

Visual identity of urban space: Principles of forming the image of cities in Shandong Province, China

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Abstract

Urban visual identity constitutes a vital component in the contemporary dissemination of a city’s image. Whilst numerous cities incorporate diverse design approaches within their artistic practices, certain issues invariably arise, thereby undermining the unique value of the city. By examining the application of design practices in the visual identity of cities within Shandong Province of China, this study aims to establish a principled framework for local urban visual identity. The core of the research lies in the analysis of visual elements in the city through a mixed research methodology, in particular using a combination of questionnaires, comparative analysis and visual case studies. The questionnaire contained within the article comprises three sections, designed to present the public’s perception, judgement and expectations regarding visual elements. An analysis of urban case studies was also conducted to distill, summarize and corroborate the key principles of urban visual identity. Research indicates that elements such as city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs and public artworks are indispensable components of a city’s visual identity. This demonstrates the vital importance of establishing a framework comprising four principles of visual identity: uniqueness, identifiability, sustainability, and regionalism. Research has shown that urban visual identity is not only a means of visual beautification, but can also participate in the formation of urban spatial perception and local identity. This study can provide a reference for the optimization of urban visual image and related research in Shandong Province.

Keywords: City image, Visual communications design, Urban visual identity, Cities of Shandong Province of China

Extended Abstract

Introduction: In the contemporary shaping and dissemination of urban image, the city’s visual identity plays an irreplaceable role. Although many cities and regions typically employ diverse approaches to artistic design practices, this often gives rise to certain issues that undermine the cultivation of a city’s unique value and diminish its overall distinctiveness. This situation requires transformation through a systematic approach that treats the city as a holistic structure encompassing multiple layers of meaning and sensory experience, thereby enabling the construction of a more refined and enriched urban visual image. In this regard, cities in Shandong Province stand as exemplars, having been shaped by the profound influence of their time-honored cultural heritage while simultaneously bearing the mission of renewing visual landscapes spurred by China’s urban modernization drive. This study systematically evaluated the visual identity elements of six cities in Shandong Province-Jinan, Qingdao, Jining, Rizhao, Liaocheng and Yantai-identifying key factors influencing urban visual identity through a public perspective. It explores the equilibrium between cultural heritage and contemporary communication to reveal the value of urban visual identity in fostering regional identity and shaping modern city image.

Purpose and scope: By analyzing the role of visual elements in shaping urban image and conveying regional characteristics, this article aims to explore the defining characteristics of urban visual identity within the contemporary design context. The study also examined how visual design influences the public's perception and experience of cities, revealing the equilibrium between aesthetic culture and regional characteristics within urban visual systems. In terms of research scope, the article examines four categories of visual elements: city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs, and public artworks. Analyze their performance in terms of formal organization, linguistic expression, compatibility with the urban environment, and aesthetic experience value. The study covered six representative cities in Shandong Province of China, and invited 100 young people aged 18 to 26 who were permanent residents within the province to complete a questionnaire.

Method: This study employs a mixed research methodology through questionnaire survey, comparative analysis and visual case study to examine the visual identity elements of six representative cities in Shandong Province: Jinan, Qingdao, Jining, Rizhao, Liaocheng and Yantai. The questionnaire section takes public perception as the clue, and there are three parts to understand the respondents' perception and attitudes towards four types of visual elements: the city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs, and public artworks. Part one clarifies the public's base perception of these urban visual elements by means of a comprehensive evaluation through five-level Likert scale matrix questions; part two presents respondents' attitudes towards visual identity in the form of single-choice questions on a five-point Likert scale; part three uses multiple-choice questions to capture people's overall value orientations and areas of focus. These contents provide the basis for the distillation of the four principles. Questionnaire data were used to analyze the relationship between visual phenomena and public experience to reveal general tendencies. Comparative analysis is used to identify the differences between the four types of visual elements in terms of visual morphology and cultural symbols, and to explore their roles in the expression of regional culture and the formation of urban identity. During the visual case study phase, the article employs four principles as an analytical framework, placing both distinct cities and visual elements within each narrative for elaboration. It offers a multidimensional interpretation of urban identity systems to explore how these design principles manifest across different visual media and their distinctive characteristics.

Findings and conclusion: The study also that visual elements such as city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs and public artworks are influenced by the distinct environments of different cities, enabling them to respond in their own ways to the demands of local culture and the modernization process. Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, it can be assumed that people's understanding of the city's visual identity is also more concerned with its integrated role in the communication of the city's image and the perception of place. Building upon this foundation, the present study has distilled a framework comprising four core design principles: uniqueness, identifiability, sustainability, and regionalism. Differentiating characteristics are the cornerstone of the principle of uniqueness; the principle of the identifiability emphasizes the effective connection between visual identity and spatial context; the principle of sustainability allows visual elements to have a stable cultural expression; and the principle of regionalism perpetuates the expression of local culture within visual communication. This framework not only reveals the synergistic relationship between urban image and modern visual language, but also clarifies the intrinsic structure of visual identity design for cities in Shandong Province. The results of the study also show that the formation of the urban visual identity system is the result of a variety of visual elements working together and in the long-term urban development and cultural accumulation. In summary, the formulation of these four principles provides evidence for understanding the hierarchical relationships within urban visual systems, and also indicates that visual identity has established a stable connection between urban communication and public cognition. The study and its framework of principles could also be applied to other cities and regions, taking into account the local context, and consideration could be given to expanding the scope and size of the sample.

Keywords: City image, Visual communications design, Urban visual identity, Cities of Shandong Province of China

INTRODUCTION

In the context of contemporary urban globalization, the visual identity of a city carries the expression of the city's characteristics and becomes an important means of cultural dissemination and social identity construction. Visual identity constructs the core expression of the city's image in the form of static non-verbal symbols, enabling cross-cultural communication of the city's message without the need to use language and text to break through geographical boundaries (Xu, 2013). This is a systematic visual communication design phenomenon by which the area of communication between people and the environment is formed (Vorobchuk & Skliarenko, 2022). However, many cities tend to use internationalized design language in shaping their image, often using standardized and highly reproducible visual symbols as the main form of expression, in order to quickly increase the competitiveness of the city. This is often based on the abstraction of the city's

cultural texture, social history and local identity, resulting in the visual image of the city appearing as “homogenization” (Grêt-Regamey & Galleguillos-Torres, 2022).

