

The Resilience of Tourism at Georgetown Heritage Sites: Insights from Local Community Engagement During Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) virus rapidly spread worldwide, evolving into a significant pandemic that has impacted nearly every country. Georgetown, as a heritage site, has witnessed distinct effects of the crisis on cultural heritage sites and stakeholders, along with various economic implications. The primary impact on this heritage site has been a decline in visitor numbers due to government-imposed preventive measures such as movement restrictions. These measures have significantly affected the tourism sector's economy. However, local community engagement was insufficient during the strategic planning for tourism development at heritage sites. This research aims to understand the involvement of the local community in heritage sites at Georgetown during COVID-19. Specifically, the objective is to identify the challenges faced by the local community and tourism at heritage sites during COVID-19. This study utilised a quantitative approach by collecting data through an online survey questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), which revealed the challenges and opportunities posed by the pandemic at heritage sites. The findings underscored the importance of strong collaboration between the local community and authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, promoting domestic tourism among residents can help sustain cultural heritage and sensitivity. Organisations and management should prioritise strategies for engaging with the local community to sustain tourism at heritage sites while preserving and conserving their historical value.

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has implemented four (4) phases of Movement Control Orders (MCO) to curb the further spread of COVID-19. These travel restrictions and the rising fatality rate significantly affected various industries, including tourism and historical sites in Georgetown. Efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, particularly on the tourism industry, were implemented to minimise the risk of an epidemic. However, the initiatives to support on-site tourism, particularly at heritage sites, were ineffective. In heritage and culture, previously valued features such as queues at museums, monuments, and archaeological sites now pose inherent risks. Overcrowding raises concerns about contagion, thereby contradicting the economic significance of these resources (Pasquinelli et al., 2021). Many countries and regions devised new policies during the pandemic to raise awareness and control the spread of COVID-19 within communities.

Consequently, Georgetown faced substantial challenges during the COVID-19 outbreak, with a decline in tourism numbers due to travel restrictions and concerns about overcrowded destinations, which could facilitate the spread of the virus among tourists unaware of social distancing measures. This situation led to an economic crisis in Georgetown's heritage sites, as local sales and transactions among residents and small entrepreneurs dwindled. Despite the severe impact of the pandemic on tourism, Georgetown witnessed resilience among some longstanding business owners who adapted to the "New Normal" by transitioning into the digital realm to promote and sell their products, representing a technological innovation in traditional business practices. Local engagement, particularly collaboration between the community and tourist management within travel agencies, offered potential alternatives to sustain tourism at heritage sites in Georgetown. However, the main challenge lies in the lack of widespread involvement. Previous studies have focused on health policies and the experiences of local entrepreneurs during the pandemic, but none have specifically addressed the implications for heritage sites. Alternative approaches for the post-COVID-19 phase have been considered, highlighting opportunities arising from the resilience to address the challenges faced by the community in Georgetown's heritage sites. Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by the local community and tourism at heritage sites during COVID-19

LITERATURE REVIEW

The effects and ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented, marking it as the worst humanitarian crisis since World War 2. The main challenge stems from the uncertainty surrounding the end of the epidemic, leading governments worldwide to implement varying degrees of lockdowns to break the chain of transmission. With the escalating death toll, virtually no country remains unaffected. Arts and culture, like other sectors of the economy and society, require governmental assistance to mitigate the adverse effects of lockdowns and economic downturns, as well as to initiate the recovery process during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 impacts all industries and areas, including the over 1,000 UNESCO World Heritage sites worldwide. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), nearly every country has enforced some form of travel restriction, such as travel bans, visa controls, and quarantines (UNWTO, 2020). The pandemic has significantly impacted World Heritage sites, with 71% of sites forced to close due to movement restrictions and a 52% average decline in entrance fees for sites that charge fees. Georgetown is no exception.

COVID-19 and Heritage Sites in Georgetown

Since its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, Georgetown has garnered widespread acclaim for its physical and intangible cultural heritage. Public support and discourse regarding conserving the city's heritage buildings, streetscapes, and artifacts have surged since then. Georgetown's UNESCO World Heritage Site boasts some of Malaysia's best-conserved and re-adapted traditional architecture, along with a diverse array of heritage crafts and arts. Historic crafts and professions have been gradually declining due to diminishing demand, prompting some of these traditional enterprises to turn to tourism over the past

decade to ensure sustainability. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck and the MCO was imposed, many firms, including the traditional trades industry, which was already struggling to survive, experienced unsustainable losses.

