Master's Thesis Evaluation Form

Student's name: Reyhaneh Hemmati

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

Name of the supervisor: PhDr. Mgr. Jan Balon Ph.D.

Name of the opponent: Mgr. Andrea Průchová Hrůzová Ph.D.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis? Please give your reasons for the suggested grade in detail below.

1.   Does the author show understanding of one or more theories, and use theory to generate a hypothesis or to make the problem area more understandable.

Comments:
The author employs a wide range of relevant theoretical literature to understand the examined issue and conceptualize the research design. She mainly uses the recent literature that underscores how "new" the scrutinized theme is. I appreciate that the text emphasizes a dialectical relationship between the physical and the digital space and provides several examples of how digital infrastructures are embedded into our everyday reality. The author also offers a good systematization of a theoretical framework to argue her interest in examining the problem of social inequality in the non-Western context of developing cities.

However, I believe that the author might benefit from including some other canonical literature about the transformation of postwar cities, especially when the processes of commodification, individualization, and privatization are mentioned (also, the two last processes should be highlighted more in the thesis), most famously writing by Richard Sennett (1978).

The author would be able to bring a more accurate analysis if a theoretical concept of "mediatization" would be developed in greater detail, so two facets of this process would be discussed: hypermediacy and immediacy. Especially the second one, immediacy, would greatly help theoretically frame the author´s interpretation of "consumption of experience" and the promotion of "vibe" when one feels as if present on the spot ("immersive experience").

The literature review might further elaborate on specific features of participatory culture articulated by Jenkins, the concept of data mining (p. 18/19), the phenomenon of smart city as an example of how digital is embedded in embodied everyday experience, and the seminal concept of digital capital that is only briefly mentioned on p. 19 with no reference. Also, there is not covered a process of gentrification, although it has been mentioned several times throughout the thesis, including the findings.

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I would welcome a theoretical section covering the existence, importance, and influence of formerly dominant means of visual representation of urban space like postcards, tourist books, travelogues, documentary films, documentary photographs, etc. As the author employs Jenkin´s concept of "convergence culture," this reflection of how old and new media are interwoven seems essential. Also, in terms of analysis, the knowledge of previous visual patterns of capturing the examined place would greatly enhance the complexity of the present study.

Lastly, I recommend the literature that discusses explicitly the concept of socially-(in)just city as represented in urban planning or developers´ projects (e.g., Goodwin et al. 2021).

2.   Is the research question articulated clearly and properly? Is the research question sufficiently answered in the conclusion?

Comments:
The author articulates two main research questions and accompanies them with two hypotheses. The RQ2 deserves clarification regarding how "unique aspects of the city" are conceptualized and understood by the author. The RQs are answered in the final section of the thesis, and the hypotheses are tested.

3.   Is the thesis based on relevant research and literature and does it accurately summarize and integrate the information?

Comments:
Please, see a detailed comment on the literature above (section 1).

4.   What is the quality of the data or the other sources? Are the sample method, data collection and data analysis appropriate?

Comments:
The aim of the research is clearly set and achieved. The author employs an existing research design used to analyze Amsterdam. I am missing information on the author's general approach to research design. According to the text, it is a mixed-method approach (?) as she conducts a quantitative visual content analysis (but there is no reference to literature, e.g., Bell 2001 or Rose 2017) and combines it with a qualitative text analysis when the axial coding is mentioned (again, there are no details provided). On the one hand, the author states that by using visual content analysis, she wants to analyze "underlying themes and perceptions" (p. 34). However, that is a goal that cannot be achieved by this quantitative method. Instead of it, some qualitative visual analysis should be used. In the analytical section, the author detects frequency and patterns and, therefore, applies the quantitative approach. I am missing the code book that would help understand better the author´s research process.

As the author has collected a small sample of 48 posts, one has to ask if the qualitative approach would fit the research design better. Usually, content analysis is used when over 100 pictures are gathered in a visual corpus. As both pictures/videos and texts were analyzed, I

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propose the application of multimodal analysis that shows in detail the dynamics among individual elements of communication.

