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## **Qualitative Study among Malaysian Older Adults and their Driving Needs**

**Nurani Nordin<sup>1</sup>, Akehsan Dahlan<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohamad Ghazali Masuri<sup>1</sup>, Ninik Nurhidayah<sup>2</sup>**  
\* Corresponding Author

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Occupational Therapy Studies, Faculty of Health Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Occupational Therapy, School of Health Polytechnics, Surakarta, Indonesia

[nuraninordin97@gmail.com](mailto:nuraninordin97@gmail.com), [akehsan@uitm.edu.my](mailto:akehsan@uitm.edu.my), [mghazali@uitm.edu.my](mailto:mghazali@uitm.edu.my), [niniknurhidayah@gmail.com](mailto:niniknurhidayah@gmail.com)  
Tel: +6013-227 1874

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### **Abstract**

Driving is more than just a mode of transportation; for many older adults, it represents independence and freedom. This study aims to explore Malaysian older adults' driving needs. In-depth interviews were conducted with eleven participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and analyzed using the six steps of thematic analysis with NVivo software aiding the process. Four main themes emerged from the data: daily routines, social leisure, caregiving responsibilities, and sense of freedom. To conclude, this study conveys important issues to policymakers in highlighting the need for driving among Malaysian older adults, thus promoting their safety and quality of life.

**Keywords:** driving; older adult; needs; mobility

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### **1.0 Introduction**

The world is currently facing a widespread demographic shift with an aging population. In 2023, there were 761 million people aged 65 and older globally, a figure that is expected to reach 1.6 billion by 2050 (United Nations, 2023). In line with this global trend, Malaysia is on track to become an aging nation by 2030. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2024), the proportion of individuals aged 60 and above increased from 3.6 million (11.1%) in 2022 to 3.8 million (11.3%) in 2023. This rise is also reflected in the growing number of older drivers on Malaysian roads. As the older adult population steadily grows, it becomes increasingly important to address their need for driving in order to promote their independence and quality of life.

The rising number of older drivers has become a significant public health concern in Malaysia, as they are increasingly involved in road traffic accidents that result in injuries and fatalities, which often result in long-term disabilities. In fact, transport accidents were the fourth leading cause of death in Malaysia in 2023 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024b). Despite the risks, driving remains an essential activity for many older adults, as it plays a crucial role in their independence and daily functioning. Driving enables older people to lead an active life, maintain social ties, and also contribute to their self-confidence (Albert et al., 2018) Hansen et al. (2020) further emphasized that losing the ability to drive can have severe consequences for older individuals, leading to significant social isolation and decreased opportunities for social engagement. Hence, this study aims to explore Malaysian older adults' driving needs. The findings may raise awareness about the importance of driving among the elderly, ensuring they can continue to lead active and fulfilling lives.

## 2.0 Literature review

Driving is categorized as one of the Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLs) in the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process (4th Edition) and plays a crucial role in an individual's community mobility (American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), 2020). Driving has been recognized as the primary mode of personal transportation throughout adulthood (Gormley & O'Neill, 2019). It holds particular significance for older adults, especially those living in rural areas with limited access to public transportation (Karthaus & Falkenstein, 2016). They further explained that for older adults, driving can significantly enhance their quality of life by promoting active and independent mobility. Driving is more than just a mode of transportation; for many older adults, it represents independence and freedom. The ability to drive provides seniors with the autonomy to manage their daily lives without depending on others for transportation. For example, the ability to drive is closely connected to improved access to healthcare, shopping, and social activities for older adults (Hansen et al., 2020). While there is existing literature on the role of driving in supporting older adults' independence and mobility, there is less research focused on the unique driving needs of this group in non-Western or rural contexts, like Malaysia.

Driving is often seen as a symbol of independence and well-being for older adults. When they can no longer drive, it can lead to significant changes in their ability to engage with the community (Hansen et al., 2020). Driving cessation is a significant life decision-making for older adults. It can lead to functional decline, especially when driving is totally ceased (Doi et al., 2021). Additionally, due to the natural decline in health associated with aging, the decision to stop driving can be tough, as it often results in greater dependence on others and limits access to essential activities such as shopping, healthcare, and social, cultural, or religious events (Schouten et al., 2021). The choice to cease driving can be a challenging one, not only for the older individual but also for their family members, friends, and healthcare providers, as it raises various concerns that must be carefully considered (Betz et al., 2021). Given that age-related physical and cognitive changes can impact driving ability, the decision to stop driving may be influenced by direct and indirect factors related to these declines.

