

NAVIGATING HERITAGE: THE DYNAMIC ROLES OF TOUR GUIDES IN KUALA LUMPUR'S HERITAGE WALKING TOURS

Siti Zubaidah Mat TAHIR* 

Universiti Utara Malaysia, School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia;
Studies of Parks and Amenity Management, College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam,
Selangor, Malaysia, e-mail: ctzubaidah@uim.edu.my

Hamimi OMAR 

Universiti Utara Malaysia, School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia,
e-mail: hamimi@uum.edu.my

Norhanim Abdul RAZAK 

Universiti Utara Malaysia, School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia,
e-mail: norhanim@uum.edu.my

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Abstract: Heritage walking tours have gained popularity as tourism offerings, signifying a growing demand for authentic and experiential experiences. The success of these tours depends not only on the historical importance of the sites visited, but also on the tour guides' competence and skills in facilitating the experience. Despite their crucial role in the tourism industry, tour guides often lack recognition in many tourism plans and initiatives. This study explored tour guides' perceptions of their roles in heritage walking tours in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Data were collected from 11 certified tour guides through in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was then performed and revealed four primary themes - an image maker, a cultural interpreter, a tour coordinator, and an influencer. As image makers, tour guides shape visitors' perceptions on the image formation of Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia as a tourism destination. In their capacity as cultural interpreters, guides facilitate deeper understanding of the cultural and historical contexts of the sites. The third role, tour coordinator, revolves around managing and monitoring group dynamics to ensure the tour proceeds smoothly within the allocated time and location. The final role, influencer, emphasises the guides' commitment to imparting their knowledge and experiences to junior guides, particularly by senior guides with over ten years of experience. While the first three roles focus on the mediation functions between the guide, visitors, and the destination, the influencer role highlights the importance of guide-to-guide interaction as an emerging component of the tour guide role structure. Senior guides serve as role models, helping to improve the skills, and competency of their fellow and junior guides in conducting heritage walking tours. These findings highlight the multifaceted roles of tour guides, demonstrating that their tasks extend beyond facilitating visitor experiences to include fostering a collaborative and knowledgeable community of guides. The implications for tour guide associations and training institutes suggest the need for tailored training modules that address these diverse roles and support the ongoing professional development of guides in this rapidly evolving industry.

Keywords: heritage tourism, tour guide role, heritage walking tour, visitor experience, Kuala Lumpur

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INTRODUCTION

Heritage and cultural tourism is deemed one of the biggest and most significant segments of the global tourism industry. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) report, international tourism in the first quarter of 2023 reached 80% of its pre-pandemic levels, attracting approximately 235 million visitors worldwide during this period. This impressive growth of more than double the figure recorded during the corresponding period of 2022 marks a significant recovery in the tourism industry, including heritage and cultural tourism.

The increasing number of tourists visiting heritage sites is often driven by a desire to immerse themselves in the local culture and history of their destinations (Timothy, 2017). Fuelled by curiosity and a passion for authentic engagement, these tourists increasingly pursue meaningful experiences that extend beyond ordinary sightseeing (Poria et al., 2009).

For many, visiting historical landmarks, museums, and cultural sites provides a more profound and engaging travel experience than traditional leisure tourism. This quest for knowledge and understanding has driven the growing demand for tours that provide in-depth historical and cultural context of a specific destination. Capitalising on this trend, heritage walking tours have garnered significant attention in several cities worldwide as a prominent offering within the heritage and cultural tourism sector (Barber, 2018; Saiyed et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2020).

* Corresponding author

Led by knowledgeable tour guides, these tours integrate historical narratives with visits to culturally significant sites. Tour guides act as cultural interpreters offering narratives to bridge the past and the present (Kalyoncu & Yüksek, 2020; Weber, 2018), mediating social interactions within the group and between various destination hosts (Weiler & Yu, 2007) and eventually creating more sustainable tourism that benefits both host communities and visitors (Francis et al., 2019; Weiler & Kim, 2011). This personalised approach allows tourists to connect with a place on a more emotional level, fostering a richer understanding and appreciation for the destination's unique heritage and culture (Chauhan & Anand, 2023; Gao et al., 2020). Owing to their communicative ability, tour guides are viewed as ambassadors who present positive information and images of the destination to tourists (Látková et al., 2018; Pereira, 2015). Another essential aspect of guides is to foster empathy or emotional access by way of explaining cultural heritage sites, especially those related to contested and challenging histories (Quinn & Ryan, 2015; Voshage & Gamerith, 2024). In this respect, the increasing interest in heritage walking tours reflects a broader trend towards experiential travel, where tourists seek to engage deeply with local culture and history, thus making the role of tour guides essential in these tours.

