Research article

Creating connections: Exploring social cohesion on the Durban beachfront

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Abstract

Public spaces can play a potential role in nurturing social cohesion, especially in post-apartheid South Africa, where historical divides continue to shape urban landscapes. The Durban beachfront serves as an ideal setting to explore how inclusive public spaces contribute to social unity by attracting people from diverse backgrounds to share experiences, form connections, and develop a collective identity. This paper re-analyses narrative and visual data from a 2021 master's study on meaningful city branding, shifting the focus toward the role of public space in promoting social cohesion. Central to this exploration is the theme of safety, a significant factor influencing how individuals engage with public space. Narratives from participants highlight the beachfront as a uniquely safe environment within the city, one that encourages informal interactions across social boundaries. Alongside safety, themes of freedom, unspoken social bonds, gratitude, and shared aspirations reveal the beachfront as a space where trust and mutual respect can grow. Participants describe it as a sanctuary offering relief from urban pressures, a space for self-expression, and a quiet, shared sense of community. By examining the Durban beachfront as a model of cohesion in an historically divided urban context, this paper offers insights into the role of inclusive public spaces in promoting social unity and guiding equitable urban policy.

Keywords: social cohesion, public space, urban open spaces, open space systems, narrative inquiry.

Introduction

This paper is based on research conducted in 2021 which explored the potential of metropolitan open space systems to contribute to the development of meaningful city brands, with a specific focus on the Durban Metropolitan Open Space System (D'MOSS). The study concentrated on the Durban beachfront as a flagship space, well-used, widely recognised, and rich with symbolic and social value. Using narrative and visual narrative inquiry, the study engaged Durban residents to explore their perceptions, experiences, and emotional connections to the beachfront.

Findings revealed that open space systems such as D'MOSS could support city branding efforts by promoting wellbeing, a sense of belonging, and place attachment (Simpson, 2021). This paper therefore revisits that original data through a different conceptual lens, social cohesion, shifting the emphasis from city branding to the ways in which inclusive public spaces might help bridge historical divides in a post-apartheid context. This retrospective analysis responds to the increasing relevance of social cohesion in policy discourse and academic research, particularly in cities like Durban where spatial legacies of segregation continue to shape urban experience.

Social cohesion, broadly defined as the social bonds that maintain unity and support within diverse communities, is vital for addressing the ongoing inequalities embedded in South Africa's urban fabric. Despite the official demise of apartheid in 1994, its legacy has left many public spaces marked by economic disparity, racial division and unequal access. In this context, the concept of social cohesion speaks not only to institutional policy but to everyday lived experience: how people encounter one another, how trust is formed, and how shared spaces either encourage or inhibit connection (Moustakas, 2022; NPC, 2012).

The Durban beachfront offers a compelling case for exploring these questions. As a highly frequented, multifunctional public space, it attracts a wide range of users from across the city's demographic spectrum. This study draws on narrative and visual inquiry to examine how users experience the beachfront in ways that promote social trust, belonging, and shared identity. Particular attention is paid to the concepts of place attachment and social capital, which provide theoretical scaffolding for understanding how emotional bonds to place and informal social networks contribute to cohesion.

Through themes such as safety, freedom, unspoken social bonds, and aspirations for the future, this paper highlights how the Durban beachfront functions not only as a physical amenity but as a socially symbolic space. In doing so, it contributes to a growing understanding of how urban design, lived experience, and collective meaning-making interact in the formation of more inclusive cities.

Social cohesion

Social cohesion is a contested concept, with different disciplines and policy contexts emphasising varied dimensions such as trust, belonging, social capital, civic participation, or the reduction of inequality (Putnam, 2000; Palmary, 2015; Eagle, 2015). Despite these nuances, most definitions converge on the idea of the social bonds that enable societies to maintain unity and mutual support. This paper adopts Moustakas' (2022) definition, which frames social cohesion as a continuous process that holds societies together and is essential for ensuring the well-being of all members, managing differences, and achieving equitable development, while acknowledging these broader debates.

In South Africa, social cohesion is multifaceted, including social capital, community engagement, and the enduring impacts of apartheid. It is deeply influenced by the country's socio-political landscape, economic conditions, and cultural diversity. During apartheid, social capital, a key element of social cohesion, was strengthened through shared resistance against state oppression and the pursuit of a democratic society (Eagle, 2015). In contemporary South Africa the identification of unifying points of connection remains challenging due to ongoing issues such as crime, inequality, and corruption (Shozi et al., 2024).

Social cohesion reflects the quality of relationships within society, promoting mutual support, shared values, trust, and collective participation (Moustakas, 2022). It is also

shaped by ongoing efforts to reduce socio-economic disparities and facilitate inclusive interactions across diverse social groups (Palmary, 2015). Public spaces, particularly those designed to encourage inclusivity and engagement play an important role in facilitating these interactions and breaking down socio-economic barriers (Pinto & Ramsar, 2015).

Social capital is broadly understood as the networks, relationships, and shared norms that enable cooperation and collective action (Putnam, 2000). Historically, it contributed to unity across divided communities under apartheid (Eagle, 2015). Further to this, in current urban settings such as Durban, the availability and quality of public spaces remain significant in sustaining social capital and mutual support (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020).

