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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Sociological Studies (ISS)

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Master's Thesis

2024   **Reyhaneh Hemmati**

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Examining the Role of New Media in Urban Inequalities: Analyzing the representations of Tehran's Lowlagar Alley on Instagram

Master's thesis

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Study programme: Society, Communication and Media

Supervisor: PhDr. Mgr. Jan Balon, Ph.D.

Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.

2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.

3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 31.07.2024   Reyhaneh Hemmati

References

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Abstract

This thesis explores the interplay between new media and urban life, focusing on Tehran's Lowlagar Alley as represented on Instagram. Through a content analysis of 48 Instagram posts, the study reveals how the platform showcases the alley's aesthetic and nostalgic appeal primarily to promote the location. These representations, while preserving Lowlagar Alley's unique characteristics, align with global trends that emphasize the promotion and commodification of spaces tied to high-end consumption and identity construction. The research highlights Instagram's role in commodifying urban spaces, where the platform is utilized to sell not just a physical space but an aspirational lifestyle experience. While these digital portrayals increase visibility and potentially enhance the area's economic value, they pose significant challenges for urban planners and policymakers. The findings demonstrate the need for strategies that ensure urban areas maintain their cultural significance and continue to be inclusive and diverse in the face of social media-driven changes.

Abstrakt (CZ)

Tato práce zkoumá vzájemné působení nových médií a městského života se zaměřením na uličku Lowlagar v Teheránu, jak je prezentována na Instagramu. Prostřednictvím obsahové analýzy 48 příspěvků na Instagramu studie odhaluje, jak platforma představuje estetickou a nostalgickou přitažlivost této uličky především za účelem propagace lokality. Tyto reprezentace, zatímco zachovávají jedinečné vlastnosti uličky Lowlagar, odpovídají globálním trendům, které zdůrazňují propagaci a komodifikaci prostor spojených s luxusní spotřebou a konstrukcí identity. Výzkum ukazuje roli Instagramu v komodifikaci městských prostor, kde je platforma využívána k prodeji nejen fyzického prostoru, ale i aspirativního životního stylu. Ačkoli tyto digitální zobrazení zvyšují viditelnost a potenciálně zvyšují ekonomickou hodnotu oblasti, představují významné výzvy pro městské plánovače a politiky. Zjištění poukazují na potřebu strategií, které zajistí, že městské oblasti si zachovají svůj kulturní význam a budou i nadále inkluzivní a rozmanité tváří v tvář změnám způsobeným sociálními médii.

Keywords

Digital Representation, Urban Representation, Commodification, New Media, Digital Platforms, Instagram, Urban Life

Klíčová slova

Digitální reprezentace, Městská reprezentace, Komodifikace, Nová média, Digitální platformy, Instagram, Městský život

Title

Examining the Role of New Media in Urban Inequalities: Analyzing the representations of Tehran's Lowlagar Alley on Instagram

Název práce

Zkoumání role nových médií v městských nerovnostech: Analýza reprezentací teheránské uličky Lowlagar na Instagramu

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms are used for a variety of purposes, from documenting personal moments to making new connections. New media platforms such as Instagram provide a virtual gateway for users to explore both familiar and unfamiliar cities, discovering lesser-known areas as well as popular spots. Instagram's visually oriented design and location-tagging features make it an ideal platform for studying the interaction between new media and urban life. While social media has made content creation more democratic, allowing diverse voices to be heard, the affordances and logic of these platforms significantly shape user interactions and influence the visibility of specific content. On Instagram, whether content is created for personal expression or commercial gain, the digital representations of urban life tend to share certain characteristics: they selectively emphasize, aestheticize, and commodify the urban space.

The way urban spaces are represented on Instagram often highlights areas associated with exclusivity and consumption while overshadowing others, thus perpetuating urban inequalities. These selective representations serve multiple purposes: they promote consumption, emphasize high-end locations, and enable users to project their identity and status by associating with these places (Boy & Uitermark, 2017; Bronsvoort & Uitermark, 2022). These digital representations of urban life have an impact on both the physical and perceived landscapes of cities.

The appeal of social media, particularly the idea of "Instagrammability," has become a key factor in urban planning and design, diverting attention from addressing actual community needs to creating spaces that cater to social media aesthetics and the preferences of gentrifiers (see Degen & Rose, 2022; Bronsvoort & Uitermark, 2022). This shift towards "Instagramization," where urban spaces are altered to align with digital trends, can lead to uniform aesthetic standards within and across cities (Matchar, 2017), potentially resulting in

a homogenization that favours upscale consumer patterns and thus reshaping urban life for the broader population.

As new media technologies become more integrated into everyday life, there is a growing acknowledgement of the crucial role social media platforms play in urban environments. These platforms are not merely representational of urban life but are active participants in co-creating urban realities (McQuire, 2008; van Dijck et al., 2018). However, the extent of their influence on urban environments, particularly through platforms such as Instagram in non-Western contexts, has not been fully explored and requires further investigation.

This thesis seeks to explore the representation of urban spaces on Instagram, with a specific focus on Lowlagar Alley in Tehran, Iran as a case study. Lowlagar Alley is renowned for its historical significance, symmetrical architecture, and designation as a national heritage site. Located in a lower socioeconomic area that has undergone gentrification, the alley is notable for housing Tehran's first pizzeria. Over time, it has expanded to include trendy cafes, a boutique hotel, a bookstore, a toy museum, and an art gallery. On Instagram, the "Lowlagar Alley" location tag (in Farsi, کوچه لولاگر) encompasses both the alley itself and these contemporary establishments, reflecting its evolution into a visually captivating and "Instagrammable" location. Accordingly, this thesis is organized around two primary research questions that aim to explore how this location is digitally represented:

- **Research Question 1)** How is Lowlagar represented on Instagram, and what dominant themes and elements characterize these digital representations?

- **Research Question 2)** To what extent do the digital representations of Lowlagar on Instagram reflect unique aspects of the city, and how do they align with broader global trends in urban representation on social media?

To address these questions, the study will conduct a content analysis of Instagram posts using the location tag "Lowlagar Alley" (in Farsi, کوچه لولاگر) to gather relevant content. Employing the 4CAT capture and analysis toolkit, this research will systematically collect and analyze both visual and textual elements from these posts, refining the analysis framework set by Bronsvoort and Uitermark (2022) accordingly as data collection progresses. The structure of the thesis is as follows:

The theoretical part of the thesis provides an overview of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks that explore the intersection of new media and urban life. It discusses theories such as "mediatization," which explain the complex interactions between digital platforms and urban life, as well as the unique participatory environments created by social media platforms. Special attention is paid to Instagram, discussing its role in shaping urban life, its influence on social distinctions, and its use in urban branding.

Following the theoretical background, the methodological section outlines the research aims, questions, and hypotheses related to the interplay of Instagram and urban life. It provides a rationale for selecting Lowlagar Alley in Tehran, Iran, as a case study, and describes the content analysis of Instagram posts, including the data collection and analysis processes.

Lastly, the analytical section presents a detailed analysis of data collected from Instagram posts, focusing on how Lowlagar Alley is represented through both visual and textual content. It examines the characteristics of the sample, including account types and gender dynamics, to provide an understanding of how different users portray the urban space. The subsequent discussion interprets these findings, emphasizing their implications for understanding Instagram's role in urban life, and explores practical applications for urban planning and policy-making. This section also addresses the study's limitations and suggests

directions for future research. The concluding chapter summarizes the key findings and provides an overview of the study's contributions to the field.

By exploring the representations of Lowlagar Alley on Instagram, this thesis aims to deepen our understanding of the interplay between new media and urban life. Through a detailed analysis of these digital portrayals, the study will explore the main objectives behind Instagram posts and assess how Instagram, as a global platform, functions within the unique context of a developing city. This research is dedicated to promoting the creation of inclusive urban spaces and preserving the distinctive identities of different urban areas.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. New Media and Urban Life

Henri Lefebvre emphasizes that spaces are not merely physical constructs but are also social products; each society, through its unique cultural, economic, and social contexts, creates and shapes spaces that reflect its distinct identity (Lefebvre, 1991). This concept holds relevance in the contemporary digital era, a period where urban life is increasingly characterized by the networks and digital technologies that are interwoven with our everyday lives, blurring the line between spatial and digital (Gordon & Silva, 2011; Törnberg, 2022). Importantly, this phenomenon should not be viewed through the simplistic lens of technological determinism, which suggests that technology autonomously shapes society (Jansson, 2013). Instead, a dialectical approach is more appropriate, acknowledging the complex, reciprocal influences between digital platforms and everyday life, and recognizing the way digital spaces and physical urban environments are continuously shaping and being shaped by one another.

Following the rapid technological advancements and the emergence of new media, alongside the growing integration of these technologies into everyday life, there has been an increased focus on the central role digital platforms – including social media platforms – play in urban life (van Dijck et al., 2018, as cited in Barns, 2019). These platforms significantly shape socio-spatial interactions through design strategies aimed at maximizing user engagement, and transform urban experiences by fostering participatory ecosystems deeply embedded in daily life (Barns, 2019).

Often referred to as "platform urbanism", digital platforms have become essential for the functioning of modern cities while gathering data as a mode of capital accumulation and remaking urban environments (Moore & Rodgers, 2020; Couldry & Mejias, 2020, as cited

in Törnberg, 2022). Most analyses of digital platforms focus on their mode of data accumulation and commodification; however, it is also important to notice how they are shaping the experience of everyday urban life (Rose, 2022). Leszczynski (2019) argues that platforms primarily serve as spaces for everyday connectivity and interaction (Barns, 2018), deeming it necessary to further conceptualize platform urbanism as an aspect of everyday urban life that exists beyond the dominion of political-economic frameworks.

