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Designing for the Feed: How social media shapes environmental aesthetics and urban Quality of Life

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Abstract

Social media increasingly shapes how people perceive and experience urban environments, yet existing environmental aesthetics and quality-of-life approaches insufficiently address digitally mediated experience. This study proposes Social Media-Driven Environmental Aesthetics (SMDEA) to explain these relationships. It aims to develop and conceptually validate the SMDEA framework by examining how social media mediates relationships between physical environments and users' aesthetic and emotional experiences. Using theory-building and multidisciplinary literature review, the study synthesizes conceptual data from relevant literature. Conceptual analysis maps relationships among physical environment, digital visual culture, platform algorithms, and online social engagement across four dimensions: aesthetic perception, spatial engagement, emotional attachment, and social inclusivity. Findings indicate positive and negative influences, providing a theoretical basis for future empirical research.

Keywords: Environmental Aesthetics; Social Media; Urban Quality of Life; Spatial Experience

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1.0 Introduction

Urban quality of life (UQoL) has traditionally been characterized by physical features of a city (i.e., accessibility, safety, environmental quality, and public spaces), and environmental aesthetics affect people's perception, experience, and connection to cities to enhance well-being and quality of life (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Mouratidis, 2021). However, rapid digital transformation has changed the way we think about cities, such that urban environments are examined, explored, and appraised more on social media than through physical interactions (Despard, 2015). Social media platforms are now a fundamental and essential part of urban experience, and users' content, short-form videos, and algorithmic tips can influence how people see places before, during, and after a visit, which makes cities' aesthetics more reliant on digital visibility and online engagement (Feng et al., 2025). This shift also raises concerns about place identity, participation, and emotional attachment. However, in all of these areas, the commodification and visual homogenization of image-oriented urban life have been identified (Lobo, 2023). Recent studies have addressed the impact of social media on tourism, marketing, and place branding; however, they have not examined its effects on environmental aesthetics and urban quality of life. To address this gap, this paper proposes Social Media-Driven Environmental Aesthetics (SMDEA). The paper provides a theory-building conceptual

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framework for how social media-mediated aesthetics can affect aesthetic perception, spatial experience, and urban quality of life, informing future research and more balanced urban design in the digital age.
The objectives of this study are:

- To identify the emerging relationship between social media, environmental aesthetics, spatial experience, and urban quality of life.
- To establish the Social Media-Driven Environmental Aesthetics (SMDEA) conceptual framework by integrating relevant theoretical perspectives.
- To examine how digital visual culture, platform algorithms, and online social engagement relate to aesthetic perception, spatial engagement, emotional attachment, and social inclusivity.
- To provide a theoretical basis for future empirical research on digitally mediated urban environments and inform more balanced urban design in the digital age.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Urban Life in the Digital Era

Digital technologies are changing the way that cities are lived (Castells, 2009). Moreover, urban experiences are increasingly shaped by the interaction between the physical and digital cities, with smartphone technology, location-based services, and social media all contributing to how people discover, perceive, navigate, and evaluate places (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). While the development of smart cities has mainly focused on urban efficiency through digital infrastructure (Batty et al., 2012), social media is also an important element of everyday urban life, facilitating continuous interaction with the city through user-generated content, visual representations, and algorithm-based information. So cities are no longer visited only by people; they are also interpreted as a whole through digital media before, during, and after the visit. Social media has become a mediator of urban experiences, with cities viewed, experienced, and remembered digitally as much as in physical ways (Despard, 2015; Feng et al., 2025).

2.2 Social Media as a Mediator of Urban Experience

Social media has transformed from a communication platform into an urban experience platform that shapes how people perceive, experience, and interact with cities. Rather than just documenting places, social media shapes urban experiences through user-generated content, digital visual culture, and algorithmic, data-driven recommendations within the community. For urban experience, there are now three interconnected stages: before visiting, during visiting, and after sharing, and digital media help shape the entire experience (Mou et al., 2023). More importantly, platform algorithms determine which places should be promoted and which should be recommended based on user likes, shares, comments, and viewing time (van Dijck et al., 2018). These results mean that the most visually attractive and most interesting places are promoted, but socially or culturally significant places receive less exposure. This algorithmic filtering affects the collective perspective, aesthetic preferences, and expectations of urban environments by privileging platform visibility over the real-world values of places (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). This algorithmic filtering of visibility, in turn, leads to conditions under which environmental aesthetics itself is reshaped, as we will discuss next.

