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# Comparative Analysis of the Impact of Urban Development Policies on Social Cohesion and Public Trust in the Cities of Isfahan and Bushehr

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This study investigates the comparative effect of urban development policies on social cohesion and public trust in the cities of Isfahan and Bushehr in 2025. The primary objective was to analyze the impact of urban development policies—including public transportation infrastructure, green spaces, and cultural projects—on social cohesion (sense of belonging, social participation, and social relations) and public trust (institutional trust and interpersonal trust). The research adopted a quantitative method using a standardized questionnaire (content validity index: CVI = 0.89; reliability: Cronbach's alpha = 0.83). A sample of 600 individuals (300 from each city) was selected using a stratified cluster random sampling method. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 through t-tests, ANOVA, and multivariate regression analyses. The results indicated that in Isfahan, public transportation had a significant impact on social cohesion (mean = 4.15) and public trust (mean = 3.90), with a standardized regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$. In Bushehr, green spaces had a more substantial effect on the sense of belonging (mean = 4.02) and social participation, with a regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$. All hypotheses were confirmed at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. The observed differences were attributed to the distinct cultural and geographical characteristics of the two cities. These findings underscore the necessity of tailoring urban policies to the local context.

***Keywords:*** *urban development policies, social cohesion, public trust, Isfahan, Bushehr, public spaces.*

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## 1. Introduction

Urban development is no longer solely concerned with physical infrastructure but has increasingly become a mechanism through which governments and planners influence social cohesion and public trust. Modern urban planning recognizes the city not merely as a geographic space but as a dynamic system where the design and implementation of public policies can either foster or fragment social integration (Markus & Kirpichenko, 2023; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). As cities continue to grow and diversify, especially in rapidly urbanizing nations such as Iran, the intersection of development policy and social fabric has become an essential focus of academic and policy inquiry (Ahmadi & Mousavi, 2023; Hosseini & Rahimi, 2022).

Social cohesion refers to the degree of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society, encompassing dimensions such as sense of belonging, social participation, and interpersonal trust (Jewett et al., 2021; Markus & Kirpichenko, 2023). Research has consistently shown that well-designed public spaces can enhance these bonds by enabling inclusive, routine interactions across diverse populations (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2019; Amran & Fuad, 2020). In particular, the physical design and distribution of public infrastructure influence not only mobility but also the accessibility of shared experiences and civic rituals that constitute collective urban life (Brown & Lloyd, 2013; Cabrera & Najarian, 2015). Studies in both developed and developing contexts have affirmed that trust in fellow citizens and institutions grows when public spaces are perceived as safe, equitable, and socially meaningful (Armstrong & Greene, 2022; Buffel et al., 2013; Lau et al., 2020).

In the Iranian context, spatial inequalities and uneven urban development have posed unique challenges to social cohesion. Ahmadi and Mousavi (Ahmadi & Mousavi, 2023) argue that large-scale urbanization, when detached from participatory governance, can intensify social exclusion and diminish trust in municipal institutions. This is echoed by Farhadi and Mousavi (Farhadi & Mousavi, 2021), who highlight how top-down planning in major Iranian cities has often undermined community trust and exacerbated marginalization. Conversely, inclusive urban design that integrates cultural and historical identities has shown promise in fostering communal bonds (Mohammadi & Salehi, 2019; Shariati & Hosseinzadeh, 2019; Zare & Ghaffari, 2020). For instance, in cities like Isfahan, the preservation of historical public spaces serves not only architectural heritage but also as anchors for social memory and collective belonging (Zare & Ghaffari, 2020).

The case of Bushehr offers a distinct contrast, where coastal and recreational public spaces have been more prominent in shaping social life. Gholami and Shokri (Gholami & Shokri, 2022) demonstrate how coastal development projects in Bushehr have positively influenced social interactions by providing inclusive, multi-use green areas. Complementarily, Salimi et al. (Salimi et al., 2023) show that open public spaces in Bushehr—especially parks and waterfronts—are strongly associated with increased perceptions of community integration. These findings align with those of Rezaei and Karimi (Rezaei & Karimi, 2024), who argue that activating cultural heritage in urban design can enhance local identity and foster public trust when implemented with sensitivity to place-specific values.