Navigating the city streets, securing a ride, ordering food and groceries, or finding a place to stay can be effortlessly managed through a vast array of platforms, both local and global in scope. As Moore and Rodgers (2020) illustrate, these platforms have redefined urban life, making cities more disrupted yet simultaneously easier to live in and access. As a subcategory of digital platforms, social media also presents both challenges and opportunities for the cities and urban life (Moore & Rodgers, 2018; 2020), having the power to shape urban experiences and alter urban spaces.

The essential role of new media platforms in everyday urban life highlights the need to move beyond seeing media as mere reflections of urban experiences. To gain a deeper understanding of this dynamic, it is crucial to explore the concept of "mediatization," which offers a critical framework for understanding the dialectical interrelation between media and the city.

2.2. Mediatization: Media's Role in Shaping Urban Life

Whereas media was once considered merely representative of urban life, contemporary scholarship recognizes that media does far more than reflect and actively participates in the co-creation of urban realities (McQuire, 2008; van Dijck et al., 2018). To explore the dynamics of how urban spaces are represented, Törnberg & Uitermark (2022) introduce the concept of "mediatization" from media studies to the urban context. Couldry

and Hepp (2013; 2018) propose mediatization as a critical analytical concept, not to examine one-way "media effects," but to explore the dialectical interrelation between media changes and cultural and social shifts. Mediatization insists on viewing media and communications not as outside forces but as embedded elements within the fabric of society (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; 2018).

Building on this, Jansson (2013) draws upon Lefebvre's triadic model of spatial production – perceived space, conceived space, and lived space – to reconceptualize mediatization as integral to the production and transformation of social space, proposing three sociospatial regimes – material indispensability and adaptation, premediation of experience, and normalization of social practice. These processes indicate how certain digital technologies become necessary in urban life, how digital media shapes our expectations and experiences of urban spaces, and how digital habits become a normal part of everyday life in the cities (Jansson, 2013). Jansson's analysis highlights how digital technologies are profoundly embedded in everyday life, shaping and being shaped by the way we navigate, perceive, and interact within urban spaces.

The interplay between media and everyday urban life includes the role digital platforms play in urban inequalities. While they can have positive implications for cities and citizens, they may also exacerbate and perpetuate existing inequalities or create new ones. The representation of urban spaces on different platforms depends on a complex interplay of several factors – including their audience, technologies, economies, and cultures, all of which shape the platform's unique logic – which then come to affect the urban areas in various ways (Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022).

For instance, Törnberg and Uitermark's (2022) study on the representations of the gentrification of Rio de Janeiro's favela Vidigal within fifteen years reveals varied representations: global media often depict Vidigal as an exciting investment opportunity,

promoting slum tourism gentrification, while occasionally giving voice to local residents and critiques of gentrification and displacement. These variations arise from the inherent logic and biases of global media platforms, which primarily seek to maximize user engagement (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022).

Recognizing new media platforms not as mere backdrops or extrinsic forces but as active participants in urban life – both influencing and reflecting urban experiences – we now shift our focus to social media platforms, arguably the leading platforms of the contemporary era. In the following section, the analysis will focus on how these platforms create a participatory media environment, extending their influence from digital interactions to a broader redefinition of everyday realities.

2.3. Social Media and Participation

Social media platforms can be analyzed through three primary lenses as conceptualized by Moore and Rodgers (2020). Firstly, technical affordances indicate how the unique features of social media platforms shape user behaviour and contributions. Secondly, user practices include the activities users engage in on the platform, such as their motivations and routines, and how these practices become embedded within the platform culture, including the development of hierarchies among users. Lastly, the platforms' political economy highlights the particular business models and ideologies underpinning them, often revolving around monetizing users, content, and networking – which are the three main characteristics defining social media platforms (Moore & Rodgers, 2020).

These three frameworks – technical affordances, user practices, and political economy – are intricately interconnected, collectively constructing the foundation of the social media platforms. The synthesis of these elements distinctly defines a platform's underlying logic. This interplay shapes the platform's environment, the user experience, and

how the material consequences of the platform unfold in everyday life. One way to define the blending of user involvement and strategic media practices within social media platforms is through what Henry Jenkins terms "convergence culture."

Convergence culture highlights the intersection of traditional and new media, merging professional media practices with user-generated content, and the fading distinctions between media producers and consumers (Jenkins, 2006). This concept marks a shift towards a more participatory media environment, characterized by the seamless flow of content across diverse platforms, collaborative interactions within the media industry, and the audiences' engagement in pursuing specific content across various platforms (Jenkins, 2006). This increasingly participatory nature, central to both the Internet and convergence culture, has radically transformed how media is consumed and produced (Deuze, 2007).

Digital media has redefined the audience from passive consumers to active producers (Gross, 2009, as cited in Bird, 2011). Coined by Brun in 2005 and later explored by Jenkins, the term "produser" captures the dual role of individuals as both producers and consumers within this collaborative media framework (Bird, 2011). While the concept of an engaged audience is not novel, the interactive nature of modern platforms has broadened the scope of who can participate, moving beyond traditional fan bases to include the general public (Bird, 2011).

Similar to other digital platforms, social media transcends the mere goal of capturing audience attention. Users can select what content they want to engage with and influence these choices through comments and reviews. As "produsers", they further assert their views and creativity by creating and sharing their own content. However, the true extent of user autonomy within this context – creating, influencing, and selecting media content – is subject to debate. While it may seem that digital platforms democratize content production, the reality is more complex. Users share content for various reasons, including self-expression,

connecting with likeminded people, and gaining cultural or economic capital. The type of content produced often reflects personal interests, yet it is also influenced by the platform's technical affordances, user practices, and political economy, which all determine content visibility and engagement.

Historically, traditional media was predominantly driven by the economic interests of investors and advertisers, who prioritized audiences based on their purchasing power and often marginalized working-class audiences lacking the financial means sought by advertisers (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). A similar approach has subtly permeated social media, where not all users have equal participation opportunities. In this advertising-driven environment, corporations exert greater authority than individual users (Jenkins, 2006), as power is concentrated not on the consumers but on the advertisers, whose decisions critically influence the media landscape (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). This uneven power distribution, driven by profit motives, is a feature across both traditional and new media.

Despite the rise of an active audience and the convergence culture, the substantial influence wielded by advertisers and media producers cannot be overlooked. They employ a variety of strategies designed to actively engage with audiences, with the primary goal of boosting sales and maximizing profits from demographic segments that possess substantial purchasing power (Bird, 2011). Therefore, while social media platforms may offer the tools for all to create content, the content that ultimately reaches a broad audience often aligns with the interests of those who have significant economic influence. As Neilson and Rossiter (2005, as cited in Deuze, 2007) caution, in such a culture, innovation and creativity may become subservient to the status quo, reduced to the market's formal apathy.

Indeed, not all audience members actively engage as creative "produsers". However, according to van Dijk (2009, as cited in Bird, 2011), the labour of the audience as data producers is more significant than their role as content creators. Social media platforms

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present themselves as free spaces for connection, creation, and interaction. Although some charge fees or offer premium memberships for additional features, the vast majority of social media remains accessible without monetary payment. Despite appearing free, user participation comes at a cost: personal data and engagement become essential currencies in these digital environments. In this way, users contribute actively by sharing content that includes personal details such as dates and locations – often without explicit consent, leading to data exploitation (Crawford, 2021). Passive users, on the other hand, still participate in the "datafication" process, where their behaviours and lifestyles are quantified and collected as data that will eventually become commodified (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021).

In this context, it is not solely the users who possess decision-making power; rather, algorithms significantly shape their choices by curating and presenting content options. In pursuit of heightened engagement, social media platforms have moved beyond simply serving as conduits for delivering content to adopting algorithmic curation strategies. These strategies rely on user interactions – such as likes, comments, shares, or views – and data to continuously keep algorithms refined, ensuring the presentation of more relevant content (Bucher, 2018). The algorithms are not just abstract strategies, they have the power to shape everyday realities (Bucher, 2019) by determining the visibility of content, thereby influencing user decisions and interactions.

Consequently, the design and operational logic of social media fundamentally aim to enhance user engagement as a means to accumulate valuable data (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021). This data is instrumental for platforms as it enables targeted advertising and the development of predictive algorithms, which are key to tailoring user experiences and optimizing business strategies. The focus on user engagement and data accumulation reflects the broader trends in digital capitalism. The process of datafication transforms social media platforms into stages that represent and commodify various aspects of life, including urban

experiences. This extends the commodification into individuals' sense of self and expands its influence into new areas of social life, thereby reshaping everyday life and culture (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021).

The next part of this discussion will specifically focus on Instagram. This social media platform exemplifies how algorithms curate user feeds, prioritizing content that is likely to maximize engagement. Such curation not only makes some content more visible according to these agendas but also influences users to create similar content in pursuit of visibility and engagement, a cycle that undeniably has material consequences in everyday and urban life.

2.4. Instagram and Distinction

Instagram, a visual social media platform owned by Meta, has rapidly become one of the most popular social media platforms worldwide since its launch in 2010. As of 2024, Instagram has 2 billion monthly active users, with the majority aged between 18 to 34 years (Statista, 2024; Oberlo, 2024). Initially aimed at photography enthusiasts, Instagram has since expanded its appeal to a broader general audience and has become the leading platform for "aesthetic visual communication" (Manovich, 2017).

