



Activity Centres as Hubs of Social Interaction and Community Engagement for the Elderly

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of ageing populations globally necessitates age-friendly urban environments to enhance older adults' well-being. In Malaysia, the proportion of individuals aged 60 and above is projected to reach 15% by 2030. To address this, Taiping was selected as the first pilot project for age-friendly city development, reflecting Malaysia's commitment to the World Health Organization's (WHO) Age-Friendly Cities framework. This study investigates the role of activity centres, clubhouses, mosques, and community halls as hubs for social interaction and community engagement among older adults in Taiping. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews with 12 participants revealed that these centres promote physical, mental, and social well-being through diverse activities such as group exercises, religious gatherings, and cultural events. Findings highlight the critical role of activity centres in fostering social connections, reducing loneliness, and enhancing community support systems. Taiping's initiative aligns with global trends while addressing the unique cultural and demographic context of Southeast Asia. The study highlights the need for policymakers to prioritise funding and integrate activity centres into urban planning strategies. By ensuring accessibility, offering diverse programs, and promoting intergenerational engagement, activity centres can serve as vital components of resilient, age-friendly communities and contribute to achieving sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Activity centre, age-friendly environment, community engagement, elderly, social interaction

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INTRODUCTION

The global rise in ageing populations has raised concerns about how cities can better support older adults. In Malaysia, the proportion of individuals aged 60 and above is projected to reach 15% by 2030,

highlighting the urgent need for age-friendly environments (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2022). The World Health Organization (WHO) promotes age-friendly cities, emphasising the importance of public spaces that enhance the well-being and social engagement of older adults. Activity centres, such as clubhouses, places of worship, and community halls, are integral to this framework, offering spaces for social interaction and combating isolation.

With Malaysia's shifting demographics, developing cities that accommodate older populations have become increasingly important. In 2018, 18.2% of individuals aged 51 and above lived in urban areas, underlining the need for liveable, supportive environments for the elderly (Ministry of Rural Development, 2018). To address this, Malaysia initiated its first age-friendly city pilot project in Taiping, Perak, in 2021. Known for its ageing population, rich history, and urban accessibility, Taiping serves as a model for addressing the specific needs of older adults while aligning with global efforts to create inclusive and supportive urban environments.

This study explores how activity centres, such as clubhouses, mosques and community halls, act as hubs for social connections and community engagement, contributing to the well-being of older adults. These centres play a critical role in promoting social interaction and enhancing the quality of life for Malaysia's ageing population.

SELECTION OF TAIPING

Taiping was selected due to its high percentage of older residents, well-preserved urban infrastructure, and history as one of Malaysia's earliest settlements. These factors make it uniquely positioned to pioneer age-friendly initiatives that emphasize ageing in place. Globally, similar projects have been implemented under the WHO Age-Friendly Cities framework, such as in Sweden, mobile care services have been introduced to address the needs of an ageing population by providing healthcare directly at patients' homes (Teske et al., 2023). Taiping's pilot project not only reflects Malaysia's commitment to these international standards but also offers a culturally specific model for addressing the needs of Southeast Asian ageing populations.

ROLE OF ACTIVITY CENTRES

Activity centres such as clubhouses, mosques, and community halls have become vital spaces for older adults to gather, socialise, and engage in meaningful activities. These centres act as community hubs, offering programmes that cater to various interests and abilities (Hutchinson & Gallant, 2016). They provide opportunities for older adults to take part in physical activities like exercise classes and social events, which help reduce loneliness and enhance mental well-being (Sánchez-Jurado et al., 2021).

Gripko and Joseph (2024), in their study of senior centres in North America, highlight the importance of the built environment in fostering older adults' engagement with their

communities. They argue that well-designed, multi-functional activity centres can improve social interaction by facilitating both formal and informal gatherings. The flexibility of these spaces enables older adults to participate in activities ranging from group exercises to religious events, contributing to their sense of belonging and purpose (Wu et al., 2020).

