

A Relook at Visual Privacy: Definition and Factors Influencing Muslim Visual Privacy (MVP)

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ABSTRACT

Past literature has indicated a lack of visual privacy in the design of terrace housing in Malaysia, especially for Malay Muslim families, owing to specific Islamic regulations and principles governing the modesty of self, family, and house. The main objectives of this paper are to analyse the definition of visual privacy from Islamic perspective or Muslim visual privacy (MVP), and to determine the factors that influence its perception among Malay Muslim communities who are living in terrace housing development in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The study involved a survey interview of 441 respondents and 10 case studies. Findings indicate that in adapting to the contemporary urban environment of today's terraced housing, Malay Muslim families are shifting away from the traditional Malay as well as previous Islamic concept of visual privacy. Analysis indicated that the Malay Muslim families required a balance between visual exposure and visual access in order to achieve an optimum level of visual privacy to enhance daily comforts, while still

being informed by Malay culture and Islam. It is the balance between visual exposure and visual access which influences the four identified factors influencing Muslim visual privacy which are protection of *aurat*, security, community interaction and hospitality to guest.

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INTRODUCTION

Privacy needs in housing are universal across all cultures, however, how they are translated and regulated is a culturally specific process (Altman, 1977). In the case of Western housings, visual privacy is highly influenced by culture (Rapoport, 1969; Shach-Pinsly et al., 2011) while visual privacy for the Muslims is influenced by both cultural and religious requirements (Besim, 1986; Hisham, 2003; Rahim, 2015). Several studies by Islamic scholars defined visual privacy as protection of the family, especially female family members from the view of male strangers (Besim, 1986; Hisham, 2003). Visual privacy is the ability to carry out daily activities free from fear of undue visual intrusion (Alkhazmi & Esin, 2017), and concealing interfamily affairs from the eyes of outsiders (Babangida & Katsina, 2018). This is supported by Besim (1986) who stressed that a context which allowed overlooking was considered harmful and was an offence in Muslim law.

The definition of visual privacy from Islamic perspective, which focuses on

the aspect of exposure from outside, has influenced the traditional Muslim house form as discussed by Besim (1986) and Hisham (2003). Figure 1 illustrates how housing in the traditional Arabic-Islamic city ensures adequate visual privacy through its design and planning. On the other hand, there are studies which attempted to define visual privacy from the Western perspectives. A study by Reis and Lay (2004) defined visual privacy as what could be visualized from certain spaces and the control of visual connections. Altman (1977) described privacy as an optimization process of controlling information to the self, while a more recent study by Georgiou (2006) described privacy as regulating the transmission of information to the surrounding environment.

Visual exposure and visual access are both important issues affecting the visual privacy level of the house. Shach-Pinsly et al. (2011) described visual exposure as being a component of visual privacy but not fully representing visual privacy. The same study defined visual exposure as:

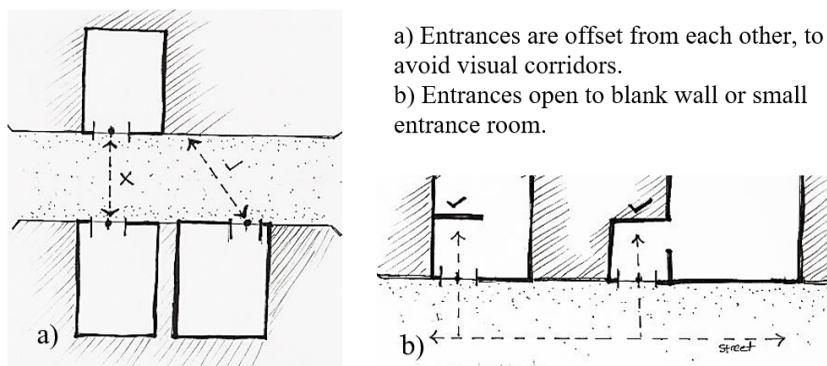


Figure 1. Positions of openings in traditional Islamic housing

“the visual penetration of one’s privacy as a result of being viewed from the external spaces of other building facades or public spaces at street level” (Shahch-Pinsley et al., 2011). From Islamic perspective, visual exposure can be defined as a visual corridor generated by the context (ie. house) which leads to privacy intrusion of female family members by male strangers (Besim, 1986). Besim (1986) strongly asserted that based on his study of traditional Arabic-Islamic cities, a context which permitted visual intrusion was considered harmful and punishable by Muslim law.

