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Article

Hawker Centres: A Social Space Approach to Promoting Community Wellbeing

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Abstract

This article sets out to examine how the use of social spaces, namely hawker centres, has contributed to community wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Using an extensive thematic analysis of online conversations, we have identified that the use of social spaces can have a positive influence on individual, relational and social wellbeing. Access to social spaces during stressful events contributes to the feeling of normalcy, supports routines and structured activities, encourages responsible behaviours, facilitates social connectedness, and helps maintain community resilience. We present a new framework for urban social space characterisation containing three dimensions: coaction, copresence, and colocation (the three Cs). Here, coaction is associated with better visibility of community practices, copresence enhances the sense of connectedness, and colocation is concerned with the use of spatial design factors for influencing movement and interactions. The framework is central to our understanding of social space and its impact on wellbeing. Underpinning the three Cs is the notion of the integration of policy, community wellbeing, and various urban agendas. The findings were considered in terms of their relevance for social space development in Singapore.

Keywords

coaction; colocation; community wellbeing; copresence; hawker centres; social space; urban development

Issue

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1. Introduction

The proportion of urban dwellers is expected to increase to 68% by 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). Accelerating global urbanisation fuels the interest in the effects of urban living on human health and wellbeing (Pykett et al., 2020). Congruent with the notion that the improvement of wellbeing of the population is a key societal aspiration (Davern et al., 2007), this article invites a closer look at how the sociospatial processes of cities benefit urban residents.

The promotion of mental health and wellbeing in urban communities is a challenge that both urbanised

and rapidly urbanising societies face (Pykett et al., 2020). In the case of a highly urbanised state such as Singapore, the search for wellbeing through urban design is of primary concern to urban planners, policymakers, and researchers as well as to citizens looking to connect the dots between urban environment and human wellbeing (Andreucci et al., 2019; Bhati et al., 2022; Matsuoka & Kaplan, 2008). Recently, this challenge has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Corburn et al., 2020), which has drastically reshaped the relationship between cities and quality of life. What came into focus during the pandemic is twofold: The role of public space changed, and access to public space is firmly linked to the quality of life in cities (Mouratidis, 2021).

Increasingly, urban spaces are associated with better health outcomes (Anderson et al., 2017; Gearey et al., 2019; Kleinert & Horton, 2016). Yet, the research focused on this area remains uneven. Much of the work is dedicated to linkages between urban parks and physical activity (Liu et al., 2017); community gardens, food knowledge, and physical health (Firth et al., 2011; Malberg Dyg et al., 2020); and urban green infrastructure and mental health (Andreucci et al., 2019). However, the role of social spaces in the production of wellbeing has scarcely been explored. While some urban spaces (open spaces, green spaces, art spaces, and pedestrian areas) receive special attention and coverage (Kleinert & Horton, 2016), social spaces such as hawker centres (HCs) receive limited research recognition despite their functionality and serious economic and sociocultural contribution (Tarulevicz, 2013). This gap hinders urban health research and practice advancement and creates barriers to the implementation of new initiatives in Singapore.

This work examines how the use of social spaces in Singapore, namely HCs, contributes to community wellbeing. The search for wellbeing has taken place against the Covid-19 backdrop. The aim is to assess how access to social spaces can affect mental health and subjective wellbeing, especially during times when access is not available or is restricted. We capture HCs patrons' sentiments and employ the transactional theory of emotion and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), together with Plutchik's (1988) model of emotions, to study emotions and analyse experiences. We introduce the concept of the three Cs, which defines the social space as a system for enabling coaction, copresence, and colocation. The former two are linked to emotional and social evaluations and are concerned with HCs as a conduit for various degrees of social interaction, participation, and engagement. The latter is linked to structural evaluations and the use of design opportunities in addressing urban stress and promoting wellbeing in urban communities.

The main argument advanced in this article is that various aspects of interaction in and with social space have a strong link to wellbeing. The results of this study could help inform holistic approaches to wellbeing as well as facilitate the rethinking of policy and urban initiatives. This study advocates that responsive urban planning and design are key to securing a healthy urban lifestyle.

2. Singapore in the Wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Urban health is an intersectoral arena that links the public health and urban planning sectors (Damiani & Jevtic, 2021). In Singapore, a variety of public health specialists, academics, researchers, and policymakers engage in communitarian strategies that aim to promote the wellbeing of the population. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Manpower are among those responsible for the public's health and safety. Together with various

authorities and advisory groups, they work on a range of policy initiatives and campaigns that aim to improve the wellbeing of the city's inhabitants.