In the context of Kuala Lumpur, the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (KLCH) has taken proactive measures to preserve cultural heritage resources as part of the city's tourism plans. For instance, a project aimed to narrate the story of Kuala Lumpur to the public by enhancing city walks within the Kuala Lumpur Heritage Zone was launched under the Kuala Lumpur City Plan 2020 (KLCP2020) to attract international tourists (Kuala Lumpur City Hall, 2018). This initiative is consistently emphasised in the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2040 (KLSP2040), specifically focusing on promoting the implementation of the Kuala Lumpur Heritage Trail (Kuala Lumpur City Hall, 2023). However, this strategic framework lacks the recognition and integration of the roles of tour guides despite their significant contributions to heritage tourism. Instead, the initiative prioritises the provision of self-guided trails accompanied only by information panels and markers to guide tourists.

Although the demand for tour guides exists in Malaysia (Mustafa et al., 2021), their roles within the context of heritage walking tours remain limited and unclear. Previous studies on tour guides in the local context have primarily focused on their communication competency (Mohamed Rosli et al., 2013; Tan et al., 2011), the use of humour in cross-cultural communication (Abdul Rashid et al., 2017), service performance quality (Syakier & Hanafiah, 2021), and issues related to their profession (Mustafa et al., 2021). The growing popularity of heritage and cultural tourism, marked by a broader shift in tourist preferences towards culturally enriching and historically significant experiences, highlights the pivotal role of tour guides within the tourism industry. Given Kuala Lumpur's wealthy multicultural background, it is hypothesised that direct interaction between tourists and tour guides is essential for effectively conveying the city's diverse historical and cultural narratives. Considering this critical aspect, this study explores the dynamic roles of tour guides in Kuala Lumpur's heritage walking tours through an in-depth qualitative analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The crucial roles of tour guides in shaping the tourist experience have long been recognised in the tourism industry. Historically, Holloway (1981) suggested that a tour guide effectively performs as an 'information giver' and a 'mediator' responsible for giving visitors meaningful information. Later, Cohen (1985) identified the traditional roles of guides as the 'pathfinder' and 'mentor.' The pathfinder guides visitors through unfamiliar environments, while the mentor's main role is to enlighten them about their destination. Subsequently, Weiler & Black (2015) advocate that tour guides serve as experience mediators by facilitating physical access, interactions, understanding, and empathy. This progression highlights the dynamic evolution of the tour guide's role in adapting to evolving tourist expectations and industry trends.

Within the context of heritage walking tours, various roles of tour guides in facilitating favourable tourist experiences have been adequately discussed with a focus on the roles of educators and interpreters (Chauhan & Anand, 2023; de Guzman et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2020; Weng et al., 2020). Both roles underscore the duty of guides in communicating the history, culture, and significance of heritage sites to tourists. However, de Guzman et al. (2019) and Chauhan & Anand (2023) emphasize a more inclusive and co-creative approach to recreational learning during the tours. In contrast, Weng et al. (2020) and Gao et al. (2020) concentrate on the transmission of historical information, highlighting the customary interpretive function of tour guides. This difference reflects that tourists' expectations vary, making it essential to prioritize a balance between education and engagement for meaningful experiences.

