

Potential of Archeotourism at the Megalithic Site in Pengkalan Kempas Historical Complex, Negeri Sembilan: An Analysis of Community Perception.

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Abstract

Archeotourism is a new branch of the tourism industry in Malaysia that is rarely promoted to the local community. This sector is more focused on tourism based on archaeological heritage sites which can generate significant income for the state. These archeotourism-based heritage sites are found throughout the country but do not receive as encouraging a reception from tourists as the Megalithic Sites in Negeri Sembilan. The objective of this study is to determine the local community's perception of the existence of this megalithic site because this megalithic stone needs to be preserved and maintained so that it becomes one of the archeotourism products to elevate this prehistoric stone as an archaeological heritage site comparable to the discovery of the Sungai Batu civilization site. Therefore, this study uses a quantitative method approach involving as many as 400 respondents consisting of local residents and tourists using research question instruments and the results of the study will be processed using SPSS version 26. The research conducted has shown that while these sites have significant historical and cultural value, public and domestic tourist awareness and understanding of the megalithic sites are still limited. This indicates that there is ample room for education and promotion to enhance recognition of this heritage. Through this study, megalithic sites are identified not only as archaeological heritage sites but also as semiotic canvases that reflect the rich culture and history of the Minangkabau community. This is the impact of this study, the archeotourism industry will be given attention and awareness to the public in order to preserve archaeological sites, especially to promote the existence of megalithic sites because this industry has great potential on a global scale and is able to generate significant income for the country.

Keywords: *Megalithic Sites, Archeotourism, Archaeological Heritage, Perception, Pengkalan Kempas.*

Introduction

Archeotourism research is a field offering significant potential for studying and appreciating past cultures. Semiotic theory, which examines signs and symbols and their use in communication, can be used as a framework to understand the meanings and symbols of the megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan (Taha, A. & Osman. A.J., 1982). This is because each megalithic stone is not only a physical object but also carries signs and meanings related to the customs and culture of the Minangkabau community. The role of the megalithic stones as 'living stones', as stated by Mubin Sheppard (1936), reflects the beliefs and values presented by the local community, revealing the metaphysical and semiotic dimensions of the site (Bilcher Bala et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the definition of archeotourism involves tourism activities focused on understanding and experiencing archaeological and historical aspects. The potential of archeotourism in Negeri Sembilan, in particular can be developed by emphasizing the megalithic sites, which represent an important dimension of the country's cultural and historical heritage. In this context, the Megalithic Site Complex at Pengkalan Kempas and Luak Tanah Mengandung in Kuala Pilah offers unique insights into the past that have yet to be extensively explored within the tourism industry (Chandran, J., 1973).

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Literature Review

Megalithic, Valuable Heritage for Archaetourism

The history of tourism in Negeri Sembilan, spanning the English colonial era, has shaped four out of the five main tourism attractions in Malaysia, including environmental tourism, recreation, cultural tourism, and heritage and history, according to a study by King (1992). However, awareness and knowledge about megalithic sites, which can significantly contribute to the archeotourism sector, have not yet fully permeated collective consciousness, especially among the current generation. The Megalithic Culture in Negeri Sembilan holds significant historical, cultural, educational, and tourism value. As highlighted by Ramli, Z. et al. (2019) and Mahadzir, S.Y. et al. (2024), preserving these sites is crucial to prevent the loss of this valuable heritage. Masdey, S. S. et al. (2019) have listed and classified the types of megalithic stones found, demonstrating the diversity and complexity of the existing megalithic culture. Furthermore, a study by Ramli, Z. et al. (2019) discovered more megalithic sites that had not been previously recorded, adding to the knowledge of this heritage.

