

Article

Public Space at the “Palm of a Hand”: Perceptions of Urban Projects Through Digital Media

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Submitted: 7 May 2021 | Accepted: 29 June 2021 | Published: 17 November 2021

Abstract

This article examines the interactions between digital and social media as the contemporary incubators of place perceptions and the critical debate of environmental quality. Digital and social media may change the way people live but not the way they use physical spaces. This indirect reading of place acts in terms of perceptual understanding in a number of ways, but, most importantly, it becomes fundamental in the “construction” of the sense of place. This is because it impacts on the way information is associated with reality or a contract of the reality which is generated through its “interference” with our intellectual and emotive understanding of place. At the same time, the politics of a new “sociality” contains participations and exclusions. The article adopts comparative case study research as the methodological approach for investigating notions of how urban space is perceived through the case study of Eleftheria Square in Nicosia, a controversial urban regeneration project that generated an extensive debate through digital and social media in Cyprus during the last two decades. It is an attempt of a parallel decoding of (i) a more formal or directive view through digital newspapers’ survey and (ii) an informal view through a Facebook group content analysis. Through the case study, the inefficiencies and potentialities of the new media tools in informing the wider public are clear by providing at the same time evidence of their priorities, preferences, and fears. The article comes to two basic conclusions: (i) the perceptions of urban projects through digital media are not static but fluent and constantly updated, usually turning positive as projects are completed and experienced; and (ii) the interactive and synchronous nature of social media provides a more accurate and updated picture of the society’s changing perceptions of public space.

Keywords

digital media; Eleftheria Square; Facebook groups; Nicosia; public space; urban design; urban regeneration; Zaha Hadid

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Towards Digital Urban Regeneration: Embedding Digital Technologies Into Urban Renewal Processes and Development” edited by Dalit Shach-Pinsly (Technion—Israel Institute of Technology, Israel).

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1. Introduction

During the last 15 years there has been a significant shift in the way we manage but also map, comprehend, and assimilate the image of existing and new places in the city (Sassen, 2017). Technological advances directly impact all activities of urban life (Certomà, 2020; Poletti, 2011; Shelton, 2016). At the same time, technologies clearly change the way cities manage the ever-growing complex-

ity but have not necessarily yet led to dramatic changes to the physical urban settings within which we operate. The reality of operation is beginning to disconnect from the “setting” within which it takes place (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2018). At the same time, gravity still constrains our movement at ground level, the classification of urban structure into centre and periphery is still a key mapping perceptual condition, and the relationship between private and public space still defines

our understanding of built and open space. Ethier (2016) refers to the three scenarios of the current transition: (i) the city of the future will continue to evolve more or less the as expected, (ii) the city will integrate smoothly the digital opportunities which add value to physical space, and (iii) digital media will dominate lives and perceptions creating a new urban digital culture. In this context, “connectivity” as the core value of digital culture will possibly affect priorities, values, and expectations from the way urban design and planning shapes physical space.

The article deals with the capital city of Nicosia in the island state of Cyprus. It examines the way cohesive social media groups express and interact through their views and shared images on their understanding of urban place and through a specific large scale associated transformation. The article explores concepts associated with digital and social media spatial constructs and assesses their compatibility with the mainstream “institutional” view and perceptions of the city as the more relevant to businesses and the lifestyle of the city expressed through digital press. A comparative case study research (Krehl & Weck, 2020), based on exploration of consents, maps the way “space” and “place” are perceived through the recording and analysis of views expressed and debated by social media interest groups, such as those on Facebook, which discuss city design issues in Nicosia. The parallel documentation of the same project through references in the digital press, which outlines the institutional or sociocultural view of the city image, is benchmarked against the perceived importance of various aspects of the project dominating the online media exchange. The assessment of the social media perceptions uses three analytic tools: (i) evaluate maps of posted images, (ii) measure popularity of posts by theme, and (iii) collate comments regarding their positive or negative views. The review of the digital media relies mainly on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of a topic-based referencing focusing on common debates. A key interest in both data sets is the observation of changing views and positions at the point of the opening of Eleftheria Square, where the theoretical imaging through the project presentation by the city and media overlays the experience of inhabiting the actual physical space.

2. Concepts Associated With Digital and Social Media Spatial Constructs

Online communication changes “the frameworks for seeing the city” and impacts on the construction of our “urban diaries” (Wolfe, 2016). Traditionally, our sensory understanding although personal (through physical presence) relied on physical clues and references such as the geometry of the path or the dominant element in the experience of a view (Lynch, 1960) often common across cultures. According to Cullen’s (1961) “concise townscape,” “serial vision” relies on the construction of townscapes as a critical perceptual tool which not only

relies on architecture or urban “components” but also on an observable “art of relationship” in the urban setting which characterises them (Wolfe, 2016). Relational referencing was acting as a strong learning mechanism of an increasingly complex system of overlaying parameters which constitute a condition on which we reflect intellectually and emotionally (Van Dijck, 2012).

The ability to walk through digital space or online referenced spatial components, order or map them in a variety of ways (often through big data difficult to access in the past), or derive digital storytelling, generates more complex approaches to place assessment (Wolfe, 2016). Van Dijck (2012) also recognised the impact of the digital era and the platform society as a non-static but dynamically emerging entity with obvious difficulties in conceptualising its long-term impact on the way we understand space but also construct physical space within a different structural order.

2.1. Impact of Online Communication on Perceptions of Space

There are key differences in the way the reading of space changes when perceived solely through digital tools. Two-dimensional fragments instead of a three-dimensional total experience constitute a quite different experiential tool. The representation of reality alters to an extent (or perhaps fundamentally in the future) our “construction” of the sense of place through the way explicit information is associated with spatial reality (or an impression of the reality) and the “interface” between the intellectual and emotive understanding of space (Lomax, 2020). Digital press and/or social media interferes with the intellectual and emotive activity associated with the process of opinion formulation of notions of place.

An often-personal experience and process of formulating an opinion is becoming a collective activity that carries the “baggage” of overlaid views and opinions which continue to transform the framework of our “online experience” of place. The content of digital platforms is co-created, shared, and re-negotiated between both places, human and non-human actors, reshaping traditional urban space (Håndlykken, 2012). The dynamics of group membership is an aspect which needs to be considered in drawing conclusions about the production and sharing of knowledge through social media platforms: “As we observed the downside of social media in the context of collective protests is their tendency to echo the voices of likeminded people, discouraging critical engagement or dissent” (Van Dijck, 2012, p. 3).

Our research case study consists of participants who are not only “likeminded” professionally but largely part of the same social circle with personal contact outside the media platform. Levenda et al. (2020), when examining the value of media tools in public consultation, confronted the claim that digitally enhanced public participation in planning increases engagement but not

necessarily the diversity of participants or the derivation of meaningful transformational opinions. He concludes that “smart city technologies complicate this dilemma of increasing tokenism through the proliferation of online platforms of engagement that facilitated public comment, not paired to other forms of meaningful participation” (Levenda et al., 2020, p. 347).

