A Conceptual Framework on Sociable Public Space in Shopping-Malls

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Retail has been one of the most active sub-sectors in the Malaysian economy, contributing towards 44.8 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in year 2017 (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2018). The rise of online retailing together with covid-19 pandemic have triggered retail bankruptcies thus abandon of physical retails and lead to a depletion of urbanity. Despite numerous existing literatures addressing the importance of sociability in the public space setting such as public plaza (Shrestha, S, K, 2015), libraries (Askarizad, 2019), shopping streets (Rahman, 2016), the study raises the issue that there is a lack of study regarding the qualities of public space influencing sociability of shopping malls. Therefore, this result aims to formulate a conceptual framework for enforcing sociability of shopping malls. This study uses questionnaires survey to identify the qualities of public space influencing sociability of shopping malls. This research is expected to lead towards background understanding of consumer behaviour, shopping malls, sociability, and variables for formalizing framework to enhance sociability of shopping malls. In conclusion, this study contributes to combine different body of knowledge and contribute design framework for the design of sociable public spaces in shopping malls. More variables can be included in the existing study to further examine the factors influencing the sociability of place and qualitative study can be conducted in future research to look in depth on sociability in relation to public space design of shopping malls. More variables can be included in the existing study to further examine the factors influencing the sociability of place.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Study

Retail has been one of the most active sub-sectors in the Malaysian economy, contributing towards 44.8 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in year 2017 (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2018). However, factors like oversupply of retail space, lower tourist arrivals, weakness in domestic retail spend, lacklustre consumer sentiment, intense competition for tenants, and changing consumer preferences and behaviour have pushed the Retail business under pressure. Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted consumer payment space in Malaysia as consumers are gradually switching from offline to online purchases. The closure of

physical stores due to lockdown and social distancing measures also led consumers to ramp up online shopping, which in turn accelerated the e-commerce market growth in Malaysia. (Globaldata, 2020) This increase in the use of online retail has since resulted in the reduction of total sales realized by physical retails.

1.2 Problem Statement

1.2.1 Motivational Problem

According to NST (2011), retail sector has been facing continued revenue loss due to the Covid-19 impact and emergence of online retailing despite the projected growth of 4.1 per cent in compounded annual growth rate (CAGR). In addition, Edgemarket (2020) has highlighted

that the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed more than two-thirds of Malaysians leaning more into online shopping. According to the Managing Director of Retail Group Malaysia Tan Hai Hsin (2021), many shopping centres in Klang Valley struggled to secure tenants due to the serious oversupply of retail space, worsened by the rapid growth of online shopping. However, despite highlighting the issues of decreasing footfall to the shopping centres, understanding of consumer behaviour and preference is still lacked.

1.2.2 Research Problem

According to Rao (2019), the rise of online retailing has forced many brick-and-mortar retail chains going bankrupt. Part of the factor was due to the customer experience being often neglected in the structural reconfigurations of the retail morphologies. According to Hami (2018), people's preferences are often not considered in majority of the malls design. Spaces such as the atria, corridors, lobbies, and walkways are often used for business establishments, this has ultimately prevented people from staying longer. (Hami, 2018) The argument is supported by Manzo (2005) study which highlighted those modifications in mall designs are mainly for the enhancement of sales, not to prevent crime or other forms of social conduct. However, current research only focuses on public preferences and interaction with shopping mall interior landscape design but there is a lack of focus in highlighting quality of public space design of the malls in affecting the sociability.

1.3 RESEARCH GAP

Although there has been numerous existing literature addressing the importance of sociability in the public space setting such as public plaza (Shrestha, S, K, 2015), libraries (Askarizad, 2020), shopping streets (Rahman, 2016), the study raises the issue that there is a lack of study regarding the qualities of public space influencing sociability of shopping malls. This study also aligns with Rakhshanifar (2019), stating that there is a lack of understanding of the sociability attributes according to the micro and macro level and hence there is a need to expand the place-based and people-based aspects of the sociability especially in the context of shopping malls.

1.3 P.O.D.

The study aims to explore how to integrate vertical growth into shophouse to promote greater living experiences in cities in consideration of the present and future.

1.4 Research Questions

This research will formulate a design parameter for sociable public space in shopping malls The objectives of this study are:

RO1: To identify the preference and consumer behaviour in public space of shopping malls

RO2: To identify the qualities of public space influencing sociability of shopping malls.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Shopping Mall

A shopping mall is defined as a group of stores under one roof managed by a single entity whereby most of the stores are grouped together in achieving the common goal to boost their common economy. (Rahimi & Khazaei, 2018). Shopping malls have provided retailers a platform that includes retail spaces, services, amenities, and facilities. (Ying, Q. X., & Alias, A., 2022) However, Ahmed (2007) stated that recent Malaysia's shopping malls has gradually evolved from into social and recreational hub for people to carry out their social activities. This is further supported by Rahimi & Khazaei, (2018) study which highlighted that shopping has always played a significant role in fostering social interactions; therefore, people can be attracted to shopping malls because they offer a variety of comprehensive functions. A study by Rahimi & Khazaei (2018) has shown that those who stay close vicinity to a shopping mall will spend majority of their time there; therefore, shopping malls are essential for fostering relationships between residents. Initially, shopping malls served only as a place for monetary transaction, but its function has since expanded to include service outlets and entertainment.