2.3 Social Media-Driven Environmental Aesthetics

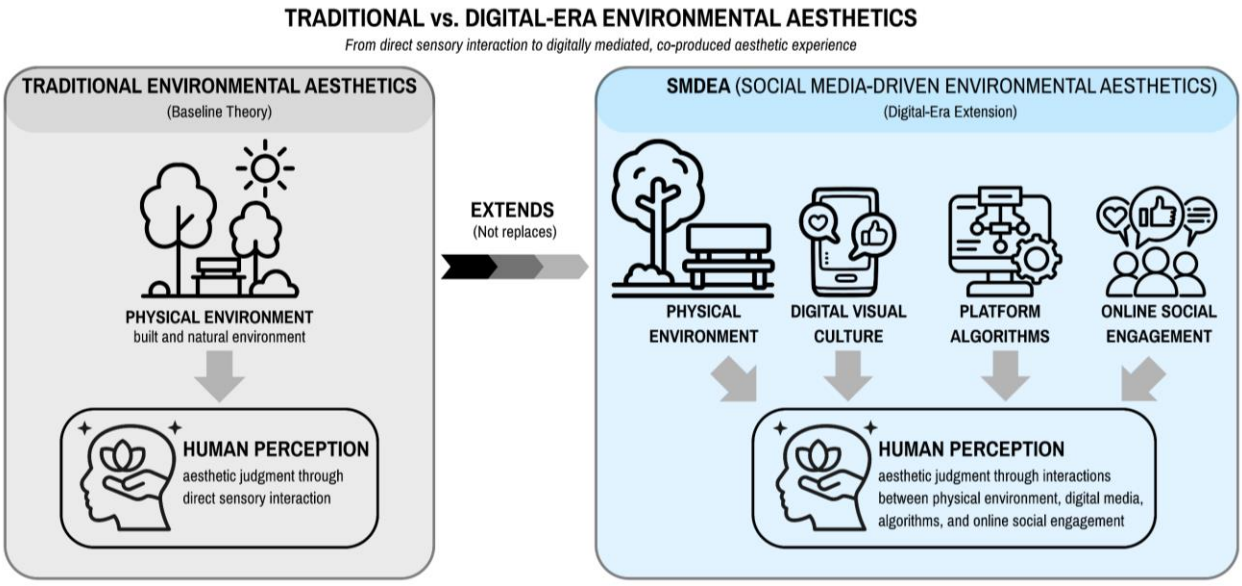


Fig. 1: Evolution from Traditional Environmental Aesthetics to SMDEA
(Source:) Author

Traditional environmental aesthetics holds that aesthetic feeling is derived from direct interaction with the environment (Berleant, 1992; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), in which various elements of the environment are perceived, interpreted, and valued through sensory and psychological processes. In the digital age, though, aesthetic experience is not only about physical encounters but also about the digital visual culture on social media. User-generated content, photographs, videos, platform algorithms, and online visual culture now constitute an added digital layer that enables people to build visual expectations and aesthetic judgments before physically visiting a place. As a result, environmental appreciation is increasingly mediated by digital beauty, platform aesthetics, and social media, where the visibility and desirability of places are influenced as much by digital interactions as by physical ones. Building on this, we develop Social Media-Driven Environmental Aesthetics (SMDEA) in this study to describe how environmental quality is influenced and shaped by interactions among people, the digital environment, platform algorithms, and online social interaction. In this way, aesthetic preferences are co-produced through direct sensory experience and digital mediation, extending traditional environmental aesthetics to explain better how social media reshapes perceptions of urban environments and ultimately influences urban quality of life.

2.4 Social Media-Driven Spatial Experience

Old-fashioned views of spatial experience describe experiencing places as a connection of people to the physical place(Scannell & Gifford, 2010). However, with the widespread use of social media, spatial experience has become an ongoing process and is not limited to physical presence. Today we experience urban life in three interlinked stages: before we go to the place, people develop their expectations through digital images, reviews, and user-generated content; during our visit, physical experience is based on digital expectations before we go and is often accompanied by content creation and online sharing; after we get there, we are sharing content and experiences and it is also our experience with people and their experiences in the future (Mou et al., 2023). Such a relationship between the online and offline world can be understood in terms of expectation, memory, emotion, and behavior (Despard, 2015), and how all of this leads to how we see, interpret, and interact with places over time. These factors are also involved in place attachment because they create emotional attachment between people and places in a direct way and also in a digital way through interaction with people. So spatial experience is no longer limited to physical encounters but is increasingly co-produced through the dynamic interface between physical surroundings and digital representations, and provides an important route through which social media influences environmental aesthetics and urban quality of life.