The impact on our sensory experience of “background knowledge” and referencing available at an instance during a site visit was traditionally clear—to a great extent—of socio-political or economic “inside,” since the experience derived mainly from the sensory understanding with less intellectualised knowledge references as a background for the observer (Singh & Christmann, 2020). Literature on the issue of participatory process in planning (Douay, 2018), the formulation of planning policy, and/or conducting city branding/promotional exercises through social media tools is part of the contemporary smart city communication context (Cleave et al., 2017; Kowalik, 2021). There seems to be an agreement that there is a difficulty of defining and engaging the “public” in its totality, managing institutional interference or “evening out” bias embedded in the design of tools, collection, and processing of data, etc. (Carson, 2016).

One set of relevant references derives from the exploration of the literature on the construction of the digital city. The bottom up and relatively fragmented approach is also identified when exploring the nature of place in digital cities as constructed products of network activity. Exploring the notion of the digital city and the associated perceptions of space, Håndlykken (2012, p. 25) suggests that digital constructs “contain symbolic meaning, and can be seen as a metaphor, where digital networks, architecture and cities represent hybrid, fluid and relational space.” Considering the constant flow of information about the context of the conceptual “making” of place, one can suggest that while we investigate what characterises spaces in the digital city (and perhaps the understanding of space through digital media), “the intertwined physical and digital city shapes our experience of the city as well as the potential for agency of users” (Håndlykken, 2012, p. 27) who are no longer only users but also creators of the digital city.

It is obvious that a one-time activity has little relationship with the perception of the spatial structure of the city, which challenges existing city views comprising singular or statutory uses. City image analysis across time is critical in future research if we are to understand the ways cities will be experienced in the future through social and digital media.

Despite the enormity of the change in the way we communicate through online tools, what, and with whom, there is relatively little empirical exploration in the literature of issues of perception and the understanding of physical space, in what way it is effectively communicated, or how views on environmental quality are formulated or re-defined.

2.2. *The Politics of a New “Sociality”: Participations and Exclusions*

Other than shaping our perceptions of space the creation of agencies of users in a hybrid urban environment generates a new social reality and fluency for new ways of sharing, co-creating, and mixing but also politicizing the debate around the environmental condition.

The literature focuses extensively on the role of social media in the different but relevant context of political activism, the mechanisms through which grassroots groups emerge, expand, and grow through annexations into significant pressure groups, shaping into political activism organised within online environments (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). Facebook membership goes beyond online interactions to support a movement/event in several different ways providing financial support, attending face-to-face meetings/gatherings demonstrations etc., but also impacts on the outsiders. It creates a community membership, which is much wider than the online participation. In contrast to random social gatherings, online media engages in a very different way with a number of layers of long-lasting imprints of processes, which very rarely accompany physical co-presence in space. Online media communication is also selective with its own distinct demographic make-ups of race, age, and gender. The issue of reliability of data, intentional or associated with misconstrued reality, is particularly relevant to using digital data for research (Sanfilippo & Strandburg, 2020).

In the way the conversation operated in the Facebook platform investigated in our sample, there was a sense of a more informal operandum relative to how people interacted and what was acceptable information to share, with ad-hoc comments emerging and by examples rather than from thoughtful strategic planning. The only sound strategy may rest on the initiative of the media administrators (as in this case) in setting the title, the description, and the periodic feedback to the media group. Under these terms, nobody can have a total view of the process of a social media group without interviewing the administrators.

What is interesting and raises another aspect our research wants to investigate is how layers of media communication interact in bridging understanding and data, and impact on opinion formulation. One can easily notice the close relationship between digital media (press) and social media exchanges (Facebook) where usually the first provides extensive and easy feedback to the second and vice versa.

3. Investigating Notions of Neighbourhood Design: Towards a Methodological Approach

3.1. *Case Study Overview*

Nicosia is the capital of Cyprus, a divided city of a total population of 300,000 inhabitants in its two parts, north

and south. Eleftheria Square was traditionally considered the centre of the city but also the location where all major public rallies took place during the 20th century.

Charis Christodoulou provides a brief summary of the project Eleftheria Square (Tuck & Karnezis, 2019). In physical terms the place was never a square but actually a bridge that connected the old city with the modern city. It became an area for people gathering for festivities, rallies, and other public events due to its important position in the city centre. This fact led the authorities to consider the redesign of this “bridge” as a “square” to provide an important public space with an objective to integrate the square to the moat of the Venetian walls—another important open space element that characterises the city centre.

An architectural design competition was launched by the Municipality of Nicosia in 2005, one year before Cyprus’ entry to the EU, marking, in a way, the celebratory spirit of the time. Zaha Hadid’s office won the competition with the jury admiring the proposal’s contemporary style. As soon as the proposal was displayed publicly, a public debate started about the project’s appropriateness for the location and how far it would enhance or hinder this historical part of town. The main objections reflected on the massiveness of scale and the sense of imposition and contrast of the new design on the medieval Venetian walls, the environmental impacts of the project associated with the cutting of trees and the sparse additions of green space, the increase of soil sealing, and the thermal comfort that the square would lack during the extreme heat conditions of the Nicosian summer.

During February 2012 the construction started, with a programme timescale of two years. The project was

only partially delivered in January 2021 after almost nine years (Figure 1). The Municipality attributes this extended delay to the project’s technical challenges and technologies that were never tested before by local contractors and to the negative impact of the bureaucratic procedures of the central government. On the other hand, various opinions suggested that the chain of inefficiencies was rooted in the call for competition terms of the contract, the jury decision in relation to the inadequacies of the design in the local context, the elitist attitude of Zaha Hadid’s office, the inadequacy and lack of capacity and project management skills on behalf of the Municipal Service Department (sometimes the Mayor of Nicosia himself), for the ineffectiveness in project management, and, finally, the speculative role of the contractor. Figure 2 presents the timeline in accordance with the construction budget so far of the relatively modest in scale landscape project. One other issue worth noting is the total lack of public consultation on the nature of such an important project for the city in a location charged with contemporary sociopolitical references. The competition and associated decisions were purely board-room decisions taken by the local government.

3.2. Methodology

Facebook was for Eleftheria Square the digital space which accommodated the extended storytelling among the citizens of Nicosia. de Jong recognises the value of Facebook as a space for storytelling and as a research tool in geography despite the difficulties it poses regarding data collection (de Jong, 2015, p. 211). For over a decade and a half, Facebook has come to be recognised



Figure 1. Night view of the implemented Eleftheria Square. Source: Unseen Views (2019).

