

Entrepreneurship as a Pathway to Empowerment: Experiences and Sustainability Challenges Among Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia

Ainur Sofea¹, Nor Haninah A. Ghani² & Shahri Abu Seman^{3}*

^{1,2&3} Faculty of Business & Accountancy, University Poly-Tech Malaysia, 56100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Corresponding author email: shahri@uptm.edu.my

Received 31 March 2025; Revised 20 April 2025; Accepted 30 April 2025; Published 31 May 2025

Corresponding author: Shahri Abu Seman Email: shahri@uptm.edu.my DOI: https://doi.org/10.61688/jev.v6i1.265	Article History Received: 31 March 2025 Revised: 20 April 2025 Accepted: 30 April 2025 Published: 31 May 2025
---	--

ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as a strategic pathway for enhancing economic participation, social inclusion, and self-empowerment among Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), particularly in contexts where access to formal employment remains constrained. In Malaysia, however, limited empirical research has examined the lived experiences of entrepreneurs with disabilities and the factors influencing their entrepreneurial sustainability. This study explores how entrepreneurship contributes to the empowerment of PWDs, the challenges they encounter, and the role of support systems in sustaining their entrepreneurial activities. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with three entrepreneurs with physical disabilities in Malaysia. The data were analysed through thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to empowerment, barriers, and support mechanisms. The findings reveal that entrepreneurship serves as an important mechanism for enhancing autonomy, self-confidence, financial independence, and social recognition among PWDs. Nevertheless, participants continue to face significant challenges, including limited access to financial resources, inadequate institutional and infrastructural support, restricted market opportunities, and persistent societal stigma associated with disability. The study also highlights the critical role of family support, community networks, and social encouragement in strengthening entrepreneurial resilience and sustaining business activities. This study contributes to the growing literature on inclusive entrepreneurship by providing context-specific insights into the experiences of disabled entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The findings underscore the need for more inclusive policies, accessible financial assistance, entrepreneurial training programmes, and coordinated support systems to strengthen the socio-economic empowerment and long-term sustainability of entrepreneurship among Persons with Disabilities.

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

How to Cite

Ainur Sofea, Norhaninah, & Abu Seman, S. (2025).

Entrepreneurship as a pathway to empowerment:

Experiences and sustainability challenges among persons with disabilities in Malaysia. *Jurnal Evolusi*, 6(1), 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.61688/jev.v6i1.265>

Copyright: © 2025 The Author(s)

Published by Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

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 (Cooney, 2008; Renko et al., 2016). 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 facing persistent barriers to conventional employment (Pagán, 2009; Darcy et al., 2020). For PWDs, entrepreneurial engagement may provide greater flexibility, independence, and opportunities to leverage personal strengths that are often overlooked in mainstream labour markets (Yamamoto & Alverson, 2013).

Entrepreneurship has been widely acknowledged as a driver of both economic and social inclusion (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). 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 (Cooney, 2012). In Malaysia, awareness of the entrepreneurial potential of PWDs has gradually increased, supported by national initiatives to improve accessibility, participation, and equality (Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, 2021). Nevertheless, despite these efforts, PWDs remain disproportionately excluded from stable employment opportunities, highlighting the need for alternative economic pathways (United Nations, 2018).

Beyond physical limitations, individuals with disabilities frequently encounter institutional barriers and deeply ingrained societal attitudes that undermine their participation in the workforce (Mitra, 2018). These barriers include limited access to financial capital, insufficient entrepreneurial training tailored to disability needs, and weak institutional support mechanisms (Renko et al., 2016). Social stigma and misconceptions regarding the capabilities of PWDs further exacerbate these challenges (Darcy et al., 2020). 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 (Pagán, 2009).

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 (Yamamoto & Alverson, 2013). 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 (Renko et al., 2016). 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 (Ismail et al., 2022).

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 (Government of Malaysia, 2008). 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 (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2021). 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 (Cobb, 1976; House, 1981). Within an entrepreneurial context, support from family members, peers, community organisations, and institutions can significantly influence business sustainability and personal empowerment (Powell & Eddleston, 2013). By applying this theoretical lens, the study seeks to understand how support networks shape PWDs' entrepreneurial experiences and help them overcome structural and social barriers.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the entrepreneurial experiences of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Malaysia.

Specifically, the study seeks:

1. To explore how entrepreneurship contributes to the empowerment and independence of Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia.
2. To identify the key challenges faced by Persons with Disabilities in establishing and sustaining entrepreneurial activities.
3. To examine the role of family, community, and institutional support networks in supporting the entrepreneurial activities and resilience of Persons with Disabilities.
4. To propose recommendations for strengthening inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurship initiatives for 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 (Cooney, 2008; Renko et al., 2016). 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 (Pagán, 2009; Mitra, 2018). In response, entrepreneurship provides greater flexibility and autonomy, allowing PWDs to tailor business activities according to their capabilities and personal circumstances (Yamamoto & Alverson, 2013).

