

The Role of Libraries as Third Places in Enhancing Wellbeing and Community Belonging

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Abstract: The concept of the library as a “third place” is becoming increasingly popular in contemporary library and information science discourse especially when it comes to the wellbeing and belonging to a community. In addition to their conventional functions as repositories of information, libraries are evolving into inclusive, non-commercial public spaces that support social interaction, emotional comfort and civic engagement. This review article highlights the importance of libraries as third places in promoting the individual wellbeing and fostering sense of belonging to the community. Using interdisciplinary sources in sociology, psychology, urban studies, and library and information science, the article discusses the theoretical foundation of the third place theory and how it relates to libraries in addition to some of the most important dimensions of wellbeing and social belonging. It examines libraries as physical, social and digital spaces that facilitate mental, emotional and social wellbeing with inclusive spaces, community programming, and user focused services. The study also identifies the role of libraries in social inclusion, cohesion and democratic participation, but it also critically analyses the issues around resource, space, policy and access. Finally, the article locates new trends, gap in research and policy implications, and the necessity to recognize and straitening libraries as wellbeing-oriented third places. The findings of the study on the importance of libraries as crucial community hub that help make societies healthier, more connected, and resilient are emphasized.

Keywords: Libraries as Third Places, Social Belonging, Community Wellbeing, Community Engagement, Social Inclusion.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Contemporary world is characterized by the rapid urbanization, digitalization, and changing trends of social interaction which changed the way in which the people interact the people space and interact with one another radically. Whereas first places (homes) and second places (workplaces or educational institutions) take center stage in everyday life, informal social interaction and community life experiences have been decreased. This move has helped to increase apprehensions regarding social loneliness, stress, mental health issues, and deteriorating communal bonds. In this regard, academic and community libraries are becoming more widely acknowledged as not simply information stores house but also as important social institutions that promote health and sense of community.

The concept of library as a ‘Third Place’ offers a valuable framework for understanding this evolving role. Libraries offer equal, convenient, and non-profit making environments, which allow people to gather, interact, study and relax without pressures associated with home or work environment. Libraries are best placed in society as trusted

institutions to address the modern needs of the society through fostering social inclusion, lifelong learning, and wellbeing holistically.

This review paper will discuss the use of libraries as third places to improve community belonging and wellbeing. The article will rely on interdisciplinary sources on library and information science, sociology, psychology, and urban studies to assess the theoretical roots of the concept of the third place, the aspect of wellbeing and social belonging and how libraries are used as physical, social, and digital third spaces. It also assesses the difficulties that libraries encounter in executing this role and points out the future trends, policy and practice directions.

➤ Objectives of the Study:

- To examine the concept of libraries as third places and analyze its theoretical relevance to wellbeing and community belonging.

- To review and synthesize existing literature on the role of libraries in promoting mental, emotional, and social wellbeing through inclusive spaces and services.
- To identify key challenges, emerging trends, and future research directions related to strengthening libraries as community-centered third places.

II. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

This review article is based on the narrative and integrative review approach in exploring how libraries provide the third places in promoting the wellbeing and sense of belongingness to communities. The pertinent literature was found in the academic journals, books, policy documents, and professional reports in library and information science, sociology, urban studies, and public health. The choice of the sources was based on their conceptual relevance, theoretical contribution, and practical insights instead of the formal systematic review protocol. The literature gathered was thematically analyzed to determine the most important concepts, trends and challenges of the third place theory, the wellbeing, and community belonging in the library context.

➤ *Significance of the Study:*

This study highlights libraries as key third places that can support wellbeing and community inclusivity. It helps to comprehend the role of libraries as a part of society, informs policy and practice, and highlights the significance of libraries in having inclusive, resilient, and socially connected communities in modern society.