Date	Event	Actors	Budget
1882	Opening in the Venetian walls (Trypioti opening)		
1972	An architectural competition was announced, but the implementation process was interrupted by the events of 1974		
2003	A new architectural competition was announced	Mayor Michalakis Zambelas	€6,492,685
2005	The assignment of the project was given to the 1st prize	Zaha Hadid	
2008	85% co-financing from the European Regional Development Fund (2007–13) was secured (provided that the project will be implemented by 31.12.2015)	Mayor Eleni Mavrou	
2011	After public bids, the Municipality of Nicosia awarded the project to the lowest bidder	Mayor Eleni Mavrou Miltiades Neophytou Civil Engineering Contractors & Developers Ltd	€22,969,825
2012	Works started and the whole project was expected to be completed in 2014	Mayor Konstantinos Yiorkadjis	
	Nicosia Municipality announces the development budget for the project		€23,985.130
2014	The Municipality of Nicosia and the company Miltiades Neophytou Ltd announced a joint consent to terminate the contract	Mayor Konstantinos Yiorkadjis Miltiades Neophytou Civil Engineering Contractors & Developers Ltd	
	The Municipality of Nicosia assigns the project to LOIS Builders Ltd	LOIS Builder Ltd	
2017	Nicosia Municipality announces the new development budget for the project		€45,800,000
2018	Opening of the upper part of the square to the public		
2021	Opening of the lower part of the square (moat) to the public		

Figure 2. Timeline of events for Eleftheria Square.

not as an object to be studied but rather a means, to examine the “ways both researcher and participant produce research within online space” (de Jong, 2015, p. 213). Facebook posts and reactions hold the potential to be both irreducibly personal and expressions in broader social and political contexts.

The authors adopt the main principles of comparative case study research which involves theoretical, empirical, and conceptual challenges based on real projects. In this context the researchers’ own positioning with regards to a particular epistemology is a sub-

jective but fundamental part of the case study analysis, so the authors are also benefitted by their own knowledge and experience of the spatial aspects of the case study project (Krehl & Weck, 2020). Relying on the study of Facebook social media interactions with parallel cross-referencing of issues through press annotation, during the past 10 years we have been investigating a city centre bespoke intervention programme, which is also an image changer and regeneration catalyst project. The scope of the case study assessment aims at analysing one specific publicly programmed urban project to decode the

conflicting urban narratives through both digital media (the formal vision) and social media (Wimmer, 1997).

The case study explores and compares how an ongoing project is described and perceived through two media categories digital press (daily newspapers) and social media (Facebook).

A more formal or institutionally controlled view is expected through digital newspapers' survey and content analysis, and, for this reason, research goes back more than 10 years. An informal view through a Facebook group content analysis focuses on the more recent aspect where digital narratives coexist with an almost completed real project. Both analyses decode positive, negative, and neutral views on the issues of:

- How collective vs. individual perceptions and the role of membership dynamics inside and outside the media impacts the nature of narrations and debate;
- What kind of intellectual product place emerges through these digital fora where users are the creators of the digital space;
- The way the new social reality and fluency of sharing information co-creates and mixes but also politicises the debate around the environmental condition and qualities;
- How is the three-dimensional aspect of space perceived through the foreground and background of a two-dimensional image and how this impacts the comprehensive understanding of environmental character and quality.

The article uses a simple approach of collecting data through surveys and content analysis which is considered adequate for case specific qualitative research (Snelson, 2016). In any case, social media, and especially Facebook, are relatively recent phenomena, so uncertainty still exists about the most effective ways of conducting research with opposing views and how far this tool constitutes an effective research method (de Jong, 2015, p. 213; Wilson et al., 2012). To assess the data, the article uses a simple classification of posts and publications as positive, negative, and neutral. Whether this classification is either obvious (i.e., through Facebook emojis and emoticons) or derives from the authors' own subjective knowledge and experience, it is an essential part of the comparative case study research (Krehl & Weck, 2020).

4. Eleftheria Square: An Ongoing Debate About Space and Its Politics

4.1. The "Institutional" View of the City Image Through Traditional Media Channels

Different types of mass media are reaching an increasing number of people every day; thus, their role and influence must not be neglected in shaping our percep-

tion on specific topics, including the spatial perception and management of our urban environment (Matoga, 2019). Where printed press was traditionally the media of communication, with a declining numbers of readers digital versions of the same publications now seem to experience a regeneration through the attraction of a wider clientele.

Currently, in Cyprus, there are 33 Greek, 11 Turkish, and six English newspapers. Due to language issues, the research takes into consideration only Greek- and English-language newspapers and focuses on main publications with higher circulation. Newspapers that did not offer an online archive were also excluded from the sample. In total, eight digital newspapers were included in the research and 101 articles with references to the regeneration project of Eleftheria Square in Nicosia, from 2009 to 2021, were studied. The articles were written by general interest journalists and not by specialised columnists in architecture or urban planning. No other research tools were applied (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, etc.). It is assumed that journalists did not have any interest invested in the project, the Municipality, the project architects, and/or other stakeholders related to the project. Moreover, among the digital media (eight newspapers), one is close to the centre-right local political party and another two are close to the left local political party. As referred to in a previous section, the political affiliation of the press is a strong characteristic of published information.

The main topics covered in the articles were: the delays in the regeneration process of the project, issues concerning the design concept, the influence of the project on the regeneration of the city centre, financial issues, pedestrian accessibility and traffic management, references to the history of place, environmental impacts, and concerns about the cultural and political issues around the project. Other than identifying the type of debate/concern, each article was categorised according to the "personality" of the main actors leading the key topic conversation as well as the position of the author regarding the content raised by the article and in relation to the topic explored. This nature of the "position" taken by the author was then documented in three main categories: positive, negative, and/or neutral (Figure 3). There is, at this point, an assumption that the author's position not only shapes public opinions but, to an extent, reflects the public view on the issue in discussion. The shift in the debate's interest in various events can be better understood through Figure 2 which in turn reveals the key points in the timeline of this regeneration project of Eleftheria Square. These key dates were further correlated with the main actors involved (Latour & Yaneva, 2017), as well as the key topic and issues addressed (Latour, 2005; Figure 2) from information collected from the content analysis of the documented articles.