In recent years, a steady increase in programmes (the Youth Support Youth Programme, in 2012), campaigns (the Covid-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce, in 2020), and initiatives (It's OKAY to Reach Out, in 2021) that focus on the diverse aspects of wellbeing signals a change in the intervention strategies that previously mainly aimed at the protection of physical health. This gradual shift in the framing of public health and wellbeing coincides with the increasing acknowledgement of the important role that mental health and wellbeing play in achieving global development goals (United Nations Sustainable Development, n.d.).

In the years leading up to the pandemic, both the Ministry of Manpower and the Ministry of Health reported an increase in physical and mental health challenges (Khor, 2019; Ministry of Manpower et al., 2020). The Singapore Mental Health Study conducted in 2016 found that one in seven persons had experienced a mental health condition in their lifetime, an increase from one in eight persons since 2010 (Khor, 2019). The psychological burden of the Covid-19 pandemic made matters worse, with the Ministry of Manpower et al. (2020) reporting an increase in stress, anxiety, loneliness, and depression in individuals. A study by the Institute of Mental Health found that 13% of the surveyed Singaporeans reported experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety in the period from May 2020 to June 2021 (Ministry of Health, 2021).

These changes were framed by the major lockdown measures. The first nationwide lockdown, known as a circuit breaker, was implemented starting on 7 April 2020, resulting in all nonessential workplaces being closed (Phase 1). Food and beverage (F&B) outlets were left with takeaway and delivery-only options for two months. On 19 June 2020, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce announced the beginning of Phase 2 (Singapore Government, 2020). Dining in was allowed with strict hygiene and safe distancing protocols. In HCs, seating arrangements were changed to adhere to safe distancing measures. Food courts installed plastic barriers, nets, and table shields to separate diners. These measures remained in place for the rest of the year. During the second half of 2020, Singaporeans were encouraged to continue working from home. The continued loss of customer traffic resulted in many food stalls ceasing operations, with new closures reported almost daily (Murphy, 2022). Vaccines became available in December 2020. The same month, hawker culture was added to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The new year saw a gradual reduction of access control. Interim fencing was removed at selected HCs and adjacent markets. The number of diners remained limited. Return to heightened alert happened occasionally throughout 2021, with some relaxation of measures taking place around early August 2021. From late

November, groups of up to five fully vaccinated persons were allowed to dine in together at F&B establishments. HCs were required to “access control” as well as conduct checks on the vaccination status of their customers. Unvaccinated or partially vaccinated customers could only purchase food to take away. The authorities continued to encourage seniors to minimise dining activity at HCs and coffee shops. The year of 2022 brought further easing of the restrictions, with dining in being allowed for groups of up to 10 people starting in April.

Singapore’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic, though decisive and collective (Chua et al., 2020), provides important learning points. Many health and wellbeing initiatives in Singapore are underpinned by an emphasis on personal responsibility (Tan et al., 2021). The existing initiatives mainly encourage a proactive approach to problem-solving (proactive coping), which includes individuals’ active participation in counselling and support programmes. In the wake of Covid-19, more voices were calling for a comprehensive solution and creation of approaches that would focus on social and environmental factors, including the use of urban spaces for wellbeing management (Baharudin, 2021). In this work, we offer a framework for considering public social spaces from a wellbeing management viewpoint. We believe that the transformative power of social spaces has the potential to deliver positive effects on physical and mental health. Before we proceed to the theoretical examination of social space properties, we need to describe the dimensions of social space through the prism of HCs.

3. Hawker Centres as a Social Space

To understand the contemporary dimensions of a social space concept, we need to discuss its application in urban research. Space-to-human relations have commanded the attention of scholars for over a century. The topic of space was prominent in Émile Durkheim’s writings (Buttimer, 1969), and Durkheim was among the first to offer insights into the role of space in social processes. According to his sociospatial theory, social life is connected through social groups to social space (Shimazu, 1995). As a key variable in the formation of social life, social space incorporates both physical and social environments, including virtual space. A social space is an essential counterpart to private home and workspaces (Anderson et al., 2017), though sadly it does not receive as much research attention.

There is a fine distinction between public space and social space. A public space is a human-oriented accessible space. It can be privately or publicly owned. A street and a beach are equally considered public spaces. However, a public space used for the sake of getting in touch with others, a place to meet or communicate, is a social space. A social space is physical or virtual, designed for specific social groups or populations. It is not a natural space; rather, social forces produce the space (Glover, 2017). Normalised practices and social val-

ues play a central role in the conception of social space (Kinkaid, 2020).