Cities situated in different locations often exhibit distinct characteristics in their respective visual identity development processes, shaped by local history, culture, economic conditions, and social structures. The character of the city generally includes monumental architectural, geographical, cultural and other historical features and determines the generation of the city’s image (Mohamad et al., 2022). Urban development in Shandong Province has been influenced by a combination of historical and cultural heritage, the geographical advantage of being both inland and open to the coast, and convenient transportation. Shandong Province remains a significant cradle of Chinese civilization, possessing profound roots in the “Qilu culture” (Pan et al., 2024), this includes diverse and distinctive regional cultural resources such as seashores, springs, canals, Confucian culture, etc., which have led to the formation of a diverse type of urban image within the province. This also provides a rich source of material for visual elements such as city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs and public artworks. This has also enabled different cities to develop their own different visual expressions in urban regeneration and the shaping of public space, thus ensuring that the visual identity of the city can be carried out effectively. The demand for communicating the image of cities is constantly increasing. Existing research on visual identity can serve as a point of entry, as it not only bridges urban culture and spatial environments but also enables multifaceted exploration of the functionalities and values inherent in these elements.

Certain scholars have examined the role of graphic design within urban visual identity systems (Adamus-Matuszyńska & Dzik, 2017; Adamus-Matuszyńska & Dzik, 2020; Zhou, 2024). In particular, this article by Zhou (2024) looks at Jinan’s urban visual identity as a systematic structure and creates an urban identity manual that includes a core logo, IP image, supporting graphics, and web posters in multiple design categories. Wardani and Wahyurini (2014), on the other hand, emphasize the role played by logo design in city branding, arguing that logos enable cities to develop a clearer brand identity.

Urban identity in contemporary scientific research constitutes a composite phenomenon that intersects multiple disciplines such as spatial studies, cultural studies, sociology, and communication processes. In the works of Ökesli and Gürçınar (2012), Oktay (2002), and Umar et al. (2024), identity is first characterized by both tangible and intangible aspects. These encompass architectural forms, landscapes, historical symbols, spatial usage patterns, cultural codes, and the everyday practices of residents. This view matches that of Melnychuk and Gnatiuk (2019), who emphasized that urban identity is determined both by socio-cultural transformations that shape public perceptions of the city and by the actual characteristics present in the contemporary environment.

In the shaping of identity, both visual and graphic elements, alongside urban communication, play a role and determine the aesthetic value of the chosen themes. Köylü (2025) and Torbati (2018) contend that it is precisely the small-scale environmental graphic design elements—such as navigation systems, information signage, and even the often-overlooked manhole covers—that ensure the stability of the urban environment, enhance cultural legibility, and forge a sense of identity and emotional connection between people and their surroundings.

From a semiotic point of view, urban visual identity can be understood as the process by which the elements of a city shift from material form to cultural connotation. Using Morris’s model of semiotics, Zhuang and Yusoff (2025) point out that urban visual identity is actually composed of multiple visual elements through the three dimensions of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. Its role is also not only to convey the cultural significance of the city through symbols, but also to influence the public’s perception of the city’s image. Similar to this is the article by Muktiono (2024), it points out that cities are not just a collection of buildings and infrastructure, but that each element of the urban environment has a unique meaning. The character and identity of the city can be more effectively recognized through the interpretation of symbols in streets, buildings and public spaces.

Urban visual identity not only relies on the generation of symbolic meaning, but also relates to the way visual images are presented and viewed in public space. In his book (2014: 2), Debord points out that landscapes are not just a simple collection of images, but a social relationship in which the public participates through the

mediatization of images. This idea suggests that urban visual elements influence the public's understanding of the city when they are repeatedly viewed, communicated and encountered by people in public spaces.

In general, although existing studies have discussed urban visual identity from the perspectives of visual communication, city branding, urban identity and spatial symbols, these results have focused more on a certain type of visual elements in the lack of attention to the perception of the joint role of multiple elements in urban image. How visual identity elements will affect the public's understanding of the city's image can be kept in view.

METHOD

This study adopts a mixed research method combining questionnaire survey, comparative analysis and visual case study to examine the characteristics of urban visual identity alongside public experience within a unified design framework. The research also focuses on the composition and perception of city's visual identity in Shandong Province, examining four categories of visual elements: city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs, and public artworks:

- City Logos: Utilizes the official version for prefecture-level cities, serving as the most intuitive visual symbol;
- Iconic Buildings: Three historical and three modern structures selected;
- Guide Signs: Frequently employed within urban public spaces;
- Public Artworks: The sculptural art of which was chosen to be analyzed is incorporated holistically.

The study selected six representative cities in Shandong Province, Jinan, Qingdao, Jining, Rizhao, Liaocheng and Yantai, as the object of research and analysis:

- Jinan: The capital city of the province, with the image of a spring city culture and administrative center;
- Qingdao and Yantai: Reflecting the visual characteristics of coastal open cities;
- Jining and Liaocheng: Associated with Confucian culture and canal culture respectively;
- Rizhao: Presenting coastal ecology and emerging city image.

These cities were chosen mainly because of the uniqueness and clarity of their local images and the ability of these images to form comparable research objects through visual elements. The research analysis conducted in this paper is also not concerned with the actual overall rankings of these cities, but mainly examines the respondents' evaluations of the visual elements of different cities and uses them as a basis to illustrate the role and characteristics of these visual identity contents in public perception.

