cultural tourism and community engagement.

The conceptual framework guides the identification of themes related to practices, issues, and challenges faced by museum institutions. It provides a structured lens for analysing interview data and interpreting findings. Thus, although the study does not explicitly rely on a single theoretical model, it is grounded in a coherent conceptual structure that frames the research questions, methodology, and analysis.

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative case study design. The exploratory approach is appropriate because the research aims to understand emerging practices, issues, and challenges of cultural tourism within Malaysian museum institutions, particularly in relation to digitalisation. Given the limited empirical research examining these dimensions collectively in the Malaysian context, an exploratory design allows in-depth investigation without testing predetermined hypotheses.

The study is also positioned as a case study because it focuses specifically on museum institutions under the Jabatan Muzium Malaysia (JMM). These institutions serve as bounded cases within a defined institutional and geographical context. The case study design enables a contextualised understanding of organisational practices, operational issues, and strategic challenges.

This research does not adopt a phenomenological approach, as the objective is not to explore the lived experiences of individuals in depth. Nor does it follow grounded theory methodology, since the study does not aim to generate a new theory. Instead, it applies thematic analysis guided by a predefined conceptual model.

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed a hybrid coding strategy combining deductive and inductive approaches. Initially, deductive coding was applied based on the conceptual model of the study, which identified three primary domains: practices, issues, and challenges. These domains served as preliminary coding categories.

Subsequently, inductive coding was conducted to identify emerging subthemes within each domain. Codes were assigned to recurring patterns, statements, and concepts expressed by informants. Similar codes were grouped into categories, and categories were further refined into overarching themes. Themes were considered saturated when no new codes emerged from subsequent interviews. Data saturation was reached after seven informants, consistent with qualitative research recommendations (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021).

Thematic development followed a systematic process:

- i. Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading
- ii. Initial code generation
- iii. Categorisation of related codes
- iv. Theme refinement and validation
- v. Alignment of themes with the conceptual model

This process ensured analytical rigor and coherence between empirical findings and the research framework.

To ensure methodological rigor, this study applied established trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation between interview data and the literature review, ensuring that emerging themes were supported by both empirical evidence and scholarly perspectives. Informants were purposively selected based on their professional roles within museum institutions, and data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicating that no new insights emerged. Transferability was strengthened by providing clear contextual descriptions of the museum institutions and participants' roles, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar institutional settings. Dependability was ensured through systematic documentation of the research process, including data collection

procedures, coding strategies, and thematic development. The alignment between the conceptual model and the analytical process further reinforced the consistency and integrity of the study.

Results The Practices, Issues and Challenges of Cultural Tourism Across Museum Institutions in Malaysia

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on cultural tourism and museum digitalisation by offering a context-specific analysis of Malaysian museum institutions. While previous studies (e.g., Serravalle et al., 2019; Richards, 2018; Mortara et al., 2014) emphasise the integration of advanced technologies such as augmented reality, virtual exhibitions, and immersive storytelling in Western museums, the present findings reveal a markedly different trajectory in Malaysia.

First, unlike many Western institutions where digital transformation is embedded as a strategic priority, Malaysian museums remain heavily reliant on physical artefact representation and on-site visitor metrics as primary indicators of success. Although digital initiatives exist, they are often supplementary rather than structural. This contrasts with Western models, where digital engagement frequently functions as an independent cultural consumption channel rather than merely promotional support.

Second, the study identifies workforce shortages and limited physical infrastructure as persistent operational constraints. While space limitations are discussed in international scholarship (Centorrino et al., 2021), Western museums often compensate through advanced digital curation systems and strong institutional funding. In contrast, Malaysian museums face infrastructural constraints compounded by limited technological investment and uneven local development, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas. This indicates that digital transformation in Malaysia is not merely a technological issue but a governance and development issue.

Third, the findings reveal that cultural tourism in Malaysia is closely intertwined with local economic ecosystems, including homestays, handicrafts, and small-scale food enterprises. While Western literature frequently conceptualises museums as global cultural consumption hubs, Malaysian museums function simultaneously as cultural institutions and local economic catalysts. This dual role reflects a development-oriented model of cultural tourism that is more community-embedded than commercially institutionalised.

