

## STREET AS A PLACE: A STUDY OF SENSE OF PLACE IN COMMERCIAL STREETS OF JAFFNA, SRI LANKA

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**Abstract:** Commercial streets are places that considered as heart of our cities that are mostly intertwined with people's everyday routines facilitating many activities, movements, and social interactions. The previous studies have researched the streets' characteristics and qualities to enhance and evaluate the image of the streets and places. But, a less focus has been given to the commercial streets in the Sri Lankan context. The aim of this study is to identify the attributes that influence people's sense in the commercial streets. The study was conducted in two commercial streets of Jaffna city and emphasis was given to qualitative analysis. Nine attributes namely access, number of people, street vendors, and variety of shops, trees and vegetation, walkways, lighting at night, pedestrians, and wall arts are found as influencing attributes for people's sense in the selected two cases. It concluded that the activity as the most influential aspect which needs to be considered in facilitating the sense of place in the commercial streets. This paper will contribute to planners, architects, and designers to create and arrange the commercial streets as a meaningful place for people.

**Keywords:** *Commercial streets, Sense of Place, People, Sri Lanka*

### 1. Introduction

Streets are recognized as an important element of public spaces that reflect the character and experience of cities (Al-Obeidy & Ali, 2017). Streets exist as a city's public domain and catalyst for social activities (Gehl, 2013; Loughton, 2005). As per Krier and Rowe (1976) streets serve for range of functions and play an important part in determining the quality and character of urban living. In contexts such as in many U.S cities, streets are merely used for transportation. But urban streets in cultural contexts such as in France, Italy, Egypt, South Africa, Taiwan, China, India, and Sri Lanka are seen as public spaces where interaction between people and streets are more and frequent (Fernando, 2000). Thus, commercial streets play an important role in every city when compared to rest of the regular streets. It has become a significant aspect of social space, serving a variety of functions that promote both formal and casual social engagement and serve as a public and social gathering place (Mishra, 2019). Unlike other public places (parks, playground, leisure and recreational place), commercial street facilitates for variety of activities and diversity of uses that plays an important role in functioning the cities. A commercial street has a significant impact on the character of the city center and the functional significance of the street users' lives (Rahman, 2013). Scholars state that the streets are places in the urban context and platform for many people which reveal the character and sense of place of cities. Shinbira and Sulaiman (2008) state that physical qualities and activity patterns related to the street generate the sense of place in the street.

There are limited studies on the streets of Sri Lanka and more focused studies have emerged only during the recent past (Dayaratne, 2010). The earlier studies have researched on streets' characteristics and qualities to enhance the image of the streets. Rajapakse and Dayaratne (1988) have studied the important characteristics of the place of streets to understand the 'sense of place' in Colombo and discuss that planning interventions should reinforce these significant characteristics of places. The studies of Wijesundara and Wijekoon (2017) indicate that the temporary urban intervention in urban shopping streets as the elements of place-making in pettah, Colombo. Further Fernando (2000) examined the pattern of activities along the Galle Road and how the ambience of the street is generated and how development policies should pay attention to retaining the cultural identity of the streets. Studies of Perera and Corey (2008) have mentioned the significance of the characteristics of the streets for enhancing the image of the city. These studies reveal that though the streets have recognized as an important element of our context, it has limited at studying

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the characteristics and quality of the street. Thus, less focus has given to the commercial streets in the Sri Lankan context. Hence, this research addresses this less explored area and then it discusses the alternative way to study the commercial street based on the concept of sense. Therefore, the research question is “What makes the sense of place in the commercial streets of Sri Lanka?”. The objectives are to identify the attributes that influence the sense of place in the commercial streets and to investigate the most influential aspect (physical, activity, and meaning) which needs to be considered in facilitating the sense of place.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 SENSE OF PLACE

The concept of sense of place is a widely discussed topic among subjects such as sociology, philosophy, environmental psychology, geography, architecture, and urban design. Shamai (1991) states that there is an ambiguity in the studies regarding the sense of place. According to environmental psychology, sense of place is a bonding between people and places that creates the meaning for their experience within the place (Hashem et al., 2013). Meanwhile, in the study of geography, a feeling of place, often known as topophilia (Tuan, 1974) referred to the affective ties that people have with their immediate environments. A sense of place in architecture refers to the significant characteristics of a structure or environment that some places have, and others have not (Nugroho & Zhang, 2021). It is an umbrella concept that includes place identity, place attachment, and place dependence (Deutsch & Goulias, 2009; Shamai, 1991).

