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PROMOTING A GROWTH MENTALITY TO ADVANCE ONESELF

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognised as a viable pathway for promoting economic participation and social inclusion among Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), particularly in contexts where access to formal employment remains limited. In Malaysia, however, empirical evidence examining the lived experiences of disabled entrepreneurs is still scarce. This study aims to explore how entrepreneurship contributes to the empowerment of PWDs, the challenges they encounter, and the role of support networks in sustaining entrepreneurial activities. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with three entrepreneurs with physical disabilities. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes. The findings reveal that entrepreneurship enhances personal empowerment by fostering autonomy, self-confidence, and financial independence. However, participants also face persistent challenges, including limited access to economic resources, inadequate institutional support, and negative societal perceptions. Family and community support emerged as critical factors in mitigating these challenges and sustaining entrepreneurial efforts. This study contributes to the literature on inclusive entrepreneurship by providing context-specific insights from Malaysia and highlights the need for more inclusive policies, targeted financial assistance, and coordinated support mechanisms to empower Persons with Disabilities through entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Person with Disabilities, Experiences, Entrepreneurship Support, Malaysia, Qualitative Study

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, academic interest in entrepreneurship among Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) has grown significantly, reflecting broader global efforts to promote inclusive economic development and social participation. Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised not only as a mechanism for income generation but also as a pathway to empowerment, autonomy, and social integration for individuals who face persistent barriers in conventional employment. For PWDs, entrepreneurial

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engagement may provide greater flexibility, independence, and opportunities to leverage personal strengths that are often overlooked in mainstream labour markets.

Entrepreneurship has been widely acknowledged as a driver of both economic and social inclusion. By allowing individuals to exercise control over their work environment, pace, and business direction, entrepreneurship offers an alternative route to employment for groups that are marginalised within traditional organisational structures. In Malaysia, awareness of the entrepreneurial potential of PWDs has gradually increased, supported by national initiatives aimed at improving accessibility, participation, and equality. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, PWDs remain disproportionately excluded from stable employment opportunities, highlighting the need for alternative economic pathways.

Beyond physical limitations, individuals with disabilities frequently encounter institutional barriers and deeply ingrained societal attitudes that undermine their participation in the workforce. These barriers include limited access to financial capital, insufficient entrepreneurial training tailored to disability needs, and weak institutional support mechanisms. Social stigma and misconceptions regarding the capabilities of PWDs further exacerbate these challenges. In this context, entrepreneurship emerges as a viable and strategic option for achieving both financial independence and social empowerment. When supported by appropriate resources and networks, entrepreneurial activities can enhance self-esteem, promote social acceptance, and foster community engagement among PWDs.

Existing studies suggest that entrepreneurship can positively influence the quality of life of individuals with disabilities by enhancing autonomy, psychological well-being, and social integration. However, much of the existing literature focuses on policy discussions, general employment challenges, or quantitative outcomes, with limited attention given to the lived experiences of disabled entrepreneurs, particularly within developing and emerging economies. In the Malaysian context, empirical research exploring how PWDs experience entrepreneurship, navigate challenges, and utilise support networks remains scarce. This gap is especially evident in qualitative studies that prioritise the voices and perspectives of disabled entrepreneurs themselves.

In Malaysia, Persons with Disabilities—commonly referred to as Orang Kelainan Upaya (OKU)—are defined under the Persons with Disabilities Act (2008) as individuals with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that may hinder full and effective participation in society. According to the Persons with Disabilities Action Plan (PTOKU), PWDs continue to face systemic challenges that restrict equal access to education, employment, and economic opportunities. These structural constraints underscore the importance of examining entrepreneurship as a potential mechanism for empowerment and inclusion within the Malaysian socio-economic landscape.

This study is grounded in Social Support Theory, which posits that access to emotional, informational, and instrumental support plays a critical role in enhancing individual coping capacity, motivation, and performance outcomes. Within an entrepreneurial context, support from family members, peers, community organisations, and institutions can significantly influence business sustainability and personal empowerment. By applying this theoretical lens, the study seeks to understand how support networks shape the entrepreneurial experiences of PWDs and enable them to overcome structural and social barriers.

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of PWD entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research objectives:

1. To explore the roles of entrepreneurship in empowering Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia.
2. To identify the key challenges faced by PWDs in pursuing and sustaining entrepreneurial activities.
3. To examine the role of support networks in facilitating entrepreneurial success among PWDs.

4. To propose recommendations for strengthening inclusive entrepreneurship initiatives for persons with disabilities.

By providing context-specific qualitative insights, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive entrepreneurship and disability studies. The findings are expected to offer practical implications for policymakers, support agencies, and entrepreneurship development programmes aimed at fostering more inclusive and sustainable economic participation among Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia. |

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship and Persons with Disabilities

Entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognised as an alternative pathway to employment for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), particularly in contexts where structural barriers limit access to formal labour markets. Previous studies suggest that disabled individuals often experience restricted employment opportunities due to physical constraints, workplace inaccessibility, and discriminatory attitudes, which collectively reduce labour market participation. In response, entrepreneurship provides greater flexibility and autonomy, allowing PWDs to tailor business activities according to their capabilities and personal circumstances.

