

MSC 2020
**International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.
COMMUNICATION»**

URBAN IMAGINARY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CULTURE

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of urban imaginary transformations caused by the modern influence of digital culture on collective ideas about the city. Studying urban imaginary, the researcher opens up the opportunity to reveal the complex mechanism of constructing collective opinions about the city, which allows to scientifically explaining the processes of social representation of the city. At the same time, the author notes that one of the most important problems requiring timely reflection is the study of the social and cultural consequences that digital culture carries today. These aspects are the relevance of the article. The aim of this work is to analyze the urban imaginary transformations caused by the influence of digital culture, which determine the nature of the processes of collective representation, perception and representation of a modern city. The author demonstrates that modern tools for the formation of collective ideas about the city within the framework of digital communications construct the fragmentation and layering of urban imaginary based on an interdisciplinary paradigm, using culturological and communicative approaches. The work shows that digital culture, causing the transformation of urban imaginary, contributes to the formation of a qualitatively new effect of imagination by increasing the spectrum and trajectories of digital practices for the “imagination” of the city. The author notes such trends in urban imaginary generation as increasing the importance of visual content in communications, multidimensional virtualization, and dynamic implementation of innovative technologies and interactivity of digital communications as key ones.

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Keywords: Collective imaginary, digital communications, digital culture, urban imaginary



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1. Introduction

The attention of the humanities to the phenomenon of “urban imaginary” is increasing every year, which testifies to the transformation of the scientific understanding of how communities conceptualize and represent the city today. The urgency of studying urban imaginary as a set of real and virtual representations of the city lies in the fact that with the help of this phenomenon, the researcher has the opportunity to reveal the complex mechanism of constructing collective opinions about the city, which makes it possible to scientifically explain the processes of social representation of the city. In particular, interdisciplinary research projects focusing on the urban imaginary demonstrate how people imagine and perceive cities in the era of globalization (Huysen, 2008).

Studies of this kind that reveal the patterns of symbolic reflection, “feeling”, and understanding of the city are especially in demand in the context of digital culture, where the problems of city representation, urban identity, and competition of cities for resources are considered within the framework of digital communications.

The phenomenon of the collective imaginary was substantiated by B. Anderson for the first time, who argued that any community in which there are no direct contacts can be imaginary (Anderson, 2016). According to Anderson (2016), the collective imaginary rests on the imaginary symbolic connection of people, and emotional attachment to the community that unites them is formed thanks to this connection.

The city is also imaginary. As such, it exists, first of all, in our imagination, since it cannot be perceived by a person as an integral object. The city is characterized by an incommensurable horizontal space, the presence of a multi-layered cultural memory, the richness of social and institutional forms. According to scientists, the city is localized and periodically reproduced through acts of imagination (Çınar & Bender, 2007), which ultimately leads to the continuous structuring of urban imaginary.

Meanwhile, the modern era is marked by trends in digital culture as a certain stage of culture that “corresponds to a digital society ...” (Kuznetsova, 2018, p. 233). In the context of digital culture, all spheres of human activity have radically transformed, which could not but affect the functioning of urban imaginary.

2. Problem Statement

Digital culture heralded the onset of increasing virtualization and visualization of reality. With the help of digital code, technologies and services, the information that a person encounters, including information about the city, is transformed and disseminated in a virtual environment, forming values in society, visual fragments of images, as well as attitudes towards events and processes. “With the advent of digital culture, changes are taking place that affect people's daily lives” (Sokolova, 2012, p. 6). In addition, digital culture presupposes endless interactivity of the communicative space. Digital culture texts are in a state of constant change or interpretation. In other words, “the prevailing cultural form of “storytelling”, along with authorship, has been problematized in networked, hyperlinked digital environments: products are always incomplete, and reading paths contain hyperlinks and networks” (Miller, 2011, p. 25).

At the same time, the digital environment is blurring the boundaries between the sender and the recipient of messages in digital communications. The digital aspects of media communications minimize

the private sphere to the detriment of widespread transparency (Nazarov, 2018), and visualized forms of communication influence the definition of the boundaries of identity, causing “the fusion of the digital and real “I” into a single digital public identity” (Lisenkova, 2020, p. 65). In other words, digital culture carries a complex of risks, including not only a radical change in the daily life of young people, but also the fragmentation and individualization of society (Kravchenko, 2019).