Social cohesion is central to uniting individuals and shaping future behaviours through shared values and collective identity (Khaile, Roman & Davids, 2021). Indicators of social cohesion include civic participation, mutual trust, social order, acceptance of diversity, well-being, and social networks (Moustakas, 2022). Survey data reveals that while South Africans generally embrace the notion of 'unity in diversity', many remain sceptical about the potential to build a unified national identity (Swanepoel, 2022). This tension is exacerbated by South Africa's complex demographic composition, which includes various ethnic groups and immigrant populations (Matema & Kariuki, 2022).

Efforts to promote social cohesion have been integrated into national development strategies (Palmary, 2015), but challenges persist. The government continues to face difficulties in realising a 'stable, vibrant, harmonious and prosperous society', where cohesion remains a 'critical ingredient' for co-existence (Mopp & Swanepoel, 2023). Interventions that address local needs, promote inclusive engagement, and support community connection can help move towards this vision. While the City of Durban explicitly allocates approximately five percent of its annual municipal budget to social cohesion programmes (Ardé, 2014), such transparency and dedicated allocations are less commonly documented in the budgets of other South African cities. Generally social cohesion initiatives are embedded within broader community development or safety programmes.

Social cohesion and public spaces

Recent research on social cohesion and public spaces highlights the significant role that well-designed urban environments play in enabling community interaction and enhancing social ties among diverse populations. A significant body of literature emphasises the importance of public spaces as platforms for social engagement, particularly in multicultural contexts (Aelbrecht, 2018, Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2023, Peters, 2010, Gehl, 2007 & 2011, Mehta, 2014). The design characteristics of public spaces are also crucial in shaping social interactions. Spatial conditions, such as seating arrangements and visibility, significantly influence informal social interactions, enhancing the sociability of public spaces (Aelbrecht, 2018). Through design, public spaces can help build a sense of community, which encourages interpersonal relationships and social interactions (Ramos-Vidal, 2023). Access to green spaces not only facilitates physical activity but also contributes to social cohesion and mental well-being (Ige et al., 2020).

Public spaces are fundamental to achieving social cohesion, argue Pinto & Remesar (2015), and Aelbrecht & Stevens (2023) and Qi et al. (2024) echo that achieving or sustaining cohesion is reliant on public spaces as they provide key contact and encounter opportunities. Public spaces hold value not just as sites for representing a

multicultural society but as arenas where the relationships between members of that society are actively tested and shaped (Houssay-Holzschuch & Teppo, 2009). Aelbrecht & Stevens (2023) argue that there is a lack of clear academic agreement on the assessment, types and design principles that help promote intercultural engagement and social cohesion in public spaces but that they are seen to be closely linked. Increasingly they are seen as important in providing opportunities for both fleeting and longer-lasting encounters which could help 'catalyse tolerance toward difference and build trust' (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2023). Chance encounters in public spaces are what gives urban life its distinctive character and these can translate into meaningful experiences that help establish cohesiveness (Wilson, 2017).

Certain physical aspects of a built environment can either facilitate or limit social interactions and initiatives or interventions which encourage walking and social activity can help imbue a sense of vitality into an urban environment (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020). Public spaces allow strangers to meet or conflict with each other and that this interaction can help people break down ethnic divides (Peters, 2010). If planners and policymakers remain 'sensitive to the complexities of human lives' and provide well-designed spaces which allow for varied social interactions, Mouratidis & Poortinga (2020) argue they could affectively be aiding in developing a vibrant urban life which can in turn help create a sense of social cohesion.

Well-designed spaces refer to environments that intentionally accommodate human needs for comfort, safety, inclusivity, meaningful activities, and pleasure, significantly influencing social interactions and overall user experience (Mehta, 2014). Mehta's dimensions for assessing public space quality, inclusiveness, meaningful activities, comfort, safety, and pleasurability, offer a structured framework for evaluating spaces like the Durban beachfront. Inclusivity ensures accessibility and diversity; meaningful activities provide opportunities for engagement and community-building; comfort encompasses physical ease and usability; safety addresses perceived and real security concerns; and pleasurability highlights the aesthetic and emotional enjoyment of the space. Together, these dimensions help shape environments conducive to frequent use, sustained engagement, and heightened social interactions, which are essential for achieving the objectives of social cohesion in urban areas like Durban.

Traditional public spaces, such as parks and squares, are frequently avoided in post-apartheid South Africa given the rise in criminal violence and lack of maintenance and have been replaced by new public spaces such as shopping malls – even if chiefly designed for consumption (Houssay-Holzschuch & Teppo, 2009). Indoor public spaces such as this do not take advantage of the benefits of being outdoors. Considering the connections available in open space systems is vital to encourage physically, socially and economically vibrant public areas (Venter et al., 2020). Various urban design projects in South Africa seek to address issues such as violence through their designs, aiming to develop a sense of place and give residents ownership of the space through various entrepreneurship opportunities (Barolsky, 2016). The Durban parks and recreation department has various programs aimed at bringing people together in public spaces and the integration of social cohesion into the city's policies reflects a commitment to healing the divisions of the past and promoting reconciliation (Ardé, 2014). With this foundation in mind, the next section examines the Durban beachfront as a case study of how spatial design and context contribute to social cohesion in practice.