The different aspects of the interaction between people and place and the impact of places on its people are generally described by this concept. People attach themselves by gaining feelings, emotions, and perceptions from the particular setting (Hashem et al., 2013). Sense of place is a concept that could explain the quality of the people’s bond with the place. It is the feeling or experience of a person in a particular setting and integrates the people with the place. The interaction between man, his image and environmental qualities is defined as the sense of place (Najafi & Shariff, 2011). Sense of place is also defined as an effective tie with the material environment (Tuan, 1974). So, it revealed that there are many classifications presented by scholars with similar perceptions. Accordingly, sense of place is constituted by three main aspects (*Table 1*). They are physical (form), Activity and meaning.

Table 1: Three Aspects of the Sense of Place (Source: Compiled by Author, 2021)

Reference	Components of the sense of place		
Ralph (1960)	Social activities	Physical setting/form	Personal and shared meanings
Canter (1977)	Activity	Physical	Conceptions
Punter (1991)	Activity	Physical setting	Meaning
Montgomery (1998)	Activity	Form	Image (cognition, perception, and information)

### 2.2 QUALITIES RELATE TO THE SENSE OF PLACE IN THE COMMERCIAL STREETS

Considering Ujang’s (2009) study (cited in Ramadhani et al 2018), eight qualities associated with the three aspects of the sense of place in the street is derived. Accordingly, each quality is sorted under the key aspects as per the definitions to carry out this study (*Table 2*).

Table 2: Definition of Selected Qualities (Source: Compiled by Author, 2021)

Three Aspects	Qualities	Definition
Physical	Accessibility	It refers to the ease of movement. It is about being able to get and move through a place (Al-Obeidy & Dabdoob, 2017).
	Legibility	It is about the ability to recognize the street (Ujang, 2009).
Activity	Vitality	Sense of liveliness of the streets (Ujang, 2009).
	Diversity	Opportunity/Choice to gain various goods (Al-Obeidy & Dabdoob, 2017; Ujang, 2009).
	Transaction	Sense of communication and engagement in the streets (Al-Obeidy & Dabdoob, 2017).
Meaning	Distinctiveness	It relates to the character and identity of the street
	Comfort	Sense of comfort in the streets (Al-Obeidy & Dabdoob, 2017; Ujang, 2009).
	Safety	Sense of safety in the streets (Al-Obeidy & Dabdoob, 2017; Ujang, 2009).

### 2.3 IDENTIFY THE ATTRIBUTES OF STREET FOR THE STUDY

Al-Obeidy and Dabdoob (2017) state that the elements and features of the street contribute in finding the degree of

sense of place. Therefore, as the next step, the street attributes which aligns with the selected eight qualities that create sense of place were identified. Table 3 detailed the street attributes and qualities that have been discussed widely by the previous authors.

Table 3: Selected Attributes form Literatures (Source: Compiled by Author, 2021)

Qualities	Attributes	Reference
Accessibility	Access, Location	Ujang,2010 as cited in Ramadhani, Faqih, & Hayati, 2018; Al-Obeidy and Dabdoob, 2017; Mu- saab, Suhana, & Nahith, 2018
Legibility	Building Appearance, Landmark	Ujang,2010 as cited in Ramadhani, Faqih, & Hayati, 2018; Musaab, Suhana, & Nahith, 2018; Al- Obeidy, Shamsuddin, & Hassan, 2014
Vitality	Street activity, Number of people	Ujang,2010 as cited in Ramadhani, Faqih, & Hayati, 2018; Zaidin et al., 2015; Al-Obeidy and Dabdoob, 2017; Jalaladdini & Oktay, 2011
Diversity	Diversity of goods, Variety of buildings/shops	Ujang,2010 as cited in Ramadhani, Faqih, & Hayati, 2018; Al-Obeidy and Dabdoob, 2017; Al- Obeidy & Shamsuddin, 2015
Transaction	Street vendors	Ujang,2010 as cited in Ramadhani, Faqih, & Hayati, 2018; Al-Obeidy and Dabdoob, 2017
Distinctiveness	Unique buildings, Historic /traditional buildings	Ujang,2010 as cited in Ramadhani, Faqih, & Hayati, 2018; Rahman, 2013
Comfort	Walkways, Tress & Vegetation, Sit- ting /Resting area	Ujang,2010 as cited in Ramadhani, Faqih, & Hayati, 2018; Al-Obeidy and Dabdoob, 2017; Musaab, Suhana, & Nahith, 2018
Safety	Lighting at night, Pedestrians, Presence of people, Security officers	Ujang,2010 as cited in Ramadhani, Faqih, & Hayati, 2018; Al-Obeidy and Dabdoob, 2017; Mu- saab, Suhana, & Nahith, 2018

