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Local Dwellers' Socio-emotional-based Connection to a Local Heritage Site

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Abstract: A local heritage site is a culturally, historically, or architecturally significant place that reflects a community's identity. However, few studies explore how long-term residents develop emotional and social bonds with such sites. Grounded in the theory of community attachment, this study investigates the socio-emotionally based connections of local dwellers to a heritage site. Utilizing a semi-structured, researcher-designed interview guide, data were collected through face-to-face interviews with five purposefully selected residents aged 40 - 80, each of whom had lived near the site for at least ten years. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke revealed two (2) overarching themes: (1) Emotion-based connection and (2) Social-based connection - further divided into seven (7) sub-themes: sense of belonging, emotional response, spirituality and religious connection, economic engagement, collective perception of the site, caretaker networks, and collective concerns and preservation efforts, yielding twenty-two categories overall. This study concludes that local dwellers possess numerous socio-emotion-based connections to the heritage site, shaped by both emotional and social dimensions of connection, suggesting the site functions as a living part of everyday communal life rather than merely a historical monument.

Keywords: local dwellers; socio-emotional based connection; local heritage site; Philippines

1. Introduction

Heritage sites serve as tangible anchors of cultural identity and collective memory. More than their historical significance, they also aid in managing space, navigation, and in strengthening a community's sense of place (Otterstrom and Davis 2016). The active local participation is crucial in protecting and preserving cultural heritage, as it maintains the long-term community engagement and ensures the continuity of a local heritage site (Nam and Thanh 2024). While physical proximity holds a crucial role in people's attachment to places, research also suggests that emotional and social bonds help reinforce a fundamental aspect of heritage significance, which is believed to be fostered through people's lived experiences and collective memory, influencing how communities oversee and participate in preservation efforts (Chen and Wang 2024; Historic England 2023 Devine-Wright and Howe 2010; McGinlay et al. 2023). When local communities actively participate in protecting their heritage sites, it is believed that they develop a sense of responsibility towards their cultural heritage.

Numerous recent studies have explored the role of community involvement in preserving heritage sites. Local participation has been widely recognized as a significant factor in both the preservation and development of heritage sites (Nam and Thanh 2024), as well as in fostering a sense of identity and belonging (Fazeel 2023; Kurisoo et al. 2023There have also been recent studies that focused on how government interventions and collaborative efforts among stakeholders may have contributed to the maintenance and sustainability of heritage sites (Estonanto et al. 2019; Mekonnen, Bires, and Berhanu 2022a; Husyam et al. 2024; Chami and Mjema 2024; Iglesias 2023; Ahmad 2022; Aigwi et al. 2021; Thim 2024). Additionally, other studies also examined the importance of the role of education in promoting preservation awareness among youth, which shows how formal education supports the conservation efforts (Banda et al. 2024; Achille and Fiorillo 2022). Research on community-driven interventions has often emphasized the economic benefits, particularly in the form of tourism and financial gains (Hampton 2005; Kostakis and Lolos 2024). Many heritage sites also hold deep spiritual and religious value for local communities (Mekonnen, Bires, and Berhanu 2022a; Zhang 2021; Banda et al. 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights, they tend to overlook how personal and collective emotional investment—particularly local dwellers' socio-emotional-

based connections—is affected. Locals residing in the area exhibit higher levels of communal attachment than the general population, likely due to longer duration of residence, homeownership, and sustained social interactions (Parker et al. 2018; Kurisoo et al. 2023).

This study examines the local community's attachment to Janiuay Cemetery and its role in contributing to its recognition as a cultural heritage site. Janiuay Cemetery, a Catholic cemetery in the Philippines, is being considered for designation as a National Cultural Treasure under House Bill No. 7481 by the Committee on Basic Education and Culture (Guardian 2024). Grounded in the Community Attachment Theory proposed by Kasarda and Janowitz (1974), this study examines how strong emotional and social ties to a place may compel individuals to protect and sustain it. Through identifying the socio-emotionally based connections of the local dwellers to the site, the study aims to provide some insights into the psychological and social dimensions of local heritage attachments. Specifically, it addresses the research question: What are the socio-emotion-based connections of local dwellers to their heritage site? The data gathered from the resident interviews were analyzed for emergent patterns to inform future inquiries and contribute to the growing body of research that is focused on heritage preservation from a community perspective. The findings from this research may inform many future heritage management strategies, policy development, and community engagement programs that may promote long-term sustainability and participatory conservation efforts of heritage sites.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

In this study, the researchers used a qualitative descriptive research design. Using this design allowed for flexible approaches applicable to uncovering complex issues that a standardized framework may fail to provide (Bradshaw, Atkinson, and Doody 2017). Moreover, to explore fields of research that are not fully developed, this design is deemed suitable to investigate characteristics and qualities of a certain phenomenon (Regoniel 2024; Ayton, Tsindos, and Berkovic 2023). Anchored in the constructivist epistemology and interpretivist theoretical perspective, specifically Kasarda and Janowitz's Community Attachment, this study thoroughly examined people's emotional and social ties to their local heritage sites, as the theory implies that these connections influence people's behavior on their local heritage sites (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). This theory posed a significant factor in research related to community engagement and place-based studies. Thus, this study sought to identify local dwellers' socio-emotional-based connection to their local heritage sites in terms of:

(1)   Emotional Attachment
(2)   Social Connection with the Site

2.2 Instrument

This study utilized a duly validated researcher-made semi-structured interview guide. Divided into three (3) sections, which are: (1) profiling questions including demographic and background data; (2) interview questions related to residents' emotional attachment to the site; and (3) a set of questions designed to identify attachment to the place in terms of social events.   This instrument allowed researchers to prepare an interview guide to gain relevant narratives into the experiences associated with a phenomenon from the point of view of the informants, thus deemed the most relevant approach for qualitative research design *(Bradshaw, Atkinson, and Doody 2017).* One (1) master's degree graduate with expertise in qualitative research and the field of social sciences validated the set of questions. Moreover, the interview guide was pilot tested on one (1) resident who met the inclusion criteria.