This historical study began with the initial discoveries by Western and local scholars and evolved with recent discoveries and interpretations by Malaysian scholars, showing that these megalithic sites are not only physical assets but also mediums of communication conveying rich historical and cultural narratives. By exploring this narrative, this article aims to uncover and evaluate the perceptions of the community, especially domestic tourists, regarding the existence and potential of these megalithic sites as archeotourism assets (J.G. De Casparis, 1980). The article seeks to understand and analyze the perceptions of the community, particularly domestic tourists, towards the megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan, some of which remain hidden and have not been fully explored as components of archeotourism (Mahadzir, S.Y. et al., 2021; Masdey, S.S. et al., 2019; Richards, G. 1996). In a semiotic context, these megalithic stones are not just physical manifestations but also contain sign systems that reflect the deep-seated customs, beliefs, and values of the local community. This study, through the framework of semiotic theory, unpacks the implicit meanings contained in the megalithic stones and how they communicate with contemporary visitors (Ahmad et al., 2025).

In archeotourism, the definition of megalithic sites goes beyond merely being visually appealing tourist attractions; they serve as centers of learning and experience that enrich historical and cultural knowledge. The discoveries by Ramli, Z. et al. (2019) and Masdey, S.S., et al. (2019) show that the megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan have untapped potential and provide opportunities to be turned into tourism assets that can strengthen the state's identity and promote cultural diversity. The framework for this study is inspired by the works of previous scholars who have established theoretical and methodological foundations. From the early research by Richard O. Windstedt (1920), which linked the existence of megalithic stones to the arrival of Islam in Negeri Sembilan by Indian missionaries, to the detailed mapping conducted by Ramli, Z. et al. (2019), we can see how these sites have been given different meanings and interpretations over time.

Advancements in technology, such as the use of GPS and integration with GIS as carried out by Ramli, Z. et al. (2019), have enabled us to record and map megalithic sites in greater detail and accuracy. This paves the way for a deeper assessment of the values of these sites, both in terms of historiography and in the context of archeotourism (Masdey, S.S. et al., 2019 and Wilkinson, R.J., 1931). Overall, the history of tourism in Negeri Sembilan, which has been intertwined since the colonial era, through the evolution from environmental, recreational, and cultural tourism to heritage and historical tourism, provides a unique opportunity to shape a holistic and multidimensional narrative that encompasses the state's rich history. Hence, this study not only aims to add to the body of knowledge regarding local archeology and history but also opens the door to the development of archeotourism that can have a significant economic and educational impact on Negeri Sembilan (Ramli, Z. 2019).

Pengkalan Kempas Historical Complex, Empowering Negeri Sembilan Archeotourism

This study focuses on the history and archaeology of Negeri Sembilan, specifically in the districts of Kuala Pilah and Port Dickson, known for their megalithic sites. Negeri Sembilan was chosen due to its

rich megalithic sites, comparable to those in Melaka, Perak, Sabah, and Sarawak. The main focus is on the Pengkalan Kempas Historical Complex, located about 35 kilometers from Port Dickson towards Melaka. This complex is attractive not only because of its visitor gallery and comprehensive infrastructure but also due to the initial excavation process conducted by Ivor Evans (1921). Additionally, this study also involves Luak Tanah Mengandung in Kuala Pilah, covering five main luaks: Gunung Pasir, Inas, Jempol, Terachi, and Ulu Muar. This area, close to attractions such as Istana Menanti and Hutan Lipur Jeram Toi, offers potential for the development of archeotourism, enabling visitors to enjoy the uniqueness of local history and culture.

Figure 1. Infrastructure And Visitor Attractions Around the Pengkalan Kempas Megalithic Historical Complex, Negeri Sembilan



Well



Inscribed stone dated 1476



Tomb of Sheikh Ahmad Majnun



Megaliths in the shape of rudders, spoons (umbrellas), and fields (kris)



