# Coast to Coast: Discovering Local Distinctiveness of Marketplaces Identity in Peninsular Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

*Modernisation in Malaysia has greatly influenced the local identity of urban and rural places. Hence, there is increasing concern that the homogenising effect of the place character has affected the individuality of places. Local distinctiveness is closely linked to a place's physical and social ambiance, differentiating it from anywhere else. The notion of marketplaces in Malaysia relating to place identity has gained proper attention from local researchers. However, the correlation of physical and non-physical elements of marketplaces in creating local distinctiveness is still under-explored. This research aims to discover the overt and covert marketplaces of the West Coast and East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The objectives are to explore how the overt and covert parameters contribute to and enhance the local distinctiveness of the marketplace's identity. This study employs a qualitative approach through direct non-participant observation and cultural mapping at the four selected marketplaces: Pantai Suri floating market in Tumpat, Kelantan, Pasar Bisik in Penaga, Penang, Pasar Jerami in Sungai Besar, Selangor, and Pasar Borneo in Masai, Johor. The overt and covert of each market were carefully observed and mapped, where three substantial outcomes were revealed. First, the market's social interaction-transaction, social activities, and social connectivity portray the covert parameters as vital for creating local distinctiveness. Second, marketplaces have the potential as dynamic community public spaces to get fresh dairy products and promote local heritage and tourism. Third, marketplaces face threats from climate change, pandemic Covid-19, and the diminishing local culture and traditions. In conclusion, the covert and overt marketplaces should be equally preserved as they become primary components for establishing the local distinctiveness of place identity.*

*Keywords: local distinctiveness, marketplace, identity, overt, covert*

## INTRODUCTION

Rapid development in Malaysia has modernised and affected the local identity of urban (Said & Ahmad Hamzah, 2020) and rural places (Zakariya, Ibrahim, & Wahab, 2019). While traditional markets are still present in many countries, including Malaysia, the recent social changes have spurred the gradual changes in the identity of marketplaces. In the fast urbanisation and global era, many researchers view marketplaces necessary to serve local communities' social, economic, and cultural needs (Tannous, 2020). Hence, there is increasing concern that the homogenising effect of the place character has affected the place identity.

The notion of marketplaces in Malaysia relating to place identity has gained proper attention from local researchers (Alias, 2010; Ibrahim, Wahab, & Shukri, 2018; Zakariya, Kamarudin, & Harun, 2016). However, the correlation of physical and non-physical elements of marketplaces in creating local distinctiveness is still under-explored. Distinctiveness is a vital aspect in shaping the identity of a place

(Phetsuriya. N., & Heath, T., (2021), in which it is closely linked to a place's physical and social ambiance, differentiating it from anywhere else. The sum of landscapes, history, local culture, and tradition make a place distinct and unique. This research aims to discover the overt and covert marketplaces of the West Coast and East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The objective is to explore how the overt and covert parameters contribute to and enhance the local distinctiveness of the marketplace's identity.

# CONCEPTUALIZING RESEARCH

Research on marketplaces, place identity and local distinctiveness has received substantial attention in different research areas. To place our research interest within the broader theoretical argument, we provide concepts and approaches to studying people-place-identity relations. Hence, the following sections will explore a literature review related to three main areas: human geography-phenomenology, environmental psychology, and ethnography.

## Human Geography and Phenomenology: Space, Place, and Sense of Place

Space and place have become the central focus of human geography as it is more than just a container for human activities. However, they produce elements of social life. Space, place, and sense of place have been widely discussed in human geography and phenomenology (Campbell, 2016; Grantham & Tuan, 1978). The former refers to space as distinct, physical, and elementary accurate, which can be perceived through experience. The latter describes space as an aspect of events that are bound to time and space in which it is also dependent on what people see and how it can be used. In contrast to the less focused on the properties of Tuan's relative spaces, Agnew has improvised this by adding three aspects of properties: location as the site in space, locale as the setting where social life and interaction take place, and sense of place as the identification with a place and a strong of a sense of belonging (Agnew, 1988). Subsequently, a definition of a sense of place is referred to as '[…] the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over […]' (Tuan, Feld, & Basso, 1997).

