Formation and Evolution Mechanism of Internet-Famous Spaces: A Case Study of Yulin Community in Chengdu, China

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Abstract

In the digital era, "digital media" has demonstrated an increasingly powerful capacity to shape spatial environments, giving rise to new urban and rural spaces represented by popular online spaces. As a fusion of digital media and physical spaces, the formation and evolution mechanisms of popular online spaces present a novel and urgent research agenda in urban theory. This paper introduces the concept of "media space" and analyzes the threefold attributes of "digital media space": user-constructed virtual scenarios, deterritorialized data tags, and flexibly produced traffic-oriented commodities. Based on the "media-people-space" perspective, the study establishes the interactive logic between digital media space and physical space, elucidating the processes through which media users and related stakeholders collaboratively participate in the formation and evolution of popular online spaces. Using "Yulin Community in Chengdu" as a case study, this paper provides an empirical analysis. Finally, it advocates for spatial planning to focus on the expansion of its scope from physical spaces to media spaces, emphasizing the proactive guidance of media space creation and virtual-real interactions.

Full Text Article

Keywords: Digital media, Internet-famous space, Space formation, Evolution mechanism, Chengdu City

Introduction

From the print era to the digital age, each revolution in mainstream media has reshaped how humans perceive and transform the world. However, no previous era has paralleled the digital age in systematically reshaping human spatial perception and behavioral logic through the pervasive penetration of media into daily life. The digital media era has witnessed the emergence of new urban and rural spaces, with "internet-famous spaces" being a particularly notable phenomenon. These spaces typically refer to physical locations that attract significant online attention. In recent years, places such as "Zibo Eight Bureaus ('淄博八大局' in Chinese)" and "Chengdu Disneyland ('成都迪士尼' in Chinese)" have emerged and evolved in unexpected ways.

As hybrid entities integrating digital media and physical spaces, internet-famous spaces present pressing questions regarding their formation and evolution. Existing studies have explored the formation mechanisms of these spaces from perspectives such as visual consumption and cultural capital [1-3], analyzed their spatial distribution and influencing factors [4-7], and examined their impact on spatial perception and behavior [8-11]. However, the unique characteristics of digital media and the interaction mechanisms between media and space have yet to be adequately addressed. To fill this gap, this paper combines urban studies with media studies by introducing the concept of "media space". It aims to analyze the features of digital media and digital media spaces, construct the interaction logic between digital media spaces and physical spaces, and use " Yulin Community in Chengdu" as a case study. This research seeks to provide insights into urban theory in the digital age and inspire interdisciplinary studies across fields.

The Concept and Virtual-Real Relationship of Media Space

Media are tools for storing and disseminating information, while media space refers to the representation of spatial information within media-essentially a virtual space that exists in a specific medium. The term "media space" was first introduced by media scholar John Hartley [12], who argued that television constructs a diverse, interactive, and symbolic media space through language, images, and sounds [13]. As a product of interactions among media, humans, and physical spaces, media space naturally exhibits a dynamic virtual-real interplay with physical space (Figure 1). Content creators within media systems gather information from physical spaces, which is then processed and presented as media space. During dissemination, media space influences audiences' spatial perceptions and decision-making, prompting corresponding behaviors in physical spaces. These behaviors, in turn, further shape the state of the physical space.
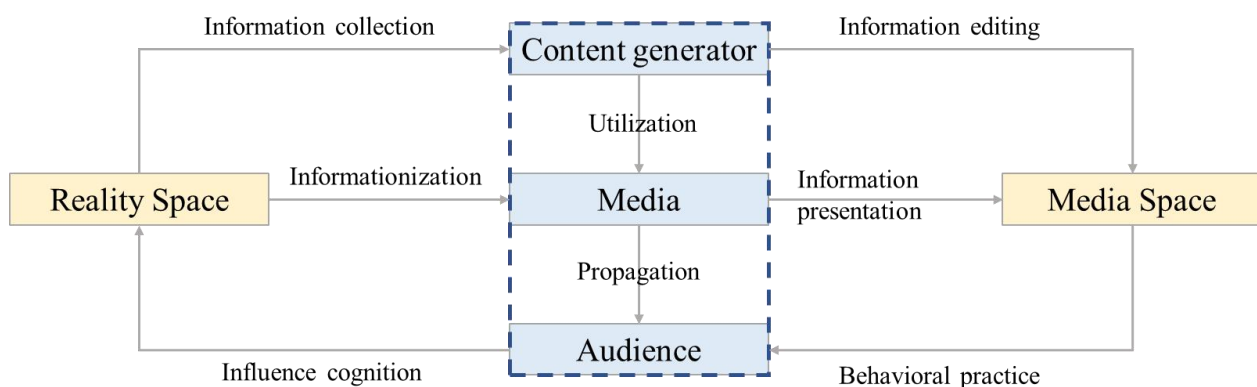