## 3.0 Methodology

The qualitative design was selected to achieve the objectives of the study which is to explore the roles of driving in fulfilling the needs of older adults. Participants were selected using the purposive sampling method. This sampling method allows deeper understanding and focuses on individuals with relevant phenomena of interest (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Accordingly, participants were selected based on the appropriateness and richness of their characteristics and experiences pertinent to this study, as detailed in Table 1. Data collection continued until data saturation was accomplished, whereby no new themes appeared in the gathered data (Francis et al., 2010).

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Sample	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<b>Older driver</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Age 60 years and above.</li> <li>Have a driving license.</li> <li>Currently engaged in driving activity.</li> <li>Able to speak and understand either Malay or English language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not have any history of driving activity.</li> </ul>
<b>Older driver's family member</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Age 18 years and above.</li> <li>Live together or live close with the older driver for at least six months.</li> </ul>	
<b>Occupational therapist (OT)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OT in Malaysia who have been in service for at least one year.</li> <li>Conducting driving rehabilitation for at least three months.</li> <li>Currently working with older adults.</li> <li>Able to speak and understand Malay and English language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OT who was never involved in driving rehabilitation.</li> <li>OT who did not have at least one older adult on their caseload.</li> </ul>
<b>Representative from the Road Transport Department (JPJ)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experienced with older drivers.</li> <li>Able to speak and understand either Malay or English language.</li> </ul>	
<b>Driving instructor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Driving instructor in Malaysia who has been in service for at least one year.</li> <li>Currently working with older adults.</li> <li>Able to speak and understand either Malay or English language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Driving instructors who did not have at least one older adult on their caseload.</li> </ul>
<b>Representative from the Malaysian Institute of Road Safety Research (MIROS)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experienced in road traffic research for at least one year.</li> <li>Able to speak and understand either Malay or English language.</li> </ul>	

In general, this study was conducted across Peninsular Malaysia, with the location of the sample of respondents determining the specific regions. For the sample of occupational therapists, the targeted locations were public hospitals around Peninsular Malaysia. For older drivers, older drivers' family members, driving instructors, JPJ, and MIROS representatives, the sample was collected around Selangor. Selangor was chosen as the primary state for data collection as this state recorded the highest number of road traffic accidents

in 2023, with 173,129 cases, followed by Johor (87,370 cases) and Kuala Lumpur (72,701 cases) (The Star, 2024).

The researcher conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with a total of eleven participants. Three older drivers, two older drivers' family members, three occupational therapists, one driving instructor, one representative from JPJ, and one representative from MIROS. Each interview took around 30 to 45 minutes for each participant. The interview guides were specifically designed for this study to gather detailed insights into the driving needs and experiences of older adults in Malaysia. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method that involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) documented that the analysis method consists of six steps. The quotes and themes developed will be translated into English using forward translation. The NVivo software program was used to assist the analysis process.

Several methods were used to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, such as member checking and investigator triangulation. The researcher used the member checks method, whereby the interview transcripts were sent to the study participants for feedback to verify the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Another method is the investigator triangulation method, which involves research team members addressing the data analysis process and aims to ensure that a correct and precise understanding of a phenomenon is acquired by cross-checking the information or findings (Kaminski & Pitney, 2004).

## 4.0 Findings

Eleven participants contributed to this study's findings: three older drivers, two older drivers' family members, three occupational therapists, one driving instructor, one representative from JPJ, and one representative from MIROS. The findings revealed three main themes: (1) Daily routines, (2) Social leisure, (3) Caregiving responsibilities, and (4) Sense of freedom. The main themes and sub-themes that emerged are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Main themes and sub-themes emerged from the findings of this study.

Main theme	Sub-themes
Daily routines	Access to groceries Attend religious activity Commute to work
Social leisure	Meeting friends Attend social event
Caregiving responsibilities	Drive for spouse Drive for grandchildren
Sense of freedom	Maintain independence Self-worth and accomplishment

### 4.1 Main theme 1: Daily routines

This theme highlighted that older adults drive to execute their daily routines. This theme is underpinned by three sub-themes: access to groceries, attending religious activities, and commuting to work.

#### 4.1.1 Subtheme- access to groceries

Mrs. Aishah, an occupational therapist specializing in driving rehabilitation, illustrates this subtheme. She highlighted that older adults commonly drive to have access to groceries.

"The second is to buy daily necessities, like going to the supermarket, going to the market. Sometimes they live alone, and their children don't stay with them. So, those are the two most common reasons. Okay, those are the ones we will prioritize, while the others are for everyday routine activities."- Mrs. Aishah.

This is supported by Mr. Ahmad, a representative from the Malaysian Institute of Road Safety Research (MIROS), who supported this subtheme by adding that they would usually only drive a little away.

"Carrying out daily activities, buying groceries. Usually, they won't drive far."- Mr. Ahmad.

#### 4.1.2 Subtheme- Attend religious activity

Most participants shared that older adults commonly drive to attend religious activities. Mrs. Aishah claimed that Muslims' older adults usually want to go to the mosque.

