



Antecedents of Place Attachment: A Thematic Inquiry

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Abstract—The present study aims to study the emotional bond between people and places using a descriptive exploratory qualitative research design to explore the factors that may contribute to the place attachment using thematic analysis framework provided by purposively selected 92 respondents through a semi structured open ended guide. Results showed three main themes pertaining to person, socio-cultural and environmental themes; 16 sub themes emerged out of the major themes such as personal-academic growth, and various codes. Implications include better understanding of a sense of place.

Keywords—place attachment, sense of a place, place-person interaction

1. Introduction

With time, theorists conceptualize people-place ties and find a home across different disciplines with different names. Within the realm of geography, Yi-Fu Tuan has studied the meanings of places extensively and coined the term “topophilia”, to encapsulate the concept of love for a place. The Place transcends its mere physicality (Tuan, 1974), it holds individual significance for those connected to it (Tuan, 1977). Beyond being spatial entities, places embody social symbols (i.e., social meanings and significance) as they represent personal memories (for instance, memories of your love might be associated with a particular place) depending upon the role it plays in different histories (Bonnes et al., 2017). Sociologists attempt to comprehend the sense of community, community attachment and how the symbolic place meaning influences the interaction among members (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). Anthropologists seek to understand the cultural significance attached to a place (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Indeed, the collective efforts of these disciplines have laid the foundation for research on the profound and meaningful ties individuals establish with places.

A plethora of global research has underscored the significance of attachment, with a predominant focus on parent-child attachment (Bowlby, 1988; Brumariu & Kerns, 2010; Kerns et al., 2001; Kerns & Stevens, 1996; McCormick & Kennedy, 1994), romantic relationships (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 2017), object attachment (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Likewise, there is an emerging emphasis on attachment formed with the environment, encompassing attachment to one's residence (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001) and a sense of connection to the neighborhood (Brown & Perkins, 1992; Cuba & Hummon, 1993).

Place attachment refers to an emotional bond with a specific place. Various psychologists from a variety of disciplines have attempted to conceptualize and study extensively and thus defined, place, in a wide variety of ways, but a framework by Scannell & Gifford (2010) is the most acceptable. This three-dimensional model integrates various dimensions of the term 'place,' offering a holistic perspective that considers the interplay between the individual, processes, and the physical environment.

The first dimension pertains to the person dimension, either individually or collectively, and encompasses the meanings and experiences assigned to a place.

The second dimension delves into the psychological processes associated with place attachment, encompassing feelings, cognitions, and behaviors that collectively shape an individual's connection to a specific location.

The third-dimension highlights place characteristics; which include geographical aspect, specificity, and the predominance of social or physical factors.

As evidenced by various studies, positive associations with a place have consistently demonstrated correlations with indicators of well-being, including quality of life and subjective well-being (Dallago et al., 2011; Harris et al., 1995; Lv& Xie, 2017; Scannell & Gifford, 2017) as well as social well-being (Rollero& De Piccoli, 2010) and life satisfaction related to social relationships (Lewicka, 2011). Additionally, establishing secure attachments to a place has been identified as a facilitator of identity development in later life, particularly in terms of exploration (Guiliani, 2017). The assigned meanings to places have also been found to influence residential satisfaction significantly. Residential satisfaction is influenced by various factors classified into five components,

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encompassing features (e.g., rooms, floor layout), home support services (e.g., electricity and fire-fighting systems), public facilities (e.g., open spaces and parking), social environment (encompassing both physical and social variables), and nearby amenities such as markets and public transportation (Mohit et al., 2010).

2. Rationale of the Study

The relationship between individuals and their environments has been a longstanding area of study. Despite the existing body of research, there is a noticeable gap in qualitative investigations exploring the nuanced meanings attached to places or the sense of place, especially among students. This study aims to address this gap by employing a qualitative approach to explore the antecedents of place attachment using qualitative approach; to explore how people construct a sense of a place. The objective of the present study is to explore the major themes based on the open-ended responses.