The Durban beachfront

The unique context of the Durban beachfront

The Durban beachfront offers a unique and distinctive urban environment due to its geographical, historical, social, and recreational characteristics. Situated along an extensive stretch of coastline, it provides open ocean views and natural boundaries that distinguish it from typical urban parks or squares. These spatial and visual qualities create an atmosphere conducive to leisure, relaxation, and recreation, significantly influencing the types of social interactions occurring within this space.

Historically, the Durban beachfront embodies a significant narrative of transformation. Under apartheid, public spaces, particularly beaches, were strictly segregated by race. Durban's beachfront, previously reserved primarily for the white minority, symbolises both historical division and contemporary reconciliation efforts (Du Plessis, 2018; Rogerson, 2017). The deliberate and inclusive redevelopment efforts, notably the substantial infrastructure improvements ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, included enhanced safety measures, upgraded pedestrian pathways, removal of clutter, improved lighting, and better visibility (eThekwini Municipality, 2016). These interventions were specifically designed to promote accessibility, integration, and equitable enjoyment across diverse demographic groups, thus supporting social cohesion objectives.

These infrastructure improvements have had tangible impacts on observed outcomes related to safety, accessibility, and increased social interactions. Enhanced lighting and visibility directly contributed to heightened feelings of safety among users, making the space more inviting, especially during evening hours. Improved pedestrian pathways facilitated greater physical accessibility, encouraging diverse user groups to engage more frequently and comfortably with the beachfront. These physical enhancements, explicitly referenced in participants' narratives, reinforced their perceptions of security, inclusivity, and ease of access, directly contributing to a more cohesive social environment.

From a social perspective, the Durban beachfront supports spontaneous, informal social interactions integral to the formation of community bonds and shared identities. Its recreational nature, encompassing spaces for walking, jogging, cycling, surfing, and various other leisure activities, attracts a broad spectrum of users, encouraging interactions across social and economic boundaries. Additionally, Durban's explicit commitment to social cohesion, demonstrated by allocating nearly five percent of the annual municipal budget to parks, recreation, and cultural activities (Ardé, 2014), underlines the city's intentional investment in promoting inclusive public spaces.

Extending approximately eight kilometres, this vibrant area attracts diverse groups of residents and visitors, serving as a centre for recreation, tourism, and cultural exchange and is arguably Durban's most recognisable urban feature and a defining characteristic of the city (Du Plessis, 2018). With its blend of natural landscapes (green space) and paved open spaces, the beachfront is central to the Durban Metropolitan Open Space System (D'MOSS), simultaneously conserving biodiversity and providing accessible amenities for both locals and tourists. Together, these distinctive geographical, historical, and social attributes demonstrate why the Durban beachfront represents an unparalleled setting for exploring and facilitating social cohesion. This reflects broader urban goals of integration, diversity, and collective identity building.

Place attachment refers to the emotional and symbolic connections individuals or communities develop with particular locations, often influenced by personal experiences, social interactions, and meaningful memories (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). These

emotional bonds can significantly impact perceptions of well-being and community identity. The Durban beachfront serves as a significant locus for place attachment due to its central role in local leisure activities, cultural gatherings, and historical significance, promoting emotional bonds that enhance feelings of belonging and care for the place.

Sense of belonging is defined as an individual's psychological sense of feeling connected, valued, and integral to a group or community (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This encompasses personal feelings of acceptance, identity, and being 'at home.' In post-apartheid South Africa, public spaces such as the Durban beachfront can facilitate interactions that support the formation of a collective identity, enabling diverse individuals to experience inclusivity, nurturing an enhanced sense of belonging (Mopp & Swanepoel, 2023).

Although the beachfront area is currently frequented by people from all walks of life, this was not always the case. The apartheid system sought to enforce racial division in all spheres of life by controlling the racial interactions in public spaces by segregating amenities, including park benches, public restrooms, swimming pools, cemeteries and beaches (Rogerson, 2017), with many of the best beaches being reserved for the white minority (Du Plessis, 2018). Under the apartheid beach segregation laws, whites-only beaches featured shark nets – symbolically demonstrating white privilege while other beaches had no nets or other facilities (Rogerson, 2017). Under increasing pressure from international sanctions and boycotts, the apartheid system began to crumble in the 1980s and on the beaches of Durban the desegregation was contested 'most vigorously among white stakeholders' and in late 1989 all of South Africa's beaches were desegregated (Rogerson, 2017).

Methods

This article draws on data originally collected by one of the authors for a master's study completed in 2021, which explored the role of metropolitan open space systems, specifically the Durban Metropolitan Open Space System (D'MOSS), in building meaningful city brands. The aim of the original research was to explore how metropolitan open space systems, and the Durban beachfront in particular, contribute to building meaningful city brands by examining the perceptions, emotional connections, and lived experiences of local residents. The study employed a qualitative research design grounded in narrative and visual narrative inquiry, to allow participants to express not only what they experienced, but how they felt about the space and the meanings they attached to it.

