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Bridging Space and Algorithm: Mediatized Urban Imaginaries and Cultural Identity Formation among Generation Z

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Abstract

This paper proposes a tri-layered mediatization model, comprising spatial, narrative, and algorithmic dimensions, to explain how Generation Z constructs cultural identity in contemporary cities. The first layer, spatial mediatization, illustrates how urban spaces are re-experienced and re-encoded through digital interfaces, fostering a "digital sense of place." The second layer, narrative mediatization, shows how young people utilize user-generated content (UGC) and AI-aided tools to co-create urban stories and perform symbolic belonging. The third layer, algorithmic mediatization, highlights how recommendation and ranking systems determine which city narratives gain visibility and emotional resonance, thereby shaping algorithmic identity. Critically, these three layers operate in a generative loop: mediated space prompts narrative production, narratives are then filtered and amplified by algorithms, and that amplified visibility, in turn, reshapes space and identity. Ultimately, this model offers a critical framework for interpreting how digital platforms transform cities into dynamic arenas of mediated identity formation for Generation Z.

Keywords: Mediatization, Urban Imaginaries, Algorithm, Cultural Identity, Generation Z

Introduction

The contemporary urban environment is fundamentally being redefined by an intensified process of mediatization, which positions media as a co-constitutive force in shaping modern urbanity (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022). We are increasingly experiencing and navigating the city through the interfaces of global digital platforms, such as Google Maps, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu, rather than relying solely on traditional sensory or geographical inputs. This growing reliance highlights how media acquire an important role in the production of social space, blurring the conceptual boundaries between symbolic and material spaces (Jansson, 2013). This systemic shift requires moving beyond traditional urban studies perspectives, which often viewed media representations primarily as a monolithic reflection of elite interests aimed at supporting growth and commodification. Instead, urban mediatization emphasizes that urban dynamics are implicated in a complex, variegated media

ecosystem, compelling us to analyze the city itself as a lived and negotiated media phenomenon.

The primary engine of this transformation is the ascendancy of algorithmic logic and increasingly pervasive visual media (Törnberg, 2022). Storytelling, which has historically been a pillar of human culture and collective memory, is no longer left solely to human intuition. It is actively affected by artificial intelligence (AI) and recommendation systems. Digital platforms operate by substituting traditional, intuition-based decision-making with algorithmic data and individualized suggestions (Shazab & Ishfaq, 2025). These computational routines are primarily designed to optimize user engagement, enhance content relevance, and encourage prolonged platform interaction (Gagrčin et al., 2024). The resulting personalized content distribution relies on the innate logic of algorithms, specifically manifested through techniques such as immersive personalization and interactive personification. Algorithms thus emerge not merely as tools but as new cultural gatekeepers and intermediaries, actively influencing cultural narratives (Walia & Jain, 2023). However, this algorithmic landscape is inherently dual-faced. While it grants platforms the power to boost marginalized voices by bypassing traditional gatekeepers, offering avenues for the democratization of cultural expression. It simultaneously risks reinforcing systemic inequalities through biased moderation, commercial pressures, and the creation of echo-chambers (Walia & Jain, 2023).

The social and cultural effects of this algorithmic shift are most acutely felt among Generation Z. Gen Z is characterized as the true “Internet-born” or “screen-born” generation, positioning them as central agents in navigating this hybrid digital-physical reality (Fu, 2021). This cohort wields significant cultural and economic influence and is expected to be a crucial driver of consumer market growth. Critically, Gen Z’s “city-selection view” marks a definitive transition from the industrial criteria of “efficiency first” to prioritizing “meaning construction,” the pursuit of humanistic and aesthetic values, and the quality of individual life experience. They express a profound curiosity and desire to explore local and traditional culture, consciously elevating the act of simple “residence” into an active daily cultural practice. This generation actively seeks identity and belonging through social recognition in communal circles defined by shared interests (“social identity circles”), acting routinely as both content consumers and producers in digital spaces.

Despite the evident transformation of the urban sphere by digital technology, current research lacks an encompassing conceptual apparatus to systematically interpret this new reality (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022). Existing scholarship often addresses the cultural dynamics of urban change or the technological characteristics of platforms in isolation, failing to unify the multi-layered dependencies inherent in this new transmedia texture (Jansson, 2013). Specifically, there remains a critical gap in understanding how the confluence of fluid urban spaces, automated algorithmic logic, and the subjective identity work of digital-native youth constructs a new form of cultural belonging. This gap necessitates a robust theoretical intervention that moves beyond mere description to frame these practices within a comprehensive, critical model.