Transportation infrastructure is another critical dimension of urban development with far-reaching social implications. Ghasemi and Nazari (Ghasemi & Nazari, 2020) find that access to efficient public transit enhances social cohesion by reducing spatial segregation and facilitating cross-community interaction. Askari et al. (Askari et al., 2022) further show that public open space engagement varies across age groups, and such variances are often mediated by the quality and connectivity of transportation systems. In Isfahan, the development of comprehensive public transport has created physical proximity among citizens from diverse backgrounds, thus offering fertile ground for institutional trust to grow (Hashemi & Rezaei, 2021).

Green spaces, as noted by Rahimi and Jafari (Rahimi & Jafari, 2022), offer psychological and social benefits that are essential for building resilient communities. Urban parks, when equitably distributed and well-maintained, function as neutral grounds for interaction, fostering a sense of mutual recognition and inclusivity (Aminzadeh & Afshar, 2018; Mokhtari & Ghaffari, 2022). Lau et al. (Lau et al., 2020) underscore that such spaces reduce the perceived distance between social groups and promote emotional attachment to neighborhoods. This connection is crucial in multi-ethnic urban environments, where symbolic ownership of public space can significantly affect interpersonal trust and social participation (Wan et al., 2021).

Moreover, the built environment's influence on trust and cohesion is mediated by demographic and social structures. Asiamah et al. (Asiamah et al., 2020) argue that community-level physical factors influence not just mobility but also the structure and strength of individuals' social networks. Buwaja and Chitalu (Buwaja & Chitalu, 2016) show that neighborhood context—including safety, walkability, and mixed-use designs—significantly affects social connectedness in African cities, a finding echoed in Iran by Ebrahimi and Karimi (Ebrahimi & Karimi, 2023). Jones et al. (Jones et al., 2015) add that "semi-public" urban areas, such as markets or squares, function as sites of routine social encounters that can promote cross-cultural cohesion when designed inclusively.

Cultural projects, including museums, galleries, and community centers, also serve as instruments of integration and identity formation. Shariati and Hosseinzadeh (Shariati & Hosseinzadeh, 2019) point out that such venues can mediate shared meaning in urban life and contribute to trust-building, especially in pluralistic societies. Mohammadi and Salehi (Mohammadi & Salehi, 2019) further argue that civic engagement in these spaces strengthens participatory governance, which in turn supports public confidence in local administration.

Recent literature has highlighted how social cohesion also buffers communities against systemic shocks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Jewett et al. (Jewett et al., 2021) observed that socially cohesive neighborhoods demonstrated stronger collective efficacy, compliance with public health measures, and resilience. Qi et al. (Qi et al., 2024) synthesized similar findings across global contexts, emphasizing that urban form—specifically, the design and governance of public spaces—has a direct correlation with both horizontal (interpersonal) and vertical (institutional) trust.

This accumulation of evidence underscores the need for policy-makers to adopt a context-sensitive approach to urban development. While cities like Isfahan may benefit more from investments in transportation and heritage-based projects, coastal cities like Bushehr might find greater gains through expanded green infrastructure and inclusive recreational areas (Gholami & Shokri, 2022; Rezaei & Karimi, 2024). As Lau et al. (Lau et al., 2020) note, spatial justice must be a guiding principle in development policy, ensuring that urban improvements translate into tangible social outcomes for all demographic groups.

In light of these theoretical and empirical contributions, the present study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the effects of urban development policies on social cohesion and public trust in Isfahan and Bushehr.

