

Community Reading Spaces as Social Infrastructure: A Case Study of Nanjing

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Abstract

This study conceptualises community reading spaces as essential social infrastructure that promotes spatial justice and social capital. Drawing on case studies from Nanjing, it proposes a three-dimensional interactive framework integrating physical, institutional, and social perspectives to analyse the mechanisms underlying their social functions. Through comparative analysis of three governance models—leading, co-operative, and autonomous—the study explores how different operational logics affect the dual social functions of reading spaces. The findings highlight the complementary logic among governance types and offer theoretical and practical insights into enhancing the inclusivity and relational capacity of urban cultural services.

Keywords: Community reading spaces; Urban governance; Social infrastructure; Spatial justice; Social capital

1. Introduction: Urban Transformation, Community Needs, and the Multifaceted Value of Reading Spaces

Despite the rapid development of modern cities, they face persistent challenges such as social atomisation, weakened neighborhood ties, and the erosion of public life (Putnam, 2000; Giddens, 1991). In this context, reshaping the urban public sphere, fostering community belonging, and strengthening social cohesion have become critical concerns in contemporary urban governance.

In response, the concept of *social infrastructure* has garnered increasing attention from both scholars. It refers to “soft” facilities such as libraries, parks, and community centers that support daily life, promote social interaction, and maintain community networks (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019). These spaces serve not only as service providers but also as foundational elements of urban public life (Amin, 2002) and “key sites” for building trust and fostering interaction. Amin (2014) emphasised that “micro-public spheres” and informal everyday interactions are crucial for sustaining urban vitality. Accordingly, the effective functioning of social infrastructure is regarded as a vital mechanism for enhancing community resilience and promoting social equity.

Following rapid urbanisation, Chinese urban communities have increasingly become essential units of social management and public service provision. Concurrently, residents’ demands for cultural engagement and public communication spaces have significantly intensified. In response, the government has been actively promoting the construction of a public cultural service system, and initiatives such as *National Reading* have been elevated to strategic national priorities (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2015), aiming to enhance national literacy and cultural engagement. Within this framework, *community reading spaces* have emerged as significant focal points, presenting new opportunities for development.

In this paper, *community reading spaces* refer to public-interest venues established by government bodies or civil society organisations within specific localities. These venues provide access to literary and digital resources and offer a range of reading-centered services and activities. They include public libraries, cultural centers, bookstores, airports, cafes, hotels, and other publicly accessible spaces. These spaces prioritise openness and service provision to the general public. Therefore, institutional libraries (e.g., university or school libraries) and private reading spaces are not within the scope of this study.

From traditional grassroots libraries to contemporary “urban study rooms,” independent bookstores, and private reading clubs, a diverse and evolving network of community reading services has taken shape. These spaces are entrusted with multiple social functions, including knowledge dissemination, cultural consumption, neighborhood interaction, and community cultural development (Wang Zizhou, 2017). However, the practical mechanism of such spaces remains more complex than anticipated. Challenges such as underutilisation, operational inefficiencies,

and significant disparities in service models, target groups, and social impact persist. These issues highlight the need for in-depth exploration of the material, institutional, and social foundations of these spaces and their interrelations.

In light of these challenges, this study conceptualises community reading spaces as a critical form of social infrastructure and seeks to investigate their underlying mechanisms. By integrating material, institutional, and social perspectives, this research addresses the following core questions: In the context of China's rapid urbanisation and the evolving public cultural service system, how should community reading spaces be understood as urban social infrastructure? What kinds of interaction mechanisms exist among their physical, institutional, and social elements? How do these mechanisms influence their overall social functions? Moreover, how do community reading spaces operating under different governance models differ in achieving these social functions?

2. Literature Review: Fragmented Perspectives and the Need for Integration

Community reading spaces, as integral components of urban social structures and public life, have garnered increasing scholarly attention concerning their planning, spatial construction, institutional governance, and social impact. While research from various disciplinary perspectives has explored their physical configuration, governance mechanisms, and social functions, most studies tend to focus on a single dimension. This narrow focus often fails to uncover the complex interrelations among physical environments, institutional frameworks, and social practices that define their overall effectiveness.

This chapter presents a systematic review of existing literature on community reading spaces and libraries, critically evaluating the contributions and limitations of different analytical perspectives. It highlights the fragmented nature of current research and advocates for the construction of an integrative framework. This theoretical basis informs the subsequent case-based analysis of community reading spaces in Nanjing.

2.1 Physical Perspective: Reading Spaces as Public Service Facilities

As a key aspect of social infrastructure, the physical characteristics of public reading spaces play a fundamental role in determining the fairness of resource allocation and the quality of user experience. Earlier research—particularly in the fields of library science and urban planning—focused on the quantitative assessment of spatial distribution of cultural facilities. Common methodologies included Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis based on service radius, population coverage, and per capita usage area (Cervero, 1998; Johnson, 2010). For example, studies in the UK and Nordic countries have used spatial models to assess alignment between library networks and residential distribution in order to achieve equitable access. In China, Dai Yanqing (2021) used network analysis to assess the accessibility of newly constructed public reading spaces in Changsha and proposed strategies for site selection and coverage optimisation.

In the context of China's push toward standardizing and equalizing public cultural services, researchers have drawn attention to the persistent “reading facility gap” between urban and rural areas and across regions. Ke Ping (2020) discussed fragmentation in the Co-operative governance of urban and rural library systems, advocating for a more integrated service network. Wang Zizhou (2020) examined how spatial restructuring and cultural drivers have facilitated the rise of “urban study rooms.”

As the research has evolved, scholars have recognised that spatial accessibility alone is insufficient. The quality of the physical environment also significantly influences readers' usage behavior, spatial attraction, and cultural engagement. Design features—such as interior layout, ambiance, lighting, and functional zoning—shape user experience and the symbolic meaning of space (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Hille, 2019). Bao Yaming (2021) emphasised that the experiential quality of cultural spaces determines whether they are genuinely “perceived” and “claimed” by users. In response, many contemporary reading spaces are designed with aesthetic appeal, human-centered layouts, and multifunctional facilities (e.g., leisure areas, parent-child corners, cafés) to enhance spatial engagement.

Nonetheless, the physical perspective has its limitations. First, conflating physical proximity with actual accessibility and benefit is misleading. As Wang Xuexi (2023) noted, user experience may still be hampered by barriers such as rigid service rules, exclusionary attitudes, or poor information access. Vulnerable groups may be marginalised due to digital illiteracy or cultural unfamiliarity. Second, this perspective often relies on static indicators, overlooking how space is dynamically occupied, contested, and redefined in daily use. Space should be seen not only as a physical site but also as a platform for social practice and meaning-making. Therefore, evaluating the social functions of social infrastructure requires integration with institutional and user-centered perspectives.

