Use of Urban Green Spaces In Northern Ireland by Ethnic Minority Groups

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Executive Summary

Observational studies undertaken in parks in Northern Ireland indicate a very low percentage usage by ethnic minority groups. This project aimed to gain a greater understanding of how urban green spaces are used by minority groups, current barriers and improvements that would increase levels of use.

A questionnaire was circulated and a focus group held, providing information from a total of 11 people. Reasons for visiting green spaces included relaxing, making new friends, walking dogs, entertaining children and a shortcut to the shops. Barriers included lack of time, weather, safety fears and accessibility of the green space. Improvements suggested included better public transport links, more toilets/better signs as to where the toilets are, lighting/security at night, separation of large and small dogs, coffee shop, more opportunities to watch sporting activities (no language barrier), and built features with architecture that comes from their cultural background.

1.Introduction

This project aims to obtain a greater understanding of the current use of urban green spaces among those from a minority background who are living in Northern Ireland. Building on this foundation we also want to learn what barriers they feel may exist to their making use of these spaces and what their priorities are to improve these spaces, so increasing the level of use.

According to NI Environment Link ethnographic studies carried out in 2022, of the 775 people who were observed in 2 different parks in Northern Ireland, only 3 people come from minority group, which showed that the using of the parks by minority population is limited. Therefore, it is significant to focus on detecting minority people.

The results from this research will then be compared with a wider Northern Ireland study to see is usage and priorities for improvements are culturally specific or not. This data will feed into a report by NI Environment Link which aims to create a route-map and action plan for the future of Urban Green Spaces in Northern Ireland, hopefully helping leverage funding for this work.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction
This chapter reviews the key literature concerned with people's behaviors toward using urban green space and people's perspective on living that is closely related to increasing the utilization rate of urban green space. Besides, this chapter also included the actual situation that non-local people living in Northern Ireland need to face and that has influenced their use of urban green space. What's more, the methods of research and scholars' suggestions on increasing the utilization rate of urban green space are collected.

Numerous scholars have conducted extensive research in urban green space in global and different societies including Western countries and Asia (Grahn and Stigsdotter, 2010; Bundy *et al*., 2002; Lang and Mell, 2020). In order to localize subjects, there has been a great deal of research on society and community life in Northern Ireland. This is especially because of the sectarian nature of Northern Irish society, which influences the culture, society ad politics at a very deep level. Because of this, sectarianism and green space use in Northern Ireland have been the focus of a great deal of academic research (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). However, because of this focus on the sectarian communities, this has meant little other research has been carried out on other communities.

As these studies are predominantly focused on investigating the native Irish communities but there is a lack of research into people who have immigrated to foreign countries. Northern Ireland contains many different communities that have various cultures which directly influence their living styles, including their use of urban green space (Hughes *et al*., 2007). Especially Northern Ireland has a great number of non-local people who have immigrated from other countries, such as Malaysia, India and China (Hayes and Dowds, 2006). Therefore, this review critically evaluates the perspective, influence and real problems on local and non-local people use of urban green space, in a bit to address the gap that raises the use of urban green space by non-local people.

2.2 Urban Green Space in general
Kondo et al. (2018) have described Urban Green Spaces as including parks and leisure-based areas. What's more, more than 50% of the population of world is living in urban areas (Kondo *et al*., 2018). Besides, according to Branas and MacDonald (2014), urban green space not only can bring benefits to the economy and environment, but also to public health, including decreasing cancer, behavioral problems and mental health problems. Aldwin (2007) has found that many kinds of stress-related illnesses can be relieved by urban green spaces. Moreover, cardiopulmonary and vascular functions can be enhanced (Aldwin, 2007).

Grahn and Stigsdotter (2010) have confirmed that the presence of Urban Green Spaces can be seen as a symbol of economic prosperity and development. Besides, urban green spaces are a good context to let people know and experience the environment (Bundy *et al*., 2002). What's more, Thompson (2002) has described that urban green spaces are vital for the green

network in many countries from an ecological perspective. Therefore, it is significant to let the urban green spaces suitable to everyone.

2.3 Suggestions for Urban Green Spaces
Some scholars have suggested methods for increasing the use of urban green spaces. Schipperijn et al. (2010) have revealed that people lack the motivation to use parks, but urban green spaces are abundant. Thus, advertising the benefits of using green spaces is meaningful. What's more, the distance has been strongly related to the frequency of using green spaces, so it is significant to shorten the distance between the nearest green space and houses (Schipperijn *et al.*, 2010).

