



RESEARCH PAPER

Exploration of Collective Identity and Visual Cues in Place Attachment among Native Young Adults Living in Karachi

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ABSTRACT

This study explores emerging trends in the development of collective identity using the selection of visual cues among young adults native to the city of Karachi; bringing the cityscape in context with the development of their sense of self and the narrative of connectedness related to the place attachment construct. The sample of 40 native young adults was purposively selected on the basis of their being born and brought up in Karachi. A mixed method approach with thematic analysis has been utilized to assess the elements of collective identity and its components through the lens of visual cues while attempting to clear the way forward for understanding Place Attachment. The results indicate that the challenge faced by today's youth in balancing personal, relational and collective constructs of identity shows a stronger tilt towards the collective identity domain. The components of social embeddedness, desire for behavioural involvement and self attributed characteristics show below average, very low and above average levels respectively. The research carries implications for psychologists, social analysts and academicians along with government agencies in building the sense of identity of the youth and in developing stronger visual cues within the urban infrastructure for improving their integration within the national construct to create a sense of belongingness.

KEYWORDS Identity, Self, Visual Cues, Place Attachment, Young Adults, Belonging. Urban Planning

Introduction

Identity as a personal or social construct has been studied in psychology with respect to the broad division of personal and social domains and more recently has acquired diversification through the usage of terminology including relational and spiritual identities (Cheek, Smith, & Tropp, 2002). It is interesting to note that communal bonds and commonalities between strangers have held a varied place in identity related research through the ages; being intermittently defined and redefined as social or collective identity.

The relational identity element, a relatively recent development explained by Andersen and Chen (2002), shows an explicit distinction between "significant others in one's life" and "social entities like groups or other social categories". It thus shows links with people who have emotionally influenced one, such as life partners or friends. On the other hand social identity includes people in general in the community with whom one shares a common attribute like gender, ethnicity, or work. Hierarchical social structures exist, such as between parent and child in the family or between supervisor and subordinate in an organization.

In today's world, questions about the cost of urban development run parallel with concerns about future progress. The urban population in developing cities comprising largely of young adults faces the challenge of maintaining personal identities that may take precedence at times over communal strivings.

Literature Review

There is a strong indication that most such constructs regarding identity in terms of background develop in childhood as a result of parental verbal reinforcement rather than visual aids. This is in contrast with the idea of adolescence and adulthood wherein the young adult relies on a pattern of reinforcing beliefs from the environment including visual and verbal aids to categorize the self into a series of identity related variables.

Bennet and Sani (2004) mention the idea of the development of the social self as synchronous with the sorting of photographs denoting social categories. In some cases this can happen as early as age 1 using habituation and seems to develop more progressively after age 4. Ethnic constructs of identity seem to develop between the ages of 3 and 5, however there is variation in the studies conducted.

As ethnic understanding stems from the conceptual knowledge of relatively complex ideas such as customs and beliefs (Aboud, 1984; Ocampo, Knight and Bernal, 1997), the idea of the development of collective identity at a later stage in life is not incomprehensible.

This study differentiates conceptually between *topophilia* – the affective bond between people and place or setting, also known as place attachment (Wolf, Krueger and Flora, 2014); and collective identity or place identity (Mazzei et al., 2025). While place attachment could act as one of the concepts associated with the aforementioned types of identity, it is not the sole marker. Castell's (2010) definition of identity as 'people's source of meaning and experience' shows greater context in this case. Individuals may therefore assume varying identities or roles in different times and situations.

Seamon and Sowers (2008) quote Relph in his idea of the identity of a place being strongly linked to the existence of authentic sense of place. According to Relph, sense of place is a person's unique understanding about a place; hence it involves (a) experience and (b) a subjective dimension. In this manner, the composition and characteristics of the physical factors of the built environment affect perception and interpretation by people about the sense of place.

Rogan (2005) has described three variables of sense of place; legibility, perception of and preference for the visual environment and the compatibility of the activities with human purposes. The purveyors of psychoanalytic theory on the other hand explain place attachment as an internalized view of objects in a place or environment that serve as a source of security during times of stress This view is essential to ones sense of wellbeing and cannot be completely distinguished from either personal identity or collective identity (Hay, 1998)..

