

# Let's Go To the Park: Motives and Emotions Experienced Of Park Goers in Singapore

LX.F. Loka[a] H.K. Lengb [b]

[a] Lok Xun Feng  
School of Physical and  
Mathematical Sciences  
Nanyang Technological  
University  
50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore  
639798, Republic of Singapore  
Email: XFLOK1@e.ntu.edu.sg

[b] Leng Ho Keat  
National Institute of Education  
Nanyang Technological  
University  
1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore  
637616, Republic of Singapore  
Email: hokeat.leng@nie.edu.sg

## ABSTRACT

Singapore has often been referred to as the "Garden City". However, there has been little research on the role of parks in the country. The purpose of this paper is to examine the behavior and motives of park goers in Singapore. Using random sampling, a survey was administered to 100 park goers on a weekend morning in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Most of the park goers are between 40 to 59 years of age. Visiting the park is a social activity for park goers in Singapore as 89% of the respondents visit the park with companions. The most commonly cited motives for visiting the park are to exercise and to relax. The survey also showed that most park goers felt happy in visiting the park and that emotions experienced in the park are perceived to be very important to their well-being. However, park visitors who are older are less likely to feel a unity with nature when compared to their younger peers. While there were differences between the age groups in the emotions experienced in the park, there were no other significant differences between demographic groups. The findings contributed to a better understanding of the park-goers profile and their motives in visiting the park.

Keywords:

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## INTRODUCTION

Urban parks provide convenient recreation opportunities for urban communities who may otherwise have limited access to nature-based recreation (Baur & Tynon, 2010; Kaplan, 1992). They have been described as lungs for cities, places where people could enjoy clean air, open space away from the city and a peaceful social setting for leisure (Page & Connell, 2010). A city can only be sustainable if it has sufficient public parks and recreation areas to make the city livable, pleasant and attractive for its citizens (Chiesura, 2004).

Singapore has often been referred to as the "Garden City" as the government has consciously sought to make greenery part of the country. Although Singapore is a small country spanning 710 square kilometers, it has over 98 square kilometers or 13.8% of green spaces. Despite the emphasis on greenery within the country, there has been little research on urban parks in Singapore.

An early study conducted in 1996 found that parks are used by visitors as a place to exercise, socialize and connect with nature. Parks are seen as 'gateways to a better world' where children can learn and play in safety, and adults can escape from the stress of urban life or to socialize with other people (Yuen, 1996).

There have been significant changes in the Singapore landscape since then. The number of parks in the country has grown from 229 to 316 parks. They now span over 23 square kilometers and together with 33 square kilometers of nature reserves, make up the bulk of green spaces in the country. As part of the government's continuing policy, the country plans to build even more green spaces in the country by integrating homes and workplaces into an island-wide network of parks and nature areas so that nature can become part of everyday life for all Singaporeans. The aim is to transform the "Garden City" into a "City in a Garden" (National Parks Board, 2012).

Given the emphasis on greenery in Singapore and the changes over the years, the aim of this research is to examine the profile of park goers in Singapore. Findings from this research will provide an update on the role that parks play in Singapore.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Parks are common community features that provide opportunities for physical activity for park goers. Park visitors are often seen to be engaged in activities such as walking, jogging, playing sports or doing exercises within the parks. Such physical activities provide various physical health benefits including lowered risk of obesity and heart diseases. In addition, participating in physical activities in the park can lead to psychological health benefits including a reduction in perceived stress and an enhanced sense of wellness (Bedimo-Rung, Mowen, & Cohen, 2005).

Studies have also suggested that it is not necessary to participate in physical activity to gain psychological health benefits from the park. Visitors to parks who do not engage in physical activities also benefit in psychological health simply by being in contact with nature (Bedimo-Rung, et al., 2005; Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St Leger, 2006). The natural environment increases a person's ability to cope with stress; helps in the recovery from injury and mental fatigue; and improves a person's general satisfaction with life (Maller, et al., 2006).

This is supported by recent studies which showed that the benefits associated with visiting the park include relaxation, experiencing nature and escape from the city (Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008; Chiesura, 2004; Özgüner, 2011; Stodolska, Shinew, Acevedo, & Izenstark, 2011). Parks are therefore considered by park goers to be important for their well-being (Chiesura, 2004; Ho et al., 2005).

