



Place-Based and People-Based Aspects of Street Sociability

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ABSTRACT

The functions of streets as social places have been undermined by the emergence of modern shopping malls that focus on indoor social activities. Streets mainly use as channels for vehicular movement rather than spaces for social activities due to the dominance of car-oriented environment. In the context of Kuala Lumpur city, in spite of the high intensity of pedestrians in the main shopping streets fewer social activities observed especially in static form like sitting, standing and so forth. The lack of social activities in the main shopping streets could be due to the quality of the physical and the social environmental characteristics. The aim of this paper is to review the related theories explaining social logic of the streets. These theories include theory of change and behaviour setting, cities as movement economies, and third place theory. The finding of this paper would reveal the conceptual framework related to street sociability which would provide better understanding of the nature of the social activities and street sociability in the context of urban design.

Keywords:

Sociability; social activity; streets
place-based criteria; third place

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1. Introduction

According to social-cognitive theory, people actively intervene to make their surrounding socio-physical environment supportive in order to obtain their desired goals [1]. One of the main goals and concerns of people life is 'Livability,' which has been the focus of fields such as urban design, planning, and health science since the 1970s. Despite its frequent appearance in the educational and professional literature, livability is an ambiguous term that is used differently by various groups in different circumstances [2]. Livability refers to various constructed views regarding the quality of life and the built environment [3], which is approached by many considerations, such as creating pedestrian-friendly enclosures in the streets [2]. In the context of Malaysia, a livable city is concerned as the vibrant and attractive places to live in [4]. To achieve the goal of the liveable and vibrant city, some aspects need to be considered such as the approach of the urban activities (ibid). The starting point for planning such a liveable city creating a people-based platform where the city must provide a good condition for people to walk, stand, sit, listen and talk [3]. In such people activity-based

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perspective, the key word is the 'street' where people are moving in or streets lined with small shops, cafes, and other entertainment hubs constituted the backbone of communities [2]. Similar to many other cities, traditional streets in Kuala Lumpur have been perceived lively as they accommodate varieties of social activities [50] and served three main purposes i.e. for mobility, commerce and social interaction [44]; however, Kuala Lumpur Streets encountered with a great loss of streets significance as spaces for socializing through modernization transformations [45]. This is because urban planners still focus their city planning efforts based on the requirements of automobiles rather than people [2, 46, 47]. Accordingly, in spite of vast investments on car-oriented concepts and its related supporting activities, pedestrian-oriented perspectives tend to be undervalued in transportation and traffic planning and practices [48, 49]. Thus, many modern cities have lost this important social character in their development process. On this basis, this paper argues that redevelopments of the streets according to the concept of the 'street for people' seems crucial especially in the rapid trend of globalization.

Shopping streets provide opportunities to represent the urban culture by the way that the shopping activities performed [20]. In addition to shopping activities, other leisure activities have also taken place. On the importance of the peoples' activities in the shopping streets, Jacobs [11] indicated that urban designers need to put effort on understanding the nature of the people and activities rather than the physical dimensions of the shopping streets. This perspective can explain why some streets are livelier and some seem to be more functional for people, as they are designed according to the peoples' need and priorities. This paper is themed 'sociable shopping street'. It explores the primary specific attributes of the well-designed shopping street as a liveable place for people. Sociability highlights the ability of public space to provide attractive zones for people to contact and socialize [21]. The term 'street sociability' was adopted in this paper as:

To what extent the street environment is conducive to the constitution of pedestrian social activities which are performed either dynamically (moving/ walking) or statically(stationary).

In this way, the following question is raised. How do existing theories support the notion of sociability in shopping streets? And what are the current urban design practices in the study of the designing streets for people and successful public social life? On this basis, to explore the factors affecting pedestrian social activities in shopping streets, first, the main theories underlie the theoretical structure of this paper is briefly explained. In the next step, the conceptual basis will be presented which is followed by the conclusion.

