Gone in a Flash: COVID-19 and Social Sustainability Impacts at Melaka World Heritage City

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Abstract

In recent years, there have been intense debates about the impacts of overtourism and unsustainable tourism development at tourism hotspots such as World Heritage Sites (WHS). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has upturned the debates surrounding overtourism to no-tourism. The economic impacts of the global pandemic have been devastating. Whilst there has been heavy emphasis on the impacts of the economic fallout on global tourism, there is limited attention on the social sustainability implications of the crisis. This paper argues that successful recovery from crisis events such as COVID-19 requires a grassroot-led strategy, wherein destination stakeholders’ stories and voices are given priority, to achieve socially sustainable tourism development in a WHS. Applying a qualitative methodology with a case-study approach, this paper adopts a destination-supply perspective to investigate social sustainability implications on destination stakeholders, in the UNESCO World Heritage Historic City of Melaka. Narratives from semi-structured interviews with destination stakeholders are analysed and a proposed approach for social sustainability at WHSs is presented.

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Introduction

One of the unintended consequences of achieving World Heritage Listing (WHL), is the rapid development of tourism and increase in visitor numbers at the World Heritage Site (WHS). This leads to concerns about overtourism. A UNESCO World Heritage Listed Historic City since 2008, Melaka in Malaysia has enjoyed exponential tourist growth in recent years, with inbound international arrivals jumping almost three-fold, from 2.2 million in 2010 to 5.7 million in 2018 (Aziz, 2020). However, the onset of the COVID-19 global health crisis has had a detrimental effect on Malaysia’s tourism industry and its related sectors. In response to COVID-19 and the government’s Movement Control Orders (MCO) in 2020, the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry cancelled the ‘Visit Malaysia Year 2020’ campaign and other tourism-related services (Zwain, 2021). In a flash, COVID-19 had emptied popular attractions and tourism hotspots previously struggling with overtourism, into cold isolated ghost towns with no-tourism. As Cheer (2020) observes, COVID-19 had abruptly rendered the flourishing “growth trajectories of the last decade fragile and redundant, and the howls of overtourism that rose to prominence from 2017 to 2019 have descended into deafening silence as tourist hordes disappeared” (p.515). Hence, overtourism as an unintended consequence of WHL, was significantly impacted by the sudden arrival of COVID-19, whereby tourists were gone in a flash.

This study was originally initiated to investigate social sustainability impacts due to the unintended consequences of exponential development and overtourism in WHSs. However, the sudden arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 had altered its progress, as the global health crisis took its toll on the world’s tourism sector. Within the context of WHSs, UNESCO’s (2021) recent study of the impacts of COVID-19 on WHSs revealed that approximately 71% of WHSs internationally were forced to close due to movement restrictions, with an average of 157 closure days reported for 2020. Correspondingly, the study indicated that visitors to WHSs fell by some 66% in 2020,
with the majority of respondents (78%) reporting devastating negative impacts on local communities living in and around these WHS. Likewise, other authors posit the significant toll that COVID-19 has had on the heritage ecosystem in general (Guest, 2021), and WHSs and Historical Heritage Cities particularly (Alvarez-Sousa & Paniza Prados, 2020; Zwain, 2021). Hence, this sudden shift from overtourism to no-tourism has impacted this study in some ways, since data collection had occurred across various periods prior to, and during COVID-19. Nevertheless, the context of this study is significant, as the findings from destination stakeholders’ perspectives across these varying periods of the pandemic can offer insights, that can be applicable to promote post-crisis recovery that addresses social sustainability concerns of WHSs. Within this context, whilst there has been a myriad of studies exploring the demand-side and customer-driven perspectives of tourism, the discourse focusing on supply-side perspectives is lacking (Aqueveque & Bianchi, 2017; Landorf, 2009). When exploring destination development, it is important to consider the differences in perspectives and inputs from destination supply-side stakeholders, since they play a key role as the main drivers and inhibitors towards the achievement of destination management goals (Aqueveque & Bianchi, 2017; Haanpää et al., 2019). Thus, by adopting a destination-supply perspective, this work debates the inherent tensions in destination stakeholder relationships, as a consequence of WHL and tourism development. Moreover, this study is significant, as the investigation of social sustainability concerns within a pre-crisis context, can offer valuable insights to managing crisis conditions and subsequent post-crisis recovery strategies. As Brouder et al. (2020) suggest, the lessons from crisis events such as COVID-19 can offer insights to refocus tourism towards a more sustainable, local-centric, and stakeholder-driven approach within the tourism landscape. Hence, following Boulder et al.’s (2020) lead, this investigation on social sustainability impacts in WHSs, has evolved due to the implications of the pandemic. This paper aims to investigate implications of tourism development at WHSs as a consequence of UNESCO WHL. The objective is to understand social sustainability implications on destination stakeholders, in a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The paper applies a qualitative methodology, using a case-study of the Historic City of Melaka. The scope is focused on destination-supply perspectives of stakeholders. This paper argues
that successful recovery from crisis events such as COVID-19 requires a grassroot-led strategy, wherein destination stakeholders’ intangible cultural heritage and voices are given priority, in order to achieve socially sustainable tourism development in a WHS. Therefore, three overarching research questions emerged:

1. What are the destination stakeholders’ perspectives about the social impacts of tourism development as a result of WHL?
2. What are destination stakeholders’ perspectives about the impacts of COVID-19 on the social sustainability concerns in a WHS? and
3. What strategies can be adopted for more socially sustainable tourism development of WHSs in response to crisis events such as COVID-19?