This paper proposed a definition for visual access as allowing visual connectivity from inside to the outside of the house. Admittedly, visual access should be controlled in order to avoid increased visual exposure, however, it still should be provided for purposes such as allowing views and security. The importance of visual access was highlighted by Besim (1986) in his definition of internal privacy of the house. He emphasised that the main objectives of internal privacy were to ensure adequate visual privacy from outside and between spaces in the house, as well as, to ensure connectivity of the member of the households to nature. His study which was based on the context of traditional Arabic city of Tunis, related ‘connectivity to nature’ via the use of the internal courtyard. However, due to the strength of the requirement of visual access to outside or nature, it informs this study that even in other types of housing typology, it is still an important variable which should

be considered in the provision of internal visual privacy.

The discussions presented so far suggest that visual privacy is a two-way system; an ability to control and regulate visual exposure and visual access. Even though there is no discussion on visual access as part of the definition of visual privacy by Muslim scholars, there is an indication that visual access was considered in the design of traditional Muslim houses. A good example is the *mashrabiyyah* (Figure 2) which is designed to allow ventilation, daylighting and visual access. It is a full height, latticed screen, which wraps around an extruded window. The *mashrabiyyah* is designed based on the no harm policy of the Islamic building principle which fulfils an important social function (Sidawi, 2012). It allows the person inside the house to view outside, while protecting them from visual exposure. In addition, the position of the *mashrabiyyah* itself is ensured not to directly face an opposite window in order to avoid overlooking into another person’s house (Sidawi, 2012). The *mashrabiyyah* is evidence in physical form of the need for visual access. Thus, this study is suggesting that the definition of visual privacy should provide a balanced view between the protection from visual exposure and allowance of visual access.

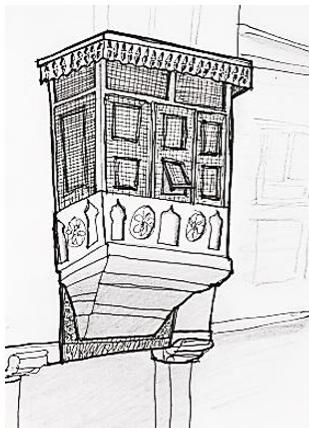
Past studies by Hashim and Rahim (2008), Md Zohri (2010), and Rasdi (2010) emphasized the serious issue of lack of visual privacy experienced by Malay families of terrace housing development in urban areas. Conflicts due to incompatibility

of the home environment and cultural norms have adverse psychological effects and ultimately lead to changes of behavioural norms and abandonment of required religious and cultural values (Hashim and Rahim, 2008; Md Zohri, 2010; Omar et al., 2012). This may also lead to a shift in terms of how Malay families living in terrace housing define and perceive visual privacy in comparison to the Islamic concept or the traditional Malay concept. Besim (1994) and Hisham (2003) asserted the importance of studies needed in the context of local culture within each Muslim community to provide a deeper understanding of the acceptable concept of visual privacy and how it could be adopted by local council, occupants, and owners.

In support with this paper, past studies on housing in Malaysia (Rahim, 2008; Md Zohri, 2010; Hashim and Rahim, 2008) emphasized the lack of privacy experienced

by Malay families of terrace housing developments in urban areas in Malaysia. As the level of privacy is measured against the compliance to Islamic teachings, thus it can be inferred that the terrace house is not providing enough privacy, especially visual privacy. Omar et al. (2012, 2016) pointed out that conflicts due to the incompatibility of the home environment and cultural norms might have adverse psychological effects or housing stress on the occupants. This will ultimately lead to changes in behavioural norms and abandonment of required religious and cultural values (Hashim and Rahim, 2008; Md Zohri, 2010).

Rahim (2008, 2015) indicated a lack of understanding of the perception, priorities, and needs of the current urban Malays themselves. A deeper understanding of what the urban Malays need is important in order to provide deeper insight into their perceptions regarding visual privacy. Past literature



(a)



(b)

Figure 2. (a) Sketch of a traditional *mashrabiya*, (b) Wikala of Bazaraa in Cairo, Egypt

Source: www.cairo.gov.eg

also shows a tendency to benchmark Malays against the traditional Malay culture. However, for Muslims, religious requirements needed to be prioritized before local culture as emphasized by Besim (1986). Changes in living environment, culture and understanding of Islam as a way of life over the years are expected to alter the perception on the visual privacy of the Malay families in the urban areas. It may well be that some aspects of the traditional Malay culture are no longer fully applicable to define the current urban Malay-Muslim families living in the urban areas. Therefore, the definition of Muslim visual privacy to the Malay Muslim community residing in terrace housing, henceforth termed Muslim Visual Privacy or MVP, need to be understood before it can be translated into housing design.