On Instagram, users can post pictures and videos, either keeping them on their feed or featuring them on their stories for a day. They can like, comment on, and share content, and use hashtags and geotags to connect their posts to broader themes or to search for specific content. Users can choose to follow certain accounts or discover new, algorithmically curated content on their explore page. Whether active or passive, users can maintain public or private profiles, have anywhere from zero to millions of followers, and decide to post daily or not at all.

The distinctive features of Instagram have shaped its unique culture. The majority of users worldwide engage with the platform to document and share moments from their everyday lives – from family gatherings and morning rituals to new spots in town or any moment they wish to preserve, share, or post for various other reasons. The content and styles of these posts are deeply influenced by the social, cultural, and aesthetic norms specific of certain locations or demographics (Manovich, 2017). Additionally, there are numerous users with large followings – influencers – and companies active on the platform, strategically posting content to promote their brands.

The choices users make on Instagram – such as what to post or engage with – serve as potential tools for asserting their socioeconomic status and expressing their identity (Manovich, 2017). Törnberg and Uitermark (2021) describe the cultural logic of digital capitalism as a "logic of identity and difference," noting that as the commodification of personal data has become a central objective of digital platforms, public culture has increasingly become focused on selfhood, identity construction, and drawing distinctions. Additionally, subcultures, historically understood as forms of resistance, have increasingly become modes of identity expression, significantly influenced by consumer culture (Woo, 2009). While cultural identities are established through subcultures, different preferences, and various styles, digital tools such as those provided by Instagram facilitate further refining and individualizing these identities (Manovich, 2017).

According to Bourdieu (1984), lifestyles are the systematic products of habitus – the internalized set of dispositions shaped by one's life experiences. When perceived through the lens of habitus, these lifestyles manifest as sign systems that are socially recognized and differentiated. These distinctions are evident in one's properties and practices, which Bourdieu refers to as taste. Taste, comprising a set of distinctive preferences, is both a

product of and a driving force behind lifestyle. Ultimately, taste serves as a clear marker of social class, reflecting broader distinctions within the social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1984).

Social media platforms have become stages where everything – from activities and opinions to geographical places – acquires symbolic value, used for the expression of cultural belongings and distinctive lifestyles (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021). Instagram facilitates and encourages users to express their identity through sharing and engaging with content that reflects their desired products, places, and practices. In this way, it can perpetuate and amplify social class distinctions through the digital representation of taste and lifestyle.

As Manovich (2017) observes, the lifestyle represented on Instagram often is about "description" rather than "narration". Instagrammers curate this sort of lifestyle by capturing and sharing their experiences – moments centred on contemplation, perfect settings, and unique feelings (Manovich, 2017). It is important to recognize that these experiences often reflect privileges associated with them. The content shared online – from the locations featured to the subtly displayed products – is crafted from moments of everyday life. Therefore, showcasing one's identity on Instagram, whether to assert uniqueness or to connect with a certain culture, involves sharing specific, curated experiences. Consequently, aspects of everyday life are often adjusted or stylized to align with desirable "experience aesthetics," either to gain online views or to be associated with certain social classes.

In this way, Instagram acts as a stage where experiences, ranging from monetized recommendations to proofs of participation and belonging, are portrayed and promoted as commodities. These representations are intensified based on their aesthetic and "Instagrammable" qualities, tuned by the platform's underlying logic of digital capitalism, namely datafication, commodification, and selection (van Dijck et al., 2018; Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021).

2.5. Instagram and Urban Life

The power to represent urban life has expanded beyond elites and mass media to individuals, who use their smartphones to create and share their own content (Castells, 2009, as cited in Boy & Uitermark, 2017). This broader participation can have positive implications: marginalized groups can insert themselves into the Instagram timeline altering perceptions and amplifying their voices (Budge, 2020). However, the digital representations of urban spaces are heavily influenced by algorithms, cultural logic, and aesthetic norms of platforms, which can introduce biases. Moreover, not everyone has access to smartphones or uses platforms such as Instagram, and those who do often possess greater cultural, social, or economic capital. This disparity means that the portrayal of urban spaces on social media can be highly selective. Such curated digital representations reflect and reinforce urban inequalities and gentrification processes by emphasizing areas associated with exclusivity and consumption while overshadowing other parts of the city (Boy & Uitermark, 2017). Ultimately, this selective visibility influences individuals' relationships with urban spaces and can change the city itself (Boy & Uitermark, 2017).

This issue is exemplified in the 2022 study by Bronsvoort and Uitermark, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork and analyzed Instagram posts from a shopping street in a gentrifying neighbourhood of Amsterdam. They discovered that, despite the variety of content, approximately 70% of the posts primarily showcased, idealized, and promoted consumption. The researchers note that these posts mainly reflected an "elective belonging" rather than a connection to local roots, with gentrifiers often using them to project their identity and status (Bronsvoort & Uitermark, 2022).

Furthermore, Bronsvoort and Uitermark link the selective representations on Instagram to Bourdieu's concept of distinction, suggesting that these digital portrayals emphasize certain places and activities, thereby setting the stage for and promoting high-end

consumption. They argue that these digital representations, whether motivated by commissions or users' personal appreciation, visually amplify and materially advance the gentrification process. By reshaping neighbourhood aesthetics to meet gentrifiers' expectations, Instagram posts contribute to transforming the physical and social landscape of these areas (Bronsvoort & Uitermark, 2022).

In a previous study of Amsterdam, Boy and Uitermark (2017) found that Instagram networks are not horizontal. They contend that the platform's logic and the uneven relationships it fosters also impact the city by highlighting some places while neglecting others. The places that gain prominence are typically "part of local scenes centred around high-end consumption, glamour, and refined lifestyles" (Boy & Uitermark, 2017). As users link themselves to these trendy hotspots to display their social distinction, they not only enhance their own social status but also elevate the status of these places, thereby pushing for certain aesthetics and processes of gentrification (Boy & Uitermark, 2017). The researchers also note that Instagram creates a space for the segmentation of users into subcultural groups, characterized by marked inequalities in the places they showcase. Gentrifiers are particularly likely to tag specific places, using the platform as a strategic tool to reassemble the city, aligning it more closely with their preferences and lifestyles (Boy & Uitermark, 2017).

In his 2018 study of Instagram photos taken in Łódź, Poland, Zasina demonstrated that the content shared on Instagram does not generally represent the urban space as a whole. Instead, it features selectively aestheticized locations and objects. His finding aligns with research conducted in Amsterdam, revealing that Instagram users prefer capturing spaces associated with consumer culture, alternative subcultures, or humorously themed areas while overlooking less picturesque locations (Zasina, 2018). Zasina (2018) argues that since users often use Instagram for self-promotion and gaining popularity, they tend to avoid spaces that

might carry negative connotations. By curating the city image, users try to create their personal image, shaping public perception of both.

The spaces and experiences that align with Instagram's aesthetic and logical preferences are deemed worthy of sharing, or so-called "Instagrammable". As Simmel notes, urban life is significantly guided by rational calculations (Gottdiener & Hutchison, 2010). This rational calculation now arguably extends to the social media appeal, or "Instagrammability" of urban experiences. Instagram users often navigate urban environments with an eye for potential online engagement, assessing how well a space or experience might perform on the platform. Alternatively, they may experience the city primarily through its digital representations, allowing dominant narratives on social media to shape their real-world urban encounters.

Urban spaces gain prominence on Instagram largely based on their "Instagrammability". This term encompasses a variety of attributes, depending on the specific location and context of each post. As Bronsvoort and Uitermark (2022) observe, Instagram posts typically adhere to the platform's aesthetic standards, primarily showcasing the beauty or uniqueness of places and experiences. This compliance with platform-specific aesthetics leads to a certain uniformity in how users interact with and utilize Instagram (Boy & Uitermark, 2017). While Instagram users strive for distinction, they often do so within the confines of the platform's norms, paradoxically expressing their individuality through conformity (Boy & Uitermark, 2020).

As a result, urban spaces are increasingly adapting to meet aesthetic standards that make them "Instagrammable" and engaging. Matchar (2017) describes this phenomenon as the "Instagramization" of urban spaces, a trend that emphasizes visually striking design elements likely to be shared on social media and promotes experiences that seem merely tailored for Instagram. This trend has grown so influential that, according to Wainwright

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(2018), "Instagrammability" has shifted from being a secondary outcome to a primary consideration in urban design, significantly shaping our environments.

Matchar (2017) notes that "Instagramization" creates filter bubbles where users are exposed to content that aligns with their existing preferences, thus reducing the diversity and unpredictability that characterize urban life. Moreover, "Instagramization" can lead to homogeneity across global urban spaces, as many cities around the world replicate popular designs seen on Instagram (Chayka, 2016, as cited in Matchar, 2017). While this trend can promote tourism, increase public engagement, and drive rapid design innovations, it can also result in poorly functioning, hastily constructed spectacles and disrupt residential areas with sudden surges of attention (Wainwright, 2018).

The reification and commodification of buildings through photography – isolating them from their context, human interactions, and practical uses, and transforming them into mere assets for capital investment – has long faced criticism (Wilkinson, 2015), and architects have always considered a building's photogenic qualities during the design process (Wainwright, 2018). However, the advent of Instagram has amplified these concerns significantly. While some architects argue that Instagram reinforces the importance of space and challenges the notion that spaces are merely passive backdrops for human activity (Wainwright, 2018), the platform's emphasis on aesthetics over functionality potentially intensifies the commodification of urban spaces. Additionally, the general lack of critical analysis (Wilkinson, 2015) and the necessity to conform to platform standards further complicate how digital representations can impact urban life and contribute to social inequalities.

This increasing commodification, combined with the use of Instagram for marketing urban areas and self-promotion, raises important concerns. As users curate and share content, they unintentionally – or sometimes intentionally and in exchange for payment – contribute

to the branding strategies of cities, promoting specific areas and lifestyles. Consequently, Instagram plays a pivotal role in shaping and commodifying urban spaces, influencing both public perceptions and the material realities of cities.