Following this introduction, section two below reviews literature on WHL and WHS designation, managing heritage sites, social sustainability, and stakeholder tensions. In section 3, the methodology section describes the semi-structured interview process. In section 4, the findings on stakeholders’ social sustainability concerns, tensions in the pre and during COVID-19 phases are presented and discussed. Then a three-pronged management strategy on social sustainability is proposed. Finally, a proposed stakeholder-driven social sustainability approach model for WHSs to support resilient post-crisis recovery concludes the paper.

**Literature Review**

**WHL and Sustainability**

It is necessary to safeguard the sustainability of WHSs around the world. The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention was established to reinforce efforts to identify, preserve and protect cultural and natural heritage value for future generations (Santa-Cruz & López-Guzmán, 2017). Extant discourse on WHSs centres broadly on themes relating to: (1) designation/inscription processes, (2) heritage presented and designation typology, (3) on-site management and implementation, (4) visitor impacts
and carrying capacity, (5) stakeholder power relations and politics, (6) destination branding and equity, and (7) advantages and disadvantages of inscription, including stakeholder motives (Bideau & Kilani, 2012; Haanpää et al., 2019; Poria et al., 2011; Ryan & Silvanto, 2010; Williams, 2010; Zhao et al., 2018). Therefore, as similarly considered in this study, such themes are central to safeguarding the sustainable development of WHSs.

WHS designation can create economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts. From a destination branding and image creation perspective, WHS designation can bestow a heritage site with powerful and evocative symbolic meaning, ascribing it as a place of outstanding universal value (Poria et al., 2011). Undeniably, the very criteria used for WHS nomination conveys a ‘seal of approval’ for a site’s authenticity and integrity, virtually underwriting its status as unique and extraordinary (Ryan & Silvanto, 2010).

However, despite the seemingly positive benefits of WHS status on destination branding, competitiveness and appeal, there have been criticisms about its contradicting impacts (Haanpää et al., 2019; Landorf, 2009). Whilst the key purpose of the UNESCO inscription is to preserve and protect, these WHS may experience a substantial increase in visitor numbers (Alvarez-Sousa & Paniza Prados, 2020; Santa-Cruz & López-Guzmán, 2017). Consequently, the achievement of the WHS status ironically results in its implicit peril, due to its newly conferred attraction value. Moreover, whilst the authorities may celebrate the destination branding and economic benefits of WHL, local community stakeholders may loathe the WHS designation because of its socio-cultural and environmental impacts.

Managing socio-cultural and environmental impacts in WHSs can be a challenge. The notion of WHL as a “catalyst to the catalyst” for tourism development (Poria et al., 2011, p.483) is unsurprising, since destination managers and policy makers may often pursue the WHS brand with the objective of increasing tourism numbers and receipts. This virtual oxymoronic promise of increase in visitorship and tourism development at the site, inevitably places pressure on the very heritage, they had sought to preserve in the first place (Tan et al., 2018). Despite the uncertainty that COVID-19 brings to the tourism sector, it remains clear that when WHSs are over-dependent on tourism, seismic crisis events such as COVID-19 can be disruptive (Silberman, 2020; Zwain,
2021). Often, this state of disruption can be a consequence of the destination’s lack of industry resilience and non-diversification. In this regard, lessons drawn from the COVID-19 crisis can shed valuable insight on the critical significance of community resilience, social connections, and society well-being. Hence, the opportunity arises to redefine, reorient, and reshape tourism toward the socialised, values-based interests of local communities and its peoples (Brouder et al., 2020; Guest, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, this study advocates that to safeguard the sustainability and preservation of WHSs, site managers must remain ever vigilant in assessing the social sustainability implications on destination stakeholders and local community.

Managing Heritage Sites: Social Sustainability and Stakeholder Tensions

Achieving social sustainability outcomes can be elusive. Whilst the need for a balanced triple bottom-line has been commonly acknowledged in sustainable tourism discourse, in reality, these dimensions of sustainability have not always been equitable within policy debates (Landorf, 2009; Zhao et al., 2018). Social sustainability refers to concerns arising from perceived negative imbalance between the social threshold and effects of tourism development, with respect to residents’ quality of life and quality of the visitor experience (Muler Gonzalez et al., 2017). Extant discourse on social sustainability have featured fundamental themes associated with: (1) community participation and empowerment, (2) equity, human rights and social justice (3) wellbeing and quality of life (4) social identity, pride and cohesion, (5) social capital and capacity building, (6) needs fulfilment, growth and development opportunities, (7) sectoral and institutional stability, (8) diversity, inclusiveness and tolerance, and (9) social changes and impacts on lifestyle (Landorf, 2011; Muler Gonzalez et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2018). However, the advocacy, implementation and management of social sustainability considerations appear to be lacking. Hence, attaining social sustainability outcomes remains tenuous.