Review of literature indicated a lack of information on visual privacy in the traditional Malay culture. However, past studies agreed that in general, the concept of privacy in the traditional Malay culture is different compared to the Western concept (Hashim et al., 2009; Hashim & Rahim, 2010). It may not be consistent with the Western concept, but it does not mean the traditional Malays are lacking in privacy. Hashim et al. (2009) highlighted in their study on the contrast between the Western perception and Eastern concept of privacy. An example of a Western privacy concept by Hall (1959) as cited in their study is that privacy is about the control of personal space. Westin (1970) noted that the Western concept of privacy was based

on individualism. This highlighted the importance of personal space in fulfilling their privacy needs. The Eastern concept, on the other hand, prioritizes the family as a unit over individual privacy needs (Hashim et al., 2009). Community ties are very strong, and hospitality is an important part of the traditional Malay society.

The unity of the Malay culture and Islamic principles can be seen in the traditional Malay house (Amirhosein et al., 2014; Razali & Talib, 2013), which is designed based on a deep understanding of cultural and religious requirements, daily and yearly routines of occupants and specific privacy needs. Elham et al. (2016) in their study emphasised that the design of the traditional Malay house was based on the beliefs and perception of the traditional Malay community itself. The said beliefs and perceptions influence the form, layout and segmentation of the traditional house thus influencing all functional aspects including privacy (Elham et al., 2016). The need for family privacy, community intimacy, hospitality and social interaction with neighbours were provided in the traditional Malay house and its setting at a different level, both inside and outside the house. Othman et al. (2013) viewed the design of traditional Malay house as being too 'extrovert' compared to the internalised Arab housing. Rahim (2015) and Tahir et al. (2010) both disagreed with this, as their study suggested that it was the unique vernacular design with their raised flooring, windows with fenestrated balustrades and transitional spaces such as the external

serambi (greeting area) which permitted community intimacy while maintaining familial privacy (Figure 3).

Objectives

The aim of this paper is to examine the perception on visual privacy among the Malay families living in terrace housing in urban areas of Malaysia.

Specifically, the objectives are to:

- i. analyse the definition of Muslim visual privacy (MVP),
- ii. determine the factors that influence its perception among Malay Muslim communities who are living in terrace housing development in Klang Valley, Malaysia.

METHOD

The study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. Mixed method is more effective and powerful as the weaknesses and biases in one method is balanced by the strength in the other (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, the qualitative nature complements the quantitative method by providing the answer why, thus adding depth and richness to the explanation (Coolen, 2008). Based on the description by Creswell (2009), the specific method chosen by this study can be termed as a sequential mixed-method approach as “*sequential mixed method procedures are those in which the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand on the findings of one method with another method...*”.

The interview survey involved 441 respondents living in two-storey three-bedroom terrace houses and 10 in-depth interviews of respondents identified during interview survey based on their willingness to participate in the study. This study also utilized the second rule by Lonner and Berry (1986), where one did the best one could under the circumstances to appropriate sample, to allow the best execution of the research. Two housing areas located in Bandar Baru Bangi and Bandar Seri Putra, Selangor were selected for the study. The locations were selected as both have a high percentage of Malay population with a high number of terrace houses. They are also located in the Klang Valley, one of the most developed districts of Selangor, and the most urbanized and populated state in Malaysia. The two housings have a combination of matured and young families.

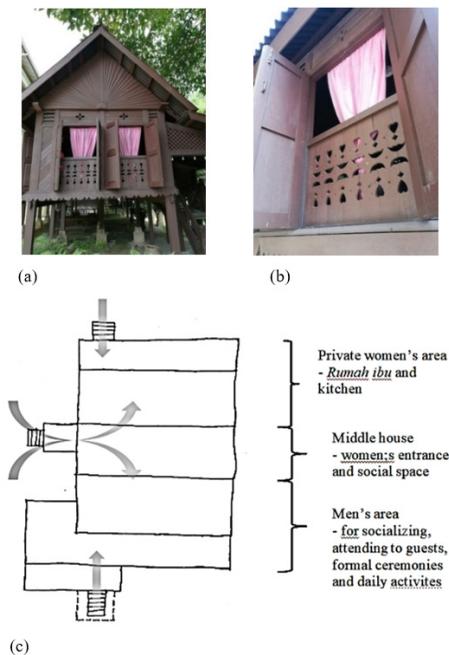


Figure 3. Windows (a), balustrade at windows (b), and layout diagram of a traditional house showing visual privacy consideration in the interior spaces (c).