The dual role of tour guides as educators and entertainers has been consistently highlighted in previous studies where they are tasked to fulfil their educational roles and at the same time entertain tourists and facilitate an enjoyable walking tour environment (Hansen & Mossberg, 2017; Kalyoncu & Yüksek, 2020; Zhu & Xu, 2021). As seen in the works by Zhu & Xu (2021), the local Chinese tour guides skilfully switched between roles, such as a Chinese sibling, a local expert, and a cultural interpreter, while subtly concealing their concurrent role as shopping promoters during interactions with Chinese outbound tourists. This approach was utilised to balance their educational responsibilities and the need for entertainment for positive impressions during the tour. In another study, Hansen & Mossberg (2017) asserted the significant role of tour guides in maintaining careful coordination between their basic role and the 'guide plus' role.

This includes serving as a storyteller, social mediator, and instructor. This can be accomplished by integrating humour, local legends, and personal stories into their storytelling, allowing tourists to connect with the destination on a more profound emotional level (Quinn & Ryan, 2015). These studies demonstrate that individual guides must skilfully perform multiple roles within a single tour to complement the tour environment and provide high-quality experiences. Recent studies indicate that the role of a tour guide as an agent of social change is increasingly significant on tours addressing contested histories or politically sensitive subjects. For instance, guides on postcolonial city walks perform

an activist role by deconstructing official city narratives to raise awareness about the impacts of colonialism (Voshage & Gamerith, 2024) while simultaneously accommodating tourists who may favour lighter or more leisurely tour (Schlegel & Pfoser, 2023). Both studies underscore the adaptability of tour guides in customising narratives to satisfy the audience. Nevertheless, the challenge lies in balancing their roles as entertainers with the necessity of delivering educational content that may evoke discomfort or ideological contention. Additionally, tour guides are also seen as sustainability advocates by promoting awareness of local heritage and its preservation (Güzel et al., 2020), as well as supporting local economies (Kalyoncu & Yüksek, 2020). In this capacity, they adopt roles that not only inform but also shape tourists' attitudes toward conservation and sustainable travel behaviours (Rugkhapan, 2023).

The roles of tour guides extend beyond shaping visitors' experiences. They serve several responsibilities towards other tourism stakeholders. For instance, past studies revealed that tour guides function as agents to implement government policies aimed at creating a favourable destination image (Dahles, 2002; Látková et al., 2018). To avoid any misconduct and maintain professionalism, tour guides must comply with the code of ethics issued by tour guide associations or tourism authorities (Mak et al., 2011), as well as adhere to the destination's regulations to support sustainability goals (Francis et al., 2019). Tour guides may, in specific instances, act as representatives of local communities, conveying their historical narratives and social values to tourists (Jensen, 2010). Additionally, Mak et al. (2011) reported that tour guides employed by tour operators are anticipated to perform a marketing role by delivering high-quality service and fostering positive word-of-mouth to draw in prospective clients.

This literature review presents the evolving roles of tour guides across different individuals and tour groups. As contended by Weiler & Black (2015), no two guides are the same since their roles are determined by their background, the setting, the type of tour, and the audience. This topic remains an active area of research owing to the complexity of their roles and the dynamic nature of walking tours (Zhu & Xu, 2021). Recognising the inherent complexity, this study provides an in-depth exploration of the essential roles performed by tour guides in heritage walking tours.

This study is both relevant and timely concerning the ongoing discourse in this field, as it is driven by the concerted efforts that have been made to plan and develop heritage trails in Kuala Lumpur.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sampling and Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the roles of tour guides in heritage walking tours. This approach was considered appropriate to discover detailed insights related to the research inquiry. Comprehensive data were collected through in-depth interviews, which is an effective method for gaining insights into specific phenomena from the perspective of those directly involved (Seidman, 2006). The participants are certified Malaysian tour guides who were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) at least three years of professional guiding experience and (2) experience in organising walking tours within the Kuala Lumpur heritage zone.

