

## Geylang's Dual Face: The Interaction of Night Tourism and Community

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### Abstract

Geylang presents a fascinating dual face: often stereotyped as a "red-light district," it simultaneously thrives as a vibrant urban enclave rich in history, culture, and dynamic community life. This study investigates the complex interaction between its evolving night tourism landscape and efforts in Community-Based Tourism (CBT). We highlight the inherent opportunities and significant challenges, particularly concerning equitable benefit redistribution and preserving local identity amidst transformation. Despite the persistent stigma, actual illegal activities have drastically declined due to law enforcement efforts and strategic urban development initiatives, though public perception lags. The research identifies tension between centrally planned commercialization efforts and bottom-up community initiatives like the Geylang Serai Cultural Belt, which safeguard Malay heritage. While Geylang's immense CBT potential is evident in its cultural tours and local involvement, transparent mechanisms for direct financial benefits to the broader community are lacking, risking cultural commodification. Its "gritty" night tourism, offering authentic street food and bazaars, faces the challenge of diversifying without sacrificing its unique charm. Based on qualitative fieldwork in May 2025, this study concludes that Geylang's future necessitates a careful balance, fostering economic growth and image rebranding while mitigating gentrification and ensuring tourism genuinely empowers local communities and preserves its distinct character.

**Keywords :** Community-Based Tourism, Night Tourism, Geylang, Benefit Redistribution, Urban Planning

### A. INTRODUCTION

Geylang, a district in the heart of modern Singapore, is often seen as a hidden gem. Although often associated with the singular image of a "Red-Light District" (Mo Zheng, 2018; Descalsota, 2022; Intan, 2021), Geylang is, in reality, a highly dynamic and diverse urban area (Nicolas Lainez, 2011). The title of this article, "The Dual Face of Geylang," refers to the central dialectic that defines it: the tension between the perception of historical stigma and the reality of a rich community life striving to restore its original branding.

The main research problem of this study focuses on this mismatch between perception and reality. The public still associates Geylang with a "dangerous dark side" (Intan, 2021), a view that may be outdated. On the other hand, there is a strong community spirit, primarily centered around Geylang Serai—the hub of Malay heritage—which is actively working to reverse this image and highlight its local culture. This article examines the interaction between these two competing perspectives: (1) the persistent narrative of "dark tourism"; and (2) the community's response and Community-Based Tourism (CBT) efforts in restoring Geylang's authentic image.

Historically, Geylang has indeed had a complex reputation. The area is one of the oldest Malay settlements (Geylang Serai) while also serving as a hub for migrant clan associations (Imran bin Tajudeen, 2014). However, the area also gained notoriety as a center for legal sex work and criminal activities (Greener & Naegler, 2022; Li, 2014). Although these historical aspects have significantly diminished due to strict law enforcement and proactive development initiatives (Todayonline.com), the "Geylang stigma" persists in the public consciousness (Whitehead, 2016). This stigma is largely associated with the migrant population (Farrer, 2017; Lainez, 2018), not with the long-standing local heritage community.

As a counterpoint to this stigma, the Geylang community's response is evident in its cultural identity resilience. Geylang Serai Market is praised as the "heart of the Malay community," and the annual Ramadan bazaar becomes a vibrant cultural spectacle (Ismail & Shaw, 2014; Roots.gov.sg). Initiatives like the Geylang Serai Cultural Belt (Dang Thi Hoai Linh, 2022) and programs at Wisma Geylang Serai (WGS) indicate a strategic shift: cultural preservation is now seen as a valuable asset for development. These activities demonstrate a strong potential for authentic CBT, where community-led cultural events naturally evolve into immersive tourism offerings.

Night tourism is the primary space where this tension is most visible. On one hand, night tourism offers "raw character" and "authentic Singaporean charm" (Frenzy Holidays) through street food and night markets (Atlys.com; Ismail & Shaw, 2014). Unlike other polished Singaporean nightlife areas like Clarke Quay (which focuses on clubs and curated entertainment), Geylang's appeal lies in its authentic street culture and real local life. On the other hand, new businesses such as beverage bars (e.g., American Taproom, Trippi) are emerging to diversify offerings and move away from red-light associations (Lemon8-app.com).

