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From likes to public spaces: the impact of social media on gender-based spatial behaviors in urban public spaces

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES: The rapid expansion of social media has introduced a digital layer into the production and experience of urban public spaces, particularly influencing gendered patterns of movement, visibility, and access. This study investigates how social media platforms mediate and reshape gendered behaviors on Ferdowsi Street in Sanandaj, Iran, examining the interaction between physical design, cultural norms, and digital representations in producing spatial inequalities.

METHODS: A mixed-methods approach was employed using a triangulation strategy to ensure validity. Behavioral mapping was conducted to identify spatial behavior patterns. Additionally, semi-structured walk-along interviews were conducted with 46 participants (24 males and 22 females), and thematic analysis was carried out, incorporating both deductive coding based on the Monitoring Cycle of Gender Behavior Differences in Public Space and inductive coding to identify emerging digital-behavioral themes.

FINDINGS: Results show clear gendered spatial segmentation: adolescent and young men predominantly clustered at peripheral, high-visibility nodes, while women concentrated in central and safer segments of the street. Social media played a significant mediating role in producing these patterns. Adolescent boys were highly sensitive to viral, geotagged, and event-driven content, translating online visibility into rapid physical presence. Young women selectively responded to cultural and commercial posts, shaping their spatial use more cautiously. Across all age groups, social media amplified specific nodes along the street, effectively branding certain areas and transforming them into digitally driven hubs of activity. These patterns reflect a hybrid physical-digital public space in which digital representations contribute to the reproduction of gender norms and influence the distribution of agency, comfort, and access.

CONCLUSION: The study concludes that spatial behaviors in contemporary urban environments cannot be understood solely through physical design or socio-cultural norms; digital representations now function as an active component in the production of space. Social media platforms mediate gendered access and reinforce spatial inequalities by commercializing visibility and shaping collective perceptions of safety, desirability, and social value. As a result, designing inclusive and gender-sensitive public spaces requires coordinated interventions in both the physical environment and the digital sphere.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, social media platforms have rapidly expanded, becoming interactive spaces that shape social behavior and public life. Social media, especially social networking sites (SNSs), is a response to the challenges of an ever-evolving and interconnected world - a world that requires increased learning and collaboration to solve today's complex problems (Coman & Grigore, 2018). The influence of these networks on all aspects of daily life and the modern world is now undeniable (Allcott et al., 2020), and they have become an integral part of our lives (Akram and Kumar, 2017). Social media platforms are fast, accessible, and affordable, so a wide range of people can use them. Communication strategies have taken a new form in this new interactive space, and the management of this space, including words, gestures, looks, expressions, trends, and biases, can influence decisions and social behaviors (Hermosilla et al., 2018). Beyond their digital domain, social media increasingly intervene in the production, perception, and everyday use of urban public spaces. Experiences such as the 15M movement in Spain, the Arab Spring, and Occupy Wall Street demonstrate that social media can act as a catalyst, creating unprecedented mechanisms for collective action in urban public spaces and leading to a rethinking of the role of these spaces in the community-building process (de Vicente, 2021). However, these transformations do not affect all social groups equally and often exhibit distinct patterns, profoundly influenced by gender (Yuan, Wei, and Lu, 2018). Many activities once confined to urban public spaces, such as social interaction and leisure, are increasingly facilitated through virtual platforms. These include shopping (Yu et al., 2018) and socializing (Hafez and Wang, 2018), as well as non-present virtual pursuits (Romm-Livermore, 2012). Moreover, the undeniable role of social networks in shaping social norms and biases (Eismann et al., 2018; Fischer and Reuber, 2011; Derek Ruths and Juergen Pfeffer, 2014) has become evident in contemporary life. Social media has diverse impacts on individuals (Hafez and Wang, 2018), producing both positive and negative social and cognitive effects. Interactions on these platforms can stimulate social engagement and shape individual behavior (Bayer et al., 2020; Kaya & Alhajj, 2019). Even a simple post on social media can have a significant impact on individuals, especially if it elicits emotional responses from the audience

(Eismann et al., 2018). Social media act as mediators between private and public spaces, creating dynamic interactions that continuously reshape urban public life (Van Dijck and Poell, 2015). Social networks are increasingly conceptualized as hybrid public spaces, closely interconnected with physical public spaces through a fusion of human interaction, media platforms, and communication technologies. Social media is transforming public space in complex ways. This condition reflects a socio-spatial transition in which digital and non-digital realms increasingly overlap (Tierney, 2013). Such hybridization suggests that digitally shaped perceptions and norms may translate into observable behavioral patterns in physical public spaces. This raises the question of whether such digitally shaped cognitive differences affect behavioral patterns in physical public spaces and how these effects differ across gender groups. Social media platforms influence behavioral patterns in public spaces and can trigger different types of social behaviors, both positive and negative (Allcott et al., 2020). From the available sources, it can be inferred that social media can influence the perception, design, and use of public spaces, sometimes blurring the lines between virtual and physical environments. Although some studies have recently been conducted using social media data (Bernabeu-Bautista et al., 2023; Yang and Liu, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2019), It appears that less attention has been paid in the discourse of social media studies to the impact on actual urban spaces and the behavior of individuals in those spaces, as well as how this mediating force affects social biases and behaviors in those real spaces. As the boundaries between the digital and physical worlds become increasingly blurred, understanding this relationship is critical to grasping the evolving landscape of public space. However, how these digitally mediated influences operate within non-Western socio-cultural contexts, particularly in relation to gendered spatial behavior, remains largely underexplored. Since its inauguration in 2020, Ferdowsi Pedestrian Street has become one of the most active public spaces in Sanandaj, Iran. As a major pedestrian corridor connecting central commercial areas and traditional markets, the street has developed into a focal point of everyday urban life and, simultaneously, one of the most frequently represented spaces on social media platforms through geotagged posts and online visibility. This

