

Factors Influencing the Distribution of Community Libraries in China: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Community libraries, as an integral part of community culture, play a key role in collecting and providing knowledge and information for residents. Their distribution directly affects the equity and convenience of services. However, the rational distribution of community libraries is influenced by a combination of factors, but there is a small body of literature on the impact of the distribution of community libraries, and the literature covers an incomplete range of influencing factors. This study systematically collects and analyses relevant literature to identify the key factors affecting the distribution of community libraries, encompassing five main aspects: population, transportation, economy, environment, and policy. The research aims to determine the factors that influence the distribution of community libraries in China. The research methodology applied in this study is a systematic literature review comprising 15 indexed journals. The integration of the existing literature is expected to provide theoretical support for the next research.

Keywords: *Community libraries, Distribution, Influencing factors, Site selection, Layout.*

Introduction

Since 2014, the "National Reading Campaign" has been included in China's Government Work Report for 11 consecutive years (People's Daily). The development of urban public learning spaces centred around reading is currently a strategic requirement set by the government to promote comprehensive reading development and build a "reading society" (China Cultural Daily). In 2021, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism released the "14th Five-Year Plan for the Construction of the Public Cultural Service System" (hereinafter referred to as the "Plan"). The "Plan" outlines the goal of developing public library services in China, which is to "build human-centred libraries." This is an important policy made in accordance with the overall requirements of the national "14th Five-Year Plan," combined with the actual development of the library sector. It sets new directions and priorities for the future development of public libraries nationwide. It will mark the beginning of a new journey for the development of public library services in China (Sina news).

Public libraries, as an essential part of China's public cultural service system, play a key role in collecting and providing knowledge and information (Zhao & Zhang, 2022). Community libraries, as a branch of public libraries, are government-led public cultural spaces located in or around communities, offering cultural reading spaces to residents. Their importance cannot be overstated. With the continuous development and improvement of China's economic, cultural, and spiritual civilisation, people's quality of life and cultural literacy have steadily increased, leading to a growing demand for knowledge and a stronger desire for community libraries. The rational distribution of community libraries directly affects the convenience of residents accessing knowledge and cultural resources. Moreover, government policies promoting public cultural services have provided new development opportunities for planning community libraries. Therefore, research on the distribution of community libraries is set to become an important issue in the future development of local governments' public cultural service systems (Yang, Wang & Wang, 2015). It encompasses five aspects: population, transportation, economy, environment, and policy.

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Background

The spatial distribution of community libraries results from the combined influence of various factors. To address the issue of library distribution, it is essential first to identify the factors influencing the selection of community library locations. The site selection and layout of community libraries involve multiple factors that often interact with or contradict each other. Moreover, these factors' relative importance and weight are difficult to determine and measure. As a result, the planning and site selection of community libraries is not an easy task (Xiao & Han, 2018). After extensively reviewing a large number of literature sources, it was found that research papers on the factors influencing the distribution of community libraries are relatively limited. This has resulted in certain limitations in the theoretical foundation of related studies (Alagappan et al., 2018). However, the research field of public cultural facilities has a relatively mature reference framework. Therefore, when studying the factors influencing the distribution of community libraries, it is possible to draw on relevant research from other similar types of public cultural facilities. For example, urban reading rooms, independent bookstores, self-service libraries, and other similar facilities. These studies share similarities and reference values in spatial distribution, service demand, and social impact. Key elements applicable to the study of community library distribution can be extracted by analysing and integrating these research findings. This can help address the gaps in existing literature to some extent, providing both theoretical support and practical guidance for the layout and planning of community libraries.

Methodology

The research method employed in this study is a literature review. The study examined 15 indexed journal articles published between 2015 and 2024 to extract the key factors influencing the distribution of community libraries. By reviewing relevant studies on library distribution mentioned in the literature, a search was conducted on CNKI and Scopus using various combinations of keywords such as "community library," "distribution," "layout," and "influencing factors." The relevant literature on the distribution of community libraries was retrieved and analysed. The identified factors were organised and summarised, resulting in 15 distribution influencing factors, as shown in Table 1. population density (A1), age structure (A2), cultural level (A3), road comfort (B1), public transportation (B2), road network density (B3), finance (C1), residents' economic levels (C2), operational cost (C3), external environment (D1), noise (D2), cultural and historical landmarks (D3), infrastructure (D4), plan (E1), legislation (E2).