## Environmental Psychology: Distinctiveness, Place Identity, Place Attachment and Place Dependence

Distinctiveness refers to a place or a city distinguished from other cities (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). It is related to a positive perception of the uniqueness of a place (Lalli, 1992). Environmental psychology has debated the definition and concept of how people relate to a place (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010). Amid significant concepts that illuminate this field of study places identity, place dependence, and place attachment. Place identity is an individual's identity influenced by conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, feelings, values and behavioral tendencies, and skills relevant to this physical environment (Proshansky, 1978). It does not merely include physical settings; social and cultural activities are also essential to capture how a place can be dynamic and functional (Ernawati, 2018; Stokols & Shumaker, 1981). Following this idea, Belanche, Casaló, & Rubio, (2021) highlight the community types and personal relevance influence place identity, where an individual or a community group is attached to certain activities and specific functions of a place. How people perceive and experience a place illuminates the concept of place attachment, which is often associated with the interaction between affection and emotion, knowledge and trust, behaviour and actions related to the place (Junot, Paquet, & Fenouillet, 2018; Peng, Strijker, & Wu, 2020; Purwanto & Harani, 2020). According to Gurney et al. (2017), the place's fundamental value greatly influences place Dependence. It is also related to the attachment power between the person and the specific place (Alrobaee & Al-Kinani, 2019). In conclusion, place attachment and place Dependence are created due to emotional components, cognitive elements, and practices of people who experienced that place.

## Ethnography: Social Cohesion, Social Interaction, and Language-dialect

Ethnography is a study through direct observation of users in their natural environment to gain insights into how users interact with things in their natural environment. It looks at the social cohesion, social interaction, and language individuals or communities use to interact in a specific place. Social cohesion is conceptualised as shared norms and values (Beckley, 1995), positive interactions and relationships among individuals (de Vries, van Dillen, Groenewegen, & Spreeuwenberg, 2013; Fehr et al., 2021), psychological health benefits (Jennings & Bamkole, 2019)( Jennings & Bamkole, 2019) and feelings of being accepted and belongings in physical settings (Esse, 2021; Forrest & Kearns, 2001). Hence, urban vitality is positively associated with social cohesion (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020). This concept resembled the meaning and value of place attachment and place dependence perceived by an individual or group of community. Social interaction is defined as behaviours of one actor that are consciously reorganised by and influence the behaviours of another actor and vice versa (Turner, 1988). These behaviours include the overt movements of individuals in space, the covert or "mental" deliberations of individuals, and the physiological processes of individuals. Meanwhile, language, including dialect, is vital to daily human practices and interaction.

## Placemaking and Marketplaces

Placemaking refers to place creation focusing on transforming public spaces to strengthen the connection between people and these places (Moreira, 2020) and the local community's involvement in the process (Ellery & Ellery, 2019). In this context, the local community's vision, aspirations, and daily needs have always been its primary inspiration as traditional market dynamism is intertwined with physical elements, activities, relationships, and constructed meanings (P., Kamath, & Paul, 2019). Maciver describes the role of marketplaces by emphasising the three goals of the public markets; namely, it functions as community gathering places, economic sustainability, and has a significant impact on local community development (Maciver, 2011). These goals parallel local research as they concluded that marketplaces are more than just a space for commercial activities. They play a significant role in food systems, placemaking, and community economic development, where the sense of place can be felt (Qamaruz-Zaman, Shaberi, Bakri, & Ahmad, 2014) and it constantly being produced and reproduced as public spaces (van Eck et al., 2022)

## METHODS

The following subsections elaborate on the case studies, methodology, and data collection involved in this study.

## Case Studies

Four case studies were chosen in this research based on their geographical location, uniqueness of covert or overt, and availability of the marketplaces during pandemic Covid-19. Pantai Suri floating market in Tumpat, representing the East Coast, is the first floating market established in Kelantan. The following marketplaces are located on the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. *Pasar Jerami* in Simpang Lima Sungai Besar, Selangor is one of a kind. It is set on the River Tengi, surrounded by a scenic paddy field, and has an appealing Javanese and Banjarese socio-cultural community background. *Pasar Bisik* in Penaga signifies a unique tradition from the northern region. Pasar Borneo in Masai Johor Bahru shows a rather distinct marketplace selling food and fresh agricultural products brought from Sarawak.

## Methodology and Data Collection

A qualitative approach through a non-participant observation was employed as it allows a researcher to be at the site while retaining the position of an outsider (Kostera, 2007). Site observation occurred between October and December 2020 with site access limitations due to the pandemic Covid-19. Table 1 shows a systematic guide covering the core and dynamic elements of local distinctiveness that the researchers utilised to observe key research parameters.

