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## Article

# Exploring the Impact of the Publicness of Public Space in Hong Kong: A Structural Equation Modelling Approach

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**Abstract:** Public spaces are spaces that are open to the public, and their publicness denotes the degree to which the space is inclusive, accessible, and representative of collective interests, fostering diverse activities, and ultimately enhancing social cohesion and urban vitality. While existing studies have focused on interpreting and assessing the concept of publicness, few explore its specific impact within public spaces. This study aims to identify the impact of the publicness of public space and develop an assessment model. Based on a literature review, five publicness impacts are proposed: effectiveness, fairness, sense of ease, meaningfulness, and friendliness. Two rounds of questionnaire surveys were conducted on public space users in Hong Kong, with a total of 305 responses received. The collected data were used to test and validate the model through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modelling (SEM). The developed model offers a robust tool for determining whether a space is public. The findings show correlations among the five impacts of publicness, except between fairness and meaningfulness, which may imply that, in the Hong Kong public space, fairness is a functional or procedural requirement rather than a deep emotional or spiritual connection with the space.



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**Keywords:** publicness; public space; assessment model; SEM; high-density city

## 1. Introduction

Public spaces, such as squares, parks, and sitting-out areas, are shared areas that are open to the public. They play an essential role in urban vitality and social cohesion [1,2]. Ideally, they should be accessible to all individuals, regardless of social or economic status, and support a wide range of activities [1,3]. This means that the governance of public spaces involves balancing different interests and ensuring the fair distribution of resources, which is a significant challenge in high-density cities such as Hong Kong. As one of the world's most densely populated cities, Hong Kong has a limited provision of public spaces [4]. As per the latest standard, 2.5 m<sup>2</sup> of public space per person should be provided in the urban areas of Hong Kong by 2030. However, the comparative figures for most other Asian cities are much higher. For example, in Tokyo, it is 5.8 m<sup>2</sup> per person, Seoul, 6.1 m<sup>2</sup> per person, Singapore, 7.4 m<sup>2</sup> per person, and Shanghai, 7.6 m<sup>2</sup> per person [5]. The limited availability of public space per capita, coupled with the uneven distribution of these spaces, often favouring affluent neighbourhoods, challenges the inclusivity and equity of public spaces in Hong Kong. Additionally, the percentage of public open space in Hong Kong

is quite low, as designated open-space zones account for only approximately 2% of total urban land [4]. Moreover, many are not intended for recreational use. The pressure of high-density urban development often results in the prioritisation of commercial interests over the creation of accessible spaces for the general public, thereby limiting opportunities for broad community use. Such phenomena exacerbate social contradictions in the use of public space, leading to debates about what truly constitutes a public space [6]. The core of the debate is the concept of publicness, which refers to the quality of a space being public [7]. This reflects the ability of the space to encourage people to gather, facilitate social interactions and diverse activities, and promote community engagement [3,8]. This concept has emerged as a key criterion for assessing the value of public spaces [7].

The publicness of public space is a contested concept that has triggered debates among scholars, urban planners, and policymakers [9]. Acknowledged as context dependent, its meaning and significance depend on who defines, governs, and uses it [10]. It has been studied from multiple perspectives, including environmental [11–13], economic [14,15], and societal [12,16] perspectives. From an urban studies perspective, the publicness of public space typically includes dimensions such as accessibility [17–20], inclusiveness [7,19,21], diversity of activities [22], and a sense of belonging [23]. From the management perspective, it involves transparency and accountability [24]. From the perspective of the physical environment, public spaces with a high level of publicness are normally well connected to their surroundings, easily identifiable to the public, and provide a user-friendly spatial arrangement. The dimensions used for assessment also vary based on different perspectives. Apart from the above-mentioned aspects, these include ownership [7,17], use and users [25], management [2,25], and agency, etc., [26]. These dimensions have been applied to develop various models for assessing the publicness of public spaces. For example, the ‘Tri-Axial Model’ [2], ‘Place Diagram’ [27], ‘Spaceshaper Spider Diagram’, ‘Star Model’ [9], and ‘OMAI Model’ [19]. These models provide a valuable framework for understanding this concept.

However, despite many studies on the publicness of public spaces, there is a lack of discussion on its impact. This has hindered public space studies, as the impact of publicness reflects what is significant in public spaces by demonstrating how these spaces deliver the social values and benefits expected by their users. This lack of clarity regarding the impact of publicness restricts our ability to fully understand the role and value of public spaces, both in theory and in practice. Therefore, this study poses the following research questions: (a) ‘What are the impacts of publicness of public space?’ and (b) ‘How can we evaluate the impact of the publicness of public space?’ From the perspective of public space governance, five publicness impacts and relevant indicators were identified through a literature review to establish a theoretical model. The model was tested, revised, and validated through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modelling (SEM), using survey data from Hong Kong. This model serves as a practical tool for public space governance. These findings facilitate in-depth discussions in urban studies and contribute to the understanding of what makes a space truly public, as well as the broader impact of public spaces on communities and urban life, facilitating a holistic understanding and enhancing public spaces.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Conceptualisation of Publicness of Public Space

In high-density cities, such as Hong Kong, public space is crucial for enhancing the quality of life by providing areas for social interaction and recreation [28]. As areas of leisure and exercise, they also contribute to physical and mental well-being [29]. As the most essential character of public space [7], publicness is essentially a social construct that is shaped by cultural, historical, and political contexts. This relates to how the society defines

and values the dimensions of public spaces. This concept is imbued with societal norms and expectations regarding what public spaces should offer and represent. Consequently, publicness embodies a subjective nature that can vary widely between societies and over time within the same society. With this understanding, this study recognises publicness as a meaning by itself, reflecting the degree to which spaces are available for public use without barriers [1,2], and it can involve the perception of physical and psychological safety and comfort [30]. Public spaces with a high level of publicness are usually characterised as open, accessible, and inclusive [1]. Such spaces typically are equipped with adequate facilities such as seating, clear pathways, greenery, and social areas, creating a welcoming environment that encourages people to use them frequently. By contrast, a public space with low publicness may not be easily accessible. It may have physical barriers, such as fences or gates, as well as regulatory restrictions that limit the ability to use the space or the activities permissible there [2]. Additionally, they may prioritise specific groups, directly or indirectly, leading to a lack of user diversity and exclusion. This exclusion may reinforce social segregation and deepen the divisions between ethnic and socioeconomic groups [28]. As recent research has highlighted, attention needs to be paid to optimise the publicness of public spaces to address urban challenges.