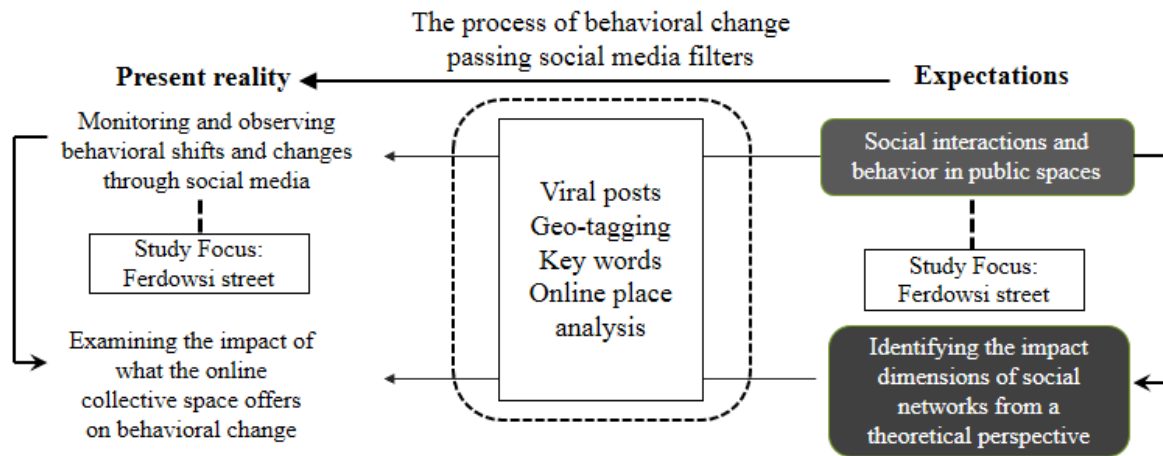


Fig. 1: The logical development of the study

dual physical-digital presence makes Ferdowsi Street an appropriate case for examining how social media intervenes in real spatial behaviors. Investigating these dynamics within the socio-cultural context of Iran, where norms of gendered visibility and public presence differ significantly from Western settings, offers a critical and underexplored perspective on digitally mediated public space. The main objective of this study is to explore how social media shapes gender-based behavioral patterns in urban public spaces, with particular attention to Ferdowsi Pedestrian Street. Specifically, the study seeks to identify gendered differences in spatial presence, public interaction, and perceived positive and negative impacts of social media on everyday urban life. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-method approach based on triangulation, combining behavioral mapping, systematic observation, and walk-along interviews over three months. The collected qualitative data were thematically analyzed to reveal the complex interplay between digital representation and physical behavior in everyday public life (Fig. 1).

Social media as a driver of behavioral change in public spaces

The topic of reciprocal influence between social media and human behavior has attracted considerable attention from researchers over the past two decades (Allcott et al., 2020; Bayer et al., 2020; Carrier, 2018; Fischer and Reuber, 2011; Huang et al., 2021; Kaya and Bicen, 2016; Mano, 2014; Meiselwitz, 2018; Pan et al., 2017; Derek Ruths and Jürgen Pfeffer, 2014;

Scopelliti et al., 2021; Swingle, 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2012; Van Dijck and Poell, 2015). Undoubtedly, the increasing prevalence of virtual social media networks and their impact on human behavior represent one of the empirical challenges of contemporary cities (Centola, 2013). However, limited research has examined how these digital interactions shape behavior in urban public spaces within non-Western contexts such as Iran. This section of the research focuses on the latest theoretical perspectives and empirical studies that examine the intersection of social media and public behavior. The goal is to clarify the impact of social media on behavior change in public spaces and provide a theoretical foundation for our study in Ferdowsi Street in Sanandaj. Hiraishi et al., (2018) show that information shared on social media can influence pedestrian behavior in urban areas, guiding movement and attention. Despite all the concerns and criticisms expressed about social networks (Beckmann et al., 2018; Meinert et al., 2018). These networks have driven large-scale social movements and influenced emotional and behavioral responses on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Mano, 2014; Carrier, 2018; Swingle, 2016; Kaya & Alhaji, 2019). Tierney (2013) introduces social networks as a new public space, emphasizing their interconnectedness with physical public space and their lack of competition with each other. He argues that social media platforms promote new social, cultural, and political agendas and defines social media as “counterpublics” that serve as alternatives for marginalized populations to express their collective

opinions and interests that are often overlooked. Nonetheless, the divisions and boundaries between digital and non-digital public spaces are becoming less obvious, creating complex interactions across time and space. Preliminary observations in Iranian urban contexts suggest that similar digital-physical interplay may shape local social behaviors. Social networks have dual effects on communities, shaping young people's social behavior while also presenting risks such as cyberbullying and reputational harm. These platforms provide opportunities for communication, learning, and professional networking, but can simultaneously facilitate negative outcomes (Akram and Kumar, 2017). Individuals actively choose communication channels based on goals and motivations, with social media complementing, rather than replacing, face-to-face interactions. Online engagement allows for impression management, social coordination, and regulation of proximity and emotions, shaping the way people interact in everyday life (Carrier, 2018). Virtual spaces have become primary tools for exploring social relationships, influencing how social boundaries and norms are learned, especially among youth (Swingle, 2016). Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrates that social networks can redefine social norms and behavior in public spaces, including hygiene practices, spatial distancing, and adherence to collective rules (Scopelliti et al., 2021; Fischer and Reuber, 2011). Social media platforms reshape public spaces within the framework of a networked society, influenced by the commercial mechanisms of communication. The analysis by Van Dijck and Poell (2015), including the shift of social networks toward "light news" in Sweden, demonstrates how platform-based curation can distort public interests and reshape civic engagement. Based on this perspective, Bayer et al. (Bayer et al., 2020) conceptualize social media as socio-technical ecosystems composed of four pairs of key elements and features: profiles and self-presentation, networks and social mobilization, streams and social comparison, and messaging and social connectedness. By providing new ways to discover, observe, and meaningfully interact with others across time and space, social media extend possibilities for interpersonal engagement, yet also create psychological vulnerabilities such as loneliness or heightened comparison pressures. Their notion of virtual streams mirrors dynamics like physical

