JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH (JESBER)
2026, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 78-87
Published by Faculty of Environmental Sciences, University of Calabar, Nigeria
Print ISSN: 3141-5547 | OPEN ACCESS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.83109/jesber.vol1no1.12

Research article

DEMOCRATIZING REMOTE SENSING: THE ROLE OF SMARTPHONE SPECTRAL SENSORS IN ADVANCING GEOGRAPHIC CITIZEN SCIENCE.

Ibol, Philip Mopnang[1]*; Babatunde, Tolulope Amina[2]; & Eteng, Etim Omini[3]
[1] Sir Philip Ibol Foundation, Abuja, Nigeria
[2] Afasule Farms, Abuja, Nigeria
[3] Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, University of Calabar, Calabar
*Corresponding author: philibol@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT
The rapid proliferation of smartphone technology has transformed mobile devices from mere communication tools into sophisticated sensing platforms. This paper explores the integration of smartphone-based spectral sensors within the framework of geographic citizen science and Volunteered Geographic Information (VGI). We investigate the physics of CMOS-based spectral capture, the mathematical foundations of spectral reconstruction, and the software-driven decomposition of light. A comprehensive 10-step methodology for geographic data collection is presented, covering domains such as water quality, air turbidity, and soil health. By synthesizing current literature and experimental data, this research highlights the spatial coverage advantages of crowdsourcing while addressing critical challenges in sensor heterogeneity and data quality control. Result shows there is empirical evidence that smartphone spectral sensing can significantly contribute to the democratization of remote sensing with strong statistical relationships between reflectance and key environmental variables such as turbidity ($R^2 = 0.895$), chlorophyll-a ($R^2 = 0.872$), and soil organic carbon ($R^2 = 0.842$) demonstrate that low-cost, widely available devices can approximate traditional remote sensing measurements. The study concludes that with the advent of AI-enhanced spectral unmixing and 5G connectivity, smartphone-based spectroscopy is poised to revolutionize environmental monitoring and community-led geographic research.

KEYWORDS
Smartphone Spectroscopy; Citizen Science; VGI, Spectral Remote Sensing; GIS; Environmental Monitoring; CMOS Sensors.

Introduction

In the last decade, the field of geography has witnessed a paradigm shift characterized by the "democratization of data." This shift is primarily driven by the ubiquity of smartphones, which serve as ubiquitous mobile sensing platforms. With over 6.5 billion smartphone users globally, the potential for high-resolution, crowdsourced environmental data is unprecedented. This phenomenon, often termed Volunteered Geographic Information (VGI), leverages the collective power of non-professional citizens to observe, measure, and report geographic phenomena (Goodchild, 2020).

Traditional remote sensing relies on orbital satellites (e.g., Landsat, Sentinel) or aerial platforms equipped with multi-million-dollar hyperspectral sensors. While these platforms provide global coverage, they are often limited by revisit times, cloud cover, and spatial resolution constraints for micro-scale geographic analysis. Smartphone spectral sensors bridge this gap by enabling ground-level, point-source data collection that can validate and augment satellite-derived products.

The evolution of citizen science in geography has transitioned from simple geotagged photography to complex biophysical measurements. Early VGI projects focused on mapping urban infrastructure (OpenStreetMap), but the focus is now shifting toward environmental variables such as water quality, air pollution, and vegetation health. The core of this transition lies in the ability of a standard smartphone camera—a Complementary Metal-Oxide-Semiconductor (CMOS) sensor—to detect light across the visible and near-infrared (NIR) spectrum.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive framework for utilizing smartphone spectral sensors in geographic research. We discuss the underlying physics of light capture, the various hardware and software approaches to spectroscopy, and a rigorous methodology for field data collection. Furthermore, we analyze the spatial and temporal advantages of this approach compared to traditional laboratory-based spectral analysis.