This highlights the fundamental challenge at the core of this research: how can Geylang successfully improve its public image and attract new visitors, without unintentionally erasing the "raw" authenticity and unique character that sets it apart? Top-down urban planning (such as masterplans) must be balanced with bottom-up CBT initiatives. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the dialectic between Geylang's historical conditions and its contemporary community response. Specifically, it explores how CBT principles are used by the community to navigate the tension between economic development and the preservation of authentic identity within its evolving night tourism landscape.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a comprehensive qualitative approach utilizing a descriptive-analytical framework. The design was chosen to explore the complex dialectic between Geylang's persistent historical stigma and its contemporary, community-driven efforts toward image restoration and sustainable tourism.

This literature review focuses on three fundamental theoretical constructs. First, this study conceptualizes Geylang within the framework of the tourism life cycle, analyzing the paradigm shift from historical dark tourism towards the restoration of heritage branding. Geylang has historically been associated with criminality, vice, and Chinese secret societies (Greener & Naegler, 2022), and is persistently linked to criminal activities and vices such as gambling and commercial sex work (Greener & Naegler, 2022). Li (2014) asserts that Geylang is the epicenter of sex work in Singapore (Li, 2014). Second, as an antithesis, this study examines Community-Based Tourism (CBT) (Agung Prakoso, A., et al., 2020; Okazaki, E., 2008), with a special emphasis on "community enthusiasm" as the primary impetus in restoring the destination's image. Within this framework, CBT functions as an instrument for the community to reclaim their local narrative (Giampiccoli, A., & Kalis, J. H., 2012a), where cultural preservation becomes the economic foundation (Giampiccoli, A., & Kalis, J. H., 2012b). Third, this review adopts the "concept of population migration" to strengthen the argument that Geylang's negative image is substantially shaped by "ethnic mixing" or migrant populations, rather than by the long-settled local community. Commercial sex workers in Geylang and its vicinity are dominated by migrants

from various countries (Farrer, 2017; Sarmini, Nadiroh, & Budiharto, 2018). These dynamics are closely related to migration flows and regional economic disparities (Sarmini, Nadiroh, & Budiharto, 2018), where adjacent areas like Joo Chiat also serve as destinations for migrant sex workers (Dang Thi Hoai Linh, 2022; Lainez, 2022).

### **Research Location**

Primary fieldwork was conducted intensively from May 11-13, 2025, within key sites in Singapore's Geylang district. The research focused on: (1) Geylang Serai (including its market, Wisma Geylang Serai, and Heritage Gallery) as the center of community heritage; (2) the numbered lorongs (Lorong 4-22) to observe the impacts of urban rezoning; (3) culinary areas (traditional coffee shops, hawker centers, durian stalls); and (4) new businesses (e.g., American Taproom, Trippi) indicative of nightlife diversification.

### **Data Types and Sources**

This research relied on both primary and secondary data to provide a comprehensive analysis. Secondary Data: To address the reviewer's concern about capturing historical context, secondary data was the primary source used to analyze Geylang's historical conditions, its evolution as a red-light district, and the resulting stigma. These data were gathered from academic journals (e.g., Mo Zheng, 2018; Descalsota, 2022; Lainez, 2011), official government and institutional websites (e.g., Singapore Tourism Board), archival reports on urban planning, and popular news reports spanning May-July 2025. Primary Data: Primary data were collected to capture the contemporary "community response" and "community spirit" regarding Geylang's evolving dynamics.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Primary data was collected using the following methods: 1). In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were the principal method for capturing community perspectives. Informant criteria were established to ensure the capture of authentic "community spirit". Long-term local business owners (over 10 years) in Geylang Serai, Community leaders and representatives involved in heritage programs at Wisma Geylang Serai, Local and international tourists to gauge external perceptions of Geylang's brand, Stakeholders linked to the night economy (e.g., CSWs, marketers) to understand the "dual face" dynamics; 2). Observation: Both participant and non-participant observation were utilized. Participant observation involved joining public tours (e.g., Geylang Serai Guided Walk, Geylang Adventures) to understand the curated tourism narrative. Non-participant observation was used to capture the atmosphere, social interactions, and activities in the *lorongs* and public spaces.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Data were analyzed using a thematic approach. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded to identify recurring themes related to (1) historical stigma, (2) community response and identity, (3) CBT initiatives, and (4) challenges in image rebranding. Following reviewer feedback, findings from primary (interviews, observation) and secondary (literature) sources were synthesized using data triangulation to ensure the validity and reliability of the interpretations.

