

Parks stress men, and narrow streets stress women: What emotions does the city awaken?

March 23 2023, by Daniel Paül Agustí and Montserrat Guerrero Lladós



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There are many people who have experienced fear or stress on the street at one time or another. There are also those who go out to relax or disconnect from their home or work lives. The place is the same, but the experiences are clearly different. Despite the fact that the street is an

important space in our lives, we don't really know why it brings about positive emotions in some people and negative emotions in others.

Many municipalities have invested significant amounts of money to "clean up," "improve" and "modernize" their streets, squares and parks. This generally means changing the urban layout, increasing the number of fixtures on the street or adding plants.

But, in reality, these are merely formal interventions: the extent to which they improve the emotions that people experience in [public spaces](#) has not been studied.

Identifying emotions

Traditionally, emotions have been identified [through surveys](#). This approach has some problems. The main issue is that people lie—whether consciously or unconsciously. They also forget things, don't want to admit that something scares them or fail fill out the questionnaire correctly.

A new method was needed. And that has been possible in recent years thanks to the miniaturization (and falling cost) of some medical devices. Now, people can move around in the street with instruments that measure their emotions.

One indicator of those is heart rate. When we say that someone has a heart rate of 60 beats per minute, it could be deduced that the time between beats is one second. But actually, during those 60 seconds, the frequency of each beat varies to accommodate the changes the person is going through. Measuring these variations makes it possible to identify changes in the emotions experienced.

These changes in the intervals between beats can be measured with

instruments like the [heart rate](#) bands that athletes use. If this information is correlated to a specific location (for example, with the GPS of a mobile phone), we can know which locations are associated with heartbeat alterations and look for possible causes.

Different reactions depending on gender

Heart rate changes reveal some significant differences in how groups of people experience [public space](#). For example, they make it possible to identify changes in the perception of space by gender.

In one of the first tests carried out to identify these changes, which took place in the historic center of Lleida (Spain), [the results](#) showed that women experienced a degree of stress that is 17.34% higher than men throughout the experiment. In addition, 20.51% of [female participants](#) rated some of the spaces visited as "unpleasant," compared to 8.6% of males. Likewise, significant differences were identified in the spaces that brought about these emotions.

Women tended to have higher levels of stress in narrow pedestrian streets, especially if there were other people or parked vehicles creating areas with poor visibility. In contrast, men were more stressed by parks, gardens and shopping streets with a high presence of people.

Something curious was observed precisely in parks and gardens. These places seemed to produce a feeling of well-being in women, while in men the common feeling was stress. This is an example of how the same place can be perceived differently by different groups.

It is also important to point out that, when identifying the emotions experienced throughout the experiment, women expressed fear and sadness more often than men. Men tended to express joy and rage.

City planning based on emotions

With the COVID-19 pandemic, [an increase in anxiety and fear of going outside was observed](#). Knowing the origin of these emotions allows us to know the causes of that situation and design public spaces that tackle the issue of the population's well-being and mental health.

Small micro-spaces that we see each day like zebra crossings, narrow sidewalks and parked cars may be directly related to whether we feel good or bad in a [public place](#). Thinking about them properly is essential to designing spaces that flow with—and not against—the population.

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