In efforts to build back better, George Town World Heritage Incorporated has collaborated closely with the local community and various organisations. Data from 2019 indicates that 60 properties, accounting for 1% of the 5,013 properties within the historic site, require significant repair work. Unfortunately, many of these conservation and maintenance efforts had to be postponed or halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Georgetown serves as a significant revenue source for both the tourism industry and the semiconductor business. It fosters competition in commercial operations encompassing diverse cultural and tourism activities, with business owners striving to offer top-notch products to tourists, both local and foreign. The preservation of heritage resources remained a priority amidst revenue challenges.

Movement Restrictions during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Numerous nations and regions have implemented quarantines, entry bans, or other restrictions for residents or recent visitors to the most affected areas due to the pandemic. Some governments have also imposed global travel restrictions applicable to all foreign countries and regions or have prohibited their residents from traveling abroad. However, overly stringent safety measures can adversely impact the tourism industry, impede economic progress, and elevate unemployment rates. Public health officials have advocated for physical distancing, consisting of two (2) primary methods. The first involves maintaining a six-foot distance between individuals, while the second advises people to minimise unnecessary interactions with individuals outside their households. Although nearly every country has encouraged its citizens to practice physical distancing, officials continue to highlight its importance, particularly with the emergence of new, more contagious variants. The near-complete halt in tourist economic revenue in several cities for at least some months has had severe repercussions for travel, hospitality, cuisine, entertainment, and related industries. Notably, with a significant rise in new cases in the state, primarily clustered in mid-October, there was a noticeable decline in mobility in public areas in Penang (Lee and Yeong, 2021), contributing to a decrease in both tourist and local community presence.

Health Crisis

COVID-19 has precipitated the most severe public health crisis in a century, with outbreaks spreading across virtually every corner of the globe. Initially concentrated in interconnected metropolises, the outbreaks have subsequently extended into urban-rural continuums. As gateways for COVID-19 transmission, cities play a pivotal role in the pandemic response (ILO, 2020). COVID-19 primarily spreads through respiratory droplets expelled when an infected individual cough, sneezes, breathes, sings, or talks, posing a risk to those within proximity, typically within about six (6) feet or two (2) meters (MFMER, 2020). Governments have responded with various policies, including movement restrictions, lockdowns, and mandatory hygiene practices, to mitigate the spread of the virus within communities. Fear of infection has led many individuals to remain indoors, impacting industries and businesses, and resulting in socioeconomic challenges.

The economic fallout from COVID-19 has left millions of businesses at risk of closure, with nearly half of the world's 3.3 billion workers facing potential job losses. Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable due to the lack of social security and healthcare, exacerbating food insecurity among affected populations. COVID-19 symptoms vary in severity, with some individuals experiencing mild symptoms or being asymptomatic carriers capable of transmitting the virus unknowingly. Severe symptoms, including shortness of breath and pneumonia, may manifest approximately a week after symptom onset. These health concerns have contributed to a decrease in tourist arrivals at heritage sites in Georgetown, as visitors and the local community prioritise safety and avoid overcrowded destinations.

Financial Crisis

In addition to pre-existing financial challenges within the local community, income generation from tourism was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As projects in Georgetown were delayed or affected by the pandemic's slowdown, the community experienced financial setbacks (Marco Ferrarese, 2021). Annual festivals, which attract thousands of tourists to Penang, serve as vital sources of income for the local community. However, events such as the Penang International Dragon Boat Regatta, Georgetown Festival, and Butterworth Fringe Festival were delayed due to timing considerations. The transition to online platforms was evident with events like the Georgetown Literary Festival in November 2020. Local businesses relied heavily on in-person transactions, but safety concerns and supply chain disruptions during lockdowns led to declining tourist numbers, affecting business operations (Lim Sok Swan, 2020). Many businesses were unprepared to adapt their marketing strategies or operations to the "new normal," further exacerbated by the overwhelming workload faced by single-person-run enterprises. Consequently, the pandemic exacerbated existing financial challenges, highlighting the importance of financial planning and emergency savings as essential measures for economic resilience (Catherine, 2021).