Assessing a heritage site’s social sustainability often comes with inherent tensions. As long as heritage is packaged and commercialised as a product for sale, the inevitable tension and conflicting agendas of economic returns vis-à-vis social-cultural and
conservation objectives will exist (Ryan & Silvanto, 2010; Silberman, 2020). One such
tension from the conflicting agendas, is addressing concerns on the limits of carrying
capacity. Sustainable tourism and site management discourse have extensively
featured literature discussing carrying capacity and the implications of increased visitor
numbers, triggering unsustainable tourism (Seraphin et al., 2018). However, carrying
capacity considerations go beyond just the volume of visitors and tourism activity. In
the wake of COVID-19, tourism hotspots and WHSs that used to experience
overtourism, have suddenly emptied (Alvarez-Sousa & Paniza Prados, 2020; Silberman,
2020). As extant discourse on carrying capacity (Muler Gonzalez et al., 2017; Zhao et
al., 2018) observe, variations in tourism volume at either extreme scale, creates
significant challenges to social sustainability and residents’ impact perceptions. Muler
Gonzalez et al. (2017) further observes that carrying capacity is multidimensional and
vary depending on the concerns of local stakeholders. Consequently, due to the
dynamic effect of tourism as a disruptive force, merely focusing on tourism numbers
alone can be deceptive. In the post-pandemic era, there is increased advocacy to
reimagine, recalibrate, and regenerate from a community-centric perspective, as
industry and destination stakeholders rally against immense COVID-induced challenges
(Cheer, 2020; Zwain, 2021). Therefore, this paper aims to examine the tensions
associated with the social sustainability impacts in Melaka, as a WHS.

Methodology

This paper applies a qualitative research methodology. The qualitative method enables
an in-depth study (Patton, 2012), of supply-side stakeholders’ perceptions about
tourism development and social sustainability concerns consequential to WHS status.
Using a case study approach (Bryman, 2012), this paper investigates social
sustainability implications on destination stakeholders, in the UNESCO World Heritage
Historic City of Melaka, Malaysia. Founded in the 15th Century, Melaka is a multi-ethnic,
multi-cultural state with a 500-year history as a maritime, trading, and cultural hub
between East and West (Aziz, 2017; Williams, 2010). Melaka has a rich melting pot of
diverse cultures, where multiple ethnicities intermingled and formed interrelationships.
This acculturation of ethnic identities shaped a unique multicultural heritage
representing the hybrid traditions of the foreign traders and locals; for example: the
Peranakan Chinese (Baba-Nyonya or Straits-born Chinese), the Chetti (Indian Peranakans), and the Kristang (Portuguese Eurasians) (Aziz, 2017). Melaka’s legacy as part of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’, gives it universal appeal value (Tan et al., 2018). It is therefore necessary to obtain qualitative in-depth data that can provide rich insights in this study. 

The data collection occurred across two data collection periods: the pre-COVID (December 2019 and January 2020) and COVID-19 (July 2020 to December 2020) phases. Following preliminary review and assessment of potential participants, 25 invitations were sent out, with additional respondents further recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling methods (Patton, 2002). 12 participants accepted the invitation to participate in a semi-structured interview. The coded interviewees are all destination stakeholders residing in and/or operating tourism-related businesses in Melaka consisting of local lodging operators (H1, H2), tour guides (T1, T2), local cultural/heritage attractions (A1, A2, A3), and local residents/small business owners (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5). The interviews during the pre-COVID phase were conducted using a variety of online and digital response mechanisms (Skype, Zoom, WhaztApps, telephone). The interviews were conducted in English and took between 45 minutes to 2 hours, with the average duration of around 1 hour. Both researchers transcribed the interview data in order to verify colloquial language and substantiate its validity. Of the 12 interviewees, there were 5 females and 7 males, with age ranging from 30 to 65 years old. In response to the unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19, follow up interviews were conducted via the same response mechanisms. The collected textual narratives were transcribed, reviewed and coded in an open coding process, followed by preliminary clustering of thematic categories. The QSR NVivo12 program was used for the axial and selective coding process. The resultant data analysis and findings are discussed in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