In the systematic literature review, three filters were applied:

- a) Filter 1 – Selection of databases for journal collection. This study utilised the CNKI and Scopus databases.
- b) Filter 2 – Selection of keywords. The keywords used were: "influencing factors," "library," and "distribution."
- c) Filter 3 – Inclusion of the period from 2015 to 2024.

A systematic review was conducted using combinations of the highlighted keywords. Based on scholars' perspectives, the key factors influencing the distribution of community libraries were identified, and the frequency of mentions for these attributes was listed accordingly. Figure 1 shows the number of journals used for this study. A total of 15 journals were used in this study. The most journals were published in this study area from 2021 to 2023 (3 journals), followed by 2019 (2 journals).

Table 1. Key Factors in the Distribution of Community Libraries.

N O .	AUTHORS(YEAR)	KEY FACTORS				
		POPULATION	TRANSPORT	ECONOMY	ENVIRONMENT	PO LIC

		Y														
		A1	A2	A3	B1	B2	B3	C1	C2	C3	D1	D2	D3	D4	E1	E2
1.	Wang et al. (2022)	*	*	*	*	*	*			*	*	*	*	*		*
2.	Hua et al. (2022)	*	*	*		*		*	*	*		*	*	*	*	
3.	Xie (2022)					*										
4.	Puan (2021)	*	*			*					*	*				
5.	Liu et al. (2021)	*				*	*								*	
6.	Chen et al. (2023)	*		*				*	*							
7.	Wen (2023)	*		*		*	*		*							
8.	Jian (2023)	*				*									*	
9.	Xiao et al. (2018)	*	*	*		*				*	*	*		*		
10.	Chai (2024)	*				*	*		*							
11.	Li et al. (2019)	*		*			*	*	*						*	
12.	Liu (2019)	*		*	*	*					*		*	*		
13.	Deng et al. (2020)										*		*	*	*	
14.	Kim et al. (2021)										*					
15.	Shi et al. (2017)										*	*				
Total times referred		11	4	7	2	10	5	3	5	3	7	5	4	7	3	1

Results And Discussion

Results

Based on Table 1, Table 2 ranks the factors influencing the distribution of community libraries and is further illustrated in Figure 2. The spider chart presents the frequency of mentions of the key factors affecting the distribution of community libraries. Table 1 outlines the 14 driving factors influencing the distribution of community libraries, categorising them into five main groups: population, transportation, economy, environment, and policy orientation.

Table 2. Ranking Based on Total References to Factors Affecting the Distribution of Community Libraries.

NO.	CHALLENGING FACTORS IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF LIBRARIES	TOTAL TIMES REFERRED	RANKING
Population			
A1	Population Density	11	1

A2	Age Structure	4	5
A3	Cultural Level	7	3
Transportation			
B1	Road Comfort	2	7
B2	Public Transportation	10	2
B3	Road Network Density	5	4
Economy			
C1	Finance	3	6
C2	Residents' Economic Levels	5	4
C3	Operational Costs	3	6
Environment			
D1	External Environment	7	3
D2.	Noise	5	4
D3	Cultural and Historical Landmarks	4	5
D4	Infrastructure	7	3
Policy			
E1	Plan	3	6
E2	Legislation	1	8

