

# VISUAL POLLUTION IN PUBLIC SPACES: BETWEEN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND THE PUBLIC'S RIGHT TO AESTHETICS

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**Abstract:** The city of Denpasar is currently facing a massive phenomenon of visual pollution due to the haphazard placement of outdoor media such as billboards, banners, and signs, creating a sense of visual pollution in public spaces. This situation creates a paradox regarding Denpasar's vision as a Culture-Based Creative City and the principles of the Sapta Pesona tourism framework. This study aims to uncover the forms and causal factors of visual pollution and analyze its impact on urban aesthetics, public safety, and the cultural identity of the community. Using a critical qualitative method, the research was conducted through field observations at strategic locations such as Jalan Teuku Umar and semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders. The results indicate that visual pollution is driven by the dominance of economic interests aimed at increasing Local Revenue (PAD) and political interests that often disregard regulations and spatial aesthetics. The resulting impacts include a decline in residents' psychological comfort, physical hazards from structurally unsound constructions, and visual hegemony that obscures local cultural symbols. This article contributes scientifically by providing a multidisciplinary analysis of the tension between regulations and field practices, as well as offering policy recommendations to ensure that the arrangement of outdoor media aligns with the principles of Tri Hita Karana and the identity of the City of Culture.

**Keywords:** visual pollution, public space, economy, politics, aesthetics.

## Introduction

Denpasar, as the capital of Bali Province, has rapidly developed into a public space rich in social, political, economic, and cultural interests. Outdoor media such as billboards, banners, and signage serve as tools for promotion, political branding, and social campaigns. As part of *Above the Line Promotion*, these media utilize large sizes and strategic placements to create a repetitive effect that reinforces audience recall (Aniendya, 2011). However, this phenomenon creates a paradox. On one hand, outdoor media serve as an effective visual communication medium, and the government strives to realize the vision of a Culture-Based Creative City while maintaining urban aesthetics in line with the Sapta Pesona program. On the other hand, it creates visual pollution that disrupts the city's aesthetics, road user safety, and even tourist comfort. Public spaces are filled with haphazardly installed billboards and incidental plastic (*flexi*) banners, thereby damaging the area's identity. The phenomenon of opposition to the Benoa Bay reclamation (2010–2018), marked by "Reject Reclamation" billboards, demonstrates how outdoor media also functions as an arena for political and cultural contestation (Nugroho & Widya, 2019).

Normatively, Denpasar positions itself as a City of Culture with a vision of a culture-based Creative City toward "Denpasar Maju," emphasizing the harmony of Tri Hita Karana, the aesthetics of public spaces, and the "Sapta Pesona" of tourism (Antara News, 2020). Ideally, outdoor media should support the cultural image, be

neatly arranged, and provide relevant information. However, reality reveals a different situation: outdoor media are often installed without permits, piled up at intersections, affixed to trees or utility poles, made of non-biodegradable plastic materials, and create a chaotic impression. Rather than reinforcing cultural identity, outdoor media instead generate visual pollution that damages the city's appearance.

The primary issue is visual pollution resulting from the haphazard placement of outdoor media, which disrupts the city's aesthetics and traffic safety. Additionally, there is a public policy dilemma: advertisements serve as a source of Local Government Revenue (LGR) through taxes, yet excessive quantities lead to social, psychological, and ecological harm (Ga'a, Rengga, & Transilvanus, 2023). A discrepancy between regulations and practice is also evident, as despite the existence of mayoral regulations on advertising, many outdoor media are installed without permits or in violation of the rules. Sociocultural implications also emerge, as outdoor media promote a consumerist culture, homogenize urban spaces, and reduce the comfort of both tourists and local residents. Safety threats cannot be ignored either, as the fragile construction of makeshift billboards poses a risk of collapse due to weather conditions and endangers road users (Gradim & Salgueiro, 2014).

Therefore, this article is crucial for revealing the forms, causal factors of visual pollution, and its impacts on public spaces in Denpasar. Through a critical approach, this study aims to advocate for the public's right to an aesthetically pleasing and

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comfortable visual environment, while providing recommendations for more harmonious urban planning in accordance with the principles of Tri Hita Karana (Yudantini, Putra, & Astawa, 2015).