It is also necessary to define the scope of the research group: (1) Residents of Shandong Province in China; (2) Those aged between 18 and 26 years. The sample included both students and those already employed, who also had some differences in their perceptions of the city: Students are more exposed to the city's image through campus life and strolling and traveling around the city, and their evaluations are more likely to be influenced by the scope of campus life and urban public cultural space; while employed people form their awareness of the urban environment more in their work commute and daily life, and are more likely to pay attention to the effect of using urban visual information. This group was also chosen because they are more active in the daily use of urban public space, the frequency of social media communication, and their demand for and acceptance of visual elements in the city is higher than that of other age groups. Due to the limitations of the sample size and age range, the findings in this paper are mainly used to reflect the perceived tendencies of young respondents in Shandong Province, and are not intended as generalized conclusions applicable to all public groups.

By extrapolating and estimating the relevant demographic data of Shandong Province, the number of young people aged 18-26 in Shandong Province can be estimated to be about 12 million, and the Cochran formula was used to calculate the sample size as follows:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \times p \times (1-p)}{E^2}$$

Choose a confidence level of 95% and a Z-value of about 1.96; allowable error is 10%, i.e. $E = 0.1$; the predicted value of the overall proportion, $p = 0.5$,

$$\text{I.e., for: } n_0 = \frac{1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}{0.1^2} = 96.04.$$

Rounded up, the minimum sample size was 97. Considering also the completeness of the questionnaire recovery and the operationalization of the study, 100 valid questionnaires were finally used for the analysis of this paper. Table 1 presents the general demographic data for these respondents. The questions in the questionnaire are pre-set to obtain standardized and low-bias feedback. The questionnaire also received the support and understanding of the respondents. At the same time, this study is part of the design discipline and does not involve minors, vulnerable groups or the private information of any individual. It has also been approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Art and Design at Shaanxi University of Science and Technology, with the approval number of Shaan Ke Da She Yi [2025] No. 0902, and the date of approval is 2 September 2025.

Table 1. Statistics on respondents' data

Project	Classification	Value
Gender Count	Male	49
	Female	51
Age Distribution	18 - 20 years	34
	21 - 23 years	38
	24 - 26 years	28
Educational Background Composition	High school and below	9
	Post-secondary students	63
	Postgraduate	28
Occupational Distribution	Student	81
	Employed	19
Length of Residence in the Province	Less than 1 year	24
	1 - 3 years	36
	3 - 5 years	26
	More than 5 years	14

The purpose of designing this questionnaire is to establish a framework of principles for determining the city's visual identity, which will be distilled from the results of the survey:

(a) Questionnaire Survey: An online questionnaire was designed via the Chinese professional survey platform "Wenjuanxing" (www.wjx.cn) and distributed through WeChat, China's largest and most widely used social media application. The questionnaire asked all respondents to rate four categories of visual elements in six cities in Shandong Province, thus ensuring the translation of comparable data from the respondents. Part 1 of the questionnaire consisted of five-level Likert scale matrix questions, which were tested for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, followed by descriptive statistics to elaborate on the distribution of the responses and the percentage of positive ratings; part 2 was all single-choice questions on a five-point Likert scale, and only descriptive statistics were used to present the distribution of responses and the proportion of positive ratings for each question; part 3 of the questionnaire was multiple choice and multiple response analysis was used to count the frequency and percentage of choices for each option.

(b) Comparative analysis: It is used to examine the differences in the representation of the four types of visual elements in six cities in Shandong Province, focusing on comparing the visual representations of different cities and the different roles of these four types of visual elements in the shaping of the city's visual identity.

(c) Visual case Study: Conducting a descriptive analysis of representative visual elements within urban public spaces in Shandong Province.

It is also necessary to explain the structure and purpose of the three parts of the questionnaire. Part one focuses on public perceptions regarding the evaluation of city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs and public artworks, guiding respondents to assess the visual presentation of these elements holistically. For each type of visual element question, six different multiple-choice questions were set up, which could present the relative advantages of the four types of visual elements under a unified standard.

Unlike the part one, the part two focuses on the role of visual elements in communication, experience and memory, comprising eight multiple-choice questions. Respondents are required to evaluate and select based on the following criteria: the impact of visual elements, international expression, frequency of exposure, cultural alignment, recognition and appeal, compatibility with regional culture, emotional experience, and overall satisfaction with the image. This enables them to articulate their perceptions and attitudes towards the city’s visual identity elements within a broad contextual perspective.

The part three comprises three multiple-response questions centered on value prioritization, existing shortcomings in visual recognition, and enhancing attention levels. These questions aim to clarify individuals’ understanding, evaluation, and expectations regarding these visual elements. The findings of this part supplement the specific assessments of urban visual elements conducted in the preceding two parts.

It should also be noted that by combing the literature and analyzing the results of the questionnaire, it was possible to clarify the way in which the four principles of uniqueness, identifiability, sustainability and regionalism were formed: the literature study provided a conceptual basis for these four principles, and the questionnaire results reflected respondents’ perceptions and evaluations of these elements. The discussion section will corroborate the way the four principles are expressed in the city’s visual identity with specific visual examples.

FINDINGS

Visual Identity Elements in Urban Space in Shandong Province

This article re-examines the orientation of shaping the visual image of urban spaces in Shandong Province based on a pre-designed questionnaire. This study focuses on four categories of visual elements: city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs, and public artworks. These elements play a fundamental role in the perceived evaluations of respondents. The results of the reliability and validity test for the first part of the questionnaire are shown in table2; parts 2 and 3 are not tabulated here, and their results are described directly in the body of the text to avoid repetition with subsequent textual content.

