How youth are socially engaged in parks: a participatory-approach for understanding youth perceptions and use patterns

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Abstract. Parks are often linked to physical activity for youth provided by park equipment and amenities. Yet, urban green spaces and parks can also afford important opportunities for young people to develop a sense of community, identity and be socially engaged. Spending more time in green spaces can significantly impact the satisfaction and well-being of park users. In this respect, the attractiveness of parks to youth is an important factor to support socially cohesive behaviours. Differences in park preferences and user needs are important, particularly since research often seeks to understand where park users of all ages spend their time and with whom, rather than directly measuring their social network. Hence, parks as sustainable community facilities should promote social interactions among youth, and between youth and adults, which can lead to cohesive behaviours integrated into a social setting. In order for park settings to become favoured by youth, they must afford a range of opportunities for youth activities. This research proposes a youth-friendly participatory-approach that includes a multi-day workshop with youth to explore their social interactions in parks in greater depth. Using drawings, freehand mapping, and discussions using aerial photos of local parks can help us understand how youth use parks, and how they relate to other park users. Key words: Youth perception, Youth participation, Social engagement, Social sustainability, Parks, Green space

1. Introduction

Neighbourhood-parks can provide important psychological and social benefits to society [8][9]. Studies have directly addressed the connection between the park space and social interaction among park visitors [24][18], specifically, among children and youth. There are many studies related to how people use neighbourhood-parks with different purposes. The majority of the attention is focused on what adults’ and children’s needs are and how they spend the majority of their time within neighbourhood-parks for participating in physical activity, playing, spending their leisure time and/or relaxing. The literature is scant with studies related to how youth and elderly spend their time within neighbourhood-parks.

Neighbourhood-parks are places where youth or even children from different backgrounds can participate in the same activities. Neighbourhood-parks can also impact satisfaction and well-being for people of all ages, and are potentially important for youth because of the absence of the concentrated focus on the youth-to-youth and youth-to-adults interactions within neighbourhood-parks, yet there has been little research on these topics. Therefore, this research will address the existing gap in understanding how youth are socially engaged within neighbourhood-parks. To investigate which youth needs can be met in parks to promote social sustainability, it is critical to better understand how youth perceive and define social engagement within these spaces. This research aims to determine:

- How youth perceive and actualise social engagement in parks?
• What are the physical and non-physical barriers to youth park use?

This paper begins to fill an important gap by firstly investigating how youth use and perceive neighbourhood-parks and what types of activities are preferred by them will be discussed. Secondly, different kinds of social activities that occur within neighbourhood-parks will be discussed to better understand youth’s perception of social engagement.

2. How youth are using and perceiving neighbourhood-parks

There have been several efforts to identify the needs of young people in neighbourhood-parks [20]. Additionally, there are studies which focus on youth preferences of landscape as related to differences in age, gender, physical appearances and education [3][16][32]. Capturing human perception is essential for understanding the interrelations between humans and landscapes [19]. As a key element of preference, environmental perception is an active process of interaction between humans and the environment [21].

Neighbourhood-park settings can provide areas to foster communication skills, for relaxation, social connectedness and friendship [7][28]. Research on young people’s social engagement is often related to playgrounds located within parks [1][30][36][37]. It is an accepted viewpoint that play provides opportunities for social skills’ development [30][32][37]. Hence, play areas for children and youth not only support contact between them but also their guardians. Moore (1983 and 1986), with expertise in architecture and psychology, considers how the physical surroundings affect young people’s well-being and development [25]. Focusing on children and youth play settings, Moore discusses how particular environmental features promote social, cognitive, and motor development. He argues that traditional playgrounds promote motor development, but are unsupportive of cognitive and social development because they offer limited unstructured and spontaneous play opportunities. Studies previously asked youth about the attributes of the play settings (both natural and built), reasons and associated activities of their preferred settings and identified the significant elements and features linked to the preferences [31]. Therefore, there is a need to find a suitable way to understand youth’s perceived needs and diverse activities within neighbourhood-parks to better understand social sustainability.

3. How social activity is perceived in neighbourhood-parks by youth

Meeting opportunities can be important for community development fostering social ties with others because visitors can meet others and establish relationships that promote a general sense of community [29]. Observations of children and youths actual behaviours reveal that neighbourhood-parks provide a context for twice the social interactions than barren spaces [24]. Socio-economic and demographic characteristics reveal that social interaction of park’s visitors with different backgrounds or social ties would be considerably different. There are certain social conditions that make park’s visitors in different age groups (e.g., children/youth and adults) suspended such norms making people more approachable because their relations can be highly dependent on the types of users, rules of behaviours and comfort that support social use [35].

Park element preferences include both social and physical. For instance, parks afford physical activities such as structured sports within a grassy area, and jumping and swinging on relevant equipment. Social affordances in neighbourhood-parks can include interactions and connections with siblings and friends or engaging in imaginative and creative play [7]. Clark and Uzzell (2006) provide evidence from Van Andel (1990) who linked place preferences and reasons for preferences. In this respect, the comparison of the place preference of children/youth and adults indicates that the types of places liked (i.e., playgrounds and natural areas) and the reasons are similar across them. These areas are preferred for three reasons, such as the place, is good for a specific type of activity (e.g., football), includes certain environmental features (e.g., open space), and the place offers the company of other children and youth. Thus, numerous aspects of the physical environment could be affective on social behaviours and social interactions [6][11][14].