Regarding the period from 2009 until today (March 2021), the general position of the articles concerning

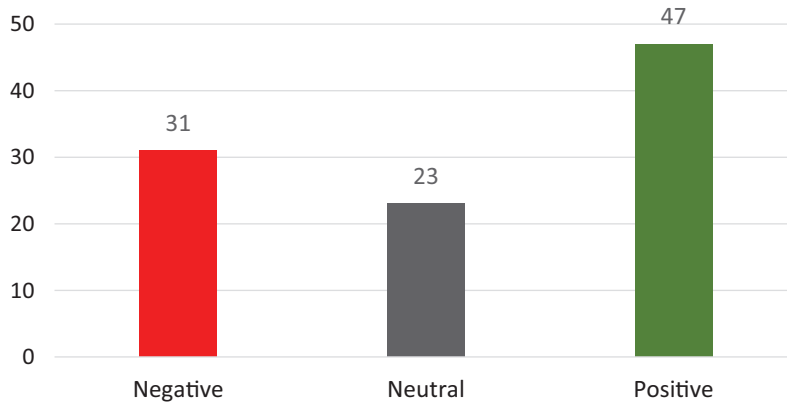


Figure 3. General position (2009–2021).

the redesign of Eleftheria Square was positive in the majority (46.5%), a considerable 30.7% of the articles presented a negative position, and 22.8% were characterised by a neutral position toward the value of the project and how far it was perceived in the public’s interest (Figure 3). The main topic of the titles of the newspaper articles throughout the period (38.6% of articles) was the issue of project management which specifically focused on the ongoing delays regarding the project’s completion (Figure 4). Other topics with a relatively high percentage of frequency in appearance in the newspaper titles concern the issue of the “design concept” of the square and its appropriateness in the surrounding area (14.9%). Financial issues and especially the ever-increasing budget of the project (13.9%) are considerably important. More complex topics followed, such as the importance of the new square/urban landscape space as a major prerequisite for the essential revitalization of the centre of Nicosia (10.9%) and references to other political controversies (10.9%). Less significant topics recorded among the headlines of the newspaper articles were about issues of pedestrian accessibility through the

square (5%), management of traffic around and inside the square (2.9%), and issues which related to the configuration of the square in relation to environmental, cultural, and historical issues (2.9%; Figure 4).

If we further analyse the content of the articles regarding the spatial reference to the project itself, we observe that more than two thirds (72.3%) of concerns have non-spatial references focusing mainly on the topics of delay, economy, and politics. Consequently, less than one third of the articles (27.7%) were concerned with space, focusing mainly on the topics of the appropriateness of the nature of design in its historic context, accessibility, and traffic management. Interestingly, of the articles that refer to the spatial dimension of the project, only one third (28.6%) describe the project as a “piece of architecture” while two thirds of the articles (71.4%) present mainly the aspects of the square as part of a wider “urban project” indicating a clear understanding of the impact of such a large-scale intervention. Based on the latter, one would expect the opposite, since the Eleftheria Square project was a product of an architectural competition, won by a renowned international

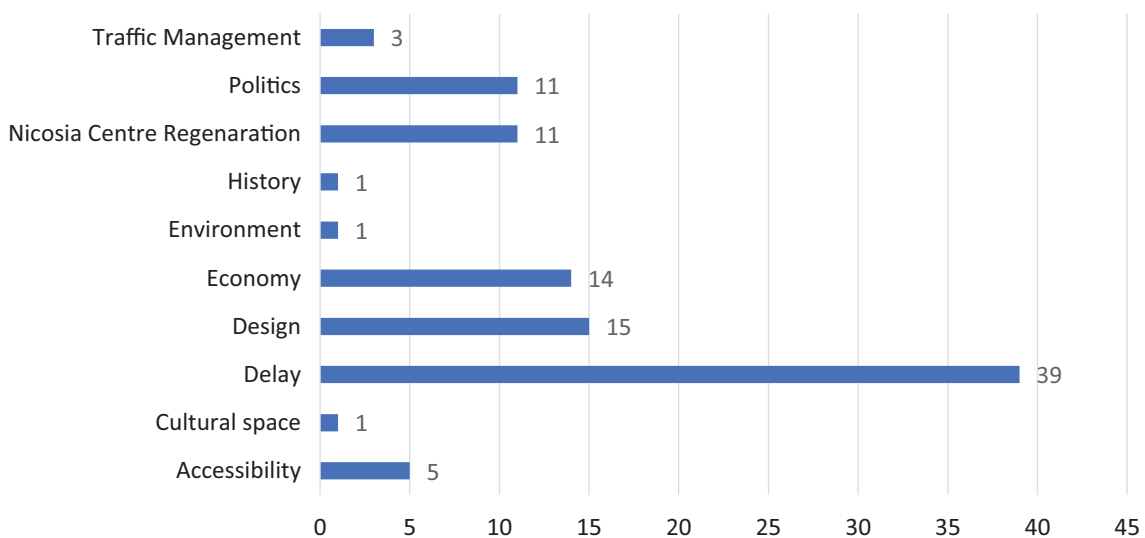


Figure 4. Main topics.

architect (Zaha Hadid Architects), and, throughout the project’s lifespan, was presented in images as a singular free standing architectural product without giving much importance on contextual references. It is suggested that the continuous delays on the delivery of the project as well as the lack of spatial images during the construction period (Figure 5) were mainly a factor that led the discussion on other aspects of the project that included the role of the square in the wider strategy of the Nicosia centre urban transformation. Newspaper digital platforms during the construction period of the square created a different “image” not directly connected with the architectural three-dimensional images produced by the office of Zaha Hadid Architects but closer to the expectations and lifestyle of Nicosians, with emphasis on the ongoing traffic arrangement around the construction site area, the spatial accessibility problems created by the continuous delays (disconnection of the old city with the commercial city centre), and the importance of the project for the urban transformation of the city centre.

Examining in more detail the topics reflecting the “articles positions” indicated in Figure 3 and starting with the negative positions, we observed that most of the articles referred to the issue of delays (42%), the budgetary and financial issues (22.6%), and to political issues (22.6%). Other issues, such as environmental, historical, design, and accessibility ones cumulatively contributed a much smaller percentage to the negativity of authors’ opinions (12.8%). In fact, the issue of the design of the square and its integrational impact on the historical environment and the Venetian walls (irreversible construction, in stark contrast to the character of the walls), as well as the lack of climatic design features (cutting of existing trees, lack of shaded areas), were topics that paradoxically did not dominate the newspaper articles. To be precise, they appeared as topics at the beginning of the construction of the project (2010) and then reappeared with less intensity after the delivery of the first phase of construction: the upper part of the square to

the public in 2019. The latter was probably because of the publication of the first spatial images of the implemented project at that stage, as well as the possibility of visiting the site and having an immediate experience of the place, which did not happen before the end of 2019.

The issue of implementation regarding the Eleftheria Square project became the subject of intense political debate which was used as an argument in up-coming mayoral elections. Moreover, it was closely linked to an inadequate government and financial management of internal and external funds and resources, especially during the economic crisis period in Cyprus (2011–2013). In many cases, the project is presented more as project of “victory” over the financial crisis by the politicians rather than a public project of poor financial management. This displacement of the conversation around the spatial aspects of the project or even its implicit regeneration impact toward the “handling” of its delivery did not perhaps allow an informed, strong debate which could have led to the restructure of aspects of the incompatibility of the design within local context.