2.2 Sociability

According to Zakariya (2014), Rakhshanifar (2019), and Yaseen (2017), sociability is defined as the ability of public space to provide attract a diverse range of public users to engage in a variety of social and recreational activities, whether individually or in groups. Sociability shows how individuals might utilise their social interaction and gathering activities in a comfortable and safe setting. A strong sense of connection to the community and to the area that offers such desirable social activities is configured when public space enables individuals to make friends, assemble, and feel at ease engaging with others

Shehata (2020), stated that Centrality and connectivity, visual permeability, thresholds and gateways, passive engagement, active engagement, discovery, comfort and relaxation, sitting, walking, public art, personalization, and shelter are some of the key physical qualities contributing to the level of sociability of a place, whereas the key measurements of social qualities of sociability include Street life, social networks, evening use and number of women, children, and elderly. In addition, Karami (2017) suggested that sociability may be divided into three categories: 'physical and environmental,' 'activity and functional,' and 'subjective and semantic,' all of which contribute to individuals' comfort in their surroundings. Placement of features, change of levels, supply of sufficient open and green spaces, connectedness, and visibility were among the important aspects that contributed to a space's sociability. (Karami, 2017) Another study done by Shrestha, S, K (2015) has provided some solutions to promote the sociability of open spaces which include: providing acceptable and adequate amounts of seating, considering the physical and social comfort of the plaza users, and designating landscape to function dually as seating spaces wherever possible.

In another study, Oram (2018) discussed about the importance of seating space in affecting the sociability of public spaces, in which the increased shading, shelter and design of seating will encourage prolonged stay activities which would ultimately improve the sociability of malls. Rakhshanifar (2019) argued that sociability should be categorized into two categories: people-based and place-based sociability. Conversation, regulars, movement, and activity (behaviour) are all characteristics of people-based sociability, while place-based aspects of sociability include

spatial arrangement, land use mix, economic access to outdoor gathering spaces, and so on (milieu). In summary, there are still uncertainties regarding the qualities of public space on sociability. Therefore, this research shall explore the qualities of public space influencing sociability of shopping malls through means of survey.

2.3 People-Based Attribute of Sociability

2.3.1 Frequency and Duration of visit

Frequency and duration of visit are often closely associated with consumers' behavior at the shopping mall in terms of visiting pattern in numerous scholars works. (Makgopa, 2016; Saat, 2018) Ramlee (2014) carried out a study and highlighted that shopper tend to visit more spaces in shopping mall but still have the time limit for them to be in the shopping mall. One to five hours in the shopping mall is found to be enough for them to socialize in the selected spaces with their companion. The study also revealed that more time and money on the store will be spent with the appropriate layout of store in malls. (Ramlee, 2014). In summary, this research will explore the effect of frequency and duration of visit by the shoppers on this aspect.

2.3.2 Shopping motives

Ahmed (2007) mentioned that there are seven dimensions of shopping malls that collectively explain consumers' motives for visiting malls. These dimensions are aesthetics, escape, flow, exploration, role enactment, social and convenience. This is supported by Makgopa (2016) study which finds that shopping mall customers visit shopping malls not only for searching for products, but they also view these visits as an entertainment activity that provides fun and pleasure from the shopping experience. However, Mansori (2013) expands the factors to be discussed about the tourist's visits to the shopping destination to include communication, accessibility, tangibility, pleasure, and product assortment.

Moreover, Wong (2012) and Ramlee (2014) finds that motives of shoppers include: enjoying the aesthetics, escaping from routine and boredom, exploring new products or stores, engaging in a state of absorption, gaining new information about stores and products, social interaction, seeking for latest trend and affiliation. In summary, there are different statements by different scholars about the matter and this

research will explore the understanding of the shopping motive.

2.4 Place-Based Attribute of Sociability

The paper identifies specific qualities that shape the sociability of a public space. Based on the previous identified qualities by previous scholars, the five main qualities associated with a sociable public space consist of safety and security, activity and function, environmental comfort, physical comfort, and accessibility. These characteristics will ultimately influence the user's degree of involvement and comfort when using the spaces.

2.4.1 Safety and security

According to Husseiny (2012), Privacy, safety, and security are significant requirements of promoting static activities in a space. The sense of perceived safety is affected by the characteristics of the environment, which affects the use and success of that environment (Mehta, 2013). Bigdeli (2013) emphasized that environmental perception with appropriate lighting, open views, elimination of unsecure places and use of signs, are vital in contributing to the safety and security of public spaces. As a result, this study will consider the impact of safety and security on the sociability of public space in shopping malls.

