



Identifying the Perceptual Image of Distinctive Places Through Storytelling

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Abstract

Every place has its own distinctive image that makes it special and different; however, places are always open to changes in buildings, people, culture and activities. But just as change can enrich a place, it can also affect it negatively by altering its individuality or by removing the characteristics to which people are attached. Each place needs to sustain its distinctive characteristics in pursuit of economic, environmental and social advantage. It is, therefore, important to identify what forms a place's distinctiveness and examine its means of measurement that can be done through identifying people's perception of image and examining what people value about their place. This paper aims to determine the key elements that contribute to a place's local distinctiveness through identifying the tangible and intangible aspects of the perceptual image and its means of measurement. The study was carried in Fouad Street, one of the most unique and important streets in Alexandria, Egypt, to quantitatively and qualitatively measure the street's distinctiveness from different aspects. Methods include perceptual studies using a storytelling technique of people's experiences and perceptions being obtained and analyzed. The paper concludes with a Distinctiveness Referential Scale (DRS) to identify the urban distinctiveness of Fouad Street according to people's perception and images, leading to recommendations to sustain and enhance local urban distinctiveness.

Keywords

Local distinctiveness • Storytelling technique • Place image • Fouad Street

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1 Introduction

Egyptian cities are rich with built, natural and cultural characteristics. While Alexandria is the second largest city in Egypt and is a major economic center and a popular tourist destination, the gradual changes of the city's streets, buildings, monuments and landmarks and the subtle changes of globalization can influence the concept of distinctiveness, affecting people's emotional attachment to their place. People notice and know about their places a wide range of things, not only the special landmarks that define the place but also different aspects that form the places. Some features may seem ordinary and familiar, but when combined they give a place its value and distinctiveness. Place meanings are rooted in the physical setting and the non-physical cultural activities; these have been termed local distinctiveness. The term was coined by Common Ground, an English organization that spent its time and effort to inspire people and communities to protect and promote whatever is distinctive about their places (Common Ground 2017).

The study identifies urban distinctiveness of Fouad Street in Alexandria and its means of measurement through the tangible and intangible aspects of an image as experienced and perceived by people. Urban analysis and perceptual studies are required and are fundamental to define the local distinctiveness of the place. In addition, it is important to define the quality of the place's distinctiveness to suggest the correct actions and tools in enhancing the positive images of the place and reconstructing the negative images people have about it.

2 Literature Review

People perceive places differently. Different characteristics that may seem ordinary and familiar give a place its value and distinctiveness. "Local Distinctiveness is described as an elusive concept. Essentially, it encompasses the unique

physical, social and economic characteristics of a place and the interaction of people with those characteristics” (Miller 2009).

The combination of physical, social and economic characteristics forms the distinctiveness of a place. Local distinctiveness primarily consists of six main elements belonging to these three characteristics, which can either be found in combination or, exceptionally alone. These elements are: natural features, man-made structures, cultural identity and people, food and drinks, crafts, and industry and business (Grant et al. 2002). Physical characteristics of distinctiveness comprise man-made structures or built fabric of the settlement and the natural features of the place. These slow-changing elements are the core features that form the foundation of distinctiveness. Other non-physical features, including the social and economic characteristics of distinctiveness related to human enterprise represented in people and their activities, create a change. Unlike the physical characteristics, non-physical features can allow the place to have the capacity to be modified or reinvent distinctiveness (Bauman Lyons Architects 2009).

People and places are intimately connected by a bond that is not physical, because each place has a distinctive identity of its own that is drawn by a self-constructed image, an intangible value that is added to the entity by the individual’s mind. In order for people to comprehend their surroundings, they reduce the reality into a few selective impressions producing place images (Carmona et al. 2010). The image of any place is related fundamentally to the study of local distinctiveness, for it is important to seek the ways people comprehend and, hence, get attached to their surroundings. The place image can mean many things, whether a physical resemblance, a mental representation or even a symbolic and metaphorical pictures. In this study, “image” is defined as a person’s beliefs, ideals, feelings, expectations and impressions about a place which is “a distinct way of processing and storing multisensory information in working memory” (Echtner & Ritchie 2003).

Many previous researchers have studied the image of a place and its components. A model of image components is proposed by Echtner and Ritchie to help in measuring the image shown in Fig. 1. In this model, the parts of the image can be broken down into two perpendicular axes: The first depends, at one end, on a holistic view of perceiving information, often described as mental picturing, and includes any or all of the five main senses: sight, smell, taste, sound and touch. At the other end is the contrast, characterized by details of information or attributes of the stimuli rather than the holistic impressions. The second axis has at one end the functional characteristics, which represent the tangible aspects of the image that are directly observable or measurable; at the other end are the psychological

characteristics, which include the intangible aspects of an image (Echtner and Ritchie 2003).