2.2 Institutional Perspective: Reading Spaces as Governance Instruments

The institutional perspective foregrounds the idea that community reading spaces are not merely spatial constructs but institutionalised entities embedded within governance systems, policy frameworks, and resource allocation logics. From this vantage point, their construction and operation are reflections of broader power structures and governance models (Harvey, 1989; Smith, 2002). Key considerations include policy goal-setting, fiscal distribution, inter-agency coordination, and the adaptability of implementation processes.

In China, community reading spaces have predominantly followed a state-led governance logic. National initiatives, such as the *Regulations on Promoting National Reading* and the *14th Five-Year Plan for Public Cultural Service System Development*, advocate for the equalisation of cultural services and emphasise building urban-rural reading networks centered around public libraries. While this model guarantees baseline resource provision, it also faces limitations such as homogeneous services and administrative inefficiency (Ke Ping, 2018; Li Guoxin, 2018). Some local institutions fail to align services with user needs, resulting in “visible spaces with invisible services.”

With the rise of “governance modernisation,” hybrid governance models featuring multi-stakeholder collaboration have emerged. These include government contracting, NGO operations, and public-private partnerships (He Ze, 2023; Xu Yibo, 2022). For instance, Nanjing Library collaborates with nonprofits and bookstores to operate “urban study rooms,” blending public missions with market flexibility via negotiated governance. Similar international examples include Dutch libraries repositioned as social innovation hubs emphasizing local autonomy (Van Melik & Merry, 2022).

This perspective also exposes structural inequalities. Resources are often disproportionately allocated to city centers, leaving peripheral or disadvantaged communities underserved (Wang Hui, 2021). Additionally, vulnerable populations such as seniors, persons with disabilities, and new migrants may lack representation in service planning and policy dialogues (Wang Sufang, 2020; Klinenberg, 2018). Without mechanisms that prioritise equity, community reading spaces risk exacerbating existing cultural disparities (Pateman & Vincent, 2010).

Institutional studies also draw attention to informal implementation dynamics. While policies establish macro-level frameworks, grassroots execution often requires adaptive practices and negotiated coordination by librarians, community workers, and partner organisations (Wang Ting, 2023). Audunson et al. (2020) described how tensions between formal institutions and everyday practices catalyze service innovation—a pattern that also applies to China’s evolving reading spaces.

Nevertheless, the institutional lens has its own shortcomings. It tends to prioritise structural analysis at the expense of understanding lived experiences and micro-level interactions. While it highlights power and governance, it may not fully explain how institutions are reinterpreted through everyday practice. Thus, integrating institutional analysis with physical and social perspectives is essential for a more holistic understanding of the social functions of community reading spaces.

2.3 Social Perspective: Reading Spaces as Relational Infrastructure

The social perspective centers on how community reading spaces function as relational infrastructure—facilitating social interactions, fostering community identity, and enabling public cultural participation. This approach shifts attention from static configurations to the dynamic processes through which space fosters relationships and generates social capital.

Klinenberg (2018), in *Palaces for the People*, emphasised that social infrastructure such as libraries and community centers forms essential networks that sustain everyday social life and community resilience. Oldenburg's (1999) theory of "third places" further underscores their role as informal social venues where civic life unfolds beyond home and work. Svendsen (2013), studying Danish libraries, categorised them as incubators of social capital by fostering bonding (in-group trust), bridging (cross-group communication), and linking (institutional trust). Similarly, Aabø and Audunson (2012) found that Oslo libraries served as inclusive platforms for intergenerational and intercultural dialogue.

In China, empirical studies offer localised insights. Wang Sufang (2020) highlighted the inclusive practices of libraries for elderly users, showing how reading spaces enhance their social engagement and well-being. Xiao Qunzhong (2019) used interviews and ethnographic observations to document emotional exchanges and identity formation in "urban study rooms," emphasizing their role in cultivating a sense of place and local belonging.

Viewed through this lens, community reading spaces also contribute to civic cultivation and co-construction of cultural life. Pateman and Vincent (2010) argued that libraries should be sites of participatory democracy—facilitating not just access to knowledge but also critical discourse and civic engagement. Latham and Layton (2019) noted that the cultural value of social infrastructure relies on the "everyday social labor" of users, which requires deliberate planning and continuous support.

However, this perspective is not without its limitations. Some studies idealise the integrative potential of space while downplaying conflicts, exclusions, and underlying power dynamics. Hall et al. (2021) cautioned that even seemingly open spaces may reinforce social boundaries related to class, race, and age. Moreover, while rich in qualitative detail, many studies fail to analyze how social interactions are shaped by spatial and institutional conditions.

More critically, the realisation of the social functions of social infrastructure often hinges on overlooked forms of "emotional labor" and maintenance. As Schloffel-Armstrong (2024) noted, the sustainability of these spaces depends on invisible infrastructures—volunteer networks, emotional support mechanisms, and managerial coordination—that are rarely acknowledged in mainstream analyses. Without considering these support systems, it is difficult to fully understand how reading spaces sustain their social relevance over time.

2.4 Summary and Research Direction

A review of the literature from physical, institutional, and social perspectives reveals that each offers unique theoretical insights into the spatial attributes, governance dynamics, and social functions of community reading spaces. However, their fragmented application results in an incomplete understanding of the multifaceted role of these spaces as social infrastructure. The compartmentalisation of perspectives risks producing reductive conclusions that overlook the complex interactions among constituent dimensions.

This paper therefore proposes an integrated analytical framework centered on the three-dimensional interaction among physical, institutional, and social elements. Inspired by Schloffel-Armstrong et al.'s (2021) model of "library institution–architecture–interaction," this framework conceptualises community reading spaces as dynamic systems. Their social functions are seen as outcomes of the co-evolution of institutional logic (e.g., governance models, policy execution), material infrastructure (e.g., spatial design, accessibility), and social practices (e.g., relationship-building, community embedding).

This study applies the proposed framework to a set of representative community reading spaces in Nanjing, aiming to analyze how different governance models mediate the interplay among space, institutions, and society. The goal is to uncover the mechanisms through which these spaces, as social infrastructure, realise their social value in the context of rapid urbanisation, and to provide theoretical insights and practical recommendations for policy design and implementation.

3. Case Study of Community Reading Spaces

3.1 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

• Three-Dimensional Interaction Mechanism

This paper proposes and utilises the “physicality-institutionality-sociality” three-dimensional interactive mechanism as the core framework for analyzing the operational logic of community reading spaces. This framework transcends the static classification of spatial constituent elements, emphasizing that community reading spaces are not isolated physical facilities constructed in a vacuum. Instead, they are processual fields continuously generated, adjusted, and embedded in residents’ daily lives against specific governance and social practice backgrounds. These three dimensions are intertwined, dynamically providing feedback to each other, and collectively shaping the operational logic and social value of community reading spaces as social infrastructure.

