

Research on the Mechanisms of Informal Social Practices in Promoting Community Renewal: A Case Study of Community Square Dancing in Wuhan Huquan

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Abstract:

This study investigates the role of informal social practices in promoting community renewal, using square dancing activities in Wuhan's Huquan Community as a case study. Through participatory observation and in-depth interviews, the research reveals that square dancing strengthens community cohesion by building social interaction networks. Under conditions of limited spatial resources, it fosters flexible and innovative spatial utilization patterns. Additionally, due to the continuity of their activities, square dance groups have become key actors in identifying and addressing community issues, forming a low-threshold, high-frequency mode of community participation. As an informal social practice, square dancing establishes channels for expressing community demands through daily activities, creates trust-based information flow networks, and cultivates bottom-up negotiation mechanisms, thereby driving micro-level community renewal.

Keywords:

Informal Social Practices, Community Renewal, Square Dancing, Community Participation

1. Introduction

In the process of urbanization, urban renewal plays a crucial role, particularly in the transformation and redevelopment of aging urban areas. Traditional urban renewal theories have primarily emphasized government policies and the role of developers [1]. However, as demands for functional improvement, enhanced quality of life, and economic benefits in aging neighborhoods increase [2], the limitations of the traditional top-down approach have become apparent. This shift has prompted growing interest in the role of community participation and informal forces in urban renewal [3].

Community organizations, neighborhood committees, and even everyday community activities, such as street markets and urban gardening, can influence the

direction and pace of urban renewal [4]. These informal forces contribute to the process by strengthening community cohesion, providing social support networks, and representing community interests in renewal decision-making [5].

Square dancing originated in China during the 1990s as a simple recreational activity. Over time, it has evolved into a widespread social phenomenon, particularly popular among older populations in urban areas [6]. Beyond offering opportunities for recreation and physical exercise, square dancing has become a platform for community interaction and engagement. Existing studies on square dancing have primarily focused on its social functions, spatial conflicts, and its relationship with urban governance [7]. Research has shown that participants in square dancing establish social networks and strengthen community cohesion through their activities [8]. However, as a prevalent public activity, square dancing's impact on urban renewal, particularly its influence on the reproduction of public spaces and its mechanisms for promoting community renewal, remains understudied and warrants further exploration [9,10].

Wuhan, as a major metropolis in central China, serves as a representative case for understanding community governance during China's rapid urbanization process [11]. Huquan Community, located in Hongshan District, is a traditional residential area facing challenges such as an aging population and a lack of public spaces. Unlike the centralized spatial utilization patterns of newly developed large-scale residential complexes [12], square dancing in this community takes place in fragmented public spaces, forming a spontaneous model of space utilization under constrained spatial resources [13].

Despite the dispersed nature of activity spaces, the prevalence of square dancing and its deep integration into residents' daily lives highlight the critical role of informal social practices in community life [14]. This makes the community an ideal case for studying the impact of such practices on community renewal.

By examining square dancing in Wuhan's huquan Community, this research aims to explore whether and how square dancing, as an informal social practice, contributes to promoting community renewal and reproducing public spaces [15]. Through an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, the study seeks to expand the understanding of the role of informal social practices in urban renewal, offering a new perspective for community renewal research [16].

2. Materials and Methods

This study selects the Huquan Community in Wuhan's Hongshan District as the research area. As a typical traditional residential community, Huquan is characterized by residential buildings constructed primarily between the 1990s and 2010s [17,18]. The public activity spaces within the community are fragmented, comprising small squares, open street areas, and spaces between residential buildings. This spatial configuration gives rise to a unique distribution pattern of square dancing as an informal social practice, providing an ideal field for observation and analysis.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, primarily relying on field observations and in-depth interviews to collect data. Field observations were conducted from June to October 2023, focusing on recording the temporal and spatial distribution of square dancing activities, participant composition, and activity forms within the community. In-depth interviews were conducted with 8 square dance

organizers and 12 community resident representatives. The interviews explored topics such as the organization and development of square dancing activities, the formation of social networks, patterns of spatial usage, and participation in community affairs. Additionally, government documents, including community planning files, were collected as supplementary data.