This article makes a scientific contribution by revealing the forms of visual pollution generated by outdoor media in Denpasar and analyzing its causal factors from a multidisciplinary “ ” perspective, encompassing visual communication, public policy, the environment, and tourism. Additionally, it provides a critical framework for assessing the relationship between regulations, economic interests, and the public’s right to visual pollution-free public spaces. This study offers policy recommendations for local governments and advertising industry stakeholders to ensure the arrangement of outdoor media aligns with the vision of the City of Culture and the principles of Tri Hita Karana. Consequently, it expands the academic literature on visual pollution in developing cities, particularly within the context of cultural tourism in Bali.

## Method

The method used in this study is a critical qualitative approach focusing on the phenomenon of visual pollution caused by outdoor media in the city of Denpasar (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The research was conducted through field observations on major roads such as Jalan Teuku Umar and the downtown area, where outdoor media are extensively installed. Observations were made by recording, photographing, and classifying types of advertisements—both permanent and temporary—as well as assessing the aesthetic aspects and the orderliness of their placement. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders, including local government officials, advertising business owners, road users, and tourists, to explore perceptions, policies, and the resulting social impacts (Moleong,

2002). Secondary data was obtained from mayoral regulations, government reports, data from the Central Statistics Agency, and academic literature related to visual pollution and visual communication.

The research methodology includes identifying phenomena, classifying outdoor media conditions, analyzing visual impacts based on visual communication design principles, analyzing policies related to advertising regulations, and conducting a socio-cultural analysis regarding implications for public comfort and tourism image. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, through data reduction, categorization, critical interpretation, and triangulation to ensure the validity of the findings. The analysis was conducted by comparing factual conditions (*dass sein*) with the ideal norms (*dass sollen*) advocated in the Cultural City vision and the Tri Hita Karana principles.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Forms of Visual Pollution from Outdoor Media

Outdoor media in Denpasar City is dominated by Above the Line Promotion, which involves the roles of agencies, designers, and the government in its presence within the urban environment. This media takes various forms, such as billboards, banners, and posters, strategically placed to attract public attention through dominant visuals and striking colors (Djalal & Kamaruddin, 2022). However, there are significant differences in technical aspects; while billboards have permanent structures and clear permits, media such as banners and posters are often placed incidentally with subpar quality. The use of plastic-based flexi printing materials with chemical dyes that are difficult to break down naturally is on the rise within the printing industry.



Figure 1. Chaotic outdoor media on Gatot Subroto Street Denpasar City (Janottama, 2023)

Although practical and inexpensive, these media tend to fade quickly when exposed to extreme weather, which ultimately contributes significantly to visual pollution and a chaotic impression in public spaces. The current urban landscape in Denpasar is being disrupted by the haphazard placement of outdoor media, particularly at intersections and on sidewalks. This phenomenon of visual pollution manifests through the installation of media that is piled up, affixed to trees and utility poles, and even obscuring vital traffic signs for road users (Harsanto, 2023). The uncontrolled presence of these media not only undermines the city’s aesthetic appeal as a tourist destination promoting the *Sapta Pesona* program but also creates negative psychological and

physical implications. Such visual pollution can reduce public comfort, disrupt driving concentration, and even threaten safety due to the risk of collapses of media structures built with fragile wooden or bamboo frames (Detikcom, 2023).

From a policy perspective, there is a dilemma between the function of outdoor media as a source of Local Original Revenue (PAD) through advertising taxes and the government’s responsibility in urban planning. Although the Denpasar City Government has legal instruments such as Mayor’s Regulation No. 3 of 2014, on-the-ground realities show that there are still practices by rogue agencies that disregard the rules. The lack of integration

between business interests and the vision of a Culture-Based Creative City has caused public spaces to lose their identity (Denpost, 2022). Therefore, firm action is needed from relevant agencies such as the Public Order Agency (Satpol PP) and the

Licensing Department to implement fair urban planning, ensuring that public spaces in Denpasar once again become comfortable, beautiful, and free from visual pollution in accordance with the principles of Tri Hita Karana (Antara News, 2020).



Figure 2. Billboards seized during a crackdown at the Denpasar City Satpol PP Office (Tribun Bali, 2023)

This issue of visual pollution stems from an imbalance between the massive flow of capitalist information and the limited carrying capacity of public spaces (Emeraldien, et al., 2024). The constant barrage of advertisements through outdoor media not only aims to promote products but also creates psychological pressure that fuels a consumerist culture within society (Olih, 2015). Theoretically, this is similar to the concept of visual pollution

proposed by Baudrillard, where the continuous display of advertisements causes psychological fatigue and can even diminish feelings of happiness when the symbolic messages conveyed are inaccessible or misdirected for certain audiences, such as schoolchildren exposed to cigarette advertisements (Saumantri & Zikrillah, 2020).