Pengkalan Kempas Megalithic Gallery

Semiotics, a Lens to the Symbolism and Meaning Embedded in Megalithic Monuments

In archaeology, semiotics plays a crucial role as an analytical lens to understand the symbolism and meanings embedded in artifacts and historical sites. This study adopts a semiotic approach to explore and interpret the complexity of the sign systems present at the megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan. These sites, rich in local symbolism and beliefs, are not only physical remnants but also cultural deposits containing layered social and historical narratives. Following the semiotic approach, this study attempts to unravel the relationship between signs and meanings manifested in the form of menhirs, artifacts, and inscriptions found at the megalithic sites. This study involves not only understanding the physical structure of the historical site but also the symbolic interactions and meanings shaped through the customs and practices of the Minangkabau community, known as 'living stones' (Mahadzir, S.Y. et al., 2024; Ismagilova, G., 2015; Jabatan Perancangan Bandar dan Desa Negeri Sembilan. 2014). In this context, the megalithic stones function not only as grave markers or monuments but also as vessels of collective memory that connect the past with present life. Understanding megalithic sites in the semiotic archaeological study in Negeri Sembilan allows us to delve deeper into how past people expressed and understood their world. This assumes that each stone or structure carries not only utilitarian functions but also semiotic content revealing specific aspects of the ideology, spirituality, and social structure of the society that created it (Ramli, Z. et al. (2019).

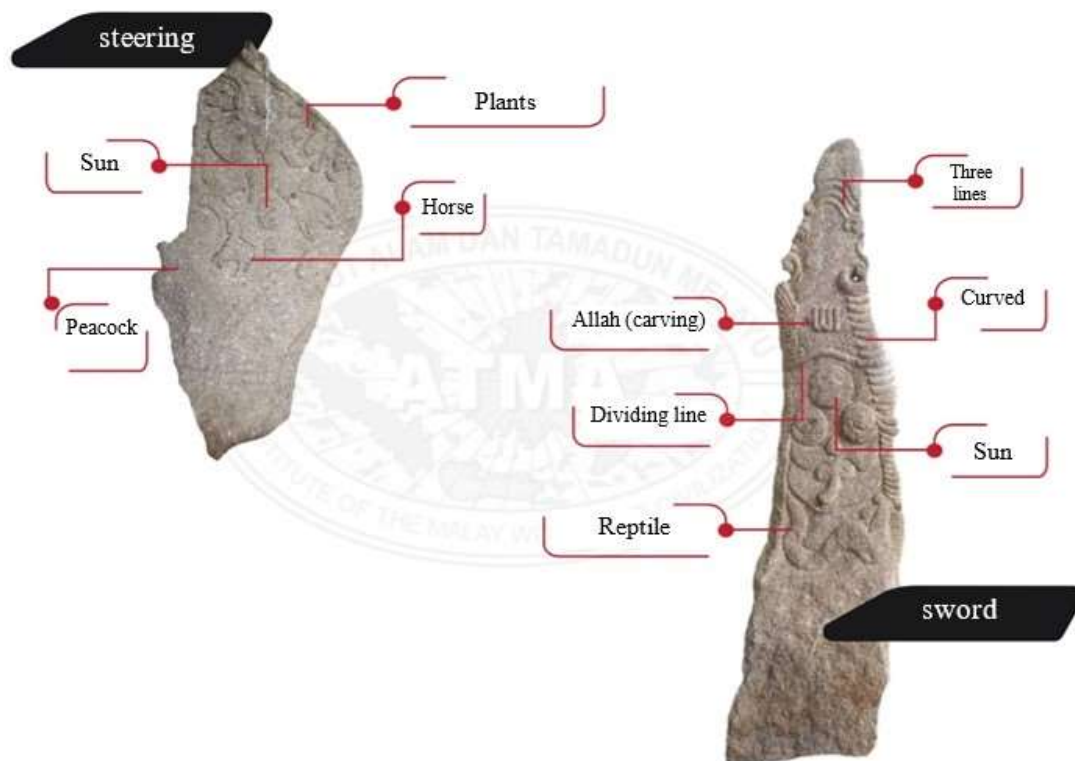


Figure 2. Symbolism and Meaning Embedded in Megalithic Stone located at Pengkalan Kempas Complex, Negeri Sembilan