The first objective strives to define Muslim visual privacy (MVP). The aim of this objective is to investigate whether the Malay family’s definition of MVP is in line with either the more traditional definition as per past Islamic scholars or inclined towards more recent findings indicating importance of visual access as part of visual privacy. The two definitions provided in the survey (Definition 1 and Definition 2) are taken from past literatures on the conception of visual privacy of the house. The second objective determines the factors that influence perception on MVP among Malay Muslim communities who are living in terrace housing development in Klang Valley, Malaysia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents were inhabitants of terrace houses in the selected housing developments. Male respondents constituted 61% and female respondents constituted 39% of total respondents. The age range

of the respondents was between 20 to 70 years old with an average age of 43.6 years. The majority (40.4%) of respondents had resided in their terrace house for more than 10 years, while 31.5% had resided for a period between 3 to 10 years, and 28.1% had resided for period between 1 to 3 years.

Definition of Muslim Visual Privacy (MVP)

A One-Sample t-test was performed on the mean responses on the two definitions which showed that there was a significant difference in mean response between Definition 1 and 2, $t(434) = -15.855, p < 0.05$ ($p = 0.000$). The result for this analysis is presented in Table 1. In general, this indicates that there is a significant difference in perception by respondents between the two proposed definitions. The findings show that 92.2% of the respondents agreed with the definition of visual privacy as the control of visual connections from inside and outside (Definition 1). Definition 1 indicates that both visual exposure and

Table 1
Result on the definition of visual privacy

Definition of visual privacy	Agree		Disagree	
	N	%	N	%
Definition 1: Visual privacy of the home from Islamic perspective involves a balance between visual restriction and visual access. (N=439)	405	93.9	34	6.1
Definition 2: Visual privacy of the home from Islamic perspective only involves protection of <i>awrat</i> as per Islamic requirements, with no need for any visual access. (N=435)	244	56.1	191	43.9

visual access are needed to achieve optimum level of visual privacy. The second definition (Definition 2), which defines visual privacy as primarily protection of visual exposure was agreed by 56.1% of the respondents which was not as strong as Definition 1. The findings also suggested that the definition of visual privacy from Islamic perspective was in line with past studies by Islamic scholars in terms of prioritizing protection from visual intrusion and protecting female family members. However, the findings differ in that it emphasised the importance of visual access for Malay families to ensure security of family through natural surveillance and for general well-being. The results are in line with not only recent study by Rahim (2015) emphasising need for visual access, but also by Besim (1986) who pointed out the need for connection to nature in designing for internal visual privacy.

Findings from in-depth interview explain the need for visual access is important in maintaining visual privacy from outsiders as visual access allows the family to see when someone is at the gate. In other words, visual access viewing out provides security and therefore privacy from unwanted intrusion. Visual access also provides psychological comfort to the occupants within the privacy of the house. The following verbatim responses illustrate some of the perceptions of visual privacy in the house by respondents:

“As a Muslim that strongly adheres to Islamic requirements and wears the hijab, I want a house that protects the visual privacy of the family and discourage visual

intrusion. Visual intrusion may affect our comfort level in the house and we would not feel free in our own house. We might feel that we don't have the freedom and privacy to open the door and windows to our own house.”

“I still want it to be open because then I can see what is going on outside, in case there is a suspicious character outside. That is important.”

Factors Influencing the Perception of MVP

There are many factors that influence the perception and satisfaction on visual privacy for terrace housing occupants. The study analysed four factors, derived from literature review and the pilot in-depth interview, which influenced visual privacy from Islamic perspective. Findings showed that all the factors; protection of *aurat* as per Islamic requirement, security of family, hospitality to guest and social interaction with community strongly influenced ($p \leq 0.05$) the perception on importance of visual privacy, visual access and house design. This result presented in Table 2, proved that all four factors were main influencers on the perception of 1) importance of Muslim visual Privacy (MVP), 2) importance of visual access and, 3) importance of house design in providing visual privacy to Malay Muslim families. Based on In-depth interview, definition and regulation of visual privacy were also influenced by a few non-visual factors such as need for natural lighting and ventilation.

