

Research Paper

Representation of Reality and Local Visitors' Sense of Attachment: The Case of the George Town Festival in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study investigated the role of a cultural festival in creating a sense of attachment among local visitors towards the George Town World Heritage site through the artistic representation of neglected outstanding values. This study particularly focused on two issues: the absence of investigations on the success of the George Town Festival (GTF) in creating a sense of attachment toward the George Town World Heritage Site, and the lack of empirical studies on the ability of a representational medium, such as photography, to draw more attention towards a cultural heritage or reality itself. The study employed a qualitative approach whereby a total 43 local visitors were interviewed. Results show that the roles of GTF and photography as a cultural festival and a representational medium, respectively, are vital in creating a sense of attachment toward the George Town World Heritage site.

Keywords: Representation, sense of attachment, cultural festivals, photography

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Introduction

Ever since the declaration of George Town in Penang, Malaysia, as a UNESCO World Heritage site on 7th July 2008, its ability to boost the local tourism market has increased tremendously. The cultural heritage of Penang, specifically George Town, has been introduced as an alternative tourism theme a long time ago (Hamzah, 2004). Nevertheless, after nomination, the state government exerted considerable

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effort in promoting cultural tourism. The key players in Penang's cultural tourism and conservation are governmental agencies, NGOs and the private sector. Governmental agencies, such as Penang Global Tourism, along with federal and state tourism bodies have effectively promoted cultural tourism while keeping an eye on conservation issues. Meanwhile, NGOs (e.g., Penang Heritage Trust) have focused on conserving and preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage as well as creating public awareness (Aboali, Mohamed, Chuin & Hassan, 2016).

One of the bodies that actively work with organizations and agencies to promote George Town as a center for arts and culture is George Town Festival (GTF). Since 2010, GTF has been held annually in honor of George Town's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This festivity aims to showcase the connections between the past and the future of arts, culture, heritage, and the community.

For many years, the objectives of several projects developed and implemented by the GTF organizers have revolved around transforming the inner city into a vibrant heritage area and raising locals' awareness of both the tangible and intangible heritage of George Town. For example, several old walls of George Town were painted with a number of paintings as part of GTF 2012, which highlighted the local culture. This project brought attention to the site from locals and tourists—albeit with a misplaced motive (Chin, 2015). This is because the wall murals shifted away visitors' attention from the heritage buildings. In addition, massive unauthorized graffiti artworks painted all over the area prompted the town's heritage authority to create a committee that would securely protect the outstanding universal values (OUVs) of the site (Mok, 2015). For this reason, the GTF organizers attempted to raise awareness regarding OUVs and a sense of attachment among locals during the festival.

The importance of local attachment to the tourism market and conservation of heritage sites has been highlighted by many scholars (Poulios, 2013; Raymond, Brown & Robinson, 2011) and have been elaborated further in literature. Hence, the current project was designed as a response to this missing element raised by authorities. The objective of the GTF is to focus on the arts and culture of the community. Consequently, photography was selected as the artistic medium to fulfill the aims of this project due to its specific character and because photography, as a representational medium, has a unique characteristic that can frame and emphasize the neglected parts of tangible and intangible heritage among visitors (Bonnie & Hanno, 1999).

Using Art Practice as research, this project proposed a street photo exhibition in the core zone of George Town World Heritage Site as a part of GTF 2014. The photos represented walls as part of the heritage buildings within the site, with the aim of fulfilling two objectives. First, it investigated the success of GTF in increasing the sense of attachment among local visitors toward the George Town World Heritage

Site. Second, this study aimed to determine whether representational medium (in this case, photography) could draw more attention towards reality itself.

Place Attachment and Festivals

“Place” has several definitions. Geographical boundary, which has additional connotations for a particular group of people living in an area, probably provides the basic definition of “place.” The codes of this meaning are detected by those who belong to a place and/or to the place they identify themselves with. In this context, Low and Altman (1992) described “place” as a space enriched with meaning. A degree of doubt exists on how people’s bond with a place should be defined. Considering the abundance of concepts used to define people’s relations with places, place attachment is hypothesized to predict people’s attitudes toward the history of their residential places (Lewicka, 2008). Cross (2015) suggested that the definitions of place attachment help us to further understand this concept. Continuing from Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) and Low (1992), Cross defined place attachment as “a positive, affective bond people with particular places where they feel comfortable and safe and desire to maintain their connection” (2015, p. 2).