Various models have been developed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the publicness of public spaces. For instance, the 'Tri-Axial Model' [2] focuses on physical, social, and symbolic dimensions, assessing how these elements influence public access and use. The 'Place Diagram' [27] focuses on key attributes, such as sociability, uses, access, and comfort, to evaluate public spaces, guiding enhancements for community needs. The 'Spaceshaper Spider Diagram' employs visual assessments to identify the strengths and weaknesses of design and management. The 'Star Model' [9] examines various factors like accessibility, comfort, and sociability. The 'OMAI Model' [19] examines ownership, management, accessibility, and inclusivity. In addition to these, publicness can be assessed using different perspectives and frameworks. It can be assessed through the combined application of a management framework for quality assessment [31] and a governance framework for public spaces [32]. Although there have been many efforts to gain a deeper knowledge of the publicness of public spaces, there has been little discussion on the impact of publicness. This contributes to the difficulty in defining whether a space is public. Expanding the discourse to include the impact of publicness is crucial for the holistic understanding and enhancement of public spaces.

## *2.2. Publicness of Public Space in Different Governance Contexts*

It is the nature of public spaces to be governed. The publicness of public spaces is shaped by policies, regulations, and rules, in addition to community engagement [33,34]. Specifically, policies set by governmental and local authorities determine how these spaces are designed, who can access them, and what activities are permissible [35]; regulations and rules dictate operational aspects, such as opening hours and maintenance. When communities are actively involved in the decision-making process, spaces are more likely to reflect the needs and desires of diverse users. However, these factors may vary widely across governance contexts, influencing how public spaces are utilised and how their publicness is perceived. In Western countries, such as the United States and Europe, public spaces are often designed to promote democratic ideals, emphasising free expression, inclusivity, and civic engagement. For instance, iconic public spaces, such as Central Park in New York City and Trafalgar Square in London, serve as venues for social interaction, public gatherings, and protests, reflecting democratic values tied to the public sphere. By contrast, in regions such as the Middle East, public spaces are often influenced by religious and traditional norms, shaping their design and usage to reflect cultural values

and practices. Similarly, in the rapidly urbanising areas of Africa and South America, public spaces are frequently contested terrains, where issues of informality, resource allocation, and access are prominent because of economic disparities and rapid population growth. These examples highlight how the concept of publicness is deeply context specific and shaped by local governance systems, historical trajectories, and societal expectations.

To a certain extent, this difference can be attributed to the different conceptualisations of the public. Related to the origin and development of the contemporary concept of the public, Western contexts often emphasise democratic principles, where public spaces are regarded as arenas for free expression and the exercising of civil rights [30,33,36]. In China, the concept of public has a different origin from that in the West [37]. Public spaces, as understood in today's mainstream academic literature, did not exist in ancient China. Today's public spaces, such as parks and squares, were manifestations of the social hierarchy in ancient China, symbolising power and order, and were not accessible to the public [38]. In the process of national development and urbanisation, the development of public spaces in Chinese cities integrates elements that blend the present, local and global, and reflect the influence of the past [39]. By integrating Western and Chinese influences, Hong Kong has developed its own governance system, presenting a unique hybrid context. This hybrid governance produces publicness that reflects both local autonomy and the influence of the wider state [40]. The perception of publicness reveals the social values behind this unique governance context, including issues of equity and justice in the urban environment [33,41]. Understanding these dynamics is critical for urban planners and policymakers when designing and managing spaces that are truly public [36].

### *2.3. Publicness of Public Space Under Different Discourses of Public Space Governance*

Public space governance refers to the systems and processes through which public spaces are designed, managed, and regulated [6,31,32]. In the discussion of public space governance, different discourses raise different expectations of public spaces with different impacts of publicness [42]. For instance, in democratic discourse, public spaces are expected to serve as platforms for democratic expression [43]. Participatory discourse is relevant to democratic expression because it stresses community interaction [44]. This discourse emphasises the role of local communities in decision making. In discourses emphasising social justice, public space governance is rooted in the ideas of inclusivity and equal access. Correspondingly, the publicness of public space is equated to social justice and equality [45]. Market-oriented discourse reflects a governance approach influenced by market principles, including privatisation, competition, and the belief that private entities can manage public spaces more efficiently than public institutions [46]. This discourse focuses on the efficient operation and maintenance of spaces. More recently, the placemaking discourse aims to create public spaces that contribute to the identity and character of neighbourhoods, cities, or regions. This emphasises that public spaces should be welcoming and friendly to ensure that people feel comfortable and relaxed. Accordingly, public space governance plays a pivotal role in shaping the publicness of urban spaces and influencing the design, management, and experience of diverse groups. In high-density cities like Hong Kong, the governance of public spaces intersects with unique socio-political dynamics, leading to practical challenges regarding aspects such as resource allocation, environmental quality, age-appropriate design, community engagement, and empowerment [47–50]. Examining how these governance discourses manifest in Hong Kong's public spaces provides valuable insight into the identification and understanding of urban issues.

For instance, related to the focus of the market-oriented discourse, public space resources are disproportionately concentrated in high-end residential areas, leaving low-income communities underserved and exacerbating social inequity in Hong Kong [4,51].

Attempts to address these disparities, such as the introduction of privately developed public spaces, have improved design quality, but are often aligned with commercial priorities that restrict access to certain groups, undermining inclusivity [52]. From a social justice perspective, environmental quality, such as natural soundscapes and green coverage, has been shown to significantly enhance user satisfaction and experience [53–55]; however, the needs of vulnerable groups, such as older age groups requiring shade and accessibility, remain insufficiently addressed [56,57]. In terms of participatory aspects, while enhancing community engagement mechanisms has proven effective in increasing trust in policies and promoting equitable urban planning, their implementation remains insufficient [58].

However, while existing research has explored the challenges and governance approaches that influence the publicness of public spaces, there is a noticeable gap in the understanding of the specific outcomes that publicness can deliver. This lack of clarity limits one’s ability to identify and understand problems in public spaces. This study aims to fill this gap by establishing an evaluation model of the impact of the publicness of public space from a public space governance perspective to provide a framework for examining the role and value of public spaces in urban environments.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Research Framework

Figure 1 provides a systematic approach to developing, testing, and refining the proposed model. The theoretical model was proposed based on a literature review. Then, the study was conducted, including a pilot study and the main study, to assess the fit of the model and refine it, followed by data analysis and a discussion of the findings, emphasising theoretical contributions and practical implications.