In Malaysia, places of worship, especially mosques, play a similar role as activity centres for older adults. These spaces not only offer religious services but also serve as social hubs where older adults can join in community events like religious talks and *gotong-royong*. Such participation fosters a sense of community and helps maintain social connections, which is crucial for mental and emotional well-being (Fadzil et al., 2021). Social networks built through these centres can also provide practical support during illness or financial difficulties (Tumin et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The interviews were conducted with 12 older adults aged 60 and above who regularly participated in activities at clubhouses, mosques, or community halls in Taiping. Participants were purposefully selected based on their active engagement with these centres, ensuring they had relevant experiences to share. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in quiet and familiar settings, such as the participants' homes or the activity centres, to ensure comfort and privacy. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about their experiences with the activity centres and their impact on well-being. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the primary researcher, who took steps to build rapport and minimise bias.

Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews were conducted in Malay, the native language of most participants, and were audio-recorded with their consent. Transcriptions were subsequently prepared and securely stored to maintain data integrity. The researcher also took notes during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. These measures ensured a rigorous and culturally sensitive data collection process, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, clubhouses play an important role in fostering social interaction and physical well-being among older adults. For instance, Elderly 9 shared how he participates in group exercise sessions, which help him maintain physical fitness and manage chronic joint pain. His wife, on the other hand, engages in social games like mahjong, which she described as 'a fun way to connect with friends and stay mentally sharp.' Such clubhouses offer multi-purpose spaces where older adults participate in both physical and social activities,

promoting their overall well-being. These findings align with research highlighting how community-based physical activities can boost health and reduce loneliness in ageing populations (Suragarn et al., 2021).

The mosque serves as another critical activity centre where older adults engage in religious and social activities. These include daily prayers, religious talks, and gotong-royong (communal work), which Elderly 3 and Elderly 12 noted as ‘a meaningful way to stay spiritually grounded while building friendships.’ Such activities not only promote spiritual well-being but also provide a sense of purpose and social connectedness, which are important for mental health. According to Elderly 4, regular participation in mosque activities ensures that older adults are known and supported by the community, which reinforces social cohesion. This supports studies that emphasise how social participation, especially in religious settings, contributes to the well-being of older adults (Löfgren et al., 2021).

Community halls provide additional venues for social interaction, particularly through events like weddings and funerals. As mentioned by Elderly 4, it is a ‘joyful moment to reconnect with distant relatives.’ These informal settings create a conducive environment for socialisation, helping older people manage feelings of loneliness. The flexible nature of community halls, which can host various events, underscores their importance in promoting social interaction. Social gatherings like these have been shown to significantly impact life satisfaction and mental well-being among older adults (Park & Kang, 2023).

The findings of this study emphasize the important role of activity centres in fostering social and community engagement among older adults. Taiping’s initiative reflects broader global trends in age-friendly city development. For instance, while Singapore focuses on social inclusion through intergenerational programs (Moogoor et al., 2022), Taiping emphasizes cultural and religious engagement as core components of its model. Such context-specific approaches highlight the importance of tailoring age-friendly strategies to the unique demographic and cultural profiles of each city. Lessons from Taiping can inform similar initiatives in other developing nations seeking to address the challenges of an ageing population.

CONCLUSION

Taiping’s selection as Malaysia’s first age-friendly pilot project highlights its strategic role in promoting inclusive urban environments for older adults. The initiative aligns with global efforts under the WHO framework and offers valuable insights for addressing ageing-related challenges in developing countries. By tailoring programs to the unique cultural and demographic context of Taiping, Malaysia, demonstrates how local solutions can contribute to achieving global SDGs, particularly those focused on health, well-being, and sustainable urban development.

These findings highlight the need for policymakers to prioritise funding for activity centres as a key component of national strategies for healthy and engaged ageing. Practical measures, such as ensuring accessibility, designing multi-functional spaces, and locating centres near residential areas or public transport hubs, can significantly enhance their impact. Furthermore, incorporating diverse and inclusive programming, including intergenerational activities, can foster stronger community bonds and social integration. By integrating activity centres into urban planning initiatives and community development programs, policymakers and urban planners can create environments that not only address the needs of older adults but also build resilient, age-friendly communities.

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