Place attachment emphasizes on two qualities, “affect” (attachment) and “environmental setting” (place), both of which address people’s emotional and cultural attachment to a specific place (Low & Altman, 1992). This concept refers to people’s connection to a certain place (Giuliani, 2003; Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2003). However, along with certain factors, such as residence length and social ties, tangible features encompassing a symbolic meaning of a place can also influence place attachment (Stedman, Beckley, Wallace, & Ambard, 2004). The attachment to a specific place increases people’s interest towards their roots and the history of that place (Lewicka, 2005). For this reason, and compared to modern architectures, people desire historical places more because they forge a connection with the past and the related traditions as well as accelerate place attachment (Low & Altman, 1992).

The cultural place attachment could be studied via different angles. According to Low (1992), cultural place attachment can be classified into six types, namely, genealogical, narrative, loss and destruction, economic, cosmological, and celebratory cultural events. In general, these types of attachment explain the process of place attachment, and each of them describes specific links between individuals and a place. Genealogical attachment occurs through links to a place of origin and family. Narrative attachment is aroused through storytelling and place identification, whereas loss and destruction links a person to a place via migration or disaster-related events. Economic attachment is made through the ownership of property or workplaces. Cosmological attachment is shaped via links to hallowed sites or religious pilgrimages, whereas celebratory cultural events attachment is shaped by attending cultural events, such as religious ceremonies or sports.

The sense of attachment to a place can be enhanced and reignited through cultural festivals, which are considered a link between the past, the present, and the future and are enhanced through celebratory events. Festivals in particular, bring intuition into people's sense of their place and strengthen their attachment to it (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013). Cultural festivals illustrate the values and identities of communities through creative artistic representations (Azara & Crouch, 2006). Previous studies confirmed that cultural festivals induce positive effects on creating and raising a sense of place attachment among visitors (Lee, Kyle, & Scott, 2012; Stedman, 2002). The local communities' participation and support for a festival also predict how strongly attached they are to a specific place (Derrett, 2003). This function of cultural festivals is more important for a destination, in which tourism is an important pillar. The manner in which a community is attached to the surrounding landscape and cultural heritage may influence how inhabitants see the potential effects of a developing tourism industry. Moreover, it is considered to be a vital determinant of effective concurrence amongst inhabitants and the tourism business (McCool & Martin, 1994; Sheldon & Var, 1984; Um & Crompton, 1987).

Attachment and attention to the surrounding and its cultural heritage are inevitable. As a common phenomenon, local people who live and are in continuous contact with their heritage tend to be accustomed with them, but mostly fail to give adequate focus on the details although they are proud of them (Jenkins, 2003). A considerable number of studies have reported that people tend to focus more on visual media and the representation of reality than on real objects (Baudrillard, 1988; Kozloff, 1987; Wells, 2009). In other words, cultural festivals generate opportunities to represent the cultural wealth of a community that, for example, can be expressed through photography or any other artistic representation.

Role of Visual Media (Photography) in Influencing the Public Mind

Visual forms of media are the most powerful tools for shaping public opinion. As the pioneer of modern visual media and the base of all means of communication, photography has tremendous power in influencing people's minds through its intrinsic characteristics and its ubiquity (Wells, 2009).

Photography is the reality through which the real object is experienced. A photograph is not only similar to its subject, it is also a tribute to that subject as well. Photographs are part of and extensions of subjects as well as serve as a potent means of acquiring or gaining control over them. The production of images furnishes a ruling ideology, and photographic reality dominates a perception of reality as a medium. People have generally become accustomed to their perceptions of the world around them in the form of photo-packs. For example, people are accustomed with the idea of sunset through sunset photos (Sontag, 1979). People sense that the world depicted through photography is absolutely real, but it is not. Photographs are only

an aspect of reality (Lacayo, 2006). Consequently, photos can attract more attention than other subjects. This aspect of photography is addressed in the current research.