Different societies relate to space in distinctive ways (Schroer, 2021). A social space is unique to the social system, and it is also unique to the individuals who participate in social interaction within its settings. Hence, the study of social space must be tightly linked to social context, which consists of multimodal social properties such as beliefs and behaviours of individuals, and details of their physical environment.

In Singapore, HCs function as sites responsible for the production of social space. HCs can be broadly described as Singapore’s community dining rooms. Offering an array of stalls under one roof, they are conveniently located in areas with high pedestrian activity, often with adjoining wet markets and shopping malls. According to UNESCO (2021), HCs play a crucial role in strengthening the social fabric of Singapore. The spatial formations of HCs display a functional relationship between the need to maximise space usage in land-scarce Singapore and provide a landing spot for numerous hungry residents without overcrowding or compromising consumers’ need for convenience—a mission that would not be possible without the ingenuity of the residents and hawkers alike. The local hawkers are well adapted to the daily social rhythm of the city-state, catering to early birds and night owls, office workers and leisure visitors, kopi (black coffee with sweetened milk) connoisseurs, and brunch aficionados.

4. Hawker Centres and Wellbeing

The meaning of social space goes beyond its functionality. Though primarily intended as a communication environment, it has a greater social significance. HCs involve the practice of dining and mingling. They enable individual and neighbourhood-level social interactions and shape local social relations (Tarulevicz, 2013). Such activities have been shown to facilitate social bonding and group membership (Conein, 2011; Forrest & Kearns, 2001), which in turn help build and maintain collaborative and social capital (Lochner et al., 1999). The latter can lead to greater social cohesion, more active participation in civic affairs, and better public health (Kawachi et al., 2008).

Jennings and Bamkole (2019) state that interpersonal dynamics and a sense of social connectedness are associated with psychological health benefits. Positive social interactions reinforce feelings of belonging and acceptance (Steger & Kashdan, 2009; Walton et al., 2012). Warm relationships with others are also found to have a significant and positive influence on life satisfaction (Tan & Tambyah, 2016). In contrast, the circumstances that lead to social isolation reduce opportunities for social engagement and lessen the potential for developing social cohesion. The Covid-19 lockdown(s) and the absence of the usual social support presented significant hardships to many individuals (Sheek-Hussein et al., 2021).

The literature leads us to make the following assumption: There is a link between access to social spaces and subjective wellbeing. We believe that evidence of the necessary conditions for supporting wellbeing can be found in “natural” online settings, but first, we need to find theories that can provide insights into the varied dimensions of subjective wellbeing.

5. Theoretical Underpinnings

5.1. Theoretical Considerations

Wellbeing studies underline the importance of analysing emotion-focused coping mechanisms during traumatic events (Fuller & Huseh-Zosel, 2021; Wanzer et al., 2005). The transactional theory of emotion and coping is useful when trying to detect signs of coping and protective wellbeing mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1987), individuals are involved in continuous evaluation of experienced events as threats or challenges. Both challenge and threat appraisals involve the assessment of personal resources as sufficient or insufficient, which leads to an emotional response that is either positive or negative. A challenge state is associated with more positive emotions and resources perceived as sufficient. A threat state is linked to more negative emotions and insufficient resources to meet the demands of a situation. The researchers need to look for signs of emotional regulation and coping—often hidden—to find evidence of wellbeing.

Coping styles are inextricably linked to basic emotions (Plutchik, 1989). Extracting and measuring emotions is a vexing but necessary process. Plutchik’s (1988) model of emotions offers a systematic way of identifying and organising feelings and sentiments expressed in a text. The application of Plutchik’s model of emotions when studying urban experiences is a tested and viable method (Stals et al., 2014). This model will aid our investigation of the constructs of coping and emotional regulation.

The transactional theory suggests that the way a person reacts to threatening, challenging, or difficult situations requires the conjunction of an environment with certain attributes. Therefore, in addition to personal variables, environmental variables such as social factors and physical attributes must be considered when studying coping mechanisms. The person–environment fit theory suggests that just as the individual influences the environment, the environment shapes the individual (Edwards & Cooper, 1990). If the fit is optimal, the individual’s functioning is facilitated, but if the environment is unsuitable, the individual may experience maladaptation (Holmbeck et al., 2008). The analysis of the person–environment relationship can provide insights into the changes in subjective wellbeing.