Figure.1 The interaction logic between media space and reality space

The characteristics and real-world impact of media spaces are shaped by the nature of the media itself. In the print era, media spaces were primarily composed of text and images, with their expressiveness and influence significantly constrained. With the advent of the electronic age, video dissemination technologies enabled media spaces to be presented in a more multidimensional and diverse manner. David Harvey observed that spatial representation in postmodern films exhibits fragmentation, heterogeneity, and multilayered characteristics [14]. Similarly, Mike Crang pointed out that while literary works assign new meanings to places through descriptive language, films create new virtual spaces through cinematic techniques and narrative structures. The latter are more spatially representative and more capable of shaping people's spatial imagination and sense of identity [15]. With the arrival of the digital age, the expressiveness, richness, and immediacy of media spaces have grown exponentially. As a result, the spatial representations within digital media-referred to as digital media spaces-have become particularly impactful on social behaviors and the dynamics of physical spaces.

Mechanisms of Formation and Evolution of Internet-Famous Spaces Driven by Digital Media

Internet-famous spaces are essentially a fusion of "hotspot" media spaces and physical spaces. The formation and evolution of these spaces represent an interactive process between virtual and physical spaces, driven by digital media and involving the participation of media users and relevant stakeholders (Figure 2). This process highlights the multifaceted shaping power of digital media systems on both media spaces and physical spaces.
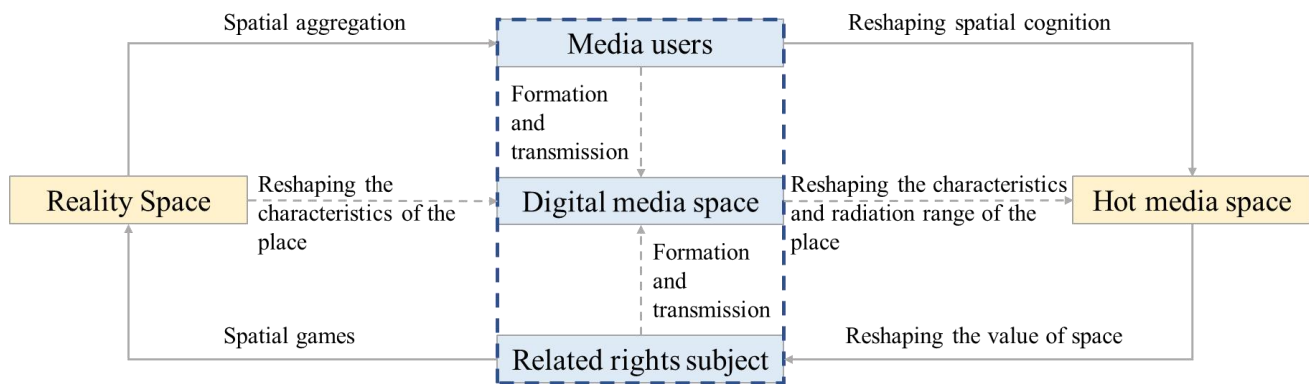
Figure.2 The formation and evolution mechanism of internet celebrity space

1. Reshaping Physical Spaces into Media Spaces

The formation of internet-famous spaces involves the generation and dissemination of hotspot media spaces, representing a process in which digital media virtually reshape physical spaces. During the information generation phase, creators of media spaces selectively emphasize or downplay certain spatial information based on social, commercial, or other objectives. This process enhances less perceptible characteristics of physical spaces (e.g., the information surrounding "Zibo Barbecue" highlights the hospitable cultural connotation of locations like the "Eight Bureaus

Market") or assigns entirely new attributes to these spaces (e.g., community parks being repurposed as festive "Chengdu Disneylands").