The measurement of an image must include aspects of both functional attributes and functional holistic impressions; in addition, the psychological attributes and psychological holistic impressions must be measured. Thus, the measurement must include both tangible and intangible aspects of image which are represented in the functional and psychological characteristics, in order to acknowledge the richness and complexity of the urban elements as seen and felt.

One of the techniques used to measure the image of a place is the storytelling technique, which is a narrative method used in obtaining the different perceptual experiences, thus identifying urban or local distinctiveness. In this fictitious storytelling technique, groups of people create the story about a place over a period of time; they are asked to describe a fictitious journey into the place, describing what they see and do on their way. This technique allows participants to map their own perceptions of the tangible and intangible aspects onto the subject of the story, producing rich material for analysis (Field 2002).

The narrative technique of “storytelling” is used widely in business world and has been used in workshops for establishing local distinctiveness such as in Bolton Town by Drew Makie Associate, the research was for providing baseline for the Council’s design guidance document on town center development, it identified areas in which policy could help to reinforce local distinctiveness, and results were published in the final report 2006 (Muray et al. 2006).

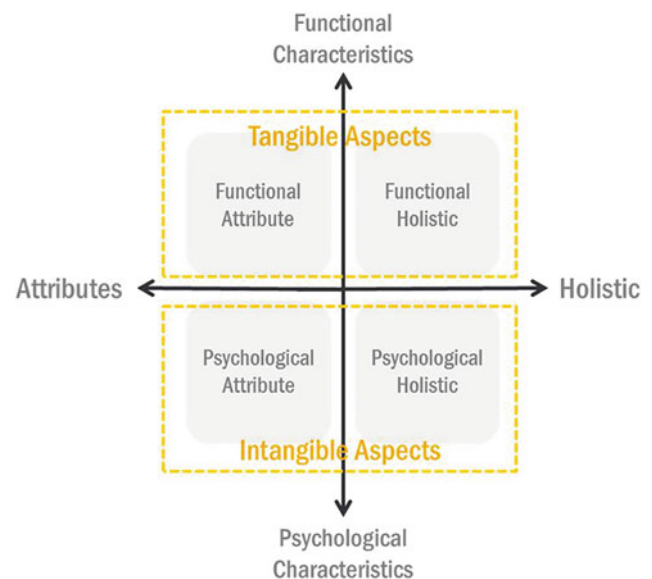
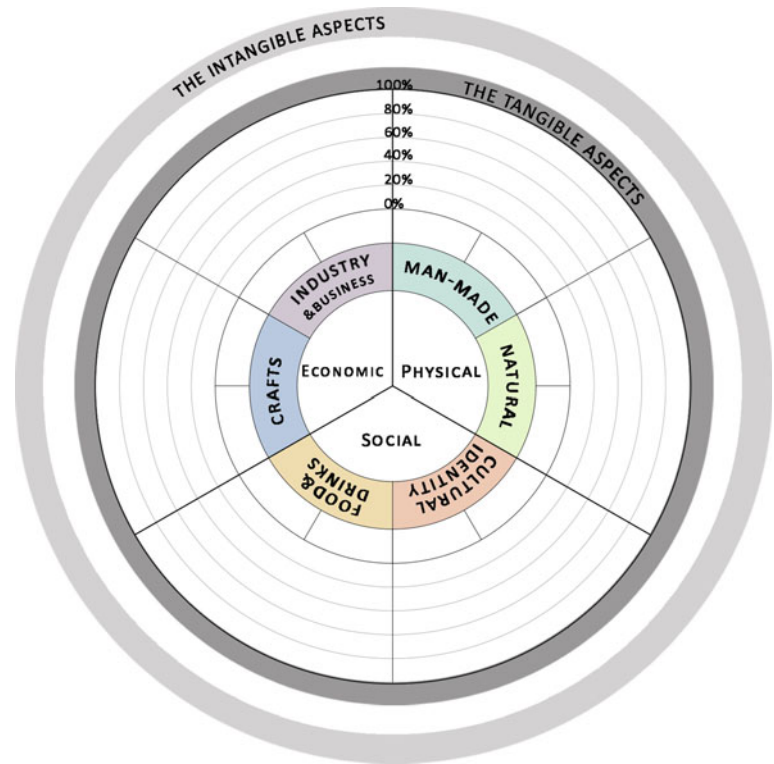


Fig. 1 Image components by Echtner and Ritchie. Modified by the researcher

Fig. 2 Referential scale to identify distinctiveness of a place. (By researcher)



The reason for selecting this technique is to make participants react to a place's values and to uncover their attitudes toward the place under study. Moreover, storytelling can be effectively used as a technique for a survey development to help researchers gain a better understanding of related emotions and issues that might otherwise be missed or misunderstood through a more structured method (Harrington and Mickelson 2009).

