

Murals as Catalysts for Tourism Growth in Muar Town: Public Perceptions and Future Potential

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ABSTRACT

Muar Town, also known as Bandar Maharani, is a royal city in Johor, Malaysia, strategically located between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Known for its historical, cultural, and geographical significance, with the Muar River flowing into the Strait of Malacca, it remains an underutilized tourism destination compared to the nearby UNESCO World Heritage site of Malacca City. In Muar Town, there is a famous mural called "The Loving Sisters," painted by Russian artist Julia Volchkova. Additionally, there is a pedestrian street in Muar called Muar Street Art, which has become a local cultural hub and a therapeutic space for autistic children. The murals are deeply beloved by the public and have become the recommended check-in points for Muar tourism on various travel websites. These factors suggest that murals have a growing potential to boost Muar's tourism industry. Therefore, this study aims to examine the potential of murals in fostering tourism in Muar Town. The objective is to assess public satisfaction with the current murals and interest in future mural developments. This research, using a 5-point Likert Scale with 392 participants, reveals moderate satisfaction with current murals in Muar Town's tourism, compared to a more positive outlook on future murals. The research emphasizes murals' potential to enhance urban identity, tourism, and community pride, highlighting their role in broader tourism strategies. Murals enhance place-making and cultural expression, offering policymakers and urban developers strategies for urban growth and tourism. Limitations include a sample mainly of non-tourists and a lack of analysis on the economic and social impacts of murals. Future studies should include diverse respondents, such as tourists, and examine murals' direct effects on tourism revenue and community engagement. A broader approach could guide mural initiatives, boosting Muar's cultural and economic appeal and reinforcing its identity as a vibrant destination.

Keywords: *Muar Town, Murals, Public perception, Tourism development*

INTRODUCTION

Muar Town, also known as Bandar Maharani, is a promising heritage tourism destination celebrated for its rich culinary diversity, authentic coffee, and well-preserved pre-war historical buildings (Ghani, 2017). Muar town, located in northern Johor along the Muar River (Muhamad Solehin Fitry, 2019), holds significant potential as an alternative tourism destination. Muar town is situated 150 kilometers southeast of Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur and 179 kilometers north of Singapore (Muar Municipal Council, 2016); see Figure 1). With attractions including historical sites, sightseeing, river cruises, culinary experiences, and escape spots, enhancing these offerings could increase its appeal to a broader range of tourists (Hafizuddin, 2017). Muar offers a strategic location, strong accessibility, and an extensive road network, making it particularly appealing to tourists, especially from Singapore, while providing a variety of attractions, including culinary experiences, historic architecture, and a rich cultural landscape (Rahman et al., 2020).

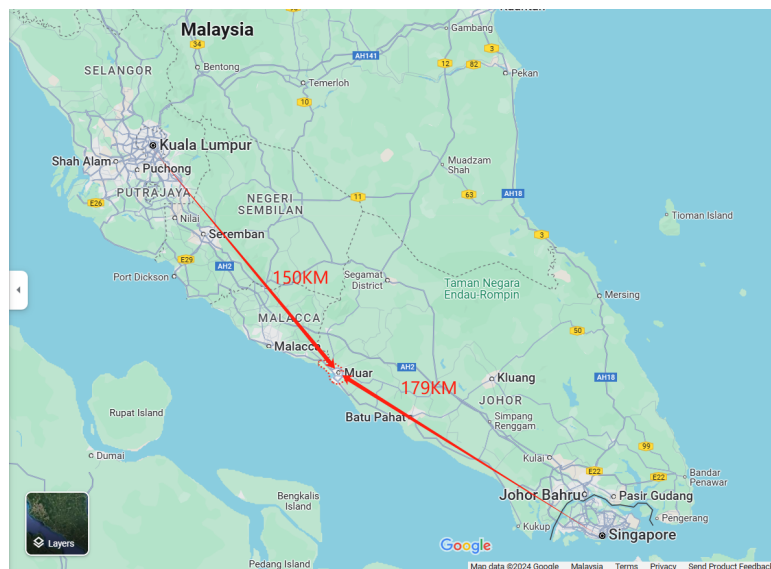


Figure 1. Location of Muar Town
(Source: Google Maps, 2024)

However, despite its historical and cultural significance, with the Muar River flowing into the Strait of Malacca, Muar remains underexplored as a tourism destination compared to the nearby UNESCO-listed Malacca City (Nur Hidayah et al., 2020).