Regarding the positive views (articles which in their overall position supported the project; Figure 3), we noticed that most topics referred also still negatively to the issue of the delay in the construction programme (44.7%) and with quite a big difference to the next issue, that of the approved design concept (23.4%). The number of negative views in articles referring to the bad financial management of the project (10.6%) followed and was almost more than offset in percentage by the articles referring to the positive impact of the project on the revitalization of the city centre (8.5%) and the increase of pedestrian accessibility to the area of regeneration (6.4%).

The topic on delays was the most prominent topic overall with the highest percentage of appearances in newspaper articles. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, the topic on delays conserved the same percentage

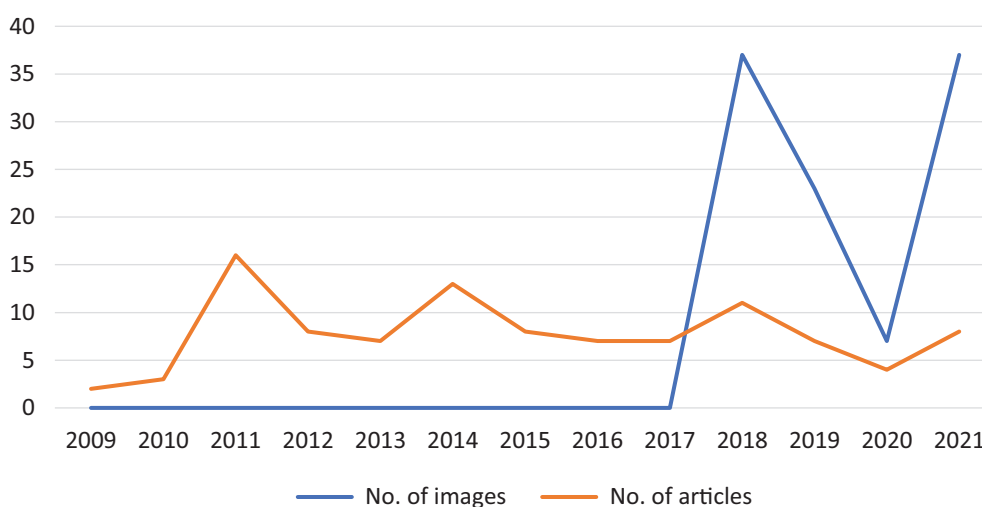


Figure 5. Number of images per articles in digital media (2009–2021).

of articles with negative and positive positions on the subject.

Moreover, what is remarkable is that throughout the digital media documented period (2009–2021), there were periods of negative position peaks and periods of positive position peaks (Figure 6). While the negative position articles were prevalent throughout the construction of the project, peaks were observed in 2011, 2014, and 2019, and articles with positive positions peaked in 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021. Comparing these peak periods (Figure 6) with the timeline of events (Figure 2) and starting with the negative position peaks, we notice that in 2011 was the initiation of the construction works, as the project was assigned by the Municipality to the lowest bidder. Most of the negative positions probably were due to the lack of public consultation regarding the winning proposal in relation to the inadequacies of the design for the local context. 2014 was also a peak period of negative positions and that had to do clearly with the undelivered expectations for the completion of the project by that time and relation to the delivery date. The negative positions were further strengthened by the announcement of a joint consent for the termination of the initial construction contract by the Municipality of Nicosia. In 2019, there was a third peak of negative positions probably again due to the expectations for the construction completion of Eleftheria Square, following the opening of the upper part of the square to the public in 2018 or the fact that the upper part alone did not fulfill the expectations for a signature project.

As far as the positive position peak periods mentioned before are concerned, 2015 was mentioned due to the events following the termination of the contract with the initial contractor of the project in 2014 (Figure 2). Specifically, just after the first contract termination, the Municipality announced new public bids and a new contract was assigned again to the lowest bidder, in 2015. In addition, articles with a positive position on the issue

of delays appeared at the end of 2015 where the construction work had already progressed with the new contractor as well as at the end of 2018, where the upper part of the square was opened to the public. As expected, the issues of delay and project management appeared more intensively during periods of changes in either the overall economy or the management of the project.

Furthermore, a cumulative number of articles with a positive position and specifically a positive position peak regarding the design of the project appeared just after the opening of the landscaped lower part of the square (moat) to the public, in 2021. Through the digital media, the square was presented as a series of “instagrammable” photos, introducing a contemporary image of the city of Nicosia but in a rather fragmented way.

Focusing on the content analysis of the last documented year (2020–2021) of digital media articles (Figure 7), we notice that a series of events and actions enhanced the positive position regarding the project. Referring to the newspaper articles of that period, we notice that for example the lighting of the square, the delivery of a number of public roads back to traffic, the operation of the newly constructed public underground parking of Eleftheria Square, the official presentation of the lower integrated space of the square (moat) by the Mayor to the journalists, as well as the dedicated articles on the world famous projects of the architects of the square are some elements that greatly enhanced the positive views and positive references to the Eleftheria Square project.

Finally, as mentioned before, there were articles that held neither a negative nor a positive attitude towards the project, keeping in that way a neutral attitude towards the presented facts. In this case, the issue of the revitalization of the city centre came first on the titles of the newspaper articles (30.4%), followed by the issues of project management and the delays (21.7%), as well as the issues of the design concept (13%) and the

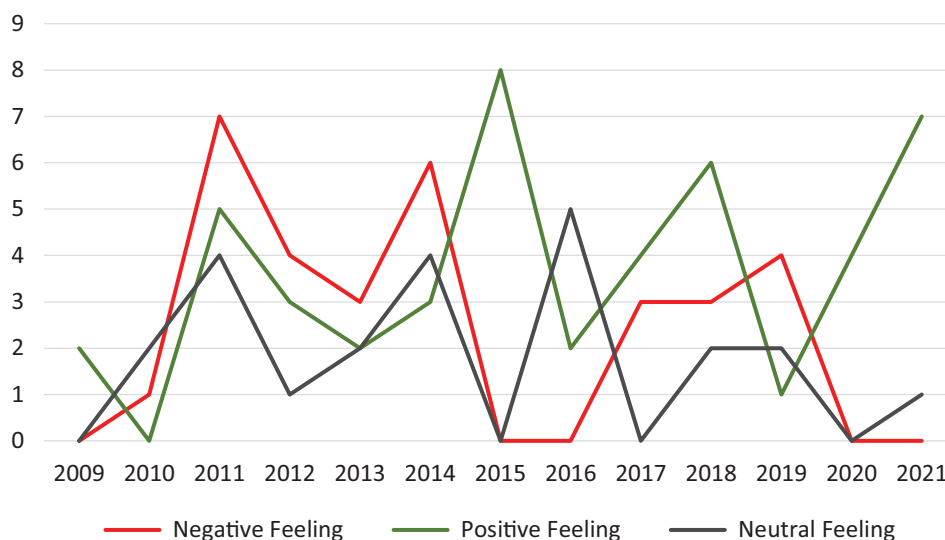


Figure 6. Digital media negative, positive, and neutral positions timeline (2009–2021).