Physical Dimension (Physical Environment): Refers to the spatial attributes of community reading spaces, including geographical location, architectural form, internal structure, facility layout, and environmental atmosphere. These material foundations not only determine the accessibility and functional adaptability of the space (Gehl, 2011; Carmona, 2010) but also influence its attractiveness and receptiveness to specific groups (Bao Yaming, 2008).

Institutional Dimension (Institutional Governance): Encompasses institutional elements such as management mechanisms, policy systems, financial support, service models, and responsibility allocation. This dimension determines how spatial resources are deployed, how governing bodies participate, and the degree of user participation and voice (Bovaird & Löffler, 2015; Ostrom, 1990).

Social Dimension (Social Practice): Emphasises practical activities occurring within the space, such as community building, knowledge exchange, cultural participation, and daily interactions. Through these social behaviors, the space is endowed with cultural meaning and transformed into a key field for community interaction and social capital generation (Oldenburg, 1989; Klinenberg, 2018).

The relationship between the three dimensions is not a linear causal chain but a multi-directional, dynamically coupled feedback loop. For example, flexible and diverse physical design can stimulate daily interactive behaviors (Gehl, 2011); open and inclusive institutional arrangements can enhance residents’ willingness to participate and sense of belonging (Larsen et al., 2021); and active social practices, in turn, may promote institutional innovation and spatial renewal (Hall, 2020). It is precisely this multi-level, bidirectional interactive mechanism that enables community reading spaces to continuously adapt to social changes and generate lasting social value.

• Dual Social Functions of Community Reading Spaces

As embedded social infrastructure serving public life, community reading spaces carry important social functions and values. This study believes that its core social objectives are mainly reflected in two closely related dimensions: the practice of spatial justice and the promotion of social capital.

Firstly, proceeding from its public attribute as “infrastructure,” community reading spaces must respond to the issue of Spatial Justice. As critical geography theory emphasises (Harvey, 1973, 1989; Soja, 2010), space is not neutral but a field where social relations and inequalities are reproduced. Therefore, social infrastructure should aim to eliminate spatial injustice. Drawing on Nancy Fraser’s (2008) theory of justice, the practice of spatial justice covers three levels: Distributive, Procedural, and Recognitive. In the context of community reading spaces, this means ensuring fair accessibility of resources (distributive justice), guaranteeing users a voice in

space management and decision-making (procedural justice), and recognizing and accommodating groups with different backgrounds and needs (recognitive justice).

Secondly, from its core attribute of “sociality,” the key value of community reading spaces lies in promoting the generation and accumulation of Social Capital. Social capital is regarded as a social resource that connects individuals, enhances trust, and promotes collective action (Putnam, 2000). Community reading spaces, as “social places,” contribute to the formation and strengthening of different types of social connections by providing interactive platforms and activity opportunities. According to the classification by scholars such as Putnam and Woolcock (2001), social capital can be divided into three forms: Bonding, Bridging, and Linking, corresponding respectively to connections within homogeneous groups, connections between heterogeneous groups, and connections between individuals/communities and external institutional resources. Community reading spaces enhance the cohesion, inclusiveness, and vitality of communities by promoting these connections.

The practice of spatial justice and the cultivation of social capital are two core social values pursued and generated by community reading spaces as social infrastructure. They are interrelated and together constitute an important perspective for measuring their social functions.

• Realizing Social Functions through Interactive Mechanisms

Community reading spaces, as a type of small-scale social infrastructure deeply embedded in everyday life, possess unique characteristics that make them ideal cases for analyzing how the three-dimensional interactive mechanism contributes to the realisation of the dual functions of social infrastructure: the promotion of spatial justice and the generation of social capital (Klinenberg, 2018; Hall, 2020). The mapping framework constructed in this study aims to reveal how the dynamic interaction among the physical, institutional, and social dimensions drives and shapes the pathways of these two core social values (Schloffel-Armstrong et al., 2021). This analysis adopts a deductive approach to understanding the mechanism, rather than treating spatial justice and social capital as directly quantifiable indicators. By examining how spaces operating under different governance models integrate physical environments, institutional arrangements, and social practices, their differentiated processes of social value generation can be clearly delineated (Fraser, 2008; Putnam, 2000).

The relationship between the three-dimensional interactive mechanism and the practice of spatial justice can be illustrated as follows (Figure1): this mapping highlights the relative emphasis and specific contribution methods of each dimension in advancing the three sub-dimensions of spatial justice.

The physical dimension, especially given the characteristics of community reading spaces being close to residential areas and limited in scale, contributes to distributive justice through site selection (e.g., located at the center of neighborhoods or on street corners) and inclusive design (e.g., age-friendly, child-friendly, and barrier-free features). These micro-level spatial elements directly influence whether different groups can equitably access and utilise public resources (Carmona, 2010; Gehl, 2011).

The institutional dimension supports procedural justice by establishing flattened feedback channels (e.g., online communities, regular exchange meetings) and mechanisms that empower community organisations and residents to co-govern (e.g., resident-led activities, participation in management committees). Pluralistic governance models effectively enhance the capacity for user voice and participatory decision-making in space operation and service planning (Bovaird & Löffler, 2015; Ostrom, 1990).

The social dimension, grounded in the localness and everydayness of community reading spaces, fosters recognitive justice by organizing context-specific activities (e.g., neighborhood storytelling sessions, community cultural salons) and facilitating informal interactions among neighbors. These practices enhance visibility and acknowledgment of diverse cultural expressions and community identities, thereby directly advancing the realisation of recognitive justice (Oldenburg, 1989; Fraser, 2008).

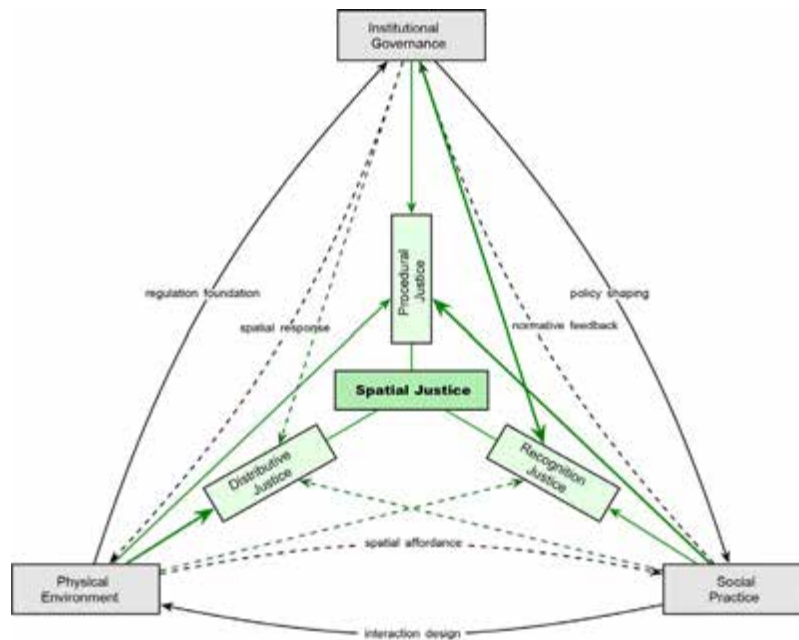


Fig.1. Pathways to Social Functions: Spatial Justice Practice

The relationship between the three-dimensional interactive mechanism and the generation of social capital can be illustrated as follows (Fig.2): this mapping outlines how the interaction across dimensions collectively shapes the formation of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, with an emphasis on their respective pathways and dynamic mechanisms (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

