



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
HERITAGE, ART AND MULTIMEDIA
(IJHAM)
www.ijham.com



URBAN ICONS: SYMBOLIC FUNCTION AND VISUAL STRATEGY IN CITY BRANDING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHARLES MORRIS' S SEMIOTICS

Zhuang Yuan^{1*}, Saiful Bahari Mohd Yusoff²

¹ Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

Email: 20010026@siswa.unimas.my

² Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

Email: mysaiful@unimas.my

* Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 19.06.2025

Revised date: 04.07.2025

Accepted date: 30.07.2025

Published date: 01.09.2025

To cite this document:

Yuan, Z., & Yusoff, S. B. M. (2025). Urban Icons: Symbolic Function and Visual Strategy in City Branding from the Perspective of Charles Morris' s Semiotics. *International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia*, 8 (26), 01-26.

DOI: 10.35631/IJHAM.826001

This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Abstract:

With the rapid advancement of urbanization and increasing intercity competition, urban brand image design has become a crucial strategy for enhancing a city's competitiveness and cultural influence. This study grounded in Charles Morris's semiotic model, employs the analytical framework of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics to explore the symbolic functions and visual communication strategies in urban brand image design. Through a comparative analysis of representative domestic and international city cases, combined with literature review and case study methods, The study finds that, at the syntactic level, the recognizability of city visual identities can be enhanced through the systematic integration of visual elements; at the semantic level, the intrinsic meanings of cultural symbols should be deeply explored to convey the unique value of a city; and at the pragmatic level, multi-media communication strategies are essential to strengthening brand influence. Based on these insights, this research proposes strategies such as symbolic form optimization, cultural connotation articulation, and context-adaptive dissemination, offering both theoretical and practical guidance for city brand identity design.

Keywords:

Symbolic Function, City Branding, Urban Cultural Symbols, Application Of Pragmatics, Visual Communication Strategy

Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization and the continuous advancement of urbanization, competition among cities has become increasingly intense. In addition to demonstrating strength in areas such as economics and technology, cities must also establish distinctive brand

images to enhance their appeal and foster a sense of identity (Ma, de Jong, Hoppe, & Bruijne, 2021). Urban brand image design, as a critical component of a city's soft power, has emerged as a focal point for both urban planners and designers (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019). It not only serves as the visual representation of a city but also encapsulates its culture, values, and unique characteristics. However, there remain significant gaps in current research on city brand identity design. First, most existing studies tend to focus on marketing or visual design perspectives, lacking systematic support from semiotic theory (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019). Second, applications of semiotics are predominantly limited to Peirce's triadic model, while the potential of Morris's semiotic framework has been largely underexplored—particularly its capability to systematically deconstruct urban cultural symbols across the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions (Wang et al., 2023).

This study adopts Morris's semiotic model due to its distinct advantages.

First, its systematic framework—comprising syntactics (symbolic form), semantics (cultural meaning), and pragmatics (communicative function)—directly corresponds to the core dimensions of city brand design: visual identity, cultural value transmission, and communicative effectiveness (Morris, 2014).

Second, in terms of cultural adaptability, Morris's model emphasizes the functioning of signs in specific contexts—such as multi-channel urban brand communication—whereas Peirce's model focuses more on the logical classification of signs. This makes Morris's framework more suitable for analyzing dynamic urban cultural symbol systems (Yang, 2022).

Finally, the pragmatic dimension of Morris's model offers actionable guidance for communication strategy, addressing the common shortcoming in current research that prioritizes symbolic design over communicative outcomes (Guangdong Institute of Science and Technology, 2023).

This study aims to explore the symbolic functions and visual communication strategies in urban brand image design from the perspective of Charles Morris's semiotic theory. As a significant branch of semiotics, Morris's framework offers a unique analytical lens through the dimensions of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. These dimensions allow for a systematic analysis of the form, meaning, and function of symbols used in urban brand design, revealing their essential role in the creation of urban identity.

The objective of this research is to provide both theoretical support and practical guidance for urban brand design through in-depth theoretical analysis and case studies. Specifically, it seeks to assist designers in effectively extracting cultural symbols, optimizing visual communication strategies, and enhancing the transmission and impact of urban brand images.

One of the core research questions addressed in this study is: How are the functions of symbols manifested in urban brand image design. Symbols in this context are not merely combinations of visual elements; they serve as carriers of cultural meaning (Eco, 1976; Morris, 1938). Through the application of Morris's syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics, this study investigates the formal characteristics, cultural connotations, and communicative outcomes of symbols. Furthermore, it examines how visual communication strategies can enhance the effectiveness of brand transmission. As a crucial component of brand design, visual communication strategies directly affect the clarity and reception of brand messaging. By optimizing symbolic forms, strengthening semantic transmission, and improving overall communicative performance, cities can significantly enhance the appeal and influence of their

brand images. Through theoretical insights and practical case analyses, this research proposes actionable visual communication strategies to support the development of more effective urban brand identities.

Literature Review

Semiotics is a scientific discipline that studies signs and symbols, originating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Foundational figures in this field include Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure defined semiotics as the science of linguistic signs and proposed the binary distinction between the signifier and the signified (Course in General Linguistics, Saussure, 1989). Peirce expanded on this foundation by defining the sign as a triadic relationship among the sign, the object, and the interpretant (Peirce, 1991). By the mid-20th century, semiotic theory had extended beyond linguistics into various disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, and the arts. Charles Morris (1938) further advanced semiotic theory by dividing it into syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics, laying the groundwork for its interdisciplinary applications.

Charles Morris's semiotic theory provides a solid theoretical foundation for interdisciplinary applications of semiotics. In recent years, this theory has gained increasing attention in the field of design, where scholars have begun to recognize its value in understanding the functions of signs, meaning transmission, and audience interaction. Yang(2022) analyzed the modern transformation strategies of Dong brocade intangible cultural heritage elements based on Morris's triadic semiotic theory. The study highlights the semantic level's emphasis on the derivative expression of cultural connotations, the syntactic level's focus on the integration of product form and aesthetics, and the pragmatic level's alignment with service design and user experience pathways to promote the revitalization and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. Chen and Wang (2020), for example, applied Peirce's triadic semiotics to interpret the symbolic characteristics of women's porcelain paintings from the Republican period, examining their logical advantages and limitations as artistic symbols. Similarly, Xiao et al. (2018) adopted a design semiotic perspective to analyze the symbolic patterns in traditional Miao silver ornaments, proposing strategies such as form simplification, cultural code extraction, and symbolic recombination to modernize traditional elements into culturally meaningful tourism souvenirs. According to Li (2021), Morris's semiotic theory can serve as a framework for designing cultural and creative products; taking the commercial culture of Hongjiang Ancient Town as a case, Li explored design processes and methods to promote regional culture through innovation. Wang (2021) also utilized Morris's threefold semiotic division to analyze the craftsmanship, patterns, and colors of Nanjing Yunjin, revealing its symbolic representation of court aesthetics and cultural heritage. Although this framework has systematic advantages, its distinctiveness still needs to be clarified through comparison with classical semiotic theories. This theoretical characteristic has already been validated in recent applications in design studies (Yang, 2022; Guangdong Vocational College of Science and Technology et al., 2023).

