JOURNAL OF TOURISM, HOSPITALITY AND ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT (JTHEM)

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN EQUESTRIAN TOURISM PLANNING: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIA

Nur Jannah Mohd Esa[1*], Hairul Nizam Ismail[2]

[1] Faculty of Built Environment and Surveying, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia
     Email: nur.jannah@graduate.utm.my
[2] Faculty of Built Environment and Surveying, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia
     Email: b-hairul@utm.my
*   Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Abstract:

Equestrian tourism is rapidly growing, attracting both local and international enthusiasts while supporting cultural preservation and outdoor recreation. However, challenges remain in operator coordination, stakeholder collaboration, and resource allocation. This study aims to explore various planning approaches in equestrian tourism. The research was conducted across equestrian centres and parks in Malaysia, with semi-structured interviews involving 22 key informants. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo, which successfully identified patterns and uncovered meaningful insights. Findings highlight the crucial role of various stakeholders, including equestrian operators, equestrian associations, and tourism agencies, in promoting equestrian tourism. Therefore, the findings of this study provide the latest knowledge regarding equestrian tourism, and the stakeholders can utilize these findings to enhance the tourism activity portfolio based on the identified variables.

Keywords:

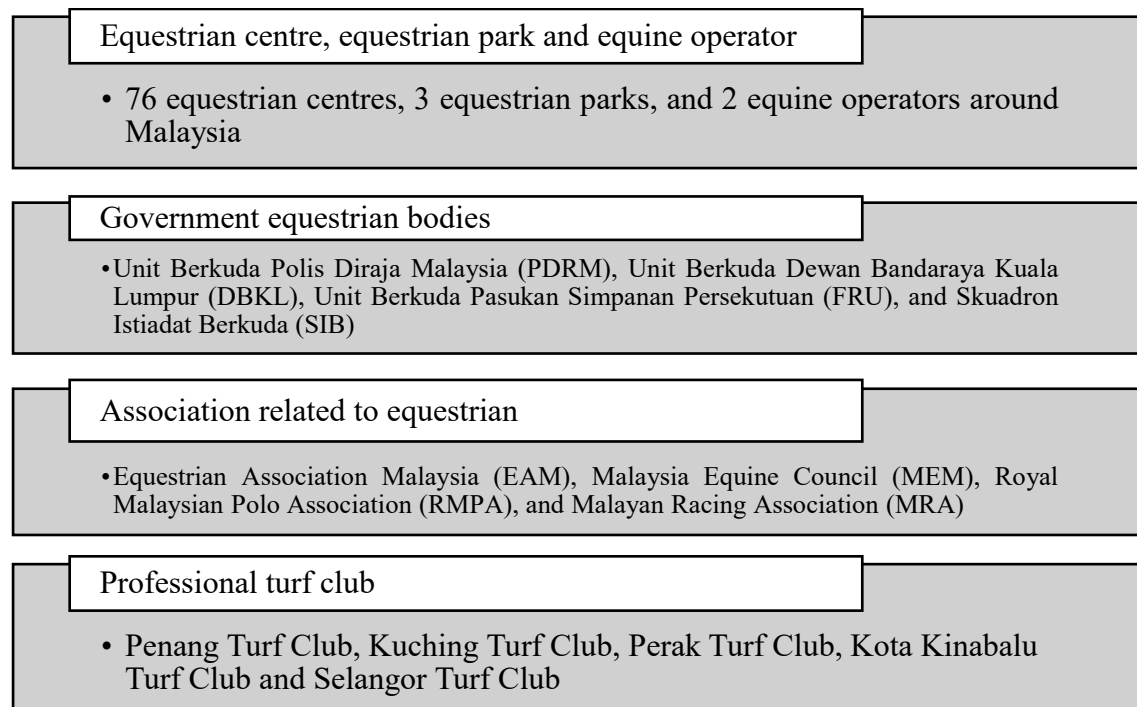Equestrian Tourism, Equestrian Centre, Tourism Planning, Stakeholder Involvement, Funding Allocation

