

## Sense of Place: Place Identity, Place Attachment, and Place Dependence Among University Students

Mohd Fadhli Shah Khaidzir<sup>1</sup> & Mafarhanatul Akmal Ahmad  
Kamal<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Pusat Pengajian Citra Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi,  
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia, <sup>2</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

Email: cali.khaidzir@ukm.edu.my, mafarhanatulakmal@uitm.edu.my

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### Abstract

University is a phase where students start their life by exploring and forming relationships with people and their surroundings. This scenario can be seen as a steppingstone for these individuals to establish their identity and pursue their future goals. Thus, having such a significant impact on the lives of individuals, the sense of place towards the educational institute such as the university is regarded as significant because it helps to form the students' sense of belonging at their place of study. Students and the university developed a sense of place based on three concepts: place identity, place attachment, and place dependence. Using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree,' 33 respondents were required to complete online self-administered surveys about students' sense of place. IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to analyse the data because it is the most common software for analysing data in quantitative research studies. All three concepts of place scored higher than the mean of 5.0, indicating a strong sense of belonging to their university, with aggregate means of 5.66, 5.26, and 5.19 for Place Identity, Place Attachment, and Place Dependence, respectively. Thus, a strong sense of place suggests that these students have a subjective and emotional attachment or connection to a specific location or environment, in this instance, their university.

**Keywords:** *sense of place; university students; place identity; place attachment; place dependence*

### Introduction

People develop a strong sense of place when they experience a strong connection and sense of belonging to their surroundings. It extends beyond the physical characteristics of a place

and encompasses the intangible elements that influence people's experiences and perceptions. These can include historical significance, personal recollections, community traditions, local customs, architectural structures, natural landscapes, and even the sounds, scents, and tastes connected with a location. According to Najafi and Shariff (2011), place is a specific space that users have infused with meanings and values. As such, individuals or a group of people can develop these subjective feelings through a psychological and emotional attachment to a specific place. This also includes the university as the primary location where students spend their time acquiring knowledge and skills and seeking for the meaning of life. The emotional bond students form with their university contributes to their overall sense of place attachment, shaping their experiences and perceptions throughout their educational journey. Understanding the role of psychological and emotional factors in the students' sense of place is crucial for creating enriching and supportive university environments that foster students' personal growth, well-being, and academic success.

However, focus has been placed on how students feel about their sense of belonging at their university, but relatively little research has been conducted on how students feel about their sense of place at the university. Depending on each student's unique experiences, expectations, and personal circumstances, their attitudes towards the institution can differ greatly. Others might feel conflicted or negatively affected while some students might have a great and rewarding experience. This is significant because it fosters students' attachment to their educational institution, which ultimately affects their sense of belonging. According to Holton (2015), a powerful factor that can elicit strong emotional reactions can have an impact on students as they advance through university. As students respond to their environment, their emotions and feelings towards a university are formed, leading to the development of place identity, place attachment, and place dependence. This is because the sense of place encompasses how these students react to their surroundings and influences the formation of these interconnected aspects. For the most part, cultivating a sense of place among university students is vital for building a supportive and meaningful educational environment. It is beneficial to the students' overall well-being, it increases academic engagement, and it adds to the thriving of the campus environment. Thus, this study seeks a sense of place among university students by delving deeper into their place identity (PI), place attachment (PA), and place dependence (PD).

### **Sense of Place**

Sense of place is a concept that encompasses the numerous ways in which individuals form relationships with the environments they inhabit (Cross, 2001; Ellery & Ellery, 2019; Ruddick, 2014). Furthermore, Ellery and Ellery (2019) define sense of place based on the context of the relationship between the person and the place, which includes: anthropological perspectives related to the symbolic relationship people have with a piece of land (Altman & Low, 1992); environmental perspectives that describe the experience an individual has when in a particular setting (Altman & Low, 1992); geographical perspectives and the aesthetic, tactile, or emotional bonds individuals form with a geographical place or setting (Steele, 1981); historical perspectives or the connection individuals create through the presentation and repetition of events within a certain place (Tuan, 1974); and sociological perspectives that consider community attachment and local sentiment based on how individuals both understand and are oriented toward a place (Jackson, 1994). By considering these diverse perspectives, this definition offers a holistic and nuanced comprehension of the concept of sense of place. Furthermore, Mohd Fadhli Shah et al. (2022a) explained that a setting in which

individuals can interpret symbolic meaning, form connections with their surroundings, and express high levels of satisfaction with their experience may indicate a strong sense of place for that setting. Thus, a setting such as a university may be the most appropriate setting to investigate as students are expected to spend a lot of their time on campus. However, their academic performances and social experiences vary from one individual to another.

Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) also claimed that a person's sense of place can be described by the meaning they attribute to a particular place. All of these concepts associate a sense of place with total distinct perceptions that build a sense of belonging and genuine personal connection to the place. Eventually, a sense of place can be associated with both the positive experiences of comfort, safety, and well-being that are generated by place as well as the negative feelings of fear, dysphoria, and placelessness. Many of the fundamental definitions of sense of place offered by scholars include the ideas of place identity, place attachment, and place dependence to explain how people and places interact. Williams et al. (1992, as cited in Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001) claim that place attachment is the general term used to describe the emotional connection that exists between a person and a particular spatial context, whereas identity and dependence are attachment subdomains.

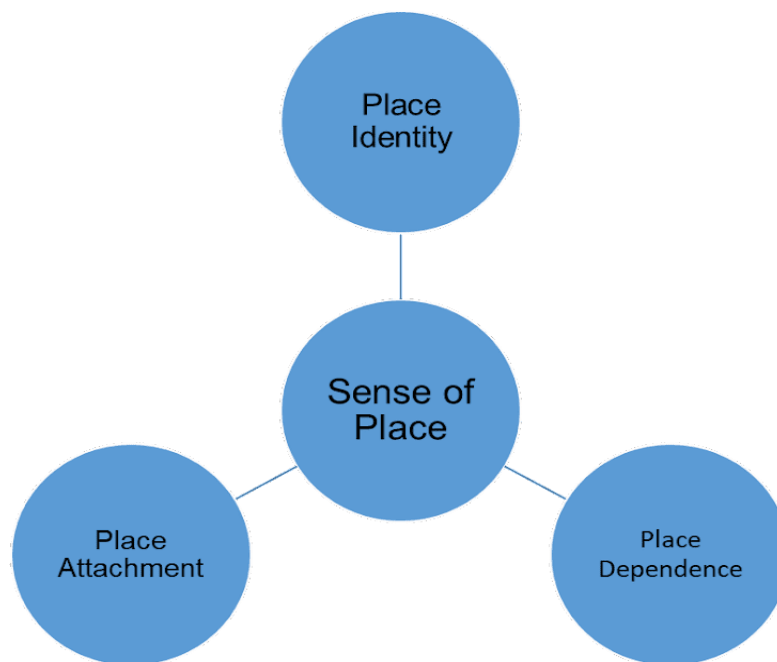


Figure 1 *The Concepts of Sense of Place*

Based on the figure above, this study believes that in order for the sense of place to be established between the students and the university, the three components; place attachment, place identity and place dependence must coincide together to form a strong bond. Therefore, a sense of place is a subjective perception of people about their environment and their conscious feeling about places. Understanding the concept of sense of place can be made from both psychological and physical approaches. This is because the place or any form of surrounding is usually composed of a combination of physical and social parameters. People take different meanings (positive or negative) from the places and then convey some meaning to it. Thus, the sense of place can be broken down further into three concepts: place identity, place attachment, and place dependence.

**Place Identity (PI)**

Place identity places a greater emphasis on the development of the self, which involves the person's unique perspective on the outside world. According to Kyle et al. (2010), place identity refers to the individual's cognitions, beliefs, perceptions, or thoughts that the self is invested in a particular setting. As a result, place identity has a significant influence on how university students develop their own sense of self. According to Vaske and Korbin (2001), the concept of place identity that encapsulates an emotional attachment to the location refers to the symbolic relevance of a place as a reservoir for the emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to life. In the course of their time at university, students will develop relationships and discover the significance of their circumstances. As university students experience memorable moments that make them feel good about a place over the course of their lives, place identity can be formed, resulting in an increase in their level of emotional attachment (Norsidah & Khalilah, 2015). As a result, students establish a place identity for the university as they make memories there. As such, the students would perceive a particular place reflects their identity, in this case the university, in which they connect their personal identity with the characteristics, values, or symbolism associated with the place (Erfani, 2022).