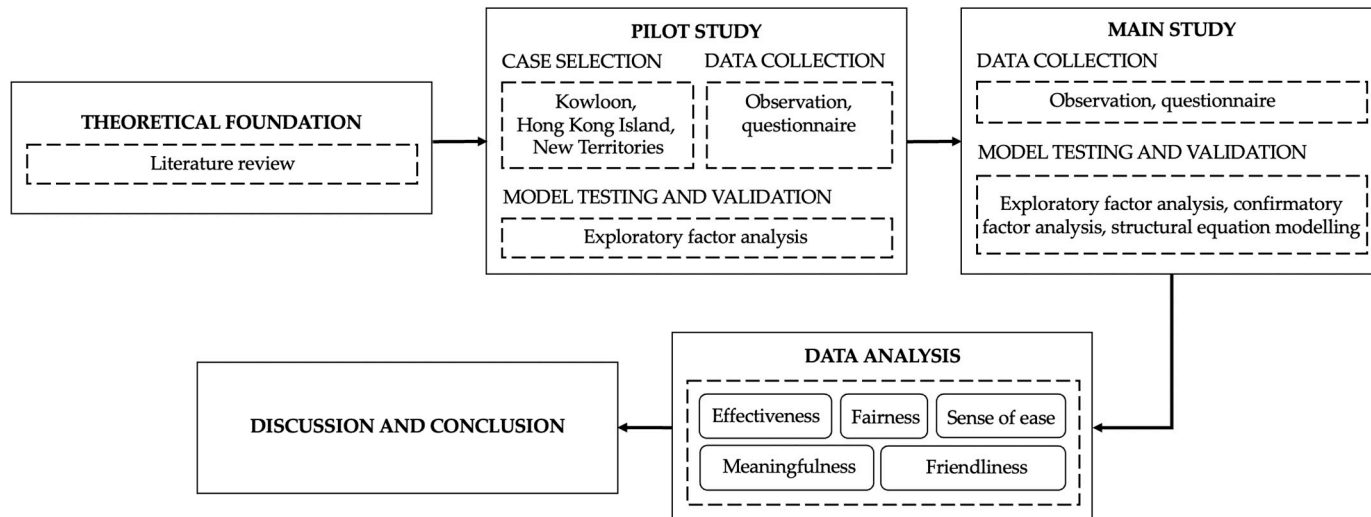


Figure 1. Research framework. Source: authors’ own elaboration.

#### 3.2. Five Publicness Impacts of Public Space and Indicators

Different discourses on public space governance reflect expectations for public space, which is a manifestation of the social values it is expected to convey, enable, deliver, and embody. Based on the emphases of these discourses, this study proposes the desired impacts of the publicness of public space, which are divided into five aspects: the effectiveness, fairness, sense of ease, meaningfulness, and friendliness of public spaces (Table 1). The effectiveness of public spaces examines how well they fulfil their intended functions, fairness refers to the equitable distribution of benefits from public spaces, sense of ease refers to the ability of a public space to be used comfortably, meaningfulness reflects the

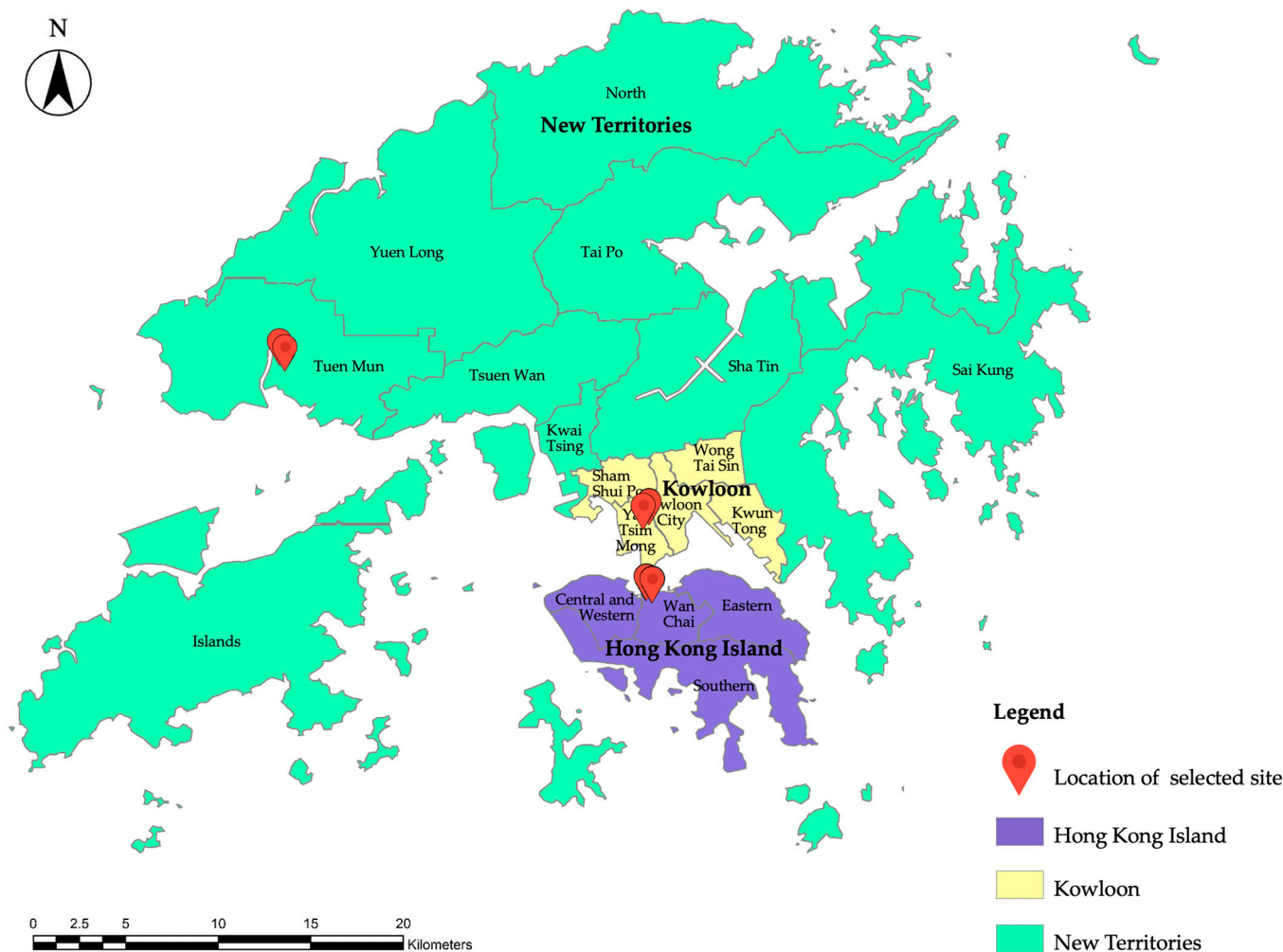
extent to which public spaces reflect their identities, and friendliness examines their ability to encourage users to behave in ways that are respectful of others' needs and experiences.