Analysis was carried out in order to rank the factors (by mean values) to investigate prioritization of respondents in terms of factors affecting MVP. The results indicated that three out of four factors made a significant difference ($\rho \leq 0.05$) on perception on the importance of visual privacy of the house for the respondents (Table 3). The factors which ranked last in the list of factors and was the only factor which did not make a significant difference to the mean of importance of MVP, was 'hospitality to guest'. The findings indicated that the protection of *awrat* as per Islamic requirement, although was highly significant ($\rho = 0.000$), was second compared to the physical security of the family which

was the primary concern for majority of respondents. This was followed by social interaction with the community. The results also show that based on respondent's perception, allowance for visual access as part of visual privacy is essential to maintain the security of the family from intrusion.

Importance of the two factors; the physical security of the family and protection of *aurat* as per Islamic requirements, indicated the importance of protection from visual exposure and allowance for visual access as factors affecting visual privacy from Islamic perspective. The need for security overrules the need to be hospitable to guests and having social interaction with the community. This finding explains the

Table 2

Factors influencing perception on importance of MVP, visual access and house design

	Protection of <i>aurat</i>	Security of family	Hospitality to guests	Social interaction with community
Importance of MVP	0.319** 0.000	0.279** 0.000	0.172** 0.000	0.211** 0.000
Importance of Visual Access	0.271** 0.000	0.260** 0.000	0.243** 0.000	0.261** 0.000
Importance of House Design to MVP	0.162** 0.001	0.163** 0.001	0.184** 0.000	0.214** 0.000

Note: * $\rho \leq 0.05$, ** $\rho \leq 0.001$

Table 3

Factors influencing perception on importance of visual privacy

Ranking of Factors	Mean	F-value	ρ
Security of the family	4.62	10.133	0.000**
Protection of <i>aurat</i> as per Islamic requirement	4.57	12.267	0.000**
Social interaction with surrounding community	4.33	2.782	0.041*
Hospitality to guests	4.27	2.400	0.067

* $\rho \leq 0.05$, ** $\rho \leq 0.001$

reliance on territorial markers for example closing gate and main door, and need to have visual access for natural surveillance, as well as behavioural norms of requiring guest to inform prior to coming over. Conflicts between protection from visual exposure and need for visual access arise when they need to close up windows and doors due to privacy violations, when in fact they would prefer to open them. Respondents mentioned they require visual access for views, when looking at guest arriving at the front gate, suspicious strangers or vehicles passing by or strangers trespassing neighbouring houses. Tinted glass windows and curtains are used to regulate visual privacy in terrace housing

The Malays are known for their good hospitality, a value consistent with the teaching of Islam. However, finding from the survey indicates that hospitality to guest is last in the list of factors influencing the perception on visual privacy (Table 3), indicating that in the process of protecting the *aurat*, hospitality to guests was compromised due to constraint of terrace house design. Unlike the traditional houses, the hierarchy of space at different levels of spaces in and outside the house which allow hospitality social interaction are not inherent in the terrace houses. Visual privacy is important to the Malay families in the context of terrace housing in Malaysia. The planning of the housing units is seen as an important factor in providing visual privacy to the occupants. A house facing an open area or park is preferred as the occupants feel that visual privacy may be compromised

if a house faces another house. In this case, due to the mirror image planning of units where the entrance doors and windows directly face another housing unit, there is a need to close the doors and windows (with curtains) to avoid visual exposure.

CONCLUSIONS

Visual privacy from the perspective of the Malay families living in terrace houses in the urban areas in Malaysia involves a second dimension; visual access and not only visual exposure as emphasized by Muslim scholars. This may be due to the fact that their definitions were based on a specific culture within the Muslim society with different cultural values and housing context. This is expected as privacy is culturally specific. A balance between protection of visual exposure and visual access involves the control of visual connections from inside and outside, with priority on protection of modesty of the family is necessary to achieve optimum visual privacy. It is the balance between the two issues of visual exposure and visual access which then affects the four factors affecting visual privacy for Malay Muslim communities namely; security of family, protection of *aurat*, social interaction with surrounding community and hospitality to guests. The definition highlights the need to allow provision for visual access and freedom to regulate openings in the house for Muslim occupants, while still protecting their modesty.

The protection of *aurat* and security are the most important factors affecting

visual privacy among the Malay families living in terrace housing. However, in the process of achieving optimum visual privacy, hospitality to guests and community intimacy; two values integral in Islamic teaching and Malay culture are compromised due to the constraint of the terrace housing environment. The lack of understanding of the importance of religious and cultural values resulted in housing design which is not consistent with the way of life of the occupants, subsequently will have negative implications to future generations living in terrace housings. There is a need for developers and designers to learn from traditional housing and settlement in providing housing designs that support and sustain religious belief and culture, consistent with the need for visual privacy.

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