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The Impact of Public Park Development on Social Relationships: A Study on Residents in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

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1. Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Urban public parks play an increasingly vital role in enhancing the social fabric of cities. Globally, studies have consistently demonstrated that green public spaces contribute to residents' physical, psychological, and social well-being (Hartig et al., 2014; Kwon et al., 2021). For instance, research in the United States showed that parks not only foster physical and mental health but also serve as essential nodes for social interaction (Hartig et al., 2014). This aligns with evidence that well-designed urban green spaces facilitate social cohesion by enabling casual interactions and building community trust (Qi, Mazumdar, & Vasconcelos, 2024).

Theoretically, urban public parks are understood to function as critical enablers of social capital and cohesion. Empirical research demonstrates that green public spaces foster repeated interactions, trust, and place attachment—core elements of social cohesion (Qi et al., 2024). A 2024 systematic review concluded that accessibility, diverse amenities, and inclusive design are essential factors that enable parks to support everyday social engagement among varying age and cultural groups (Qi et al., 2024). Furthermore, parks that facilitate positive experiences across demographic lines can enhance social capital, leading to healthier and more resilient communities (Schwartz et al., 2019). These theoretical perspectives underscore the importance of evaluating public park development not only for environmental or physical health outcomes, but as a vehicle for nurturing robust social relationships—especially in large, diverse cities.

Jeddah, the commercial hub located along the Red Sea coast in western Saudi Arabia, is a sprawling metropolis covering approximately 1,756 km² (Jeddah Municipality, 2025). According to the most recent figures, the city's population stands at roughly 3.75 million as of 2022, making it the second-largest city in the Kingdom and the ninth-largest in the Middle East (WorldPopulationReview, 2025). The city's demographic composition is notably diverse: Saudi nationals constitute the majority, but expatriates from countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and other

Arab and Asian nations collectively form over 40% of the population (Jeddah Municipality, 2025). Jeddah experiences a hot desert climate with average daytime temperatures exceeding 37 °C in summer and mild, humid winters (Jeddah Municipality, 2025). These climatic conditions intensify the need for well-designed green spaces that can provide respite for residents and support outdoor social activities year-round.

Demographically, Saudi Arabia's population reached nearly 37 million in May 2025, with a national density of roughly 16 people/km² (WorldPopulationReview, 2025). However, population clusters around urban centers—including Jeddah—exhibit much higher density, reaching over 6,400 persons per square mile (approximately 2,500 per km²) (Jeddah Municipality, 2025). The multicultural nature of Jeddah, combined with its relatively young population, underscores the urgent need for communal venues that nurture social ties and inter-cultural understanding. Public parks can serve as inclusive platforms for connecting diverse groups, thereby supporting social integration and cohesion.

Within the Middle Eastern context, and particularly in Saudi Arabia, the development of public parks has become a strategic priority under Vision 2030, which emphasizes improving quality of life through urban revitalization. In Jeddah, efforts to expand and enhance park infrastructure support broader goals of walkability, community engagement, and sustainable urban growth (Alnaim, Dano, & Alqahtany, 2025; Almohandes & Mohamed, 2023). Empirical studies in Saudi settings, such as the Dammam Metropolitan Area, have highlighted that features like safety, maintenance, and accessible design in local parks are key drivers of social interaction among residents (Alnaim et al., 2025). Similarly, GIS analyses in Jeddah revealed disparities in walkable access to parks caused by urban form—such as street connectivity, block permeability, and park distribution—which directly affect residents' ability to utilize these spaces for social engagement (Addas & Maghrabi, 2020).

Complementary qualitative research in Jeddah has further explored how public open spaces contribute to social life, demonstrating cultural and demographic diversity

in how these spaces are experienced (Addas & Maghrabi, 2020). However, while existing studies have highlighted health, environmental, or general usability benefits, fewer have focused on social outcomes such as frequency and quality of interpersonal relationships within the park context. This signals a gap in both theory and practice, particularly regarding how parks influence social dynamics among specific population segments.

This research, therefore, seeks to contribute by examining how public park development projects in Jeddah influence social relationships among residents, with a refined focus on one accessible demographic subgroup, such as mothers. By leveraging a concise and validated questionnaire around social relationship constructs, this study will bridge the gap between urban planning initiatives and lived social experiences. It responds directly to the theoretical need for concrete empirical evidence linking park infrastructure and social outcomes (Qi et al., 2024), as well as the practical imperative of Vision 2030 to foster cohesive, healthy, and sustainable urban communities.

