

Capturing and Interpreting Mediated Learning Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the perceptions of Communication students to infer meanings and understandings as they responded to visual stimuli presented to them. It was guided by the objectives to determine how communication students perceive pre-selected visual stimuli, how they understand the meanings in these urban spaces, how they respond to the visual stimuli in an interview, and how they connected their interactions to the spaces in their lived experiences. Mimetic Art Theory was used to frame the analysis as it examined sources, tools, and methods that captured, analyzed, and communicated the visual dimension of communicative learning spaces through an interview with 25 Communication students. Thematic analysis was validated using inter-rater reliability tools. Findings revealed three emergent themes, namely, urban expression, lived experiences, and diverse meanings. Inter-rater reliability coding was applied by three faculty members. Inter-reliability results show that 60% consider lived emotions as urban expression; 62-72% see actual, changing, and hybrid emotions as lived experiences; and 82-90% find material culture, usage, and human behavior as sources of diverse meanings. A strong need for creating and maintaining space ensued from the connectivity and collaboration of students' activities. Parallel constructs of wireless sensor networks/mobile devices induced and enhanced engagements within the different spaces. Through mediation, learning spaces directly contributed to the quality of social interactions because the use of visual stimuli served as a medium for capturing, processing, and expressing how urban spaces mediated interpersonal interactions in various campus activities. More explicit and transparent methodologies and exemplary visual urban studies may help visual research gradually enter the realm of widely accepted options in the scholarship on the communication value of urban space.

Keywords: communication value, material culture, Mimetic Art Theory, urban communication

INTRODUCTION

Urban communication, like urban studies, is an interdisciplinary field that provides a fresh perspective to view the city and its transformation. The communication lens offers valuable perspectives and methodologies for the examination of urban and suburban life. It conceptualizes the city as a complex environment of interpersonal interaction, a landscape of spaces and places that shape human behavior in an intricate technological environment.

Cities – or the urban, in more abstract terms – are central to the mediated and non-mediated communication practices that set apart our current times in the conduct of our everyday lives. By the same token, considerations, about patterns of communication between individuals and communities, technology, aesthetics and representation have become progressively fundamental to an understanding of what cities are as a consequence of urban planning and policymaking. With the rise of professional practices like city branding and the development of concepts such as “creative cities” and “smart cities” into veritable global formats for urban development and regeneration, research on media and communication has become central to the making of rather than just the studying of cities (Aurigi 2005, 1253). This emerging field of urban communication research comprises an invitation to look at the variety of intended and inadvertent expressions of the built environment and material culture to fill a void in the study of media, culture, and communication and to determine how communication is enacted in these daily narratives.

Prominent scholars have approached the nexus of urbanization and mediation by actively developing cutting-edge theoretical concepts and methodological frameworks to examine both media and communication as central to structures and practices of contemporary articulations of urbanism (Aiello and Tosoni 2016, 1252). However, the uncharted field of urban communication linked to learning spaces within universities has remained unexplored at a level of methodological research. In this paper, the researcher argues that a systematic conversation on the methodological principles and practices that set apart this burgeoning area of inquiry is not only timely, but also much needed.

It is in this context that a city is seen as a laboratory to research with diverse and often unconventional forms of urban expression as “a diverse spectacle composed of inter-woven signs, competing stories, diverse actors, and social boundaries in a constant flux, and a hodgepodge of communicative genres” (Pauwels 2016, 1325). Corollary to this is the notion of the city as a medium and the city as content in that they highlight the importance of cities as both producers and products of particular practices, interactions, and narratives. The communication value of urban space is a new concept which merits further consideration. However, there are no methods for determining the communication value of urban space. The approach proposed in a previous study relied on Nowakowski's method, which supports the development of a fast and universal approach to evaluating the phenomena in urban

space (Kurowksa et al. 2021). Thus, in order to preserve and disclose this urban spectacle in constant flux, visual methods are of paramount importance.

