

EXPLORING TYPE OF LEISURE ACTIVITIES AMONG THE ELDERLY IN COMMUNITY: AN IDEOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MALAYSIA CONTEXT

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Abstract

Leisure activities provide elderly individuals with opportunities to pursue their interests and engage in enjoyable and fulfilling activities that align with their values and preferences. This qualitative study aimed to explore the participation and engagement of elderly Malaysians in leisure activities and identify the elements of their daily routines. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 Malay elderly individuals residing in Kelantan and Terengganu, and interpretative phenomenological analysis was used for data analysis. The study revealed three main themes of leisure activities: active leisure, community-based leisure, and relaxed leisure, influenced by cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental factors. Collaboration among policymakers, healthcare providers, and community organizations is necessary to promote leisure activities for the elderly in Malaysia. By working together, these stakeholders can ensure access to a wide range of leisure activities that enhance health, well-being, and social connections, ultimately improving the quality of life for this significant demographic group.

Keywords: Community Older People, Healthy Ageing, Ideographic, Leisure Activity

Introduction

Leisure activity is a topic of growing interest in the literature, as it is increasingly recognized as an essential aspect of elderly well-being (1-4). Engaging in leisure activities has been associated with a range of physical (5, 6), cognitive (6), and social benefits (7, 8), including improved mental health (7), reduced stress (8), and increased social relationships (5). Additionally, leisure activity has been shown to have a significant impact on the health status among the elderly, who may face a range of challenges related to aging, such as declining health, loss of social networks, and reduced mobility.

As elderly individuals may have more free time available, they are well-suited to participate in leisure activities that can help them enhance their overall quality of life (QoL) (1, 9) in terms of physical, psychological, social, and environmental well-being. One important aspect of this is the engagement in leisure activities, which has been linked to positive health outcomes and increased life satisfaction among the elderly (10). However, elderly individuals may also face barriers to leisure participation, such as age-

related health issues (1-4), financial constraints (11), or lack of transportation (12).

Leisure activities refer to non-work-related activities that individuals engage in voluntarily, with the primary aim of personal enjoyment and satisfaction (13). These activities can include physical-task activity, socializing with friends and family, hobbies such as gardening or painting, or participating in cultural events. In the context of the elderly, engagement in leisure activities has been shown to promote physical function (5, 6), enhance cognitive abilities (6), reduce stress and anxiety (8), and improve social connections and support networks (7, 8). This provides opportunities for elderly individuals to pursue interests and engage in enjoyable and rewarding activities that align with their values and preferences. For the elderly, engagement in leisure activities can be particularly important as they may be experiencing transitions related to retirement (14, 15), loss of social networks (9), or changes in health (1-4).

Besides that, identifying leisure activities for the elderly can help promote independence and autonomy (16, 17).

Elderly individuals may experience limitations related to health or mobility, but engagement in leisure activities can provide opportunities for them to maintain a sense of control over their lives and engage in activities that they enjoy. This can enhance their sense of identity and self-worth, which in turn can promote feelings of autonomy and independence (16, 17). Hence, occupational therapy is among the healthcare professions that work closely with issues related to autonomy and elderly individuals (13).

Occupational therapy (OT) works with older adults to develop individualized leisure plans, identify appropriate leisure activities, and address any physical, cognitive, or social limitations that may affect their ability to participate. By promoting leisure participation among older adults, occupational therapists can help improve their overall health and well-being and enhance their ability to engage fully in life (13). Additionally, it can contribute to their independence and autonomy. OT practitioners often use leisure activities as an intervention for the elderly. In OT perspectives, leisure activities are defined as non-obligatory, enjoyable, and intrinsically motivating activities that individuals engage in during their free time. Participating in leisure activities can help promote physical, emotional, cognitive, and social well-being in the elderly (18).

In Malaysia, there is a growing interest in promoting leisure activities for older adults by occupational therapists, as the population of older adults in the country is expected to increase significantly in the coming years. Participation in leisure activities among the elderly in Malaysia (19) may be influenced by various factors such as culture, socioeconomic status, and politics (20). Cultural beliefs and values, for example, may influence the type of leisure activities that older adults engage in, as some activities may be considered more socially acceptable than others. Socioeconomic factors such as income level, education, and access to leisure facilities may also impact the ability of elderly individuals to participate in leisure activities. Additionally, political factors such as government policies and regulations may affect the availability and accessibility of leisure opportunities for older adults.