presence in an urban square, where evaluative signals such as likes or comments become quantified, measurable cues that shape social comparisons over time. Mass media can serve as a valuable resource for studying behavioral change on a large scale. Online personal and social data constitute a rich source of information for studying human behavior; however, many predictions and analyses conducted in the digital space may present a distorted representation of the real world, as biases—particularly in user populations—exist across all social platforms, which can influence individual behavior (Ruths and Pfeffer, 2014). A study investigating the effects of social media on student behavior yielded interesting results, indicating that students are aware of protecting their social identity and that social media fulfills their need for respect, which positively impacts their social and mental health (Kaya and Bicen, 2016). Therefore, these networks have significant potential to influence behavior and modes of interaction in urban public spaces (Humphreys, 2010). Research has also shown that these networks can influence different individuals' perceptions of various urban spaces through images of those spaces created in the digital realm. For example, the frequency of mentions of a location's name on Twitter was significantly associated with its perceived beauty and role in the daily life of the local community. Similarly, the frequency of mentions of registered locations on Instagram (Instagrammability _ was linked to the perception of a place as an architectural landmark and tourist attraction. Furthermore, the frequency of references to a location on Twitter, Twitterability, correlated with the perception of its beauty and its connection to the daily lives of communities (Huang et al., 2021). While the existing theoretical literature offers valuable insights into the influential role of social media in shaping collective movements and behaviors of individuals, as well as its intricacies in guiding people's decisions and choices, a theoretical framework has been developed at this stage through the integration of these theoretical perspectives and empirical research to understand the opportunities and threats of social networks in relation to public behavior in urban spaces (Fig. 2). The virtual space should not be viewed as a flat and equal realm; rather, much like the physical world, it is fragmented by social stratification, wealth, education, and gender (Faris and Rahimi, 2015). Although a literature review indicates that

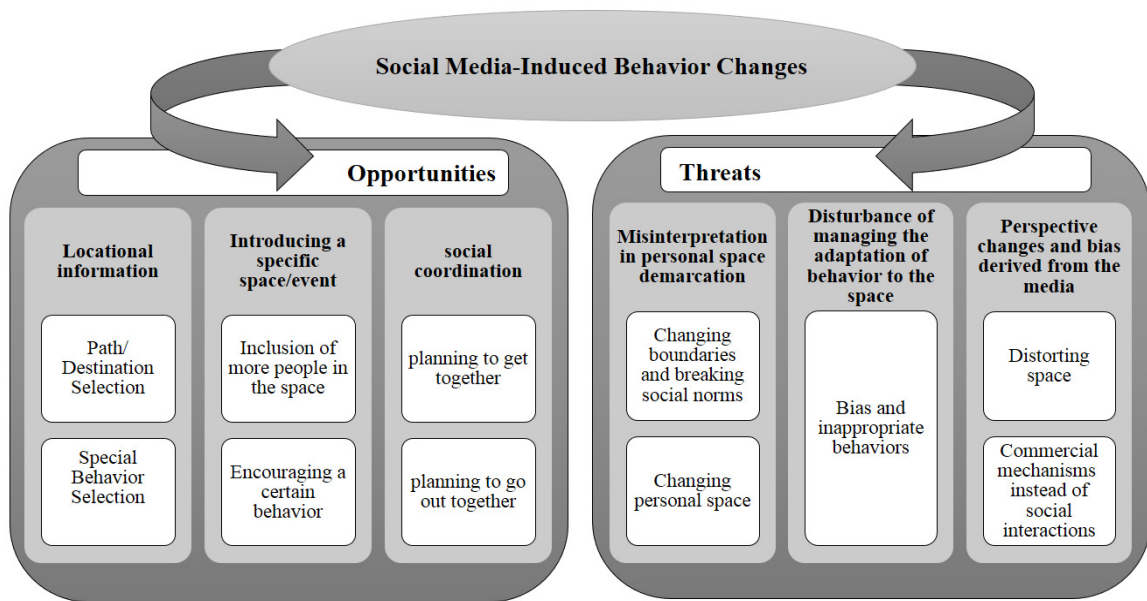


Fig. 2: A framework of how social media shapes public behavior.

social networks can influence emotional responses, identity construction, mobilization, and place perception across various contexts, the mechanisms through which online representations, norms, and biases shape everyday spatial practices have not been sufficiently theorized or empirically examined. This conceptual gap is particularly evident in Middle Eastern countries, where socio-cultural norms, gender visibility, and patterns of public presence differ significantly from those in Western urban settings—yet are largely absent in existing research on social media and urban space. Therefore, the aim of proposing this framework in the present study is to provide a basis for assessing the influence of social networks on individuals' spatial behavior in Iran's urban public spaces, with a focus on the city of Sanandaj. This framework will be developed and subsequently evaluated and analyzed through walk-along interviews with individuals and the creation of behavioral maps in later stages of the research.

Gender and urban public space as a heterogeneous behavioral context

Many studies have recognized gender differences in cities and highlighted gender inequalities in urban spaces (Day, 1999; Jalalkamali and Doratli, 2022; Jo *et al.*, 2020; Listerborn, 2020; Peake, 2020; Polko and

Kimic, 2022; Sági, 2022; Wu *et al.*, 2022). While we are familiar with the phenomenon of urban spaces being highly segregated by income, social class, and race, urban spaces are not consciously segregated by gender. Indeed, the aim has always been to make these spaces inclusive. But social norms and traditional definitions based on discussions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' also inevitably have a profound impact on the urban experience and how urban spaces can be used, sometimes leading to inequalities in use that predominantly favor male dominance. Statements such as "He is really masculine" (strong, silent, authoritarian) or "She is a desirable girl" (beautiful, talkative, caring) (Jarvis *et al.*, 2009) indicate that there are significant differences between traditional and modern areas in terms of behavioral restrictions for women in public spaces (Jalalkamali & Doratli, 2022). In addition to social and cultural norms, the physical structure of public space itself influences the types and patterns of observable behavior, and human behavior and experiences in public space can be influenced by the physical and ecological characteristics of the built environment (Rasoulpour *et al.*, 2019). In addition, a high-quality urban environment leads to a greater diversity of behavioral patterns and cognitive relationships (Ahmed and Neima, 2020). Researchers believe that social behavior in public spaces tends to

be concentrated in centrally located and highly symbolic public places, and despite the increasing popularity of virtual public spaces, physical public spaces continue to provide a vibrant environment for public and private behavior (Liao et al., 2012). On the other hand, social networks have the power to change the traditional ways people communicate in public spaces (Nguyen et al., 2019). In relation to the urban environment, we consistently deal with a spectrum of possibilities. This is because the environment provides a wide range of opportunities for decision-making; environmental conditions make certain decisions and behaviors (and consequently their outcomes) more probable than others for individuals (Tigran et al., 2020). For example, excessive traffic congestion affects people's perception of environmental safety (Mohamed and Stanek, 2019). Individuals can shape their environment in ways that enable various behaviors within urban spaces. It seems that in all of the above cases, the moderating role of social media (Pan et al., 2017) in studying behavior change and moderating and reinforcing certain behaviors and activities in public spaces is worth exploring and evaluating. Accordingly, this research investigates how the influences of social media intersect with gender-specific experiences of public space and how these dynamics manifest in the study area.