This study explored and critically discussed emergent themes and key aspects of mediated and unmediated campus life from a socio-cultural and a communicative research perspective. It examined the perceptions of Communication students in order to infer meanings and understandings as they responded to visual stimuli presented to them. This study examined how communication students perceived images discussing how they understood the use of urban space. During the interviews, they were able to recount how they had interacted with and around these urban spaces by relating their particular lived experiences. The focus of the study was on the learning spaces in the Far Eastern University Manila campus as represented through pre-selected visual stimuli or found images.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A previous study by Talbert and Anat (2019) on an analysis of active learning spaces sought to identify the critical elements of active learning classrooms that contributed the most to their effects on student learning and instructor performance, including affordances and elements of design, architecture, and technology integration.

One of the more obvious ways to study visual aspects of the urban sphere was to collect and analyze preexisting or so-called found images, visual representations, and artifacts. The potential benefits of using existing images or visualizations of urban society are manifold. First, the choice of existing visual materials and sources documenting aspects of the urban condition is broad, diverse, and rich; for example, historical photographs made with documentary intent. In today's networked society, huge repositories are becoming better organized and widely accessible. They provide access to a wide variety of public and private worlds, potentially traversing different cultures. Often this material can provide a unique "insider's view" of homes, institutions, neighborhoods, etc. Having not been produced for the particular research for which they later serve, such materials are, at least in this respect, "nonreactive" records, although, of course, they often should be considered as performances of some kind and for some purpose (Pauwels 2009, 1310).

Mimetic forms of the visual recording of city life are not limited to capturing preexisting aspects of material urban culture or the mere documentation of naturally occurring events. They can also involve more experimental set-ups in which respondents are recorded while reacting to unexpected stimuli. The choice between stills (photographs, drawings) and continuous film records depends primarily on the nature of the phenomenon under study (material-cultural snapshots or time frames versus fleeting

phenomena in their context of cause and effect) and on the information one wants to extract for specific research interests.

In order to mitigate or minimize bias (preconceptions and predispositions), several techniques have been developed to introduce a more “random” approach to the data-production process (Gendelman, Dobrowolsky and Aiello 2010, 69). Methodologically, a researcher could, for instance, use a sampling method probability, selectivity, or convenience to select research units that will be studied (houses or households in a neighborhood) from a database or draw a grid on a map to select the sites that will be photographed. Alternatively, one could decide to record every tenth house in a street or all visible billboards along a predetermined route.

Time, space, scale, and movement are often essential aspects of visual data production. Significant changes in the flows of cities can transpire in just a few minutes, hours, or days and span several years or even decades. A diachronic study of an urban environment could concentrate on the repetitive patterns of a number of activities and phenomena that occur during a day from the early morning until late in the evening, or it could focus on changes in the urban environment that span much larger periods of time. Therefore, some visual data-production techniques explicitly focus on sequentially researching social change and cultural expressions as they develop gradually in a particular physical or cultural space.

This study employed the Mimetic Theory in Art as an overarching framework to examine interpersonal, developmental, and ideological perspectives on select icons, sculptures, and images that Communication students are exposed to. Simultaneously, the new millennium sees the developed world functioning as an ocular-centric society (El Moussaoui 2020, 1291). This and other scholars discussed the concept of the intersection of ideas of knowledge and those gained from sight. These advances did not only shape our built environment but also changed our inherited culture. Hence, these perceptions were aided by historically unprecedented access to multiple images that resulted from the highly developed mimetic machinery of cameras and digital technology (Taussig 1993, 20).

Fundamental to the researcher’s approach was understanding mimesis as part of an active process that embraces representation as *re*-presentation, rather than as a process that passively copies its subject in an attempt to reproduce reality. Simply, mimetic process and perceptions establish the relationship between urban spaces and interactions. The overarching objective of using Mimetic theory in this research can be summed up as follows: Art is genuinely a gift to the world. It is what we crave in human experience. Art gives meaning to our lives and helps us to find the meaning and relevance of our environment in as much as art appreciation is an essential part of our culture because it allows us to have a deeper understanding of our emotions. It increases our self-awareness and also allows us to be open to new ideas and experiences. Art, therefore, continues to open our minds and our hearts.