WHL and Stakeholder Social Sustainability Concerns

As previously reviewed, WHL can cause unintended consequences in WHSs. Hence, in order to safeguard the sustainability of a WHS, it is necessary to acknowledge social
sustainability concerns at the destination, as well as potential stakeholder tensions arising as a result of seasonality and unsustainable tourism development (Seraphin et al., 2018). The commodification of heritage for tourism consumption may invariably result in tension and conflicting agendas between economic, social-cultural and conservation agendas (Ryan & Silvanto, 2010). Despite extant advocacy for the pursuit of a balanced triple bottom-line, achieving social sustainability outcomes remain elusive for many WHSs. Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) posit that potential communal, physical, and psychological pressures may arise when a destination’s social sustainability thresholds are breached. Although tourism development strategies are commonly embedded within a destination’s broader economic and socio-political agendas, these agendas forwarded may not always represent the wishes of local communities and their concerns (Bideau & Kilani, 2012). For example, whilst acknowledging tourism development’s contributions to the local economy and appreciation of Melaka’s historical value, C1 expresses his concerns about unrestrained tourism development following the WHL, sharing that “the locals...have everything to lose when tourists come to destroy the beauty of [our community] in terms of respect, behaviours and their attitudes”. Notwithstanding, T2 feels that the WHL and its “UNESCO overall universal value [does offer] a platform to tell the Melaka Story”. C3 further shares that the WHL has allowed Melaka to introduce its “diverse cultures...food, ethnic and historical places” to outsiders, which in turns strengthens the economy. Likewise, A3 believes that the “massive promotions” and increase in tourists have helped to change Melaka from “a sleepy hollow...to a booming destination” following the UNESCO WHS status.

The interviewees’ narratives highlight that WHSs may inadvertently experience implicit tensions, conflicting agendas and/or socially divergent reactions amongst its stakeholders following WHL. As Landorf (2009) observes, the achievement of exemplary social sustainability outcomes can be elusive, and the triple bottom-line dimensions of sustainability may not always be equitable. This may pose further challenges if residents’ impacts perceptions, concerning carrying capacity and seasonality fluctuations are overlooked. These concerns about tourism development and seasonality fluctuations on social sustainability, can be observed from shared narratives.
by some interviewees. For example, H2 shares that,

The problem with the ‘The Weekend Economies’ is that most people come over for
the weekend only. There’s a problem with seasonality….[tourism] is both good and
bad - good because of the tourists and spending, and bad, because of seasonality
and over-reliance [on tourists].

A3 similarly voices a similar opinion, contrasting the short weekend trips of local
domestic and Asian (e.g., Singaporean) tourists vis-à-vis that of western tourists who
tend to stay longer, but typically during the school holidays. Likewise, A2 highlights the
effect on heritage attractions and guides, since “weekends can be very peak (sic)...[but]
weekdays are sometimes very quiet”, unless it is the school holiday season when large
groups may visit their attraction. Consequently, these stakeholders perceive such
seasonal fluctuations or unanticipated incidences (such as bad weather or crisis events)
negatively, since there can be substantial variations in visitor volumes and activities; as
well as earning opportunities, since many are self-employed or freelancers. This
perception is similarly observed in other studies (Zhao et al., 2018; Muler Gonzalez et
al., 2017; UNESCO, 2021), wherein severe fluctuations in tourism volume at either
extreme scale may have repercussions on stakeholders’ impact perceptions and social
sustainability concerns. However, local stakeholder perceptions are not homogeneous,
and tourism’s perceived impacts vary between segments of the population.

Destinations, as socio-spatial entities, encompass a mosaic of varying, and sometimes
conflicting personalities, interests, and priorities. Just because people share the same
neighbourhood and space, it does not automatically infer that they have a common
sense of community or the same emotional stake in the place (Tan et al., 2018). Hence,
there is a critical need to recognise and understand the different nuances and
implications that a particular spatial locality has for its diverse inhabitants. This was
evident when comparing the responses from local residents (vis-à-vis business and
industry operators). For example, C1 purports that it severely affects their day-to-day
life, where,