Practices in the social dimension—particularly service activities and community interactions that target specific interests or groups and encourage deep engagement (e.g., regular community reading groups, parent-child co-reading sessions, professional knowledge-sharing events)—serve as key drivers of bonding and bridging social capital. Rooted in shared interests and daily exchanges, these activities create relational platforms for interpersonal connection and mutual trust.

The physical dimension (e.g., open and flexible spatial designs that support informal encounters, such as shared long tables and lounge areas) and the institutional dimension (e.g., low-threshold access policies, institutional support for community-led events, flexible space-use regulations) offer critical yet indirect support for social capital formation. For instance, a welcoming communication corner can spark spontaneous interactions, while inclusive institutional arrangements lower barriers to participation (Gehl, 2011; Gilchrist, 2004).

Furthermore, the institutional dimension—particularly through collaborative operational mechanisms with external community institutions (e.g., local schools, social work stations, non-profit organisations, sub-district offices)—establishes concrete channels for generating linking social capital (Woolcock, 2001). These localised institutional linkages enable community reading spaces to attract external resources and help residents connect to broader networks, thereby strengthening their social connectivity and outward engagement capacity.

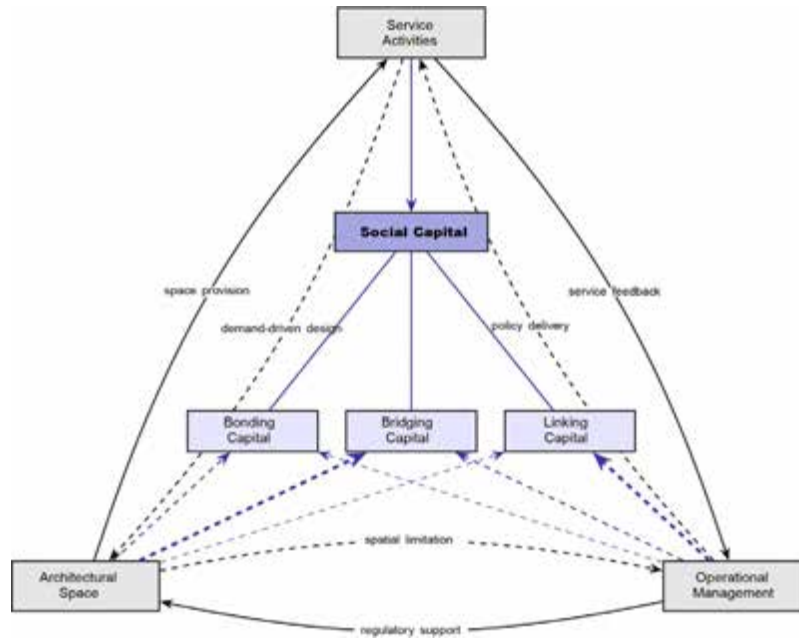


Fig. 2. Pathways to Social Functions: Social Capital Generation

3.2 Case Analysis

To investigate the differentiated realisation paths of the social functions of social infrastructure across various types of community reading spaces, this study adopted the principles of typicality, diversity, and research feasibility in case selection (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Shi Lei, 2016). Drawing on a preliminary investigation into the development status of community reading spaces in Nanjing and informed by the typological analysis of governance models in the literature review, the study constructed a typology framework based on three key dimensions: the level of government support, the degree of integration with the library system, and the extent of collaboration with social actors. These dimensions correspond to distinct institutional driving forces and resource coupling strategies (Bovaird & Löffler, 2003; Zhang Qian, 2021), which shape the institutional characteristics of each case and influence their patterns of interaction with the physical and social dimensions (Ostrom, 1990; Yan Fei, 2017).

Based on this typological framework—and taking into account the representativeness, operational features, and data accessibility of candidate cases—this study selected three representative community reading spaces in Nanjing for in-depth analysis: Jiangsu Writers' Works Hall, Yunji Study, and Wanxiang Study (Table 1). These three cases represent distinct interactive Operational Managements associated with different governance types: government-led (leading type), government-social collaboration (co-operative type), and socially-led (autonomous type). Their significant variation across the three screening dimensions provides a robust foundation for multi-dimensional comparison of interaction mechanisms and the dual functions of social infrastructure—namely, the practice of spatial justice and the generation of social capital.

Table 1. Cases Selection Analysis

Cases	Government Support	Library System Participation	Depth of Social Force Cooperation	Typologies
Jiangsu Writers' Works Hall	Financial + Venue	Nanjing Library Cooperation	Writers' Association Participation	Leading Type
Yunji Study Xuanwumen Store	Policy Guidance	Jinling Library Resource Access	Commercial Brand Led	Co-operative Type
Wanxiang Study	Initial Venue Support	Completely Independent	Brand Independent Operation	Autonomous Type

Case 1: Jiangsu Writers' Works Hall (Leading Type)

•Interactive Dimensions

Architectural Environment: As a thematic venue located within Nanjing Library, the Jiangsu Writers' Works Hall occupies 638 square meters and benefits from the library's prime location and central urban infrastructure (Fig.3 & Fig.4). The interior adopts a "large study room" layout, combining exhibition, reading, and interactive functions. It includes a manuscript exhibition hall, a themed reading zone, and an interactive experience area, displaying over 3,800 works by more than 800 Jiangsu-born authors. Although the space lacks an independent lecture hall, it accommodates large-scale events by utilizing the main library's lecture facility on a rotating basis. Medium-sized events are held by reconfiguring the main hall, while regular small book clubs and new book launches take place in a dedicated conference room. The spatial layout is tailored to serve the pavilion's thematic orientation and activity needs.



Fig.3. Urban Location& Exterior Picture of Case 1



Fig.4. Floor Plan of Case 1

Operational Management: The hall operates under a typical administrative coordination model. Initiated by the Jiangsu Provincial Writers' Association with thematic input, the project was executed through governmental resource coordination and ultimately implemented within Nanjing Library, which handles its daily management. This model, marked by clearly delineated responsibilities and reliance on public funding, ensures stable financial support—its operational costs are embedded in the Nanjing Library's budget system, contributing to long-term sustainability. However, this highly bureaucratic model limits market-oriented flexibility. Resource integration is predominantly achieved through Nanjing Library's local literature system, systematically collecting official literary resources; channels for collaboration with social actors remain relatively limited.