Further to the above, a pilot study was conducted with an intention of narrowing down or to add any other missing attributes to the selected list which truly caters the Sri Lankan context. Accordingly, street wall art was identified as a new attribute. Hence, 12 attributes (*Table 4*) were finalized to carry out this study.

Table 4: Selected Attributes for the Study (Source: Compiled by Author, 2021)

Number	Attributes
1	Access
2	Appearance of the buildings
3	Landmarks
4	Number of people
5	Street vendors
6	Variety of shops
7	Trees and vegetation
8	Walkways
9	Lighting at night
10	Pedestrians
11	Old structures and traditional buildings
12	wall arts

### 3. Methodology

A mixed method approach was adopted to carry out this study. First, the preliminary observation was conducted to study the streets. Photographs and activity patterns were recorded using mobile phone and sketchbook notes. People’s behavioral observation was conducted to understand the places where the social activities and people interactions were

concentrated, and the patterns of the user’s activities were sketched. Accordingly, certain attributes were combined to depict one category, some were omitted, and new attributes were also introduced to carry out the study.

Subsequently as per the observational findings, the conceptual framework (Figure 1) of this study was formulated. Then, the questionnaire and semi structured interviews were prepared to test the observation and literature review finding based on people’s view. The questionnaire was prepared to select statements using a 1-5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was focused on 60 respondents from each street as a total of 120 and semi structured interviews were conducted from 10 people in both streets. The non-probability sampling (convenience sampling) method was used in this study. Descriptive analysis, Relative Important Index and Narrative analysis deliver the analysis output.

Specifically, the hierarchy chart analysis generated through NVivo software was used to validate the findings of the questionnaire survey. All interview results were transcribed and used as the input for this analysis. The total information of 20 interviews was coded in the NVivo one by one. The three main aspects were taken as the main three themes in this analysis. Then the qualities and attributes were coded as subcategories under these three aspects. Thus, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used as the input for the data analysis.