Although the original study was framed through the lens of city branding, many of the emergent themes, such as safety, freedom, connection, gratitude, and belonging, resonated strongly with theoretical constructs of social cohesion. This article revisits and reinterprets the original dataset with a refined focus on social cohesion to explore how inclusive public spaces may contribute to bridging social divides in a post-apartheid urban context. Existing narratives and visual materials were re-analysed thematically to highlight insights relevant to social cohesion literature and policy discourse.

Narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) remained the central methodological framework. It enabled an exploration of how participants construct meaning through storytelling. Visual narrative inquiry (Bach, 2007) was used alongside this to elicit deeper reflection, with participants' Instagram photographs serving as prompts for semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to share more about the story, significance or meaning of the photographs and asked to share the story behind the photo. Using laddered questions to elicit further detail, the researcher allowed the

participants' a chance to elaborate on the experience captured. A reflexive approach was embedded throughout the process, with the researcher's own positionality as a Durban resident and regular user of the beachfront acknowledged through ongoing journaling and critical reflection (Patnaik, 2013; Adams & Herrmann, 2023).

Participants were purposefully selected to ensure meaningful engagement with the research questions. The selection criteria specifically targeted Durban residents who were regular users of the beachfront and who actively documented their experiences on Instagram. Participants were initially identified via hashtag searches and subsequently recruited through direct messaging on Instagram. Rather than aiming for statistical generalisability, the study prioritised depth of insight, focusing on a small, purposefully selected group to explore the nuanced, lived experience and emotional connection participants held with the space. A total of seven participants agreed to take part in the study.

The participants were diverse in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity, although all shared frequent and positive experiences of the beachfront, which introduces an inherent, intentional, positive bias, acknowledged explicitly as a limitation. The original study sought to examine the potential for metropolitan open space systems to contribute to meaningful city branding, and thus prioritised narratives that demonstrated connection, value, and emotional resonance. The aim was not to provide a balanced critique of both positive and negative experiences, but rather to explore how public space might function as a unifying and meaningful asset. While acknowledging that not all experiences of the beachfront are positive, this study was designed to understand how and where positive engagement occurs, to assess the capacity of such spaces to support broader urban and social objectives.

Data collection occurred in two complementary stages. First, photographs posted by participants on Instagram depicting their experiences on the Durban beachfront were carefully selected by the researcher. Images chosen were those that represented meaningful or interesting aspects of participants' beachfront experiences or suggested significant emotional connections to the place. These photographs served as visual prompts in the second stage, where multiple semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews were held face-to-face or via virtual platforms to accommodate logistical constraints and participant preferences. This approach allowed participants time and space to reflect deeply on their experiences, memories, and emotions, providing richer insights into both personal and collective meanings associated with the Durban beachfront.

A reflexive approach was integrated throughout the research process, with the researcher acknowledging their positionality as both researcher and regular user of the Durban beachfront. Reflexive journaling and ongoing self-reflection were maintained to critically engage with personal biases, assumptions, and potential influences on the interpretation of data, enhancing the transparency and authenticity of findings (Patnaik, 2013; Adams & Herrmann, 2023).

The collected narratives were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This involved systematic coding and categorisation of narrative and visual data into meaningful themes, identifying recurring patterns and capturing the essence of each participant's experience. Thematic analysis was chosen specifically for its flexibility in handling diverse forms of qualitative data, allowing for a holistic representation of participants' emotional and experiential insights. These themes, which are explored in the subsequent narrative sections, arose through this reflexive thematic analysis process and are interpreted in relation to relevant literature to highlight broader patterns of social cohesion.

Throughout the methodological process, steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. These included transparent documentation of participant recruitment and data collection methods, reflexive practice, and triangulation between visual materials, narrative interviews, and theoretical literature, creating robust links between findings and existing literature.

Narratives

The concept of social cohesion in urban spaces is well-documented as a means of bringing communities together, particularly in cities with complex social histories. Urban public spaces are significant in facilitating interactions that encourage social bonding (Aelbrecht, 2018; Pinto & Remesar, 2015). Public spaces are environments where social boundaries can be diminished (Ramos-Vidal, 2023; Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020) and the findings of this study reveal that the beachfront serves as a recreational space where these social boundaries appear blurred.

This study reveals key themes that illustrate how the area supports social cohesion. Each theme provides insight into the ways participants experience and relate to the beachfront, strengthening a sense of shared identity and belonging:

1. Feelings of safety.
2. Freedom and self-expression in a shared space.
3. Unspoken connections and the formation of community bonds.
4. Gratitude for the shared public space.
5. Contemplating the future and aspirations for a shared community space.

The themes presented here are in the form of a narrative using seven 'characters' who represent participants from the study, interwoven with an interpretation of findings in relation to literature. These identifiers, such as the surfer, the runner, the optimist, the doctor, the photographer, the roller-skater, and the inquirer (the researcher), were selected to reflect aspects of how participants presented themselves during the interviews. Some are based on observable roles or repeated behaviours (e.g. the surfer, the doctor), while others emerged from distinctive narrative tones or dispositions (e.g. the optimist). This narrative framing is not meant to categorise participants narrowly, but to offer an accessible and human-centred way of conveying diverse emotional relationships to the Durban beachfront.

