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Third Spaces in Recreation Management: Social Connection, Community Well-Being, and a Local Government Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the third place approach in recreation management within the context of social connectedness, social well-being, and inclusive recreation management. Designed as a conceptual review, the study is based on the assumption that recreation areas are not merely physical spaces for physical activity, relaxation, or leisure participation, but also public spaces where individuals build social relationships, develop a sense of belonging, and participate in social life. Accordingly, the literature was evaluated within the framework of four main concepts: third place, social connectedness, social well-being, and inclusive recreation management. The findings indicate that parks, public gardens, youth centers, campus recreation areas, walking paths, and municipal social facilities may function as third places. The findings also re-

veal that recreation areas should be evaluated not only in terms of physical facilities and activity provision but also in terms of their capacity to generate social interaction, trust, belonging, inclusive participation, and well-being. As a result, it is argued that recreation management should move beyond the traditional facility- and activity-oriented approach and adopt a management perspective focused on social impact and social well-being. This study is expected to contribute to the recreation management literature through the third place perspective and to provide a theoretical basis for local governments to reconsider recreation services in terms of social connectedness and inclusiveness.

Keywords: recreation management, third place, social connectedness, social well-being, inclusive recreation management

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, recreational areas are considered not only as physical spaces where individuals spend their leisure time, but also as public living spaces that support social interaction, belonging, community participation, and well-being. Urbanization, individualization, digitalization, and transformations in social relationships have increased the need for individuals to have everyday social spaces outside of home and work/school. In this context, parks, national gardens, youth centers, campus recreation areas, walking paths, and municipal social facilities are gaining importance as third spaces where individuals socialize and develop a sense of community. The concept of the third space refers to areas where individuals establish social relationships, participate voluntarily, and develop a sense of belonging within their daily lives, outside of home and work/school [1, 2]. Recreational spaces, in this respect, not only offer opportunities for physical activity or relaxation; they also possess the potential to generate social connection, trust, encounters, and social integration among individuals. Indeed, the positive effects of public green spaces on social cohesion, mental health, and quality of life have been emphasized in various studies [3–5]. This study aims to address the third-space approach in recreation management together with the concepts of social connection, community well-being, and inclusive recreation management. Accordingly, the study argues that recreational spaces should be evaluated not only based on the number of facilities, amenities, or activities, but also on their capacity to generate social interaction, include different groups, create a sense of belonging, and contribute to community well-being. This conceptual review is expected to contribute to the recreation management literature from a third-space perspective and to develop an applicable evaluation framework for local governments.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. THE THIRD SPACE

The concept of third spaces refers to areas where individuals come together, establish social relationships, participate voluntarily, and develop a sense of belonging in their daily lives outside of home and work/school. Oldenburg and Brissett [2] define third spaces as areas where individuals establish informal relationships and strengthen the social fabric of daily life. Oldenburg [1], on the other hand, considers third spaces as public or semi-public areas outside of home and work life where individuals relax, socialize, and develop a sense of community. In this context, third spaces are not merely physical spaces; they are daily life areas where social relationships, encounters, and a sense of belonging are produced.

The third space approach is closely related to the literature on urban and public spaces. Jacobs [6] states that vibrant urban life is strengthened through daily encounters, street safety, and social interaction. Gehl [7] emphasizes that designing public spaces on a human scale supports social life, while Lefebvre [8] argues that space is produced through social relations. These approaches show that recreation areas are not merely spaces containing physical amenities; they are social spaces where social relations, daily encounters, and public life practices are produced. From the perspective of recreation management, the concept of the third space makes it possible to re-evaluate areas such as parks, national gardens, campus recreation areas, youth centers, walking paths, open sports areas, cultural centers, and municipal social facilities. These areas are not only places where individuals spend their leisure time or engage in physical activity; they are also spaces where they socialize, develop acquaintances, feel social support, and experience themselves as part of a community.

Mehta et al. [9] state that the physical characteristics of third spaces have an impact on social interaction and spatial attachment. Finlay et al. [3] emphasize that third spaces are important social environments for the collective health and well-being of individuals. In this study, the concept of third space is considered as a fundamental theoretical concept explaining the social function of recreation areas. The indicators of accessibility, voluntary participation, social interaction, belonging, inclusivity, and continuity that stand out in the findings are evaluated as the basic elements determining the third space quality of recreation areas. Therefore, for a recreation area to function as a third space, it is not enough for it to simply exist physically. The area must be regularly preferred by users, be open to different groups, allow for social interaction, and create a sense of belonging among users.

2.2. SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY

Social cohesion is a multidimensional concept related to individuals establishing meaningful relationships with others, feeling part of a community, and developing social support networks. According to Putnam [10], social capital is one of the fundamental elements that strengthens the quality of social life through trust, reciprocity relationships, and social networks between individuals. In this respect, social cohesion refers not only to individuals establishing relationships at the individual level but also to the development of social integration and local belonging.

Recreational spaces play a significant role in fostering social cohesion. This is because these spaces offer individuals the opportunity to meet, communicate, participate in shared activities, and expand their social networks within the context of daily life. Iso-Ahola [11] states that recreational behaviors are related to both psychological gratification and the need for social interaction. Mannell and Kleiber [12] emphasize that leisure experiences play a crucial role in the psychosocial

development of individuals. Iwasaki and Mannell [13] demonstrate that leisure time is functional in terms of coping with stress and social support mechanisms. These approaches show that recreational spaces should be evaluated not only for individual relaxation but also for generating social relationships. Research on public green spaces and parks also supports the relationship between social cohesion and recreational spaces.

Peters, Elands, and Buijs [14] state that urban parks can support social interaction among different social groups. Kazmierczak [15] reveals that local parks contribute to the development of social bonds at the neighborhood scale. Wan and Shen [5], in their systematic review examining the relationship between public green spaces and social cohesion, emphasize that the physical characteristics of green spaces, user perceptions, and usage patterns have an impact on social cohesion. Jennings and Bamkole [4] state that green spaces are important in terms of social cohesion, health equity, and social well-being. In this study, social cohesion is considered as the main social outcome of recreational areas, which are considered third spaces. The findings show that social cohesion develops through mechanisms such as everyday encounters, shared activities, acquaintance, trust, belonging, and social inclusion. Therefore, recreation managers should consider activities not only as means to increase participant numbers, but also as management tools that enable individuals to build social connections, foster a sense of community, and create a sense of belonging. The concept of social cohesion is also related to the literature on spatial attachment and belonging. Tuan [16] states that individuals' relationship with a space develops through experience and meaning. Low and Altman [17] explain spatial attachment as the emotional and social relationship individuals establish with the physical environment. Scannell and Gifford [18], on the other hand, examine spatial attachment through the dimensions of person, process, and place, revealing the multidimensional nature of belonging. In line with these approaches, social cohesion in recreation areas is not limited only to interpersonal relationships; it is also strengthened by users developing emotional bonds with the space.