Overall, a better understanding of promoting and enhancing the participation of elderly individuals in leisure activities in Malaysia is important. Hence, the objective of this study is to identify the constructs of daily routines among Malay elderly individuals who live in the community in Malaysia by exploring their participation and engagement in leisure activities. By gaining insights into their preferences, challenges, and motivations, appropriate strategies can be developed to promote leisure participation among the elderly population, ultimately leading to improved quality of life and well-being.

Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative research methodology aimed at exploring the ideographic experiences and

perceptions of the participants and gaining an in-depth understanding of concepts (21). Specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized as the analytical approach (22). Given the inherently subjective nature of interpreting people's relationships with the world, the study focused on their attempts to assign meaning to their experiences of daily activities. A purposive homogeneous sampling strategy (23) was employed to select 10 participants for semi-structured interviews in this qualitative study.

Participants were recruited from the Malaysian states of Kelantan and Terengganu based on recommendations from local community leaders. These states were chosen due to their distinct and diverse characteristics related to leisure activity constructs. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows:

- Aged 60 years or above.
- Fluent in either Malay or English language.
- Scored above 26 on the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MOCA) (24).
- Scored below 7 on the modified Malay version of the Geriatric Depression Scale (M-GDS) (25).
- Demonstrated at least a mild level of dependency in activities of daily living (ADLs) with scores above 75 on the Modified Barthel Index (MBI) (26).

Participants underwent an initial assessment to ensure eligibility according to the criteria. Subsequently, the study's aims and methodology were explained to each participant, and written consent was obtained. The participants were then interviewed using a series of semi-structured and open-ended questionnaires guided and developed based on the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework 4th Edition (OTPF-IV) (13). The study adapted the Occupational Functioning Model (OFM) (27, 28) as its theoretical model and followed the triangular broad-based structure of questionnaire development for qualitative studies, as described by Plummer-D'Amato (29). The interview sessions, which lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The data were analysed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which involved six steps (22, 23): data immersion, text analysis, theme development, making connections between themes, writing final themes, repeating the process for each interview, and searching for similarities across interviews. Master and subthemes were identified to illustrate the concept of leisure activity. To ensure the study's trustworthiness, the questionnaire items were developed based on a pilot study, and measures were implemented to avoid bias (30). Selected quotes were translated from Malay to English by a certified translator. This study was approved by The Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Results

The results were derived by 10 participants, comprising of 8 females and 2 males. Majority of the participants are retired, residing either independently, with their significant other, or with family members, consequently increasing the diversity and distinctiveness of their leisure activities. As pensioners, they must adapt to a lifestyle that involves participating in more purposeful leisure activities as a part of their daily routine. The use of IPA led to the identification of three master themes, each containing a varying number of subthemes, which are succinctly presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes concerning leisure activities among the elderly emerged from the interview transcripts

MASTER THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Active Leisure	Gardening Group Fitness Classes Nature Walks
Community-Based Leisure	Festival Celebration Gotong-royong
Relaxed Leisure	Travelling Reading books or newspapers Engaging in arts and crafts Cooking and baking Watching television

The identified of master themes in this study reflect the range of experiences shared by most of the participants with regards to their engagement in leisure activities. These themes are supported by direct quotations taken from participant interviews, although only select quotes were chosen to effectively illustrate each of the identified subthemes. The three master themes identified are active leisure, community-based leisure, and relaxed leisure.

Master Theme 1: Active Leisure

Active leisure is one of the ideographic experiences that identified in the interview and expressed often by the participants. They are enjoying doing active leisure that requires their physical exertion, movement, and energy expenditure. From this study, there are four subthemes emerged from the interview transcripts which are gardening, group fitness classes and nature walks.

a) Gardening

According to the findings of this study, gardening activities emerged as the most popular leisure pursuit amongst the participants. Most of the participants are involved in these activities because it helps to maintain their aesthetics and cleanliness of their house area. For instance, Mak Ani, 71-year-old female stated that:

“I enjoy gardening and ensure that the area around my house is always clean. Through gardening, I am also able to

engage in light exercise such as lifting pots and soil, which helps to strengthen my legs and arms.”