Table 2. Results of the reliability test for the first part of the questionnaire

Visual Element	Number of Questions	Reliability Coefficient
City Logo	6	0.885
Iconic Building	6	0.922
Guide Sign	6	0.887
Public Artwork	6	0.874

City Logo

The most widespread and frequent primary content and visual communication element of the city’s visual identity and image is the city logo (Xu, 2013); it is a central symbol in the communication of the city’s brand, crosses cultural and spatial boundaries, and emerges as a powerful tangible asset for the city (Wardani & Wahyurini, 2014). According to the questionnaire survey, respondents generally held positive overall evaluations of the logos for the six cities of Jinan, Qingdao, Jining, Rizhao, Liao Cheng and Yantai (Figures 1 and 2). Among the six options, the proportions of “agree” and “strongly agree” exceeded half. Among them, the positive evaluations of aesthetic harmony and ease of memory accounted for 55% and 53% respectively, showing relatively outstanding performance; positive ratings on clarity of color and form, embodiment of cultural identity, suitability of the medium, and potential for long-term use and promotion were all 51%. City logo also showed relative strength in the two comparison questions, with the frequency of selection topping all four categories of visual elements: positive ratings were 53% for “influence in shaping the overall image of the city” (Figure 9a) and 32% for “representativeness in international communication” (Figure 9b). This underscores logo pivotal role in both local image recognition and external international communication.

These logos chosen for this paper uses the officially released version in the six cities, which is widely used in public activities such as cultural and tourism promotion in these cities, and was shown to the respondents during the distribution of the questionnaire with the corresponding multiple-choice questions.



Figure 1. Shandong provincial city logos: a) Jinan, b) Qingdao, c) Jining, d) Rizhao, e) Liaocheng, f) Yantai

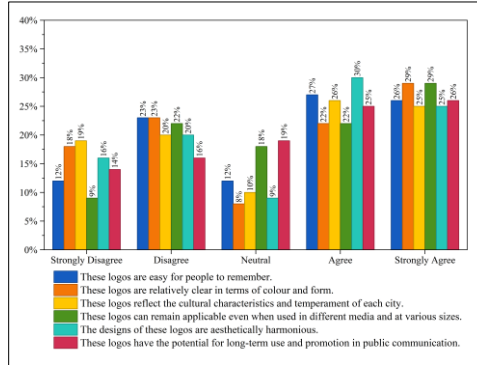


Figure 2. Overall visual assessment of the city logos

Iconic Building

Iconic buildings have an important value in the urban built environment, shaping people’s unique perceptions of the city, and have a symbolic value in the city’s identity (Zamparini et al., 2023); iconic buildings is also a constant influence on the standard of living and the quality of the environment in urban spaces (Riza et al., 2012). The construction of iconic buildings can also quickly attract people’s attention to the city’s construction, in order to obtain more recognition and enhance the city’s reputation (Elhagla et al. 2020). Respondents also expressed positive overall assessments of the iconic buildings in these six cities (Figures 3 and 4). Of the six options, easy to recognize and remember received the highest positive rating, with a total of 59% choosing “agree” and “strongly agree”; the positive ratings of reflecting cultural characteristics and the spirit of the times, and possessing visual harmonization and aesthetics were both 57%; positive ratings for both distinctive stylistic features and use value for long-term preservation were 51%; the positive evaluation of modern communication and multi-scenario application adaptability is 48%, which is relatively low, and there is still room for improvement in communication adaptability. On the question of frequency of daily contact, 56% of the respondents chose “often” and “very often” together, slightly higher than public artwork, guide sign, and city logo, suggesting that they are highly visible in the daily spatial experience of the city (Figure 9c). The six iconic buildings selected in this paper are mainly from the preliminary data collation and urban case screening, with randomness; and these buildings also have clear identification characteristics and high visibility in their respective cities, and frequently appear in the public visual image, with a good typical role. Special questions have also been set up in the questionnaire and these images have been shown to the respondents at the time of distribution.

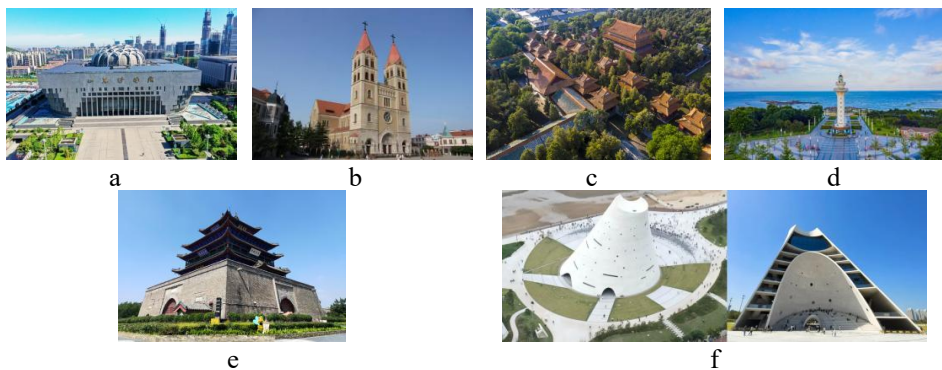


Figure 3. Iconic buildings in Shandong province: a) Jinan, b) Qingdao, c) Jining, d) Rizhao, e) Liaocheng, f) Yantai

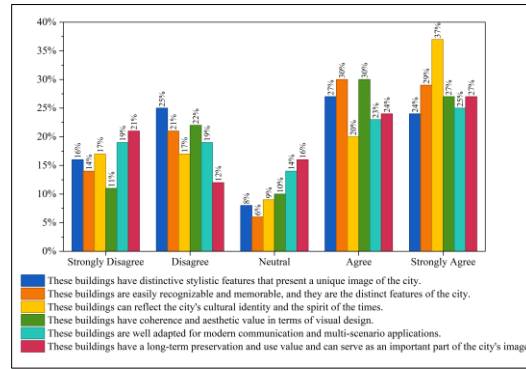


Figure 4. Overall visual assessment of urban iconic buildings

Guide Sign

Guide signs are actually a set of information systems that depend on the space with the area (McCarthy, 2006). In ordinary roads, street corners and other public spaces we commonly see guide signs that generally follow universal design, inclusive design, accessible design and other methods (Persson et al., 2015).