3. Method

3.1 Study Design

We adopted a cross sectional, exploratory descriptive qualitative design. The exploratory descriptive research design is adopted as it provides deeper and detailed information in order to study a complex phenomenon (Jankowski & Wester, 2015).

3.2 Sample

102 participants were initially drawn. However, after removing the irrelevant responses, 92 participants were included in a study. Purposive sample technique is used to collect data. Inclusion criteria involved a) 18-30 age ranged students enrolled in colleges or universities, b) willingness to participate. Participants who did not provide consent were excluded.

3.3 Tools

Demographics. Participants' demographic details such as age, gender, residential status, who do they live with, and length of residence.

In addition to close ended demographics questions. Two open ended questions were asked, i.e., (1) what are the psychological risks and benefits of living at this place? And (2. what are the reasons that make you feel attached to this city; please enlist all your reasons. Also, if you feel no attachment with your city, enlist your reasons?). The survey aimed to gather participants' perception and experience with regard to their house and city for a specific period of time. Open-ended guides gives participants freedom of expression, time to think and respond (Lovrić et al., 2020), moreover, online surveys offer felt anonymity (Braun et al., 2020).

3.4 Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance for the study was sought from the Institutional Board of studies. Informed consent was signed. Confidentiality was assured and therefore, Respondents ID was assigned with numbers instead of real names. (For example, respondent 1, respondent 2). Moreover, the study procedures followed the principles of the declaration of Helsinki for human research (2008, 6th version).

3.5 Procedure

Responses collected via Google forms. All the respondents signed the informed consent form and further answered the open-ended questions. Responses collected from the respondents were first entered into Microsoft Excel and then in a text analysis tool after irrelevant responses were cleaned.

4. Analysis

Open-ended responses were indexed and coded using six phases of the (Braun et al., 2020) approach. We familiarize with the text-based data first and initial codes were generated electronically using NVivo software. After re-reading text data and codes based on the initial codes, major themes emerged. Responses collected to the questions were coded inductively. The resulting categories were then mapped onto the themes, whether any new themes or sub-themes. The inductive coding was deemed most appropriate, nuanced to the existing literature.

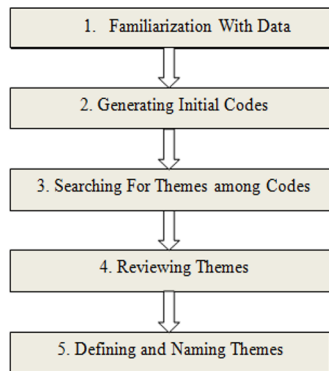


Fig 1. Six Phases of the Braun and Clarke Approach to Thematic Analysis (Source: Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Guba and Lincoln's approach to trustworthiness viz. credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability — were adhered in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We made sure that the participants were engaged for a prolonged period of time to maintain credibility. Prior to collecting data, the author became familiar with the study's setting and participants. All pertinent details relating to the study's methods and its findings were discussed in detail in order to ensure dependability. In an effort to attain confirmability, a reflective record was kept to make sure that the interpretations of the data were not influenced by the researchers' own prejudices, expertise, and experiences.

5. Results

It is important to note that for people's place attachment or sense of place does not develop independently; rather, it is moulded within a larger social, historical, cultural, and institutional framework. Reasons for being attached to a specific place demonstrated profound themes. Result showed 3 major themes i.e. personal, socio-cultural and environmental themes and 16 sub themes.

Person Context. This aspect includes codes and sub-themes describing how respondents experience place attachment uniquely.

PERSONAL AND ACADEMIC GROWTH. A sense of place where we are born, live and act is often linked with a sense of personal identity (Proshansky, 1978). Consequently, people become emotionally attached to a place, as explained by participants, for instance, "I am who I am because of this place". People identify themselves in relation to a place. Respondents said in this regard—

"It says a lot about who I am"

"This place brings out the best in me. I came here when I was not that mature, but this place modified me in the best possible ways."