Figure 3. Billboard on Akasia Street, Denpasar (Janottama, 2023)

Visual disturbances have gone beyond aesthetic boundaries and begun to disrupt the balance of the relationship between humans and their environment. In addition to psychological impacts, field findings confirm the existence of real physical threats resulting from the disregard of construction standards in incidental outdoor media. The use of wooden or bamboo frames, which are vulnerable to strong winds and unpredictable weather, has led to several incidents of billboards collapsing, directly endangering the safety of road users. On the other hand, while advertising taxes serve as a crucial tool for enhancing local fiscal capacity and strengthening the local economy, their optimization often conflicts with Denpasar's vision as a representation of a beautiful and clean Bali in the international eye.

The regulation of outdoor media, which has so far been limited to policy statements, must be immediately implemented concretely through collaboration among Regional Government Agencies (OPDs) to strictly enforce violations of permits and improper placement locations. This effort is crucial to realizing the public's right to clean, comfortable public spaces that align with the envisioned vision of a Culture-Based Creative City.

## 2. Causes of Visual Pollution from Outdoor Media

The phenomenon of visual pollution from outdoor media in Denpasar is driven by five interrelated factors, with economic factors serving as the primary driving force. The dominance of the economic “ ” is evident in how urban space is commodified as a commercial asset to pursue Local Own-Source Revenue (PAD) and advertising agency profits, the culmination of which is seen in the

massive use of digital videotrons at strategic points such as Jalan Teuku Umar (Ga'a, Rengga, & Transilvanus, 2023). However, this economic drive is often intertwined with factors of power and the dominance of the political elite, where policies and enforcement of regulations tend to be discriminatory (Saumantri & Zikrillah,

2020). This creates visual spatial injustice, where billboards belonging to political figures are often tolerated even when they violate aesthetic standards, while small commercial advertising media are subject to stricter regulation.



Figure 4. Jaya Giri Advertising Billboard (Bali Ekspres, 2023)

This situation is exacerbated by the weak enforcement of existing regulations and sanctions. The implementation of Denpasar Mayor's Regulation No. 39 of 2023 still faces resource constraints and tends to be symbolic, such as enforcement efforts that are only carried out ahead of major state events. On the other hand, socio-cultural factors also perpetuate this visual pollution through the normalization of billboards as a community communication tool, ranging from holiday greetings by STT to

infographics on village fund transparency. Finally, the use of Campaign Propaganda Materials (APK) during political periods reaches the peak of visual chaos, which not only damages the city's appearance but also reduces the value of democracy to a mere contest of public image (Sutarwiyasa, et al., 2024). Overall, visual pollution in Denpasar is the result of " "—the dominance of economic logic that disregards the state's regulatory functions and the values of local wisdom in the City of Culture.



Figure 5. Holiday Greeting Billboards in Denpasar (Antara Bali, 2023)

Public spaces should function as spaces for equal citizen communication; however, in Denpasar, there has been a shift in the function of public spaces into private spaces for capital owners. The control of strategic locations by large agencies such as Jagir Bali Advertising indicates the existence of visual hegemony, where the public is forced to consume commercial messages without the

right to turn off these advertisements, unlike with television or the internet. This creates sensory injustice; residents lose their right to the city's aesthetic views and cultural landscape because they are obscured by giant billboards that often lack relevance to local identity (Sukmayadi, 2019).



Figure 6. Political Billboards on Gatot Subroto Street in Denpasar (Suwanto, 2024)

Furthermore, there is ideological inconsistency in the city government's policies. On one hand, the government promotes cultural preservation and urban aesthetics through various festivals; on the other hand, the government heavily relies on advertising taxes to meet its Local Revenue (PAD) targets (Pradnyana & Saskara, 2025). This economic dependence weakens the state's regulatory function, leading to selective law enforcement. The practice of turning a blind eye to billboards featuring political figures or officials while aggressively cracking down on small business billboards demonstrates that the city's visual space has become an arena of unequal power contestation (Ibadi, 2020). Ultimately, this visual pollution not only physically defaces the city's appearance but also reflects the degradation of democratic values and the disregard for residents' psychological well-being in the pursuit of capital accumulation and short-term political image-building.