From a theoretical perspective, this study refines the understanding of cultural tourism sustainability by proposing a structured differentiation between practices, issues, and challenges. Existing literature often treats institutional barriers as homogeneous constraints. However, this study distinguishes between operational issues (e.g., space, staffing, reliance on physical visitors) and systemic challenges (e.g., passive local development and ineffective cultural commercialisation). This layered analytical model contributes a clearer conceptual structure for examining cultural institutions in emerging economies.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that digitalisation should not be conceptualised as a purely technological upgrade but as an institutional transformation process requiring infrastructural readiness, human capital development, and governance alignment. This expands existing museum digitalisation discourse by situating technological adoption within broader socio-economic systems rather than treating it as a standalone innovation variable.

Overall, the Malaysian case demonstrates that cultural tourism development in emerging contexts follows a structurally different pathway from Western museums, shaped by resource constraints, governance capacity, and community dependence. This contextual insight enriches comparative museum studies and extends theoretical discussions on cultural tourism sustainability in non-Western settings.

Tourism is a rapidly growing industry globally and in Malaysia, contributing 9.5% (USD 7 trillion) to the world GDP in 2013 (Ramli et al., 2015). Malaysia's cultural and ethnic diversity, along with regions like Malacca, Penang, Sabah, and Sarawak, attracts tourists through historical heritage, culture, and eco- or agrotourism (Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2008). Museums play a key role in promoting culture-based tourism and preserving heritage. This study finds that cultural tourism in local regions is evolving, positively impacting the regional economy and addressing gaps noted by Bertacchini et al. (2019). This section addresses the second research question

concerning the practices, issues, and challenges of cultural tourism in Malaysian museum institutions. The thematic analysis identified nine (9) key themes that characterize the cultural tourism landscape in Malaysia.

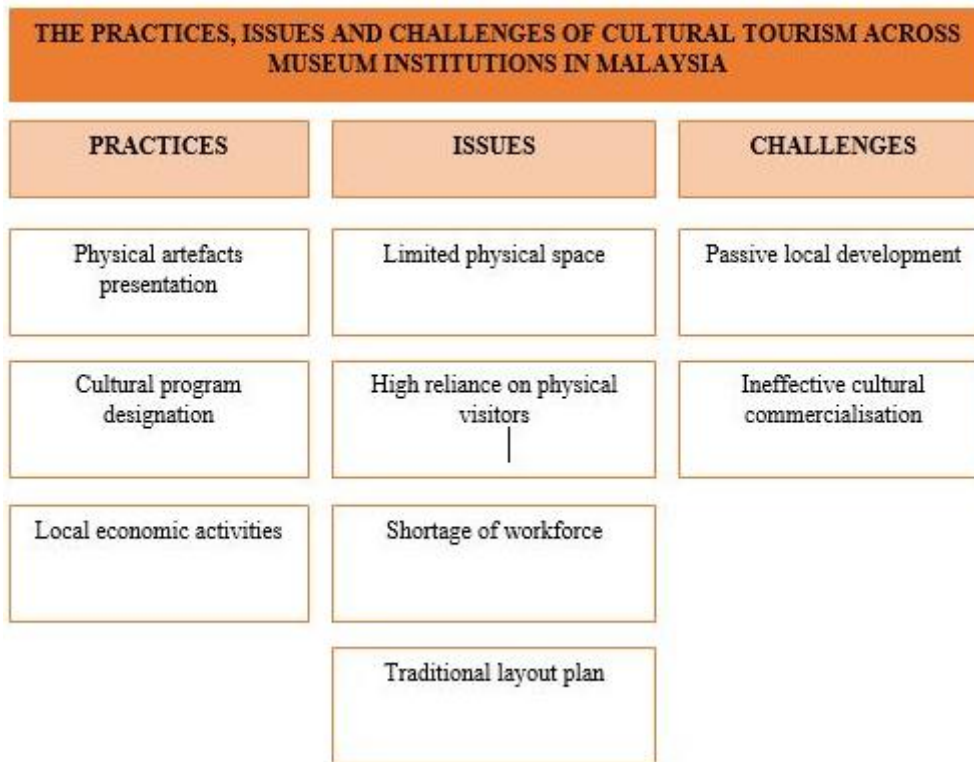


Figure 1.0: Framework of findings illustrating the practices, issues, and challenges of cultural tourism in Malaysian museum institutions.

Statistics indicate that the majority of foreign tourists visiting Malaysia frequent Georgetown in Pulau Pinang and Melaka, particularly travelers from Southeast Asia. Among natural attractions, Kinabalu National Park in Sabah is the most popular, followed by Mulu National Park in Sarawak and Pahang National Park in Pahang. Cultural tourism plays a significant role in contributing to national economic growth; however, its importance is often overlooked due to the heavy promotion of ecotourism (Puah et al., 2018).