Therefore, this study proposes a conceptual framework grounded in mediatization theory to analyze the interwoven processes through which urban space is constructed,

narrative disseminated, and identity formed in the age of the algorithm. Drawing on the socio-spatial reconstruction of mediatization (Jansson, 2013), the specific objective of this research is to conceptualize and systematically analyze how algorithmic storytelling and visual platform engagement shape urban imaginaries and facilitate the construction of mediated urban identity among Generation Z. By detailing the generative mechanisms that link space (urban environment) to algorithm (computational logic) and ultimately to cultural identity (youth belonging), this paper aims to provide a critical and holistic tool for understanding the core forces reshaping contemporary urban life and cultural self-formation.

Progress and Shifts in Mediatization Research: From Institution to Society

The Core Trajectory of Mediatization Theory

Mediatization is a pivotal theoretical concept used to explain how our media environment fundamentally underwrites and (re)constructs the social world (Kannengießer & McCurdy, 2021). Initially rooted in the institutionalist tradition, early scholarship primarily focused on charting the rise of media as an independent social institution (Hepp & Krotz, 2014). This approach meticulously examined how other societal domains, such as politics and religion, were forced to adapt their procedures and practices to align with the pervasive "media logic" (Kannengießer & McCurdy, 2021). While this tradition provided a robust analysis of media's structural influence, it often framed media as an external force acting upon society.

In recent years, however, there has been a notable theoretical reorientation toward a social-constructivist perspective. This emerging trajectory, often associated with "deep mediatization," emphasizes that the construction of social reality itself has become inextricably dependent on technological processes of mediation. Within this framework, media is no longer viewed merely as an external influence but as co-constitutive of social reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Hepp et al., 2015). It acknowledges that the very elements and building-blocks from which a sense of the social is constructed are fundamentally rooted in technologically based processes of mediation (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022).

City Space as a Mediatized Arena

The conceptual framework of mediatization is essential for grappling with the growing and deepening role of media in urban dynamics (Jansson, 2013). Applying this framework to metropolitan environments reveals the increasing phenomenon of "urban mediatization" (Törnberg, 2022). This process fundamentally reshapes contemporary urbanity by blurring the conceptual distinction between physical spatial realities and digital realities (Hurova & Shkurov, 2023). Media representations, once considered merely reflective of urban life, are now understood as being actively woven into daily experience, dynamically shaping local imaginaries and influencing the flows of tourism and capital.

Urban mediatization captures how media content, such as widely circulated posts and visual narratives, becomes part of the city's very fabric, leading to new spatial practices like digital "checking in." This process, in turn, subtly destabilizes existing land-use arrangements by allowing urban places to be re-experienced and consumed at a distance (Xiang et al., 2023).

The Omission of Algorithmic Agency

While traditional mediatization effectively illuminated changes driven by human agents, institutional adaptation, and symbolic narratives (Monzer et al., 2020), its established models generally lack the analytical tools to systematically account for the structural reshaping brought about by non-human intermediaries (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022). Specifically, the pervasive rise of algorithms and platform logic represents a significant omission that demands theoretical redress.

Algorithms are computational routines that function as modern cultural gatekeepers, actively engaging in the production, filtering, and distribution of narratives (Shazab & Ishfaq, 2025). This computational intervention effectively substitutes traditional editorial and gatekeeping functions, introducing complex, proprietary, and often opaque processes into the heart of the media ecosystem. This reliance on automated logic, which is inscribed with institutional intentions and commercial imperatives, is not merely an extension of human action but represents a structural shift that traditional, human-centric media logics struggle to fully explain. Therefore, to develop a comprehensive and current understanding of contemporary cultural identity, the existing mediatization framework must be expanded to systematically integrate this algorithmic agency and platform structure into the core of its analysis.

The Urban Imaginaries Research: From Geographic Symbols to Digital Landscapes

The study of urban imaginaries has traditionally focused on how a city's identity is constructed through a collection of symbolic meanings (Ye & Jeon, 2023). Drawing from classical theoretical bases, city branding efforts historically relied heavily on promoting tangible and functional elements, such as distinctive natural landscapes, iconic historical sites, and representative cuisine to build a recognizable public image (Klinger & Svensson, 2018). Kevin Lynch's The Image of the City (1964) laid the foundation for understanding urban form through its legibility and imageability, emphasizing how people cognitively map and emotionally connect to urban environments. Later, semiotic and cultural geography approaches extended these insights by framing the city as a communicative text, where material structures function as cultural symbols that produce meanings through social interpretation (Bartolomei et al., 2024).