Building on the above, we hypothesise that a social space can facilitate coping and provide support during trying times. We suggest that a more outward-looking approach, whereby wellbeing is defined as a multidimen-

sional concept, is most appropriate for this study. To this end, we need to develop a framework that supports and describes the emotional, social, and environmental components of wellbeing.

5.2. Coaction, Copresence, and Colocation

We offer a new framework for urban social space characterisation that has three parts: coaction, copresence, and colocation—the three Cs. The three parts do not seem to appear as complementary concepts in urban design literature. Discussed mostly in social studies as separate concepts or sometimes as coaction–copresence combinations, the three Cs are yet to receive research recognition.

People in a public space can be engaged in a calculated copresence. Zhao (2003) defines copresence as a sociological concept that describes the conditions in which human individuals interact with one another. He notes that copresence has two dimensions: copresence as a mode of being with others (social projection) and copresence as a sense of being with others (emotional projection). Mode of copresence refers to the social and physical conditions that structure human interactions. Sense of copresence, on the other hand, refers to the subjective experience of being with others that an individual acquires in an interaction. Copresence enables not only social proximity (social closeness and familiarity) but also reciprocity, accessibility, and availability to each other (Creangă, 2019; Zhao, 2003). It facilitates supportive social relationships and contributes to the sense of connectedness among people.

A socially shared experience can support processes that enable coaction with like-minded others (Radomskaya & Pearce, 2021; Stewart et al., 2019). A coaction effect is a phenomenon whereby task performance can increase as a result of the presence of others (social facilitation, see Harkins, 1987). The presence of other people as well as the apprehension about being evaluated by others is important for social facilitation to occur. Public spaces offer better observability of self and others and, by extension, provide better visibility of community practices. In other words, a public space can help people gain awareness of what constitutes socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviour and thus support coaction.

While “being with” might be considered an equivalent of copresence, “being in” is considered an equivalent of colocation (Creangă, 2019). In a broad sense, colocation means to be located jointly or together. It can also mean “working together in one space” (Ghorob & Bodenheimer, 2012). In this context, we define colocation as a physical location that can enable rich communication. Colocation is concerned with the smart use of spatial design factors for influencing movement and social interactions. By finding traces of colocation in the data, we hope to understand how space shapes and is shaped by people’s lives.

Building on the literature, we hypothesize that social spaces such as HCs can serve as a system for enabling the three Cs. We argue that the three Cs is a useful new tool that should be studied in conjunction with varied aspects of urban development and wellbeing.

6. Methodology

For this qualitative research, the scholars chose a deliberate sampling strategy. Criterion sampling was used to identify relevant user content. Among the initial broad criteria were timeframe (mid-2020 to early 2022) and relevance. The user comment was deemed relevant if it focused on HCs and related experiences. The researchers used online social media platforms as data sources (Facebook, Twitter, Google reviews, Reddit, YouTube). Over 1,500 posts met our initial inclusion criteria. These were further narrowed down to posts that contain information “other than purely gastronomic or service-related.” For example, content that exclusively focused

on meal description or service rating was excluded. About one-third of the original sample was retained for further analysis.

The extracted data were coded using first and second cycle codes. A coding manual was developed by two researchers to maintain the reliability of coding. The first cycle codes were mostly inductive and descriptive, designed to help cluster and summarise segments of data. The second cycle codes were inferential, designed to group the summaries into themes and concepts. The schematic representation of the coding logic is presented below (Figure 1). The labels (the three Cs, levels, challenges, and threats) helped organise data into conceptual categories. The codes, labels, and themes are not mutually exclusive and some overlap is expected.

Of the selected user posts, 119 were retained for an in-depth thematic analysis. These were user texts created by patrons: self-identified regular customers and hawker supporters. User-supplied information (e.g., “I come here all the time”) was used to verify the “patron”