These psychological health benefits can be explained in part by the restorative environment inherent in natural settings. Urban parks, as accessible nature, satisfy the four elements of restorative environment. They offer a sense of fascination from the flora and fauna; a sense of being away or temporary escape from the usual setting; an extensive area to move around and compatibility with an individual's inclinations. As such, parks can help provide restorative experiences for visitors in reducing their mental fatigue and are essential for healthy human functioning (Kaplan, 1992; Maller, et al., 2006).

Visiting a park is generally considered a social rather than a solitary activity. As such, parks can also facilitate leisure-based social interactions for family members and friends (Bedimo-Rung, et al., 2005; Ho, et al., 2005; Stodolska, et al., 2011). Such social interactions have a positive effect on the well-being of individuals. Through such social interactions, individuals are more likely to engage in physical activities in the form of sports and games. In addition, friendship formed from such social interactions can lead to a sense of well-being (Bedimo-Rung, et al., 2005; Cattell, et al., 2008). To a lesser extent, parks as a form of public space, provides the community an opportunity to mingle with each other, including those from different ethnicities, thus enhancing social interactions (Cattell, et al., 2008; Peters, Elands, & Buijs, 2010).

However, there are cultural differences in how visitors use the park (Gobster, 2002; Ho, et al., 2005; Özgüner, 2011; Sasidharan, Willits, & Godbey, 2005; Stodolska, et al., 2011; Winter, Jeong, & Godbey, 2004). In studies conducted in the United States, African Americans and Hispanics were more likely to stay in the park longer than the other ethnic groups. In addition, Whites were more likely than other ethnic groups to participate in physical exercises in the park and visit the park in smaller groups (Gobster, 2002; Ho, et al., 2005; Reed, Price, Grost, & Mantinan, 2012; Sasidharan, et al., 2005). This has been attributed to cultural differences between the different ethnic groups. An ethnic group that has collectivist cultural orientation places greater emphasis on the family unit and the importance of larger social organisations. As such, these ethnic groups are more likely to visit the park in larger groups and do so for social reasons (Ho, et al., 2005; Özgüner, 2011; Stodolska, et al., 2011).

Comparing the findings from studies conducted in different countries also showed that there are differences in park usage and motives for visiting the park. Studies in the European countries of Netherlands, Denmark and the United Kingdom show that people visited parks to relax, be in touch with nature and escape from the stressful urban lifestyle (Burgess, Harrison, & Limb, 1988; Chiesura, 2004; Schipperijn et al., 2010). However, recent studies in the Asian countries of Hong Kong and Pakistan show that the primary reasons for visiting the park are to exercise and take leisure walks (Hussain et al., 2010; Wong, 2009).

A review of the literature suggests that it is inconclusive as to whether park usage is influenced by age. While some studies have suggested that park visitors are more likely to belong to the elderly demographic segment (Schipperijn, et al., 2010; Wong, 2009), other studies have suggested that older adults are less likely to be frequent users of parks (Bedimo-Rung, et al., 2005; Reed, et al., 2012). However, studies have been more consistent that the motives

for visiting a park differ across the age groups. Younger visitors to the park are more likely to visit the park for sports and social activities while the objectives for older visitors are to relax, spend time with family and be close to nature (Chiesura, 2004; Kemperman & Timmermans, 2006; Schipperijn, et al., 2010).

Most studies show that there is no difference between the genders in park usage and perceived benefits from visiting the park (Chiesura, 2004; Ho, et al., 2005; Wong, 2009). However, male visitors are more likely to be involved in physically vigorous activities such as jogging as compared to female visitors (Reed, et al., 2012).

The above review has shown that parks provide physical, psychological and social benefits to visitors. However, it has also been established that park visitors are not the same in terms of park usage, motives and in perceiving the benefits of the park. This suggests that Singapore park goers may differ in their behaviors from those in other countries. While an earlier study was conducted in Singapore parks, it is also recognized that much has changed in the Singapore landscape since then. In addition, recent studies have also added to the body of knowledge in this area. As such, there is a need to re-examine the profile of park goers in Singapore as an update to the earlier study and also examine the behavior and motives of park goers in Singapore in light of recent findings.