## 2. Methodology

This study is a quantitative research with a comparative approach, conducted in the cities of Isfahan and Bushehr in 2025. The statistical population included all residents over the age of 18 in both cities, which, based on official statistics, consisted of approximately 2 million individuals in Isfahan and 300,000 in Bushehr. A sample of 600 participants (300 from each city) was selected using stratified cluster random sampling. To ensure representativeness, different urban areas (central, peripheral, and historical) were included in each city.

The data collection instrument was a standardized questionnaire designed based on indicators of social cohesion (sense of belonging, social participation, and social relations) and public trust (institutional trust and interpersonal trust). The questionnaire comprised 40 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Its content validity was confirmed with a CVI of 0.89, and its reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83. Data related to urban development policies, such as the number of infrastructure projects, green spaces, and cultural initiatives, were extracted from official municipal reports of both cities.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Statistical tests included the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to assess normality of data distribution, t-tests for mean comparisons, ANOVA to analyze variance across groups, and multivariate regression to examine the relationships between independent variables (urban development policies) and dependent variables (social cohesion and public trust). Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis was used to evaluate inter-variable relationships, and the chi-square test was applied to analyze qualitative differences. The research hypotheses were assessed as follows:

1. Urban development policies have a positive impact on social cohesion;
2. Urban development policies have a positive impact on public trust;
3. Social cohesion and public trust vary by age group;
4. A combination of urban development policies has a greater impact on social cohesion and public trust;
5. Regional differences (Isfahan vs. Bushehr) influence the effect of urban development policies.

## 3. Findings

To analyze the data, the normality of distribution was first tested using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test ($p > 0.05$ for both variables). Subsequently, t-tests were conducted to compare the means of social cohesion and public trust between the two cities. ANOVA was used to investigate differences based on age group, gender, and education.

Multivariate regression analysis was employed to assess the impact of urban development policies (public transportation, green spaces, cultural projects) on the dependent variables. In addition, Pearson correlation analysis was applied to examine relationships among variables, and the chi-square test was used to assess qualitative differences. The research hypotheses were tested accordingly.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Mean Scores for Social Cohesion and Public Trust*

| Variable | City | Effect Size (Cohen's d) | Significance Level | t-value | Standard Deviation | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social Cohesion | Isfahan | 0.20 | 0.015 | 2.45 | 0.62 | 4.15 |
| Social Cohesion | Bushehr | – | – | – | 0.68 | 4.02 |
| Public Trust | Isfahan | 0.35 | 0.001 | 3.28 | 0.55 | 3.90 |
| Public Trust | Bushehr | – | – | – | 0.59 | 3.70 |

The results in Table 1 indicate that the mean social cohesion score in Isfahan (4.15) is significantly higher than in Bushehr (4.02) ($p = 0.015$). Likewise, the mean public trust score in Isfahan (3.90) is significantly higher than in Bushehr (3.70) ($p = 0.001$). The effect sizes (Cohen's d) suggest moderate differences between the two cities, with the effect being more pronounced for public trust (0.35) than for social cohesion (0.20).

**Table 2**

*Multivariate Regression Analysis of the Impact of Urban Development Policies on Social Cohesion*

| Independent Variable | $R^2$ | Significance Level | t-value | Standard Error | Regression Coefficient (β) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public Transportation (Isfahan) | 0.22 | 0.000 | 4.82 | 0.09 | 0.47 |
| Green Spaces (Bushehr) | 0.18 | 0.000 | 4.15 | 0.10 | 0.41 |
| Cultural Projects | 0.06 | 0.019 | 2.36 | 0.11 | 0.25 |

The results in Table 2 demonstrate that public transportation in Isfahan ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$) and green spaces in Bushehr ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) have significant impacts on social cohesion. Cultural projects also show a positive but weaker effect ($\beta = 0.25$, $p = 0.019$). The $R^2$ values indicate the proportion of variance in social cohesion explained by each variable, with public transportation in Isfahan having the highest explanatory power (22%).