2.6. Instagram and Urban Branding

Focusing on Instagram as a tool for urban branding, Degen and Rose (2022) analyze how a specific area in London is represented on Instagram as part of a cultural regeneration and redevelopment project. They argue that the increased mediatization of urban spaces on social media has led to "a dramatic aesthetic" and a staged organization of space, where intense and short-lived moments and emotions are experienced, captured, and shared online (Degen & Rose, 2022). Their analysis reveals that it is often difficult to distinguish between branded and non-branded images of the area. This blurring suggests that individual users frequently adopt the visual norms established by major corporations in their representations of urban spaces, which shapes how individuals perceive and interact with their surroundings.

The branding and commodification of urban spaces on platforms such as Instagram significantly influence who belongs in these spaces. Urban areas are deliberately designed to generate appealing visuals that attract visitors and investments (Degen & Rose, 2022), aligning with the aesthetics favoured by gentrifiers (Boy & Uitermark, 2017). This trend leads to urban environments that cater to individuals who conform to these aesthetics – those who can afford and are willing to participate in creating the type of spectacles that attract likes and shares on social media. Consequently, this selective representation promotes a homogeneous visitor demographic while marginalizing and rendering invisible those who do not fit this curated image, affecting the social fabric of the city.

Urban residents have transitioned from merely being the targets of place marketing to becoming active creators and narrators of their urban experiences (Degen & Rose, 2022).

This shift allows individuals to authentically share their personal stories and interactions with the city. However, this also implies that individuals increasingly serve as marketing tools themselves, as they prominently feature in urban imagery to display their personal style and identity. This trend is evident in how urban marketers strategize: as noted by the marketing manager of London's project in discussions with Degen and Rose (2022), marketers purposefully highlight a range of individuals in promotional content. This approach aims to attract like-minded people, making the space more appealing to those who see reflections of themselves in the marketing materials, thereby shaping the demographic and cultural makeup of urban events and spaces.

Marketing an urban space online involves more than just showcasing the location; it involves crafting a specific aesthetic designed to capture and convey the "vibe" predetermined for the space (Degen & Rose, 2022). This strategy aims to promote not just the physical space but the experience of it, evoking particular sensations and emotions that resonate with potential visitors. Manovich (2017) emphasizes that on visual platforms such as Instagram, it is not just the content that matters, but also the aesthetics. The aesthetic is often aligned with specific trends to connect with certain subcultures or consumer behaviours. For instance, a space might adopt a light and minimal aesthetic to suggest that engaging with it will align consumers with a certain refined lifestyle or integrate them into a group that identifies with this clean, curated look, as reflected in the filters and aesthetic choices in their Instagram posts. This approach uses visual cues to create a sense of belonging and identity among its target audience.

Instagram's role in urban branding further impacts placemaking, shaping perceptions and interactions with urban spaces before they are physically visited. For those who have not yet visited a certain location, the place is conceptualized based on visual representations (Budge, 2020), which, as Zasina (2018) points out, often do not accurately depict the real

city. This visual curation on Instagram is further compounded by the use of location tags. Many Instagram users utilize these tags not just for geographical identification, but as markers of identity and symbolic claims over places, especially when travelling (Boy & Uitermark, 2017). This tagging practice transforms Instagram into a tool akin to a personalized guide or a search engine for exploring new places (Boy & Uitermark, 2017), albeit one influenced by algorithms and the platform's underlying logic. This feature reinforces the visibility and perceived status of these tagged locations, enhancing their competitive stance and often solidifying their role as catalysts for gentrification. In this way, Instagram not only capitalizes on existing socio-spatial inequalities but also actively exacerbates and expands them, reshaping urban environments in ways that privilege certain demographics and aesthetic values over others (Boy & Uitermark, 2017).

Furthermore, as most active users on Instagram engage in self-branding and crafting their identities, their bodies and lifestyles become spaces for advertisement (Abidin, 2014, as cited in Smith, 2021). The self-branding is the strategy of creating a distinctive image to gain economic and cultural capital, positioning themselves advantageously within the late capitalist economy (Smith, 2021). Through their heightened visibility, some users become "influencers," who, depending on their niche – be it lifestyle or a specific field – earn commissions from advertisers for promoting products or experiences. This influencer-driven promotion has been identified as being more effective than traditional advertising methods (van Dijck 2013, as cited in Smith, 2021). Influencers, particularly those in travel, lifestyle, and urban categories, play a crucial role in shaping trends, often guided by advertisers' decisions, setting certain locations and aesthetics as desirable.

2.7. Conclusion and Research Direction

This literature review has explored the critical role of new media platforms, particularly Instagram, in shaping everyday urban life and urban spaces. It has highlighted the dynamic interplay between digital and physical environments, emphasizing the concept of "mediatization" as a framework for understanding the co-creation of urban realities. The review also discussed how social media platforms transform media consumption and production, fostering participatory cultures that blur the lines between producers and consumers.

Instagram, in particular, emerges as a powerful tool for expressing social distinctions and identities, reinforcing social hierarchies, and influencing urban spaces. It shapes everyday urban experiences by selectively highlighting certain areas and lifestyles, contributing to urban inequalities and gentrification processes. Furthermore, Instagram's role in urban branding demonstrates its capacity to market and commodify urban spaces, aligning with specific aesthetic and cultural values.

Despite these insights, research in this area is relatively new and continuously evolving. Much of the existing research focuses predominantly on Western or developed cities, often overlooking the relationship between new media platforms and urban life in non-Western and developing contexts. The influence of Instagram on urban spaces can manifest differently across global and local contexts, reflecting an interplay between universal trends and specific cultural dynamics. As Schroeder (2018) notes, while social media usage in various countries does not dissolve their distinctions, there exists a form of homogeneity within the diversity. This homogeneity often manifests as the promotion of an idealized lifestyle, inherently structured by the platform's affordances (Schroeder, 2018). This dichotomy raises important questions about the degree of agency in shaping urban

narratives on Instagram. The platform's global reach can eventually lead to a convergence of urban aesthetics and experiences, potentially diluting local uniqueness (Matchar, 2017).

Social media platforms, by promoting idealized lifestyles, often commodify experiences, turning them into marketable entities that cater to global audiences while retaining local characteristics. Analyzing the relationship between social media and urban life in the context of a developing city, where Instagram similarly permeates the lives of individuals, can provide valuable insights into the global implications of digital platforms on urban life. Therefore, this thesis aims to analyze how a specific location in Tehran, Iran is represented on Instagram and to identify the major characteristics of these digital portrayals to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between new media and urban life.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Aims

This thesis aims to address the gaps mentioned in the theoretical background by focusing on Lowlagar Alley in Tehran, Iran, as a case study. It seeks to understand how Instagram, as a global platform, represents the unique urban environment of a developing city. By exploring this relationship, the thesis aspires to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between new media and urban life.

Drawing inspiration from the analytical approach of Bronsvoort and Uitermark (2022), this research will conduct a detailed content analysis of Instagram posts concerning Lowlagar. By systematically examining both the textual and visual elements of these posts, the study aims to provide a detailed exploration of how the urban space is represented on Instagram, identifying prevalent themes and narratives. Additionally, the research seeks to assess whether Instagram's role as a global platform manifests differently in Tehran's unique urban context compared to Amsterdam, where Bronsvoort and Uitermark (2022) noted uneven representations associated with identity status and high-end consumption.

3.2. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question 1) How is Lowlagar represented on Instagram, and what dominant themes and elements characterize these digital representations?

Research Question 2) To what extent do the digital representations of Lowlagar on Instagram reflect unique aspects of the city, and how do they align with broader global trends in urban representation on social media?

Hypothesis 1) Instagram posts related to Lowlagar Street are likely to predominantly feature visual and narrative elements that highlight consumption, upscale urban lifestyles, and aesthetic appeal.

Hypothesis 2) While the digital representations on Instagram will retain distinct characteristics of Lowlagar, they are also expected to resonate with global trends, emphasizing upscale identity and lifestyle, and reflecting the trend of "Instagrammability" and "Instagramization" of urban spaces.

3.3. Lowlagar, Tehran, Iran

Situated in the bustling centre of Tehran, Lowlagar Alley is one of the city's oldest and most iconic locations. Nearly 100 years old and registered with Iran's Cultural Heritage Organization, Lowlagar is one of the few places that has preserved its historical character. Its fame largely arises from its unique symmetrical architecture, with houses, facades, windows, and even trees perfectly aligned. Additionally, the alley is home to Iran's oldest pizzeria, Davood's, which has been serving its classic pizza since 1961. Dining at Davood's has turned into an experience, and the pizzeria plays a vital role in preserving the historical atmosphere and significance of Lowlagar Alley.

1. Lowlagar Alley, by Kamyar Minoukadeh (@kamyar78)

In recent years, Lowlagar has witnessed the addition of new establishments, including Lowlagar Café, Godo Café, Bookestan Bookstore, a toy museum, and Aaran Art Gallery. Notably, one of the alley's renowned symmetrical houses has been revitalized and

transformed into Hanna Boutique Hotel, featuring a café-restaurant, preserving the historical building while incorporating modern elements. Despite their location in Lowlagar, a lower socioeconomic area of the city, these recent developments – which have turned the alley into a popular spot for Instagrammers – target a more affluent demographic. These transformations position Lowlagar as an appropriate case study to explore its depiction on Instagram, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of digital urban representation.