According to the literature review, the elements of local distinctiveness in both the tangible and intangible aspects could be measured through the storytelling technique and correlated according to the concluded distinctiveness referential scale in Fig. 2.

In this referential scale, the three characteristics (physical, social and economic) are represented equally, but when used to demonstrate the distinctiveness of a place, these characteristics are represented quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantity can be observed as the area taken by each characteristic, while quality can be observed in the percentage of each element within the three main characteristics. This scale can be used to identify and evaluate the local distinctiveness of a place, and to set up recommendations for the elements to be further developed and protected.

3 Methodology

The study was carried in Fouad Street, which is located in the city center of Alexandria, Egypt. It was named after King Fouad I, and it is one of the most important streets in the city of Alexandria. It features a number of landmarks, investment institutions, art houses, museums and old florist shops. The street goes back to Ptolemaic era in the third century BC, and now of course it had undergone many changes, but it is one of the few places left in the city with most of its heritage buildings still intact, despite the new buildings and overcrowded urban center (Awad & El-Tabbakh 2005).

The selected area is located in the central district of Alexandria, cut into the heart of the modern European city and contains some of the city's most amazing nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architecture. It starts from Alexander the Great's statue that is located in the El Saa Square and ends at the Attarin Police Station, located at the intersection of Salah Salem Street and Sidi El Metwally Street.

In the perceptual studies of Fouad Street, an interactive storytelling technique was used. The method and the process

was in follow of Bolton Town report as an example, but with adaptation in order to suit the case of Fouad Street and to gain the information covering the tangible and intangible aspects of people's image.

Participants in groups were asked to describe a touristic journey in Fouad Street, where they spend time with a tourist who is interested in visiting distinctive places in Alexandria, showing what is special about the street and indicating their perceptions as they walk in, describing what they see and do on their way. Incidents are fed into the story at some points, such as asking the participants to stop and look around at various points they prefer in their journey. The materials were used to identify the key elements that in people's opinion from local distinctiveness of Fouad Street and how they perceive it as individual attributes and holistic image. Participants were given sheets in which to record their story. These sheets include:

3.1 A Map of Fouad Street (Fig. 3)

Participants were asked to indicate their routes into and out of the place, mark significant or distinctive attractions, and draw lines around recognizable areas with common characteristics.

3.2 A Table for Journey Stages (Fig. 4)

Participants had the opportunity to explain their stories in their preferable way including the start and the end of the journey.

3.3 A Spider Diagram (Fig. 5)

Used to score from 1 to 10 to each of the elements related to local distinctiveness as mentioned in the literature review.

Within this process, the participants answered a set of questions to measure the components of image proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993). The questions included the

street's image, characteristics, general atmosphere and unique attractions.

The storytelling technique was based on focus groups that represent different users of the street and were categorized according to the purpose of visit, while using the experience of participants to describe images or characteristics of Fouad Street, pursued activities, adjectives to describe Fouad Street, attractions and general atmosphere. Also, participants were given maps and asked to outline places they thought were significant for both visitors and locals. By the end of this stage, 22 stories were constructed by 90 participants within groups of 3 to 6 persons. The groups reflected a wide range of different age groups Fig. 6, in addition to different users: visitors, non-regular visitors, employees, residents and stakeholders Fig. 7. Participants were split into groups with their common category.

It should also be noted that generally the participants were all educated, and with different education levels such as two groups were architects and another group were high school students.

The information given by stories reveals a spread of attitudes and perceptions related to the local distinctiveness of Fouad Street, and these can define the key elements of which distinctiveness is composed. While they contain tangible aspects, such as mentions of buildings, places and activities that can be categorized and assessed by statistical analysis by the number of times they reoccur across all focus groups, they also contain intangible aspects that are mostly descriptive words that can be analyzed through theming these descriptions (Fig. 8).