Research indicates that entrepreneurial engagement among PWDs is not solely driven by economic necessity but also by a desire for independence, self-fulfilment, and social participation. Entrepreneurship enables individuals with disabilities to redefine their professional identities and challenge societal stereotypes that portray them as economically dependent. However, while the entrepreneurial potential of PWDs is increasingly acknowledged, their participation rates remain relatively low, particularly in developing economies, suggesting the presence of persistent structural and institutional barriers.

Empowerment through Entrepreneurship

Empowerment is a central concept in disability and entrepreneurship research, encompassing economic, psychological, and social dimensions. Economic empowerment refers to the ability to generate income and achieve financial independence, while psychological empowerment relates to enhanced self-confidence, autonomy, and perceived control over life choices. Social empowerment, on the other hand, involves increased participation, recognition, and inclusion within society.

Entrepreneurship has been shown to contribute positively to all three dimensions of empowerment among PWDs. By owning and managing businesses, disabled entrepreneurs gain greater control over their working conditions and decision-making processes. Studies have also reported improvements in self-esteem and motivation, as entrepreneurial success reinforces individuals' belief in their capabilities. Furthermore, engagement in business activities facilitates broader social interaction, helping PWDs to integrate into community networks and economic systems.

Despite these benefits, empowerment outcomes are not uniform across individuals. The extent to which entrepreneurship leads to meaningful empowerment depends on contextual factors such as access to resources, institutional support, and the availability of enabling environments. This highlights the need to examine entrepreneurship not merely as an individual endeavour but as a process shaped by social and structural conditions.

Challenges Faced by Entrepreneurs with Disabilities

Although entrepreneurship offers potential benefits, PWDs face numerous challenges that can hinder business development and sustainability. Financial constraints are among the most frequently cited barriers, as disabled entrepreneurs often experience difficulty accessing start-up capital, credit facilities, and financial assistance. Conventional financing mechanisms may not adequately accommodate the unique needs of PWDs, thereby limiting their ability to expand or formalise their businesses.

In addition to financial challenges, PWD entrepreneurs frequently encounter institutional and environmental barriers, including limited access to tailored training programmes, inadequate business support services, and physical inaccessibility of business infrastructure. Social stigma and negative perceptions of disability further exacerbate these challenges by affecting customer trust, networking opportunities, and market acceptance. These findings underscore that entrepreneurial difficulties faced by PWDs extend beyond individual limitations and are deeply embedded within broader socio-economic systems.

Role of Social Support Networks

Social support has been widely identified as a critical factor influencing entrepreneurial outcomes, particularly for individuals facing social or physical disadvantages. Drawing on Social Support Theory, support can be categorised into emotional, informational, and instrumental dimensions. Emotional support includes encouragement and empathy, informational support involves guidance and advice, while instrumental support refers to tangible assistance such as financial aid or access to resources.

For PWD entrepreneurs, family members often serve as primary sources of emotional and instrumental support, providing motivation, financial assistance, and practical help in managing business operations. Community organisations, peer networks, and disability-focused associations also play an important role by offering training opportunities, mentorship, and access to entrepreneurial ecosystems. Empirical studies suggest that strong support networks can mitigate the negative effects of structural barriers and enhance business resilience among disabled entrepreneurs.

However, the availability and effectiveness of support networks vary considerably across contexts. In many developing countries, formal support systems remain fragmented or insufficiently coordinated, limiting their impact on entrepreneurial sustainability. This variation highlights the importance of examining how different forms of support are accessed and utilised by PWDs within specific socio-cultural environments.

Entrepreneurship and Disability in the Malaysian Context

In Malaysia, Persons with Disabilities—commonly referred to as *Orang Kelainan Upaya* (OKU)—continue to face challenges in accessing education, employment, and economic opportunities despite the existence of legislative frameworks such as the Persons with Disabilities Act (2008) and the Persons with Disabilities Action Plan (PTOKU). While these policies aim to promote inclusion and equal participation, implementation gaps persist, particularly in relation to employment and entrepreneurship support.

Existing Malaysian studies on disability have largely focused on employment barriers and welfare provision, with limited empirical attention given to entrepreneurship as a mechanism for empowerment. Moreover, few studies adopt qualitative approaches that capture the lived experiences of PWD entrepreneurs. As a result, there is limited understanding of how disabled individuals in Malaysia navigate entrepreneurial pathways, mobilise support networks, and cope with socio-institutional constraints.

