

Sense of Community in Gated Communities: The Case of Awali Town in Bahrain

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| Received | Accepted | Published |
|------------|------------|------------|
| 30.12.2023 | 16.05.2024 | 19.05.2024 |

Abstract

Community bonds are developed and maintained through neighborhoods. Gated communities, nowadays, have become a recognizable housing typology in the Gulf region, since its emergence as a western housing typology during the Modernization era. Those communities are well known to have been affected by urban livability and quality of life as a result of such practices. In Bahrain, gated communities are on the increase. They seem to affect resident's social activities and behavior within and beyond the community's boundaries. In this context, this research explores the sense of community in Awali: the Oil town in Bahrain in terms of factors that influence sense of community.

The research ascertains the sense of community in Awali Town based on the indicators. The research employs unstructured Interviews and questionnaire, administered to a sample of residents of Awali Town.

The findings reveal that the sense of community measured in Awali town is high, due to motivational, living experience and social relationship factors.

Keywords: Sense of Community, Awali, Bahrain

Introduction

Sense of community (SOC), according to McMillan and George, is the relationship that involves social interaction within a community resulting in sense of belonging within the group and perception of ownership through sharing of needs, requiring individual commitment (Sakip, 2012). Community relationships in the context of a neighborhood, implies a physical area of different sizes and forms to make residents feel more socially connected to each other (Talen, 1999). Physical elements such as gates or enclosures, known to influence the sense of community within its neighborhood (Rogers et.al, 2009). Those communities surrounded by physical elements, usually referred to as gated communities. Familiar terms such as, "gated enclaves", "enclosed neighborhood", "residential or housing compounds", also applies to gated communities (Sakip, 2012). Therefore, a Gated community defined as a physical space that separated from its surrounding by fenced or walled elements and separated from another neighborhood" (Sakip, 2012). However, despite authors' contradiction in the matter of community enclosure's physicality and its relationship with the sense of community, previous researches reveals that the sense of community in physical gated communities is higher as than in non-gated ones (Blandy et.al, 2003; Serife, 2007). On the other hand, McMillan and George introduced four dimensions, in which by them, the extent of SOC of a community could be

indicated. In environmental behavior point of view, the issue of SOC is very critical, as community relationships provide the satisfaction of living in a residential area (Blanchard, 2008; Fried, 1984), and are significant determinants of the general quality of life and satisfaction in well-being (Rogers et.al, 2009). Measuring sense of community is not an easy task to perform, since several factors interferes affecting the level of outcome's precision, yet, those dimensions indicate a convincing overall result. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine the sense of community in a gated community, based on indicators, further interpreted in this paper.

Review of Literature

According to literature, Hiller (1995) has introduced the idea of sense of community. According to Hiller (1995), a community based on the conceptions of 'social ties' and 'geographic area'. This has similar interpretation with Goldschmidt, whom have previously compared the quality of life in two communities based on the distinction between 'communities of interest' and the 'geographic community', which was dependent upon the structure of agriculture. Blanchard and Fried mentioned that sense of community is one of the key indicators of quality of life in social classes. This is further explicated by Kumar, whom have described the sense of community as being the simplest first grouping beyond the family, which has social significance and conscious of some local unity. In other words, a sense of community associated with the obligations given by the members of the community to others in society; which endures significance on sense of security and belonging (Rogers et.al, 2009). In further interpretation to Rogers', Austin, Furr and Spine, invoked that the sense of community is an important aspect in a neighborhood to promote feelings of safety, security and eliminate the opportunities for crime. It will also, influence the relationship between communities in neighborhood design, especially in the physical environments. This is in contrast to Talen, whom argued that the environmental factors influences and stimulate community relations. On the other hand, Austin, Furr and Spine arguments' have similarities with Uzzell, Pol and Badenas, whom have investigated that not only the physical environment elements can enhance relationships among residents using community space in two neighborhoods, but also, the social environment elements in the community. It is obtained from the study of both neighborhoods that the respondents are more satisfied with the condition of neighborhood X, in terms of physical image, as compared to neighborhood Y (Uzzell et al. 2002). Corresponding to that, Rogers and Sukolratanamete, argued that an attractive physical environment will boost the sense of community as spaces created and provided in neighborhood areas, maintains continuous spatial integration. Previous research at four suburban, metropolitan neighborhoods in Houston found that residential areas with adequate ecological designs have a greater sense of community (Rogers et.al, 2009). Ecological design such as parks and pedestrian walkways believed to encourage outdoor activities, thus leading to higher social interaction and networking (Rogers et.al, 2009). Likewise, Rogers' arguments have similarities with Talen's, who focuses on the environmental influences, since, environment and ecology are inter-related. Moreover, Talen mentioned five elements in the environment that enhances the community relationship, namely architecture and site design, density and scale, streets, public space, and mixed land uses. By that, Talen's arguments further corresponds with Jan Jacobs, whom concentrates on the mixed land uses, creating multipurpose space, responsible for "repetitive chance encounters" settings that build and enhance community bonds. According to Sakip, the physical gated features contributes to influencing the relationships of the community members and their daily interactions. This is in contrast to Atkinson and Blandy's loss in social diversity and social segregation in gated communities, Alexander's building a living pattern language as a gate, indirectly, by the ordinary actions of people, Hamdi's view on the possibility of the "sense of community" achievement in a non- ideological nor physical boundaries. However, according to McMillan and George, spaces have to have well- defined boundaries to enable interaction and good community networking. Thus, Serife, Blandy and Lister, stated that in gated communities, the sense of community is higher than in non-gated community.