In a semiotic context, the megalithic sites around Kuala Pilah and Port Dickson in Negeri Sembilan can be viewed as rich systems of symbolic and communicative meanings as shown in figure 2. The distribution and positioning of these megalithic stones form not only a geographical landscape but also a semiotic landscape that reflects the customs, beliefs, and sociocultural values of the local community. The geographical position of these megalithic sites is closely related to historical and cultural locations such as the Pengkalan Kempas Historical Complex, Istana Menanti, and Hutan Lipur Jeram Toi Jelebu, uncovering a dialogue between the past and present, offering an evolving and dynamic narrative. In this study framework, semiotics is defined as the analysis of signs and symbols that express the cultural and historical

identity of the Minangkabau community in Negeri Sembilan (Miksic, J. N., 1985.). In this context, megalithic sites are interpreted not just as scattered stones without meaning but as mediums that store and convey messages across ages. These stones, sometimes referred to as 'living stones', contain stories and rituals that play a role in preserving and narrating the history and myths associated with the place (Khattak & Abukhait, 2024).

In the field of semiotic studies, the megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan are not merely viewed as static archaeological remains but as dynamic and meaningful sign systems. Each stone in this complex carries not only historical dimensions but also layers of semiotic connections that link the past to the present through myths, symbols, and related rituals. Through the semiotic framework, this study interprets megalithic sites as discourses that facilitate dialogue between cultural heritage and contemporary perceptions held by travelers and local communities. The selection of study sites specifically the Pengkalan Kempas Historical Complex and Luak Tanah Mengandung is based on the availability of historical data sources and geographical contexts that allow in-depth semiotic studies. Additionally, the integration of these sites with existing tourism areas offers a unique opportunity to understand how historical artifacts are imbued with meaning and reinterpreted in the context of archeotourism. Semiotic research at megalithic sites has the potential to contribute significantly to our understanding of the cultural and social practices of the Minangkabau community in Negeri Sembilan. This semiotic analysis is expected to reveal how megalithic sites function as mediums of exploration for collective identity and living cultural memory within the current consciousness, while maintaining dialogue between ancestral heritage and cultural continuity (Richards, G., 1996 and Masdey, S.S. et al., 2019).

Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative approach using cross-sectional surveys and questionnaires as the primary measurement tools. This approach enables the collection and analysis of numerical data to explain the phenomena under study. A total of 400 questionnaires, containing a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions, were prepared and distributed to three groups of respondents: local residents, business owners, and tourists. The questionnaire was developed based on theories from previous studies and reviewed by experts to ensure its validity. The questionnaire includes 11 types of questions using various formats such as Likert scales and objective choices to gather data on perceptions and views regarding the megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan.

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software, version 26, with a focus on descriptive statistics to describe frequencies, percentages, averages, and maximum and minimum values obtained from respondents' answers. This analysis aims to understand the demographics and perception levels of respondents regarding the variables studied.

Results and Discussion

The overall findings obtained through the structured questionnaire survey indicate that public perception of megalithic sites as part of the archeotourism industry is still at a low level. Additionally, the results show that respondents are more interested in heritage and ecological tourism activities compared to archaeology. Consequently, this study gathers information on the potential and perceptions of megalithic sites to assist the government and the national tourism industry in generating significant revenue and enriching sociocultural diversity.

Respondent Demographics

Table 1. Distribution of Respondent Demographics (n=400)

| Variable | Number of Respondents (N) | Percentage (%) |
|----------|---------------------------|----------------|
| Gender | | |