4 Results

According to results, participants' answers related to the "Map of Fouad Street" and the "Table of journey stages" were categorized according to the three main characteristics: physical, social and economic along with all the elements related to these characteristics, as follows (Fig. 9) and (Table 1):

Fig. 3 A map for fouad street to identify distinctive places. (By researcher)



التاريخ Date	عدد المجموعة Group Number	نوع المجموعة Group Type	عمر المجموعة Group Age
			15-23 , - 35 , - 45 , 46<
Start البداية	The Trip الرحلة		Departing المغادرة

Fig. 3.4 A table of the journey stages. (By researcher)

Fig. 5 A spider diagram used to rate elements of distinctiveness. (By researcher)

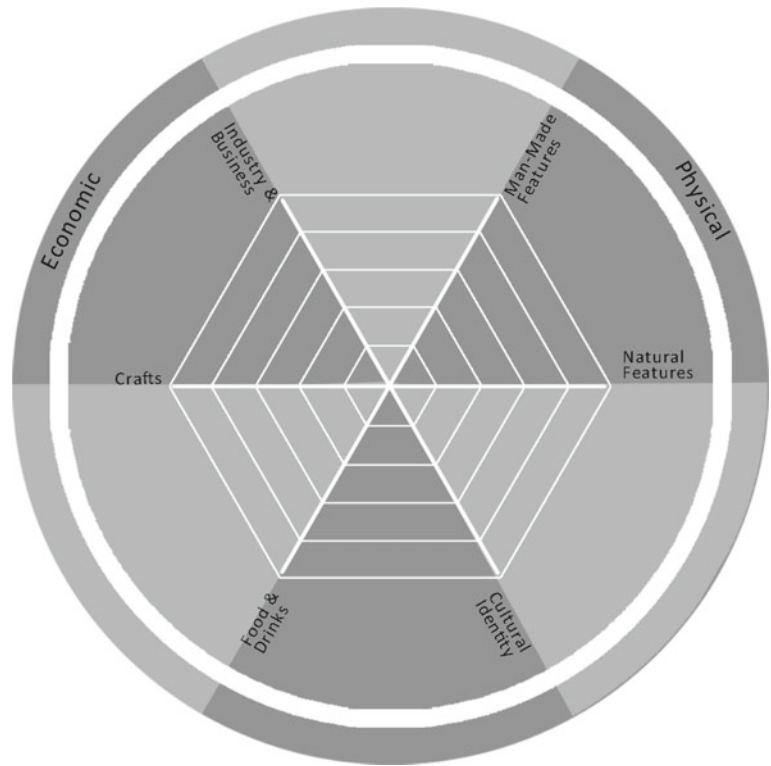
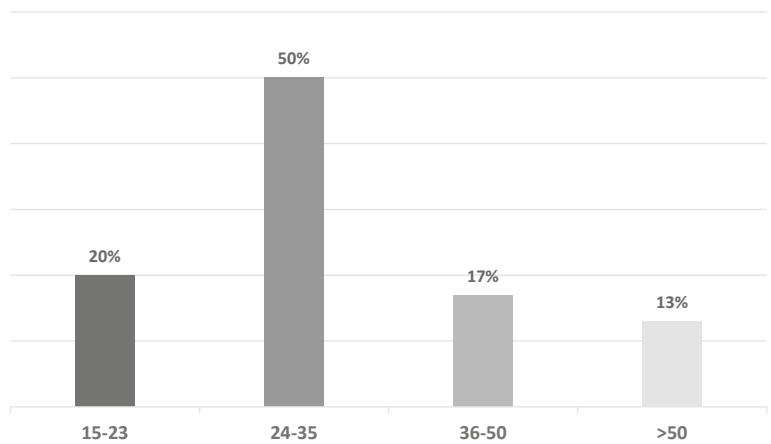


Fig. 6 Participants age groups. (By researcher)



