Curated Landscapes and Digital Perception Warfare: Investigating Instagram's Influence on Urban Park Experiences

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Abstract

In contemporary digital environments, visual social media platforms such as Instagram have evolved beyond lifestyle-sharing applications into influential platforms for shaping visual representations and public impressions of places. Urban green spaces, particularly public parks, are increasingly represented through curated visual narratives that shape public expectations, behavioural engagement, and interpretations of physical space. This study explores the influence of visual social media on users' engagement and perception of the landscape at Seremban 2 City Park in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, particularly regarding how such media shapes visitors' impressions and motivates their decisions to visit the park. A qualitative research design was employed, involving five days of site observation and semi-structured interviews with 14 park visitors conducted on both weekdays and weekends. Interview sessions utilised prompt questions and voice recordings to gather in-depth insights into visitors' experiences and motivations. Data collection focused on the park's Instagrammable, users' perceptions, photography practices, social media sharing behaviours, and the influence of visual social media users on the park environment. Thematic analysis revealed seven key themes: (1) Instagram engagement, (2) sharing experiences in the park, (3) influences on visitors, (4) park-related challenges, (5) overall experiences, (6) expectations versus reality, and (7) the impacts of sharing. The findings indicate that curated Instagram representations may shape visitors' expectations, behaviours, and interpretations of the park environment, transforming public spaces into visually curated and platform-mediated landscapes. The study argues that visual social media functions as a subtle mechanism of soft power and perception management within the contemporary information environment. These findings contribute to broader discussions on media influence, visual communication, and the role of digital platforms in shaping public understanding and engagement with urban spaces in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Instagram, place perception, visual place representation, urban parks, media influence, digital narratives.*

1.0 Introduction

Visual social media refers to networked platforms that transmit images and videos for communication, allowing users to share personal narratives and emotional experiences through impactful visual content (Arts et al., 2021). This has led to the emergence of "instagrammable landscapes," where spaces are designed to be visually appealing and easily shareable online. Social media platforms like Instagram have significantly influenced modern perceptions and interactions with outdoor spaces. Instagrammable locations align with users' desires for meaningful experiences and opportunities for self-expression. Consequently, these practices may encourage visual and aesthetic conventions associated with the platform, moulded to conform to the visual and aesthetic norms of the platform. In curating and sharing visual content, users engage in selective interpretation of their surroundings to construct and project personal narratives to a wider audience (Lobo, 2023). This phenomenon reflects a deeper, universal human need for narrative

order and identity expression within digital environments. By shaping visitor behavior and aesthetic preferences, these platforms also redefine how both local communities and tourists experience landscapes.

Building on this, our expectations of nature are significantly shaped by the outdoor landscapes featured in images shared on social media and by those who play important roles in curating such representations. These images, despite being mediated by technology, still foster a diverse collective construction of digital nature areas, enriching our experiences with the natural world (Evans, 2015). Instagram accessible via smartphones or other devices, create significant opportunities for capturing and sharing personal moments, thereby democratizing tools and techniques that were once limited to professionals, such as photographers (Stokes & Price, 2017). The features of Instagram's advanced photography tools have provided easy access for users, allowing anyone on the platform to enhance their images or videos with just a few taps. For instance, high-quality camera functions, editing capabilities, and filters enable users to create visually appealing photographs while sharing their outdoor experiences online. The aestheticization of everyday life among users results from the shift in this technological advancement, where human personal, social, and leisure activities are increasingly captured through a curated lens. Ordinary daily moments are transformed into a visually appealing narrative, making the monotonous, ordinary pictures shared online seem outstanding to view (Ibrahim, 2015). This process not only elevates the aesthetic value of the everyday but also reinforces the role of visual media in shaping how individuals construct and present their lives. In this context, visual representations have become central to self-expression and social connection.