Mak Engku, 65-year-old female who are retired lecturer also illustrated about gardening activities as her leisure activity:

“I do many things during my free time, including gardening. Every afternoon, I go to the garden located at the back of my house and take good care of my plants.”

b) Group fitness classes

A participant in this study has disclosed their engagement in group fitness classes as a form of leisure activity. Mak Dayang, 62-year-old single women who are retired writers express their positive sentiments towards Zumba class:

“I enjoy participating in Zumba activities, particularly those organized by the community here. It allows me to sweat and feel refreshed. During the Movement Control Order (MCO) period, they even conducted online classes, which I found more convenient as I could simply join in using my phone (laughs)”

This statement was also shared by Mak Siti, a 60-year-old widow who engages in simple exercises with her child and grandchildren at home. She was doing this activity is to provide support to her child who aims to lose weight:

“It’s enjoyable to do this exercise. At home, I always do it with my child and grandchildren. They force me to participate in this activity because they want to lose weight.”

c) Nature walks

Pak Abu, a retired teacher 64-year-old male, is an active person who enjoys taking slow jogs at the park at least twice a week and has a penchant for walking amidst nature. He expressed his experience in nature walks as follows:

“Walking while enjoying the beauty of nature is a truly wonderful feeling. Observing the magnificence of God’s creation in the form of natural scenery, it reminds me that humans are merely humble servants of the Almighty.”

Master Theme 2: Community-Based Leisure

Community-based leisure is another master theme that emerged in this study. The strong relationship between community and participation in community work are related with this finding. Three meaningful subthemes were identified are Eid Celebration event, weeding ceremony and gotong-royong.

a) Festival Celebration

Mak Noor, a 69-year-old woman, expressed that the annual Eid celebration event is the most eagerly anticipated activity for her and her fellow villagers every year:

“Enjoyable and meaningful. Being involved in the preparation for the Eid celebration is indeed enjoyable.

There is a lot of work that we will do, including cleaning the hall, cooking, preparing ketupat, making traditional Eid cookies, and so on. It's a busy time with various activities, starting from morning until night during the celebration."

This is supported by the statement of Pak Abu, who mentioned that the preparation for the Eid celebration is one of the leisure activities that everyone in his neighbourhood will participate in. His involvement in this activity is meaningful as it not only involves his family, but also includes his fellow villagers and neighbouring communities:

"The most festive celebration is during Raya. We usually plan for it a month in advance and start preparing during the month of Ramadan. During free time, we will discuss and assign tasks. Everyone will be involved, from family members to all neighbours in the village."

The wedding ceremony is also one of the festivals in which the elderly community are involved and engaged. According to Mak Murni, a 68-year-old housewife, she often involved in wedding ceremonies as a chef:

"My leisure activity is during the weddings ceremony. At that time, I am the chef. I will ensure that every dish cooked is delicious and loved by everyone. It is not an easy task, as everyone is given tasks to cook, cut onions, cut the meat, and wash all the cooking utensils. This is "bekwoh" the traditional way of celebrating village weddings, where everyone helps each other."

b) Gotong-royong

The act of gotong-royong has been recognised by the participants as a means and opportunity for leisure activities. Pak Ali, a 71-year-old retired government servant, shared his experience of participating in gotong-royong as one of his leisure activities. He perceives that this activity facilitates cooperation and promotes neighbourly relationships:

"Gotong-royong activity is a good leisure activity to engage in. In my area, we carry out gotong-royong activities once a month according to the designated areas such as the neighbourhood, mosque, community centre, and school. My leisure time is well spent with useful activities, including light exercise. This activity also helps to foster better and closer relationships among us."