2.4 The method for research projects
According to Kondo et al. (2018), the articles that have been conducted in the survey were identified by certain research terms, including urban green space and research objectives. Besides, the data for reflecting the impacts on human health were collected from urban hospitals, and the BUGS method was integrated and provided environmental, economic and societal information via its numerous models, like GIS, climate model and so on (De Ridder *et al.*, 2004). What's more, 'the results came from questionnaires that have recorded study design, location, years, unit(s) of analysis, sample size, population or sample characteristics, environmental exposure and control exposure, health outcome(s), and direction of findings from each of the studies' (Kondo *et al.*, 2018, p.445). In addition, three-way classifications were used to divide the green spaces (Lang and Mell, 2020). Many scholars also applied focus groups to study residents' understanding of shared green spaces.

2.5 Society and Community life with urban green spaces in Northern Ireland
According to Ali (2007), green spaces have been permeated by different cultures, economies and people's perspectives. What's more, Northern Ireland has obvious sectarianism (Lang and Mell, 2020). Thus, people in Northern Ireland should consider different cultures before using green space. Some problems related to sectarianism have decreased the use of urban green space to some extent. Belfast is a city with many parks, but also has conflicts because of its history (Bollens, 2018; Mell, 2019). Besides, Shirlow and Murtagh (2006) have suggested that many conflicts in Belfast are original from the difference between religious background, classes and economic trends. Urban green space development has been impacted by conflicts.

Belfast has been a good example of improving using urban green space. Bollens (2018) has argued that compared with many cities which focus on developing their industry in the UK, Belfast has poured a great deal of effort to flourish its shared parks, which has been regarded as the development of economy and charity. Moreover, shared space, like urban green spaces, should not be tied by different religions, gender and classes. Although it has much related to culture and politics, the recent improvement has boosted the economy and received capital funds, which shows a positive attitude of the residents in Belfast (Rallings, 2014).

Stimulating estate prices has been a good method to fuel economic growth, and the urban green spaces in Belfast have inspired the prices of property (Belfast City Council, 2017). Lang

and Mell (2020) have regarded that the use of the parks has influenced by their locations' social and economic status. What's more, Murtagh (2011) has proved that Belfast has been stimulating the housing market by absorbing migration. Therefore, giving much consideration to non-local people is valuable.

However, Abdelmonem and McWhinney (2015) have revealed that the decision and discussion on 'nature' spaces haven't been applied by the same political standard. According to the report, the affiliations caused by sectarianism have made residents feel not safe enough when they use parks. Some parks, such as Alexandra Park, have physical isolation, like the wall, to divide shared spaces by religion and create a sense of security (Lang and Mell, 2020). However, people's range of activity is limited. A lady who has lived in Belfast for 50 years said: 'I only stick to one side, and I am impossible to go to the other side. Having this wall makes me feel safe'(Lang and Mell, 2020). What's more, some historical factor has roosted in the elder generation's mind, which has hindered them from using shared green space (Ken, 2014). Ken (2014) has observed that many people tend to give a lot of thought before using Gezi Park (Istanbul) since some residents hid weapons and even themselves in the bushes in war times. In addition, Brewer et al. (2011) also have defined that the Christian groups, including Catholics and Protestants, have been a trigger of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

All in all, it is significant to create an inclusive and engaged atmosphere in urban green space (Lang and Mell, 2020). Belfast City Council has aimed to eliminate the unfairness in green space, which strongly relies on policy-making in Northern Ireland (Belfast City Council, 2017). Thus, the priority is letting urban green spaces accommodate more cultures, even as it diversifies (Lang and Mell, 2020).

2.6 Literature Review Conclusion
The articles involved in this review not only have established the concept of urban green space, but also have explained the cause of the phenomenon and analyzed the improvement for increasing the use of urban green space. What's more, the benefits of using urban green space are clarified. The scholars come from different countries, which can prove that using urban green space has been focused widely.

Although many areas have been detected, non-local populations are rarely paid attention. Therefore, more systematic and theoretical research on the use of urban green space by non-local groups is required for finding the improvements in using urban green space.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

A questionnaire was circulated about use of urban green spaces, however only 6 people completed it due to language barriers. A focus group of 5 people was also undertaken.

