

EVALUATION AND DETERMINANTS OF THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION EFFECTIVENESS OF URBAN COMMUNITY SPORTS SPACES

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of ongoing urbanization and the deepening of community-based governance, urban community sports spaces serve not only as important venues for residents' physical activity and leisure, but also as everyday public spaces with the potential to foster neighborhood interaction, strengthen community ties, and promote social integration. From the perspective of social integration, this study examines the social integration effectiveness of urban community sports spaces, with particular attention to its conceptual meaning, dimensional structure, and key influencing factors. First, the study clarifies the notion of social integration in community sports spaces and conceptualizes social integration effectiveness along three core dimensions: interaction, social relationships, and identity/participation. Second, based on questionnaire survey data, field observations, and interview materials, the study analyzes the overall performance of social integration effectiveness in urban community sports spaces. The findings indicate that such spaces play a relatively strong role in facilitating everyday contact and interaction among residents, but remain more limited in promoting deeper relationship building, community identification, and sustained public participation. Overall, social integration effectiveness exhibits a declining pattern from surface-level interaction to deeper forms of integration. Further analysis suggests that social integration effectiveness is not an automatic outcome of spatial existence itself, but rather the combined result of spatial conditions, governance support, and residents' usage behavior. In particular, accessibility, openness, facility adequacy, safety, and comfort provide the basic conditions; governance-related factors such as activity organization, rule guidance, and community organizational involvement play an important facilitating role; and residents' frequency of use, duration of stay, and degree of joint participation directly shape the realization of integration outcomes. The study argues that future development of urban community sports spaces should place greater emphasis on their social and public functions, and should more fully release their integrative potential through improvements in spatial environment, organizational governance, and the quality of social interaction.

Keywords: Urban community sports spaces; Social integration; Social integration effectiveness; Influencing factors

1 INTRODUCTION

With the continued advancement of urbanization, the community has increasingly become the primary arena for residents' everyday life, social interaction, and the delivery of public services [1,2]. In this context, growing attention has been paid to the social functions of community public spaces [3]. As an important component of such spaces, urban community sports spaces serve not only as venues for physical activity, leisure, and health promotion, but also as everyday settings where residents of different ages, occupations, and social backgrounds can encounter one another, interact, and build social ties [4,5]. This role becomes particularly salient in contemporary urban communities, where population composition is becoming more diverse while social connections are often relatively weak. Under these conditions, community sports spaces hold unique potential for fostering neighborhood interaction, strengthening community belonging, and promoting social integration. Therefore, moving beyond the conventional focus on facility provision and sports participation, and re-examining urban community sports spaces through the lens of social integration, is of considerable theoretical and practical significance.

Existing studies on community sports spaces have generated a substantial body of knowledge, with primary attention given to issues such as spatial provision, equitable accessibility, facility allocation, user satisfaction, and residents' participation in physical activity. At the same time, some scholars have begun to examine the role of community public spaces in facilitating social interaction, generating social capital, and enhancing community cohesion [6]. Nevertheless, two major limitations remain in the current literature. First, discussions of how community sports spaces contribute to social integration are still fragmented; social integration is often treated as a secondary or incidental outcome rather than a clearly defined analytical focus. Second, research on the effectiveness of social integration remains relatively underdeveloped, particularly in terms of its core dimensions, evaluative logic, and influencing factors. In other words, whether community sports spaces can genuinely function as effective platforms for promoting social integration, and what factors shape this process, has yet to be systematically clarified.

Against this background, this study focuses on the social integration effectiveness of urban community sports spaces and approaches the issue from three interrelated dimensions: conceptualization, analytical dimensions, and influencing factors. First, drawing on existing research on community sports spaces and social integration, the study defines the

concept of social integration effectiveness in the context of urban community sports spaces and identifies its core analytical dimensions. Second, it examines the actual manifestations of such effectiveness from the perspectives of interaction, social relationships, and identity/participation, in order to reveal how community sports spaces contribute to social integration in practice. Finally, the study explores the key factors shaping social integration effectiveness, with particular attention to spatial conditions, governance support, and residents' usage behavior, and on this basis discusses the underlying mechanisms through which urban community sports spaces facilitate social integration. The study aims to provide both theoretical support and practical implications for optimizing community sports spaces and improving community-based social governance.