In this sense, a city's image can be conceived as a holistic set of attributes categorized along functional, emotional, symbolic, representational, and ambient dimensions (Dai & Zheng, 2021). The semiotic turn in urban studies conceptualized urban branding as a signifying practice—cities became "texts" to be read, interpreted, and consumed (Ye & Jeon, 2023). However, this traditional paradigm often led to static, top-down understandings of urban image construction, privileging monumental narratives and official representations over participatory or pluralistic meaning-making (Gelbard, 2023). Such approaches often reduced the city's identity to stable symbolic constructs rather than recognizing it as a dynamic, socially negotiated process.

Shifts in the Digital Age: From Symbols to Hybridity

The rise of digital and algorithmic media has profoundly transformed how cities are imagined and experienced. Urban representation is no longer dominated solely by authoritative discourses but is increasingly shaped by distributed, user-generated narratives

and visual practices (Tu et al., 2021; Główczyński, 2022). This evolution is embedded within what scholars call platform urbanism, where digital infrastructures such as social media platforms, mapping services, and algorithmic recommendation systems actively reshape urban perception and mobility (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022).

In this context, city imaginaries have become performative and participatory. Practices like "check-in culture," location tagging, and aestheticized "Instagrammable" places exemplify how social media transforms urban experience into shareable content and symbolic capital (Sun et al., 2023; Xiang et al., 2023). The hybridization of physical and digital spaces produces digital sense of place—a spatial experience mediated by platforms, data, and algorithms (Koliska & Roberts, 2021). This new landscape fosters what some scholars call "networked authenticity," where the credibility and desirability of urban experiences depend on their algorithmic visibility and peer recognition.

For Generation Z, as digital natives embedded in algorithmic culture, this process represents both participation and self-expression. They not only consume but actively produce urban meanings through visual narratives and meme-based discourses that circulate within online communities (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022). Their UGC functions as a form of cultural agency that reshapes symbolic hierarchies, rendering the urban image a continuously evolving mosaic rather than a static construct.

Nevertheless, a theoretical gap persists. Existing research often treats city images as communication results, stable representations rather than processual mediations. This neglects the generative dynamics through which Z-generation users algorithmically co-construct urban identity within hybrid digital spaces. To bridge this gap, future frameworks should reconceptualize the city image as a mediated process, one sustained by the interplay among spatial affordances, narrative practices, and algorithmic infrastructures that collectively shape urban cultural identity.

Algorithmic Culture and the New Power of Cultural Visibility

The emergence of digital platforms has solidified Algorithmic Culture as a pervasive force, fundamentally reshaping socio-cultural dynamics. Algorithms transcend their function as mere technical tools, becoming powerful intermediaries that structure cultural consumption, taste formation, emotional engagement, and knowledge acquisition.

Algorithmic Culture as a Cultural Intermediary

The emergence of digital platforms has solidified algorithmic culture as a pervasive socio-technical force that fundamentally reshapes how culture is produced, circulated, and consumed. Algorithms have transcended their initial technical and instrumental roles to become cultural intermediaries that actively structure cultural consumption, taste formation, affective engagement, and knowledge acquisition (Beer, 2017; Gillespie, 2014). Rather than functioning as neutral computational systems, algorithms embody social, economic, and institutional logics—encoding human intentions, market imperatives, and political values into code (Airoldi, 2021; Klinger & Svensson, 2018). As such, they participate in a new regime of structural power that determines not only what becomes visible or invisible but also how individuals understand and relate to culture itself (Kitchin, 2017).

As cultural intermediaries, algorithms shape audience preferences and cultural behavior through processes of recommendation, personalization, and predictive analytics. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube continuously refine content distribution using user data for viewing history, engagement metrics, and demographics to curate highly relevant and emotionally resonant content (Walia & Jain, 2023). This algorithmic curation system ostensibly enhances user experience yet paradoxically reinforces ideological and cultural fragmentation by reproducing familiar preferences and sustaining echo chambers. In the creative domain, algorithms increasingly influence the production process itself through generative AI and automated editing tools that anticipate audience desires and trends (Ma & Yu, 2025; Santoso & Wijayanti, 2024). These developments reposition algorithms as active agents of cultural authorship rather than passive distributors, blurring the distinction between cultural producer and technological system. However, this shift also raises new ethical and epistemological concerns, as algorithmic mediation often perpetuates systemic inequality and reinforces hegemonic cultural hierarchies under the guise of objectivity and efficiency (Beer, 2019). The collective visions, fears, and expectations attached to these systems, which are Bucher (2018) and Cheney-Lippold (2019) refer to as the algorithmic imaginary illustrate how algorithms acquire symbolic and affective authority in shaping socio-cultural possibilities and meaning-making processes.

