

Image of the urban public spaces Narvaez Street, Matanzas, Cuba

Imagen del espacio público urbano calle Narváez, Matanzas, Cuba

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ABSTRACT

The revitalization of heritage public spaces involves not only physical interventions but also a deep understanding of how citizens construct meaning and value those places. This article analyzes the image of Narváez Street in Matanzas, Cuba, as a perception of built identity, based on a mixed-method study with 300 residents of the city, evaluating five dimensions. The results show a strong appreciation for social interaction and uniqueness, but also critical deficiencies in safety, signage, technology, and environmental preservation. Based on these findings, the article discusses the gap between the importance attributed to build identity and the image perceived by residents as the target public, and proposes management strategies aimed at differentiation through image, prioritizing the dimensions that are relevant to this specific public, and strengthening the sense of belonging. The study provides empirical evidence to rethink the management of public spaces in Cuban heritage urban contexts. In this sense, the attributes of the space under empirical study are established, which, given their level of importance and perception by the urban public studied, should be addressed for short- and medium-term performance improvements.

Keywords: public space; urban image; urban marketing; heritage management; Matanzas.

RESUMEN

La revitalización de espacios públicos patrimoniales implica no solo intervenciones físicas sino también una comprensión profunda de cómo los ciudadanos construyen significado y valoran esos lugares. Este artículo analiza la imagen de la calle Narváez, en Matanzas (Cuba) como percepción de la identidad construida, a partir de un estudio mixto con 300 residentes de la propia ciudad, evaluando cinco dimensiones. Los resultados muestran una fuerte valoración de la interacción social y la singularidad, pero también deficiencias críticas en seguridad, señalización, tecnología y preservación ambiental. A partir de estos hallazgos, se discute la brecha entre la importancia atribuida a la identidad construida y la imagen percibida por los

residentes como público objetivo, y se proponen estrategias de gestión orientadas a la diferenciación a través de la imagen, priorizando las dimensiones que resultan relevantes para este público en particular, y a la consolidación del sentido de pertenencia. El estudio aporta evidencia empírica para repensar la gestión de espacios públicos en contextos urbanos patrimoniales cubanos. En este sentido, se establecen los atributos del espacio objeto de estudio empírico, que, dado su nivel de importancia y percepción por parte del público urbano estudiado, deben ser intervenidos para la mejora de sus prestaciones a corto y medio plazo.

Palabras clave: espacio público; imagen urbana; marketing urbano; gestión patrimonial; Matanzas.

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Introduction

In the fabric of contemporary cities, public spaces stand as much more than mere physical supports. They are the settings where collective life manifests, differences are negotiated, memory is constructed, and shared identity is forged [1; 2]. Their configuration and the citizens' perception of them directly influence quality of life, social cohesion, and the competitiveness of the city as a whole [3; 4]. In this context, concepts such as identity – the set of unique traits that define a place's character – and image – the mental representation that the public builds of it – become fundamental strategic assets for urban management.

The quality of a public space cannot be measured solely by physical indicators (accessibility, furniture, vegetation); it also requires incorporating dimensions such as citizen appropriation, perceived safety, social inclusion, and the capacity to generate community ties. These dimensions ultimately determine whether a space is truly public – that is, of everyone and for everyone – or becomes an empty, underused, or exclusionary place.

The notion of identity in the urban realm has been developed by various disciplines. For Lynch [5], it is one of the components of environmental image, along with structure and meaning. Beyond its initial definition, in the context of public spaces, identity can be understood as the set of distinctive traits – historical, architectural, functional, symbolic – that give a place its own character and differentiate it from others [6]. This identity is not only the result of planning; it is also built daily through users' practices, the activities carried out there, and the narratives that circulate about it.

Image, for its part, is the mental representation that individuals or groups form of a place based on their direct experiences, the information received, and their own subjective dispositions. Image is a filter through which reality is interpreted, and it conditions attitudes and behaviors toward objects or spaces. In the urban realm, the image of a public space is the result of a perceptual process that combines cognitive (what is known), affective (what is felt), and evaluative (what is valued) elements [7].