Figure 1.0 shows the findings framework from the data analysis, identifying nine themes on cultural tourism practices, issues, and challenges in Malaysia. Practices focus on three main areas: (i) physical artefact representation, (ii) cultural program design, and (iii) local economic activities. Physical artefacts, often presented through storytelling, are crucial for attracting and engaging visitors.

Cultural programs involving local communities attract visitors, enhance learning experiences, and boost local economic growth. Museums promote heritage and education through storytelling, art, and interactive activities that engage and inspire visitors. Cultural tourism enhances learning, but museums face challenges such as limited space, reliance on physical visitors, workforce shortages, and traditional layouts. These issues can reduce visitor engagement. Implementing digital technologies offers opportunities to improve heritage presentation and attract more visitors. The main challenges in implementing cultural tourism are limited local development and ineffective cultural commercialisation.

Cultural diversity and access to culture are essential for fostering social cohesion and development (Fanea-Ivanovici, 2018). Sustainable local development relies on management efforts to promote cultural tourism through physical and digital content, enhancing visibility of artefacts and attracting investment. Digital access to cultural content also engages visitors and increases participation, supporting the creation of new forms of cultural production and promoting cultural diversity globally.

In conclusion, cultural consumption should be expanded through digital platforms and integrated with technological and operational processes. Raising awareness of digitalisation’s importance in cultural tourism is

essential. The next section presents the informants’ experiences and perspectives on managing cultural tourism programs in museums.

The Practices of Cultural Tourism Across Museum Institutions in Malaysia

A key function of the Jabatan Muzium Malaysia (JMM) is to provide knowledge and learning experiences about Malaysia’s history, culture, and heritage. Malaysia’s strong cultural tradition is reflected in national efforts to develop cultural-based museums. The cultural and creative sectors are important sources of innovation, both technological and non-technological, and this potential should be maximised (Fanea-Ivanovici, 2018). This study identified three main themes in cultural tourism practices within Malaysian museums: (i) physical artefact presentation, (ii) cultural program design, and (iii) local economic activities. These themes are summarised in Table 4.4.

Table 5.0: Themes representing the practices of cultural tourism in Malaysian museum institutions.

The Practices of Cultural Tourism Across Museum Institutions In Malaysia	Informant	Practices	Indicator of Themes		
			PP	CP	LE
	Informant 1	Pelancong yang melawat Muzium Seni Kraf Orang Asli di Malaysia akan terpikat dengan artifak asli suku kaum Orang Asli.	/		
	Informant 3	Muzium kami memaparkan bilangan spesimen dan koleksi hidupan laut terbanyak di Malaysia.	/		
	Informant 4	Lawatan fizikal membayangkan hubungan yang lebih timbal balik antara muzium dan pelancong dan memberikan pengalaman fizikal yang berbaloi.	/		
	Informant 5	Lawatan fizikal membayangkan hubungan yang lebih timbal balik antara muzium dan pelancong dan memberikan pengalaman fizikal yang berbaloi.	/		
	Informant 7	Koleksi dalam talian memberikan konsep pelancongan budaya rentas sempadan serta kesinambungan kepada pelancong yang mengunjungi muzium untuk melihat koleksi secara fizikal.	/		
	Informant 7	Pelajar tersebut datang ke sini untuk mempelajari dan melihat adat resam dalam konteks budaya yang memfokuskan kepada aspek bukan material. Jadi, muzium fizikal mewakili bahan di mana ia nyata, kita boleh melihatnya secara langsung, dan aspek bukan material, iaitu adat resam.		/	
	Informant 1	Kami mengadakan pelbagai program bersama pengunjung dan ‘Orang Asli’. Kami menjalankan pelbagai program seni dan budaya seperti tarian tradisional, demonstrasi budaya, dan seni anyaman.		/	
	Informant 5	Di Sungai Lembing, penduduk tempatan menghasilkan biskut kelapa mereka, dan mereka mencipta produk makanan berasaskan kayu.			/

	Informant 7	Terdapat pasar malam dan pasar hujung minggu di sekitar kawasan muzium. Kita dapat melihat bahawa pasaran memberi kesan positif kepada ekonomi tempatan, dan sesetengah penduduk tempatan menjana wang melalui perniagaan homestay dan hotel.			/
	Informant 2	Terdapat begitu banyak aktiviti pelancongan yang berlaku di sekitar sini di mana penduduk tempatan dan penduduk kampung membina chalet dan homestay mereka memainkan peranan penting dalam pembangunan ekonomi tempatan.			/
	Informant 1	Terdapat begitu banyak aktiviti pelancongan yang berlaku di sekitar sini di mana penduduk tempatan dan penduduk kampung membina chalet dan homestay mereka memainkan peranan penting dalam pembangunan ekonomi tempatan.			/
	Informant 1	Selain demonstrasi budaya, Orang Asli juga menjual hasil kraftangan seperti 'sumpit', kraf anyaman dan juga madu tulen yang segar daripada hasil hutan.			/
TOTAL			5	2	5