| | | |
|--|-----|------|
| Male | 167 | 41.8 |
| Female | 233 | 58.3 |
| Age Group | | |
| 20 – 30 years | 178 | 44.5 |
| 31 – 40 years | 28 | 7.0 |
| 41 – 50 years | 24 | 6.0 |
| 51 – 60 years | 170 | 42.5 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Malay | 285 | 71.3 |
| Chinese | 38 | 9.5 |
| Indian | 34 | 8.5 |
| Bumiputera (Sabah / Sarawak) | 42 | 10.5 |
| Others | 1 | 0.3 |
| Locality / State | | |
| Negeri Sembilan | 99 | 24.8 |
| Melaka | 76 | 19.0 |
| Selangor | 85 | 21.3 |
| Johor | 10 | 2.5 |
| Kuala Lumpur | 43 | 10.8 |
| Kedah | 7 | 1.8 |
| Perak | 40 | 10.0 |
| Pulau Pinang | 4 | 1.0 |
| Perlis | 14 | 3.5 |
| Terengganu | 3 | 0.8 |
| Kelantan | 6 | 1.5 |
| Pahang | 6 | 1.5 |
| Sabah | 3 | 0.8 |
| Sarawak | 4 | 1.0 |
| Education Level | | |
| No formal education | 37 | 9.3 |
| Primary School Education | 33 | 8.3 |
| Secondary School Education | 57 | 14.2 |
| Diploma / Bachelor's Degree | 203 | 50.7 |
| Master's Degree / PhD | 70 | 17.5 |
| Employment Type | | |
| Management and Professional Administration | 107 | 26.8 |
| Technical / Support Staff | 56 | 14.0 |
| General Workers / Self-employed | 80 | 20.0 |
| Student | 90 | 22.5 |
| Unemployed / Homemaker / Retiree | 67 | 16.8 |
| Monthly Income | | |
| RM900 or less | 100 | 25.0 |
| RM901 – RM1500 | 56 | 14.0 |
| RM1501 – RM2000 | 65 | 16.3 |
| RM2001 – RM3000 | 94 | 23.5 |
| More than RM4000 | 85 | 21.3 |

Table 1 presents the descriptive analysis of the demographic profile of the respondents, which include domestic tourists and local residents in the study area. Of the respondents, 41.8% (167) are male, and 58.3% (233) are female. Regarding age, respondents range from 20 to 60 years old. The analysis shows that 44.5% (178) of respondents are aged between 20-30 years, followed by 42.5% (170) aged between 51-60 years, 7% (28) aged between 31-40 years, and 6% (24) aged between 41-50 years.

In terms of ethnicity, 71.3% (285) of respondents are Malay, 9.5% (38) are Chinese, 8.5% (34) are Indian, and 10.5% (42) are Bumiputera from Sabah and Sarawak. Only one respondent (0.25%) is from other ethnicities. Regarding locality, the majority of respondents are from Negeri Sembilan (24.8%, 99), followed by Melaka (19%, 76), Selangor (21.3%, 85), Johor (2.5%, 10), and Kuala Lumpur (10.8%, 43). Other states include Perak (10%, 40), Kedah (1.8%, 7), Penang (1%, 4), Perlis (3.5%, 14), Terengganu (0.8%, 3), Kelantan (1.5%, 6), Pahang (1.5%, 6), Sabah (0.8%, 3), and Sarawak (1%, 4).

Regarding the educational level, the majority of respondents have a Diploma or Bachelor's degree, with 203 respondents (50.7%). Only 70 respondents (17.5%) hold a Master's degree or PhD. There are 37 respondents (9.3%) with no formal education, while 33 respondents (8.3%) received only primary school education, and 57 respondents (14.2%) have secondary school education. For employment types, 107 respondents (26.8%) work in management and professional administration, while 90 respondents (22.5%) are students, and 80 respondents (20%) are general workers/self-employed. Additionally, 67 respondents (16.8%) are unemployed/housewives/retirees, and 56 respondents (14%) are technical and support staff.

Finally, regarding monthly income, 100 respondents (25%) earn RM900 or less, followed by 94 respondents (23.5%) who earn between RM2001 to RM3000. A total of 85 respondents (21.3%) have a monthly income of more than RM4000, 65 respondents (16.3%) earn between RM1501 to RM2000, and only 56 respondents (14%) have an income between RM901 to RM1500.