## METHODOLOGY

Singapore Botanic Gardens is a popular national park in Singapore. The 74-hectare Gardens, has a history of more than 150 years. It serves not only as a regional recreational park but also as a popular attraction for tourists and an institution for botanical studies. Within the Gardens, there are several smaller themed gardens catering to visitors of all interests and age. For example, the Jacob Ballas Children's Garden caters to children up to 12 years of age to learn about nature and the environment, while the National Orchid Garden offers the largest display of orchids in the world (Singapore Botanic Gardens). The Gardens is also accessible by public transportation including buses and the local subway system. Due to the Gardens' popularity and accessibility, it was selected to be the survey site for this study.

The Gardens is divided into three major zones: Tanglin Core, Central Core and Bukit Timah Core with the Central Core being the largest zone. After two field observations at the Gardens, it was decided that the survey would be conducted in the Central Core near the Gardens' Visitor Centre. This was because the Centre was near to one of the more popular entrances to the park, Nassim Gate, and serves park visitors coming by private cars, taxis and coaches. As there is also a restaurant and other amenities in the area, the location will likely be populated with visitors.

The survey instrument consists of 14 questions. The first part of the survey instrument collected data on demographics and park usage details of respondents. These questions were adapted from earlier studies conducted in other countries (Sasidharan, et al., 2005; Schipperijn, et al., 2010; Tinsley, Tinsley, & Croskeys, 2002).

Questions were also adapted from Chiesura's (2004) study conducted in the Netherlands to examine the motives and emotions experienced in visiting parks. To examine the motives in visiting the park, respondents were asked "What was the reason for coming here today?" Respondents were given several options of which they are allowed to select more than one option. These options include "To do sport and exercise", "To relax" and "To escape from the city". To examine the emotions experienced in visiting parks, respondents were asked "What are your feelings or expected feelings after spending time in the park?" Respondents are again given several options of which they are allowed to select more than one option. These options include "Sense of Freedom", "Unity with nature" and "Happiness". Respondents were also asked "How important are these feelings for your daily well-being?" For this question, a Likert 5-point scale was used to measure the importance of the emotions experienced from 1 being "Not Important at all" to 5 being "Essential".

The survey was conducted in Singapore Botanic Gardens on a Sunday morning between 8 am to 12 noon. Respondents were randomly selected from among the visitors of the park at the Visitor Centre. Respondents who were younger than 20 years of age were excluded from the survey.

Survey administrators were briefed on the procedures in conducting the research prior to the study to maintain consistency in data collection. Respondents were first informed on the research objective. Once a respondent had decided to participate in the survey, the survey instrument would be handed out and survey administrators were to assist where necessary. As the English language is commonly used in Singapore, the survey instrument was worded in English. However, it was expected that there might be a small number of cases involving older respondents which require the survey administrators to clarify or translate certain words for the respondents. Survey administrators were briefed on the appropriate translation for consistency.

The data was keyed into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) program version 20 for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, frequency analysis and non-parametric tests were conducted on the data. In particular, Chi-Square

tests for independence were used to examine the existence of association between demographic variable and other dependent variables.

## RESULTS

106 questionnaires were distributed to visitors of the park. 6 questionnaires were returned incomplete and were not used for analysis. Hence, only 100 responses or 94.3% of the distributed questionnaires were used for analysis.

### Demographic profile of park goers

The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1 below. There are approximately equal numbers from both genders with 51% of the respondents of the female gender. The majority of park goers (46%) in this study are between 40 to 59 years of age. In addition, the majority of respondents (63%) reside more than two kilometers away from the park.

Table 1 Demographic profile of respondents

Responses	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender:</i>	
Male	49.0
Female	51.0
<i>Age:</i>	
20 - 39	33.0
40 - 59	46.0
60 and over	21.0
<i>Distance:</i>	
< 300 m	5.0
300 m - 2 km	32.0
> 2 km	63.0

Table 2 shows the park usage of respondents. 71% of the respondents visited the park at least once a month. This is consistent with an earlier study conducted in Turkey which found that 80% of the park goers visit the park at least once a month (Özgüner, 2011). Concurring with earlier studies, a Chi-square test for independence indicated no significant association between gender and the frequency in visiting the park,  $\chi^2(4, n=100)=2.58, p=0.63$ , Cramer's  $V=0.16$ .