Regional insights into public behavior and gendered urban experiences

Recent studies from Iran and neighboring countries provide evidence on how behavioral patterns in urban public spaces are shaped by gender (Haghighi et al., 2021; Jalalkamali and Doratli, 2022), cultural norms (Rafatjah, 2012), and socio-political conditions (Askarizad, He and Dastoum, 2025). However, research directly examining the interplay between social media and behavior in public spaces within this region remains limited. The existing theoretical literature emphasizes the differences and gender inequalities in the use of and access to urban public spaces (Hashemi, Hosseini and Moradi, 2021), as well as issues such as safety (Avar and Karimi, 2025), social surveillance (Arjmand, 2016), social expectations, and the unequal experiences women have in public space (Mohammadpour and Abbaszadeh, 2024). Parallel studies from countries with socio-cultural structures similar to Iran, such as Turkey, similarly emphasize the influence of social norms, gender ste-

reotypes, and the socio-spatial construction of gender in the city on women's access to and mobility within urban spaces, as well as the gendered imbalance in the use of these spaces (e.g., Beyazit et al., 2023; Cag and Ozkazanc, 2025; Kaya, 2023; Yazici, 2019). Similar to global trends, Iran has also witnessed a daily increase in users across various social networks. The influence and often indirect, yet observable, roles these platforms play in information dissemination and collective movements—as well as in shaping urban mobility and public perception—alongside their complex impact on the offline world, have been briefly discussed (e.g., Faris and Rahimi, 2015; Khiabany, 2015). However, studies have seldom considered behavioral changes in urban public spaces as a direct or indirect result of online interactions, particularly regarding the gendered consequences of social media content associated with specific urban locations. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap by integrating the proposed theoretical framework with a targeted empirical examination of a Middle Eastern context, specifically investigating the direct influence of location-related posts on social networks on gender-based behaviors in the public spaces of Sanandaj.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Survey design and data collection

In this study, a combined method is used to identify gender-specific behavioral patterns in the selected public space, to understand the type of active users in each space, and to improve the validity of the research findings through the triangulation method (Bans-Akutey and Tiimub, 2021), as well as to gain deeper insights and a better understanding of the phenomenon. In the first phase, the behavioral mapping technique is used to observe behaviors and identify recurring patterns. Based on environmental observations on five different days over three months, the highest number of individuals present in the space during the busiest hour, i.e., just before sunset, will be determined. The density measurements were carried out from March 11, 2023, to May 5, 2023. The highest concentration points, perching areas, and movement paths of individuals were recorded and displayed in behavioral maps using AutoCAD and GIS software. In the second phase, the walk-along interview technique is used for an in-depth investigation of the nature of individuals and groups in the selected public space. This technique is preferred

Table 1: The total number of participants in the walk-along interviews conducted in Ferdowsi, categorized by age and gender.

Gender of space users	50 and above	30 -49	20 -30	10 - 20	3 -10	Walk-along groups	Duration of companionship
	Elderly	Middle-aged	Young	adolescent	Child		
Male	4	10	7	24	1	28	1064 Minutes
Female	3	10	5	2	1		
Total	7	20	12	26	2		
Total of 66 individuals							

for capturing behavioral outcomes due to its dynamic question-and-answer format (Barron *et al.*, 2021; Skov *et al.*, 2019). To ensure diversity, individuals of all ages, both genders, and different social groups were relatively evenly represented in the selection process. To achieve repetitive and saturated research results, walk-along interviews were conducted with different groups. In total, 66 people participated in Ferdowsi Street in winter and spring 2023, forming 28 different groups. For example, there were groups consisting of young people, children, and older people (Table 1). Participants for the walk-along interviews were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring representation across gender, age range, and general social background (including students, various socio-economic groups, families, youth groups, and older visitors). The accompanying duration for each group varied, ranging from a minimum of 10 minutes to a maximum of 1 hour and 15 minutes, depending on the willingness of participants and the saturation of responses for each thematic component. These accompanying sessions continued until sufficient answers were obtained for the research components, varying for each group. In the final phase, to conduct thematic analysis, the walk-along interview transcripts for each group were converted into text files for use in NVIVO software. The coding process followed a hybrid deductive-inductive strategy: First, deductive codes were derived from the adapted behavioral observation framework (which will be explained in detail in the following section) (Gehl and Svarre, 2013; Whyte, 1980). Subsequently, inductive codes emerged from recurring themes in the participants' narratives. Additionally, the correlation between certain significant components was discussed and examined and was reported in the findings of the research.

Monitoring cycle for analyzing social media-induced behavior changes in Ferdowsi Street

In examining walk-along interviews, this study adopts a behavior surveillance cycle (Fig. 3) derived from a combination of behavior typologies in urban space by Gehl and Svarre (Gehl and Svarre, 2013) previously introduced by Whyte (1980), with slight modifications and the addition of indicators on the manner of behavior in space and the influential factors of virtual space on behavior. Ultimately, it uses behavioral map analysis. In this cycle, each indicator is used to investigate in walk-along interviews and includes the following aspects:

- (1) Behavioral Identification in Urban Space, including: Who? (identifying space user groups, gender, and specific groups), What? (necessary, optional, and mandatory activities in the space), How? (the manner of behavior in space and personal spaces), When? (timing and duration of activities), and where? (tracking specific behavior points and behavioral locations).
- (2) Identification of social media contributions regarding the selected public space, including popular posts on the most widely used social networks in the city, geo-tagging and specific points mentioned on social media platforms, and keywords related to Ferdowsi Street, such as buildings, surroundings, and specific events in the space.
- (3) Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis and behavior mapping, including: spatial distribution of users by gender and age during peak hours, density analysis, and identification of high-activity behavioral nodes.