Research indicates that entrepreneurial engagement among PWDs is driven not only by economic necessity but also by a desire for independence, self-fulfilment, and social participation (Darcy et al., 2020). Entrepreneurship enables individuals with disabilities to redefine their professional identities and challenge societal stereotypes that portray them as economically dependent (Cooney, 2012). However, while the entrepreneurial potential of PWDs is increasingly acknowledged, their participation rates remain relatively low, particularly in developing economies, suggesting persistent structural and institutional barriers (United Nations, 2018).

Empowerment through Entrepreneurship

Empowerment is a central concept in disability and entrepreneurship research, encompassing economic, psychological, and social dimensions (Zimmerman, 1995). 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 (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005).

Entrepreneurship has been shown to contribute positively to all three dimensions of empowerment among PWDs (Pagán, 2009). By owning and managing businesses, disabled entrepreneurs gain greater control over their working conditions and decision-making processes (Yamamoto & Alverson, 2013). Studies have also reported improvements in self-esteem and motivation, as entrepreneurial success reinforces individuals' belief in their capabilities (Renko et al., 2016). Furthermore, engagement in business activities facilitates broader social interaction, helping PWDs to integrate into community networks and economic systems (Darcy et al., 2020).

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 (Mitra, 2018). 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 (Renko et al., 2016). Financial constraints are among the most frequently cited barriers, as disabled entrepreneurs often experience difficulty accessing start-up capital, credit facilities, and financial assistance (Cooney, 2008). Conventional financing mechanisms may not adequately accommodate the unique needs of PWDs, thereby limiting their ability to expand or formalise their businesses (Darcy et al., 2020).

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 (Pagán, 2009). Social stigma and negative perceptions of disability further exacerbate these challenges by affecting customer trust, networking opportunities, and market acceptance (Mitra, 2018). These findings underscore those 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 (Cobb, 1976; House, 1981). 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 (House, 1981).

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 (Powell & Eddleston, 2013). Community organisations, peer networks, and disability-focused associations also play an important role by offering training opportunities, mentorship, and access to entrepreneurial ecosystems (Renko et al., 2016). Empirical studies suggest that strong support networks can mitigate the negative effects of structural barriers and enhance business resilience among disabled entrepreneurs (Darcy et al., 2020).

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 (United Nations, 2018). 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) (Government of Malaysia, 2008). While these policies aim to promote inclusion and equal participation, implementation gaps persist, particularly regarding employment and entrepreneurship support (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2021).

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 (Ismail et al., 2022). 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 (Ismail et al., 2022). 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 (Renko et al., 2016). Third, although Social Support Theory has been widely applied in entrepreneurship research, its application to disability entrepreneurship in Malaysia remains underexplored (Powell & Eddleston, 2013).

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 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the exploratory nature of the research and the limited empirical evidence on disability entrepreneurship in the Malaysian context, qualitative inquiry offers rich, nuanced insights that may not be captured by quantitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative designs are particularly suitable for studies focusing on marginalised groups because they prioritise participants' voices and lived realities within their socio-cultural environments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

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. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015).

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 (Guest et al., 2006). The limited sample size was also influenced by accessibility constraints and the target group's specific nature. 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 (Saunders et al., 2018).

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 (Kallio et al., 2016). 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 in accordance with ethical research principles (Orb et al., 2001). 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 in line with the study objectives and relevant literature. Semi-structured interviews are effective in qualitative research because they provide structure while allowing participants to express their perspectives freely (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to share their personal experiences and perspectives.

Sample questions included:

1. How does entrepreneurship contribute to your personal empowerment and independence?
2. What challenges have you faced in establishing and sustaining your business?
3. What types of support have been most important in your entrepreneurial journey?
4. What improvements would you suggest to enhance entrepreneurship opportunities for persons with disabilities?

The semi-structured format enabled the use of probing questions when clarification or elaboration was required, thereby enhancing the richness and depth of the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following a systematic and iterative process. Thematic analysis is widely recognised as a flexible and rigorous method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated to capture meaningful text segments 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 (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and relationships in the data, enabling 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, confirmability, and transferability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). 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 (Nowell et al., 2017).

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 (Orb et al., 2001). All data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes in compliance with ethical standards for qualitative research involving human participants.