uncontrolled numbers of vehicles...causes massive traffic jams especially during
Similarly, C3 shares the frustrations of coping with congestions in the city, particularly during the weekends and public holidays. In response, C2 shares that, one of the ways she copes is “to avoid the touristy areas”. Likewise, A3 recommends avoidance as a coping strategy, sharing, “we only go out shopping from Mondays to Thursdays. The tourists are coming Fridays to Sundays...so, we avoid it [and] stay at home”. Conversely, the narratives from business owners and proprietors (e.g., H1, H2, A3) indicate a greater tolerance towards the crowds of visitors, since their businesses are “affected by the number of incoming tourists”, which in turn “directly impacts [on] their survival and profitably”. As A3 recounts, “In Melaka, it is a seasonal business...but it is enough...it’s good for the locals [and] people providing food, service and lodging”. Beyond the tensions arising from seasonality, carrying capacity fluctuations, overcrowding and congestion, interviewees also highlighted other social sustainability concerns brought on by heightened tourism development, such as: (1) bad/irresponsible tourist behaviours; (2) dilution of local culture; (3) increased cost of living; (4) safety and security; (5) competition and/or social intrusion from peer-to-peer accommodation; (6) lack of support from local authorities to address infrastructural limitations; and (7) lack of non-tourism related activities. For example, regarding the dilution of local culture, C2 believes that there is an exploitation of local cultural heritage, adding that, “in a bid to be associated with the Peranakans, a lot of businesses, particularly eateries, have used the term carelessly to increase prices. The shops are the same, selling the same products”. T1 adds that Melaka’s unique “living heritage and roots...[should be] the (intangible) experience...and not just the tangible or images promoted”. Yet other stakeholders, like H2 for example, express concerns about the role of mass media (e.g., the hit Chinese-television series, The Little Nyonya) in pushing the ‘Peranakan’ and ‘Nyonya’ labels into popular culture, thereby corroborating cultural misrepresentations and imitations. Figure 1 below illustrates the local stakeholders’ narratives and perceptions of social-sustainability tensions (word frequency analysis and top five clusters).
Thus, whilst achieving WHS inscription may initially be celebrated by policy makers, industry and society, this euphoria may subsequently give way to antipathetic sentiments from local residents and community stakeholders, if threats to social sustainability are not adequately addressed. Narratives from this study indicate that social sustainability implications and concerns arising from tourism development are multidimensional, values-driven, and divergent, depending on the concerns of stakeholder groups, giving rise to tensions (Haanpää et al., 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Muler Gonzalez et al., 2017). Since these tensions may be intensified during times of crisis events such as COVID-19, we would argue that social sustainability is very important. Listening and acting on the diverse supply-side stakeholders’ concerns, is the key to post-crisis resilience and recovery. Hence, to mitigate unintended consequences of WHL, a long term, holistic approach to tourism planning in WHSs is required, wherein stakeholder engagement in the planning process is facilitated.

The COVID-19 Effect on Social Sustainability

The unexpected arrival of COVID-19 has resulted in significant tourism shock to Malaysia and Melaka. The implications from the implementation of Malaysia’s MCO have placed the tourism industry at risk of collapse. Pre-COVID-19, Malaysia’s tourism sector
enjoyed an auspicious outlook, with unprecedented growth in recent years. It contributed 11.5% (RM173.3 billion) to Malaysia’s GDP in 2019, contributing 14.7% to total employment in the country (Zwain, 2021). As its top tourist destination, Melaka has similarly witnessed exponential tourism growth, hosting some 17 million visitors in 2018 (Aziz, 2020). COVID-19 has brought this uninterrupted growth to a standstill. From the pre-COVID-19 debates and concerns about unsustainable development at tourism hotspots, the discourse has now made a turnabout to anxieties about its risk of collapse. For Melaka, this risk to tourism is felt strongly. The Melaka Tourism Division estimates a potential loss of RM51.8 million for 2020 as a result of COVID-19 if mitigation efforts are not initiated (Aziz, 2020). For instance, the hotel sector witnessed the permanent closure of several prominent and long-established hotels in Melaka, due to the drastic fall in tourist arrivals and unprecedented numbers of booking cancellations. It is estimated that Malaysia endured over 170,000 cancellations in hotel room bookings (an estimated RM68.2 million in losses), with the sector suffering an estimated RM3.3 billion in losses due to the MCO and COVID-19-related restrictions (Zwain, 2021). This has led to concerns regarding extraordinary challenges on local communities, social sustainability implications and destination stakeholder vulnerability.

Crisis events such as COVID-19 can trigger tourism industry instability. Such instability is due to uncertainties and risks inflicted on a destination’s social-cultural, political, economic, and environmental conditions (Gurtner, 2016). Moreover, crisis events occurring within pivotal seasonal windows of tourism may intensify fluctuations, further jeopardising social sustainability; just as overcrowding or overtourism has the potential to be at the other end of the spectrum (Alvarez-Sousa & Paniza Prados, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Be it a result of the disruptive consequences of unsustainable tourism development and overtourism, or the emptying of the same WHSs due to an unexpected dearth of inbound tourists, extreme variations in tourism at either scale is unsustainable. A review of narratives from follow-up interviews conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated anxieties expressed regarding the disruptive nature of severe fluctuations in tourism volume. For example, C1 shares, “Businesses are hurting badly…many have gone bankrupt. It’s very sad indeed”. Similarly, C4 expresses
sadness when witnessing many time-honoured and popular iconic establishments emptied due to COVID-19 and the MCO. Furthermore, C2 adds that whilst they (as local residents) enjoyed the respite from the tourists during the MCO, “it was disheartening to see a lot of businesses shutting down in what used to be the bustling tourist area of Melaka”. In this regard, H1 shares that occupancy rates for their property had dropped to as low as 10% during the MCO and between 30% to 45% during the previous peak holiday seasons in July and December respectively. This was despite dropping prices to as low as 40% of their usual room rates. Likewise, T2 shares that tour guides like him have been badly affected by COVID-19 due to border closures, and they had to adapt in order to survive (e.g., driving private-hire car services).