Although Morris's three-part semiotic framework provides a systematic structure for design research, its differences from classical semiotic theories are often overlooked. Compared to Saussure's binary structure (signifier/signified), Morris's introduction of the pragmatic dimension breaks through the limitations of a static sign system and is more applicable to the dynamic communication field of city branding (Nöth, 2020). However, this expansion has also sparked theoretical debates: the Saussurean school argues that pragmatics blurs the boundaries

of the sign system, while Morris's supporters emphasize that a sign can only realize its full meaning through usage (Cobley, 2016). This study adopts the latter position, as city branding is essentially a “sign system in practice,” whose meaning is continuously generated through interaction among multiple actors such as citizens and tourists.

Compared to Peirce's triadic model (sign–object–interpretant), Morris's pragmatics places more emphasis on the social function of signs rather than the interpretive process. Peirce's “interpretant” focuses on individual cognitive understanding of the sign, while Morris's pragmatics concerns how signs are collectively received and functionally realized within specific social contexts (e.g., urban space) (Bergman & Paavola, 2016). This distinction is particularly significant in city branding research: the Peircean model is more suitable for analyzing the interpretation of specific signs such as landmark architecture (Chen et al., 2020), while the Morrisian framework provides a systematic explanation of the entire process from brand design to communication.

According to Green and Perkins (2016), the theoretical foundation of urban brand image design spans multiple disciplines, including urban planning, marketing, sociology, and design. Scholars widely agree that urban brand identity should go beyond mere visual consistency and instead reflect the cultural uniqueness of the city through integrated communication strategies. As noted by Abd Ghafar, Che Ghani, and Adam (2022), the effectiveness of city branding depends on the synergy between visual identity systems, symbolic meaning, and public participation. Moreover, Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca (2019) emphasize that visual elements such as city logos, color systems, and typography should be embedded in a holistic symbolic system that reflects civic values, thereby enhancing communication effectiveness. Semiotic analysis shows that symbolic and linguistic signs in urban environments significantly affect cultural identity and public perception (Pătruț, 2023).

Ren (2022) further argues that the construction of an urban brand image should draw deeply from local cultural resources and visualize the city's historical and cultural values through design, thereby strengthening citizens' identification and cultural belonging. According to Wu (2019), visual communication systems are not merely channels of information, but crucial tools to encapsulate urban spirit and express soft power. As suggested by Beijing University of Technology (2020), innovative urban brand image design requires an integrated system-based approach, combining semiotics and service design concepts to enhance public perception of the city. Therefore, urban brand image design is not only a design endeavor but also a crucial part of soft power development, enhancing urban attractiveness, competitiveness, and social cohesion, as recently emphasized by Shirvani (2024).

In recent years, the theoretical study of urban brand image design has become increasingly sophisticated. Scholars have turned their attention to semiotic issues within urban brand identity, exploring how to extract, integrate, and communicate urban cultural symbols. According to Guangdong Polytechnic College of Science and Technology (2023), three visual semiotic-based design paths—graphic-dominant, text-dominant, and image-text symbiosis—can guide the systematic design of city logos. Researchers have also applied semiotic perspectives to analyze symbolic resources such as urban heritage, folk culture, and natural landscapes, aiming to convert them into visually appealing and culturally rich brand identities. For example, Wang et al. (2023) emphasize that visual elements in city branding not only serve as identifiers but also evoke cultural identity and belonging. Hu et al. (2021) propose

reconstructing symbolic systems of visual representation to better reflect the city's values and spirit. Wang and Zhao (2021) argue that visual language, as a core medium of urban communication, should be infused with local cultural characteristics to strengthen symbolic resonance and public identification.

Despite these advancements, a critical issue remains: the gap between theory and practice. At the level of semiotic analysis, scholars are either trapped in the over-decoding of single cultural symbols (Xiao et al., 2018) or obsessed with generalized discussions of macro-level communication strategies (Abd Ghafar et al., 2022), yet they lack an intermediary theory that connects symbol design with communication effects. This disjunction is further manifested in the dilemma of cultural expression—while local studies (Ren, 2022) attempt to uphold cultural authenticity, globalization-oriented approaches (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019) demand cross-cultural legibility of symbols, and the two have yet to form a dialectical unity. More critically, 78% of existing research focuses on the designer's perspective (CNKI, 2023), severely neglecting the audience's differentiated interpretations of symbols (Wang & Zhao, 2021). This imbalance between “encoding and decoding” (Hall, 1980) often reduces city branding to a one-way output of dominant discourse. These contradictions collectively reveal the urgent need for a theoretical framework in city brand research that can integrate semiotic depth with communicative breadth, balance cultural specificity with global consensus, and reconcile design intention with audience interpretation.

Methods

Research Design

This study selects representative cases of urban brand image design as the primary objects of analysis. The criteria for defining “representative” cases in this study are as follows:

- (1) The city must have implemented an official or widely recognized city brand identity project;
- (2) The selected city's visual identity system must include explicit elements of regional cultural symbols, demonstrating both visual distinctiveness and cultural significance;
- (3) The brand design must have achieved broad public dissemination or high recognition, either domestically or internationally;
- (4) The selected cases should reflect diversity in terms of geographical location, cultural background, and level of economic development.

In addition, to ensure the study focuses on effective practical approaches, cases with unclear brand communication, low public awareness, or evident branding failures were excluded so as to avoid interfering with the theoretical analytical framework of this research. Although most of the selected cases are administrative cities, some province-level regions (such as Sichuan and Anhui) were included due to their widely recognized cultural and natural symbols used in branding practice. These regions serve a similar communicative function in visual identity design, which aligns with this study's focus on regional cultural symbols. These cases cover cities with diverse geographical locations, cultural backgrounds, and levels of economic development, in order to ensure the broad applicability of the research findings.

Table 1 presents the basic attributes of the ten selected city and regional branding cases. These cases provide the foundation for subsequent analysis based on Morris's semiotic framework.

To further clarify the symbolic reach and communicative representativeness of the selected cases, this study includes a column titled “Branding Exposure” in the overview table. This indicator reflects the geographic scope of the city or regional brand's visual identity dissemination, categorized into five levels: Local, Regional, National, International, and Global & National.

The classification is based on a combination of factors, including whether the branding project was officially promoted by local authorities, the extent of its presence in domestic or international cultural/tourism platforms, and its visibility in mainstream media or social networks. This variable supports the analysis of pragmatic functions of urban symbols and provides comparative data for assessing the relationship between symbolic composition and communicative performance.

Table 1: Overview of Selected City and Regional Branding Cases

Region	Country	Population	Key Visual Symbols	No. of Symbols	Cultural Representation Type	Branding Exposure
Paris	France	~2.1 million	Boat emblem, deep blue, sans-serif font	3	Historical culture	International
Meizhou	China	~4.3 million	Plum blossom, red, calligraphy font	3	Hakka folk culture	Regional
Fuzhou	China	~8.3 million	Banyan tree, Ma'an wall, green-blue scheme	4	Nature vernacular architecture +	National
Madrid	Spain	~3.3 million	Embracing icon, modern font, light blue	3	Contemporary urban culture	International
Beijing	China	~21 million	Temple of Heaven, red-yellow, seal script font	3	History political culture +	Global & national
Bielefeld	Germany	~0.3 million	Castle icon, gothic font, dark brown	3	Local heritage	Local
Sichuan (centered on Chengdu)	China	~83 million	Panda image, black-white palette, cartoonish style	3	Nature national identity +	International
Anhui (focused on	China	~61 million	Welcoming pine, mountain	3	Natural landscape culture	National

Yellow Mountain)			outline, green-blue tones			
Ulaanbaatar	Mongolia	~1.6 million	Yurt icon, circular layout, beige tone	3	Nomadic culture	National
Munich	Germany	~1.5 million	Church towers, beer fest symbol, blue heart	3	Regional + tourism culture	International

As shown in Table 3.1, the selected cases reflect a diverse range of cultural representation types, visual symbol combinations, and branding exposure levels. These differences not only highlight the richness of regional identity construction but also provide an ideal foundation for systematic analysis.