In the information dissemination phase, users further reshape media spaces through interactions such as likes, comments, and shares, influenced by their spatial experiences and emotions. Two scenarios may logically arise during this phase: 1) Public rationality: Differences between media spaces and physical spaces are corrected, causing media spaces to converge with physical spaces; 2) Public emotion: Differences are amplified, sometimes creating entirely new spatial attributes.

In practice, however, non-mainstream, idealized, or "anti-reality" characteristics tend to garner more attention and evolve into hotspots, making the second scenario more likely to generate internet-famous spaces. Overall, digital media transform the "objective reality" of spaces into "symbolic reality"-a virtual representation optimized for dissemination-and eventually reshape the "subjective reality" embedded in societal consciousness.

2. Media-Driven Transformation of Physical Spaces
Spatial Convergence of Media Users

Media users, influenced by "media cultivation", engage in spatial convergence behaviors such as "media pilgrimages", reshaping the functions and hierarchies of physical spaces. Media cultivation refers to the process by which individuals' perceptions align with media representations over time [16]. As hotspot media spaces emerge, media users' perception of physical spaces shifts, leading them to treat the attributes presented in media spaces as "reality". This often results in symbolic travel behaviors, or media pilgrimages, where users visit prominent locations depicted in the media [17]. Unlike traditional media-era practices motivated by emotional attachment to places ("topophilia"), digital media pilgrimages are often highly utilitarian, emphasizing actions such as check-ins, live streaming, and other activities aimed at garnering visibility. This shift reflects a new "place-display complex", contrasting with the traditional "place-affection complex". Following the guidance of media spaces, media users, as new participants in physical spaces, redefine these spaces through their spontaneous activities.

Spatial Negotiation Among Stakeholders

The spatial convergence of media users creates conflicts of interest among existing space users, local governments, and other stakeholders, resulting in multi-party spatial negotiations. The influx of media users disrupts the original supply-demand equilibrium of physical spaces, imbuing them with new functional and market values. These changes can lead to intense conflicts between media users and original users, manifesting in exclusionary phenomena such as "delocalization" or "demediation". Local governments, driven by governance goals related to regional development and social stability, play a critical role in mediating these conflicts and guiding "positive" spatial behaviors. Compared to media users, original space users and local governments possess greater control over spatial configurations and can reshape physical spaces through material modifications and regulatory measures. The outcomes of these spatial negotiations vary across contexts, resulting in different trajectories for spatial transformation: 1) Media-oriented transformation. Physical spaces are reshaped to align with media spaces; 2) Preservation-oriented transformation. Efforts are

made to restore the original attributes of the space; 3) Compromise-oriented transformation. Spatial adjustments balance the interests of all parties.

3. Dynamic Integration of Virtual and Physical Spaces

The evolution of internet-famous spaces often entails iterative interactions between digital media spaces and physical spaces, culminating in their eventual integration. As media users and stakeholders transform physical spaces, these modified spaces may give rise to new hotspot media spaces, characterized by novel scenes and attributes, thus initiating a new cycle of virtual-physical interaction. Due to the labeling and commodification inherent in digital media spaces, the spatial behaviors of media users and stakeholders are closely monitored, serving as material for creating new media spaces. Over time, however, as the traffic and attention associated with hotspot media spaces wane, the utilitarian media pilgrimage behaviors gradually subside, and the virtual-physical interaction diminishes until it largely ceases. Through continuous cycles of virtual-physical interaction, the disparities between media spaces and physical spaces gradually narrow, ultimately converging toward a unified state.

Case Study

"Chengdu Disneyland" was originally a community park located in Yulin Seventh Lane, Wuhou District, Chengdu. The park is surrounded by open residential areas built during the 1980s. In April 2024, a surreal online parody movement transformed this modest park, equipped with only a single amusement facility, into a viral sensation nationwide. It quickly became a must-visit destination, sparking spatial conflicts among tourists, local residents, and the municipal government. Despite its seemingly absurd and contentious emergence, the "magical" evolution of this urban micro-space vividly demonstrates the profound influence of digital media on shaping spaces. It provides critical insights into the virtual-physical interaction mechanisms underpinning the formation and evolution of internet-famous spaces.

