Proceedings Bali Bhuwana Waskita: Global Art and Creativity Conference
2026, Volume 6, page 83-91, ISSN 3026-233X (online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31091/bbwp.v6i1.689

Visual Pollution of Outdoor Media in Denpasar as a City of Culture

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the phenomenon of visual pollution caused by outdoor media, which threatens the aesthetics and cultural values of Bali, as perceived by the majority of the community in Denpasar City. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, this study analyzes the forms, causal factors, and impacts of visual pollution on society and urban identity. The primary forms identified include cluttered visuals, pragmatic space exploitation, irregular spatial planning, and obsolete media. These are predominantly driven by economic gain, alongside power relations, weak law enforcement, socio-cultural factors, and the proliferation of campaign materials. Consequently, this pollution erodes local wisdom, weakens Denpasar's identity as a cultural city, disrupts traffic safety, reduces media communication effectiveness, and risks diminishing public trust in local governance. Theoretically, the findings demonstrate a process of societal normalization toward urban visual disorder, thereby offering valuable contributions to visual communication design studies and serving as a strategic reference for outdoor media policy formulation in Denpasar.

KEYWORDS

Visual, Pollution, Outdoor, Media, Denpasar

Introduction

Denpasar, as a developing city, faces a paradoxical dynamic in the utilization of public space, caught between business promotion and its image as a Cultural City. On the other hand, outdoor media, as an integral part of visual communication design, plays a strategic role in disseminating commercial advertisements, public education, and political campaigns [1]. Its large scale, visually engaging nature, and strategic placement in high-traffic areas provide extensive reach and high exposure frequency for audiences. [2]. As part of above-the-line promotion involving advertising agencies [3], the presence of outdoor media significantly influences the city's visual landscape.

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The growth of outdoor media in Denpasar is driven by business activities that continuously innovate by utilizing incidental media such as billboards and banners. Regrettably, the use of plastic-based flexi printing and chemical dyes frequently contributes to visual pollution due to fading and low degradability. Despite the rapid advancement of digital media, outdoor media persists as it possesses unique characteristics regarding dominant visibility and spatial context that cannot easily be ignored by the audience [4]. The strong influence of visual communication demands aesthetic principles, such as harmony and proportion, to remain effectively communicative. [5], However, the public is often forced to endure excessive visual exposure on public roads.

From regulatory and economic perspectives, the Denpasar City Government has issued a series of regulations, such as Mayor Regulation (Perwali) No. 51/2014 and Perwali No. 17/2007, to create an orderly urban environment. However, managing outdoor advertising presents a unique dilemma, as tax revenues from these displays serve as a vital source of Regional Original Revenue (PAD) to fund city development. [6]. However, if their quantity remains unregulated, the presence of outdoor media instead violates the criteria of *Sapta Pesona* (Decree of the Minister of Tourism, Posts, and Telecommunications No. KM.5/UM.209/MPPT-89) and undermines the vision of a "Culture-Based Creative City toward Advanced Denpasar" anchored in *Tri Hita Karana*. Furthermore, the Bali Provincial Government has also highlighted the urgency of managing Denpasar's urban aesthetics, given its status as an international transit hub.

In fact, violations regarding the placement of outdoor media in Denpasar remain widespread, ranging from unauthorized installations along main thoroughfares to banners posted on trees and utility poles. This disorder creates visual pollution resulting from spatial overconsumption, ultimately eroding the area's identity. [7]. Its negative impacts not only spoil visual comfort and the city's appearance [8], but also pose physical hazards from collapsed billboards and cause driver distraction [9].

Psychologically and culturally, the proliferation of commercial advertising fosters an excessive consumer culture [10]. This phenomenon gives rise to what is termed "visual garbage" of capitalism, which can trigger psychological fatigue and misdirected symbolic interpretation among the public [11]. Therefore, a multidisciplinary study grounded in a critical approach is required to unpack the root causes of this visual pollution. Fair and decisive spatial management is urgently needed to restore the right of the Denpasar community to a public space that is comfortable, safe, and free from visual pollution.

Methods

This study employs a critical and eclectic Cultural Studies approach to uncover the underlying meanings behind social phenomena and their intricate relationships with power dynamics [12]. Culture is positioned both as a generic system and as a practice of signifying daily life [13]. This approach is integrated with a descriptive qualitative method to systematically and factually describe and analyze the relationships between the phenomena of outdoor media visual pollution [14]. The research location focuses on high-density thoroughfares in Denpasar City, such as Gatot Subroto Street, Teuku Umar Street, and By Pass Ngurah Rai Street, selected due to their high concentration of outdoor advertising and complex spatial dynamics.