3.2 Questionnaire design
The questionnaire contains 15 questions and takes 5 to 10 minutes to finish. Besides, the questionnaire, the information about residents' location, ages, frequency of using the urban green spaces, the comment of it, the way and aim for using and the improvement people expect. Since this part did not provide enough information in the improvement people expect, the focus group was added.

3.3 Focus group design
Five people are aged 40, 45, 59, 62 and 65, and they all have been living in Northern Ireland for more than 15 years. Three people are Asian and two of them are African.

4. Findings

In this report, the target population is 10 residences who come from minority background. Besides, the classification of exercise are inactive, light activity and intense activity.

4.1 The result from the questionnaire
The sample includes six people all living in Northern Ireland. Two of them have lived in west Belfast and South Belfast respectively, and others have lived in Derry-Londonderry, Lisburn and Bangor. Besides, their ages are 29, 38, 42, 45, 54 and 66. A person whose age is 29 chose once a week for visiting the parks, which is the same as people whose ages are 38 and 45. A person whose age is 42 has never used parks. A person whose age is 54 uses the urban green space every 2 to 3 months, and a person aged 66 likes using the parks three times a week. Since one person has never used parks, the following conclusion excludes his/her answers.

As for the park use, four participants have visited parks mainly on weekends, one person chose without visiting and one person chose both visiting on week days and weekends. What's more, two respondents walked to the nearest parks, and they all chose to walk for less than 15 minutes. Others chose public transport which takes 21 to 30 minutes.

As for interviewees' comments on the urban green spaces, five participants chose neither agree nor disagree for almost all the descriptions of the urban green spaces that include a place to relax, a high-quality place, which is good for children and pets and feeling safe. Moreover, two of the respondents' reasons for using green spaces are walking their dogs and children, other respondents regarded their aims are for themselves, like relaxing and making new friends.

Lastly, all interviewees in my survey viewed accessibility to toilets in the park which were chosen five times as the priority. Besides, having more events and feeling safer were chosen three times, and cleaning dogs' excrement and making the urban green spaces more inclusive were chosen twice and once respectively.

4.2 Discussion about the result from the questionnaire

The participants aged 29, 38 and 45 do full-time work and indicate insufficient leisure time. Therefore, having a high-quality and handy park near them is important for helping some people who are struggling to squeeze time to keep healthy. Similarly, the respondent aged 42 states that he/she does not have time to visit parks. Lastly, the participant aged 66, has time to visit parks as they are retired. Thus, the main used population of the parks may be people over 65 years old.

Considering that parks tend to be busier during weekends, and the population aged 65 and under mostly work during the week, a number of events could be created on the weekends. Moreover, travelling 21 to 30 minutes to get to the park is longer than residents' expectations of routine exercise. Since according to Basu and Nagendra (2021), people tend to go to the parks which can be reached within then minutes. Besides, because of the Asian moderation culture that makes people like choosing the middle option, like the comments from the residents are not positive nor negative, which did not offer ideas relating with improvement.

4.3 The result from the focus group

People in the focus group were provided some information that was collected as an 'improvement card' and mentioned by people who filled in the questionnaire. The improvement cards include seats, lights, free events and activities, security, clean appearance, welcome signage, shelter, separated paths, bright color, green spaces, rubbish bins, shops, toilets, public transport, free Wi-fi, certain areas for meeting people, family activities, pet-friendly, parking lots, use facilities, public design, temporary uses, community gardens, picnic tables, dog safe areas, dog excrement bins and Cafe. According to the response from the focus group, good security and toilets should be treated as priorities.

The interview responses from the focus group revealed the following views: firstly, people like watching sporting activities and finding short-cut to go to supermarkets, which were mentioned by all participants. Then, the reasons for using urban green space is getting close to nature and feeling peace when using parks. Lastly, more than half of people said they only did inactive activities in the near parks, and others did some light activities occasionally. No respondents in the sample indicated doing intense exercise in parks.

However, three people in the focus group also argued about some bad phenomena that they saw when using parks. They described the scrambling, drug use and heavy drinking of alcohol, especially during the weekends.

Moreover, people in the focus group suggested some improvements that were excluded from the cards. Firstly, a participant found that the parks are large but not being used enough. Thus, some activities could be held in the parks near the school, like outdoor activities. However, peace is still important, especially for the older generation. Secondly, some people raising dogs said they want separated places to divide large dogs and small dogs. Lastly, interviewees suggested they would welcome coffee shop and a toilet, at least a clear sign for guiding them to the nearest shop or bathroom.