1. A Carnival Park Detached from Reality
The "Nomi" Rebellion Space

In March 2024, the rapper "Nomi", frustrated after being eliminated by mentor "Xie Di" on a talent show, posted a music video online. The video featured him fiercely performing his song "Xie Di Xie Di, I want to diss you ('谢帝谢帝，我要鄙视你' in Chinese)" while pedaling on a fitness machine in the community park at Yulin Seventh Lane. The machine, resembling a seesaw, was chosen by Nomi to showcase his muscularity and defiance, as he explained during a livestream. However, the exaggerated expressions, clumsy movements, and humorous lyrics unintentionally sparked online debate. Viewers mocked his awkward English pronunciation, interpreting "diss ni ("你" in Chinese)" as sounding like "Disney". This misinterpretation gave rise to the park's nickname, "Chengdu Disneyland", injecting an element of irony into the space and initiating its transformation into a hotspot media space.

The "Apple Sister" Carnival Park

Online influencer "Apple Sister", known for her humorous videos, recognized the potential for viral attention and redefined the community park as an alternative carnival park-"Chengdu Disneyland"-through her own short videos. On April 2nd, she posted a video titled "Xie Di, I Want Disney" on the platform Douyin (TikTok in China), in which she performed exaggerated rap in eccentric outfits in the community park. Her antics sharply contrasted with the calm elderly man exercising in the background. However, the video initially did not garner widespread attention. On April 3rd, she returned to the park to repeat a similar performance and uploaded another video, this time recording a university student who happened to be visiting the park as a "rapper" enthusiast (a student from a nearby school) with a caption claiming, "Chengdu Disneyland's popularity has reached the point where people are fighting for spots to check in". She named the community park "Chengdu Disneyland", and despite few people actually visiting the park, exaggerated the check-in behavior for promotional effect.

This video immediately sparked public enthusiasm, accumulating 360,000 likes on the same day and eventually reaching 678,000 likes, becoming the most liked video related to "Chengdu Disneyland" across platforms. It also contributed to the growing popularity of the previous video. The audience primarily consisted of young people from various provinces (Figure 3). In the video, the park's original function of serving residents with fitness facilities was overshadowed, transforming into a carnival space for showcasing unconventional behaviors. The viral success of "Chengdu Disneyland" was fueled by media users' fascination with "meme" culture and the allure of non-mainstream behaviors.
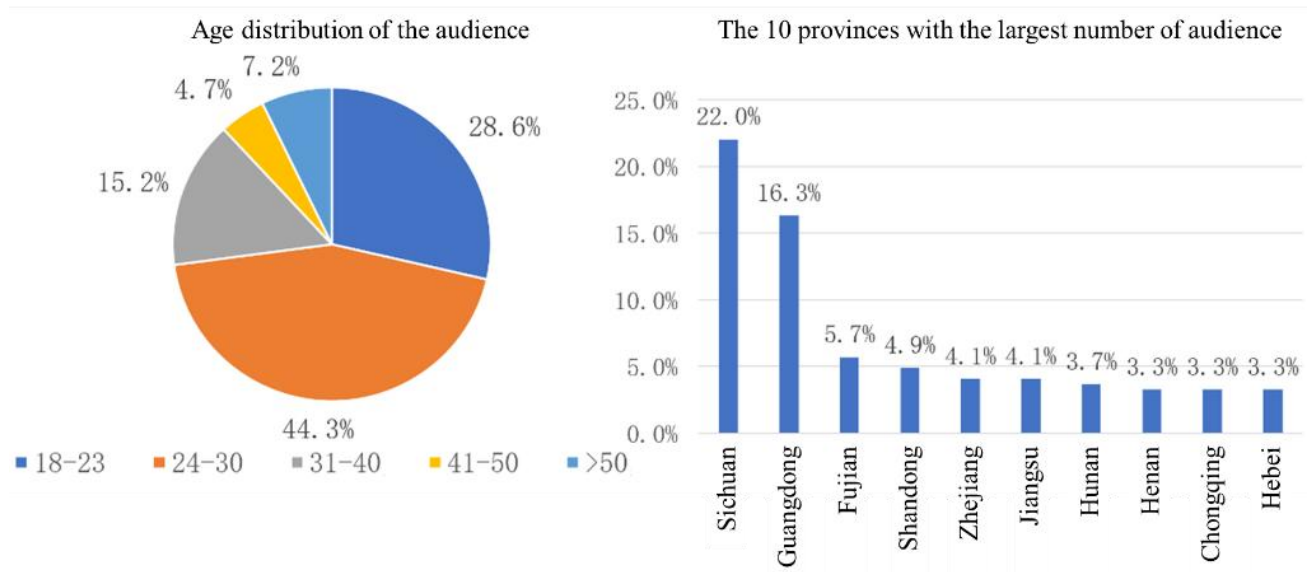