To interpret the communicative roles and design strategies of these visual identities, this study adopts Morris's triadic semiotic model—comprising syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics—as the core analytical framework. The following section outlines how each dimension is applied to the study of urban brand symbolism.

The research framework is constructed based on the three core dimensions of Charles Morris's semiotic theory: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. This framework facilitates a systematic analysis of the symbolic functions and visual communication strategies in urban brand image design. Syntactics: Focuses on the formal characteristics and visual recognition of symbols, analyzing visual elements such as color, graphics, typography, and their compositional structures. Semantics: Examines the cultural connotations and symbolic meanings of signs, investigating how symbols convey a city's historical, cultural, and social values. Pragmatics: Investigates the communication effectiveness and audience reception of symbols, analyzing how signs function in real-world contexts and interact with target audiences.

Data Collection Methods

Literature review forms a critical foundation of this research. Through systematic collection and analysis of relevant theoretical literature and case studies, the study builds a comprehensive understanding of Morris's semiotic theory and its applications in urban brand design. The sources include the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), foreign academic databases, peer-reviewed journals, professional books, and documented design projects. The literature review aims to synthesize existing research findings, identify gaps in the current scholarship, and provide theoretical support for subsequent case analyses.

Case study analysis serves as the core methodological approach in this research. By examining exemplary urban brand identity projects from both domestic and international contexts, the study conducts in-depth analyses of symbolic design and visual communication strategies employed in each case.

Table 2: Steps of Case Study Analysis

Step	Process	Description	Notes
Step 1	Case Selection	Select representative urban brand image design cases based on the research objectives and framework.	Selected cases span diverse city types, cultural backgrounds, and design styles.
Step 2	Case Description	Provide a detailed background description of each case.	Describe the city's historical, cultural, and socio-economic characteristics.
Step 3	Symbolic Analysis	Apply Morris's semiotic framework—syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics—to conduct systematic symbol analysis.	Analyze the formal features, cultural meanings, and communication effects of symbols; explore their functions in urban brand design.

As shown above in Table 2, the case analysis consists of three distinct stages. In the first step, Case Selection, representative urban brand image design cases are selected based on the research objectives and theoretical framework. The selection ensures diversity in terms of city types, cultural backgrounds, and design styles, thereby supporting the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the research findings. This approach aligns with Yin's (2018) emphasis on choosing information-rich cases that enhance analytical depth and theoretical insight within case study research.

The second step, Case Description, involves providing a detailed background profile of each selected case. This includes an exploration of the city's historical, cultural, and socio-economic characteristics. A thorough contextual understanding of each case lays the foundation for in-depth analysis and helps readers grasp the environment and conditions under which the urban brand image was developed.

In the third step, Symbolic Analysis, Morris's semiotic framework—comprising syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics—is employed to systematically analyze the symbolic components of each case. Specifically, the analysis begins with the formal characteristics of the symbols, examining their visual presentation (Morris, 1938). This is followed by a deep interpretation of the cultural connotations, revealing the values and meanings encoded within the design. Finally, the study evaluates the communication effectiveness of the symbols—how well they convey the city's brand message and contribute to the construction of urban identity—thus offering a holistic understanding of symbol use and its impact in urban brand image design (Chandler, 2017).

Data Analysis Methods

Syntactic Analysis. Syntactic analysis focuses on the formal characteristics and visual recognition of symbols. It examines the visual elements of urban brand identity design—such as color, graphics, and typography—to identify how these elements are composed and how they contribute to the visual system of the brand. This dimension includes: **Visual Elements Analysis:** Investigates the use of color palettes, graphic forms, and typefaces, exploring how these elements collaboratively shape the city's visual identity. **Symbol Composition Analysis:**

Analyzes the relationships among different visual elements, assessing how their arrangement influences the coherence and recognizability of the urban brand image.

Semantic analysis investigates the cultural connotations and symbolic meanings embedded in the design. This involves analyzing the historical, cultural, and societal contexts of urban cultural symbols and how they reflect the city's identity and values. Key components include: cultural connotation analysis studies the historical and cultural references conveyed through symbols, evaluating how these elements reflect the city's unique heritage and collective values.Symbolic meaning analysis, explores how symbols function metaphorically or allegorically to express the city's brand philosophy and cultural vision.

Pragmatic analysis examines the communication effectiveness and audience reception of the symbols. It evaluates how symbols function in real-world contexts, particularly their interaction with the target audience. Key areas include: assesses the channels, scope, and impact of symbolic dissemination, exploring the role of symbols in communicating and reinforcing the urban brand image.

Analysis and Results

Analysis of Symbolic Functions in Urban Brand Image Design

Syntactic Analysis: Symbolic Form and Visual Identity

Syntactics focuses on the formal characteristics and visual recognizability of symbols, which form the foundation of urban brand image design (Morris, 1938; Chandler, 2017). The visual form of a symbol directly influences the recognizability and memorability of the brand. In urban brand identity systems, visual elements—such as color, graphics, and typography—constitute the core components of brand formation.

1. Visual Elements of Symbols

Table 3: Analysis of the Visual Elements of Symbols

Case	Background	Visual Elements
Meizhou (China)	Location: Southern China, humid climate, traversed by the Meijiang River. History: Rich history; major settlement for Hakka migrants. Culture: Known for Hakka culture, folk songs, walled villages, and overseas Chinese heritage. Economy: Agriculture-based, with a rapidly growing tourism industry.	Graphics: Plum blossom as the central symbol; flowing lines represent the Meijiang River, symbolizing unity and inclusiveness among ethnic groups. Typography: Sans-serif font for clarity, reflecting a modern identity. Color: Red symbolizes passion and vitality, echoing the city's rapid development.
Paris (France)	Location: Northern France, spans the Seine River; temperate climate with four seasons. History: Capital city with a legacy of revolutions and reforms. Culture: A global capital of art, fashion, and romance.	Graphics: Boat symbol representing maritime heritage, openness, and innovation. Typography: Classic sans-serif font, modern and legible, reflecting an international image.

	Economy: Economic and innovation hub of France.	Color: Dark blue as the main tone, symbolizing elegance, stability, and connection to both history and nature.
--	---	--

In urban brand identity design, the strategic use of visual elements is crucial. Through color, graphics, and typography, a city can communicate its unique character and cultural depth. Meizhou City, located in Guangdong Province, China, is a major center of Hakka culture and is known as the “World Hakka Capital.” Its city logo features the plum blossom as the core graphic element, with red as the dominant color and paired with a sans-serif font. From a morphologic (syntactic) semiotic perspective, this design constructs a visually clear and highly recognizable system. The plum blossom is rendered in a geometric and symmetrical abstraction, reflecting the formal regularity of signs emphasized by Morris (1971), thereby enhancing visual recognizability across media.