2.3. SOCIAL WELL-BEING

Social well-being is a multidimensional concept related to individuals' physical and psychological health, as well as their social relationships, connections with their environment, sense of security, quality of life, sense of belonging, and level of participation in public life. Keyes [19] explains social well-being through the dimensions of an individual's relationship with society, social integration, social contribution, social acceptance, and social fulfillment. Diener et al. [20], on the other hand, state that subjective well-being is related to individuals' life satisfaction and emotional experiences. These approaches show that well-being is not limited solely to individual happiness or health; it is also closely linked to the social environment, public life, and social relationships.

Recreational spaces play a significant role in promoting social well-being. Driver, Brown, and Peterson [21] state that recreational experiences can generate individual, social, and environmental benefits. Godbey [22] emphasizes that leisure time holds an important place in human life in terms of health, happiness, and social participation. Stebbins [23] suggests that, through a serious leisure approach, individuals can gain identity, belonging, and personal development through leisure activities. In this context, recreational spaces not only offer individuals the opportunity to utilize their leisure time but also support quality of life, social participation, and psychosocial well-being. Urban green spaces and parks constitute an important area of study in the well-being literature. Hartig et al. [24] state that the experience of nature affects health through physical, psychological, and social mechanisms. Kuo [25] suggests that contact with nature can produce multifaceted effects that support human health. Maas et al. [26] demonstrate that green spaces can have positive effects on health by fostering social interaction. Wood et al. [27] highlight the importance of public green spaces for mental health and social interaction. The World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe also states that urban green spaces support physical activity, provide psychological relaxation, and strengthen social cohesion (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2016). In the context of this study, social well-being is the fundamental concept explaining the impact of recreational areas, ranging from individual benefit to social value. The findings correlate social well-being with physical, psychological, social, environmental, and public well-being dimensions. Walking paths, sports fields, and outdoor activities support physical well-being, while parks and green spaces are important for psychological relaxation, stress reduction, and mental rejuvenation. Social events, group activities, and daily encounters strengthen social well-being; safe, accessible, and inclusive recreational areas contribute to public well-being. The concept of social well-being is also related to discussions of loneliness and social isolation. Cacioppo and Cacioppo [28] state that loneliness has significant consequences for the physical and mental health of individuals. Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton [29] demonstrate that social relationships have a strong impact on individuals' lifespan and health status. The World Health Organization considers loneliness and social isolation a significant global public health problem [30]. In this context, recreational areas, as third spaces, can play an important role in supporting social well-being by enabling individuals to engage in social interaction.

2.4. INCLUSIVE RECREATION MANAGEMENT

Inclusive recreation management refers to making recreational spaces accessible, safe, usable, and meaningful for individuals of different ages, genders, income levels, disabilities, cultural backgrounds, and social positions. This concept constitutes the social justice dimension of the third space approach. For a recreational space to qualify as a third space, it is not enough for it to simply be public or open; it must also be accessible to different social groups, visible within the space, and a sense of acceptance. This concept is closely related to discussions of social equality, access, participation, and social justice in the leisure and recreation literature. Aitchison [31] emphasizes that gender, class, disability, and cultural differences are decisive factors in participation in leisure work. Henderson and Bialeschki [32] state that social roles and structural constraints are influential in women's recreational experiences. Shinew, Glover, and Parry [33] indicate that recreational spaces hold significant potential for interaction and social inclusion among different social groups. These approaches suggest that simply providing space is insufficient for recreational services; This shows that the needs, expectations, and barriers to participation of different user groups should also be taken into account.

The literature on urban parks and green spaces also highlights the importance of inclusivity and accessibility. Gobster [34] notes that cultural preferences and perceptions influence the use of parks by different ethnic and social groups. Byrne and Wolch [35] argue that racial, class, and social inequalities should be considered in the planning of public green spaces. Wolch, Byrne, and Newell [36] emphasize that environmental justice problems may arise if urban green spaces are not planned equitably. Rigolon [37] draws attention to the existence of socioeconomic inequalities in urban park access. Rigolon, Browning, and Jennings [38] state that park inequalities are related not only to distance and access but also to site quality, facilities, and usage capacity. Dietz et al. [39] also reveal that park quality and health-promoting facilities are not evenly distributed across different cities. This study addresses inclusive recreation management through the dimensions of physical accessibility, economic accessibility, social accessibility, program diversity, and participatory management. Physical accessibility requires the appropriate design of spaces for individuals with disabilities, the elderly, children, and users with mobility limitations. Economic accessibility refers to the ability of low-income individuals to participate in recreation services free of charge or at low cost. Social accessibility is related to users feeling safe, comfortable, and accepted in the space. Program diversity requires offering activities suitable for different age and interest groups; participatory management necessitates the involvement of users in planning and evaluation processes. Inclusive recreation management is a crucial management approach for the sustainability of third spaces. Non-inclusive recreation areas can become limited spaces used only by certain social groups. This weakens the capacity of these areas to generate social cohesion and support community well-being. Therefore, local governments and recreation managers should consider these areas not merely as physical investment or activity spaces, but as public service spaces that support social participation, equitable access, and community integration.

3. METHOD

This study is a qualitative conceptual review aiming to examine the third-space approach in recreation management from the perspectives of social connection, community well-being, inclusivity, and local governance. The research did not employ an experimental or quantitative data collection process; instead, theoretical approaches, academic studies, international reports, and current assessments related to the subject were examined through document review. Accordingly, the study focuses on considering recreation areas not merely as physical leisure spaces, but as third spaces that support social interaction, belonging, and community well-being. The fundamental theoretical basis of the research is Oldenburg's third-space approach. According to Oldenburg, third spaces are informal and accessible spaces where individuals come together to establish social relationships in their daily lives outside of home and work/school [1]. In line with this approach, parks, public gardens, youth centers, campus recreation areas, cultural centers, walking paths, open sports areas, and municipal social living spaces are considered as areas with third-space potential within the context of recreation management.

The aim of this study is to conceptually examine the third-space approach in the field of recreation management and to reveal the importance of public recreation areas in terms of social cohesion, community well-being, inclusive participation, and local government policies. To this end, the study argues that recreation areas should be considered not only as spaces for physical activity, rest, or leisure, but also as public spaces where individuals forge social connections, develop a sense of belonging, and participate in community life. Within this scope, the study sought answers to the following questions:

- How can the concept of the third space be evaluated from the perspective of recreation management?
- How can public recreation areas contribute to social cohesion and community well-being?
- Why is it important to manage recreation areas in an inclusive and accessible way?
- How can local governments integrate the third space approach into recreation services?

