

Chapter 10

Smart Environment: Cyber Parks (Connecting Nature and Technology)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to explore young people's habits and attitudes regarding visiting urban green places and ICT use in park settings. A multi-method design involving in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=34) and questionnaire (n=246) was applied. The qualitative research findings were used to prepare instruments for the quantitative stage, and to develop a model of park-visiting behavior of young park users. Most participants visited parks few times per month, usually during the afternoons, accompanied with someone. The main motives for park visits were related to the nature, while the main drawbacks were lack of spare time and bad weather. The most popular activity in parks was conversation. The participants rarely used ICT devices in parks. No significant difference was found regarding subjective wellbeing indicators and frequency of park visits, but positive change in mood was observed after visiting parks. Attitudes towards urban parks were grouped around three distinctive factors: Management, Use and Preferences, explaining 14% of variance of park visiting behavior.

INTRODUCTION

While developers of “smart cities” usually focus on using information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance the quality of urban public services such as traffic and transport, finance, sustainable energy use, and health care, ICT in “green” urban areas has been neglected. Some might even argue

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9276-1.ch010

that introducing ICT would ruin or corrupt the purpose of urban parks seen as the only remaining link between people and nature left within cities - regardless of the fact that “smart/ICT parks” or “cyber parks” don’t force their visitors to use ICT, they just enable them to do so.

However, there are many reasons favorable for introducing and using ICT in urban parks. For example, since ICT has become a part of our everyday lives, we may reason that excluding urban parks from incorporation of ICT might result in a declining number of park visitors. The danger of excluding city parks from ICT lies in the possibility that people might avoid places where all the privileges of contemporary technology they are accustomed to are not present. This especially refers to young people who were raised in an electronic world (so called digital natives) and prefer places where “being connected” is a part of the default setting. Rather than being cut out of the grid they might decide to stay at home/bars even though it is important for them, as well as it is for other age groups, to spend some time in nature. Namely, that environment can be beneficial for their both physical and mental health (see in Lee & Maheswaran, 2011). Furthermore, urban open areas have so far been mostly related to activities like walking, jogging, and playing ball games, but also to more passive activities like reading, picnicking, or just sitting and enjoying the nature. ICT could widen the range of possible “outdoor” activities and attract more (young) people to parks:

- While sitting in a park people could work,
- Write e-mails,
- Chat on-line,
- Make on-line purchases and bill payments, or
- Just explore the internet.

“Smart/cyber” parks could also help us engage in different activities related to a park itself, from finding potential friends or playmates for some games, to learning about the park history and its features.

Taking into account the above mentioned and the fact that advanced technological solutions (e.g. Wi-Fi space combined with smart phones and tablets) have provided us with a possibility to use ICT in outdoor settings as good as in indoor settings, the role of ICT in urban parks and similar nature-preserved areas within cities should be addressed. Do people visit green urban areas in order to avoid ICT, or do they wish to have ICT available there? Once this question gets answered, it is possible to start working towards adjusting urban green environments into making them more attractive for visitors.

The aim of this research was to explore current trends in park visiting among young people and their typical activities and preferences related to park visits, with focus on possibilities of implementation of ICT in park settings.

The findings of this research are intended to help in informed planning of urban green areas and adequate implementation of ICT in park settings.

BACKGROUND

Many socio-demographic characteristics of urban residents were found as valuable predictors of urban green spaces use. As an illustration, in the survey conducted by Paxton, Sharpe, Granne and Hutto (2005), typical park users were employed, male, and between 18 and 34 years of age. Cohen et al. (2007) also concluded that males were using urban parks more than females. Loukaitou-Sideris and Sideris

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