**Table 1.** Construction of the theoretical model. Source: authors' own elaboration.

Discourse of Public Space Governance	Latent Variable	No.	Observed Variable	Reference
Market-oriented discourse	Effectiveness	Eff1	Access convenience	[2,7,42,59]
		Eff2	Perceived safety	[60–64]
		Eff3	Satisfaction with seat availability	[2,7,25,63]
		Eff4	Degree of cleanliness	[2,7,60]
		Eff5	Satisfaction with night lighting	[25,60,65]
Democratic discourse, social justice discourse	Fairness	Fai1	Experience of gender discrimination	[20,42,63]
		Fai2	Experience of age discrimination	[20,42,63]
		Fai3	Activity needs fulfilment	[2,7,25]
		Fai4	Perceived partiality of rules	[19,21,36]
Placemaking discourse	Sense of ease	Eas1	Perceived freedom of activities	[7,25,63]
		Eas2	Perceived freedom of expression	[45,60,63]
		Eas3	Perceived identity freedom	[6,63]
		Eas4	Feeling of relaxation	[1,7,63]
		Eas5	Understanding and acceptance of the rules	[6,7]
		Eas6	Acceptance of CCTV	[9,25,60]
Democratic discourse, placemaking discourse, participatory discourse	Meaningfulness	Mea1	Space attraction	[42,66]
		Mea2	Interaction with others	[7,18,42,63]
		Mea3	Sense of belonging	[42,64]
		Mea4	Community engagement	[25,63,66,67]
		Mea5	Sense of local culture	[42,59,60]
Placemaking discourse	Friendliness	Fri1	Adherence to the rules	[6,68]
		Fri2	Attitude towards others	[7,20,60]
		Fri3	Tolerance of others	[20,60,66]

### 3.3. Study Area

Owing to historical reasons and different urban development processes, the contexts of public spaces in the three regions of Hong Kong (Kowloon, Hong Kong Island, and the New Territories) are different. To capture the different contexts of public space in Hong Kong, this study selected two public spaces in the Yau Ma Tei (Kowloon), Wan Chai (Hong Kong Island), and Tuen Mun (New Territories) areas (Figure 2). Six sites were selected, all of which are public open spaces with sitting-out as the main function.



**Figure 2.** Six sites for data collection in Hong Kong. Source: authors’ own elaboration.

### 3.4. Pilot Study

#### 3.4.1. Questionnaire

To test the proposed model developed from the literature review, a pilot study was conducted in August 2024 with users of sitting-out areas in Hong Kong. Data were collected through an on-site questionnaire survey using a convenience sampling method, with 115 participants taking part in the study [69,70]. The questionnaire, designed based on the model framework, consisted of twenty-seven items, including five questions addressing user feedback [71] on the effectiveness of the public space, four on the fairness of the public space, six on the sense of ease in the public space, five on perceptions of the meaningfulness of the public space, three on the friendliness of the public space, and four on demographic factors. All non-demographic questions employed a 7-point Likert scale.

#### 3.4.2. Model Test

R-4.4.1 was used for descriptive statistics and EFA of the data. Parallel Analysis was used to determine the factor numbers. Principal axis factoring (PAF) and oblimin rotation were used to identify the optimal number of factors, underlying structure, and theoretically associated variables.

#### 3.4.3. Model Revision

Through PAF in EFA, variables that were not well correlated with the expected factors were identified. These variables were regrouped under more correlated factors, based



on loadings, or were excluded to refine the model. The revised model was retested by repeating the EFA process to assess its fit to the data.

### 3.5. Main Study

#### 3.5.1. Questionnaire

To validate the revised model, the main study was conducted through on-site questionnaire surveys among users of sitting-out areas in Hong Kong during August and September 2024, employing the same sampling methods as the pilot study and yielding 305 valid responses. The main questionnaire comprised twenty-three questions, including five on the effectiveness of the public space, four on its fairness, three regarding the sense of ease, four on perceptions of meaningfulness, three on friendliness, and four on demographic factors. All non-demographic questions were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Statistical summary of the questionnaire responses on public perception of publicness impacts ( $n = 305$ ). Source: authors' own elaboration.

	Variables	Min/Max	Mean	Std.
Eff	Effectiveness			
Eff1	Access convenience	1/7	5.446	1.175
Eff2	Perceived safety	1/7	5.328	1.232
Eff3	Satisfaction with seat availability	1/7	5.072	1.184
Eff4	Degree of cleanliness	1/7	5.131	1.294
Eff5	Satisfaction with night lighting	1/7	5.007	1.257
Fai	Fairness			
Fai1	Experience of gender discrimination	1/7	5.646	1.423
Fai2	Experience of age discrimination	1/7	5.748	1.354
Fai3	Activity needs fulfilment	1/7	4.803	1.480
Fai4	Perceived partiality of rules	1/7	5.518	1.333
Eas	Ease			
Eas1	Perceived freedom of activity	1/7	5.167	1.128
Eas2	Perceived freedom of expression	1/7	5.416	1.064
Eas3	Feeling of relaxation	1/7	5.587	1.097
Mea	Meaningfulness			
Mea1	Interaction with others	1/7	4.423	1.535
Mea2	Sense of belonging	1/7	4.820	1.390
Mea3	Community engagement	1/7	4.010	1.427
Mea4	Sense of local culture	1/7	4.705	1.310
Fri	Friendliness			
Fri1	Adherence to the rules	1/7	4.390	1.649
Fri2	Attitude towards others	1/7	5.295	1.455
Fri3	Tolerance of others	1/7	5.207	1.372

Seven-point Likert scale: 0 (negative) to 7 (positive), 4 (neutral value).

#### 3.5.2. Model Validation

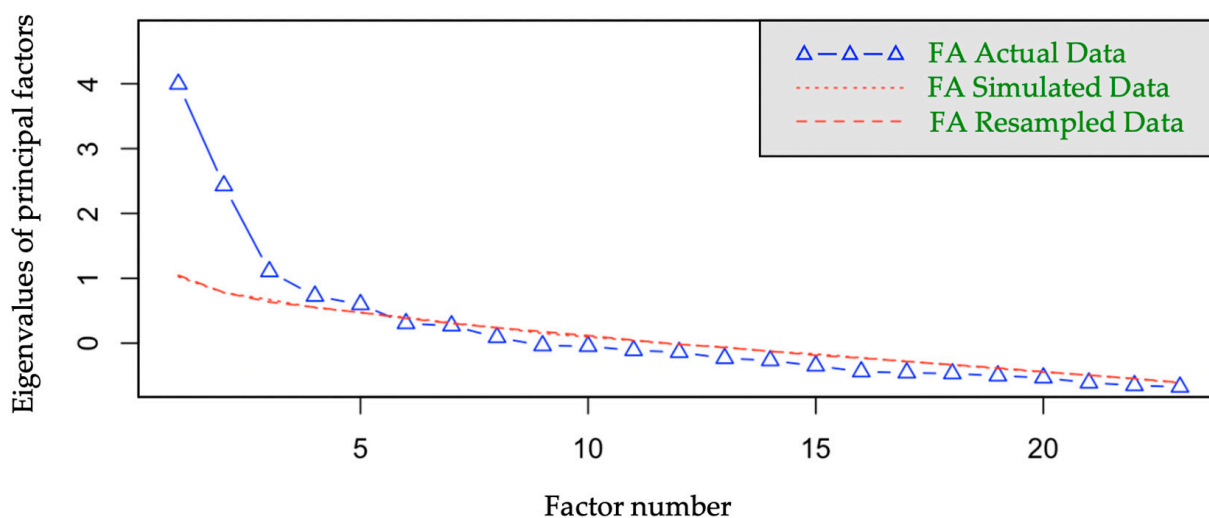
R-4.4.1 was used for CFA and SEM of the data [71–74]. The CFA results validated the factor structure and confirmed that the variables were loaded onto the expected factors.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Model Development

