

Assessing Social Interaction in Public Open Spaces: The Case of Dataran Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur

Amir Hossein Askari

Soha Soltani

Department of Art and Architecture, Apadana Institute of Higher Education, Shiraz, Iran

amir1360.askari@gmail.com

sohasoltani63@gmail.com

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Abstract: Social interaction stands at the lowest level among ethnic groups in public open spaces in Malaysia. Therefore, the current paper seeks to identify the factors contributing to increasing social interaction. To achieve this, a self-administered questionnaire gathered 400 participants' assessment of factors affecting social interaction. The findings show that establishing strong social bonds through embossing ethnic values and holding socio-cultural activities that equally address the beliefs and norms of ethnic groups influence social interaction most, compared to personal, managerial, and physical factors. The findings offer constructive insights into the future designing and planning of inclusive public open spaces in multicultural societies.

Keywords: Socio-cultural activities, Social interaction, Public open spaces, Multicultural countries.

1. Introduction

Scholars, such as Gehl & Gemzøe (2004); Sugiyama et al. (2009); Ramli & Jamaludin (2012); Tang & Khan (2012); Hajmirsadeghi et al (2013); Rahely Namin et al. (2013) worked on social interaction in public open spaces. Moreover, Abu Bakar (2002); Mansor (2011); Hajmirsadeghi et al. (2013) studied social interaction in Malaysia. Nevertheless, none of these studies assessed the impact of urban factors on increasing social interaction among ethnic groups. This academic gap underlies the starting point of the current study. Ramli & Jamaludin (2012); Elfartas, 2015 stated that social interaction among ethnic groups stands at its lowest level in Malaysia where population comprises three cultures of Malay, Chinese, and Indian and there is a decline in social interaction and cohesiveness in Malaysian communities. In light of this urban challenge, the main question raised is: "What is the impact of urban factors on social interaction?" The first part of the paper elaborates on the relevant literature review that establishes the

theoretical framework. The second part discusses the method chosen, the process of data collection and the study area. The third part delves into the findings, presenting pragmatic suggestions and implications for enhancing social interaction in public open spaces.

2. Definition of a public open space

It plays a significant role in enhancing the quality of life of urban populations (Martinelli et al., 2015). Well-managed and maintained public open spaces offer a wide range of opportunities for all groups to interact (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Peters & De Haan, 2011; Khotdee et al., 2012; Kazmierczak, 2013) and foster the quality of life (Beck, 2009). People from different cultures choose public open spaces for social interaction (Burton & Mitchell, 2006; Cattell et al., 2008; Charkhchian & Daneshpour, 2009; Dines et al., 2006; Holland et al., 2007; Madanipour, 1996, 2004; Marcuse, 2006; Mitchell, 2003; Lieshout & Aarts, 2008; Orum et al., 2009; Rogers & Sukolratanamete, 2009; Shaftoe, 2008). Therefore, such spaces are

important urban components that foster public life (Chen et al., 2016) and enhance social interaction among ethnic groups (Lofland, 1998; Cradock et al., 2009).

These places fulfil recreational, social and cultural desires of ethnic groups (Elfartas, 2015). There are six types of urban open spaces such as civic space, public open space, left over space, undefined space, conspicuous space and interface space (Carmona, 2010). The definition of a public open space in this paper is on par with a civic open space with public accessibility designed for social interaction and activities. Civic public open spaces, accessible places to the public, facilitate permanent and occasional activities. Considering the viewpoints and definitions of a public open space, the researcher listed the areas in the center of Kuala Lumpur. These areas are Dataran Merdeka and public spaces along Hang Kasturi and Masjid India Streets. Analytical review of the characteristics shows that all three areas include commonalities. Yet, Dataran Merdeka is the most important and exemplary public open space in Kuala Lumpur. This causes the researcher to choose only this public space as the study area.