In this regard, one of the most important problems requiring timely reflection is a comprehensive study of the social and cultural consequences that digital culture carries. And one of the aspects within the framework of the designated problem is the question of the impact of digital culture on the generation of urban imaginary.

3. Research Questions

In this paper, we focus on the specifics of urban imaginary transformation in the context of digital culture. It is important to note that urban imaginary research focuses on the relationship of the city as such to urban communities and urban space. In our case, the city “ceases to be an administrative or economic object, but is conceptualized as a place that is formed through collective actions” (Fedotova, 2020, p. 125). The city appears as “a specific, complex cultural construct that embodies <...> fundamental aesthetic, social and worldview attitudes of people” (Avanesov, 2018, p. 10). In other words, the city is not an a priori entity, but something that is generated by a number of subjects of action, including through urban imaginary processes. And the means of forming collective representations of the city are now not only a map, a museum and a population census noted by B. Anderson, but a digital reality.

When studying urban imaginary, communicative trajectories, carriers and identification codes (color, size, event, etc.) are often identified with the help of which a city is imagined, forming not only fragments of an urban image, but also an assessment, attitude towards the city. The process of imagining a city as a set of images of people, streets, events, sounds with which it is identified is closely related to urban identity. Cognizing urban identity through the prism of the urban imaginary concept, “the city turns out to be the bearer of meanings that, in one way or another, symbolically “overcome” the differences between specific and very different urban communities” (Musiezdov, 2013, p. 29-30). At the same time, the most unique and distinguishable aspects of the city's iconic bearers (brand, monument, nature, etc.) become the key to the successful “imagination” of the city, determining the urban identity and emotional attachment of a person to the city.

In modern research, it is not so much the repertoire of urban imaginary identification codes that is of particular importance, as the features of their representation in the digital communication space. In this regard, in this work, we focus on a number of properties of digital culture that will determine the transformation processes of urban imaginary today.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this work is to analyze the urban imaginary transformations caused by the influence of digital culture, which determine the nature of the processes of collective representation, perception, and representation of the modern city.

5. Research Methods

Since the research topic is interdisciplinary in nature, this work is based on an interdisciplinary approach aimed at integrating scientific developments from different branches of knowledge (anthropology, philosophy, sociology). Also, the research methodology includes a culturological approach, with the help of which the cultural conditions of the urban imaginary functioning are investigated. In addition, the work uses the method of a communicative approach, which makes it possible to focus on the methods of encoding and disseminating collective representations of the city in a digital culture

6. Findings

Let us consider the key trends in urban imaginary transformation driven by the influence of digital culture.

a) Virtualization of urban imaginary.

Virtual nature is initially characteristic for urban imaginary, since it is almost impossible for us to directly read the city as a text; the city is always reduced and approximated virtually. A person comes into contact only with fragments of the city, and the city itself “exists only in our heads or in the discourses of those who work in the field of various types of art and media: television, press, theater, radio, cinema, novels, DVDs” (Çınar & Bender, 2007, p. 2). Meanwhile, the virtual nature of digital culture evokes a new quality of urban imaginary. If we consider the mechanism of codification and labeling of urban reality inherent in postmodern studies, then the virtuality of urban imaginary also means the construction of ideas about the city, causing the illusory nature of urban reality.

Digital culture determines the urban imaginary virtualization, which we can explain by referring to the theory of simulacra by Baudrillard. Urban imaginary functions through the multi-layered realm of symbolic production of impressions of the city, which are, in fact, simulacra. Symbolic, in the words of a philosopher, is no longer “a concept <...> but an act of exchange and a social relationship that puts an end to the real” (Baudrillard, 2019, p. 243). The city becomes an imaginary reflection of the “on-screen” representation of the city in blogs, social networks, computer games, and electronic applications in the context of digital culture and total virtualization of the urban image in digital communications. E. Soja gives the name of invisible “hypercosm” to such cities constructed in the imagination, (Soja, 2003), which is born of virtual electronic communications. He believes that today, the representation of the city and the purposefully formed image of the city have more weight than what the city really is. In the era of digital culture, the electronic representation of the city (through online excursions, virtual communities, etc.) becomes dominant as symbolic production of impressions is shifted to digital format.

b) Interactivity of digital society and urban imaginary.

