

HOUSES OF WORSHIP AS RESTORATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Muhammad Faris Syahmi Hasbullah¹, Izzat Firdaus Ahmad¹, Mohd Shuib Sukeri¹, Nurul
Kamal Zulkarnain², Nor Diana Mohd Mahudin³

ABSTRACT

Despite the established role of houses of worship in restoring individuals from stress and mental fatigue, there is insufficient research on this issue, particularly in Malaysia, which, in turn, warrants a closer examination of existing scientific endeavour and corresponding evidence. A cross-sectional comparative survey using questionnaires was employed to 89 participants (Muslims = 54; Christians = 35) from a church and a mosque to address two objectives: to identify the relationship between moods before and after visiting these houses of worship and to investigate the motivations for visiting these places. Data were analysed by Pearson's correlation and independent sample t-test. Results indicate that there is a significant relationship between moods before and after visiting the houses of worship. Findings also demonstrate that there is a statistically significant difference in motivation levels between masjid visitors and church visitors. Overall, the findings suggest that a house of worship can provide an avenue for the visitors for fulfilling their spiritual needs and rejuvenating their mood as well as restoring their directive attention.

Keywords: restorative effects; house of worship; reflection; motivation; mood

INTRODUCTION

While the existing studies on restorative effects of spiritual environments have mainly focused on churches or monasteries (e.g. Clayton, 2009; Ouellette, Kaplan, & Kaplan, 2005), limited evidence is available on the restorative effects of other houses of worships such as *Masjid* or mosque. This is an important deficit in the literature as the restorative effects observed in churches or monasteries may or may not directly apply to other houses of worship. Studies conducted on churches and monasteries have shown that houses of worship, in general, can serve as restorative environments for individuals in fulfilling their spiritual needs and restoring directed attention while simultaneously providing a nurturing environment for reflection and meditation (Herzog et al., 2010; Oullette, Kaplan, & Kaplan, 2005). There is also evidence that spiritual activities that take place in houses of worship can, to some extent, improve mental health by reducing depression, anxiety, and mental fatigue (Cornah, 2006). Researchers also suggest that houses of worship serve as a place of spirituality where people may sense their purpose of life and feel peace in closeness to God (Cornah, 2006). Those feelings of pleasure are related to the restorativeness of the environment and have a special connection to a place like a house of worship. Similarly, it can be

¹ 3rd Year Psychology Student, Dept. of Psychology, KIRKHS, IIUM, e-mail: farispsyc@gmail.com

¹ 3rd Year Psychology Students, Dept. of Psychology, KIRKHS, IIUM

² Psychology Student, Dept. of Psychology, KIRKHS, IIUM.

³ Assistant Professor, Dept. of Psychology, KIRKHS, IIUM, e-mail: nordianamm@iium.edu.my

assumed that *Masjid* or mosque, as a house of worship, is also capable of offering some healing or restorative experiences to its visitor.

However, our current understanding of the nature and magnitude of the restorative effects of *Masjids* is rather limited. In most cases, researchers have to rely on the few studies of mosques as a communal and personal space in order to understand the restorativeness of their environments and functions. One such study is by Kusuma and Dewiyanti (2012) who investigated the types of spaces considered to have a spiritual connotation for Muslims, and how these places build their sacred meaning. By using an open in-depth interview technique, 17 respondents were asked about their experiences while they performed their religious activity in a particular space during prayer time. The study found that the mosque is perceived as a place to establish the value of human spirituality that also plays the role of communal space where people can meet, feel belonged, and enjoy positive social atmosphere. The study also found that mosque serves as a personal space that offers one to get closer to God by praying and contemplating. With the exception of this study, no other investigations have exclusively explored the restorative nature of mosques. Taking into account the lack of existing literature, it is therefore crucial that more research on this topic be conducted and the current study attempts to fill this gap.