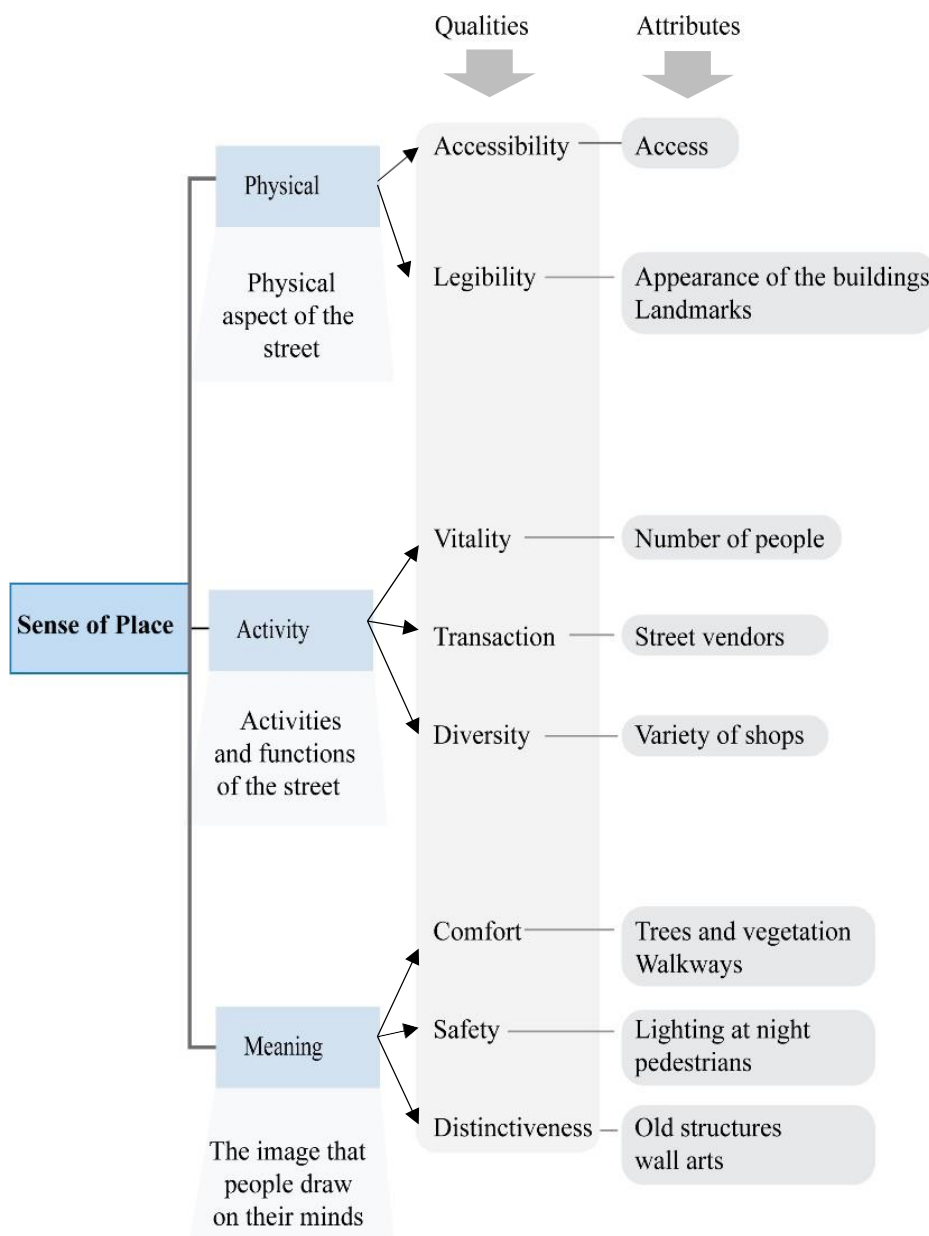


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study (Source: Compiled by Author, 2021)

### 3.1. STUDY AREA

During the pilot study, commercial streets of Jaffa city was observed to understand the streets that are in line with the literature findings. According to Fernando (2000), the streets in traditional contexts are the vibrant place for the people interaction. As per the studies done by Dyaratne (2010), streets of Sri Lanka can be categorized as shown in Figure 2.

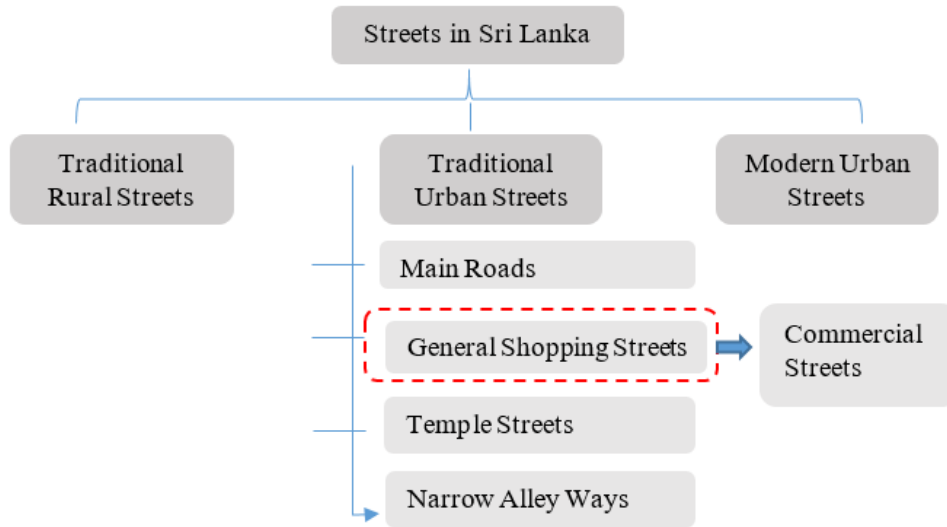


Figure 2: Selected Category of the Street (Source: Dayaratne, 2010)

Accordingly, two main commercial streets namely Hospital Street and Powerhouse Street from the Jaffna city center is selected to carry out the study. The following listed criteria too were taken into consideration when selecting these streets.