METHOD AND MATERIALS

The primary method for data collection involves conducting surveys through the distribution of questionnaires to the local community. As of 2022, the population of the study area, Georgetown, was estimated to be 300,000 people. To ensure the validity of the findings, a sample size of 380 respondents is required based on the population size of the study area. This sample size was calculated using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula. However, due to time constraints, the total number of respondents may be less than 380, but it must still reach at least half of that amount to be considered acceptable data. The questionnaire was distributed from July 20th, 2022, to July 23rd, 2022. A total of 194 respondents were obtained, with an alpha Cronbach value of 0.901, indicating high and satisfactory internal consistency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Respondents

In this study, six (6) variables were examined, including gender, age, race, occupation, education, and two questions concerning knowledge of heritage sites. The highest proportion of respondents falls within the 50-59 age group (27.3%), while the lowest is in the 60-year-old and above category (5.2%). This indicates that a significant portion of Georgetown's population comprises elderly individuals who have resided there for over 50 years. Chinese ethnicity constitutes the largest percentage of the population at 74.7%, followed by Malays (35.5%), with Indians comprising the smallest percentage (9.8%). Similarly, according to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020), 57.8% (340.3 thousand people) of Penang's total population identify as Chinese. Additionally, Georgetown's cultural sites predominantly reflect Chinese culture, and the majority of old shophouses in Penang are owned by the Chinese.

The highest level of education attained among respondents was certificates and degrees, accounting for 36.1%, while the lowest was primary school education, with only 2.1% of respondents. However, 28.9% of respondents had completed secondary school, 26.8% held degrees, and 6.2% were pursuing master's degrees. This suggests that the majority of the population has received formal education. Occupations were categorised into five (5) groups, including students and the unemployed. The highest percentage of respondents belonged to the private sector (36.6%), while the lowest percentage represented students, accounting for 12.4% of the sample population. 94.8% of respondents acknowledged the presence of heritage sites, indicating a widespread awareness of the historical significance in Georgetown. Additionally, 63.6% of respondents expressed enjoyment in visiting heritage sites, highlighting the local community's willingness to engage with these sites as tourist destinations. Overall, the respondents exhibited diverse

backgrounds and profiles, yet demonstrated a shared interest in heritage sites. Furthermore, many expressed a desire to contribute to heritage preservation and conservation, indicating a strong understanding of the historical assets within the community.

Identifying the Challenges Faced by the Local Community and Tourism at Heritage Sites During COVID-19

In this section, the data has been analysed to identify the objective. Three (3) variables that have been highlighted consist of certain important factors that led to how this pandemic affected the local community in Georgetown. The findings of the data are as follows:

Movement Restrictions

Table 1 demonstrates that the majority of respondents were impacted by government movement restrictions and took self-initiated protective measures. After a period of severe lockdowns, most nations adopted a strategy where residents were required to avoid crowded places, as recommended by the WHO. Restricting travel to regional recreation hotspots and international or national tourist locations was seen as crucial in preventing the rapid spread of COVID-19 infections. Avoiding crowded areas remains a focal point of global strategies, even during the "second wave". A significant majority of the respondents agreed to take precautions and spend their leisure time at home during the pandemic. Additionally, respondents tended to avoid crowded places, refrain from using public transportation, and avoid group gatherings. The ability to fulfil these basic social needs is threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic, creating an obvious behavioural conflict. Despite the virus spreading at an increasing rate, people still require social interaction.

According to the health belief model framework, the disadvantages of remaining at home begin to outweigh the advantages even in the absence of a change in the sensitivity or consequence of infection. The highest percentage of respondents (60.3%) agreed that social distancing can help prevent COVID-19 infection. Social distancing methods include quarantines, travel restrictions, and the closure of places such as offices, schools, stadiums, and retail malls. Staying at home, restricting travel, avoiding crowded places, utilising no-contact greetings, and physically distancing from others are all examples of social distancing techniques that people might employ. These alternative infection control methods aim to reduce direct contact between individuals and decrease disease transmission.