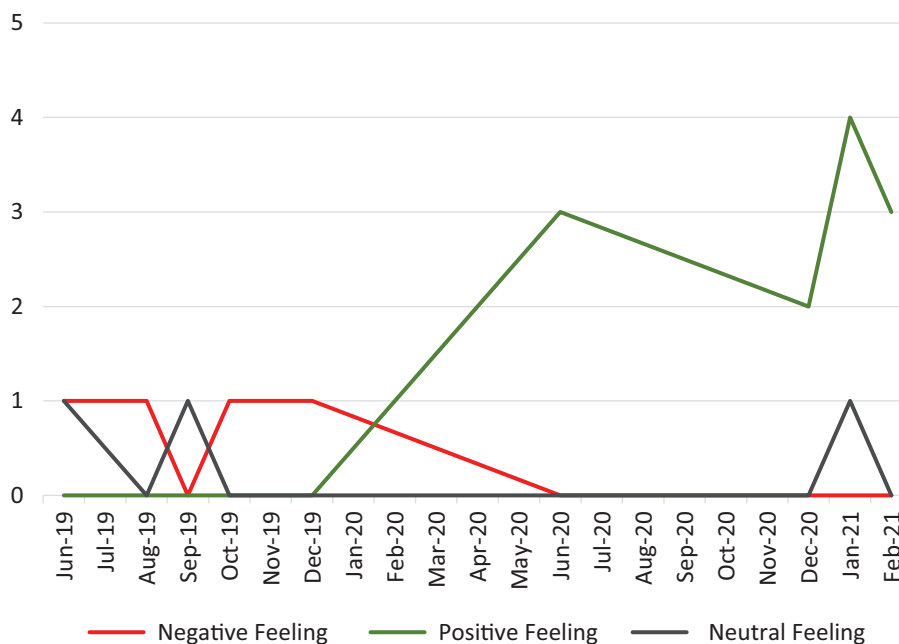


Figure 7. Digital media negative, positive, and neutral positions timeline (June 2019–February 2021).

traffic management (13%). Other issues related to budget and finance (8.7%), pedestrian accessibility (4.4%), culture (4.4%), and politics (4.4%) appeared in the article titles, although with a quite small percentage. A probable assumption regarding the neutral attitude towards the issue of regeneration was due to the lack of sophisticated and informed debate about the potential impact of the new design on the old town of Nicosia and specifically on how open public space improvement can have a major impact on the economies of the city.

What is clear from the analysis of the data of this first part of the research is that media responses are relatively opportunistic, close in time to specific events, more than having the stamina to follow up the conversation in the long run, reporting issues in the context of their immediate timeframe and not their significance in the overall success of the project. The balanced view from positive to neutral and negative references reflects perhaps the complex nature of the particular debate and the lack of in-depth presentation of city design and its consequences on city regeneration.

4.2. The Informal View of the City Image

The second part of this research examines the perceptions of the wider public through social media (Facebook) during the last stages of the project completion (post-2017). In this period there are growing and active social media groups when compared to the initial stages of the project where social media was not so widespread in the community. For this purpose, a Facebook group with a strong representation is selected for data analysis. Nicosia Today and Tomorrow is the largest active citizens' local Facebook group in Cyprus dealing with all issues relevant to the place making of

Nicosia. Kagarise and Zavattaro (2016) comment on the validity and the compatibility to the views of the broader public of the social media pages. Some of the basic criteria of the soundness of these digital fora are: (i) organisational awareness (number of group members), (ii) follower engagement (posts and level of interactions), and (iii) sentiment (tone and emojis) to which Nicosia Today and Tomorrow comply with.

The group has been active during the last three years and engaged 2,803 members (51% female, 49% male). The most highly represented group is the 35–44 age group (around 30%), while the 25–43, 45–54, 55–64, and more than 65 groups are around 15% each. The 18–24 group is close to 4%. 78% of the group members are permanent residents of Nicosia City, while the remaining 22% have a very close affiliation to the city. Less than 10% of the group members are design professionals or associated with architecture, planning, engineering, or any other field relevant to public governance or city design. The group founder and administrator, George Mesaritis, is a civil engineer and the director of an established local architecture and urban design studio. Mesaritis has been preliminary interviewed for verification purposes and approvals for the use of data deriving from this Facebook platform. In our opinion, Nicosia Today and Tomorrow satisfies the validity criteria as an active and sound digital platform, due to its scale of membership and followers, the frequency of posts and interactions, and the activity of sentiment as regards the tone and the emotions. The scope of this part of the case study was to illustrate how citizens perceive and respond through digital media to information associated with this project in terms of its design quality, project management, and users' experience. Most of these topics became the focus of the public debate around the project during the last decade.

The research of the Facebook platform Nicosia Today and Tomorrow focused on the period between January 2020 and January 2021. During these 13 months, the Facebook group had grown enough to provide a daily flow of posts and reactions. We have examined all the posts of this period, isolating the posts referring to Eleftheria Square. Each post was identified as positive, negative, or neutral, similarly to the analysis of the previous part of the study. At the same time the impact of each post was counted in terms of the relevant number of comments and emotive reactions. Project management was an issue preferred frequently by the digital press (Figure 8). As mentioned above, it is a common belief that the project delivery was excessive and something which was illustrated daily for years by the “open hole” of the ongoing construction site and the interruptions of circulation in the central area of the city. It seems that this negative performance increases the general negativity about the project in terms of reactions (Figure 9) as an effect of membership dynamics. Positive and negative emotional reactions (love, care, haha, wow, sad, angry) are connected to more emotional and extroverted users who sometimes exaggerate their responses. Figure 9 documents the chain of negativity emerging in all the three key points of the public debate.

The public perception of the project had been shaped by newspapers and posts for the last two decades until part of the project was delivered to the public on January 1st, 2021. Figure 10 refers specifically to the posts commenting on the “design quality,” which is considered as the most subjective set of opinions, but also to the ones referring directly to the nature of the resulted physical space and the urban landscape. At this point, it is clear that after January 1st, 2021, the narratives about the project were enriched by users’ site visits and real pictures taken on the site and posted. There is a clear positive turn that reveals the significance of real space experience

in opening formulation of views, compared with relying on two dimensional images or being informed about relevant parameters indirectly.

Comments on design quality were in favor or against the unusual futuristic form of the architecture, the domination of concrete volumes and surfaces, the massiveness of the structures, and the overshadowing of the medieval wall. Few comments only dealt with the wider regeneration impact of the project. A lot of comments were superficial, the debate was not in depth, and, to some extent, failed to contextualise issues, with an overall opinion in favor of the originality of the project since Nicosia Today and Tomorrow is not composed of a pool of experts. The Nicosia Today and Tomorrow administrator was neutral on the issue of design quality, trying to encourage all the aspects in the exchange of views. Most of the commenters and/or participators in the debate were, across the examined timeframe, campaigning constantly for or against the project. In this context, leading voices from the site of design professionals were visible but not dominating the debate, even on design issues.

