SOCIAL INTERACTION AMONG URBAN RESIDENTS IN GREENSPACES OF NEW TOWNSHIP, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is currently developing into an urbanized country. Malaysian’s severe loss and degradation of urban greenspace could adversely affect ecosystems as well as human social pattern. The aim of this paper is to discover the greenspace characteristics that contribute to the factors affecting level of social interaction among new township residents in Malaysia. This would reveal the unique characteristic of each greenspace eventually promotes or hinders social cohesion among new township residents. A raft of articles from various disciplines of urban and landscape planning, green infrastructure, human behavior and psychology, and ecological corridor engineering were reviewed to give an insight on what social interaction offers to human well-being, why do human need to socialize to gain wellness and how ecological setting influence the social-bonding quality. Result of the review suggests that social interaction is a mode that brings people together in community, particularly in the context of multi-cultural community. Mingling in subspaces of the greenspace permits relationship between users through spontaneous conversation. The park characters that afford the social interaction are diversity of subspaces, vegetation and animal populations, landforms and water bodies. Therefore, in planning of urban greenspace, it is necessary to interweave the boundary of a neighborhood with another to form a continuous community network.

KEYWORDS

Urban greenspace, Human Social Pattern, New township residents, Social interaction

INTRODUCTION

In recent year, social, economic and environmental considerations have led to a re-evaluation of the factors that contribute to sustainable urban environments. Information concerning the social interaction and meanings of greenspaces to urban residents is scarce nowadays. Urban greenspace is seen as an integral part of new township providing a range of services to people in urban area (James et al., 2009). Urban greenspaces are essential in new township due to the opportunities they provide for people to come in contact with each other. In terms of social well-being urban greenspace contributes to social interactions and to bring people together, reduces negative social behaviors such as aggression and violence, contributes to a sense of place and play an important role in fostering social cohesion and social identity (Newton, 2007). There is a raft of theories and studies showing the urban residents’ preferences for urban areas with greenspaces for social interaction that afford social harmony and community wellbeing (Wilson, 1993; Appleton, 1996; Stamps, 2004; Staats and Hartig, 2004; Regan and Horn, 2005; Hartig and Staats, 2006; James et al., 2009). For instance, in the Netherlands, preserving or increasing a social mix has proven to be a successful strategy to combat social segregation and strengthen social cohesion (Uiter-mark, 2003). The Dutch government is therefore trying to stimulate social interactions by promoting activities that will facilitate inter-ethnic interactions in greenspaces. Greenspaces may provide excellent opportunities for exchange between ethnic communities (Lofland, 1973; Sennett, 1990). However, prior research has shown that this applies more to urban than to non-urban greenspaces (Rishbeth, 2004; Buijs et al., 2009). In the context of Malaysia, research on how greenspace within new township area affects level of social interactions among users is still lacking. Malaysian urban communities are lacking of social interactions due limited time for socialization and insufficient public place such as park for the social activities. Most of them feel comfortable communicating only within their own social group and do not feel the need to interact with others. This is in line with earlier research by Lofland (1998) that interactions with
strangers are less common than those with known people. Most people like to be in these greenspaces and enjoy meeting and seeing other people, which can lead to the feelings of connection to the place and strong community interactions.

As can be seen in Table 1, previous research on social interaction had focused only on the particular neighborhoods and its surrounding public spaces. Based on these previous researches, there is still a gap on greenspace characteristics which affords and fosters social interaction among its users. Most of the variables measured were focused on specific neighborhoods and its nearby greenspaces. However, in this research the author will look at the social interactions among users from several nearby neighborhoods.