Master Theme 3: Relaxed Leisure

Relaxed leisure was also identified as one of the most reported leisure activities by the participants. This master theme encompasses leisure activities that are more comfortable activity that focus in personalise occupation and spending time with family members. The participants expressed this theme through five main sub-themes are traveling, reading books or newspapers, engaging in arts and crafts, cooking and baking, and watching television.

a) Travelling

Mak Dayang shared about travelling as one of the leisure activities that she has been doing since she was young. Being a former writer, she traversed diverse locations to glean inspiration and knowledge for her literary works. Even after retirement, she persisted in this activity. She noted that travelling provides her with a sense of liberation and a transient respite from her tribulations:

"Travelling is one of my preferred pastimes. I enjoy wandering to seek inspiration for my writing, which I did before. Even now, after retirement, I still pursue this activity. There are many benefits to be gained from it, including forging new acquaintances, increasing knowledge regarding local cultures, and granting myself some peace of mind by momentarily forgetting about problems at home (laugh). Moreover, during my travels, I tend to walk a lot, which is good for my leg muscles (laughs again)."

Pak Ali also mentioned with his experience regarding travelling activity:

"I like to visit my children and grandchildren in Kuala Lumpur and Terengganu. Although the journey is quite far, I enjoy driving there. The long journey feels short when I finally get to meet my family members. I used to visit them frequently in the past, but now that I am 70 years old, my children do not allow me to drive long distances anymore."

b) Reading books or newspaper

Reading was also reported as a leisure activity among the participants of this study. Pak Ali stated that his leisure time is filled with reading the Quran or religious books:

"During my free time, I also read the Quran and religious books. If possible, I read the Quran after every prayer. As I get older, I believe it is important to draw closer to God and increase my good deeds for the hereafter."

Mak Halimah, a 66-year-old retired teacher enjoys reading in various genres of books, and for her, reading is a daily routine activity that meaningful and must be done:

"Reading is a bridge to knowledge (Membaca itu jambatan ilmu). Every day, I will make sure to read at least one page, regardless of whether it is an academic book, religious book, novel or either newspaper. All of these provide us with valuable information."

c) Engaging in arts and craft

Engaging in arts and crafts activities is also one of the leisure activities among the elderly in this study. They involve themselves in batik painting activities during their free time. Mak Murni stated:

"Batik painting has become my hobby whenever I have free time. When I was younger, I used to help my uncle at his batik factory. Now, the factory has many workers and is managed by my niece. Sometimes, I visit the factory to do some batik painting."

d) Cooking and baking

Cooking and baking are also one of the leisure activities that participants of the study involve, especially among women. This activity is usually carried out at home and the food is prepared for family members or shared with neighbours. Mak Ani expressed her feeling with this activity and mentioned that:

“Mak Cik enjoys cooking and baking. Every day, I will cook for my husband. We both prefer to eat at home. If my children come to visit, I will prepare various dishes. It’s enjoyable to see them enjoy my cooking.”

e) Watching television

Watching television is a sedentary activity that is reported to be a favourite leisure activity among participants. They enjoy watching television in the evening and at night. Mak Ani mentioned that:

“After returning from congregational prayer at night, I usually watch TV. Many Malay drama shows are interesting. Sometimes, I get annoyed with the villains who always cause problems (laughs)”

“I love to watch TV everyday” – Pak Abu

“I am enjoying while watching TV especially religious class and documentary” – Pak Ali

Discussion

In the context of exploring leisure activities among the elderly in the community, an ideographic study was conducted in Malaysia to investigate the most popular types of leisure activities among this population. The findings of the study revealed that the elderly participants engaged in a diverse range of leisure activities, including active leisure, community-based leisure, and relaxed leisure activities. This discussion will examine these themes and relate them to the factors that influence engagement in leisure activities among the elderly in Malaysia, including culture, socioeconomic status, and environment.