Feelings of safety

In a city with high crime rates and lingering social inequalities, safety is an essential component of public life. For participants of the study, the beachfront stands out as one of the few public spaces in the city where they feel safe. The vibrant mix of activities and people in the area are due to the 2010 upgrades which sought to remove clutter and provide clear lines of sight in all directions (Cloete & Yusuf, 2018).

The runner expressed her feelings about safety. *'As a female, whenever I'm going out, it's always like, "who's going with you?"… I don't have that issue when I'm going to the beach, because there's lots of security, the police are patrolling all the time. Even the beggars don't really harass you. You feel really safe to walk by yourself and safe as a female. I can walk on my own and enjoy the beachfront, on my terms'.*

The doctor perceives the space as safe. Considering the then Covid restrictions and social spacing, the space available *'has helped me a little bit to just carry on being in the environment and not feeling too unsafe'.*

Participants consistently highlighted safety as a unique and powerful attribute of the beachfront, describing it as a 'safe haven' where they could unwind without the fear that often accompanies public spaces elsewhere in the city. The visible presence of surveillance measures was cited as a factor enhancing this feeling of security without appearing overbearing. The runner, a regular at the beachfront, noted that '*even on days when I go alone, I feel completely at ease. There's a sense of protection here that I don't feel in other parts of the city.*' This assurance allows her to exercise freely, contributing to a sense of independence and belonging. Similarly, the surfer expressed that although she occasionally feels uneasy during early morning runs when the beachfront is quieter, the overall perception of safety enables her to interact more openly with other users, connecting through shared activities like jogging and surfing.

For female participants in particular, the beachfront offers a rare space for solo enjoyment without the usual apprehensions. The doctor pointed out that being able to visit the beachfront alone provided a sense of liberation: '*As a woman, this is one of the few places in Durban where I don't feel the need for a companion. There's comfort in the openness, the security, and even the familiar faces that you see regularly.*' Female participants reported feeling a sense of freedom and security on the beachfront, reinforcing findings from Mouratidis & Poortinga (2020) that safety is fundamental to making public spaces more inclusive. This aspect challenges conventional views that public spaces in post-apartheid South Africa struggle to ensure safety, particularly in a high-crime context, as noted by Eagle (2015).

The theme of safety extends beyond physical security to encompass a psychological dimension. For many, the beachfront offers relief from the tensions of urban life. It functions as a sanctuary from the anxieties associated with daily stressors. This emotional refuge reflects early indicators of place attachment – where a public space becomes associated with comfort, reliability, and a sense of stability in one's daily routine. The consistency of positive experience contributes to a growing emotional connection between user and place, grounded in a sense of trust, protection, and familiarity.

This shared perception cultivates a welcoming atmosphere where interactions are natural and spontaneous, from nods exchanged between morning walkers to conversations sparked over shared activities. These repeated low-intensity interactions give rise to a form of 'bridging' social capital, where weak ties and informal recognitions between diverse individuals begin to build a quiet sense of social trust. Familiarity with others in the space, what one participant called 'familiar faces', encouraged casual engagement and reduced the sense of isolation often associated with urban public spaces.

This perception of safety reinforces social cohesion by drawing a diverse array of people to the same space, where they can interact informally and develop a collective sense of trust. As urban theorists like Mehta (2014) have observed, perceptions of safety play a significant role in encouraging engagement with public spaces. In Durban, this has proven to be particularly significant, bridging social divides by creating a secure, inclusive environment. The beachfront sets an example for how enhanced safety measures, such as visible police patrols and surveillance, contribute to creating a welcoming environment for diverse groups. While security in public spaces is undeniably important, an overemphasis on security measures can lead to detrimental effects, including feelings of alienation, reduced accessibility, and social exclusion. A more balanced approach that prioritises both safety and the preservation of public space as inclusive and welcoming environments is essential for building community trust and encouraging engagement (Frosdick, 2010; Koskela, 2000; Kiełek, 2022).

Freedom and self-expression in a shared space

At the Durban beachfront, the sense of freedom is palpable, intertwined with the open space and ocean backdrop. For the participants, freedom here is not just about physical openness but about the mental and emotional release that comes with leaving behind the city's pressures. Participants described the beachfront as a place where they can 'breathe,' 'escape' and feel 'unencumbered.' A city should allow residents *'freedom to live, move and build our lives as we wish'* (Montgomery, 2013).

The runner believes her Instagram posts reflect freedom. She explains: *'Each one of these is about freedom... For me they're about freedom because I haven't had that same opportunity to feel safe in other areas. The beachfront is somewhere I really feel free... I post a lot of photos of birds too and that's also about freedom. Being there is very therapeutic for me, and at the moment, we're in this pandemic, and you're always so stressed. But at the beachfront you do feel a lot more, free.'*

The optimist describes visits to the beachfront as *'a bit of an escape from everything.'*

This sense of freedom is closely linked to the layout and design of the beachfront, which offers expansive, unbroken views and an accessible promenade stretching for kilometres. Having access to open views or being in spaces that convey a sense of openness can promote feelings of freedom (Montgomery, 2013). The photographer, who visits frequently, shared how the early mornings at the beachfront give him *'a freedom to move, to capture moments,'* allowing him to interact with the space in a deeply personal way. For him, and others who embrace this open environment, the beachfront is a place where they can not only escape daily routines but connect to a broader Durban identity through shared experiences in the same physical space. This repeated interaction and emotional investment in the setting suggests a growing sense of place attachment, as the beachfront becomes embedded in participants' routines and sense of self.