Although identity and image are related, they are not equivalent. Identity refers to what the space

is in terms of its objective and socially constructed attributes; image refers to how it is perceived by different publics. A solid identity can lead to a positive image, but gaps can also occur: a space with a rich historical identity may project a neglected image if its maintenance is deficient; or a space with little identity may be valued positively for circumstantial reasons (such as the presence of ephemeral activities).

This conceptual framework is especially relevant in the Cuban context, where cities currently face a double challenge in the management of their public spaces: on the one hand, the need to preserve a historically and architecturally valuable heritage; on the other, the urgency to respond to new functional, social, and environmental demands of a constantly changing population.

Matanzas, known as the "Athens of Cuba" for its cultural flourishing in the 19th century, possesses a set of public spaces – squares, parks, streets, and waterfronts – that condense layers of collective memory, social practices, and symbolic meanings [8; 9]. However, the passage of time, economic cycles, and management limitations have generated, in many of these places, a dissonance between their historical identity and the image they currently project.

Narváez Street, located on one of the banks of the San Juan River, is a paradigmatic case of this phenomenon. Originally a commercial thoroughfare linked to the sugar trade in the 19th century, it fell into disuse for decades until it was intervened in 2017 as part of the Master Plan for the city's 325th anniversary. Its transformation into the "Narváez Promenade" has turned it into a laboratory for creative economies: artists' workshops, gastronomic-cultural enterprises, and educational spaces coexist in a restored heritage environment. However, beyond the physical intervention, it is unknown how the city's residents perceive this space, which attributes they value and which they consider deficient, and whether the resulting image corresponds to the identity that the project attempts to project.

Public spaces such as squares, parks, streets, and seawalls [10; 11] constitute the heart of urban life, the settings where social interaction is woven, collective identity is forged, and citizenship is experienced. Urban marketing offers a conceptual framework and practical tools to address these challenges [12], conceiving the city and its components as entities that must manage their value and communicate effectively with their various publics.

Although there have been advances in the study of city image [13] and the establishment of desired urban identities [14], the systematic evaluation of the identity and image of specific public spaces using mixed methodologies is still incipient. This gap limits the ability of urban managers to design evidence-based improvement strategies and to effectively communicate the heritage and social value of these spaces.

In this sense, previous research has indicated that, while local managers recognize the heritage and natural value of the city, their perception of its current state is predominantly negative or neutral, particularly in dimensions such as infrastructure, services, and marketing [15]. This situation reveals the existence of a disconnect between the desired identity and the perceived identity, underscoring the need for strategic management that aligns both concepts.

This research seeks to help fill that gap, starting from the following research question: what are the strengths and weaknesses of the image of Narváez Street from the perspective of its users, in this case, residents? The main objective is to analyze residents' perception of the image of this space, identifying the attributes that function as assets and those that represent obstacles to its consolidation as an urban reference point. Based on data obtained from applied research [16], the results are presented and their implications for the strategic management of heritage public spaces in Cuban urban contexts are discussed.

Methods

The research was conducted under a mixed approach, integrating qualitative techniques for the construction of the theoretical-methodological framework and quantitative techniques for data collection and analysis using statistical methods. The study was structured in three phases.

Phase I: Preparation for the implementation of the general procedure

A group of 15 experts was convened from key institutions in urban management in Matanzas: Provincial Directorate of Heritage, Provincial Directorate of Physical Planning, Office of the City Conservator, Office of the Historian, local government, and marketing specialists. Through in-depth interviews and group dynamics, the experts identified the city's main public spaces and classified them according to typologies (squares, parks, streets, waterfronts). Narváez Street was selected as a case study for three reasons: its historical and heritage relevance, its recent revitalization process, and its emerging role as a hub for creative economies, which makes it a unique space within the Matanzas context.

Phase II: Evaluation of the image of the selected public space

The core of the study was the application of a structured questionnaire to 300 residents of the city of Matanzas. The sample was selected through probabilistic stratified sampling by people's councils (the seven councils of the municipality), with a sampling error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. Residents over 16 years of age, of both sexes, were included to ensure representativeness of the different population strata.