- Diversity of the uses and variety of activities (Predominantly commercial activities)
- Physical and functional characteristics of the street
- Identifiable and familiarity of people

Hence, the observation and literature findings provide justification for selecting these case studies.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1 ANALYSIS OF THE STREET’S ATTRIBUTES

People were asked to indicate the influence of the attributes as per 5- Point Likert scale and the output of the data was analyzed using Relative important index. Accordingly, a gradient of colours were used to identify the level of influence. The findings of this analysis were depicted in the below Table 5. Further the findings of the attributes derived from the analysis of relative important index were further categorized in a hierarchical order as low, moderate and high as mentioned in the Table 6. This categorization was further justified through narrative analysis which depicts the factors that the people identified to be highly influential in the commercial streets of Jaffna.

Table 5: Output of the Relative Important Index (Source: Compiled by Author, 2021)

Attributes	Hospital Street		Powerhouse Street	
	RII	Rank	RII	Rank
Access	0.68	7	0.70	7
Appearance of the buildings	0.63	9	0.67	9
Landmarks	0.66	8	0.65	10
Number of people	0.82	1	0.83	2
Street vending	0.68	7	0.73	5
Variety of shops	0.79	3	0.79	3
Trees and vegetation	0.81	2	0.72	6
Walkways	0.77	4	0.73	5
Lighting at night	0.71	5	0.84	1
Pedestrians	0.71	5	0.74	4
Old structures and traditional buildings	0.62	10	0.69	8
wall arts	0.69	6	0.73	5

Low  High

Table 6: Categorize the Respondent's Responses (Source: Compiled by Author, 2021)

Respondent's responses	Hospital Street	Power House Street
High	Number of people, Variety of shops, Trees and vegetation, Walkways	Number of people, Variety of shops, Lighting at night
Moderate	Lighting at night, Pedestrian, Street vending, Access, wall arts	Street vending, Access, Trees and vegetation, Walkways, Pedestrian, wall arts and Old structures and traditional buildings
Low	Appearance of the buildings, Land-marks, Old structures, and traditional buildings	Appearance of the buildings, Land-marks

The analysis indicates that there are nine attributes that are commonly highlighted by the respondents in both streets. They are access, number of people, street vendors, variety of shops, trees and vegetation, walkways, lighting at night, pedestrian, and wall arts. While the findings reveal that building appearance, landmarks and old structures are less influencing the people's sense in the commercial streets when compared to other streets. The narratives (Table 7) from the people were used for the validation of the questionnaire findings. The result of the narration highlights the above identified attributes as meaningful. Notably, the attributes namely access, number of people, street vendors, variety of shops, trees and vegetation, walkways, lighting at night, pedestrian, and wall arts were frequently mentioned by people.

Table 7: Output of Narratives (Source: Compiled by Author, 2021)

Attributes	Highlighted narrations
Access	<i>"I can get to this street easily from my home. I can easily access the next street through the crosswalks."</i> (R1-H) <i>"I feel easy to walk here."</i> (R9-H)
Number of People	<i>"Yes, this is very active street. I can always see people in this street."</i> (R7-H) <i>"This is very active street than the hospital street. You can find always people in the street."</i> (R1-P)
Street Vendors	<i>"You can see pavement shops along this way. I can select some cheap price goods in those than big shops."</i> (R9 - H) <i>"I mostly go to pavement shops and market to buy the goods in cheap price."</i> (R4 - P)
Variety of Shops	<i>"I always prefer to visit this street. Because I can buy anything in this street."</i> (R6 -H) <i>"I can say first; the different kind of shops are interesting to this street."</i> (R9-P)
Trees and Vegetation	<i>"I think more than 5 big trees are along this street. From the start of this street to this point very cool always."</i> (R2-H) <i>"I always stay under this tree before turn to the bus stand from my tuition class. I get comfortable from these trees."</i> (R10-P)
Walkways	<i>"Also, walkways along the hospital street provide easy walk to reach the bus stand."</i> (R8 -H) <i>"I always use this walkway. Because I feel comfortable walking through it."</i> (R1-H)
Lighting at Night	<i>"Streetlights add very safety to this street."</i> (R5 -P) <i>"I think streetlights are very safe to this street. Sometimes I need to go alone at night-time after my work. I feel it is very safe."</i> (R1-H)
Pedestrians	<i>"If I say another thing, this is a very safe street. Because people and pedestrians are here. I never get fear."</i> (H-9)