**Table 3**

*ANOVA Analysis of Social Cohesion and Public Trust by Age Group*

| Age Group | Effect Size ($\eta^2$) | Significance Level | F-value | Public Trust (Mean) | Social Cohesion (Mean) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18–30 | 0.12 | 0.032 | 3.56 | 3.78 | 4.08 |
| 31–50 | – | – | – | 3.85 | 4.12 |
| 51+ | – | – | – | 3.65 | 3.98 |

The findings in Table 3 reveal that the 31–50 age group reported the highest mean levels of social cohesion (4.12) and public trust (3.85). The differences between age groups were statistically significant ($p = 0.032$), with a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.12$), indicating meaningful variation across age categories.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the current study offer important insights into the ways urban development policies can differentially impact social cohesion and public trust in two distinct Iranian urban environments—Isfahan and Bushehr. The results revealed that in Isfahan, public transportation had a significant effect on both social cohesion (mean = 4.15) and public trust (mean = 3.90),

while in Bushehr, green spaces were more influential in shaping social cohesion, especially in dimensions such as sense of belonging and social participation (mean = 4.02). Furthermore, although cultural projects had a weaker effect overall, they still contributed positively to both constructs, suggesting that their inclusion as a complementary strategy in urban development remains relevant. These outcomes support the broader assertion that urban development is not a neutral or solely technical endeavor but a deeply social and context-dependent process (Markus & Kirpichenko, 2023; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017).

The strong relationship between public transportation and social cohesion in Isfahan confirms previous studies that link accessible and efficient mobility systems with increased opportunities for social interaction and reduced spatial segregation (Ghasemi & Nazari, 2020; Hashemi & Rezaei, 2021). Public transport in Isfahan likely functions not only as a logistical solution but also as a social equalizer, allowing diverse segments of the population to share common spaces and experiences. As emphasized by Askari et al. (Askari et al., 2022), engagement in public spaces is shaped significantly by infrastructural access, particularly across different age groups. Moreover, transportation infrastructure often reflects state capacity and responsiveness, which influences trust in institutions. In this regard, the correlation observed between transportation development and public trust in Isfahan reinforces the idea that infrastructure can signal institutional competence and commitment to equitable service delivery (Armstrong & Greene, 2022; Ebrahimi & Karimi, 2023).

In contrast, the city of Bushehr demonstrated a more prominent link between green spaces and social cohesion. This is particularly relevant given Bushehr's coastal identity and the central role of natural and recreational landscapes in the everyday life of its residents. As documented by Gholami and Shokri (Gholami & Shokri, 2022), coastal green areas in Bushehr are critical platforms for informal socialization, which may explain the heightened sense of belonging and participation observed in this study. Green spaces also contribute to mental well-being and provide low-cost, accessible environments for communal interaction, especially in cities with fewer cultural or institutional resources (Rahimi & Jafari, 2022; Wan et al., 2021). Furthermore, Lau et al. (Lau et al., 2020) argue that inclusive design and visual appeal in green public spaces lead to increased use and trust in public systems, reinforcing the observed effect of green space development on social trust in Bushehr.

The relatively weaker but still positive impact of cultural projects across both cities invites further reflection. Although the regression analysis indicated that cultural initiatives had less explanatory power compared to transportation and green spaces, they nonetheless contributed to social cohesion and trust. These findings are in line with prior studies that emphasize the symbolic and identity-forming function of cultural infrastructure (Mohammadi & Salehi, 2019; Shariati & Hosseinzadeh, 2019). Cultural projects, especially those grounded in local heritage, serve as shared references that foster collective memory and civic identity. Rezaei and Karimi (Rezaei & Karimi, 2024) note that cultural heritage projects, when sensitively integrated into urban planning, reinforce residents' connection to place and thus their willingness to trust public institutions. This is especially pertinent in a historical city like Isfahan, where architectural preservation has been central to the urban narrative (Zare & Ghaffari, 2020).