2. Theoretical basis

A lively street is defined by Mehta, [22] as a street which accommodates a variety of people performing different types of activities e.g. predominantly stationary and sustained activities which are in fact social in nature. This view shows the significance of the social activities in street liveliness; however, fewer studies have explored these types of activities compared to necessary activities. The main question is that is there any relationship between this street environment and formation of social activities? Therefore, it is important to critically review related theories on how the street environments support livability goals based on the social cognitive perspective. In fact, a physical framework does not have a direct influence on the quality, content, and intensity of social contacts, which are the primary essence of the pedestrian social activities [5]. Gehl mentions that social activities mainly relate to the common interest in economy, politics, and ideology among users of public space. Additionally, architects and planners can have an effect on creating possibilities for the meeting, seeing, and hearing people - possibilities that both take on a quality of their own and become important as background and starting point for other forms of contact [6]. This point of view

highlights the social function of streets beyond their physical function¹. Obviously, current debates on the streets focused on the social functions of the street environment which contributed to the social public life [7-10]. In this view, the street is considered a source of communication [42] where people can meet other people. In other words, a street is a place 'to see and to be seen' [11]. In such a view, the street must be seen as the social fabric of the city as the presence of streets is as necessary as the buildings to explain the social logic of the cities [12]. Mahdzar, [13] highlights the importance of the streets in people's public life, considering the streets in terms of Jacobs's social opinions in which she recognized the streets as the most prominent public spaces found in a city related to social public life [14]. As streets are the first opportunity where public and private physically connected, they are a valuable platform for the constitution of social interaction and activities [15]. Streets are thus typically considered to be diverse spaces being used by people from different ethnic groups, income levels, and age, among other things. This makes streets the location for establishing social connections and interactions that are part of the daily life of any city [16,17]. Behavior studies emphasize on the two-way social interaction between people and the environment as people would make the direct or indirect interaction between them and the surrounding environment [18]. Many studies have shown a link between social interaction and specific health outcomes [19]. Considering the significant role of the streets in the provision of the possibility of the social interaction with urban places, reemphasize on the social function of the street is necessary. Thus, where social activities lost in some urban environments, to bring back the social life to the cities the streets would be the point of departure.

Loss of social activities in the streets might be associated with many reasons, such as quality of the built environment, natural, economic, and human-based elements. Focusing on the human element, loss of social activities might be caused by users' personal characteristics, such as their individual social attitudes and preferences. For example, negative attitude and preference toward outdoor activities might act as a barrier to participation at the personal level [23]. It is also influenced by individual needs, cultural, and personal background of the street users who perceive the environment [24]. To investigate the possible relationships between social activity and the street environment characteristics, this paper reviews sets of theories related to the human behavior on one hand and the physical environment on the other hand such as: theory of 'Behavior setting,' 'Cities as movement economies,' and 'Third place' which are explained in the following.

In this paper, the 'Transtheoretical Model' developed by Prochaska & DiClemente in 1983 [25,26] is kept in mind, focusing on the possibilities for changes in individual preferences towards being engaged in social activities. Moreover, the 'behavior setting' theory [27] is utilized as it concentrates on the relationship between people social behavior and the physical environment. To focus on the economic implementation of the social activities in urban streets, the theory of the 'cities as the movement economies' [28] is used which point out to the multiplier effect between land use design and pedestrian movement which is the dominant pedestrian activity. The first two theories were developed in the fields of environmental and ecological psychology in the last three decades and have been recognized as foundations for environment and behavior research [24]. The third theory (cities as movement economies) was developed in the field of the planning and design and further adapted around the world in a variety of research areas and practical applications including archaeology, criminology, information technology, urban and human geography, anthropology and cognitive science.

¹ Physical function of the streets are mostly concerns of the transportation planning fields which emphasize on the movement as the primary function of the streets.