3.4. Instagram in Iran

Despite the throttling of internet speeds and the block on Instagram in 2022, the platform's usage has not only persisted but increased. According to Hajizadegan (2023), the number of accounts with more than 500,000 followers has risen by nearly 600. World Bank figures from 2021 show that approximately 79% of Iran's population uses the internet. In February 2024, the Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA) reported that after Telegram, WhatsApp was the most popular platform with about 47.7 million users, and Instagram ranked third, with 47 million users (Tadrisi Hassani, 2024).

These numbers are particularly noteworthy considering the ban on these platforms and the challenges associated with using VPNs for connection. The persistent growth of Instagram's user base under these conditions reflects its essential role in everyday life in Iran, making it an ideal platform to study within this urban context.

3.5. Methods

This thesis adopts a content analysis of Instagram posts, focusing on both the visual elements (images or videos) and textual elements (captions) present in the posts about Lowlagar Alley. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of the representation of Lowlagar on Instagram, which is crucial for understanding the underlying themes and perceptions conveyed through these digital portrayals.

The dataset includes Instagram posts from January 1, 2023, to June 23, 2024, covering 175 days to capture the most recent and relevant trends in the digital representation of Lowlagar. Posts were gathered based on the location tag "Lowlagar Alley" (in Farsi, کوچه لولاگر), with translations done from Farsi to English. The 4CAT Capture and Analysis Toolkit was employed to systematically collect and organize these posts along with their metadata. Using this toolkit became necessary as Instagram has disabled its API (Application Programming Interface) to enhance user privacy, making it impossible to collect data directly through the platform.

From an initial dataset of 240 posts, a 20% sample was randomly selected, resulting in 48 posts for detailed analysis. This sample size was chosen to balance the depth of analysis with the breadth of representation, facilitating the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and trends relevant to the study's hypotheses and research questions. This selection approach is similar to Bronsvoort and Uitermark's (2022), who analyzed 98 Instagram posts from a larger collection of 748 gathered over approximately 100 days in Amsterdam. To minimize bias and improve the accuracy of the analysis, posts from official business accounts located within Lowlagar Alley were excluded from this study. Additionally, unrelated posts, such as those by Instagram bots or advertisements randomly using the location tag, were omitted from the analysis.

The study employed directed content analysis alongside axial coding, following the framework developed by Bronsvoort and Uitermark (2022). Initially, we adopted a set of categories from their research, including the "genre", "specific object", "setting", and "meaning of place". As our data collection and analysis progressed, we refined and expanded the codebook to better reflect the unique context of Lowlagar. For instance, *genre* covers themes such as *promotion* and *personal style*, while *specific object* includes elements such as *pizza*, *brick walls*, and *vintage decorations*. Settings were categorized into scenes such as

café, *alley*, and *pizzeria*, and the meaning of place was interpreted in terms such as *promoting the place*, or *showcasing style*. These categories helped systematically code posts according to their primary themes and objectives.

Additional categorization included media type (video, picture, or carousel), user type (influencer, commercial, personal), follower count, and identifiable gender. Main locations and detailed descriptions of each post were manually recorded and coded. Engagement metrics, such as the number of likes and comments, were collected, and captions were analyzed based on both keywords and the conveyed messages. Prominent hashtags and their frequencies were calculated, and the posting frequency of particular users was noted, with a few accounts posting multiple times, each featuring diverse content from various locations within the alley. Visual content from both pictures and videos was manually analyzed, including all slides of the carousel posts, focusing on identifying objects, settings, aesthetics, and implied messages. For video posts, keywords and, where applicable, the type of music used were also recorded.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This thesis is dedicated to maintaining ethical standards in digital content analysis, ensuring that all data collection and analysis stages respect individual privacy and comply with copyright laws. The research is limited to publicly accessible Instagram posts and rather than saving visual content directly, this study maintains only links to the original posts. Consequently, if a user chooses to delete their post, it is automatically excluded from our dataset, thereby respecting user autonomy and consent.
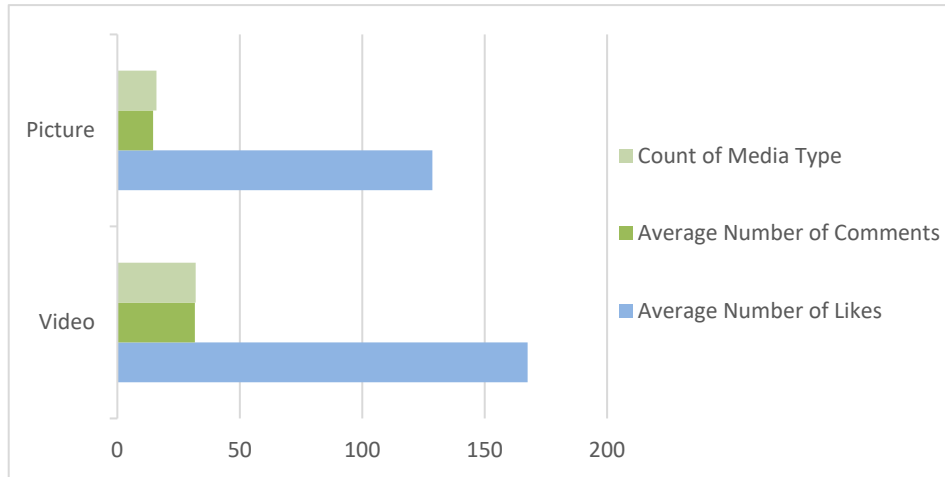
4. Analysis

This section presents a detailed analysis of 48 Instagram posts, selected randomly from a total of 240 posts tagged with "Lowlagar Alley" (in Farsi, کوچه لولاگر), covering the period from January 1, 2023, and June 23, 2024. The data collected from these posts provides insights into the representation of Lowlagar Alley on Instagram, focusing on both the characteristics of the accounts involved and the content of the posts themselves.

4.1. Media type Distribution

The dataset contains 16 pictures and 32 videos. Carousel posts, which include up to ten slides of images, are categorized as a single picture, though all elements in the slides are analyzed in subsequent sections. On Instagram, videos are typically short and consist of brief, edited sequences rather than long, continuous footage. The marked preference for videos indicates several factors influencing social media usage:

- The data reveals that videos receive higher average likes and comments compared to pictures, as shown in Figure 1. This trend can be attributed to the dynamic nature of videos, which are often more engaging as they can capture the "vibes" and activities more effectively.

- Due to their higher engagement, Instagram's algorithm is likely to promote videos more than images. This trend is potentially influenced by the success of platforms such as TikTok, encouraging users to post more videos to increase their visibility through engagement. This shift highlights the evolution of Instagram from a primarily photo-sharing platform to one that increasingly embraces video content.

2. Media Types Distribution

4.2. Account Type and Follower Count

The analysis of account types and their follower counts provides insights into the influence of users posting about Lowlagar Alley. For this study, accounts were initially categorized based on their function: commercial accounts, which are associated with specific businesses using the location tag, and individual accounts. Individual accounts were further classified based on follower count, distinguishing between those with fewer than 1,000 followers and those with more.

- **Accounts with >1,000 followers**: 29 posts

- **Accounts with <1,000 followers**: 13 posts

- **Commercial accounts**: 6 posts

Among accounts with more than 1,000 followers, 93% were influencers, predominantly active in lifestyle, tourism (including promoting only Tehran), and fashion. These influencers often post regularly to gain followers and engage their audience. Their posts receive higher engagement in terms of likes and comments, highlighting their influence on the representation of locations such as Lowlagar Alley.

About half of the accounts with fewer than 1,000 followers, which were among the least frequent to use the Lowlagar Alley location tag, posted in a style similar to influencers in an attempt to gain more followers and become influencers themselves. Commercial accounts, which primarily aim to sell goods or services rather than focus on personal branding like influencers, included those involved in content creation, real estate, and various businesses. These accounts used Lowlagar Alley as a backdrop to sell products such as tote bags or to increase their follower base through the strategic use of the location tag.

4.3. Gender Representation

The gender analysis of the social media accounts showed a distribution of 22 posts by female users and 12 by male users. Additionally, there were 7 posts featuring users whose gender was not identified. This analysis accounts for repeated entries only once.

Female Accounts

- Female accounts have the highest total number of followers and likes, indicating greater visibility or popularity within this dataset. They also demonstrate the highest average number of comments, suggesting a deeper level of engagement with their audience.

- After excluding a notable female influencer with nearly 90,000 followers to prevent skewing the data, the adjusted average number of followers for female accounts is 4,428. Additionally, these accounts receive an average of 195 likes and 27 comments per post, maintaining robust engagement despite the outlier.

Male Accounts

- Male accounts have a lower total and average number of followers and likes compared to female accounts. However, their engagement, as measured by comments, remains relatively high considering their smaller follower base. This

could imply that their content may engage their audience in more interactive ways despite a smaller reach.

- The average follower count for male accounts stands at 2,053, about half that of female accounts, with an average of 78 likes and 21 comments per post.

Unspecified Gender

- Accounts with unspecified gender display the highest average number of followers and a comparably high average number of likes. This category includes accounts with a high number of followers, as evidenced by two commercial accounts with nearly 20,000 and 43,000 followers, respectively.