Images and videos serve as powerful tools for crafting individual identities and building social bonds (Duffy and Sawey, 2022). With its massive user base, Instagram plays a key role in shaping how individuals share and experience the outdoors. Millions of users post photos of landscapes and recreational activities, making these images an integral part of contemporary social interaction (Conti & Cassel, 2019). The potential for variety and diverse personal storytelling can also reinforce certain stereotypes among communities. Many images shared on Instagram tend to idealize the outdoors, often showcasing nature and outdoor activities in a way that overlooks the diverse ways people experience these spaces (Tscholl & Sturm, 2022). Consequently, while Instagram has introduced new ways for people to narrate their encounters with nature, it also risks limiting the diversity of these representations by adhering to established media tropes. Despite this, much of the research to date has focused on high-profile accounts and popular hashtags, leaving the everyday user's engagement and interaction with these platforms underexplored. This gap presents a significant opportunity to better understand how social media impacts individuals lived experiences and how these interactions influence their engagement with outdoor spaces in a more personalized, everyday context. This study aims to examine how does Instagram use influence visitors' perceptions and experiences of Seremban 2 City Park? It explores how the intersection of social media and outdoor spaces not only transforms users' experiences but also introduces new considerations for the preservation and aesthetic framing of these landscapes.

2.0 Literature Review

As visual social media platforms, particularly Instagram, continue to influence how individuals document, interpret, and share their experiences, outdoor environments are increasingly curated through the lens of aesthetic appeal and digital shareability. This visual shift has transformed urban park experiences from purely recreational or ecological encounters into socially constructed performances mediated by digital imagery. The growing prominence of visual social media has not only altered patterns of park visitation but has also raised new questions about the design, function, and cultural significance of urban green spaces. These platforms serve as both tools for personal expression and mechanisms for collective memory, encouraging users to engage with landscapes based on their visual impact rather than their ecological or historical context. As such, the focus on instagrammable moments may overshadow more diverse or inclusive uses of public parks. This literature review examines the emergence of instagrammable landscapes and the intersection of visual social media with evolving urban park experiences. It explores how these dynamics influence user behaviour, reshape design priorities, and reframe the socio-cultural value of urban green spaces in the digital age.

2.1 Instagrammable landscape

The concept of the instagrammable landscape refers to outdoor environments that are curated or appreciated primarily for their visual appeal, often crafted to align with the aesthetics that perform well on social media platforms (Despard, 2015). The increasing popularity of visual social media has directly influenced urban design, encouraging planners and developers to prioritize aesthetic features that enhance a location's instagrammability. According to Wagiri et al. (2024), urban public spaces, such as parks, gardens, and recreational areas, are now intentionally designed to incorporate instagrammable elements. These features often include vibrant floral arrangements on sunlit slopes, large-scale art installations designed to dominate the visual frame, and panoramic views from elevated platforms. Such design strategies not only provide visual pleasure but also stimulate social media engagement, encouraging visitors to capture and share their experiences online. This trend reflects a broader cultural shift in how public spaces are consumed and valued. Instagram has been identified as a platform used not only for aesthetic appreciation but also for purposes such as social surveillance, memory preservation, identity expression, and building cultural capital. As noted by Sheldon and Bryant (2016), individuals with higher levels of social activity are more likely to use Instagram for purposes such as social interaction and documentation, reinforcing the platform's influence on user behavior and engagement with physical spaces. These dynamics suggest that the relationship between visual media and public space is not merely superficial but is deeply embedded in contemporary social interactions and urban experiences. As urban landscapes become more visually curated to meet digital expectations, the design and function of public spaces are increasingly shaped by the values and behaviors promoted through visual social media.