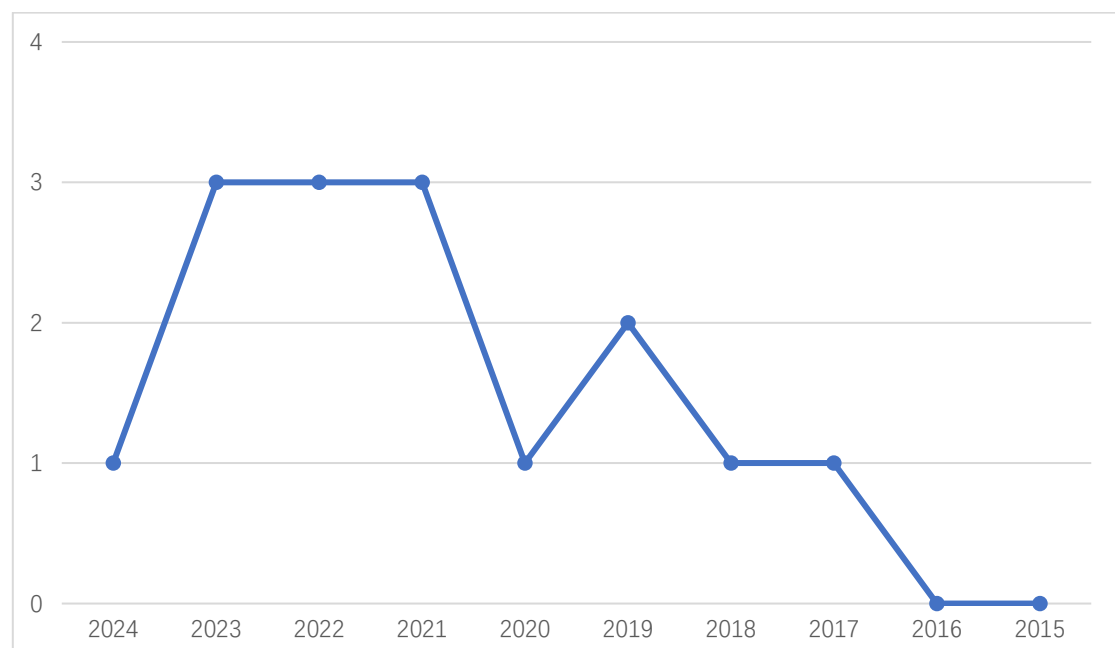
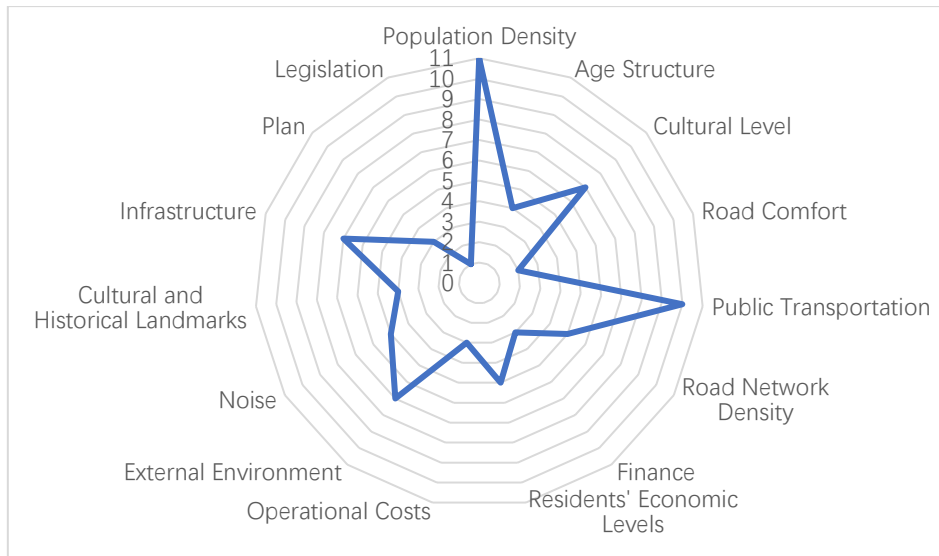


Figure 1. Number of Journals Reviewed based on Year of Publication**Figure 2.** The spider chart presents the frequency of mentions of the key factors affecting the distribution of community libraries

Overall, the factors influencing the distribution of community libraries with the highest level of attention are population density, ranked at the first level; public transportation ranked at the second level; and cultural level, external environment, and infrastructure, ranked at the third level. Population density and cultural level fall under the population category. Public transportation belongs to transportation, while external environment and infrastructure are classified under the environment category. Research on the distribution of community libraries emphasises meeting the practical needs of residents. Population factors are the most frequently mentioned factors in the papers reviewed in this study. Population-related variables such as population density, age structure, and educational attainment significantly influence the siting and layout of community libraries.