"The driving needs among the elderly, most of the feedback they often give is that they want to go to the mosque. Yes, especially the men, they want to go to the mosque."- Mrs. Aishah.

Mr. Halim, an older adult, stated that driving to the mosque is part of his daily routine.

"Going to the mosque, that's the routine. At least for me, the mosque's for Subuh (dawn) prayer and night prayers."- Mr. Halim.

Similarly, Mrs. Fatimah, a senior occupational therapist in driving rehabilitation agreed that older people drive to attend religious activities.

"So, when we ask why they need to continue driving, of course they will say, "Oh, I want to go to the surau. I want to go to the mosque. I want to go to the market." So, it's more related to religious activities."- Mrs. Fatimah.

#### 4.1.3 Subtheme- Commute to work

This subtheme highlighted some older adults are driving to commute to work. Mr. Chua, a Road Transport Department (JPJ) representative, explained that sometimes, older people are still working despite their old age, and therefore, driving is crucial as a means of transportation for them.

*Okay, it depends on their life. Some people, at 60 years old, still have to work, even until 70 or 80. Yeah, some of my friends and relatives are still working. My father is still working. So, they need to drive to get around. Sometimes, they don't want to depend on others to get around, so they must be independent. They have to drive." - Mr. Chua.*

Mrs. Fatimah, a spouse to an older driver, also stated that her husband is still working and needs to drive at least three times a week.

*"Now, he goes to the office. He teaches part-time. So, he drives to UiTM, Faculty of AAGBS. He goes about 3 days a week."- Mrs. Fatimah.*

#### 4.2 Main theme 2: Social leisure

This theme highlighted older adults' need to drive in order for them to participate in social leisure activities. This theme is underpinned by two subthemes: meeting friends and attending social events.

##### 4.2.1 Subtheme- Meeting friends

This subtheme is described by most of the participants. For example, Mr. Chua explained that older people will commonly need to drive to meet friends and socialize after their retirement age to keep them active.

*"Yeah, for example, some are already at retirement age. Maybe they like leisure, meeting their friends, or going to coffee shops. These are some of the routines retired people do, yeah. So, it helps keep them active, actually." - Mr. Chua.*

Mr. Ahmad also agreed that they usually drive to visit friends.

*"Usually, they don't drive far. They will go to their neighborhood, visit friends."- Mr. Ahmad.*

##### 4.2.2 Subtheme- Attend a social event

This subtheme elaborated that older adults also drive to attend social events. For example, Mr. Halim explained that he also drives for leisure activities such as vacations or visits.

*"Driving is also for leisure, maybe once a month or once every two months. It's for vacations or visits." - Mr. Halim.*

Another participant, Mr. Ahmad, also said that nowadays, older adults also drive to attend wedding invitations that are commonly held on weekends.

*"But on weekends, they may often attend weddings. This is because, looking at the trend, they will usually go to weddings ceremony during school holidays."- Mr. Ahmad.*

#### 4.3 Main theme 3: Caregiving responsibilities

Participants in this study describe that older people have caregiving responsibilities related to driving activity. Two subthemes underpin this theme: drive for spouse and drive for grandchildren.

##### 4.3.1 Subtheme- Drive for spouse

This subtheme is highlighted by Ms. Lisa, the daughter of an older driver, who explained that her father drives every day to send her mother to work. She stated that

*"Basically, he drives every day. Hmm, especially in the morning and evening because he needs to send my mum to her workplace."- Miss Lisa.*

Mr. Halim also added that her wife prefers him to drive her everywhere compared to their adult children.

*"My wife actually prefers me to drive rather than my daughter's driving. Maybe it's because of the way I drive, she can sleep soundly."-said Mr. Halim*

##### 4.3.2 Subtheme- Drive for grandchildren

This subtheme is illustrated by Mr. Azad and Mr. Hashim, both older adults who typically drive for their grandchildren.

*"If there are grandchildren, and the child asks us to take them, we will. We'll bring them and drop them off here and there." – Mr. Azad.*

Mr. Hashim, on the other hand, mentioned that:

*"Right now, I only drive around here, near my house. Sometimes, I go pick up my grandchildren. So, that's my current activity."-Mr. Hashim*

#### 4.4 Main theme 4: Sense of freedom

This theme highlighted that older adults drive to achieve a sense of freedom. Two sub-themes underpin this theme: maintain independency and self-worth and accomplishment.

#### 4.4.1 Subtheme- Maintain independence

Mrs. Aishah illustrates this subtheme by highlighting that driving is essential for older adults to maintain their independence, especially for those who are living alone. Therefore, they need to take care of themselves.