The digital format of new media is transforming the way a collective image of the city is produced. Now we perceive cities through the official website on the Internet or through the information posted in the review on the Facebook page. At the same time, for example, tests of bloggers who live in a given city or have visited it, as well as any other people who create public content about the city on the Internet, have no less influence on the formation of urban imaginary. An active user of digital reality, creating verbal and

visual texts that approximates the perception of the city, spontaneously or purposefully participates in the generation of urban imaginary, actively influencing the dynamics of collective ideas about the city.

The direct experience of a city's perception by a specific person can be replicated many times, multiplied and influenced by the city's representation in digital communication channels in a digital culture. At the same time, attitudes towards urban imaginary identification codes may change due to the personal attention of individual users to certain unique practices of urban reality. This is a fundamentally new practice of urban imaginary formation, associated with the interactivity of digital culture, since now not only a film, book or museum are tools for generating urban imaginary, but also ordinary people who take an active position in digital communications and participate in the production of symbolic information about the city. Digital communications become the most important intermediaries that construct urban imaginary, reproduce the values of the city, consolidate collective ideas about the city in digital media due to interactivity (for example, in blogs or social networks).

c) Visualization of urban imaginary.

One of the features of digital culture is associated with the fact that digital devices are designed to transmit small information, short messages, accompanied by images (photographs, emoticons, etc.) to the screen. The digital format is dominated by reduced information about the city, which, due to short capacious texts with visual design on the screen, affects imaginative thinking and thereby generates urban imaginary.

Urban imaginary visual codes, with the help of which a city is identified, have “an exceptional figurative, generating effect, conveying the character, spirit, and image of the city with the help of visual forms” (Fedotova, 2020, p. 125). The on-screen representation of the city, formed in digital communications, is always marked with visual codes - the style of the streets, the colors of buildings, the images of people. By watching a video about a city on the official city portal or a photo on a social network, people unconsciously form visual representations of the city, which, thanks to digital means of communication, acquire a collective character. Despite the fact that the visual appearance of the city is often created purposefully and the visual version of the city can be presented in a version much more spectacular than if we can see it in everyday life, nevertheless it is fixed for a long time and becomes defining. The digital environment allows creating and distributing visual images of the city based on spectacular positions (a city in the sun or from a bird's eye view), including unique fragments (streets, squares, embankments), as well as through digital information processing. At the same time, the digital visualization of urban imaginary opened up the opportunity for cities to use this experience to accumulate symbolic capital as a set of significant elements that provide the city with “recognition, fame, prestige, and trust in it from various social groups” (Fedotova, 2018, p. 144) in order to solve social and economic problems.

d) Innovative technologies and urban imaginary.

The digital culture is characterized by regular technical updates and technological innovations that set the dynamics for digital communication. The value of innovations in general determines their constant growth, and innovative technologies and the improvement of digital devices contribute to the constant introduction of new ideas, including science-intensive ones, which change the processes of representation of the city in society.

Cities that use innovative ways of updating their identification codes (unique events, exceptional facts) in digital communications, introducing IT technologies into the process of “imagining” a city, have

a clear advantage in the competition between city images and city brands. Today, this includes not only electronic reconstructions of cities or urban projects (knightly duel, Slavic holiday, city of the future), but also computer games with a plot around authentic urban practices, virtual platforms for communication that open the city for perception in different contexts. Digital practices like these are becoming modern generators of urban imaginary.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that within the framework of digital culture, any processes of the imaginary acquire a qualitatively new effect, since the trends of digitalization of society increase the range of tools and communications for the “imagination” of certain territories. These days, digital practices are gaining dominance in the collective image of the city that is transforming urban imaginary. The city is now imagined not only through traditional means (museum or map), but also through digital tools that, by increasing the value of visual content, virtualization, dynamic implementation of innovative technologies and interactivity of digital communications, provide the construction of a fragmented and multi-layered urban imaginary. Such a transformation of urban imaginary opens up new vectors of research that can reveal the multifaceted processes of social perception and representation of the city in the era of digital culture. Researchers have the opportunity to identify tools that allow managing digital methods of bringing a city closer to a person, creating a new reality of a city, broadcasting in digital reality that version of an imaginary city that would be attractive for travel or for the life and work of people.

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