3. Social interaction in public open spaces

The location, activities, physical traits, function (Mäkinen & Tyrväinen, 2008), size, and quality (Giles-Corti et al., 2005) determine the way people utilize such places. "Social interactions occur when people perceive co-located with other people and sense that they are being perceived as well" (Cheng, 2011). Social interaction addresses the change of social interplays among individuals or groups who amend their relationships in accordance with their peers' actions (Teig et al., 2009; Alwi & Rashid, 2011). It is a complex process that refers to inclusion of people with varying social expectations (Amin, 2008) such as interpersonal relationship (Low, 2006; Porta, 1999) and intergroup interaction (Low, 2006). Attraction to public open spaces fosters social contacts among ethnic groups that change such places into livable and active spaces (Golichnik & Ward Thompson, 2010). Goffman (1963) asserted that enriched information and reactions from both sides underlie a successful social interaction. This success happens when we see the counterpoint person's reaction and ensure being observed. Cheng (2011) furthered the discourse that the success of social interaction

is first determined by social presence. A more profound understanding of others, such as their interaction capacity and tendency for interaction is the result of a high level of social presence (Short et al., 1976). The heterogeneous inclusion results in division and cohesion in public open spaces (Keith, 2005). Social interaction is important in promoting mixing of all kinds of urban citizens through reducing conflicts, avoidance behavior, ignorance, and segregation (Mingione & Oberti, 2003; Nesdale & Todd, 2000). Social interaction among ethnic groups leads them to share their social activities in public open spaces (Peters et al., 2010).

The term "social" refers to persons in planned groups (Tang & Khan, 2012). The term "interaction" in social sciences refers to dynamic actions among individuals. Contacting others is one of the humane crucial needs to the extent that togetherness brings along reassurance feeling (Lennard & Lennard, 1995). Goffman (1963) classified interaction as unfocused ("physical gestures such as waving or saluting, facial decorations and broad emotional expression" with no connection to specific "verbal communications") (p. 33), focused, and accessible engagements. The perception of social interaction in this paper acts upon the concepts stated by Goffman (1963) and Lofland (1998)'s unexpectedness, which talks about unfamiliarity in public open spaces. It refers to any kind of social contacts, ranging from none-verbal to verbal exchanges within a short term or even engaging in social activities, between heterogeneous groups with different cultural values and interests.

4. Factors affecting social interaction in public open spaces

Design, maintenance, management (Holland et al., 2007; Mean & Tims, 2005; Shaftoe, 2008), animation (Shaftoe, 2008), location (Shaftoe, 2008), accessibility (Carr et al., 1992; Holland et al., 2007), heterogeneity (Jacobs, 1961), time of the day (Holland et al., 2007; Mean & Tims, 2005), unusual events and occurrences (Bigdeli Rad & Ngah, 2013), and overall social activities and engagement (Carmona et al., 2003; Dines et al., 2006; Gehl, 2011; Mean & Tims, 2005) are the prerequisites of social vividness and inclusiveness, influence social interaction. In addition, desire for socialization, quality of place, attractiveness, experiences (Peters et al., 2010), quality of life, and availability of high quality public open spaces (Lee

& Maheswaran, 2010) are the factors that affect promoting social interaction and cohesion with others. Clitheroe et al. (1998) pointed out that social interaction changes are based on physical, personal and social factors. Personal factors include age, gender, social level, education, religion, culture and ethnicity (Garcia-Ramon et al., 2004). Social factors encompass “the relationship between an individual and other individuals or groups” (Clitheroe et al., 1998; Williams, 2005).

Physical privacy also influences social interaction (Charkhchian & Daneshpour, 2009), which fosters constructive social interaction (Altman, 1975; Walmsley, 1988). Well-defined physical privacy results in miscellaneous types of social interaction. Keeping away from disturbing groups and controlling “spatial territory” underlie physical privacy (Ramezani & Hamidi, 2010). Social success and inclusiveness partially build upon the design-related factors (Billingham & Cole, 2002; Carmona et al., 2003; Gehl, 2011; Holland et al., 2007; Mean & Tims, 2005). Diversity of physical forms, sufficient pedestrian flow (Law, 2000) and arrangement of elements (Whyte, 2001) affect people’s interaction. Physical obstacles restrict social interaction (Porta, 1999). Providing spaces tailored to everyday needs and places for transition, lingering, togetherness and even secluded-ness play an important role in social interaction occurrence (Cattell et al., 2008). Physical quality, appearance, attractiveness (Bigdeli Rad & Ngah, 2013; Sugiyama et al., 2009), cleanliness (Pasaogullari & Doratli, 2004) and safety (Pasaogullari & Doratli, 2004; Rahely Namin et al., 2013) increase the likelihood of social interaction.