Specific Issue

Gated communities in Bahrain usually referred to as residential compounds, housing mainly expatriates and foreigners. Other dominant types of gated communities, not only in Bahrain, but also, in the gulf regions, known as Oil towns. Oil towns extend to the oil exploration era; prefacing the emergence of enclosed segregated communities in the region as a typology. They purposed in housing foreign employees of the oil companies, allowing them to practice their own lifestyle, within an enclosure that served as a barrier against any cultural, social or political interference (El-Ekhteyar, 2016).

However, this research study aims to investigate the sense of community in Awali, the oil town in Bahrain, among foreign residents (employees) in a gated community of a foreign country. Exploring their feelings, attachment, strength of relationship towards each other and their satisfaction over a community that seems physically and socially, segregate them from other urban areas in the country. The study is based on indicators that measures the sense of community.

Research Methodology

This study obtained based upon unstructured recorded interviews, conducted in order to evaluate the experience of the residents, in addition to the quantitative approach of structured questionnaires towards a deep understanding of the resident's living experience. The setting of the interview was in Awali town, Bahrain. The focus of this study involved a group of residents (employees) composing of different job levels, ranging from a high to standard job levels. The study was exceptional over the majority population of foreign employees living in Awali, whom represents 88% (Fig.2). The site study performed on Awali's residential area, composed of 720 foreign households (Askar, 2017). The respondents comprised the head of the family (fathers/employee) members in the quantitative survey (questionnaire). Whereas, the wives were selected as the respondents of interviews, accounting their responsibility and relationship towards their neighbors.

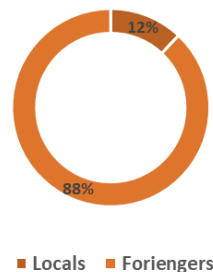


Fig. 1: Rate of Foreigners vs. Local residents of Awali town.

Source: Author

Prior to that, a preliminary site survey was conducted to identify and further distinguish between types of foreign residents. Out of 800 residences, 80 residences neglected from the respondent selection list as they form the Bachelor category of residence. They represent 10% of foreign residents (Fig. 3) (Askar, 2017). Further to considering only two family members (husband and wife) out of the total household, which then equals to 360 residence. Therefore, the population study involved a total of 360 residences. Out of 360, 180 targeted for the questionnaire survey, while the other 180 form the interview research part.

Findings

However, an electronic questionnaire passed to 50 employees by email and Whatsapp, where out of 50, only 45 responded. On the other hand, a face- to face interview performed with 30 wives, out of 180, in which five of them refused to conduct an interview. The interview was performed by introducing general subtopics, by which the responses obtained based upon their expression, point of view that had also introduced other non- expected issues in the town.

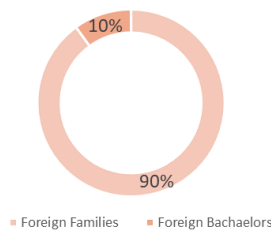


Fig. 2: Proportion of Foreigners Families vs. Foreign Bachelors in Awali town.
Source: Author

Finally, since the sense of community develops by time and therefore strongly interrelates with the length of stay in a community (Byrne, 2014). For this reason, the results of the survey neglects the responses of less than five years length-of-stay, which already presents a non- satisfactory overall result. Thus, out of 45 only 40 responses were considered.