Cultural Visibility and New Power Hierarchies

The politics of cultural visibility further reveal how algorithms govern the symbolic economy of the digital age. Platform algorithms mediate visibility through mechanisms of filtering, sorting, and ranking, thereby defining which narratives and representations attain prominence and emotional resonance (Cotter, 2019; Klinger & Svensson, 2018). In this sense, visibility itself becomes a new cultural currency, and algorithmic design determines what circulates, what remains hidden, and who gains influence. As Beer (2018) notes, the "algorithmic gaze" functions as a distributed form of power, constructing new hierarchies of attention and legitimacy. Platforms like TikTok, for instance, operate through algorithmic amplification, decentralizing traditional media hierarchies by enabling micro-narratives to achieve viral reach regardless of creators' initial popularity (Dawson, 2020). Yet this apparent democratization coexists with a deepening commercialization of visibility, as algorithmic recommendation prioritizes emotionally charged, visually engaging, and advertiser-friendly content.

This dual logic of algorithmic amplification presents both opportunities and threats(Shazab & Ishfaq, 2025). On one hand, it facilitates cultural participation by empowering marginalized voices to bypass traditional gatekeepers (Pandey, 2025). On the other hand, it fosters exclusionary dynamics through biased moderation, "shadow bans," and content prioritization guided by engagement metrics and profit motives (Bishop, 2019). The outcome is a platform-based hierarchy in which formulaic trends dominate, potentially leading to cultural homogenization and the silencing of alternative narratives. Algorithms thus not only mediate symbolic expression but also shape the economic viability and cultural legitimacy of creative labor.

Crucially, algorithmic visibility has spatial and identity-based consequences, particularly in the context of urban mediatization (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022). Algorithms actively contribute to the construction of hybrid spaces for interweaving digital representations with

physical geographies, where urban imaginaries are continuously redefined through mediated interactions. For Generation Z, whose socialization is deeply entangled with algorithmic media, these mechanisms shape the digital sense of place, influencing how youth emotionally connect to cities and perform cultural belonging. For instance, algorithmic promotion of visually appealing neighborhoods or "check-in hotspots" contributes to the transformation of physical spaces into symbolic territories of identity performance. Studies on digital nomads demonstrate how algorithmically curated urban imagery creates new spatial labels (e.g., "digital nomad paradise"), reshaping local economies and cultural meanings (Hällgren & Björk, 2022). Thus, understanding algorithmic visibility in relation to spatial practices and youth identity requires moving beyond general discussions of content bias or inequality toward a more integrative framework linking algorithm, space, and belonging. This integration reveals how algorithms mediate not only information flow but also the affective and spatial dimensions of cultural citizenship in the digital city.

The tri-Layered Mediatization Model: Bridging Space, Narrative, and Algorithm

This section introduces the Tri-Layered Mediatization Model, which explains how Generation Z constructs cultural identity within algorithmically mediated urban environments. The model consists of three interrelated layers: spatial, narrative, and algorithmic mediatization. Spatial mediatization describes how urban space is re-experienced and re-encoded through digital interfaces, shaping a "digital sense of place." Narrative mediatization highlights how user-generated and AI-assisted storytelling enables youth to participate in collective meaning-making and symbolic belonging. Algorithmic mediatization focuses on how recommendation and ranking systems determine cultural visibility, guiding aesthetic preferences and reinforcing certain urban imaginaries. These layers operate as a generative loop: mediated space stimulates narrative production, narratives circulate through algorithmic filtering, and algorithmic visibility reshapes spatial perception. Together, they reveal how digital platforms transform cities into dynamic arenas of mediated identity construction, where Generation Z negotiates belonging, visibility, and participation within the algorithmic city.