a) Culture

Culture plays a significant role in shaping the leisure activities that elderly individuals engage in Malaysia (31). Malaysia is a diverse country with a rich cultural heritage, encompassing Malay, Chinese, Indian, and various indigenous cultures. Each of these cultures has its unique set of leisure activities that are often passed down through generations, becoming an essential part of the cultural identity of individuals and communities. For example, traditional Malay leisure activities include Silat, a martial art, and Wayang Kulit, a shadow puppet play, while traditional Chinese leisure activities include Mahjong and Tai Chi. Indian leisure activities may encompass classical dance performances and music concerts. These cultural leisure activities provide an opportunity for older adults

to connect with their cultural roots and socialize with others who share similar interests (32, 33). Thus, the finding that community-based leisure activities are popular among older adults in Malaysia is not surprising given the importance of social connections and community in Malaysian culture. Gotong-royong is a traditional Malay concept of community cooperation and mutual aid, which involves voluntary participation in communal activities such as cleaning, repairing, or beautifying public spaces (34). It is often organized by local authorities, community leaders, or religious institutions and is considered an important way to promote social cohesion and civic engagement.

In addition to cultural heritage, religion also plays a significant role in shaping the leisure activities of older adults in Malaysia (31). For example, Muslim older adults may engage in religious practices such as prayer or attending religious classes. These religious leisure activities provide a sense of community and connection to a higher purpose. Therefore, leisure providers and policymakers should consider the cultural preferences of different ethnic groups when developing programs and activities for the elderly.

Culture plays a significant role in shaping the leisure activities that the elderly engage in Malaysia. By recognizing and supporting the cultural leisure activities of older adults, we can promote healthy aging, enhance social connections, and foster a sense of community and cultural identity

b) Socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status is a crucial factor that influences the types of leisure activities that the elderly engages in Malaysia (20). The availability and affordability of leisure activities are directly linked to an individual’s economic situation. Older adults with higher socioeconomic status may have greater access to a range of leisure activities and opportunities, including travel, cultural events, and social gatherings, while those with lower socioeconomic status may have more limited options.

Socioeconomic status significantly influences the types of leisure activities that the elderly engages in Malaysia. Specifically, the study identified education level, marital status, and locality as significant determinants of leisure participation among the elderly, with education being the primary predictor (33, 34). Elderly individuals with higher socioeconomic status were found to be more likely to engage in leisure activities such as traveling, attending cultural events, and participating in social groups, while those with lower socioeconomic status tended to engage in more basic leisure activities such as watching television, reading, and walking.

Education level is another important factor that contributes to socioeconomic disparities in leisure participation (34). Elderly individuals with higher levels of education may have greater knowledge and exposure to a wider range of leisure activities, making them more likely to participate in activities that require specialized knowledge or skills. In

contrast, those with lower levels of education may be less likely to participate in such activities and may be limited to more basic leisure activities. Additionally, access to resources such as transportation, equipment, or facilities can impact leisure participation among the elderly. Those who live in rural or remote areas may have limited access to leisure opportunities (35), while those in urban areas may have more opportunities available but may face other barriers, such as traffic congestion or limited parking. Similarly, those with physical limitations or disabilities may have difficulty accessing certain leisure activities that require specialized equipment or facilities.

These findings highlight the importance of addressing socioeconomic disparities in leisure participation among older adults in Malaysia. Providing accessible and affordable leisure opportunities for older adults with lower socioeconomic status can promote social inclusion, prevent social isolation, and enhance the overall well-being of older adults. This can be achieved through policies and programs that provide access to resources and facilities, as well as by promoting awareness and education about the benefits of leisure activities and the resources available to individuals of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, community-based programs and initiatives can be developed to provide opportunities for elderly individuals to engage in leisure activities with others who share similar interests and backgrounds, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

c) Environment

Malaysia is a country blessed with a diverse range of natural landscapes, including beaches, rainforests, mountains, and parks (36). Many of these natural areas offer a range of walking trails that are suitable for the elderly who want to enjoy the great outdoors. The tropical climate and urbanization can impact the types of leisure activities that older adults can participate in, as well as their social connections and community engagement.

As mentioned earlier, older adults living in urban areas may have limited access to green spaces or parks, which can impact their ability to engage in physical activities. A previous study found that elderly living in urban areas had lower levels of physical activity compared to those living in rural areas (35). This was attributed to the lack of accessible parks and green spaces, as well as safety concerns in urban areas. Therefore, it is important to provide access to safe and accessible parks and green spaces in urban areas to encourage physical activity among the elderly.