Mural art, traditionally painted directly onto walls or ceilings, faced challenges in gaining recognition within modern American civilization due to the rise of 'modern art' (Susanto et al., 2018). According to Liang (2017), for years, street mural art was confined to back alleys, blank walls, abandoned vehicles, and subway stations, often created without approval and considered graffiti that would eventually be erased. However, in the late 1990s, street mural art underwent a significant transformation, gaining acceptance as mainstream art. Today, global cities such as Berlin, Buenos Aires, London, New York, and Melbourne are leveraging street art to enhance their local art scenes and strengthen their unique place identities.

Muar Town is home to numerous murals, including the famous "The Loving Sisters" (see Figure 2), painted by Russian artist Julia Volchkova (Rick, 2017). In addition to this iconic artwork, Muar is also known for its Muar Street Art and Muar Cultural Walk—pedestrian streets that have become vibrant local

cultural hubs (Gourlay, 2024). These murals are widely recognized and recommended as check-in points for tourists on various travel websites, such as SGMYTAXI, Tripadvisor, and others. Notably, the Muar Street Art Lane also serves as a therapeutic space for autistic children, highlighting the town's commitment to blending artistic expression with social impact (Rick, 2024). These developments suggest that murals have growing potential to enhance Muar's tourism industry, contributing to both its cultural identity and economic growth. Therefore, the research aims to evaluate public perception of murals in Muar Town, with an emphasis on tourism and urban appeal. To achieve this aim, the objectives are: 1. To assess public satisfaction with the current mural offerings in Muar Town. 2. To evaluate public interest in future mural developments as a means of enhancing Muar's tourism appeal and urban identity.



Figure 2. The Loving Sisters
(Source: Adapted from Rick, 2017)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mural and tourism

Murals are a type of public art that can be continuously viewed from various physical perspectives within the urban environments of towns and cities (Skinner & Jolliffe, 2016). In earlier times, art was not considered to be "owned" by the public and had no social function, art was solely the property of the artist (Susanto et al., 2018). However, this changed in the 1960s, when the exclusivity of art shifted to include the public (Anusapati, 2019). Murals, whether for personal expression, political messages, or enhancing tourism, are a form of public art accessible to all passersby (Skinner & Jolliffe, 2016).

Murals have become increasingly widespread globally, serving not only as aesthetic elements but also as platforms for spreading information, marketing, and political movements. For example, in Chicago, USA, murals are used to express political views, from Chicago's Wall of Respect to the Berlin Wall and the murals of Belfast and Derry during The Troubles, while in Penang, Malaysia, the government has implemented regulations to preserve heritage areas, transforming them into canvases for the city's creative expression (Susanto et al., 2018). Additionally, in many locations, murals have been grouped into tours, serving either as a means to convey political messages or as a tourism product and activity (Skinner & Jolliffe, 2016). Culture is considered one of the main beneficiaries and is viewed as a crucial asset in the development of tourism (Mousavi, 2016). Cultural tourism is as diverse as culture itself, encompassing activities related to art, cinema, language, sport, religion, architecture, gastronomy,

nature, and folklore specific to a region or city (Iberdrola, 2024). Murals play a significant role in tourism, attracting visitors not only as art but as expressions of local politics, heritage, and identity. Whether it's a historical fresco in Italy or vibrant political art in places like Belfast or Tehran, murals contribute to the cultural appeal of a destination, enhancing its tourism value (Skinner & Jolliffe, 2016).