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION EFFECTIVENESS IN URBAN COMMUNITY SPORTS SPACES

2.1 Social integration in Community Sports Spaces

Social integration is generally understood as a dynamic process through which different social groups develop connections, build trust, strengthen mutual identification, and engage in shared participation within a common social setting [7]. Compared with macro-level institutional integration or structural incorporation, social integration in the community context is more often manifested as an everyday, situated, and relational process. At its core lies the extent to which residents are able to sustain contact, engage in meaningful interaction, and develop positive forms of community connection within shared living spaces. In this sense, social integration should not be viewed merely as the passive mitigation of social differences; rather, it is an active process through which social ties, behavioral norms, and a sense of belonging are gradually produced through everyday encounters. Accordingly, social integration at the community level is reflected not only in improved neighborhood relations, but also in higher levels of interpersonal trust, stronger willingness to participate in public life, and a growing identification with the community as a shared collective.

Community sports spaces provide a micro-level setting with openness, shared access, and everyday accessibility for the realization of such social integration. Compared with other forms of community public space, sports spaces tend to attract residents through relatively low thresholds of participation and facilitate repeated encounters through diverse forms of activity, including exercise, recreation, spectating, accompanying family members, and casual communication. In this process, residents do not merely occupy the same physical space; they also develop perceptions of, understanding of, and responses to others through concrete forms of action and interaction. Particularly in communities characterized by differences in age structure, occupational background, and social experience, sports spaces can create opportunities for contact in relatively relaxed and informal settings, thereby helping to reduce social distance, foster neighborhood familiarity, support relationship formation, and enhance community inclusion. Community sports spaces, therefore, should not be understood solely as sites for physical activity; they also function as important arenas in which social relationships are generated and community ties are reconfigured.

However, community sports spaces do not automatically produce social integration. Their actual effects depend largely on the quality of interaction that takes place within them and on the broader community context in which such interactions are embedded. On the one hand, sports spaces create the basic conditions for contact and communication, yet contact in itself does not necessarily translate into stable social relationships or a shared sense of community identity. On the other hand, variations in spatial conditions, governance arrangements, and patterns of use may significantly shape residents' participatory experiences and the outcomes of interaction within these spaces. Therefore, the notion of "social integration in community sports spaces" in this study does not simply refer to the co-presence of residents in the same location. Rather, it emphasizes the formation of interactive connections, the improvement of social relationships, and the strengthening of community identification through sustained use and repeated social engagement. In other words, social integration in community sports spaces should be understood as a gradual process through which residents, by relying on sports spaces as everyday public settings, build social ties and develop a shared sense of community through contact, interaction, and participation.

2.2 Analytical Dimensions of Social Integration Effectiveness

Once the meaning of social integration in community sports spaces has been clarified, the next question concerns how its effectiveness can be analytically understood and assessed. Given that social integration is inherently processual, layered, and multidimensional, it cannot be adequately captured through a single outcome or an isolated observable feature. This is especially true in the community context, where social integration is rarely achieved in a one-time or linear manner. Rather, it tends to emerge gradually through sustained contact, repeated interaction, and the progressive development of identification and engagement. Accordingly, an analysis of the social integration effectiveness of community sports spaces should begin with the different forms of social experience and expression that arise through residents' use of these spaces, and should be organized into dimensions that reflect an internally coherent developmental logic.

Based on the core characteristics of community-level social integration and the practical setting of community sports spaces, this study conceptualizes social integration effectiveness along three key dimensions: interaction, social relationships, and identity/participation. First, the dimension of interaction concerns whether community sports spaces create opportunities for contact and communication among residents, and whether they facilitate everyday encounters

and social exchange across different individuals and groups. Interaction constitutes the basic condition under which social integration becomes possible and represents the most immediate and visible social function of community sports spaces. Second, the dimension of social relationships examines whether repeated interaction in these spaces contributes to the formation of more stable forms of social connection, including neighborhood familiarity, enhanced trust, increased mutual support, and the expansion of weak-tie networks. Compared with interaction, this dimension reflects a deeper level of social connection that usually depends on more sustained contact and more positive interactional experiences. Third, the dimension of identity/participation refers to whether residents, through the use of sports spaces and ongoing engagement with others, gradually develop a stronger sense of belonging to the community, a greater awareness of shared membership, and a stronger willingness to participate in public and collective affairs. This dimension captures the more advanced outcome of social integration, in which simple co-presence and interaction begin to evolve into identification and active involvement.