Table 1. The Profile of the Participants Interviewed (Source: Authors' own data)

Participant's ID	Gender	Age	Education	Origin	Years of experience	Training institute
P01	Female	63	Undergraduate	Kuala Lumpur	33	Ministry of Tourism
P02	Male	51	Undergraduate	Kuala Lumpur	8	Karisma International College
P03	Female	50	Some Academy	Sibu	7	Green City
P04	Male	53	Undergraduate	Johor	8	Green City
P05	Male	58	High School	Kuala Lumpur	12	Global Institute of Tourism (GIT)
P06	Male	39	Undergraduate	Kuala Lumpur	10	JPK (Jabatan Pembangunan Kemahiran)
P07	Female	65	Certificate	Klang	27	Reliance Training Centre
P08	Male	40	Undergraduate	Petaling Jaya	10	Karisma International College
P09	Female	36	Undergraduate	Kuala Lumpur	5	Travex
P10	Male	43	Undergraduate	Subang Jaya	6	Perfect Tourism Management Centre (PTMC)
P11	Male	52	Undergraduate	Kuala Lumpur	11	Sunway Business College

They were recruited through internet searching via the Google search engine, with key terms associated with heritage walk tourism operators (such as heritage walk, heritage city tours, and heritage trail). Additionally, snowball sampling was utilised, where interviewed participants were asked to recommend other guides relevant to the study. Potential participants were then contacted via email to brief them about the study details and their potential involvement. Upon agreeing to participate, interviews were promptly scheduled. As a result, 11 tour guides were interviewed between January and April 2022 (Table 1).

The interview questions were developed based on the current literature, with emphasis on addressing the following key research question: How do tour guides describe their role in heritage walking tours? Various probing questions were employed to gather detailed responses. The analysis in this qualitative study focused on the explanations and meanings given by the participants rather than on quantifying phenomena. After obtaining the participants' informed consent, each interview session was digitally recorded. The transcription process commenced immediately after each interview to guarantee the highest level of accuracy and trustworthiness to the participants' responses. This rigorous technique aims to capture the complexities of the roles of tour guides in heritage walking tours and contribute valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge. The methods of data collection are illustrated in Figure 1.

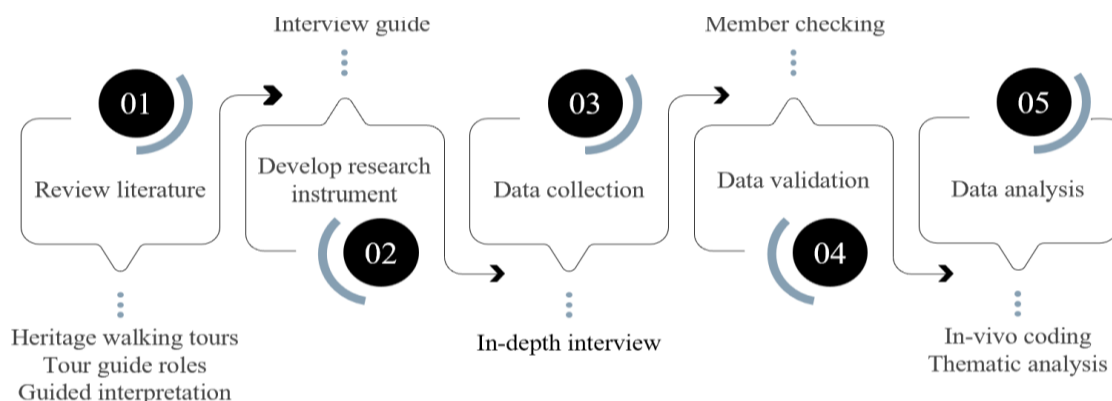


Figure 1. Research Methods Flowchart (Source: Authors' illustration)

Data Analysis

The data collected was managed and analysed using ATLAS.ti 9 software. In particular, thematic analysis was employed to identify emerging ideas and themes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The ‘*in vivo* coding’ method was adopted from Creswell & Poth (2018), in which the code term was selected from the participants’ original words. For lengthy words, the authors renamed the quote that best encapsulates their meaning. Table 2 provides the Thematic Analysis Matrix (TAM), which lists a concise summary of the codes, code groups, and final themes related to the perception of tour guides regarding their roles. A total of 93 *in vivo* codes were identified from 11 individual tour guide interviews (n = 11). Identical *in vivo* codes were combined into 27 codes. The codes with similar meanings or characteristics were further grouped into 15 code groups or categories to enhance clarity in interpretation. The code groups were constantly compared to determine the final themes. Selected participants were tasked with reviewing the summary of key themes and points to ensure the reliability of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This member-checking process also ensures that the data interpretation aligns with the participants’ intended meanings, thereby enhancing the overall validity and reliability of the study.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis Matrix (Source: Authors' own data)