The concept of the third place was developed by the urban sociologist Oldenburg, [29] and focuses on the importance of informal public gathering places. This theory has been adopted since it deals with the microscale level features of particular gathering places which host a variety of activities. In the following, after a brief description of each theory, it is explained how the above theories can potentially provide the theoretical basis for filling the knowledge gap.

2.1. Theory of Change and Behavior Setting

Where individual users' characteristics act as a barrier to the social activities, to promote pedestrian activities in outdoor spaces it would be beneficial to look for changing personal attitudes and behaviors. The 'Transtheoretical Model' developed by Prochaska & DiClemente, [25] concerns the intention of the change via the integration of many theories related to the behavioral changes. This theory shaped based on the decision-making capability of people involves five change stages, which are: (a)Pre-contemplation Stage in which change is not considered or decided upon yet. (b)Contemplation Stage which explains uncertainties about changing. (c)Preparation Stage which is preparation to make a specific change. And (d,e) Action and maintenance are the other two stages of behavioral change and involve taking action and incorporating the new behavior according to Transtheoretical Model.

Having looked at the five stages, it is clear that the possibility of changing the negative tendency of pedestrian toward outdoor activities would be available by pushing the pedestrian to the second stage and highlighting the possible benefits of the changes (e.g. economic or health benefits) on one hand and disadvantages of the negative attitudes on the other. As a result, the negative attitude of pedestrians toward being sociable might be modified by their own choice of changing the old habits through a teaching program. Thus, according to the 'Transtheoretical Model', altering peoples' negative attitudes towards social activities to the positive attitudes would be one of the effective ways of promoting pedestrian activities in the streets. However, besides the peoples' personal attitudes there are other factors which influence the incidence of outdoor activities in urban streets. It can be explained that in the constitution of the social activities in urban streets two main aspects engaged including: 'people and the environment'. This idea is described further in terms of 'behavior setting' by Barker, [27].

Barker's [27] concept of behavior concentrates on the study of everyday human behavior in relation to physical settings [30]. This concept of a behavior setting examines the relationship between a physical environment (setting) and the patterns of behavior that may possibly take place in it [24]. A typical behavior setting consists of a milieu (a particular layout of the environment), a standing pattern of behavior (a recurrent activity), and synapomorphy (a congruent relationship between the two) [24,27]. This concept is concentrated in 'behaviorism movement' in which the main principle is providing an environment which could secure the behavior needs of people completely and clearly [31].

2.2. Cities as Movement Economies

In the late 1970s, a method called space syntax was developed by Hillier and Hanson in University College London which considers the spatial structure of the city and the two-way systematic and probabilistic relationship between physical space and social and the economic functioning of a city. The Hillier, et al.'s 'Natural Movement' theory [32] shown that movement pattern is affected and generated by the structure of the urban grid and its 'configuration', as pedestrians tend to follow the shortest and most direct routes moving from places to their destinations [28]. The grid of a town or

city may be defined as the system of space of public spaces created by the way in which buildings are aggregated and aligned [32]. Natural movement theory emphasizes the role of the spatial structure of the street as a 'part' and its connection to the bigger context of the city as a 'whole'. Movement is affected with part and the whole structure of the cities. This theory is later explored to examine the other aspects of the pedestrian activities like predominantly stationary and sustained activities in urban design and planning field [33].

In 1996, Hillier published the theory of 'Cities as Movement Economies' which demonstrates a spiral of multiplier effects of natural movement and urban grid and space. It was shown that natural movement and even the urban grid itself impacts attraction of movement-seeking land uses, such as retail in high natural movement locations, and sends non-movement seeking uses to low natural movement ones. Movement seeking uses then resulted in the attraction of more movement to those high movement locations and again more attracted uses are encouraged. This spiral of multiplier effects of natural movement on land uses and densities results in the creation of mixed-use areas.