**Table 1**: Past studies relating social interactions and greenspaces.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Articles &amp; authors</th>
<th>Major Findings</th>
<th>Site Context</th>
<th>Variables Measured</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Interaction</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Racially mixed neighbourhoods, perceived <em>neighbourhood cohesion</em>, and adolescent health in Canada (Abada et. al., 2007).</td>
<td>• Strong social ties within the community foster an environment associated with connectedness, meaning, and purpose, thus increasing the risk of depressive symptoms.</td>
<td>• Adolescents within neighbourhoods</td>
<td>• Gender&lt;br&gt; • Place of residents&lt;br&gt; • Race - visible minorities&lt;br&gt; • Health measures&lt;br&gt; • Parental educations&lt;br&gt; • Family structure&lt;br&gt; • Low-income parents&lt;br&gt; • Geographic mobility status&lt;br&gt; • Perceived neighbourhood cohesion</td>
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<td>Neighbourhood social cohesion and youth participation in physical activity in Chicago (Craddock et al. 2009).</td>
<td>• Neighbourhood social cohesion influences participation in physical activity.</td>
<td>• Youth in neighbourhoods</td>
<td>• Physical activities&lt;br&gt; • Race/ethnicity&lt;br&gt; • Age and gender&lt;br&gt; • Heights or weights&lt;br&gt; • Health and behaviour&lt;br&gt; • Parental education</td>
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<td>Associations of neighbourhood problems and <em>neighbourhood social cohesion</em> with mental health and health behaviours: The multi-ethnic study Atherosclerosis (Echeverria et al., 2008).</td>
<td>• Less socially cohesive neighbourhoods were associated with increase depression, smoking, and not walking for exercise.</td>
<td>• Problematic Neighbourhoods</td>
<td>• Excessive noise,&lt;br&gt; • Heavy traffic&lt;br&gt; • lack of access to adequate food shopping,&lt;br&gt; • lack of parks or playgrounds,&lt;br&gt; • trash/litter,&lt;br&gt; • No or poor sidewalks&lt;br&gt; • Violence.</td>
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<td>Social interactions in urban parks: Stimulating social cohesion? (Peters et al., 2010).</td>
<td>• Urban parks can indeed facilitate social cohesion in urban neighbourhoods.</td>
<td>• Immigrants in Neighbourhoods</td>
<td>• Park Usage&lt;br&gt; • Attachment&lt;br&gt; • Distance&lt;br&gt; • Gender,&lt;br&gt; • Age.&lt;br&gt; • Origin,&lt;br&gt; • Activities and interaction.</td>
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<td><strong>Green Space</strong></td>
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<td>Peoples’ use of, and concerns about, <em>green space networks</em>: A case study of Birchwood, Warrington New Town, UK. (Tzoulas and James, 2009)</td>
<td>• The decision on whether to use urban green space or not for recreation may be influenced by social and cultural factors.</td>
<td>• Urban Forest</td>
<td>• Outdoor physical activities&lt;br&gt; • Activities take place&lt;br&gt; • People they engage&lt;br&gt; • Time: Weekly and Seasonally&lt;br&gt; • Two different routes</td>
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<td>Making friends in Zurich’s urban forests and parks: The role of public <em>green space for social inclusion</em> of youths from different cultures, (Seeland et al., 2009).</td>
<td>• Children and youths in making contacts and friends across cultures, which is considered a prerequisite for social inclusion.</td>
<td>• Urban forest and parks</td>
<td>• Ways of making friends&lt;br&gt; • Sociodemographics&lt;br&gt; • Preferred leisure activities&lt;br&gt; • Role of urban greenspace in curriculum&lt;br&gt; • Potential social inclusion</td>
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<td>Are urban green spaces optimally distributed to act as places for <em>social integration</em>? Results of a geographical information system (GIS) approach for urban forestry research, (Germann-Chiari and Seeland, 2004)</td>
<td>• Create opportunities to integrate youths, elderly people, foreigners, unemployed and other social groups in Switzerland.</td>
<td>• Urban forest and greenspace</td>
<td>• Recreation and well-being&lt;br&gt; • Aesthetics&lt;br&gt; • Nature conservation&lt;br&gt; • Biodiversity preservation&lt;br&gt; • Climate and hygiene</td>
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PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is a plethora of research suggesting that greenspace has the potential in promoting social interaction within neighbourhoods (e.g. Abada et al., 2007; Cradock et al., 2009; Echeverria et al., 2008). Social interaction evidently unites and harmonizes community in neighborhoods. Currently, Malaysia is developing towards urban and suburban landscapes, hence maintaining quality of existing greenspaces or creating new greenspaces needs a lot of attention in ensuring they are fully utilized. In the UK the main recreational activities that people engage in when visiting urban greenspaces includes walking, cycling, exercising and taking part in social activities (Ward-Thompson, 2005; GreenSpace, 2007). Most of urban residents perceived the greenspaces functionality which affords active participation rather than aesthetic value. Snape and Binks (2008) suggest that social and cultural factors influenced the decision-making whether to use urban greenspace or not. Furthermore, individual preferences towards greenspace are based on variety of leisure opportunities in parks; alternative forms of recreation; easy access; and successful promotional efforts (Mulder et al., 2005; McDonald and Price, 2009). In contrast, the reasons residents do not use the greenspace is because they are not interested (Moore, 2003), personal feelings of insecurity towards greenspace (Jorgensen et al., 2007) and fear of crime. According to McPherson et al. (2006), surveys conducted indicate that people these days have fewer friends compared to previous decades. This fact is caused mainly by the growing number of indoor games, and online social networking hence making this outdoor social interaction impossible. Mutz (2007) coined that social connections are declining due to neighborhood segregation and segmentation caused from design and planning itself. Furthermore, some studies have reported that different characteristics of greenspace (i.e. size and the presence of facilities), seems to have an effect on its usage pattern of users (Giles-Corti et al., 2005; Kaczynski et al., 2009). According to Bjork (2008) and Giles-Corti (2005), distance to greenspace is commonly seen as the most important factor. The closer a greenspace is to each individual home, the more it is been used. However, this research would modify the Bjork and Giles-Corti stance by hypothesizing that greenspace plays the biggest role instead of the distance factor. Some of the greenspace are quite far from residential area however it is favourable rather than the one which is near to home due to uninviting characteristics.