The scope of this research comprises academic and institutional resources related to recreation management, third spaces, public spaces, social cohesion, community well-being, inclusive recreation, and local government policies. Specifically, parks, national gardens, youth centers, campus recreation areas, cultural centers, walking paths, open sports areas, and municipal social living spaces are considered recreation areas with third-space potential. The study focuses on the managerial and societal dimensions of recreation rather than individual recreational behaviors. Therefore, the study centers on how recreation services should be planned, managed, and evaluated. In other words, the study evaluates recreation areas not only in terms of user satisfaction but also in terms of social integration, quality of public life, inclusivity, and community well-being.

This study utilized academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, international organization reports, and current institutional publications as data sources. While the theoretical foundation of the research was based on fundamental sources related to the concept of the third space, current studies on recreation management, public space, social cohesion, social isolation, urban parks, green spaces, and social well-being were evaluated to support the conceptual framework of the study. Three main criteria were considered in the selection of sources. First, the source must be directly related to the research topic. In this context, studies addressing the third space, public space, recreation management, and social cohesion were given priority. Second, the source must offer a theoretical or contemporary contribution. In addition to fundamental theoretical sources such as Oldenburg's third space approach, recent research and reports published in recent years were also included in the review. Third, the source must be reliable and academically sound. Accordingly, peer-reviewed articles, academic books, and reports from international organizations were used as primary data sources.

The literature review process utilized key concepts determined in line with the study's objective. Both Turkish and English keywords were used in the review. Turkish keywords included "recreation management", "third place", "public space", "social connectedness", "community well-being", "inclusive recreation", "urban parks", "local governments", and "social isolation". English keywords used in the search were "recreation management", "third place", "public space", "social connectedness", "social isolation", "urban parks", "inclusive recreation", "community wellbeing", and "local governments". The sources obtained from the literature review were evaluated in accordance with the study's objective and scope; sources directly related to the topic were included in the review. In this process, priority was given to studies that linked the third place approach to recreation management, research addressing the impact of parks and public spaces on social connectedness, and sources discussing the contribution of recreation services to community well-being.

In this study, a descriptive analysis approach was adopted in the analysis of the data. Descriptive analysis refers to the process of classifying, summarizing, and interpreting information obtained within a specific conceptual framework. The literature examined in this study was evaluated under predetermined themes in line with the main objective of the research. In the analysis process, the information obtained from the sources was classified under four main themes. These themes are as follows:

- Theoretical foundations of the third space concept,
- The role of recreation areas in generating social cohesion,
- The contribution of public recreation areas to social well-being,
- Third space-based recreation management from the perspective of local governments.

In line with this thematic classification, the interpretation of the concept of the third space from the perspective of recreation management is first explained, followed by an evaluation of the effects of recreation areas on social interaction, inclusive participation, and well-being. Finally, based on the conceptual findings obtained, managerial implications for the third space potential of recreation areas in the Turkish context are developed.

In qualitative and conceptual reviews, validity and reliability are related to the quality of the sources used, the consistency of the conceptual framework, and the clarity of the analysis process. To ensure validity, this study evaluates fundamental theoretical sources and current academic studies on the subject. The theoretical foundation of the third space concept is based on Oldenburg's work and supported by current literature on recreation management, public space, social cohesion, and social well-being.

To enhance reliability, the keywords used in the literature review process are clearly stated, the criteria considered in selecting sources are expressed, and the analysis themes are structured in accordance with the study's objective. Furthermore, the evaluations reached in this study are not based solely on a single source or approach, but are formed by interpreting different theoretical and current studies together. In this respect, the study aims to provide a holistic and consistent conceptual evaluation of the third space approach in the field of recreation management.

This study has some limitations. First, it is a conceptual review that does not rely on primary field data. Therefore, user opinions, management experiences, observational data, or survey findings are not directly included in the study. Second, the study addresses the third-space approach at a conceptual level within the context of recreation management; it does not conduct an empirical examination of a specific park, public garden, youth center, or campus recreation area.

However, this study is important because it provides a theoretical framework for evaluating recreational areas in the context of social cohesion and community well-being. Future research could examine parks, public gardens, campus recreation areas, municipal social facilities, and youth centers through user experiences. Furthermore, quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods research could empirically assess the third-space nature of these areas, their contribution to social cohesion, and their impact on community well-being.

Since this study is based on document review and a conceptual evaluation of the existing literature, no data was collected directly from human participants. Therefore, no process requiring ethical committee approval, such as surveys, interviews, observations, or experimental applications, was conducted. All sources used in the study have been cited in accordance with scientific ethical principles and are included in the bibliography section.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents findings from the literature on the third-space approach in recreation management within a thematic framework. Given the conceptual review nature of the study, the findings are not merely a summary of information found in the literature; rather, they are structured to generate theoretical and managerial implications for the field of recreation management. Accordingly, the findings are examined under the themes of third-space quality, social connection, community well-being, inclusivity, local governments, and administrative transformation.,

4.1. THE THIRD SPACE NATURE OF RECREATION AREAS: THE TRANSITION FROM PHYSICAL SPACE TO SOCIAL EXPERIENCE SPACE

A literature review revealed that recreation areas can be strongly associated with the third-space approach. The concept of the third space refers to spaces where individuals voluntarily come together, establish social relationships, develop a sense of belonging, and engage in informal interactions in their daily lives outside of home and work/school [1]. Project for Public Spaces [40] also notes that Oldenburg's third-space approach offers an important theoretical basis for understanding public life through spaces such as cafes, parks, libraries, public squares, and similar everyday meeting areas. In this context, parks, public gardens, walking paths, campus recreation areas, youth centers, open sports areas, cultural centers, and municipal social life areas can be considered not only as physical leisure spaces but also as third spaces where individuals establish social contact in their daily lives. This finding indicates that the function of space in recreation management needs to be rethought. Because contemporary recreation areas are not only areas that respond to the need for physical activity, rest or entertainment; they are also components of public life that support social interaction, a sense of community and belonging. The main finding that draws attention at this point is that the nature of recreation areas as third places cannot be explained only by physical existence. Although it is important for a park to be large, have a walking path or include sports equipment, in order for these areas to function as a third place, they must have regular use, social encounters, a sense of trust, accessibility and the capacity to create belonging among users. Finlay et al. [3] state that third spaces support the well-being of individuals; It emphasizes that there are areas that can produce social interaction, support, protection and care mechanisms. This situation shows that recreation areas should be considered not only as "used" but also as "lived" spaces.