Hillier, [28] has noted that the multiplier effect of space and movement on each other rises from the distribution of variety of the land use and building density that themselves are influenced by the space-movement relationship. This is the so-called 'Movement Economy'. This theory has been examined in different fields of social, economic and planning and various countries. Similar to the natural movement theory, this theory has been expanded to cover the relationship between spatial structure and the other aspects of the pedestrian activities e.g. social activities [33]. Focusing on the economic aspects of the 'movement economies' in the shopping streets, it can be said that three main economic attributes need to be highlighted include variety of commercial goods and services, competitive price of goods and services, and quality of the goods and services [34]. This paper emphasizes on the three mentioned economic attributes as economic implementations for engaging in incidences of social activities in shopping streets.

2.3. Third Place Theory

Oldenburg, [29] introduced the "third place" as somewhere people can gather, put aside the concerns of work and home, and hang out simply for the pleasures of good company and lively conversation. Third places are the heart of a community's social vitality, the grassroots of democracy and establishing feelings of a sense of place. Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons and so on fit into the Third Places Category by providing a public place for social gatherings and interaction [35].

In his theory, Oldenburg, [29] identified three main domains of the contemporary people's life: the domestic, the gainful or productive, and the inclusively sociable. The first place is home, where people live which is the most important environments since it regularly affects the development of every individual. The second place called workplace, which reduces the individual to a single and productive role that motivates competition and social hierarchy. It provides the fundamental means to living by improving the material quality of life but is structured by work deadlines, timecards, and traffic. Third places, then, serve as the "anchors" of community life and facilitate broader, more creative interaction besides providing relief and escape from the stress of the first two realms. According to Oldenburg, [36], "the third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (p. 16). This contribution [29] summarizes that the combined effect of common interest, social interaction and cultural value can contribute to a great extent to achieve dynamic third place or public realm.

Oldenburg's novel idea [29] challenged him and many other researchers by arguing that informal public life was essential to the social structure of communities, and that third places were ideal environments for facilitating public life. In the absence of social public life, urban design and planning research must restore traditional values and redevelop 'lost spaces' to a livable urban place [37]. Therefore, Oldenburg and many researchers since have argued for continued research and celebration of third places [38].

Third places are usually small-scale, independent businesses owned and operated by local people [39] which offer something therapeutic valuable [40]. This paper argues that besides the indoor third places (e.g. cafes, bars, book stores, etc.), the outdoor third places are growing. This includes places such as the entrance step of a shopping complex that many people used to sit there to rest, relax, and watch people passing by or street activities. These places would also accommodate a variety of informal street activities including public arts, musician, showmen, and vendors. Based on the primary observations in the shopping streets in Kuala Lumpur City, this paper indicates that the shopping streets owe their livability to vibrant activities in the outdoor third places along the streets.

3. Results and Discussion

According to the theory of the behavior setting [27], there is an interaction between place (milieu) and individual behavior. The interaction can be verbal or non-verbal [42]. On this basis, the main conceptual framework set up which emphasizes on the extent to which the sociability characteristics of the shopping streets are perceived by street users. As explained, the 'Transtheoretical Model' and 'behavior setting' theory concentrates on the relationship and association between pedestrian behavior and the surrounding physical environment from the non-built and built aspect point of view, respectively. However, the theory of the 'Cities as Movement Economies' focuses on the causal relationship between spatial structure and pedestrian movement. In his theory, Hillier, [28] indicated that by the generation of the natural movement through spatial configuration, the social and economic features come afterward. Also, Oldenburg, [29] highlighted different characteristics of the particular place where people used to hang out, gather, and put aside the concerns of work and home – called a 'third place'. This paper attempts to synthesize these theories and use this synthesis as a theoretical base for investigation (Figure 1.).

As it can be clearly seen, Behavior and setting theory presented as the main theory explaining the relationship between behavior and milieu while the other two theories highlight some macro and microscale characteristics of the milieu and behavior. Having reviewed the various definitions of sociability, it can be concluded that sociability encompasses the physical environment and the consequences of human actions and management. The former is known as place-based dimension, while the latter is people-based aspects of the environment [41]. Figure 1 demonstrates people-based aspects of sociability like conversation, regulars, movement and activity (Behavior) and place-based aspects of the sociability including spatial configuration, land use mix, economic access provision of outdoor gathering places and so forth (milieu).