These three dimensions should not be seen as isolated from one another; rather, they form a progressive analytical sequence moving from surface-level contact to deeper forms of integration. In general, residents first encounter one another and engage in everyday interaction through shared use of sports spaces. Through repeated contact, familiarity and social relationships may gradually emerge, which in turn can foster emotional attachment to the community and encourage greater participation in collective life. In this sense, interaction represents the starting point of social integration, social relationships reflect its extension, and identity/participation indicates its further consolidation. By distinguishing social integration effectiveness into the three dimensions of interaction, social relationships, and identity/participation, the study is able not only to capture the basic process through which community sports spaces contribute to social integration, but also to provide a clearer basis for identifying differences across dimensions and examining their respective determinants in subsequent analysis.

2.3 Analytical Framework

Building on the preceding conceptual clarification and dimensional distinction, this study further develops an analytical framework for understanding the social integration effectiveness of urban community sports spaces. The purpose of this framework is to explain how community sports spaces influence social integration outcomes under specific social and spatial conditions [8]. In general, the social integration effectiveness of community sports spaces should not be understood as an automatic consequence of the mere existence of space itself. Rather, it is a processual outcome that gradually emerges through the combined effects of spatial conditions, governance support, and residents' patterns of use. In other words, community sports spaces do not inherently generate social integration; the realization of their social functions depends on certain material foundations, institutional arrangements, and everyday practices. Therefore, any meaningful analysis of their social integration effectiveness must go beyond the physical presence of space and examine how such spaces are organized, how they are used, and how residents actually interact within them.

From this perspective, the formation of social integration effectiveness in urban community sports spaces can be understood through three interrelated dimensions. First, spatial conditions constitute the basic precondition for the emergence of social integration. These include accessibility, openness, facility adequacy, safety, and environmental comfort. Favorable spatial conditions help lower the barriers to entering and using sports spaces, thereby creating the basic possibility for co-presence and contact among diverse groups of residents. Second, governance support serves as an important condition for sustaining and deepening social integration. This dimension is reflected in the day-to-day management of sports spaces, facility maintenance, activity organization, rule guidance, and the involvement of community-based organizations. Compared with physical provision alone, governance support more directly shapes whether a sports space can evolve into a stable, orderly, and inclusive environment for social interaction. Third, residents' usage behavior functions as the key intermediary linking spatial and governance conditions to social integration outcomes. This includes frequency of use, duration of stay, modes of participation, and the extent to which activities are undertaken with others. Only when residents actually enter these spaces, use them continuously, and engage in concrete forms of interaction can community sports spaces begin to function as effective sites for social integration.

Accordingly, this study argues that the social integration effectiveness of urban community sports spaces is formed through a sequential logic of spatial conditions–governance support–usage behavior–integration outcomes. Spatial conditions and governance support jointly shape the likelihood that residents will enter sports spaces, remain in them, and engage with others, while residents' actual experiences of use and interaction further influence different dimensions of integration, including interaction, social relationships, and identity/participation. In essence, the formation of social integration effectiveness is a gradual process that moves from spatial provision to social interaction, and from social interaction to relationship building and community identification. This analytical framework not only provides the theoretical basis for the subsequent evaluation of social integration effectiveness and its influencing factors, but also contributes to a clearer understanding of both the potential and the limits of community sports spaces in the broader context of community governance and social integration.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data used in this study were derived primarily from a questionnaire survey of community residents, supplemented by field observation and semi-structured interview materials. The questionnaire survey was conducted from March to

May 2024, and the target population consisted of residents who used community sports spaces either frequently or occasionally. In order to include respondents from different age groups, occupational backgrounds, and lengths of residence, the survey was administered through a combination of on-site distribution within communities and supplementary online collection. The questionnaire mainly covered respondents' basic characteristics, patterns of community sports space use, experiences of interaction in such spaces, perceptions of neighborhood relationships, and their sense of community identity and willingness to participate in public affairs. These components correspond directly to the core analytical dimensions of social integration effectiveness adopted in this study and provide the empirical basis for the subsequent analysis of influencing factors.