The questionnaire was designed based on a literature review and, above all, on the dimensions and attributes established in studies related to the image of public spaces that established content and construct validity in their application to the city of Matanzas [15; 16]. To structure the analysis, we started from the premise that the quality of public space is evaluated through indicators such as identity, accessibility, or sociability [17]. Likewise, it is assumed that an effective evaluation system should prioritize the image perception of different user groups (residents and visitors), whose demands can be organized into dimensions such as spatial structure, environmental perception, and sociocultural aspects [18]. Based on the integration of the methodological references analyzed, the authors constructed a questionnaire consisting of 19 image attributes grouped into five dimensions:

- Spatial character: presence of monuments, reflection of historical heritage, uniqueness, atmosphere.
- Physical configuration: accessibility, aesthetics, maintenance, comfort.
- Social dynamics: space designated for strolling, space designated for social interaction, safety, inclusion.
- Collective confluence: signage, technology (WiFi), art and narratives.
- Environmental dimension: perceived environmental benefits, environmental quality, care of flora and fauna, heritage care.

For each attribute, respondents rated their perception (Likert scale from 1 = very negative to 5 = very positive) and the importance they assigned to it (1 = not important to 5 = very important). In addition, questions were included about the overall assessment of the space and the intention to

repeat the visit. For global assessments, analyses of the distribution of ratings by dimension were performed using box-and-whisker diagrams, where the neutral point (3.0) and the positive threshold (3.5) were represented, as well as a radar chart to compare the rating versus importance by dimension.

Reliability was verified using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (0.950 for ratings and 0.981 for importance) and construct validity using multiple linear regression ($R^2 > 0.7$ in both cases). Data were processed using SPSS statistical software version 22.0, employing descriptive statistics (means) to analyze perceptions by attribute, dimension, and globally.

Phase III: Proposal of identity and image strategies

The results were represented using the importance-perception matrix, which allows establishing strategic lines for improvement, structured along three axes: indistinctiveness (raising basic standards), differentiation (enhancing unique attributes), and communication (making visible and engaging in dialogue with the community). These strategies are presented in the discussion and conclusions section.

Results

53.4% of the respondents were men and 46.6% women. The predominant age groups were 16-25 years (28.2%) and 46-55 years (27.8%), with a smaller presence of the 56 years and older group (20.6%). Regarding occupation, 61.8% are workers and 26.5% students. University education level predominates broadly (79.4%), which reflects a highly educated sample, a factor that could introduce bias in the analysis of the results.

Analysis by Dimensions and Attributes

Table 1 presents a summary of the ratings and importance (arithmetic means) given by the 300 respondents for each dimension and attribute of Narváez Street.

Table 1 - Summary of means by dimensions and attributes.

Dimensions and Attributes	Mean (Rating)	Mean (Importance)
Spatial character	3.29	3.67
Presence of monuments	3.34	3.53
Reflection of historical heritage	2.91	3.56
Uniqueness	3.72	3.78
Atmosphere	3.19	3.81
Physical configuration	3.29	3.76
Accessibility	3.53	3.66
Aesthetics	3.44	3.94
Maintenance	3.06	3.75
Comfort	3.13	3.69
Social dynamics	3.37	3.77
Space designated for strolling	3.75	3.78
Space designated for social interaction	3.75	3.88
Safety	2.50	3.63
Inclusion	3.47	3.78
Collective confluence	2.70	3.46
Signage	2.50	3.44
Technology (WiFi)	2.19	3.47
Art and narratives	3.41	3.47
Environmental dimension	2.85	3.57

Perceived environmental benefits	2.91	3.50
Environmental quality	3.03	3.66
Care of flora and fauna	2.56	3.53
Heritage care	2.90	3.59

The best-rated dimension was social dynamics (3.37), with the attributes "space designated for strolling" (3.75) and "space designated for social interaction" (3.75) standing out. Uniqueness (3.72), within spatial character, also obtained a high score. These results indicate that users perceive Narváez Street as a place that effectively fulfills its function of social encounter and possesses a unique character within the urban fabric.