Table 1. *Key Indicators Determining the Third Space Character of Recreation Areas*

Dimension	Third Space Indicator	Its Significance from a Recreation Management Perspective
Accessibility	The space is easily accessible to different user groups.	Planning recreation services in accordance with the principles of social justice and equality
Voluntary participation	Users choose the space without being obligated to do so.	Making recreation areas a natural part of daily life
Social interaction	It offers opportunities for interpersonal encounters and communication.	Contributing to the reduction of loneliness and social isolation
Belonging	Users embrace the space and feel a sense of belonging.	The area generating not only physical but also social and emotional value
Inclusion	It is open to different age, gender, income, and skill groups.	Strengthening the participation of disadvantaged groups in recreation services
Continuity	The space generates regular and recurring use.	Recreation services creating sustainable community ties

Table 1 presents the key indicators defining the third-space quality of recreation areas: accessibility, voluntary participation, social interaction, belonging, inclusivity, and continuity. These indicators reveal that recreation areas are not merely physical leisure spaces; they are public experience spaces where individuals establish social relationships, express themselves, participate in social life, and develop a sense of belonging within their daily lives. The informal, comfortable, accessible, and regularly used social space characteristics emphasized in Oldenburg's [1] third-space approach can also be

considered as decisive criteria in the management of recreation areas.

The accessibility dimension in the table refers to the ease with which recreational areas can be used by different segments of society. For a recreational area to qualify as a third space, it is not enough for it to simply exist physically; it must be accessible to people of different ages, incomes, genders, disabilities, and social groups. This highlights the importance of social justice, equality, and public service in recreation management. In particular, parks, national gardens, walking paths, and social living spaces planned by local governments should be designed with an approach that does not exclude different segments of society. The voluntary participation dimension shows that third spaces are areas preferred by individuals without any obligation. The regular use of recreational areas depends on their integration into individuals' daily routines. If users choose a park, walking path, youth center, or campus recreation area not only when they need to, but also because they feel good, can socialize, and relax there, then the area begins to acquire the quality of a third space. The social interaction dimension is one of the most critical indicators of this. For recreational areas to function as third spaces, they must offer opportunities for encounter, communication, and relationship building among individuals. This interaction doesn't always have to occur through a planned activity. Individuals knowing each other because they regularly use the same walking path, families communicating in children's playgrounds, users forming groups during outdoor sports activities, or students gathering in youth centers constitute everyday forms of social interaction. The sense of belonging is related to the ownership of recreational areas by users. For an area to acquire the quality of a third space, users must see it not merely as a temporary space, but as a social environment to which they feel they belong. When a sense of belonging develops, users visit the area more frequently, tend to protect it, and establish stronger social bonds with other users. Therefore, in recreation management, beyond user satisfaction, the level of belonging, ownership, and social bonding should also be evaluated. The dimensions of inclusivity and continuity demonstrate the sustainability of the third space quality. Areas that are not inclusive, used only by certain groups, or that exclude some users have limited third-space functionality. Similarly, areas that are used irregularly, lack continuity of activities, or are not preferred due to maintenance/security issues also lose their capacity to generate social bonds. Therefore, Table 1 shows that in recreation management, the quality of a third space is possible through the combined evaluation of multi-dimensional elements such as physical design, social use, accessibility, and user engagement.

4.2. PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL COHESION: THE SOCIAL CAPITAL FUNCTION OF RECREATION AREAS

One of the important findings of the study is the potential of recreational areas to generate social cohesion and community capital. Social cohesion is related to individuals establishing meaningful relationships with others, feeling like they are part of a community, and having social support networks. Considering Putnam's [10] approach to social capital, recreational areas can be evaluated as public environments that generate trust, reciprocity, familiarity, and shared living experiences among individuals.

In this context, parks, neighborhood sports fields, walking paths, outdoor activities, cultural programs, and youth centers enable individuals to establish planned or unplanned social contact in their daily lives. Wan and Shen's [5] review study on the relationship between public green spaces and social cohesion reveals that the physical characteristics of green spaces, user perceptions, and usage patterns all have a combined effect on social cohesion. This result shows that the function of recreational areas in generating social cohesion depends not only on the existence of the space but also on how that space is perceived, how it is used, and what social relationships it enables. Cardinali et al. [41] also state that features such as accessibility, connectivity, diversity of use, and proximity are decisive in the effect of green spaces on social cohesion and mental health. This finding reveals that social cohesion in recreation management should be considered not as a random outcome but as a planned and manageable goal. In other words, recreation managers can support the production of social cohesion through spatial arrangements that increase social interaction, program diversity, and participatory management mechanisms.

Table 2 explains the mechanisms by which recreational areas contribute to social cohesion through the dimensions of daily encounters, shared activities, acquaintance and trust, belonging, and social inclusion. This table shows that the process of generating social cohesion in recreational areas is not dependent on a single factor; spatial arrangement, program design, user experience, and social participation are all effective together. Social cohesion is important for individuals to feel like part of a community and to establish meaningful relationships with others. Therefore, recreational areas can be considered not only as spaces that support individual leisure activities but also as public spaces with the potential to generate social capital.

The everyday encounter mechanism refers to social contacts that arise when individuals are in the same space without any obligation or formal organization. Parks, walkways, seating areas, children's playgrounds, and outdoor sports areas are recreational spaces where these encounters most frequently occur. Although such encounters may seem superficial at first glance, they can contribute to the development of social familiarity and trust through repeated use. From a recreation

management perspective, this highlights the importance of seating arrangements, common areas, and open activity spaces that facilitate the gathering of individuals in the area design. The shared activity mechanism, on the other hand, refers to the strengthening of social cohesion through individuals coming together around the same activity. Group exercises, outdoor sports events, cultural programs, neighborhood festivals, walking groups, and children's and youth activities can be considered within this scope. Such activities enable individuals not only to be in the same space but also to interact around a common purpose, experience, and sharing. Therefore, recreation managers should plan activities not only as a means of increasing participant numbers, but also as a means of building social connections and strengthening a sense of community. The dimension of familiarity and trust is crucial in ensuring the continuity of social cohesion. Regular use of recreational areas fosters a sense of familiarity among users. Individuals walking in the same park every day noticing each other, families using the same children's playground communicating, or people participating in the same activity forming groups over time, all reinforce a sense of trust. In this respect, recreational areas can contribute to the re-establishment of neighborhood relationships, which are weakening in modern urban life. The mechanism of belonging expresses a deeper dimension of social cohesion. Individuals' ownership of a recreational area is related to seeing that area not merely as a physical space, but as a meaningful part of their living environment. A sense of belonging can increase users' satisfaction with the area, their intention to revisit, and their sensitivity towards its preservation. Therefore, in recreation management, obtaining user feedback, supporting volunteer activities, and developing participatory planning processes can be considered tools that strengthen the sense of belonging. The social inclusion mechanism refers to the ability of different age, gender, income, culture, and ability groups to come together in the same recreation area. Recreation areas can serve a function of reducing social segregation when they provide opportunities for encounter between different social groups. However, this function does not arise spontaneously. The area must be safe, accessible, economical, and culturally inviting. Therefore, Table 2 shows that for recreation areas to strengthen social cohesion, it is not enough for them to be physically open; they need managerial strategies that consciously support social interaction.