Ferdowsi Street: Setting the scene

Ferdowsi Street in Sanandaj plays a crucial role in the center of the city due to its historical and social importance to the central fabric of the city (Fig. 4), its commercial and arterial centrality between the old and new squares of the city (Enghelab and Azadi squares), and its high pedestrian traffic (Rezaee

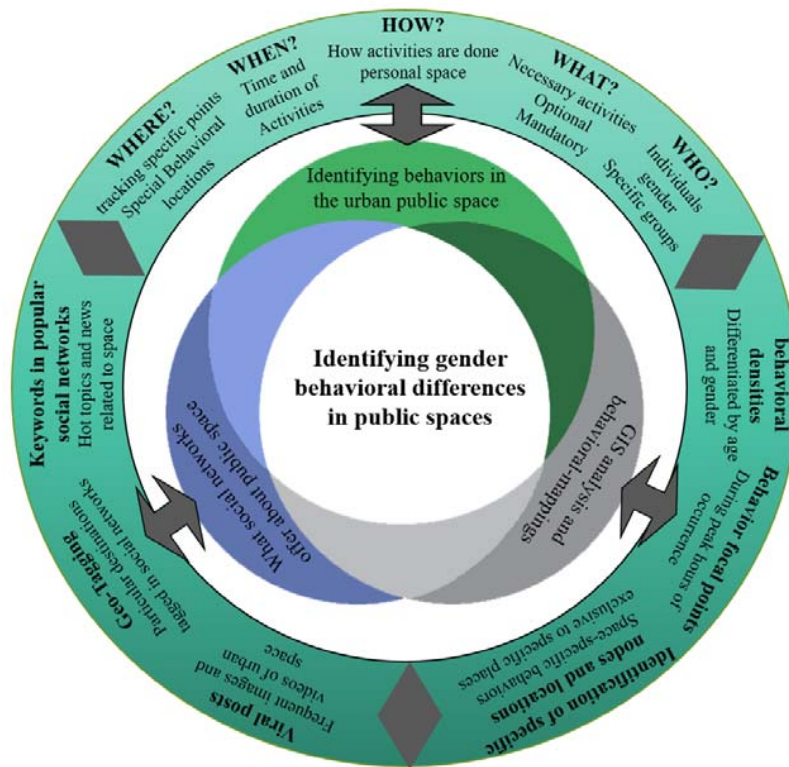


Fig. 3: Monitoring cycle of gender behavior differences in public space based on the social media effects

and Nasiri Ardali, 2019). In 2020, this street was redesigned and transformed into a pedestrian zone. The new design banned car traffic while formalizing the street vendors, who previously operated informally, and acknowledging their presence in this space. This street, which is an important access to the main centers of the city, the historic market, and the commercial districts, is always very busy. Due to the presence of street vendors, the movement and vibrancy of the square continue until late in the evening (around 22:30) (Fig. 5). Its continuous social presence and symbolic centrality make it an ideal site for examining gendered patterns of public behavior.

Ethical considerations

In conducting this research, ethical considerations were given paramount importance to ensure a responsible and respectful examination of gender-specific behavioral differences. Accordingly, the ethical frameworks and standards of the *Helsinki Declaration* were followed. In line with this declaration, informed

consent was obtained, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and the general welfare of participants was safeguarded throughout all interviews and data collection processes. Furthermore, measures were taken to protect the privacy of participants, ensuring that all information obtained during the study remained confidential and was used exclusively for this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gendered behaviors and social media influence in Ferdowsi Street

Overview of thematic analysis

Walk-along interviews were analyzed using NVivo with both deductive coding based on the “Monitoring Cycle of Gender Behavior Differences in Public Space” and inductive coding for emerging themes. A total of 28 groups (66 participants) of diverse ages, genders, and social backgrounds were included to ensure representativeness (Table 2). Coding focused on five key indicators: Who, What, How, When, and Where, as well as the influence of social media on behaviors.



Fig. 4: Geographic location of the study area, Ferdowsi Street in Sanandaj, Iran.