Indicator of Themes:

PP : Physical artefacts presentation

CP : Cultural program designation

LE : Local economic activities

The first theme is the presentation of physical artefacts. Traditionally, artefacts are displayed in museum spaces to provide visitors with cultural experiences that evoke memories (Ocón, 2021). However, museums need to enhance this experience by adapting to technological changes and transforming routine activities into meaningful practices that benefit both the institution and social development.

“Pelancong yang melawat Muzium Seni Kraf Orang Asli di Malaysia akan terpicat dengan artifak asli suku kaum Orang Asli.” (Informant 1)

“Muzium kami memaparkan bilangan spesimen dan koleksi hidupan laut terbanyak di Malaysia.” (Informant 3)

“Lawatan fizikal membayangkan hubungan yang lebih timbal balik antara muzium dan pelancong dan memberikan pengalaman fizikal yang berbaloi.” (Informant 4, 5)

Informant 1 highlighted food carvings from the Mah Meri Aboriginal Tribe on Carey Island, Selangor, as examples of unique shapes and artistry. Informant 3 noted that visitors primarily engage with stone quarrying artefacts, while Informants 4 and 5 emphasized that physical visits allow visitors to experience the museum space as a holistic narrative. Analysis of the interviews revealed that most informants prefer conventional approaches, relying on physical exhibitions as the main method to attract visitors. This preference likely stems from the belief that in-person displays best promote active engagement and participation in the museum’s cultural activities.

“Koleksi dalam talian memberikan konsep pelancongan budaya rentas sempadan serta kesinambungan kepada pelancong yang mengunjungi muzium untuk melihat koleksi secara fizikal.” (Informant 7)

Informant 7 offered a different perspective, suggesting that cultural tourism can benefit from integrating digital and physical experiences. By publishing digital content online, museums can provide an overview that encourages visitors to engage with cultural heritage in person. Digitalising artefact presentations removes traditional barriers such as location, cost, and accessibility, while creating opportunities for interactive virtual experiences. This approach enables stakeholders to innovate new programs that enhance visitor engagement and promote cultural tourism.

Secondly, digital cultural programs can enhance museum storytelling by emphasizing emotional engagement through interactive content. Informants from art and culture museums noted that such programs highlight daily activities, norms, and beliefs of local communities. Most visitors participate in these programs to experience and immerse themselves in the cultural environment.

“Pelajar tersebut datang ke sini untuk mempelajari dan melihat adat resam dalam konteks budaya yang memfokuskan kepada aspek bukan material. Jadi, muzium fizikal mewakili bahan di mana ia nyata, kita boleh melihatnya secara langsung, dan aspek bukan material, iaitu adat resam.” (Informant 7)

“Kami mengadakan pelbagai program bersama pengunjung dan ‘Orang Asli’. Kami menjalankan pelbagai program seni dan budaya seperti tarian tradisional, demonstrasi budaya, dan seni anyaman.” (Informant 1)

Cultural programs play a key role in engaging audiences and promoting active participation in cultural activities, making physical programs important for attracting visitors. Informant 7 noted that such programs foster physical and emotional connections to culture and the arts, while Informant 1 emphasized that inclusive programs enhance interaction between visitors and locals. To respond to environmental and technological changes, museums should adopt hybrid activities that engage both physical and virtual audiences, ensuring adaptability and strategic agility.

The third key theme in cultural tourism practices in museums is local economic activities. Cultural tourism is a major contributor to Malaysia’s local economy (Puah et al., 2018), providing opportunities for communities to promote products and services, boost individual incomes, and contribute to national tourism revenue. The tourism industry involves both tangible products, such as hotels and restaurants, and intangible experiences, such as scenery and atmosphere, to enhance visitor experiences (Erkuş-Öztürk & Terhorst, 2018). Overall, cultural tourism serves as a key driver of economic growth.

