

The Role of Outdoor Recreation Space in Fostering Social Interactions: Insights from A Mixed-Method Ethnographic Study in Singapore

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Abstract

In a world facing increasing social isolation and loneliness, the World Health Organization emphasises that promoting social connection is a global public health priority (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). A growing body of literature highlights the various roles physical spaces play in fostering social relationships through spatial proximity, composition, and configuration (Boessen et al., 2018; Mouratidis, 2021; Small & Adler, 2019). Accessible places near people's homes, equipped with amenities and facilities, encourage greater social interactions (Small & Adler, 2019). However, little is known about how different spatial contexts interrelate or how perceptions, such as safety concerns, might hinder social engagement (Chan Tack & Small, 2017; Harding, 2009). To address these gaps, we conducted a mixed-methods study on Outdoor Recreation Spaces (ORS) in Singapore to explore how different users visit various types of ORS and what features encourage social interactions. ORS are public spaces, such as parks and outdoor facilities, that support relaxation, socialising, and recreation, contributing to overall well-being. Singapore has invested significantly in ORS as part of its "City in Nature" vision (Tan et al., 2013). We employed the System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC) and walk-along interviews across five types of ORS: a neighbourhood park, playground, linear park connector, rooftop garden, and regional park. Our study identified eight key activity types and five factors that promote ORS usage: convenience, nature, wildlife, facilities, programming, and social interactions. We also provide recommendations for planning and designing ORS to strengthen their role as social hubs in urban settings.

Keywords: Ethnographic Study, Outdoor Recreation Space, Singapore, Social Interaction