Introduction

Equestrian tourism is a global industry that relies on the involvement of various stakeholders, including equestrian operators, to ensure sustainable development and a unique, engaging, safe, and sustainable experience (Dashper et al., 2021). The quality of equestrian tourism products

is influenced by the uniqueness and authenticity of the experience, which includes learning about horse management (Palmquist et al., 2024), participating in local traditions (Kedebe, 2020), and exploring natural landscapes on horseback (Tolls & Carr, 2020). The involvement of stakeholders in the development of equestrian tourism is crucial, as each offers distinct viewpoints and expertise to create a comprehensive and satisfying experience for tourists (Sigurðardóttir & Steinthórsson, 2018; Williams & Marlin, 2020). This shows that previous studies have emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts among a diverse range of stakeholders, such as tourism authorities, local communities, equestrian associations, and private operators, in ensuring the success and long-term sustainability of equestrian tourism initiatives. These collaborative partnerships are vital in enhancing the overall quality of the tourism experience, promoting cultural and environmental responsibility, and fostering inclusive decision-making processes that benefit all parties involved.

Malaysia's equine industry, which primarily revolves around equestrian sports, breeding, and tourism, has experienced notable growth in recent years. Figure 1 illustrates the status of the equestrian industry in Malaysia up to 2024, while data from 87 locations nationwide indicate a strong and sustained demand for equestrian programs, as shown in Figure 2. This reflects an increasing interest in both recreational and competitive equestrian activities. This steady expansion of these programs highlights a continued commitment to the industry's development, education, and overall advancement in the equestrian sector. Despite the progress made, there remains substantial potential for further development within Malaysia's equestrian industry.
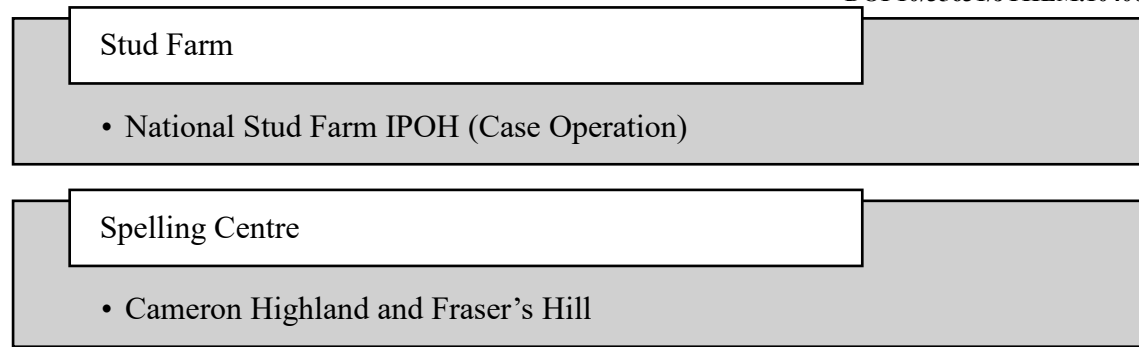
Equestrian centre, equestrian park and equine operator

- 76 equestrian centres, 3 equestrian parks, and 2 equine operators around Malaysia

Government equestrian bodies

- Unit Berkuda Polis Diraja Malaysia (PDRM), Unit Berkuda Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL), Unit Berkuda Pasukan Simpanan Persekutuan (FRU), and Skuadron Istiadat Berkuda (SIB)

Association related to equestrian

- Equestrian Association Malaysia (EAM), Malaysia Equine Council (MEM), Royal Malaysian Polo Association (RMPA), and Malayan Racing Association (MRA)

Professional turf club

- Penang Turf Club, Kuching Turf Club, Perak Turf Club, Kota Kinabalu Turf Club and Selangor Turf Club

Stud Farm

• National Stud Farm IPOH (Case Operation)