Parallel Analysis is a rigorous statistical technique used to ascertain the number of factors to be retained in EFA [75]. Figure 3 shows a comparison of the eigenvalues of the principal factors extracted from the actual dataset with those derived from the simulated and resampled datasets. The eigenvalues of the actual data demonstrated a significant decrease from approximately four to one, after which they stabilised. This indicates a

swift decline in the explained variance following the initial factors, which is a hallmark of dominant underlying factors. The scree plot illustrates that an intersection occurs at the fifth factor, suggesting that up to five factors may possess substantive significance.



**Figure 3.** Parallel Analysis scree plots. Source: authors' own elaboration.

No missing values or outliers were identified in the preliminary analysis. In the factor matrix analysis of the pilot study ( $n = 115$ ), the items displayed distinct loadings on their corresponding constructs, with 'effectiveness' items showing strong loadings between 0.58 and 0.78, which suggests a high level of internal consistency. 'Fairness' items demonstrated significant loadings, with Fai2 recording 0.86, confirming construct validity. The 'Sense of Ease' construct demonstrated significant loadings, with Eas1 and Eas2 registering values of 0.76 and 0.71, respectively. For 'Meaningfulness', Mea2 exhibited a substantial loading of 0.85. The 'Friendliness' construct demonstrated notable loadings on Fri1 (0.71) and Fri2 (0.64), highlighting their role in defining the construct. Items including Eas3, Eas5, Eas6, and Mea1, which exhibited factor loadings of less than  $\pm 0.40$  and presented cross-loadings, were removed from the analysis [76]. The results emphasise the dimensional coherence of the constructs and indicate areas that may require refinement due to possible cross-loading issues (Table 3).

Table 4 illustrates the changes in item metrics across the five dimensions during the transition from the preliminary to the revised model. This analysis offers insight into the effects of model refinement on key dimensions through a thorough comparison of item-specific data. We conducted a comparative analysis of items, designated by their codes (e.g., Eff1 $\Rightarrow$ Eff1), reflecting their conditions prior to and following model revision [73]. For most dimensions, the item scores were not significantly different from those obtained earlier. Friendliness demonstrated variability, with Fri1 exhibiting a minor negative change and Fri2 and Fri3 exhibiting positive shifts.

CFA performed on a sample of 305 participants exhibited a strong model fit across all assessed indices. The chi-square statistic was 310.592, with 142 degrees of freedom (df). This yielded a chi-square ( $\chi^2$ )-to-degree-of-freedom ratio of 2.187, which is within the acceptable range of 1–3. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was 0.932, and the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) was 0.918. Both indices surpassed the minimum threshold of 0.9, demonstrating a robust comparative fit. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.062, and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) was 0.059. Both values were significantly below the upper threshold of 0.08, confirming the adequacy of the model.

These results collectively confirm the validity and appropriateness of the model for the proposed theoretical framework (Table 5).

**Table 3.** First factor matrix in the pilot study ( $n = 115$ ). Source: authors' own elaboration.

Item	Eff	Fai	Eas	Mea	Fri
Eff1	0.58	−0.09	0.14	0.06	0.03
Eff2	0.70	0.11	0.00	0.04	0.04
Eff3	0.65	0.08	−0.02	0.08	−0.10
Eff4	0.78	−0.02	−0.01	−0.04	0.07
Eff5	0.64	0.05	0.04	0.09	−0.17
Fai1	0.16	0.73	−0.03	−0.07	0.09
Fai2	0.04	0.86	0.00	−0.02	0.09
Fai3	−0.02	0.54	−0.03	0.13	0.05
Fai4	−0.10	0.74	0.19	0.05	−0.15
Eas1	−0.05	0.02	0.76	0.10	−0.04
Eas2	0.07	0.12	0.71	−0.17	0.12
Eas3	−0.08	−0.18	0.01	0.11	0.26
Eas4	0.34	−0.10	0.49	0.11	−0.01
Eas5	0.09	−0.06	−0.05	−0.16	0.15
Eas6	0.07	0.10	0.03	−0.01	0.28
Mea1	0.17	0.00	−0.09	−0.23	0.11
Mea2	−0.06	−0.02	−0.04	0.85	−0.05
Mea3	0.13	−0.11	0.10	0.66	0.14
Mea4	−0.05	0.10	0.12	0.55	0.03
Mea5	0.18	0.08	−0.09	0.68	0.04
Fri1	0.03	−0.15	0.07	0.03	0.71
Fri2	−0.07	0.29	−0.05	0.02	0.64
Fri3	−0.09	0.31	0.11	0.07	0.46

Eff = effectiveness; Fai = fairness; Eas = sense of ease; Mea = meaningfulness; Fri = friendliness.