Table 2. *Mechanisms by which Recreation Areas Contribute to Social Cohesion*

Mechanism	Explanation	Administrative Equivalent
Everyday encounters	Users being in the same area unplanned	Creating seating areas, walking paths, and open activity spaces
Shared activities	Users coming together around the same activity	Organizing group exercises, cultural events, and sports tournaments
Acquaintance and trust	Development of social familiarity among users through repeated use	Ensuring the continuity of regular programs and neighborhood-scale events
Belonging	Users taking ownership of the space	Participatory planning, volunteering, and user feedback mechanisms
Social inclusion	Different groups becoming visible in the same public space	Programming suitable for people with disabilities, the elderly, youth, women, and low-income groups

4.3. THE IMPORTANCE OF RECREATIONAL AREAS IN COMBATING LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

The findings reveal that recreational spaces, which function as third spaces, serve as an important social infrastructure in combating loneliness and social isolation. The World Health Organization's Social Connectivity Commission's 2025 report [30] states that social isolation and loneliness are widespread global problems with significant impacts on health and well-being, yet are not sufficiently visible. This indicates that recreational spaces should be evaluated not only within the scope of leisure services but also within the context of public health and social policy. The closure or weakening of third spaces can lead to a decrease in the low-intensity but continuous social contacts that individuals establish in their daily lives. Finlay et al. [3] draw attention to the potential consequences of the loss of third spaces for collective health and well-being, noting that these spaces can have a function in reducing loneliness, stress, and alienation. This finding demonstrates that in recreation management, areas such as parks, youth centers, social facilities, and cultural centers should be considered not only as physical facilities but also as spaces that generate social support. In the context of loneliness and social isolation, the most significant contribution of recreation areas is that they offer individuals the opportunity for low-threshold participation. Low-threshold participation refers to the ability of individuals to participate in an area without high costs, membership requirements, social networking needs, or performance pressure. In this context, parks, walking paths, outdoor activities, and free municipal programs are important meeting places, especially for individuals living alone, the elderly, students, and those with limited social circles. This finding points to two important conclusions for recreation management. First, combating loneliness should not be limited to psychological or individual interventions; it should be supported by spatial and social interventions. Second, recreation areas should be designed and managed as public infrastructures that support social connection. Therefore, activities that facilitate individual participation, intergenerational programs, neighborhood gatherings, and low-cost social activities are gaining importance in recreation services.

4.4. SUPPORTING SOCIAL WELL-BEING: FROM PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TO PSYCHOSOCIAL RECOVERY

Findings from the literature show that recreational areas play a multifaceted role in supporting social well-being. Social well-being is related not only to individuals' physical health levels but also to their mental state, social relationships, connection with the environment, perceptions of security, sense of belonging, and quality of life. In this respect, recreational areas provide opportunities for increased physical activity, as well as psychological relaxation, social contact, connection with nature, and escape from the stresses of daily life. The WHO European Region's report on urban green spaces [42] states that green spaces support physical activity, provide psychological relaxation, strengthen social cohesion, and can contribute to the reduction of environmental risks. In this context, the contribution of recreational areas to well-being can be evaluated at three levels. The first level is physical well-being. Parks, walking paths, open sports areas, and exercise areas support healthy lifestyle behaviors by increasing individuals' mobility levels. The second level contributes to psychological well-being. The use of green spaces can reduce individuals' stress levels, provide mental rejuvenation, and support mental balance. The third level contributes to social well-being. Recreational areas can enable individuals to make social contact, be visible within the community, and develop a sense of belonging.

Table 3. *Dimensions of the Contribution of Recreation Areas to Social Well-being*

Well-being Dimension	Its Equivalent in the Recreation Field	Literature Basis
Physical well-being	Walking, sports, mobility, outdoor activities	WHO emphasizes the relationship between physical activity and green spaces and health.
Psychological well-being	Stress reduction, mental relaxation, contact with nature	The relationship between urban green spaces and mental health is supported by many studies.
Social well-being	Social encounter, belonging, sense of community	The literature on third spaces and social cohesion strengthens this relationship.
Environmental well-being	Relationship with nature, environmental awareness, satisfaction with public spaces	The contribution of green spaces to quality of life is emphasized.
Public well-being	Safe, accessible and inclusive urban life	Recreational areas are considered as social infrastructure.

Table 3 examines the contribution of recreational areas to social well-being within the framework of physical, psychological, social, environmental, and public well-being dimensions. This classification is important in making the multifaceted effects of recreational areas visible. While the traditional approach to recreation mostly associates parks, walking paths, sports fields, and outdoor activities with physical activity, current literature shows that these areas also play important roles in terms of psychological relaxation, social cohesion, environmental awareness, and public quality of life.

The physical well-being dimension is one of the most visible contributions of recreational areas. Walking paths, bike trails, outdoor sports areas, exercise equipment, and nature-based activities increase individuals' levels of physical activity. Considering the positive effects of physical activity on health, recreational areas can be considered as preventive service areas that support public health. Therefore, local governments and recreation managers should treat parks not only as resting areas but also as public health infrastructures that promote healthy lifestyle behaviors. The psychological well-being dimension is related to the function of recreational areas in reducing individuals' stress levels, providing mental relaxation, and offering a respite from the pressures of daily life. Green spaces, in particular, can contribute to individuals' mental renewal by offering opportunities for contact with nature. In modern urban life, crowds, traffic, workload, digital overload, and social pressures can negatively affect individuals' psychological well-being. In this context, parks, open spaces, and natural recreational areas function as areas for mental escape, relaxation, and rejuvenation for individuals. The social well-being dimension is directly linked to the third-space nature of recreational areas. Individuals' ability to make social contact, participate in group activities, share experiences, and feel like part of a community supports social well-being. Recreational areas can create important meeting places for individuals living alone, students, the elderly, families with children, and individuals with limited social circles. Therefore, in recreation management, well-being should be evaluated not only through the individual's physical health but also through their social relationships and level of belonging. The environmental well-being dimension is related to individuals' relationship with nature and environmental awareness. Green spaces enable users to connect with nature, experience environmental values, and develop ecological sensitivity within urban life. The cleanliness, maintenance, aesthetics, and integration of natural elements in recreational areas can increase user satisfaction with the environment. Therefore, environmental quality is an important factor that strengthens the third-space function of recreational areas. The public well-being dimension, on the other hand, expresses the broader societal impact of recreational areas. Safe, accessible, inclusive, and vibrant public recreational areas improve the quality of urban life. These areas enable individuals to participate in public life, meet different groups, and connect with their environment. Therefore, Table 3 shows that the contribution of recreational areas to well-being is not limited to individual health; it produces broader outcomes such as social integration, public satisfaction, and quality of life. For this reason, when evaluating recreational services, in addition to indicators such as the number of participants, facility

usage, or activity satisfaction, social impact, belonging, environmental quality, and contribution to public life should also be considered.