➤ *Concept of "Third Place" and its Relevance to Libraries:*

The concept of "third places," which was introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in 1989, has been a popular concept in sociological and cultural studies. Oldenburg defines third places as public places that exist outside the home (the "first place") and the workplace/school (the "second place") where people voluntarily participate in social activities, build community and spend leisure time. These spaces are important for social connection and supporting a rich public life, providing a platform for individuals to meet, converse, and interact beyond the limits of their private and professional life (Canbulut & Dede, 2025).

According to Oldenburg (1989), third places are important in supporting healthy social structures. These environments provide opportunities for people to form relationships and establish shared meanings, as well as providing opportunities for cultural and social activities. The most common examples of third places are cafes, parks, public libraries and other public gathering places. These spaces transcend social boundaries bringing together individuals from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and professional backgrounds and often serve as a source of sense of belonging and community ((Purnell, 2015)(Canbulut & Dede, 2025)). As comfortable and inviting spaces, third places are crucial to our individual well-being

as well as the cohesion of our society as they contribute to our mental health, safety, and feelings of community.

Libraries fit into these defining characteristics very well. They are generally open to all members of society regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status and cultural background. Unlike commercial spaces, libraries do not require users to make purchases which makes them particularly inclusive and equitable. They are neutral and non-judgemental in nature which enables individuals to engage freely whether for study, leisure or social interaction and for personal development.

Over the past few decades, the applicability of the third place theory to libraries has increased as libraries have reinvented themselves to counteracting print circulation and rising levels of digital access to information. Most libraries now are shifting away to book-based silent environments and are becoming active community centers with collaboration spaces, cultural activities, technology and social services. This change has put libraries in a better position as crucial third spaces that enhance the wellbeing of individuals as well as the social lives of the community.

➤ *Significance of Wellbeing and Community Belonging in the Modern Society:*

Wellbeing has become a primary focus in the modern policy and academic discussions, and it does not necessarily mean physical wellbeing, but also mental, emotional, and social wellbeing (Karki et al., 2024). Academic pressure, work pressure, economic insecurity and social disintegration are some of the factors that have contributed to the rise in the level of anxiety, loneliness and depression in various populations. Meanwhile, globalization and digital communication, despite making social interactions more connected, have bizarrely undermined the social interactions and the local community bonds.

The sense of belonging to a social group or place has been becoming more important as a determinant of wellbeing. Studies have never ceased to reveal that people with high levels of social connectedness and a sense of belonging are stronger, healthier, and more active in the civic life. Social exclusion and isolation on the other hand are linked with poor health outcomes in both mental and physical health. Third places like cafes, parks, libraries establish weak, strong and even stranger ties that in aggregate help to build a sense of belonging and social cohesion (Alidoust et al., 2026).

The libraries are very important in overcoming the challenge through provision of a space where social interaction, cultural exchange and the experience are shared. And libraries are also viewed as secure, trusted, and welcoming spaces where individuals of any age can socialize, utilize resources and acquire skills, which subsequently enhance personal and societal wellbeing (Karki et al., 2024). Being publicly funded organizations that are obligated to uphold democratic principles, libraries are considered as the participants in social equity and social cohesion, which is why they are especially important in

diverse and multicultural societies. Their contribution on the wellbeing and belonging is not limited to providing information, but it also covers the provision of emotional

support, social involvement, and empowering the community.

➤ *Key Roles of Third Places for Wellbeing and Belonging:*

Table 1 Core Third Place Functions Linked to Wellbeing and Belonging in Libraries.

Third Place Function	Wellbeing/Community Effect	Library Example
Social Gathering	Reduce loneliness, build social capital	Activity groups, clubs, informal mingling
Safe, Neutral space	Support Psychological safety, Inclusion	Safe space in Academic and public libraries
Accessible everyday venue	Lowers barriers to participation and support	Free entry, local presence, non-stigmatizing

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

➤ *Theoretical Foundations of Third Place Theory:*

The third place theory is focused on the social role of informal public spaces in ensuring democratic living and community living. Oldenburg discussed that third places are bases of community life, which promote social equality, civic engagement, and trust with others. These areas promote informal interactions that form social capital and empower community networks (Canbulut & Dede, 2025).