In the Chinese cultural context, red symbolizes enthusiasm and prosperity, complementing the plum blossom's connotation of resilience. However, in international communication, this color may evoke unintended emotional interpretations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The curved lines surrounding the floral motif introduce dynamic tension and spatial depth, symbolizing both geographical features and implying cohesion and inclusivity, although their high level of simplification may reduce the representational specificity of local terrain.

In terms of typography, the sans-serif font improves legibility and conveys a modern image in digital communication contexts, aligning with a contemporary brand orientation. Yet, this choice also raises concerns about whether the emphasis on modernity undermines the historical depth of Hakka culture. Overall, the Meizhou logo demonstrates strong visual organization through its syntactic arrangement of form, color, structure, and type, effectively supporting brand identification. However, in an increasingly competitive semiotic landscape of global city branding, whether this stable and orderly morphologic strategy can truly highlight Meizhou's cultural uniqueness remains a question warranting further reflection and exploration.



Figure1: Meizhou's City Logo

Paris, the capital of France and a global cultural and fashion hub, employs a city logo that combines form, color, and typography to convey its unique urban identity. The abstract boat-shaped graphic symbolizes the Seine River's navigation history and the city's openness. Its dynamic structure aligns with Morris's (1971) notion that syntactic clarity enhances visual communication. However, such abstraction may weaken direct associations with Paris for non-local audiences compared to more iconic landmarks like the Eiffel Tower.

The logo's deep blue color, commonly associated with nobility, rationality, and trust (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), reinforces a stable urban image. Yet, it may underrepresent the city's vibrant connotations of romance and fashion. The modern sans-serif typeface ensures legibility and supports Paris's globalized identity but may dilute its historical and cultural richness amid increasingly uniform global city branding.

In sum, while the logo excels in structure and clarity, it faces tension between functional form and cultural symbolism. Whether this morphologic strategy fully captures Paris's status as a world cultural capital remains open to further critique and refinement.



Figure2: Paris's City Logo

2. Symbolic Composition and the Coherence of Brand Identity

The way in which symbols are combined directly shapes the overall coherence and consistency of a brand identity. A successful urban brand image design must integrate elements such as color, graphics, and typography in a unified manner to establish a distinctive and recognizable visual identity system.

Table 4: Analysis of Symbol Combinations

Case	Background	Symbolic Composition
Fuzhou (China)	Location: Southeastern China, lower Min River basin; warm and humid climate, coastal plains. History: One of China's historical treaty ports. Culture: Origin of Min culture; rich in heritage such as Three Lanes and	Color: Combination of green and blue—green symbolizes vitality and prosperity (also referencing the banyan tree, the city tree); blue signifies historical depth and traditional architecture. Graphics: Integrates the banyan tree and

	Seven Alleys, Min opera, and Shoushan stone carving. Economy: Capital of Fujian Province; strong in manufacturing, digital economy, and international trade.	saddle-shaped wall motif (typical of local architecture), represented with modern design techniques to express regional identity.
Madrid (Spain)	Location: Central Spain, 670m elevation; one of the highest capitals in Europe. History: Became capital in 1561; has witnessed major historical events. Culture: Spain's cultural center with world-class museums, flamenco dance, and strong football culture. Economy: A key economic and tourism hub in Spain.	Graphics & Typography: Merges the word “Madrid” with an abstract embracing gesture, symbolizing openness, inclusivity, and warmth of the citizens. Color: Light blue background paired with white graphics for visual clarity and friendliness. Font: Simple, modern, and legible typeface that enhances coherence with graphical elements.

Fuzhou, located on the southeastern coast of China, is a major center of Min culture. Its city brand logo, from a syntactic (morphologic) perspective, integrates local features with modern design elements. The color scheme combines green and blue to form a coherent visual system: green symbolizes the banyan tree, the city's official tree, reflecting cultural depth and vitality; blue represents the traditional saddle-shaped walls (ma'an walls), evoking Fuzhou's historical architectural identity. This chromatic pairing strengthens regional recognizability and creates a symbolic fusion of natural ecology and cultural heritage through visual grammar.

The graphic design merges the banyan tree's foliage with the curved outline of ma'an walls, crafting a form that balances locality with contemporary aesthetics. However, the cultural connection between the two symbols may not be immediately apparent to non-local or international audiences, potentially requiring contextual explanation to decode the intended meaning. Furthermore, the dense combination of figurative symbols—if not carefully refined—risks visual complexity, which may reduce legibility across small-scale or digital media formats.

Madrid, located in central Spain, is a culturally vibrant and historically rich city. Its city brand identity integrates text, imagery, color, and font to form a strong syntactic structure. The logo merges the word “Madrid” with a stylized embrace, blurring the boundary between text and image to symbolize warmth, hospitality, and freedom. As Morris (1971) noted, syntactic structure enhances both recognition and interpretive efficiency. This metaphorical form adds emotional resonance, allowing the logo to transcend geographic symbolism and embody deeper humanistic meaning. However, such reliance on symbolic association may hinder clarity in cross-cultural contexts, potentially affecting recognition among global audiences. The logo's light blue and white color palette creates a clean and open impression. Light blue often conveys calmness and inclusivity, aligning with aspects of Madrid's temperament. Yet, for a city known for its passion and vitality, this subdued tone may underrepresent its energetic character. While blue adds modernity and friendliness, it may soften the brand's vibrant identity. The sans-serif

font enhances clarity and digital adaptability, aligning with modern design standards. However, its cultural neutrality may weaken the brand's uniqueness by lacking visual references to Madrid's rich historical and artistic traditions. This gap reveals a tension between modern functionality and cultural expressiveness.

In sum, Madrid's logo excels in structural clarity and emotional warmth but could benefit from deeper cultural alignment and symbolic specificity. Balancing visual simplicity with cultural depth is essential to strengthening the brand's resonance in both local and international contexts.



Figure3: Fuzhou's City Logo








Figure4: Madrid's City Logo

Semantic Analysis: Cultural Connotation and Symbolic Meaning

Semantics focuses on the cultural connotations and symbolic meanings embedded in visual elements. It forms the soul of city brand identity design. A symbol must not only be visually appealing but must also communicate the unique values and spirit of the city it represents. Urban cultural symbols are a critical resource in brand identity construction; their discovery and classification are essential to conveying the cultural charm and spiritual core of a city with precision. Through careful semantic analysis, designers can ensure that every visual element resonates with local identity while remaining accessible to broader audiences.

Table 5: Symbolic Connotations and Meanings

Symbol Category	City (Country)	Cultural Connotation	Symbolic Meaning
Historical Heritage Symbols	Beijing (China) 	Temple of Heaven, one of the most iconic ancient architectural sites in China.	Historical and cultural continuity; Philosophy of harmony between heaven and humans; Symbol of Beijing's political and cultural centrality; Unity in diversity.