Therefore, neighbourhood-parks should offer great scope for social interaction, and a variety of unplanned and planned social uses and behaviours, which fulfil the diverse needs of users in terms of comfort, publicness and privacy [35]. Chaudhury, et al. (2019) defines good play areas as those which
offer opportunities for playing alone or with peers/siblings. Neighbourhood-park environments that facilitate play should dedicate attention to the age appropriateness of the playground design and amenities for younger and older children. For instance, youth prefer un-designated park features with vacant areas, corners, rest areas, and playfields as a setting for gatherings and sports, community facilities. Whereas, the younger children, more often prefer playgrounds, green areas and developed parks [31]. In addition, youth prefer invisible parks such as un-developed and vacant areas, whereas children prefer play areas. The gender differences are also reflected in varied preferences in the park use. Girls generally prefer natural areas, while boys tend to favour remote settings [31].

4. Barriers to park use for youth
Barriers for youth to use neighbourhood-parks include the lack of physical access. In terms of public green spaces, this includes long distances and unsafe routes [19][28], unattractiveness [18][19], and safety issues [19][32][33][37]. Various perceived barriers, including unpleasant neighbourhood-park features, a lack of walkability and playground, and a limited sense of community, indicate negative associations with satisfaction, and the strongest negative association with general comfort [19]. Unsafe neighbourhood-parks with low quality will be avoided by park visitors, especially children and youth. The fear of crime may negatively impact youth social interactions [29], with the highest levels of crime negatively affecting social relations.

Another perceived barrier by children and younger youth is that they are not allowed to go to neighbourhood-parks without an adult. However, neighbourhood-parks can also be the neighbourhood location for social interactions where the good quality of parks settings and characteristics are combined with neighbourhood characteristics and lead to the establishment of social ties [24]. Parents may perceive parks as dangerous, because of older people at the park. Measures of individual perceptions can improve the understanding of how the setting of a neighbourhood-park affects social contacts [29]. Based on prior studies, further research is required to explore the perceived and actual barriers faced by youth for socialising. Therefore, in order to investigate which youth needs can be met in parks to promote social activities, it is critical to better understand youth experiences and their perspective directly.

5. A gap in our understanding of youth preferences and use patterns in neighbourhood-parks
The Kaplans (1987) developed a model of environmental preferences (see table 1) [19][21][22][32] which defines different characteristics of preferred environments. The four properties - coherence, legibility, mystery and complexity - provide a means of assessing landscape quality empirically, while at the same time intuitively meaningful [22]. The two key dimensions that lead to an environment being preferred are first whether an individual can make sense of the environment and secondly if individuals can be involved in the environment by understanding and/or exploration. The preference matrix is applicable to any environment (human-designed or natural) [34].

Table 1. Kaplan Preference Matrix as a perception-based approach to landscape quality [22]

| Dimension  | Understanding | Exploration |
|------------|---------------|-------------|
| Immediate  | Coherence     | Complexity  |
| Inferred   | Legibility    | Mystery    |

The first series of studies on preferences identified four basic properties (i.e., coherence, legibility, complexity and mystery) that allow park users to evaluate them in comparison to other scenes (called collative properties) [19][32]. In the case of social preferences, research also suggest social (togetherness with friends and family), behavioural (preferred activities), and emotional (mental well-being) reasons for the preferences [26][27][31]. The main limitation with the Preference Matrix for youth preferences is that this method has used the researchers’ perspective of the landscape [20][31][32] rather than the
youth perspectives. It is, thus, useful to explore the specific ways that youth perceive their nearby landscape structure to gain insights into design considerations for neighbourhood outdoor spaces that are preferred and used by them. To address this gap, face-to-face workshops to collect qualitative data from the youth themselves is warranted. Based on past research using this approach, we have proposed a workshop framework for further research [2]. The face-to-face and informal series of workshops (multi-day) allow for discussions to resolve design questions (Ibid, 189). Therefore, series of workshops with three different art-based activities with youth about their concerns for surrounding social engagement within neighbourhood-parks are introduced to better understand their opinions and preferences. The three different tasks include:

- Drawing and freehand mapping of their favourite neighbourhood-parks to understand youth viewpoints about sustainable park design
- Discussion of aerial photos of their neighbourhood-parks to understand youth experience (positive and negative) and barriers
- Photography of their neighbourhood-parks to understand their perspectives and preferences through capturing their perceptions with a description of what they have photographed.

6. Conclusion

This paper introduced firstly the ways that youth use and perceived neighbourhood-parks. Secondly, it demonstrated how youth perceive social interaction therein. Finally, the barriers for using neighbourhood-parks and fostering social engagement within neighbourhood-parks were discussed. Numerous studies about social sustainability discuss the effect of environmental design on social sustainability [6][13][14][23]. Social sustainability also is one of the important issues in sustainable development. There is evidence to support that the experience of being in a place is associated with the built environment quality, psychological comfort, the perception of the environment, the ability of establishing social relationships, and formal or informal encounters [4][5][6][12][13][14][15][17][23]. A sustainable community is a place which provides a sense of community not only among youth, but also among youth and adults. From a social sustainability perspective, youth need to socially grow while using neighbourhood-parks. In this respect, when youth get together with their friends, they can make many decisions such as what time to go park/ where to meet each other/ what to do there. Through these activities, they can be educated on how to get along with others and how to make a group decision [2].
Further, talking with youth about their social activities can help them to be socio-culturally educated which is important for having a sustainable community. Therefore, the neighbourhood-parks where people spend their time and interact with others is important for fostering social well-being, satisfaction, quality of life, and also sustainable communities. To do so, introducing a suitable method for unpacking youth needs and perceptions of park spaces and social well-being is needed. By employing qualitative youth-friendly methods, future parks can be designed to fulfil its users’ actual needs. Moreover, the findings from youth participation and the proposed method can provide design recommendation for the future design of socially sustainable neighbourhood-parks for both young people and adults and to overcome youth barriers to be socially active beside adults within neighbourhood-parks.

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