BRAND DESIGN STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE THE AESTHETIC VALUE OF URBAN IMAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN TAOJIANG COUNTY, HUNAN PROVINCE*

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop brand design strategies to enhance the aesthetic value of urban image and cultural identity in Taojiang County, Hunan Province, China. The objectives were (1) to analyze the current urban image and branding practices of Taojiang County, (2) to synthesize local cultural resources into coherent brand identity components, and (3) to develop a brand design strategy that strengthens urban image, cultural identity, and aesthetic value. A mixed-methods approach was employed, including document analysis, visual observation, semi-structured interviews with six experts, and a questionnaire survey administered to 100 respondents. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic and visual analysis, while quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The findings revealed five major issues affecting Taojiang's urban branding: visual inconsistency, weak cultural representation, absence of visual identity guidelines, fragmented stakeholder coordination, and limited aesthetic

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coherence in public spaces. The study translated local cultural resources, including bamboo weaving craftsmanship, bamboo forest landscapes, peach blossom traditions, and folk arts, into a comprehensive visual identity system comprising logo design, color schemes, typography, modular patterns, and cultural mascot applications. The proposed strategy consists of four key components: visual identity development, spatial application guidelines, stakeholder coordination, and an implementation roadmap. The findings suggest that the proposed strategy can effectively strengthen Taojiang's urban image, cultural identity, and aesthetic value while providing a sustainable framework for future city branding initiatives.

Keywords: Brand design strategy, Urban image, Cultural identity, Aesthetic value, Taojiang County

Introduction

In the era of globalization and intense regional competition, urban image has become a critical indicator of a city's comprehensive competitiveness, cultural attractiveness, and potential for sustainable development. Cities are increasingly evaluated not only on infrastructure or economic performance but also on cultural narratives, visual expression, and brand identity. City branding has thus emerged as a strategic tool to differentiate urban areas, communicate local values, and enhance recognition and memorability (Kavaratzis, 2004; Zhang & Zhao, 2009; Oguztimur & Akturan, 2016). In contemporary contexts such as the creative and experience economy, cities must leverage cultural and heritage resources to construct meaningful and aesthetically appealing urban identities (Richards & Wilson, 2006; Richards, 2020; Duxbury et al., 2020).

Taojiang County, Hunan Province, China, possesses abundant natural and cultural resources, including bamboo forests, bamboo crafts, bamboo shoots, peach blossoms, and diverse intangible cultural heritage such as folk arts and

traditional performances. These assets reflect distinctive ecological and cultural characteristics that could serve as the foundation for a cohesive and recognizable city brand (Nursanty et al., 2023; Del Mármol & Santamarina, 2024). However, current branding efforts in Taojiang remain fragmented and inconsistent. Existing brand elements including city logos, slogans, and IP images such as the “Bamboo Gentleman” and “Peach Fairy” lack coherent visual identity systems, standardized design logic, and systematic integration across public spaces, media platforms, and tourism experiences.

From a theoretical perspective, place and city branding frameworks emphasize that urban identity comprises meaning, experiences, and relational dynamics between people and place (Anholt, 2002; Kavaratzis, 2004; Hankinson, 2014). Destination branding highlights the need for differentiation, consistent communication, and memorable experiences, while creative and cultural tourism concepts advocate participatory engagement and co-creation with local communities (Morgan & Pritchard, 2002; Ritchie & Ritchie, 2002; Richards & Wilson, 2006; Al-Ababneh, 2020). Moreover, visual identity design including color, typography, symbols, and imagery can enhance aesthetic value, reduce fragmented messaging, and increase recognition (Demirbag Kaplan et al., 2010; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Sustainable and participatory approaches suggest that city branding should involve local communities, authorities, designers, and visitors to build shared, enduring urban identities (Healey, 2020; Spiliotopoulou & Roseland, 2020).

This study is motivated by the need to explore how brand design strategies can systematically enhance Taojiang’s urban image and cultural identity. By integrating local cultural resources into a coherent visual system guided by design principles and strategic thinking, the research aims to address current gaps in branding, develop a design-led framework, and provide practical recommendations for county-level cities with rich cultural assets but

underdeveloped brand systems. The expected contributions include expanding academic knowledge on city branding in small urban contexts and providing implementable strategies for local authorities, tourism operators, and designers to strengthen urban image and cultural value.

Objectives

1. To analyze and interpret the Taojiang urban image from a design and visual system perspective, identifying current strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in visual coherence, cultural representation, and aesthetic expression.