Spelling Centre

• Cameron Highland and Fraser's Hill

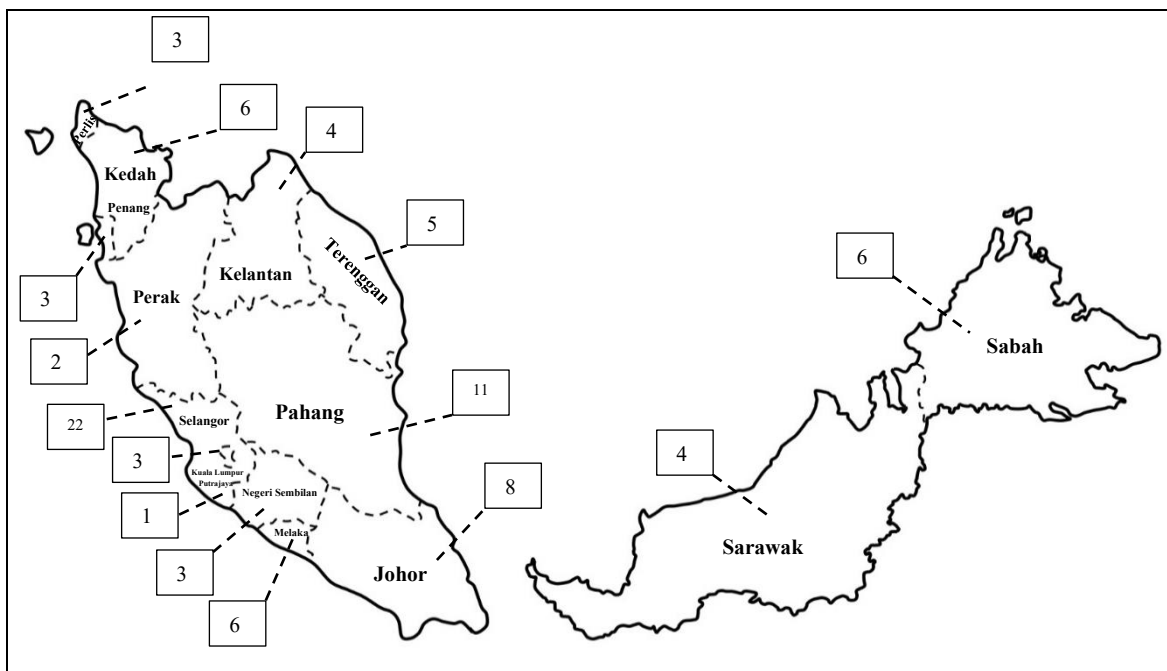**Figure 1: Equestrian Industry in Malaysia**

Figure 2: Location of Equestrian Places in Malaysia

Although the equestrian industry is growing in Malaysia, the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement practices in Malaysia is still lacking. Limited dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders have resulted in low levels of understanding, trust, and cooperation, which are elements that should be consistently maintained in the development and sustainability of tourism products (León-Gómez et al., 2021). As a result, decision-making processes are influenced by a narrow range of perspectives and feedback from various channels, potentially leading to conflicts within the equestrian tourism industry. However, the success of equestrian tourism relies on effective communication among stakeholders to align tourism objectives with tourist interests (Dashper et al., 2021). Strong cooperation among stakeholders will play a crucial role in advancing equestrian tourism from Malaysia's perspective.

This study contributes to planning approaches that can be handled by various stakeholders. It will support the government and local authorities in identifying ideal locations for equestrian tourism and improving regulations to boost its growth. Currently, ineffective development has hindered its expansion, resulting in low demand from both local and international tourists. This study provides primary data for policymakers to enhance public equestrian facilities, attract

more visitors, and integrate equestrian tourism as a key tourism product. Moreover, it can guide feasibility studies, awareness campaigns, and educational programs while encouraging subsidies for industries with high tourism potential. The long-term impact of this research will enable the government and local authorities to understand the current situation of the equestrian tourism industry and identify key areas for improvement, policy development, and strategic planning.

Literature Review

Helgadóttir & Sigurðardóttir (2018) highlighted that stakeholder engagement in equestrian tourism offers significant benefits, particularly in promoting sustainable development and economic growth. Thus, it makes a significant contribution to planning the best experience in the equestrian tourism industry at any place. Moreover, Sigurðardóttir & Steinthorsson (2018) supported this by emphasizing that collaboration among local communities, government agencies, tourism operators, and non-profit organizations can create a strong foundation for equestrian tourism. Such cooperation helps establish safe, well-maintained trails, advocates for responsible tourism, and preserves cultural traditions associated with horseback riding (Tolls & Carr, 2020). These findings have been acknowledged by more recent studies, which continue to stress the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships in addressing contemporary challenges such as environmental conservation, community empowerment, and the diversification of rural economies through equestrian tourism (Rezapouraghdam H. et al., 2024). Additionally, local communities can benefit from tourism's economic impact, such as job creation and increased business for local vendors, while also ensuring the conservation of historical and cultural practices.