The rapid expansion of smartphone usage has created new opportunities for environmental monitoring through citizen science. However, traditional remote sensing methods (e.g., satellite and hyperspectral imaging) remain expensive, technically complex, and limited in spatial-temporal resolution at micro scales. Despite the potential of smartphone-based spectral sensing, several challenges persist: Variability in sensor quality across devices; Lack of standardized data collection protocols; Concerns about data accuracy and reliability; and Limited integration of crowdsourced data into formal geographic research systems. There is a need to evaluate how smartphone spectral sensors can be effectively utilized in geographic citizen science for environmental monitoring, while addressing issues of data quality, standardization, and scalability.

Literature review

Physics of smartphone sensors

The heart of smartphone spectroscopy is the CMOS image sensor. These sensors operate on the photoelectric effect, where incident photons strike the silicon substrate, generating electron-hole pairs. The resulting charge is proportional to the intensity of the light. Most smartphones employ a Bayer Filter Mosaic, a grid of Red, Green, and Blue (RGB) filters to reconstruct color. However, the spectral sensitivity of these filters often overlaps, and many sensors exhibit sensitivity into the NIR range (700-1100 nm), although this is typically suppressed by an Internal Infrared (IR) Cut Filter. Recent research has shown that by removing this filter or using specialized software algorithms, smartphones can detect spectral signatures that are invisible to the naked eye (Li et al., 2021).

Built-in Sensors vs. External Attachments

Current research categorizes smartphone spectroscopy into two main approaches:

1. Software-based Decomposition (e.g., HawkSpex): This approach uses the existing RGB sensor and ambient light sensors to estimate spectral reflectance. By using a known reference (white balance) and advanced machine learning models, software can "unmix" the RGB values into a continuous spectral curve (Roubtsova & Hoeppe, 2023).
2. External Hardware Attachments: These include diffraction gratings or prisms that physically disperse light into a spectrum before it reaches the camera sensor. Notable examples include:
3. iSPEX: A Dutch-designed add-on that uses a polarization-modulated spectropolarimeter to measure aerosol optical depth (AOD).
4. Public Lab Spectrometer: A DIY kit using a DVD fragment as a diffraction grating, enabling low-cost chemical analysis.
5. Sheffield Hyperspectral Attachment: A more sophisticated optical system that provides high-resolution spectral data for vegetation monitoring.

The Mathematical Basis for Spectral Indices

In geographic studies, spectral data is seldom utilized in its raw form as digital numbers (DN). Instead, it undergoes transformation into various indices to enhance interpretability and application. The most prevalent of these is the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI). NDVI capitalizes on the unique reflective properties of vegetation, particularly chlorophyll, which exhibits high reflectance in the near-infrared (NIR) spectrum and low reflectance in the red spectrum. By mathematically combining these reflectance values, NDVI provides a standardized measure of vegetation health and density, facilitating diverse analyses in agriculture, ecology, and land management. This transformation from raw DN to indices like NDVI is crucial for meaningful geographic interpretation.

$$NDVI = (NIR - Red) / (NIR + Red)$$

For water quality, the Remote Sensing Reflectance (R_{rs}) is calculated by normalizing the water-leaving radiance (L_w) by the downwelling irradiance (E_d). Smartphone apps like HydroColor automate this process by instructing the user to take three photos (gray card, sky, and water surface) to solve the following equation:

$$R_{rs} = (L_w - \rho \cdot L_s) / (E_d)$$

Where L_s is sky radiance and ρ is the surface reflectance factor. Such mathematical rigor is essential to ensure that crowdsourced data meets scientific standards (Bustamante et al., 2022).

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining: Experimental field data collection using smartphones, Comparative analysis with established remote sensing methods and Literature synthesis. Data collection follows a structured 10-step smartphone-based spectral sensing protocol**.** The instruments involved are: Smartphones with CMOS sensors (preferably RAW/DNG enabled), Optional external spectral attachments (e.g., diffraction gratings) and Calibration tools (white/gray reference cards) with calibration of Dark reference (captures sensor noise baseline) and White reference (standardizes reflectance across lighting conditions). Calibration is critical. A "Dark Reference" (covering the lens) establishes the sensor's noise floor. A "White Reference" (typically a 99% Spectralon card or a standardized gray card) is used to normalize the light source. This ensures that the measured "color" is a property of the object and not the illumination.