2.3 Informants

To identify the informants, a purposeful sampling technique was utilized. This approach allows researchers to choose individuals capable of providing in-depth and comprehensive data *(Nyimbili and Nyimbili 2024).* Five (5) residents from Janiuay, Iloilo, who live near the heritage site, were chosen to participate in this study. The inclusion criteria are as follows: (1) he or she is aged 40 to 80 years old; (2) he or she has at least 10 years of duration of residency; and (3) he or she is located within 500 meters of the site. Table 1 summarizes informants' profiles, with a distribution of five (5) females. The youngest among the informants was 47, followed by ages 49, 49, 60, and 62. All have been living near the site for 18 years to 62 years and are located within 500 meters of the heritage site. The most experienced informant lived 62 years near the area, followed by 18, 23, 49, and 61 years. The specific demographic and inclusion criteria were used to ensure that informants possess familiarity and exposure to the site, which paved the way for in-depth information about their socio-emotional-based connection with the place. Prior to the interview process, ethical considerations such as confidentiality measures and the willingness of their participation were implemented, along with informing the informants of the study's objectives.

Table 1. Informants of the study

Informant	Sex	Age	Years of Residency	Proximity to Heritage Site
Lanie	Female	62	62	Approximately 170 meters
Amie	Female	47	18	Approximately 250 meters
Yvonne	Female	61	61	Approximately 270 meters
Banjie	Female	49	49	Approximately 150 meters
Lynette	Female	49	23	Approximately 160 meters

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

After the Dean of the College of Education approved the study, the data collection process began. A formal letter prepared by the researcher was presented to the barangay captain pf the town where the heritage site is located. Before conducting the interview process, informed consents were distributed and confirmed from the informants. In addition, the researchers conducted a brief discussion about the purpose of their involvement. Ethical considerations were also considered, such as anonymity assurance using

false names or pseudonyms and confidentiality of the statements. After consent was approved and signed, the researcher began the interview while recording the conversation using mobile devices.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

After the data was gathered, the information given by the informants underwent thorough analysis. Recorded interviews were transcribed to ensure accuracy. The study utilized a reflexive thematic analysis, an inductive approach, following Braun and Clarke. With the use of this analysis procedure, adaptability is ensured throughout the process by introducing, refining, or excluding emerging themes (Byrne, 2021). The following steps are:

(1) Repeatedly reading the informant's description of their socio-emotional-based connection to their heritage site in order to familiarize and comprehend them thoroughly
(2) Converting their socio-emotional-based connection to their heritage site narratives into transcription
(3) Identify significant statements from the transcription interview for initial themes
(4) Double-checking emerged themes from significant statements
(5) Defining and naming themes
(6) Develop a clear description of the findings. Data triangulation was employed to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings after the data were organized into specific themes (Moon 2019). This process involved cross-referencing the identified themes with existing literature and observational data to identify both converging and contrasting evidence, ensuring a well-supported and comprehensive discussion.

3. Findings

To describe the socio-emotionally based connection of local dwellers residing near the local heritage site, two (2) significant themes emerged, modeled after the theory of community attachment. These were

(1) Emotion-Based Connection
(2) Social-Based Connection.

3.1 Emotion-Based Connection

Findings suggest that residents develop emotional connections to nearby heritage sites through routine interactions and personal experiences. Divided into four sub-themes, namely:

(1) Sense of belonging
(2) Emotional response
(3) Spiritual and intangible belief systems.

3.1.1. Sense of Belonging

Developing a sense of belonging through long-term proximity and family legacy strengthens emotional connections to the heritage site. This sub-theme includes:

(1) Lifelong residency
(2) Intergenerational family ties
(3) Sense of heritage pride

Lifelong Residency

Long-term residence near the cemetery fostered a strong sense of belonging to both the place and the community. *Banjie shared, "We live very close to the cemetery. I grew up here. This is our home." Lanie noted, "Since birth. Almost 62 years." Yvonne stated, "Since birth." Amie remarked, "Forty-seven years in the community." Lynette added, "Almost 23 years."*

Intergenerational Family Ties

Intergenerational family ties deepen belonging, as buried relatives and family roles, such as gravedigging, anchoring residents to shared memories and traditions. *Lanie shared, "Since we have a gravedigger in the family… I often spent a week at the cemetery assisting visitors." Yvonne said, "Yes, my family members who passed away are buried there - my husband, my grandmother, my mother, my father—the site is important because all our deceased loved ones are buried there." Banjie added, "My parents and grandparents are buried there. It is where we have lived since childhood. We used to play in front of the cemetery when we were kids. My children also grew up here.*