However, negative perceptions often arise due to conflicting interests and a lack of collaboration. Devereux & Davis (2017) noted that disputes among landowners, tourism operators, and residents can hinder equestrian tourism development, particularly regarding land use, trail access, and environmental impacts. Furthermore, Williams & Marlin (2020) pointed out that some stakeholders prioritize economic gains over sustainability and animal welfare, leading to ethical concerns about equine treatment and environmental harm. Both studies have shown that without effective communication and aligned interests among stakeholders, the development of equestrian tourism can be limited, leading to disjointed efforts, a lack of support, and negative impacts on the industry's image and sustainability. These challenges highlight the need for inclusive and transparent decision-making processes to balance interests and ensure the benefits of equestrian tourism for all stakeholders. Consequently, research in equestrian tourism increasingly focuses on understanding the relationship between stakeholder involvement and horseback riding activities.

Therefore, collaboration among stakeholders through activities such as organizing events, competitions, and exhibitions can generate positive economic impacts by attracting more tourists and supporting regional development (Paula & Dasha, 2020). Public authorities also play a key role in ensuring that tourism infrastructure complies with safety and quality standards, primarily through the implementation of regulatory frameworks and financial management systems (Helgadóttir & Sigurðardóttir, 2020). Research conducted in Otago, New Zealand, highlights the contributions of stakeholders such as local authorities and landowners in developing equestrian trails and providing access to necessary facilities (Tolls & Carr, 2020). Similarly, a study in Córdoba by Gallardo and Hernandez (2024) emphasizes the importance of stakeholder involvement in enhancing visitor experiences and promoting the sustainability

of equestrian events. Globally, the continued success of equestrian activities is regularly supported by the active involvement of specific stakeholder groups. In many countries, stakeholders participate in riding programs, educational and training initiatives, event management, and the promotion of horse welfare.

Methodology

This study utilized qualitative methods with an interview-based approach, which proved highly effective in identifying key characteristics aligned with the research objectives (King et al., 2018). The interview method is particularly valuable when direct observation of participants is not feasible, as it allows them to share historical insights and enables researchers to maintain control over the questioning process (Creswell & Báez, 2020). To ensure no information was missed during the analysis process and to facilitate the interview session, voice recording and note-taking methods were used. Both methods enhance data reliability and ensure no data is missed during the information collection session. During the interview session, several questions need to be modified to reflect the informants' experiences and knowledge.

Semi-structured, in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with 22 key informants from various organizational backgrounds within the equestrian tourism sector. The participants included nine managers, seven owners and founders of equestrian operators, three equestrian coaches, and representatives from a council, a non-profit organization, and a tourism agency. The interviews took place over six months, from February to August 2024, with delays due to last-minute scheduling changes based on informant availability. Despite this, all primary informants were successfully interviewed. Each participant provided written and verbal consent, and most interviews lasted over 30 minutes, except for four informants whose shorter sessions were due to concise responses and limited experience in equestrian tourism. The remaining 18 informants provided valuable insights through detailed explanations and extensive experience. Overall, full cooperation from informants enhanced the quality of data collected for the study.

The analysis for this study was conducted using thematic methods, which were considered the most suitable approach. Thematic analysis was chosen primarily for its accessibility and flexibility, allowing for the systematic coding and interpretation of qualitative data while connecting findings to broader theoretical or conceptual frameworks. It is important to note that thematic analysis serves solely as a method of data analysis rather than a qualitative research approach (Virginia & Victoria, 2021). According to Braun and Clarke (2021), the process involves six key stages, refined from their earlier 2012 framework: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and compiling the final report.

In addition, NVivo software was utilized in this research for coding and developing study themes. It proved to be a faster and more efficient tool for coding, theme construction, and retrieving respondent excerpts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The NVivo process began with transcribing qualitative data for accuracy and consistency. A new project was then created, and transcribed files were uploaded for structured organization. Key themes and concepts were categorized through systematic coding, capturing patterns and relationships. A matrix analysis helped identify connections between themes, while visualization tools like project maps provided a clear representation of the findings.