2.4.2 Activity and function

According to Bigdeli (2013), visual and aesthetic factors alone are not enough in contributing to the sociability of public space. Functional features of a public space can affect the quality and quantity of people's absorption for interaction in these spaces. Existence of enough spaces for sitting and special events in the space like street theatres, public arts and such activities that connect the people, improve the attractiveness of the space. (Bigdeli, 2013)

According to Kara (2015), activities serve as an important basis for a public place which provides a reason to people for come multiple visits. Mandeli (2019), mentioned that activity has two related concepts: vitality and diversity. Vitality refers to the numbers of people in and around the public space at different times of the day and night, the number of cultural events and celebrations over the year, the presence of an active street life, and feeling alive or lively.

According to Gehl (1987), outdoor activities are classified into necessary, optional and social which can serve as a guideline in understanding the function and sociability of public space. Necessary activities, such as going to work or school, occur almost regardless of the quality of the environment; optional activities, such as taking a leisurely walk or lingering only occur when the environmental conditions are optimal; and social activities are a result of a high level of optional activities requiring a high environmental quality. (Gehl, 1987). In conclusion, activity and function has a vital role in the sociability of public spaces, encouraging more people to engage.

2.4.3 Environmental Comfort

Various studies have discussed about the importance of environmental influences in affecting people's health and place satisfaction in public open spaces and encourages physical and social participation According to Rahman (2016), environmental comfort is associated with the provision of protection to shade people from environmental factors and provides a suitable temperature for people to socialize. In another study by Ramlee (2014), he emphasized that to be out of the weather and to be comfortable are some of the primary factors affecting the social participation of people in a space. Human behaviours are very much dependent on environmental influences. (Askarizad, 2020). Therefore, environmental comfort has to be taken into account when designing a sociable public space to engage people.

2.4.4 Physical Comfort

According to Bigdeli (2013), physical comfort of a public space is related to the access, position, physiological comfort in different climate conditions. Elements such as: monuments, stairs, seatings, and other effective factors encourage people to present and interacts in the space and they are considered crucial in encouraging social interactions in public open spaces. (Bigdeli, 2013) According to Rahman (2016), comfort refers to the extent to which public space enable people to visit of their choices without a physical and mental discomposure. Comfortable public spaces which is calm, welcoming, and pedestrian friendly with facilities and services required will subsequently encourage people to stay longer. (Rahman, 2016). In summary, this study will investigate the effect of physical comfort on the sociability of public space in shopping malls.

2.4.5 Accessibility

According to Mahdzar (2008) accessibility is defined as the behaviour of people in an appropriate space as a configuration of urban public space. His research has shown that an individual urban space with relatively low visibility and connectivity will result in low static activities which contributes to unsociable public space. (Mahdzar, 2008). This is supported by Mahboubeh (2008)'s study which highlighted that the absence of accessibility could discourage social interaction. According to Kara (2015), accessibility of public spaces is not only about its connection to surroundings, but it involves both visual and physical which refers to the ease of a place or facility reachable by people. It is expected from a successful public space to be visible and easily reachable. (Karami, 2017). Therefore, accessibility has a very important role in socialization and identity creation for public spaces.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual framework is planned and illustrated as below:
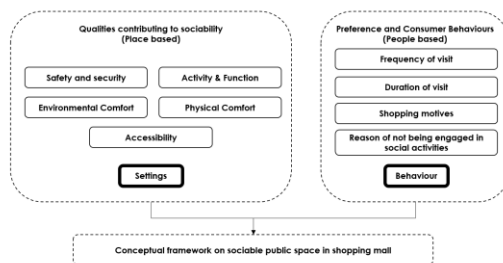
4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study is to support a study on the qualities of public space influencing sociability of shopping malls. The research is expected to lead towards background understanding of consumer behaviour, shopping malls, sociability, and variables for formalizing framework to enhance sociability of shopping malls.

5. CONTRIBUTIONS AND BENEFITS OF RESEARCH.

5.1 Research Contribution

This research contributes to combine different body of knowledge and contribute design framework for the design of sociable public spaces in shopping malls for Malaysia Retailers Association and designers so that sociability will become the emphasis in designing public spaces in shopping malls.

5.2 Limitation of Research / Future Recommendations

This study encounters a common limitation where the study only covers the influence of consumer behaviours and qualities influencing the sociability of public space in shopping malls. In addition, convenience sampling is used, and the total number of respondents is small. Although it has prompted some new information, it is limited to a small scale of research. If a larger scale is used, the results may differ. It is recommended that in future research, the focus of the study be broadened by considering the behaviour of shoppers within specific age groups in the public spaces of shopping malls. In the future, a larger sample size could be used. Furthermore, to achieve better population representation, probabilistic sampling should be used.

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