Service Activities: The services are centered on literary materials related to Jiangsu-born writers, emphasizing a regional cultural collection. Its primary audience consists of literary scholars and local culture enthusiasts, particularly middle-aged and senior readers. In addition to permanent exhibitions, it hosts annual public service-oriented cultural events such as literary lectures, book launches, and author meet-and-greets. While weekend events draw more diverse participants, the overall service approach remains rooted in public welfare. Activity formats—typically one-way in nature—are led by the Writers' Association or organised by Nanjing Library. To broaden outreach, a tiered strategy has been adopted, incorporating youth-targeted programming on weekends and holidays while maintaining professional depth in core activities.



Fig.5. Interior Pictures of Case1

• Dual Functions

The leading-type institutional mechanism of this case (government-led, stable finance, library system) directly ensures a superior physical space and rich thematic resources. At a macro level, this contributes to a high degree of distributive justice—the accessibility of specific public cultural resources (Jiangsu writers' works) is guaranteed. However, the interaction between the institutionally set thematic positioning, the limitations of the physical space (insufficient informal communication areas, event venue constraints), and social practices (primarily serving specific groups, one-way output activities) collectively restrict the inclusiveness of resource distribution. For non-literature enthusiasts and residents living relatively far away, its distributive justice is insufficient.

In terms of procedural justice, the highly administrative institutional dimension results in a long decision-making chain for operations, with limited channels for ordinary readers to participate in operational and service content setting, leading to weak user voice. Although collaboration with the Writers' Association and Nanjing Library reflects institutional-level consultation, the lack of a bottom-up user interaction mechanism means that the practice of procedural justice is insufficient.

The presentation of recognitive justice is mainly reflected in the institutional dimension's high recognition of the needs of specific cultural groups (literary researchers, Writers' Association members), providing professional resources and space (physical dimension), and thematic services (social dimension). In recent years, attempts have been made to expand inclusiveness by adjusting physical space (adding a popular reading area) and social practices (holding cross-disciplinary activities), somewhat enhancing the recognition of different groups' needs, but the core positioning still leans towards specific cultural groups.

Regarding social capital, the interaction between the institutionally set public welfare orientation, the social dimension's service content (thematic literature, regular activities), and the target group positioning effectively bonding local literary communities, strengthening the potential for generating bonding social capital. However, the interaction between the physical space design (solemn atmosphere, insufficient informal communication areas) and social practices (daily one-way output primarily) limits the occurrence of spontaneous daily social interactions. Natural interaction among readers from different backgrounds is constrained, and the ability to generate bridging social capital is moderate to weak. The institutional dimension's close ties with academia and the Writers' Association system, as well as the digital resources available through the Nanjing Library platform, construct specific linking social capital. However, due to the administrative nature of the Operational Management, interaction with broader social forces is limited, and linking primarily occurs as structural connections in specific fields.

• Case Summary

Overall, under a leading-type institutional drive, the Jiangsu Writers' Works Hall, with its stable physical and institutional resources, performs outstandingly in ensuring the distributive justice of specific public cultural resources and the bonding capital of specific communities. However, its administrative operation and insufficient social interaction constrain the comprehensive practice of procedural and recognitive justice, as well as the broader generation of bridging and linking social capital. (Table 2)

Table 2. Analysis Summary of Case 1

Dimension	Sub-Aspect	Characteristics	Implications for Spatial Justice	Implications for Social Capital
Institutional	Governance Structure	Government-led; administered by Nanjing Library	Ensures public cultural resource accessibility	Supports bonding within literary institutions
	Resource Integration	Stable public funding; reliance on library systems for official collections	Strengthens distribution of cultural knowledge	Weak external linkage; limited connection to other networks
	User Participation & Co-Governance	Top-down decisions; weak reader engagement mechanisms	Weak procedural justice	Lacks participatory co-governance culture
Physical	Location & Spatial Accessibility	Located in city center; shares main library's spatial advantages	High accessibility for literary users	Excludes residents in non-central areas
	Spatial Layout & Design Features	Thematic, formal layout; lacks flexible or multifunctional spaces	Narrow inclusiveness (recognitive justice)	Hinders adaptation to diverse community needs
	Informal Interaction Capacity	Minimal casual zones; solemn, institutional atmosphere	Constrains interactive use	Weak bridging and linking capital generation
Social	Target Groups	Literary researchers, Writers' Association members, older readers	Recognises needs of cultural niche	Strengthens bonding capital
	Activity Design	One-way activities: lectures, book launches, exhibitions	Weak user engagement; limited feedback inclusion	Inhibits cross-group interaction
	Social Interaction & Inclusion	Occasional outreach efforts; limited informal engagement	Attempts recognitive improvement, but core remains exclusive	Linking capital restricted to institutional domains

Case 2: Yunji Study (Co-operative Type)

• Interactive Dimensions

Architectural Space: Yunji Study Xuanwumen Store is located within the Hengji Center commercial district on Changjiang Road in Xuanwu District, Nanjing. It is situated in a core area along Nanjing's traditional cultural axis, boasting an excellent location and convenient transportation. The Xuanwumen store has a total area of

approximately 400 square meters, arranged in a long rectangular layout (Fig. 6 & Fig. 7). The space is divided into a reading area, a coffee and dining area, a cultural product display area, and an independent small activity space. Some areas feature floor-to-ceiling windows, bookshelf-enclosed seating, and green plant decorations, creating a reading environment that is both quiet and imbued with an urban atmosphere. Its physical space emphasises the integration of “aesthetic experience” and “life scenes,” reflecting how new reading spaces accurately respond to the aesthetic and social needs of young consumer groups.