Layer 1: Spatial Mediatization and the Digital Sense of Place

Spatial mediatization refers to the transformation of urban space under digital mediation, where the experience, meaning, and identity of place are increasingly shaped by media technologies, data infrastructures, and networked interactions. Kitchin and Dodge and Kitchin (2022) conceptualize this as code/space, arguing that contemporary urban environments depend on software-driven systems for their very operation: any space reliant on code to function as intended constitutes a code/space. This notion marks a crucial epistemological shift, from understanding space as fixed physical form to seeing it as a hybrid assemblage of code, interface, and experience. In this mediated environment, spatial perception is co-produced through screens, sensors, and algorithms. For Generation Z, the city is not only inhabited or traversed but algorithmically navigated and visually performed.

As digital platforms mediate the access and representation of cities, spatial experience becomes inseparable from the logic of visibility and sharing. Shaban (2024) expanded this framework by introducing the concept of digital sense of place, describing how emotional and symbolic attachments to urban locations are increasingly generated through mediated practices such as geotagging, digital mapping, and location-based storytelling. This sense of

place no longer depends solely on physical proximity or long-term habitation but emerges from mediated participation and algorithmic exposure. For instance, research on youth spatial practices in Surabaya demonstrates how walking, photographing, and sharing urban environments create new layers of meaning and attachment to place (Nugroho & Zhang, 2022). These practices highlight how mediated urban space becomes an affective and cultural interface, allowing young people to experience the city both as a lived and a visualized space.

Digital platfosms such as TikTok (Douyin), Xiaohongshu, and Instagram exemplify this process. They function as powerful cultural intermediaries that curate how urban places are discovered, navigated, and represented. Algorithms determine which cafés, murals, or riverfronts appear in a user's feed, thus shaping not only digital exposure but also physical mobility is a phenomenon sometimes described as platform placemaking (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022). The city becomes a dynamic interface where physical and digital realities fuse, producing hybrid or "digiplaces" that exist simultaneously in physical geography and algorithmic circulation. For Gen Z users, these mediated environments form the foundation of urban experience, as the boundary between visiting a place and representing it collapses into a continuous cycle of observation, performance, and sharing.

This fusion is vividly illustrated in the practice of check-in culture (daka). Young users are drawn to urban landmarks or aesthetically appealing cafés first encountered online. Their physical visits are ritualized acts of mediated performance: they take photos or short videos, attach hashtags and geolocations, and share these posts across social networks. Once uploaded, the local site becomes embedded in digital circulation, gaining new symbolic capital as an "internet-famous" destination. The act of visiting thus becomes an act of visual re-encoding which is the transformation of physical spaces into communicable and consumable digital symbols (Tan & Yang, 2021; Zou et al., 2025). This process converts localized cultural assets into mobile cultural knowledge, spreading rapidly across algorithmic networks and reconstituting the city as a site of aestheticized consumption and mediated belonging.

For Generation Z, this process is not merely about visibility but about identity work. Growing up amid accelerated urbanization and digital saturation, they seek meaning and recognition through networked visibility and participatory practices. Their urban experiences are often mediated by prior exposure, what Pärn (2021) terms premediation which digital representations shape expectations before physical encounters. A young user exploring Chengdu's Taikoo Li or Seoul's Ikseon-dong may do so to replicate or reinterpret an influencer's post, performing both self-expression and spatial participation. Through these acts, Gen Z individuals negotiate their cunzaigan (存在感, sense of existence), asserting belonging within the city's mediated cultural sphere. Sharing location-based content allows them to counter the alienation of urban life by gaining social validation and emotional connection through visibility and engagement metrics such as likes and comments.

This identity performance contributes to a hybrid sense of place, where attachment arises not only from the built environment but from its digital representations and social interactions. Therefore, digital participation reinforces affective ties to urban culture, integrating spatial familiarity with mediated belonging (Hällgren & Björk, 2022). The city thus functions as a mediated interface for identity negotiation: the more a site circulates in algorithmic feeds, the more it becomes a marker of cultural capital and social presence. For

Gen Z, belonging is not defined by residence or permanence but by participation, representation, and visibility within the digital city.

Within the broader Tri-Layered Mediatization Model, spatial mediatization serves as the foundation upon which narrative and algorithmic layers operate. It provides the infrastructural and experiential conditions through which digital narratives are created, and algorithmic forces gain power. Without acknowledging this coded, mediated environment, analyses of algorithmic urban imaginaries and youth identity formation remain incomplete. Spatial mediatization reveals that Generation Z's engagement with the city is both material and symbolic, grounded in embodied movement yet amplified through digital visibility. It reframes urban identity as a mediated construct, continuously produced through networked interactions and algorithmic circulation.