Figure 10 correlates closely mostly with the interest of the digital press during the same period. Usually, a press release on behalf of the municipality increased the media interest on covering the project progress often with negative commentary and this was reflected also in the Facebook activity from time to time. This trend was reversed at the point of the project opening to the public in January 2021. At this point, the sophisticated and new (for Cyprus) design of public space and landscaping surprised the visitors positively. Unfortunately, this article cannot follow through post-January 2021 any possible future negative posts or run an audit check after possible deterioration of the project due to insufficient maintenance or even wearing of the viewers’ interest due to the lack of complexity in the detailing of the space and landscape.

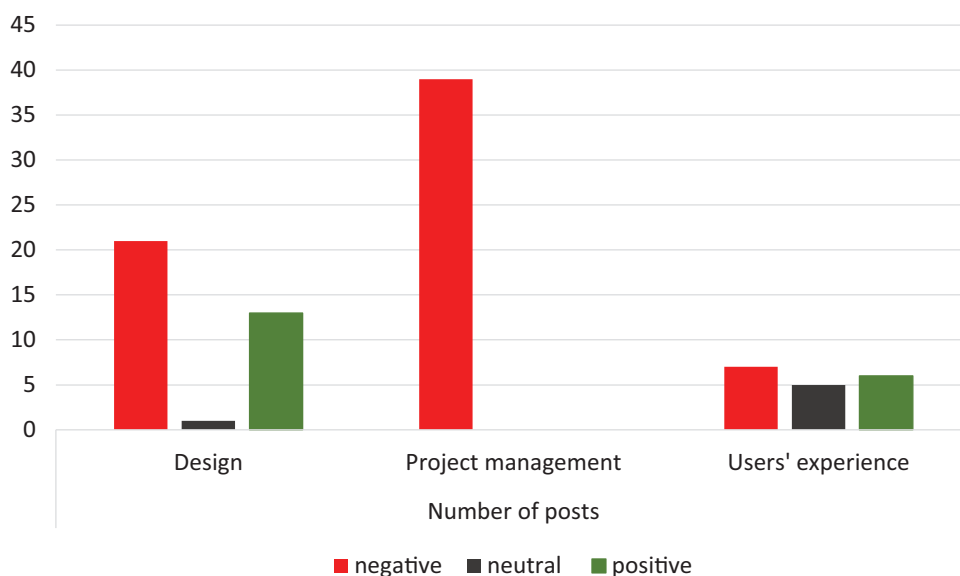


Figure 8. Negative, neutral, and positive posts, from January 2020 to January 2021.

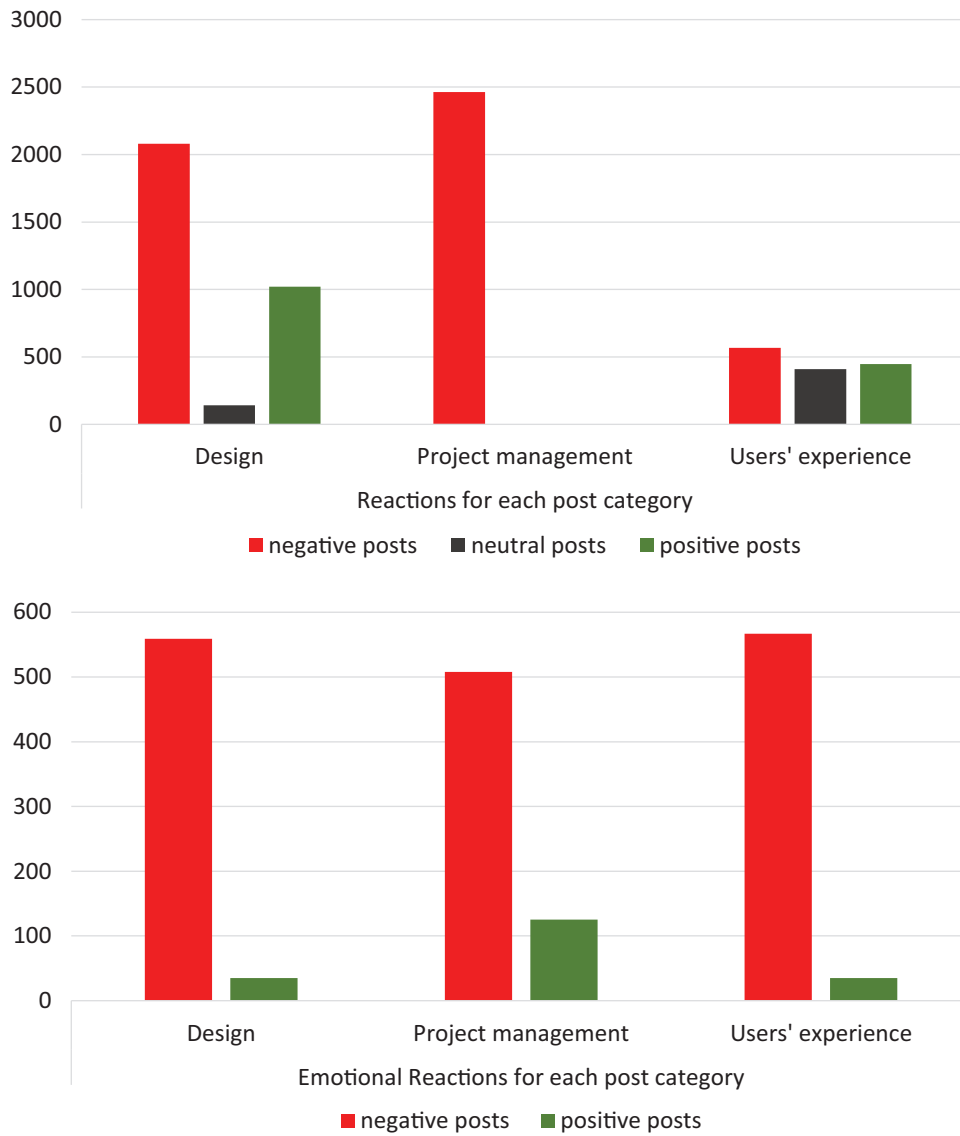


Figure 9. Moderate supportive reactions (likes) to the posts of Figure 8 (top) and strong supportive reactions (emotions) to the posts of Figure 8 (bottom).