Participants emphasised that the beachfront creates a sense of freedom by providing a judgment-free zone. As the doctor pointed out, *'Here, I can let go, and so can everyone else. It doesn't matter where you come from or what you do, on the promenade, we're just people enjoying the same moment.'* This environment of acceptance and inclusivity enables a rare opportunity for diverse groups to coexist without the usual social barriers, reinforcing a collective sense of place. These spontaneous, low-stakes encounters between strangers contribute to the development of bridging social capital—forming subtle but meaningful connections across difference, grounded in a shared experience of the space.

The roller-skater exemplifies how the beachfront facilitates a sense of freedom and self-expression. Unlike routine physical activities like jogging or walking, roller-skating adds a playful, dynamic element that showcases the beachfront's role as a space where people can express themselves more fully. The roller-skater noted that the open promenade allows them to move freely and experiment with different techniques. The interaction with bystanders creates a ripple effect, drawing others into the experience, even as spectators. Such moments of shared enjoyment, even from a distance, reinforce the theme of the beachfront as a space where diverse forms of self-expression coexist harmoniously. Kageyama (2011) notes that *'fun' is often overlooked in urban planning,* yet creating spaces where residents can enjoy themselves makes places more loveable.

This freedom to engage in such unique forms of movement also adds to the vibrancy of the beachfront, supporting Mehta's (2014) notion that urban spaces thrive when they accommodate a wide range of meaningful activities. The diversity of interactions, whether expressive, observational, or social, helps build informal networks of recognition and shared understanding that are foundational to urban social capital.

This sense of freedom significantly enhances social cohesion by allowing people to express themselves openly, uninhibited by the constraints that other urban spaces may impose. Public spaces are shaped by the mix of elements, like the variety of buildings, art, sounds, and nearby places, that influence how people use the space and feel a sense of belonging in them (Cloete & Yusuf, 2018). Over time, the ability to act freely and be accepted within a shared environment strengthens both emotional ties to the space (place attachment) and relational ties to others (social capital), reinforcing a collective identity grounded in the space itself. By accommodating diverse expressions of identity, whether through fitness, relaxation, or creative pursuits, the beachfront unites Durban's residents under a shared value of freedom, making it an important communal space that encourages both individuality and unity.

Unspoken connections and the formation of community bonds

One of the most powerful yet subtle dynamics at the Durban beachfront is the 'unspoken connection' among those who use the space. This connection forms through repeated encounters and a shared appreciation for the beachfront as a communal space. Participants spoke of an informal community composed of familiar yet nameless faces, the jogger passing by each morning, the vendors setting up their stalls, the woman walking her dog, the surfers catching early waves. These recurring, low-stakes encounters represent a form of 'weak social ties' that are often foundational to bridging social capital in urban contexts (Putnam, 2000; Mehta, 2014).

The optimist described it as *'a silent acknowledgment; you may not know their name, but you know their presence. It's a kind of shared ownership of this space that creates a community without words.'*

The runner remarked: *'What I love about the Durban beachfront is that everyone can go there. Beggars walk there and a CEO could be walking beside him. There's no hierarchy in terms of status, race, religion, or anything. It's open to everyone, the ocean is for everyone. It's a space in Durban where everyone comes together, and it doesn't matter who you are or what you do.'*

The surfer added: *'I think it's a space where there are so many different people and demographics and ages and it's just open there for anybody to use.'*

This theme of unspoken connection is reinforced by the shared routines and rhythms of the beachfront, where people move in harmony with one another even without formal interaction. The runner recalled: *'There's something comforting in seeing the same people every day, the same vendors, the same families. We don't talk, but we're all happy to be here together. It's like we're part of a quiet agreement to share this place respectfully.'* These routines build not only familiarity but also emotional attachment to the space, marking the early stages of place attachment, where a public setting becomes intertwined with one's daily life and sense of continuity. Social cohesion requires both symbolic and active measures; public spaces can include community-driven events that reinforce cultural identity and inclusion (Mopp & Swanepoel, 2023).

Many participants expressed that these casual encounters and regular sightings create a sense of belonging and community, bridging divides that are often more apparent in other city settings. To feel happy living in an urban environment *'we need contact with nature. And most of all, we need not to be excluded. We need to feel some sort of equality'* (Montgomery, 2013). The surfer describes *'People who surf or run here tend to help each other out without hesitation. There's an unspoken code of friendliness and support that you just follow.'* Such interactions—whether through a nod, a smile, or a shared look of recognition, subtly build trust and reinforce the idea of the beachfront as a shared, inclusive space. These moments contribute to a diffuse yet durable form of

social capital that helps reduce social distance between groups and enhances community resilience. Inclusiveness is an essential component in assessing the quality of a public space (Mehta, 2014).