“Di Sungai Lembing, penduduk tempatan menghasilkan biskut kelapa mereka, dan mereka mencipta produk makanan berasaskan kayu.” (Informant 5)

“Terdapat pasar malam dan pasar hujung minggu di sekitar kawasan muzium. Kita dapat melihat bahawa pasaran memberi kesan positif kepada ekonomi tempatan, dan sesetengah penduduk tempatan menjana wang melalui perniagaan homestay dan hotel.” (Informant 7)

“Terdapat begitu banyak aktiviti pelancongan yang berlaku di sekitar sini di mana penduduk tempatan dan penduduk kampung membina chalet dan homestay mereka memainkan peranan penting dalam pembangunan ekonomi tempatan.” (Informant 2)

“Terdapat begitu banyak aktiviti pelancongan yang berlaku di sekitar sini di mana penduduk tempatan dan penduduk kampung membina chalet dan homestay mereka memainkan peranan penting dalam pembangunan ekonomi tempatan.” (Informant 1)

“Selain demonstrasi budaya, Orang Asli juga menjual hasil kraftangan seperti ‘sumpit’, kraf anyaman dan juga madu tulen yang segar daripada hasil hutan.” (Informant 1)

Most informants agreed that cultural tourism in museums benefits the local economy by creating opportunities for businesses in food, handicrafts, services, and hospitality. The resulting diversity of economic activities attracts more visitors and varied tourist types, ultimately increasing income for both the local community and the museum.

The Issues of Cultural Tourism Across Museum Institutions in Malaysia

Cultural tourism showcases arts, culture, and local lifestyles, offering authentic visitor experiences (Ocón, 2021). Key issues in Malaysian museums include limited space, reliance on physical visitors, workforce shortages, and traditional layouts (Table 4.5).

Table 6.0: Key themes of issues in cultural tourism across Malaysian museum institutions

The Issues of Cultural Tourism Across Museum Institutions In Malaysia	Informant	Issues	Indicator of Themes			
			LS	HV	SW	TP
	Informant 1	Kami mempunyai begitu banyak artifak yang masih tidak dipaparkan. Kami tidak mempunyai ruang yang mencukupi untuk memaparkan semua koleksi.	/			
	Informant 6	Kami mempunyai lebih daripada 6,000 koleksi sedia untuk menemui pengunjung. Bagaimanapun, kapasiti muzium kami hanya berjaya mempamerkan 2,500 koleksi, tidak lebih daripada itu.	/			
	Informant 3	Kami menyokong idea pendigitalan institusi muzium dalam mempromosikan muzium untuk menyumbang kepada statistik bilangan pelawat yang melawat muzium kami.		/		
	Informant 1	Kami mempunyai rancangan bual bicara secara langsung dalam talian bernama 'Bicara Bersama Muzium' yang dilancarkan berikutan pandemik COVID-19. Alhamdulillah, kami sudah mencecah 100 tontonan ketika bersiaran.		/		
	Informant 6	Kami hanya mempunyai sepuluh kakitangan untuk melaksanakan tugas. Berbanding dengan Jabatan Muzium Malaysia (JMM) yang mempunyai 30 kakitangan dengan jumlah artifak yang sedikit.			/	
	Informant 7	Bangunan kami kecil dan perlu melaksanakan fungsi yang berbeza seperti galeri pameran, ruang penyimpanan, pejabat, perpustakaan, dll.			/	
	Informant 1	Institusi muzium juga perlu berurusan dengan bangunan lama dengan pelan susun atur yang lemah. Oleh itu, tiada banyak yang boleh dilakukan untuk memaparkan semua artifak sekaligus.				/
	Informant 7	Bangunan kami kecil dan perlu melaksanakan fungsi yang berbeza seperti galeri pameran, ruang penyimpanan, pejabat, perpustakaan, dll.				/
TOTAL			2	2	2	2

Indicator of Themes:

LS : Limited physical space

HV : High reliance on physical visitors

SW : Shortage of workforce

TP : Traditional layout plan

The first issue is limited physical space, affecting museums in Malaysia and abroad (Liu & Lan, 2021). Space constraints prevent full display of artefacts and complicate managing multiple museum functions. Effective task delegation is needed to preserve artefacts and maintain their value for future generations.

“Kami mempunyai begitu banyak artifak yang masih tidak dipaparkan. Kami tidak mempunyai ruang yang mencukupi untuk memaparkan semua koleksi.” (Informant 1)

“Kami mempunyai lebih daripada 6,000 koleksi sedia untuk menemui pengunjung. Bagaimanapun, kapasiti muzium kami hanya berjaya mempamerkan 2,500 koleksi, tidak lebih daripada itu.” (Informant 6)

Informants noted that Malaysia possesses a wealth of cultural and heritage artefacts worthy of global display. However, limited museum space restricts the number of artefacts that can be exhibited. These constraints highlight opportunities for digital solutions, such as virtual exhibitions, digitised artefacts, and digital catalogues to preserve cultural information. The space limitations are further compounded by a high reliance on physical visitors, leading to the second key issue.