Measure of Sense of Community Indicators

Sense of community is measured, to identify the member community member's feelings about each other and the community’s successful functioning, which reveals member's satisfaction over the community they live in (Sakip, 2012). McMillan and George adopted four dimensions to measure the sense of community. The first dimension is membership, which has four sub- elements; boundaries, emotional safety, sense of belonging and personal investment. The second dimension is influence, which develops by trust. The third dimension is Reinforcement integration of fulfillment needs, that is, building a successful social community by adding value (connection, resources, etc.) to it (Byrne, 2014). While the last dimension is shared emotional connections, which involves shared events that ties into the psychological aspects of sense of community (El-Ekhteyar et.al, 2016).

The sense of community measured using a questionnaire relating to the dimension of the four indicators. The dimensions of the sense of community is measured by 1 to 10 opinion scale, whereby scale 1 refers to "Highly Disagree" and scale 10 refers to "Highly Agree" as shown in figure 1 (Sakip, 2012).

Table 01: Sense of Community Indicators.
Source: (Sakip 2012).

| Indicators | Description of instrument | Scale |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Membership | I can identify most of the residents here. | 1= Strongly disagree 10= Strongly agree |
| | Most of the community knows me. | |
| | I always participate in community activities organised by the community association. | |
| Influence | I look after my neighbours' children/plants/pets when they go on vacations. | 1= Strongly disagree 10= Strongly agree |
| | I value my neighbour 's/community's views or comments. | |
| | Whenever there are problems in this residential area, they are solved by the community. | |
| Integration and fulfillment of needs | I feel that I am one of the community members in this residential area. | 1= Strongly disagree 10= Strongly agree |
| | I can trust the community here. | |
| | I feel this residential area is good to live in. | |
| Shared emotional connection | I am happy living among the community in this residential area. | 1= Strongly disagree 10= Strongly agree |
| | The community here always share important events such as birthday parties, weddings, festivals (Deepavali, Hari Raya and so on). | |
| | The community here care about each other. | |

Analysis and Discussions: Qualitative Research- Interview

The Motivation behind Living in Awali town

According to the interviews conducted, it seems that residents are attracted and motivated to live in Awali town mainly because of the town's vicinity to the workplace and public facilities and amenities. Awali town is only ten minutes away from the refinery, as well as, the fact that the town conforms a work and residence community. Apart from that, the vicinity of public facilities and amenities is highly appreciated by non-driving housewives. According to them, the town is very pleasant, quiet and encourages pedestrian movement from home to town's amenities. Other fact that seems to attract most of the residents in residing Awali is the security, safety and privacy issues. Although, majority of the respondents consider southern region the safest with the lowest rates of crime, they appreciate the security provided within Awali community. In addition, the security feeling enhanced to the increased road safety because of the reduced traffic, and thus the suitability of such communities for children not requiring constant adults' supervision. Moreover to "the Package", or in other words, the better-designed urban amenities, according to some residents, contributes in making Awali a town of a choice. While others, consider having a sense of community and belonging towards the town, in comparison to living in other urban towns and cities. The chart below reveals the rate of each factor that motivates Awali residents to live in Awali (Fig. 4).

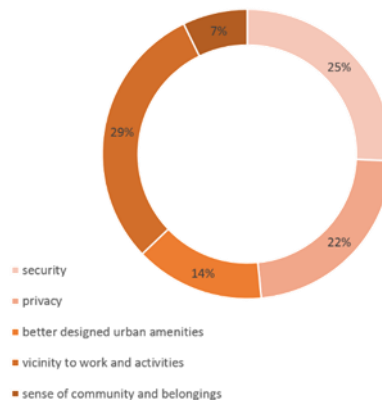


Fig. 4: Rate of Factors motivating Awali residents in in Awali town.

Source: Author

The Living Experience in the Awali Community

Residents describe the experience in living in Awali as a resort-style living. Residents appreciate the accessibility and the affordability of many facilities such as, the club (Fig. 5), the park (Fig.6), the private swimming pools, the gym and outdoor sports fields. The availability of facilities in Awali contributes to enhance quality of life and well-being of its residents, especially when they are foreigners. Residents highlighted that living in such communities creates a stronger relationship with your neighbors, compared to non-gated communities, since it enhance a sense of belonging and that all of the residents are considered one family. In addition, the provision of constant services and maintenance to the houses, by Awali Corporate Service. Further to the availability of children activity areas and playgrounds, adds to the livability level of the gated community.