Corbin and Strauss (2008, 13) urge investigators to be more sensitive to conditions, actions, interactions, and consequences of a phenomenon and to order these conditions and consequences into theories. To facilitate this, they offer a useful tool called the “conditional matrix,” which is a set of concentric circles with each level corresponding to a different unit of influence. At the center are actions and interactions such as cognitive participation, collective action, reflexive monitoring, and coherence. The inner rings represent individual and small group influences on these actions, and the outer rings represent international and national effects as indicated in the micro, meso, and macro labels in a given framework (see Figure 1).

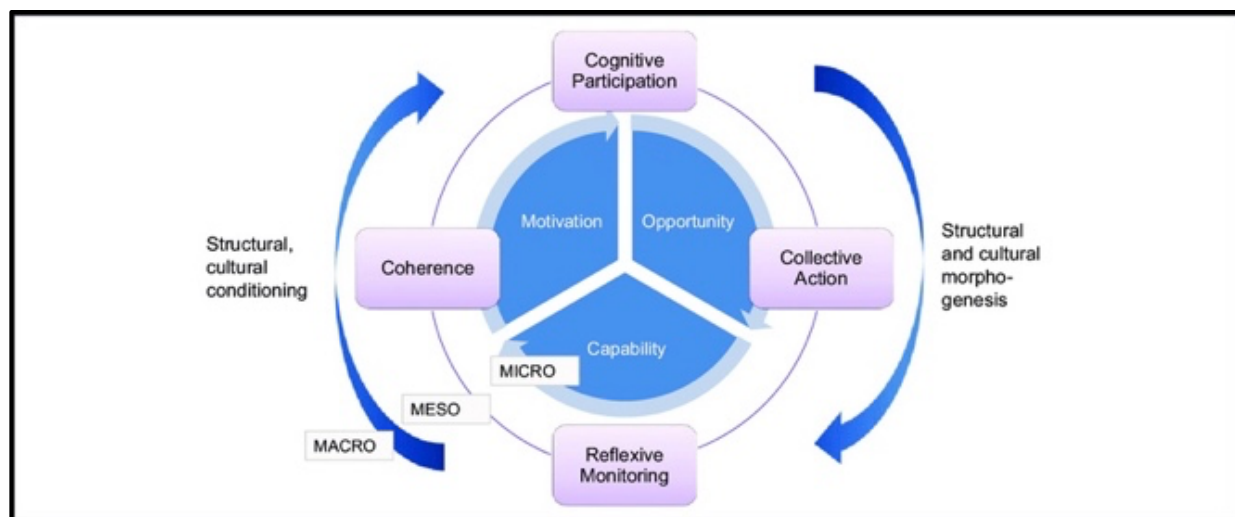


Figure 1: Modified Adaptation of Paradigm Model. Source: Corbin and Strauss (2008).

The study was performed to determine the communication value of learned spaces by setting the following objectives: 1) to determine how communication students perceive pre-selected visual stimuli; 2) to examine their understanding of the meanings in these urban spaces; 3) to evaluate their responses to the visual stimuli in an interview; and 4) to determine how the students connect their interactions to the spaces in their lived experiences.

Figure 2 outlines the procedural flow of determining this communication value of mediated/non-mediated learning spaces on the Manila campus of the Far Eastern University by interviewing 25 Communication students at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The categorization of themes in this study emanated from the characteristics of the phenomena being studied. However, they did not come from already agreed-upon professional definitions and local common-sense constructs but rather from respondents' values, theoretical orientation, and personal experience with the subject matter. A list of codes following an initial scan of the data was created relating to the research topic.