In brief, spatial mediatization relocates urban identity formation into the realm of mediated experience, where space is co-constituted through code, image, and interaction. For Generation Z, the city becomes both a site of digital exploration and a canvas of self-expression, linking emotional attachment to mediated visibility. This layer illuminates how the urban environment functions as both infrastructure and interface in the ongoing production of cultural identity within the algorithmic age.

Layer 2: Narrative Mediatization and Polyphonic Co-Creation

The concept of Narrative Mediatization captures a fundamental paradigm shift in urban culture, where control over city narratives transitions from centralized (Finnemann, 2011), top-down dissemination by official entities to a dynamic process of Polyphonic Co-creation (Oke, 2025). This co-creation is driven by youth, UGC practices, and AI-mediated tools, reflecting how algorithms actively structure and influence narratives. In this approach, urban imaginaries cease to be static images and become fluid narrative fields wherein members of Generation Z, the Internet native cohort, move from passive consumers of city-images to active storytellers who fundamentally shape how cities are perceived and experienced (Finnemann, 2011). Henry Jenkins's notion of participatory culture emphasizes this movement, highlighting how digital technologies facilitate the dissolution of the boundaries between traditional producer and audience, making narrative practices interactive and communal (Jenkins, 2006). This consequential shift from homogenized, linear narratives to networked, multi-voiced story forms enable Generation Z to claim authorship of urban meaning and engage in crucial identity work and symbolic belonging within their complex social contexts (Fu, 2021).

At the core of narrative mediatization is polyphony, that is, the multiplication of voices, platforms, and media forms that embed individual experiences into collective urban stories (Hepp et al., 2015). The explosion of digital storytelling practices, as documented by Sánchez-López et al (2020), reveals how creative practitioners employ mobile video, social media narration, and remix culture to generate hybrid narrative forms. These practices are emergent in urban youth cultures: for example, young users in compact city districts film 15-second vlogs of "city walks," tag the city locale, apply AI-generated visuals, and invite peer remixes. By doing so, each individual instance becomes a node in a larger narrative mosaic of urban life and identity (Fu, 2021). Anecdotal evidence from user-generated city content underscores

how UGC functions not just as a commentary on place but as a performative act of identity construction.

In the urban context, Generation Z uses short-form video platforms like TikTok or Xiaohongshu to narrate micro-stories of local spaces—street cafés, mural alleys, independent bookstores. These snippets often incorporate AI image generation, or augmented reality filters that re-visualize the urban environment: a graffiti wall becomes a surreal AI-enhanced artwork, a neighborhood café becomes the backdrop for aspirational lifestyle narratives. These digital artefacts are not only consumed but shared, remixed and referenced, thus enabling a co-creative social logic of urban storytelling. For instance, a youth filmmaker might create a "day in the life of the city" sequence, invite peer duets, and repurpose camera angles from earlier posts, each iteration adding layers of meaning and place-attachment. This participatory process strengthens self-projection: the creator not only visits a city site but inserts themselves into the city's story, converting space into symbol and peer visibility into belonging. Empirical studies show that Generation Z is drawn to narrative formats that privilege authenticity, interactivity, and peer recognition rather than polished brand narratives (Santer et al., 2023).

The culmination of this shift from linear, top-down storytelling to networked, multi voiced co-creation is the enablement of symbolic belonging. In an era characterized by social fragmentation, Gen Z employs media practices to negotiate their relationship with various social contexts. The performance of self, often staged across platforms (such as Snapchat Stories or WeChat Moments), is crucial for achieving recognition and reinforcing identity. For young people navigating fluid urban environments, sharing life moments on platforms validates their existence to their social network and fosters an affective connectedness, thereby anchoring their sense of belonging in a digitized urban context. This digital sense of place, generated through participatory media writing practices, blends seamlessly with physical reality to form a hybrid sense of place. By contributing narratives that visually re encode urban spaces, Gen Z collectively shapes the urban imaginary, transforming the city from an objective geographical setting into a subjective, emotionally resonant, and fluid space defined by their co-created stories. The shift, therefore, signifies a move where identity and cultural meaning are actively produced by the citizenry, rather than passively received from official or commercial mandates.