A total of 360 questionnaires were distributed, of which 338 were returned. After excluding incomplete responses, questionnaires with obvious logical inconsistencies, and invalid submissions, 312 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis, yielding an effective response rate of 86.7%. In terms of sample composition, the respondents covered different gender, age, and residential-tenure groups, thus providing a reasonable basis for reflecting the general patterns of community sports space use and perceived social integration effectiveness among urban community residents. To enhance the interpretation of the survey findings, the study also conducted field observations in selected community sports spaces, with particular attention paid to activity types, patterns of stay, forms of interaction, and temporal rhythms of space use. In addition, interview materials from selected community managers and residents were used to supplement and triangulate the questionnaire findings.

Overall, the questionnaire survey constitutes the principal data source for the analysis of social integration effectiveness and its influencing factors in urban community sports spaces, while field observations and interview materials serve primarily to support the interpretation of actual interaction processes and their underlying mechanisms. The combination of multiple sources of evidence enables this study to capture more comprehensively the role of community sports spaces in fostering resident interaction, relationship building, and community identification.

3.1 Evaluation of social integration effectiveness

Based on the analytical framework developed above, the social integration effectiveness of urban community sports spaces can be differentiated into three dimensions: interaction, social relationships, and identity/participation. Taken as a whole, community sports spaces show a clear positive capacity to promote social integration, yet their effects are unevenly distributed across dimensions. In relative terms, the interaction dimension is the most prominent, the social relationship dimension occupies an intermediate position, and the identity/participation dimension appears comparatively weaker. This pattern suggests that community sports spaces are more effective in facilitating everyday contact and immediate communication among residents, whereas their effects tend to attenuate when moving toward deeper relationship building and community identification.

Table 1 Analytical Dimensions and Major Manifestations of Social Integration Effectiveness in Urban Community Sports Spaces

Dimension	Core meaning	Typical manifestations	Depth of integration
Interaction	Contact, communication, and shared activities in sports spaces	Greetings, conversations, co-presence, spontaneous joint exercise	Relatively shallow
Social relationships	More stable social ties developed through repeated interaction	Neighborhood familiarity, trust enhancement, stronger willingness for mutual support	Intermediate
Identity/participation	Sense of belonging, collective awareness, and willingness to engage in community affairs	Community identification, participation in activities, support for public matters	Relatively deep

As shown in Table 1, social integration effectiveness should not be understood as a single outcome, but rather as a processual structure that unfolds progressively from surface-level contact to deeper forms of communal connection. Interaction constitutes the starting point of social integration, social relationships represent the further extension of social connection, and identity/participation reflects the more consolidated outcome of integration. From this perspective, the evaluation of community sports spaces should go beyond the simple question of whether a space is used, and instead consider whether such use genuinely contributes to improved relationships and stronger community identification.

To illustrate the relative performance of the three dimensions more clearly, Figure 1 presents a visual comparison of their indicative levels. The figure shows that interaction ranks highest, followed by social relationships, while identity/participation remains the weakest. This pattern indicates that community sports spaces primarily function as platforms for encounter: they effectively increase residents' visibility to one another and expand opportunities for contact. However, the transition from short-term encounter to stable relationships, and further to a shared sense of community, still requires a longer process of interactional accumulation and stronger organizational support.

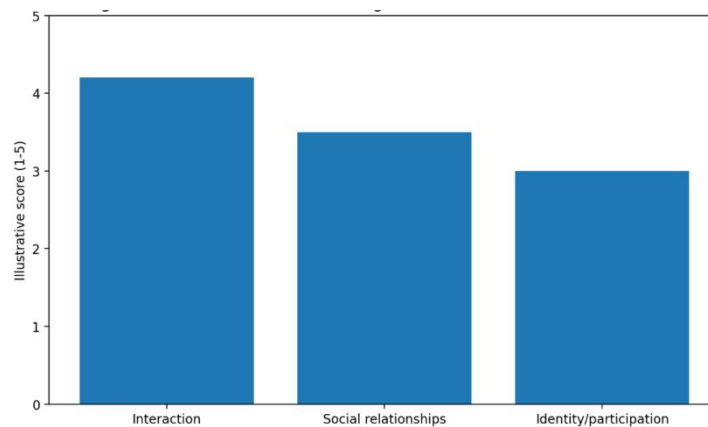


Figure 1 Relative Levels of Social Integration Effectiveness Across Dimensions

Figure 1 further suggests that the particularly strong performance of the interaction dimension is closely associated with the openness, low threshold, and everyday accessibility of community sports spaces. Residents can enter these spaces without substantial institutional barriers, while activities such as exercise, casual leisure, and accompanying family members generate numerous opportunities for incidental encounter. By contrast, improvements in social relationships and identity/participation depend more heavily on repeated interaction, positive user experiences, and the sustained embedding of collective activities. In this sense, the overall pattern of social integration effectiveness in community sports spaces can be summarized as one of relatively strong surface-level interaction but comparatively weaker deep integration.