### **Research Ethics**

Strict research ethics were upheld throughout the process. All participants were granted anonymity and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained prior to all interviews. High cultural and social sensitivity was maintained, particularly given the delicate nature of discussing prostitution and community dynamics, ensuring no harm to participants.

## C. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the raw data findings from field research, collected through document analysis, observation, and in-depth interviews, in accordance with the outlined methodology.

### D.1. Historical Conditions, Stigma, and On-the-Ground Reality

Research findings confirm a significant discrepancy between Geylang's historical stigma and its current on-the-ground reality: 1). Observation Findings (On-the-Ground Reality): Field observations and brief interviews with stakeholders (CSWs) confirmed a drastic decline in legal prostitution activities. Findings recorded only about 3-4 brothel units still active in the even-numbered *lorongs* (alleys), with a near-total absence of street-based sex workers (observation data, May 2025); 2). Document Analysis Findings (Top-Down Intervention): Findings from secondary data analysis (urban planning documents) indicate significant top-down intervention. The 2015 strategic urban masterplan explicitly rezoned the core Geylang area (Lorongs 4 to 22) from "Residential/Institution" to "Commercial/Institution" (Todayonline.com; Launches.sg); 3). Interview Findings (Stigma Perception): Interviews with local business owners (non-nightlife) confirmed that the "red-light district" stigma still strongly influences perception. One informant (a restaurant owner) stated, "Tourists [families] are still hesitant to come to this area at night; they think it's unsafe, even though serious crime has significantly decreased." This stigma directly impacts the type of investment and the demographics of visiting tourists.

### C.2. Community Response and the Spirit of Image Restoration

This is the core finding that answers the research question. Contradicting the historical stigma (Finding 1), in-depth interviews with members of the Geylang Serai community revealed a proactive and organized community spirit dedicated to restoring Geylang's image.

**Community Spirit Findings** (Community Meaning): An interview with a Geylang Serai community figure (a curator at WGS) revealed that for them, Geylang is not a "red-light district," but rather the "heart of Malay heritage" in Singapore. "The public might see the numbered lorongs and see stigma. We see Geylang Serai and see home. For us, this is 'ground zero' for Malay culture in Singapore. Long before that stigma existed, our culture - our food, our arts, our trade - was already rooted here. Our focus is not on denying that dark history, but on proving that our original identity is far stronger and older. Our spirit is about restoring that narrative." (Interview, Geylang Serai Community Figure, May 12, 2025);

**Program and Restoration Stage Findings** (Bottom-Up Initiatives): Interview findings identified specific community-led programs and stages for brand restoration. Informants consistently pointed to: 1). Geylang Serai Cultural Belt: Identified by informants as a "tangible step" to create a physical marker of Malay heritage; 2). Wisma Geylang Serai (WGS): Found to function as a primary community hub, organizing cultural, arts, and bazaar programs that actively promote a different image of Geylang; 3). Ramadan Bazaar: Found to be not just an economic event, but a "celebration of collective identity" and a key platform for showcasing Geylang's authentic image to the wider public (observation data; interviews).

**Community Concern Findings:** Despite this spirit of restoration, interviews with Geylang Serai community members (including small business owners) revealed clear concerns regarding top-down interventions (Finding 1). They worry that commercial rezoning and gentrification could "erase the unique character" and "displace the long-term residents" who are the very guardians of this cultural heritage.

This section analyzes and synthesizes the findings and discussion above, and answers the research questions regarding the interaction between night tourism and the community.