4.4 Discussion about the result from the focus group

In this report, the impacts of weather are excluded. However, all people in the focus group mentioned that rainy days always hinder them to visit parks. Especially for the Chinese population, because of some old traditions and saying, people are unwilling to go out during rainy days.

A woman around 50 years old said she often walks along in the parks, even during the nighttime. She described this situation as not 100% safe, but the suffering accidence is a small probability event. Mahrous et al. (2018) have suggested that perceived security in urban parks is significant in the Egyptian context. What's more, building safe parks is the priority in South Africa (Hook and Vrdoljak, 2002). Besides, according to other descriptions of dangerous behaviors, visible security should be added.

Three people in the focus group said that their social contact is limited. Sometimes they want to watch sports games or attend activities to know local people, for which language barriers are not an obstacle to let them integrate into the positive atmosphere. However, two people argued that they want to feel peace in the urban green space. Therefore, finding a balance is vital. For example, a park can be divided into two parts, including a social part and a quiet part.

Since supermarkets tend to be open at 1pm on Sundays, so people like using parks and then going to the supermarkets (information from the focus group). Moreover, all people said that they need to use the toilet in the parks. The most effective improvement could be giving guidance to the nearest supermarket and toilet.

Asian people in the focus group suggested the parks should be fully used, because their home countries don't have plenty of urban green space and the nature-based classrooms have many benefits, including increasing children's well-being, independency and reducing conflicts among teenagers (Dennis *et al.*, 2014).

Minority people tend to live in apartments or terraced houses, therefore they do not have enough space to raise large pets. Four people in the focus group who have small dogs at home said that they are unwilling to let their dogs meet large dogs.

The limitation of this research is people in the focus group are around 55 years old, so they all filled in inactive exercise and watching the game, and no improvement relating to light activity and intense activity was suggested.

5. **Recommendations and Conclusion**

5.1 Recommendations

According to the results from the focus group and questionnaire, there are several recommendations for improving the quality of the urban green space, which can effectively attract more minority visitors.

Firstly, adding security is a powerful improvement. Since no visible security and a place where there are instances of crime and antisocial behavior due to underage drinking. Thus, increasing the decent behaviors should be emphasized. Besides, some minority people like to predict the risks because of historical reasons, which also can be weakened by security. Therefore, it is significant to hire security to offer surveillance that prevents antisocial behavior and drinking in the park. However, additional financial costs for hiring securities could decrease its feasibility. Ideally, the government can provide more funds to support the improvement achieved.

Secondly, toilets and lighting are expected. Providing toilets has been one of the priorities of the focus group. Besides, lighting is vital in the dark months. Since some working people prefer to use parks after work. The feasibility is positive. Although at the same time as building the toilets, cleaning staff also need to be hired, which also needs budget.

Thirdly, it is helpful to enrich the public transport and improve the bus connections and the extra bus or train for activities. People in the focus group said that parking car is not convenient and it is an obstacle to visiting parks. Besides, after some evening activities, calling a cab is not timely. However, Cáceres et al. (2020) have regarded that adding that would promote many financial and service issues. Although parks are aiming to increase accessibility, motorbikes should be regulated. It is not only because of the low safety of motorcycles, but also because of the high noise (Khan *et al.*, 2018).

Fourth, increasing the amusement of the urban green spaces, which can be achieved by holding seasonal activities, sports games and building play equipment, is feasible. Although it consumes financial and human resources, the pros overweigh its cons. Because minority people like attending activities and watching games. Besides, they also embrace to take exercises along, same as they use parks in their own countries (McCormack *et al.*, 2010).

Fifth, some parks, like Botanic Garden that have some special design, such as a pavilion, have more minority visitors. Thus, it is vital to decorate urban green spaces with some designs that are familiar to the minority population. It also can make them feel secure. However, it is hard to be applied. Designing, building and maintaining are challenging.

5.2 Conclusion

This report focuses on the minority population's views of using urban green space in Northern Ireland, which is to increase the use of urban green space by minority people. This

report mainly employs a focus group to detect information. Besides, in the findings part, the valuable information from the focus group and the reason for the current views have been discussed.

6. References

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