Public art gathers different groups expressing their cultural values and directly enhances social interaction (Bach, 1992). Public art in Malaysia, as a catalyst, embosses the outstanding art acknowledgment and visual pleasurableness among all groups (Mustafa, 2009). It inculcates an embossed interrelationship between art, public open space and social environment while imparting identity to its context (Miles, 1997; Moughtin et al., 1999; Mustafa, 2009; Weber, 2003). Overall, the following viewpoints build the theoretical framework.

1. Goffman (1963): Enriched information and reactions from both sides underlie a successful social interaction. Interactions are classified as focused, unfocused, and accessible engagements.

2. Goffman (1963); Lofland (1998): Unexpectedness, which talks about unfamiliarity in public open spaces.
3. Short et al. (1976): Successful social interaction happens through a deep understanding of others.
4. Schroeder (2002): Social presence
5. Whyte (2001); Lofland (1998): Social interaction is considered cooperation.
6. Shaftoe (2008): Conviviality of a public open space

5. Methods

Supported by similar studies such as Tang & Khan (2012); Rahely Namin et al. (2013) the study employs a quantitative approach in gathering information about issues related to social interaction in public open spaces. The researcher employed a random time-interval sampling method, supported by Ja’afar & Usman (2009); Johnson & Christensen (2011); Askari (2014); Askari et al. (2014); Askari et al. (2015). The groups assigned by the researcher randomly asked the people who passed through the major entrances of the study area every 10 minutes to participate in the survey. Content analysis of the relevant literature elicits 26 urban issues, which are used for further analysis to classify the independent variables of the study. The definition of social interaction is considered the dependent variable and assessments were done through a 5-point Likert Scale. Pilot study reassures “flow, timing, and participants’ interest in the actual survey” (Askari, 2014 cited from De Vaus, 2002). In the pilot study in July 2011, the researcher distributed the draft of questionnaires to 20 Malay, 18 Chinese, and 12 Indian participants to ensure that the questions convey participants’ opinions in the actual survey. After conducting the pilot study, the researcher replaced professional terms with public-digestible ones. In addition, the researcher found that English words are difficult for the participants; therefore, the questions were also translated into Malay language to be used in the actual survey. The researcher grouped the raw data derived from the survey through Principal Component Extraction. In the next stage, the Pearson Correlation Analysis identified the relationship between the variables grouped. Finally, Multiple Linear Regression Analysis, supported by similar studies such as Moirongo (2002) and Rogers & Sukolratnametee (2009) identified the

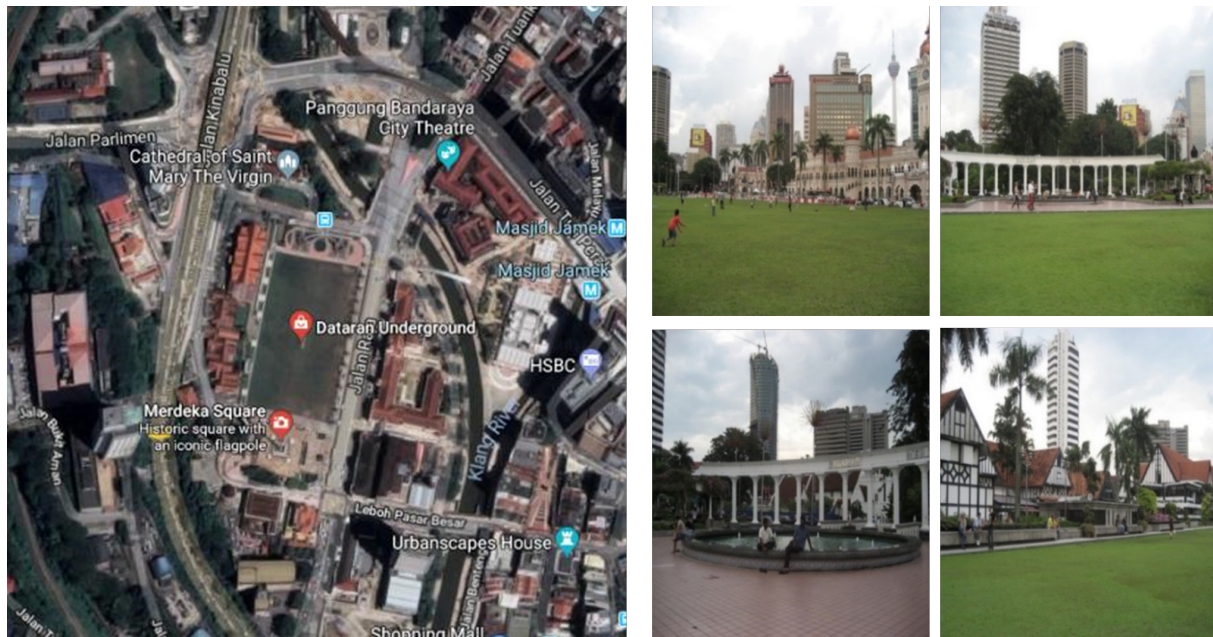


Figure (1). Dataran Merdeka, Imagery@2018 CNES/Airbus, Map data@2018 Google and photos