Codes	Code groups	Final themes
1) A frontliner; 2) Bound to ethics 3) Deliver accurate information 4) Deliver information 5) Good first impression 6) Highlight positive images 7) Mini ambassadors 8) Promote the country 9) Representative of the country	1) Good first impression 2) Mini ambassador 3) Accuracy of information 4) Highlight positive images	1) Image maker
10) Communicate with visitors 11) Educate visitors 12) Knowledgeable and updated 13) Language interpreter 14) Telling stories 15) The role of entertainer	5) Interpret the site's significance 6) Storytelling 7) Entertain visitors 8) Language interpreter	2) Cultural interpreter
16) A leader 17) A facilitator for travel arrangements 18) To build friendship 19) Take them to places not on the itinerary 20) Determine tourists' needs and interests 21) To be a student 22) To be very attentive	9) Being attentive 10) Facilitate travel arrangements 11) Value friendship 12) Go beyond the itinerary	3) Tour coordinator
23) A role model 24) An influencer 25) Passing knowledge 26) Raising the profile of the tour guides 27) Setting up the standards for tour guides	13) Raising the profile of the tour guide 14) Sharing expertise and experiences 15) Setting up standards or best practices	4) Influencer

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tour Guide Roles

Participants were asked to describe their roles in the heritage walking tour. Based on the results in Table 3, four broad themes emerged from the analysis: (1) image maker, (2) cultural interpreter, (3) tour coordinator, and (4) influencer.

Table 3. List of Themes and Sub-Themes related to Tour Guides' Roles (Source: Authors' analysis)

Themes	Sub-themes	Participants
Image maker	Good first impression; Mini ambassador; Accuracy of information; Highlight positive images	P01, P02, P03, P04, P05, P06, P07, P08, P09, P11
Cultural interpreter	Interpret the site's significance; Storytelling; Entertain visitors; Language interpreter;	P01, P02, P03, P04, P06, P07, P09, P10
Tour coordinator	Being attentive; Facilitate travel arrangements; Value friendship; Go beyond the itinerary	P01, P03, P04, P05, P06, P09, P10, P11
Influencer	Raising profile of the tour guide; Sharing expertise and experiences; Setting up standards or best practices	P01, P05, P07, P011

Role 1: Image Maker

Firstly, the participants perceived themselves as image makers and were responsible for establishing initial contact with tourists upon their arrival to this country. Being a frontline employee in the tourism industry, they are accountable for making good first impressions in terms of greetings and appearances. As one of the participants explained, *"I consider myself a frontliner. In some ways, I'm the first person to meet the tourist visiting my country. The way I dress and speak represents my country"* (P07). Since tourists highly regard a positive first impression (Huang et al., 2010), upholding this aspect sets the right tone for the entire tour and establishes a foundation for building rapport with tourists.

As image makers, the participants were also aware of their role as *"mini ambassadors"* (P05, P09) or *"representatives of the country"* (P02, P04, P06) to showcase the site's attractions. These roles, which are among the most cited from the interviews, align with established scholarly recognition of tour guides as ambassadors who host, accommodate, and represent the country and its image (Látková et al., 2018; Pereira, 2015). They also highlighted the responsibility of tour guides to enlighten tourists about Kuala Lumpur's tourism offerings, including its attractions, cultures, and heritage. In this regard, tour guides must also be knowledgeable about the latest information, as the accuracy of the information provided to visitors is critical to avoid misrepresentation, which could influence their perceptions of Malaysia, particularly Kuala Lumpur, as a received image. The Tourism Industry Act 1992 (Section 28) also emphasises this responsibility, which stipulates that inaccuracies can result in the suspension or revocation of a guide's license.