While positive and emotional meanings to a place have been assigned by participants on account of what they have achieved in which they live. For instance, a respondent said in this regard—

"It's only place where I found my academic growth has reached its peak"

"This place helped me making my career; I did graduation, post-graduation and now doing PhD from here".

People seem to assign functional meanings to a place with respect to how the place is facilitating them in achieving their goals and needs (e.g., "This place brings out the best in me. I came here when I was not that mature, but this place modified me in the best possible ways.").

SENSE OF CONTROL. In most cases, freedom, control and independence happen to be the reason for the sense of a place. Opportunity to grow, become independent, move, explore, and have control over one's decisions fosters a sense of autonomy. Respondents describe their autonomy and independence as a benefit of living at their places as— "I do everything by myself. I am acknowledging my strength and weakness here; I am learning every day. This city is helping me to know myself".

Memories. The most mentioned theme is memories respondents describe their attachment to a place because of memories. They describe this theme as follows—

“I feel attached to this house for the sole reason, i.e. memories. It becomes difficult for any person to let go of their memories (whether happy or unhappy). This house is a "first" among many "firsts" of life.”

“Each of the walls of my house tells a fun story and always makes me happy to be home”

HOME AND HOMESICKNESS. Emotionally assigned meaning to a place as “home” described by respondents (e.g., “I attached my city so much; it’s a home to me”). Most respondents who were living away from their hometowns described their detachment from a city (e.g., “I miss my hometown, and everything about that place makes. I feel kind of lost here in this city”).

Socio-Cultural Context. This aspect includes codes and themes describing how respondents’ experience and perceptions are influenced by socio-cultural factors such as rootedness, social relationships, cultural attachment and affordability and convenience.

ROOTEDNESS. A sense of place leads to rootedness (Hummon, 1992; Tuan, 1980). While attributing a place attachment, the most commonly mentioned reason is the birthplace, native place or hometown, length of residence and time spent. Respondents described this theme in this regard as follows— “Been living in this city ever since I came to this world. Spent my childhood, schooling every single thing in this city”

“Born and brought up in this city, saw it growing from a town to smart city”

SOCIAL TIES. Sense of a place developed through a sense of belongingness and community connectedness. Opportunity to live and share a space and time with family and friends and finding a sense of belongingness with community or neighbors—were the mentioned reasons why they feel happy about their places. More specifically, respondents described as—

“Brotherhood and Helping Nature of people”

“I’ve a caring and friendly neighborhood.”

“Friends who shared our childhoods, the neighbors who lived next door”

CULTURAL TIES. We have explained culture as the respondents’ place-specific ways of living with others within a locality at a particular point in time. Perceptions of people’s involvement in cultural activities, religious activities, food, and history were mentioned as the facilitators provided by their places, for instance —

“This place is known for its culture such as language and locks industry, cuisines”

“I also like this city for the variety of street food which I can’t get easily in other cities.”

“We live in a residential society building, where most of the people are from my community, hence, I feel very relaxed and safe”

AFFORDABILITY AND CONVENIENCE. This theme revealed how the participants perceive the benefits of their places and assign positive meanings in terms of affordability and how easier it is to live with nearby facilities and markets. Respondents explained in this regard—

“I feel good about being in a small city where everything is nearby.”

“There is a sense of familiarity attached with the city which makes my day-to-day life easier”

FACILITIES. The most common and mentioned reason for a place attachment represents how the participants perceive themselves to have access to medical, institutional, school and gym facilities, for instance— “I wish I was in a big city with metros and other means of transport.”

“Medical facilities are very good. Educational institutions are available for every field”

“I feel very relaxed and safe. Gym facilities and green parks are just a bonus thing to make oneself at peace”

Environmental Context. This aspect includes codes and themes describing how respondents’ experiences and perceptions are influenced by environmental factors such as Safety, comfort, aesthetics, nature, privacy and comfort zone.

SAFETY. Safety was one of the most highlighted reasons for participants to feel inclined towards a place. Based on the responses provided by participants, safety is the reason they feel attached to their places (e.g., “I feel no other place is as safe as Aligarh, I feel safe here, I go to work and even for grocery at night”).