2. To synthesize Taojiang's distinctive cultural elements into cohesive and aesthetically appealing brand identity components through design-oriented strategies.

3. To develop and articulate a brand design strategy specifically tailored for Taojiang County to enhance its urban image, cultural identity, and aesthetic value.

Literature Review

1. Brand Design Theories

Brand design theories emphasize that effective urban branding requires the integration of visual, symbolic, and strategic elements into a coherent identity system. Aaker's Brand Identity System (1996) highlights multiple dimensions product, organization, person, and symbol suggesting that logos and slogans must be part of a broader, consistent system. Keller's Brand Equity Theory (1993) underlines the importance of repeated exposure and consistent visual communication in forming strong and favorable brand associations. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008) integrates cultural values, personality, and audience reflection into identity, while Verganti's Design-Driven Innovation (2009) emphasizes translating traditional cultural meanings into contemporary brand

expressions. Wheeler (2017) further provides a practical framework for structured visual identity, including logos, typography, color, and application guidelines. Together, these theories support creating a cohesive visual and strategic brand system, which is essential for organizing Taojiang County's rich cultural resources into a recognizable, aesthetically coherent urban identity.

2. Place Branding Theories

Place branding theories focus on understanding cities as multidimensional identity systems shaped through physical form, communication, and stakeholder interaction. Kavaratzis (2004) highlights three layers of communication primary (physical and spatial), secondary (formal promotion), and tertiary (word-of-mouth) illustrating that a city's brand extends beyond logos and campaigns. Identity-Based Place Branding (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) emphasizes that brands should emerge from the interplay between internal place identity and external representation, aligning cultural meanings with audience perception. These frameworks indicate that Taojiang's branding must go beyond fragmented promotional elements, integrating spatial design, public experience, and stakeholder participation to reflect authentic cultural identity and support sustainable urban development.

3. Cultural Identity Theories

Cultural identity theories underscore the dynamic construction of identity through history, representation, and social practice. Hall (1990) emphasizes that cultural identity is continuously produced rather than fixed, while Bourdieu (1986) frames culture as symbolic capital that can be embodied, objectified, or institutionalized. Relph's Place Identity Theory (1976) highlights emotional attachment and experiential continuity, and Lynch's Image of the City (1960) emphasizes spatial legibility through paths, edges, nodes, districts, and landmarks. Zukin (1995) argues that urban image is shaped by cultural narratives and symbolic representation. Together, these theories suggest that Taojiang's

bamboo culture, folk arts, and ecological landscapes must be strategically interpreted and visually expressed to construct an authentic and meaningful urban identity.

4. Urban Image Theories

Urban image theories consider how people perceive, remember, and evaluate cities through visual, spatial, and cultural cues. Lynch (1960) introduces "imageability" as a framework for legible and recognizable urban spaces, while Golledge & Stimson (1997) emphasize cognitive processing of environmental stimuli. Zukin (1995) highlights symbolic and cultural construction of urban image, and Relph (1976) connects visual cues to place attachment and identity. In Taojiang, consistent visual identity, wayfinding, signage, and cultural landmarks can enhance perception and recognition, transforming rich cultural resources into a coherent and memorable urban image that supports branding and tourism.

5. Aesthetic Value Theories

Aesthetic value theories examine how coherent design, perception, emotion, and cultural meaning shape appreciation of urban environments. Dewey (1934) emphasizes integrated aesthetic experience, Berleant (1992) highlights immersion and participation, Arnheim (1974) explains structural clarity and visual order, and Saito (2007) extends aesthetics to everyday environments. In Taojiang, aesthetic value emerges when bamboo culture, folk arts, peach blossoms, public spaces, and media communications form a consistent, visually coherent, and culturally meaningful environment that strengthens emotional response, memorability, and urban identity.

6. Strategic Design Theories

Strategic design theories frame branding as a systemic, long-term process addressing complex, multi-stakeholder challenges. Buchanan (1992) defines design problems as "wicked problems" requiring integration of culture, perception, and context. Throsby (2001) emphasizes mobilizing cultural resources for strategic differentiation. For Taojiang, a strategic design approach

entails creating a coordinated visual identity system, engaging stakeholders, translating traditional cultural elements into modern applications, and ensuring sustainability across public spaces, tourism, media, and community participation, thereby transforming fragmented branding efforts into a coherent, meaningful, and enduring urban brand.