Table 2 Park usage

Responses	Percentage (%)
<i>Frequency of visit:</i>	
Daily	4.0
Several times a week	13.0
Weekly	32.0
Monthly	22.0
Seldom	29.0
<i>Time spent in the park:</i>	
Less than 1 hour	10.0
1 to 2 hours	78.0
3 or more hours	12.0
<i>Type of companion:</i>	
Alone	11.0
With friends	20.0
With family	64.0
With organized group	5.0

Most of the park goers (78%) spend between 1 to 2 hours in the park. A Chi-square test for independence also found that there is no significant association between gender and the duration of time spent in the park,  $\chi^2$  (2,  $n=100$ )=3.41,  $p=0.18$ , Cramer's  $V=0.19$ .

The majority of park goers (89%) are accompanied by other people. 64% of park goers are accompanied by family members. A smaller number of park goers (20%) are accompanied by friends. This is comparable with an earlier study conducted in Turkey which found that 97% of the park goers visit the park with others (Özgüner, 2011).

### Motives of park goers

Table 3 tabulates the motives for visiting the park. Park goers are allowed to provide more than one response for the two questions.

Table 3 Motives experienced by park goers

Responses	Percentage (%)
<i>Motives:</i>	
Do sports or exercise	55.0
Relax	53.0
To be with nature	40.0
Spend time with family	34.0
Escape from city	7.0
Meet others	6.0
Get inspiration	6.0
Meditate	3.0

The most popular motive in visiting the park is to do sports or exercise (55%). Other reasons to visit the park are for relaxation (53%), to be with nature (40%) and to spend time with family members (34%). Chi-square tests for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated no gender differences across the motives to do sports or exercise ( $\chi^2$  (1,  $n=100$ )=0.03,  $p=0.86$ ,  $phi=0.04$ ); for relaxation ( $\chi^2$  (1,  $n=100$ )=0.38,  $p=0.54$ ,  $phi=-0.08$ ); to be with nature ( $\chi^2$  (1,  $n=100$ )=0.74,  $p=0.39$ ,  $phi=0.11$ ); and to spend time with family members ( $\chi^2$  (1,  $n=100$ )=0.13,  $p=0.72$ ,  $phi=-0.06$ ). Less popular reasons include escaping from the city (7%), meeting other people (6%), getting inspiration from nature (6%) and meditation (3%).

The findings are different from an earlier study conducted in the Netherlands (Chiesura, 2004). Park goers in Netherlands visited parks primarily for relaxation (73%), to be with nature (54%) and to escape from the city (33%). In comparison, while park goers in Singapore visited parks for relaxation and to be with nature, they are less likely to do so in order to escape from the city. In addition, park goers in Singapore are more likely to visit the park because they intend to do sports or exercise in the park as compared to park goers in the Netherlands.

### Emotions experienced by park goers

Table 4 tabulates the emotions experienced by park goers. Respondents are allowed to provide more than one response for the two questions.

Table 4 Emotions experienced by park goers

Responses	Percentage (%)	Percentage by age group (%)		
		20-39	40-59	60 and over
<i>Emotion experienced:</i>				
Happiness	64.0	63.6	65.2	61.9
Unity with nature	53.0	54.5	65.2	23.8
Freedom	28.0	42.4	21.7	19.0
Unity with self	23.0	27.3	21.7	19.0
Adventure	5.0	12.1	2.2	0.0
Luck	3.0	3.0	0.0	9.5

The majority of park goers experience feelings of happiness (64%) and unity with nature (53%) in visiting the park. Chi-square tests for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated no gender differences across the emotions experienced of happiness ( $\chi^2(1, n=100)=0.13, p=0.72, phi=0.06$ ) and unity with nature ( $\chi^2(1, n=100)=0.35, p=0.56, phi=0.08$ ).

However, a Chi-square test for independence indicated significant association between age and feeling of unity with nature,  $\chi^2(2, n=100)=9.97, p=0.01$ , Cramer's  $V=0.32$ . Cramer's value indicated that age had a medium level of effect on the feeling of unity with nature. This suggests that park goers in Singapore, who are 60 years of age and older, are less likely to experience a feeling of unity with nature compared to younger park-goers.