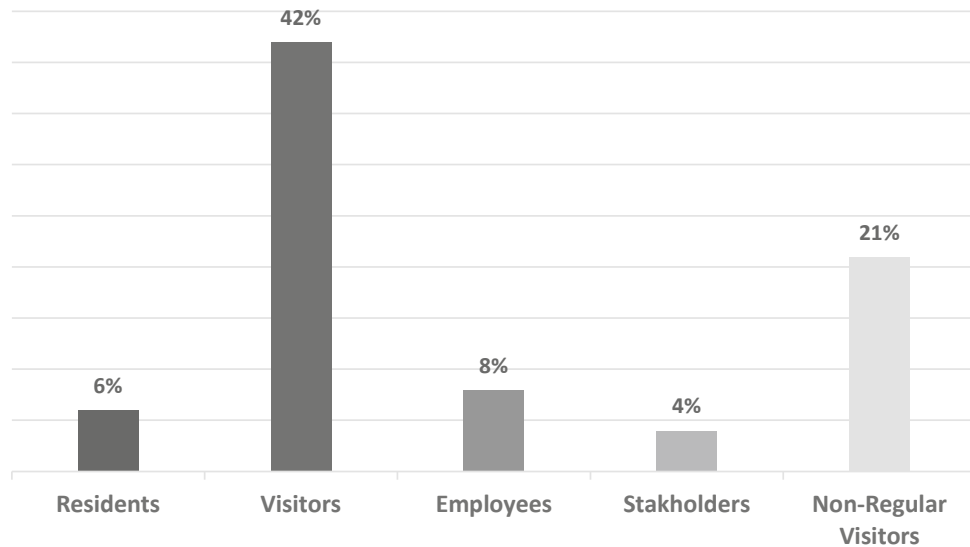


Fig. 7 Participants as users. (By researcher)



Fig. 8 Storytelling in process. (By researcher)

4.1 Physical Characteristics

a. Man-made features Scored the highest, averaging a score of almost (9). Most people mentioned and remarked the architecture and historic features of the street, indicative of these features' distinctiveness to people.

b. Natural features The lowest score is the natural features, which scored (3.8), with most of the score given to the

central location of the street, while it was mentioned through people's comment on the street's great location (38%), it was seen as a place to pass through to various places or a popular place to meet friends in a central location. The only space mentioned in this category was Shallalat Gardens (19%); however, it is not located within the context but can be seen within the approach of the street.

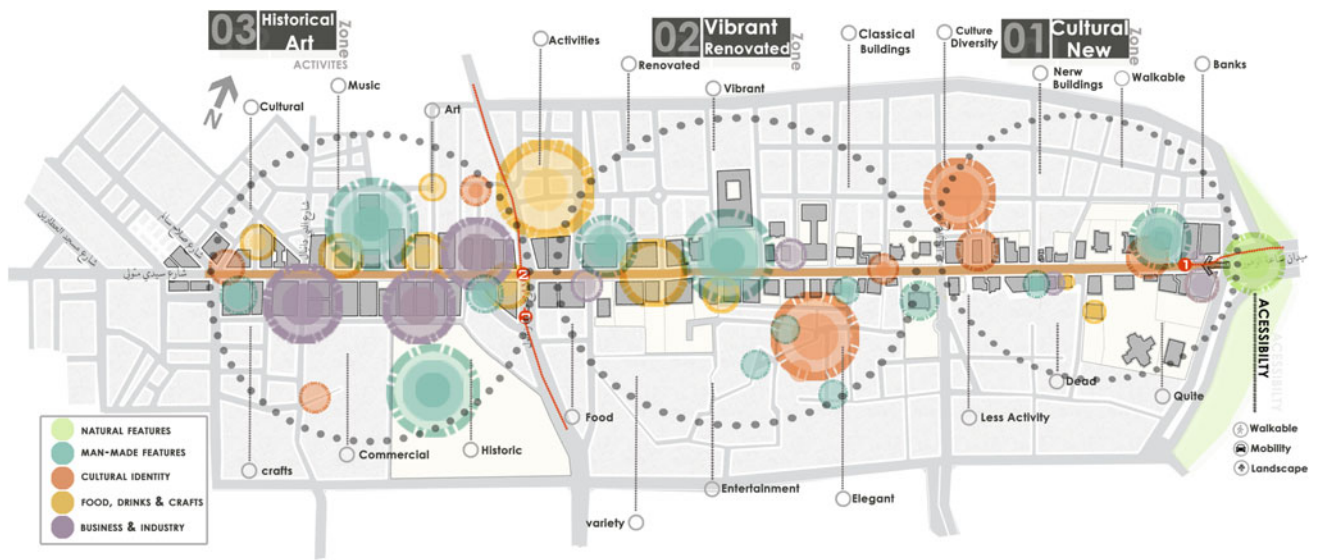


Fig. 9 Map of fouad street categorized according to the main characteristics. (By researcher)

Table 1 Distinctive physical, social and economic characteristics in fouad street. (By researcher)