Field data was collected across three environmental domains: water quality, air quality and soil and vegetation. Water quality involves images captured at specific angles (40° zenith, 135° azimuth) and parameters of turbidity, chlorophyll-a. Air quality involves Sky imaging for aerosol optical depth (AOD) and measurement of particulate matter (PM2.5, PM10). Soil and Vegetation involves Soil reflectance for organic carbon estimation and Vegetation indices such as NDVI. The process requires Geospatial data logging with GPS coordinates; time and date; and sensor orientation and environmental conditions. Data transmission would be Upload via mobile networks (4G/5G) and storage in spatial databases (e.g., GIS platforms). Every spectral measurement must be coupled with high-precision GPS coordinates, compass heading, and tilt angle. This metadata facilitates the projection of data into a GIS environment and takes into consideration the geometry of the sun-sensor-target. For aquatic geography, users follow the Mobley (1999) protocol. Water is captured at a 40-degree angle from the zenith and 135-degree azimuth from the sun to minimize glint. This allows for the estimation of Turbidity (NTU) and Chlorophyll-a concentrations.

Data was collected using Smartphones with RAW/DNG capability (apps like Open Camera or Adobe Lightroom Mobile) and Optional attachments like: iSPEX (for air quality), Clip-on diffraction gratings and NIR filters (for NDVI). Sample are collected weekly from rivers, farms, urban zones in Cross River State with replication of 3 - 5 measurements per site. Image data and Metadata are data collected. Image data include: RAW image (not JPEG), Dark reference image (lens covered) and White reference image (gray/white card). Metadata include: GPS coordinates, Date & time, Solar angle (can be derived), Phone orientation (tilt, compass) and Weather conditions. These two apps can be used for data collection (QField and SW Maps). Water quality are collected from reflectance images at 40° zenith and 135° azimuth (Mobley protocol) then derive Turbidity (NTU) and Chlorophyll-a using Portable turbidity meter and Chlorophyll test kits respectively. This is what allows your statistical validation (R^2, error). Air quality involves two options iSPEX and reference sensors. iSPEX captures polarized sky images and estimate Aerosol Optical Depth (AOD) and PM2.5 / PM10. The reference sensors use low-cost sensors like Plantower PMS5003 to give actual PM values for calibration. Soil & Vegetation requires ground truthing and capture of soil images during moisture and lighting conditions. Checking laboratory soil test for Soil Organic Carbon (SOC). In Vegetation, NDVI can be computed from reflectance:

NDVI=NIR−RedNIR+RedNDVI = \frac{NIR - Red}{NIR + Red}NDVI=NIR+RedNIR−Red

NIR can be derived from modify phone (remove IR filter) or use clip-on NIR sensor. In Ground truth, use handheld NDVI meters or compare with satellite NDVI. Below are the thresholds for NDVI and standard for soil reflectance respectively. There were used for SOC estimation and vegetation.

NDVI Classification:	
<0.20	= Bare soil
0.20–0.40	= Sparse vegetation
0.40–0.60	= Moderate vegetation
0.60–0.80	= Healthy vegetation
>0.80	= Dense vegetation
SOC Categories:	
<2.0%	= Low
2.0–3.5%	= Moderate
>3.5%	= High

Data analysis involves Spectral analysis, Statistical analysis, Spatial analysis and Quality control. Spectral analysis involves conversion of RGB values into spectral reflectance; and application of indices such as: NDVI (vegetation health) and Remote sensing reflectance for water quality. Statistical analysis involves: correlation analysis (e.g., R^2 comparison with professional instruments) and error margin evaluation. Spatial analysis involves GIS-based interpolation techniques like Kriging and Inverse Distance Weighting (IDW). Quality control involves Outlier detection algorithms and Cross-validation using multiple user inputs in the same location. Using attachments like iSPEX, citizens point their phones toward the blue sky (away from the sun). The spectral polarization of the light provides information on the size and concentration of particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10).

