

A Semiotic Perspective on Urban Brand Image Design: The Case of Macao

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Abstract

As an international hub for tourism and leisure, Macao possesses significant potential for urban brand reconstruction due to its unique Sino-Portuguese cultural elements and advantageous geographical position. Semiotic theory provides a fresh lens through which to revitalize urban brand images. By applying semiotic methods, this study deconstructs and reorganizes Macao's urban symbols, extracting those deeply rooted in its cultural heritage to construct symbolic representations of the city's brand identity. The objective is to employ semiotic approaches to explore the core system of urban symbols within Macao's brand, and to propose corresponding strategies for brand image development. This research aims not only to offer services for urban brand construction, but also to build a perceptible and resonant brand image, thereby enhancing Macao's global influence and competitiveness.

Keywords

Semiotics; cultural symbols; semiotic analysis; urban branding; Macao

1. Introduction

Driven by the tide of globalization, the construction of urban brand images has become a crucial factor in strengthening urban competitiveness. An urban brand not only concerns the external image and economic development of a city, but also serves as a vital carrier of its cultural depth and historical heritage. Macao, a city that originated and prospered from the sea, has been profoundly shaped by maritime civilization, which in turn determines the outward-oriented nature of its economy and culture (Zhou, 2019). Recognized as a historic city of China and one of the nation's southern gateways to the world, Macao has borne witness to centuries of cultural exchange between East and West. Over time, it has evolved into a world-renowned tourist destination (Zhang, 2023). However, under the impact of modernization and globalization, the construction of Macao's urban brand image faces multiple challenges, including the monotony of symbolic expression, insufficient exploration of cultural connotations, and limited effectiveness in international

communication.

Semiotics, as a discipline that studies signs and meanings, offers a novel perspective and methodology for urban brand image design—specifically, the expression of a city’s cultural connotations and values through the combination and reconstruction of symbols (Quan, 2024). Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist and pioneer of semiotics, proposed a dyadic model of the sign comprising the signifier and the signified. Charles Sanders Peirce, the American philosopher, introduced a triadic model that incorporated the dimension of interpretation, thereby breaking the closure of Saussure’s binary structure. These semiotic theories highlight the cultural constructiveness and dynamism of signs (Wang, 2024). From a semiotic perspective, deconstructing Macao’s historical and cultural signs alongside its modern symbolic expressions, and distilling core images to reconstruct the city’s visual and communicative system, will help Macao build an urban brand image that embodies cultural depth while maintaining modern appeal.

2. Semiotic Theory and Urban Brand Image

2.1 Foundations of Semiotics

Semiotics, as the study of signs and their meanings, was advanced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce, 1931). Saussure argued that signs are composed of two inseparable components: the signifier—the material form of a sign, including images, words, and sounds—and the signified, which refers to the abstract concept or meaning carried by the sign (Saussure, 1983). Their combination is not naturally determined but instead reflects the conventions of a specific society and culture.

Peirce, in contrast, classified signs into three categories: iconic, indexical, and symbolic. Iconic signs share similarities with the object they represent. Indexical signs are based on causal relationships between sign and object. Symbolic signs are deeply rooted in cultural conventions and collective consensus. Together, these three types form Peirce’s triadic model.

Semiotics emphasizes the cultural production, convention, and circulation of signs, making it an essential pathway for understanding human societies and cultural exchanges (Barthes, 1967). As a visual language, signs function not only as carriers of information in visual communication and branding, but also as representations of cultural identity and values (Eco, 1976).

2.2. Theories of Urban Branding

Urban branding is widely recognized as a key dimension of global competitiveness (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). It encapsulates cultural heritage, economic strength, and the city’s developmental trajectory. Kevin Keller (1998) conceptualized brand image as consumer perceptions and understandings of a brand, comprising functional, emotional, and symbolic dimensions. Like commercial brands, urban brands are shaped through symbolic and emotional representations, enabling audiences to recognize and engage with

them. Yet, commercial brands tend to be more streamlined in construction compared to the complexity of urban branding (Hankinson, 2001).

Urban branding aims to cultivate city images and brand equity, targeting residents, tourists, and other stakeholders. Its ultimate goal is to enhance global competitiveness and sustainability (Yao, 2024). Specifically, urban branding includes:

Urban brand symbols, which form the visual system of the city, encompassing logos, colors, slogans, architecture, cultural signs, and other symbolic elements. Iconic examples include the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the Statue of Liberty in New York.