The roller-skater's interactions with other visitors also exemplify the unspoken connections that arise at the beachfront. They noted feeling a sense of camaraderie with other regulars who engage in unique activities, cyclists, dog walkers, or even other roller-skaters. Without formal introductions, these repeat encounters created a sense of belonging to an informal community united by shared routines. This points again to the development of place-based identity, where emotional connections to a public space emerge through repeated positive experiences.

This unspoken bond not only enhances social cohesion but also breaks down social hierarchies, creating an environment where people from different backgrounds can coexist as equals. The beachfront becomes more than just a physical space; it transforms into a social platform where Durban's residents, rich or poor, young or old, forge a collective identity rooted in a shared appreciation of place. It is this mutual investment in the space, both emotional and behavioural, that reinforces the place attachment necessary for long-term engagement and stewardship. This community of silent recognition helps build a sense of unity, demonstrating how public spaces can support cohesive urban life even in the absence of direct communication. Urban designers and planners have an opportunity to enhance the beachfront's cohesion-building role by optimising its design to accommodate additional social, recreational, and cultural activities. Including a variety of seating spaces, activity opportunities or art installations that reflect Durban's heritage could encourage even greater participation. Regular community events, such as open markets, cultural festivals, and sport events, have the potential to attract a wider range of visitors.

Gratitude for the shared public space

Gratitude emerged as an unexpected theme among participants, with many expressing a deep appreciation for the Durban beachfront as a unique and significant part of their lives. For the participants, the beachfront is more than a recreational area; it is a cherished public resource that enhances their quality of life and provides a place for respite, connection, and well-being. This emotional attachment reflects the affective dimension of place attachment, where repeated, positive experiences generate personal and collective meaning.

The optimist noted: 'The beachfront has become an essential part of my routine. After spending so much time here, I realise it's something special, something I want to protect and enjoy for as long as I can.'

The runner expressed her gratitude: 'I just felt really lucky to have gone through the lockdown in Durban as opposed to any other city. We really need to be grateful and appreciate life.'

The surfer shared: 'I think I'm in this space where, every time I'm at the beachfront and I look at the sunrise I think that's where you express your gratitude.'

Participants conveyed how this sense of gratitude was especially amplified during the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The runner reflected on her first visit back to the beachfront after lockdown: 'I felt incredibly lucky to be here. Having access to the ocean and this open space made me appreciate where I live so much more.' This renewed appreciation for the beachfront as a safe, open space deepened the participants' connection to it, making them more aware of its value to the wider community. In this way, gratitude reinforces place attachment, as individuals begin to

associate the space not only with personal well-being, but also with shared meaning and collective identity. When people feel love for their city, they actively set out to defend and promote the city (Kageyama, 2011).

Alongside gratitude, participants expressed a desire to protect and preserve the beachfront for future generations. The surfer spoke of her regular visits to watch the sunrise, describing it as a *'moment of quiet connection'* that she hopes will remain accessible to all. She explained: '*It's a privilege to have a place like this, and we all have a part in keeping it clean and safe for everyone.'* Such expressions of shared care point toward a form of civic social capital, where informal stewardship and mutual responsibility arise not through formal structures, but through a shared emotional connection to place.

The inquirer provided a more reflective perspective, viewing the beachfront not only as a social space but also as a significant community asset. Their observations added depth to the theme of gratitude, as they expressed a profound appreciation for the beachfront's role in their life and the lives of others. Gratitude in this sense is not merely an individual emotional response; it is a socially binding force that strengthens both person-to-place and person-to-community connections. It enhances social cohesion by nurturing a collective sense of pride and responsibility. By valuing the beachfront as a shared asset, Durban's residents become more inclined to engage in small acts of care, picking up litter, reporting maintenance issues, or supporting community-driven initiatives that enhance the space. Even when residents find it difficult to express their feelings about a place, Kageyama (2019) suggests that places can create an emotional infrastructure to support community goals. This 'emotional infrastructure', rooted in gratitude, care, and mutual recognition, is a subtle yet powerful foundation for both place attachment and the social capital necessary to sustain cohesive urban communities.

Contemplating the future and aspirations for a shared community space

For participants, the Durban beachfront represents more than a current place of enjoyment; it stands as a symbol of Durban's potential for unity and resilience. Participants voiced a mix of hopes and concerns about the future of this cherished space, highlighting its importance not only to their personal lives but also to Durban's collective identity. This orientation toward long-term stewardship reflects a future-oriented dimension of place attachment, in which emotional bonds with place motivate concern for its continuity and care.

The surfer described her long-term vision for the beachfront: *'I hope that when I have a family, my kids will be able to enjoy this place as much as I do now. It's essential that we keep this space safe, clean, and welcoming so it remains a part of Durban's heritage.'*

The runner expressed her opinion about the area: *'I think what is sad about running on that stretch of beach is just seeing the litter.'*

The doctor said she would love to see a *'government-driven initiative to take pride in our beaches and keep them clean.'*

Several participants shared concerns about the environmental challenges facing the beachfront, especially around litter and maintenance. The runner expressed dismay over the visible litter on the sand and promenade, noting: *'Seeing trash here makes you think about the bigger picture of what we're leaving behind. This place is too valuable to be taken for granted.'* Her sentiments were echoed by the doctor, who called for greater community-driven efforts and municipal support to keep the beachfront clean and inviting. Many participants felt that regular beach clean-ups, more visible waste management, and a collective commitment to preservation could safeguard the

beachfront for future generations. Such shared concern for place reveals a form of civic social capital, where residents, despite demographic differences, unite around the care of a common public asset. If public spaces are not taken care of, it can appear that the city does not take care of its people (Gehl, 2011).