According to Evans (2005), murals serve as visual representations of local history, culture, and traditions, providing tourists with an opportunity to engage with a place's unique identity. This cultural dimension enhances the authenticity of a destination and fosters a deeper connection between visitors and its heritage. Beyond their cultural significance, murals function as prominent visual markers within urban landscapes, contributing to place branding efforts. According to Anholt (2007), murals attract art and culture enthusiasts, thereby increasing a city's visibility and appeal as a tourist destination. In addition to branding, murals serve as a platform for expressing local narratives and community voices. Eltokhy et al. (2023) assert that murals contribute to neighborhood vibrancy by transforming overlooked urban spaces into visually compelling attractions for both residents and visitors. Similarly, Sahabuddin and Hildayanti (2024) emphasize the role of murals in shaping cultural identity, promoting tourism, and preserving urban spaces. From an economic perspective, murals can stimulate local economies by attracting tourists whose expenditures on accommodations, dining, and other services generate economic benefits (Chang & Teo, 2009). Gesare (2024) further underscores the significance of public art in enhancing a city's tourism appeal, strengthening its global identity, and promoting economic sustainability through its integration into urban development strategies. Moreover, murals contribute to the visual aesthetics of urban spaces. As noted by Chmielewska (2007), murals create dynamic and engaging environments, offering memorable and shareable experiences that resonate with contemporary tourists.

Collectively, these studies underscore the multifaceted impact of murals on tourism, highlighting their ability to combine cultural, economic, and aesthetic dimensions to enrich urban tourism experiences. The town of Muar has seen a rise in interest in murals as part of its cultural tourism strategy. Murals are not just decorative but have the potential to enhance the town's appeal by adding a layer of cultural significance that attracts both domestic and international visitors. Therefore, the relationship between murals and tourism in Muar Town can be accessed by these five aspects: 1. Visual aesthetic, 2. Cultural, 3. Economic from tourist appealing, 4. Place branding 5. Community engagement.

Public perception

Public perception refers to the collective attitudes and opinions held by individuals or groups regarding specific issues or entities, such as murals. This perception plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, which in turn influences political agendas, media narratives, and policy decisions (Fiveable, 2024). Public opinion, as a broader concept, represents the aggregated beliefs and attitudes of a population on particular matters and is often measured through surveys and polls to gain insights into prevailing sentiments (Fiveable, 2024).

Furthermore, a positive public perception of murals can foster a sense of pride within the local community, leading to greater support for tourism initiatives and increased visitor numbers. For example, a study by Gesare (2024) described an initiative in Brazil where local artists and community members collaborate to create murals that reflect their cultural heritage, enhancing the area's aesthetic appeal, attracting tourists, and boosting the local economy.

In the case of murals, when the public perceives these artworks as meaningful representations of local identity, they are more likely to be integrated into a town's cultural and tourism strategies. A positive public perception can enhance the town's appeal as a destination for visitors seeking cultural and artistic experiences.

Therefore, in the context of Muar, where murals may embody both local heritage and contemporary culture, public perception of these artworks could significantly influence the town's cultural tourism development and its attractiveness to tourists.

METHODOLOGY

In order to objectively capture public perceptions, this research employed quantitative methods. Quantitative data collection often requires operational definitions to convert abstract concepts (such as mood) into measurable indicators (Bhandari, 2022).

This research employed two main methods: the questionnaire and the 5-point Likert scale. As described by Bhandari (2022), survey research is one of four principal quantitative methods, alongside experiments, systematic observation, and secondary research. In this study, the survey method was chosen for its effectiveness in capturing direct responses from a large sample size, a significant advantage for obtaining broad public perceptions (Bhandari, 2022). To quantify these perceptions, the 5-point Likert scale was chosen for the questionnaire, providing a nuanced approach to measuring public opinion on the murals in Muar Town. Data analysis then utilized both the median and mean to offer a comprehensive view of the data's central tendency. The flowchart of this research methodology can be seen in Figure 3 below.