Fig.6. Urban Location& Exterior Picture of Case 2

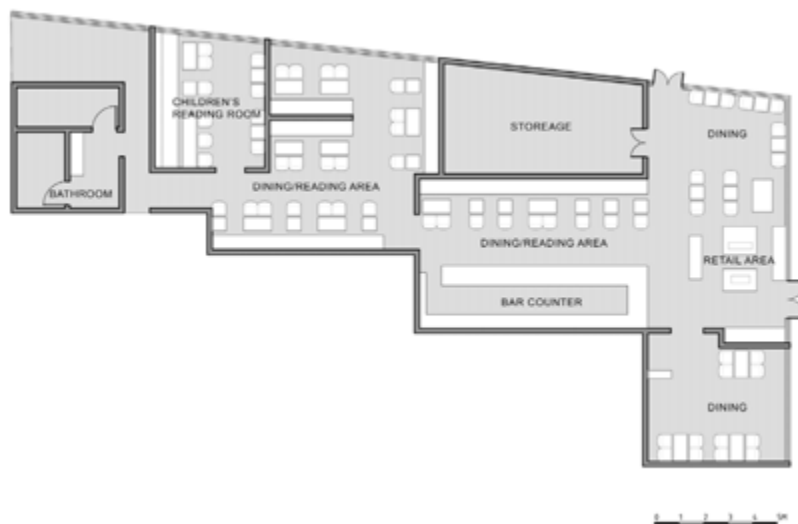


Fig.7. Floor Plan of Case 2

Operational Management: The Operational Management of Yunji Study can be classified as a “co-operative” path, embodying Co-operative governance characteristics involving local government cultural departments and market entities. The store is operated by Nanjing Yunji Culture Company, with Jinling Library as a partner providing some book resources and lending services. The government is not directly involved in operations but indirectly participates in the public cultural service system through brand co-construction and the embedding of book resources. The source of the venue and the rent mechanism have not been clearly disclosed, but the commercial embeddedness of the study is strong. Relying on the matrix of multiple Yunji Study stores in Nanjing, it constructs an overall operational system through branded service projects. However, most front-desk operational staff are concurrently catering service personnel, with limited public service capabilities. Book lending and reading guidance primarily rely on the books provided by Jinling Library. The space places more emphasis on parent-

child companionship, urban leisure, and cultural consumption, with its public cultural attributes being relatively weaker.

Service Activities: In terms of literature resource allocation, Yunji Study focuses mainly on children's picture books and English original books, also stocking a certain proportion of books about Nanjing city. This is closely related to its core user group positioning: parent-child families (accounting for over 60%) and tourists (reaching over 30% during peak season). In terms of activity model, the study is predominantly venue rental-led, with about 85% of activities hosted by external organisations. The frequency of self-organised activities is low, and activity themes are mostly parent-child reading sessions, etc., with themes being diversified due to external determination. Although the physical separation of the children's area provides a dedicated space for specific groups, the fragmented service characteristic resulting from its scenic area location poses challenges to cultivating reader loyalty.



Fig.8. Interior Pictures of Case 2

• Dual Functions

The physical environment of Yunji Study (scenic area location, commercial aesthetic design) brings high accessibility and attractiveness. Coupled with the institutional co-operative with Jinling Library (providing free book resources), it has, to a certain extent, expanded the breadth of distribution, unexpectedly serving a large number of out-of-town tourists. However, the institutionally set consumption-for-seating policy essentially creates an economic barrier, constraining distributive justice for low-income groups. Simultaneously, the lack of dedicated event space, requiring temporary adjustment of business areas (physical dimension), may also affect the user experience of non-consuming readers.

In terms of procedural justice, the institutional priority of commercial operational logic means that reader demand feedback is mostly conveyed indirectly through consumption behavior, lacking direct mechanisms for participation in operational decision-making. Daily operations are handled by non-professional staff (institutional dimension), which may affect the efficiency of processing professional feedback, leading to a weaker presentation of procedural justice.

The presentation of cognitive justice is strong for specific groups (parent-child families), mainly reflected in the physical space design (physical separation of the children's area) and the service configuration of the social dimension (abundant children's books, frequent parent-child activities) highly matching their needs, providing targeted space and services. However, due to its commercial attributes and focus on specific service targets, the recognition and response to the needs of academic readers, in-depth readers, and other groups are insufficient.

Regarding social capital, the interaction between social dimension services for parent-child families and the physical dimension's children's area design helps attract and form temporary parent-child activity groups. However, there is a lack of sustained institutional support for in-depth community cultivation, limiting the ability

to generate bonding social capital. The physical dimension's scenic location and composite functional design, along with the institutional dimension-led venue rental model that introduces external activities and diverse participants, facilitate chance encounters among readers from different regions and with different purposes. This provides opportunities for establishing weak connections, resulting in a moderate to strong ability to generate bridging social capital. The promotion of linking social capital mainly relies on the institutional co-operative with Jinling Library, enjoying basic resource connections, and establishing Co-operative relationships with external activity organisers. However, this is more of an institutional-level resource connection rather than directly helping ordinary users connect to external high-end cultural or social resources.

• Case Summary

Through a government-social co-operative institutional model, Yunji Study leverages the locational and aesthetic advantages of its physical space and introduces market vitality. This effectively expands the physical accessibility of resources (partial distributive justice) and promotes superficial communication among readers from different backgrounds (bridging capital), performing prominently in the recognitive justice for specific groups (parent-child). However, its commercial logic and limited institutional user participation constrain the practice of procedural justice and the generation of bonding capital within in-depth communities. (Table 3)

Table 3. Analysis Summary of Case 2

Dimension	Sub-Aspect	Characteristics	Implications for Spatial Justice	Implications for Social capital
Institutional	Governance Structure	Commercial-led; cooperative with Jinling Library	Enhances distribution range via public-private resource sharing	Enables formal collaboration for resource supply
	Resource Integration	Free book resources from library; consumption-for-seating model	Creates economic thresholds; limits access for low-income users	Institutional support favors event organizers, not individuals
	User Participation & Co-Governance	User needs inferred via consumption; no explicit feedback or decision channels	Weak procedural justice; lacks participatory governance	Limited institutional responsiveness to diverse reader groups
Physical	Location & Spatial Accessibility	Scenic location; commercial aesthetic; highly attractive	High visual/spatial appeal; broad distribution coverage	Attracts diverse transient users; supports weak tie formation
	Spatial Layout & Design Features	No dedicated event space; flexible use of café areas	Affects reader experience, especially for non-consumers	Restricts bonding via regular, fixed group activities
	Informal Interaction Capacity	Composite functions; adaptable but commerce-oriented layout	Partially inclusive; constrained by business logic	Supports bridging via shared, open use; lacks bonding anchors

Social	Target Groups	Parent-child families are primary audience	Strong recognitive match for select users	Weak toward academic/in-depth users
	Activity Design	Rich parent-child activities; frequent events	Event accessibility high for core groups	High turnover; limited long-term relational development
	Social Interaction & Inclusion	Short-term group cohesion; lacks deep community cultivation	Partial recognitive justice; segment-specific engagement	Weak bonding; moderate bridging; structural linking only

Case 3: Wanxiang Study (Autonomous Type)

• Interactive Dimensions

Architectural Space: Wanxiang Study enjoys a significant locational advantage next to Nanjing University, effectively targeting its core customer group. The interior space is meticulously divided into multiple functional areas, including a shared self-study area, a book lending area (which also functions as a bookstore), a coffee area, an exhibition gallery, a screening room, and an independent space rented out to an external art studio. (Fig.12 & Fig.13) This composite design greatly enhances space utilisation efficiency and provides a physical carrier for different types of reading, learning, leisure, artistic activities, and informal interactions. Its spatial design is full of personality and curatorial sense, aiming to create a unique atmosphere that aligns with its cultural propositions. It is noteworthy that the gallery area is open to the public free of charge, providing a limited point of free public cultural contact.