Research Gap

Little research has emphasized on the effects of segregated and fragmented neighborhoods’ greenspace in new township community. Current condition of common urban greenspace properties does not promote social interaction among urban residents. This study takes stride to understand the characteristics of greenspaces that influence the quality of social interaction of users within their neighbourhood community. This research looks at the level of social interactions in several neighborhoods’ greenspaces. It reviews the interaction of residents with urban parks, character of the parks which attracts the residents, and outdoor activities that usually take place in the park.

SCOPE OF STUDY AND VARIABLES

The research explores the responses of urban residents towards greenspaces character and activities offered. Especially the users’ relationship with greenspace components will become platforms of social interaction and networking. It will measure the greenspace properties (i.e. green quality, green setting, accessibility, dynamic feature) and social preferences (i.e. activities, events, hobbies/habits and needs) through verbal and non-verbal responses.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of the research is to discover the greenspace characteristics that contribute to the factors affecting level of social interaction among new township residents in Malaysia. The objectives of the research are to identify the characteristics of greenspace that can promote social interaction; to identify ways of people interacts and socializes between different race, gender, and age and establishing the activities that unites people; and to establish the multiple role of greenspace as the catalyst of social interaction. The main research questions used in steering the research are what are the social activities in greenspaces that can generate the social interaction? What are the characteristics of the neighborhood greenspaces that stimulate social interaction? Therefore it will investigate the impacts of greenspace properties (independent variables) towards social preferences (dependent variables). Responses from urban community will be collected through survey questionnaires and personal interviews. Then, observations will be carried out according to greenspace properties and social preference
variables which cannot be elicited through questionnaires and interviews. Later, the behavioral pattern will be mapped to reveal and clarify the preferred space within the greenspace that promote users to socialize. An assessment will be made to identify the physical setting of the greenspaces which actually promotes or hinders social activities.