**Place Attachment (PA)**

Place attachment, as defined by Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) and Low (1992), as cited in Cross (2015) and Domingues et al., (2021), is the emotional bond that people develop with particular places that gives them a sense of comfort and security and expresses a desire to maintain their association with those places. Shumaker and Taylor (1983) also believe that place attachment connects attitudes and behaviours to express a person's familiarity and emotional connection to their surroundings. In this case, when students develop a positive emotional attachment to their university, they are better able to become acclimated to their surroundings and make the most of their time there. Shah et al (2022b) concurred that place attachment is significant because it establishes a connection between the location and an individual's emotions, attitudes, and behaviours in response to the exploration and discovery of the place. This can also be justified by Ralph (1976, as cited in Kudryavtsev et al (2012), in which place attachment represents ties between people and places, while place meaning is the symbolic association that people ascribe to places which defines individual and cultural identity. Kudryavtsev et al (2011) suggest that employing a psychological approach to a sense of place means considering it as a combination of place attachment and place meaning.

**Place Dependence (PD)**

Place dependence was first conceptualised as the degree to which individual perceives a connection between themselves and the settings (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981, cited in Domingues et al., 2021). It is an extent to which a particular place effectively supports the achievement of goals and satisfies essential needs, given the alternatives available (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Masterson et al., 2017; Pretty et al., 2003; Stokols & Shumaker, 1981). Williams and Vaske (2003) identifies the concept of place dependence as a functional attachment which reflects the significance of a place in providing features and conditions that support an individual or a group of people's specific goals or desired activities. Thus, place dependence suggests a continuous experience which forms a relationship with a particular setting. This denotes a functional bond between individuals and a place, where the physical and social resources of the setting influence the individual's goal-oriented behaviours and

their evaluation of the quality of life in the community in relation to other options. As students reside in a particular place and become accustomed to it, they come to rely on that place for their daily and educational activities, social interactions, and overall well-being. Ultimately, this reflects the extent to which students feel physically and socially dependent on a particular place to accomplish their goals, which they believe they would not be able to achieve in a different location or setting.

### **Sense of Place in Educational Settings**

In the context of education, sense of place refers to the process by which an individual forms a strong connection and attachment to the social and physical environment of an educational institution. When the students spend the most of their time engaged with the place of learning, students develop positive or negative feelings as they become attached to their place of study. Esposito (2022) affirmed that a sense of place refers to the students' perception of how a particular setting affected the overall learning process in which students had an active part. This process can take place over the course of quite some time to the extent of several years or even decades. Students become emotionally attached to the place where they receive their education through a process that involves not just the physical surroundings but also other members of the educational community including other students, teachers or lecturers, and staff. This interaction will eventually have an effect on the students' strong sense of place, which typically occurs when they experience a strong connection and a sense of belonging to their surroundings, regardless of whether this feeling is positive or negative.

According to Evianne and Huisman (2019), students who lack a sense of belonging are more likely to leave university, because they feel their values and norms are dissimilar to the mainstream student community, and their contributions are not valued by others. On another note, the concept of sense of belonging among students towards their university has shown to benefit students' academic performances (Anderman & Jensen, 2007, as cited in Evianne and Huisman, 2019). According to the study, university students who have a better sense of belonging towards the institute, were found to be more motivated in terms of their academic performances and are seen to put more effort into their study while frequently attending classes. Sense of place is also seen as a contributing factor towards students' self-efficacy in studying as reported by Zumbrunn et al. (2014). Students were found to be influenced positively in their academic engagement and achievement when they established a strong relationship with the university.

In another aspect, students with a low sense of place towards the university may affect their health condition which may hinder these students from achieving optimum academic performance in their study. Shumaker and Taylor (1983) define place attachment as a system of interlinked attitudes and behaviours that pertain to the home and household and represent the individual's familiarity and connection to their surroundings. Similar to home and household, university can also be interpreted as residency in which individuals reside or stay for a specific period of time. Thus, lack of sense of place towards their study environment may result in the students to have more frequent visits to the doctors and high numbers of medical reports including loneliness, depression, and suicidal thinking (Walton & Cohen, 2011). This emphasises the significant impact that a sense of place can have on the mental and emotional health of students, highlighting the importance of nurturing a positive and supportive environment in educational settings. This is also echoed in Scannell and Gifford (2017) who stressed on the importance of sense of place as it helps to enhance the

individual's well-being by increasing satisfaction of psychological needs for self-esteem, meaning, and belonging.