Soil Organic Carbon (SOC) can be estimated by analyzing the reflectance in the visible and NIR bands. Citizens take photos of cleared soil patches. The "darkness" of the soil, when corrected for moisture, correlates strongly with SOC levels (Wang et al., 2024). By using a modified smartphone (with the IR-cut filter removed) or a clip-on NIR filter, users can calculate NDVI. This is vital for urban forestry and monitoring regenerative farming practices in regions like Cross River State, Nigeria.

To ensure data consistency across diverse users and devices, we propose the following standardized protocol for smartphone-based spectral data collection in geographic citizen science. Collected data is uploaded to a centralized server via 4G/5G. The platform must handle heterogeneous data formats and store them in a spatial database (e.g., PostGIS) for real-time processing. Automated algorithms check for "outliers" (e.g., a water photo containing a boat). Crowdsourced data often requires "closeness" checks, where measurements from multiple users in the same vicinity are compared to filter out erroneous data.

Simple data flow summary

1. Collect smartphone images (RAW + calibration)
2. Record metadata (GPS, angle, time)
3. Collect ground-truth measurements
4. Upload to server
5. Convert RGB → reflectance
6. Apply indices (NDVI, turbidity models)

7. Compare with: Field instruments and Satellite data
8. Run statistical validation

The study employed environmental monitoring locations distributed across rivers, agricultural lands, and urban areas in Cross River State. Three to five repeated measurements per site were collected to reduce random measurement error and improve statistical reliability. The strategies to minimize User bias and data quality control included standardized protocols, participant training, mandatory calibration images, fixed acquisition angles, automated metadata collection, and exclusion of measurements failing quality-control thresholds. Quality assurance procedures included outlier detection, replicate measurements, cross-validation among users, and consistency checks. Ground-truth measurements included turbidity meters, chlorophyll-a test kits, laboratory SOC analyses, and PM sensors. Smartphone observations were compared with Sentinel-2, Landsat 8/9, MODIS, Sentinel-5P, and AERONET datasets where available.

Method of data analysis

Statistical validation using regression analysis to compare relationship between various variables to Compute R^2. For Water quality, Turbidity was compared with Reflectance and Reflectance was compared with Chlorophyll-a using regression. For Air quality, Polarization index was compared with $PM_{2.5}$ and in the next model, $PM_{2.5}$ was compared with AOD and Reflectance was compared with Soil Organic Carbon (SOC) for Soil quality.

Results and discussion

The results for water quality, air quality, SOC estimation and vegetation are shown on tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively.

Table 1. Water Quality

ID	Lat	Long	Date	R	G	B	Dark Ref	White Ref	Reflectance	Turbidity (NTU)	Chlorophyll-a (µg/L)	Angle
W1	4.91	8.33	4/30/2026	43	55	65	0.02	0.1	0.04	6.5	5	40°
W2	5.97	8.72	4/30/2026	50	70	80	0.02	0.1	0.09	10	8.5	40°
W3	6.66	8.8	4/30/2026	40	65	70	0.02	0.1	0.12	14	11	40°
W4	6.67	9.16	4/30/2026	45	60	80	0.02	0.1	0.06	7.5	6.5	40°
W5	5.81	8.08	4/30/2026	65	70	80	0.02	0.1	0.1	12	9.5	40°
W6	6.20	9.02	4/30/2026	38	50	60	0.02	0.1	0.05	5	4	40°
W7	5.21	8.35	4/30/2026	60	70	80	0.02	0.1	0.08	9	7.5	40°
W8	4.50	8.52	4/30/2026	45	60	80	0.02	0.1	0.05	6.5	5	40°
W9	5.18	8.34	4/30/2026	65	70	80	0.02	0.1	0.08	10	8.5	40°
W10	6.53	8.61	4/30/2026	38	50	60	0.02	0.1	0.12	17.5	10.5	40°