Research Gap

Based on the reviewed literature, several gaps are evident. First, while entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as a pathway for empowering PWDs, empirical research—particularly qualitative studies—remains limited in the Malaysian context. Second, existing studies tend to focus on structural barriers or policy discussions, offering limited insight into the lived experiences and personal perspectives of disabled entrepreneurs. Third, although Social Support Theory has been widely applied in entrepreneurship research, its application to disability entrepreneurship in Malaysia remains underexplored.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the entrepreneurial experiences of Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia, with particular emphasis on empowerment, challenges, and the role of support networks. By foregrounding the voices of PWD entrepreneurs, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of inclusive entrepreneurship. |

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) engaged in entrepreneurial activities in Malaysia. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and meanings attached to entrepreneurship and empowerment. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the limited empirical evidence on disability entrepreneurship in the Malaysian context, qualitative inquiry provides rich and nuanced insights that may not be captured through quantitative methods.

Research Participants and Sampling

The target population for this study comprised Persons with physical disabilities who are actively involved in entrepreneurial activities. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria: (i) individuals with physical disabilities, (ii) self-employed or business owners, and (iii) having at least one year of entrepreneurial experience. This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed relevant experiences and knowledge aligned with the research objectives.

A total of three participants were involved in the study. Although the sample size is relatively small, it is considered acceptable in qualitative research where the emphasis is placed on depth rather than breadth of data. The limited sample size was also influenced by accessibility constraints and the specific nature of the target group. Data saturation was achieved when no substantially new themes emerged from subsequent interviews, indicating that the collected data were sufficient to address the research questions.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. The interview sessions were conducted online using Google Meet to accommodate participants' mobility and accessibility needs. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a language comfortable for the participants.

Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of data capture. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol focusing on three main areas: (i) the role of entrepreneurship in empowering persons with disabilities, (ii) challenges encountered in entrepreneurial activities, and (iii) perceived support mechanisms and future recommendations.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to share their personal experiences and perspectives. Sample questions included:

- How does entrepreneurship contribute to your personal empowerment and independence?
- What challenges have you faced in establishing and sustaining your business?

- What types of support have been most important in your entrepreneurial journey?
- What improvements would you suggest to enhance entrepreneurship opportunities for persons with disabilities?

The semi-structured format enabled probing questions to be asked when clarification or elaboration was required.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following a systematic and iterative process. First, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times to achieve familiarisation with the data. Initial codes were then generated to capture meaningful segments of text relevant to the research objectives. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories, from which key themes were identified and refined.

The thematic analysis process involved several stages: data familiarisation, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, and interpretation. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and relationships within the data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of participants' entrepreneurial experiences.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied established qualitative criteria, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through careful transcription and prolonged engagement with the data. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting the research procedures and analytical decisions. Confirmability was addressed by minimising researcher bias through reflexive consideration and consistent application of analytical procedures.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and removing identifiable information from transcripts. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

FINDINGS

This section presents and discusses the findings derived from semi-structured interviews with three entrepreneurs with physical disabilities in Malaysia. The analysis yielded four main themes: (1) entrepreneurship as empowerment and independence, (2) structural and financial challenges, (3) societal perceptions and stigma, and (4) the role of support networks. The discussion integrates participants' narratives with existing literature and Social Support Theory.

Entrepreneurship as Empowerment and Independence

All participants viewed entrepreneurship as a critical means of achieving independence and personal empowerment. They highlighted that running their own businesses allowed them to determine their working pace, manage physical limitations, and make autonomous decisions. One participant explained:

"When I run my own business, I can decide my schedule. I don't have to depend on others or worry if people think I'm slow because of my condition" (P1).

This sense of autonomy enhanced participants' self-confidence and reinforced their self-identity as capable individuals rather than dependents. Another participant noted that entrepreneurship helped them regain a sense of purpose:

“Before this, it was difficult to get a job. Having my own business makes me feel useful and confident again” (P2).

These findings support previous studies indicating that entrepreneurship contributes to psychological empowerment and self-efficacy among persons with disabilities. In line with empowerment literature, entrepreneurship in this context functions not only as an income-generating activity but also as a platform for redefining self-worth and social identity.

Structural and Financial Challenges in Entrepreneurial Activities

Despite the benefits of entrepreneurship, participants reported significant structural and financial barriers that constrained their business growth. Limited access to financial capital was a recurring concern. Participants expressed difficulties in obtaining loans or formal financial assistance, particularly due to perceived risks associated with disability:

“Getting funding is very hard. When they see I’m disabled, they doubt whether I can manage the business long term” (P3).

Additionally, participants highlighted the lack of tailored entrepreneurship training programmes that accommodate the specific needs of PWDs. While some general business support programmes exist, they were often perceived as inaccessible or insufficiently inclusive. These challenges echo findings from previous research that identifies financial exclusion and institutional barriers as major constraints for disabled entrepreneurs, particularly in developing economies.