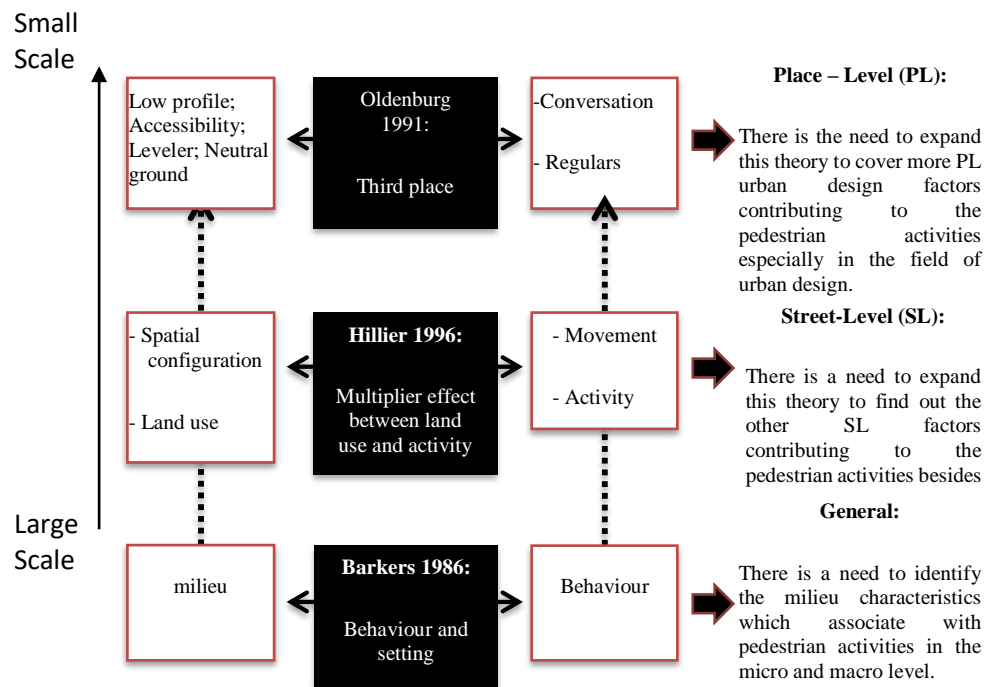


Fig. 1. Conceptual basis underlying the research problem

Thus, this paper introduces both place-based and people-based aspects of the sociability in shopping streets (Figure 2). While some of the existing literature addressing the importance of the macro-scale factors in promoting sociability in the shopping streets (e.g. accessibility), the other research highlights the micro-scale factors [19,22,29]. This paper raises the issue that in practice ‘street sociability’ failed to meet the street users’ needs due to the lack of understanding of the streets’ attributes according to the micro and macro levels. Thus, this paper proposes that the place-based aspects of sociability encompass the macro and micro scales characteristics. The former -called Street-Level attributes (SL) highlights the street characteristics as a whole which are more or less similar along the street such as ease of access, safety of crime and traffic and diversity of uses and activities in the street, and the latter called Place-Level attributes (PL) concentrates on the particular characteristics of the common outdoor gathering places (third places) in the selected streets such as place visibility, place amenities and facilities. While the people-based aspect of the sociability includes personal preference called the Individual Sociability Characteristics of the street users like the attitudes and tendency towards being socially active. Individual sociability identified through social awareness as having excellent social skills, being socially sensitive, adaptable, and perceptive, and influencing others and so forth [43]. SL and PL characteristics need to be considered together since the incidence of social activities might be caused either by any of SL/ PL characteristics or it might be contributed to both of them. The SL characteristics might affect PL ones. For instance, a place might be well designed in terms of the decor and ambiance (PL) but it might be located in a poorly accessible area (SL). Or in another example, the street might be planned with compatible land uses (SL) but the gathering places might not be facilitated by the activity-supporting features like benches (PL). Thus, people might not want to visit and retain there longer. Thus, on condition that the social activity investigation focuses only on one of the either SL or PL characteristics of the street layout, another remaining characteristic would be undervalued. Accordingly, it is necessary to integrate SL and PL characteristics contributing to the social activities to cover a wider area of knowledge about social activities in shopping streets.