2.2 Visual social media

The significance of visual communication has become increasingly prominent across various online platforms. Travel vlogs, as visually driven and personally narrated content, are perceived as trustworthy and influential sources that shape tourists' destination choices and visit intentions, highlighting the growing role of visual social media in guiding landscape engagement (Islam et al., 2024).The emphasis on visual elements plays a crucial role in shaping user experiences and digital identities, underscoring the impact of visual content on how individuals perceive themselves and interact with others in social contexts (Adami, 2016). According to Van Eeden (2020), visual social media serves as a key communication tool that leverages images and videos to facilitate interaction and shape user engagement. Their work examines how visual elements generate and convey meaning within social media platforms, highlighting aesthetic trends and visual narratives that shape how users present themselves and engage with content. On platforms like Instagram, this performance is enacted visually through photographs, filters, and captions turning everyday moments into staged representations of identity. Users often construct idealized portrayals of their lives through carefully selected visuals, heightening self-awareness and intensifying the desire for social validation. This visual storytelling process not only impacts individual identity formation but also contributes to broader cultural narratives, defining what is seen as desirable, beautiful, or aspirational in a digital society. As a result, visual content shared on social media becomes a fundamental mechanism for constructing and communicating both personal and collective identities, exerting a substantial influence on prevailing social norms and consumer behaviors in the digital age.

2.3 Urban Park experience

Outdoor experiences in urban parks encompass a variety of activities within both natural and built environments, significantly contributing to individual well-being and strengthening social connections. The ways visitors perceive and share these experiences, especially influenced by visual social media, have notably shaped their behavior, expectations, and engagement with outdoor spaces. According to Peters et al. (2010), urban parks play a crucial role in enhancing outdoor experiences for individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. These spaces serve as inclusive environments that foster social interactions and

promote community cohesion. Parks provide opportunities for users to establish meaningful connections and develop a sense of attachment, particularly when experiences are shared across different social and cultural groups Jang, Choi, & Kimanalyzie (2024), further emphasize that interacting with nature in urban settings, like visiting gardens or green spaces, supports emotional well-being and fosters a deeper connection to the natural environment. However, individuals who are more environmentally conscious may prioritize ecological values over social engagement, highlighting the importance of designing nature-related activities that encourage community involvement. Thus, urban parks serve not only as ecological and recreational assets but also as essential spaces for cultivating social cohesion and meaningful human-nature relationships.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Case study

This research focuses on Seremban 2 City Park as a case study, selected for its strong visual appeal and widespread representation on social media, particularly Instagram. The park exemplifies the characteristics of an instagrammable landscape, where aesthetic design, curated views, and user-friendly infrastructure collectively contribute to its popularity among both casual visitors and social media users seeking photogenic settings. Spanning over 18 acres, the park has been a prominent landmark of the Seremban 2 township for more than two decades since its unveiling to the public in 2005. The park has evolved beyond its traditional role as a recreational space, becoming a meaningful extension of residents' homes and daily routines. Its extensive, well-designed environment functions as a community sanctuary, fostering social connections, promoting well-being, and enhancing appreciation for nature. The park's visually engaging features, including scenic landscape views, open green spaces, and interactive art installations, contribute to its appeal and are frequently shared on social media platforms (Figure 1). These qualities make Seremban 2 City Park an ideal setting for examining the relationship between visual social media and visitors' outdoor experiences. This research focuses on the aesthetic features, social media trends of outdoor green spaces, and visitors' interactions, which help in understanding how these elements shape perceptions and influence users' behaviors. The presence of ethnically diverse park users also contributes to the richness of the study, offering valuable insights and varied perspectives from potential interviewees. Figure 1 illustrates the geographical overview of Seremban 2 City Park, highlighting six locations (a–f) where participants captured and shared visual content on Instagram.



Figure 1: Overview of the case study, including the locations where participants posted the views on Instagram, as in Figure 4 (Source: Google earth image, 2023)

3.2 Data collection

This study utilizes a qualitative research design organized into three sequential stages to explore the influence of visual social media on urban park experiences (Figure 2). Stage 01 begins with a preliminary study that includes a literature review, definitions of key concepts such as "instagrammable landscapes" and "visual social media," and the development of research instruments and ethical considerations. Stage 02 encompasses the data collection phase, employing two primary methods: site observation and semi-structured interviews. Site observations are conducted to identify and categorize landscape features, assess visitor behaviours, and document visually prominent features and observable visitor practices related to visually engaging elements. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews investigate three thematic areas: (1) visual social media usage, (2) urban park experience; and (3) user perception. Stage 03 focuses on data analysis and interpretation. Findings are synthesized into three core results: the impact of social media interactions on visitor engagement, how visual social media influences visitor perception and decision-making, and an in-depth understanding of the design and spatial characteristics that constitute "instagrammable" elements within the context of landscape architecture. This methodological structure provides an exploratory approach for analysing how digital visual culture reshapes the experiential and aesthetic values of urban parks.