I am not sure if the category "meaning of the place" is well named if the analysis talks about "post objectives", so this category is merely referring to the "function of the post" (promoting, showcasing lifestyle, etc.)?

I would like to read a clear explanation based on which literature the division of influencers on -1000 vs. +1000 followers was made (e.g., the literature refers to macro-, micro-influencers) and why one extremely popular influencer had been excluded from the sample.

5.   *Are the findings relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions of the thesis based on strong arguments?*

Comments:
The findings are relevant to the research questions.

I would add the reference to the existing research literature when the author argues about the greater engagement of the audience with videos than photos (known and long-time researched fact).

Throughout the analysis, the presence of communication elements constructing the feeling/experience of nostalgia should be more complexly explained, as this finding is fundamental. I am very excited about the finding that is put as "commodification of history" and would like the author to read and refer to other cases like that (mainly Greek tourism). As noted above, the concept of "immediacy" as part of the theory of "mediatization" would help solidify the author's argument about the importance of promoting the "experience." Also, the final part of the analysis talks about the phenomenon of "authenticity," which is greatly examined in the realm of social media communication. The author provides no references, but if the concepts of constructing feelings of nostalgia as authentic experiences were connected, the interpretation would be stronger.

It might also be productive to think about the presence of many tourists in Amsterdam, who produced the pictures to document themselves in front of some specific urban places. Therefore, the second scenario, "place as a background," is very frequent in the study. In the case of Tehran and the chosen location, this might be different as the analyzed accounts are mostly local ones (both individuals and companies).

6.   *Are the author's thoughts distinguished unambiguously from the borrowed ideas?*

Comments:
The author carefully distinguishes her statements from the body of existing research literature.

7.   *Is the thesis containing original/innovative research (in terms of topic, approach, and/or findings)?*

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Comments:

I believe that the research focuses on a social issue of great global importance in the innovative context.

8.   What is the quality of style and other formal requirements?

Comments:

Firstly, the text needs more direct quotations from literature. In the theoretical section, the author often refers to the specific term as a quote (e.g., "logic of identity and difference" on p. 21) but does not indicate a particular page of the source (in this case, Manovich 2017). This is also the case for the section "Instagram and Urban Life."

There are missing references to the original sources if referred from the secondary literature; see Lefebvre p. 15, Simmel p. 25. The author does not abbreviate "Ibid" if the same reference is used consecutively.

The text is missing appendixes: a list of analyzed materials (either pictures or account links) and a codebook.

There are some minor errors in the reference list, e.g., Žižek´s reference is missing the link or the reference no. 37 (p. 64) contains error. In general, when an online source is listed, then the information about the date of its last visit is missing.

9.   Are there any other strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, which are not included in the previous questions? Please list them if any.

Comments:

The stylistic quality of the text is great, and thus, the text is read smoothly and with excitement.

10.   What topic do you suggest for the discussion in the thesis defence?

Comments:

1. Please clarify your research design in terms of overall approach, individual methods, and selection of IG accounts.
2. Could you specify what you mean by the "unique aspects of the city" in the RQ2?
3. Could you elaborate more on the differences between your Tehran and existing Amsterdam cases, which produce different results/findings?
4. Is there any earlier/historical set of visual representations through which the examined location was portrayed publicly? What is the collectively shared image of the place, and what is its role in how it is represented digitally?

11.   Declaration that the supervisor has read the result of the originality check in the system: [   ]   Theses   [   ]   Turnitin   [x]   Original   (Urkund)

Supervisor's   comment   on   the   originality   check   result:

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Overall assessment of the thesis:

The author submitted a well-written text examining the recent and important theme from an innovative perspective. The author demonstrates a deeper insight into the relevant research literature, yet some aspects of the theme should be further elaborated (individualization, privatization of cities, the process of immediacy, the process of gentrification). The research goal is fulfilled, but some aspects of the research design are unclear and require further clarification. The findings are relevant and well-argued, but they would benefit from emphasizing the cultural analysis of the concepts of nostalgia and authenticity. There are some formal flaws throughout the text, but the overall stylistic quality of the writing is good.

Proposed grade: **C**

Date: September 10 2024   Signature:

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