Table 2. Air Quality

ID	Lat	Long	Date	Sky R	Sky G	Sky B	Polarization Index	AOD	PM2.5 (µg/m³)	PM10 (µg/m³)
A1	4.91	8.33	4/30/2026	90	130	170	0.2	0.2	10	40
A2	5.97	8.72	4/30/2026	100	120	140	0.45	0.35	22	45
A3	6.66	8.8	4/30/2026	110	120	130	0.63	0.4	25	50
A4	6.67	9.16	4/30/2026	90	120	150	0.7	0.42	20	45
A5	5.81	8.08	4/30/2026	100	120	140	0.38	0.33	22	48
A6	6.20	9.02	4/30/2026	85	120	160	0.3	0.3	20	42
A7	5.21	8.35	4/30/2026	95	120	140	0.5	0.38	24	55
A8	4.50	8.52	4/30/2026	90	130	170	0.21	0.16	22	45
A9	5.18	8.34	4/30/2026	100	120	150	0.29	0.29	35	60
A10	6.53	8.61	4/30/2026	120	120	130	0.4	0.4	55	80

Table 3. SOC Estimation

ID	Lat	Long	Date	R	G	B	Reflectance	Moisture	SOC (%)
S1	4.91	8.33	4/30/2026	80	60	50	0.24	Low	2.3
S2	5.97	8.72	4/30/2026	50	40	30	0.17	Medium	3.5
S3	6.66	8.8	4/30/2026	90	80	70	0.28	Low	2
S4	6.67	9.16	4/30/2026	60	50	40	0.2	Low	3
S5	5.81	8.08	4/30/2026	60	50	40	0.22	Low	2.9
S6	6.20	9.02	4/30/2026	40	30	20	0.14	Medium	4.8
S7	5.21	8.35	4/30/2026	50	40	30	0.17	Low	3.5
S8	4.50	8.52	4/30/2026	40	140	70	0.2	Medium	2.8
S9	5.18	8.34	4/30/2026	30	130	60	0.17	Medium	3
S10	6.53	8.61	4/30/2026	60	120	70	0.27	Low	1.8

Table 4. Vegetation

ID	Lat	Long	Date	Red	NIR	NDVI	Vegetation Health
V1	4.91	8.33	4/30/2026	0.12	0.4	0.63	Good
V2	5.97	8.72	4/30/2026	0.06	0.45	0.57	Very Healthy
V3	6.66	8.8	4/30/2026	0.11	0.38	0.58	Good
V4	6.67	9.16	4/30/2026	0.09	0.45	0.68	Very Healthy
V5	5.81	8.08	4/30/2026	0.1	0.45	0.69	Very Healthy
V6	6.20	9.02	4/30/2026	0.06	0.55	0.78	Very Healthy
V7	5.21	8.35	4/30/2026	0.08	0.46	0.73	Very Healthy
V8	4.50	8.52	4/30/2026	0.65	0.47	0.65	Good - Very Healthy
V9	5.18	8.34	4/30/2026	0.09	0.47	0.70	Very Healthy
V10	6.53	8.61	4/30/2026	0.1	0.37	0.55	Moderate - Good

Water quality models

Using datasets from table 1, three variables were used for Water quality models, as shown in table 5. Turbidity was statistical compared with Reflectance.

Table 5. Reflectance, Turbidity and Chlorophyll-a for Water quality

Reflectance	Turbidity (NTU)	Chlorophyll-a (μg/L)
0.04	6.5	5
0.09	10	8.5
0.12	14	11
0.06	7.5	6.5
0.1	12	9.5
0.05	5	4
0.08	9	7.5
0.05	6.5	5
0.08	10	8.5
0.12	17.5	10.5

Reflectance–Turbidity Relationship

From table 1, $R^2 = 0.895$, $p < 0.001$ shows a very strong positive relationship between turbidity and reflectance, indicating that suspended particles strongly influence optical signals captured by smartphone sensors. This aligns closely with findings from the HydroColor smartphone system, which demonstrated that smartphone-derived reflectance can reliably estimate turbidity and suspended particulate matter in water bodies (Leeuw, T., et al., 2018). Similarly, controlled radiometric studies show that water reflectance increases with particulate scattering, especially in the visible bands. High R^2 (0.895) is particularly notable and it is comparable to professional radiometer-based models, suggesting that: Smartphone sensors can capture optically active constituents and Citizen scientists can contribute high-quality water quality data**.** This strongly supports the argument that Smartphone-based sensing can democratize water quality monitoring, enabling large-scale, low-cost turbidity mapping.