Sense Of Heritage Pride

A sense of heritage pride reflects the informants' attachment to the site, rooted in identity, memory, and a lived connection. Their reflections reveal pride, a sense of belonging, and ownership. *Lanie expressed, "… you would feel happy. It is nice that you are here in this cemetery." Lynette added, "… you would feel proud. You would tell others that you are staying here. It would be a point of pride. You can tell people about it. Our cemetery... It is the best." Amie stated, "I would be happy that it will be known." Banjie shared, "...I would be happy because it means our... the cemetery is given recognition - It is our pride of Janiuay." Yvonne emphasized, "Yes, compared to other cemeteries, ours is incomparable - Janiuay Cemetery is number one."*

3.1.2. Emotional Response

Informants described a broad spectrum of emotional responses to the heritage site, shaped by their roles, histories, and changes within the site itself. This theme includes:

(1) Emotional labor
(2) Low-affective responses
(3) Responses to change

(4)   Positive attachment.

Emotional Labor

Emotional labor stems from the pressure to remain composed despite personal grief. Care-taking duties - both familial and communal-contribute to emotional exhaustion for some residents. *Lanie shared, "Sad, of course. My husband is buried here… along with my in-laws and uncles. There is no avoiding the cemetery because when someone asks me to accompany them, I cannot refuse-I have to go with them.*

Low-Affective Response

Some informants showed minimal emotional involvement, reflecting neutrality or emotional flattening as the site blends into routine life without strong resonance. These neutral reactions suggest that familiarity may also lead to emotional distancing or desensitization. *Amie stated, "Yes, the feeling is okay when I visit the cemetery." Yvonne shared, "I just feel okay when I visit there." Lynette noted, "I do not go up there because it's uncomfortable for me."*

Responses to Change

The residents also reacted to potential physical alterations in the site, prompting them to feel a slight difference or absence in their emotional baggage due to activities such as renovation and removal. Although without an explicit disagreement, the narrative suggests discomfort towards heritage site disruptions. *Lynette said, "I don't mind if it [the site] were to be destroyed," Banjie expressed, "It would feel strange… different. This is what we have long been aware of. It is what we wake up to every day. If they remove it, that will feel different. We are already used to living near the cemetery."*

Positive Emotional Attachment

Informants expressed appreciation, peace, or enjoyment, showing that heritage sites can evoke comfort, familiarity, and aesthetic pleasure. These affirmations reflect the emotional stability and peace that some residents associate with space. *Lynette shared, "You enjoy it here… since I have lived here, even though some may say it is like a squatter area, it is peaceful."*

3.1.3. Spiritual And Religious Connections

Spirituality and intangible belief systems shaped informants' view of the site as a spiritually charged space tied to personal beliefs and shared experiences, and divided into three subthemes:

(1)   Spiritual connection with nature
(2)   Supernatural encounters
(3)   Religious practices

Spiritual Connections with Nature

Informants view natural elements, such as balete "lunok" trees, as sacred and spirit-inhabited, fostering respect and ritual in their presence. It affirms that spiritual beliefs influence ecological sensitivity and practices of reverence toward nature. *Lanie shared, "Those are balete trees. Of course, those trees may be owned by someone and haunted or enchanted. Even my child, before cutting down the trees, would ask questions and talk to them. He would say that if he were to cut those trees, he would have to dream at night not to cut the trees, since maybe the consequence may fall on him. He did not dream about it, though."*

Supernatural Encounters

One informant shared that the site's history, intertwined with supernatural events, deepens emotional attachment by making it feel mysterious and spiritually resonant. *Banjie recounted, "There are many, sometimes people have experiences with spirits there, things like that. And its history."*

Religious Practices

Informants form emotional and spiritual ties through religious practices, such as attending Mass, praying, or spending time near the site. These shared rituals signify the site's enduring role as a center of community faith and devotion. *Lanie stated, "Back then, there was always a Mass here. I used to attend regularly." Banjie added, "There is mass there every Monday. Every first Monday of the month, there is Mass there. Of course, we attend church too." Yvonne said, "Yes, of course. Because you light candles, you go inside, you attend mass—you go there."*

3.3 Social-Based Connection

The social-based connection highlights informants' ties to the site through communal experiences. Divided into seven sub-themes, namely:

(1)   Economic engagements

(2)   Collective perception of heritage site

(3)   Caretaker networks

(4)   Collective concerns and preservation efforts

3.3.1. Economic Engagements

Residents rely on the cemetery for their livelihood, blending cultural significance with economic roles such as caretaking, vending, and other services. Divided into two sub-themes:

(1)   Regular economic dependency

(2)   Seasonal income opportunities

Regular Economic Dependency

Regular economic dependency refers to consistent income-generating activities that informants rely on, like gravedigging, tomb maintenance, and vending within or near cemetery grounds. *Lanie shared, "I usually sell fish in the market, but my husband passed away—he was a gravedigger in the cemetery. In 2017, he died of illness, and then his brother Basil took over his role. Gravedigger, you clean the cemetery, repair graveyards, and make graveyards. Even my in-laws depend on the cemetery for their livelihood, as they are the ones who manage its operations." Yvonne added, "...but every day, we also sell candles to visitors, so they can go inside, buy a candle, and light it there."*