degree with which urban factors contribute to social interaction among ethnic groups. The researcher gathered the data on working days, weekends, and public holidays from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., when most people were observed in the study area. Malaysian population encompasses 63.1% Malay, 24.6% Chinese, and 7.3% Indian (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). Complying with the ethnic percentage, out of 400 participants surveyed, 240 (60%) are Malay, 110 (27.5%) Chinese, and 50 (12.5%) Indian (Askari, 2014). Moreover, 50.5% of the participants are males and the remaining 49.5% females. People surveyed are 13 to 50 years old and above. The response ratio of the survey was 5 to 1. Moreover, the Reliability Test showed that Cronbach's Alpha was 0.851 and 0.906, respectively for the independent variables in English and Malay versions.

6. The study area

The study area, Dataran Merdeka⁽¹⁾ (Figure 1), lies in the heart of Kuala Lumpur and is an exemplary lively public open space where there is an enormous possibility for social gathering and interaction (Askari & Soltani, 2018).

The place is regarded as a major historical site in Kuala Lumpur where Malaysians annually

(1) It is a Malay word, which means Independent Square.

celebrate their independence on August 31. The site offers access to all social classes due to the strategic location and its potential for holding social activities commensurate with a broad range of people's needs. In the past, the prevailing events included hot air balloons ride, military parades, Queen Victoria diamond jubilee in 1897, first Merdeka Parade in 1957, bullock carts parade, and children fete (Harun & Said, 2008). Currently, the site hosts parades, national and charity ceremonies, social gatherings and activities. It welcomes various social and national activities during day-time and night-time (Askari & Soltani, 2018). This square, throughout history, has been one of the most important arenas for people's social activities. Although there are some other public open spaces such as the area along Hang Kasturi Street (formerly Rodger Street) and the open space in front of Masjid India, Dataran Merdeka is selected as the study area due to aforementioned salient traits and functions, which emboss the square as the most exemplary public open space in the city (Askari & Dola, 2009; Askari et al., 2014; Askari et al., 2015).

7. Results

Analytical review of literature justifies that an extensive number of urban factors determine social interaction. Hence, the first step is to classify

the factors evaluated in the questionnaire survey in order to investigate the ones that outweigh others. Principal Component Extraction Method (shown in Table 1) shows the convergence of four factors (24 items) “that account for 66% of the whole variance. The percentages of variance for these factors are 17.45%, 19.73%, 14.16%, and 14.66% respectively” (fieldwork done by Askari (author), 2014). The personal factors include “age, ethnicity, culture, gender, social class, education level and religion” (fieldwork done by Askari (author), 2014). Moreover, the physical factors comprise “the existence of physical obstacles and uneven surfaces, arrangement of the elements that construct a public open space, public art, enough

pedestrian paths that allow people to move easily, architecture, physical outlook, visual attractiveness of the place, location, ease in finding a public open space, and easy access to such a space” (fieldwork done by Askari (author), 2014). The management rules, cleanliness, safety and security fall under managerial factors. Social factors include inter-group and intra-group interaction, equity of rights of all groups, inclusiveness, social activities, organized events, festivals, unusual events as well as formal and informal gatherings. These factors are considered the inputs of the further analyses, Pearson Bivariate Correlation and Multiple Linear Regression.