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 are consistent with previous research suggesting that entrepreneurship can enhance autonomy, self-confidence, and self-efficacy among Persons with Disabilities by providing greater control over working conditions and economic activities (Pagán, 2009; Yamamoto & Alverson, 2013; Renko et al., 2016).

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 the 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 opportunities for empowerment 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

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on disability entrepreneurship by providing qualitative insights into the lived experiences of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) engaged in entrepreneurial activities in Malaysia. The findings demonstrate that entrepreneurship serves not only as a source of income generation but also as a significant mechanism for empowerment, autonomy, and social inclusion among PWDs. Consistent with previous entrepreneurship and disability studies, the findings suggest that entrepreneurial engagement enables individuals with disabilities to exercise greater control over their professional lives, challenge negative societal perceptions, and enhance their psychological well-being and self-efficacy (Renko et al., 2016; Darcy et al., 2020).

At the same time, the study reveals that disabled entrepreneurs continue to face substantial structural, financial, and social barriers that constrain business sustainability and growth. Limited access to financial resources, insufficient institutional support, inadequate infrastructure for accessibility, and persistent societal stigma remain major obstacles within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. These findings reinforce arguments within disability studies that entrepreneurial challenges experienced by PWDs are not solely individual limitations but are socially and institutionally constructed through unequal systems and exclusionary practices (Mitra, 2018; O'Day & Killeen, 2002).

Importantly, the study highlights the critical role of social support networks in shaping entrepreneurial experiences and outcomes. Emotional encouragement, informational guidance, and instrumental support from family members, peers, community organisations, and institutions were found to strengthen entrepreneurial resilience and empowerment. This supports Social Support Theory, which emphasises that supportive relationships significantly influence coping capacity, motivation, and performance outcomes (House, 1981; Cobb, 1976). The findings therefore suggest that inclusive entrepreneurship policies should extend beyond financial assistance to encompass broader ecosystem support, including mentorship programmes, disability-inclusive training, assistive technologies, and accessible entrepreneurial infrastructure.

From a methodological perspective, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative inquiry in disability entrepreneurship research. By foregrounding participants' voices and lived realities, the research provides nuanced understandings that are often overlooked in quantitatively driven policy discussions. Qualitative approaches are increasingly recognised within entrepreneurship and disability studies for their ability to capture subjective experiences, contextual complexities, and socio-cultural dimensions of empowerment (Leitch et al., 2010; Caldwell, 2014). The findings, therefore, contribute not only to entrepreneurship scholarship but also to inclusive and emancipatory disability research paradigms.

In ensuring research rigor, this study adhered to established principles of trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, and ethical integrity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through careful engagement with participants' narratives, systematic thematic analysis, and reflexive interpretation of the data. Techniques such as prolonged engagement, accurate transcription, and consistent coding procedures enhanced the authenticity and validity of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). Dependability was reinforced through comprehensive documentation of methodological procedures and the maintenance of an audit trail, thereby ensuring transparency and consistency throughout the research process (Wigren, 2007). Ethical integrity was prioritised through informed consent, voluntary participation, protection of confidentiality, and secure data management practices, ensuring respect for participant autonomy and welfare (Orb et al., 2001).

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The small sample size and focus on physically disabled entrepreneurs may limit the transferability of findings to broader disability groups or different socio-economic contexts. Future research should therefore expand the scope of inquiry by involving participants from diverse disability categories, geographical regions, and business sectors. Comparative and longitudinal studies may also provide deeper understanding of how entrepreneurial experiences evolve over time and across varying policy environments.

Additionally, future studies should investigate the effectiveness of specific interventions and support mechanisms aimed at enhancing disability entrepreneurship. Areas such as mentoring programmes, digital entrepreneurship, assistive technology adoption, inclusive financing systems, and disability-responsive policy reforms warrant further scholarly attention. Such investigations would contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies capable of strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems for PWDs and promoting more inclusive socio-economic development.

Overall, this study underscores that entrepreneurship has significant potential to function as a pathway for empowerment and inclusion among Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia. However, achieving sustainable and meaningful entrepreneurial participation requires collaborative efforts among policymakers, educational institutions, financial agencies, community organisations, and society at large. By fostering accessible, inclusive, and supportive entrepreneurial environments, stakeholders can help ensure that PWDs are not merely participants in economic activities but active contributors to national development and social transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia for providing the resources and support necessary to complete this study. We would also like to thank all participants who contributed their time and insights to this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who offered valuable feedback during the development of this manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in the paper.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Author 1 contributed to the conceptualization, research design, and writing of the original draft.

Author 2 was responsible for data collection, analysis, and validation of the results.