Next are environmental factors, which, as mentioned in the literature, include natural and cultural environments. A pleasant natural environment can enhance the reading experience, while a rich cultural environment can inspire residents' interest in reading and promote the development of community libraries. Although noise was mentioned only five times in the reviewed literature, some articles noted that libraries should avoid being near specific entertainment venues. This indirectly reflects the need for libraries to have a quiet environment.

In these articles, transportation factors have been mentioned 17 times. Good transportation conditions, which enhance residents' convenience in reaching libraries, can effectively expand libraries' service scope. Locations near public transport stations or major roads are more suitable for establishing libraries, as they improve accessibility and utilisation rates.

Economic and policy factors were mentioned less frequently, as most studies primarily focus on residents' reading experiences. The level of economic development affects the funding available for the construction of community libraries. Economically developed regions have more resources to build and maintain community libraries, providing better services to residents. Due to the relatively macro-level nature of policy research, there is currently limited content in the related literature.

Discussion

Population

The target audience of community libraries is people, and every individual has the right to access essential public cultural services. Therefore, based on regional population, community libraries must be scientifically planned to create a service network that covers all residents. This ensures the right to essential reading and meets the cultural needs of all citizens (Wan, Chen & Zhang, 2017). The quantity and structure of the population have a significant impact on the development of libraries. The number of permanent residents in a region determines the potential reader base, while a stable flow of visitors is a prerequisite for the library's utilisation rate. The size of the reader base, in turn, dictates the rationality of its location selection.

- (1) Population density. Most site selection strategies consider areas with high population density as suitable locations. High population density typically indicates a more extensive potential reader base, meaning that the same unit of library space can serve a greater number of residents. Setting up community libraries in densely populated areas is more likely to attract the attention of citizens, intending to draw more people in or increase the overall usage rate of the library (Shorabeh et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a strong correlation between libraries' spatial distribution and residents' spatial distribution. However, the higher the population density and mobility, the greater the demand for spatial coverage within the library's effective service area. Naturally, as population density increases, the effective service radius of the library decreases (Hua & Li, 2022). Liu and Li (2021), in their paper "Spatial Distribution Characteristics and Influencing Factors of Physical Bookstores in Xi'an City: Based on the DBSCAN Algorithm," concluded that there is a positive correlation between population density and the concentration of public cultural service facilities. In other words, the higher the population density, the greater the number of public cultural service facilities in the area.
- (2) Age structure. The site selection of community libraries should consider the age distribution and needs of the target reader group. Compared to adults, the effective activity radius of elderly people and children is more minor. When selecting a location, the library should be near communities with more elderly people and children (Pan, 2021).
- (3) Cultural level. The higher the cultural level of the population and the greater the demand for knowledge, the higher the knowledge needs within the effective service range of community libraries. Choosing areas with an intense cultural atmosphere, such as cultural centres, historical districts, or near educational institutions, can better meet residents' demands for knowledge and culture while promoting community culture's inheritance and development (Chen, Chen & Liu, 2023).

Transportation

Community libraries are located at residents' doorstep (Deng & Lu, 2020), and convenience is one of their most prominent characteristics. Transportation is the link between service points and people and the connection between libraries and their readers. It is one of the most fundamental factors influencing library site selection. Transportation factors are crucial in influencing residents' daily travel activities. The density of road networks and the availability of public transportation significantly impact the time residents spend travelling to libraries within their living areas. Generally, the better the transportation accessibility, the more effectively it can meet the travel needs of readers, thereby ensuring a steady flow of visitors. Only by selecting locations in areas with high population density and good transportation accessibility can the smooth operation of a library be guaranteed (Wen, 2023).

The construction of large public libraries is commendable, but most residents do not choose to visit these large libraries regularly. The primary reason is that the distance between large public libraries and residents' communities is often not ideal. Community library development aims to provide more convenient services for local residents (Xie, 2022). The completeness of the transportation network, the availability of public

transportation, and parking conditions will directly affect readers' interest in visiting community library branches and their borrowing frequency (Wang & Han, 2022).