- These accounts achieve a higher like count than both female and male accounts, which points to substantial passive engagement. Nonetheless, the similar number of comments to male accounts suggests that while content is widely liked, it does not necessarily provoke deeper interactions such as discussions.
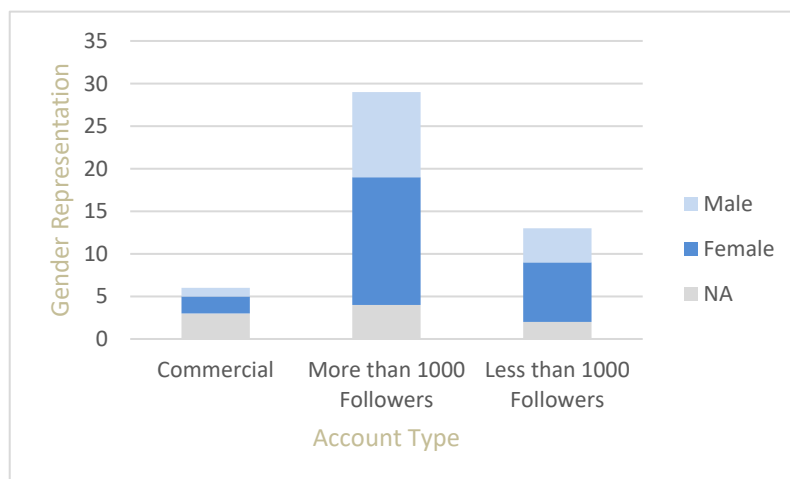
3. Gender Representation by Account Type

4.4. Locations and Settings

The most frequently used locations as the main setting of the posts include:

1. **Lowlagar Alley**: 17 times

2. **Lowlagar Café**: 6 times

3. **Godo Café**: 6 times

4. **Davood's Pizzeria**: 5 times

4. Interior of Lowlagar Café (Left) and Godo Café (Middle and Right)
Photos sourced from the respective locations' official Instagram accounts.

5. Davood's Pizzeria front (left), Lowlagar Alley (middle), and Hanna Boutique Hotel front (right)
Photos by Instagram accounts @tehran_page, @alireza.khatibiii, and @Hanna_Boutique_Hotel, respectively.

The most "Instagrammable" spots in Lowlagar Alley prominently feature the area's newly established cafés and the iconic old pizzeria, which serves as the hallmark of this alley. However, the alley itself is the focal point of the majority of posts, often captured in aesthetically pleasing compositions. When the alley is the main setting, content often

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showcases people wandering in stylish clothes or posing against brick walls, old cars, or storefronts. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the alley's symmetrical design and old architecture, as well as introducing its various establishments.
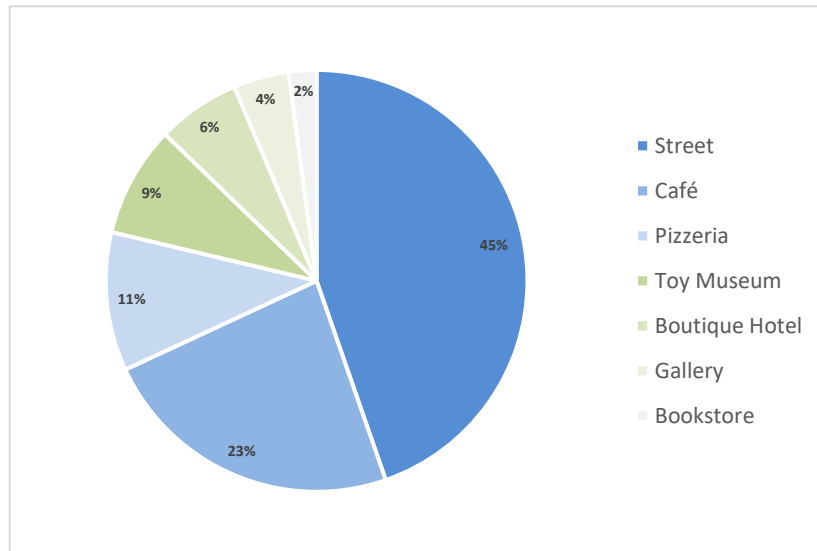
6. Main Setting of Posts

Places associated with consumption and socializing – namely cafés and restaurants – are featured the most. Despite its prominence and having the highest follower count among establishments in Lowlagar Alley (120,000 followers), Hanna Boutique Hotel, which includes a high-end café-restaurant, is seldom featured in posts tagged with Lowlagar Alley as the main location. Conversely, spaces like the Bookestan bookstore, with its distinctive selection of aesthetically appealing English titles and connection to consumer culture, are primarily used as photographic backdrops rather than being actively promoted.

It is important to highlight here that as far as this research found out, most establishments within Lowlagar lack their own unique location tags, with the exception of Hanna Boutique Hotel. Davood's Pizzeria also has a tag, but it is used in fewer than 100 posts. Consequently, for places such as Godo Café, users tend to tag Lowlagar Alley instead. This may explain why Hanna Boutique Hotel is not the primary location in posts, as it is the only establishment with a distinct tag. Additionally, there is a "Lowlagar Gallery" tag that does not correspond

to an actual location; it may be associated with the Aaran Gallery in Lowlagar and is primarily used by the official Bookestan bookstore account to promote its books.

4.5. Post Objectives

The posts tagged with Lowlagar Alley can be categorized by their primary objectives, given that some posts may fit into multiple categories. The distribution is as follows:

1. **Promoting place**: 22 posts

2. **Showcasing style and self**: 14 posts

3. **Art and Photography**: 7 posts

4. **Showcasing Consumption**: 2 posts

5. **Other**: 3 posts
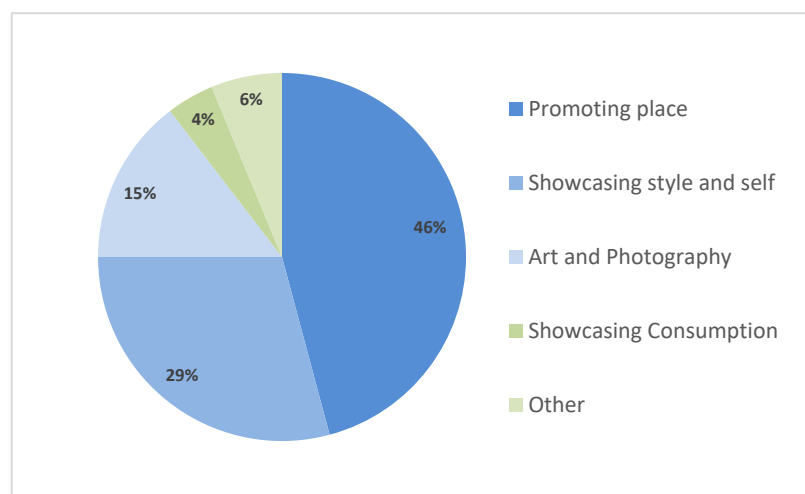
7. Post Objectives

Promotion of Lowlagar Alley and its Establishments

A significant portion of the posts aims to promote Lowlagar Alley and its various establishments as desirable destinations. These posts highlight the aesthetic appeal and nostalgic charm of these locations, presenting them to followers as unique and visually appealing experiences. Most of these accounts focus on exploring Tehran (in Farsi, تهران

گردی) or exploring cafés (in Farsi, کافه گردی). The posts frequently feature the storefronts, interior, and ambience of places such as Lowlagar Café and Godo Café, or the unique experience of dining at Tehran's first pizzeria, Davood's. When showcasing interiors, the focus is on design elements, such as old decorative details, furniture, brickwork, and traditional Persian central yards. Additionally, posts promoting the alley often highlight its unique architecture and occasionally mention its historical significance.

The frequent representation of vintage décor and historical context suggests that the alley's aesthetic and historical significance are major draws for social media content. These posts often aim to attract visitors by showcasing the cafés as ideal spots for socializing and consumption. This theme reflects the commodification of urban spaces on social media, where they are curated and marketed in exchange for monetary payments or follower engagement. Men, women, and accounts without identifiable gender engage in this objective equally.

Self-presentation and Style

The next most common objective is self-presentation, where individuals use Lowlagar Alley as a backdrop to showcase their personal style and identity. These posts often include mirror selfies, portrait photos, and fashion-centric imagery, depicting stylish individuals walking in the alley. The mirror selfies are mostly taken with iPhones, which are considered expensive smartphones in Iran. The backgrounds typically feature brick walls, old architecture, or storefronts. This theme underscores the use of urban spaces for identity performance on social media. The styles are carefully curated, often trendy or vintage, with women engaging in this objective twice as much as men.

Art and Photography

Some posts focus on photography and artistic expression, capturing the architectural significance and cultural essence of Lowlagar Alley. These posts often emphasize the alley's

symmetrical architecture, old brick buildings, and artistic street views, portraying the area as a site of aesthetic and cultural value.

Other Objectives

A few posts explicitly focus on consumption as their main objective. However, promoting the alley's cafés, restaurants, and other establishments as part of a lifestyle narrative inherently revolves around consumption. This theme highlights the commodification of the urban experience, where a consumption-based lifestyle is central to the digital portrayal of the area.

4.6. Music, Filters, Hashtags, and Captions

The use of hashtags, background music, filters, and captions in posts offers deeper insights into the cultural and aesthetic trends associated with Lowlagar Alley:

1. **Music**: Out of 30 relevant posts, 12 featured nostalgic Persian music, which aligns with the overall nostalgic theme observed in other elements of the content.

2. **Filters**: 11 posts utilized old-style aesthetics, enhancing the nostalgic feel. Other posts typically followed the general Instagram aesthetics, with carefully curated images that adhered to modern visual trends, but used no specific filters.

3. **Frequently Used Hashtags**:

    In Farsi: #کافه_گردی (Café Exploration), #لولاگر (Lowlagar), #کافه (Café), #تهران (Tehran), #تهرانگردی (Exploring Tehran)

The hashtags were predominantly in Farsi, focusing on themes such as café/restaurant experiences, locations, and style/fashion. Other hashtags invoked nostalgia and "good vibes".