The second theme is the high reliance on physical visitors. Informants noted that visitor numbers are often used as a measure of a museum’s success. Malaysian museums are generally unprepared to promote virtual exhibitions, and digitalisation efforts remain limited. Although informants considered these efforts satisfactory, social media metrics show low engagement, likely due to the novelty of digital technology, meaning even a small number of viewers is perceived as a success.

“Kami menyokong idea pendigitalan institusi muzium dalam mempromosikan muzium untuk menyumbang kepada statistik bilangan pelawat yang melawat muzium kami.” (Informant 3)

“Kami mempunyai rancangan bual bicara secara langsung dalam talian bernama 'Bicara Bersama Muzium' yang dilancarkan berikutan pandemik COVID-19. Alhamdulillah, kami sudah mencecah 100 tontonan ketika bersiaran.” (Informant 1)

Based on the informants’ responses and non-verbal cues, the thesis can conclude that the issues of physical visitors and physical space are contrary to the cultural tourism scenario. The informants readily admit that the physical space and a massive number of visitors are pressing them for digitalisation. However, they also rely on the physical visitors as an indicator to measure the success of museum institutions. The minimum efforts on digitalising cultural content led to an ineffective digital program structure.

Surprisingly, unattractive content that produces 100 views is considered an achievement in the informant’s opinion. This is a tough call for government agencies and museum institutions to reconstruct museum management to overcome physical space issues and visitors.

The third theme is workforce shortages. Interviews revealed an imbalance between the number of artefacts needing management and available staff, particularly in smaller urban areas, where limited job opportunities drive workers to larger cities (Fanea-Ivanovici, 2018). This shortage hampers task delegation and museum operations, and limited budgets for hiring exacerbate the problem. As a result, the museum’s ability to support cultural tourism and preserve national arts, culture, and heritage is compromised.

“Kami hanya mempunyai sepuluh kakitangan untuk melaksanakan tugas. Berbanding dengan Jabatan Muzium Malaysia (JMM) yang mempunyai 30 kakitangan dengan jumlah artifak yang sedikit.” (Informant 6)

“Sektor kerajaan terdedah kepada giliran kerja dan pertukaran jabatan. Akan ada sedikit isu dari segi pengurusan sumber manusia, dan bukan mudah untuk mengambil kakitangan baharu kerana ia memerlukan cadangan belanjawan baharu dan alasan kukuh.” (Informant 7)

Informant 6 highlighted a significant imbalance between staff numbers, museum space, and artefact collections. Informant 7 noted the need for more specialised staff due to frequent job rotations. Financial constraints and limited management support make hiring additional staff challenging, and overall, urban museums tend to have larger workforces compared to smaller metropolitan areas. The uneven workforce distribution between urban and smaller areas indicates a need for government institutions to restructure staff according to artefact numbers and workload.

The fourth theme concerns issues with traditional layout plans. Poor planning that ignores long-term sustainability negatively affects museums, as historic spaces often limit the provision of essential services (Mateo, 2021). Museums face a dilemma between preserving artefacts and maintaining the heritage building’s original form. Digital-based museums offer a potential solution by presenting artefacts virtually, but this approach remains underexplored and largely unsupported by government initiatives for cultural tourism.

“Institusi muzium juga perlu berurusan dengan bangunan lama dengan pelan susun atur yang lemah. Oleh itu, tiada banyak yang boleh dilakukan untuk memaparkan semua artifak sekaligus.” (Informant 1)

“Bangunan kami kecil dan perlu melaksanakan fungsi yang berbeza seperti galeri pameran, ruang penyimpanan, pejabat, perpustakaan, dll.” (Informant 7)

Based on the interview, Informant 1 expressed his opinions on managing artefacts in limited space. The discovery leads to noteworthy findings. The inability of the museum institution to display all the artefact collections is due to the physical structure of the heritage building itself. On the contrary, Informant 7 highlighted that the museum functions are not centralised, leading to limited space for artefact representation since other areas were utilised to perform other management and operation activities. For instance, one small heritage buildings consist of various departments such as a management office, library, and exhibition gallery, making it difficult to exhibit all the artefact collection in a limited space.