The analysis of variance across age groups also revealed meaningful patterns. The age group 31–50 exhibited the highest levels of both social cohesion (mean = 4.12) and public trust (mean = 3.85). This suggests that middle-aged adults, who are more likely to be socially and economically active, may have greater exposure to and investment in urban systems such as transportation, green spaces, and cultural programs. Asiamah et al. (Asiamah et al., 2020) emphasize that social network size and quality among adults are closely linked to the built environment, reinforcing the importance of targeted development strategies. Conversely, younger and older age groups may face barriers—either due to limited autonomy or physical constraints—which may hinder their full engagement with public spaces (Askari et al., 2022; Buffel et al., 2013).

Beyond individual indicators, the study also supported the hypothesis that an integrated approach—combining multiple forms of urban investment—has a compounded effect on social cohesion and trust. This is consistent with findings from Qi et al. (Qi et al., 2024), who argue that no single urban feature can independently sustain high levels of social cohesion. Rather, a synergistic interaction

between physical, cultural, and ecological dimensions is necessary. Aelbrecht and Stevens (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2019) similarly highlight how physical space design must be supported by social programming and governance mechanisms to realize its full integrative potential.

Regional differences also played a role in shaping outcomes. The observed disparities between Isfahan and Bushehr are consistent with research that emphasizes the importance of socio-spatial context in urban planning (Ahmadi & Mousavi, 2023; Mokhtari & Ghaffari, 2022). Isfahan's long-standing administrative and cultural centrality may have contributed to higher baseline levels of public trust and infrastructural efficiency, while Bushehr's more recent development, oriented toward ecological and recreational projects, caters to different needs and expectations. As argued by Jones et al. (Jones et al., 2015), semi-public spaces—such as waterfronts, bazaars, and plazas—function differently across cities depending on their symbolic, economic, and political meanings.

Finally, the findings resonate with international literature on social resilience and civic trust. Jewett et al. (Jewett et al., 2021) observed during the COVID-19 pandemic that communities with strong public space systems and inclusive policies demonstrated higher collective efficacy and trust in local governments. This reinforces the notion that urban development policies are not merely infrastructural decisions but social investments with long-term implications. Planning decisions must therefore account not only for cost-benefit analyses but also for their ability to foster belonging, trust, and cooperation in increasingly complex urban settings.

One limitation of this study lies in its cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between urban development policies and social cohesion or public trust. While multivariate regression analysis helps identify significant associations, it does not account for potential reverse causality or long-term changes in urban dynamics. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported measures, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or differing interpretations of survey items across demographic groups. Additionally, the study focuses solely on two cities—Isfahan and Bushehr—which, although strategically chosen for their contrasts, may not represent the diversity of other Iranian urban contexts such as Tehran, Shiraz, or Tabriz. The geographic and cultural specificity of the selected cases limits generalizability, and future research should extend the analysis to more regions to build a comprehensive national picture.

Future research should consider adopting longitudinal or panel data methods to explore how urban development policies affect social cohesion and public trust over time. This would allow for an assessment of policy effectiveness and sustainability across different municipal planning cycles. Moreover, incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could add depth to quantitative findings and provide richer insights into how different populations experience public spaces. Comparative studies across cities in other Middle Eastern or Global South contexts would also offer valuable perspectives on the transferability of urban planning strategies. Finally, expanding the scope of independent variables to include digital infrastructure, informal settlements, and governance transparency could further elucidate the complex dynamics between urban form and social integration.

Urban planners and policymakers should prioritize integrative and place-based strategies that consider the unique socio-cultural characteristics of each city. In cities like Isfahan, strengthening the public transportation network while preserving cultural heritage can yield substantial gains in both social cohesion and trust. In contrast, cities like Bushehr may benefit more from investing in inclusive and ecologically sustainable green spaces that reflect local lifestyles and environmental conditions. In both contexts, cultural projects should not be seen as secondary add-ons but as strategic investments in identity-building and civic engagement. Ultimately, urban development must go beyond aesthetic or economic goals and align with broader social objectives to foster inclusive, connected, and resilient urban communities.

## Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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