T2 further shares that the Melaka Historical City Tourist Guide Association has initiated programmes to support and upskill the sector’s recovery efforts by conducting training on alternative tourism products such as local farm tours, new tourist outlets and online platforms “to put the tourist guide services online…and prepare ourselves for the future”. With regards to the gradual reopening to domestic tourism, C1 concurs that the return of domestic visitors during the weekends have helped, recognising that these tourists returning “was good for local businesses”, despite previous frustrations at the traffic jams and overcrowding caused by tourists during the pre-COVID-19 interview. Figure 2 below illustrates the local stakeholders’ narratives and responses regarding the impacts of COVID-19 (word frequency analysis and top five clusters).
Accordingly, as observed from the narratives analysed, the volatile and profound effects of tourism (or lack thereof) as a disruptive force, reaffirms the dangers of indiscriminately focusing on tourism numbers alone. This may be intensified, when there are few non-tourism options available, and/or when sectorial support structures and institutional policies are not adequate to mitigate such fluctuations. For example, H2 surmises,

*We couldn’t do anything during the lockdown. We had ‘lost our way’, we didn’t know when the MCO [will be] lifted, we cannot do anything, but to wait for the government to make announcements. We were all alone… and could not talk to anyone [e.g., the Hotelier Association].*

Relatedly, C2 observes the frantic competition between businesses, “*to the extent where ‘famous’ shop owners would come out and entice you to patronise them. A lot of eateries are also focusing on delivering food on [food delivery] apps*” to survive. Hence, despite their best efforts, social sustainability outcomes may not always be easily achieved nor equally prioritised, which may lead to unanticipated tensions, contradictory agendas and/or contention amongst its stakeholders; all of which may be intensified during times of unprecedented crisis such as the COVID-19. After all, local community perceptions regarding perceived tourism impacts and their own well-being
may not be homogeneous across various populations. Thus, whilst this study had originated with the investigation on overtourism, its sudden shift to the critical discussion of crisis-driven no-tourism conditions is not unwarranted. Its findings can benefit industry and stakeholders, as such crisis events offer opportunities to learn from past problems, develop pre-emptive strategies and improvement measures toward a more sustainable future (UNESCO, 2021; Zwain, 2021). Destinations impacted by crisis events, can gain valuable insights about the intricate dynamics of stakeholders relations, mitigate community tourism over-dependence, and build resilience for effective future crisis response and recovery (Gurtner, 2016; Silberman, 2020). Hence, a heritage-led recovery strategy for Melaka as a WHS requires effective stakeholder participation and representation, wherein social sustainability measures are prioritised.

Our Story, Our Heritage: Stakeholder Voices and Socially Sustainable Management of WHSs

Stakeholder representation and voices are crucial to achieve social sustainability at WHSs. As Landorf (2011) observes, there is an incongruence between the prominence of heritage management authorities as governors of a WHS and the capacity for community participation and grassroots decision-making as custodians of their heritage. To ensure sustained change, social integration, and economic revitalisation at the grassroots level, the identification and legitimisation of local stakeholder voices and their collective vision of heritage value must be addressed against sustainable conservation practices and policies (Haanpää et al., 2019). However, Ryan and Silvanto (2010) also suggest that there are significant implications of political influences on how WHS inscription is utilised and promoted within the destination. Apropos, the presence of a strong sense of community, place attachment and local identity perceived by stakeholders may result in stronger grassroots-led actions, crucial in achieving social sustainability.

Based on the study’s findings, we argue that social sustainability needs to be more holistically integrated into the planning, management, and policy decision-making for sustainable tourism development. To be socially sustainable, tourism development...
policies require a multi-faceted approach that support community capacity building, cross-sectional stakeholder voices and partnerships. Particularly within the context of crisis events like COVID-19, the industry’s ability to recover and adjust, and residents’ outlook of post-crisis recovery, depends on the dynamics between various stakeholder constituents and institutional policy agendas (Guest, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Thus, we propose the following three-pronged strategy (Figure 3) for socially sustainable cultural heritage tourism development.

**Figure 3: Strategies for socially sustainable tourism development of WHSs**

**Strategy 1 – Telling OUR Story: Stakeholder Voices and Destination Storytelling**

One of the successes of tourism development is often attributed to stakeholders’ participation, engagement, and empowerment. As discussed, addressing supply-side local stakeholder concerns, representation and active participation can be a key requirement for successful WHS management and conservation efforts. In this regard, enabling stakeholder voices and suitable platforms for local heritage storytelling can facilitate this participation and engagement process (Djabarouti, 2020; Dredge, 2011). From the narratives reviewed, it seems there is a perception that policymakers do not actively engage or involve local stakeholders in the consultative process. Some interviewees felt that they “never had the opportunity” (C1) “for any consultation” (C2), since “the power is in the hands of the authorities and tourists” (H2). These interviewees were not alone in their perceptions that local stakeholder concerns are overlooked, since tourists’ purchasing power is the primary consideration. Conversely, T1 shares an alternate strategy of “playing behind the scenes”, sharing,

> As tour guides, we start the ball rolling...since we are the ambassadors of [Melaka]...so, we are in the position to advise [the local authorities] on things [that
are] not found in the book. So, I give suggestions to improve...from my experiences gained as a tour guide and [my local] association....This way, I am able to ‘tell OUR Story’ (with passionate emphasis)!...We are the small guys, we work behind the scenes...we are the living heritage, the people and the culture.