The primary research data consisted of photo documentation of visual governance and interview results, alongside secondary data gathered from literature and policy documents. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement and communication capacity[15], encompassing visual communication designers, business owners, stakeholders (government officials), and the general public. Data collection utilized cameras, audio recorders, stationery, and interview guides across five primary techniques: visual observation, in-depth interviews, literature review, documentation, and digital media searches.

The data analysis method applied interactive steps comprising data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification using a critical social theory approach. The results of the analysis are presented qualitatively in descriptive narrative form, supported by tables, diagrams, and photographic documentation [16]. The novelty of this study lies in applying a multidisciplinary Cultural Studies perspective to dissect the phenomenon of visual pollution caused by outdoor media in Denpasar City. This research critically examines the enforcement of government regulations hitherto considered effective in managing outdoor media while uncovering the forms, root causes, and broader implications of visual pollution that often go unnoticed by the public.

Result

As the capital of Bali Province and the hub of economy, tourism, and culture, Denpasar City faces significant challenges regarding population density and liveability. Administratively, this strategic territory connecting various regencies in Bali is divided into four sub-districts: West Denpasar, North Denpasar (expanded in 2006), East Denpasar, and South Denpasar. The city's growth is supported by a 540.61 km road network—comprising national, provincial, and municipal roads—that experiences high traffic density during peak hours. Broad, strategic corridors such as Gatot Subroto Street (a 10 km logistics route with the highest advertising density), Teuku Umar Street, Cokroaminoto Street, and Bypass Ngurah Rai Street serve as prime locations for various entities to erect commercial outdoor media and social campaigns.

To address the issues of visual pollution, environmental degradation, and aesthetic disturbances in public spaces, the Denpasar City Government has implemented a series of strict regulations. This governance framework is codified under Mayor Regulation (*Perwali*) No. 17 of 2007, which prohibits advertising on public facilities (places of worship, schools, government offices, traffic signs) as well as sacred and government zones such as Niti Mandala Renon and *Catur Muka*. It is further updated by *Perwali* No. 39 of 2023, which regulates classifications, distance zoning, and strict legal sanctions. Field enforcement and oversight are reinforced by Mayor Decree No. 188.45/422/HK/2-13 regarding the Advertising Implementation Team and Decree No. 188.45/568/HK/2014, which categorizes installation territories into Main Protocol Zones, Class 1 Economic Corridors, and Class 2 Neighborhood Roads. Additionally, financial aspects are governed by *Perwali* No. 51 of 2014 on the Procedures for Collecting Advertising Tax, supported by external regulations such as General Elections Commission Regulation (PKPU) No. 15 of 2023 specifically managing Electoral Campaign Materials (APK).

Outdoor media in Denpasar City possesses distinct characteristics designed to reach fast-moving commuters through dominant standardized sizes (such as 200 × 800 cm) and the strategic use

of color psychology. Vibrant hues such as red (energy/urgency), yellow (optimism), blue (trust), and orange (creativity) are selected to reinforce brand identity and convey diverse message types, ranging from branding, short-term promotions, and location information to public service announcements. To generate a striking visual effect and foster collective memory, these media leverage their surrounding environment alongside tailored illumination technologies. Lighting systems are broadly categorized into Frontlight illumination for direct visibility, Backlight illumination applied to semi-transparent substrates for a modern aesthetic, and Dynamic LED-based digital displays that craft an elegant and futuristic visual atmosphere at night, albeit requiring higher maintenance costs.

Outdoor media types in Denpasar City encompass both conventional and digital formats, each carrying its own distinct environmental footprint. These formats include political flags—such as those of PDI-P, Demokrat, and Golkar—that risk becoming physical waste if left unrecycled, alongside permanent billboards and incidental *baliho* constructed from synthetic flex-face plastic along arterial corridors. Additionally, the city features digitally printed cloth banners, dynamic inflatable sky dancers acting as store mascots, standard commercial signboards, and neon boxes. In contrast, permanent digital videotrons (megatrons) offer an energy-efficient alternative capable of rotating multiple audiovisual advertisements sequentially, thereby optimizing space at high-traffic intersections like Renon and Simpang Enam Teuku Umar. Meanwhile, creative workers and activists deploy alternative wheat-paste posters using natural flour adhesives for social critique. Visually, this urban landscape remains heavily dominated by tobacco industry promotions along non-protocol routes, telecommunication providers and device retailers in commercial districts, and the hospitality sector, continuously fueling debates over urban visual pollution.