Fig. 5: Princess Sabeeka Park in Awali town. Source: <http://kazeroonibuildingproducts.com/project/princess-sabeeka-park/>
Fig. 6: Bapco Club in Awali town. Source: (BAPCO, 2017). Edited by Author

Relationship with Other Residents

The good relationship among neighbors and residents of Awali community reduces the desire of shifting and enhances the sense of belonging. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned that they maintain a friendly relationship with their neighbors. Not only among adults, but also among their children in which they perform a strong friendship with their neighbors as they play, exercise and study together. Apart from relations, 80% of the interviewees mentioned that gated community affected their lifestyle, in terms of increasing their well-being through daily exercising and walking.

Quantitative Research- Questionnaire

Measuring Sense of Community

The sense of community measured by requesting the residents to rank their opinion from 0 to 10, based on the dimension of the SOC indicators. The four dimension of SOC were subdivided into statements of description of instruments, transformed to questions. The membership dimension determined by counting the average of two statements: 'I can identify most of the residents here' (identification); and 'I always join in community activities organized by the community members' (involvement). The graph below shows the result of membership dimension, based upon the relationship between rates of resident's opinion and no. of responses (Fig. 7). According to that, the average score of the membership dimension equals to 7.8 out of 10.

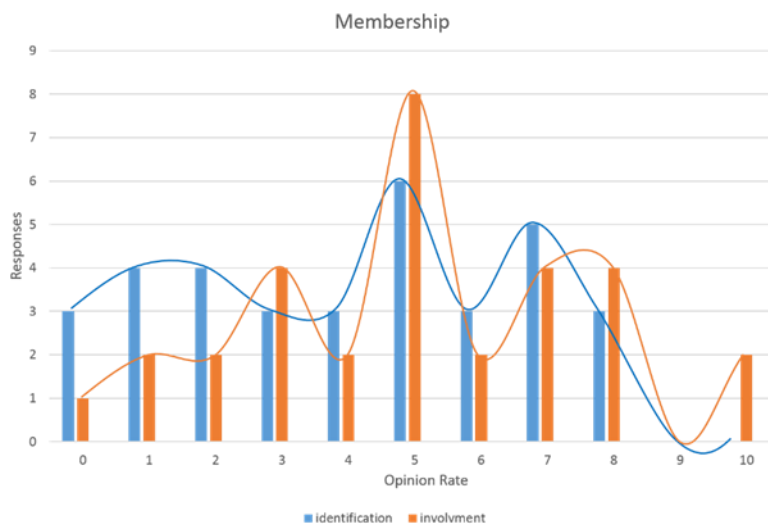


Fig. 7: Membership dimension among foreign residents in Awali town.
 Source: Author

The second dimension, influence, measured by ranking only one statement: ‘I care for my neighbors’ children/pets/plants when they go on holidays’ (care). The influence dimension scored an average of 6.5, according to the analysis obtained from the graph below (Fig. 8). However, this dimension scored the lowest, in comparison with other dimensions.

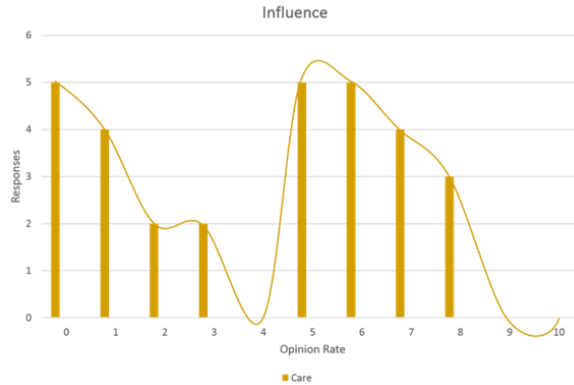


Fig. 8: Influence dimension among foreign residents in Awali town.
Source: Author

Ranking three statements obtained the third dimension, integration and fulfillment of needs: ‘I feel that I am a member of the community in this residential area’ (member); ‘I can trust the community I live in’ (trust); and ‘I feel this gated community is good to live in, in terms of privacy and security’ (satisfaction). According to the graph below, the average result is 9 (Fig. 9). This dimension scored the highest among all other dimensions.