3.2 Key influencing factors

The social integration effectiveness of community sports spaces is not determined by any single variable; rather, it is shaped by the combined effects of spatial conditions, governance support, and residents' usage behavior. To provide a more structured account, the key influencing factors are grouped into three categories, and their principal pathways are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Key Influencing Factors of Social Integration Effectiveness in Urban Community Sports Spaces

Category	Specific factor	Main function	Expected effect on integration effectiveness
Spatial conditions	Accessibility	Lowers entry barriers and increases everyday use	Positive
Spatial conditions	Openness	Encourages co-presence and contact across groups	Positive
Spatial conditions	Facility adequacy	Enhances activity diversity and willingness to stay	Positive
Spatial conditions	Safety and comfort	Improves user experience and prolongs duration of stay	Positive
Governance support	Routine maintenance	Sustains usability and spatial order	Positive
Governance support	Activity organization	Increases interaction frequency and joint participation	Strong positive
Governance support	Rule guidance	Reduces conflict and improves inclusiveness	Positive
Governance support	Community organizational involvement	Activates the public character of the space and strengthens social ties	Strong positive
Usage behavior	Frequency of use	Increases opportunities for repeated contact	Positive
Usage behavior	Length of stay	Enhances the possibility of deeper interaction	Positive
Usage behavior	Degree of joint participation	Facilitates trust building and relational accumulation	Strong positive
Usage behavior	Type of activity	Collective activities are more conducive to integration	Differentiated positive

As shown in Table 2, spatial conditions constitute the precondition for the emergence of social integration. A sports space with good accessibility, strong openness, and high environmental comfort is more likely to attract residents to enter and remain in the space, thereby increasing the probability of encounter and contact among different groups. In other words, spatial conditions first shape whether residents are able and willing to use the space, which in turn provides the basic material environment for social integration.

By contrast, governance support affects whether interaction can be sustained and whether the space can acquire a stable public character. In particular, activity organization, community organizational involvement, and rule guidance often play a more decisive role in shaping the quality of interaction than physical provision alone. A well-managed sports space with sustained activities is more likely to generate repetitive social scenes and foster the transition from incidental contact to stable exchange. In this regard, governance support may be even more important than basic spatial conditions in promoting relationship formation and strengthening community identification.

Residents' usage behavior represents the direct link between spatial conditions and integration outcomes. Even when spatial conditions are favorable and governance support is strong, the social integration effectiveness of community sports spaces may remain limited if residents only stay briefly, use the space individually, or rarely engage in shared activities. By contrast, high-frequency use, longer duration of stay, and joint participation are more likely to promote repeated contact, trust accumulation, and the formation of shared experience. Collective forms of activity, such as ball games, group exercise, parent-child activities, and community-organized sports programs, are especially important in breaking down individualized boundaries and enhancing social connection within the space.

To further demonstrate the logical relationship among these factors, Figure 2 presents a schematic pathway model of social integration effectiveness in urban community sports spaces. The figure shows that spatial conditions and governance support jointly shape residents' usage behavior, while usage behavior further affects integration outcomes in terms of interaction, social relationships, and identity/participation.

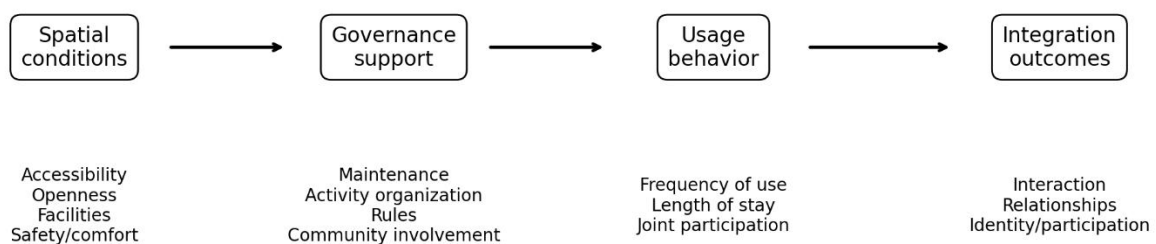


Figure 2 Schematic Pathway of Factors Shaping Social Integration Effectiveness

Figure 2 makes clear that the formation of social integration effectiveness is not a linear process of “space provision followed by automatic integration.” Rather, it is a gradual chain moving from spatial provision to behavioral practice and then to social outcomes. For this reason, the social value of community sports spaces should not be assessed solely in terms of facility quantity or physical scale, but also in terms of whether the space is effectively governed, consistently used, and able to generate interaction with connective social meaning.