- (1) Road comfort. When selecting a library location, priority should be given to areas with convenient transportation to ensure readers can easily access the facility. Research shows that good road comfort can effectively enhance the accessibility of public facilities, thereby increasing their usage frequency (Wang et al., 2021). When selecting a library location, areas such as steep roads or places with significant elevation differences between the road and the library's ground level should be avoided. These geographical conditions may hinder accessibility (Wang & Han, 2022), mainly posing significant obstacles for elderly individuals and those with mobility challenges (Alagappan, Hefferan & Parivallal, 2018). Accessibility is one of the key factors in determining whether the distribution of community libraries is reasonable. Through model analysis, Chai Lei proposed that road network density positively impacts accessibility.
- (2) Public transportation. Generally, areas with convenient public transportation tend to have higher foot traffic, which can help libraries located in such areas attract more visitors and expand their potential user base, thereby increasing the library's service coverage (Jian, 2023). If transportation is not convenient enough, it may reduce the frequency of readers visiting the library, affecting its utilisation rate and significantly diminishing its social service functions and effectiveness. Public transportation factors primarily include metrics such as the distance from the library to metro stations and bus stops and the number of nearby transit points. With the improvement of urban transportation networks, public transportation modes such as buses and subways have become dominant. They are now the most common means of travel in medium and large cities. The reader demographic includes many teenagers, children, and elderly individuals, most of whom do not drive and often rely on public transportation to visit libraries. Therefore, the presence of public transportation stations near libraries can reduce travel costs for readers, thereby enhancing the accessibility of libraries. The closer a library is to subway stations or bus stops, the lower the time and financial costs for readers, which increases their willingness to visit. As critical transportation hubs, the site selection of bus and subway stations also requires careful consideration of factors such as accessibility, foot traffic, and commercial activity, making them highly representative. Therefore, using the number of bus and subway stations as representative indicators of public transportation factors helps analyse the extent to which libraries are influenced by transportation accessibility (Wen, 2023).
- (3) Road network density. The site selection of community libraries is closely linked to transportation accessibility. Only by locating them in areas with well-developed and highly accessible transportation networks can their efficient operation be ensured. Transportation accessibility directly affects the convenience of visiting libraries, and road network density, as a key indicator of transportation accessibility, significantly impacts residents' daily travel activities within their living areas. Higher road network density can reduce travel time for residents, enhance the service accessibility of community libraries, and expand the potential user base. Studies analysing the distribution of urban reading rooms and independent bookstores in specific cities have shown a positive correlation between road network density and the spatial distribution of these facilities. In other words, the greater the road network density, the denser the spatial distribution of such locations (Liu & Li, 2021).

Economy

Economic factors mainly encompass three aspects: government fiscal conditions, residents' economic levels, and future operational costs (Hua & Li, 2022).

- (1) Finance. Due to varying levels of economic development across regions, the demand for public cultural service facilities such as urban reading rooms also differs. The work plan typically includes Community library construction only when the local government's fiscal conditions are relatively strong. Significant financial investment is a crucial requirement for building community libraries, and the funding needed varies greatly depending on the location. Constructing a library in a bustling city centre requires far more investment than building one in a remote community (Xiao & Han, 2018).
- (2) Residents' economic levels. Residents in high-income communities typically have greater cultural consumption capacity and demand, resulting in a higher need for library services. Only when residents'

economic conditions are stable and no longer preoccupied with basic living needs will they frequent libraries more often. Chai Lei's study indicates that housing prices significantly influence accessibility, mostly positively. The analysis suggests that areas with higher housing prices are often located in regions with relatively well-developed transportation and populated by individuals with more significant economic means, providing them better access to public cultural facilities. In contrast, individuals with weaker economic means tend to have less accessibility to such facilities (Chai, 2024).