In conclusion, resource and capacity imbalances in museum institutions remain a critical challenge. Poor governance and managerial decisions are major reasons why cultural tourism issues persist. The government and museums should focus on implementing practical strategies rather than relying solely on statistics. Stakeholders can address these challenges by partially adopting digitalisation, using technology to enhance workforce efficiency, and implementing virtual exhibitions and digital storytelling to overcome limitations in visitor numbers, physical space, and layout constraints.

The Challenges of Cultural Tourism Across Museum Institutions in Malaysia

Addressing major challenges is essential before implementing effective solutions. For museum institutions, these challenges primarily involve managing and preserving heritage collections and artefacts (Kim, 2018; Ocón, 2021). This study identified two key challenges: passive local development and ineffective cultural commercialisation.

Table 7.0: Key themes of challenges in cultural tourism across Malaysian museum institutions.

The Challenges of Cultural Tourism Across Museum	Informant	Challenges	Indicator of Themes	
			PD	IC
	Informant 5	Kami mempunyai akses internet yang lemah. Di kawasan luar bandar, kami hampir tidak mendapat	/	

Institutions in Malaysia		sambungan melainkan kami pergi ke sekolah terdekat.		
	Informant 6	Kami hanya boleh memaparkan 2,000 koleksi daripada 6,000 yang kami ada.	/	
	Informant 6	Galeri ini dibina di Kampung Kilim memandangkan tiada pembangunan di sini, bagi memastikan setiap bahagian Langkawi mempunyai sesuatu untuk dipertontonkan, bagi memastikan pergerakan ekonomi sejajar dengan kawasan lain.	/	
	Informant 1	Kami berjaya mengumpulkan 100 tontonan di platform sosial kami, memperkenalkan kehidupan Orang Asli melalui persembahan video digital.		/
	Informant 7	Terdapat peningkatan dalam mencipta kandungan melalui jalan cerita untuk menarik pengunjung.		/
TOTAL			3	2

Indicator of Themes:

PD : Passive local development

IC : Ineffective cultural commercialisation

The first challenge is passive local development. Local decision-makers, including government agencies, play a key role in improving infrastructure, transportation, and community facilities (Puah et al., 2018). Informants noted that limited action in supporting museum institutions hampers cultural tourism. Additionally, poor internet access in smaller urban areas reflects inadequate governance in providing technological infrastructure, which must be addressed as a foundation for digital development.

“Kami mempunyai akses internet yang lemah. Di kawasan luar bandar, kami hampir tidak mendapat sambungan melainkan kami pergi ke sekolah terdekat.” (Informant 5)

“Kami hanya boleh memaparkan 2,000 koleksi daripada 6,000 yang kami ada.” (Informant 6)

“Galeri ini dibina di Kampung Kilim memandangkan tiada pembangunan di sini, bagi memastikan setiap bahagian Langkawi mempunyai sesuatu untuk dipertontonkan, bagi memastikan pergerakan ekonomi sejajar dengan kawasan lain.” (Informant 6)

The second challenge is ineffective cultural commercialisation. Museums struggle to introduce culture to the public due to limited institutions showcasing cultural perspectives, as each museum under Jabatan Muzium Malaysia (JMM) has a specific focus. For example, Muzium Marin (MM) highlights marine ecology, while Muzium Adat (MA) and Muzium Seni Kraf Orang Asli (MSKOA) lead in promoting culture and arts, yet cultural outreach remains challenging.

“Kami berjaya mengumpulkan 100 tontonan di platform sosial kami, memperkenalkan kehidupan Orang Asli melalui persembahan video digital.” (Informant 1)

“Terdapat peningkatan dalam mencipta kandungan melalui jalan cerita untuk menarik pengunjung.” (Informant 7)

Interviews revealed that difficulties in promoting cultural programs, both virtually and physically, contribute to ineffective commercialisation strategies. Limited exposure of cultural tourism within museum institutions highlights the need for new branding approaches. Stakeholders should reintroduce Malaysia's unique and diverse culture to attract greater global attention.

The structure and economic development around museums significantly affect visitor numbers and attractions. Interviews revealed that stakeholders must build a strong, holistic foundation—including technology, infrastructure, facilities, human resources, and community engagement—to keep cultural tourism relevant and give museums a competitive edge. Stagnant development can undermine government credibility and the museum's reputation in preserving national cultural heritage for global recognition.

CONCLUSION

This section presents the study's conclusion. The paper explored the perspectives of seven experienced staff from six Malaysian museum institutions on current practices, issues, and challenges. Regarding digitalisation, informants noted that advanced technology can enhance promotional activities, improve artefact management, and support the creation of more engaging programs.