Themes that characterize the experience of informants – researchers are interested in understanding how textual data illuminate questions of importance to social science. Ryan and Bernard's (2023) study on analyzing themes suggested searching interviews for evidence of social conflict, cultural contradictions, informal methods of social control, things that people do in managing impersonal social relationships, methods by which people acquire and maintain achieved and ascribed status, and information about problem-solving. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) examined the setting and context, the perspectives of the informants and their ways of thinking about people, objects, processes, activities, events, and relationships.

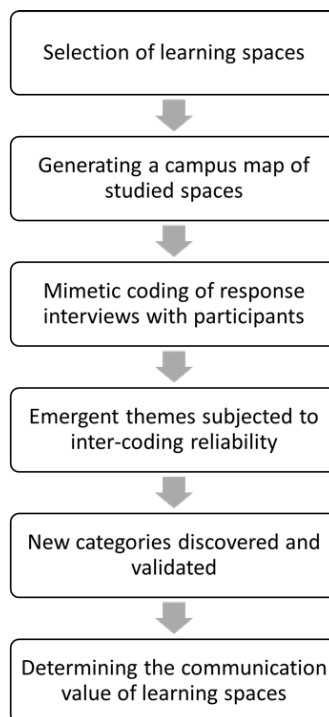


Figure 2. Data Gathering Process Flow. Source: author.

At the heart of qualitative data analysis is the task of discovering themes. By themes, I mean perceptions, experiences, feelings, values, and emotions in the minds of the interviewees. For the Mimetics, an interview with 25 students of the Communication discipline viewed the pre-selected visual data. Their responses were transcribed and subjected to mimetic analysis. Then, the results were further validated using inter-rater reliability tools on the transcribed data, categories, and themes. The approach used by the researcher in the inter-rater reliability was to select three faculty members to revalidate the categorized themes from the results of subjecting the transcribed interviews to in-vivo analysis. In-vivo coding is a form of qualitative analysis that places emphasis on the actual spoken words of the interviewees. It comes from grounded theory research and means that words or terms are so remarkable that they should be taken as codes. After this, the rater's scores were averaged among the interrater's faculty ratings.

Data-driven coding (inductive inference) of the pre-selected visuals was abstracted from highlights of the interview process. Using the respondents' exact words or verbatim coding (Saldaña 2016, 177-178) allowed the researcher to stay close to the data. A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. The data can consist of interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journals, documents, open-ended survey responses, drawings, artefacts, photographs, video, Internet sites, e-mail correspondence, as well as academic and fictional literature. The portion of data coded during the first cycle of coding processes can range in size from a single word to a full paragraph, an entire page of text or a stream of moving images. In the second cycle of coding processes, the portions coded can be the exact same units, longer passages of text, analytic memos about the data, and even a reconfiguration of the codes.

In the present study, data triangulation was employed as a technique to analyze the results of the same study using different methods of data collection. In this study, the transcribed data collected was triangulated with interviews and field notes from observations during the interview and so-called memoing as a key technique in qualitative research where insights are documented in the process. These three data sets were used for three main purposes: to enhance validity, create an in-depth picture of a research problem, and interrogate different ways of understanding a research problem. Most often, triangulation validated research findings by checking with the inter-raters on their different observations of the same phenomenon that produced the same results. It was also used to interrogate inconsistencies and data that were not expected to align. The methodological framework adopted and modified by Corbin and Strauss (2008) determined the degree of overlap between methods as conceptualized.

Data convergence indicated there was a strong degree of overlap and accuracy between the data sets collected by using different methods. Complementarity also built a richer picture of the research results by allowing the results from different methods to inform each other.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using the campus map as a legend, the images of Figures 3 to 6 were shown to the participants. Excerpts of their narrative accounts are presented below.

The Manila campus of the Far Eastern University depicts the landscape of learning spaces amidst lush greenery spawning four hectares. The campus is noted for a number of historical art Deco buildings, preserved from the first half of the 20th century (see Figure 3).