Research Method

A qualitative approach was employed to fulfill the objectives of this study. Qualitative research generally focuses on the experience of the people or on the phenomena being studied, thereby obtaining the study participants' perspectives of such an experience. This type of research adopts a systematic method to describe or investigate a certain phenomenon. Walker (1987) and Creswell (2013) discussed the strategies associated with qualitative research, including Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Case Studies, Phenomenological research, Phenomenological research, Narrative Research, and Art Practice as Research. The current study matches that of Art Practice as Research. This strategy is defined as the visual arts research practice that inquires into the procedures and creations of an artistic perceptible. Studio methodology and art-based practice as research are extensions of a qualitative model (Creswell, 2013).

Practical Project

The practical project of this study was an art street photo exhibition during GTF 2014. The subjects of this art project were the weather-beaten walls found within the George Town Heritage Site. The study was also the main subject of the art practice studio methodology as research. Art Practice as Research is an especially valuable strategy for research projects targeting to describe, explore, or discover a phenomenon (Leavy, 2009). Considering that an artwork is a form of human representation, it can be considered as a place where knowledge is created and meanings are made. A study on works of art shares new perceptions into how objects carry meaning regarding ideas, themes, and issues. As an object of research, an artwork is an independently and ethnically created form and can, therefore, be regarded as a mine of knowledge (Sullivan, 2010).

Photo-based approaches may offer an advantage for understanding such multifaceted constructs. Visual anthropology and sociology use photographs for assessments and comparisons. Photographs are "...cultural documents offering evidence of historically, culturally and socially specific ways of seeing the world" (Rose, 2012, p. 556). Goin (2001) recommended that researchers need to move beyond considering photos as "supportive" of data, and instead, see stand-alone images as expressions of the ideas themselves. Methodologically, these approaches frequently analyze previously taken collections of photos to understand phenomena (Rose, 2000) or entail researcher-taken photos as objects for research participants. Qualitative, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and pre-determined open-ended questions were employed to cover the basis of the current research.

Sampling

In this research, non-probability purposive sampling (judgment sampling) was applied. This type of sampling obtains information from a specific target group who can give the desired data based on the criteria set by the researchers. Judgment sampling approaches subjects who can provide the required information based on the objective of the study (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). A sufficient sample size for a qualitative research varies between 12–60 or 20–50 participants. A sample larger than 50 can be difficult to manage in terms of ensuring the quality of data collection and analysis (Ragin, 2014; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). The other justification for the sample size is guided by theoretical sampling (Jennings, 2005), which is also considered for data collection and analysis in qualitative research. This approach denotes when to end sampling. Interviews should be stopped when the data reaches saturation level (Seidman, 2012) or when a qualitative informational “isomorphic” is achieved (Ford, 1975). Based on previous discussions, this study interviewed 43 individuals. Although the qualitative information “isomorphs” were obtained early and data collection was saturated after 15 to 20 interviews, the researchers continued the interviews to guarantee data validation.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and pre-determined open-ended questionnaires were employed to cover all aspects of this research. The data were collected during a month-long, one-man street photo exhibition during GTF 2014. A total of 43 local visitors were interviewed.

To apply Art as Research in Practice, high-quality photos were taken with precise and firm composition from the eroded walls of George Town. The photos were enlarged to the maximum allowable size. After frameless mounting, the photos were installed right beside the photo frame on the original wall (Figure 1). Given that all the pictures were taken from the walls located in the core zone of the George Town World Heritage Site, the rules and regulations of UNESCO for such a heritage site were considered. For project implementation, all the required permits from the George Town authorities, George Town World Heritage Site Incorporated, and private owners of the premises were acquired. After the approval of the proposal, the GTF office provided all the necessary permits.

The data gathered for this research were analyzed using the qualitative approach. This method is employed when data are presented in words and remain in words during analysis (Blaikie, 2003). The present research applied the thematic analysis technique to analyze the data. This technique is defined as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis grants a reachable and theoretically versatile

approach, through which to analyze qualitative data. Using this technique, interview transcriptions were studied to obtain the essence and extract content. The motivating features of the data across the whole data set were then coded in a methodical manner.



Figure 1. Ah Quee Street Photo, GTF, 2014.

Source: Farhad Fakhrian (Researcher)

Research Findings and Discussion

Place Attachment and Cultural Events

The local respondents admitted that the GTF has been successful in raising the public's sense of attachment and belonging towards the George Town World Heritage Site. Considering the locals' further attachment to the heritage and their sense of pride, the local interviewees made the following comments:

"These events made me more attached to the George Town Heritage Site."

