

Walking on familiar streets: Insights on how neighborhood attachment may promote people's walking behavior

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The environmental design features of a location are important for facilitating people's attachment to places. Such place attachment may have an important role in determining people's neighborhood-based physical activity routines. Credit: source Free Picture from "Shlomi Fish at Flickr":

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Physical activity has numerous health benefits. Often, someone's physical environment or the way someone perceives their surroundings can impact their decision to engage in physical activity. Scientists refer to a person's functional relationship with and feelings or emotions towards a place as "place attachment."

Place attachment results from a person's interactions, over time, with their surroundings. Environmental factors such as housing quality, accessibility to destinations, and security encourage people to form place attachments. These factors suggest that, in the long run, place attachment can positively influence people's daily routines.

To further understand this, researchers led by Associate Professor Mohammad Javad Koohsari from the Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (JAIST) conducted an exploratory study to investigate how place attachment linked to their residential neighborhood influences people's tendency to engage in outdoor [physical activity](#).

The team of researchers included Professor Yukari Nagai at JAIST; Professor Koichiro Oka at Waseda University; Professor Tomoki Nakaya at Tohoku University; Professor Akitomo Yasunaga at Bunka Gakuen University; and Associate Professor Gavin R. McCormack at the University of Calgary in Canada. Their study was published in *Landscape and Urban Planning*.

For the purpose of their study, the researchers surveyed 1,800 adults living in Calgary, Canada. They used walking for transportation or leisure and vigorous physical exercise as proxies for physical activity.

Researchers also measured "built" features of neighborhoods, like perceived "walkability" (the self-reported ease with which a participant can walk through a defined area), to check whether they shape the relationship between place attachment and outdoor physical activity.

They found that physical activity, specifically walking for transport and leisure, is positively associated with participants' place attachment. Moreover, the likelihood of engaging in these activities weekly and the total time spent on them were linked to place attachment. "Our findings suggest that place attachment is a relevant correlate of neighborhood-based physical activity, and thus future interventions should consider place attachment when investigating relationships between the built environment and physical activity," explains Dr. Koohsari.

In the study, researchers measured two aspects or "dimensions" of place attachment—place identity and place dependence. While place identity reflects the importance of a place in a person's life, place dependence indicates the extent to which a person depends on a place to engage in routines they enjoy. Results of the study suggest that both dimensions are positively linked to the likelihood of a participant walking around their [residential neighborhood](#) on a weekly basis and the total amount of time they devote to this activity.

A notable finding of the study that can inform health interventions attempting to increase people's outdoor physical activity is that perceived walkability mediates the relationship between place attachment and physical activity. Research has shown that external built environments and perceptions of those environments do not always match. Assuming that place attachment is responsible for this discrepancy, changing the perceived environment can effectively boost physical activity in people.

"Our findings suggest that strategies for encouraging people to form stronger emotional bonds with their neighborhoods could potentially

improve walkability perceptions and physical activity. When modifying the built environment is not possible, place attachment may be improved by offering local events or initiatives that encourage people to interact and become more familiar with their neighborhood surroundings, for instance through organized nature walks or park-based activities, besides encouraging social and [community engagement](#) that forge friendships and build trust, improving a sense of safety, and creating a sense of community," concludes Dr. Koohsari.

The study has revealed a clear association between place attachment and physical activity (walking, and not vigorous physical exercise) mediated by perceived walkability. Further studies will help to unravel the cause(s) for the link between place attachment, physical activity, and perceived walkability.

More information: Mohammad Javad Koohsari et al, Place attachment and walking behaviour: Mediation by perceived neighbourhood walkability, *Landscape and Urban Planning* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.landurbplan.2023.104767](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2023.104767)

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