Although there is some evidence, albeit very limited, that *Masjid* may offer some form of restorative experiences, even less prevalent have been comparative studies that investigate the extent to which these experiences differ between different types of house of worship. For example, no studies were found comparing the restorative effects of churches with the restorative effects of mosques. Such comparative studies are essential because they can provide a way to make generalisations about the nature and extent of the restorative effects in various spiritual environments. It is possible that no comparative studies have been performed simply because not very much work has been done on this topic, as highlighted by researchers such as Oullette, Kaplan, and Kaplan (2005). Consequently, there is a clear need for a study that directly compare the restorative benefits of visiting spiritual environments (e.g. churches and mosques), particularly within the Malaysian context.

Restorative effects of houses of worship

According to Kaplan and Kaplan (2005), there are four factors that need to be taken into consideration when examining the restorative effects of houses of worship. These factors are known as 'Being Away', 'Compatibility', 'Spirituality', and 'Beauty' (Oullette, Kaplan, & Kaplan, 2005). Factors such as 'Beauty' and 'Spirituality' were identified as

important factors for repeat visitors and positive outcomes in the houses of worship (Oullette, Kaplan, & Kaplan, 2005). On the other hand, a study by Herzog et al. (2010) found that 'Being Away' was the most effective predictor of 'Peace', especially for first-time visitors to these places. Oullette, Kaplan, and Kaplan (2005) attribute these differences, at least partially, to experience and familiarity with the house of worship. More specifically, they assert that the appreciation and importance of beauty occur only with increased experience in a spiritual setting.

Houses of worship are not only a place where religious ritual takes place - they can also be a centre of people to meet together and do various activities. Nevertheless, not all people experience positive effects from attending these places. For example, Nicholls (2002) found that among those who had been involved with a church or religious group, some were incapable to deal with the church and its activities while for the rest, the place offered stability, a sense of community and family, and minimised isolation. Aspects of religious ritual such as prayer brought relief to some, while for others just sitting in a blessed place helped them to feel more peaceful and tranquil. Consequently, it can be said that by involving oneself in a faith community in houses of worship, in this case – a church, may or may not enhance personal well-being.

The experience of restorativeness and enhanced well-being while visiting houses of worship might have a significant relation to motivational state of the visitors. Existing findings have shown that people seek a retreat for a variety of reasons. Some arrived with many burdens and struggles, hoping to find a place to sort things out, while some arrived in a better physical and psychological health yet no less need of taking stock of their lives (Ouellette, Kaplan, & Kaplan, 2005). Another study, which investigated the functions of monasteries, reported that staying in a monastery was partly motivated by restorative needs, and the visitors felt rested, clear headed, competent and alert at the end of their stay (Clayton, 2009). The choice of a monastery therefore suggests that faith, prayer, and a spiritual quest are intrinsic to the decision for a retreat. Besides that, meditation can serve a restorative role and can be facilitated by the content and process dimensions first identified in nature-based restorative environments.

The internal and external restorative elements are also important in determining whether a place like a house of worship can facilitate personal well-being among the visitors. For example, a house of worship is considered internally restored and secured when there are no theft cases or loss of visitor's belonging. Similarly, a house of worship is considered externally restored when there are no acts of violence from outsiders such as terrorist threats to the building or provocations against

its existence. According to Harrell (2010), it is possible to control the external threats through effective countermeasures and the internal environment of houses of worship could benefit from better security measures. In short, a place like house worship can effectively offer restorative effects when matters of safety are taken into account.

Taken together, all these studies indicate that there seems to be an interplay between experience of restorativeness, mood, visit motivation, and activities conducted within houses of worship and this interplay is worth to be explored further. Given the apparent need for a more comprehensive research on the potential restorativeness of houses of worship, the next section discusses the significance and importance of the current study.

Why the current study is important?