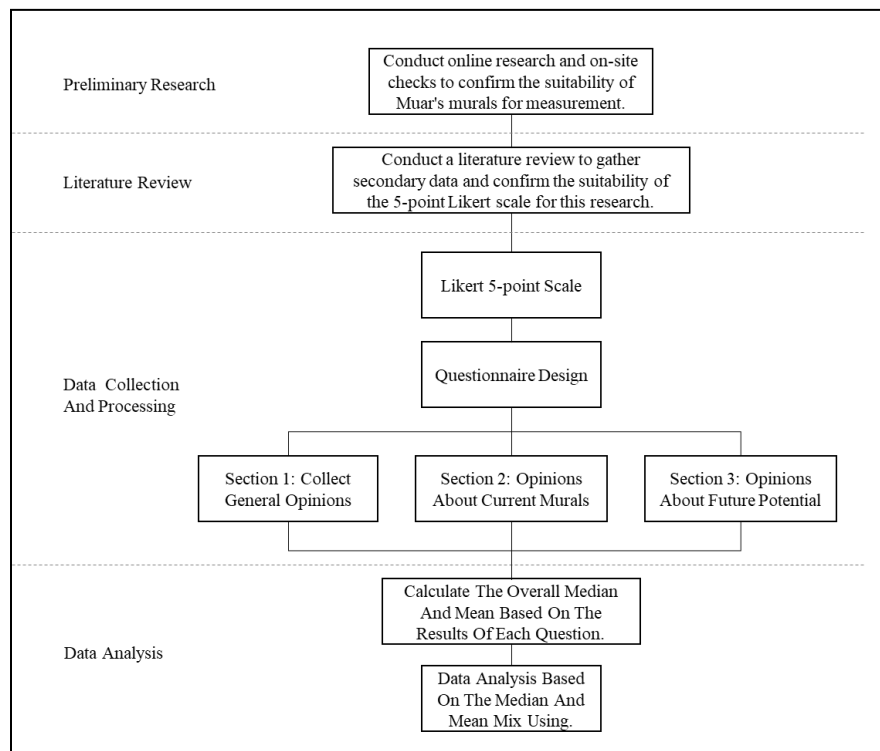


Figure 3. The flowchart of the research methodology
 (Source: Author)

The Likert Scale

The Likert scale was created in 1932 to measure 'attitude' in a scientifically recognized and validated way (Edmondson, 2005). A Likert scale measures opinions or perceptions about a single "latent" variable through multiple questionnaire items, which are summed to create a composite score representing a unidimensional trait (Joshi et al., 2015). Likert scales are typically ranging from 3 to 9-point options with positive, negative, and neutral responses, compared to the 7-point scale, which provides more detailed feedback, the 5-point Likert scale is simpler and more user-friendly, offering clear insights with fewer options, which can improve response accuracy and speed in data collection (Jotform Editorial Team, 2024).

In the context of this study on murals in Muar, the Likert scale is employed to gauge public perceptions towards murals in Muar Town. The scale helps quantify subjective attitudes, such as whether the murals enhance the town's appeal as a tourist destination, influence visitors' satisfaction, or contribute to the town's cultural identity. A 5-point Likert scale has been selected for this research, as it strikes an ideal balance between simplicity and providing sufficient data for analysis. This scale allows for quick and accurate responses while maintaining enough detail to draw meaningful conclusions about how murals influence tourism in Muar. Additionally, its simplicity ensures a high response rate, making it particularly useful for surveys targeting a large and diverse respondent group. Data analysis proceeded based on the questionnaire results. The median can be used together with the mean to analyze the average of a set of data (Wu et al., 2023).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire method is widely regarded as a versatile and effective tool for data collection across various research fields. Its structured design enables standardized data gathering, organization, and analysis, making it particularly beneficial for quantitative research applications (Kuphanga, 2024).

The questionnaire is structured into three sections to capture a comprehensive understanding of public perception toward murals in Muar. Section 1 gathers general public opinions regarding murals in Muar, establishing a baseline of attitudes. Section 2 assesses public satisfaction with the current murals in Muar, aiming to understand perceived value and impact. Section 3 explores public perspectives on the future development of murals, examining whether the public supports increased attention and expansion of mural spaces as part of the city's growth, or whether there is a preference for mural removal to preserve building and city cleanliness and order. \

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "Strongly Disagree" and 5 represented "Strongly Agree." The questionnaire investigated five aspects of the relationship between murals and tourism, with one question in each section addressing:

- Aspect 1 Visual aesthetics
- Aspect 2 Cultural value
- Aspect 3 Tourist appeal
- Aspect 4 Place branding
- Aspect 5 Community engagement

To enhance understanding of the questionnaire structure, the five dimensions and their corresponding items are summarized in Figure 4.