Thus, seeing how sense of place has a major impact towards students and their educational aspects, it is important to investigate the establishment of a sense of place among students towards the university and factors contributing to students' sense of place.

### Methodology

This small-scale study on sense of place is conducted to ensure the reliability of the construct. According to Polit and Beck (2020), a well-planned and carried out preliminary study may aid in the identification of potential confounding variables that were not previously recognised and the assessment of the strength of correlations between critical variables. This study employed a quantitative research approach, employing online self-administered surveys on students' sense of place. Using a seven-point Likert scale extending from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree,' the questionnaire was adapted from Domingues et al. (2021), Jorgensen and Stedman's (2001), Lee et al. (2015), and Wu et al. (2019). The questionnaire was divided into two (2) parts, with six (6) questions on demographic backgrounds and 12 questions on sense of place, which are classified into three (3) concepts: place attachment, place identity, and place dependence.

As there is no consensus on a specific number of respondents for preliminary study, this study utilised convenience sampling to collect 33 responses in order to assess the students' sense of place. This is confirmed by previous research, which suggested that 10 to 12 up to 60-75 participants in each group would be sufficient depending on the research aims, as the primary goal of the preliminary study is to test the viability of the research design (In, 2017; Lewis et al., 2021). This study analyses data using IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), which is the most generally utilised programme for quantitative studies (Purwanto et al., 2021). Cronbach's alpha is used to measure the questionnaire items in order to determine the construct's internal consistency, with values ranging from .00 to 1.0. According to Farahiyah Akmal et al. (2020) and Olaniyi (2019), a value of .00 denotes a lack of measurement consistency, whereas a value of 1.0 denotes high measurement consistency. Considering the best ranges for determining reliability and validity are .70 to .90 or above, the Cronbach's coefficient of .907 for all questions on sense of place as indicated in Table 1 suggests outstanding reliability.

Table 1  
*Reliability Statistics*

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.907	12

### Results

This study evaluated the feasibility of a sense of place among university students. The findings will adhere to the concept of Sense of Place, which encompasses a variety of notions on the relationship between people and the environments in which they live, such as place identity, place attachment, and place dependence.

**Table 2***Place Identity (PI)*

Item No	Place Identity	Mean
PI2	This university helps me develop as a person.	5.91
PI3	This university allows me to be myself.	5.76
PI1	This university means a lot to me.	5.73
PI4	This university is a representation of who I am.	5.24
Overall Mean		5.66

Table 2 presents the concept of place identity with item PI2 has the highest mean score of 5.91, indicating the idea that "*This university helps me develop as a person.*" Item PI3 "*This university allows me to be myself*" received the second highest mean score of 5.76, followed by PI1 "*This university means a lot to me,*" which received 5.73. Finally, PI4 had the lowest mean for the notion of place identity at 5.24, stating "*This university is a reflection of who I am*". The students' perception that the university helps them grow as individuals corroborated Vaske and Korbin (2001)'s emphasis on the place identity by underlining significant emotional relationships in the students' lives. This further strengthens Erfani (2002)'s argument that students develop the place identity towards their university, perceiving it as a reflection of their identity. The time they spend at college has a big impact on how many students feel about themselves and how they discover who they are. A student's capacity for personal development and sense of self-identity might be influenced favourably, throughout the course of their university life, by the extent of their relationship to their university.

**Table 3***Place Attachment (PA)*

Item No	Place Attachment	Mean
PA4	This university will be missed when I graduate.	5.70
PA2	This university makes me feel happy.	5.36
PA3	This university is one of my favourite places to be.	5.00
PA1	This university makes me feel relaxed.	4.97
Overall Mean		5.26

The concept of place attachment is depicted in Table 3, with item PA4, "*This university will be missed when I graduate,*" obtaining the highest mean score of 5.70. Then comes PA2, "*This university makes me happy,*" with a mean score of 5.36. Item PA3 had a mean score of 5.00, "*This university is one of my favourite places to be,*" however item PA1 received a below-average mean score of 4.97, "*This university makes me feel relaxed.*" The findings from this section illustrate the connection between students and setting, emphasising that the students would miss the place once they graduated from the university. Despite the fact that the majority of the students disagree that university provides relaxation, a sense of comfort and security (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001, & Low, 1992, as cited in Cross, 2015; Domingues et al.,

2021) motivates them to maintain their connection with those locations. The results indicate that university students have a considerable emotional attachment to their educational setting, and they associate positive emotions and a sense of ease with the overall environment of their university. This strong place attachment generates an inclination to stay connected to the university even after their time as students has ended.