Seasonal Economic Dependency

Residents earn income from the cemetery during peak periods like burials and All Saints' and All Souls' Days, when it becomes a busy economic hub for vending and services. These seasonal peaks highlight the heritage's role as a temporary but vital economic engine during key events. *Yvonne stated, "Sometimes, when there is a burial, I sell, which is good because I can earn and help." Lynette shared, "In our life near the cemetery, since we live close to it, every November during All Saints' Day, it becomes our source of income. That is how it helps us. During All Saints' Day, the cemetery is filled with people, and there is a great deal of activity. It provides us with work and income." Banjie noted, "We sell every November, I mean October 30 until November 2 or 3, 4, 5, and we earn good money." Lanie added, "For us, the cemetery has been significant because during the All-Souls' Day, we sell candles—it is what we do. We have benefited a lot from it because of the sales."*

3.3.2. Collective Perception of Heritage Site

The heritage site shapes collective representation with locals regarding it not only as a cultural benchmark but also as bound with publicity and historical narratives, divided into two sub-themes, namely:

(1) Public image and cultural display
(2)   Historical narratives

Public Image and Cultural Display

The heritage site is regarded as a cultural landmark due to its presence in the media, portrayal in films, social media, and pageantry, which is attributed mainly to its tourism appeal and architectural features. *Lanie remarked, "Sometimes, people come here to take pictures, like students who visit. Yes, others even wear gowns and take photos on the stairs. Did you see it? They even filmed a movie here. Do you remember Ian Veneracion? They were here. It has a significant impact. It is a tourist spot there—it is very popular in the town." Lynette added, "The most important thing is that the cemetery is always being showcased, like in pictorials and beauty pageants." Banjie stated, "Of course, it is nice because of its view, the tiered stairs... they say it is the most beautiful cemetery in the Philippines."*

Historical Narratives

Historical narratives reveal the community's connection to the cemetery, grounded in local and intergenerational knowledge, oral traditions, and collective memory. *Lanie shared, "The elders - my mother - say that the Spaniards collected the stones and built the cemetery." Yvonne recalled, "Yes, they just layered [the stones] and cemented them." Banjie noted, "They carried them one by one... the workers lined up one after another passing stones." Lynette emphasized, "Our cemetery has been mentioned in books… it is known for - what is the word again - [historical]. It is historically significant - it is one of the oldest cemeteries in the area. It was once the main cemetery in the entire province of Iloilo and Panay. Our cemetery is a historical site. It is a must that they should know our cemetery."*

3.3.3. Caretaker Networks

Caretaker networks show how organizations and institutions collaborate to manage, preserve, and promote heritage sites, divided into four sub-themes:

(1)   Dual management system
(2)   Religious institution involvement
(3)   Government participation
(4)   School rehabilitation Initiatives

Dual Management System

A dual management system emerged, with the church and municipal government overseeing separate sections of the cemetery as a heritage site. *Lanie explained, "It is Catholic and municipal. You inquire at the municipal office for the municipal cemetery, and you inquire with the priest for the Catholic cemetery." Banjie confirmed, "There are two: municipal and catholic." Yvonne clarified, "That part belongs to the church, while the municipal government owns another part. If you want to be buried in the municipal cemetery, you get a permit from the municipal office. However, if you want to be buried in the Catholic section, you go to the church." Amie noted, "The church manages that part. The other one is municipal. It is the same; whoever is from the municipality is also the caretaker of that part. Then, for the upper part, the church has people too." Lynette added, "Yes, the church is responsible for the upper part, and the municipality takes care of the lower part. The church is authorized for the upper part."*

Religious Institution Involvement

Religious institutions support the site's maintenance, including renovations, tree planting, and regular cleaning, which fosters community engagement and involvement. *Banjie stated, "Yes, the church also does something for the cemetery. The church is responsible for maintaining the cemetery; it is currently undergoing renovation. It is the church that's improving it. They have cleaners at the cemetery paid by the priest." Yvonne added, "...the priest is the one who oversees the cemetery, and they plant trees and cut overgrown plants inside."*

Government Participation

Government participation emerged as key, with the municipality managing the lower section of the site and providing labor and funding for maintenance to keep the site clean and accessible. *Amie observed, "The cemetery is part of Damo-ong-—they are people who clean. They seem to do it for the money. Then, when there is an evaluation, they need picture taking, the municipality does it." Yvonne added, "They have people assigned to clean." Lanie further explained, "There is a fee as well on the other. You pay first at the municipal office. Then, you also pay if you want it to be handled by others. If you want to have work done by the people at the municipal office, you will pay around twelve thousand or eleven thousand, something like that. Then, the grave will be finished."*

School Rehabilitation Initiatives

This study noted that schools involve students in clean-up drives, fostering preservation, communal responsibility, and heritage awareness. *Lanie shared, "One time there we like tourism students… tourism like phase one to phase five cleaning down below where there is moss growing." Banjie added, "Before, the high school would clean there too. Yes, the schools. Moreover, clean your family tomb, right?" Lynette recalled, "Sometimes there is… what do you call it again? You have those school programs in your AP. What was it called before? There is… RO… [TC]."*