**Table 1:** Description of local distinctiveness elements

| Core Elements | | Dynamic Elements | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Natural Features | Man-Made Features | Cultural Identity and people | Food-Drink and Crafts | Industry and Business |
| Location | Historic Features | Event | Craft | Manufacturing |
| Topography | Townscape | Language | Artefact | Cultural Industries |
| Natural Landscape | Buildings | Tradition | Food | Lan Uses |
| Habitat | Monument | Famous Person | Drink | Activities |
| Coastline | Transportation | Dressing | | |
| Native Plants | | Music | | |
| Natural Materials | | | | |

Source: (El Hosary, 2018)

Data collection through the cultural mapping technique is a systematic approach to identifying, recording, classifying, and analyzing a community's cultural resources or assets that trace a site's historical, economic, social, and geographical significance ( Savić, 2017; Pillai, 2013). Overt consisting of physical elements on-site such as artificial and natural features, circulation, spatial layout, and land use were mapped alongside the covert represented by the socio-cultural aspects, namely social cohesion, social connectivity, social interaction/transaction, and social activities. Figure 3.1 illustrates the metaphor of place identity, which is highly dependent on both covert and overt substance. Following this, place identity is related to context, thus requiring a thorough investigation of the context qualitatively (Relph, 1976).

## RESULTS

Through the recorded observation and cultural mapping of the four selected case studies, three key variables that encompass the overt and coverts elements that contribute significantly to local distinctiveness were suggested, namely (1) the physical settings and layout, (2) social dimension, and (3) the products offered. The result indicates that the various case studies observed showcased covert and overt elements contributing to place identity. All of the studied sites possessed overt and covert characteristics but varied in scale, form, and intensity. The observed overt and covert parameters have suggested that social interaction and transaction, the physical setting, and the products offered at a particular market contributed most significantly to marketplace identity.

## The Physical Settings and Layout

The physical setting of the market plays a significant role in the formation of local distinctiveness. Three of the market observed are located in or near a river. This critical geographical feature contributes to the whole setting where the market is affected by the river and vice versa. The different backdrops of the market become a significant factor in observed time spent in a particular market. People seem to spend more time at a market space near natural features such as the Pantai Suri Floating Market and *Pasar Jerami* than markets near urban blocks, specifically Pasar Borneo. Figures 1-4 showcase the layout of each case study.
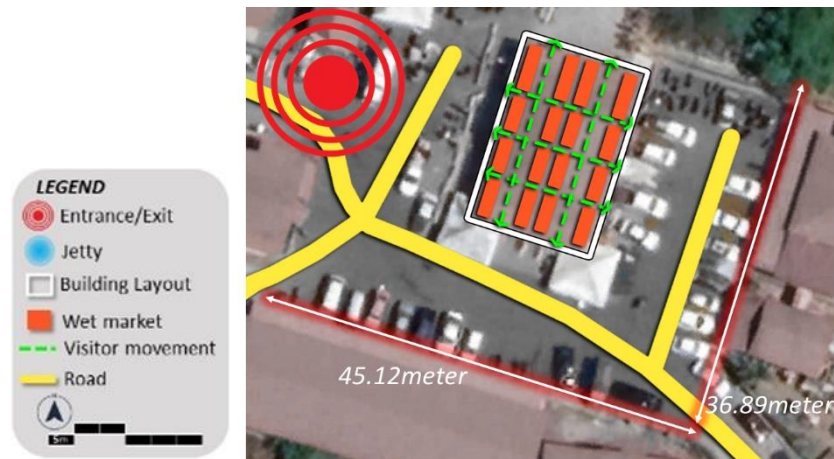
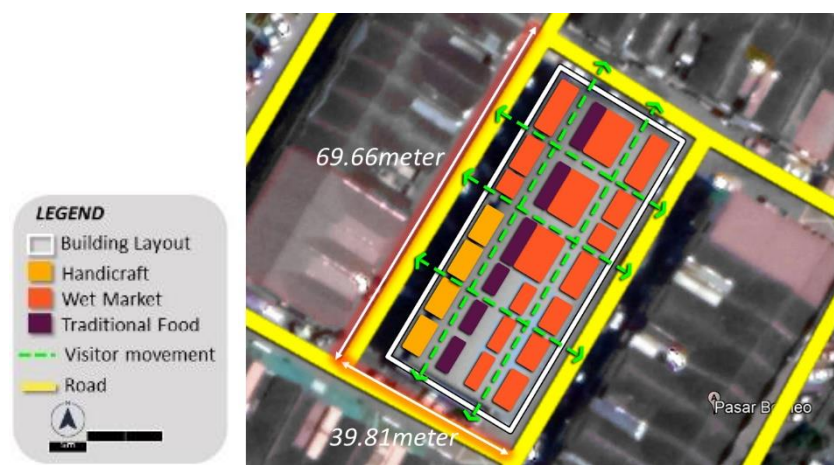**Figure 1:** Layout of *Pasar Bisik*, Penang