More recently, Narayanan and Nagarsheth, (2026) have taken this a step further by describing place attachment affordance clarifying the why and how of people forming attachment bonds at a deeper level with a certain place. The present study follows the same path by attempting a dissection of the interlinks between identity and place attachment while focusing on the city of Karachi and its native inhabitants.

Identity has long been a subject of intense debate among researchers. From differences in definitions and the relevance of environmental context, to the types of identities; it is an area full of potential for exploration. The current study examines a sample of young adults with reference to the urban environment of Karachi. The idea follows the concepts of both collective identity and place attachment. Researchers known for their extensive and relevant work, such as Haapala (1998) and Mazzei et al (2025), contend that all human beings create a set of familiar spaces for themselves in a city that threatens

unfamiliarity in most respects. This desire for connectedness and belongingness, leads towards a sense of collective or urban identity that shapes the future experiences of the individual.

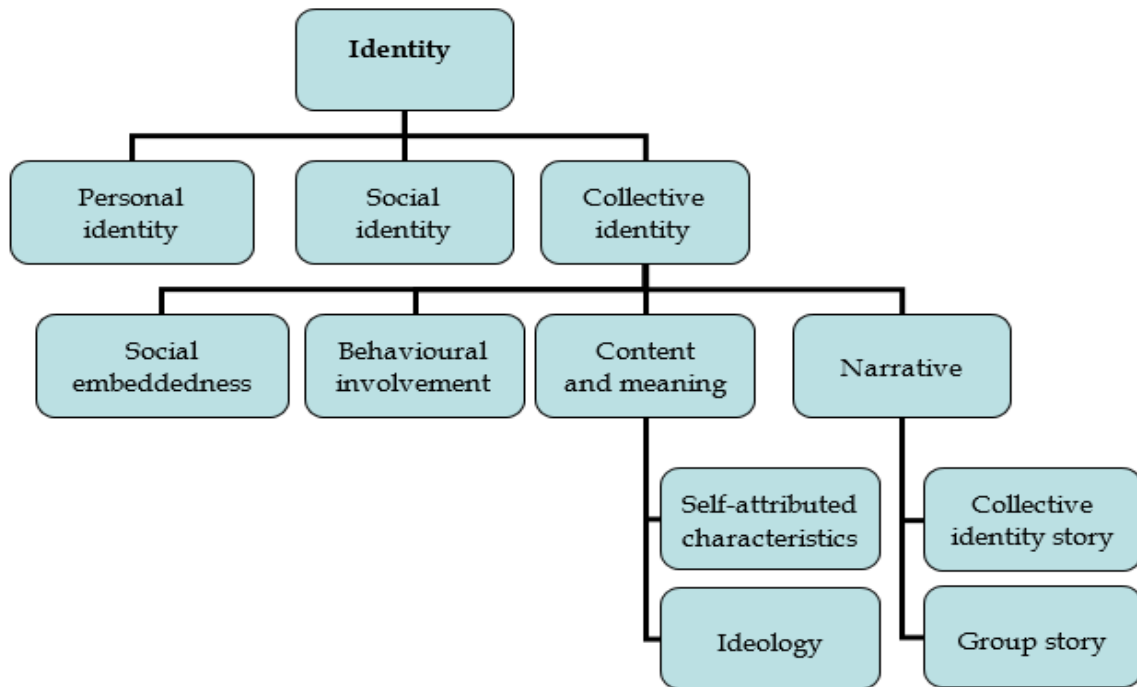


Figure 1: Theoretical framework of the study showing the elements of identity

The theoretical framework for the study has been adapted for use following Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004), who have provided a multidimensional organizing framework for the analysis of collective identity and relevant elements. Figure 1 shows the link between the types of identity and further explores the dimensions of collective identity in the current research. Place Attachment is posited an additional area that is not part of this framework, however it is analyzed as part of the existing narrative.