Discussion

Visual pollution in Denpasar reflects a pragmatic exploitation of public space driven by short-term economic gain. The urban landscape is no longer treated as a neutral socio-cultural entity, but has instead undergone commodification and spatialization by large-scale capitalists through mass advertising agencies such as Jagir Advertising, whose revenue surged by up to 300% ahead of elections. This capitalist drive directly marginalizes the local living philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana*, while illustrating the dynamics of modern marketing, where every public space turns into a symbolic battleground for competing brands and commercial messages [11].



Figure 1. Chaotic outdoor media along Gatot Subroto Street, Denpasar City
(Source: Janottama documentation, 2023)

The placement of outdoor media across Denpasar City's busiest nodes—such as the Dewa Ruci Intersection, Bypass Ngurah Rai Street, Renon, and Teuku Umar Street—proceeds haphazardly while ignoring principles of urban architectural harmony. This chaotic installation pattern frequently involves unauthorized, illegal media stacked on top of one another to the point of mutual obstruction. Based on observations at the Akasia Street junction, this disarray is further exacerbated by the neglect of damaged advertising infrastructure. Numerous large-scale *baliho* were found in dilapidated, tattered, torn, and near-collapsing conditions. Such administrative negligence not only degrades the legibility of the city's visual orientation, but also poses immediate physical hazards to the safety of commuters passing underneath.

Outdoor media contributes significantly to the accumulation of 1,300 tons of daily residual waste in Denpasar City due to the prevalent use of synthetic, non-biodegradable materials such as plastics and vinyl (PVC), which take up to 1,000 years to decompose. Wild banners, baliho, umbul-umbul, and wheat-paste flyers permanently adhering to utility poles on Gajah Mada Street are simply abandoned until faded and torn by extreme weather. While the proper use of color in public spaces can enhance aesthetic experience making the environment more engaging and inviting public interaction the current visual chaos yields the opposite effect. Regulation-wise, Perwali No. 39 of 2023 strictly obligates the removal of advertising media within 3 × 24 hours after the expiration of the permit period. However, field realities reveal widespread non-compliance, such as *Selamat Hari Raya Nyepi* greetings remaining suspended for months after the celebration has concluded. This phenomenon creates a social context mismatch, fosters a slum-like and neglected visual impression of the city, and reflects both low accountability among advertisers and weak enforcement by law officials.

Economic factors serve as the primary foundation driving the proliferation of outdoor media in Denpasar City through the exploitation of public space for the commodification of goods and services. This economic aspect acts as a main catalyst for growth, underpinning diverse facets of community life ranging from commerce and tourism to the creative industries [17]. A pragmatic mutual symbiosis emerges: business entities leverage outdoor media—such as premium videotrons costing up to IDR 50,000,000 per month—to boost sales, while the local government is incentivized to maximize Local Genuine Revenue (PAD). This phenomenon is evidenced by the 2025 advertising tax revenue, which exceeded its target by 147% (reaching 4.4 billion IDR). However, this fiscal surge stands in sharp contrast to the reality faced by conventional advertising agencies, which remain under pressure due to technological disruption and the reallocation of advertising budgets toward digital media platforms.

Political power and financial capital collaborate massively to legitimize the commodification of the public view across the city's premium locations. Power operates not only in decision-making processes, but also in controlling agendas and shaping public preferences. [18]. The bureaucratic habitus hijacks the communication function of public services and holiday greetings by dominantly featuring self-portraits of officials for personal branding. This biased visual dominance gives rise to symbolic violence, wherein private businesses are strictly sanctioned

by the Public Order Agency (Satpol PP), while the baliho of political elites are allowed to violate regulations without equitable enforcement.



Figure 2. Outdoor advertising (*baliho*) for the Tumpek Krulut Celebration by the Bali Provincial Government
(Source: Janottama documentation, 2023).

Visual pollution is further exacerbated by optimal-lacking, discriminatory, and largely symbolic regulatory enforcement. Drawing upon policy implementation theory, this weak law enforcement is driven by limited personnel within the Public Order Agency (Satpol PP), minimal cross-sectoral bureaucratic coordination, and strong compromises with political and economic interests. Enforcement actions are often selective and incidental—such as the abrupt removal of legislative candidates' *baliho* at the Renon Roundabout only during official visits by President Jokowi. Light administrative sanctions (such as merely marking non-compliant boards with a red cross) fail to produce a deterrence effect. In contrast to Jakarta, which enforces strict Advertising-Free Zones along main protocol routes, or Surabaya, which sterilizes its green belts, Denpasar remains fragile in upholding the supremacy of its spatial planning regulations.