At the opposite extreme, collective confluence was the worst-rated dimension (2.70), with the attributes "technology (WiFi)" (2.19) and "signage" (2.50) at the lowest levels. The environmental dimension also presented low ratings (2.85), especially in "care and preservation of flora and fauna" (2.56) and "perceived environmental benefits" (2.91). Safety, included in social dynamics, obtained one of the lowest scores (2.50), which constitutes a critical finding. These low perceptions in these attributes are due to residents noting the absence of these provisions in the studied space, or in any case, far below what would be considered normal even in the context of the specific public space in the city where they reside. All of this denotes dissatisfaction with this type of provision and/or benefits of a space associated above all with leisure and urban recreation in the city of Matanzas.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of ratings by dimension, where it is observed that the spatial character and physical configuration dimensions have the same mean (3.29), variables that remain stable against the change of threshold, indicating that the perception is consistent and slightly above the midpoint of the scale. In contrast, social dynamics (3.37) shows a mean higher than the positive threshold, reflecting a more favorable evaluation in the current scenario with respect to the other dimensions, which requires less immediate intervention in this particular regard. On the other hand, both collective confluence and the environmental dimension recorded means below the neutral point and the positive threshold, evidencing that both dimensions are perceived below the level of indifference, suggesting that they are critical areas requiring priority intervention.

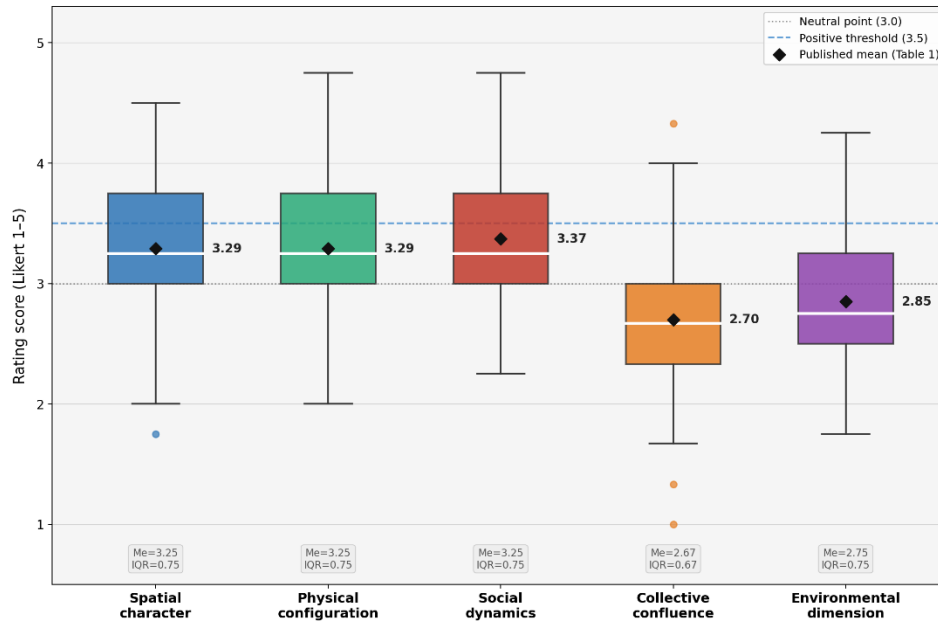


Fig. 1 – Distribution of image ratings by dimension.

Respondents assigned the greatest importance to attributes belonging to the physical configuration and social dynamics dimensions, while attributes belonging to the collective confluence and environmental dimensions were considered less of a priority. This reveals that, although many of these attributes are rated negatively, users do not place them among their main concerns, which tempers the urgency of intervening in them in the short term. The overall results of importance and rating by dimension are shown in figure 2.