Physical characteristics		Social characteristics		Economic characteristics	
Man-made structures	%	Cultural identity	%	Crafts	%
Sayed Darwish Theater (SDT)	86	Music (MUS)	71	Leather products (LPR)	48
Roman Theater (RMT)	62	Sayed Darwish Heritage (SDH)	44	Frames and portraits (PNF)	10
National Museum (NMU)	52	Teatro Alexandria (TAL)	40	Handmade carpets (HMC)	5
Horreya Cultural Center (HCC)	48	Culture Centers (CUL)	72	Wood workshops (WDW)	5
Kom El Dekka (KED)	43	Culture Diversity (CUD)	40	Industry and business	%
Cinema Amir (CAM)	43	Jewish Synagogue (JSY)	19	Bookshops (BKS)	57
Nabi Daniel Street (NDS)	43	San Saba Church (SSC)	19	Banks (BNK)	47
Old Buildings (OBL)	40	Mausoleums (MSL)	14	Flower shops (FLS)	33
Architectural Style (ARS)	36	Graffiti Art (GRA)	14	Furniture galleries (FRG)	29
Greco-Roman Museum (GRM)	33	Kom El Dekka Festival (KDF)	10	Antique shops (AQS)	24
Spanish Consulate (SPC)	29	Nassim El Raqs (NRQ)	5	Admin buildings (ADB)	14
Old City Hall (OCH)	24	Nabi Daniel Mosque (NDM)	5		
Cavafy Museum (CMU)	19	Food and Drinks	%		
Natural features	%	Oriental Food (ORF)	71		
Location (LOC)	38	Nightlife (NTL)	52		
Shallalat Gardens (SGR)	19	New Restaurants (NRS)	52		
		Oriental Cafes (ORC)	19		

4.2 Social Characteristics

a. Cultural identity Achieved the second highest score (7.5) with a multiple religious, educational and cultural identities and events that the street offers, in addition to the impact of the physical features that represent different cultures used to occupy the street.

b. Food and drinks Were given a high rating (7), although responses varied about this element, as participants noted that there is not a significant restaurant that can earn the high scoring but rather the wide variety has the attraction quality. Young people emphasized food outlets, where evening entertainment and lunch or dinner outings dominated stories told by participants aged from 16 to 35. The young people liked the wide range of restaurants variety now available at the street.

4.3 Economic Characteristics

a. Crafts Were given a fairly good rating (4.6), with a large number of leather products, frames, handmade carpets and wood workshop.

b. Industry and Business Were given a good rating (4.8), with a large number of banks and administrative buildings dominating the street, yet they do not impact the distinctiveness of the street.

Moreover, the storytelling resulted in a large number of descriptive words or adjectives whether positive or negative, which can be grouped under several themes (Table 2).

According to the **Spider diagram** used to score different elements of distinctiveness, Fig. 10a shows the mentions of the five main elements of distinctiveness across all stories. The diagram gives an indication of the distinctiveness of the elements without representing their quality. The man-made features scored the maximum; all stories mentioned various buildings, places and architectural features. Different

restaurants and cafes, whether they are global cuisines or serve oriental food, also dominated the stories, and those mostly attracted young visitors. However, Fig. 10b shows the results of the spider diagram scores in which participants rated the distinctiveness of the main elements from 0 to 10. The diagram shows the average score for each element; the rating was a point of discussion between participants.

5 Discussion

From a combination of inputs and information from the storytelling, the research could devise the key elements that contribute to the local distinctiveness of Fouad Street. It was clear that most of the respondents had a strong image of Fouad Street. Even the non-regular visitors had general knowledge of the street's location and rich history.

The maps indicated routes taken and areas perceived as having certain characteristics, both positive and negative. It is worth notice that different groups of participants noticed different features and were attracted to different things about the place, which partially reflected their interests. The storytelling identified that there is a mix of activities which draw people to the street in different times; the banks, schools, administrative buildings and the great walkability feature of the street at the day, and restaurants, leisure and concerts at night. This is an indication of the vibrancy and safety of the street all day long. Furthermore, to devise the different importance of elements, the percentage of mentioning each element across all stories is an indication of the degree of its distinctiveness. Likert scale was used to classify the elements distinctiveness, as illustrated in Table 3 in percentages. The elements exceeding the medium degree of distinctiveness contribute to the distinctiveness and are transmitted to the Distinctiveness Referential Scale (DRS).

The distinctive image of Fouad Street according to the most repeated aspects is constructed of tangible aspects, which were mostly perceived positively except for some. A large number of elements were man-made features; however, it is noted that they are all related to cultural

Table 3.2 Descriptive words and their themes of fouad street. (By researcher)

Theme	Descriptions	Frequency (%)
Usability/Accessibility	Walkable, Pedestrian Friendly, Safe, Connected, Social Connection	70
Vibrancy	Active Nightlife, Busy, Vibrant, Crowd, Active, Dead At Times, quiet	48/–28
Identity	Historical, Cultural, Original, Old, Identity, Authentic	55
Emotional	Charming, Clean, Cozy, Calming, Relaxing, Cheerful, Joyful, Intimate, Neat, Nostalgic	46
Diversity	Variety, Diverse	32