4.5. INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY: THE SOCIAL JUSTICE DIMENSION OF THIRD SPACES

The study's findings demonstrate that the third-space approach is directly related to the principles of inclusivity and accessibility. One of the fundamental functions of third spaces is to enable different social groups to meet and be visible in the same public space. Therefore, it is not enough for recreational areas to simply exist physically; these areas must be usable, safe, and inviting for individuals of different ages, genders, incomes, disabilities, and social positions.

Dietz et al. [39] conducted a study of 23,477 parks and 827,038 park elements in 35 global cities, revealing significant inequalities in the capacity of parks to facilitate health-promoting activities. The study examined different categories of health-promoting activities, including physical, social, cultural, environmental, mind-body, and nature experience; it noted significant differences in the availability of social activities among parks. This result indicates that not only the quantitative presence but also the qualitative capacity of recreational areas should be evaluated. From an inclusiveness perspective, the fundamental issue in recreation management is whether services are equally accessible to everyone. In this context, physical accessibility, economic accessibility, and social accessibility should be considered together. Physical accessibility relates to transportation, accessibility for people with disabilities, lighting, security, seating areas, and basic amenities. Economic accessibility concerns usage fees, transportation costs, and the financial burden of participating in activities. Social accessibility relates to individuals feeling safe, comfortable, and accepted in that space.

Table 4. Key Criteria for Inclusive Third Space Management

Inclusion Dimension	Assessment Question	Recommendation for Recreation Management
Physical accessibility	Is the area suitable for disabled, elderly, and child users?	Universal design principles should be applied
Economic accessibility	Are the usage and participation costs affordable for different income groups?	Free or low-cost programs should be increased
Social accessibility	Do users feel safe and accepted in the space?	Safety, lighting and social inclusion policies should be strengthened
Program diversity	Are there activities for different age and interest groups?	Programs should be developed for women, youth, the elderly, children and people with disabilities
Participatory management	Are user feedbacks incorporated into the planning process?	Surveys, focus groups and neighborhood meetings should be organized

Table 4 outlines the key criteria for inclusive third-space management, considering physical accessibility, economic accessibility, social accessibility, program diversity, and participatory management dimensions. This table demonstrates that the third-space quality of recreation areas can only be strengthened through an inclusive and accessible management approach. This is because third spaces are not merely selective areas used by specific groups; they are public living spaces where different social groups can come together and feel safe and accepted.

Physical accessibility is a fundamental dimension of inclusive recreation management. A recreation area should be easily accessible to individuals with disabilities, the elderly, children, families using strollers, and individuals with mobility limitations. Ramps, smooth walkways, adequate lighting, rest areas, accessible restrooms, directional signage, and safe transportation links are elements that strengthen physical accessibility. However, physical accessibility is not limited to architectural arrangements; regular maintenance of the area, ensuring its safety, and enabling users to move around comfortably should also be considered. Economic accessibility refers to the availability of recreation services for different income groups. Paid activities, high facility usage fees, transportation costs, or equipment requirements can limit the participation of low-income individuals in recreation services. Therefore, it is important to increase the number of free or low-cost activities offered by municipalities, universities, and public institutions in recreation services. Without ensuring economic accessibility, recreation areas may partially lose their public character and become spaces catering only to specific social groups. Social accessibility is related to individuals feeling safe, comfortable, and accepted in a recreation area. Even if a space is physically accessible, it cannot function as an inclusive third space if users feel excluded, unsafe, or uncomfortable. The perception of safety, social acceptance, and comfortable usage conditions are particularly important for women, young people, the elderly, people with disabilities, and disadvantaged groups. Therefore, lighting, staff presence, social supervision, user diversity, and anti-discrimination practices should be considered in recreation management. Program diversity is a crucial element in increasing the participation of different age and interest groups in recreation areas. Spaces that cater only to a specific age group, sport, or user profile may have limited inclusivity. Play and development activities for children, social and sports programs for youth, low-intensity physical activities for the elderly, safe participation opportunities for women, adapted recreation programs for individuals with disabilities, and shared activities for families

can strengthen inclusive third-space management. The participatory management dimension refers to the involvement of users in the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of recreation areas. Recreation areas may deviate from user expectations when user opinions are not taken into account, the needs of the local community are not analyzed, and decision-making processes are centralized. Therefore, surveys, focus group discussions, neighborhood meetings, digital feedback systems, and stakeholder participation mechanisms are fundamental tools of inclusive management. Table 4, in this respect, reveals that inclusivity is not only a physical arrangement but also a multi-dimensional management approach.

4.6. THE NECESSITY FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO MANAGE RECREATION AREAS AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The findings show that local governments play a central role in giving recreation areas the status of a third space. Parks, social facilities, sports fields, cultural centers, youth centers, and walking paths managed by municipalities and local public institutions are elements of social infrastructure that directly affect the quality of daily life of city dwellers. Klinenberg's [43] social infrastructure approach argues that spaces such as libraries, parks, schoolyards, and community centers should be considered as infrastructures that strengthen social bonds. This approach is quite explanatory in terms of recreation management. NRPA defines park and recreation professionals as the implementers of "community well-being centers" that improve community health, health equity, and quality of life. Furthermore, the NRPA's statement regarding its 2025 Interaction with Parks Report [44] indicates that approximately 227 million adults will visit local parks or recreation facilities in 2025, and that people seek quality park access, community support, and a sense of belonging. These findings highlight the continuity of recreation areas in community life and their nature as public services. For local governments, the third-space approach necessitates four fundamental management transformations in recreation services. First, recreation areas should be planned not only as infrastructure investments but also as tools for social connection. Second, area management should not be limited to maintenance, repair, and security services; it should also include social programming, participatory planning, and impact assessment processes. Third, the needs of the local population should be analyzed regularly, and services should be updated accordingly. Fourth, the social impact of recreation areas should be measured and reported.

Table 5. *Third Space-Based Recreation Management Framework for Local Governments*

Management Area	Traditional Approach	Third Space Based Approach
Planning	Physical space and facility creation	Designing spaces that generate social interaction and belonging
Programming	Number of events and participation focus	Social connection, inclusion, and well-being
Measurement and evaluation	Satisfaction and usage intensity	Social impact, belonging, accessibility, and community contribution
Stakeholder participation	Centralized decision-making	User, neighborhood, NGO, and institutional participation
Service approach	Leisure services	Social infrastructure and community well-being services

Table 5 presents a comparison of the traditional and third-space-based recreation management framework for local governments. This table clearly demonstrates the paradigm shift in recreation management. While the traditional approach primarily focuses on creating physical spaces, operating facilities, organizing events, and ensuring user satisfaction, the third-space-based approach considers recreation areas in terms of their capacity to generate social interaction, belonging, inclusivity, social well-being, and social impact.