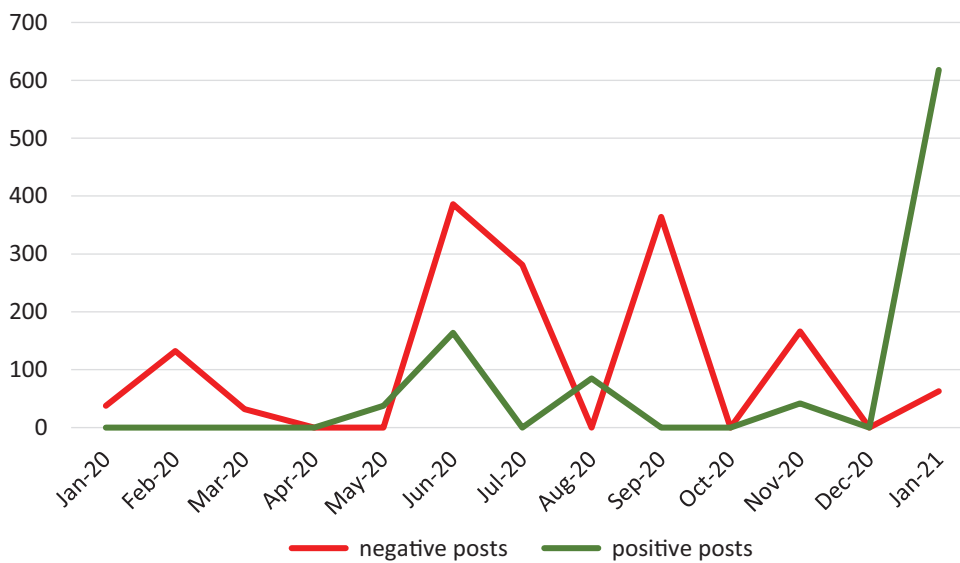


Figure 10. Timeline of reactions on design quality.

5. Discussion

Both parts of the comparative case study analysis show collective perceptions impacting on the nature of narratives. Priorities revealed through digital media as budget issues, project management, and delays provide feedback to social media commenters. Social media narrative is of course more pluralistic providing views and aspects from a variety of perspectives, while digital media are more “contained” and uniform according to the timing of events. Membership dynamics can reveal whether an image or a view of the project has a public acceptance.

In both cases, the examined media users are the creators/generators of the digital perception of space. In the case of the digital media, a journalist, as a creator and as a professional author, is more objective and more willing to revise their narrative according to new data. In the case of social media, the poster reflects an immediate raw judgement of a position which is perpetuated and is consistent through changing circumstances. In our case, Facebook provided more images and spatial references and opinions than the electronic press, and the reactions were more polarized, leaning either in favor or against, without the “balancing of views” or “neutrality” of some of the institutional press.

The way the new social reality is constructed through the selective participation in both groups and the fluency of sharing information, co-creates, mixes, but also politicises the debate around the environmental condition and qualities. In our case, the newspapers’ behavior was more opportunistic at times close to specific events than having the stamina to follow up conversations and sustain views in the long run. Social media, on the other hand, looked more capable of supporting a conversation on substantial issues of environment, cultural heritage, and preservation, usually neglected by the digital press.

Inevitably, the three-dimensional aspect of space perceived through the foreground and background of a two-dimensional image limited the associated reference to the spatial condition. In the case of digital media, the two-dimensional image was narrated by journalists, without in some of the cases a prior visit and experience of the space. On the other hand, in the social media platforms a two-dimensional image is commented by numerous physical visitors of the space, rendering the image a supportive medium for the associated narrative with several different supportive references deriving from various site visits and real time and place experiences. In this manner, social media was more effective in comprehensive understanding of environmental character and quality.

The overview of the interaction with digital media (press) and social media, using as a case study a regeneration project in Nicosia, shows that both platforms indicate the same temporal pattern in terms of negative, positive, or neutral posts. The online press is less critical to negative commentary with all references focus-

ing on more tangible topics which can easily be quantified and referenced through formal sources. This was expected since the online press is edited before publishing compared to the impromptu commentary of the Facebook group. The time lag and parallel interest in topics with a huge number of posts following official statements in the press was also expected. The online media responses seem to be relatively opportunistic and react closely to events rather than having the stamina to complete/inform a debate in the long run. The balance of view from positive, neutral, and negative references reflects perhaps closely the level of complexity associated with the debate, the cross referencing of information, and, therefore, opinion formulation across the two media. A significant finding is the relatively but clear lack of in-depth presentation of city design issues, the consequence of long-term impact on regeneration, etc. Although the complexity and the novelty of the design has been adequately communicated, experiencing this project only through digital media is still less appropriate to the multilayered and relatively long debate associated with design issues.

6. Conclusions

The perception of urban projects through digital media is not static but “changeable,” usually turning positive as projects are completed and experienced. The interactive and synchronous nature of social media provides a more accurate and updated picture of the society’s changing perceptions of public space.

The Facebook platform with the “in real time” and informal commentary generated a more open debate; it influenced views, shifted the debate, diversified topics, and associated narratives. The multiplicity of participation in a single conversation made the debate more fluent and versatile with frequent shifts from positive to negative commentary and continuously changing positions even by the same participants on a specific topic. It appears that Facebook could be a constructive tool for public consultation on urban projects if managed appropriately and could set agendas for debate in a structured manner.

Paradoxically, the issue of design, environmental quality, and regeneration value did not appear highly on either negative or positive positions in neither of the media samples, despite the leading role of the high proportion of professionals in the field. This might perhaps relate to the nature of information conveyed about the projects design attributes and/or the difficulty in conveying more complex descriptions and narratives through the short references imposed by the medium of communication. Interestingly, the notion of regeneration is more prominent in the discussions but again, in neutral terms, fails to debate the more complex characteristics and mechanisms.

At the same time, nonmaterial aspects of perceiving space as project management, budget, sitework

programme, and local politics seemed more prominent. We could not verify how this relates to the ease of referencing these topics or why they are becoming critical “political” aspects associated with the generation of the “city image” that begin to concern a more active and sophisticated public. Such aspects are clearly less dominant as parameters in our experience during the physical exploration or experience of the city. In this respect, the debate on perceptions associated with media platforms cannot concern purely spatial and sensual aspects but more subjective, even biased references to more attainable topics.

The complex context of urban regeneration, as a decisive environmental change, relates equality to spatial configurations and the re-shaping of cultural constructs associated with issues much more complex to discuss through the simple two-directional communication mode of a media platform. The interactive and synchronous nature of social media cannot stand without a more active multi-dimensional debate before formulating opinions. Social media platforms could be a part of public consultation but only additionally to face-to-face communication mechanisms which are more suitable to the understanding and debating of design issues.

Acknowledgments

To George Mesaritis, administrator of the Nicosia Today and Tomorrow Facebook group for the useful information provided. This publication is based upon work from COST Action, European Middle Class Mass Housing (MCMH-EU) CA 18137 supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). www.cost.eu

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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