The analysis is structured around three dimensions:

(1) Community Cohesion: Examining the impact of square dancing activities on community cohesion, with a focus on the construction of participant networks and interaction patterns.

(2) Public Space Utilization: Analyzing the influence of square dancing on the use of community public spaces, including innovative spatial utilization methods and improvements in space use efficiency.

(3) Community Affairs Participation: Investigating the characteristics of square dance groups' involvement in community affairs to reveal the mechanisms by which informal social practices drive community renewal.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *The Impact of Square Dancing Activities on Community Cohesion*

Through field observations, in-depth interviews, and social network analysis, the study finds that square dancing, as an informal social practice, significantly enhances community cohesion. This impact is reflected in three key aspects: the construction of participant networks, increased interaction frequency, and the growth of mutual assistance behaviors.

(1) Construction of Participant Networks

Field observations identified five major square dancing activity sites within the Huquan Community, documenting the composition of participants at each site. The findings reveal that each site has developed a stable core group of participants (3–10 individuals) and a larger, more transient group (20–25 individuals). As illustrated in Figure 1, the participant structure forms a multi-layered social network, with the core organizer at the center, regular participants as key members, and temporary participants forming the peripheral layer. In-depth interviews further revealed the organic process of network formation:

“It started with just a few of us dancing here. Gradually, people noticed and found it interesting, so they joined. Now, our group has a consistent 10 to 15 people every day, and on weekends, more than 20 join in.” (Interviewee A01, square dance organizer)

The formation of these social networks demonstrates the self-organizing nature of informal social practices. The interviews highlighted that connections among participants were not driven by formal organization but emerged naturally during daily activities. One organizer explained:

“Our dance group is entirely self-organized, without any formal enforcement. People join simply because they find it enjoyable. Even when I’m unavailable, the other ladies in the group take the initiative to organize the activities themselves.” (Interviewee A03, square dance organizer)

This self-organizing characteristic underscores the unique role of informal practices like square dancing in fostering organic community connections and reinforcing social bonds.

(2) Increased Interaction Frequency

Weekly observation records reveal that regular participants engage in social interactions an average of 3–4 times per week. These interactions extend beyond the duration of square dancing activities, spilling over into daily life. Participants have formed WeChat groups to facilitate communication, and these groups have become vibrant platforms for exchanges. This finding is corroborated by interview data:

“Now, we dance together and have developed such strong bonds. We often go grocery shopping or take walks together. For any big or small family matters, we help each other out.” (Interviewee A05, regular participant)

The increase in interaction frequency directly strengthens neighborly relationships. Regular participants reported that their social circles expanded significantly through square dancing activities, and their relationships with neighbors became closer. This informal social activity surpasses the limitations of traditional neighborhood interactions, fostering a more dynamic and engaging community atmosphere.

(3) Growth of Mutual Assistance Behaviors

In-depth interviews with 30 participants indicate that square dancing activities foster various forms of community mutual assistance, with information-sharing being the most prevalent. Respondents noted that they gained valuable information through their square dancing groups. This information exchange exhibits a clear hierarchical transmission pattern, ranging from:

Community-level information: “The community is conducting a survey for old neighborhood renovations; everyone should remember to register.” (Interviewee A12)

Daily life tips: “Which vegetables are fresh and cheap at the market, and when the supermarket has discounts.” (Interviewee A07)

Health and wellness knowledge: “We often share health tips, like seasonal dietary adjustments.” (Interviewee A15)

This information-sharing enriches participants’ lives and establishes an informal, fast-track channel for disseminating community information.