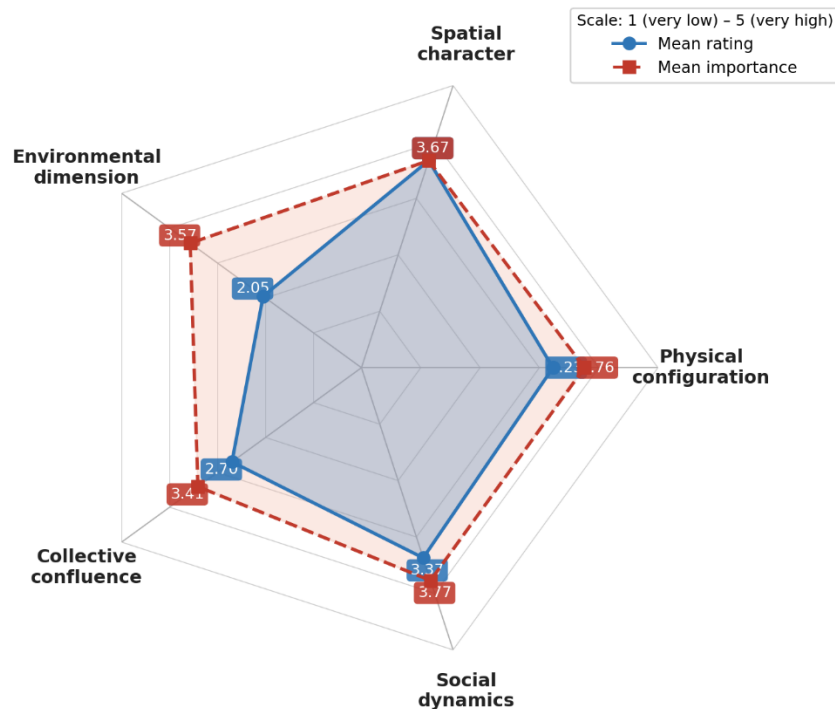


Fig. 2 – Radar chart comparing importance vs. image rating by dimension.

Overall Assessment

The overall assessment of the image of Narváez Street reached a mean of 3.26 (on a scale of 1 to 5), a moderately positive score that contrasts with the low evaluations of some specific attributes. However, the intention to visit the space again was notably higher (3.76). This difference suggests that, despite the deficiencies, users remain favorably disposed to continue frequenting the place, which can be interpreted as an indicator of loyalty or as a reflection of the lack of equivalent alternatives in the city. To deepen the analysis and support the gradual implementation of identity and image strategies, the importance-rating matrix (Figure 3) was constructed, which constitutes the starting point for management recommendations.