### 3. Implications of Outdoor Media Visual Pollution

Outdoor media visual pollution in Denpasar not only damages the city's physical aesthetics but also carries profound multidimensional implications for social structures, the city's image, and public well-being. The most critical implication of visual pollution in Denpasar is the clash between the city's identity as a "City of Culture" and the chaotic visual reality (Sangkop, Pati, & Egeten, 2023). The uncontrolled presence of outdoor media creates a visual hegemony that obscures local cultural symbols. Public spaces, which should represent the values of Bali's local wisdom, are now dominated by commercial and political messages. This leads to a decline in the aesthetic quality of the environment, which, in the long term, can erode residents' pride in their cultural identity and diminish Denpasar's appeal as a clean and well-organized cultural tourism destination (Triyuni, Ginaya, & Suhartanto, 2019).



Figure 7. Dense use of outdoor media at the Teuku Umar Road intersection in Denpasar (Hendra, 2023)

The phenomenon of visual clutter renders media communication ineffective. Due to the excessive density and overlapping of billboards and advertisements, the audience (the public) experiences information overload (Udayana, 2017). Rather than absorbing the messages, the public tends to ignore these media, perceiving them as visual disturbances. This creates an irony for advertisers and the government: the substantial costs incurred for installing outdoor media go to waste due to the low message absorption caused by the visual pollution they themselves create.

Functionally, visual pollution directly impacts the comfort and safety of road users. Haphazardly placed billboards on sidewalks or at intersections disrupt drivers' concentration and obstruct pedestrians' rights. Beyond physical risks, this chaotic

visual environment contributes to mental fatigue and a decline in residents' quality of life (Priadarsini, Dewi, & Parameswari, 2021). Urban spaces saturated with the visual clamor of advertisements create a psychologically unfriendly environment, ultimately diminishing residents' comfort in their daily activities.

The government's inability or lack of firmness in regulating outdoor media that violate regulations leads to a loss of public trust. The disparity in enforcement—where political materials are often tolerated while small commercial advertisements are not—highlights a failure of public policy. This reinforces the perception that the government prioritizes economic gains (advertising taxes) and the interests of the political elite over aesthetic well-being and the public's right to a clean environment (Wilson, 2022).



Figure 8. Artwork from a 2024 Campaign Billboard (Setyo, 2024)

The implications of visual pollution in Denpasar reflect the failure of government agencies to balance economic structures with social needs. This visual pollution is a manifestation of power dynamics that treat public space as a commodity to be traded without restraint. There is a clear ideological contradiction: on one hand, the government promotes a narrative of cultural preservation, yet on the other, it allows the city's landscape to be obscured by a jungle of billboards that undermine those aesthetic values. If not immediately addressed through strict regulations and a visual spatial plan grounded in aesthetic justice, Denpasar risks losing its soul as a cultural city and transforming into nothing more than a chaotic visual marketplace (Triadnyani, Tjahjandari, & Setyani, 2024). This imbalance indicates that economic power has succeeded in dictating social structures and undermining the harmony of urban life that should be preserved.

## Conclusion

The phenomenon of visual pollution in Denpasar is not merely an aesthetic issue but a multidimensional problem reflecting the tension between economic, political, regulatory, and cultural identity interests. Chaotic outdoor media—including billboards, banners, and videotrons—have transformed public spaces into arenas of capital and power dominance, thereby eroding the public's right to a well-ordered and comfortable visual environment. The government champions the vision of a "Culture-Based Creative City" and the principles of Tri Hita Karana, yet on-the-ground practices reveal a heavy reliance on advertising taxes. This creates an ideological contradiction between cultural preservation and the commodification of urban space.

Public spaces are controlled by large agencies and political elites, creating visual injustice. Political billboards are often left up even when they violate regulations, while small commercial advertisements are removed. Visual pollution reduces residents' comfort, disrupts the concentration of road users, and triggers mental fatigue due to excessive visual pollution. The fragile construction of makeshift advertisements poses real physical risks, such as billboards collapsing and endangering road users.

The visual hegemony of advertising obscures local symbols, putting Denpasar at risk of losing its image as a cultural city and transforming into a chaotic visual marketplace. Visual pollution in Denpasar is a manifestation of the failure of public space governance. The imbalance between economic interests and the public's right to aesthetic space indicates the weakness of the

state's regulatory function. If not immediately addressed through strict regulations, fair law enforcement, and inter-agency collaboration, Denpasar will face the degradation of its cultural identity and a decline in its tourism appeal.

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