	Coaction	Copresence	Colocation	
First cycle codes*	<i>[We call for] government support, development programmes, relief funds, rental waivers, subsidies...</i>	<i>[We] a community, society, Singaporeans, patrons, neighbours, volunteers, supporters...</i>	<i>[General attributes] CBD, central area, district, suburb, residential area...</i>	National level — broader social actions — broader social belonging — broad spatial settings
	<i>[I see people in HCs] wearing masks, social distancing, observing rules, supporting others, reporting violations...</i>	<i>[In HCs, people] socialise, meet people, engage w/others, stay connected, help each other, volunteer...</i>	<i>[Local attributes] parking, public transport, walkability, neighbourhood characteristics, access to green space, bike-friendly</i>	Local level — local actions — local interactions — local spatial settings
	<i>[In HCs, I can] keep others safe, follow rules, social distance, clear table/tray/seat, support others, discourage violations of safety...</i>	<i>[I go to HCs] to meet others, to socialise, observe others, support businesses, patronise hawkers, enjoy a meal...</i>	<i>[Subjective assess.] layout, seating, crowds, cleanliness/safety perceptions, facilities, accessibility, ambience, maintenance...</i>	Individual level — individual actions — individual interactions — subjective spatial characteristics
Second cycle codes**	<i>Socially responsible behaviours, proactive/productive behaviours, health-promoting behaviours...</i>	<i>[In HCs, people] socialise, meet people, engage w/others, stay connected, help each other, volunteer...</i>	<i>[Local attributes] parking, public transport, walkability, neighbourhood characteristics, access to green space, bike-friendly</i>	Challenging
	<i>Breaches of safety measures, vaccine hesitancy, risky behaviours...</i>	<i>Loneliness/isolation, absence of routines, limited activities, boredom, anxiety...</i>	<i>Bad ventilation, poor cleanliness, low seating capacity, business closures, explicit safety control mechanisms...</i>	Threatening

* Additional first level codes: **source, data, HC location**

** Additional second level codes: **emotional projection** (e.g., sadness, joy, anger), **behavioural reaction** (e.g., avoiding crowds, praising the effort, seeking company)

Figure 1. Examples of coding and organising data.

status. The retained user texts were coded for emotions. We used Plutchik’s model of emotions to classify semantic units of text into a set of emotion classes. These emotions, together with the codes, themes, and labels helped assess and describe the changes in the subjective wellbeing of HC patrons. The results are presented in a narrative format below.

7. Results and Discussion

Most data were collected from Google reviews (67%), Facebook (19.5%), Twitter (7%), and Reddit (4%). The category Other (YouTube and blogs) accounted for the remaining 2.5%. The majority of posts were created in 2021 (69%). Only 11% were created in 2020. The limited amount of data from 2020 can be explained by the reduced activity of HCs during the first year of the pandemic. The HC locations are shown below (Figure 2). The locations were chosen based on Google ratings (higher than four stars).

The analysis revealed that most patrons assessed the reality brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic as challenging (72%) rather than threatening (28%). The theme of support, either sought or received, emerged as a major aspect of the experiences described. The calls for “neighbours to come together” and “do our bit by going to our favourite stalls” are common in the dataset. This coping strategy can be described as “taking control” coping. By taking control, patrons felt more empowered. Common empowerment examples that emerged from the data were linked to decisions to support seniors, “adopt” a hawker stall, support businesses, participate in community projects, and volunteer. This ability to contribute to community outcomes was generally linked to reduced feelings of uncertainty and apprehension and was associated with better mood and motivation. The HCs acted as a spatial catalyst for proactive and productive behaviours.

The most talked about Covid-19 restrictions were the stay-at-home orders and the ban on social gatherings. Patrons’ perceptions and emotions helped frame the themes within the context. Among patrons, the feelings of loneliness and claustrophobia (“feel like a corralled animal,” “wondering when freedom will arrive”), low morale (“I expect many suicides”), and anxiety (“sense of despair and anxiety that hangs in the air”) were relatively common during the early stages of the pandemic. That said, low morale persisted in 2021 despite the easing of restrictions. We can attribute that to general Covid-19 fatigue. Boredom and stress were also mentioned, but by a lower percentage of patrons. These sentiments appeared in various contexts, some of which can be glimpsed in the provided quotes. Interestingly, loneliness and boredom were mostly associated with a person projecting an emotion, the focus of the projection being seniors. Seniors were also perceived to be at risk due to the absence of routines. For example:

Spare a thought for the lonely old folks....I feel so sorry for our senior citizens who are missing their first cup of morning kopi at their *fave* food court....Their golden years during Covid times can be made more tolerable. If Covid-19 doesn’t kill, boredom and loneliness may.

Asking [seniors] to stay home and not even dine out at HCs—that’s like imposing a mini circuit breaker [lock-down] for more than half of all Singaporeans. Humans are social creatures. Asking seniors to stay at home for prolonged periods of time, especially if they live alone, is just not good for mental health.