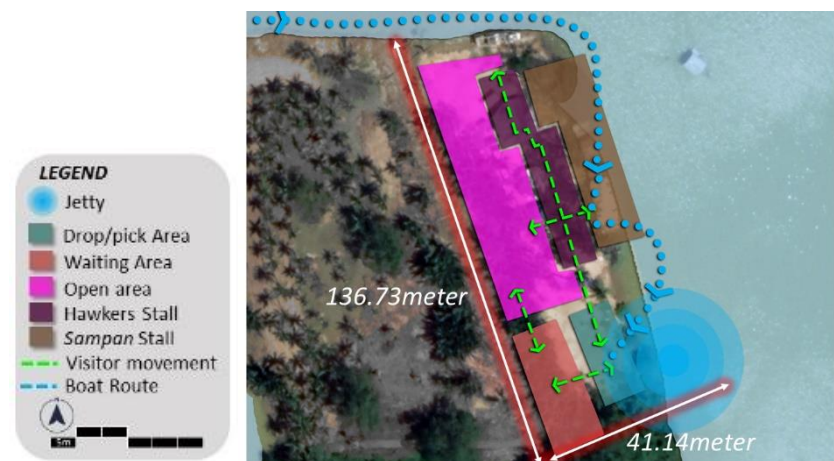**Figure 2:** Layout of *Pasar Borneo*, Johor



**Figure 3:** Layout of *Pantai Suri,* Kelantan

**Figure 4:** Layout of *Pasar Jerami*, Selangor

## Social Dimensions-social Activities, Social Interaction and Transaction, Social Connectivity and Social Cohesion

One of the key elements contributing to the place identity is a particular market's social interaction and transaction. This element differs from place to place and varies greatly, particularly in spoken dialects. The differentiation of dialects is apparent in audible form and the text, informal signage, and reference to spaces within the market. Some terms and vocabulary familiar to the locals might be alien to outsiders. For example, in Pantai Suri Floating Market, sellers-buyers interact using the Kelantanese dialect and *Pasar Jerami* in Sungai Besar Selangor. The majority of the transaction use Javanese and Banjarese dialects. Despite language and dialect, how the transactions are made also differs and impacts the whole layout of the marketplace, which is evident at the Pasar Bisik. The market is set up differently as the transactions between buyer-seller are made via whispering, thus needing people to be closer to each other.

## Products Offered

The products offered at a particular market are also considered a significant element contributing to place identity, particularly foodstuff and local produce. *Pasar Borneo*, Pantai Suri Floating Market, and *Pasar Jerami* boast rich cultural elements of Sarawakian, Kelantanese, and Javanese, respectively. Unique cultural and regional products are made available at these marketplaces and thus making them a point of destination for visitors. The products offered at these markets significantly contribute to the place's identity as they directly reflect the community's culture, norms, and daily lifestyle.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results discussed in section 4 demonstrate the local distinctiveness of the marketplaces on the East Coast and West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. On another note, these marketplaces resemble places that can be built with specific geographical, physical, and environmental features, combined with distinctive cultural factors that manifest in the original form and purpose of the settlement and subsequent human interventions over time (Carmona, 2021). The subsequent sections discover the potentials and challenges of marketplaces in the contemporary era. Despite the dynamic characters of each marketplace, the potentials and challenges faced by these marketplaces to coexist with current development and local lifestyle are noteworthy to be explored.