In the light of the literature review and the theoretical framework, two research questions were put forth. The first question assessed collective identity and its components asking: “What are the levels of the elements of collective identity as individual level constructs?” The second question based on the exploration of facets of place attachment in the urban visual context: “What are the dimensions of place attachment that can be derived from visual cues present in Karachi for young adults brought up in the city?”

Material and Methods

Research design

Mixed methodology including a qualitative design utilizing thematic analysis of the visual cues involved in place attachment was used in the study.

Participants

A sample of 40 participants between 18-25 years was included. Purposive sampling was used to obtain the sample and all participants were included after ascertaining that they were natives – having been born and brought up for the most part of their lives in Karachi. All those who had spent less than 10 years in Karachi were excluded from the study. Originally 78 participants had been approached, yet those results that were incomplete due to their single word responses or sentence fragments instead of narrative explanations that could be thematically analyzed, were discarded.

Measures

Demographic Information

All the participants were requested to note their name or selected pseudonym, age, gender, place of birth and number of years living in Karachi prior to the Photo Sort process.

Photo Sort

The photo sort method was used via the virtual medium in this research. Participants were provided a given link to select at least one and a maximum of two photographs from a visual list based on the keywords 'Karachi', 'Urban' and the current year, ensuring latest photographs. They were not restricted in the number of virtual web pages they might want to go through in order to select the photographs.. Participants were asked to internally self-reflect on the question: "Which photograph best reflects your sense of self and identity while living in Karachi?" while selecting the photographs.

Procedure

The sample of young adults was contacted through email and social media networks. The participants, who agreed to participate in the study, were provided the link for the online photo sort and document for the related questions. It may be noted that feedback obtained from persons who did not complete the study; mostly leaving out the narrative explanation, showed that they felt that the writing of this explanation was tedious. Briefer responses (sentence fragments) had to be removed from the overall data exploration due to paucity of data that could be analyzed and this proved to be a challenge during the the compilation and thematic analysis. Participants were asked to select photographs based on the photo sort method mentioned above. Once they had selected the photograph, they were given the following instruction: "With reference to the photograph you have selected, please provide your reason/(s) for selection. Why do you feel that this / these particular photograph/(s) best represent your sense of self and identity while living in Karachi." The narrative written responses were then thematically analyzed for personal versus collective identity using the operational definitions in NVivo along with the elements of collective identity. The photographs selected by the participants were thematically analyzed and cross referenced for levels of place attachment corresponding to the visual cues.

Operational Definitions of Key Terms

Personal identity

Personal identity here is an individual's focus on his own self.

Relational identity

While social identity refers to socially constructed and socially meaningful categories that are accepted by individuals as descriptive of themselves or their group (Thoits and Virshup, 1997), in this study, this is further defined as the narrative involving interpersonal familial or fraternal relations.

Collective identity

It is defined as the individual's subjective claim or acceptance in a statement about categorical membership based on relevance of urban concepts including natural and manmade landscapes, traffic and environment showing their link with the cityscape.

It is relevant to mention here that some authors in sociology and psychology merge the definitions of Social and Collective Identity pointing out that all aspects of the self are socially influenced. However for the purposes of this study, the definitions have been kept separate to help identify collective identity as distinct from social identity in terms of the narrative link to urban concepts in the former as compared to the elements of general relationships in the latter.

The following components have been taken directly from the theoretical ideas of Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004):

Social embeddedness

The degree to which a particular collective identity is embedded in the person's everyday ongoing social relationships

Desire for Behavioral Involvement

The desire of the person to engage in actions that directly implicate the collective identity category in question

The overall content and meaning of the narrative was analyzed using the following elements:

Self-attributed Characteristics

The extent to which traits and dispositions that are associated with a social category are endorsed as self-descriptive by a member of that category

Ethical Considerations

Respondents were assured about the confidential nature of the forms. They were informed that any research presentations or publications made in this regard would only include summaries and that individual identifying data would not be provided to any third party.