*"But when we look at it again, sometimes they live alone. There's no one to buy food for them. Yes, it's for their needs, for essential needs. If it's something very basic, something essential for their life, then it's unfair." - Mrs. Aishah.*

This is supported by Mrs. Fatihah, who supported this subtheme by adding that driving is important, especially for female elderly or widowers who need to resume driving to continue living.

*"Hmm, they need to drive themselves because there are no relatives living with them. Okay, for single drivers, especially female drivers, they usually want to resume driving if their husband has passed away." - Mrs. Fatihah.*

#### 4.1.2 Subtheme- Self-worth and Accomplishment

Mr. Azad claimed that driving activity somehow made him feel better about his life and gave him a sense of self-worth and accomplishment.

*"Ah, the car is like medicine. It's a cure for mental pain. Truly! What if I give you a Honda? You'd jump with joy. You love Honda, and once you get it, your pain will disappear. That's my car, that's my dream car. So, sometimes, for some people, the car is their medicine." - Mr. Azad.*

Mrs. Fatihah added that we cannot quickly stop older adults from driving or even taking away their driving licenses because driving symbolizes their dignity.

*"Because we can't restrict their dignity, especially for the elderly. If you take away their license, it's their dignity, you know. So, we can't just stop them like that. However, we have to prove to them, providing evidence, as to why we don't encourage them to continue driving." - Mrs. Fatihah.*

## 5.0 Discussion

The findings from this qualitative study provide information on the need to drive among older adults in Malaysia. This study identified four main themes: daily routines, social leisure, caregiving responsibilities, and sense of freedom. These themes generally emphasize that daily routines, social leisure, caregiving responsibilities, and a sense of freedom are why older adults still need to preserve their driving skills.

The first main theme, "Daily routines", suggests that driving ability ensures a sense of control over their daily schedules and reduces reliance on others. For many older adults, driving remains essential for maintaining their daily routines. Driving is the main form of personal transportation, mainly to drive themselves (Gormley & O'Neill, 2019). It enables them to manage tasks such as shopping independently (Eldér et al., 2023), accessing healthcare services (Musselwhite, 2011; Touns et al., 2022), and participating in social activities (Eldér et al., 2023; Musselwhite, 2011). This aspect of driving among older drivers highlights its practical necessity in facilitating daily life.

The second main theme, "Social leisure," illustrated that driving also plays a crucial role in enabling older drivers to engage in social activities and leisure pursuits. It is essential for older adults' formal and informal social participation, such as empowering them to visit friends and family, attend religious activities, and participate in organized activities (Pristavec, 2018). By facilitating social interactions and maintaining connections, driving allows them to manage an active life, strengthen social ties, and promote their self-confidence (Albert et al., 2018). To conclude, driving did serve as a means to maintain a vibrant social life and foster a sense of belonging among older drivers.

The third main theme, "Caregiving responsibilities", highlighted that older adults often play roles in providing care within their families, such as transporting grandchildren (Ang et al., 2020) and spouses (Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2016). The ability to drive ensures they can fulfill these caregiving roles effectively, contributing to the well-being and support network of their loved ones. Transporting grandchildren has become one of the everyday tasks for grandparents to perform, and it mostly involves short-distance trips within the city (Roin et al., 2023). Older married couples, on the other hand, often rely on each other for transportation support, such as having male partners as principal drivers and female partners as alternate drivers or co-drivers (Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2016). Therefore, this aspect underscores driving as a means of nurturing relationships and demonstrating care and responsibility within familial and social circles.

The final main theme, "Sense of freedom," emphasizes that driving gives older adults a profound sense of freedom and independence. The ability to drive oneself fosters mobility and independence and maintains the social identity of the elderly (Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2016). This sense of freedom is often associated with a sense of control over their life, which usually involves fulfilling their social roles without relying much on others (Shope et al., 2019). Over-reliance of the elderly on family and friends may be burdensome on both those who are providing the rides and those who are dependent on others (Spinney et al., 2020). Thus, this sense of freedom extends beyond physical mobility, promoting a positive outlook on life and enhancing overall quality of life for older drivers.

## 6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, the findings highlighted four needs of driving among older adults in Malaysia: daily routines, social leisure, caregiving responsibilities, and sense of freedom. The findings of this qualitative study are specific to the Malaysian context, and caution is advised when applying the results to different cultural or geographical settings. The sample size of participants may be limited, which could affect the representativeness of the findings. Besides, the finding from this study also conveys important issues to policymakers and healthcare professionals in highlighting the need for driving among older adults and thus promoting both safety and quality of life among older adults in this country. Future research should focus on raising awareness of the significance of safe driving for older adults. By working together, we can create environments that prioritize safety and empower older adults to preserve their mobility and independence on the road.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper makes a significant contribution to the field of study by understanding the needs of driving among older adults in Malaysia. This finding can inform policies and promote older adults' mobility while maintaining their independence and quality of life.

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