Findings

Effective policies play a crucial role in fostering stakeholder collaboration and ensuring that all parties work toward shared objectives. In the context of equestrian tourism, industry operators often rely on government bodies or equestrian associations to initiate and implement improvements that enhance the sector's viability and attractiveness. These policies help set clear guidelines for development, ensure compliance with safety and environmental standards, and create opportunities for financial support and incentives. One of the equestrian centre's managers revealed,

> *"Being under Putrajaya's jurisdiction means we face strict regulations when developing the equestrian park. The approval process involves extensive paperwork and planning, which slows down even basic upgrades. While compliance is important, streamlining these procedures would help us improve the park more efficiently."* (Informant 5)

Insights from these interviews with industry professionals reveal a consistent call for targeted programs and strategic interventions to address sector-specific challenges. Meanwhile, one of the equestrian operators highlighted,

> *"The procedure has changed, and it's now harder to apply for financial support, especially from tourism-related sources. We've had to rely on other channels instead. I hope the government can ease the process and provide funding for those promoting equestrian tourism to international visitors. There's real potential for returns if that's what they're looking for."* (Informant 15)

This shows that comprehensive support from the government is necessary to address the needs of the equestrian tourism industry. Therefore, the interview with the equestrian council suggested that a dedicated equestrian tourism body should be established to oversee the development, regulation, and promotion of equestrian tourism activities. The equestrian council revealed,

> *"There needs to be a dedicated body to oversee equestrian tourism in Malaysia, as the industry operates at an international level and is recognized by global federations. Unfortunately, such a structure does not currently exist in Malaysia. Despite the country's strong potential, particularly in Sabah, Sarawak, Pulau Pinang, Terengganu, and Kelantan, equestrian tourism remains unorganized. While activities like beach rides are available, they lack coordination and formal promotion under a unified national framework."* (Informant 9)

This body would help coordinate stakeholders, standardize practices, and ensure strategic growth of the sector both locally and internationally. These findings highlight the importance of policy frameworks that are responsive, inclusive, and aligned with the unique needs of the equestrian tourism sector. Besides that, many equestrian operators currently running trail ride activities face significant challenges in expanding land use to improve trail accessibility. Land use issue often stems from complex regulations and lengthy approval processes, which hinder their ability to develop new routes and provide more diverse experiences for tourists. One of the equestrian operators revealed,

"It would be beneficial if the city council could provide easier land access for us. This would allow us to travel seamlessly between different locations and explore various regional areas. By helping to connect these areas with well-maintained and accessible routes, the city council could significantly enhance equestrian tourism. Such improvements would attract enthusiasts and tourists seeking adventure and outdoor experiences." (Informant 11)

The city council, as a key stakeholder, plays an essential role in addressing these challenges. Their involvement is critical in creating a supportive environment where operators can thrive. Taking the findings from Desaru, it was able to revealed by the equestrian operator,

"The land is designated for tourism, but expanding or developing it is challenging. We hope to purchase it from the local council, as it offers great potential for development. The Desaru land is in a prime location, but since the local council owns it, the process is complicated. Owning or securing long-term lease rights would allow us to invest in more facilities, boosting tourism and benefiting both the community and visitors." (Informant 13)

This shows that equestrian operators require strategic land to carry out their activities and need the city council's support in terms of facilitating land access, streamlining approval processes, and offering long-term leasing or ownership options to enable further development and investment. In addition, one of the tourism agencies mentioned that supporting these activities requires a strong proposal that outlines clear objectives, potential benefits, and a well-structured plan for development and sustainability. The tourism agency revealed,

"To support various tourism segments, including equestrian tourism, a feasibility study should be conducted to assess whether the government should invest in or develop these sectors. For instance, an active equine park in Malaysia must be marketable and either include a professional breeding centre or source horses from abroad. A feasibility report would help the government evaluate the potential for investment in these areas." (Informant 20)

The suggestion from the tourism agency regarding a feasibility report highlights the importance of conducting a thorough assessment to determine the viability and potential of equestrian tourism. It emphasizes the need for detailed analysis to guide government decisions on whether to invest in or develop these tourism segments. However, some equestrian operators argue that the documentation they prepare often goes unused and rendering their efforts ineffective. One of the equestrian operators highlighted,