The need to keep routines was attributed to seniors, though most users making the projection were younger people, who, probably, experienced the most interruption. Overall, the ability to practice “normal activities” in familiar settings was identified as a path to

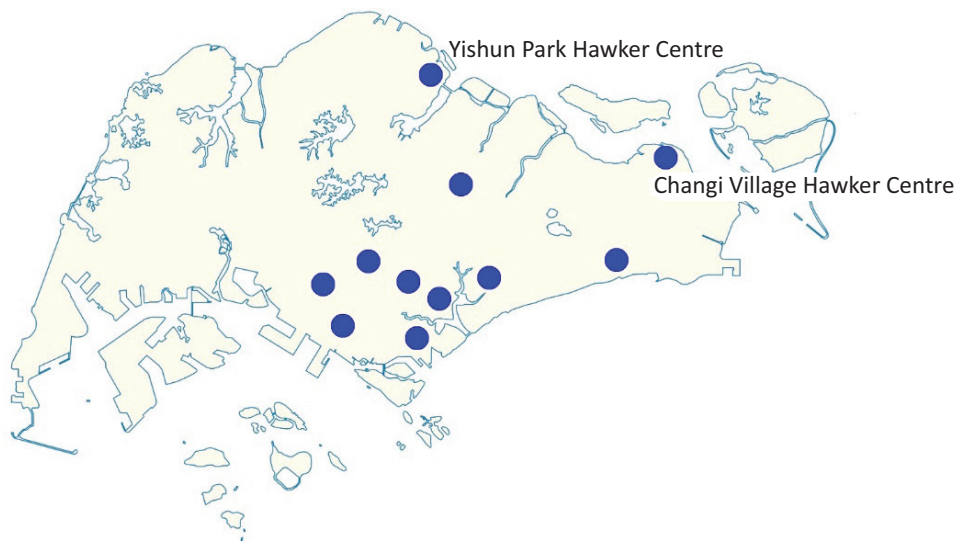


Figure 2. HC locations.

subjective wellbeing. The absence of routine, expressed through the inability to congregate and assemble in food courts, was generally perceived as a threat. We suggest that finding ways to support routines and structured activities should be a consideration when designing a social space.

Linked to routine was the feeling of “normalcy.” The users identified the ability to enjoy a meal in a HC as contributing to their feeling of normalcy and even being able to reduce tension and stress. The HCs’ association with normalcy, routine, and even tradition is a big part of HC appeal, as it promotes both emotional and social wellbeing. This, in turn, suggests that access to social spaces can be a valuable resource during times of uncertainty. Yet, it is also a challenge that needs to be addressed in tandem with the smart implementation of regulatory policies and innovation in urban planning.

Among other significant social–emotional themes was the reassessment of the value of human interaction. The comments highlighted how seemingly normal human interactions could elicit strong positive emotional responses. Some pointed out that during the first year of the pandemic, most of their social interactions tended to happen in HCs (e.g., on the way to pick up food). For many, HC space was conducive to social interaction:

Looking forward to [the] resumption of dine-in... [the] simple pleasure of sipping kopi at hawker centre, [and going to a] coffeeshop with family and friends. Just to be safe even if allowed, [I] will first do so with [my] own social bubble as championed by Dr Lye [patron’s friend].

The most common theme in the dataset was copresence. A sense of copresence facilitated social relationships and, according to our data, contributed to relational and individual wellbeing. Furthermore, we found many examples of HCs’ environment being conducive to prosocial behaviour. For example:

Do you know that this is a stall with a heart? Free porridge for the senior citizens, up to two bowls each....Asked the stall owner why, he said, “we all must try to do our part for the seniors, in whatever way we can.” Kudos to this stall, worth supporting and eating from them, IMHO [in my honest opinion].

Pro-social behaviour was expressed in numerous ways: by volunteering, “patronising hawkers,” launching online campaigns and posting on social media (#supporthawkers, #hawkerculture, #supportlocal), teaching seniors digital literacy, or simply inquiring about the wellbeing of others. Pro-social behaviours are linked to social wellbeing.

In the data, we saw many examples of copresence and coaction working together: when a smile, an act of kindness, a simple encouragement seemingly contributed to feelings of connectedness, security, and trust.

The coaction–copresence synergy helped support perceived community wellbeing and maintain resilience. Building resilience is an important precondition for successfully combatting future outbreaks, and social spaces are ideally suited to such a task. Prior research shows that not only performing acts of kindness but also recalling them can increase wellbeing (Ko et al., 2021). We hope that the communal effort to support each other during Covid-19 will have a lasting positive effect on citizen morale even as time progresses.