"I think art brings more attention and creates attachment to the heritage."

"I think this kind of projects for the local people make sense of pride or at least attachment."

"We locals at least should know and care about old things that we have."

"I think we locals should take part to such things and try to show what we have here."

"It was another way to show how we can preserve our city and enjoy it."

“That is the complex which can make people feel more attached.”
“I got the point, practice to see what is there, how valuable they are and we should feel proud of them.”
“It was my pleasure to see them as a Penangite.”
“There would be a high chance of positive influence sourced by images on the local perspective of the show case.”

All the locals stated that they had previously seen the heritage sites hundreds of times, but have failed to notice the details. Therefore, art events can create a qualitative change in the perception of details as a valuable but ignored, neglected, or unseen part of the heritage. This result confirms the interpretation of Jenkins (2003) that local people living in and are in continuous contact with their heritage commonly tend to be accustomed with them but mostly fail to notice the details. Nevertheless, these individuals are proud of having them, as evidenced by their statements below.

“We locals at least should know and care about old things that we have.”
“That is the complex which can make people feel more attachment.”
“I got the point, practice to see what is there and how valuable they are and we should be proud of them.”
“There would be a high chance of positive influence sourced by images on local perspectives of the show case.”

The local respondents believe that the GTF and its events, particularly photography projects involving the George Town Heritage Site, can increase the sense of pride and attachment among locals. This observation is in line with the findings of previous studies, which posited that cultural festivals yield positive effects on creating and raising a sense of place attachment among visitors (Lee et al., 2012; Stedman, 2002).

Effect of the Representation of Reality

With regard to the second research objective, that is, to determine whether the site's representation of reality through the representational medium can draw the attention of visitors to reality itself, several responses were captured.

“The representations lead us to pay more attention to our city.”
“What [they] have installed on the walls is not real, but catches more attention than the real one.”
“These representations cause you to rethink what we have seen before.”
“Of course, the representation is more eye-catching because it has frame.”
“In this case, representations caught my eyes more, because they are different from reality and it is fantastic.”

One statement from a particular respondent is highly incisive. She emphasized that pictures vary from reality, whereas the general belief argues that photos are a representation of reality. This same respondent commented that this interplay between reality and photographic reality is fantastic.

"I never noticed and paid close attention to the walls until [I observed] these pictures."

"If the picture was not there, I would not notice the wall."

"I do not think that without pictures I would pay attention to walls."

"Of course, the photo caught my eyes, I would not have paid attention to the walls if there were no photos."

The respondents asserted that the photos allowed them to see the real objects, that is, the existence of these images (as an artistic medium) prompted them to notice the original reality (first objective). Therefore, a photograph seems to have a particular power to transform common objects into something important, precious, fantastic, valuable, or something else, which exists in relation to today's communication and people's taste, education, and experiences.

Well-known critics Siegfried Kracauer and Andre Bazin have both emphasized the ontological relationship between photographs and reality (Bazin, 1967; Kracauer, 1960). Walter Benjamin was among the thinkers who argued over the effectiveness of the photograph in this matter, disputing that the duplicates of the surface facade of places and things can only convey minimal information on the socio-political contexts affecting and confining actual human experience (1972). From Benjamin's viewpoint, a photo cannot be the object that can extend the knowledge and experience of the public. The current study's findings, however, contradict Benjamin's theory, because the statements prove that a photo can extensively extend human knowledge and experiences.

"I looked at the photos as an art form, and then I noticed the walls precisely."

"At this moment, the picture caught my eyes, because we do not see the picture after reality all the time."

Practically all of the participants emphasized that they focused on the walls after noticing the photos. In fact, the photos have framed their limited visual context, which in turn, influenced and circumscribed the participants' actual experiences.

"These art works caused me to see the walls and think that they could be so inspiring."

"These are such art works, which have come out from gallery and would attract lots of people's interest with art work."

According to Benjamin, a mechanical reproduction of an image shifts one's attitudes toward arts. Singularity, a special place to show, and "aura" as a concept attached to artworks, are factors that are commonly lost among the mechanically reproduced images (Benjamin, 2008). These photographs seem to capture the "aura" that formerly belonged to unique artworks and moved the role from museums and galleries to public sites. People no longer care about the singularity of photographs by appropriating the reality and representing it in a manner that only photography can afford.