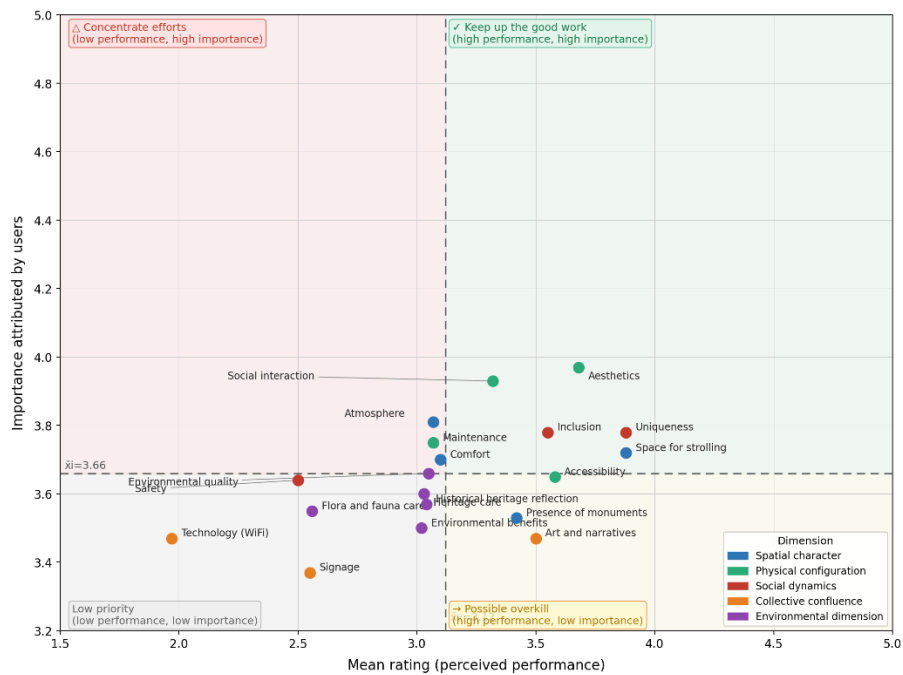


Fig. 3 – Importance-rating matrix of the image dimensions of Narváez Street.

From the analysis, the following management recommendations are derived:

1. Implement a comprehensive program to improve basic standards, prioritizing lighting and perceived safety, as well as the installation of clear and accessible signage that facilitates orientation and heritage interpretation.
2. Strengthen cultural programming and participatory activities by leveraging the uniqueness and social dynamics attributes that are already valued. The programming should be stable and diverse, involving the artists and entrepreneurs of the place themselves.
3. Design a participatory communication strategy that includes awareness campaigns about heritage and environmental care, as well as dialogue channels with users to gather suggestions and evaluate the impact of interventions.
4. Conduct complementary studies that delve deeper into the perceptions of specific segments of residents, but also include studies of tourists and investors as equally relevant target publics,

and incorporate longitudinal measurements to assess the evolution of the image over time.

Discussion

The results obtained allow us to identify three fundamental tensions that run through the management of the image of Narváez Street and that can be extended to other heritage public spaces in similar urban contexts. These tensions have been similarly diagnosed in studies of tourist urban identity carried out in the city of Matanzas [8; 15].

The first tension manifests itself in the gap between the high valuation of social dynamics and the low evaluation of safety, signage, and technology. While users recognize and value the social character of the space –its capacity to host strolls, gatherings, and activities– they simultaneously perceive deficiencies in the support elements that condition the daily experience. Safety is a particularly critical factor here. With a mean of 2.50, it is the worst-rated attribute along with signage and technology. The perception of insecurity, although not necessarily corresponding to objective crime data, could have medium-term effects on the use of the space: it reduces the likelihood of nighttime visits, limits the presence of certain population groups (such as women and older adults), and generates a feeling of vulnerability that contradicts the goal of an inclusive and open public space. This tension reflects a common problem in revitalized public spaces [6; 7]: investment in heritage restoration and cultural activation is not always accompanied by improvements in safety management, lighting, and basic maintenance. These improvements should be carried out in coordination with public institutions, companies, and relevant concurrent actors, under the direction of the municipal government and the Office of the City Conservator, in analysis and decision-making sessions on the matter, involving safety, lighting, and basic maintenance actions in pursuit of better performance in these areas.

The second tension lies between the historical identity of the place and the image it currently projects, in line with the results of recent research [16]. Narváez Street possesses a valuable heritage: its 19th-century warehouses, its relationship with the San Juan River, and its role in the region's sugar economy give it a unique identity. However, the low rating of attributes such as "reflection of historical heritage" (2.91) and "heritage care" (2.90) indicates that this identity does not effectively translate into the perceived image. One possible explanation is that heritage elements are not adequately interpreted for users. The lack of informational signage, the absence of narratives connecting the past with the present, and the neglect of some architectural elements may cause heritage to go unnoticed or be perceived as a mere backdrop rather than an active identity resource. Incorporating physical and digital information supports about the space, and introducing in these cases elements associated with augmented reality in certain places within it that contribute to knowledge of its identity, history, as well as the current offerings of each place, could help improve perceptions in this regard.

This tension is especially relevant in heritage management contexts, where conservation often focuses on the materiality of assets but neglects their communicative and educational dimension. The identity and image of a public space are not exhausted in its physical attributes; rather, they are constructed through daily practices and narratives that incorporate the historical value of the place, according to the results of previous research carried out in the same city [13; 14].

The third tension derives from the comparison between what users consider important and what they actually value in relation to the image of the assumed dimensions of the public space.