- (3) Operational costs. Although community libraries are government-led and nonprofit, their long-term sustainability still requires consideration of operational costs. The higher the local economic and cultural development level, the better the operational performance of community libraries. In contrast, for libraries located in more remote areas, their visibility and utilisation rates tend to be lower (Wang & Han, 2022). Indeed, the site selection of community libraries significantly impacts their subsequent management and operations. Libraries built in remote communities generally incur higher book distribution costs, whereas those in bustling urban areas tend to have much lower logistics and distribution costs (Hua & Li, 2022).

Environment

- (1) External environment. Library site selection should prioritise areas with a serene environment and good sanitary conditions, avoiding noisy or unhygienic locations. Areas with heavy traffic, severe air pollution, or stagnant wastewater disrupt readers' concentration and pose health risks, making them unsuitable for library locations. Also, sites near crematoriums, slaughterhouses, cemeteries, or large industrial facilities are considered poor choices. Similarly, proximity to entertainment venues that may negatively influence social norms or other inappropriate locations is also unsuitable (Zhang, Ge & Xue, 2024).
- (2) Noise. For community libraries, reading is their primary function. Therefore, the library environment must be conducive to reading. High-decibel noise in the vicinity should be avoided, as it can negatively affect readers' focus and mood. People with quiet moments and the time and space to think and focus mainly accomplish productive intellectual work. The demand for silent spaces by readers is high. Intuitively, a noise-free environment is necessary for effective learning and studying. A silent environment is desirable for reflection, introspection, review, contemplation, analysis, creative thinking, writing, etc. In fact, any activity requires a sense of communion with oneself to think and create knowledge. Research indicates that different people are affected differently by the noise level in an environment. Not everyone remains unaffected by a noisy environment while reading. Extroverts tend to be less influenced by noise, whereas introverts require a quieter environment for compelling reading. If we are to believe the estimate that at least half of the population tends to be introverted, the need to provide silent spaces in the library cannot be denied (Choy & Goh, 2016).
- (3) Cultural and historical landmarks. The cultural landscape elements surrounding community libraries are also crucial, as they allow readers to relax when they feel tired from reading. The closer a library is to parks, green spaces, or leisure plazas, the more it exudes a sense of cultural ambience and atmosphere (Hua & Li, 2022). Research indicates that the purpose of visiting public libraries has extended beyond borrowing books; people derive multiple benefits from the external environmental factors surrounding libraries. For instance, many individuals use libraries as a backdrop for photography or incorporate a library visit into broader experiential activities, such as exploring nearby cultural landmarks and leisure facilities. Studies focusing on specific libraries have found that some attract readers due to their beautiful external surroundings, while others draw visitors because of their location near iconic buildings or landmarks (Kim & Lee, 2021). The closer a library is to parks, leisure plazas, green spaces, or rivers within residential areas, the more conducive it is to create a culturally rich and relaxing atmosphere. These locations are popular spots for residents to stroll and enjoy leisure activities, often exhibiting strong crowd-gathering effects (Liu, 2019).
- (4) Infrastructure. Community libraries require well-developed municipal supporting infrastructure in their surrounding areas, including municipal utility facilities and public life service amenities. Such facilities include public restrooms, security booths, and parking lots. The completeness of infrastructure plays a

supportive role in enabling libraries to fulfil their service functions better. Consequently, library site selection tends to favour areas with well-developed infrastructure (Wang & Han, 2022). For private vehicle travel, parking is a key concern. During preliminary field interviews, it was found that in most cases, if there are no parking areas near the library, some readers driving by or visiting the library often change their plans due to the inability to park conveniently. Public service facilities equipped with parking lots attract potential readers in the area and prevent congestion around the library caused by parking issues, ensuring smooth mobility of people and vehicles. Lastly, it is essential to consider nearby facilities with similar functions, such as public libraries and existing community libraries, to avoid unnecessary competition, redundant investment, and resource wastage. Parking availability is a key concern for travel modes such as private cars. In most cases, if there are no parking areas near the library, some drivers passing by or explicitly planning to visit the library may change their plans due to parking difficulties. Public service facilities equipped with parking lots attract potential users in the area and help prevent congestion around the library caused by parking issues, ensuring smooth flow for visitors and vehicles. Finally, it is essential to consider nearby facilities with similar functions, such as public or community libraries, to avoid redundant investments and resource wastage.