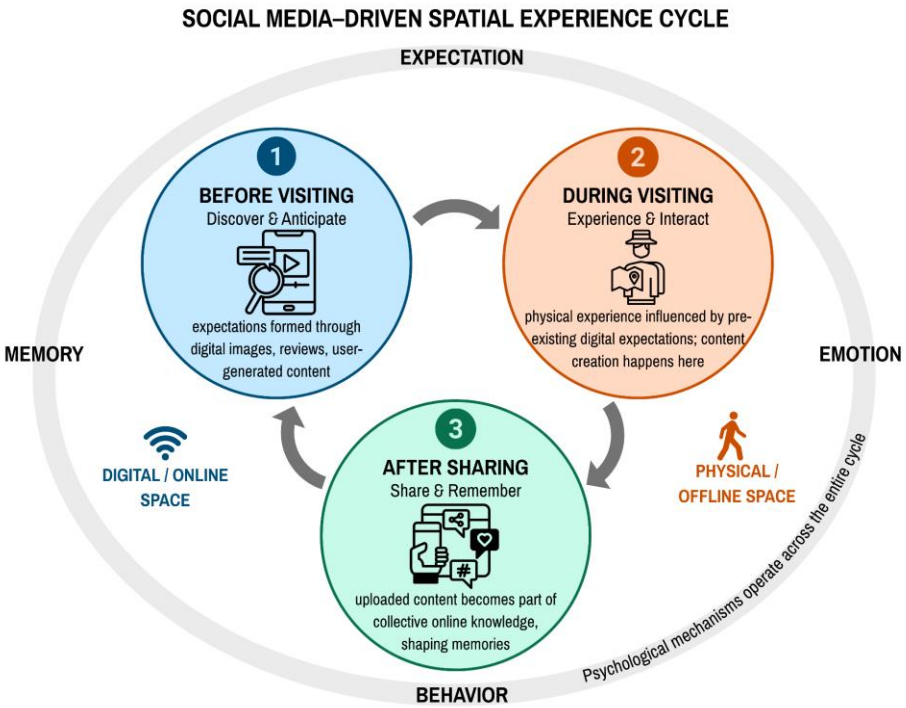


Fig. 2: Social Media-Driven Spatial Experience Cycle, illustrating the continuous interaction between digital anticipation, physical presence, and online sharing
(Source:) Author

2.5 Urban Quality of Life in the Age of Social Media

UQoL has traditionally been associated with the physical, social, environmental, and psychological conditions that allow people to live healthy, fulfilling, and meaningful lives in urban environments (Mouratidis, 2021). In the digital age, quality of life is not only influenced by the physical attributes of cities but also by the way in which people are presented, experienced, and evaluated in the city on the internet as well. On one hand, social media can enhance place identity, encourage public engagement, strengthen community engagement, and improve emotions because places are better suited for people to connect with, be part of, and socialize in (Shi et al., 2025). On the other hand, with an increasing focus on digitally attractive and shareable places, public space is commodified, overtourism

may be facilitated, people are excluded, and urban landscapes become homogeneous (i.e., they are made to serve platform aesthetics rather than the needs of local communities) (Lobo, 2023). In addition, the constant exposure to idealized visions of places and the expectation to document and share urban life experiences may add psychological and health strain, such as social comparison, pressure to perform for the camera, digital overload, and sensory overload, and can negatively affect the quality of life. The latter are indicative of the fact that the quality of urban life is a matter of physical space as well as digital experience, and we should balance digital visibility with inclusiveness, authenticity, and long-term human well-being.

2.6 Research Gap

Although numerous studies have examined the impact of social media on tourism, place branding, destination marketing, and overall urban image, little attention has been paid to its impact on environmental aesthetics and urban quality of life. Most of the existing research has been on the topic alone, as digital aesthetics is a very fragmented concept. Hence, the people in this field are not fully aware of their perception, spatial experiences, and well-being. So far, no unified conceptual framework has been suggested that systematically connects social media, environmental aesthetics, spatial experience, and urban quality of life. Furthermore, the concept of SMDEA is not defined or theoretically developed in the environmental aesthetics literature. To address these gaps, in this paper, we introduce SMDEA as a new concept and develop a theory-building framework that shows how social media is a mediator of environmental aesthetics, improves spatial experience, and ultimately contributes to the quality of life in the city. The framework proposed here provides a theoretical basis for future empirical research and extends environmental aesthetics into the world of contemporary digital society.