In terms of planning, the traditional approach focuses primarily on physical investments such as parks, sports fields, walking paths, or social facilities. While these investments are important, the third, site-based approach goes beyond the physical space and also considers the social use of the area. The location of a recreation area, who uses it, which social groups it brings together, how much time users spend in the area, and whether the area supports social encounters become fundamental questions in the planning process. In terms of programming, while the traditional approach emphasizes the number of events, the number of participants, and the variety of services; the third, site-based approach prioritizes the capacity of events to generate social cohesion and community well-being. For example, a walking event can be designed not only as a program that increases physical activity, but also as a tool that brings individuals together, creates social support, and strengthens a sense of belonging. Therefore, local governments should evaluate event programs not only with quantitative success indicators but also with social impact indicators. The measurement and evaluation dimension is one of the most important contributions of the table. In traditional recreation management, evaluation is often done through indicators such as usage intensity, satisfaction level, and number of participants. However, the third-space-based approach requires the consideration of more qualitative social indicators such as social connection, belonging, accessibility, trust, inclusivity, and community contribution, in addition to these indicators. This increases the importance of social impact measurement in recreation management. In terms of stakeholder participation, while the traditional approach relies on more centralized and institutional decision-making processes, the third-space-based approach deems it necessary to include users, neighborhood residents, civil society organizations, universities, and other local actors in decision-making processes. This is because areas with third-space characteristics become more embraced and functional when shaped

according to the needs, habits, and expectations of users.

The most fundamental transformation is seen in the service concept. While the traditional approach views recreation services as a public service aimed at utilizing leisure time, the third, space-based approach considers this service as a social infrastructure and a policy for societal well-being. This perspective shows that local governments should manage recreation areas not only as parks, facilities, or event spaces, but also as strategic public spaces that strengthen social bonds, reduce loneliness, support inclusive participation, and improve the quality of urban life.

4.7. THE POTENTIAL OF THIRD SPACES AND GOVERNANCE GAPS IN THE TURKISH CONTEXT

In recent years, national gardens, city parks, municipal social facilities, youth centers, walking paths, open sports areas, and campus recreation areas have become widespread in Turkey. These areas hold significant potential from a third-space perspective. Considering urbanization, apartment living, individualization, the need for social spaces among the young population, and the daily interaction needs of older individuals, public recreation areas are of strategic importance in Turkey in terms of social cohesion and community well-being. However, findings from the literature indicate that the quality of a third space cannot be achieved solely through the creation of spaces. In the Turkish context, a significant portion of recreation areas are considered from a physical investment perspective; however, their potential to generate social impact, foster belonging, bring different groups together, and combat loneliness is not adequately measured. This situation points to a significant research and application gap in the field of recreation management. To integrate the third-space approach into recreation management in Turkey, it is first necessary to analyze the social use profiles of these areas. It should be regularly measured who uses the area, who doesn't, at what times and for what purposes it is used, whether users feel safe, whether the area generates social encounters, and whether it facilitates interaction between different groups. Such assessments will allow for the improvement of recreational areas not only in terms of physical adequacy but also in terms of social functionality.

4.8. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS: A THIRD SPACE-ORIENTED PARADIGM SHIFT IN RECREATION MANAGEMENT

When the findings are evaluated holistically, it is seen that the third-space approach in recreation management indicates a new paradigm shift. This paradigm shift represents a movement from viewing recreation areas traditionally as spaces offering physical activity and leisure services to viewing them as spaces that generate social connection, community well-being, inclusivity, and social infrastructure. The role of the recreation manager also changes in this transformation. While in the traditional approach the recreation manager is primarily responsible for managing facilities, activities, personnel, and user satisfaction; in the third-space-based approach, the recreation manager becomes an actor who supports social contact, belonging, inclusive participation, community well-being, and the production of local social capital.

Table 6. *General Synthesis of Findings*

Thema	Key Finding	Contribution to Recreation Management
Third space quality	Recreational spaces are social living spaces outside of home and work/school.	Recreation areas should be managed as social experience areas
Social connection	Recreational spaces generate a sense of community and social capital.	Programs should be designed to increase social interaction
Coping with loneliness	Third spaces can contribute to reducing loneliness and social isolation.	Low-threshold, free and regular social events are important
Social well-being	Recreational spaces support physical, psychological, and social well-being.	Success indicators should include social impact
Inclusivity	Accessible and equitable recreational spaces strengthen the function of third spaces.	Physical, economic and social accessibility should be addressed together
Local governments	Municipalities are key actors in the production of third spaces.	Recreation services should be planned as social infrastructure policy
Türkiye context	While investments in physical spaces are increasing, the measurement of social impact is limited.	There is a need for third place-oriented evaluation models

Table 6 synthesizes the overall findings of the study through the themes of third-space quality, social connection, combating loneliness, social well-being, inclusivity, local governments, and the Turkish context. This table is important in revealing the holistic outcome of the study. When the findings are evaluated together, it is seen that recreation areas are not only areas for physical activity, rest, or leisure in the traditional sense; they are public spaces that generate social connection, belonging, inclusivity, and social well-being.

The theme of the third spatial quality reveals that recreation areas function as social living spaces outside of home and work/school. This finding shows that recreation management needs to expand from physical space management to

social experience management. The success of recreation areas can no longer be explained solely by size, number of facilities, or frequency of use. The meaning the area holds in individuals' daily lives, the social relationships it facilitates, and the extent to which users take ownership of it must also be evaluated. The theme of social connection points to the potential of recreation areas to generate a sense of community and social capital. This finding shows that recreation programs should aim not only to increase individual participation but also to foster relationships, create encounters, and produce shared experiences among users. Neighborhood parks, youth centers, campus recreation areas, and municipal social facilities are particularly important areas for generating social connections in this respect. The theme of combating loneliness reveals that third spaces can serve a supportive function against the increasing problem of social isolation in modern societies. This finding shows that recreation areas are also important in terms of public health and social policy. For individuals living alone, the elderly, students, people moving to a new city, and groups with limited social circles, low-cost, accessible and regular recreation activities can offer important opportunities for social connection. The theme of social well-being shows that recreation areas make multifaceted contributions at physical, psychological, social and public levels. This finding indicates that success indicators in recreation management need to be rethought. Although the number of users and satisfaction rate are important, the effects of the areas on quality of life, social harmony, belonging, trust and environmental satisfaction should also be included in the evaluation processes. The theme of inclusivity shows that the third space function of recreation areas can only be strengthened if they are open to different social groups.