**Table 4.** Second factor matrix in the pilot study ( $n = 115$ ). Source: authors' own elaboration.

Item	Eff	Fai	Eas	Mea	Fri
Eff1⇒Eff1	0.59	−0.10	0.13	0.05	0.03
Eff2⇒Eff2	0.68	0.12	0.00	0.05	0.01
Eff3⇒Eff3	0.63	0.12	−0.02	0.10	−0.14
Eff4⇒Eff4	0.78	−0.02	−0.02	−0.04	0.05
Eff5⇒Eff5	0.65	0.01	0.03	0.07	−0.09
Fai1⇒Fai1	0.17	0.75	−0.04	−0.08	0.08
Fai2⇒Fai2	0.02	0.86	0.00	−0.01	0.09
Fai3⇒Fai3	−0.04	0.51	−0.01	0.15	0.07
Fai4⇒Fai4	−0.11	0.72	0.20	0.05	−0.11
Eas1⇒Eas1	−0.06	0.03	0.80	0.10	−0.06
Eas2⇒Eas2	0.10	0.12	0.68	−0.19	0.12
Eas4⇒Eas3	0.37	−0.11	0.47	0.08	0.03
Mea2⇒Mea1	−0.06	−0.01	−0.04	0.84	−0.06
Mea3⇒Mea2	0.13	−0.10	0.11	0.67	0.12
Mea4⇒Mea3	−0.05	0.08	0.12	0.54	0.04
Mea5⇒Mea4	0.17	0.07	−0.08	0.68	0.04
Fri1⇒Fri1	0.05	−0.19	0.07	0.03	0.68
Fri2⇒Fri2	−0.05	0.15	−0.06	0.01	0.81
Fri3⇒Fri3	−0.08	0.23	0.11	0.06	0.52

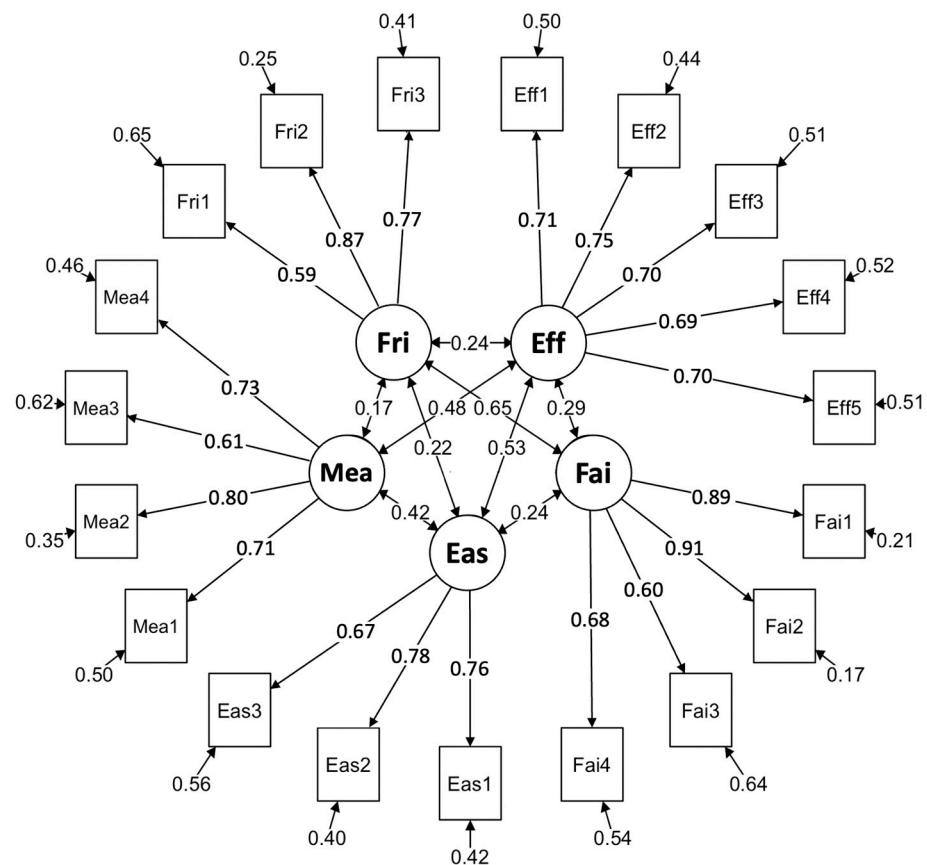
Eff = effectiveness; Fai = fairness; Eas = ease; Mea = meaningfulness; Fri = friendliness. In the item column, the left side of the arrow shows the item names in the preliminary model, and the right side of the arrow shows the item names in the revised model.

**Table 5.** Goodness of fit of the confirmatory factor analysis CFA ( $n = 305$ ). Source: authors' own elaboration.

Goodness of Fit Measure	Criteria	Index in the Model	Whether it Obeys the Criteria
$\chi^2$	-	310.592	-
df	-	142	-
$\chi^2/df$	$1 < \chi^2/df < 3$	2.187	Yes
CFI	$>0.9$	0.932	Yes
TLI	$>0.9$	0.918	Yes
RMSEA	$<0.08$	0.062	Yes
SRMR	$<0.08$	0.059	Yes

4.2. Structural Model

The SEM integrated multiple observed indicators for each latent variable, demonstrating notable interrelationships and factor loadings (Figure 4). Maximum likelihood estimation was used to assess the proposed theoretical model. The latent constructs were assessed using multiple indicators. The path coefficients were evaluated to ascertain the strength and significance of the relationships. The structural model demonstrated notable interconnections between the constructs (Table 6). It revealed positive correlations among most latent variables, except between fairness and meaningfulness, which did not show an obvious connection. Regarding those that demonstrated obvious connections, the  $p$ -values for effectiveness and friendliness (0.001), fairness and sense of ease (0.001), sense of ease and friendliness (0.003), meaningfulness and friendliness (0.022), and others were  $< 0.001$ .



**Figure 4.** Results of the structural equation modelling (SEM). Source: authors' own elaboration.

**Table 6.** Path coefficients between latent variables. Source: authors' own elaboration.

Path	Coefficient	Relationship
Eff and Fai	0.29	moderate positive
Eff and Eas	0.53	moderate positive
Eff and Mea	0.48	moderate positive
Eff and Fri	0.24	moderate positive
Fai and Eas	0.24	moderate positive
Fai and Fri	0.65	robust positive
Eas and Mea	0.42	moderate positive
Eas and Fri	0.22	weak positive
Mea and Fri	0.17	weak positive

#### 4.3. Measurement Model

The SEM results depict the complex interrelations between the latent variables and how they are influenced by the observed variables. The loadings of the indicators for each construct are described below, with all  $p$ -values  $< 0.001$  (represented by \*\*\*), showing a highly statistically significant result.

Effectiveness (Eff): Eff1 (0.71), Eff2 (0.75), Eff3 (0.70), Eff4 (0.69), Eff5 (0.70);

Fairness (Fai): Fai1 (0.89), Fai2 (0.91), Fai3 (0.60), Fai4 (0.68);

Sense of ease (Eas): Eas1 (0.76), Eas2 (0.78), Eas3 (0.67);

Meaningfulness (Mea): Mea1 (0.71), Mea2 (0.80), Mea3 (0.61), Mea4 (0.73);

Friendliness (Fri): Fri1 (0.59), Fri2 (0.87), Fri3 (0.77).