Fig.9. Urban Location& Exterior Picture of Case 3

Operational Management: Nanjing University Press acts only as the venue provider, while the Wanxiang Study brand is fully responsible for core functions such as book procurement, operational services, and activity planning. This clear division of labor grants the brand high operational autonomy, enabling it to make flexible decisions and quickly respond to market and community needs. Its operation is guided by a distinct cultural philosophy, balancing operational costs through a diverse commercial portfolio including book sales, coffee consumption, membership fees, crowdfunding, and art studio rental, thereby reducing reliance on a single funding source.



Fig.10. Floor Plan of Case 3

Service Activities: In the social dimension, Wanxiang Study' service configuration reflects a high degree of professionalism and community orientation. Literature resources focus on humanities, social sciences, and independent publications, precisely catering to the interest preferences of its core user group. Its core users are primarily faculty and



Fig. 11. Interior Pictures of Case 3

students from Nanjing University and Southeast University, and activity design is highly diversified and deeply connected with the community. Although many events involve providing venue rental services with content determined externally, Wanxiang Study, through holding activities and curating its own themes, has formed a unique and rich sequence of activities, including book clubs, sharing sessions, small exhibitions, workshops, and film screenings. These activities are not only frequent but also emphasise in-depth interaction and community co-creation, effectively cultivating close-knit communities based on shared values and interests.

• Dual Functions

Wanxiang Study' presentation of spatial justice reflects a coexistence of high benefits for specific communities and relatively insufficient inclusiveness. In terms of distributive justice, limited by the physical space volume and the

institutionally set consumption-for-seating policy, the accessibility and coverage of physical space and literature resources are relatively limited, making it difficult to guarantee resource fairness in a universal sense, especially for non-core communities and low-income groups (although the free gallery offers limited compensation). However, its high degree of autonomy under the institutional dimension and user co-construction fostered by the social dimension have built a deeply participatory governance structure, granting users extremely high voice and decision-making power in space operation and activity planning, thereby maximizing procedural justice.

Simultaneously, through highly curated physical space design and service configurations in the social dimension that closely match the needs of the core user group, Wanxiang Study highly recognises and satisfies the needs and identity of specific cultural groups (such as Nanjing University faculty and students, literary communities), providing them with a field where they are highly seen and accepted. Therefore, recognitive justice is very strong. Overall, Wanxiang Study' spatial justice is more manifested in the procedural and recognitive justice constructed by its institutional and social dimensions, rather than in the inclusiveness based on equitable distribution of physical resources.

Wanxiang Study, based on social dimension service activities driven by common cultural concepts, interests, and in-depth interaction, as well as an institutional dimension user co-creation community model, jointly foster an extremely strong capacity for generating bonding social capital, forming high identity and mutual aid networks. Its physical space's composite business format design (such as coffee areas, galleries) and high-frequency, issue-oriented social dimension activities with diverse themes introduced externally attract participants from different backgrounds and professions. This provides a unique platform for intellectual exchange and establishing weak connections, resulting in a strong ability to generate bridging social capital.

Furthermore, relying on the background of Nanjing University Press, the founder's connections, and institutional cooperation with media, academia, and other independent cultural institutions—especially by directly introducing external resources and organisers through the model where activity content is externally determined—Wanxiang Study has built rich external connections. This provides community members with opportunities to connect to higher-level resources and networks, also showing a strong ability to generate linking social capital.

• Case Summary

Driven by an autonomous institutional model, Wanxiang Study, with its physical space and social practices highly aligned with community needs, excels in promoting in-depth user participation (procedural justice, recognitive justice) and generating different types of social capital (especially bonding and linking). Its main drawback lies in the resource limitations under its autonomous model, which restricts its performance in inclusive resource allocation (distributive justice). (Table 4)

Table 4. Analysis Summary of Case 3

Dimension	Sub-Aspect	Characteristics	Implications for Spatial Justice	Implications for Social capital
Institutional	Governance Structure	User-led governance; institutional autonomy; community co-construction	Maximises procedural justice; strong user voice	Strong bonding through participatory operation
	Resource Integration	Limited government support; relies on private funding and social networks	Limited distributive justice; access constraints remain	Enables flexible linking with media and cultural institutions
	User Participation & Co-Governance	Users involved in planning and decision-making	Strong bottom-up engagement; highly participatory governance	Fosters deep user ownership and relational commitment
Physical	Location & Spatial Accessibility	Small-scale space; consumption-for-seating policy; free gallery partially compensates	Restricted space access for broader users and low-income groups	Limited inclusiveness; tailored access for core users
	Spatial Layout & Design Features	Curated environment; tailored for university/literary users	High cultural specificity supports recognitive justice	Reinforces shared identity and cultural cohesion
	Informal Interaction Capacity	Multifunctional layout: café, gallery, book lounge	Encourages spontaneous interaction for targeted groups	Supports both bonding and bridging through semi-public settings
Social	Target Groups	Literary community, university scholars	Strong identity alignment; highly responsive to user profiles	Strong bonding among culturally cohesive groups
	Activity Design	Issue-driven events; external organizer cooperation; diverse cultural themes	Recognises and amplifies cultural plurality; active programming	Bridges communities; deepens trust and reciprocal ties
	Social Interaction & Inclusion	Open platform for dialogue; multi-background participation	Rich recognitive justice; cultural responsiveness	Strong bridging (diverse participants) and linking (external ties)

5. Conclusion and Prospects

5.1 Case Comparison: Complementary Logic of Multiple Types

The three governance models represent distinct institutional configurations that profoundly influence resource allocation, operational logic, and managerial approaches. These institutional differences shape the development of physical space and the structuring of service activities, thereby producing varying strengths and weaknesses in

fulfilling the dual functions of social infrastructure—namely, the realisation of spatial justice and the generation of social capital. Table 778 summarizes the core characteristics of each governance model and their corresponding performance in key dimensions.

The leading type, marked by high institutional centralisation, ensures stable resource input and standardized operational mechanisms. This is reflected in its prime physical location, robust infrastructural support, and a systematic cultural resource collection system. These features significantly enhance distributive justice, ensuring access to public cultural resources and safeguarding the basic cultural rights of specific user groups. However, this model lacks institutional channels for user participation and relies on administratively led, top-down service delivery. The physical environment, while functional, is insufficiently configured to support informal social interaction or diverse engagement, resulting in weaker performance in procedural and recognitive justice. This governance model represents a “top-down” social infrastructure paradigm, with a primary focus on resource provision and institutional order maintenance.