"We have made numerous attempts to approach the ministry for funding, providing all the necessary documentation and following proper procedures. However, despite our efforts, we were unable to secure the funding, primarily because our tourism product has not gained the same level of popularity or attention as other, more mainstream offerings." (Informant 6)

This shows that tourism products lacking hype and popularity face difficulties in securing funding and support. However, the tourism agency strongly urges the need for a detailed feasibility report, as this would enable them to present a comprehensive case to higher-level management. With this report, they can facilitate a more in-depth discussion and evaluation, allowing decision-makers to better understand the potential benefits, risks, and overall viability of investing in or developing the equestrian tourism sector. The tourism agency urged that,

"Bring us a solid feasibility report, and we can explore the possibilities of making it happen. The key data we need to present to the ministry includes statistics such as the number of tourists visiting the center, the income generated, and feedback from the visitors. It's also important to include spending patterns in our approach, as presenting clear and compelling statistics would strengthen our case. Sharing this data with the ministry can help secure funding, providing tangible evidence of the value and potential of our efforts. A data-driven approach will demonstrate the importance of supporting these projects, aligning with the ministry's goal of boosting tourism revenue."
(Informant 20)

This shows that there are still opportunities for all equestrian operators to apply for future funding, especially if they present strong, data-driven feasibility reports that highlight the potential and value of their projects. The tourism agency not only provides a pathway for funding but also encourages all equestrian operators to collaborate to elevate the industry as a whole. By working together, operators can strengthen their collective efforts, share resources, and present a unified front, which would increase the chances of securing funding and fostering sustainable growth for equestrian tourism.

Discussion
The results demonstrate that equestrian tourism requires its dedicated policy framework, one that is developed through active collaboration among all stakeholders, including government bodies, equestrian operators, associations, and councils. Such a framework would not only address the unique challenges faced by the sector but also provide clear guidelines for its growth and sustainability. Similarly with the study by Pavić et al. (2019), the government plays a crucial role in tourism development, particularly through policy-making, which has a high impact on shaping the sector's growth and sustainability. Equestrian operators in Malaysia should actively collaborate to gain the government's attention and work collectively towards developing a comprehensive framework that addresses the unique needs of the equestrian tourism industry. This framework should encompass clear policies for sustainable growth, infrastructure development, safety standards, and marketing strategies.

Besides the urgent need for a policy framework, land use for trail accessibility should be carefully planned and streamlined to ensure that equestrian operators have clear, reliable access to suitable areas for trail development. Douglas et al. (2022) highlight that government support can be crucial in facilitating the development of equestrian tourism, particularly through the approval of land use for trail accessibility. The current city council, as revealed by several equestrian operators, shows that there is less attention given to the needs of the equestrian tourism sector, particularly in terms of land use approvals and support for infrastructure development. This lack of focus hinders the growth and potential of the industry, preventing operators from fully developing their offerings and attracting more tourists. This issue should be addressed through a policy developed by the ministry, which would provide clear guidelines and support for equestrian tourism.

In addition, the suggestion from the tourism agency regarding the feasibility study provides valuable new insights for practitioners, offering a structured approach to present comprehensive proposals to the ministry. According to Williams and Marlin (2020), operators should develop a comprehensive approach when preparing their proposals for investors and stakeholders. Tourism agencies urge that by preparing and sending a feasibility study, operators can gather essential data and clearly outline the potential benefits, risks, and growth

opportunities of their projects. This approach is seen not only to enhance the quality of proposals but also to increase the likelihood of the ministry's acceptance and support, ensuring that equestrian tourism initiatives are backed by solid evidence and a clear roadmap for success.

Conclusion

This study highlights the crucial role of stakeholder involvement in the equestrian tourism industry. The findings offer new practical knowledge in effectively expanding the growth of equestrian tourism at a national level. Additionally, the study provides valuable insights into how collaborative strategies can drive the growth and effectiveness of equestrian tourism. By identifying the significant approach by stakeholders, this research expands stakeholder roles to incorporate industry-specific elements vital for equestrian tourism growth. Researchers urge all stakeholders in the equestrian industry to collaborate and actively participate in the development of equestrian tourism in Malaysia, so that it can evolve into a prominent form of special interest tourism that not only attracts domestic and international visitors but also contributes to cultural preservation, economic diversification, and sustainable tourism development. By working together, stakeholders can help position Malaysia as a unique and competitive equestrian tourism destination in the global market.