3.3 Discussion

Based on the above figures and tables, three broader points may be drawn. First, the social integration effectiveness of urban community sports spaces is clearly layered. The dimensional differences shown in Figure 1 indicate that community sports spaces are most effective at promoting interaction-level integration, whereas relationship-level integration and identity/participation require longer-term accumulation. This means that while sports spaces can create opportunities for encounter, they do not inherently guarantee the emergence of deeper integration.

Second, the social function of community sports spaces should be understood more as an opportunity structure than as an assured outcome. Taken together, Table 2 and Figure 2 show that space itself can only provide the possibility of contact and interaction. What ultimately shapes integration outcomes is whether the space has favorable entry conditions, whether it is supported by sustained governance, and whether residents engage in forms of use that are socially connective. In other words, sports spaces do not automatically produce social capital; their social effects depend on the coupling of space, governance, and behavior.

Third, the practical implication is that improving the social integration effectiveness of community sports spaces requires more than simply expanding facilities. What matters is enabling such spaces to move from being merely usable, to being interactive, and ultimately to being connective. This suggests that future development of community sports spaces should pay greater attention to openness, activity organization, and inclusiveness of use. Only when sports spaces truly become everyday settings for repeated encounters, relationship accumulation, and the generation of shared experience can their social integration function be more fully realized.

4 CONCLUSION

This study examined the social integration effectiveness of urban community sports spaces by moving from conceptual clarification to dimensional analysis and the discussion of influencing factors, thereby providing a systematic account of how such spaces contribute to residents' social integration. The findings suggest that urban community sports spaces should not be understood merely as physical venues for everyday exercise and leisure, but also as important forms of everyday public space that facilitate neighborhood contact, relationship building, and the development of community identification. In terms of its concrete manifestations, the social integration effectiveness of community sports spaces is most evident at the level of interaction, where these spaces effectively increase opportunities for contact and everyday

communication among residents. By comparison, their effects on deeper relationship formation, community identification, and public participation appear to be more limited, revealing a general pattern in which surface-level interaction is easier to achieve than deeper forms of integration.

Further analysis indicates that the social integration effectiveness of urban community sports spaces is not an automatic outcome of spatial existence alone, but rather the combined result of spatial conditions, governance support, and residents' usage behavior. Favorable accessibility, openness, facility adequacy, and safe and comfortable environments provide the basic conditions for residents to enter and use sports spaces. At the same time, continuous maintenance, activity organization, rule guidance, and the involvement of community organizations more directly determine whether such spaces can evolve into inclusive, orderly, and interaction-oriented public settings. Residents' frequency of use, duration of stay, and degree of joint participation, in turn, directly affect whether interaction within sports spaces can be transformed into trust, a sense of community belonging, and willingness to participate in public affairs. In this sense, the social integration function of community sports spaces does not arise automatically; rather, it depends on the effective coupling of spatial provision, governance mechanisms, and behavioral practice.

Based on these findings, this study argues that the future development of urban community sports spaces should move beyond a narrow emphasis on facility provision and pay greater attention to their social and public functions. On the one hand, efforts should be made to improve spatial layout, environmental quality, and facility provision so as to increase residents' opportunities for entering and continuously using community sports spaces. On the other hand, stronger activity organization, community mobilization, and everyday governance are also needed to help these spaces evolve from being merely usable to becoming interactive and connective, thereby more fully realizing their potential for social integration. At the same time, this study has several limitations. The sample scope and data types remain relatively limited, and issues such as variation across different community types and the long-term dynamics of social integration have not been examined in sufficient depth. Future research may therefore benefit from larger comparative samples, longitudinal investigation, and multi-source behavioral data in order to provide a more refined understanding of the formation mechanisms and differentiated pathways of social integration effectiveness in urban community sports spaces.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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