PEACE AND NATURE. This theme is described in terms of the features of an environment that leads to pleasurable responses. Respondents described this theme in this regard— “Peaceful and loving environment decreases negative energy and improves our mental health”

PERSONAL SPACE. This theme reflects constitute all the reasons given by respondents as a benefit of living at their current dwelling (e.g., “Aligarh provides proper space to grow and here I feel more alive”). Moreover, respondents also described their disliking in this regard as follow— “I don’t feel connected with the place and eventually the hostel I’m living in. There is no personal space and privacy.”

COMFORT ZONE. While describing not being attached to a place, respondents attribute this feeling as being trapped or living in comfort, living in limbo. Respondents described this theme as follows— “self-growth is not possible as it provides a comfort zone. People here live in a limbo”

“I have problem with the comfort zone that this city provides and also the slow life”

“This place is my comfort zone which is good but also limiting in a way as it doesn't provide me with the space to grow and explore.”

Overall, the study highlights the importance of understanding and embracing the unique experiences and experiences of people who experience place attachment. Thematic analysis revealed 16 themes, i.e., Personal context (personal and academic growth, sense of control, memories, home and homesickness), socio-cultural context (rootedness, social and cultural ties, affordability and convenience and facilities), and environmental context (safety, peace and nature, personal space and comfort zone). Participants describe their attachment to a place based on factors such as birthplace, native place, length of residence, time spent, social ties, cultural ties, affordability and convenience, facilities, and personal space.



Fig 2. This visual representation shows the frequently used words and phrases within our dataset, depicted through word frequency queries. The varying font sizes represent how frequently terms occur.

6. Discussion

In line with the expectations, coding analysis revealed 15 codes describing three main themes i.e., personal, socio-cultural and environmental. A cross-cultural study conducted by, Indians reported strong home attachment

In person dimension, most commonly described place attachment with regard to personal identity and memories, which is consistent with findings by (Chow & Healey, 2008) and (Degnen, 2016; Rishbeth & Powell, 2013) followed by personal and academic growth, and autonomy and control (Hashemnezhad et al., 2013). Home as a reason for a place attachment is again highly mentioned which is consistent with the work of (Anton & Lawrence, 2014). Apart from home, relatively few participants who were living far away from their hometowns described their detachment with a place as homesickness (Chow & Healey, 2008). Furthermore, there is evidence that females have a higher sense of place attachment than males (Kamalipour et al., 2012)

In socio-cultural dimension, in a collectivist society like India, place attachment is highly relational with social and cultural values. Participants mostly mentioned codes such as length of residence, stories associated with a place, which comes under a sub theme called rootedness. Rootedness as the reason for place attachment is highly mentioned in the response sheet which is frequently listed in literature (Hashemnezhad et al., 2013; Lewicka, 2010). Moreover, participants mentioned social ties as a reason for their attachment with a place such as family, friends, and neighbors. Attachment with a place is socially and culturally bounded (Ujang & Zakariya, 2015), Cultural ties such as cuisines, community, language, way of living and history occurred to be reason for place attachment, such findings are line with the literature by (Nartova-Bochaver et al., 2022). Moreover, participants described their ties with a place particularly in terms of affordability, convenience and facilities provided; such findings find its base in the studies.

In the environmental dimension, theme viz. comfort and safety were the most mentioned reasons behind their attachment with a place, it finds theoretical roots in the work of (Karsono et al., 2016). Surprisingly, participants described their place attachment in terms of the comfort zone, nevertheless few participants explained their disliking for a place as it provides comfort zone. Particularly in regard to aesthetic and nature, findings substantiate previous research by (Zahid & Misirlisoy, 2021). Apart from the above mentioned results, it also occurred that people feel threatened if their freedom is being restricted in that place, this is in line with the findings by (Brehm et al., 1966). This provides insight for comprehending the reasons behind public involvement in recreational activities.