Urban brand connotations, which emphasize intangible meanings, including history, memory, cultural imagery, and collective spirit (Kavaratzis, 2004).

Urban brand identity, which underscores emotional resonance between a city and its audiences. Through public communication and media promotion, symbolic representations reinforce recognition and attachment (Zenker & Braun, 2010).

2.3. The Link Between Semiotics and Urban Branding

Semiotic theory views urban brand construction as a scientific process. From this perspective, the urban brand image reflects a comprehensive system of material, cultural, and symbolic signs. Each level requires specific methods to capture the city's identity through brand symbols (Kavaratzis, 2004).

Signs function as cultural carriers. Through design and communication, they encapsulate a city's historical memory, cultural uniqueness, and developmental vision, translating these into visual forms for external audiences (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990). The cultural meanings behind these signs confer uniqueness and recognizability (Chandler, 2007).

Signs also serve as bridges between brands and audiences. In cognitive systems, recognizable symbols trigger emotional connections (Hankinson, 2001). Since signs are polysemous and evolve through social practices and urban transformations (Barthes, 1967), their interpretations vary across different cultural contexts. Thus, effective cross-cultural dissemination is crucial to extend symbolic meanings globally. This study applies semiotic frameworks to extract cultural connotations in Macao's urban branding, enabling broader recognition and communication (Dinnie, 2011).

Ultimately, the semiotic approach to urban branding emphasizes not only external form but also cultural depth and intrinsic meaning. By deconstructing and reconfiguring symbols, urban brands evolve sustainably and resonate with diverse audiences (Zenker & Braun, 2010).

3. Semiotic Analysis of Macao's Urban Branding

3.1. Cultural Symbols of Macao

Macao represents both a historical intersection of East and West and a maritime city rich in cultural heritage. Its distinctive culture is embodied in historical, architectural, and traditional cultural symbols that collectively shape its urban brand.

3.1.1. Historical Symbols

Historical symbols are deeply embedded in Macao's cultural heritage. The Historic Centre of Macao, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is one of the most representative symbolic assets of the city, including landmarks such as the Ruins of St. Paul's, A-Ma Temple, and Senado Square. The Ruins of St. Paul's, for instance, symbolize the fusion of Western Baroque and Eastern cultural elements (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). The A-Ma Temple reflects Macao's maritime traditions, originating from the Song dynasty as a place where fishermen and merchants prayed for safety at sea. Over centuries, A-Ma has become an emblematic figure of seafaring spirituality.

3.1.2. Architectural Symbols

Architectural signs are reflected in Macao's religious, residential, and public buildings. Portuguese-style architecture, exemplified by the Taipa Houses, displays bright colors, arched windows, and graceful curves that highlight Portuguese influence (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990). Conversely, Chinese architectural heritage, such as the Mandarin's House, illustrates traditional Chinese aesthetics. Together, these buildings showcase Macao's architectural diversity and cultural hybridity.

3.1.3. Cultural Symbols

Cultural signs manifest in local festivals and folk traditions, serving as both continuations and disseminators of Macao's intangible heritage. Lion dances during Lunar New Year and dragon boat races during the Dragon Boat Festival reflect regional traditions. A-Ma Temple fairs embody maritime culture and folk belief. Influenced by Portuguese customs, Macao also embraces culinary traditions—most notably the iconic egg tarts and pork chop buns—that have become integral cultural markers of the city's brand (Chandler, 2007). These food symbols embody recognition of Macao through sensory experience, reinforcing cultural identity.

3.2. Modern Symbols of Macao

Macao's rapid economic growth and globalization have fostered the emergence of modern symbols across tourism, economy, and the arts, reshaping its contemporary urban brand.

3.2.1. Tourism Symbols

Tourism signs underpin Macao's status as a "World Centre of Tourism and Leisure." Modern casino complexes, such as The Venetian, Grand Lisboa, and MGM Cotai, have become iconic symbols of Macao's international profile as the global hub of the gaming industry (Anholt, 2010).

3.2.2. Economic Symbols

Macao's economic identity is also symbolized by its role as a bridge in the Guang-

dong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and as a platform for trade with Portuguese-speaking countries. Events such as the Macao International Travel Expo and regional dialogue forums reinforce its status as a center for international cooperation (Dinnie, 2011).