Figure.3 User profile of top stream videos

2. The Transformation of the Carnival Park
Media Users' Convergence and Carnival

Inspired by "Apple Sister" and "Nomi", starting on April 4th, the community park saw a significant influx of visitors, including those filming themselves, live-streaming, and crowding

around to watch "Apple Sister's" performances. The foot traffic around the park surged noticeably (Figure 4). Among the crowd, some loudly rapped and encouraged onlookers to join in, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of a "grassroots music festival". Driven by the online influencers' calls and media-induced excitement, more and more onlookers joined the "carnival", chanting "I want Disney". This enthusiastic participation even included elderly individuals and children. The community park underwent a tangible transformation into a carnival space, where people expressed themselves, vented their emotions, and sought attention. Meanwhile, the behavior of the media users became the raw material for the creation of new media spaces, reinforcing the park's identity as a carnival zone. A flood of provocative titles and vivid videos began circulating, such as "There are 100 million people in Chengdu, and 10,000 are at Chengdu Disneyland", "If you're unhappy, come to Chengdu Disneyland", and "Chengdu Disneyland's opening day", each of which garnered tens of thousands of likes.
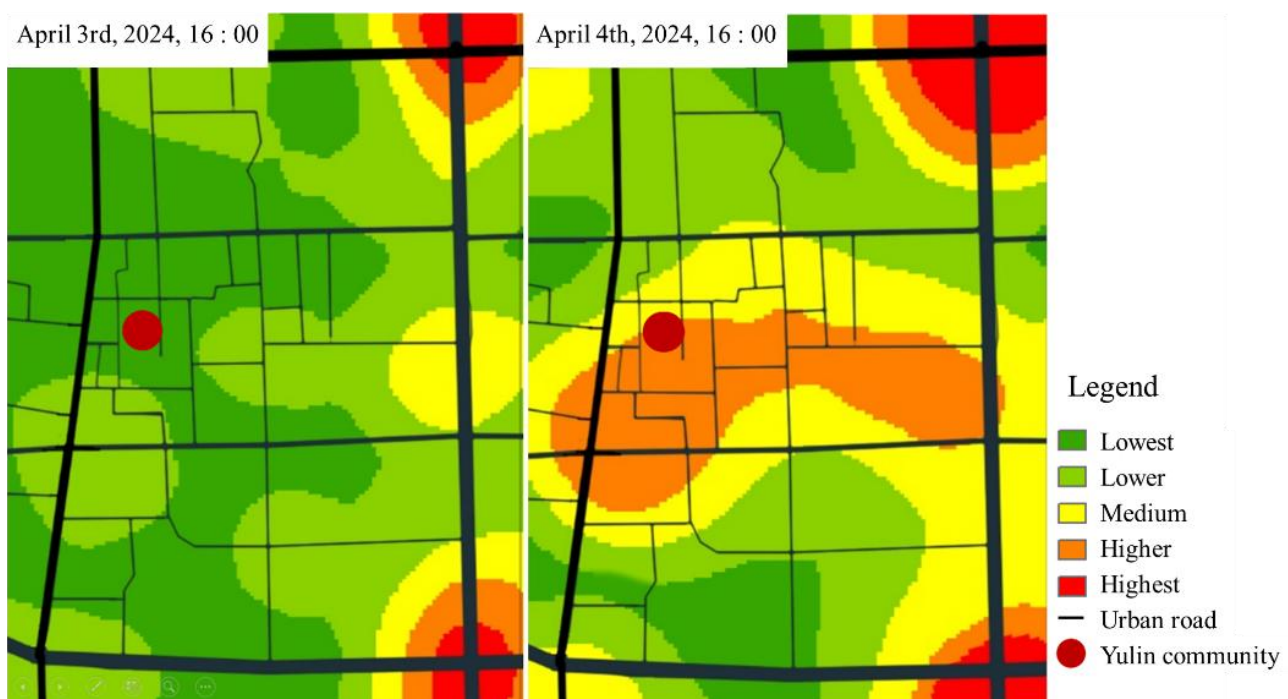
Figure.4 Changes in pedestrian flow and heat around Yulin community during the same period