Fig. 5: A Glimpse into Daily Life and Interactions on Ferdowsi Street, Sanandaj

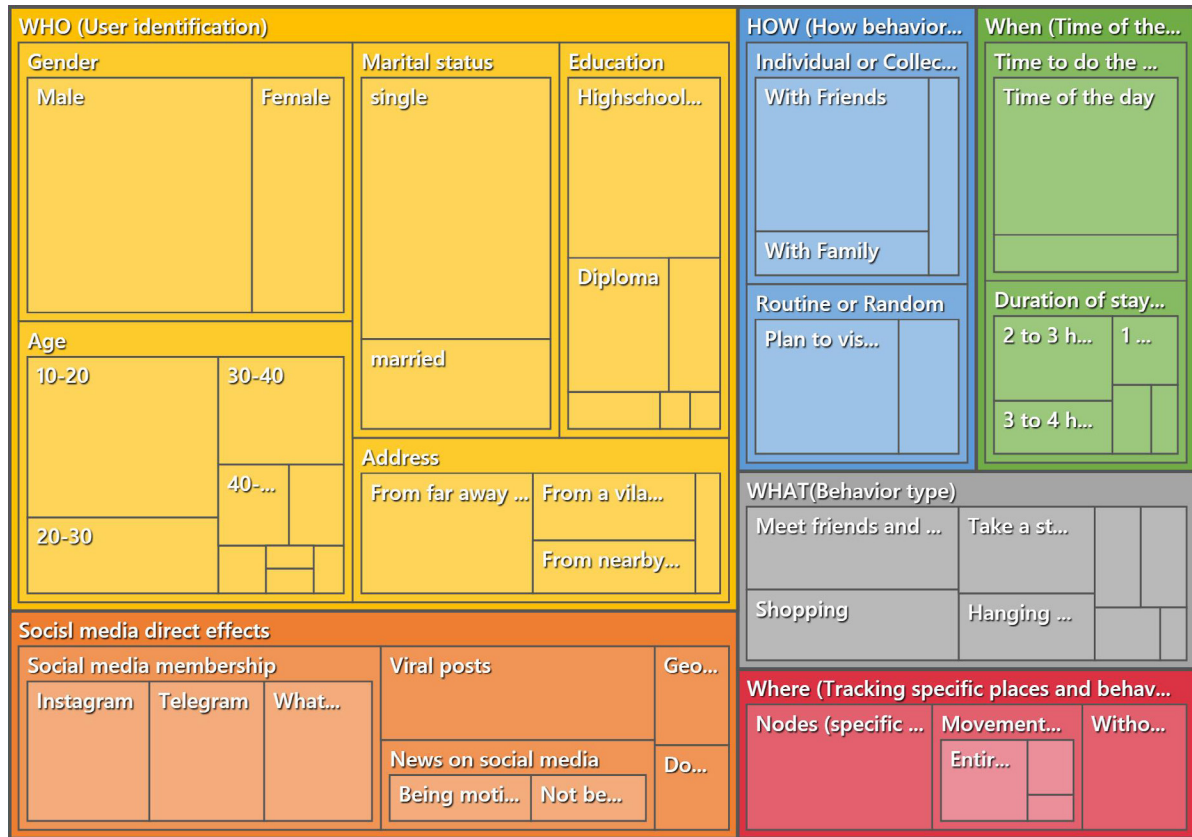


Fig. 6: Thematic Hierarchy of User Behaviors on Ferdowsi Street (Thematic Coding Results).

Additionally, the chord diagram (Fig. 7) illustrates the correlation between demographic groups and engagement with location-based viral posts on social media. The strongest interactions belong to two clusters: young women (20–30) and adolescent boys (10–20), revealing a gendered polarization in social-media-driven presence.

Spatial distribution of gendered behavior

Behavior mapping and GIS analysis show a clear gendered spatial pattern (Fig. 8). Women, especially younger women, concentrate in the central part of Ferdowsi Street, whereas men dominate peripheral nodes such as the Naser-Khosrow entrance and the Namaki Bus Station. Young men more frequently occupy one linear movement corridor leading to the BaanBashgah market, indicating a strong directional pattern in male mobility. The spatial segregation reflects gendered comfort zones and perceived safety, revealing masculine clustering in transitional or high-visibility nodes and more distributed female

presence along commercial fronts. The density maps also revealed that social media exposure amplifies these patterns: locations frequently tagged or advertised online drew adolescents and young adults, creating digitally mediated nodes of activity.

Key behavioral patterns

The analysis reveals key user demographics and behavioral patterns for Ferdowsi Street (Table 2). A significant portion of users are young males who often visit with friends, primarily for socializing. Furthermore, social media plays a substantial role in attracting visitors and influencing their movements within the space. The street functions as a citywide informal social hub, attracting male youth and facilitating peer-group clustering. Women's use remains more functional and spatially cautious.

Social media influenced patterns

A gendered pattern of social media influence on spatial behavior was observed. Teenage boys demon-

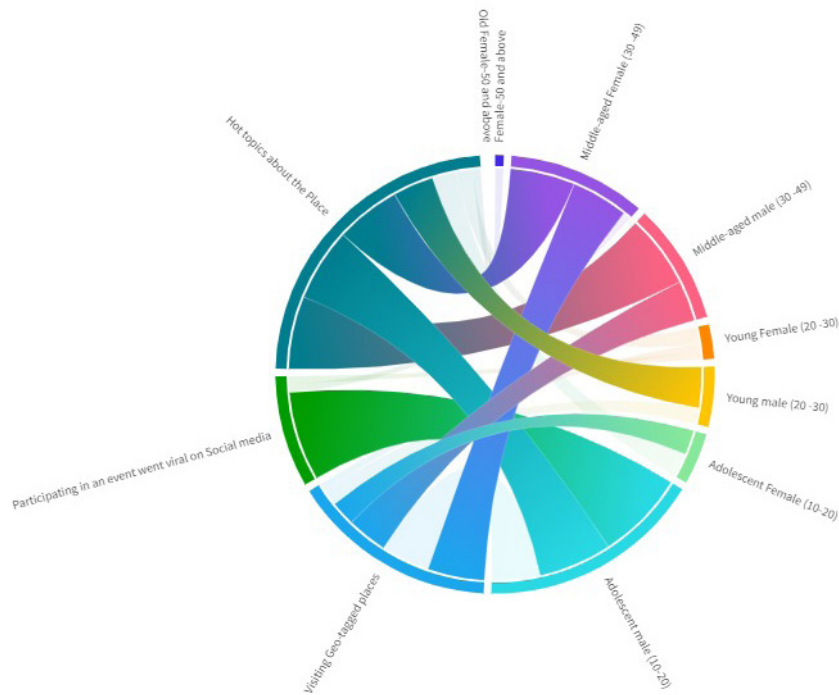


Fig. 7: Correlation between demographic groups and location-oriented social media posts, 2024 (Walk-along interviews).

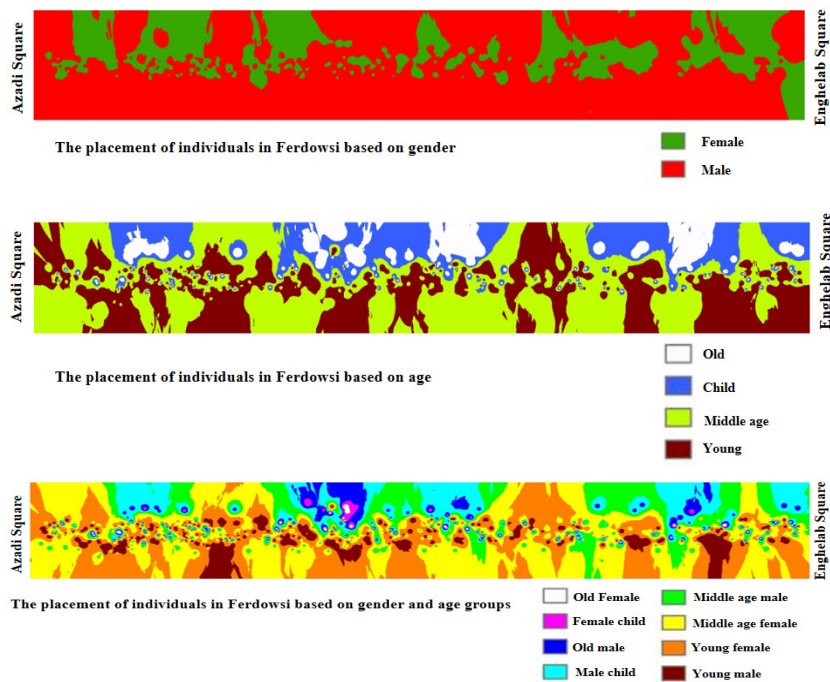


Fig. 8: Spatial distribution of gender and age groups along Ferdowsi Street, based on behavior mapping, 2024.