Results and Discussion

The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics and qualitative thematic analysis using NVivo. Descriptive statistics were calculated in order to provide visual analysis wherever possible. Two questions were formulated for analysis regarding the elements of collective identity and the visual cues of place attachment in Karachi.

Age related data shows that nearly 92% of the sample population was between the ages of 20 to 23 years while the age range was between 18-25 years.

The results of this study therefore prove to be quite interesting when viewed under the lens of a developmental framework. Most developmental theorists place the emergence of individuation or the sense of self as beginning in adolescence and continuing into early adulthood. The issue of young age, social influences and differences in maturity levels in a country with immense power-distance like Pakistan, create several challenges in assimilation for young adults who may strive to maintain a unique sense of self. This challenge has been duly examined here and the percentage values prove consistent with the idea of the emergence of a collective identity at this stage; one that is stronger than personal identity and far removed from the element of relational identity. While this is heartening as a discovery for the concept of emotional investment in the cityscape, it creates further questions in terms of the effect it may have on the development of an independent and

strong sense of self. The unequal balance here between the components may create inner conflicts.

The personal, relational and collective identity constructs were first taken in account and measured using the operational definitions given earlier. Table 1 shows the relevant percentage levels for personal, relational and collective identity components. It must be noted that each person's narrative was analyzed for each of the given components and marked accordingly.

Table 1
Relative percentage totals of young adults with elements of Personal, Relational and Collective Identity (N=40)

Variable	Subvariables	%
Identity	Personal Identity	36.84
	Relational Identity	8.77
	Collective Identity	54.39

Note: % = Percentage of young adults

Table 1 effectively categorizes the types of identity found in the sample population. Further, it was seen that all individuals who presented any aspect of relational identity; that is 8.77% were found to focus on elements of both personal and relational identities. This is in sync with the concept that one's sense of being is related to the age appropriate desire to form relationships with others in emerging adulthood. Additionally, 37.5% of the sample population had elements of personal as well as collective identities, while the rest were found to relate to the visual cue in only one of the constructs.

For the first research question, "What are the levels of the elements of collective identity as individual level constructs?" using the percentage values of the individuals presenting with at least one of the elements of collective identity (n=31), further analysis was carried out. Each variable here was also assigned percentage values as shown in Table 2

Table 2
Components of Collective Identity in Native Young Adults Brought Up in Karachi (n=31)

Variable	Components of Collective Identity	%
Collective Identity	Social Embeddedness	35.4
	Desire for Behavioural Involvement	19.3
	Self Attributed Characteristics	67.7

Note: % = Percentage of young adults

The first research question about collective identity and its components focused on the levels of the elements of collective identity as individual level constructs. The idea of *social embeddedness* is interesting as several young adults felt a definite lack of connection with others in the environment (Table 2). Distinctly the impression of the lower middle class as 'still being present' was one presented in many narratives directly or indirectly stemming from the visual cues of traffic jams, slum areas and the congested built city environment. This could be among other reasons an important one resulting in below average levels of social embeddedness.

The low levels of the desire for behavioural involvement (Table 2) pose a concern. If youth are believed to be the future of tomorrow in terms of their interaction and ability to influence the environment around them they must feel a sense of empowerment along with the ability to make a difference. As one participant of the study voiced this concern through the narrative explanation "everyone belongs to Karachi but Karachi belongs to no one."

The second question was “What are the levels of place attachment that can be derived from visual cues present in Karachi for native young adults brought up in the city?” Results were analyzed based on the levels of categorization of Place Attachment ranging from 1-7 as shown in Table 3 (Shamai, 1991).

Table 3
Levels of Place Attachment in Young Adults Brought Up in Karachi (N=40)



Levels	Place Attachment Descriptors	%
1	No sense of place	5
2	Knowledge of being located in a place	37.5
3	Belonging to a place	27.5
4	Attachment to a place	10
5	Identifying with the place goals	17.5
6	Involvement in a place	0
7	Sacrifice for a place	2.5

Note: % = Percentage of attachment from visual cues association

The second research question, therefore surrounded the exploration of the levels of place attachment that could be derived from visual cues present in Karachi for young adults brought up here. Following Shamai (1991), the analysis used seven levels of attachment. Figure 4 shows higher percentages on lower levels of the categorization indicating that while most young adults feel a sense of affinity with the city based on visual cues and some major landmarks and symbols, the sense of involvement or sacrifice has not developed.