Survey findings indicate that people hold a generally neutral to positive attitude towards guide signs in the six cities (Figures 5 and 6). Long-term usability and adaptability to urban development had the highest positive rating of 56% for this question; the choices of directional guidance and information communication, incorporation of regional characteristics, and visual expressiveness in different environmental conditions were all 52%, indicating that these cases have gained a certain degree of recognition in terms of functional identification and regional expression; the positive evaluation of functional needs and the value of the cultural viewing experience was 50%, which is in a more balanced state. Meanwhile, the positive rating for the coordination of guide signs in the surrounding environment is 47%, which indicates that these respondents believe that guide signs need to be optimized in terms of environmental adaptation. Guide signs in urban spaces in Shandong Province are generally characterized by modern design in terms of Harmonization of materials with the environment, Integration of regional characteristics and aesthetics, and Dynamics and emotional interaction (Li and Skliarenko, 2025). It should also be noted that the regional characteristics of cities in Shandong Province and the modern urban development situation are taken into account in the selection of cases in this paper, and except for Fig. 5d, the pictures of the cases are taken from the results of the published paper. Pictures of these cases had also been provided to the respondents at the beginning of the questionnaire distribution with special multiple-choice questions.



Figure 5. Guide signs of Shandong province: a) Jinan, b) Rizhao, c) Qingdao, d) Liaocheng, e) Jining, f) Yantai

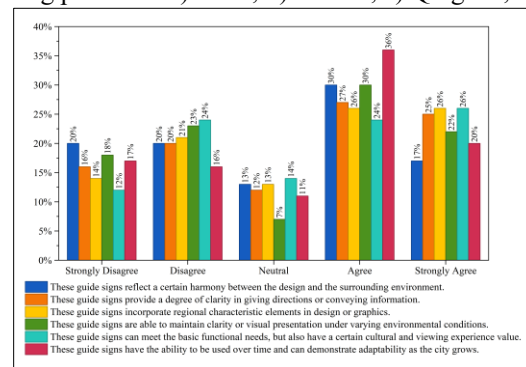


Figure 6. Overall visual assessment of urban guide signs

Public Artwork

Public art influences people’s perceptions with the uniqueness of its own composition, encompasses people’s attitudes to life, and reflects cultural phenomena in the city through artistic means (China Architecture and Culture Center, 2018: 17). It encompasses a wide variety of forms, such as urban sculptures, monuments, arches, street furniture, murals, details of public buildings, digital displays, and even graffiti and street art (Jasmi & Mohamad, 2018).

The survey findings indicate that respondents’ evaluations of public artworks in these six cities varied considerably (Figures 7 and 8): Visual coherence and aesthetics had the highest positive rating in this question at 60%, indicating that public art is better recognized on an aesthetic level; the positive ratings of 51% for being a city landmark symbol and easy to remember, and 50% for creativity and visual appeal, and expressiveness and adaptability in different scenarios indicate that these public artworks have a role to play in visual appeal and spatial communication. It is worth mentioning that the positive rating of 49% for long-term value and 47% for reflecting the city’s cultural connotations, historical memory and contemporary spirit are relatively low, indicating that there is still room for improvement in the ability of these artworks to symbolize adaptation, cultural expression and sustained dissemination. The selected cases of urban public art in Shandong Province in this paper take urban sculpture as the main object, and these works, through the combination of urban landscape and regional spatial characteristics, present a more distinctive regional cultural imprint in the modern urban development. After organizing the visual material of the six cities, works with a high degree of local orientation and more famous were selected to be included in the questionnaire. Images of these sculptures were also shown to the respondents when the questionnaire was distributed.



Figure 7. Iconic buildings of Shandong province: a) Jinan, b) Qingdao, c) Jining, d) Rizhao, e) Liaocheng, f) Yantai

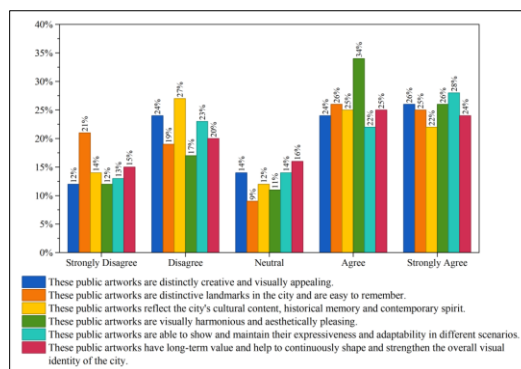


Figure 8. Overall visual assessment of urban public artworks

Features of Visualizing Emotional Perception of a City

The public’s perception of a city’s image is gradually formed through daily use and experience. A clear, stable and positive city image can enhance the city’s visual appeal and strengthen people’s emotional attachment to it. The findings further demonstrate that these visual elements continue to exert an influence over prolonged use and memory retention. The part two of the questionnaire further investigated respondents’ subjective assessments of these four categories of visual elements. The results show that 52% of the respondents

recognized the important value of visual design in conveying local cultural and historical identity (Figure 9d). With 56% of respondents believing that these visual elements have a positive role to play in shaping the city’s visibility and attractiveness, this option has the highest percentage of choices among these five questions (Figure 9e). The positive rating of 51% in terms of regional cultural fit and the city’s competitive advantage shows that respondents tend to understand the city’s visual identity in relation to its regional character (Figure 9f). Overall, 55% of respondents recognized the ability of these elements to influence their experiences and memories, and to enhance the sense of belonging to some extent (Figure 9g); and in the evaluation of overall satisfaction, 53% of people have a positive attitude towards these cities and their visual elements, which shows that the visual image of the six cities has gained relatively stable recognition (Figure 9h).