Table 2: Summary of key behavioral patterns on Ferdowsi Street

Behavioral Indicator	Dominant Finding	Notable Gender Trend
WHO (Users)	• 34% are adolescent/young males (15-25). • 36% have a high school education or are students. • 31% come from distant city neighborhoods; 18% commute from suburbs/villages 2-3 times/week.	High male overrepresentation
HOW (Behavior & Activities)	• 41% of visits are with friends; 12% are with family. • 31% coordinate visits in advance for planned activities (e.g., walking, shopping). • 13% of visits are unplanned (e.g., passersby, aimless wandering).	Strong male clustering in peer groups
WHAT (Activity Type)	• 22% meet friends (average 2-3 hours). • 13% shop (in three distinct patterns). • Other activities: aimless wandering (15%), socializing/hanging out (12%), business (6%), people-watching (6%).	Women engage more in shopping/errands; men in hanging out
WHEN (Timing & Duration)	• 51% are frequent users (daily or 2+ days/week). • Preferred time: evening/sunset (34%), then morning (10%). • Longest stays (2-4 hours) are common among young boys and those from distant areas.	Teenage boys show the longest presence
WHERE (Location)	• Highest concentration (31%) of young boys/adolescents at specific hangout spots. • Elderly men (14.4%) and middle-aged women (4.7%) use market entrances. • 18% occupy space without a specific purpose; most (64%) traverse the entire street.	Women favor commercial areas and mid-street
SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE	• Top platforms: Instagram (28.8%), Telegram (27.3%), WhatsApp (25.8%). • 55% of social media users report that posts changed their movement/destination. • Teenage boys are most influenced by viral/location-tagged posts (56.7% of the affected group). • Young women are uniquely influenced by cultural event posts (39%). • Middle-aged users are influenced differently: men by news, women by commercial ads.	Social media influences men (teen and middle-aged) through trends, news, and peer-based content, while it influences women (young and middle-aged) through experiential, cultural, and commercial content.



Fig. 9: Word cloud generated from walk-along interviews.

strated the strongest behavioral response, particularly to Instagram advertising, geotagged posts, and viral content. Notably, 41% of this group were directly influenced by or aware of protest-related posts during September–October 2022, indicating a heightened sensitivity to event-driven content. In contrast, young women were primarily influenced by posts concerning cultural events, while middle-aged users exhibited divergent motivators: men responded mostly to news content, and women to commercial posts. Overall, the influence of these platforms on movement was significant, with 55% of social media users reporting that they had altered their route or destination based on location-triggered content. A clear gendered digital-to-physical transfer is evident. Adolescent boys translate online content into spatial presence more rapidly, while women respond selectively to specific content types such as cultural or commercial posts. The word cloud (Fig. 9) visualizes prominent interview terms such as friends, evenings, Instagram, and

hanging out, reflecting the social nature of the street and the centrality of peer-group presence.

Gendered spatial dynamics and digital mediation

The findings of this study reveal that Ferdowsi Street operates as a heterogeneous behavioral context in which physical design, cultural norms, and digital infrastructures jointly shape gendered patterns of presence. Social media functions as a mediator of gendered access, enhancing or constraining who moves where, when, and for what purpose. The findings indicated the congregation of adolescent boys at entry/marginal points; the movement and lingering of women in the central section; friendly group behaviors; and the immediate influence of location-based posts on adolescents' destinations. Lefebvre's concept of the "social production of space" emphasizes that space is not merely a backdrop for human activity but an active element in shaping social relations (Pradeep, Jisha, Paul, and Benziker,

2024). Space is produced by social relations; people's material behaviors (movement, stopping, direction of movement) are symbolic of social structure. When adolescents cluster in marginal hubs, this everyday practice reveals a picture of social power distribution and agency. Social networks perform the work of distributing spatial information (geotags, viral posts), and this information is rapidly translated into "where I should go." Thus, spatial practice transforms: digitally prominent locations become physical hubs. On Ferdowsi Street, adolescent and young men are directly influenced by location-based posts and viral content, whereas young women primarily respond to cultural or advertising-related content. Given that social networks can influence individual behavior in urban space—even reinforcing or altering informal social constraints and norms (Carrier, 2018; Swingle, 2016; Van Dijck and Poell, 2015)—social media thus plays a mediating or reinforcing role in gendered access to space. The impact of location-based posts on young and adolescent boys demonstrates that digital visibility directly shapes patterns of movement and pause in space. Social media streams and networks guide behavior, with the digital environment functioning as a "social space" that enables social comparison and valuation (Bayer et al., 2020). Both physical and digital spaces simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of gender norms and roles, and the commodification of public space through social networks becomes tangible. Commercial posts and digital advertisements highlight specific sections of Ferdowsi Street; middle-aged individuals, in particular, respond to advertising-related posts; parts of the street effectively become branded. In the digital age, corporations, business pages, and algorithms have assumed the roles of "designer" and "arbiter of meaning": they construct the "visual framework" of space and suggest which places hold economic and social value. Drawing on what Lefebvre terms the representational or abstract space—referring to homogenized, commodified spaces under capitalist logic (Lefebvre, 1991)—this logic is now measured by "likes, reach, and views"; digital quantitative data transforms into capital and a metric of a place's value. In other words, space becomes designated by the logic of platforms and the market. Young women often target specific cultural events on Ferdowsi Street and are drawn there through social media posts; the presence of men at entrances has, in a way, become