Intervention by Residents and Community Committees

The gathering and carnival of media users not only overcrowded the already limited community park but also disturbed the normal lives of the surrounding residents due to the noise generated. Faced with escalating, even 24-hour, carnival-like behavior from media users, residents began to lodge complaints with the community committee to express their dissatisfaction. In response, the committee did not simply close the park or continue to tolerate the media users' behavior; instead, it implemented a compromise by improving the space to accommodate the demands of all parties involved. The community committee initiated beautification efforts and refined management strategies to transform the park into a more organized, tourist-like destination. They enclosed the

corner of the park where the key attraction (the fitness machine area) was located, erected signage for "Chengdu Disneyland", and established designated entry and exit points. They also set clear opening and closing hours and restricted the maximum number of visitors (20 people at a time), while enforcing a strict ban on loud noise during check-ins. Under the committee's guidance, residents were mobilized to become volunteers who would help maintain order during visits to "Chengdu Disneyland". Starting on April 6th, media users who wished to visit had to follow the new guidelines and enter the park in an orderly manner. With the joint involvement of the residents and the community committee, the space was restructured into a tightly controlled tourist attraction.

3. The Community Park After the Carnival

The community committee's transformation of the park was recorded by media users and redefined the park's space with qualities that symbolized Chengdu's inclusive culture, sparking a new round of virtual-real interaction. On April 6th, a short video documenting the transformed Chengdu Disneyland, titled "Chengdu is truly a very inclusive city", became the new viral sensation, amassing 286,000 likes. However, the "disciplined" characteristics of the park did not align with the initial expectations of many media users who had been drawn to the "Chengdu Disneyland" for its free expression and unrestricted release of emotions. As a result, negative videos and comments about the "silent" check-ins, restricted visitor numbers, and other limitations began to proliferate. The changes to "Chengdu Disneyland" rapidly diminished its online popularity. After a week of viral fame, no new videos received more than 10,000 likes, and the physical foot traffic to the park also drastically reduced. By the second week, the number of visitors had returned to levels seen before its sudden popularity. By June 2024, although some visitors still occasionally came for check-ins, the barriers and facilities had been dismantled. "Chengdu Disneyland" had faded into history, and the community park had returned to being a fitness space for local residents. Throughout this process, while the community committee successfully balanced the needs of the residents and media users, the transformation did not fully capitalize on the influx of attention brought by the "Internet celebrity" space, missing an opportunity to turn the viral flow into a catalyst for local development.

Discussion

Digital media space has become an essential basis for human perception and spatial practices. As digital media continues to evolve, the presentation of space will become increasingly rich, and the relationship between virtual and real spaces will grow even closer [18]. Consequently, media space is undoubtedly an important area for theoretical exploration and practical engagement within spatial planning. The significant influence of digital media space on human activities will inevitably generate new demands for space use, offering new digital momentum for urban development, which urban planning must actively address.

1. Adapting to New Spatial Demands of Digital Media Users

The widespread emergence of "Internet celebrity" spaces reflects the new spatial demands of digital media users. It also highlights the collective demands of various subcultures in a relatively egalitarian online environment and their struggle for rights to real-world spaces. Spatial planning needs to fully consider the presence of such "Internet celebrity" spaces in cities, understand the socio-economic motivations behind their creation, and guide the spatial practices of digital media users in a way that maximizes benefits and minimizes risks. Urban renewal planning and design should be carried out in response to the spontaneous emergence of "Internet celebrity" spaces and their surrounding areas. Spatial planning should be seen as a way to realize the ideal representations and characteristics of digital media spaces, as well as a means to mediate the conflicts between media users and original space stakeholders. By rationally planning space, the online traffic generated by digital media spaces can be transformed into tangible social and market value. On the one hand, by carefully managing space development and implementing dynamic updates, planners can avoid the short-lived nature of "Internet celebrity" spaces, ensuring their sustained popularity. On the other hand, by developing the surrounding resources of "Internet celebrity" spaces, planners can further amplify the positive influence of these spaces on the neighborhood or even the entire city, helping to create "Internet celebrity" brands that combine regional characteristics with diversity.