Wall arts	<p><i>"I prefer the wall arts in this street. It very beautiful and colourful." (R7-P)</i></p> <p><i>"I can remember these wall arts came recently. It is very nice in looking." (R3-P)</i></p>
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Therefore, the nine attributes namely, access, number of people, street vendors, variety of shops, trees and vegetation, walkways, lighting at night, Pedestrian and wall arts are influencing the people’s sense in the commercial streets of Sri Lanka.

**4.2 MOST INFLUENTIAL ASPECT IN STRENGTHENING THE SENSE OF PLACE IN COMMERCIAL STREETS**

According to the conceptual diagram of this study, it has defined that three main aspects are forming the sense of place. Those are physical, activity, and meaning. Accordingly, activity is identified as the most influential aspect in creating more sense in these streets. Under the activity, diversity of the shops and goods has taken the main reason for their response. Street vending activities take little concern of people. But it is relatively contributing in influencing the sense in the street. The findings reveal and justify that activities are the main aspect that influences the people’s sense in the commercial street in the selected study. Subjective experience (meaning) has taken as second aspect in creating sense in these streets. The qualities such as comfort and safety are highlighted as the main reason for their response. The physical aspects were selected due to the accessibility and as per the analysis it turned out to be the least important aspects in creating Sense of place in a commercial street. Thus, the findings reveal that as per people the order of most influential aspects in creating sense of place in these streets are activity, meaning and physical setting.

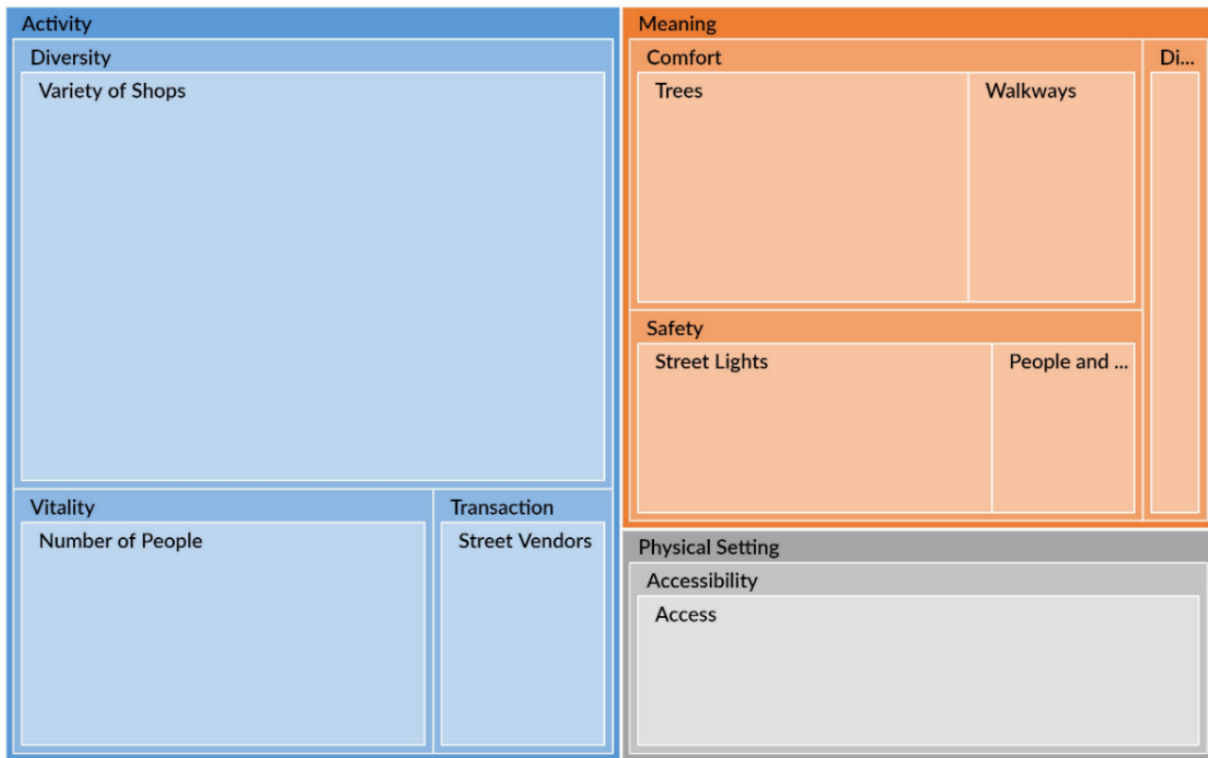


Figure 4: Output of Hierarchy Chat (Source: Compiled by Author, 2021 using NVivo)