	Aspect 1: Visual aesthetics	Aspect 2: Cultural value	Aspect 3: Future mural opinions	Aspect 4: Place branding	Aspect 5: Community engagement
Section 1: General opinions	The overall aesthetic appeal of the murals in Muar Town is highly satisfying.	Interacting with the murals in Muar Town, such as taking photos or appreciating the artwork, provides a memorable experience.	The murals have significantly enhanced the attractiveness of Muar Town as a tourist destination.	The murals in Muar Town effectively represent the local culture and heritage.	The murals contribute positively to the sense of community and pride in Muar Town.
Section 2: Current mural opinions	The quality of the murals in Muar Town enhances the visual appeal.	The murals in Muar Town effectively capture the cultural and historical essence of the town, making them interesting for tourists.	The murals in Muar Town are well-maintained and contribute positively to the overall tourist experience.	The murals in Muar Town are unique and creatively designed, making them an attractive feature for visitors.	Tourists are likely to take photos of the murals in Muar Town as part of their visit to the town.
Section 3: Future mural opinions	I believe that maintaining the current murals in Muar Town will attract more tourists.	I think more murals should be developed in Muar Town to improve the town's cultural identity and aesthetic appeal in the future.	I believe that future mural projects should be incorporated into Muar Town's tourism strategies.	Future murals should focus more on local themes and stories.	I think that increasing the number of murals in Muar Town would encourage tourists to visit and explore the town more.

Figure 4. Questionnaire Structure and Item Overview
(Source: Author, 2025)

The questionnaire was distributed entirely online using social media to gather public perceptions. It was created using Google Forms, with the link and QR code shared through various channels, including the Facebook page of the Muar News Group, Google Map reviews for Muar Culture Walk and Muar Street Art, and a Xiao Hong Shu post geotagged in Muar.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The study collected a total of 392 responses. The initial section of the questionnaire examined respondents' purpose for visiting and their awareness of murals in Muar to ensure the validity of the responses. Considering that this study investigates the impact of murals on tourism, the introductory questions regarding the purpose of the visit were specifically designed to capture tourism-related factors. The results reveal that 80.1% of respondents were non-tourists, with only 19.9% indicating tourism as their primary reason for visiting (see Figure 5). Additionally, 96.9% of the participants reported noticing murals in Muar Town, whereas 3.1% indicated that they had not observed the murals (see Figure 6).

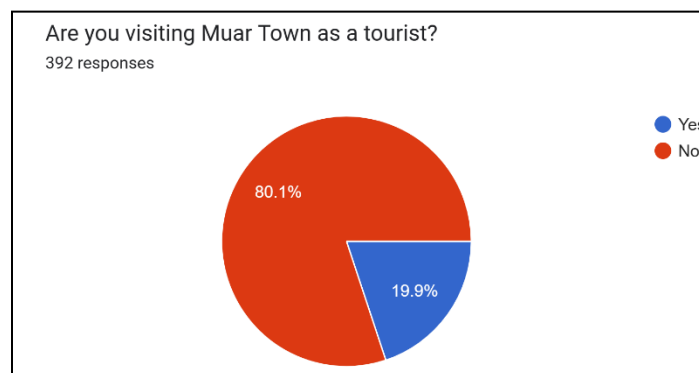


Figure 5. The purpose of visits to Muar Town result
(Source: Google form results, 2024)

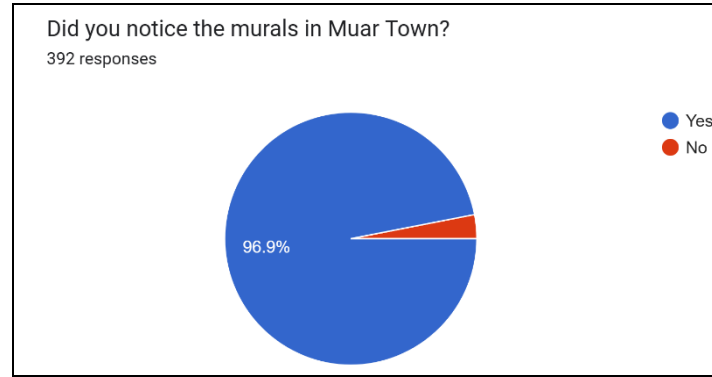


Figure 6. The result of attention drawn by murals in Muar Town
 (Source: Google form results, 2024)