Tour guides also play a significant role in correcting preconceived misunderstandings that tourists may have about Malaysia, especially related to sensitive topics, such as its multi-racial community, cultural norms, and religious practices. This educational role is vital in facilitating tourists to navigate and comprehend cross-cultural tourism settings, as mentioned by P02: *"I emphasise on the matter that we are multi-racial country. This is very important because they assumed that this is Islamic country that strictly followed Islamic law."* As image makers, tour guides must also adhere to the code of conduct or ethics by demonstrating positive aspects of the country. In fact, tour guide associations in various countries have introduced their standards of practice to regulate their members' actions and ensure the delivery of professional service (Mak, 2011). This role requires tour guides to maintain neutrality and deter from engaging in political discussions. However, one participant (P04) pointed out his concern over the behaviour of some tourists who provoke the guide by asking unexpected questions. He shared several strategies for handling such situations, such as providing carefully taught answers to avoid potential tensions, emphasising the importance of maintaining a neutral stance and redirecting discussions toward attractions, culture, and heritage.

Likewise, another participant emphasised the roles of tour guides in supporting the government agenda, *"It is the tour guide's duty to present the country to tourists in the way that the government wants"* (P11). This statement underlines the dutiful role of tour guides in shaping the desired image of Kuala Lumpur as a tourism destination according to the vision of the city authorities. As mentioned by Dahles (2002) and Látková et al. (2018), this situation highlights the political role of tour guides in mediating and regulating the flow of information about the country to support the government's objectives.

The results also reveal the significant influence of tour guides as image makers on positive outcomes. One participant (P05) stated that these outcomes include enriching visitors' understanding of the destination, which inspired them to visit again, as well as fostering tour guides to be proud of their job and motivating them to provide better services. Another participant (P08) describes these outcomes as *"chain reactions,"* impacted by the spread of positive word-of-mouth about their services. Eventually, this encouragement contributed to boosting the country's economy and other sectors of the tourism industry. These findings underscore the crucial role of tour guides in shaping the destination image and influencing visitors' satisfaction and experience quality. Thus, the tour guide's expertise in creating an ideal destination image by providing engaging and accurate information is vital to accomplishing a positive experience.

Role 2: Cultural Interpreter

Tour guides serve as cultural interpreters by aiding comprehension and understanding across varying topics and cultural contexts. Their ultimate role on most tours is to convey understanding and deliver a meaningful and memorable experience for all visitors, regardless of their initial reasons for participating in the tour. One participant described this commitment: *"It is important to me that every visitor who joins my tour, for whatever reason, leaves with new knowledge. I believe they have learned something"* (P01). Besides, tour guides are responsible for building connections with what visitors encounter during the tour, thus promoting understanding, enjoyment, and appreciation (Chauhan & Anand, 2023; de Guzman et al., 2019; Kalyoncu & Yüsek, 2020).

Furthermore, they indicated that the learning outcomes rely on the visitor's interest and motivation for joining the tour. The findings reveal visitors join the tour for various reasons, including a desire *"to experience it"* or to gain a

“better understanding of the area,” while some are unsure about their “learning curve”, suggesting an openness to unexpected discoveries and personal growth during the tour. Therefore, those who seek to gain knowledge are likely to learn more than those who participate in the tour for leisure. Regardless of their reasons, one participant suggested that tour guides should “just educate people the best we can” (P10).

The role of a cultural interpreter underscores the importance of a tour guide’s knowledge and interpretation in informing the historical narrative and significance of the sites, thus enhancing visitors’ understanding. Majority of the participants employed storytelling as an essential interpretive technique for nurturing cognitive and emotive connections with the destination via captivating and appealing stories. They believed that this interpretive skill was crucial to gaining visitors’ interest and attention during the tour. As storytellers, the roles of tour guides go beyond simply reciting facts, such as names and dates. Their ability to keep visitors entertained and avoid them “getting bored” (P04, P10) is a crucial aspect of storytelling that can contribute positively to meaningful learning experiences. In fact, education and entertainment are integral to one another as essential elements of on-site interpretation. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Bryon, 2012; Weiler & Black, 2015; Weng et al., 2020), which implies the significance of interpretive and communicative skills in guiding for facilitating visitors’ meaning-making processes.