Thus, the act of narrative creation transforms urban identity from being represented to representing oneself. When Generation Z individuals upload their city visits and stylized visuals, they treat urban space as a canvas for performing identity and community affiliation. This shift from reception to production constitutes a key transition in the model: narrative mediatization functions as the bridge wherein space (Layer 1) becomes story and identity. In this conceptual model, narrative mediatization thus serves three key roles. First, it enables participatory sense-making: Generation Z produce urban stories rather than only consume official image content. Second, it facilitates symbolic alignment: through co-creation, youth align personal experience with collective urban imaginaries and symbolically locate themselves in that narrative. Third, it provides the material for algorithmic mediation: each UGC act becomes data for platforms to filter, rank and amplify, thereby connecting with the next layer of algorithmic mediatization. The generative loop becomes visible: mediated space

prompts user narratives; user narratives are shared and remixed; algorithmic systems surface and amplify those narratives; the amplified narratives reshape space and identity in turn.

By emphasizing co-creation, polyphony and UGC, narrative mediatization shifts the cultural identity process for Generation Z from passive identification to active production. In urban settings, youth become authors of city meaning, remixers of place narratives and participants in the ongoing negotiation of belonging. Their digital practices transform isolated spatial encounters into collective stories, enabling them to stake claims to urban culture through visibility, remix culture and social media circulation. Narrative mediatization thus bridges the spatial and algorithmic domains, anchoring identity formation within media practices that are participatory, platform-native and culturally agentive.

Layer 3: Narrative mediatization and Polyphonic Co-Creation

Algorithmic mediatization is the process where platform algorithms become the central mediators of cultural meaning, dictating not just content circulation but also which places, narratives, and identities gain visibility. In this model, algorithms do more than mechanical sorting; they embed value judgments, aesthetic logics, and power relations into the mediated urban imaginary. As Hastuti et al (2025) observes, algorithmic audiences are hybrid entities: part user, part platform, shaped by recommendation systems and engagement metrics rather than purely human choice. This shift means urban identity, especially for Generation Z, is increasingly moderated by algorithms that control which city images, urban stories, and cultural forms are seen and affirmed.

Algorithms serve as cultural intermediaries in urban communication, selecting and amplifying specific place stories, images, and user-generated content while pushing others into obscurity (Kant, 2020). Studies confirm that visibility criteria are not neutral. The gatekeeping functions previously held by editors or institutions are now performed by opaque recommendation systems (Garajamirli, 2025). These systems favor content triggering high engagement, shares, or emotional resonance, often privileging visually strong, emotionally saturated, or popular-culture friendly city representations. According to Degen and Rose (2024), content aligned with algorithmic aesthetic preferences gains visibility, directly shaping how urban spaces are perceived and what achieves iconic status. For Generation Z, whose practices involve uploading short videos, geotagged stories, and participatory content, their urban identity is mediated not only by the spaces they inhabit but by what algorithms permit others to see and value. The result is an algorithmic identity that is not based solely on spatial occupancy or attribution but is constructed through data-driven categorization and platform visibility.

Within urban mediatization, visibility transforms into a form of cultural currency: to be seen is to belong, and to be visible is to matter. Algorithms filter, sort, and rank content, amplifying some urban narratives while marginalizing others (Jacobsen, 2023). As Alaimo and Kallinikos (2017) explain, platforms recognize users through data profiles, thereby shaping which urban practices are legible, shareable, and socially endorsed. This results in a new cultural power hierarchy: urban places and narratives that align with algorithmic visibility criteria achieve cultural legitimacy, while those that do not risk invisibility. This power dynamic holds significant implications for cultural diversity. Algorithmic selection often leans

toward homogenization, allowing popular trends, viral visuals, and easily digestible urban tropes to dominate, sidelining more nuanced, marginalized, or locally specific urban stories.

For Generation Z, algorithmic mediatization profoundly transforms their formation of urban identity and belonging. Young users engage in short video creation, and hashtagged geolocation posts primarily to gain visibility in platform feeds. These posts become components of algorithmically defined urban imaginaries; they circulate, accumulate likes, and signal symbolic affiliation. Since algorithms reward specific aesthetics and stories, Generation Z adapts by performing urban identity in algorithmically recognizable ways. Their choice of location, their filming of a café interior or mural, and their narration of a city walk are all optimized for algorithmic reward. This dynamic reduces cultural participation to metrics of visibility, and youth identity work is consequently shaped by the algorithmic environment, as they strive for recognition through algorithmic featuring. This process enables the formation of algorithmic identity, a digitally mediated self-understanding shaped by visibility, metrics, and circulation.