Views on Megalithic Sites in Negeri Sembilan

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Views on Megalithic Sites in Negeri Sembilan (n=400)

| Statement | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | Min (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) |
|--|-------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|---------|-------------------------|
| Megaliths are believed to have associations with supernatural powers | 72 (18.0 %) | 66 (16.5%) | 98 (24.5%) | 86 (21.5%) | 78 (19.5%) | 3.08 | 1.371 |
| Megaliths have taboos and should not be treated carelessly | 56 (14.0 %) | 54 (13.5 %) | 109 (27.3 %) | 103 (25.8 %) | 78 (19.5 %) | 3.23 | 1.297 |
| Megaliths have age-old stories and legends | 42 (10.5 %) | 49 (12.3 %) | 89 (22.3 %) | 132 (33.0 %) | 88 (22.0 %) | 3.44 | 1.251 |
| Megaliths are said to have 'spirit' when accompanied by ritual worship | 73 (18.3 %) | 44 (11.0 %) | 97 (24.3 %) | 104 (26.0 %) | 82 (20.5 %) | 3.19 | 1.374 |
| Megaliths are also associated with mystical tales | 55 (13.8 %) | 45 (11.3 %) | 93 (23.3 %) | 120 (30.0 %) | 87 (21.8 %) | 3.35 | 1.310 |
| Average | | | | | | 3.26 | .841 |

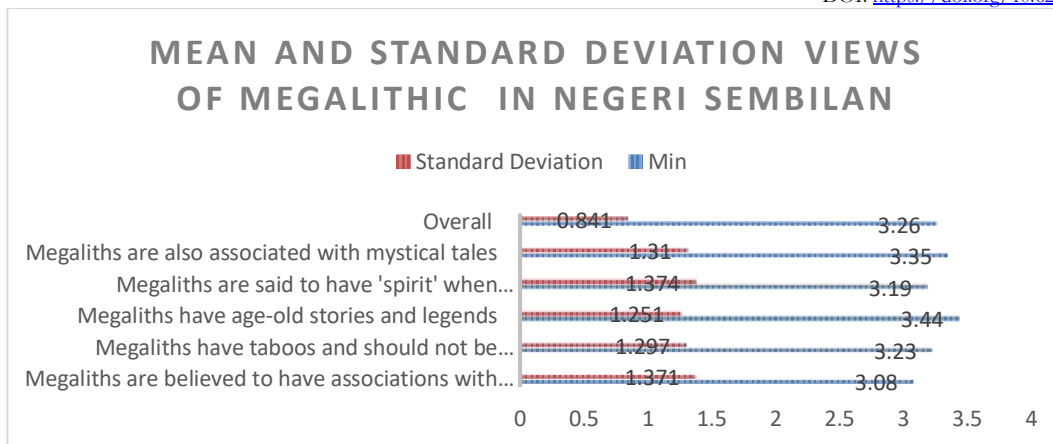


Figure 3. Chart of Mean and Standard Deviation of Views on Megalithic Sites in Negeri Sembilan

Table 2 and Figure 3 shows the mean and standard deviation of views on megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan based on respondents' perceptions. The study's findings indicate that "Megaliths are believed to have associations with supernatural powers" ($M=3.08$, $SD=1.371$) and "Megaliths have taboos and should not be treated carelessly" ($M=3.23$, $SD=1.297$). Furthermore, "Megaliths have age-old stories and legends" ($M=3.44$, $SD=1.251$) and "Megaliths are said to have 'spirit' when accompanied by ritual worship" ($M=3.19$, $SD=1.374$). The final statement, "Megaliths are also associated with mystical tales" ($M=3.35$, $SD=1.310$). All these views received mean values at a low level, indicating that megalithic sites still lack tourist attention. This is because these megalithic sites are not commercialized as archeotourism products where visitors or tourists are not exposed to the uniqueness of these ancient relics.

Community Perception of Archeotourism at Megalithic Sites

Table 3. Community Perception of Archeotourism at Megalithic Sites

| Statement | True | False |
|---|---------------|---------------|
| Archeotourism is a branch of heritage tourism | 283 (71 %) | 117 (29 %) |
| Archeotourism focuses on visits to historical places, archaeological heritage, and monuments | 273 (68 %) | 127 (32 %) |
| Archeotourism can provide an exotic experience to visitors by experiencing the atmosphere at archaeological sites | 272 (68 %) | 128 (32 %) |
| The archeotourism sector can promote and develop the local socio-economy | 264 (66 %) | 136 (34 %) |
| The existence of megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan can make the state as popular as Stonehenge (UK) | 280 (70 %) | 120 (30 %) |