Resident-Led Stewardship

Residents actively participate in the upkeep and preservation of the site, demonstrating a deep sense of ownership and responsibility they feel toward the space. *Lanie explained, "Yes, sometimes I plant some plants here. I also clean up the trash. I make sure to watch over it and make sure no one damages it or leaves glass around. That is what we do—we keep an eye on it. We cannot just leave it unattended, especially since we are right in front of the cemetery. At night, I stay at my store, and while I am there, I watch over things—it is well-lit. There is a light up there, and I can see all the way down. The stairs are up there. You can see it. There is a light up top, and there is also a light in front. I want it to be, like, clean, and the bottom should be filled with flowers to make the landscape look nice. We help, too, like when I gather the weeds from the stairs. We are helping in our own way." Banjie added briefly, "We clean up. In front, in front." Lynette concluded, "…they are currently renovating the museum there, and you can see how it is improving, especially at the top, where they are doing much work. They plan to make changes and construct an underground section. That way, once they fix the top part, it will be more visible."*

3.3.4. Collective Concerns and Preservation Efforts

Heritage protection and challenges reflect the desire to preserve the cemetery amid concerns about environmental damage, low community involvement, and institutional neglect. Informants emphasized the importance of preserving the site for future generations. Divided into three (3) sub-themes:

(1) Preservation advocacy
(2) Community involvement gaps
(3) Environmental degradation and neglect
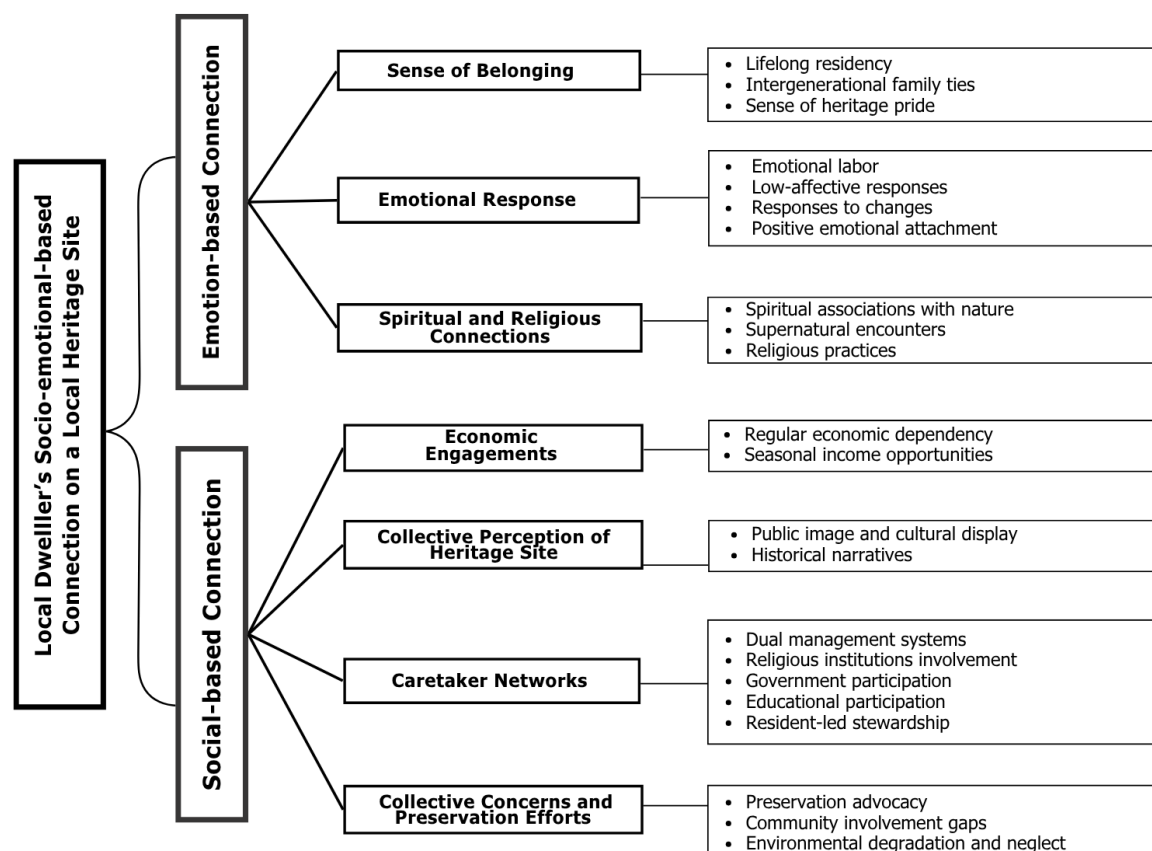
Figure 1. Thematic Map of the respondent's socio-emotion-based connection in their local heritage area.:

Preservation Advocacy

Preservation advocacy refers to the expressed beliefs on how the cemetery should be maintained and valued, rooted in its sacredness and historical significance. *Yvonne emphasized, "They should not destroy it! The people should work together so the cemetery can continue to improve. Everyone should help—both the authorities and the people." Lynette added, "We, the residents living nearby, also take care of it. Just talking about it is one way to spread awareness about what makes this cemetery unique." Banjie shared, "...we really need to protect it so that... so that the cemetery will not be taken away. They should not litter on it to protect it, so the cemetery does not look unappealing. It should be planted with beautiful flowers, and landscaping should be added. They should make it beautiful." Lanie stated, "I hope the next generations and families will also preserve the cemetery. Whatever is there, they should not destroy it. It is important to maintain it properly, just like it is now. The people should also be diligent in cleaning." Amie added briefly, "They should just clean it, not demolish it."*