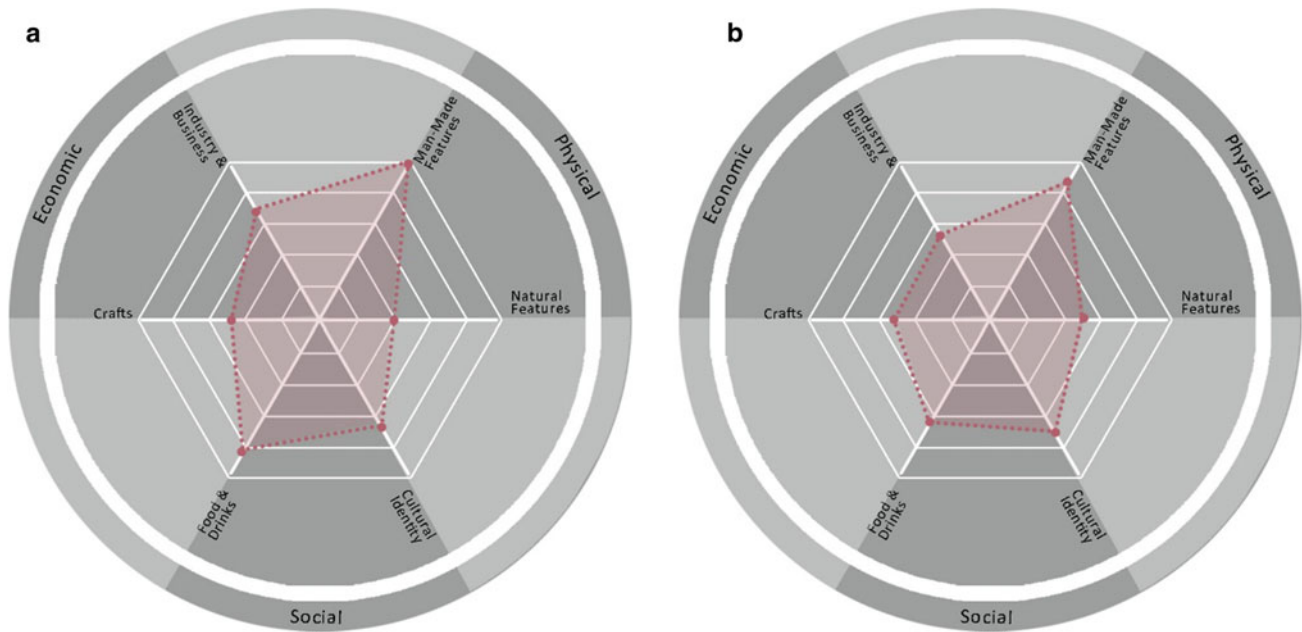


Fig. 10 a Distinctiveness elements’ strength. b Distinctiveness elements’ ratings

Table 3.3 Likert scale for elements distinctiveness. (By researcher)