	Bielefeld (Germany) 	Sparrenburg Castle, a key historical landmark.	Long-standing historical tradition; Unique cultural identity; Historical strategic significance; Resilience and endurance.
Natural Resource Symbols	Sichuan (China) 	Giant panda, endemic species and native to Sichuan.	Biodiversity; Peace and friendliness; International recognition; National pride.
	Anhui (China) 	Huangshan Mountain, "Welcoming Pine," sea of clouds, temples.	Diverse natural environments; Symbol of hospitality; Embodiment of Eastern etiquette culture.
Socio-Cultural Symbols	Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia) 	Mongolian yurt—a traditional nomadic dwelling.	Grassland culture; Circular worldview philosophy; Harmony between urban life and nature; Deep cultural heritage
	Munich (Germany) 	Traditional pretzels, churches.	Rich culinary heritage; Religious traditions; Spirit of openness and inclusivity

As shown in Table 5, cultural symbols can be categorized into three main types: historical heritage symbols, natural landscape symbols, and socio-cultural symbols. Historical heritage symbols serve as witnesses to a city's past. They carry the memory and cultural continuity of the city or even the nation and are indispensable core elements in city brand design. Natural landscape symbols reflect the natural beauty of the city. These landscapes not only beautify the urban environment but also become significant cultural emblems. Socio-cultural symbols reflect the lifestyle and cultural characteristics of the city, including folk customs, local cuisine,

and distinctive architecture, vividly showcasing the city's unique charm and vibrancy. By exploring and utilizing these symbols effectively, city brand design can attract attention visually while conveying deep cultural meaning, helping the city stand out in a globalized context as a recognizable and attractive cultural signifier. Meanwhile, the meaning of a symbol lies not only in its form but also in its connection with the city's values. Successful city branding needs to integrate symbols with the city's core values to convey its cultural philosophy and spirit. Historical heritage symbols serve as crucial visual carriers of cultural memory and civilizational continuity in city branding. By incorporating iconic architectural landmarks, cities not only showcase their unique historical depth but also affirm their identity and values in the present. These symbols evoke a strong sense of belonging and pride among local residents while projecting a dignified and culturally rich image to the outside world.

As the capital of China, Beijing's logo centers on the symbol of the Temple of Heaven, highlighting the city's profound historical and cultural legacy. Once an imperial site for rituals to heaven, the Temple embodies the fusion of ancient architectural aesthetics and cosmological philosophy, reinforcing Beijing's cultural authority and symbolic connection to Chinese civilization. Its core value of "harmony" is reinterpreted to align with contemporary urban ideals, reflecting the city's role as a multicultural hub. However, while the emblem strongly conveys tradition, it risks underrepresenting Beijing's modern identity—particularly its positioning as a center of technological innovation and global connectivity. In international contexts, the Temple of Heaven may be perceived merely as a historical monument, with its deeper cultural meanings lost in translation. Therefore, the challenge for Beijing's city branding lies in balancing cultural gravitas with forward-looking symbolism. Incorporating more globally resonant and future-oriented semiotic elements may enhance the adaptability and communicative power of the brand in diverse cultural settings.

Another example of leveraging historical heritage in city branding is found in the German city of Bielefeld, Bielefeld take Sparrenburg Castle as its core cultural symbol, seamlessly integrating historical heritage into its visual narrative. Built in the mid-13th century, the castle served as a key military fortress and administrative hub, symbolizing authority, protection, and the city's strategic geopolitical role. From a semantic perspective, it conveys values such as resilience, security, and continuity, reinforcing local cultural memory and enhancing residents' sense of pride and belonging. However, this heavy reliance on Sparrenburg as the dominant emblem also introduces communicative limitations. On one hand, while the castle holds strong local symbolism, its meaning may appear obscure in international contexts—potentially perceived simply as "an old building" by audiences unfamiliar with German history, failing to evoke deeper cultural associations or emotional resonance. On the other hand, the castle's inherent connotation of "defense" may semantically imply conservatism or insularity, which could hinder the representation of contemporary urban values like openness, innovation, or inclusiveness. These challenges illustrate that while integrating historical architecture into modern city branding effectively bridges tradition and progress, it also requires careful attention to semantic accessibility and global readability.

Natural resource symbols play a vital role in shaping city brand identities, particularly in regions with rich ecological resources and unique landscapes. These symbols not only reflect the city's geographical features and biodiversity but also carry deep cultural and emotional significance. In city branding, the integration of natural symbols helps to convey environmental

consciousness, local uniqueness, and spiritual values that resonate with both domestic and international audiences.

Sichuan adopts the giant panda as its core semantic symbol, effectively merging regional ecological identity with global communication potential. The giant panda, recognized as China's "national treasure," also symbolizes Sichuan's unique natural environment. Its gentle and lovable image is widely regarded as a cultural ambassador of peace and friendship. Semantically, this symbol enhances local cultural identity while generating strong global resonance. It is closely linked to Sichuan's panda reserves and tourism industry, contributing significantly to both cultural outreach and economic development. However, the semantic over-reliance on the panda presents certain challenges. While its associations with cuteness, rarity, and ecological friendliness have universal appeal, they fall short of representing the full spectrum of Sichuan's regional characteristics, such as its rich historical heritage (such as Sanxingdui civilization), cultural diversity, and technological progress. Moreover, as the giant panda is frequently used in various national image campaigns, it risks becoming an overly generalized symbol in global communication. Its meaning, once regionally specific, is increasingly perceived as broadly national—if not entirely universal—diminishing its effectiveness in uniquely representing Sichuan. In addition to animals, natural landscapes also serve as important branding resources. In the branding of Anhui, Mount Huangshan serves as the core semantic symbol, emphasizing regional natural identity and cultural recognition. As a UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage site, the mountain's iconic "Welcoming Pine" conveys the idea of hospitality, symbolizing the region's openness, friendliness, and inclusiveness. From a semiotic perspective, this fusion of natural landscape and humanistic spirit enhances the city's visual distinctiveness and emotional resonance, providing strong communicative power and cultural symbolism. However, relying solely on Huangshan as the central symbol also presents limitations. While its associations with scenic beauty and hospitality are appealing, they fall short in representing Anhui's diverse developmental identity, including its rich Huizhou merchant culture, agricultural strengths, and growing manufacturing sector. Moreover, the Welcoming Pine, though symbolically powerful, is a highly specific and localized image that may not fully encompass the province's broader diversity and modern aspirations. This results in a semantic constraint that limits the brand's ability to reflect Anhui's contemporary, multifaceted character.

Besides historical cultural symbols and natural resource symbols, social cultural symbols are another common and significant category in city brand identity design. Unlike the former two, social cultural symbols are products of societal development and human civilization. They typically reflect the dynamics of social life, cultural evolution, and collective memory. These symbols are characterized by their fluidity and contemporaneity, constantly evolving with the progression of society and shifts in cultural paradigms. Social cultural symbols are inclusive and diverse, encompassing a wide array of social activities and cultural phenomena. They are often closely connected to people's daily lives, experiences, and interactions, thereby encouraging public participation, emotional resonance, and cultural continuity. Furthermore, due to their relevance and relatability, these symbols tend to have strong communicative power, spreading widely through various media and significantly influencing public behavior and perceptions. As such, they serve not only as identifiers of cultural identity but also as indicators of societal progress and civic values.

Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, incorporates the traditional yurt into its city brand identity—a powerful cultural symbol reflecting the Mongolian worldview of harmony and coexistence with nature. This circular structure reinforces Ulaanbaatar's role as a cultural center while conveying inclusiveness and confidence in international contexts. However, overreliance on such traditional symbols can obscure the city's modern identity as a political, educational, and technological hub. Similarly, Munich's city brand uses a multi-symbol strategy featuring a pretzel, the Frauenkirche, and a blue heart to reflect culinary tradition, religious heritage, and emotional warmth. While the pretzel and cathedral convey strong regional identity, the blue heart, a universal symbol, may weaken localization. The weak semantic link among these symbols risks message fragmentation. Both cases reveal a shared challenge: how to preserve cultural depth while ensuring semantic clarity and unity in global brand communication.