## Marketplace as a Dynamic Community Place

Food is the main reason for the local community and visitors to gather, which that gathering creates these marketplaces a hub for community life (PPS, 2014). The covered pavilion of *Pasar Borneo* or also known as the "Little Sarawak," is sometimes used for Bornean cultural performances and social gatherings. Consequently, this market has become a virtual gathering space for the Sarawakian (Najihah, 2017). It is also suggested that the marketplace's location, visibility, and accessibility are vital to its success (T & Bass, 2016). Observations made at the Pantai Suri floating market resembled these characteristics. Visitors come not just to buy food but also to perform passive recreational activities such as eating and watching roaster crowing competitions while enjoying the scenic view of the Kelantan River. The similarities of its setting and physical characteristics to the floating markets in Thailand make this place a popular destination for residents and tourists (Ithnin, 2018). The four marketplaces in this study resemble cultural diversity, potentially leading to increased discovery and distinctiveness from the tourists' home culture (Zandieh & Seifpour, 2019). In conclusion, the flexible spaces at the Borneo and Pantai Suri floating markets have made these places suitable for social activities and enhanced their social connectivity. Cultural diversity leads to increased discovery, and the more distinct a destination is from the tourists' home culture, the more likely it is to attract specific niche tourism.

## Building Future on Local Heritage and Domestic Tourism.

True sustainability of marketplaces depends on organised complexity, where all materials and immaterial elements link together coherently in a dynamic environment and understanding the community's attachment to their place (Ekomadyo, Nurfadillah, Kartamihardja, & Cungwin, 2018). The local dialect of the Javanese, Banjarese, Kelantanese, and the whispering technique used for interaction, make these marketplaces unique and worthy of preservation. The immaterial elements considered by a given community are essential components of its intrinsic identity and distinctiveness compared to all other community groups (Lenzerini, 2011). The intrinsic qualities that build marketplaces' image and identity are crucial for tourism activities, where local heritage marketisation can contribute to the safeguarding of the intangible heritage for future generations (Maags, 2021).

## Adapting to climate change and public health realities.

Pasar Bisik and Pantai Suri floating markets, located at the water edge, are potentially affected by rising sea levels, tsunamis, flash floods, and monsoon floods. The outbreak of the Covid-19 Coronavirus affects the daily activities of communities around the globe. This disease has severely impacted marketplaces that serve as vital public spaces providing fresh food (van Eck, van Melik, & Schapendonk, 2020). The open-air design of the marketplaces in this study may make them safer than grocery stores, which allow for greater social distancing and abiding by other standard operational procedures (SOPs).

## Threatened Local Dialect and Cultural Traditions

Language is commonly used to communicate to understand one another, yet it can also be used to construct an identity of a speaker too (Syuhudi, 2019). For instance, the Javanese and Banjarese in Selangor, who migrated from Indonesia in the 16th century, use the local dialect to interact at Pasar Jerami (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2021). However, research suggests that compared to the Kelantanese, Bornean, and Kedah dialects due to the mixed marriage, these dialects have become less widely spoken at home by the young Javanese and Banjarese adults (Johari & Nazari, 2019). Unlike the other three marketplaces, the social interaction and transaction at the whispering market or "Pasar Bisik" are very different. The traditional whispering technique used among sellers and bidders makes this market noiseless and peaceable. As social distancing requires sellers and bidders to be in a certain proximity, this tradition has been banned, abiding by the SOP of the pandemic of Covid-19. Hence, while the 60

years old traditional practice is unique, sellers and mediators have been advised to change their modus operandi (Merican, 2020).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the core and dynamic elements of the local distinctiveness of the four marketplaces. The primary elements that have been suggested are social interaction and transaction, the physical setting, and the products offered. Through the observation and appreciation of these features, the elements of what makes a place unique and how it adapts over time can be better understood. Hence, it could lead to a higher appreciation of these spaces as an essential cultural landscape resource. The core and dynamic elements observed in the four case studies can be suggested as significant elements in understanding, safeguarding, and a key catalyst in developing local distinctiveness at the four case studies. It is recommended that future development considers significant aspects such as the local and regional identity, local heritage such as products, and interaction and transaction methods to protect the uniqueness of these social gathering spaces.

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| | |
|---|---|
| Raziah Ahmad | Abstract, introduction, methodology, literature, result, discussion, and references |
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| Zainuddin Ab Rahman | Abstract, introduction, references |
| Muhammad Adam Zakaria | Formatting, illustration, references, and corresponding author |
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