Table 4

*Place Dependence (PD)*

Item No	Place Dependence	Mean
PD4	As far as I am concerned, there are no better places to be than this university.	5.42
PD3	This university is a good place for me to do the things I like to do most.	5.21
PD1	This university is the best place for doing the things that I enjoy.	5.12
PD2	This university meets my academic, mental, and personal demands better than any other place.	5.00
Overall Mean		5.19

Table 4 depicts the concept of place dependence with item PD4 received the highest mean score at 5.42, *“As far as I am concerned, there no are better places to be than this university”* and this was followed by item PD3 with the mean score of 5.21, *“This university is a good place for me to do the things I like to do most”*. Item PD1 received the mean score at 5.12, *“This university is the best place for doing the things that I enjoy”*, whereas the least mean score was obtained by item PD2, *“This university meets my academic, mental, and personal demands better than any other place”* at 5.00. In this regard, it is evident that students believe the university is the best place for them to live a fulfilling life and pursue their passions because it effectively facilitates the achievement of objectives and satisfies fundamental needs, compared to the alternatives. (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Masterson et al., 2017; Pretty et al., 2003; Stokols & Shumaker, 1981). Eventually, students who feel at home in their surroundings are more likely to form close bonds with one another. It promotes social interactions and participation in campus activities, resulting in a more satisfying experience at university.

**Discussion**

Based on the findings, it is noteworthy that students exhibited an above-average level sense of place across all three concepts, namely Place Identity, Place Attachment, and Place Dependence.



**Table 5***Average mean for Place Identity, Place Attachment, and Place Dependence*

Item No	Sense of Place	Overall Mean
PI	Place Identity	5.66
PA	Place Attachment	5.26
PD	Place Dependence	5.19
Total Overall Mean		5.37

This is evidenced, as shown in Table 5, by the fact that all three concepts of place scored above the mean of 5.0, indicating a strong sense of belonging to their university, with overall means for Place Identity, Place Attachment, and Place Dependence at 5.66, 5.26, and 5.19, respectively. Having a strong sense of place shows that these students hold a subjective and emotional attachment or connection to a specific area or environment, in this instance, their university. This may be because the university provides them with the distinctive qualities, experiences, and cultural significance that give a place its identity and significance beyond its physical attributes that contributed to the highest mean score among all items at 5.91 for PI2, *"This university helps me develop as a person"*. This is consistent with the notion that significant interaction with place influences place identity, which in turn influences the development of a sense of self-identity (Anderson, 2004; Lalli, 1992; cited in Erfani, 2022). Not only the students develop self-identity, but they also indulge themselves in a setting that gives their lives purpose and meaning (Vaske & Korbin, 2001). This demonstrates the profound influence of the setting on the development and well-being of students, as they form emotional bonds with specific places that contribute to their sense of identity and satisfaction.

According to Williams et al. (1992, as cited in Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001), place attachment is the overarching concept describing the emotional bond between an individual and a specific spatial setting, whereas identity and dependence are attachment subdomains. Nevertheless, the results of this research are intriguing because place attachment typically receives a higher score than place identity. However, the mean for place attachment is 5.26, whereas the mean for place identity is 5.66. Significant differences were observed between two place attachment items, with the highest mean score being 5.70 for PA4, *"This university will be missed when I graduate,"* and the lowest mean score being 4.97 for PA1, *"This university makes me feel relaxed"*. Mohd Fadhli Shah et al. (2022b) contend that the significance of place attachment stems from the establishment of a connection between the location and a person's emotions, attitudes, and behaviours as they reside in and explore the space. Feeling connected to one's university environment can alleviate tension and loneliness, promoting a healthy mental and emotional state. Other than that, a possible explanation for why Item PA1 has the lowest mean score is that universities serve as learning environments where students spend the majority of their time preparing for future endeavours requiring excellent academic performance. Domingues et al. (2021) noted that when individuals feel at ease, they develop a desire to establish relationships with the specific settings. Thus, when students strive for academic success, experiencing pressure to fulfil submission deadlines and

prepare for examinations, their feelings of ease are compromised, affecting their university experience.