Community Involvement Gaps

Community involvement gaps reveal limited resident participation in site upkeep, despite strong support for its preservation. *Amie shared, "We do not clean. Damo-ong handles that. I do not visit always, and we do not go to any activities." Lynette admitted, "I just wander around there, especially near the new area. Someone is cleaning there. I do not attend. Frankly speaking, I do not engage." Yvonne noted, "Since I was little, I have not heard of anything happening inside."*

Environmental Degradation and Neglect

This sub-theme reflects concerns over natural and human threats to the cemetery's condition and meaning, with efforts hindered by harsh weather and insufficient protection. *Lanie described, "There used to be a landscape there. In the past, my husband planted tall trees, but they were cut down because of the intense heat. Also, the children back then would play around. Imagine, they would fight with stones... bottles. They even sneak candle holders." She also recalled disturbing events: "There was no one before... but then, they left a corpse-it was as if it had been discarded. They just placed it between the graves, as though it had been abandoned. Perhaps they left the woman there overnight. Perhaps she had been attacked somewhere, and then they left her there." She added, "Sometimes, you would find some scattered bones." Banjie confirmed, "Many things happened there. Someone even died there-a corpse was found there, up there-a woman." Lynette echoed this concern, "Yes, sometimes you will find a dead body there, and you get curious. There was one time they found a dead body outside. I think it was killed and thrown."*

4. Discussion

Modeled after the theory of community attachment by Kasarda and Janowitz (1974), this study identified the socio-emotional connections of local dwellers to their heritage sites. These connections were categorized into two main thematic clusters:

(1)   Emotion-based
(2)   Social-based.

These themes were further classified into seven (7) sub-themes, under which twenty-two (22) categories were identified namely:

(1)   Sense of belonging, further categorized into lifelong residency, intergenerational family ties, and sense of heritage pride;
(2)   Emotional response, which includes emotional labor, low-affective responses, responses to physical or symbolic change, and positive emotional attachment.
(3)   Spirituality and religious connections, defined by spiritual associations with nature, supernatural encounters, and religious practices.
(4)   Economic engagements, categorized into regular economic dependency and seasonal income opportunities.
(5)   Collective perception of heritage site, including public image and cultural display as well as history narratives.
(6)   Caretaker networks, characterized by dual management systems, religious institutions involvement, government participation, educational participation, and resident-led stewardship.
(7)   Collective concerns and preservation efforts, which address preservation advocacy, community involvement gaps, and environmental degradation and neglect.

An emotion-based connection forms when people relate to a place through emotional resonance rather than logic or shared experiences (Hartson and Pyla 2012). In this study, the duration of residence is identified as a critical factor in shaping how individuals interact with their environment. Living in the same area for many years fosters a strong sense of attachment, as extended residency cultivates familiarity, a sense of security, personal autonomy, and a lasting sense of belonging (Lebrusán and Gómez 2022). Residents' attachment to the heritage site is often rooted in the memory of deceased loved ones. Others are attached to the site through familial roles and traditions, making it both a personal and communal space. With a gravedigger as a family member, the site becomes a means of interaction, further developing a personal value and attachment to the heritage site. Through several acts of remembering their deceased family members, other locals sustain their involvement with the site, specifically through a simple visit or cleaning the graves of their loved ones (Peterson, 2023). Moreover, residents view their closeness in terms of physical distance to the site as a source of pride, a marker of distinction, and an extension of their identities. The heritage site served not only as a personal touchstone but also as the community's public emblem of cultural significance. It is not only a space for mourning but also one of distinction, often described as unique or superior to cemeteries in neighboring towns. This sense of pride indicates an emotional investment in place-based heritage, which in turn deepens locals' behavior toward the protection and promotion of such places (Rosilawati et al. 2020; Stephens and Tiwari 2014; Alburo 2014).

The heritage site, in this study, further emphasizes the site's representation not only as a cemetery for personal sites of grief but also as a place for carrying out communal and familial duties, despite the unresolved sorrow attached to the place. The act of frequent interaction with the cemetery as a heritage site becomes emotionally draining, as residents with duties within the cemetery

are expected to remain composed despite personal loss and memories of grief. Emotional labor not only connects them to the space but also reinforces the social expectations tied to heritage and familial duty (Mura and Wijesinghe 2022). Alongside this, some locals expressed low-affect responses-engagements marked by emotional neutrality or detachment. For the local dwellers, the cemetery neither evokes deep attachment nor aversion but is seen as an ordinary or utilitarian space. However, emotional engagement with the site is not uniformly positive or intense. Low-affect responses were recorded, which discussed the locals' emotional neutrality and detachment from the site. The heritage site was perceived more as an ordinary space rather than a sentimental one. Such narratives examine how emotional connection to the site can fade, fluctuate, or fail to develop entirely. It can be influenced by physical discomfort experienced at the site and prolonged exposure to it (Gross 2015; Askland and Bunn 2018). The scenario of the site being removed or modified also led residents to be concerned, expressing that such changes would feel strange and be a disruption. These concerns were rooted in how the site has been integrated into their emotional landscape. These sentiments were also reflected in previous findings, which underscore the importance of place attachment as a critical factor in resistance to or agreement with changes applied to heritage sites (Marshall, Grose, and Williams 2019; Askland and Bunn 2018). Heritage sites also offer a sense of peace, happiness, and comfort among their residents, thus indicating a positive emotional attachment that explains heritage spaces are capable of bringing solace to their local residents and the community (Prayag and Del Chiappa 2021).