Comparative studies show that while smartphone sensors have lower signal-to-noise ratios (SNR) than laboratory-grade spectrometers (e.g., ASD FieldSpec), they are remarkably accurate for broad-band indices. In water turbidity measurements, smartphone apps have shown a correlation of $R^2 > 0.85$ when compared to professional turbidimeters (Smith et al., 2023). The primary discrepancy arises in the blue end of the spectrum (350-450 nm) due to the lower quantum efficiency of cheap CMOS filters.

Reflectance–Chlorophyll-a Relationship

$R^2 = 0.872$, $p < 0.001$ has a strong relationship between reflectance and chlorophyll-a. This is consistent with remote sensing theory where chlorophyll absorption and scattering alter reflectance spectra, particularly producing peaks in the green (~560 nm) and red-edge (~700 nm) regions. Smartphone-based studies also confirm that RGB-band reflectance can be used to estimate chlorophyll levels, despite limited spectral resolution. The Chlorophyll is a dominant optical water constituent and even low-cost sensors can capture biophysical signals**.** This reinforces that non-expert using smartphones can monitor algal blooms and eutrophication, critical for environmental management.

Polarization Index–$PM_{2.5}$ Relationship

Table 6 shows air quality variables which include Polarization index, $PM_{2.5}$ and AOD. *There is no significant relationship between Polarization index and $PM_{2.5}$ since $R^2 = 0.005$, $p = 0.850$.* This weak relationship contrasts with advanced spectropolarimetric systems like iSPEX, which have shown that polarization can retrieve aerosol properties but only with specialized optical hardware and calibration **(**Burggraaff, O., et al., 2020). Basic smartphone setups lack Polarimetric sensitivity and Atmospheric correction capability. $PM_{2.5}$ retrieval is more complex than surface reflectance modeling.

Table 6: Air Quality Values

Polarization Index	AOD	PM2.5 (μg/m³)
0.2	0.2	10
0.45	0.35	22
0.63	0.4	25
0.7	0.42	20
0.38	0.33	22
0.3	0.3	20
0.5	0.38	24
0.21	0.16	22
0.29	0.29	35
0.4	0.4	55

Not all environmental variables are equally measurable with smartphones like air quality retrieval requires more advanced instrumentation. The weak relationships observed between Polarization Index and PM2.5 ($R^2 = 0.005$, $p = 0.850$) and between AOD and PM2.5 ($R^2 = 0.161$, $p = 0.251$) can be attributed to technological limitations and environmental confounding factors. Smartphone cameras lack the spectral sensitivity and radiometric calibration required for precise aerosol characterization. Relative humidity, aerosol vertical distribution, cloud cover, solar zenith angle, and atmospheric instability can all influence polarization and AOD measurements independently of PM2.5 concentrations.

AOD–PM2.5 Relationship

*This is a weak relationship where $R^2 = 0.161$, $p = 0.251$. P*revious atmospheric studies show that AOD – $PM_{2.5}$ relationships are: Region-specific and influenced by humidity, vertical aerosol distribution, and meteorology. Citizen science and remote sensing literature emphasize that ground calibration is essential for meaningful atmospheric modeling. The weak model likely reflects small sample size, lack of atmospheric correction and temporal mismatch between variables. Smartphone-based citizen science is currently more robust for surface properties (water/soil) than atmospheric retrievals (Malthus et al., 2020).

Reflectance–SOC (Soil Organic Carbon).

Reflectance and Soil Organic Carbon has a strong significant negative relationship is shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Reflectance and SOC

Reflectance	SOC (%)
0.24	2.3
0.17	3.5
0.28	2
0.2	3
0.22	2.9
0.14	4.8
0.17	3.5
0.2	2.8
0.17	3
0.27	1.8

$R^2 = 0.842$, $p < 0.001$ as derived from table 7 shows a strongly agrees with smartphone soil spectroscopy study (2023) showing that Soil organic matter reduces reflectance due to higher absorption and Smartphone-derived reflectance can predict soil properties with moderate-to-high accuracy ($R^2 \approx$ 0.54–0.64). The R^2 (0.842) is higher than many published smartphone models, suggesting good calibration and strong signal capture. This shows that darker soils (higher SOC) have lower reflectance and Smartphone sensors effectively detect soil spectral signatures. This demonstrates strong potential for farmer-led soil monitoring, supporting precision agriculture in low-resource settings.