Author 3 provided supervision, critical review, and editing of the final manuscript.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia and the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Review Board under reference number EJ265. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and the data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

REFERENCES

- Alsop, R., & Heinsohn, N. (2005). *Measuring empowerment in practice: Structuring analysis and framing indicators*. World Bank.
- Caldwell, K. (2014). Dyadic interviewing: A technique valuing interdependence in interviews with individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Qualitative Research*, 14(4), 488–507. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794113490718>
- Cobb, S. (1976). Social support as a moderator of life stress. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 38(5), 300–314. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00006842-197609000-00003>
- Cooney, T. M. (2008). Entrepreneurs with disabilities: Profile of a forgotten minority. *Irish Business Journal*, 4(1), 119–129.
- Cooney, T. M. (2012). *Entrepreneurship skills for growth-orientated businesses*. Danish Business Authority.

- Darcy, S., Maxwell, H., & Green, J. (2020). Disability entrepreneurship and self-employment: A review of literature and policy implications. *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Public Policy*, 9(3), 299–320. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEPP-D-20-00005>
- Delve. (2006). *How to do thematic analysis*. Delve Research Methods. <https://delvetool.com/blog/thematic-analysis>
- Department of Social Welfare Malaysia. (2021). *Statistics of registered persons with disabilities in Malaysia*. Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.
- Dovetail. (2023). *What is a semi-structured interview?* Dovetail Research Methods. <https://dovetail.com/research/semi-structured-interview/>
- Government of Malaysia. (2008). *Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685)*. Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad.
- House, J. S. (1981). *Work stress and social support*. Addison-Wesley.
- Ismail, R., Ibrahim, N., & Hamid, N. A. (2022). Challenges faced by persons with disabilities in entrepreneurial activities in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(4), 455–468. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i4/12345>
- Kitching, J. (2014). *Entrepreneurship and self-employment by people with disabilities*. OECD Publishing.
- Leitch, C. M., Hill, F. M., & Harrison, R. T. (2010). The philosophy and practice of interpretivist research in entrepreneurship: Quality, validation, and trust. *Organizational Research Methods*, 13(1), 67–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428109339839>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. (2021). *Pelan Tindakan OKU 2016–2022 (PTOKU)*. Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.
- Mitra, S. (2018). *Disability, health and human development*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53638-9>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- O'Day, B., & Killeen, M. (2002). Research on the lives of persons with disabilities: The emerging importance of qualitative research methodologies. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 13(1), 9–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073020130010201>
- OECD. (2023). *Inclusive entrepreneurship policies: Supporting under-represented groups*. OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/smes/inclusive-entrepreneurship.htm>
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33(1), 93–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x>
- Pagán, R. (2009). Self-employment among people with disabilities: Evidence for Europe. *Disability & Society*, 24(2), 217–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590802652504>
- Persons with Disabilities Action Plan (PTOKU). (2016). *Pelan tindakan orang kurang upaya*. Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.
- Powell, G. N., & Eddleston, K. A. (2013). Linking family-to-business enrichment and support to entrepreneurial success: Do female and male entrepreneurs experience different outcomes? *Journal of Business Venturing*, 28(2), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2012.02.007>
- Renko, M., Parker Harris, S., & Caldwell, K. (2016). Entrepreneurial entry by people with disabilities. *International Small Business Journal*, 34(5), 555–578. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242615579112>
- Rosli, N. N. (2021). *Cabaran OKU untuk mendapatkan pekerjaan dan hubungkait dengan majikan*. Trends in Social Inclusion Studies. <https://www.tsis.my/wp-content/uploads/KP-Cabaran-OKU-Untuk-Mendapatkan-Pekerjaan-1.pdf>

- Shakespeare, T. (2014). *Disability rights and wrongs revisited* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315887456>
- Shane, S., & Venkataraman, S. (2000). The promise of entrepreneurship as a field of research. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 217–226. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.2791611>
- Tihic, M. (2019). Disability and entrepreneurship: Barriers and opportunities. *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Public Policy*, 8(2), 197–212. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEPP-04-2018-0021>
- United Nations. (2018). *Disability and development report: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities*. United Nations.
- Waite, R. (2024). *Conquering business: Succeeding in business despite disability*. The Fearless Business Coach.
<https://www.robinwaite.com/blog/conquering-business-succeeding-in-business-despite-handicap>
- Wigren, C. (2007). Assessing the quality of qualitative research in entrepreneurship. In H. Neergaard and J. P. Ulhøi (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research methods in entrepreneurship* (pp. 383–405). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- World Health Organization. (2011). *World report on disability*. WHO Press.
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564182>
- Yamamoto, S. H., & Alverson, C. Y. (2013). Self-employment and income outcomes of individuals with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 39(2), 119–127. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-130650>
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 581–599. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506983>
- ...