When asked to rate the importance of these feelings to their daily well-being on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being not important at all and 5 being essential, respondents indicated that the feelings were important with a mean score of 3.79 (S.D. = 0.83). This finding is consistent with an earlier study which found that feelings experienced in a park is important to the daily well-being of park goers (Chiesura, 2004).

The findings in this study is comparable to an earlier study conducted in the Netherlands (Chiesura, 2004). Both studies found that the most common feelings experienced in a park are "a sense of freedom", "unity with nature" and "happiness". However, the park goer in Singapore is more likely to experience feelings of happiness while the park goer in Netherlands is more likely to experience a sense of freedom.

## DISCUSSION

The majority of park goers in this study were between 40 to 59 years of age. This concurred with the literature review that there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that parks are dominated by a specific age group. Some parks are dominated by young children (Reed, et al., 2012) while others are dominated by people of 60 years of age and older (Wong, 2009).

It was interesting to note that the majority (63%) of park goers travelled more than 2 kilometers to the park. Park goers may be more willing to travel to Singapore Botanic Gardens because it has wide open space, a wider variety of flora and more facilities than the neighborhood parks (Yuen, 1996).

The study also found that only a small proportion (11%) of park goers visit the park alone. This concurs with the literature that a visit to the park is generally considered a social activity and that 'companionship is an important factor in people's park visitation' (Ho, et al., 2005). Singaporeans, as Asians, strongly emphasize family bonding as can be seen from the majority (64%) of park goers who visit the park with family members.

The most commonly cited motives of park goers in Singapore are to do sports and to relax. This concurred with the earlier study conducted in Singapore which also indicated that the majority of park goers perceived the parks as a place to relax from the tension of urban life for a short moment (Yuen, 1996). Another commonly cited motive was "to be in nature". This reflected park goers' desire to connect with nature; to see flora and fauna; and to feel the breeze and the sunlight. Again, this has not changed from the earlier study where some park goers described they liked to be in a natural setting 'where people can touch the earth and relax' (Yuen, 1996).

The survey also revealed, generally, Singapore park goers felt happy, united with nature and sense of freedom by spending time in the park. Almost all of the respondents also agreed that these feelings were very important to their daily well-being. The park is able to provide restorative experiences to park goers by allowing people to get away from the urban setting. There seems to be a 'special resonance between the natural setting and human inclination' providing compatibility between human and nature (Kaplan, 1992). These positive feelings experienced by the park goers benefit them psychologically by reducing mental fatigue and, hence, play an important role in human functioning and daily well-being.

A closer examination showed that park goers who were of 60 years of age and older were less likely to experience the feeling of being connected with nature as compared to those who were younger. It is possible that this is due to this demographic segment is more interested in social interaction than immersing themselves into natural environment. In terms of psychosocial benefits, Tinsley et al (2002) found that for Asian park goers who are 55 years of age and older, have rated highly on the need for affiliation.

From this study, the findings have shown that the majority of park goers are between 40 to 59 years of age, visit the park in groups and are willing to travel further to enjoy the wide spaces and facilities in the park. Park administrators in Singapore should focus on developing the park to meet the needs of park goers. As the Singapore population

continues to age, park administrators may also have to consider how best to develop the park to allow for social interaction.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to examine the behavior and motives of park goers in Singapore. The study revealed that the most appealing motives for park visitation were to do sports and to relax. Park goers were more likely to feel happiness in visiting the park and emotions felt in the park were perceived to be very important to the well-being of park goers. It was also found that park goers who were older were less likely to feel unity with nature as compared to the younger park goers.

Due to resource constraints, the survey was conducted in only one section of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Park goers in different park zones may have different motives and experiences when visiting the park. More importantly, as the survey was conducted on a Sunday morning, the findings may not reflect the behavior and motives of park goers during the weekdays or at other times during the weekends. As such, further studies will need to be conducted to examine if the findings can be generalized to a wider population.

As the study indicated that the majority of park goers in Singapore are adults between 40 to 59 years of age, it suggests that future research should examine the behavior and motives of this group in greater detail. While this study has found that the most common reason for visiting the park is to do sports and exercise, it is not within the scope of this study to examine the extent of the physical activities in terms of physical activity intensity and the physical health benefits achieved. This is an area that should be investigated further. Findings from such research will be beneficial to the park authorities and the government in maintaining parks, recreational sites and population health.

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