The analysis of the questionnaire's initial section revealed two significant findings. First, tourists do not appear to constitute the dominant visitor group in Muar Town. Second, the murals in Muar Town are prominent visual elements that are difficult for visitors to overlook. Following these initial findings, the scores for Sections 1 to 3 were calculated based on the results obtained. It is important to note that 3.1% of the responses were identified as invalid and were excluded from the dataset, as these respondents indicated they had not noticed the murals. To account for the influence of these invalid responses, the average scores obtained from the Google Form data were recalibrated by applying a correction factor (see Figure 7) of 0.969 (calculated as 380/392).

$$CF = TV/OV$$

- CF is the correction factor
- TV is the true value
- OV is the observed value

Figure 7. Correction Factor Formula
 (Source: Calculator Academy Team, 2024)

To obtain more accurate data, a correction factor of 0.969 was applied, and the recalibrated results are displayed in Figure 8 below.

Section No.	*Average Rating					Overall Average	Median Results
	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5		
1	3.21	3.23	3.3	3.37	3.45	3.31	3.3
2	3.5	3.4	3.34	3.27	3.47	3.4	3.4
3	4.29	4.09	4.15	4.24	4.3	4.22	4.24
*All result scores were adjusted by a correction factor of 0.969 based on the original scores.							

Figure 8. The score results of the questionnaire
 (Source: Author, 2024)

Questions 1 to 5 were designed to capture the public's perceptions across five key aspects of the relationship between murals and tourism. The trends in these perceptions are effectively illustrated in the

line chart (see Figure 9). As discussed previously, Sections 1 to 3 address general opinions, current mural opinions, and future mural opinions, respectively.

The line chart reveals distinct trends in public perception. Although the public expresses relatively low approval of the existing murals in Muar Town, there is a notable positive shift when considering future mural developments. This suggests that, despite current reservations, the community holds a more favorable outlook towards the potential for murals to play a more significant role in the town's tourism landscape. The welcoming attitude toward future murals indicates a growing awareness of the value murals could add to the town's cultural and visual identity. This trend in perception could also reflect broader trends in the acceptance of public art as an important cultural and tourist asset.

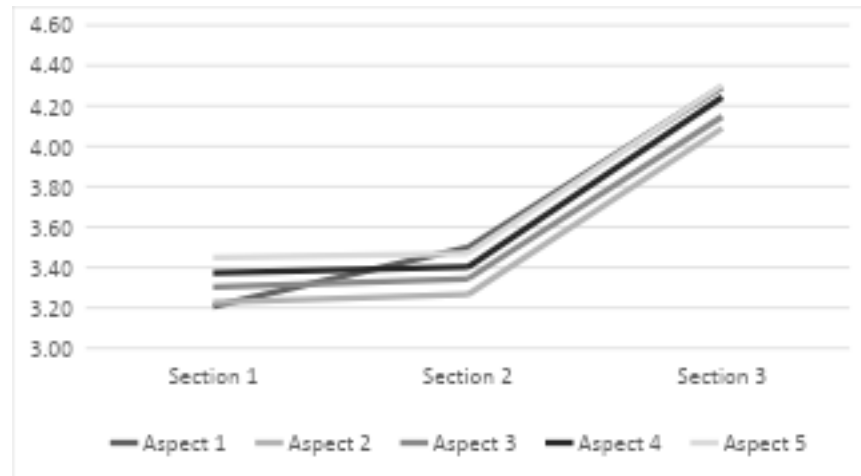


Figure 9. Average Rating Line Chart
 (Source: Author, 2024)