This study assessed the convergent validity of the latent constructs using CFA. Convergent validity was evaluated using standardised estimates, composite reliability (CR), and extracted average variance (AVE). The CFA results for effectiveness indicated robust factor loadings, with standardised estimates between 0.694 and 0.747. The CR and AVE values were 0.835 and 0.505, respectively, indicating satisfactory convergent validity. Fairness exhibited significant factor loadings, with standardised estimates ranging from 0.602 to 0.911. The CR was 0.856 and the average variance extracted (AVE) was 0.610, indicating strong convergent validity. The sense of ease construct exhibited standardised estimates, ranging from 0.667 to 0.776. The CR was 0.779 and the AVE was 0.542, indicating sufficient convergent validity. Meaningfulness demonstrated factor loadings ranging from 0.613 to 0.804, accompanied by a CR of 0.806 and an AVE of 0.515, thereby affirming its convergent validity. The standardised friendliness estimates ranged from 0.592 to 0.865. The CR was 0.779 and the AVE was 0.563, demonstrating adequate convergent validity. CFA indicated that the CR values were substantial, with all constructs surpassing 0.77, demonstrating sufficient internal consistency. The AVE values for each construct exceeded 0.5, indicating that a significant portion of the variance was accounted for by the constructs in relation to the measurement error, thereby affirming the reliability and validity of the measurement model (Table 7).

Inter-construct correlation coefficients were compared with the square roots of the AVEs, represented as bold diagonal values in the matrix, to emphasise their magnitude relative to the off-diagonal elements (Table 8). The larger diagonal values, compared to the corresponding off-diagonal coefficients in their respective rows and columns, indicated strong discriminant validity, demonstrating that each construct shared more variance with its indicators than with the other constructs. The correlation of 0.781 between fairness and sense of ease is significant; however, it remains below the square root of the AVE values for these constructs, indicating their distinctiveness despite conceptual overlap. The lack of correlation between meaningfulness and fairness underscored discriminant validity, suggesting that these constructs represent distinct dimensions of public spaces. This matrix

validation ensured the structural integrity and uniqueness of the constructs employed to assess public space characteristics.

**Table 7.** Convergent validity assessment ( $n = 305$ ). Source: authors’ own elaboration.

Latent Variable	Observed Variable	Estimate	Std. Err	z-Value	<i>p</i>	Std. Estimate	SMC	CR	AVE
Eff Effectiveness	Eff1	1.000				0.709	0.503	0.835	0.505
	Eff2	1.105	0.096	11.504	***	0.747	0.558		
	Eff3	0.998	0.092	10.895	***	0.702	0.492		
	Eff4	1.079	0.100	10.791	***	0.694	0.482		
	Eff5	1.053	0.097	10.844	***	0.698	0.487		
Fai Fairness	Fai1	1.000				0.889	0.791	0.856	0.610
	Fai2	0.975	0.046	20.973	***	0.911	0.830		
	Fai3	0.705	0.061	11.567	***	0.602	0.363		
	Fai4	0.712	0.053	13.537	***	0.676	0.456		
Eas Sense of ease	Eas1	1.000				0.760	0.578	0.779	0.542
	Eas2	0.963	0.088	10.988	***	0.776	0.602		
	Eas3	0.853	0.084	10.111	***	0.667	0.444		
Mea Meaningfulness	Mea1	1.000				0.708	0.501	0.806	0.515
	Mea2	1.028	0.088	11.656	***	0.804	0.646		
	Mea3	0.805	0.085	9.427	***	0.613	0.376		
	Mea4	0.884	0.080	11.003	***	0.733	0.537		
Fri Friendliness	Fri1	1.000				0.592	0.351	0.779	0.563
	Fri2	1.288	0.128	10.043	***	0.865	0.748		
	Fri3	1.079	0.111	9.761	***	0.768	0.590		

\*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 8.** Discriminant validity assessment ( $n = 305$ ). Source: authors’ own elaboration.

	CR	AVE	Eff	Fai	Eas	Mea	Fri
Eff	0.835	0.505	<b>0.710</b>				
Fai	0.856	0.610	0.287	<b>0.781</b>			
Eas	0.779	0.542	0.532	0.240	<b>0.736</b>		
Mea	0.806	0.515	0.476	0.000	0.420	<b>0.718</b>	
Fri	0.779	0.563	0.236	0.652	0.223	0.165	<b>0.750</b>

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Five Impacts of Publicness of Public Space

This study aimed to establish an assessment model for the impact of the publicness of public spaces. For high-density cities with limited public space resources, such as Hong Kong, it is important to fully utilise the value of public spaces to meet community needs [4]. Since being governed is the nature of public spaces, this study adopted the perspective of public space governance [6,31,32]. Based on the discourses of public space governance [41,43–46], this study proposed five impacts of the publicness of public space: its effectiveness, fairness, sense of ease, meaningfulness, and friendliness.

The effectiveness of public spaces emphasises their efficient management and functionality [46]. It reflects the space’s ability to achieve its intended purpose by examining the accessibility, maintenance, provision of amenities, and the sense of safety it provides [18–20,30]. The publicness effect explains whether a public space can effectively meet users’ needs and encourage their regular use and engagement [3,40,68]. The fairness of public spaces highlights the inclusive and fair distribution of resources. It reflects the

ability of the space to create an inclusive environment wherein diverse needs are met and discrimination is minimised [22,42]. A sense of ease in public spaces emphasises the importance of creating comfortable and relaxed spaces. This reflects the ability of the space to provide an accommodating environment [7,24]. The meaningfulness of public spaces underscores the community identity and cultural significance. It reflects the ability of the space to build a connection on a personal and communal level, making individuals feel connected and engaged, and enhancing mental and emotional well-being [24,42,66]. The friendliness of public spaces emphasises their role in building respectful and harmonious communities, reflecting the ability of a space to foster an environment wherein users are considerate of one another and ensure that diverse groups feel accepted and valued within the space [20,60].

### *5.2. Indicators Contribute to Publicness of Public Space in Hong Kong*

According to the model, all indicators of effectiveness showed strong and consistent loadings (approximately 0.70), implying that they are equally important in creating effective public spaces. It can be observed that improving the effectiveness of public spaces in Hong Kong requires a holistic approach that addresses all key aspects, including accessibility, maintenance, provision of amenities, and safety. For fairness of public spaces, experiences of gender (0.89) and age (0.91) discrimination demonstrated very high loadings, indicating that gender and age inclusivity are essential for improving the publicness of public spaces in Hong Kong. Gender- and age-inclusive governance strategies may help improve Hong Kong residents' experiences in public spaces. In terms of ease of use in public spaces, high loadings for perceived freedom of activity (0.76) and perceived freedom of expression (0.78) highlighted the importance of freedom and relaxation perception. Enhancing these aspects can significantly enhance user experience. Regarding the meaningfulness of public spaces, the sense of belonging (0.80) was prominent, suggesting that meaningfulness is closely tied to community identity and cultural significance in Hong Kong. Public spaces that reflect local culture, history, and traditions can foster a strong sense of connection among users. This provides references for the creation of spaces incorporating traditional elements (e.g., the Wedding Card Street, which integrates collective memory and historical characteristics, and old streets and alleys that retain neon signs) or architectural heritage (e.g., Tai Kwun). This is particularly relevant in cities where rapid urban development often threatens the preservation of cultural identity. Regarding the friendliness of public spaces, the strongest indicator was adherence to rules (0.65), suggesting that obeying rules is considered important for creating a friendly environment.