4. **Frequently Used Words in Captions**:

Translated from Farsi: Lowlagar, Café, Alley, Tehran, Pizza, Museum, Toy

These terms reflect the places that are represented the most within Lowlagar Alley. The primary goal of the captions aligns with that of the accompanying posts: to promote these locations. While not every video or caption explicitly uses specific terms, when they do, it serves to associate the content with a sense of nostalgia. The incorporation of nostalgic music and old-style filters further emphasizes this theme, effectively positioning Lowlagar Alley as a historical, unique, and aesthetically appealing location.

5. Discussion

5.1. Experiencing Space

The increasing shift of social media platforms, including Instagram, towards video content carries multiple implications. While Instagram pictures are often highly styled and "designed" images (see Manovich, 2017), short videos enable users to more easily capture not only these carefully curated spaces and aesthetically pleasing surroundings – considering each frame as a distinct moving image – but also to convey a specific feeling, "vibe," or lifestyle.

For instance, a picture from a café featuring an antique table with a coffee cup next to a window overlooking a green terrace offers a glimpse of the nostalgic and relaxed atmosphere one might feel there. However, a video capturing this scene with the gentle movement of trees in the breeze, accompanied by old music, and focusing on the coffee, pastries, and other vintage decorations, immerses the audience, making them feel as if they are experiencing the place alongside the content creator.

This transition towards video content is potentially driven by higher engagement levels, making it more profitable for platforms. Consequently, urban spaces are increasingly represented on social media in ways that emphasize experiential qualities. It is no longer just the design or composition that matters but also the feelings and activities that are central to urban representations. As a result, urban spaces are evolving beyond traditional "Instagrammable" features, such as selfie walls. They are now striving to create comprehensive "Instagrammable" atmospheres – a mise en scène where content creators can perform their lifestyles in front of the camera – and to create "vibes" that can be used for marketing these spaces. This trend reflects a broader shift towards the consumption of

experiences alongside material goods, as articulated by Rifkin (2001), where individuals seek to consume experiences that resonate with their aspirational lifestyles (Žižek, 2014).

5.2. Influenced Spaces

In our analysis, most users with public accounts tagging the location were influencers or aspiring influencers, which significantly affects how the area is represented. Influencers typically post with one of two primary objectives: they either receive monetary payments for promoting places, products, or services, or they are working to build their personal brand. In both cases, their goal is to maximize engagement, captivate their followers and attract new ones. Therefore, their representations often adhere to the platform's logic and affordances, follow specific trends (based on the influencer's niche), and capture attention.

We hypothesize that influencers typically represent urban spaces in one of three ways:

1. **The Urban Space as a Commodity:** The space itself is promoted as a desirable location.

2. **The Urban Space as a Background:** The space acts as a backdrop for the promotion of other products or services.

3. **The Urban Space as a Lifestyle Setting:** The space is used by influencers as a setting for showcasing their style and identity – or self-promotion.

Influencers often come from more advantaged backgrounds, and people tend to follow those they find relatable or aspirational. In the first scenario, when an influencer promotes a place, their primary goal is to create content that motivates their followers to visit the location. To achieve this, they present the place in a way that appeals to their follower base, focusing on aesthetic elements and using appealing descriptors such as "nostalgic" and "good vibes," while avoiding aspects that might evoke negative feelings. This approach,

however, is not without its consequences. Researchers such as Bronsvoort and Uitermark (2022) note that curated representations have material consequences, reshaping the place by redefining who belongs and driving changes such as gentrification.

In the second scenario, where the urban space serves as a background, influencers choose locations that complement the product they are promoting. The chosen settings suggest that the type of people who visit these places would also use the promoted product, enhancing its desirability. This strategic choice of location often aims to associate the product with a specific lifestyle or social status, typically highlighting high-end areas while overlooking other spaces.

Lastly, in the third scenario, the urban space acts as a stage for influencers to display their identity, style, and "distinction" through what they consume, where they spend time, and how they present themselves. This type of content often showcases their personal tastes and affluence, reinforcing social hierarchies and influencing followers' perceptions and aspirations. As Boy and Uitermark (2017) show, by distinguishing themselves in trendy hotspots, users elevate their own social status and that of the featured space, promoting aesthetics linked to refined lifestyles and high-end consumption, which in turn drives processes of gentrification.

In our data, influencers predominantly used the first and third scenarios to represent Lowlagar Alley. The second scenario was mainly utilized by commercial accounts lacking a personal brand, comprising only 12% of the posts. This raises several questions: Is Lowlagar Alley not yet considered high-end enough to attract more commercial representations? Or is it because "consumption" is not yet the main genre of posts, with "place promotion" being the current trend? Alternatively, could this be due to an earlier identified shift towards "experience promotion"?

5.3. Gender Dynamics

As our data showed, both accounts with a high number of followers and those with fewer followers – primarily representing influencers and aspiring influencers in our sample – were predominantly managed by women, who have much higher engagement rates compared to male accounts. Moreover, focusing on active engagement, such as commenting on a post, reveals that when a real person is behind an account, engagement tends to be higher. This is likely why influencers with personal branding can promote goods and places as effectively, if not more so, than commercial accounts.

When it comes to place promotion, both women and men participate equally. However, women are twice as likely to use urban spaces as backdrops to showcase their style and identity. Given that the highest engagement rates are seen in female-managed influencer accounts, urban spaces aiming to attract social media attention are increasingly designed as aesthetically pleasing backdrops and lifestyle settings. These environments cater to influencers, especially women from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, offering ideal settings to display fashion, upscale lifestyles, and personal identities. As these spaces serve as settings for influencers to showcase their distinction and status, this trend risks alienating broader demographics, potentially making these places less inclusive and less responsive to the diverse needs of a broader range of the population.

5.4. Meanings of Place

Our data showed that among the locations present in Lowlagar Alley, the alley itself received the most representation on Instagram. Following that were the two cafés, Godo and Lowlagar, and then Davood's Pizzeria. Other places were rarely the main locations of the posts. Most posts were either promoting the place or showcasing style and identity. Lowlagar Alley, being the most represented location, was frequently mentioned in both categories.

For promotional posts, the alley was depicted as a unique place where one could feel as though they had travelled back to simpler times, while still enjoying aesthetic, pricey coffee in old-style cafés or purchasing an expensive, "pretty" English book from its niche bookstore. Posts often featured compositions of brick walls, symmetrical and old architecture, along with modern minimalist storefronts, and influencers as the main actors, walking the alley with their high-end, trendy styles – sometimes vintage and carefully aligned with the ambience of the place.

When the cafés were the main focus, the posts were almost always about promotion, videos capturing the experience of the places: how the old furniture, yard and terrace, and brick interior made visitors feel. The same applied to Davood's Pizzeria. Although Davood's is neither new nor trendy, it has preserved its old décor, interior, and style of serving pizza. Arguably, it is the other establishments in the alley that have adapted themselves to the "vibe" of Lowlagar and Davood's. Promotional content for Davood's focused on the nostalgic dining experience, emphasizing the feeling of being in an old, cherished place. Interestingly, these posts rarely mentioned the quality of the food itself; instead, they either encouraged followers to have this experience or showcased that they had had it – a gesture positioning them as individuals connected with their roots. This trend suggests that the "feeling of place" is the main commodity being sold on Instagram in the case of these representations. Consequently, it is not only urban spaces that are becoming commodified but also the urban experience itself.

As mentioned, approximately 46% of the posts tagged with the Lowlagar Alley location promoted the place, while about 29% showcased personal style and identity. In both cases, the primary locations featured were the aesthetically pleasing alley and the two vintage cafés. Other locations, such as Aran art gallery or Bookestan bookstore were seldom featured in a straightforward promotional manner. Meanwhile, Bookestan promotes itself

through its selection of English books with "beautiful" covers, aiming to attract the affluent population. Additionally, it has designed its interior with vintage decorations to enhance its appeal.

Based on these observations, it is evident that consumption is neither the sole drive nor the main objective in Instagram representations of Lowlagar. The places being promoted are "Instagram-worthy" and naturally lead to consumption. However, the emphasis is on promotion and style, with consumption subtly integrated into the narrative of experiencing the unique location.

Therefore, consumption becomes part of a lifestyle, integral to how a day would be spent experiencing this "desirable" alley and its cafés. It is as if saying: "You do not need to buy gallery tickets or books; you simply need to come, enjoy the café's charming yard, and socialize. You can take aesthetic pictures for your Instagram with the vintage blue car against the brick wall, guaranteeing plenty of likes and proving you belong. Sure, you might purchase a thing or two at the café, but the main reason we highlight this place is for the overall *experience*."

5.5. *More Distinction?*

Interestingly, Hanna Boutique Hotel, which has its own unique location tag, boasts the most followers on Instagram among the businesses in the alley but is rarely tagged with the alley location. Given that Hanna is the most expensive business in the alley, attracting a highly affluent demographic, and its café-restaurant features fine dining with a more "modern vibe", it can be hypothesized that while some people draw distinction by showcasing their presence in Lowlagar Alley, there is another group that draws further distinction by associating themselves specifically with Hanna. This bifurcation highlights a

layered social dynamic within the same geographic space, where different levels of distinction and identity performance are at play.

5.6. Global Trends and Local Adaptations

Social media plays a crucial role in shaping urban spaces and identities. The Amsterdam research by Bronsvoort and Uitermark (2022) demonstrated that gentrifiers used social media to express their identity and status, frequently posting content that serves as advertisements for trendy and upscale establishments. In contrast, other businesses were largely absent from digital platforms, except for a few shops that have altered their aesthetics to attract gentrifiers.