2. Opening New Frontiers in Digital Media Space Planning

Spatial planning must proactively engage in the creation and dissemination of media spaces, actively planning and developing "Internet celebrity" spaces to expand the scope of planning from physical spaces to media spaces. In an era characterized by growing land scarcity, stagnating spatial growth, and tightened fiscal conditions, spatial planning faces significant challenges in transforming and adapting. A key issue is how to revitalize urban existing spaces and improve their operation-an essential question for spatial planning and a crucial driver of urban renewal. There is a need for spatial planning to further expand its disciplinary boundaries, actively incorporating knowledge from related fields like communication studies, and opening up new territories in the planning of digital media spaces. Digital media spaces are gradually surpassing physical spaces to become the "primary space" in social perception. Spatial planning should explore and accumulate methods for designing media spaces, seeking the best ways to present physical spaces within digital media, and using superior presentations of digital media spaces as key criteria in selecting physical space planning and design solutions. The goal is to create the best experience where media and physical spaces mutually reinforce each other. Through the planning and design of media spaces, the unique characteristics of real-world spaces can be highlighted, enhancing their influence, fostering social consensus, and continuously driving urban renewal. By utilizing low-cost, digitally generated media spaces as catalysts, spatial planning can attract online traffic and transform it into digital capital that supports the ongoing revitalization of cities.

3. Constructing New Forms of Public Participation Based on Digital Media

For areas where planning is about to be implemented, it is essential to conduct a diversified analysis of existing digital media spaces and create designs that incorporate digital media,

establishing a public participation model that spans the entire planning process. In the field investigation phase, big data analytics and artificial intelligence should be employed to gather information on existing digital media spaces from platforms like Weibo and Little Red Book. This will help understand how media users perceive and evaluate the current state of the space. During the initial design phase, thematic digital media spaces should be created, symbolizing the start of the planning process. These spaces can reflect the design team's preliminary understanding and vision for the area. The digital media content should be spread through channels such as influencers and official organizations, while gathering feedback and suggestions from media users.

It is important to develop and apply interactive feedback tools for digital media spaces. For example, creating an "interactive map" where the public can submit more direct and precise feedback by marking locations in the urban space. Throughout the planning process, digital media space content should be updated dynamically, sharing planning information with the public in a timely manner. Moreover, combining technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) to create virtual city models or demonstration projects can enrich the presentation of digital media spaces. This allows the public to more intuitively "experience" the planning proposals and continuously generates advertising effects for future investment and operations.

Conclusion

With the advent of the digital age, "digital media" has demonstrated an increasingly powerful capacity to shape space. The continuous emergence of new phenomena such as "Internet-Famous Spaces" calls for the enrichment and refinement of urban theories. This study combines urban research with media studies, introducing the concept of "media space", and analyzes the triple attributes of digital media space based on the three-dimensional features of information presentation, communication mechanisms, and business models in digital media. These attributes are: user co-constructed virtual scenes, de-territorialized data labels for dissemination, and the flow commodities produced through flexible production processes. Furthermore, from the perspective of the "media-people-space" interaction, the paper constructs a dynamic logic of the interaction between digital media space and physical space, including the transition from real to virtual, from virtual to real, and the fusion of both. This framework systematically explains the formation and evolution mechanism of influencer spaces, driven by digital media and involving the participation of both media users and relevant stakeholders. Using the "Chengdu Disneyland" case study, the article examines how a community park unexpectedly transformed into a festive wonderland and gradually reverted to its original function. The significant impact of digital media space on human activity is bound to create new spatial usage demands and provide new digital momentum for urban development. Urban planning must explore the expansion of objects from real space to digital media space and strengthen positive guidance for the interaction between these spaces.

Nowadays, theories and empirical research on digital media space are still in the exploratory stage, with vast interdisciplinary research potential. This paper primarily introduces the concept and characteristics of digital media space and explores the mutual relationship between media, people, and space in the formation and evolution of influencer spaces. In reality, as digital media continues to develop, the types of influencer spaces are becoming increasingly diverse, and the differences in virtual and real interactions behind different types of influencer spaces warrant further analysis.

Additionally, the impact of digital media space on physical space is not limited to the creation of influencer spaces. For instance, digital media space influences the location of communities, leading to shifts and differentiation in commercial spaces, affects the city's image, resulting in the evolution of urban industries and spaces, and alters preferences for public activity spaces, giving rise to mixed virtual and real spaces such as citywalk routes. Overall, the new phenomena in urban and rural spaces in the digital age can all be analyzed through the lens of digital media space. Under the overall framework of "media-people-space", these phenomena offer deeper and more comprehensive explanations, and related research awaits further development.

Acknowledgment

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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