"I can see the difference between a piece of art and reality."

"It is like [the] creation of [a] new reality."

The remarks of the respondents regarding the second research objective bring to mind the prominent statement of Bazin, who asserted that "[A] photograph is not an image of reality [...], but rather a true imprint of reality, a kind of luminous mold [...]. There is [an] ontological identity between the object and its photographic image" (Bazin, 1967).

"In fact, these photos attract [the] attention of viewers to the historic walls."

"This representation of reality made me to look at things around [me] very carefully."

"I do not look at the walls regularly, this (representation) caused me to see them and think that they could be so inspiring."

"I am staring [at] the walls much more now than before. I can see the difference between a piece of art and the reality."

"This project has done its job very well to drive [audience] attentions to hidden values."

This research verified that people initially focus more on the photographic reality than the reality itself (i.e., objective reality). Nevertheless, extremely few participants believe that the objective reality catches their attention more than the photographic reality. The direct observations of the exhibition's visitors and the significant number of participants who believe that photos catch the eye more than actual objects provide ample evidence in proving this.

This finding is supported by the discourses of several thinkers, including Susan Sontag (1977), Allan Sekula (1982), Mary Price (1997), Max Kozloff (1979), Victor Burgin (1982), Bazin & Gray (1960), and Roland Barthes (1981). Considering that photographs act as an index that can be occasionally iconic, they not only add an aura of authenticity, they also appear reassuringly familiar. Articulating the familiar-looking subjects through settled aesthetic traditions further nurtures realist notions linked with photography (Burgin, 1982).

The locals interviewed admitted that despite seeing these images a hundred of times already, they have never seen the walls in detail (as works of art). Furthermore, this phenomenon occurred after observing the photos beside such images. This finding demonstrates that simulated reality has the power to improve people's perception and observation when it is located beside an objective reality. This proposition is supported by Stanczak, who claimed that "to a certain degree, visual representation is already a staple behavioral science" (2007).

The street photo exhibition was successful in raising the sensitivity of the people to perceive visual aesthetics and discover unseen or neglected beauty around them. The significance of the findings may indirectly lead us to conserve the heritage site by influencing the mind of every single person noticing every tiny detail of his/her heritage in this collective responsibility and commitment. In fact, photographic representation acts as a beacon light to draw one's attention to things that have previously existed and have inspired lives, but never noticed properly. Thus, this feature of photographic representation can relatively increase the public's awareness of their heritage while enjoying its aesthetic elements.

In addition, this type of realistic representation can optimize onlookers' opportunities to discover otherwise neglected artistic values. The research participants emphasized that the exhibition inspired them to rethink several things that they have previously failed to detect regarding the George Town Heritage Site. These individuals further believed that the show has made realistic representation highly comparative and allowed them to think of both the medium and reality.

This study also showed that the local people have begun to consider preserving parts of the unseen heritage or those that are assumed unimportant. Therefore, this type of artistic representation may serve as a strong motivation to raise public awareness of their heritage and attach these artworks to their heritage more than before. Another significant implication is that, with photographic representation, it becomes possible to direct the public's general attention to the unknown values of the heritage site.

This vital capability lends to a sense of extra attachment, at least for the locals, to their heritage in return. Conserving and preserving the neglected parts of the heritage site may be considered a product of this capability while raising the general aesthetics among people to gain a sense of attachment and pride after visiting the exhibition.

Conclusion

The research findings demonstrate the vital roles of the GTF as a cultural festival and photography as a representational medium in creating a sense of attachment among locals toward the George Town World Heritage Site. The respondents highlighted that the GTF, particularly the photo exhibition, directs their attention to neglected

values. The representation of reality catches more attention compared to reality itself; moreover, such representations build and increase a sense of pride among local visitors, heightening their attachment to their heritage, specifically to the George Town World Heritage Site. Furthermore, this capability leads individuals to think about preserving and conserving the neglected parts of the heritage sites/destinations and can result in sustainable heritage tourism development. On the other hand, the role of cultural festivals/cultural events as a way of place-making could be a topic for further study.

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