There are three obvious gaps in our current knowledge. First, where restorative effects of spiritual environments have been explored, researchers have tended to focus on church or monastery settings (e.g. Clayton, 2009; Ouellette, Kaplan, & Kaplan, 2005), and less on other types of house of worship. Second, while the restorative effects of churches and monasteries have been studied, the comparative effects of restorativeness between different spiritual settings remain relatively unexplored. Third, and perhaps most disturbing, findings from a large-scale study of spirituality among college students conducted by Herzog et al. (2010) showed that attendance at religious services declines, and this may partly reflect the weaknesses of the houses of worship in offering a restorative experience to visitors. The study reported here attempts to deal with these issues. It attempts to examine the role of houses of worship as restorative environments, with a particular focus on *Masjids* or mosques and churches in Malaysia. More specifically, the study aims to measure the relationship between moods before and after visiting these houses of worship, which are indicative of restorative states. Finally, it is also the aim of the study to investigate the inherent motivations for visiting these places.

METHOD

A quantitative survey design, utilising a questionnaire was used to make comparison between church and mosque visitors on the restorative effects towards them. This approach was chosen in order to access visitors' motivation, thoughts, and feelings and to reduce delay in getting visitors' responses. Quota sampling technique was used for sampling because it enabled the researchers to choose people with characteristics

needed for the study. This technique was also used such that the proportion of sampled visitors from the church and mosque is close to the quota set by the researchers (i.e., 60 for mosque visitors and 40 for church visitors). However, only 54 Muslim participants and 35 Christian participants returned the completed questionnaire.

The questionnaires were distributed to visitors of Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Mosque, IIUM and Christ for the King Church, Selayang. These questionnaires were divided into two different types of houses of worship in order to see the differences in the motivation and restorative effects. Both Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Mosque, IIUM and Christ for the King Church, Selayang were chosen as the study locations because of their accessibility and frequency of their daily visitors.

Participants

The participants consisted of 89 individuals from two types of house of worship. There were 54 Muslim respondents from Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah mosque and 35 Catholic Christian respondents from the Christ for the King Church. The majority of the respondents were male (62.2%), young (63% i.e. between the age of 10 and 24), and single (70%).

Materials

Data were collected via a questionnaire survey, similar to that used in Ouellette, Kaplan, and Kaplan's (2005) study. However, the researchers modified the structure of the questionnaire as to remove the differences between first-time and repeat visitors. Some changes were also made to the survey items in order to focus more on a house of worship surroundings rather than on a monastery setting.

As the study compared two houses of worship, two sets of the questionnaire were prepared i.e., Set A was for the mosque's visitors whereas Set B was for the church's visitors. Both sets consisted of six parts. Part A, which contained 20 items, measured the motivation of the visitors for going to the house of worship. Part B, which also consisted of 20 items, focused on the pre-mood state before going to these places. In Part C, the activities of the visitors were asked (9 items) whereas in Part D, the post-mood state after visiting the house of worship was measured (13 items). Meanwhile, Part E was an open-ended question that asked the participants to write down any comments or reflections on their experience of attending the house of worship. Lastly, Part F was demographic information of the participants. The questions in Part A, B, C, and D were

answered using a 5-point Likert scale that consist of '1 = Not at all', '2 = Slightly', '3 = Somewhat', '4 = Definitely', and '5 = Very Much'.

Procedure

Set A questionnaires were distributed in two sessions. The first session was after *Zuhur* prayer and the second session was after *Jumaat* prayer. In the first session, 17 questionnaires were obtained while another 37 were collected in the second session. Set B of the questionnaire were distributed after consent from the respective church was obtained. 35 questionnaires were returned from the 60 forms distributed.

RESULTS

A Pearson correlational analysis was conducted to test the relationship between the moods before and after visiting the houses of worship. The result shows that there is a statistically significant difference between pre-mood and post-mood states ($r = .457$; $p < .01$).

To address the second objective, i.e. examining the difference between types of house of worship and motivation for visiting, an independent sample *t*-test was used. Findings indicate that that there is a statistically significant difference between the types of houses of worship with regard to the motivation of the visitors ($t(87) = -4.472$; $p < .05$). In particular, the mean for the mosque visitors ($M = 77.74$; $SD = 12.138$; $n = 54$) was lower than the church visitors ($M = 89.40$; $SD = 11.818$; $n = 35$) (see Table 1.0).