Emotional support is another crucial form of mutual assistance within the square dancing groups. The study found that square dancing activities created a safe space for emotional exchange. One participant remarked:

“While dancing, we often talk about family matters. For instance, whose child is preparing for exams, whose elderly parents are sick—everyone listens attentively and offers advice. This opportunity to share and receive comfort is vital, especially for some older participants.” (Interviewee A19)

Mutual assistance behaviors highlight the unique advantages of informal social practices in fostering community support. These networks are not reliant on formal institutional arrangements but are cultivated naturally through daily interactions, forming a robust network of information-sharing and emotional support within the community.

3.2 .The Impact of Informal Social Practices on Public Space Activation

Field observations and interviews reveal that square dancing, as an informal social practice, reshapes the use of community public spaces in a spontaneous and gradual manner. In the resource-constrained Huquan Community, square dancing demonstrates unique spatial adaptability. It not only revitalizes underutilized public spaces but also establishes distinctive mechanisms of space utilization.

(1) Innovation in Spatial Utilization Patterns

Field investigations identified relatively fixed square dancing activity points in the community, located in small squares, spaces between buildings, and street corners. The selection and use of these activity points exhibit a clear characteristic of “adaptive utilization,” primarily reflected in temporal and spatial flexibility.

Temporal Flexibility:

Different square dancing groups coordinate their activities to form staggered usage patterns. For instance, at the Shanquanju Small Square, Group A occupies the space from 6:00–7:30 AM, while Group B uses it from 7:00–8:30 PM. This scheduling is not officially regulated but has developed organically over time through mutual understanding. As one square dance leader noted:

“Everyone knows their time slot. If someone wants to adjust their schedule, they discuss it with the other groups in advance. Over time, we’ve never had any conflicts over timing.” (Interviewee B05)

Spatial Coordination:

Observations show that the activity points are also utilized for other community activities during non-square dancing hours. For example, these spaces serve as gathering spots for elderly residents to chat in the morning and as play areas for children in the afternoon. Interview data indicate that this shared use of space is widely accepted by the community:

“This place belongs to everyone. Square dancing only takes up a small portion of the morning and evening, and the rest of the time, people use it however they like. Everyone understands and accepts this.” (Interviewee B11)

(2) Improved Space Utilization Efficiency

Weekly monitoring of space usage shows that square dancing activities significantly enhance the efficiency of public space utilization. Data indicate that in areas designated as regular square dancing spots, the average daily effective usage time increased from 3–4 hours to 6–8 hours, while the number of users grew from sporadic use to peak periods accommodating 30–40 individuals.

This increase in utilization is not limited to square dancing hours but also stimulates space usage during other periods. The heightened vibrancy of these spaces further promotes their multifunctionality, transforming originally transitional spaces into hubs for rest, social interaction, and fitness activities. As one community resident observed:

“These places used to be almost empty, but now you can see different people using them at different times. It feels like the community has become much more lively.” (Interviewee B13)

Through flexible temporal and spatial utilization, square dancing activities optimize the allocation of limited public space resources, enhancing both their efficiency and multifunctionality. This demonstrates the transformative potential of informal social

practices in activating underutilized spaces and fostering vibrant community environments.

3.3. Informal Social Practices Facilitating Resident Participation in Community Governance

In-depth interviews and participatory observations reveal that square dancing, as an informal social practice, plays a role in encouraging residents to engage in community governance, fostering a bottom-up culture of participation. Over time, square dance groups have become significant contributors to community governance, a role closely tied to the unique characteristics of these groups. These groups primarily consist of middle-aged and elderly women, many of whom are retirees or homemakers with relatively abundant free time. Their regular participation in daily activities within the community gives them more opportunities than other resident groups to observe and understand changes in the neighborhood. As one square dance participant noted:

“We are out in the neighborhood every morning and evening. It’s easy to spot problems. For example, just the other day we noticed a broken streetlight near Building 3 and mentioned it to the community committee staff.” (Interviewee C02)

Another characteristic of this group is their long-term residency within the community, which provides them with deep familiarity with the environment and relationships within the neighborhood. During daily activities, they not only pay attention to physical issues but also identify community members in need of assistance. As one participant explained:

“We’ve been living here for years, so we’re familiar with everything in the neighborhood. We know who the elderly living alone are, which families might need help, and if anything comes up, we report it to the community committee.” (Interviewee C07)

This form of participation, rooted in daily life, exemplifies the nature of informal social practices: it is not deliberately organized but emerges naturally from routine activities. The square dance group, due to its regular activity schedule, stable membership, and familiarity with the community, serves as a vital bridge connecting residents’ everyday lives with community governance.