From a discussion perspective, these findings suggest that empowerment through entrepreneurship is highly dependent on structural conditions. Without inclusive financial systems and targeted institutional support, entrepreneurial efforts among PWDs may remain small-scale and vulnerable.

Societal Attitudes, Stigma, and Business Credibility

Societal perceptions of disability emerged as a significant theme influencing entrepreneurial experiences. Participants reported encountering negative assumptions regarding their competence, which affected customer trust and professional relationships. One participant shared:

“Sometimes customers don’t believe I can handle the business properly. They look at my disability first, not my ability” (P2).

These experiences reflect persistent societal stigma that associates disability with incapacity. However, participants also noted that sustained business performance gradually helped to change perceptions:

“After some time, when they see my business doing well, their attitude changes” (P1).

This finding aligns with existing disability studies, which suggest that entrepreneurship can serve as a mechanism for challenging stereotypes and reshaping social perceptions. While stigma initially acts as a barrier, successful entrepreneurial engagement enables PWDs to demonstrate competence and legitimacy within the marketplace.

Role of Support Networks in Sustaining Entrepreneurship

Support networks played a crucial role in helping participants cope with entrepreneurial challenges. Family support was consistently identified as the most significant source of assistance, providing emotional encouragement, financial help, and practical support. As one participant explained:

“My family is my biggest support. Without them, it would be very difficult to continue this business” (P3).

In addition to family, participants acknowledged the value of community organisations and peer networks, particularly in terms of advice and motivation. However, formal institutional support from government agencies was perceived as inconsistent and limited in reach.

These findings strongly support Social Support Theory, which emphasises emotional, informational, and instrumental support as key determinants of individual resilience and performance. In the context of disability entrepreneurship, strong informal support networks appear to compensate for gaps in formal institutional support, highlighting the importance of strengthening both dimensions.

Integrated Discussion

Overall, the findings indicate that entrepreneurship provides meaningful empowerment opportunities for Persons with Disabilities by enhancing autonomy, self-confidence, and social participation. However, these benefits are constrained by financial exclusion, institutional limitations, and persistent societal stigma. The experiences shared by participants demonstrate that entrepreneurial success among PWDs is not solely driven by individual effort but is significantly shaped by the availability of inclusive support systems.

By integrating participants lived experiences with existing literature, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of disability entrepreneurship in Malaysia. It underscores the need for coordinated support involving families, communities, financial institutions, and policymakers to foster sustainable and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems for Persons with Disabilities.

CONCLUSION |

The findings of this study suggest many areas that warrant more research on the subject of disability entrepreneurship. The effectiveness of specific support networks and therapies intended to address the challenges faced by handicapped entrepreneurs should be further investigated. Analysing the effects of mentoring programmes, assistive technology initiatives, and inclusive legislative reforms on the experiences and outcomes of entrepreneurship may be necessary to achieve this.

Credibility, as a cornerstone of trustworthiness, underscores the extent to which the research accurately reflects the experiences and perspectives of participants without undue influence from researcher biases or preconceptions. To bolster credibility, techniques such as member checking and peer debriefing are employed. Member checking involves involving participants in the validation process, allowing them to review and confirm the accuracy of their contributions to the research. This not only empowers participants but also ensures that their voices are accurately represented in the findings. Similarly, peer debriefing involves critical evaluation of the research process and outcomes by fellow researchers, serving as a check against potential biases or oversights.

Dependability, on the other hand, pertains to the consistency and stability of the research process and outcomes over time. To enhance dependability, meticulous record-keeping practices are employed, including detailed field notes, audio or video recordings, and other relevant documentation. These records serve to reconstruct the research process, allowing for transparency in how conclusions were reached and facilitating judgments regarding the reliability and stability of findings.

Additionally, the creation of an audit trail further contributes to dependability by providing a clear roadmap of the research journey, thereby enhancing transparency and accountability.

Ethical considerations are paramount in qualitative research, particularly concerning the protection of participant rights and confidentiality. Informed consent, obtained through clear and comprehensive explanations of the research goals, risks, and participant rights, ensures that individuals understand the nature of their involvement and provide consent willingly. Respect for participant autonomy is upheld by allowing individuals to withdraw from the study at any point without repercussion. Moreover, safeguarding participant confidentiality is essential, requiring researchers to anonymize data and ensure secure storage to prevent unauthorized access. By adhering to ethical guidelines and prioritizing participant welfare, researchers can establish trust, preserve integrity, and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in a responsible and ethical manner.

In essence, the adherence to principles of trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research interviews serves as a safeguard against potential biases and ensures the credibility, dependability, and ethical integrity of research outcomes. By employing robust methodological practices and ethical standards, researchers can uphold the validity and reliability of their findings, ultimately advancing knowledge and understanding within their respective fields.

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