Study Sites

A comparison will be made by selecting two case studies which is located at Hutan Bandar Mutiara Rini and Bukit Indah Community Park, Johor Bahru. Mutiara Rini Urban-forest Park has been newly established for about three years whereas Bukit Indah Community Park has been established for about 15 years. These greenspaces will be compared according to their year of establishment, physical characteristic, and users’ visit frequency. It is expected that the greener and diverse the park, the higher will be level of social interactions regardless of its distance and aesthetic values. Hence, both of Mutiara Rini Urban-forest Park and Bukit Indah Community Park are appropriate for investigating the behavioral responses of their users towards the greenspace properties that are already designed. Study sites that have been selected are based on the criteria, the site is located within newtownship area and the park users are racially mixed.

Methods

There are two methods used to elicit data consistently and thoroughly which include survey questionnaires and field inventory. This research will be using survey questionnaires and interviews to elicit urban residents’ social preferences as the dependent variable and their relationships with greenspace characteristics as the independent variable. The unit of analysis is the various range of age of urban residents of new township areas in Malaysia. The reason of selecting urban residents of newtownship areas are because this research would like to compare the effect of newly established neighbourhood with an older one. The respondents will be selected from different range of age in order to see different quality of social interaction experienced by them such as the quality of social interaction among adult and elderly; adult and adult; adult and young adult; adult and children. Furthermore, understanding the attachment of urban residents towards urban greenspace could become the first stride in learning more about design and planning of greenspaces. A total of 200 samples of survey questionnaires will be distributed within the park by distributing randomly regardless the users age, race and ethnic. Later, a green inventory of each site will be carried out to map the spaces and characteristics each of the greenspace have. Each of the study sites will be visited several times. It is for mapping the existing greenspace character; activities take place and types of space or enclave offered. In order to cover intangible data, 30 sets of group and personal interviews are conducted. To ensure the spontaneous behavior is recorded, expert observations are performed. Later, the data collected will be mapped with ArcGIS to formulate behavioral mappings of users within those greenspaces and a comparative analysis will be done. Behavioral mapping is a tool designed to capture the valuations of local greenspace characteristics. Social information will be mapped and gives an opportunity for multiple analyses and comparisons with other green inventories and expert assessments. The behavioural maps will indicate where the most valued greenspaces are situated, as well as giving a good impression of how residents respond to the current supply of greenspace.

FINDINGS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

Among the findings from literature review is that short distance to greenspace is associated with increased use of the greenspace (Bjork et al, 2008). Thus, increase use causing frequent interactions among users take place. The character of urban greenspaces has been continuous to be important in expressing activities, modern society behavioral patterns, social interaction and cultural norms among urban communities. Furthermore, social interaction is one of the key aspects of the social environment which refer to the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups (Kawachi and Berkman, 2000). Strong social ties within the urban community foster an environment associated with connectedness, interactiveness, meaning, and purpose, whereas lack of integration may contribute to feelings of hopelessness, thus increasing the risk of depressive symptoms (Wickrama and Bryant, 2003). A sense of integration among urban residents provides an opportunity to get to know their friends as well as friends of the friends in the area. It will create an intergenerational closure between adults and children and provides an opportunity to establish supportive relationships with youth in the urban greenspace, which leads to effective formal and informal social interactions.
ANTICIPATED FINDINGS FROM STUDY AT NEW TOWNSHIP NEIGHBOURHOOD IN MALAYSIA

This research anticipates that the park usage depends on the function of the elements and space in a park. For example, lawn area will be utilized as picnic area by large family and football field for young adult. Amount of the intensive used area would include entrance space and open fields. Thus, lawns and open fields promote more social interaction instead of clustered of trees. In contrast, designed areas such as themed garden are less likely utilized by the users. Neighborhood parks in residential community are a setting that affords social interactions for urban community (Tzoulas et al., 2010).

Since urban greenspaces are inclusive and interactive spaces, they can be seen as possibly favorable spaces for stimulating social interaction. Urban greenspaces are one of the sites which can promote different ethnic groups mingling and communicating. It is also as sites where informal and cursory interactions occur and which people feel connected.

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REFERENCES