Some also expressed aspirations for the beachfront's development, envisioning enhanced facilities and spaces that would make it even more inclusive. The photographer suggested that adding more community events, local art installations, and thoughtfully designed amenities could elevate the beachfront's role as a hub for social and cultural engagement. *'It would be great to see more of Durban's local culture reflected here, markets, performances, art. It would enrich the experience for everyone and make this space feel even more like ours,'* he shared. In well-designed open spaces offering a diverse range of activities, users have opportunities to encounter and engage with people from various cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. This interaction encourages greater tolerance and empathy, contributing to the development of more inclusive and connected communities (Gehl, 2011). Such aspirations speak to the potential of public spaces to cultivate bridging social capital, strengthening ties between groups that may otherwise remain socially distant.

By reflecting on these aspirations and concerns, participants reveal a shared commitment to the beachfront's role as a legacy for future generations. This shared vision represents not only personal attachment, but also a form of collective place attachment that extends beyond the present, rooted in the idea of leaving something meaningful behind. It reinforces social cohesion, as participants from varied backgrounds find common ground in their dedication to preserving and enhancing a space that reflects Durban's diversity and unity. In contemplating the future of the beachfront, the participants express a deep connection to both the present and the potential of this unique urban space, positioning it as a significant part of the city's social fabric and aspirations. Small actions, such as discarding a cigarette butt on a street, can harm a community, but through equally small positive actions communities can be strengthened (Kageyama, 2011). Practical measures for environmental sustainability, such as regular beach clean-ups and the addition of more waste disposal stations, provide visible ways in which place attachment and social capital can be activated in everyday civic life.

Discussion: Implications for urban policy

This paper has offered critical insights into how the Durban beachfront contributes to social cohesion in a post-apartheid urban context. In doing so, it demonstrates how shared public spaces, when safe, inclusive, and emotionally resonant, can act as informal platforms for unity and belonging.

These findings also offer key implications for urban policy and public space design, particularly in contexts striving to advance social cohesion. The themes emerging from this study – safety, freedom, unspoken bonds, gratitude, and shared aspiration – reveal that it is often the subtle, human-scale experiences that cultivate cohesion. This suggests, therefore, that rather than focusing solely on functional infrastructure, planners and municipalities should consider how emotional, psychological, and relational dynamics shape the success of public spaces.

Perceived safety, for example, was key to enabling solo engagement and routine use, which in turn supported deeper emotional ties to place. To promote place attachment, design interventions should prioritise comfort, accessibility, aesthetic quality, and safety, especially for marginalised users such as women, youth, or lower-income residents.

Policies that invest in ongoing maintenance, visible yet non-intrusive security, and inclusively programmed activities can amplify these effects.

Repeated, low-stakes encounters were shown to be important in building trust and connection, and design should try to encourage these types of interactions. This includes creating multi-use paths, seating areas that accommodate casual observation and interaction, and spaces for spontaneous or playful activity. Supporting informal community rituals and encouraging user-generated participation (such as roller-skating, jogging clubs, or regular clean-ups) can help reinforce a sense of collective ownership.

The Durban beachfront illustrates how public spaces function as more than physical amenities, operating instead as sites of reconciliation and inclusion. From a policy perspective, embedding social cohesion outcomes into spatial planning frameworks means recognising public spaces as more than physical amenities, they are active sites of reconciliation, inclusion, and identity formation. Policies should integrate cohesion indicators (e.g., user diversity, perceived safety, regularity of informal interaction) into how public space performance is evaluated. Participatory co-design processes that engage diverse users in shaping and caring for these spaces could also strengthen both attachment and cohesion.

Ultimately, spaces like the Durban beachfront demonstrate that when public environments are meaningfully supported, not just built, they can act as catalysts for community resilience, mutual trust, and inclusive urban futures.

Conclusion

Drawing on the 2021 master's study through the lens of social cohesion, the paper demonstrates how a well-used urban space like the Durban beachfront can support subtle but meaningful forms of social connection. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of literature on public spaces as platforms for unity and belonging, particularly in contexts shaped by historical division. The use of narrative and visual inquiry offered rich insights into how users experience the space, not only as a site of leisure but as a setting for trust, belonging, and shared identity.

While the original data offered depth of perspective, the scope was intentionally narrow, focused on a small sample of participants who held largely positive views of the beachfront. This selective focus, rooted in the original research objective to explore potential rather than critique, presents a recognised limitation, but also offers a valuable foundation for further research into more contested or excluded urban experiences.

For policymakers and urban planners, the findings demonstrate the social value of emotionally resonant, inclusive public spaces. Future research might expand on these insights by exploring other city spaces through similarly interpretive methods, or by comparing different demographic groups' experiences of the same space. As cities continue to grapple with inequality and division, understanding how public space can contribute to social cohesion, through design choices that promote safety, freedom, routine interaction, and emotional connection, remains a critical pursuit.

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