1.2. Research Problem

Despite growing recognition of the value of public parks in fostering community well-being, the relationship between park development and social relationships—particularly in urban contexts within the Gulf region—remains underexplored. While numerous studies have emphasized the physical and environmental benefits of green spaces, limited research has examined how public parks influence interpersonal social interactions, especially among specific demographic groups such as mothers. This lack of focused inquiry leaves a significant gap in our understanding of how urban design can enhance or inhibit community cohesion. Therefore, the central research problem guiding this study is:

To what extent does the development of public parks in Jeddah influence social relationships among local residents, particularly mothers?

This research aims to address this question by analyzing residents' experiences, perceptions, and patterns of interaction in newly developed or improved parks, thereby contributing to both theory and practice in urban planning and social development.

1.2.1. Theoretical Gaps

While urban planning literature has increasingly acknowledged the psychological and physical benefits of public green spaces, less attention has been paid to the specific social mechanisms that these spaces enable (Hartig et al., 2014; Qi et al., 2024). Most theoretical models of urban livability and sustainability reference parks in general terms but fail to articulate how these spaces foster trust, belonging, and repeated interaction—key ingredients of social capital (Schwartz et al., 2019). Furthermore, existing studies tend to view “community” as a homogenous entity, overlooking the nuanced ways in which different groups (e.g., mothers, children, elderly, expatriates) interact with public space. In the context of Saudi Arabia, theoretical frameworks that connect urban park development with measurable changes in social cohesion are still underdeveloped, leaving a notable conceptual gap. This

research seeks to build on and extend existing theory by isolating social relationships as a specific outcome of public park use, contributing new empirical insights to a growing but incomplete body of knowledge.

1.2.2. Practical Gaps

From a practical standpoint, Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 has spurred rapid development of public infrastructure, including urban parks, as part of efforts to enhance quality of life. Yet the evaluation of such projects often focuses on physical access, green coverage, or user satisfaction, without delving into the social impact on communities (Al-Na’im et al., 2025; Almohandes & Mohamed, 2023). In cities like Jeddah—characterized by dense populations, diverse residents, and a harsh climate—well-planned public parks could play a key role in strengthening everyday social bonds. However, urban designers and policymakers currently lack localized data on how these spaces are actually used for social purposes. There is also a shortage of feedback from marginalized yet socially influential groups such as mothers, who often serve as facilitators of community interactions through their children. By examining the real-world social implications of park development, this study aims to inform more inclusive, community-driven urban design strategies in Jeddah and similar cities across the region.

1.3. Research Significance

Understanding how public park development affects social relationships is especially relevant in urban environments undergoing rapid transformation. This research contributes to the growing discourse on livable cities and social sustainability by examining the link between spatial planning and social interaction, focusing specifically on Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. By investigating how the design and development of public parks influence the quality and frequency of social relationships—particularly among mothers—this study provides new insight into how everyday environments shape human connection. The significance of this research lies in its ability to bridge a conceptual and practical gap in urban development discourse, especially within the Gulf context, where studies of social cohesion through public infrastructure remain limited.

1.3.1. At the theoretical level

At the theoretical level, this study advances the understanding of public park development as more than just an urban beautification effort. It frames parks as active social infrastructures capable of influencing interpersonal dynamics, trust-building, and social inclusion (Qi et al., 2024). While urban sociology and planning literature have addressed the importance of public space in general terms, this study isolates social relationships as a measurable outcome and investigates their development within the specific socio-cultural and environmental conditions of Jeddah. Furthermore, by focusing on a defined population—mothers—the study introduces a demographic-specific layer to social cohesion theory, challenging the assumption that public space serves all communities equally. These insights contribute to the refinement of theoretical models that address the social impact of urban design in non-Western, high-density, climate-sensitive cities like Jeddah.

1.3.2. At the practical level

On a practical level, the study aligns with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 objectives, particularly the Quality-of-Life Program, which prioritizes improved urban environments and stronger community bonds through inclusive public infrastructure. Urban planners and municipal authorities in Jeddah are investing heavily in park development projects, yet limited local data exists on how these projects shape residents' social experiences. This research provides decision-makers with empirically grounded recommendations to ensure that park designs are not only aesthetically pleasing or physically accessible but also socially functional. By highlighting the role of public parks in facilitating daily social interactions, especially for mothers who often act as community connectors, this study may inform more inclusive, family-centered park planning. Ultimately, it provides evidence to support policies that foster both physical and social well-being in Saudi urban environments.

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