These case studies reveal that effective city branding relies on the deep integration of natural, historical, and sociocultural elements. City logos function not merely as visual identifiers but as cultural narratives that enhance civic pride and promote international visibility. The incorporation of symbolic meanings into visual design contributes to shaping a distinctive city image, reinforcing social cohesion, and articulating a compelling cultural identity on the global stage.

Pragmatic Analysis: Functional Roles and Communication

Pragmatics focuses on the functions and effects of signs in actual communicative contexts, making it a critical dimension in city brand identity design. The significance of a sign lies not only in its visual and cultural value but also in its effectiveness in communication and dissemination.

The communication effectiveness of a sign directly influences the visibility and appeal of a city brand. Successful city branding requires a strategic dissemination process across multiple channels—such as advertising, social media, and urban installations—to expand the brand's reach and impact. The slogan “Hometown of Southern Confucius, Polite Quzhou” exemplifies the integration of regional culture and modern communication. From a pragmatic perspective, the pairing of “Southern Confucius” and “politeness” builds both semantic depth and actionable value orientation. Through layered strategies—authoritative media like CCTV and high-speed rail branding, alongside interactive platforms such as the Douyin dance challenge—the slogan gained strong perlocutionary effect, transforming abstract ideals into performative acts. The campaign's reach, with nearly 10 million video views and over 100 million topic impressions, highlights the success of turning pragmatic meaning into social practice. However, as “politeness” becomes performative and widely replicated, does it risk being reduced to symbolic formalism, detached from its ethical roots? The critical challenge lies in balancing mass dissemination with cultural depth and sustaining pragmatic tension in the face of viral repetition.

After reviewing the preceding cases, we can extract both common successes and comparative challenges in the communication of city brand symbols from the perspectives of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics.

In terms of symbol selection and semantic construction, all cases tend to choose symbols that are strongly associated with the core characteristics of the city. These symbols represent the most iconic historical, cultural, or natural elements of their respective regions. Through their

unique locality and cultural depth, they can quickly establish a city's distinctiveness and recognizability at the semantic level, effectively anchoring the core image of the city while triggering emotional resonance and cultural identification among audiences. By means of cultural encoding, they achieve efficient semantic transmission within their respective cultural spheres.

Despite the strong appeal of these core symbols, some cases face challenges in terms of semantic breadth and balance. For example, Ulaanbaatar's symbol, though historically profound and ethnically distinctive, focuses excessively on a single dimension, potentially failing to reflect the city's modern urban development, innovation vitality, or broader industrial landscape. In contrast, Munich attempts to enrich semantics through the combination of multiple symbols, but its challenge lies in the potential lack of semantic coherence, which may lead to scattered information or blurred focal points. While Sichuan's giant panda possesses strong global appeal, its risk of semantic overgeneralization also deserves attention. The key challenge is how to deepen Sichuan-specific meaning beyond merely representing a “national treasure.”

In pragmatic level, the case of Quzhou clearly demonstrates the powerful pragmatic function achieved through the combination of a slogan and multi-channel communication strategies. These not only utilize the authority and wide coverage of traditional media to ensure brand recognition and credibility, but more importantly, actively embrace new media to stimulate audience interaction and participation. The “Youli Dance” challenge on short-video platforms is a prime example. By transforming abstract concepts into embodied actions, it enabled viral communication and significantly enhanced brand influence and user stickiness. Such integrated pragmatic strategies, combining online and offline, traditional and new media, represent a common successful model of modern city brand communication.

Some cities may encounter gaps in resource investment, creative transformation, or their understanding of the new media environment. Even with rich symbolic meanings, the pragmatic activation of these symbols in the era of social media may remain limited. Additionally, over-reliance on a single communication channel or failure to effectively integrate online and offline resources could lead to low pragmatic efficiency in symbol communication, making it difficult to establish deep and lasting brand recognition and emotional connection in the minds of target audiences.

In conclusion, successful city brand symbol design and communication does not lie solely in the selection of a representative symbol, but also in how syntactic design ensures recognizability, how semantic construction remains rich and balanced, and how innovative pragmatic strategies enable efficient dissemination and audience engagement. Future city branding efforts should place greater emphasis on the diversified expression of symbolic semantics and the interactive adaptability of communication strategies to address the increasingly complex global communication landscape.

Visual Communication Strategies in City Brand Identity Design

Visual Communication Strategies Based on Syntactics

Syntactic analysis provides a theoretical foundation for optimizing the form of symbols in city brand identity design. By systematically studying the formal aspects of symbols, designers can

enhance the effectiveness of visual communication and improve the overall image of the city brand.

Integrating and coordinating visual elements is a key strategy for enhancing the coherence of a brand identity. In city brand design, visual elements include color, graphics, typography, patterns, and more. These elements should be interconnected and complementary within the overall design to create a unified and recognizable visual system.

Color choices should align with the city's cultural connotations and positioning, while maintaining consistency across various application scenarios. Graphic and pattern designs should be inspired by iconic city landmarks, historical relics, or natural landscapes, expressed in concise and creative forms to highlight the city's unique charm. Typography also plays a critical role; it should match the overall design style and remain legible and distinguishable across different media.

In practice, the integration and coordination of visual elements must consider the city's diverse cultural background and the audience's visual habits. For cities known for historical heritage, incorporating traditional elements—such as ancient architectural silhouettes or traditional patterns—can evoke collective memory and emotional resonance. In contrast, for modern metropolitan areas, a minimalist and contemporary style can better convey urban vitality and innovation.

Furthermore, visual consistency should be maintained across different applications—logos, promotional posters, signage systems, and city landscape designs—ensuring a coherent visual language across all brand touchpoints. This unified approach enhances the overall perception and continuity of the city brand.

Through the integration and coordination of visual elements, city brand identity design can more effectively communicate cultural values and brand positioning, while increasing recognition and influence. This integration is not merely a visual optimization, but a systematic interpretation and in-depth excavation of cultural symbols, rendering the city brand more persuasive and emotionally resonant.

Optimizing symbol forms is key to enhancing the recognizability of a city brand. In city brand identity design, such optimization involves not only the simplification, refinement, and standardization of existing symbols but also the innovation of new forms to align with contemporary communication needs and evolving aesthetic preferences.

First, effective optimization requires an in-depth exploration and extraction of urban cultural symbols. Elements such as a city's historical heritage and folk traditions serve as important symbolic resources; however, these elements are often complex and must be simplified and abstracted through design techniques to improve recognition and communicability.

Second, innovation in symbol forms is an essential means of increasing the appeal of a city brand. With social evolution and technological advancement, city brand imagery must continuously adapt to new media environments and audience expectations. Innovative design may involve the introduction of novel design elements, adoption of new visual styles, or the integration of emerging technologies such as motion graphics, virtual reality (VR), or

augmented reality (AR), thereby making the city brand more contemporary, interactive, and engaging.

Moreover, optimization and innovation must account for multi-context applications. City brand symbols are not confined to traditional media such as advertisements, brochures, and signage systems, but are increasingly deployed across digital platforms and social media. Therefore, symbol design must exhibit high scalability and adaptability, maintaining consistency and recognizability across varying sizes, materials, and media channels.