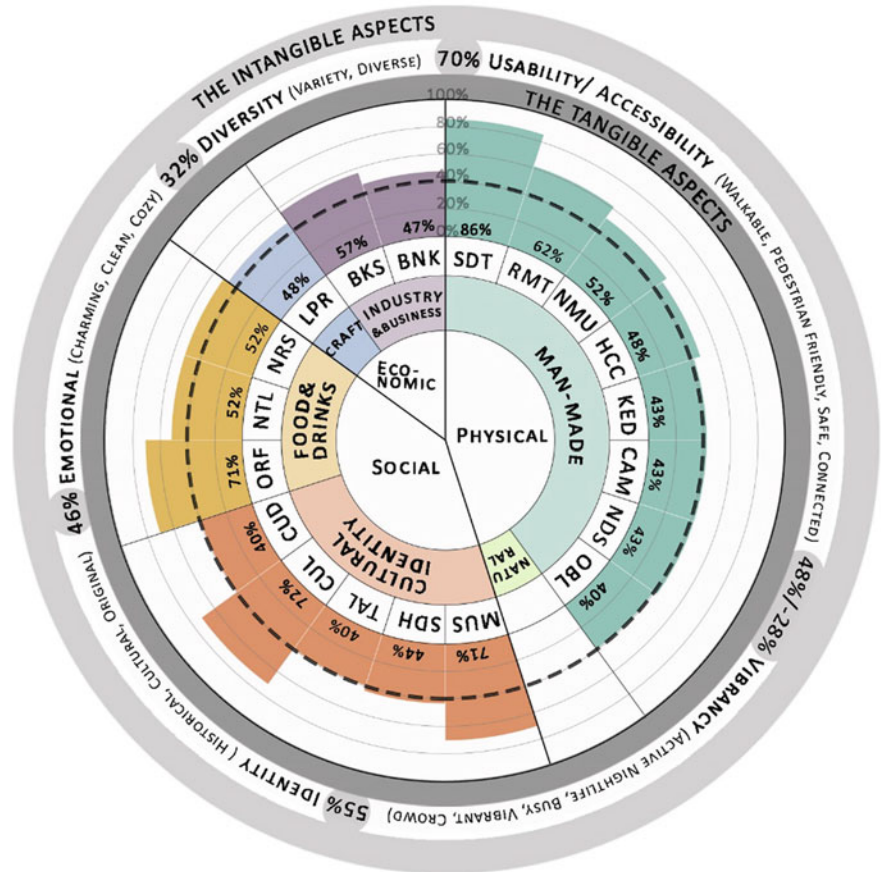
Very weak (0.0–19.9%)	Weak (20–39.9%)	Medium (40–59.9%)	Strong (60–79.9%)	Very strong (80–100%)
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activities and identity. The highest percentage was scored by Sayed Darwish Theater. It is distinctive with its architecture and is a great renovation example of heritage buildings. On the other hand, the most negatively perceived element was Kom el Dekka, which was described as deteriorated and not attractive. Cultural identity and people were mentioned with Sayed Darwish heritage presented in his house, café and festival, in addition to Teatro Alexandria and a number of cultural centers such as Goethe Institute. Food and crafts emphasized the oriental food restaurants and the new ones, presenting a wide variety that highlighted the street since these developments, in addition to the leather products that was former mentioned. The bookshops and the banks are mentioned as the main distinctive businesses in the street.

The tangible holistic images of Fouad Street were mostly about music. Many participants mentioned directly the street’s relation to music, whether for the Conservatory or Sayed Darwish’s Theater and heritage. In addition, participants complemented the buildings’ architectural style, the old renovated buildings and the nightlife of the street, but

they were also critical of the street having the resources to being a central business district but not a successful one due to the disconnected functional structure. The distinctive image is also constructed of intangible aspects, which can be indicated through the descriptive words and adjectives describing the street’s experience, including usability and accessibility, identity and diversity. The advantage of walkability and the high permeability of the street to the pedestrians scored the top between other attributes concerning the historical and diverse aspects. The intangible holistic images of Fouad Street are: vibrant and emotional, as a beautiful authentic street, nostalgic with its European architecture; energetic and vibrant at times; and crowded or busy at others. Finally, the local distinctiveness of Fouad Street is derived from a number of key elements, which can be combined and summarized in the distinctiveness referential scale, as an initial step to be further developed and taken into consideration in design guidance and future propositions to sustain and enhance the local distinctiveness of the place Fig. 3.11.

Fig. 11 Distinctiveness referential Scale (DRS) of foudad street. (By researcher)



6 Conclusion

This research presented the storytelling technique to define local distinctiveness, according to people’s perceptions and images, in order to identify and evaluate the elements and qualities both tangibly and intangibly that contribute to the local distinctiveness, to ensure the development of place through enhancing these qualities. The value of the perceptual dimension is the emphasis placed on people and how they perceive and evaluate their places, in addition to the clear understanding of people and their engagement to places is important for developing a successful place.

The storytelling technique uses free form descriptions to measure image to gain a better understanding of related emotions and issues that might otherwise be missed or misunderstood through a more structured method. While the attributes are not specified but respondents are allowed to freely describe their impressions, it also succeeded in measuring holistic components in addition to the attributes and also it was effective in capturing the unique features and auras of the place.

Results can then be analyzed, sorted and categorized through the distinctiveness referential scale that primarily consists of the three main characteristics; physical, social and economic, and their elements, each of these elements is perceived by; directly observable or measurable aspects representing the tangible aspects, and their psychological characteristics representing the intangible aspects.

On the other hand, limitations of the storytelling technique must be noted, such as engaging some categories, for example; residents and employees and other individuals, was limited due to delivering their participation in groups was hard or not possible. Moreover, although all cultures and age groups tell stories and can comfortably engage with the technique, not all people were interested or had the time to share their information, but such incidents can happen in other techniques that require people’s participation.

Moreover, further techniques that can capture the tangible and intangible aspects of image can be examined and compared to the storytelling technique, in addition to examining other places with the concept of local distinctiveness and applying the Distinctiveness Referential Scale (DRS) to be further developed.

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