Table 4 shows the 5 most common negative and positive visual cues along with their keywords for selection during the Photo Sort process. Here (Table 4) the *visual cues* are the directly observable visual phenomena occurring in the frequently selected photographs. In a separate step this was later affirmed by reaching out to 50% randomly selected participants. The *narrative - associated keywords*, as explained in the proposed theoretical framework, are the frequently occurring responses cued by the photographs.

Table 4
Commonly Occurring Negative and Positive Cues in Photo Sort

Photographs (Selected by more than 80% of the participants using the same associated keywords)	Nature of Cues	Visual Cues	Narrative - Associated Keywords
	Negative	High density areas	Overpopulation
		Traffic	Noise pollution
	Positive	Roads	Insecurity



Positive

Lights

Life

Gulmohar Tree

Growth

Dining out

Parents , Events

Sea

Breeze



Content analysis of the photographs further revealed that those with levels 1-3 of place attachment had mainly focused on negative cues like noise, pollution and insecurity as indicated through their written narratives and their selection of photographs. Those at the 4 – 7 levels of attachment, identifying with the place goals, showing involvement and even willing to sacrifice, were the ones more likely to pick positive visual cues related to nostalgia, greenery, and events.

Additionally, as per Table 4, the verbatim of the respondents affirms this notion as many have criticized the traffic, the pollution, the congested clusters of housing and the lack of connection they feel on account of an insecure environment. It is widely recognized in attachment related research (Proshansky et al.,1983; Newman, 2004,) that resilient individuals are more capable of maintaining a sense of hope and optimism in even insecure surroundings . An interesting finding is that those, on the other hand who have focused on the presence of greenery, lights, life and have experienced a combined sense of frustration at the unresolved potential of the city, have identified with the place goals and in a marginal number of cases have talked about goals and their own desire to do good no matter what the cost. It must also be noted that the visual cues of such individuals are strongly associated with nostalgia and memories linked with the presence of their loved ones in the city – mostly their parents. The Gulmohar tree, aerial views of city lights and food related experiences including events, all were irrevocably linked with positive associations stemming from past experiences and in turn with higher levels of place attachment.

This observation lends credence to the concept of attachments being formed on the basis of relationships with primary caregivers, beginning from childhood and continuing through adolescence to adulthood (Jack, 2010). In the current context, as Pakistan is a collectivistic culture, this indicates the power of past associations and visual cues embedded in long term memory

Conclusion

The study carries several noteworthy explorations into the conceptual framework of an urban sense of self. The lower levels of social embeddedness and desire for behavioural

involvement are put into perspective by the higher levels of self attributed characteristics with reference to the urban area of Karachi. This indicates the inner conflict many young adults face in trying to assert their unique sense of self and yet assimilate in a largely collectivistic culture with emphasis on the characteristics of their environment. The realization that attractive features and the resultant positive mood states matter in place attachment also brings to light the lack of importance of these in the image of the city.

Implications

The overall findings carry implications for those directly involved in guiding the young adult population. Educationists, therapists and counselors directly involved with the youth must pay attention to the experiences and memories of the environment if we are to reduce brain drain from the city. The area of desire for behavioural involvement should alert the attention of social science scholars and academicians alike. It is alarming to note that far from actual behavioural interaction toward positive and meaningful engagement, the desire at the mental level is also weak.

Recommendations and Implications

The study consisted of an unequal number of males and females. Future researches could be done keeping in mind gender discrepancies and may therefore add more to the area of gender studies and the environment.

It should be noted here that the sample of young adults contacted via email or through social media were mostly available in university settings and being on vacation during the time period of the study (July – August) did not respond as per expectations. This has impacted the sample size estimates. A follow up study conducted in other months and may result in a significant increase in numbers.

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