The findings of this study show some complement and contradiction with the previous studies. It is in line with the findings of Al-Obeidy and Shamsuddin (2015) works that quality of diversity is influencing more on people’s sense in the commercial street. At the same time, it is in line with the Zaidin and others work that vitality of the street is influencing the sense of place (Zaidin et al., 2015). It shows that people are more concerning the functional characteristic of the commercial street environment. Also, in the Al- Obeidy, Shamsuddin and Hassan (2014) works, they have identified that the appearance of the buildings and landmarks are contributing to recognizing the place and influence to create the identity. But the findings of this study reveal that they are not much influential attributes in the selected two case study streets which are commercial streets compared to the other attributes. These aspects need to consider when alter the commercial streets in the context. Even though the physical aspects of the streets give visual views to the people, the functional characteristics of the street give more attachment to people.

Yet, there is a possibility to gain the actual influence of these attributes with increased sample size since it has taken the moderate influence. Also, other attributes such as access, street vending, trees and vegetation, walkways, lighting at night, and Pedestrians have been tested in this study with the previous findings of the authors (Al-Obeidy and Dabdoob, 2017; Jalaladdini & Oktay, 2011; Musaab, Suhana, & Nahith, 2018; Ujang, 2010 as cited in Ramadhani, Fa-qih, & Hayati, 2018).

In addition to the literature findings, the author has identified wall arts are the new attribute that are influencing the people's sense and giving the visual pleasing in the commercial street environment. It shows that there are some other attributes that can identify by doing this study in other commercial streets of Sri Lanka. This research also has provided and tested that some common attributes are influencing the sense in the commercial streets in all contexts. The study further proved that the commercial streets in the cultural contexts marginally vary from the other streets where interaction between people and streets are more and frequent (Fernando, 2000). Thus, commercial streets play an important role in such places when compared to the regular streets.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Streets are widely used public places, where the commercial streets are the heart of our cities and most intertwine people's everyday routine. Exploring the interlink between the people and street is important to maintain the quality and bond between people and place, which in turn could help to create a good city image. The study reveals that the commercial streets of Sri Lanka are one of the places for evoking the experience of the people. Attributes namely access, number of people, street vendors, variety of shops, trees and vegetation, walkways, lighting at night, pedestrian and wall arts are identified as mostly influencing the people's sense in these streets. The attributes namely building appearance, Landmarks, and old structure and traditional buildings have taken less consideration by the people compare to other attributes. The overall findings reveal that activity as the most influential aspect in creating sense of place in the context of Commercial Street. This study only limited to the visual attributes of the street. But in general phenomena, the non-visual attributes such as noise, smell and thermal condition of the street also influence in people's sense. So, it is limited to this concern. The conceptual framework of this study can be used to test the findings in other segments of commercial streets in the Sri Lankan context. In line with main influential aspect in creating sense in the commercial streets, the activity, one can further explore about the extent of those activities in creating the sense of place. Such as what kind of diversity characteristics that people desire to have in these commercial streets and what type of transaction (street vending) activities create the more sense in these streets. Also, the new attributes could have added by asking question from the people than merely depend on observation.

Since, the concept of sense of place is now widely applied in planning studies to stimulate the experience of the surrounding environments (Berg et al., 2021), the findings of this study could use effectively to create such places. This concept is also a wide talking topic in cultural studies. Thus, scholars state that architects, planners and designers should pay additional concern to make the quality of places and built environment because creating sense of place is one of the main goals of urban design (Hashem et al., 2013). Also, as per Carmona, 2021, it is important to understand the interaction between people and place. Therefore, this is a significant study to the urban planners, designers and architects to arrange and design the commercial streets.

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