It appears from the narratives that despite a perceived lack of stakeholder consultation, there is a sense of indifference on the one hand and passionate grassroots-driven initiative on the other. Guides like T1, T2 and A3, for instance, express their pride as the local storytellers and custodians of their heritage. As T2 declares, “we are the ambassadors of the state!”. Likewise, A1 expressed gratification in being able to “preserve all the treasures”, to learn about their own local heritage and unique stories and share them with the visitors. Intrinsically, stories can reflect the personal and cultural perspectives of storytellers, contributing to affective and emotive acts of heritage interpretation (Burlingame 2019; Djabarouti, 2020). Further, Aziz (2017) suggests the value of active stakeholder engagement to build a sense of community ownership, custodianship, and advocacy for sustainable development at WHSs. Thus, to realise mutually beneficial outcomes toward social sustainability, equitable stakeholders’ participation, engagement, and empowerment should be facilitated, wherein opportunities for stakeholder voices to be authentically represented in destination storytelling are encouraged.

Strategy 2 – Sharing in OUR Story: A Community United in Resilience

A second success of tourism development is the strategy towards community focused WHS management. Such strategies call for pro-active grassroot-led initiatives wherein social capital building and resilience are encouraged. In this regard, Landorf (2011) advocates the need for participatory governance as a constructive strategy to boost social coherence, equity, and active civic engagement, aligned with sustainable development objectives. In order for sustainable heritage tourism development and preservation of local community resources, a mutuality between related stakeholders must be found (Tan et al., 2018). In this regard, T1 suggests the need for local stakeholders and community to stake a claim in championing local tourism, explaining,
we do our part by sharing and interacting with the tourists...and people who visit Melaka...and through them...we can influence public opinion and their support for our living heritage...[We can] affect change through their feelings of [being] involved. It is our responsibility to change mindset...to do what we can to change people’s opinions....about [our] heritage and culture of the place.

From the narratives, there appears to be some consultative engagement present amongst some stakeholders. However, this is not homogenised, and it tends to be restricted to groups within the formal business community and special interest groups, such as, the local city council, state executive committee, local industry associations, etc. Hence, there is a need for building genuine grassroots stakeholder engagement and not mere tokenistic action, as perceived by some stakeholders. As Aqueveque and Bianchib (2017) suggest, destination managers face the challenge of uniting an often-fragmented stakeholder population. This impacts on the ability to curate a coherent and sustainable tourism development strategy. Hence, whilst local authorities, tourism boards and operators may be the key players, there still lies a myriad of stakeholder grassroots segments, who can influence or challenge the achievement of a shared goal. Consequently, we argue for the need to socialise the tourism agenda and reoriented toward a more community-centric stakeholder approach. In the context of WHS in Melaka, this study highlights the unique heterogeneity and contextualised circumstances of destinations, communities, and ethnicities co-existing within the same space. There is an opportunity to harness community knowledge and empower participation. Such pro-active grassroot-led initiatives capitalised as strengths can prove useful in building a more socially sustainable tourism development that can recover from crisis events such as COVID-19.

**Strategy 3 – Curating OUR Story: The Melaka Story for Social Sustainability**

The third success for tourism development is storytelling. Storytelling reflects the social heritage voices of stakeholders (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011). Therefore, curating such storytelling can result in social sustainability by facilitating stakeholder involvement, collaboration, and representation. The importance of stakeholder voices and storytelling
to placemaking, place heritage and destination planning has been observed in other studies (e.g., Burlingame, 2019; Djabarouti, 2020; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011; Frost et al., 2020). As Frost et al. (2020) observe, persuasive storytelling can promote visitor engagement and authentic experiences at the destination. Central to many tourism experiences is the pursuit of affective experience that allows visitors to feel something (Burlingame, 2019). Through facilitating stakeholder voices and story-sharing, there is an opportunity to curate “The Melaka Story”, based on themes that local stakeholders feel are important and which represents who they are as a community. From the narratives analysed, the key themes suggested by interviewees emphasise the importance of curating both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. After all, heritage placemaking entails an assemblage of diverse material and immaterial dimensions (Djabarouti, 2020; Silberman, 2020). Thus, in order to curate the intangible, it is necessary to first curate the tangible heritage, as it invokes the intangibles, such as place attachment, nostalgia, and emotions. Regarding the contributions of tangible heritage, T2 highlights the value of curating visually and aesthetically appealing tourism viewscapes (e.g., the “beautiful lights” along the Melaka River and its bridges) to trigger affective responses and connections with visitors. Likewise, C3 supports the local authorities’ efforts to “beautify the surroundings” to enhance Melaka’s visitor appeal and placemaking. Such curated heritage viewscapes can activate both tangible (physical attraction) and intangible (nostalgic emotions) cultural heritage experiences at the WHS.