Ensuring that spaces can be used safely and comfortably by women, children, youth, the elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income groups is one of the fundamental conditions for a third space. Therefore, inclusivity in recreation management is not only an ethical principle but also a fundamental management criterion that determines the social functionality of the space. The theme of local governments shows that municipalities and other local institutions are decisive actors in the production of third spaces. Local governments need to plan recreation areas not only as physical investments but also as social infrastructure policies. This approach makes it possible to link recreation services with social cohesion, public health, inclusive participation, and local quality of life. The theme of the Turkish context presents one of the most important implications of the study in terms of application. While parks, national gardens, social facilities, youth centers, and campus recreation areas are becoming increasingly common in Turkey, it appears that their capacity to generate social impact is not adequately measured. Therefore, there is a need for new measurement tools, user research, and social impact analyses to evaluate the third-space nature of recreation areas in Turkey. Table 6 demonstrates that the third-space approach in recreation management is not merely a theoretical discussion; it also offers a robust management framework for practical application. This framework expands the role of recreation managers from facility and event management to social impact, belonging, and community well-being management. Consequently, the third-space approach provides an important conceptual foundation for future empirical research, local government practices, and policy development processes in the field of recreation management.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study conceptually discusses the social functions of recreation areas in contemporary societies by examining the third-space approach in recreation management from the perspectives of social connection, social well-being, inclusivity, and local governance. The findings show that recreation areas are not merely spaces for physical activity, rest, or leisure; they are multi-dimensional public spaces where individuals establish social relationships, develop a sense of belonging, participate in social life, and support their well-being. In this respect, recreation areas can be considered as everyday social life spaces outside of home and work/school, within the framework of Oldenburg's [1] third-space approach.

One of the key findings of the study is that the third-space quality of recreational areas has a more comprehensive structure than just a physical presence. Indicators such as accessibility, voluntary participation, social interaction, belonging, inclusivity, and continuity stand out as fundamental elements determining the social functionality of a recreational area. This shows that traditional indicators such as area size, number of facilities, number of activities, or user satisfaction alone are insufficient in recreation management. The success of recreational areas should also be evaluated based on the extent to which users can establish social connections in these areas, feel safe and a sense of belonging, whether different social groups can benefit from the area, and whether the area becomes a continuous part of daily life.

The findings also reveal the potential of recreation areas to generate social cohesion and community capital. Parks, national gardens, youth centers, campus recreation areas, walking paths, and municipal social facilities are spaces where individuals experience daily encounters, participate in shared activities, and develop social familiarity. Considering Putnam's [10] approach to social capital, these areas can contribute to strengthening trust, reciprocity, familiarity, and a sense of community. Similarly, Wan and Shen [5] state that public green spaces are related to social cohesion; they emphasize that the physical characteristics of these areas, user perceptions, and usage patterns can have an impact on social cohesion. Therefore, in recreation management, social cohesion should be seen not as a random outcome, but as a goal that needs to be consciously planned and managed. Another important result of the study is that recreation areas, as third spaces, can have a supportive function in combating loneliness and social isolation. The World Health Organization

emphasizes that loneliness and social isolation are global problems with serious impacts on the health and well-being of individuals [30]. In this context, recreational areas offer opportunities for low-threshold social contact, especially for individuals living alone, the elderly, young people, students, and groups with limited social circles. Finlay et al. [3] state that third spaces are important for the collective health and well-being of individuals, and that the loss of these spaces can have negative consequences in terms of social isolation. Accordingly, recreational areas should be considered not only as spaces offering leisure services, but also as public social infrastructures that support social connection. When evaluated in terms of social well-being, recreational areas are seen to contribute in physical, psychological, social, environmental, and public dimensions. Walking paths, open sports areas, and parks support individuals' physical activity levels; while green spaces are also important for stress reduction, mental relaxation, and contact with nature. The WHO Regional Office for Europe's report on urban green spaces draws attention to the potential of green spaces to support physical activity, provide psychological relaxation, strengthen social cohesion, and reduce environmental risks [42]. This finding demonstrates that recreation services should be directly linked to public health, quality of life, and social policy. Inclusivity and accessibility are key elements that strengthen the third-space character of recreation areas. The findings of the study show that simply being open to everyone is not enough; these areas must offer safe, accessible, and meaningful opportunities for individuals of different ages, genders, incomes, disabilities, and social positions. Dietz et al. [39] highlight the importance of the qualitative capacity of recreation areas by revealing inequalities in access to health-promoting facilities in parks across different cities. Therefore, inclusive recreation management should not be limited to physical accessibility arrangements alone; it should also include dimensions such as economic accessibility, perception of social security, program diversity, and users feeling accepted. From the perspective of local governments, managing recreation areas as third spaces requires a significant strategic transformation.

While the traditional approach to recreation services primarily focuses on the production of physical space, facility management, and event organization, the third-space approach considers recreation areas as social infrastructures that generate social connection, belonging, inclusive participation, and social well-being. Klinenberg's [43] social infrastructure approach also argues that public spaces such as parks, libraries, schoolyards, and community centers are areas that strengthen social bonds. In this context, municipalities and local institutions should plan parks, national gardens, youth centers, and social facilities not only as physical investments but also as public service areas that support the quality of life and social connection of city residents. In the Turkish context, parks, national gardens, municipal social facilities, youth centers, walking paths, and campus recreation areas hold significant potential from the perspective of the third-space approach. However, it appears that the capacity of these spaces to generate social impact, foster belonging, bring different groups together, and contribute to combating loneliness is not adequately measured. Therefore, there is a need for third-space-based evaluation models, user experience analyses, and social impact measurements in the field of recreation management in Turkey. In this respect, the third-space approach to recreation management offers a significant contribution both theoretically and practically. Recreation areas are not only physical spaces where leisure time is spent; they are public spaces where individuals establish social connections, develop a sense of belonging, participate in social life, and have their well-being supported. Therefore, success indicators in recreation management should be re-evaluated; indicators such as social connection, inclusivity, belonging, accessibility, trust, and social well-being should be included in the evaluation processes.

Future research could empirically examine parks, national gardens, campus recreation areas, youth centers, and municipal social facilities in Turkey in terms of their third-space characteristics. This could include qualitative interviews, observational studies, user experience analyses, social impact measurements, and mixed-methods research. This would provide a more concrete demonstration of the practical application of the third-space approach within the recreation management literature.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In the course of preparing this manuscript, the authors employed ChatGPT to improve the linguistic quality and readability of the content. After utilizing this AI tool, the authors conducted comprehensive review and necessary revisions to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and scientific rigor of the manuscript. All authors bear full responsibility for the final content of the published work, including any errors or inconsistencies that may arise.

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