In nurturing an understanding of the cultural context, tour guides act as language interpreters, especially for visitors with poor command of Bahasa Melayu and English. Language proficiency is vital as guides must localise information about the site, ensure accurate communication, and enhance visitor comprehension. This dual role aids in bridging language gaps and addresses visitors’ misconceptions about the country, if any. Effective interpreting languages helps tour guides assist visitors in understanding complex information and cultural nuances, fostering better knowledge dissemination of the sites they visit. This role is crucial to the educational mission of tour guiding, ensuring that all tourists, regardless of their language proficiency, depart with a clear and accurate comprehension of the country and its cultural heritage. This result highlights the role of tour guides in bridging the gap between foreign and local cultures, presenting the destination in a culturally sensitive manner that resonates with a diverse audience (Scherle & Nonnenmann, 2008).

Role 3: Tour Coordinator

The analysis highlights the tour coordinator as the third role of tour guides, which involves overseeing the tour group and managing the activities throughout the walking tour. This role allows guides to determine visitors’ needs through their responses during the walk and enables them to attend to visitors’ well-being, maintaining a smooth progression of the walk. These attentive actions, which include informing visitors about tour preparations, adjusting walking paces, ensuring safety, and continuously monitoring their condition, allow guides to effectively address any arising issues that may affect visitors’ experience during the walking tour. This finding highlights the importance of being caring and attentive to visitors’ needs and cultivating problem-solving skills. Previous studies have also demonstrated problem-solving skills as a key quality for professional tour guides (Huang et al., 2010; Zhang & Chow, 2004).

The duty of tour guides also involves assisting visitors with their travel arrangements. Excluding the handling of hotel check-ins and check-outs, their tasks focus on managing the progression of the walk from one point of attraction to another so that visitors can explore the sites in an authentic local manner and avoid any potential inconveniences, such as being overcharged or denied entry. One participant explained this point, “We act as a facilitator where we guide them on travel arrangements and to prevent them from being taken advantage of” (P06). This finding underlines the tour guide’s vital responsibility in ensuring a safe and enriching experience during walking tours. Previous studies also mentioned that a tour coordinator is tasked with planning, organising, managing, and leading the group to foster positive group dynamics and create memorable experiences for visitors (Çetinkaya & Öter, 2016; Crespi-Vallbona, 2020; de Guzman et al., 2019).

In addition, participants highlighted the importance they place on cultivating positive relationships with clients, as stated by several participants, “I always treat my clients as my friend” (P05); “I want to share few information with them like a friend” (P09). They noted that this positive relationship is crucial for encouraging active engagement between tour guides and visitors. This approach promotes visitors from passively listening to commentary to active interaction in the walking tour experience. Through relationship building, tour guides create favourable impressions, thereby enhancing dynamic two-way interactions with tourists and encouraging an inviting tour environment (Zhu & Xu, 2021).

As tour coordinators, the findings suggest that tour guides are willing to make extra efforts by adding more stops beyond the initial plan, provided it is within their capability. Given the nature of walking tours, visitors are exposed to potentially various encounters along the route. Hence, it is always possible to add more stops throughout the tour. These additional efforts made by tour guides are referred to as the “guide plus” role by Hansen and Mossberg (2017), which underscores the willingness of a guide to provide better service beyond their typical role through more encounters and fostering active visitor engagement. These efforts are motivated by intrinsic rewards, such as visitors’ smiles, satisfaction, and appreciation. Ultimately, tour guides feel a sense of fulfilment when the tours they have coordinated are favourably received, thus motivating them to improve their performance further in future tours (de Guzman et al., 2019).

Role 4: Influencer

This study revealed the significant role of the tour guide as an influencer, particularly among senior tour guides with extensive professional experience in the industry. They noted that their role in improving public understanding of the tour guide profession extends beyond their functionary roles in enhancing the visitor experience.