In addition, this study effectively identifies key issues and challenges affecting the success of equestrian tourism in Malaysia. The government's limited proactive measures in addressing these challenges and facilitating industry growth have contributed to uncertainty within the equestrian sector. The study also highlights that active stakeholder involvement is crucial for the success of Malaysia's tourism industry, a principle that can be applied to equestrian tourism. Therefore, the development of a strategic framework is expected to help stakeholders design more effective programs and enhance collaboration among all parties. According to Sigurðardóttir and Steinthorsson (2018), stakeholder involvement has played a key role in transforming the equestrian industry into a prominent tourism product. All relevant parties must capitalize on this opportunity to develop equestrian tourism destinations across every state in Malaysia.

Acknowledgement

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide.* Sage.

Creswell, J., & Báez, J. (2020). *30 Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher.* SAGE.

Creswell, J., & Creswell, J. (2023). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sixth ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.

Dashper, K., Helgadóttir, G., & Sigurðardóttir, I. (2021). Conclusion: planning, managing and experiencing equestrian events. In *Humans, horses and event management* (pp. 198 - 212).

Devereux, J., & Davis, T. (2017). The economic impact of equestrian tourism in Ireland: A case study of Ballyhoura Country. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 6*(4), 342-350.

Douglas , J., Owers, R., & Campbell, M. (2022). Social Licence to Operate: What Can Equestrian Sports Learn from Other Industries? *Animals, 12*(15).

Gallardo, J. A., & Hernandez, R. (2024). Impact of touristic sustainability on satisfaction with touristic services in a world heritage city. The case of the equestrian show in Cordoba (Spain). *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*.

Helgadóttir, G., & Sigurðardóttir, I. (2020). Intangible heritage of Icelandic equestrianism: the experience of domestic horse tourists. *Mondes du Tourisme, 18*.

Kedebe, A. (2020). Horse culture & tourism development: Towards initiating horse tourism in Awi Zone, Northwestern Ethiopia. *Cogent Social Sciences*.

King, N., Horrocks, C., & Brooks, J. (2018). *Interviews in Qualitative Research* (Second Edition ed.). SAGE.

León-Gómez, A., Ruiz-Palomo, D., Fernández-Gámez, M., & García-Revilla, M. (2021). Sustainable Tourism Development and Economic Growth: Bibliometric Review and Analysis. *Sustainability, 13*(4), 2270.

Palmquist, G. T., Alveheim, N. K., Huot-Marchand, F., Ashton, L., & Lewis, V. (2024). The Role of European Equestrian Institutions in Training Professionals: Outcomes from a Workshop on Horse Welfare in Equestrian Education. *Animals, 15*, 183.

Paula, D., & Dasha, G. (2020). Human–equine tourism and nature-based solutions: exploring psychological well-being through transformational experiences. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research, 46*(3).

Pavić, L., Blešić , I., Petrović, M., Petrović, M., Radovanović, M., & Prišenk, J. (2019).). Can the Quality of Hospitality Services Play a Role in Sustainable Equestrian Tourism in Slovenia? Mediations, Effects and Implications. *Sustainability, 11*(21).

Rezapouraghdam, H., Saydam, M. B., Altun, O., Roudi, S., & Nosrati, S. (2024). A contemporary systematic literature review of equestrian tourism: emerging advancements and future insights. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights, 8*(2), 472 - 492.

Sigurðardóttir, I., & Steinthórsson, R. (2018). Development of micro-clusters in tourism: a case of equestrian tourism in northwest Iceland. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism, 18*(1), 261 - 277.

Tolls, C., & Carr, N. (2020). The role of nature on horse trail rides: tourist experience expectations. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 1257 - 1269.

Virginia, B., & Victoria, C. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide.* SAGE.

Williams, J., & Marlin, D. (2020). Foreword – Emerging issues in equestrian practice. *Comparative Exercise Physiology, 16*(1), 1-4