In summary, algorithmic mediatization constitutes the third layer of the tri-layer model, standing at the intersection of space, narrative, and identity. It explains how urban imaginaries and youth cultural identities are not merely produced by creative agency or physical place, but are algorithmically shaped, mediated, and validated. By foregrounding the power of visibility and the construction of algorithmic identity, this layer draws critical attention to how Generation Z's urban cultural identity is deeply embedded in platform logic and the algorithmic economy of attention. In the mediated city, belonging requires being seen, and being seen means mattering.

The Dynamic Interplay and the Generative Loop

The three layers of the mediatization model do not act in isolation but operate in a dynamic, generative loop. The process begins with spatial experience: mediated urban spaces (Layer 1) provide the conditions under which young people engage with place, share experiences, and build attachments. For example, when a Generation Z user visits a "check-in" hotspot, records a short video and posts it, the physical space is transformed into a mediated experience embedded with visibility and performativity. These spatial practices feed directly into the second layer, narrative mediatization: users generate stories, tag locations, remix content, and co-create urban narratives. The act of turning a location into a story shifts the relational field from mere presence to symbolic belonging.

Once narratives are produced, the third layer, algorithmic mediatization, comes into play: algorithmic systems filter, rank and amplify certain pieces of content over others. Content that is compelling, tagged, geolocated and enabled for circulation gets boosted in platform feeds. Research on recommendation feedback loops shows how user engagement and algorithmic amplification reinforce each other in a continuous loop . In our context, a young creator's city-walk video may receive likes and shares, triggering the algorithm to push it further, increasing visibility of the associated place, embedding that place more deeply in the mediated urban imaginary.

The loop then returns to spatial practice. Algorithmically amplified narratives tag certain places as significant, visible and meaningful, attracting more visits, more user-generated

posts, and further algorithmic visibility. In effect, spatial experience drives narrative production; narrative production feeds algorithmic mediation; algorithmic mediation reshapes spatial behavior and reinforces place-attachment. This cyclical process results in what might be termed a generative loop of mediated identity, where urban identity is continuously produced through successive rounds of mediated space-narrative-algorithm interaction.

For Generation Z, this loop means that belonging is less about long-term residence and more about participatory visibility. The city becomes a stage for identity performance: visiting, filming, posting, being seen. Platform logics encourage repeat practices and reward visibility, shaping spatial-narrative-algorithmic cycles that define which urban identities become legible and which remain marginal. Researchers note that feedback mechanisms in digital media contribute to reinforcing cultural meanings and exclude others. The continuous interaction of user behavior and algorithmic responses makes some places, stories and identities increasingly central, while others vanish from view.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has articulated a tri-layered mediatization model that bridges space, narrative, and algorithm to explain how Generation Z constructs cultural identity in contemporary urban environments. The model begins with spatial mediatization, which emphasizes how digital infrastructures and interfaces transform physical places into networked, code-inflected environments. It then progresses to narrative mediatization, which details how young people deploy user-generated content and AI-assisted tools to co-create urban stories and perform belonging. Finally, algorithmic mediatization reveals how platform logic and recommendation systems govern visibility, aesthetic preference, and recognition, thereby shaping which city imaginaries gain traction and which identities become legible. Together, these layers form a feedback loop: mediated spaces generate narratives, these narratives are algorithmically filtered and amplified, and that amplified visibility in turn informs new spatial engagements and identity work. This framework not only clarifies how cities become arenas of mediated identity production for Generation Z but also signals key implications for cultural diversity: as algorithmic visibility becomes central, certain narratives and affinities may be privileged while others remain marginalized or invisible. By mapping these mechanisms, the model provides a critical lens for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand and engage with the algorithmic city as a dynamic site of identity formation and cultural negotiation.

This research makes several theoretical and contextual contributions to the study of mediated urban identity. Theoretically, it advances mediatization research by integrating spatial, narrative, and algorithmic dimensions into a single generative framework, moving beyond existing studies that typically examine these processes in isolation. By conceptualizing how code/space, polyphonic narrative co-creation, and algorithmic visibility operate interdependently, the model explains identity formation not as a static outcome, but as a continuous, platform-mediated process shaped through feedback loops. This responds to existing gaps in urban communication, where the role of algorithms in shaping place-based cultural meaning remains under-specified. Contextually, the study contributes to understanding Generation Z in rapidly digitizing urban environments, particularly within Chinese and broader Asian media ecologies where platform-driven cultural production is

especially dynamic. By grounding identity formation in everyday participatory media practices such as short-video sharing and AI-assisted storytelling, the research illuminates how urban belonging today emerges from mediated visibility, symbolic presence, and algorithmically structured emotional resonance.

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