They seek to challenge the prevailing stereotype of tour guides as individuals who follow itineraries motivated solely by commissions or profits. In contrast, their goal is to elevate the profession’s visibility by establishing proper standards

and best practices for conducting heritage walking tours. This approach has been considered influential in shaping public perceptions and correcting the negative stereotypes associated with the tour guide profession (Li et al., 2021). One participant explained in detail this proactive stance in the following:

“I consider myself today as an inspirer, an influencer to set the standards and raise the profile of the tour guide, which the public often has a very negative perception of. Perhaps they don’t understand our job. I’m still doing my functionary job as a tour guide. But I think I’m consciously setting a trend and raising the profile of guides in the country.” (P01)

Another participant (P07) who shared a similar goal, expressed her willingness to impart knowledge to junior guides. This voluntary knowledge sharing helps novices polish their skills by observing and learning the way to conduct walking tours by senior guides. They also highlighted the challenging nature of conducting heritage walking tours, where tour guides require proper guidance on best practices. This attention to detail differentiates walking tours from bus tours, as every stopping point and the content of the walk must be well-planned to ensure visitors experience a structured and meaningful tour. For junior guides, accumulating sufficient experience and participating in or conducting numerous tours is essential to achieving the same depth in heritage walking tours as senior tour guides. This finding verifies the importance of shadowing and observing senior tour guides to acquire knowledge about best practices (Tsai et al., 2016).

As influencers, senior tour guides play a critical role within their professional community. This role incorporates guide-to-guide interaction as the new component in the tour guide role structure (Figure 2). Senior tour guides with extensive knowledge and experience serve as role models by sharing their best guiding practices with fellow and junior guides to help improve their skills, experiences, and expertise in conducting heritage walking tours.

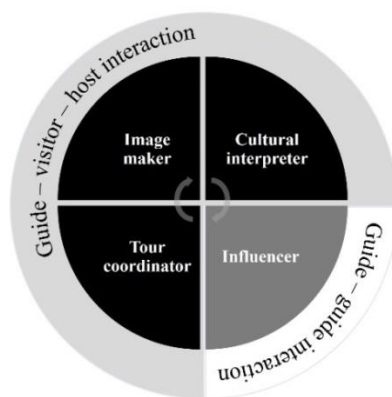


Figure 2. Four Major Roles of Tour Guides in Kuala Lumpur Heritage Walking Tours (Source: Authors’ own illustration)

CONCLUSION

The findings conclude that tour guides are optimistic about their roles in enhancing the city’s heritage tourism assets through walking tours. Four primary roles were identified: image maker, cultural interpreter, tour coordinator, and influencer. The first three roles highlight the mediatory roles played by tour guides during interactions with visitors and the host destination. In comparison, the final role as an influencer underlines the tour guides’ commitment to mentoring and sharing their accumulated knowledge and experiences with less experienced colleagues. Their goal is to ensure the steady improvement of heritage walking tour experiences and contribute to the professional development of the guiding community as a whole. This role was particularly emphasised by senior guides with over ten years of experience.

The outcome of this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding the multifaceted roles of tour guides in heritage walking tours. In particular, the roles of tour guides in providing positive visitor experiences were highlighted, which enhanced the image of the destination and fostered visitor engagement in the destination’s narrative. Moreover, their roles extend beyond facilitating interactions with visitors and the host community, encompassing the roles involving other tourism stakeholders and, notably in this study, their fellow guides. This highlights the significance of integrating this distinct role into the broader framework of tour guide performance. On the other hand, the practical implication of this study is relevant to tourism authorities and tour guide associations.

The findings provide some insights into the recognition of tour guide performance in narrating the city’s history through heritage walking tours, thus upholding the city as an international tourist spot. The findings also serve as guidelines for tailoring more relevant training courses related to heritage walking tours to enhance tour guides’ performance. Such courses may include interpretation, storytelling, communication competency, and problem-solving skills with special attention to developing skills and training on-site.

Notwithstanding its valuable contributions, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the findings are context-specific, concentrating on heritage walking tours in Kuala Lumpur, which may restrict the generalisability and transferability of the findings to other locations. Therefore, future research should expand the scope to include diverse geographical contexts and types of walking tours with varying cultural, historical, and social dynamics.

Next, the study primarily represents the viewpoints of experienced tour guides, especially those with over a decade of experience, perhaps excluding views from novice or mid-career guides whose experiences and challenges might differ. Comparative studies between novice, mid-career, and senior tour guides could offer a more nuanced understanding of how roles evolve over time and the specific training needs at different career stages.

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