The co-operative type reflects a collaborative governance structure involving both public and private sectors. It typically operates through parallel mechanisms of resource integration, brand co-construction, and service outsourcing. Market participation enhances the spatial design by introducing aesthetic considerations and multifunctional layouts, thereby improving spatial attractiveness and user accessibility. Social practices in this model exhibit higher service diversity and activity frequency, which strengthens recognitive justice and facilitates the generation of bridging social capital. Institutional partnerships with public libraries also partially mitigate deficiencies in cultural coverage and professionalism. However, the dominance of commercial logic may dilute the public-oriented mission, and mechanisms for procedural justice remain limited. This model exemplifies an “embedded” institutional design that seeks to balance resource collaboration with responsiveness to user demand.

The autonomous type is characterized by decentralized governance and strong user agency. This model emphasizes participatory management and community co-creation, with service design closely aligned to the interests and needs of its core user base. Consequently, it demonstrates the strongest performance in procedural and recognitive justice. Moreover, curatorial spatial design and issue-driven programming foster the formation of bonding and linking social capital. However, the lack of institutional support from governmental or library systems constrains its physical space capacity and limits its distributive inclusiveness. This governance path represents a “bottom-up” model driven by community mobilisation and shared cultural identity.

Collectively, these governance models do not exist in isolation but demonstrate a complementary logic in their institutional objectives and operational strategies. The leading type offers broad coverage and foundational guarantees; the co-operative type enhances service diversity and spatial appeal, broadening the potential for superficial social interactions; and the autonomous type prioritizes deep community engagement and user participation, activating the cultural functions of intensive interaction. This complementary interplay is also echoed in international scholarship, such as Tonkiss’s (2013) and Mehta’s (2014) discussions on “institutional diversity” and “community-negotiated spaces.”

Accordingly, the future optimisation of institutional frameworks for community reading spaces should avoid rigid adherence to any single governance logic. Instead, it should strategically combine the strengths of each model: enhancing institutional flexibility and user participation mechanisms within government-led frameworks; integrating public service attributes and professional resources into market-led models; and providing foundational policy support and external resource channels for community-initiated efforts. Through the synergistic coordination of institutional structure, physical space, and social practices, community reading spaces can more effectively fulfill their dual social functions, advancing both spatial justice and the generation of social capital as essential components of new social infrastructure.

5.2 Research Conclusions

• Dual Functions of Social Infrastructure and Three-Dimensional Interactive Mechanism

This research finds that community reading spaces, as a form of social infrastructure, embody the dual functions of providing fundamental public services and fostering social relationship networks. These spaces serve not only as platforms for physical and institutional delivery—guaranteeing daily cultural rights and access to knowledge—but also as relational fields that facilitate neighborhood interaction, collective identity, and trust-building. This dual embeddedness positions them as urban social apparatuses with communicative capacity, organisational capability, and normative orientation.

The realisation of these functions is rooted in the dynamic and synergistic interaction among three dimensions: physical space, institutional arrangements (particularly context-specific governance models in China), and social practices. Case analysis reveals that different institutional logics—such as administrative dominance in the leading type, government-society collaboration in the co-oping type, and community autonomy in the autonomous type—directly shape the accessibility and inclusiveness of physical spaces and guide the design of social practices, thereby determining the specific pathways and performance levels of each model in achieving these dual functions.

• The Synergisation of Spatial Justice and Social capital

The core value of community reading spaces as social infrastructure lies in promoting spatial justice and cultivating social capital. The research emphasises that spatial justice does not solely depend on the balanced distribution of physical space (distributive justice) but must be embedded with dimensions of institutional participability (procedural justice) and responsiveness to cultural identity (recognitive justice).

The Nanjing case analysis (e.g., the autonomous type maximised procedural and recognitive justice, while the leading type focused on the foundation of distributive justice) confirms this. Simultaneously, social capital is not a passive construction of social scenarios but a network of relationships (bonding, bridging, linking capital) dynamically stimulated by physical space forms, institutional arrangements, and user behaviors. Different governance models promote the generation of different types of social capital in differentiated ways by shaping the openness of physical space, institutional openness, and the diversity of social practices (e.g., the co-operative type promotes bridging capital, while the autonomous type strengthens bonding and linking capital). This indicates that spatial justice and social capital, as the two core objectives of infrastructure, are interrelated and synergistically achieved under different practical paths. Their effect depends on whether the three-dimensional elements can be effectively coupled and balance and promote the diverse facets of these two objectives.

• Complementary Logic of China's Pluralistic Governance Models

The Nanjing case study further reveals that against the policy backdrop of China actively promoting pluralistic governance in public cultural services, different governance models such as leading, co-operative, and autonomous types exhibit significant complementary logic. The leading type provides an inclusive foundation, the co-operative type introduces vitality to expand boundaries, and the autonomous type stimulates the deep vitality of communities. This co-existence of multiple paths and complementary patterns provides possibilities for addressing China's diverse community needs. Theoretically, the "three-dimensional interaction—dual functions" analytical framework proposed in this paper offers a new perspective for understanding how social infrastructure plays a composite function at the micro-scale.

At the policy level, it is necessary to move beyond indicator-based assessments and focus on the mechanism design for institutional openness and social embeddedness, and encouraging mixed governance, flexible spaces, and pluralistic participation. Through synergistic complementarity, the value of community reading spaces, as important social infrastructure, can be more comprehensively enhanced to address "spatial injustice" and "social alienation" in urban development. Concurrently, the theoretical perspective and mechanism analysis methods provided by this study can also offer references for research on other types of social infrastructure.

5.3 Research Prospects

This study, based on the “physical-institutional-social” framework, has conducted a preliminary exploration of the interactive mechanism behind community reading spaces. However, the current case selection (only three cases in Nanjing) is limited in quantity and type, failing to fully cover model variations or potential sub-types, and lacks quantitative analysis of the dynamic process of social capital. Based on this, future research needs to expand the breadth and depth of cases, deepen the study of governance models, and strengthen theoretical dialogue. This includes geographical expansion to different cities and regions, inclusion of different community types, identification of more diversified governance practices (such as mixed operations, transformation cases), and more detailed typological research on existing models. At the same time, placing community reading spaces within theoretical dialogues on public space, community governance, etc., aims to construct a more comprehensive and refined classification system of governance models and to verify and improve the theoretical framework.

Secondly, future research should deepen the dynamic process and quantitative analysis of efficacy, and closely connect with practice. The efficacy of community reading spaces evolves dynamically over time, requiring a tracking design to examine the long-term interaction of physical space, institutions, and social practices and their impact on community structure and changes in social capital. Introducing quantitative methods such as social network analysis can systematically depict the composition and dynamics of social capital. At the practical level, research results should be actively connected with departments of urban planning, cultural policy formulation, and community management to provide decision-making support for site selection, design, operation, resource allocation, and efficacy assessment. This will help promote the construction of more vibrant, equitable, and inclusive urban communities and enhance the overall effectiveness of public cultural services.

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