In terms of intangible cultural heritage, T1 suggests that for Melaka to be a truly successful WHS, the focus should not only be on the tangible heritage (e.g., historical architecture of buildings and conserved places of interest), but also getting to know the real locals and connecting with the authentic soul of the WHS and its peoples. Such soulful and emotional connections are important, as it is this intangible cultural heritage (e.g., stories of the local community and traditional livelihoods) that engages and connects with the visitors. As Burlingame (2019) suggests, incorporating affective and emotional dimensions within a multivocal, multisensory heritage process can greatly enhance the visitor’s lived experience. Likewise, T1 shares, “It’s our responsibility...to share our living heritage....from the stories we tell, [we have] conversations... [and]
make them feel the connection [to us]...through the feelings of touching, seeing and involving (sic)”.

Furthermore, H1 shares that, to help visitors appreciate and understand more about Melaka, they do their best to “tell the story of our traditional heritage...explain about our culture and local stories”. Similarly, other interviewees (e.g., T2, C2 and A2) express hopes of cultivating visitor appreciation for their roots and unique heritage through their stories. As Djabarouti (2020) suggests, intangible cultural heritage is most frequently described through stories – stories about people, communities, and recollections of the heritage. Hence, listening to these curated stories, may invoke authentic living heritage. It allows the visitors to get to know the real locals by mentally and emotionally connecting, inducing authentic intangible cultural heritage experiences. Thus, social sustainability measures that include collective community voices and social heritage could further enhance WHSs.

In light of the above, this paper proposes a stakeholder-driven social sustainability approach for WHS. It recommends prioritising local stakeholder voices and values, wherein a grassroots-led, bottom-up approach can result in equity with a social sustainability focus. We posit that this proposed approach (Figure 4) can disperse potential tensions between stakeholders and encourage greater stakeholder representation, through applying the three strategies of telling, sharing, and curating local stories, that enhances social heritage value at WHSs. A bottom-up approach can reshape priorities to better engage destination stakeholders as co-narrators and custodians of the heritage, placing the community at the forefront of heritage placemaking. As highlighted by UNESCO (2021), COVID-19 offers us a chance to address prevailing challenges and uncover new opportunities for WHSs to “reset” and “build back better” through management strategies that places the needs of its local communities at the heart of the recovery process (p.8). Therefore, by curating the stories, voices, and socio-cultural ideals of these stakeholders, it can strengthen social sustainability value, beyond just economic and political agendas of sustainable development.
Conclusion

This paper has investigated the implications of tourism development at Melaka, a WHS, as a consequence of UNESCO WHL. Specifically, it investigated the key social sustainability implications from a destination-supply perspective. The COVID-19 and its global impacts have extinguished a once robust tourism sector, leaving it vulnerable and exposed to significant economic and social shocks. From being overcrowded with tourists, the pandemic saw tourists gone in a flash. Similarly, many WHSs have faced severe challenges and risks to cultural heritage values, local communities, and livelihoods (Alvarez-Sousa & Paniza Prados, 2020; UNESCO, 2021; Zwain, 2021). To navigate and recover from crisis events such as COVID-19, this paper argues for a grassroots-led destination management strategy, wherein destination stakeholders and social sustainability concerns are prioritised. Therefore, we proposed a three-pronged strategy prioritising stakeholder voices, community well-being and integrity of cultural heritage. In order to ensure social sustainability, stakeholder collaborative partnerships and local representation must be strengthened, wherein stakeholders’ social capital, coordinated action and coherence of identity are supported (Landorf, 2011; Muler Gonzalez et al., 2017; Ryan & Silvanto, 2010). This is particularly important for tourism-dependant destinations that are at greater risk from crisis events, such as COVID-19, due to their tourism reliance and vulnerability (Brouder et al., 2020; Guest, 2021). The lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis, can offer insights towards future sustainability
and resilient post-crisis recovery for destination stakeholders. Furthermore, while this study is focused on a case study of Melaka, its strategies can be applicable in the wider COVID-19 tourism discourse. However, we acknowledge the limitations of this WHS case study and the destination supply-side perspectives. We would recommend that further research on the complexities surrounding other stakeholder perspectives on the impacts (immediate and long-term) of COVID-19 on other tourism-focused destinations is required. Nevertheless, the findings from this study can support the advocacy for social sustainability measures, as a key post-crisis recovery focus at WHSs.

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References


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