Through the optimization and innovation of symbol forms, city brand identity design can better meet the demands of modern society, enhance public visibility, and strengthen a city's influence. This process is not merely a formal adjustment, but also a profound reinterpretation of cultural connotations in a contemporary context.

Visual Communication Strategies Based on Semantics

Semantic analysis provides a theoretical foundation for uncovering the deeper cultural meanings embedded in city brand symbols. By analyzing the meanings conveyed by symbols, designers can more accurately communicate a city's cultural values and distinctive charm.

Thoroughly exploring the cultural connotations of symbols is essential to enhancing the cultural value of a city brand. A city brand is not merely a collection of visual symbols; it is a comprehensive representation of the city's history, culture, society, and economic characteristics. In brand identity design, the cultural depth of symbols forms their core value, enabling emotional resonance and cultural recognition among audiences.

To extract cultural meaning, one must delve into the city's historical context and cultural heritage. Each city possesses unique stories, traditions, and symbolic artifacts that form the cultural foundation of its brand. The expression of these connotations must be conveyed accurately through visual means. In brand identity design, superficial or decorative use of symbols should be avoided. Instead, designers should transform rich cultural content into impactful and emotionally engaging visual forms through deep exploration and abstraction.

Moreover, effective cultural expression should consider the communicative effectiveness of symbols. In an era of information overload, city brand symbols must stand out amid abundant visual stimuli. Therefore, designs should be simple, clear, and easy to comprehend and disseminate. Additionally, symbols should possess a certain degree of openness to allow diverse interpretations across different cultural contexts, thus broadening the brand's international appeal.

By deeply excavating and precisely expressing cultural connotations, city brand identity design can more effectively communicate cultural values, enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the brand. This in-depth approach not only promotes cultural continuity but also empowers the city brand with rich cultural meaning.

A clear conveyance of symbolic meaning is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of city brand communication. The meaning of a symbol lies not only in its form but also in the audience's ability to accurately perceive and interpret it. In city brand design, symbolic meaning must be conveyed through precise design and strategic dissemination.

To achieve clarity, symbols must be legible and easily understood. Although city brand symbols often carry rich cultural values and messages, these meanings are only effective if audiences can swiftly recognize and interpret them. Therefore, design should emphasize simplicity and clarity, avoiding overly complex or ambiguous forms.

Reinforcement of symbolic meaning requires continuous dissemination across various channels and contexts. This includes widespread application in public spaces, advertising, and social media platforms to deepen public impressions over time. The clearer the meaning is repeated and reinforced, the more effective the symbol becomes in shaping perception.

Moreover, effective communication must take into account the audience's cultural background and cognitive habits. Symbols should possess a degree of universality that allows them to transcend cultural barriers, while also respecting diverse interpretations across different demographic groups. Cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness are essential to ensuring widespread understanding and acceptance.

Through the clear transmission and reinforcement of symbolic meaning, city brand design can better achieve its communication goals, enhancing both the visibility and reputation of the city. This clarity is not only a technical improvement in symbol design but also a strategic dissemination of cultural value, enabling the city's identity to resonate powerfully in visual communication.

Visual Communication Strategies Based on Pragmatics

Pragmatic analysis provides a theoretical foundation for optimizing the effectiveness of symbol transmission in city brand identity design. By studying how symbols are used and interpreted in varying contexts, designers can enhance the communicative power of visual elements and foster deeper audience engagement and recognition.

The meaning of a symbol is never isolated; rather, it is closely intertwined with the context in which it is used. In city branding, the successful communication of symbolic elements depends on how well they resonate with audiences across diverse cultural and situational contexts. Pragmatic strategies thus emphasize the importance of context-sensitive design and delivery to ensure that symbols convey the intended message and evoke shared meaning.

One key aspect of pragmatic adaptation is the cross-cultural interpretability of symbols. City brand identities are often addressed to global audiences from different cultural and geographical backgrounds. Therefore, designers must consider how cultural differences may affect the reception and interpretation of symbols. Conducting cross-cultural research becomes essential to avoid misunderstandings and ensure that the visual identity remains intelligible and resonant across cultures. A symbol that is perceived positively in one culture might carry a different or even negative connotation in another. Sensitivity to such variations is critical in crafting inclusive and universally meaningful city brand visuals.

Another important dimension is the symbol's adaptability across media and usage scenarios. Contemporary city branding extends beyond traditional promotional materials and encompasses a wide range of digital platforms, urban signage, social media, architectural applications, and more. In digital media, for instance, symbols must be concise, responsive, and animated, aligning with fast-paced user interactions and screen-based communication. In

contrast, symbols deployed in urban landscapes—such as signage, sculptures, or architectural motifs—must possess durability, scale, and visual impact to ensure long-term recognition and spatial integration. As such, visual identity systems must be tailored to suit the affordances and constraints of each communication medium to maintain consistent brand messaging across all touchpoints.

Finally, temporal adaptability must also be addressed in pragmatic strategy. City brand symbols are not static—they evolve alongside social, cultural, and technological developments. As public perceptions shift and urban narratives are rewritten, symbolic representations must also be revised to reflect contemporary values and remain relevant. An effective brand identity must therefore possess a degree of flexibility and openness to reinterpretation, allowing it to adapt without losing its core meaning. Periodic updates or iterative redesigns of city logos, for instance, help sustain public interest and reinforce the city's ongoing evolution.

In conclusion, pragmatic strategies in city visual identity design require an acute awareness of context—cultural, medial, spatial, and temporal—to ensure that symbols are not only seen, but also understood and embraced. Such strategies enhance the communicative function of city brands and support their sustainable development in a complex and dynamic global landscape.

Conclusion

The Morris semiotic theory offers a systematic and comprehensive analytical framework for city brand identity design. Through the three dimensions of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics, it enables an in-depth understanding of the core functions and roles of signs in the construction of city branding. This study, through syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic analyses of multiple domestic and international city cases, not only verifies the explanatory power of the theory but also extracts and proposes visual communication strategies for city brand identity based on these three dimensions. The aim is to provide city managers and designers with more scientific, practical, and actionable theoretical support and guidance.

Syntactic Level: Enhancing Visual Recognition

Graphic Simplification and Abstraction

Extract the geometric characteristics of the core elements and eliminate unnecessary details to ensure clarity and recognizability across various media scales (such as business cards, large billboards and app icons).

Color System Construction

Develop a primary and secondary color palette based on the city's core cultural or natural features, and define standardized color values for different application contexts.

Typeface Selection and Specification

Prioritize fonts that balance legibility with cultural relevance—for instance, sans-serif fonts for a modern feel, or custom-designed typefaces that incorporate traditional strokes. Establish font usage guidelines including size, weight, and spacing to maintain visual consistency.

Recommended Tools

Design software such as Adobe Illustrator and Sketch for vector graphics; Pantone color guides.

Semantic Level: Deepening Cultural Resonance

Cultural Heritage Symbol Revitalization

Conduct in-depth research into the city's distinctive historical landmarks, legends, endemic species, folk customs, or philosophical concepts. These elements should then be abstracted and modernized for integration into visual design in order to avoid stereotypical or outdated representations.

Multidimensional Semantic Integration

Strategically balance tradition and modernity, nature and humanity, locality and globality within a single symbol or a system of symbols. This ensures that the designed identity communicates layered meanings that resonate across different cultural and temporal contexts.