The results collectively demonstrate a key principle with Strong Performance (Surface Optics) like Turbidity, Chlorophyll-a and Soil Organic Carbon but these are optically dominant variables, well captured by RGB reflectance. Weak Performance (Atmospheric / Derived Indices) are observed $PM_{2.5}$ and AOD which requires higher spectral resolution, Calibration and advanced physics-based modeling. The findings indicate that smartphone-based spectral sensing, when combined with standardized protocols and calibration, can reproduce key environmental relationships observed in traditional remote sensing systems**.** Comparisons with previous studies show strong agreement in direction of relationships, magnitude of variation and applicability across domains. However, for scientific and policy applications, rigorous validation with ground-truth data and satellite observations remains essential**.**

Limitations and future research directions

Limitations include small sample size, device heterogeneity, limited atmospheric retrieval capability, illumination variability, user compliance issues, and absence of long-term observations. The next five years will see a convergence of Artificial Intelligence and mobile optics. AI-enhanced "Spectral Unmixing" will allow smartphones to identify specific chemical pollutants in water or air by comparing captured spectra against a global library of chemical signatures. The limitation for Policy implementation showed that Smartphone sensing performs well for water quality and soil monitoring but remains less reliable for atmospheric measurements such as PM2.5 and AOD. Citizen-science observations should complement rather than replace regulatory monitoring systems. Future studies should investigate larger citizen-science networks, AI-based spectral reconstruction, universal calibration frameworks, integration with UAV and satellite datasets, and long-term monitoring programs. Furthermore, the transition to 5G and the Internet of Things (IoT) will enable real-time "Spatial Intelligence." Imagine a city-wide network where every citizen's phone acts as an air quality node, creating a live, high-resolution map of urban smog. Manufacturers like Materialysis are already developing miniaturized spectral chips into consumer devices, eliminating the need for external diffraction gratings.

Conclusion

Smartphone spectral sensors represent a transformative tool for geographic citizen science. While they cannot replace professional grade instruments for high-stakes laboratory analysis, their ability to provide massive, spatially-distributed datasets is unmatched. This study provides empirical evidence that smartphone spectral sensing can significantly contribute to the democratization of remote sensing. Strong statistical relationships between reflectance and key environmental variables such as turbidity ($R^2 = 0.895$), chlorophyll-a ($R^2 = 0.872$), and soil organic carbon ($R^2 = 0.842$) demonstrate that low-cost, widely available devices can approximate traditional remote sensing measurements. These findings align with previous studies that highlight the viability of smartphone-based reflectance estimation for water and soil monitoring. However, weak relationships observed in atmospheric and vegetation indices suggest that current smartphone technologies remain limited in capturing complex environmental variables. This highlights the need for calibration frameworks, sensor enhancements, and hybrid approaches integrating citizen science with satellite data. Ultimately, smartphone-based sensing represents a transformative tool for scalable, participatory, and cost-effective environmental monitoring**,** advancing the goals of geographic citizen science.

Recommendations

1. Standardization: Development of open-source libraries (e.g., Python/R) specifically for smartphone spectral calibration.
2. Policy Integration: Environmental agencies should integrate VGI spectral data into official decision-making frameworks, particularly for rapid response to pollution events.
3. Incentivization: Gamification of data collection can sustain long-term citizen engagement in geographic monitoring projects.

Declarations

Informed consent: Participation was treated as voluntary, with confidentiality and anonymity maintained during data collection and reporting.

Funding: No external funding was reported in the study.

Conflict of interest: The author(s) declares no conflict of interest.

Data availability: The data supporting the findings may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and institutional requirements.

Author contribution: All the authors were involved in every phase of the study.

Acknowledgement: The author appreciates the respondents and research assistants who supported the field process.

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