Figure 4 of the University Library and the Food court depicts a collaborative active space for public thinking space as well as that of the pavilion. It is a representative image of a traditional learning space. The aesthetics show a collaborative space with movable furniture and dynamic, untraditional settings in multiple modes for visible collaborations.



Figure 3: Far Eastern University logo. Source: University website.



Figure 4: Far Eastern University Library. Source: University website.



Figure 5: Far Eastern University Food Court. Source: University website.

Figure 5 shows that the food court created an interactive learning space that enhanced connectivity and collaboration. The respondents' account of how this collaborative space was also a public thinking space reaffirms the images seen in Figure 2, which perhaps was designed unknowingly as an active learning design to elicit multiple modes of visible collaborations. Again, to many, the food court is perceived as just a space to enjoy meals. However, beyond that, such space could actually provide viewers with a tool for self-expression and group expression where visible learning and thinking could transpire.



Figure 6: Far Eastern University Pavilion. Source: University website.

Figure 6 shows the university pavilion. It was validated as a collaborative, flexible learning space for social interactions and visible learning and thinking. From this visual image, one can glean that the pavilion appeared to be a triple-sized classroom in an open space, with lush greenery providing a soothing environment – the place where small group discussions transpired within and through this space. This communicative space provided a haven for students from all disciplines and undertake various activities, such as practicing, writing, and verbalizing thoughts and feelings.

The highlights of the interview with respondent 3 (R3, an undergraduate student) are presented below:

The University library is a living space for learning. For me, every visit to the library means new knowledge and new learnings. It opens up a whole new dimension of what I have yet to know, serendipitous as I continue my journey as a student. [...] This learning space of the library humbles me as I continue to discover more and more new things, new dimensions and perspectives to the Communication discipline. For me, it is not just a repository of knowledge but a place where East meets West as I explore more journal readings on my thesis topic." (R3 interviewed by author, September 2022)

Respondents 4 (R4, a teaching assistant) stated:

The FEU Food Court is one of my favorite spaces, not only because of the food but the cherished opportunity to connect and collaborate with classmates and friends. It has become a witness to varied emotions experienced by students on their respective journeys. [...] As a teaching assistant and graduate student, this food court has become my arena to observe the dynamics of interactions of various students and even a potential source of ideas for thesis topics. (R4 interviewed by author, September 2022).

Respondent 5 (R5, an undergraduate student) and Respondent 6 (R6, an undergraduate student) found the Pavilion as their favorite open space on the campus. Thus, R5 stated: "I meet up with my friends at the Pavilion often; so for me, it is not just an open space but one that becomes meaningful as we huddle for our student projects or simply use it as a convergence point to gather as a group before we embark on a shoot." (R5 interviewed by author, September 2022). And R6 confirmed: "The pavilion brings to mind happy memories of connecting with new acquaintances and cementing relationships with others." (R6 interviewed by author, September 2022).

From all narrative accounts of the 25 interviewees, categories and themes were created using In-vivo coding and the results of these themes were presented in Table 1. Three themes emerged from the transcripts of interview accounts. These themes are urban expression, lived experiences, and meanings. The general themes alone would not make sense unless an inter-coder reliability tool is used to determine connections to the main themes. Therefore, the second column on the category is the result that emerged by using In-vivo.

Theme	Category	Inter-Coder Reliability
Urban Expression	Lived Emotions	60%
Lived Experiences	Actual	72%
Variable Experiences	Changing	60%
Modality	Hybrid	65%
Meanings	Material Culture	82%
Utility of Meanings	Usage	90%
Interpretations	Human Behavior	87%

Table 1: Themes, Categories, and Inter-coder Reliability. Source: author.

Various categories resulted for each major theme which were all abstracted from the verbatim interviews. For urban expression, only one category emerged, i.e., lived emotions, because the narrative accounts, when grouped and subjected to inter-coder reliability, can all be summed up under one umbrella category.