3.4. The Practical Impacts of Informal Social Practices on Community Renewal

As an informal social practice, square dancing generates tangible impacts on community renewal through sustained daily activities in the following aspects:

(1) A Natural Channel for Expressing Community Needs

Informal practices like square dancing create a more accessible channel for expressing community needs compared to formal resident meetings. In the Huquan Community, square dance groups, due to their consistent activity schedules and locations, are well-positioned to observe and report community issues.

(2) Enhanced Public Space Utilization

Square dancing activities significantly improve the effective use of community public spaces. In the space-constrained Huquan Community, these spontaneous activities have revitalized underutilized areas such as street corners and spaces between buildings. Through scheduled activities, these spaces have developed stable usage patterns. A community committee staff member observed:

“Some corners that were barely used before are now lively spots because of square dancing. The surrounding environment has also improved significantly.” (Interviewee D05)

(3) Strengthened Social Interactions

Square dancing fosters daily interaction among residents, creating opportunities for socializing that transcend traditional neighborhood boundaries. This interest-based group activity has facilitated cross-unit and cross-building social networks. As one participant remarked:

“Through square dancing, I’ve met many neighbors I didn’t know before. Even though we live in different buildings, we now greet each other and chat. This rarely happened in the past.” (Interviewee D09)

Although the impacts are gradual and informal, they contribute positively to improving the community environment and fostering stronger neighborly relationships. These findings underscore the need to recognize the value of informal social practices in the community renewal process and their role in enhancing daily life within neighborhoods.

4. Conclusions

This study, using square dancing activities in Wuhan’s Huquan Community as a case, explores the role of informal social practices in promoting community renewal. The findings are as follows:

(1) Fostering Community Cohesion

Informal social practices cultivate community cohesion through daily activities. Square dancing forms stable participant groups, building cross-building and cross-regional social networks through information sharing and emotional interactions. These interest-based and everyday-life-driven networks strengthen connections among residents, providing a vital social foundation for community renewal.

(2) Innovating Community Space Usage

Informal social practices drive innovation in the use of community spaces. In resource-constrained aging neighborhoods, square dancing enhances the efficiency of public space utilization through flexible scheduling and shared spatial arrangements. The self-organized patterns of space usage demonstrate residents’ creative adaptability when faced with resource limitations.

(3) Cultivating New Modes of Community Participation

Square dance groups, characterized by their regularity and continuity, are able to identify and address community issues promptly. By integrating discussions of community topics into daily activities, they create a low-threshold, high-frequency mode of participation, offering grassroots perspectives for community governance.

The mechanisms through which informal social practices promote community renewal can be summarized as follows. Daily activities create natural opportunities for residents to convey their demands. Social interactions foster reliable networks for sharing and disseminating information. Informal practices gradually develop collaborative and sustained interactions that contribute to micro-level community renewal through residents’ daily routines.

This study offers several insights: Community renewal should not focus solely on improving the physical environment but also recognize the role of informal social practices in reconstructing social relationships. The positive impact of residents' daily activities on activating community spaces should be acknowledged, and urban planning should allocate more flexible spaces for such uses. The spontaneous participation facilitated by informal practices should be valued and supported, with conditions created to encourage their development.

This study also has several limitations: The findings are based on a single community, limiting the generalizability of the conclusions. The observation period was relatively short, making it difficult to capture the long-term effects of informal social practices. The research focuses primarily on the positive impacts, with insufficient attention to potential negative effects, which should be explored further in future studies. By addressing these limitations, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of informal social practices in community renewal.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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