These constructs align with existing theories, whereas the emphasis on adherence to rules for friendliness is contextually specific. Hong Kong's public spaces are shared environment resources, with a low per capita area compared to global cities [5]. Adherence to rules, such as not littering, maintaining low noise levels, and respecting queues, ensures that everyone can coexist peacefully. Rule adherence reflects Hong Kong's cultural values (collectivism and respect for order), urban density (the need for managed spaces), and governance style (rule-based efficiency) [77,78]. Rule adherence might not be as well addressed in other contexts where order is less emphasised, whereas in Hong Kong, it plays a critical role in fostering the friendliness of public spaces. This specificity highlights the importance of understanding how the governance context shapes the perceptions of public space attributes.

As the observed variables correspond to different aspects of public space, they are independent of each other in theory. However, in the actual implementation of public spaces, they are often interconnected, especially in high-density environments, because, in a complex system such as an urban environment, the interaction between the components

produces unique emergent properties [79]. This interconnectedness between the observed variables is not discussed in this study, which can be explored in future studies.

### 5.3. Correlations Between the Impacts of Publicness of Public Space

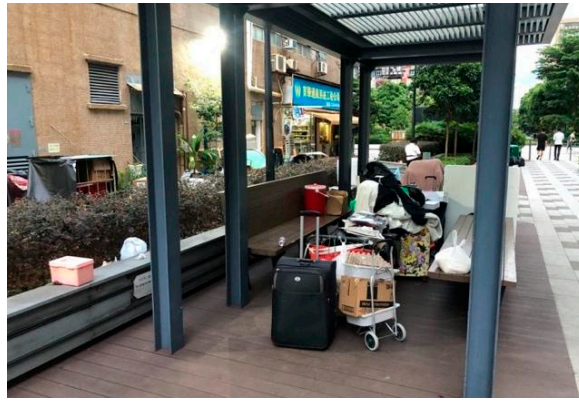
Correlations between the five publicness impacts were revealed using SEM analysis. According to the SEM results, there was no obvious relationship between the fairness and meaningfulness of public spaces. Except for this, all other publicness impacts demonstrated positive correlations. The correlation coefficients between the effectiveness and sense of ease of public spaces and the fairness and friendliness of public space were over 0.5, the latter being the highest, reaching 0.65. These findings confirmed the theoretical expectation that fair practices and effective service provision in public spaces enhance social interactions and create a welcoming and relaxing atmosphere [55,80]. However, the lack of an obvious relationship between the fairness and meaningfulness of public spaces is surprising. Theories often suggest that fairness contributes to a sense of belonging and cultural significance [81]. This lack of correlation may be because, in the context of Hong Kong, fairness may be seen as a more functional or procedural aspect of public space, rather than something that fosters a deeper emotional or spiritual attachment to a space. Perhaps, in the context of Hong Kong, the connection between the fairness and meaningfulness of public spaces is not as close as expected or the factors may even be independent of each other. For example, Fai4 (perceived partiality of rules) may not have a practical impact on the interaction between users and space because it also involves the compliance and enforcement of rules. One example is that some sitting-out areas post rules requiring people not to lie on the benches, although such phenomena are common.

However, the limited scope of the respondents and feedback collected may also have contributed to this unexpected finding. For example, none of the respondents was homeless. Homeless people may have limited access to many urban spaces, and some public open spaces could be temporary or even long-term residence options (Figures 5 and 6). In this case, it is reasonable to expect that the fairness of public space, as one of the preconditions for long-term residence for homeless people, contributes to the creation of meaning for public spaces, that is, the connection between them and public spaces, or at least a sense of belonging. Future research could include a wider range of respondent types in the surveys to examine the association between the fairness and meaning of public spaces more comprehensively and explore the impact of demographic factors.



**Figure 5.** A public space under a bridge where homeless people live on Hong Kong Island. Source: Photographed by the authors.





**Figure 6.** A sitting-out area where homeless people live in Kowloon. Source: Photographed by the authors.

This study has certain other limitations. It only focused on public open spaces with sitting-out as the main function, which may have led to limited generalisability of the findings. Additionally, this study did not discuss the interconnectedness between the observed variables and the complex interactions between publicness impacts and external factors, such as how urban policies or socioeconomic conditions may generate biased insights. To address these limitations, investigations of spaces with varying functions can be conducted to improve generalisability and understand the different dynamics. Examples include public pleasure grounds, playgrounds, and transit areas. Public spaces can then be explored in different governance contexts, considering external conditions in terms of, for example, society, the environment, and the economy, to better understand complex publicness and reduce potential bias. Further, studies on a broader range of public spaces across different areas of Hong Kong should be conducted to obtain a more comprehensive picture. The suggested studies are expected to enrich urban research by facilitating a deep exploration of the nature of public spaces. These findings can lead to informed decisions that improve the design and governance of public spaces, ultimately contributing to the creation of urban environments that balance different interests and respond to user needs.

## 6. Conclusions

The impact of publicness has rarely been discussed in studies on the publicness of public spaces. However, it is important to understand the dynamics of public spaces, especially in high-density cities, such as Hong Kong. This study focused on this gap and developed an assessment model for the publicness impact of public spaces. Based on the discourse on public space governance, this study identified five key publicness impacts: effectiveness, fairness, sense of ease, meaningfulness, and friendliness. The identification of these five impacts and their correlations expands the discussion on public spaces and helps enhance the understanding of how they influence community dynamics. Revealing the interconnectedness of publicness impacts contributes to the discussion on public space research by providing valuable insights into the complexity of this concept. The results revealed no significant relationship between fairness and the meaningfulness of public space, while the other impacts of publicness were positively correlated, revealing how changes in one impact of publicness affect other impacts. These findings suggest that fair and effective public spaces promote social interaction and contribute to a relaxed atmosphere, while the lack of a correlation between fairness and meaningfulness may reflect that, in the context of Hong Kong, fairness is perceived more as a functional or procedural attribute of public space than a factor that fosters deeper emotional or spiritual connections to the space. These findings are a valuable reference regarding public space

governance in other high-density cities. Exploring these impacts ensures that public spaces fulfil their potential as vital components of urban life, contributing to vibrant, equitable, and sustainable communities.

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