Recommended Tools

Cultural research reports, ethnographic data, focus group interviews.

Pragmatic Level: Maximizing Communication Impact

Multichannel Integrated Communication

Develop a comprehensive communication plan that combines online platforms (such as social media, short videos and official websites) with offline channels (such as outdoor advertising, urban events) to ensure consistency and continuity of brand messaging across multiple touchpoints.

Interactive and Experiential Engagement

Encourage audience participation by transforming abstract brand concepts into tangible, shareable experiences. Utilize user-generated content (UGC) to amplify influence and expand reach through emotional resonance.

Precise Audience Targeting

Identify the needs and preferences of different target groups (such as tourists, investors and local residents), and customize content and pragmatic strategies accordingly to enhance relevance and reception.

Effectiveness Evaluation and Iteration

Establish a monitoring system to track communication performance (such as social media engagement, ad click-through rates), and continuously optimize the symbolic use and dissemination strategy based on data-driven insights.

Recommended Tools

Social media analytics platforms (such as TikTok Data Platform), Google Analytics (for website traffic), market research tools (such as surveys, interviews).

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. It primarily focuses on theoretical analysis and case studies, lacking in-depth engagement with actual design projects. Such limitations may affect the practical applicability of the conclusions. City brand identity design is a complex and dynamic process involving multiple stakeholders and practical constraints. Although theoretical and case-based approaches offer rich insights, they cannot fully substitute for

longitudinal observation and evaluation of real-world design projects. In practice, design teams often face constraints such as limited budgets, tight schedules, and stakeholder coordination, all of which may influence the implementation and outcomes of design strategies. Furthermore, evaluating real projects provides direct data on performance, audience feedback, and long-term impact—valuable inputs for refining both theory and practice.

Future research should focus more on real-world design contexts by incorporating field studies, longitudinal tracking, and user feedback to analyze the effectiveness and challenges of branding strategies in practice. Such efforts will help address current gaps, providing more practically grounded theoretical support and methodological recommendations for city brand design. By further exploring these directions, the application of Morris's semiotics in city branding can be refined, promoting both theoretical innovation and practical advancement. Ultimately, this will help cities construct more attractive and distinctive brand images in an increasingly competitive global environment.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts (FACA) and the University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) for providing research resources and institutional support throughout the study. This publication is part of my PhD thesis, titled “*Research on the Visual Transformation of Regional Cultural Symbols: A Method for City Visual Identity Design Based on Morris Semiotics*”, undertaken at the School of Applied and Creative Arts, UNIMAS.

Reference

- Abd Ghafar, N., Che Ghani, S. A., & Adam, A. (2022). Branding a city through culture: The role of visual identity in urban cultural symbolism. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(6), 445–456. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i6/13979>
- Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: The basics* (3rd ed.). Abingdon, Oxon & New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chen, Y., & Wang, L. (2020). Republican-era women's porcelain paintings from the perspective of Peirce's triadic semiotics. *Chinese Ceramics*, (8), 94–98. <https://doi.org/CNKI:SUN:ZGTC.0.2020-08-016>
- Chen, Y., & Wang, L. (2020). Study on women's porcelain paintings in the Republic of China from the perspective of Peirce's triadic semiotics. *Journal of Art and Design*, 6, 112–117.
- De Saussure, F. (1989). *Cours de linguistique générale* (R. Engler, Ed.; Vol. 1). Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Indiana University Press.
- Guangdong Polytechnic of Science and Technology, City University of Macau, & Zhuhai College of Beijing Institute of Technology. (2023). Methodological exploration of urban image-logo design in the context of visual semiotics. *Design Art Research*, 36(12), 112–115. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1003-0069.2023.12.029>
- Green, M., & Perkins, R. (2016). City branding and the political economy of urban image construction: Toward a critical research agenda. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 38(2), 243–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/juaf.12171>

- Li, C. (2021). A study on the design of cultural and creative products of regional culture based on Charles Morris's semiotic theory—Taking Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town as an example. *Packaging Engineering*, 42(24), 337–343.
- Ma, W., de Jong, M., Hoppe, T., & de Bruijne, M. (2021). From city promotion via city marketing to city branding: Examining urban strategies in 23 Chinese cities. *Cities*, 116, 103269. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103269>
- Morris, C. (1938). *Foundations of the theory of signs*. University of Chicago Press.
- Pătruț, M. (2023). The semiotic construction of urban identity: Signs and symbols in cityscapes. *Semiotica*, 2023(251), 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2023-0003>
- Peirce, C. S. (1991). *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotics* (J. Hoopes, Ed.). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Quan, X. X. (2024). A semiotic interpretation of urban cultural images: A case study of Chengdu's panda IP image. *Art Education Research*, (3), 89–91.
- Ren, J. X. (2022). Design representation of regional culture in urban brand image. *Art Education Research*, 2022(7), 85–87.
- Shirvani Dastgerdi, A., & De Luca, G. (2019). Strengthening the city's reputation in the age of cities: An insight in the city branding theory. *City, Territory and Architecture*, 6(1), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40410-019-0101-4>
- Shirvani Dastgerdi, A., & De Luca, G. (2019). Strengthening the city's reputation in the age of cities: An insight into urban branding in the scientific literature. *Cities*, 94, 61–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2019.05.019>
- Shirvani Dastgerdi, A., & De Luca, G. (2024). Urban branding and public value creation: A cultural-semiotic perspective. *Urban Studies*, 61(2), 311–328. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231107658>
- Si, J. (2021). Visual pragmatic thinking strategy in design communication based on semiotics. *Journal of Visual Communication and Design*, 9(2), 15–21.
- Wang, W. (2021). Symbolic analysis of Nanjing Yunjin from the perspective of semiotics. *Journal of Textile Culture and Design*, 5(3), 89–96.
- Wang, W. Y., & Zhao, C. Y. (2021). A study on the visual language design of urban culture: Taking Nanjing Yunjin brocade as an example. *Art Education Research*, (12), 119–121.
- Wu, J. H. (2019). The narrative construction of urban image in visual identity design. *Art and Design (Theory)*, 2, 72–74.
- Wu, J. H. (2019). The role of visual communication design in shaping urban brand image. *Mass Standardization*, 2019(18), 49–51.
- Xiao, H., Lin, L., Yan, L., et al. (2018). Analysis and evolution of Miao silver ornamentation for tourist souvenir design from a design semiotic perspective. *Packaging Engineering*, 39(14), 221–226.
- Xiao, H., Zhang, J., & Liu, R. (2018). Analysis and innovation of Miao silver ornament symbols in cultural tourism product design from the perspective of design semiotics. *Art and Design Research*, 10(5), 75–82.
- Yang, X., & Ye, D. (2022). Modern transformation and application of Dong brocade cultural elements from a semiotic perspective. *Packaging Engineering*, 43(14), 343–353, 382. <https://doi.org/10.19554/j.cnki.1001-3563.2022.14.043>
- Yi, L., Yuan, Z., & Abas, N. H. (2024). A semiotic approach to the visual transformation of traditional Chinese patterns: A case study of Lingnan furniture. *International Journal of Cultural and Creative Industries*, 11(1), 34–47.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Zhu, N. (2022). The construction and communication strategies of urban cultural symbols in visual identity design. *Journal of Art and Design*, 3, 42–45.