Furthermore, the study implies a spiritual and religious connection between the locals to the site. A spiritual connection to nature emerged as a category due to a specific tree mentioned by the informants—the "Balete" tree, which is widely perceived as being attributed with mystic forces, where unseen figures and entities live (De Guzman 2022). The balete tree is viewed as a superior sacred figure that requires rituals as a way of honoring it. With this, a practice emerged among the community to always seek permission before cutting down these trees. This became a culture and tradition passed down from generation to generation. This permission is often done through asking the forces to appear in the residents' dreams. In doing so, locals can prevent any negative consequences such as falling ill or bad luck. Spiritual attribution to nature tells that a simple natural element, like a tree, can hold sacred attributes to the places in which it is situated (Cervantes 2023). In addition, supernatural encounters emerged, which are both felt as fear and perceived with respect, thus implying a connecting factor between the emotional dimension and spiritual beliefs of a person. From a supernatural encounter point of view, the site developed a spiritual connection through the beliefs, perception, and significance that arise through continued exposure within the site. Spirits, as described by the locals, are the common entities experienced at the site by the community. These beliefs and experiences are often tied to be intangible connection that adds weight to the attachment to a heritage site (Jarratt and Sharpley 2017). Acts of devotion were revealed through personal practice of lighting candles and praying in silence, as another interaction with the place. According to the locals, monthly Masses are regularly scheduled every Monday is conducted which gives opportunity for the residents to practice their faith. These acts are embedded in their spiritual core, where comfort grows. However, disruption of these routines leads to lack and absence within the locals, specifically when these Masses were halted for renovation, thus implying that heritage sites form a place within the spiritual lives of the community that could affect their emotions (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004).

Social-based connection to the heritage site was expressed in this study through the locals' economic activities. Several residents relied on informal but steady forms of work such as gravedigging, tomb cleaning, and daily vending. These roles were not only sources of income but also integral to family identity, often passed down by relatives who had previously held the same responsibilities. For many, this work was described as their primary means of survival (Timothy and Boyd 2006; Dizon and Donguiz 2023). Others shared that they engaged in vending around the site during peak periods, selling candles, flowers, and food, particularly during All Saints' and All Souls' Days. These events serve a purpose beyond the economic aspect, and they also follow annual patterns that combine cultural observances with financial necessity (Guadalquiver 2023). This study further reveals how these financial dependencies and engagements with both regular and seasonal events were essential to their household's needs, forming their long-standing relationship with the heritage site. The connection of the residents to the site was not just spiritual or symbolic, but also practical and lived. The heritage site was perceived not only as a burial site but also as a symbol of the community. The cemetery, as a heritage site, has become a popular space for photo opportunities, with visitors, including students, utilizing the site as a backdrop for various purposes, such as in movies, films, and even beauty pageants. Its constant presence in public has built its status as a cultural landmark of the community, wherein it is often featured in various media outlets. Moreover, aside from its visibility in media display, the heritage site has gained recognition as a tourist destination. Its popularity is rooted in the frequency of visitors' interactions with it, which has transformed the site from a burial space into a shared cultural and heritage destination (Jin and Liu 2022). The iconic tiered stairs, as the site's noticeable architectural features, were highlighted as a key aspect and source of pride for the community. The presence of these architectural features increases the growth of heritage sites' tourism through attracting visitors through their visual appeal (Higuera-Trujillo, Llinares and Macagno 2021). Alongside its publicity, the historical significance of the site was also recognized. The site's origin is tied to local intergenerational knowledge, with a focus mainly on its construction, a narrative that was passed down through generations. The site is linked back to the Spanish colonial period, thereby tying the present-day community to its past. The construction process involved the transportation and laying of stones and limestone. Aside from these oral narratives, the site was also recognized as a historical site acknowledged by the locals and is in the process of being designated as a National Cultural Treasure (NCT), formally recognized by the authorities (Guardian 2024). The site's enduring existence, spanning multiple colonial periods, has made it a significant part of the community's identity.