Table (1). Principal Component Extraction for the factors affecting social interaction

| Items | Factors | | | |
|---|---------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Age | .752 | | | |
| Ethnicity | .717 | | | |
| Culture | .735 | | | |
| Gender | .686 | | | |
| Social class | .769 | | | |
| Education level | .702 | | | |
| Religion | .707 | | | |
| Existence of physical obstacles, such as uneven surfaces and other nuisances in a public open space | | .746 | | |
| Arrangement of the elements that construct a public open space | | .748 | | |
| Public art | | .544 | | |
| Enough pedestrian paths that allow people to easily move | | .569 | | |
| Architecture, physical outlook, and visual attractiveness of the place | | .720 | | |
| Location of the place | | .812 | | |
| Ease in finding a public open space | | .646 | | |
| Easy access to a public open space | | .583 | | |
| Rules that people should follow in a public open space | | | .708 | |
| The way a public open space is ruled, controlled and managed | | | .715 | |
| Cleanliness of the place | | | .802 | |
| Safety and security of a public open place | | | .769 | |
| Relation between people in their groups and with the other groups | | | | .602 |
| Equal rights given to all groups of people in using a public open space | | | | .723 |
| Presence of people | | | | .558 |
| Event such as lunch-time concerts, art exhibitions, festivals, annual events, and unusual events | | | | .760 |
| Various types of activities, such as playing sports, formal and informal gatherings | | | | .768 |
| % Variance explained | 17.45 | 19.73 | 14.16 | 14.66 |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation converged in 4 iterations. Askari (author), 2014
 Factor 1=Personal. Factor 2= Physical. Factor 3= Managerial. Factor 4= Social

9.1 Determining the role of extracted factors in social interaction

Pearson Bivariate Correlation Test (in Table 2) outlines the highest relationship between social factors and social interaction ($r=.886^{**}$, $P < 0.01$). Personal factors ($r=.760^{**}$, $P < 0.01$), managerial factors ($r=.705^{**}$, $P < 0.01$), and physical factors ($r=.623^{**}$, $P < 0.01$) also affect social interaction. Considering this, four factors are considered the units of analysis in Multiple Linear Regression Test.

The analysis shows that Adjusted R Square is significant and covers 83.6% of variance of social interaction, which is acceptable for the further analysis. ANOVA Test results ($F 4,395 = 508.213$, $p < 0.0005$) predict a significant relationship between at least one of the factors and social interaction and highlight the significant reliability of the results. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis (Table 3) pinpoints how significantly social interaction hinges on the four factors. "The emerged equation is: social interaction = $0.026 + 0.291$ (managerial factors) + 0.273 (physical factors) + 0.323 (personal factors) + 0.612 (social factors)" (fieldwork done by Askari (author), 2014).

8. Discussions

The results show that design-related issues impose the lowest significant impact on social interaction in the area. They imply that the appearance of a public open space does not strongly affect social interaction. Although Carr et al. (1992); Parfekt & Power (1997); Madden (2000); Weber

(2003); Özsoy & Bayram (2007); Mustafa (2009) supported the role of public art in increasing social interaction, the findings of the study do not show a strong relationship between public art and social interaction among ethnic groups. Similar to physical factors, the findings demonstrate that management-related factors play a weak role in enhancing social interaction. Despite the contributing role of management in increasing social interaction supported by Holland et al. (2007); Mean & Tims (2005); Shaftoe (2008) the findings show that applying inefficient management strategies, not enforcing administratively comprehensive plans, and ignoring participatory management programs tarnish the role of managerial factors. The study area lacks the security facilities that assure people of "physical and social comfort", which also weakens the role of management in promoting social interaction (fieldwork done by Askari (author), 2014). The findings affirm that personal backgrounds including "age, gender, culture, religion, ethnicity, social class, and educational level" (fieldwork done by Askari (author), 2014) influence the way social interaction take places across different groups. Despite supports by Garcia-Ramon et al. (2004) and Holland et al. (2007), this study demonstrates a rather weak relationship between these factors and social interaction. The plausible reason might be that people from ethnic groups possessing different socio-cultural thoughts, which is considered a hindrance for gatherings, does not strongly support the role of personal backgrounds in promoting social interaction. The findings imply that socio-cultural discrepancies do not trigger intra-group social interaction.

Table (2). Correlations between social interaction and influencing factors (Pearson Bivariate Correlation Test)

| Dependent Variable | | PF | MF | PHF | SF |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Social Interaction | Pearson Correlation | 0.760** | 0.705** | 0.623** | 0.886** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 |
| | N | 400 | 400 | 400 | 400 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). PF= Personal Factors, MF= Managerial Factors, PHF= Physical Factors, SF= Social Factors. Askari (author), 2014