In the library and information science, Third place theory has been incorporated into the related concepts of social capital theory, community informatics and place making. The theory of social capital emphasizes on the importance of social networks, trust, and reciprocity to improve both individual and group wellbeing. Libraries can be used to enhance social integration as they help to bond social capital (within groups), and bridge social capital (between different groups).

The place-making theory also adds to this framework as it focuses on the purposeful planning and controlling of spaces to facilitate human interaction and community belonging. By following the principles of placemaking, libraries focus on designing to become more user-friendly, adaptable, and culturally relevant, which supports their role as meaningful third places.

➤ *Dimensions of Wellbeing and Social Belonging:*

Wellbeing is a concept of multidimensional that includes mental, emotional, social, and occasionally spiritual. Mental wellbeing can be described as cognitive, stress and psychological resilience. Emotional wellbeing entails happiness, safety and self esteem. Social wellbeing has to do with interpersonal relations, social support, and being a part of the community (Millett et al., 2025).

Social belonging is strongly connected to wellbeing and encompasses a feeling of belonging, recognition and connection to a particular community or place. Libraries enhance a sense of social belonging, shared activities as well as participatory opportunities. Libraries make one feel seen, supported, and connected through their services and spaces, especially to those who are vulnerable or marginalized (Gustina et al., 2022).

IV. LIBRARIES AS THIRD PLACES

Libraries are third places in the physical, social and digital dimensions. Physically, modern libraries offer spaces and areas which include reading spaces, collaborative spaces, makerspaces, children's spaces, and quiet reflection spaces. These spaces cater for different user needs and invite individual as well as group activities.

Socially libraries organize programs and events to bring people together such as book clubs, lectures, cultural performances, workshops, and community discussions. These activities encourage interaction, dialogue, and mutual understanding between the members of the community (Karki et al., 2024).

Libraries are digitally expanding their third place role by means of online services, virtual programs, social media, and digital resources. Digital library spaces facilitate remote connection, lifelong learning, and involvement especially among users who might experience some physical or social barriers to library buildings (Suresh et al., 2025).

➤ *Inclusive and Welcoming Library Environments:*

Inclusivity is a defining characteristic of libraries as third places. The libraries are aimed at providing an atmosphere that is friendly to everyone regardless of their ages, abilities, cultures and backgrounds. This involves convenient building structure, multilingual services, collections that are culturally sensitive, and employees who served with an inclusive and understanding nature.

Libraries are also seen to be safe places to the marginalized population of migrants, students, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and the homeless ones. Dignity, respect and non-discriminative access are provided in libraries and foster social equity and belonging to diverse groups of people.

Libraries aim at establishing environments that are friendly to all people regardless of their age, abilities, cultures, and backgrounds. These include building design, available in multiple languages, collections responsive to culture, and employees who are educated on inclusive and sensitive service provision.

V. LIBRARIES AND WELLBEING

➤ *Mental, Emotional, and Social Wellbeing Benefits:*

Libraries also play a great role in mental wellbeing by offering stress-free and relaxing settings of concentration, reflection, and learning. Information and knowledge are power sources, which increase self-efficacy and make informed decisions and all these are associated with psychological wellbeing.

Libraries provide emotional support and stability, especially when a person or the community is facing some crisis. The security and continuity can be developed through the routine of library visits, familiar places, and helpful staff. Pleasurable reading, creative, and cultural engagement also support emotional health (Merga, 2025).

Social wellbeing improves through opportunities for interact, collaborate, and participate in common activities. Libraries decrease the social isolation by providing friendly environments where people may associate both informally and in formal programs. Such communication reinforces social networks and a feeling of community.

➤ *Library Programs and Services Supporting Wellbeing:*

Libraries have also come up with wellbeing initiatives to assist with wellbeing such as sessions on mindfulness, workshops on health information, literacy, and creative arts. Stress-reduction services like relaxation and therapy animals visits and wellness workshops are becoming increasingly common in academic libraries, especially during examination period (Suresh et al., 2025) (Cox & Brewster, 2020).