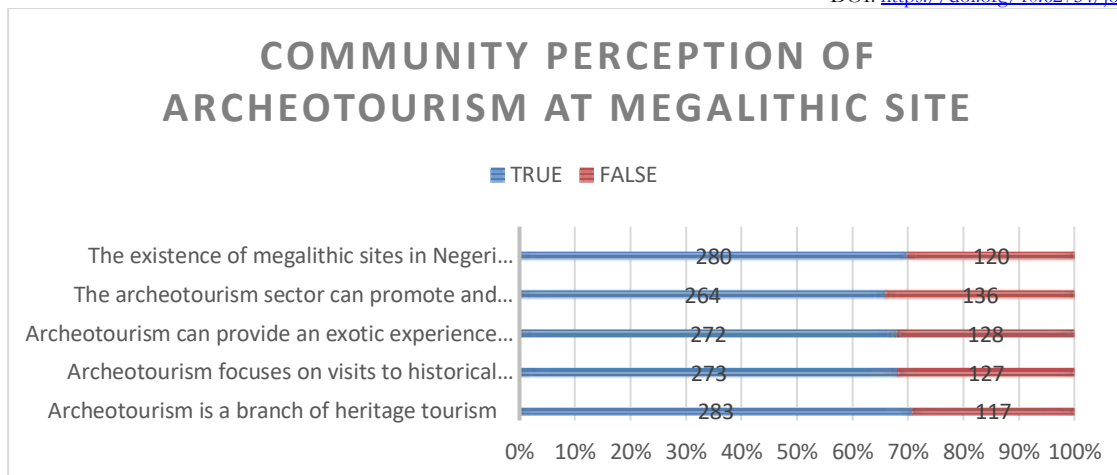


Figure 4. Chart of Community Perception of Archeotourism at Megalithic Sites

Table 3 and Figure 4 shows respondents' perceptions of statements regarding archaeotourism at megalithic sites. The analysis results indicate that 283 (71%) respondents agreed that archaeotourism is a branch of heritage tourism, while 117 (29%) disagreed. Furthermore, 273 (68%) respondents agreed that archaeotourism focuses on visiting historical sites, archaeological heritage, and monuments, compared to 127 (32%) who disagreed. The third statement shows that 272 (68%) respondents believed that archaeotourism can provide an exotic experience for visitors by immersing them in the atmosphere of archaeological sites, while 128 (32%) disagreed with this statement.

The next statement shows that 264 (66%) respondents agreed that the archaeotourism sector can promote and develop the local socioeconomy, compared to 136 (34%) who disagreed. Finally, 280 (70%) respondents agreed that the existence of megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan could make the state as popular as Stonehenge in England, while 120 (30%) disagreed.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study summarizes the potential of megalithic sites in Negeri Sembilan as important assets in the archaeotourism sector. The research conducted has shown that while these sites have significant historical and cultural value, public and domestic tourist awareness and understanding of the megalithic sites are still limited. This indicates that there is ample room for education and promotion to enhance recognition of this heritage. Through this study, megalithic sites are identified not only as archaeological heritage sites but also as semiotic canvases that reflect the rich culture and history of the Minangkabau community. The ability of these sites to narrate ancient stories and influence contemporary perceptions highlights their symbolic strength, which can serve as a starting point for cultural and historical dialogue. Moreover, this study also emphasizes the importance of preserving and managing the megalithic sites, reminding us of the need to protect these sites from development threats and environmental damage. Preservation is crucial not only in terms of maintaining cultural heritage but also as a long-term investment in sustainable archaeotourism development. Therefore, this study's findings call upon stakeholders, including the government, local communities, academics, and the tourism industry, to collaborate in ensuring that this megalithic heritage can continue to be enjoyed by current and future generations. A multidisciplinary approach involving archaeology, semiotics, and tourism is recommended to develop broader interpretations and richer experiences of these megalithic sites.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The researchers affirm that they conducted the research without any commercial or financial relationships that could potentially create a conflict of interest.

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