Malaysian museum institutions play a significant role in sustaining cultural tourism and supporting local economic ecosystems. Artefact presentation, cultural programming, and community engagement remain central operational practices. However, these activities are constrained by structural limitations, including restricted physical space, workforce shortages, and a persistent reliance on physical visitor metrics.

Unlike many Western museums where digital transformation is institutionally embedded, Malaysian museums adopt digital initiatives in a supplementary rather than strategic capacity. This reflects broader infrastructural and governance constraints rather than resistance to innovation. Digitalisation in this context is therefore not merely a technological transition but an institutional restructuring challenge.

The study contributes conceptually by distinguishing between operational issues and systemic challenges. Operational issues, such as space and staffing constraints, directly affect day-to-day functioning. In contrast, systemic challenges—including passive local development and ineffective cultural commercialisation—shape long-term sustainability. This layered analytical distinction clarifies how emerging economies experience cultural tourism differently from Western institutional models.

Strengthening digital infrastructure, improving governance alignment, and enhancing workforce capabilities are therefore critical to ensuring the sustainability and competitiveness of Malaysian museum institutions within the evolving global cultural tourism landscape.

This study examined cultural tourism practices, issues, and challenges in Malaysian museum institutions. Informants working in museums focused on arts and culture noted that cultural tourism development remains stagnant. Current practices revolve around artefact representation, program creation, and local economic development. Historically, museums have served as the heart of artistic presentation, with public participation being essential for sustainability. Informants emphasized that storytelling through artefacts and interactive programs can attract visitors and increase exposure for museum institutions.

In addition to relying on nearby visitors, museums offer culturally based programs that encourage public participation and showcase art and heritage. These programs also foster social engagement by connecting visitors with local communities. While such programs generate revenue, museums could increase profits by designing interactive cultural programs that reach a wider audience beyond local visitors.

This aligns with Ocón (2021), who recommended interactive programs to attract future physical visitors. Such programs allow potential visitors to gain virtual knowledge and experiences, encouraging real-life visits. Beyond artefact displays and program design, cultural tourism in Malaysia also supports local economic development around museums.

Museums significantly boost the local economy, particularly in the food, tourism, and hospitality sectors. Locals sell cultural food products, such as honey, cookies, and wood-based items, attracting visitors and offering authentic cultural experiences. Additionally, homestay businesses provide visitors with opportunities to experience local lifestyles and the natural environment.

Local economic development around museums benefits both the community and the institutions, offering visitors more activities beyond the museum visit. However, despite impressive cultural practices, museums face significant challenges that require major improvements for long-term sustainability. Key issues include limited physical space, high dependence on physical visitors, workforce shortages, and traditional layout plans, as reported by the informants.

Malaysia is rich in cultural diversity and heritage, with architecture influenced by colonial powers (Enchanting Travels, 2022). Many museums occupy heritage buildings with unique layouts, limiting the number of artefacts that can be displayed. As a result, some collections remain in storage, and the preservation of tangible cultural heritage is only partially coordinated. Additionally, minimal digitalisation forces museums to rely heavily on physical visitors rather than virtual audiences, further restricting access and outreach.

These issues create challenges for local development and slow the commercialisation of culture. Local communities contribute significantly to Malaysia's tourism-driven economic growth. Local development, defined as improving an area's economic, social, and environmental conditions through endogenous resources, supports community well-being (Pedersoli Jr, Antomarchi, Michalski, Malapitan, Foulquié, & Irqosy, 2016). Socio-economic activities around museums—including tourism, hospitality, and small-scale food and handicraft enterprises—require integrated development and improved infrastructure to attract visitors and enhance tourist experiences while boosting the local economy.

Effective management of resources and community ownership—through access, usage rights, or control over local resources—must be prioritised to generate financial and social benefits. This has led to the emergence of various community-based tourism enterprises, including homestays, cultural and heritage ventures, agri-tourism, recreational facilities, and tour services. Proper governance and empowerment can enhance revenue, strengthen cultural tourism, and improve the livelihoods of local communities.

In conclusion, Malaysian museum institutions play a vital role in promoting cultural tourism, preserving heritage, and supporting local economic development. While current practices—such as artefact representation, cultural programs, and community engagement—positively impact visitor experiences and the local economy, significant challenges remain, including limited physical space, workforce shortages, reliance on physical visitors, and traditional layouts. Advancing digitalisation, improving infrastructure, and empowering local communities through effective governance and resource management are essential strategies to enhance museum sustainability, expand cultural outreach, and maximise the socio-economic benefits of cultural tourism.

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