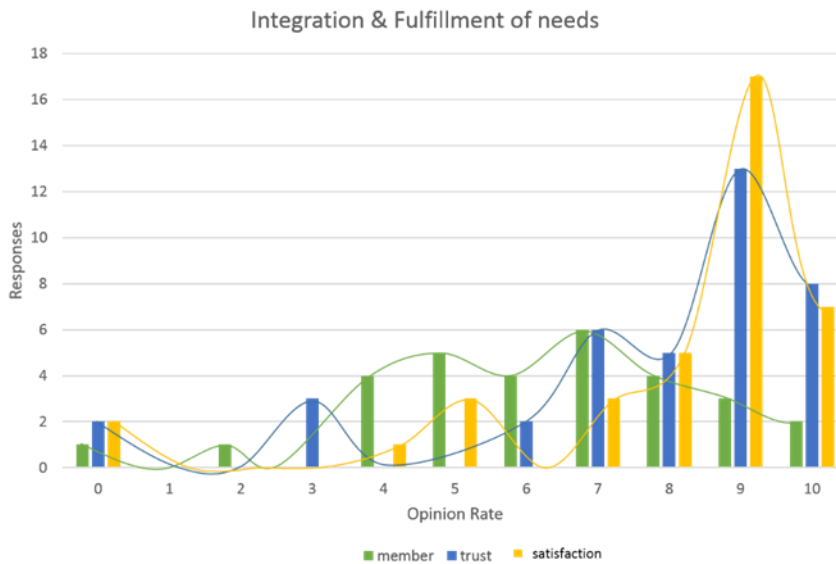


Fig. 9: Integration and fulfillment of needs among foreign residents in Awali town.
Source: Author

Lastly, the fourth dimension which is shared emotional connection, also measured by ranking three statements: ‘I am happy because I living among the community in this gated community’, ‘the community members always share important events such as birthday parties, weddings, festivals’ and ‘the residents of the community care about each other’. This dimension scored an average of 7.3, obtained from the graph below (Fig.10).

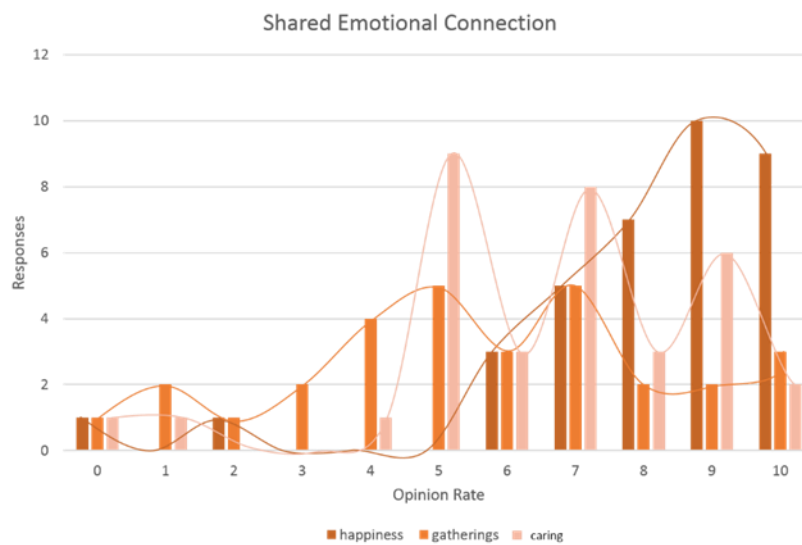


Fig. 10: Shared emotional connection dimension among foreign residents in Awali town.
Source: Author

Conclusion

In conclusion, the sense of community in this gated community scored an overall average of 7.7 out of 10. Apart from that, residents were requested to describe the social activities performed outside Awali community. 90% of the respondents stated that their social activities has been developed inside Awali community as well as, they ensure that their children are developing their social relationships within the walls of the community. The chart below shows the rate of residents whom develop their social activities within Awali community versus the residents whom usually develop their social activity outside Awali (Fig. 11).

Overall, the sense of community measured in the Awali community among foreign residents considered very high, relatively, to other studied performed on communities in GCC regions. In addition, it has been revealed from information gathered that various degrees of expanded social life is present in Awali town. In addition to the availability of well ecological-designed urban neighborhoods with proper public spaces, which encourages social interaction, resulted in a high demand of such communities to evolve from distinct Oil towns to a popular housing typology. However, on the other hand, the occurrence of social activities within enclosed urban schemes, in fact, has known to reduce socialization with residents of non- gated communities, leading to a consequence of urban fragmentation. This had rather, been revealed from the chart displayed above.

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