Policy

- (1) Plan. The distribution and construction of community libraries must align with the overall urban planning and development trends. The layout of urban reading spaces should be integrated with the city's general development plan (Deng & Lu, 2020). At the same time, different cities have developed various documents and construction standards tailored to their local community libraries, making a one-size-fits-all approach impractical. Any planning and layout can only be effectively implemented if it aligns with the overall urban planning framework (Hua & Li, 2022).
- (2) Legislation. According to Shi's (2024) research on the local legislation of community libraries, as of June 2023, 10 cities in China have established local regulatory documents, local work guidelines, and local laws related to community libraries. These legislative efforts incorporate the planning and construction of community libraries and subsequent operations, management, and service provision into the scope of local legislation. This approach effectively standardises community library practices, clarifies development boundaries, and provides a legal framework for resolving contentious issues. However, the formulation of local legislation also faces specific issues. There is significant redundancy among local legislative efforts, emphasising rapidly constructing a set minimum number and size of community libraries. While this appears to reflect high administrative efficiency and governmental attention to community libraries, it highlights the lack of long-term, scientifically grounded planning that considers the local economic and social development conditions. A review of the literature reveals that the currently enacted local regulations are not yet sufficient to fully standardise or address the numerous practical issues arising in the construction and development of community libraries. Continuous exploration, evaluation, and problem-solving are required in future legislative practices for community libraries. As urban master plans are time-sensitive, it is also essential to prepare for adaptive adjustments.

Conclusion

Zhao and Zhang's (2022) research on the factors influencing the distribution of community libraries provides valuable guidance for achieving service equalisation and scientific site selection in library development. The findings of this study hold significant reference value on both theoretical and practical levels. However, the study shows shortcomings in analysing influencing factors, failing to comprehensively and systematically explore the complex and multifaceted distribution elements. Additionally, its summary of previous research is relatively general, lacking an in-depth examination of the differences, similarities, and interconnections between various research perspectives and methodologies.

The research conducted by Hua and Li (2022) on the factors influencing the distribution of community libraries has made significant academic contributions to this field, providing valuable insights into the spatial distribution patterns of community libraries. However, their study is primarily based on a summarised

analysis of literature, with a relatively weak theoretical framework and lacking rigorous theoretical support. Future research could benefit from incorporating established theoretical models or constructing more explanatory theoretical frameworks to further enrich the academic depth and practical value of studies on the distribution of community libraries.

In research on factors influencing library distribution, the prioritisation of influencing factors varies among scholars, depending on their research perspectives, study regions, and objectives. In the study by Chen et al. (2022), the factors influencing library spatial distribution were ranked by impact: education level, economic status, cultural atmosphere, population size, cultural demand, and fiscal capacity. The survey conducted by Chen and Cao (2016) indicated that the primary purpose for readers using public libraries is to access quiet study spaces, suggesting that noise is a critical factor that requires focused attention. In the research on the site selection of self-service libraries, Xiao and Han (2021), through a comprehensive review of the literature and local expert opinions, found that population density is the most heavily weighted influencing factor. In the study on evaluation criteria for self-service library site selection, Wang and Han (2022) employed expert surveys to gather and analyse the opinions of library operation teams and specialists in related fields, ultimately concluding that operational management is the most important influencing factor.

In conclusion, when analysing the factors influencing the distribution of community libraries, it is necessary to consider the specific social, economic, and cultural characteristics of the region, clarify the impact of policies on resource allocation and construction direction, and use methods such as surveys or expert interviews to identify and prioritise factors with higher weights that influence library distribution. This comprehensive approach ensures the scientific nature of the distribution planning and enhances the practical effectiveness of library usage, providing higher-quality cultural services to community residents.

The distribution of community libraries is a multi-point optimisation problem characterised by high complexity. It requires the consideration of numerous and diverse practical factors, some of which remain unaddressed in this study. Future research could expand the range of influencing factors while adopting a more refined and systematic analytical framework. Additionally, enhancing the critical review and integration of existing research findings would improve the depth of understanding and practical applicability of the spatial distribution patterns of community libraries.

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