For lived experiences – the second major theme – three categories emerged. These are actual, changing, and hybrid. They refer to the actual lived experience accounts abstracted from the narrative. Changing refers to the volatile experiences in the FEU learning journey. Volatile means that different interviewees have different perspectives or accounts of their learning journey. Lastly, there is hybrid because the respondents all experienced hybrid online interactions for two years, from 2020 to 2022. Their narrative accounts of these years were rather limited because face-to-face learning only resumed in the first semester of 2022.

Evident in the findings of the study were qualitative elements such as the quality of social interactions with an emphasis on security inside the campus and educational utility or benefit of the space for the learning journey of a student. There is a strong need for creating and maintaining space that enhances connectivity and collaboration as regards the activities of students. Furthermore, wireless sensor networks and mobile devices were parallel constructs that helped induce and enhance engagements within the different spaces. This points to the fact that these spaces had directly contributed to the quality of social interactions.

The learning spaces in the Manila campus of Far Eastern University elicited mixed emotions among the 25 respondents as they recounted their lived journey. It reinforced active learning as defined broadly to include any pedagogical method that involves students actively working on learning tasks and reflecting on their work, apart from watching, listening, and taking notes (Bonwell and Eison 1991).

The highlights of respondent 1 (R1, a teaching assistant) are: “Every time I see a visual of my campus, I feel nostalgic because it brings to mind memories of my journey as a student. Now, as an alumnus, I cherish those lived experiences that have shaped my destiny. Thank you, FEU!” (R1 interviewed by author, September 2022).

Respondent 2 (R2, also a teaching assistant) stated: “I feel fulfilled whenever I see this photo because it reminds me of how my Tamaraw identity enabled me to belong and achieve success in various forms and ways. Of course, there were challenging times, but now I view them as learning experiences in my personal development as a young adult. Soon I will march as a graduate of the Communication program, and already I feel sad leaving this campus I have grown to love.” (R2 interviewed by author, September 2022).

The narratives of Communication students described the affective domains – feelings, emotions, and experiences – stimulated by the image of the university. They associated empowering connectedness with their Tamaraw identity. Their perception of the Manila campus represented an image as a process that reproduced a lived reality, i.e., an intertwined relationship between the mimetic process of the FEU learning journey and its vivid memories resulting from a lived experience. In particular, accounts of

their lived experiences, such as academic activities held in the lush, spacious campus, recalled moments of collaboration and interactions. From the simple fire and earthquake drills all these form part of their lived experiences as students.

The findings from above support the elements of active learning design, as shown in Figure 7. Flexible learning space reduced the sedentary time among tertiary learners because accounts of narratives in the study findings point to a realization that innovative, flexible learning spaces account for improved academic learning outcomes in the thinking process. They reinforce a previous study discussing active learning spaces (Talbert and Anat 2019), with the visual model reflected in Figure 7. While to most visitors, a university library may simply be a repository of cognitive knowledge, the discussants articulated how this traditional space elicited their values, theoretical orientation, and personal experience with the said learning space. Triangulated data reinforced how the library enhanced validity and created a more in-depth picture of interactions as proof that the respondents' perception of the Manila campus was their lived reality.