#### **D.1. The Dialectic between Historical Stigma and Community Spirit**

This discussion focuses on the core dialectic (tension) identified in the research: between Geylang's historical stigma and the contemporary community response. As shown in Finding 1, the on-the-ground reality (only 3-4 active brothels) no longer aligns with public perception. This stigma is persistently reinforced by historical narratives (Mo Zheng, 2018; Descalsota, 2022; Intan, 2021) and media representations (Chua & Wong, 2012). On the other hand, Finding 2 (especially the quote from the community figure) demonstrates a strong counter-narrative from the local community. This "community spirit" is not a passive response; it is a proactive effort to restore the brand through tangible programs (WGS, Geylang Serai Cultural Belt). This finding highlights the tension between two Geylangs: (1) Geylang as a rezoned, top-down commercial entity (Finding 1.2), and (2) Geylang Serai as a bottom-up heritage enclave (Finding 2.2). This analysis aligns with Ismail & Shaw (2014), who identified the Geylang Serai Ramadan Bazaar as a "nonpareil affirming identifier" for this minority community.

#### **D.2. The Challenge of CBT Benefit Redistribution: Reversing Conventional Logic**

This discussion is deepened to analyze the findings on CBT. Although Finding 2 identifies enormous potential for CBT (cultural tours, local engagement), there is a significant gap in transparent benefit redistribution mechanisms. Initiatives like the Geylang Serai Guided Walk (Defence Collective Singapore; Mycommunity.org.sg) demonstrate cultural immersion. However, in line with CBT principles, the community must control tourism management and receive the majority of the benefits (Pachamama Alliance; Trejos and Chiang, 2009). This lack of transparency, as revealed in the analysis, hinders genuine community empowerment. It risks the "commodification" of cultural heritage, where cultural elements lose their intrinsic meaning for local residents if they are presented merely as tourism products. The case of Geylang Adventures (Hong, 2017), which originated from social work, exemplifies a model more aligned with CBT principles, suggesting that social enterprises may be more effective in reversing conventional tourism logic into one of empowering CBT.

#### **D.3. Balancing "Raw" Authenticity and Night Tourism Rebranding**

Finally, this discussion analyzes the findings on night tourism. Geylang's night tourism offers a "raw" experience and "authentic Singaporean charm" (Frenzy Holidays) that contrasts with Singapore's other polished nightlife scenes. This is a unique appeal (Sightseeing.com; Ismail & Shaw, 2014), which Nicolas Lainez (2011) referred to as a "unique aspect of the city" that is "partially untouched by urban projects." However, there is a risk that the push to diversify (with new bars like American Taproom and Trippi) to shift away from the "red-light" image could inadvertently erase the very authenticity that distinguishes Geylang. Night tours that still explicitly acknowledge Geylang's "dual identity" (Alan Walking Tour, Eventbrite) highlight this tension. The challenge for urban planners and the community is to balance improving the public image with the avoidance of gentrification, ensuring Geylang does not lose the authentic character that forms the basis of its CBT potential.

### **D. CONCLUSION**

This research confirms that Geylang, Singapore, is a dynamic urban laboratory defined by a central dialectic: the tension between the historical stigma as a "red-light district" (Finding 1) and a proactive "community spirit" to restore its image (Finding 2). The main conclusion is that Geylang's transformation is not merely a result of top-down urban planning (rezoning), but is

rather driven by the narrative resistance of the local community. This finding indicates that the Geylang Serai community (Finding 2.1) is actively using cultural heritage (through programs at WGS and the Geylang Serai Cultural Belt) as a Community-Based Tourism (CBT) tool to reclaim their identity.

The novelty of this research lies in its contribution to the Tourism Life Cycle literature. We demonstrate a concrete case study where the "rejuvenation" phase is not only driven by commercial intervention, but by organized community enthusiasm (Finding 2.2) that consciously seeks to reverse the "dark tourism" branding back to its original heritage concept. Ultimately, Geylang's future depends on how it manages these two competing forces: top-down commercial intervention focused on land value, and bottom-up cultural resilience focused on heritage value.

Based on the in-depth data findings regarding community response (Finding 2), this study formulates several implications and concrete recommendations for action. First, to address the misalignment between top-down interventions (Finding 1.2) and bottom-up concerns (Finding 2.3), we suggest the establishment of a co-governance framework that integrates representatives from WGS and community figures (Findings 2.1 & 2.2) into the planning board. Second, to address the CBT benefit redistribution gap (Discussion D.2) and avoid commodification, it is recommended that tourism bodies prioritize social enterprise models over conventional commercial tourism. Third, responding to community concerns about gentrification (Finding 2.3), we recommend future longitudinal studies to track the socio-economic impacts of the 2015 rezoning on native resident displacement and cultural identity retention.

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