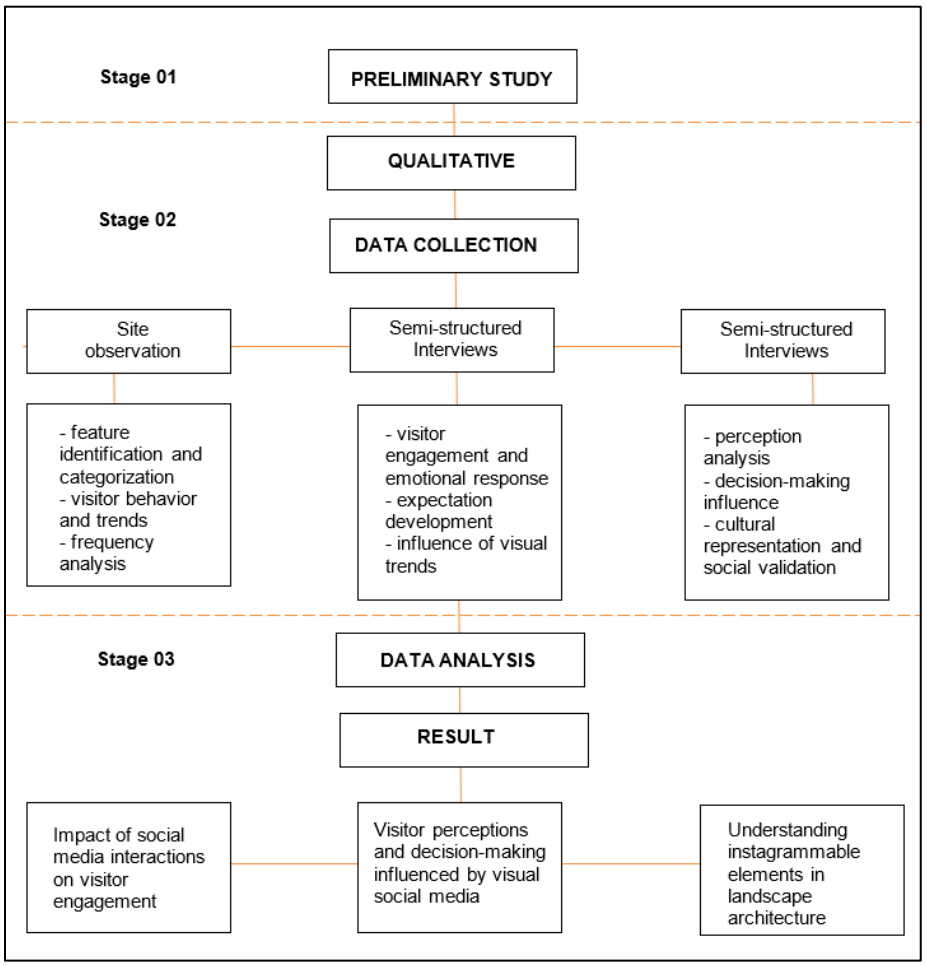


Figure 2: Research Design

3.3 Site observation

Five days of site observation were conducted at Seremban 2 City Park on weekdays and weekends during morning, evening and night periods. The observations focused on the park's physical setting, visually prominent landscape features and visitors' visible activities, including their interactions with and photography of locations. An inventory checklist guided the examination of natural landscapes, built structures, recreational areas, lighting conditions, maintenance issues and other features contributing to the park's visual and photogenic appeal.

The observational material was used to provide contextual support for interpreting the interview findings rather than as an independently analyzed quantitative dataset. It helped the researchers understand participants' accounts of the park's visual appeal, photography practices, comfort, safety and maintenance conditions. No statistical conclusions regarding social media activity were drawn from the site observations.