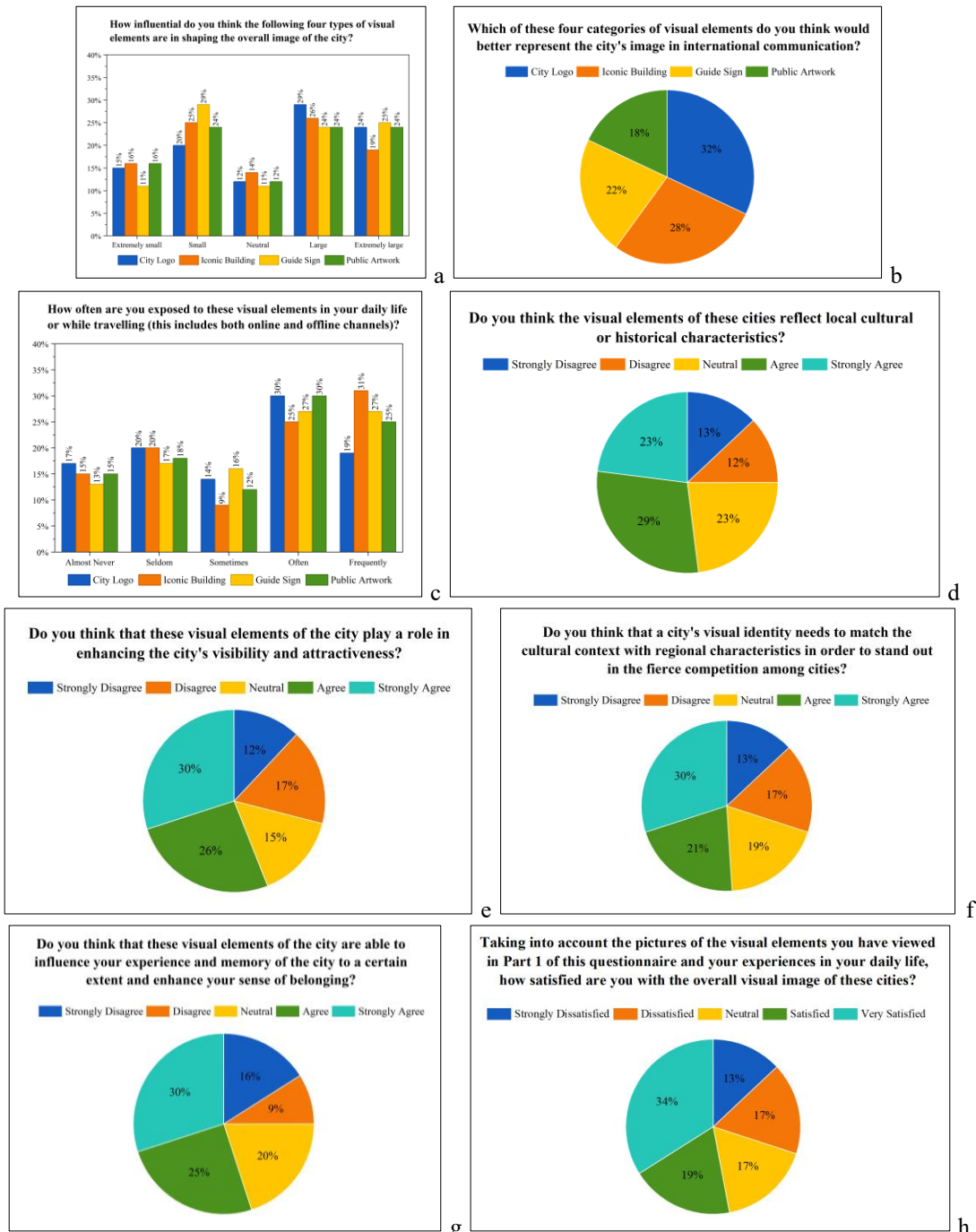


Figure 9. Emotional perception of the city (Questionnaire results): a) Visual impact, b) The international communication of city image, c) Frequency of contact, d) The historical and cultural characteristics of the locality, e) The city’s reputation and appeal, f) Cultural background, g) Experience, Memory and Belonging, h) Overall satisfaction

The part three clarifies respondents' overall expectations regarding the city's visual identity. The results show that when asked about the values that should be most prominent in the city's visual identity (Figure 10a), the highest percentage of respondents chose the option of the heritage of the local culture, at 57%; the percentage of choices for functional identification, long-term maintenance and multi-scene adaptation, and differentiated presentation are 47%, 44% and 43% respectively, which shows that the respondents' judgment of the value of urban visual identity is not limited to visual aesthetics, but pays more attention to its cultural expression and practical application value. Feedback on deficiencies centered on insufficient exploration of regional culture, insufficient attention to artistic aesthetics, lack of environmental adaptation, and too much similarity between elements, with 75%, 59%, 52%, and 52% of choices, respectively, suggesting that people would like to see a more prominent and distinctive image of the city (Figure 10b). Regarding the reasons for the growing interest in the city's visual identity (Figure 10c), efficient identification and communication, and improvement and maintenance of the visual identity system were both selected by 56%, and the development of the city's brand by 55%; and the percentage of choices for the concept of sustainable urban development was 45%, which is lower than the previous three, but still close to half, indicating that respondents are also beginning to understand the value of visual identity from the perspective of long-term urban development. It is also clear from the question that respondents are beginning to understand urban visual identity as an important aspect in the communication and spatial renewal of the city's image.