Wu et al. (2023) suggest that incorporating both the average and median in data analysis offers a more thorough understanding of distribution trends. Consequently, the "Overall Average" is analyzed alongside the median results. The distribution pattern of these metrics is illustrated in the following diagram (see Figure 10). Upon further examination, Section 3 stands out as the only category exhibiting a notable difference between the median and mean, with the median being higher than the mean. This indicates a negative skewness in the distribution of responses for Section 3, suggesting that a larger proportion of respondents tend to provide more positive evaluations regarding future murals. This skewness could reflect a cluster of more favorable attitudes among respondents, while a smaller group of individuals may hold more critical views, pulling the mean down slightly. This pattern suggests that, while there is overall support for future mural developments, there is a degree of variance in the strength of those opinions, with a tendency for more respondents to hold optimistic expectations for the role of murals in Muar's tourism and urban identity. Therefore, future mural initiatives in Muar could benefit from incorporating public feedback to ensure designs are relevant and impactful, thereby fostering stronger connections between murals, the local community, and the tourism industry.

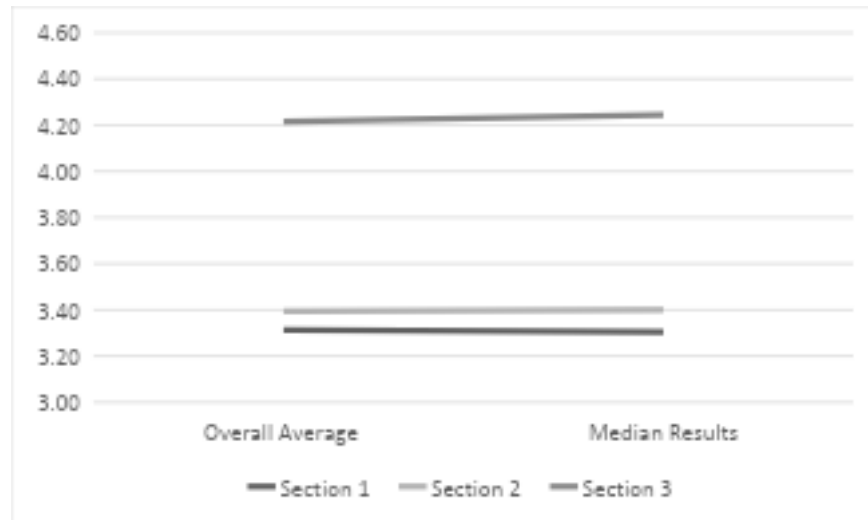


Figure 10. Comparison Chart of Average and Median
 (Source: Author, 2024)

CONCLUSION

This study sought to evaluate public perceptions of murals in Muar Town, focusing on satisfaction with existing murals and interest in future mural developments. The findings highlight that while public satisfaction with current mural offerings is moderate, there is a strong sense of optimism and interest in future projects. This reflects an acknowledgment of murals as significant cultural and visual elements that have the potential to enhance Muar Town's urban identity and tourism appeal. The research underscores the importance of murals as a tool for place-making and cultural expression, offering valuable insights into how public art can contribute to urban development and tourism growth. Murals in Muar Town are not merely decorative but serve as key visual and cultural assets that contribute to the town's sense of place. They capture the attention of visitors and locals alike, acting as place markers and conversation starters that enrich the tourism experience. Integrating murals into tourism marketing initiatives, such as digital promotions, interactive maps, and guided tours, can enhance visitor engagement and strengthen Muar's cultural appeal. The optimism surrounding future murals indicates the opportunity for murals to play a larger role in tourism strategies, fostering stronger connections between the visual environment, community pride, and visitor engagement. Moreover, the positive reception toward future mural developments in Muar will be instrumental for urban designers and policymakers in formulating strategic plans for mural implementation. Examining the economic and social impacts of murals could offer deeper insights into their role in urban development, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their contributions to the local economy and community well-being. However, the study is not without limitations. The participant sample primarily represents non-tourists, with limited input from tourists or external visitors, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study does not address the broader economic or social impacts of murals, leaving these aspects open for further exploration. Future studies could expand the scope by incorporating a more diverse range of respondents, including tourists, and by examining the direct impacts of murals on tourism revenue and community engagement. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role murals can play in shaping a town's cultural and economic landscape. By addressing these areas, future research can help guide mural initiatives that are not only visually impactful but also resonate deeply with both the local community and visitors, reinforcing Muar Town's position as a vibrant and culturally enriched town.

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