The least number of respondents (23.2%) chose less popular destinations, indicating a lack of interest in visiting attractions during the pandemic. People often select destinations they have no particular interest in and only seek to satisfy their travel needs. Filep, Sebastian (2007) a researcher, presents an interesting argument that "An enjoyable trip is about more than just satisfaction. It also encompasses how personally significant our vacation experiences are." This demonstrates how establishing social connections, having opportunities to learn and grow, and showing dedication are all related to the objective of travel. Additionally, travellers have the opportunity to learn new skills, experience different cultures, and fully immerse themselves in activities. In other words, all these aspects contribute to increasing resilience, particularly in terms of heritage tourism. Travelers interested in discovering and appreciating the historical significance of specific locations and attractions face challenges as management strictly regulates these areas due to a shortage of employees to monitor the situation and prevent any negative consequences. This is because, during the pandemic, many employees were laid off due to budget constraints.

Table 1. Movement Restrictions

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Neutral (3)		Agree (4)		Strongly Agree (5)		Mean	Standard Deviation
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
I will protect myself and spend the holidays at my usual residence	10	5.2	6	3.1	54	27.8	55	28.4	69	35.6	3.87	1.09
I should minimize taking public transportations to avoid infections	7	3.6	9	4.6	37	19.1	52	26.8	89	45.9	4.06	1.06
I believe social distancing has been suggested to help prevent infection of COVID-19	11	5.7	6	3.1	15	7.7	45	23.2	117	60.3	4.32	1.08
I prefer to spend my leisure time alone within COVID-19 pandemic	25	12.9	34	17.5	49	25.3	38	19.6	48	24.7	3.24	1.35
I would choose a less typical destination	38	19.6	21	10.8	74	38.1	16	8.2	45	23.2	3.03	1.37

Source: Authors, 2024

Health Crisis

Based on Table 2 the majority of respondents (74.2%) agreed to choose tourist accommodations that provide sanitary practices and health policies to ensure their safety regarding the COVID-19 virus, while the least agreement was observed for the statement that mental health can be negatively impacted by COVID-19 (24.7%). Unprecedented stress brought on by the pandemic's social isolation is a significant factor in this trend, according to some experts. The inability of individuals to work, seek help from loved ones, and participate in their communities were cited as contributing factors.

Furthermore, respondents highlighted the importance of hygiene to ensure their safety and the impact of COVID-19 on precautions (56.7%). Strict implementation of new health measures by authorities was enacted daily to prevent the rise in COVID-19 cases. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic may cause tourists to experience anxiety, with 45.4% of respondents agreeing with this statement. However, within this pandemic, multiple stress factors could lead to mental or physical health crises, both pre-existing and newly developed. Some individuals might experience anxiety related to fear of the virus and other stressors.

Table 2. Health Crisis

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Neutral (3)		Agree (4)		Strongly Agree (5)		Mean	Standard Deviation
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
My mental health is negatively impacted by the COVID-19	16	8.2	26	13.4	52	26.8	52	26.8	48	24.7	3.4677	1.22431
I will trust and choose a tourist accommodation with a sanitary and hygiene measures by health authorities	4	2.1	0	0	12	6.2	34	17.5	144	74.2	4.629	0.75169
The COVID-19 pandemic made me anxious to travel.	13	6.7	10	5.2	43	22.2	40	20.6	88	45.4	3.9355	1.21292
After Covid-19, my need for hygiene while travelling is changed.	4	2.1	3	1.5	19	9.8	58	29.9	110	56.7	4.3871	0.85612
During the pandemic, I have started to worry more about money and work issues.	10	5.2	6	3.1	28	14.4	49	25.3	101	52.1	4.1613	1.10429
I am concern over being isolated during lockdown has escalated, throughout the pandemic	10	5.2	25	12.9	39	20.1	52	26.8	68	35.1	3.7258	1.2034

Source: Author, 2024

Financial Crisis

Table 3 shows that the majority of respondents (49.5%) agreed that they have budget constraints for traveling, followed by most local businesses in traditional shophouses receiving no purchases due to COVID-19 (44.3%). During the pandemic, certain sectors of the population continue to be more severely affected by the economic effects of COVID-19 than others. Additionally, the economy suffered greatly during the COVID-19 epidemic, resulting in job losses for some individuals. Major athletic events and regional religious gatherings were postponed, while international travel, trade, and small-town markets were all severely impacted.