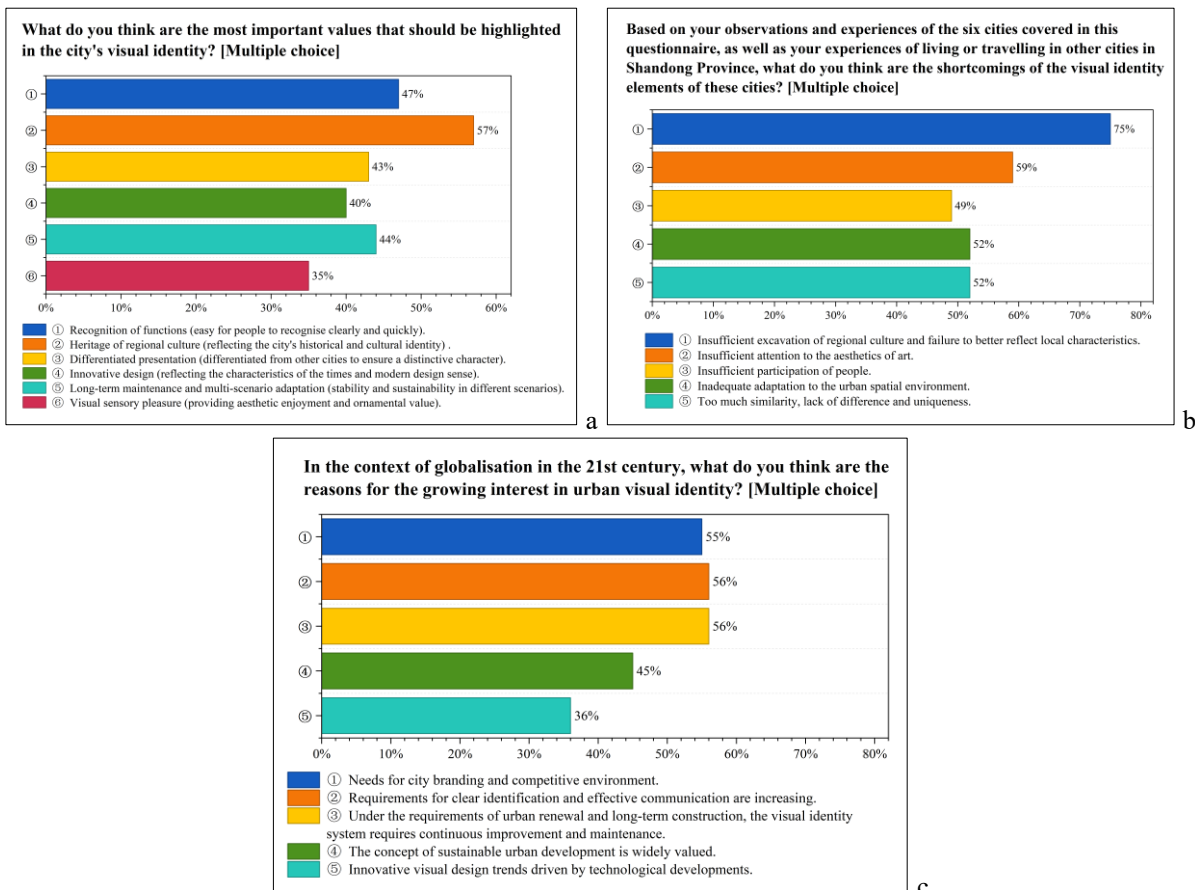


Figure 10. The overall value orientation and focus of the urban visual image: a) The distinctive value of urban visual identity, b) Shortcomings in urban visual identity elements, c) Emerging trends in urban visual identity

The city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs and public artworks collectively form a legible and perceptible visual system. The results of the questionnaire show that urban visual identity plays a significant role in shaping the public's spatial cognition and emotional attachment. Respondents demonstrated a greater propensity to identify with visual elements that possess cultural symbolism, exhibit clear form, and harmonize with the urban environment. Therefore, to enhance a city's competitiveness and identity, it is essential to establish systematic principles for urban visual identity design.

DISCUSSION

The Principle of Uniqueness

Distinguishing between cities and their regions requires an exploration of the notion of distinctive identity (Ginting & Wahid, 2017), and the uniqueness of cities is made manifest by the combination of material and immaterial elements (Musiaka et al., 2021).

Guided by the principle of uniqueness, multiple representative elements of Shandong's cities have been integrated through historical and cultural synthesis to construct distinctive visual imagery. Based on the findings of the previous questionnaire, it is evident that respondents' interest in the city's image is influenced by the visual appearance of its elements and the experiential impact within the urban space.

The principle of uniqueness holds that possessing distinctive expressiveness and recognizability is fundamental to a city's visual identity. The combination of these elements' form, material and color can give a city a visual character distinct from other cities. Whether static logo graphics or spatial elements such as architecture, signage and sculpture, these components resonate across multiple dimensions, ensuring the distinctive character of the locality is consistently conveyed through diverse media and settings. This motif appears in the Jinan city logo (Figure 1a), the Qingdao city logo (Figure 1b), Saint Michael's Church (Figure 3b), beer cap-shaped signage (Figure 5c), and the "May Wind" (五月的风) sculpture (Figure 7b).

The Principle of Identifiability

Similar to identifiability is the scientific definition of legibility, which was first proposed by Lynch in his monograph 'The Image of the City' (Lynch, 1964: 2-6). According to him, it can be assumed that a clear city attracts people's attention quickly, creates a stable image of the city in their minds and brings them a sense of security. Unlike legibility, identifiability emphasizes how visual elements can be distinguished and highlighted, focusing on whether visual symbols can be recognized by different groups in diverse circumstances within complex urban environments. In the survey results, the majority of respondents favored elements within the urban environment that enable them to quickly recognize and retain vivid memories.

Among cities in Shandong Province, the principle of identifiability manifests across multiple visual media. The Confucian Temple complex in Jining (Figure 3c) embodies the solemn and dignified character of traditional Chinese architecture through its majestic ritual order, enabling visitors to swiftly form an impression of the regional culture upon entering the space; its tourist orientation map (Figure 5e) employs concise graphics and judicious color schemes to enable visitors to swiftly ascertain key location information. The "Spring Mark" (泉标) sculpture in Jinan (Figure 7a), with its fluid, dynamic form, serves as both the visual focal point and defining symbol of the space, while also functioning as a significant daily gathering place for people. The "Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea" (八仙过海) sculpture in Yantai (Figure 7f) features mythological figures as its central image, creating a profound visual impression and similarly possessing a high degree of locational recognition.