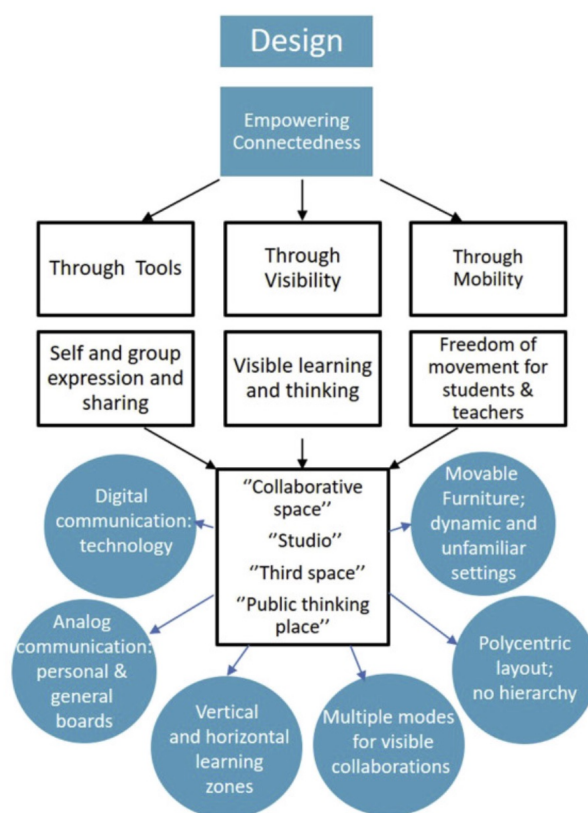


Figure 7: Elements of Active Learning Design. Source: Talbert 1998.

The narrative accounts about the university library revealed the students' feelings about their experiences using the library, not just to study but to read, conduct research, and even interact with other thesis students as they discovered journal studies for their research project.

As educational institutions increasingly seek to implement active learning, concerns about the learning spaces for active learning have naturally arisen. Numerous instructors, school leaders, and architects have explored how learning spaces can be designed differently to support active learning and amplify their positive effects on student learning.

Talbert's 1998 study was a meta-analysis drawn from literature reviews that resulted in the framework given in Figure 7. The goal was to analyze how empowering connectedness is achieved through tools, visibility, and mobility. Self-expression, group expression, and sharing are achieved through tools. Design and flexibility were key contributory elements to the learning processes as articulated by teachers and students. They proved instrumental to the thinking process.

This pavilion is one of the favorite flexible learning spaces of Tamaraws. They have vivid memories not just of academic activities that transpire here but also of collaborative meetings and discussions that extend even to discussions with teachers during conferences and workshops.

Furthermore, the design qualities illustrated in Figure 7 are reinforced by the narratives as several accounts allude to digital communication technology as enhancing the learning journey for Tamaraws. The presence of vertical and horizontal learning zones contributes to the maximized use of space for interactive activities, both curricular and otherwise.

CONCLUSION

The study conducted at Far Eastern University derived themes of urban expression, lived experiences, and meanings. Triangulated data enabled the researcher to support the argument that a systematic conversation on the methodological principles and practices can be undertaken as an attempt to qualitatively measure communicative learning spaces. Triangulation validated the research findings by checking different methods or different observers of the same phenomenon producing the same results. A previous study undertaken by the researcher had alluded to the FEU learning journey, and its results ran parallel to the constructs discovered through this study.

The many promising prospects of visual methods in the study of urban contexts presented a complex communicative constellation. Such methods require the development of scientifically informed visual competencies among researchers, more explicit and integrated methodologies, and general attention to maintaining highly reflexive attitudes throughout the process. The choice of visual imagery, i.e., found images, became critical to the study as this imagery served as a medium for eliciting its purposive communicative content beyond the utility of the space.

Previous literature about the notion of the *city as a medium* and *the city as content* highlights the importance of cities as both producers and products of particular practices, interactions, and narratives. This study was an attempt to present ways as to how the communication value of urban space was investigated using a procedural method validated inter-coder reliability tools and anchored upon the Mimetic Art Theory.

The use of the visual as a data source or as a medium for capturing, processing, and expressing social scientific knowledge about (urban) society continues to challenge current scholarship. It generates particular demands, including specific visual competencies but also unique rewards by creating new opportunities for captivating ways of building and disseminating knowledge. More explicit and transparent methodologies and exemplary visual urban studies may help visual research gradually enter the realm of widely accepted options in the study of the communication value of learning spaces in metropolitan universities in Manila, Philippines.

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