3.4 Semi-structured interviews

The method of semi-structured interviews enhances observational data by collecting qualitative insights from park users about their experiences and perceptions of outdoor spaces. These interviews explore the influence of visual social media on visitors' experiences and seek to understand how it affects their perceptions of the park and their decisions to visit. This study focuses on perception analysis to investigate how visual social media shapes visitors' expectations and realities regarding the park's ambiance and surrounding beauty. The visual elements that motivate visitors examined to understand how they choose the park based on social media representations and to assess how these influences compare to their real-life expectations of the park. Furthermore, the interviews aim to provide a deeper understanding of how visual social media could impact the park's representation in cultural narratives and its role in social validation as an "instagrammable" location. As Magaldi and Berler (2020) emphasize, semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable in exploring participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they assign to them, making this method well-suited for unpacking the layered influence of visual social media on public space engagement.

Fourteen Park visitors participated in onsite semi-structured interviews and were identified as P1–P14. The interviews were voice-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts included the interviewer's questions and the participants' responses. The analysis examined recurring patterns concerning Instagram use, expectations of the park, onsite experiences, photography practices and online sharing., and each transcript included both the interviewer's questions and the interviewee's responses. For this study, 14 interview transcripts were gathered from various participants, (P1) as well as locals who often engaged with the park (P2-P14). The data for these transcripts was extracted from the voice-recorded interviews that were conducted on-site with visitors. This transcription process aids in analysing the in-depth qualitative insights obtained during the interviews and ensures that important details are not overlooked. By examining all the transcripts, we identified repetitive patterns related to how visitors perceive the influence of visual social media on their outdoor experiences in the park. The focus was on understanding how social media representation shapes visitors' expectations, how those expectations align with or differ from their actual experiences on-site, and how visual elements drive their decision to visit the park.

The insights and understanding extracted from the transcript shed light on how social media affects individual visitors' behaviour, including what they photograph, where they go, and how they share their experiences online. It also influences the significance of cultural imagery and practices of the park as an "instagrammable" location. The interviews provide insight that having valuable information about the digital representations of a park can shape its identity, impact its roles within the community as a recreational space. These interviews enrich the understanding of how Seremban 2 City Park can serve as both a physical space for recreation and a digital landmark.

4.0 Results and Discussions

This section provides a summary of the findings from the interview sessions. Seven themes were developed from the interview transcripts, which were transcribed and categorized based on (1) Instagram engagement, (2) sharing experiences in the park, (3) influences on visitors, (4) challenges in the park, (5) overall experiences, (6) expectations versus reality, and the (7) impacts of sharing. The interview sessions with 14 participants revealed twenty-one sub-themes based on their outdoor experiences in Seremban 2 City Park (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Themes and Subthemes Developed from the Participant Interviews.

Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Instagram engagement	Account activity	Daily usage
	Content on social media	Nature photos
	Photography preferences	Landscape photography
Sharing Park experiences	Posting Park visits	Park photos shared online
	Reason for posting	The beauty of landscape
	Audience reaction	Positive engagement
Influences on visitors	Perception of influence	Social media influences
	Types of activities	Walking and photography
	Socializing	Social gathering
	Scenery and ambiance	Visual appeal
	Peacefulness	Serene atmosphere
Challenges in the park	Uncomfortable experience	Lacking in facilities
	Wildlife interaction	Crow disturbance
	Maintenance issues	Cleanliness
	Safety	Lighting at night
Overall experience	Positive feedback	Enjoyable
	Areas for improvement	More facilities
Expectations vs reality	Alignment with social media	Expectations met
	Disappointment factors	Underdeveloped spot
Impact of sharing	Contribution to park's popularity	Increased visitors
	Suggestion for improvement	Better safety and amenities

4.1 Instagram engagement

Based on the interviews, all participants were identified as active Instagram users, with the content they shared reflecting their individual preferences. Participants described different content-sharing preferences, including nature, food, aesthetic and lifestyle content. (Figure 3).