On the other hand, elderly living in rural areas may have more opportunities for active leisure activities, such as gardening or farming. Gardening was a popular leisure activity among the elderly living in rural areas of Malaysia (31). Gardening provided physical activity, social connections, and a sense of purpose and fulfilment for the elderly in these areas. Therefore, it is important to consider the unique environmental factors in rural areas and provide opportunities for them to engage in leisure activities that

are suitable for their environment. Additionally, through gardening activities, the elderly is exposed to multisensory experiences such as touching various soil textures, seeing different plant colors, smelling a variety of plant scents, tasting the fruits of their labour, and hearing calming sounds in the surrounding environment (33). Sensory gardens improve physical fitness, health, mood, and cognition.

Nature walks are also a popular leisure activity among older adults in Malaysia, as mentioned earlier. This is attributed to the opportunity to engage in physical activity while enjoying the beauty of nature. Walking is a low-impact exercise that can help older people maintain cardiovascular health, improve balance and coordination, and reduce the risk of falls (37). Therefore, promoting nature walks and other outdoor activities can be an effective way to encourage physical activity among older adults in Malaysia.

Ultimately, the environment can play a significant role in shaping the leisure activities that the elderly engages in Malaysia. It is important to consider the unique environmental factors in both urban and rural areas and provide opportunities for older adults to engage in leisure activities that are suitable for their environment. Additionally, promoting physical activity through leisure activities can have significant health benefits for the elderly in Malaysia.

In conclusion, this ideographic study sheds light on the construct of leisure activities for the elderly in Malaysia. By understanding the factors that influence the types of activities older adults engage in, such as culture, socioeconomic status, and environment, policymakers and leisure providers can tailor programs that meet the needs and preferences of this population. In a nutshell, promoting leisure activities has the potential to preserve the standard of living, enhance quality of life, and confer substantial health benefits for older adults in Malaysia.

Limitation

This study provides important insights into the type of leisure activities that elderly individuals engage in within a Malaysian community. However, there are several limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study only focuses on the Malay population, so the findings may not be representative of the leisure preferences and needs of elderly individuals from other ethnic groups in Malaysia. Future studies should include participants from diverse ethnic groups to provide a more comprehensive understanding of leisure activities among elderly individuals in Malaysia.

Secondly, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall and social desirability biases. To address these biases, future studies could consider using more objective measures of leisure activity participation, in addition to self-reported data. While self-reported data is valuable, researchers should be aware of potential biases and consider using additional measures or methods to

validate the self-reported data. Overall, addressing these limitations can guide the development of more targeted and effective interventions to promote leisure activities and enhance the well-being of the elderly population in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Leisure activities are important for promoting the well-being and QoL of the elderly population in Malaysia. Engaging in leisure activities can provide opportunities for physical, social, and cognitive stimulation, which can have significant health benefits for elderly individuals. Research has shown that participating in leisure activities can contribute to better physical health outcomes (1), such as improved mobility and reduced risk of chronic illnesses (3). It can also improve cognitive function (4), reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness (5), and enhance overall mental health and well-being (6).

Culture, socioeconomic status, and environment are important factors that influence the type of leisure activities that older adults engage in. Traditional cultural activities, social connections through community-based leisure activities, active leisure and relaxed leisure activities are valued by elderly Malaysians. Socioeconomic status can also impact the type of leisure activities that older adults can engage in, as those with higher income and education levels may have more opportunities to access and participate in various leisure programs. The environment can also impact the ability of elderly individuals to engage in leisure activities, particularly in urban areas where green spaces and parks may be limited.

Overall, promoting leisure activities for elderly requires collaboration and partnership among stakeholders, including policymakers, healthcare providers and community organisations. By working together, these stakeholders can ensure that elderly have access to a wide range of activities that promote their health, wellbeing, and social connection, ultimately contributing to a better QoL for this important demographic group.

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Competing interests

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Ethical clearance

We obtained approval from Human Research Ethics Committee USM (HREC), USM, registered under (USM/JEPeM/21080547).

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