3.0 Methodology

This study uses a theory-building conceptual research design to understand how social media shapes environmental aesthetics and UQoL. It is based on a conceptual review of interdisciplinary literature rather than empirical research. Literature was searched in Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect using combinations of “social media”, “environmental aesthetics”, “urban quality of life”, “urban experience”, “digital visual culture”, “spatial experience”, “place attachment”, and “platform algorithms”. The search covered literature published from 2015 to 2026, together with key earlier theoretical works. Studies were included when they were directly related to the main concepts and excluded when they were unrelated, duplicated, or lacked sufficient relevance. The selected literature was reviewed and compared to identify relationships between physical and digital urban environments and to develop the SMDEA concept. Four dimensions were identified: visual perception, spatial engagement, emotional attachment, and social inclusivity. These dimensions form the basis of the conceptual framework.

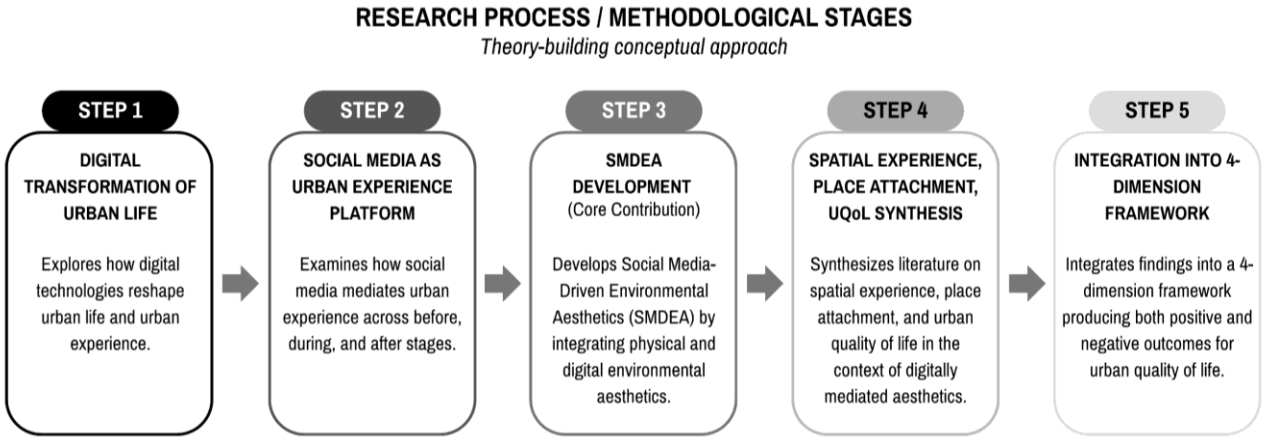


Fig. 3: Research process illustrating the five sequential stages of conceptual synthesis leading to the SMDEA framework
(Source:) Author

4.0 Conceptual Framework Development

The conceptual framework explains how social media shapes environmental aesthetics and impacts UQoL through interrelated psychological and spatial processes. Based on the interdisciplinary literature outlined in the Abstract and Section 3, SMDEA is at the center of how digital visual culture relates to human experience of urban life (Despard, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018). Environmental aesthetics is increasingly co-produced through interactions between physical environments and digitally mediated representations and is not just generated by direct sensory experience, as was shown in Section 2.3 and Figure 1(Carlson, 2000; Leaver et al., 2020).

The four dimensions are mutually reinforcing rather than independent. Aesthetic perception influences spatial engagement through visual expectations that guide how urban spaces are used. Moreover, spatial engagement strengthens emotional attachment through repeated interactions with physical sites and their digital representations. Emotional attachment reinforces aesthetic perception through

circulating images and narratives online, consolidating dominant aesthetic norms. However, it can lead to social inclusivity being undermined by visually optimized spaces that favor certain behaviors and relegate everyday or non-curated uses.