"I have an Instagram account that is still active, where I often share posts about myself and life updates on my feeds and Instagram stories." (P6)

"My Instagram account remains active, and I frequently share updates about my work as a graphic designer, including aesthetic posts about places and products." (P1)

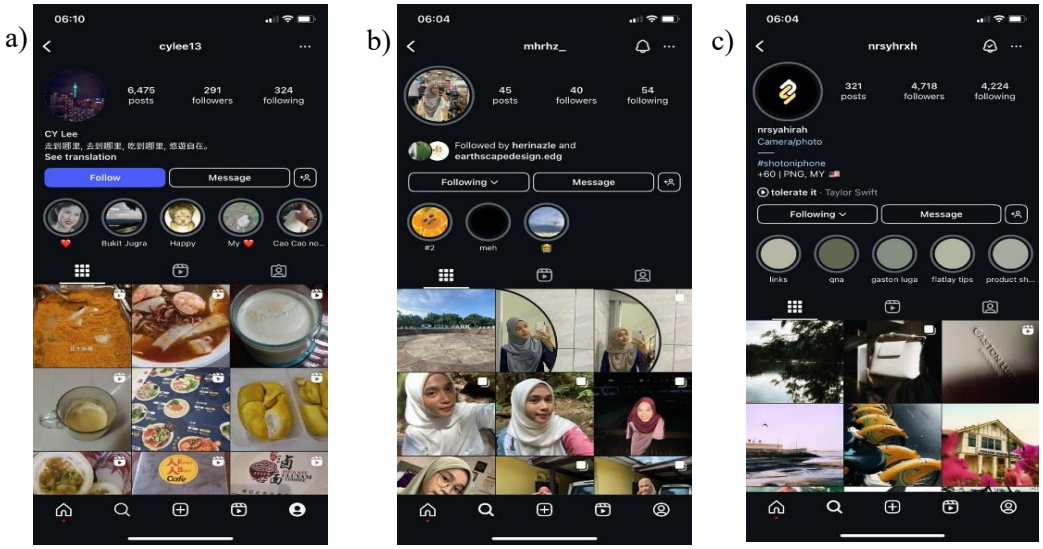


Figure 3. A variety of Instagrammer feeds based on their preferences
(a)Foodie instagrammer, (b) Lifestyle instagrammer, and (c)Aesthetic instagrammer

4.2 Sharing Park experiences

Many participants enjoy sharing their park experiences on social media by uploading photos from their visits that capture the park's scenic landscape (Figure 4). When asked why they post about their experiences, their primary motivation is to share these moments with other users online, appreciate the park's stunning views and serene atmosphere, and receive positive feedback from friends and followers. This encouragement has led participants to share more content and connect with other users through interactions and appreciation focused on the park's beauty.

"I share my outdoor experiences to highlight the beauty of the park to my followers." (P3)

"I enjoy sharing with my friends the atmosphere and beautiful views of the landscape to show appreciation for nature." (P12)

"The outdoor experiences I shared online often received positive feedback, with my followers consistently curious about these hidden natural gems." (P14)

4.3 Influences on visitors

Instagram content appeared to influence some participants' perceptions and expectations of the park on visitors' perceptions, shaping their preferences and behaviors during their visits to Seremban 2 City Park. The activities that most participants frequently engage in include walking, jogging, and photography. These activities are driven by the desire to capture and experience the visually appealing scenery of the environment. A few participants use this park to socialize through gatherings and picnics, which influences how visitors interact with the space, as they are likely to connect with its warm and welcoming ambiance. Participants often describe the scenery and ambiance as serene, calm, and healing, seeking peaceful surroundings for enjoyment and relaxation.