3.2.3. Artistic Symbols

Contemporary artistic expressions enrich Macao's brand by integrating tradition with innovation. Events such as the Macao Arts Festival, the Macao International Music Festival, and large-scale art installations in hotels like MGM Cotai highlight the fusion of Lingnan traditions with modern technology, revitalizing cultural heritage through contemporary creativity.

3.3. Symbolic Deconstruction and Reconstruction

3.3.1 Multidimensional Meanings of Symbols

Macao's symbols carry layered meanings. For example, the Ruins of St. Paul's may signify cultural accumulation and identity for residents, while for tourists, it functions primarily as a visually striking attraction.

3.3.2. Audience Interpretation

Interpretations of symbols vary according to audience cultural backgrounds. International visitors more readily recognize Macao's gaming and modern architectural symbols, while historical and religious signs such as A-Ma Temple require narrative storytelling to foster emotional resonance and cultural identification.

3.3.3. Strategies of Symbolic Reconstruction

Symbolic reconstruction plays a pivotal role in evolving urban brand images. Balancing tradition with innovation, Macao's brand strategy should modernize traditional symbols without compromising cultural integrity. Digital technologies can breathe new life into historic signs, transforming them into multisensory, historically rooted experiences. Aligning visual identity systems with cultural narratives enables integration between traditional symbols and modern Macao, ensuring sustainable brand development.

4. Strategies for Urban Brand Image Design in Macao

4.1. Extraction of Core Symbols

The core symbols of an urban brand encapsulate a city's essence. For Macao to achieve global recognition, its brand must integrate historical-cultural depth with modern vitality.

Historical landmarks such as the Ruins of St. Paul's and A-Ma Temple represent Macao's collective memory and cultural hybridity. As a complement, its role as a "World Centre of Tourism and Leisure" introduces modernity through integrated

resorts like Galaxy and The Venetian, which have themselves become symbols of Macao's identity. Meanwhile, Macao's expanding participation in international conferences within the Greater Bay Area reinforces its global profile. Cultural and artistic events such as the Macao Arts Festival add contemporary vibrancy, merging tradition with fashion and innovation.

4.2. Visual Symbol System Design

4.2.1. Brand Logo Design

As the visual emblem of a city, brand logos must emphasize recognizability and symbolism. Macao's logo design could incorporate abstracted elements from the Ruins of St. Paul's façade and Portuguese architecture, simplified into a modern yet culturally resonant form.

4.2.2. Color Palette and Visual Standards

Color functions as a universal visual language. Green, already associated with Macao as a Special Administrative Region, may serve as a primary tone, complemented by gold, symbolizing prosperity and vitality. A unified color system across signage, public facilities, and cultural products would reinforce Macao's coherent visual identity.

4.2.3 Public Space and Facility Integration

Brand design elements should extend into urban spaces and facilities. Signage in heritage sites and tourist attractions can blend historical references with contemporary aesthetics. Public transportation, road systems, and city landscapes should integrate consistent branding elements, ensuring widespread recognition and emotional connection.

4.3. Cross-Cultural Brand Identity

Global recognition of Macao's brand requires cross-cultural communication strategies. Visual signs should be simplified and optimized for universal comprehension, enabling resonance across cultural backgrounds. Storytelling techniques can enrich symbolic meanings—for instance, narrating the maritime heritage of A-Ma Temple or the cultural hybridity embodied in the Ruins of St. Paul's. Finally, tailored localization and globalization strategies should target diverse audiences, achieving integrated yet differentiated communication across contexts.

5. Conclusion and Prospects

5.1. Conclusion

In the context of economic globalization, urban brand construction and marketing play a vital role in enhancing city competitiveness. As a site of Sino-Portuguese cul-

tural exchange, Macao reshapes its unique brand through the interplay of cultural, modern, and artistic symbols. Research findings highlight the Ruins of St. Paul's and A-Ma Temple as core elements of Macao's identity, while gaming, tourism, architecture, and cultural events inject international modernity. By reinterpreting symbols, Macao merges its deep-rooted heritage with contemporary dynamism, producing a distinctive brand cognition model.

5.2. Prospects

Future research will deepen empirical analysis, exploring innovative strategies for brand implementation in real-world contexts. Comparative studies with other cities will help identify transferable approaches to urban branding, contributing systematic theoretical support for sustainable urban brand construction.

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