Academic and Public Libraries often collaborate with health and social service providers to offset their mental health, digital literacy, and social inclusion information, referrals, and outreach programs. These projects reflect the growing importance of libraries as places of holistic wellbeing hub within their communities.

VI. LIBRARIES AND COMMUNITY BELONGING

➤ *Role in Social Inclusion, Cohesion, and Civic Engagement:*

Libraries enhance social inclusion through the provision of equal access to information, technology and also to cultural resources. They are instrumental in closing digital gaps and lifelong learning and especially among the disadvantaged groups (Hauge et al., 2025).

Libraries promote social cohesion and intercultural understanding through community programs, public discourse and cultural events. They also promote civic participation by availing information about the government, support citizen communication by organizing civic education events.

➤ *Libraries as Safe and Neutral Community Spaces:*

The libraries are widely regarded as a safe and neutral environment devoid of commercial, political or religious interests. This impartially makes it possible to have the open discussion, the respectful intercourse, and the democratic involvement. During social conflict or crisis, libraries can be likened to places of confidence where people turn to and places of strength to face the community.

VII. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

➤ *Space, Resources, and Policy Constraints:*

Despite the potential, libraries encounter serious challenges in achieving their goal of being third places. The development of flexible and inclusive spaces may be limited by limited funding, staffing, and insufficient infrastructure. The policy frameworks can enforce the idea of prioritizing the traditional library functions minimizing innovativeness and community based services (Shatona, 2025).

➤ *Equity and Accessibility Issues:*

Although libraries are designed to be inclusive, location, opening hours, language and access to digital facilities are some of the obstacles that restrict some groups. To resolve these inequalities, there must be long-term investment, involvement of the community, and policymaking.

VIII. EMERGING TRENDS AND INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

The future library development is probably to focus on co-creation, collaboration with the community and physical-digital spaces. Libraries can more fully incorporate wellbeing-centered design, participatory programming, and technology-enabled services to improve user experience and community impact. There are a number of trends redefining the role of libraries as third places focused on the wellbeing:

➤ *Health and Wellbeing Frameworks:*

The health and wellbeing plan addresses a number of issues pertaining to health. Systematic models of libraries that express roles that include working with partners, developing skills, establishing links, and raising local voices which encourage social connection, mental wellbeing, and physical health.

➤ *Trauma-Informed and Mental-Health-Aware Practice:*

Education of librarians that should be provided to better raise awareness and understanding of mental health, trauma-informed approaches and contemplative pedagogies to support users and staff. (Shatona, 2025) (Cox & Brewster, 2020).

➤ *Space Redesign for Resilience:*

Post-COVID design focus on flexible interior schemes, outdoor space, and technology-enhanced hybrid services without an internal communal and social nature of libraries (Park & Lim, 2025)

➤ *Youth-Led and Arts-Based Programs:*

Co-created Activities that focuses on creative expression, cultural engagement and community experiences as a core dimension of wellbeing, particularly among young people.

Such innovations make the libraries active participants in the health, social sustainability and community development activities of the population.

➤ *Research Gaps and Policy Implications:*

The empirical studies should continue to measure the role of libraries as a third place in wellbeing and social belonging. The additional social role of libraries should be recognize and support by policy frameworks and sustainable funding and cross-sector cooperation established.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study brings out the changing position of libraries as the third place that improves wellbeing and sense of belonging to a community. Basing the argument on the third place theory and the associated conceptual frameworks, libraries can be viewed as inclusive, accessible and trusted space that contributing to the mental, emotional, and social wellbeing and promoting social integration and civic participation.

Although there are issues of resource and access, libraries have massive potential as wellbeing oriented community hubs. This role should be identified and enhanced in order to deal with modern challenges in the society and ensure the creation of strong, interconnected, and inclusive communities. The libraries are committed to wellness of communities, still libraries remained important third places in more increasingly complex and fragmented world.

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