Our findings show that social connectedness was the most prevalent subtheme associated with the use of HCs (43% of the comments). We found numerous examples of HCs acting as a spatial catalyst for purposeful human interaction.

Times are bad and the days ahead may get more difficult for many, many of us—from the person walking on the street to someone cooking up a humble storm behind the counter....Such times call for resilience, care for one another, and support for each other. Warmest cheers to those in the F&B businesses (industry). Remember to look out for each other...

The social connectedness subtheme often appeared as being linked with socially responsible behaviours. We found that copresence–coaction synergy contributed to the enhancement of different types of health-promoting behaviours. The ability to facilitate socially responsible behaviours while also discouraging risky behaviours is an important characteristic of a social space. Our data revealed that people who were concerned with the resurgence of Covid-19 used coaction as a form of safety citizenship behaviour, hoping that increased communal participation in safety compliance (e.g., returning dirty trays, wearing masks) would lead to better safety outcomes. The coaction would often manifest as a word/persuasion/demand (“we all must try”) and/or a personal example:

This HC gives me a very welcoming, fresh, and even new (literal sense!) kind of feeling! [Look at how] well organized as captured in the photos—there’s a hand wash area, tray return station, top-up station (membership card top-up to be used at the HC), etc., everything [is] nicely and neatly organized! Well maintained too! Hawkers are all so friendly—at least the few stores that I patronized, love this place!

Coaction was mostly associated with positive emotions, yet in some cases it was linked to annoyance (e.g., why should we when the government does not; why offload complex problems onto citizens). A few comments observed that poor safety compliance and breaches of safety, when performed in a public space, could lead to complacency. That said, the net positive effect of coaction observed within and facilitated by social space was prominent. We conclude that social spaces can be

an effective instrument for increasing awareness and encouraging pro-community behaviours.

As mentioned previously, HCs as social spaces can add to the feeling of connectedness and social cohesion through coaction and copresence. There are spatial attributes that can facilitate connectedness and social cohesion and factors that can discourage them. We can explore these factors through colocation.

Research suggests that the management of the flow of people has a direct impact on social wellbeing (Carson et al., 2004). The management of people-flow in social spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic was a challenging task. Our observations show that HCs faced numerous difficulties adapting to the new Covid-19 normal. Many solutions—from entry and exit points to the need to perform safety checks—ended up provoking general confusion and “crowds waiting to check in at peak hours”. Patrons reported feeling unsafe, frustrated, and angry. Some measures even contributed to HC avoidance.

Patrons questioned the efficacy of controlled entry and exit points at HCs, arguing that the rules that apply to other F&B outlets (with more controlled entry/exit points) should not be enforced on HCs and need revising. The management of the flow of people through physical-spatial factors raised many questions regarding the quality and efficacy of safety management strategies at HCs. For example:

HC and Kopitiam [controlled entry and exit point] not practical to do so. Unless you want to cordon off and do it like wet markets, then you see huge crowds waiting to check in...it is just a nightmare to try to enforce the rule at HCs and coffeeshops when there is no controlled access point...

Our findings suggest that the use of soft management strategies that utilise space design elements to control human flow implicitly (innovative layout and new seating arrangements) rather than explicitly (by putting up nets and fences) might deliver better results. We found evidence that the use of explicit control mechanisms contributed to dissatisfaction and was even met with resistance. For example, the netting used to cordon off tables and exits received mostly negative feedback, with some people describing their experience as “sitting in a cage.” Some pointed out that it was a nuisance and a safety hazard:

Dunno which *dumbass* decided to net the seats. Stupid design. I was at Chinatown HC two weeks ago and my two-year-old nearly trip over the netting. I was holding a tray of soup and rice. Lucky my mom saw and pulled her away, then immediately behind me one auntie tripped over the netting and fell on both hands. She totally blanked out and sat there for three minutes. Even *tho* my mom offered a hand to pull her up, she wanted to sit there on the floor for a while. Senior citizens tripping over is really dangerous.

Urban planners and policymakers need to consider these factors and plan for people-centric urban solutions that are in line with population expectations and needs.

A social space can serve as a conveyor of multiple messages, values, and meanings. A well-designed social space can instigate social interactions and increase satisfaction with life. Social interactions, however, are not limited to communicative interactions. Our data identified that “people watching” was an important social activity within HCs. Less activity and fewer crowds during the Covid-19 pandemic opened more opportunities to engage in people-watching. We suggest that urban designers explore solutions for the static use of space and seek designs that create comfortable conditions for people watching in urban social spaces.