A complex network of caretaking roles within the heritage site was revealed. These networks are grounded in both institutional structures and personally led stewardship. There is a presence of a dual management system within the site, wherein it is divided into upper and lower sections, managed by the municipal government and the Catholic Church. Burial arrangements, maintenance protocols, and other payments are directed accordingly, depending on the section of the site involved. This system was described as a community dynamic in which the religious and civic sectors of the community operate separately yet share a common goal of overseeing the site (Jedan et al. 2020). Although there are differences between the functions of the church and the municipality, these authorities are still in contact and contribute to shaping how the community behaves at the site. The one in charge of keeping the upper part of the site is the Catholic Church in which funds and mostly conducts rehabilitation initiatives like regular cleaning of the site, tree planting, and major renovations. The people involved with these acts are the caretakers and cleaners paid and assigned by the parish. These duties by the church reveal that religious institutions, as part of the spiritual side, contribute to the material aspect of preserving the site for future generations and sustaining interaction with the site (Zhang 2021). On the other hand, the municipal government plays its role in the lower section. Locals expressed the initiatives conducted by the municipal government through cleaning operations, employment programs, economic services, and the standardized transaction for building and arranging tombs. The joint forces of these two sectors indeed marked a significant part in the presentation of the site to the public and also for its preservation. With this, civic engagement is recognized in heritage site maintenance not only because it is composed of civic leaders but also its employment and economic services that benefit the people (Ahmad 2022; Aigwi et al. 2021). One contributor to the maintenance of the heritage site is the educational institutions, such as universities and schools, due to their community service initiatives. These initiatives are done through tree planting and clean-up drives in which the institutions organize as a requirement in their curriculum subjects, such as the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), Social Studies, and other subjects. These efforts imply that educational institutions promote cultural heritage awareness in formal education, allowing students to have the capacity to sustain these sites. Therefore, this intervention from the education sector of the community tells the significant contribution of schools and universities in actively safeguarding heritage sites (Frullo and Mattone 2024). Moreover, personal efforts of the locals emerged through acts of sweeping, landscaping, and simply overlooking the place to prevent littering and vandalism. Residents' stewardship is implied to be rooted in a natural link of residing near the site or by having a relation to those buried there. Therefore, these efforts are perceived as expressions of aesthetic appreciation rooted in the socio-emotional ties developed over time, aside from just paying respect to it. The local community appeared to be a significant factor for the sustained regular conservation and beautification of the site, although through simple efforts, it provided effective action for the longevity of their heritage sites (Nam and Thanh 2024).

Various concerns were collected from the community for the preservation of the site. These narratives are expressed through implying the site as a source of pride, thus being committed to protecting it, and the frustrations with regards to the current degradation of the site. Inclusive collaborative efforts among the caretakers of the site were desired by the locals, with an emphasis that taking care of the place is not only a sole effort duty but a shared responsibility. These collaborative initiatives should not only be practiced during special occasions but should also become a part of a scheduled routine among the residents. The residents also advocate for the beautification of the site, which could be done through landscaping and cleaning efforts, due that these physical attributes of the place are one of the points of pride for them and a reflection of their historical roots. These advocates imply that to establish a sustained practice to preserve the site, inclusive participation must exist. What makes it also a significant concern is that other residents admit to being distant from the site due that they rely on the caretakers of the site, the ones who are paid to do the upkeep, prompting them to disregard visiting the site or participating in its activities. Others also shared that they only clean their ancestral tombs, suggesting a more personally inclined initiative rather than a communal one. Their limited participation in the site reveals inconsistency in their commitments and advocacies, which suggests that there exists a gap between community engagement and the site. They desire to beautify and preserve the place, yet their actions reflect the opposite, prompting a negative effect on the conservation of the site. The continuity of these sites is weakened and disrupted if there has been a lack and absence among their caretaker networks—institutions and residents (Simakole et al. 2018). The challenges the site currently faces are also extended due to the environmental and social disturbances caused by degrading weather instances and, worse, human intrusion. These repeating occurrences invalidated the past efforts of the residents to maintain the upkeep of the site, specifically the trees they planted and the landscapes they arranged, with the intense heat as the destroyer. Neglect of the site emerged due to the history of gruesome violence embedded in the site. Locals spoke of bodies being abandoned between graves or thrown within the heritage site, indicating a breakdown in respect for the significance of the site. Scattered human bones, desecrated tombs, and other disturbing scenes are present at the site, which underscores institutional lack of adequate protection and neglect of not only the public sector but also the residents. Insufficient protection and human disregard compromise the integrity of heritage sites (Sakai et al. 2024).

Although this research has revealed the socio-emotional ties of local dwellers to their heritage sites, various limitations should be addressed in future studies. Firstly, the informants interviewed were only five (5) residents in a particular heritage area; therefore, the uncovered data did not fully generalize the socio-emotional ties of local dwellers in a broader scope and perspective of local dwellers' connection to the site. Secondly, quantitative research may be utilized as a supplement to this study to understand the socio-emotional ties of the locals residing near the site in a different approach, yielding potentially better results through statistical data. Thirdly, all the informants available for this study were biologically female; therefore, it is suggested that other researchers modify their inclusion criteria to include other genders. Fourthly, this study only focused on the socio-emotional ties of the local dwellers; studies may want to focus on other points of interest, such as their preservation patterns towards the heritage site. Lastly, given that this research is conducted in a Philippine setting, the findings may differ from those in other countries. However, despite these limitations, this paper presents findings that provide an adequate explanation of the socio-emotional-based connection of local dwellers to their heritage sites. Furthermore, the findings from this study could lay the foundation for future studies on this topic.

5. Conclusions

Local heritage sites offer valuable insights into how people connect with culture, memory, and their sense of place. The diverse ways residents engage with their heritage sites contribute to the active and sustained process of developing a socio-emotional

connection to these sites through everyday experiences. Attachment to heritage sites varies, even within a local level, which suggests that socio-emotional connections to heritage sites are not always uniform or can easily be discernible. Moreover, a deficiency in consistent preservation measures creates a barrier between local engagement and heritage site preservation, even with the possession of a strong emotional, cultural, and social attachment. They desire a progressive and preserved heritage site, yet their actions imply the opposite. Therefore, it is important to consider community viewpoints, open-mindedness to emerging meanings, and support inclusive programs where all sectors of the community take part, and accessible resources and opportunities for all exist. In doing so, heritage sites will not solely be remembered as a physical space but also as a living meaning where people's emotions and social experiences are tied, prompting them to strive for something that will surely make a difference for the continuity of a lifelong memory.

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