Table (3). Multiple Linear Regression

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. | |
|-------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|------|--------|------|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | | | |
| 1 | (Constant) | .026 | .092 | | .280 | .780 |
| | MF | .291 | .025 | .296 | 8.593 | .000 |
| | PHF | .273 | .026 | .275 | 6.819 | .000 |
| | PF | .323 | .028 | .333 | 9.875 | .000 |
| | SF | .612 | .033 | .617 | 18.725 | .000 |

a. Dependent Variable: Social Interaction. Askari (author), 2014

Most significantly, the findings underlie a strong relationship between creating an affinity among ethnic groups and social interaction in public open spaces. In providing such a strong socio-cultural bond, making public open spaces welcoming to all groups and holding social activities, planned and unplanned that involve diverse thoughts and beliefs, contribute to enhancing social relationship among ethnic groups in public open spaces the most. The findings demonstrate that heterogeneous inclusiveness makes everybody feel free to use public open spaces, arouses the sense of discovery, animates such places, and increase social interaction. This supports what Keith (2005) stated that the mixed inclusion leads to division and cohesion. The findings imply that successful social interaction occurs within a rigorous consideration of expectation of various groups (Amin, 2008), peers' actions (Teig et al., 2009; Alwi & Rashid, 2011), reactions (Goffman, 1963), social presence (Cheng, 2011) and a deep understanding of others (Short et al., 1976).

9. Conclusion

The findings contribute to the foundation of social interaction in multicultural societies. The current paper, through an exploratory approach, identified the influential factors, classified them, and finally, presented an equation that determined the impacts of these factors on social interaction in line with ethnic groups' perceptions and interests. The findings show that creating strong socio-cultural bonds plays the most significant role in increasing social interaction among ethnic groups. Moreover, the findings insinuate that striking a balance between people's reaction and other groups' actions and accepting other groups' cultural beliefs highly impact on creating strong socio-cultural bonds. From another perspective, it is achievable through establishing administrative initiatives for a participatory process in which the needs, cultural values, and beliefs of different groups are considered in the future design and planning of public open spaces. In fact, underestimating the cultural values and beliefs of groups is the most detrimental threat to social interaction and solidity in multicultural societies. The current study identified the priority of urban factors in increasing social interaction, which presents initiatives for planning and designing

livable, healthy, and socially sustainable public open spaces in multicultural countries. Theoretically, the findings contribute to social sustainability asserted by Polèse & Stren, (2000), that provides "a helpful environment for more cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups" and the "development of strong social cohesion" stated by Francis et al. (2012).

Although the current paper fundamentally examined the role of urban factors in social interaction in a socially representative public open space in Kuala Lumpur, the implications of the findings are generalizable to other similar regional contexts. The findings are limited to the factors that generally enhance social interaction among ethnic groups in Malaysia. In addition, the role of economy, social class, education and age is specifically worth investigating in future studies.

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تقييم التفاعل الاجتماعي في الأماكن العامة المفتوحة: حالة داتاران ميرديكا في كوالالمبور

سها سلطاني

أمير حسين العسكري

قسم الفنون والعمارة، معهد أبادانا للتعليم العالي، شيراز، إيران

amir1360.askari@gmail.com

sohasoltani63@gmail.com

قدم للنشر في ٢٣ / ٥ / ١٤٤٣ هـ؛ وقبل للنشر في ٢٠ / ٨ / ١٤٤٣ هـ.

ملخص البحث. يقف التفاعل الاجتماعي عند أدنى مستوى بين المجموعات العرقية في الأماكن العامة والمساحات المفتوحة في ماليزيا. لذلك، تسعى الورقة الحالية إلى تحديد العوامل المساهمة في زيادة التفاعل الاجتماعي. ولتحقيق هذا تم عمل استبيان ذاتي الإدارة جمع تقييم ٤٠٠ مشارك للعوامل المؤثرة على التفاعل الاجتماعي. وتظهر النتائج أن إنشاء روابط اجتماعية قوية من خلال غرس القيم العرقية وعقد الأنشطة الاجتماعية والثقافية التي تتناول على قدم المساواة المعتقدات والأعراف العرقية؛ تؤثر على التفاعل الاجتماعي بشكل أكبر، مقارنةً بالتفاعلات الشخصية والإدارية والعوامل الفيزيائية. وتقدم النتائج رؤى بناءة في المستقبل لتصميم وتخطيط المساحات المفتوحة العامة الشاملة في الدول متعددة الثقافات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأنشطة الاجتماعية والثقافية، التفاعل الاجتماعي، الأماكن العامة المفتوحة، الدول متعددة الثقافات.