Our data revealed that among the many HC properties, ventilation, cleanliness, and appropriate seating arrangements contributed most to the feeling of safety. Airiness, brightness, and openness were also associated with better experiential outcomes. Here, it may be prudent to look at some examples. Depending on their needs, people assess and reassess the characteristics of space and their own relationship with it. For example, the Yishun Park HC (Figure 3) had a pronounced colocation theme, which was also the driver of copresence. The patrons pointed out that its modern look (“spacious and airy,” “uncluttered,” “fresh”) and access to green infrastructure (adjacent greenery, near a park, indoor plants) had a positive impact on overall satisfaction. A big number of young entrepreneurs working within the space and access to modern conveniences (cashless payment options, automatic tray collection stations) added to patrons’ feelings of happiness and comfort.

That is not to say that a modern look is a highly coveted attribute for a social space. A variety of tangible and intangible experiences create conditions that facilitate meaningful engagement with space and place. For example, many patrons of the Changi Village HC indicated that the ambience and cultural significance contributed to their connection with the space. We also found that nostalgia was an important meaning-making resource that contributed to place attachment:

Coming here [Changi Village HC] for nasi lemak today brought back memories of my NS [national service] days in the early 1970s when we would take the bumboat from Changi Point jetty to Pulau Tekong for field camp and live-firing exercises. Back in those days, this HC was already known for its nasi lemak. So it’s THE PLACE to come to for your nasi lemak binge....What makes it worthwhile to make the trip to this far eastern tip of Singapore is that after your meal you can enjoy a relaxing stroll at the windy stretch of beach a short bridge away. You’ll also feel less guilty about the heavy meal u just had. Bring your family or your cat or a book if you have time—or MAKE time—to spare.



Figure 3. Yishun Park HC. Source: Courtesy of Yishun Park HC.

Our findings also suggest that place familiarity was a significant positive feature of social space, one that contributes to visitation interest. For many, the feeling of connectedness (e.g., social connection with local hawkers) was a driver for their visit. The variability of opinions expressed in the comments reinforces the notion that a social space is not just a conglomerate of social and spatial conditions, but is a commentary on the process of urban change and wider social transformation.

8. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the use of social spaces contributes to subjective wellbeing. We found that the use of social spaces can have a positive influence on individual, relational, and social wellbeing. The results showed that access to social spaces during stressful events contributes to the feeling of normalcy and supports routine and structured activities. Access to social space can encourage responsible behaviours, facilitate social connectedness, and help maintain community resilience during difficult times.

Overall, our findings confirm that the three-dimensional coaction-copresence-colocation (three Cs) framework is useful for defining and understanding social space. We found that copresence twinned with coaction under the effect of colocation is what makes a space truly belong to society. The use of three Cs frame-

work in social space design offers potential pathways to reduce vulnerabilities during times of uncertainty.

The three Cs framework contributes to the theoretical understanding of how space shapes and is shaped by people's lives. If further developed, the three Cs can be used as the basis for establishing performance metrics for social spaces and as criteria for social space design. The current three Cs framework has a loose structure that allows room for other processes and tools to be included.

The study of social spaces can be useful both in practice and as a focus for future social scientific research. For urban planners, the expansion of the social space concept can inform their understanding of social cohesion in urban settings. For health practitioners, it is a way to improve psychological resilience and wellbeing within a community. In addition, this work provides a solid basis for the growth of the social space concept in urban wellbeing initiatives.

We are limited to what we see in the public domain. Therefore, our data only partially capture the emerging conditions of today's use of HCs as social spaces. Inferences had to be made when interpreting emotional and social projections. While capturing various HC locations, we overlooked food courts located in the west of Singapore. That said, the concentration of HCs in the west is low. The limited space available to us means we can only briefly discuss the coaction-copresence-

colocation role in urban management and planning. We invite future contributors to critically engage with the concept and suggest further refinements. We also suggest using the three Cs as factors in models that explore the person–environment link. We believe that the continued investigation of social spaces is a great opportunity for city planners and health professionals to work together to improve health and wellbeing on a wide scale.

We would like to conclude with the following HC patron quote:

So, HCs play a crucial role in social bonding and nation building. In a way, HCs are like school tuckshops but on a nationwide scale. They are like social nodes, knots in a fishing net which hold Singapore’s multicultural social fabric together.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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