Table 1.0

T-test for the type of houses of worship with regard to the motivation of the visitors

Source	df	M	SD	t
Mosque	87	77.74	12.138	-4.472*
Church		89.40	11.818	

* $p < .05$

DISCUSSION

This study sets out to explore the restorative effects of houses of worship in relation to visitors' mood and motivation for visiting. Using data collected from 89 visitors of a mosque and a church, the findings demonstrate an overall improvement of mood states, indicative of restorative effects. These results, to some extent, are consistent with

previous studies (e.g. Herzog et al., 2010; Ouellette, Kaplan, & Kaplan, 2005), which suggest that houses of worship are capable of providing a restorative environment for fulfilling spiritual needs, restoring attention, and serving a nurturing environment for contemplation, reflection and meditation. However, it should be noted that the correlation between pre and post mood states is not entirely high i.e. $r = .457$. This could be attributed to the distinctiveness in experiences of places, as explained by Nicholls (2002). According to him, houses of worship may be used, perceived, experienced differently by different people. Therefore, it is likely that this uniqueness that makes the effects houses of worship on personal well-being experiences varied.

Another possible explanation for the results of this study is that quality of space might influence the mood, restorative level, motivation, and type of use of these houses of worship. Nevertheless, quality is often difficult to measure as perceptions of it are likely to vary from one user to another, depending on their type and preference (Mitchell, Astell-Burt, & Richardson, 2011). This variable was not investigated in the recent study and therefore should be considered in any future research.

Meanwhile, the results obtained from the independent sample t -test showed that there is a significant difference with regard to the motivation for going to the mosque and the church. More specifically, motivational scores for mosque visitors was somewhat lower than scores for the church visitors. One possible explanation for this result could be related to the nature of the respective religion. The church usually serves as a place of worship once in a week whereas the mosque is used for daily worship. It is possible that the time spent in prayer and meditation within these places contribute as one of the motivating factors for attending the church or the mosque.

A socio-cultural factor may also play a part in explaining the results obtained with regard to the visit motivation. The participants from both settings generally have distinct differences in their background. For example, the visitors of the mosque are mostly academicians and students (both local and international) since the mosque is located within the university compound. Whereas, the church, which is located at the outer edge of a city i.e., Selayang, are used by visitors who are from various background, ages, and occupations. It is likely that this socio-cultural factor may have influenced the motivation for going to the mosque and the church. Some form of control of this factor is necessary for obtaining more accurate results and for making generalisations in future studies.

It should be mentioned as well that there are three common motives or reasons for visiting houses of worship. These motives are

derived from comments made by the participants from both houses of worship. First, some participants described their attachment to God and responsibilities to religion by attending the house of worship, offering their prayers, sensing the love of God, getting rewards from their good deeds, and seeking help from God. Second, the majority of the participants described the feeling of peace and calmness during their visit to these houses of worship. And finally, the participants reported that the houses of worship, which serve as a meeting place of the community, are capable of creating a sense of belonging to the community. These factors can all contribute to the visit motivation, mood state, and restorative effect within these houses of worship.

While all these results are quite promising, two issues deserve to be raised. First, some participants found it challenging to answer the questionnaire as it was administered in English. Further studies therefore should consider using a translated version of the questionnaire in order to make it more relevant for use within the Malaysian context. Another potential limitation involves demographic differences across participants, which, in turn, may affect the results. For example, the majority of participants from the mosque were students of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) with age ranges from 19 to 23 years old. On the other hand, the church visitors were varied in terms of age (17 to 58 years old) and levels of education (majority did not attend formal education). Therefore, the demographic factors of the participants may affect the way the participants answered the questions presented to them.

It is hoped that the current study contributes valuable information to the study of environmental restorativeness, especially on the restorative effects of houses of worship. It is recommended that future studies should also explore houses of worship of other religions in Malaysia, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism, among others.

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