7. Implications

The proverb goes “you can take the boy out of the country, but you cannot take the country out of the boy”. Place attachment develops as a result of robust emotional or cognitive ties with a place as place fulfills not only personal or social needs but overall general well-being. It is a quite difficult concept to gauge using scale-based methodologies, rather using narratives or personal meanings or symbols. However, understanding a sense of place among students can facilitate new insight for counselling approaches as what factors affect students who live far away from their homes. A new insight on account of it being the psycho-geographical approach to understand human-environment interaction.

8. Future Studies

Place attachment is a complex phenomenon; there is a need to study it through different methodologies using visual images, triangulation of data. Future studies may highlight the religious or spiritual aspect in place attachment and cost and benefit attached with place.

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Appendices

Table A1. Themes and Initial Codes

| Context | Themes and Initial Codes | Example Quote |
|---------|--------------------------|---------------|
|---------|--------------------------|---------------|

| | | |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Personal Context | Personal & Academic Growth | "I do everything by myself. I am acknowledging my strength and weakness here, I am learning every day. This city is helping me to know" |
| | Identity, | |
| | Education, | "It's only place where I found my academic growth has reached its peak" |
| | Career | |
| | Sense of Control | I can do anything what I want at anytime, it's the place where I can rule and nobody can disturb me or judge" |
| | Freedom, | |
| | Having control | |
| | Home & Homesickness | I attached my house so much; it's a home to me. I would rather call it a home. People close to your heart make a house a HOME. "Each of the walls of my house tells a fun story and always makes me happy to be home" |
| | Memories | "I found my life partner here. Moreover, this is my father's birth place and our native place, so I am emotionally attached to this place." |
| | Good memories, childhood memories, bittersweet memories | "It's my hometown. Our hometown got the many childhood memories we hold dearly like the friends who shared our childhoods, the neighbours who lived next door and the festivals or celebrations." |
| Socio-Cultural Context | Rootedness | "Been living in this city ever since I came to this world. Spent my childhood, schooling every single thing in this city" |
| | Time spent | "Born and brought up in this city, saw it growing from a town to smart city" |
| | Social Ties | "I've a caring and friendly neighborhood." |
| | Caring neighborhood, community | "We live in a residential society building, where most of the people are from my community, hence, I feel very relaxed and safe" |
| | Cultural Ties | "This place is known for its culture such as language and locks industry, cuisines" |
| | language, | |
| | culture, | "I also like this city for the variety of street food which I can't get easily in other cities." |
| | food | |
| | Affordability & Convenience | "People who have low income or high income both can survive in the city" |
| | expenses, | |
| familiarity, | "I feel good about being in a small city where everything is nearby." | |
| easy | "There is a sense of familiarity attached with the city which makes my day to day life easier" | |
| Facilities | "I wish I was in a big city with metros and other means of transport." | |
| transport | "Medical facilities are very good. Educational institutions are available for every field" | |
| medical | | |
| school | "I feel very relaxed and safe. Gym facilities and green park are just a bonus." | |
| gym | | |
| Environmental Context | Comfort Zone | "I have problem with the comfort zone that this city provides and also the slow life" |
| | Slow life | |
| | No space to grow | "This place is my comfort zone which is good but also limiting in a way as it doesn't provide me with the space to grow and explore." |
| | Safety | "I feel safe, comfortable and I can do anything what I want at anytime, it's the place where I can rule and nobody can't disturb me or judge" |
| | safe, | |
| | no disturbance | "I have lived my entire life here and it's the place I feel safest and happiest" |

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Peace and Nature | <p>“Peaceful and loving environment decreases negative energy and improves our mental health.”</p> <p>“..there are mountains and scenic beauty imparts a kind of mental peace,it gives you fresh air and psychic relief. People from different states come here to get psychic relief from their hassel full life.”</p> |
| Personal Space privacy | <p>“I don’t feel connected with the place and eventually the hostel I’m living in. There is no personal space and privacy.”</p> <p>“One of the main reasons is of privacy issue in room because many people live in same room”</p> <p>‘Comfort, memories, meaning, personal space’</p> |

Fig. A1. street where individuals report feeling both comfort and constraint (Photos by author).



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