The Principle of Sustainability

Sustainable development is often addressed in urban and design research in topics such as ecology and social development, emphasizing the protection of environmental resources and the coordination of human-nature relations (Ge, 2024; Skliarenko et al., 2022). One of these studies also points out that sustainable development also involves multiple dimensions such as cultural, spatial and social (Ragheb et al., 2022). The term sustainability in this paper is closer to "visual sustainability", which emphasizes the stability of recognition and cultural expression of visual elements in long-term use. Hanachi and Moghimi (2017) argue that physical and visual elements can influence the sustainability of cities and regions over time and intervene in cultural sustainability. This perspective offers help in understanding sustainability in terms of visual identity and urban identity maintenance.

The visual elements of multiple cities in Shandong Province demonstrate design objectives capable of enduring dissemination under this principle. The city logos of Rizhao and Yantai (Figures 1d and 1f) feature a distinct color structure and stable graphic form, enabling them to adapt and harmonize across various visual media.

Yantai's "Time Tower" (Figure 3f) stands along the coastline, its architectural form possessing strong modern characteristics and enduring symbolic value; the Shandong Museum (Figure 3a), an iconic building in the inland city of Jinan, presents an image that combines the orderly and rational qualities of modern design with the steadfastness and solemnity inherent in Qi-Lu culture. The guide signs in Jinan and Rizhao (Figure 5a and 5b) make use of the context of streets and lanes and the landscape features of greenways to extend the coordinated cultural expression of the visual messages in daily use and urban renewal. Yantai's coordinate check-in frames (Figure 5f) maintain landscape appeal by employing a visual language that is both robust and gravitas-imbued, while permitting repeated updates. The starfish sculpture in Rizhao (Figure 7d) uses an exaggerated image of the sea creature to demonstrate its ability to maintain a stable expression of its image under different lighting and landscape conditions.

The Principle of Regionalism

Regionalism is regarded as possessing authentic attributes, its essential characteristics lying in the shaping of a spirit of place, the enhancement of cultural belonging, and the achievement of contextual adaptation between the built environment and the regional ecology (Anderson & Al-Bader, 2006). This principle also advocates drawing design elements from local languages, skillfully integrating cultural achievements specific to a region into visual design.

Visual expression must maintain a close connection with the local cultural context, thereby ensuring the city's image achieves a harmonious and stable balance between cultural continuity and regional distinctiveness. Within this principle, Jining's city logo (Figure 1c) and Liaocheng's city logo (Figure 1e) respectively employ calligraphic and pictorial graphic compositions to address the visual expression requirements of their respective urban cultural characteristics within the flat graphic identity system. It is worth noting that Liaocheng, renowned as the "Jiangbei Water City" (江北水城), draws inspiration for its logo design from the iconic Guangyue Tower (Figure 3e). Here, the city's character and its geographical memory converge and resonate. Viewed from afar, the lighthouse structure at Rizhao Coastal Plaza (Figure 3d) merges its transparent spatial interface with the distant azure sky and sea, embodying the modern openness characteristic of a coastal city. Localized written expressions appear on Liaocheng's dialect culture wall (Figure 5d), where such regional vocabulary frequently garners attention and affection in everyday life. The bronze statue of Confucius in Jining (Figure 7c) and the "Two Dragons Playing with a Pearl" (二龙戏珠) sculpture at Tenglong Square in Liaocheng (Figure 7e) become the focal point of public recognition through their grand, stable shapes, ensuring that they can be clearly identified from a distance.

CONCLUSION

The dissemination of contemporary urban image increasingly relies upon the diverse expressions of visual media, and the role played by the urban visual identity in this process cannot be overlooked. Multi-faceted design interventions not only effectively elevate the standard of artistic development within cities but also address issues arising from the fast-paced social context, thereby enhancing the unique value of urban environments. Based on a structured questionnaire, this study identifies how four categories of visual elements -city logos, iconic buildings, guide signs, and public artworks- influence people's visual perception. The reason why visual image can play a role in shaping urban perception is inseparable from the fact that people constantly come into contact with these visual elements in their daily spatial and media experiences, and form an understanding of urban image and its characteristics through their visual judgments. Visual content with stable identification characteristics and regional cultural orientation can enhance people's regional memory and association of the city, and transform the material city image into imaginative environmental experience.

In addition, the four key principles for constructing a city's visual identity: uniqueness, identifiability, sustainability and regionalism also come together to form a complete content of the city's visual identity, providing a basis for categorizing the visual composition: the principles of uniqueness and identifiability can regulate and optimize the convergence of urban visual expression and the lack of image recognition, so that its visual elements can be more easily recognized and remembered, and can be applied to the visual image design of most cities; the principle of sustainability applies to cities where visual elements have been used for a long

time or are undergoing urban renewal and image integration, and is concerned with the continuity of expression and stabilization of recognition of visual elements over a long period of time; the principle of regionalism can be used in cities with deep historical and cultural resources or rich natural and geographic landscape elements, so that the visual language can fit the regional characteristics, and the problem of homogenization of urban image expression can be improved.

This study still has some limitations: the sample size of the questionnaire is 100 people, the age of the respondents is limited to 18-26 years old, and the results of the survey mainly reflect the tendency of the youth group in Shandong Province to perceive the visual identity elements of the city, which does not directly represent the entire age group. At the same time, the framework of visual identity principles proposed in this paper is mainly based on the six specific cities of Jinan, Qingdao, Jining, Yantai, Liaocheng and Rizhao in Shandong Province; for other provinces, regions and cities, although the framework can provide reference ideas and bases for understanding the formation process of the city's visual identity, it cannot be regarded as an established design form, and still needs to be adjusted according to the status quo of the respective regions and cities in the actual application.

Authors' Contributions

The authors contributed equally to the study.

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Competing Interests

There is no potential conflict of interest.

Ethics Committee Declaration

Ethics committee approval dated 02/09/2025 and numbered 0902 was obtained by Ethics Committee of School of Art and Design at Shaanxi University of Science and Technology.

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Table 1: Statistics on respondents' data. Word software.

Table 2: Results of the reliability test for the first part of the questionnaire. Word software.

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