The dynamic is illustrated by an Instagram-famous urban perspective. Aesthetic perception is initially shaped by curated online images that create an image that we imagine to be the one. Spatial engagement follows, as visitors repeat similar framing and poses, and the space becomes the same in terms of how people use and experience it. With time, both visitors and local stakeholders develop emotional attachments that combine recognition with feelings of discomfort in a new world. Ultimately, social inclusivity wanes as the space becomes more and more dominated by more visually oriented users, and everyday community practices and less visually attractive activities are less visible. This example shows how the four dimensions co-produce one another through cycles of digital representation and physical interaction.

In general, the framework argues that social media does not influence urban experience in isolated ways but rather creates feedback loops in which aesthetic perception, spatial engagement, emotional attachment, and social inclusivity persist over time. These dynamics explain how digitally mediated visual culture is embedded into urban quality of life and both enhances and creates tension depending on how strongly aesthetic visibility is prioritized over diverse urban uses (Figure 4).

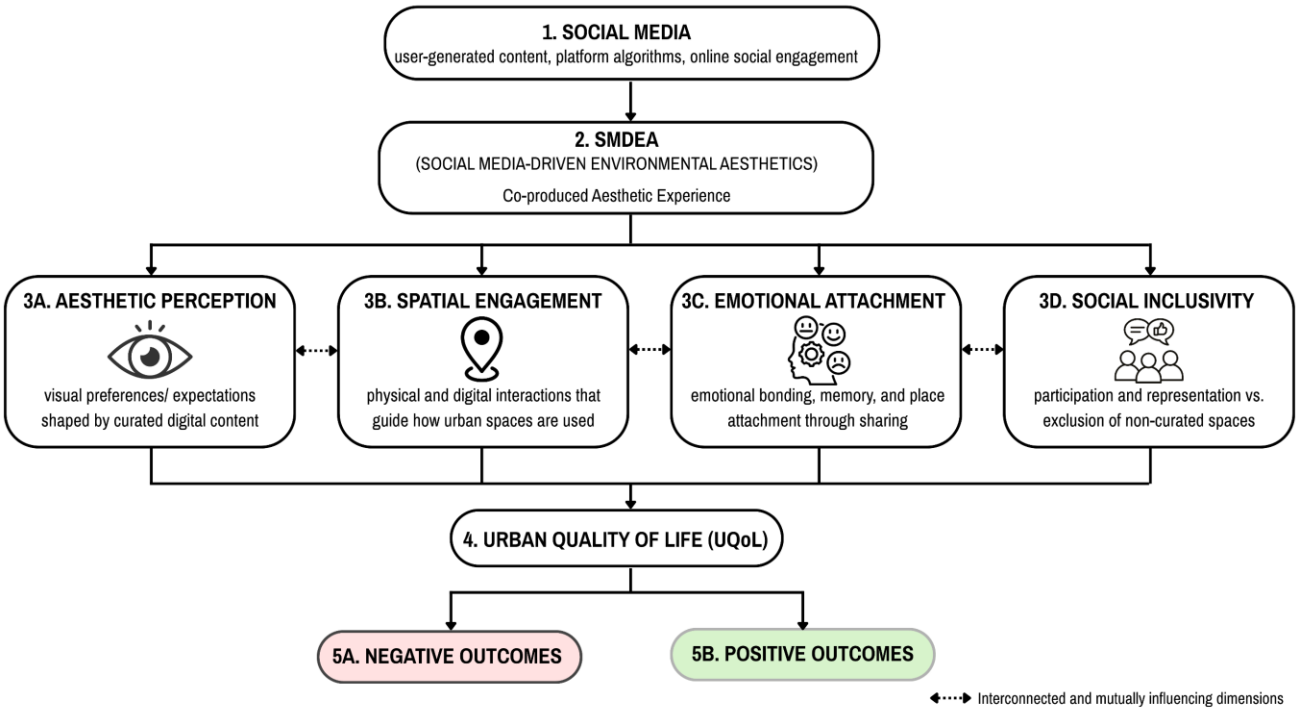


Fig. 4: Conceptual framework of SMDEA and its influence on UQoL
(Source:) Author

5.0 Discussion

The study contributes to urban quality of life research by examining the impact of social media on environmental aesthetics and contemporary urban experience. While previous research has been focused on tourism, destination marketing, and place branding, this work views social media as an evolving factor in environmental aesthetics and urban quality of life. Rather than being used in a communication mode, social media is used to construct and reproduce aesthetic values, spatial expectations, and everyday urban experiences (Low & Altman, 1992; Shi et al., 2025). The key contribution is in reframing digitally mediated aesthetics as a structural condition of urban perception instead of a purely representational layer. SMDEA expands and complicates earlier theories of Debord's society of the spectacle and Goffman's dramaturgical self-presentation. Unlike those based on mediation and performativity, SMDEA models visual culture in spatial aesthetics and spatial experience and shows us how visual culture not only represents urban space but also determines how it is designed, used, and assessed for the rest of a person's life (Debord, 1994; Goffman, 1959). It shows that there exists a tension between digitally constructed visibility and material and experiential aspects of the city.