"I really like the ambiance of this park, where it often gives me peace and a calming effect when I walk through the park" (P7)

"The park gives me a relaxing and serene atmosphere, which is the factor on why I always love to engage with this park" (P9)

"The positive and calm environment of this park really helps me a lot when I am stressed out and need some healing, the vibes and ambiance help me to chill out" (P13)

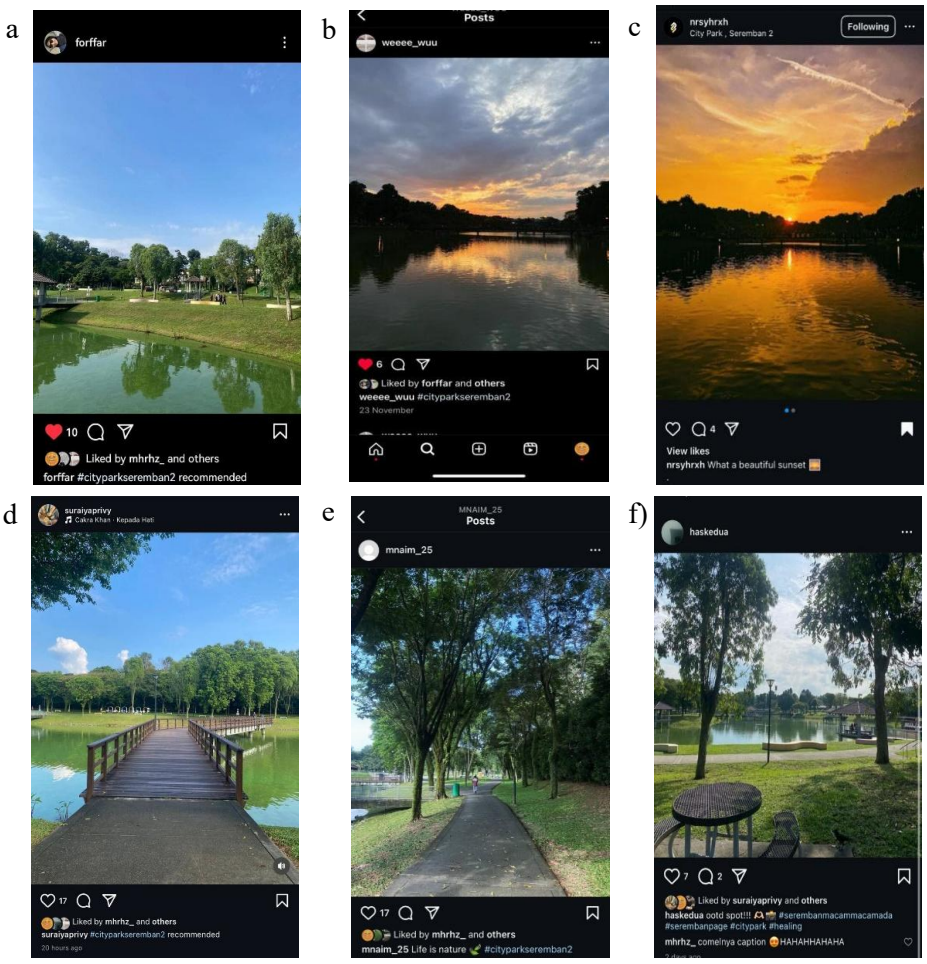


Figure 4. Postings About The Seremban 2 City Park Made By The Participants Highlighted Their Outdoor Experiences, And Image Location As In Figure 1

4.4 Challenges in the park

During the interview, some participants expressed their discomfort due to a lack of facilities, disturbances from crows, and maintenance issues, such as cleanliness, which leave them dissatisfied with the situation. Safety concerns, particularly the inadequate lighting at night, also make the participants hesitant to stay after dark, as the park becomes less accessible due to this problem. The highlighted challenges emphasize the need for improvement to enhance the park's appeal and security.

"The droppings of the crows really affect some spots where people cannot access and engage with some spots, and it really affects the visual appearance" (P2)

"The cleanliness of the park is still poor despite the good ambiance the park has, I think there should be an enhancement in terms of the maintenance" (P8)

"I think the park lacks or lighting, where most people who engage with the park during the evening time cannot stay longer because it will be very dark at night" (P10)

4.5 Overall Experiences

The participants generally provide positive feedback, highlighting the enjoyable experiences in the park despite the discomfort they face. However, they also express opinions about areas that need improvement, particularly the necessity for additional facilities, better cleanliness, and enhanced safety to increase the comfort and convenience of the park for visitors.