The 2024 simultaneous legislative and regional elections (*Pemilu* and *Pilkada*) served as the primary contributor to the overwhelming surge of tedious visual waste along protocol corridors such as Gatot Subroto Street. Political candidates fell into a pattern of political narcissism: prioritizing oversized portrait photography (half-body close-ups adorned in traditional Balinese attire) accompanied by bombastic slogans, while offering minimal substantive policy information. This aligns with the perspective that modern individuals rely heavily on public recognition and cannot function without an admiring audience [19]. The failure of the Integrated Law Enforcement Center (*Sentra Gakkumdu*) and the Election Supervisory Body (*Bawaslu*) to curb candidates' narcissistic behavior not only degrades the aesthetic integrity of the Cultural City, but also fosters an unhealthy competitive climate and undermines public trust in the integrity of the democratic process.

The public perceives systemic negligence regarding spatial planning violations, as evidenced by the widespread persistence of obsolete political campaign media long after the March 2026

elections, remaining posted through late April. On an operational level, the Public Order Agency Satpol PP faces structural constraints, including a shortage of specialized equipment required to execute the dismantling of massive billboards and large-scale LED megatrons. This gap between ideal regulation and field reality is met with subversive resistance by the artist community. Through an ecological-political critique exhibition titled "Cover UP," artists repurpose discarded *baliho* waste as a symbol of resistance against the corporatization of public space.



Figure 3. Artwork created from repurposed 2024 campaign *baliho*
(Source: Rizki Setyo documentation, 2024)

Constant exposure to striking, dense, and cluttered visual stimuli along heavily congested corridors such as Gatot Subroto Street inflicts psychological impacts on residents, inducing visual fatigue, confusion, and distorted focus. Drawing upon Foucault's theory of discipline, this repeated exposure subtly conditions the body and public consciousness, leading to aesthetic desensitization or numbness. Spatial violations such as wild *baliho* nailed to trees, obstructing sidewalks, and obscuring utility poles have now become normalized and accepted as ordinary urban scenery. From Jean Baudrillard's perspective, this flood of commercial signs triggers an implosion of meaning, wherein urban society is conditioned to passively accept the engineered imagery of a capitalist lifestyle as normal reality.

The implications for communication demonstrate that the overlapping accumulation of outdoor media triggers a counterproductive phenomenon of visual clutter. The high concentration of commercial and political baliho competing at a single point such as at traffic light intersections results in divided public attention. Drawing upon information overload theory, fast-moving audiences possess only a few seconds to process visual stimuli; consequently, they tend to unconsciously filter out and ignore these messages altogether.

From the standpoint of public safety, outdoor visual pollution poses direct physical hazards and infringes upon citizens' rights to a safe street environment. The deployment of videotron

technology featuring excessive LED brightness at night induces severe glare, distracting drivers' concentration and causing sudden, unsafe vehicle decelerations outside designated stopping points. Furthermore, weak oversight regarding structural material quality particularly fragile, semi-permanent bamboo or wooden frame baliho renders these structures highly vulnerable to collapse during extreme weather and strong winds. Empirical evidence includes the collapse of a political party billboard on Pulau Moyo Street that injured a pedestrian, alongside tilted billboards intruding onto the road shoulder on Mahendradata Street. These cases highlight the systemic failure of urban spatial governance to curb the agency of socio-political actors who compromise human safety for commercial and political exposure.

Conclusion

Visual pollution from outdoor media in Denpasar City manifests as urban spatial clutter, driven by the dominance of political power and market capitalism that deprives citizens of their right to a clean urban aesthetic. This spatial exploitation is characterized by aggressive commercialization, political narcissism, the widespread use of non-biodegradable materials, hazardous semi-permanent structures, and the systemic abandonment of expired electoral campaign materials and promotional displays. This condition is fueled by the logic of capitalism, which commodifies the urban landscape for economic profit. The issue is further compounded by asymmetrical power relations and opportunistic collaborations among capital owners, advertising agencies, and policymakers. Weak and selective regulatory enforcement, alongside the rampant exploitation of public space as a venue for recurring political branding every five years, constitutes the root cause of this urban decay ultimately undermining social functions, architectural aesthetics, and the integration of local Balinese cultural values within visual communication design practices.

The implications of this burgeoning visual pollution erode the identity and core values of Balinese culture, ultimately diminishing Denpasar's prestige as a Cultural City and international tourist destination. Constant visual saturation and the relentless siege of consumerist signage progressively degrade the psychological well-being of residents. Furthermore, the chaotic accumulation of media triggers communication breakdown through information overload, forcing messages into friction and stripping them of persuasive force. The proliferation of illegal and obsolete media not only reflects fragile urban governance and erodes public trust in local authorities, but also poses severe hazards to road safety by distracting drivers' focus and obscuring essential traffic signage.

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