Looking ahead, the majority of respondents indicated that while facing challenges in meeting their commitments, achieving their long-term financial goals became more difficult. Due to their limited resources, they often prioritise commitments and emergency savings.

Table 3. Financial Crisis

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Neutral (3)		Agree (4)		Strongly Agree (5)		Mean	Standard Deviation
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%		
I use most of money from saving due to COVID-19	10	5.2	18	9.3	55	28.4	38	19.6	73	37.6	3.74	1.2
I had existing financial issues prior to COVID-19.	25	12.9	24	12.4	42	21.6	35	18	68	35.1	3.46	1.41
I had problems to pay for my commitment	25	12.9	24	12.4	51	26.3	30	15.5	64	33	3.4	1.39
Most of the local business on traditional shophouses received no purchase due to COVID-19	11	5.7	21	10.8	45	23.2	31	16	86	44.3	3.82	1.24
Due to financial issues, I have constraint in budget for travelling.	13	6.7	12	6.2	40	20.6	33	17	96	49.5	3.95	1.24
I have constraints budget priority for emergency saving.	10	5.2	0	0	52	26.8	52	26.8	80	41.2	3.98	1.06

Source: Author, 2024

Throughout the data analysis, most respondents faced difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic from various perspectives. The pandemic had an unprecedented impact on communities worldwide, drastically altering the behaviour patterns of local people in their daily lives. During the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic, many governments enacted various measures and issued stay-at-home orders to limit people's mobility in an attempt to slow the spread of the disease. Movement restrictions have impacted numerous aspects of people's work and leisure activities, serving as one of the alternatives to prevent the spread of the virus. In these variables, most respondents believe that social distancing is an effective method to reduce COVID-19 transmission and spend most of their time at home. Some respondents also minimise the chance of spreading the virus by using public transport and avoiding crowds. Overall, the necessity for driving or using public transportation has decreased dramatically, with people becoming more inclined to walk or cycle near their homes. This demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both physical and virtual environments.

A health crisis arises when individuals face challenges for which there is no specific answer, such as the fear of illness and isolation. On the health front, several nations are implementing various measures, such as mask mandates and lockdowns. Travel patterns also reflect concerns about hygiene and safety measures. Lastly, the threat to financial stability during the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the economy, with markets experiencing significant declines. Every layer of the local community has been profoundly affected. In summary, the highlighted variables were evaluated to pursue a better tourism development plan for heritage sites, considering the contributions of the local community and the beneficiaries of their engagement with the authorities.

CONCLUSION

The global COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated a profound crisis, necessitating a comprehensive response with significant social, political, and economic repercussions. This study reveals that heritage sites have encountered numerous challenges due to the pandemic. Compliance with movement restrictions and avoidance of crowded areas were seen as crucial for mitigating virus transmission, leading to reduced visitor numbers at these sites. The pandemic has driven individuals to prefer isolation, affecting public interactions. The Ministry of Health's movement restrictions were vital in curbing the virus's spread, impacting various aspects of community health and behaviour. Throughout 2020 and 2021, recurring waves of infections and stringent measures affected mental health and travel behaviours, with a majority of respondents favouring hygienic travel options. Financial constraints have emerged as a significant issue, with many respondents prioritising emergency savings and businesses struggling with reduced revenues. The tourism industry faces substantial risks, and government support remains critical for its survival. Coordinated efforts and sustainable strategies are essential for long-term recovery, ensuring the resilience of the tourism sector by aligning with broader environmental, economic, and social objectives.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial, or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Ahmad Nazrin Aris Anuar conceptualised the research idea, provided the theoretical framework, and supervised the research progress; Nor Izzatie Rahmat carried out the research, and wrote the article; Che Bon Ahmad designed the methodology research and revised the article; Rabiatul Adawiyah Nasir carried out the analysis and revised the article; Ainur Zaireen Zainuddin anchored the review, revisions and monitored the article submission.

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