Respondents assign the greatest importance to aesthetics, social interaction, and atmosphere, which are precisely the best-rated attributes. This indicates a coincidence between their expectations and perceived reality in these aspects. However, when examining the poorly rated attributes (safety, technology, signage), it is observed that users assign them medium, non-priority importance. Recent studies confirm the existence of this tension in other international scenarios based on the ratings received from urban publics on these attributes [2; 12].

This apparent contradiction can be interpreted as a resigned acceptance of deficiencies, or as a prioritization of the social benefits of the space above its functional shortcomings. The high intention to repeat the visit (3.76) supports this reading: users are willing to continue coming to Narváez Street despite its problems, probably because they value the social experience more than the discomforts associated with the deficiencies.

However, this "perceptual resilience" should not be a cause for complacency. Low ratings on key attributes can erode the image of the space in the long term and affect its sustainability. Furthermore, they may be deterring potential users who do not belong to the groups that currently frequent it. Proactive management should address these deficiencies before they become insurmountable barriers.

The tensions identified point to the need for an integrated approach that combines actions at three levels:

1. Indistinctiveness: raising basic standards of safety, maintenance, signage, and environmental care. These actions are not the most "visible" from the point of view of urban marketing, but they are a condition of possibility for a satisfactory experience and for the inclusion of all publics.
2. Differentiation: enhancing the unique attributes that are already valued, such as cultural programming, the presence of artists' workshops, and the pedestrian promenade condition. Uniqueness (3.72) and social dynamics (3.37) are strategic assets that must be cared for and developed.
3. Communication and participation: articulating a narrative that connects historical identity with the contemporary image, through interpretive signage, educational activities, and feedback channels with users.

This approach is consistent with the principles of urban marketing as a tool in the service of sustainable management and with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, which promote inclusive, safe, and resilient cities [19; 20].

Conclusions

The analysis of the image of Narváez Street from the citizen perspective confirms the utility of mixed approaches to capture the complexity of heritage public spaces. The results show a clear strength in the social dynamics dimension and the uniqueness of spatial character and physical configuration (rating above 3.25), indicating that the revitalization project has succeeded in building a positive sense of place. However, weaknesses in safety, signage, technology, and environmental care constitute limiting factors that deteriorate the overall image and may affect long-term sustainability. Prioritizing actions associated with the circular economy in establishments, responsible behavior toward cultural and natural heritage within the space, as well as environmental education, would be relevant in this task.

As a limitation, this study is based on a single case and at a specific point in time. Future research could extend the analysis to other public spaces in Matanzas and other Cuban cities, as well as explore participatory methodologies that involve citizens in the co-management of these spaces. Incorporating direct observation techniques and analysis of public uses would also be valuable. From the field of industrial engineering, the study constitutes a conceptual-methodological framework to reliably address research related to urban service management, the perceived quality of public spaces according to urban publics, as well as process improvement in heritage environments.

Narváez Street could become a benchmark for the integrated management of heritage public spaces in Cuba. To achieve this, it is necessary to go beyond physical revitalization and build a management framework that articulates the social, heritage, environmental, and communicative dimensions, with the active participation of the community. This article hopes to contribute to that goal by offering empirical evidence and a conceptual framework to rethink the identity and image of the spaces that form the heart of our cities.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Jensy Tanda Díaz: Project leader and administrator, participated in drafting the introduction and in conceiving the differences between supply chains and value chains; carried out the value chain modeling and drafted the original first draft.

Roberto Carmelo Pons García: Participated in drafting the introduction with respect to sugarcane agroindustrial value chains. Participated in applying the procedure's results and in discussing the research.

Eylén Torres Machado: Participated in designing the procedure and in applying Phase Three: impact assessments. Participated in collecting field information to support modeling. Participated in writing the manuscript's conclusions.

Yasniel Sánchez Suárez: Participated in drafting the introduction sections related to value chains. Participated in designing the methodology section on stakeholder analysis and identification of improvement opportunities. Participated in the initial drafting of the discussion and in revising the manuscript.

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