This can be connected to the next concept of sense of place, place dependence. Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) stated that the concept of dependence is conceptualised in terms of how the environment compares to other alternatives supporting similar objectives or goals, which in this case is to provide a place for these students to acquire knowledge in preparation for their future. Previously, the lowest mean score for place dependence was associated with students' emotional state. As a result, it could also be related to the item PD2, which has the lowest mean score for place dependence at 5.00, "*This university meets my academic, mental, and personal demands better than any other place.*" Despite the previous result, it appears that the students have a strong sense of place towards the university, as the highest score for place dependence was item PD4, which scored 5.42 for "*As far as I am concerned, there are no better places to be than this university*". This ties the previous literature together by demonstrating that a place dependence serves the purpose of having a sense of place, which provides the means to accomplish the goals of the said place, the university. The results of the findings were also confirmed by Vaske and Kobrin (2001), who stated that emotional attachment played an important role in establishing a sense of functionality, which creates a sense of dependency between students and the university. As students interact with their university more often and longer, particularly in terms of classes, facilities, and surroundings, their functional attachment might gradually convert to place dependency, in which students agree with items PD4 and PD3.

## Conclusion

### Table 6

*Sense of Place Among University Students*

Item No	Sense of Place	Mean
PI2	This university helps me develop as a person.	5.91
PA4	This university will be missed when I graduate.	5.70
PD4	As far as I am concerned, there are no better places to be than this university.	5.42
Overall Mean		5.68

The results of this study indicated that university students have a strong sense of place, as the mean scores for place identity, place attachment, and place dependence were higher than average. Therefore, it is apparent that the university fulfils its role in equipping students for a more promising future by accomplishing its objectives during their time there. Table 6 depicts the students' notable sense of place for place identity, as shown by a score of 5.91, suggesting that the university plays a significant role in shaping their personal development. This is further supported by the fact that they demonstrated a sense of place attachment at a score of 5.70, acknowledging their affection for the university as they departed from the place later. Lastly, it is worth noting that the highest mean score for place dependence was 5.42, indicating a strong agreement that the university is the most ideal place for fulfilling their aim of studying. After all, this study reveals a significant relationship among the three fundamental concepts of sense of place. Particularly, it reveals that when students establish a functional connection between their university and themselves (Place Dependence), they

subsequently develop an appealing emotional bond with the institution (Place Attachment), eventually influencing the development of their self-identity (Place Identity). This ultimately shaped their sense of self-identity through their strong sense of place, which includes place identity, place attachment, and place dependence. The strong sense of place among the university students is influenced by the distinctive qualities, experiences, and cultural significance that the university provides beyond its physical attributes. This highlights the significance of the university as a place of learning and development, which contributes to the formation of their self-identity and overall sense of their purpose in life.

The concept of sense of place within the educational landscape remains obsolete, since it is mostly explored in the context of tourism, physical environments, and architectural structures. Thus, it is interesting to explore on the human cognition, particularly in relation to the idea of "place." While the term "place" does not exclusively refer to physical environments, it encompasses the ways in which individuals perceive and conceptualise spatial contexts. Consequently, the research offers significant insights into how university students perceive and interact with their environment. It demonstrates the profound influence of place attachment, identity, and dependence on shaping the experiences and well-being of students within the educational environment. Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering a sense of belonging, personal development, and academic success among university students by fostering environments that are supportive and enriching. Universities can actively contribute to the development of a sense of place by encouraging affection for the institution, providing supportive services, connecting with cutting-edge technology, and creating venues that allow students to form profound connections with their university. Notably, future research on sense of place could explore the students' sense of place in the new landscape of teaching and learning post-pandemic, COVID-19, as many tertiary education institutions are still implementing hybrid learning in which the total time spent in the tertiary education setting is limited compared to pre-pandemic practises.

Sense of place is a multifaceted and intricate term that is employed in a broad range of contexts to denote the relationship between individuals and their spatial settings. The presence or absence of a particular trait or quality varies across different settings, whereas for certain individuals, it is subjectively experienced as a feeling or perception. Given that the place or setting may be a shared or a common place that belongs to everyone in the given context, their sense of place may vary. This is due to the way they perceive, experience, and value the place itself. However, the concept of sense of place should be explored further to look into how external factors can influence and satisfy the needs and wants of every individual. As proposed in this paper on how the concepts of sense of place influence an individual's dependence, attachment, and identity towards a place or setting, it is necessary to redefine and reposition the significance of place and environment in influencing one's perspectives, outcomes, and outlook.

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