a "display of power/visibility"; certain spaces are felt to be "off-limits" for women. This is precisely where Lefebvre's *represented space* transforms into *lived space* (Schmid, 2022). These are places imbued with symbolic and emotional weight, where everyday experience gains meaning. Instagram posts construct a desirable image of a place (the space of representation), and this image translates into lived experience: for instance, when a spot is labeled as "youthful and masculine," women's presence there becomes conditional and constrained. Digital representation on social networks shifts a place from a local memory/experience into a "comparable image"; people decide whether to be present based on that image—meaning representational spaces are shaped through digital content, which in turn reproduces or alters the lived experience. Therefore, it can be argued that the representation of a place on social media unfolds in the following manner: First, 1) Posts, advertisements, and platform-generated narratives construct the concept of a place (defining it as "marketable" or "youthful," for example). 2) People then act based on these images—they either visit the place or avoid it. 3) A collective experience of the place emerges, which in turn reinforces new representations. Consequently, a cycle of spatial production arises, intertwining the digital and the physical objective space, and either reinforcing or reproducing gender inequalities. In line with our findings, prominent locations are valued based on quantitative metrics (tags, likes), and this valuation determines physical presence. The result is a reduction in differential spaces—places for diverse, non-homogeneous experiences. For women, this risk is twofold. Either a space becomes commodified and appealing only to culturally sanctioned users (e.g., young men), or networks create performative and temporary spaces (such as events) for women, which lack social sustainability. The findings of this research confirm that the production of space today incorporates a digital layer. This demonstrates that in contemporary discussions on urban spaces, relying solely on Lefebvre's triadic interpretation is insufficient; one must also acknowledge the "blurring and dissolution of boundaries between digital spatial representation and physical spatial production." Social media accelerates the performative production of place, and these representations rapidly translate into spatial practices. Consequently, gender inequalities are either reinforced or, at times, reconfigured. For

studying spatial justice and gender-sensitive design, “digital representations” must be considered as one of the influential factors in the production of space. Urban planning must move beyond “purely physical design” and incorporate digitally oriented policies into its agenda. Examples include regulations on local advertising on social media, planning for “equitable performative spaces,” and supporting local events to enhance women’s presence in urban public spaces. To change this condition, intervention is required at both the level of physical design and digital governance to transform space from a commodity-driven state back to an inclusive and accessible one. In conclusion, the hybrid physical-digital nature of public space underscores the necessity for *social media-informed urban design*. This approach acknowledges how online content shapes offline spatial behavior. Similar research in contexts comparable to Iran and other Middle Eastern countries—where socio-cultural norms profoundly influence spatial movement and accessibility—can contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between digital platforms and physical space, ultimately advancing the goals of spatial inclusion and justice.

Theoretical contributions

The results of this study advance the understanding of gendered public space by demonstrating that Lefebvre’s triadic framework for interpreting urban space must, in the contemporary context, be understood through a broader lens that incorporates digital representation as an active layer in spatial production. Social media platforms shape representational space by framing places as desirable, masculine, commercial, or culturally coded. These representations, in turn, rapidly translate into lived spatial practices. The findings point to the emergence of a *socially mediated cycle of spatial production*, where online visibility, tags, and algorithmic reinforcement determine physical presence, comfort, and access in real-world space. This contributes a new conceptual framework for public space research, articulated here as *social media-informed urban design*.

Policy and urban design implications

From a policy and design perspective, the results indicate that promoting inclusion in public spaces cannot rely solely on physical and structural interventions. Urban management must address the

digital and virtual dimensions of spatial inequality. Consequently, designing equitable and gender-sensitive public spaces requires coordinated interventions across both virtual and real spheres, such as regulating the commercial branding of places on social media; supporting cultural events centered on women in urban spaces; diversifying performative spaces to reduce gender-based clustering; and enhancing safety and visibility in peripheral nodes dominated by male presence. Urban planners and municipalities must recognize and integrate the impact of digital placemaking as part of spatial management strategies, especially in socio-cultural contexts like Iran, where informal norms strongly shape spatial movement and access.

Limitations

The present study acknowledges several limitations. First, the research focuses on a single urban site in Sanandaj, Iran, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, observational data and in-person interviews were collected during specific time periods; seasonal variations or long-term behavioral shifts were not captured, which could influence the long-term effects of social networks. Third, the study relies on participants’ self-reported interactions with social media, which may not fully reflect the nuanced impacts of social platforms and the algorithms shaping them.

Directions for future research

Future studies could usefully complement the results of this research by conducting multi-location comparisons across cities in the Middle East with similar socio-cultural structures. This would help identify what other behavioral patterns dominate urban public spaces under the influence of social networks and test this study’s findings in different contexts. Further research should also investigate algorithmic placemaking, longitudinal shifts in gendered spatial behavior, and the role of platforms beyond Instagram. Integrating digital ethnography, sentiment analysis of location-based posts, and real-time mobility tracking could provide deeper insights into how digital representations evolve into real-world spatial practices. Expanding this line of inquiry can contribute to developing a comprehensive framework for social media-informed urban design capable of advancing spatial justice and gender equality.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Ferdowsi Street as a hybrid physical-digital public space in which gendered behaviors, urban form, cultural norms, and social media influence intersect, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, including thematic analysis of walk-along interviews, behavioral mapping, and GIS analyses. The findings reveal a clear pattern of gendered spatial distribution, with adolescent and young men clustering in peripheral, high-visibility nodes while women's presence remains concentrated in central and safer segments. Social media significantly mediated these behaviors: adolescent boys responded strongly to viral, geotagged, and event-driven posts, whereas young women tended to follow cultural or commercial content. These patterns demonstrate that spatial behaviors today are co-produced by physical design and digital representations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

A. Nasri conceived the original research idea, designed the methodology, collected and validated the data, performed formal analysis and interpretation of results, conducted the literature review, wrote the original draft (including theoretical foundations and manuscript text), and handled editing and final preparation of the manuscript. K. Habibi contributed to the conceptualization of the study, supervised the research process, ensured methodological validity and reliability, and provided critical revisions to the manuscript. M. Saidi (Corresponding Author) oversaw the overall research integrity, assisted in data analysis and interpretation, validated analytical frameworks, supervised data interpretation, contributed to critical revisions for intellectual content, and finalized the manuscript for submission.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article. All ethical principles in research, including informed consent, data integrity, and originality of the work, have been strictly adhered to.

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ABBREVIATIONS (NOMENCLATURE)

SNSs	Social Networking Sites
GIS	Geographic information system

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