Further extends spatial theory (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), which describes urban experience as continuous outside of physical presence. This continuity also creates a structural tension: digital visibility measures like likes, shares, and engagement are increasingly used as a proxy for urban quality (Boy & Uitermark, 2016), and that can be problematic as well, as they make physical spaces seem more and more like a performance space over a place that is truly inclusive, functional, and socially relevant. As such, city quality of life may differ from its digital picture, so there is a gap between the perceived attractiveness of the city and reality. Connected to urban quality of life, digital aesthetics can both enhance and dilute urban value. Social media visibility can enhance symbolic recognition and emotional attachment to places, but it can also reinforce spatial inequality, as spaces are more photogenic or algorithmically favored and less visible (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). This results in aesthetic stratification: visibility is unevenly distributed across urban

landscapes. In the world of urban design practices, the findings imply that digital visibility should be viewed as a factor in the design process and not as the primary focus of the design process. The proposals can be evaluated not only in terms of their photogenic potential but also in terms of their flexibility in other everyday uses, which do not fall into a single dominant visual frame and may not be constrained in a static narrative. Finally, the framework mainly draws on Western thinking and platforms based on global social media culture, for instance, Instagram. In Southeast Asian megacities such as Bangkok, the relationship between digital visibility, cultural norms, informal urban practices, and lived experience may be different. Local everyday urbanism and other forms of place attachment may change or resist SMDEA mechanisms in the city. The framework should be further tested and adapted in a variety of cultural and geographical environments.

6.0 Conclusion

The rapid introduction of social media into daily life in urban society has changed the way people think about, feel about, and perceive city life. Quality of life is not just a function of the physical space within which people live but also of digitally mediated experience that can affect our aesthetic preferences, spatial expectations, and emotional responses (de Souza e Silva, 2006). So, to understand urban landscapes, we have to move beyond the aesthetic of the environment in contemporary urban life and examine how digital visual culture is shaping the human–environment relationship. The present paper develops a theory-building framework for SMDEA. It argues that social media actively shapes urban experience, and hence how places are perceived before and after people's physical proximity. Using the interdisciplinary literature synthesized in this study (Abstract; Figure 3), four dimensions of social media-based aesthetics influence urban quality of life: aesthetic perception (Nasar, 1990), spatial experience (Tuan, 1977), emotional attachment, and social inclusivity (Gatti & Procentese, 2021). The framework is useful for three reasons. First, it extends environmental aesthetics by integrating digitally mediated visual experience into aesthetic perception (Degen & Rose, 2024). Second, it provides an understanding of how social media, spatial experience, and urban quality of life are related in this context (Gatti & Procentese, 2021). Third, it provides an interdisciplinary conceptual foundation for different fields (see Abstract), addressing a gap in existing research. As described in Sections 2.5 and 5, these results can be seen as a key tension in digital-era urban development between visibility and authenticity (Simmel, 1950). So urban planning is to balance digital visibility with inclusiveness, authenticity, and long-term environmental quality. The approach is not experimental and should be treated as a theory. This study has some limitations. The literature review mainly focused on English-language studies and selected social media platforms, which may cause selection bias. The SMDEA framework has not yet been empirically tested. Future research should develop measurable indicators for each dimension: aesthetic perception through geotagged images and image evaluation, spatial engagement through posting and check-in activities, emotional attachment through place-attachment measures, and social inclusivity through measures of participation and inclusion. These indicators can then be tested across different cities, cultures, and platforms and refined based on empirical results.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the field of environmental aesthetics, urban design, and quality of life research by providing a new theoretical framework of SMDEA by linking social media, environmental aesthetics, spatial experience, and urban quality of life in one place to the theory. The four-dimensional model provides a theoretical basis for future empirical research into how digital visual culture shapes urban space.

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