"The experience I have in this park is fun and enjoyable" (P4)

"This park gives me thrill and fun every time I come to here" (P9)

4.6 Expectation vs. Reality

Visitors' expectations are often influenced by the images or posts they see on social media, which showcase an idealized version of the park. In many instances, these expectations are fulfilled as visitors enjoy the experience they anticipated. When asked, a few participants express that the park's depiction on social media is exaggerated, and some feel disappointed when they encounter underdeveloped areas or locations that do not align with the polished images they observed online. Like how influencers in beauty campaigns reduce message credibility due to their lack of realism and emotional resonance (Hidayat, Marzaman, & Christin, 2024), highly curated or idealized park images on Instagram may also create a disconnect between visual expectations and actual visitor experiences, influencing user satisfaction and landscape perception.

"The park meets my expectations on what I have seen online, the features and other elements are all the same as I have seen on social media" (P3)

"I think some postings about this park on social media are exaggerated, where it might not meet the expectations, people have seen online" (P11)

4.7 Impact of sharing

Social media users actively contribute to city branding by co-creating digital narratives and imagery, which collectively shape the perceived identity and visual appeal of urban destinations (Sukiman et al., 2023). In the context of Seremban 2 City Park, Participants believed that sharing park-related content increased its visibility and could encourage others to visit. To sustain and improve this engagement, participants recommended enhancements such as improved safety measures and additional amenities, aimed at creating a safer and more comfortable environment for the community. When asked, some participants mentioned that they realized how sharing their outdoor experiences in the park on social media has positively impacted attracting people. Additionally, some received feedback from other users with recommendations and suggestions for improving the park.

"I think the sharing of my outdoor experiences online is leading to a positive impact where some of my colleagues are engaging with the park after my sharing" (P4)

"The sharing of outdoor experiences in my postings is giving various feedback, where some commented-on recommendations for the park improvement" (P6)

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study provides exploratory evidence of the perceived influence of visual social media, particularly Instagram, on outdoor experiences and perception at Seremban 2 City Park. Participants actively used social media to share curated images of the park's scenery, which was reported as influencing in shaping expectations and decisions to visit. The alignment or mismatch between digital representations and real-life experiences impacted their satisfaction, emotional responses, and overall sense of place. Idealized imagery not only influenced individual behavior but also contributed to a collective narrative of what is seen as desirable and "instagrammable" in urban park settings. Interview findings, interpreted alongside contextual field observations emphasized the importance of specific landscape features that have visual appeal, tranquility, and recreational accessibility in driving user engagement. Positive audience reactions to shared content reinforced posting behavior and contributed to the park's popularity. However, participants also raised concerns about cleanliness, lighting, and wildlife disturbances, highlighting the need for improved maintenance and safety measures. These insights underscore the dual influence of social media: as a tool for community connection and as a mirror that reflects and amplifies both strengths and shortcomings in park management.

In response, cautious practical implications find that park planners leverage visual social media as a strategic communication and design tool. Creating designated "instagrammable zones" that emphasize aesthetic elements, along with preserving quieter, undisturbed areas, can enhance user experiences while managing space use effectively. Social-media-based features such as story templates, future research could investigate whether location-based features, interactive geotags and augmented-reality tools support visitor engagement with urban green spaces. These approaches not only attract visitors but also support education, storytelling, and inclusive interaction with urban nature. Looking ahead, urban planners and landscape architects should integrate user feedback from digital platforms into ongoing park development. Harnessing generational preferences; youth-oriented storytelling can drive meaningful community involvement. As social media continues to shape spatial expectations, digital and physical integration in park design offers a holistic path forward, promoting both ecological sustainability and a stronger sense of belonging within urban green spaces.

This exploratory study is limited to one urban park and a relatively small group of participants. Detailed demographic comparisons were not undertaken, and the findings are not intended to represent all park visitors or Instagram users. Field observations provided contextual support rather than an independently analyzed dataset. Future studies could employ larger and more diverse samples, systematic analysis of social media content and comparative research across multiple urban parks.

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