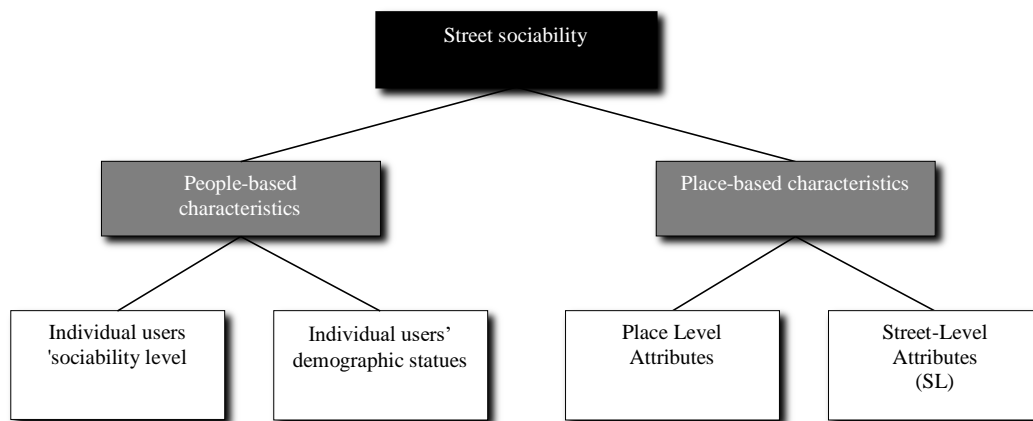


Fig. 2. Proposed theoretical framework underlying the people-based and place-based aspects of the street sociability

Thus, based on the critical analysis of the mentioned theories and relevant literature, this study identified the main SL and PL attributes which might be contributed to the social activities in the streets. The former includes Accessibility, Diversity, Seating Comfort and Experiential Qualities while the latter includes Amenities and Facilities, atmosphere quality, affordability and access, Visibility, Uses, and events. These characteristics need to be further explained and explored.

4. Conclusion

This paper emphasizes on the theories underlying the sociability characteristics of the shopping streets which are perceived by street users. How people perceive an environment is related to the environmental characteristics on one hand (place-based aspects) and individual user characteristics (people-based aspects) on the other hand. Overall social behavior is shaped as a consequence of user perception of shopping streets in terms of functional performance and social dynamic or static activities [30]. This paper emphasizes on the need for exploring street sociability through the integration of sets of theories from a variety of fields including, social and health science, urban planning, psychology and so forth.

The existence of social activities plays a significant role in almost every street [7-9]. They need to be considered in the planning and design of the cities in order to bring back the street life to people which consequently would characterize the street liveliness. This paper argues that the social activities (either dynamically or statistically) which would take place in the streets would be affected by the street layout (milieu) characteristics as physical, spatial, social, and the economic fabric of the street in addition to the individual characteristics of the street users. This paper opens up the issue regarding the importance of the matter of scale in sociability studies. The SL attributes (macro-scale) would influence peoples' choice of a particular shopping street to fulfill their social needs besides shopping. While the PL attributes (micro-scale) would influence the peoples' choice of a particular street to fulfill their social needs on one hand and staying longer in an outdoor gathering place on the other hand. Thus, further studies need to explore both macro and micro scales of the street sociability attributes in order to make a precise understanding of social activities and sociability especially in the field of urban design.

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