Similarly, in Tehran's Lowlagar Alley, the representations are mostly by the affluent population, who either aim to express themselves and enhance their personal brands or promote places. While in Amsterdam about 70% of the posts showcased consumption with the places in the background (Bronsvoort & Uitermark, 2022), in Lowlagar Alley, the posts primarily aim to directly promote a place. This promotion often subtly masks the underlying goal of high-end consumption. For instance, a picture of a coffee with an appreciative caption about the café where it was consumed showcases consumption. In contrast, promoting a place means posts that directly introduce the café, display its interior and decorations, and try to capture the overall experience.

Instagram's use as a global platform shows remarkable consistency across different contexts, including Iran and the Netherlands, though the manner of usage differs. In Iran, particularly in Lowlagar Alley, the emphasis is on promoting and introducing a place by linking it to its history and culture, commodifying that history rather than altering it. Older establishments, like Davood's Pizzeria, have retained their original charm without updating themselves to align with Instagram aesthetics. In contrast, newer establishments have

adapted to the characteristic ambience of the alley, becoming integral parts of an experiential narrative on Instagram.

Globalization through "Instagramization", despite different local contexts, ultimately aims at the same goal: promoting places for high-end consumption and identity construction. However, it manifests in styles relevant to each locality. In Lowlagar, this manifests as the promotion or commodification of experiences, appealing to gentrifiers seeking to connect with and belong to their historical and cultural roots rather than merely chasing after trendy, new, or chic places.

5.7. Revisiting Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question 1) How is Lowlagar represented on Instagram, and what dominant themes and elements characterize these digital representations?

Hypothesis 1) Instagram posts related to Lowlagar Alley are likely to predominantly feature visual and narrative elements that highlight consumption, upscale urban lifestyles, and aesthetic appeal.

As observed in the data, the representations of Lowlagar Alley and its establishments on Instagram primarily aim to promote these locations. Consumption is not overtly the main objective; rather, it serves as an underlying theme subtly woven into the promotion of each place. The focus is predominantly on capturing the aesthetic appeal of the locations or emphasizing themes that evoke nostalgic feelings. The representations mainly commodify the experience of the places.

Research Question 2) To what extent do the digital representations of Lowlagar on Instagram reflect unique aspects of the city, and how do they align with broader global trends in urban representation on social media?

Hypothesis 2) While the digital representations on Instagram will retain distinct characteristics of Lowlagar, they are also expected to resonate with global trends, emphasizing upscale identity and lifestyle, and reflecting the trend of "Instagrammability" and "Instagramization" of urban spaces.

These "Instagrammable" locations preserve the distinct characteristics of Lowlagar, crafting a unique backdrop for both personal identity showcase and the broader "Instagramization" of urban experiences. While maintaining their uniqueness, these portrayals align with global trends in urban representation, primarily focusing on the promotion and commodification of spaces associated with high-end consumption. However, the emphasis is more on consuming experiences rather than products, reflecting an emphasis on lifestyle over material goods.

5.8. Implications for Practice

The findings of this study show that Lowlagar Alley and its establishments are increasingly promoted on Instagram, leading to the commodification of both the spaces and their experiences. Notably, it is the alley's history and culture that make it particularly "Instagrammable". These insights raise important considerations for urban planners and policymakers. Such digital representations can drive neighbourhood transformations and contribute to gentrification, attracting visitors from more affluent demographics and altering the area's social fabric. Urban planners should prioritize designing spaces that promote inclusivity and affordability rather than solely focusing on aesthetic appeal and promotability.

Moreover, it is evident that promoting a place does not necessarily require transforming it into a high-end or trendy location. Authenticity and unique cultural elements can also make a space appealing while preserving its original values. However, it is

important to consider that what is often perceived as "authentic" can also be strategically appropriated for commercial purposes. This "constructed authenticity" can serve to enhance a location's marketability while potentially obscuring or redefining its intrinsic cultural and historical identity.

5.9. Limitations and Future Research

This study has a number of limitations, including a small sample size of 48 posts, which may not fully capture the diversity of content and user engagement related to Lowlagar Alley. The study also lacks engagement with the users behind these posts, missing out on their motivations and perceptions. Additionally, this study only shows how Lowlagar Alley is represented on Instagram, but it does not analyze how these representations affect the urban area itself.

To build upon the findings of this thesis, future research could address its limitations by expanding the sample size and including a broader range of posts. This would enable a more comprehensive exploration of the digital representations of Lowlagar Alley. Longitudinal studies could also explore how these representations evolve over time and assess the long-term impact of social media on the urban area.

Moreover, engaging directly with social media users through interviews or surveys could provide deeper insights into their motivations and perceptions, as well as the cultural and social implications of their posts about urban spaces. Conducting interviews with residents of these urban areas could also illuminate how digital representations on platforms such as Instagram influence real-world changes in urban development and gentrification, providing a more holistic view of the interaction between new media and urban life.

Comparative studies involving different urban areas, both within and outside Iran, could further clarify the global and local dynamics of social media representation. Such

studies would enhance our understanding of how specific urban characteristics influence social media trends and vice versa, contributing to a richer comprehension of these complex interplays.

6. Conclusion

Building on research examining the interplay between new media, particularly social media, and urban life, this thesis explored the representation of Tehran's Lowlagar Alley – a gentrified urban area within a developing city – on Instagram, a leading visual social media platform with global reach. A content analysis of Instagram posts tagged with "Lowlagar Alley" (in Farsi, کوچه لولاگر), revealed that the representations of this area primarily aim to promote the place, emphasizing aesthetic appeal and nostalgic charm. Despite retaining the unique characteristics of Lowlagar, the digital representations align with global trends of promoting locations linked to consumption. Influenced by Instagram's technical affordances, user practices, and political economy (see Moore & Rodgers, 2020), these representations contribute to a high-end consumer culture that is transforming urban experiences.

Central to this transformation is the commodification of urban space and the urban experience. In Lowlagar Alley, a historically rich and culturally significant area, the appeal of "Instagrammability" is predominantly tied to its vintage and traditional charm. This distinctive aesthetic does more than just attract visitors – it sells an experience. As shown in this thesis, the emphasis in Instagram posts has shifted from merely showcasing physical goods or services to promoting an immersive experience that embodies a specific lifestyle.

Instagram plays a multifaceted role in this commodification process. It provides a stage where everyday spaces are turned into highly curated, visually appealing images and videos. These modifications are shaped by the platform's logic, affordances, and algorithms, and are often shared in exchange for economic or cultural capital. Influenced by the surge in video content and the rising influencer culture, Instagram showcases dynamic portrayals of life and luxury. These depictions encourage viewers to observe and participate, offering a

glimpse and an invitation to a refined lifestyle where individuals can draw distinctions and construct their identities.

Influencers, primarily motivated by monetary gain or personal branding, are essential in driving this phenomenon. Their content goes beyond simply promoting products or places; it sells a lifestyle that is aspirational and, importantly, consumable. These digital representations, while highlighting the beauty and desirability of places such as Lowlagar Alley, often disproportionately showcase demographics similar to the influencers themselves. This selective visibility can obscure the diverse range of people who actually frequent these areas, thereby distorting public perception and potentially impacting the social fabric of the neighbourhood. Such skewed representations on Instagram can accelerate gentrification processes, pushing urban areas towards catering predominantly to affluent demographics.

While Instagram operates as a global platform, the concept of "Instagrammablity" manifests differently across various locations. This thesis supports the key findings from Amsterdam regarding Instagram's role in showcasing "aspirational consumption" and "elective belonging," and that such selective representations could visually and materially contribute to gentrification (Bronsvoort & Uitermark, 2022). The case study of Tehran's Lowlagar Alley expands on these findings by illustrating how the area's unique cultural and historical identity intertwines with this process, enhancing its appeal to a specific demographic.

In Lowlagar, the attraction lies in the authenticity and historical depth, which contrasts with other areas where modernity and luxury might define appeal. Furthermore, while in locations such as Amsterdam's Javastraat, Instagram representations predominantly showcased consumption (see Bronsvoort & Uitermark, 2022), in Lowlagar consumption is subtly integrated into the promotion of the place, which forms the majority of the

representations. This is done by presenting the alley within the context of a nostalgic experience that celebrates, rather than alters, its cultural and historical essence.

These distinctions are crucial for understanding how different locales respond and adapt to the pressures of "Instagrammization". While Instagram can offer a means to preserve and promote cultural heritage, it can also drive cultural commodification, valuing aesthetics over authenticity. Therefore, while the platform helps draw attention to historical and cultural sites, it also risks marginalizing the very elements that make these places unique, promoting instead an aesthetic urban landscape tailored for social media consumption.

Given that this research was limited to 48 posts, there is a clear need for more extensive studies. Future research could benefit from expanding the sample size, longitudinal studies, and engaging directly with users and residents to deepen understanding of the interplay between social media and urban life. Comparative studies across various urban contexts could further explain how global digital trends are adapted locally.

In conclusion, the findings of this thesis highlight how urban spaces are commodified and consumed in the age of social media. The increasing commodification of urban experience through Instagram reflects a broader cultural shift towards lifestyle consumption that prioritizes identity, aesthetics, and the experiential above all else. In the face of this, it is crucial for urban planners and policymakers to engage critically with these trends. They must strive for a balance between the economic advantages of increased visibility and the imperative to preserve the cultural and social integrity of urban communities. Furthermore, such balance should promote the creation of spaces that genuinely cater to the diverse needs of the population. Only through such approaches can we preserve the unique identities of places such as Lowlagar Alley, ensuring they are appreciated not just for their "Instagrammability" but for their inherent historical and cultural significance. It is essential

to guarantee that urban environments remain inclusive and diverse, upholding everyone's right to the city.

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