Methodology

1. Research Design and Methodological Structure

The research design consisted of five main stages. First, academic literature, books, journal articles, and policy documents were reviewed to establish the theoretical foundation and clarify the research direction. Second, secondary data and visual materials, including official documents, planning materials, branding visuals, promotional media, signage, and public visual elements, were collected and analyzed to understand Taojiang's current urban image and branding context. Third, field investigation and semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected experts, including cultural managers, designers, practitioners, and academics, to obtain qualitative insights into cultural identity, visual communication, and branding problems. Fourth, the qualitative findings were synthesized into a design-oriented brand strategy framework and practical guidelines. Finally, the proposed design outcomes were evaluated through expert feedback and a small-scale questionnaire to assess visual coherence, aesthetic appeal, and cultural recognition.

2. Population and Sample

The qualitative sample consisted of six key informants selected through purposive sampling. They included two art and cultural managers, two brand or visual communication designers, and two cultural practitioners or academics with expertise in urban culture, brand design, or cultural heritage. The selection criteria were based on professional experience in cultural management, design practice,

or academic research related to urban image and cultural identity. For the quantitative phase, 100 respondents were recruited through voluntary participation during the post-design validation stage. The questionnaire was used as a supplementary tool to evaluate perceptions of visual coherence, aesthetic value, and cultural recognition of the proposed brand design outcomes.

3. Research Instruments

Six research instruments were employed in this study. First, literature analysis was used to review academic and policy-related sources concerning brand design, urban image, aesthetic value, and cultural identity. Second, visual documentation, including photography and field recording, was used to collect data on urban spaces, signage systems, branding applications, and public visual environments in Taojiang County. Third, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore perceptions of Taojiang's urban image, existing branding issues, local cultural characteristics, and possible design strategies. Fourth, design synthesis tools were used to translate cultural elements into visual concepts and brand identity components. Fifth, a questionnaire was developed to assess perceptions of visual coherence, aesthetic appeal, and cultural recognition. Finally, data analysis instruments included thematic analysis, visual analysis, categorization, comparison, interpretation, and descriptive statistics.

4. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in four stages. First, secondary data were gathered from academic literature, policy documents, planning materials, online media, and existing visual branding materials related to Taojiang County. Second, field investigation was carried out through visual documentation of urban spaces, signage systems, branding applications, and public visual environments. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six selected experts to collect in-depth qualitative data on Taojiang's urban image, cultural characteristics, and branding challenges. Fourth, a post-design questionnaire was administered to 100 respondents to validate perceptions of the proposed brand design strategy.

5. Data Analysis

Data analysis combined qualitative and quantitative techniques. Secondary data were analyzed through categorization and comparison to identify key issues related to urban image, branding practices, aesthetic characteristics, and cultural representation. Visual data were examined using qualitative visual analysis to assess visual coherence, aesthetic consistency, and the integration of cultural elements. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed through thematic interpretation to identify recurring ideas, shared perceptions, and professional insights, which were then synthesized to support design concept development. Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, to provide supplementary evidence for evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed brand design strategy.

Results

1. Analysis of Taojiang's Urban Image and Visual System

In line with the first research objective, the integration of visual documentation, secondary data, and semi-structured interviews revealed five major gaps in Taojiang's current urban image and branding practices. First, visual inconsistency was observed across official logos, IP characters, and public applications, resulting in weak brand recognition. Second, cultural representation in design elements was limited; bamboo motifs, peach blossom references, and folk arts were inadequately expressed, failing to convey the county's rich heritage. Third, the absence of systematic visual identity guidelines led to fragmented applications across government departments, promotional materials, and public spaces. Fourth, stakeholder coordination was fragmented, with cultural, tourism, and urban planning departments operating in silos without unified branding oversight. Finally, aesthetic coherence in public spaces was weak, with inconsistent signage, wayfinding, and materials undermining the clarity

and legibility of the urban image. These findings highlight that Taojiang's current urban branding lacks both strategic coordination and visual consistency, limiting the county's potential for cultural identity expression and aesthetic impact.

2. Synthesis of Cultural Elements into Brand Identity Components

Addressing the second research objective, distinctive cultural resources in Taojiang were systematically translated into cohesive brand identity components. Bamboo weaving craftsmanship was abstracted into a pattern language emphasizing geometric repetition, rhythmic forms, and natural color tones. Peach blossom traditions informed a secondary palette with soft pinks and seasonal variations. Bamboo forest landscapes inspired vertical compositional principles, layering, and atmospheric visual language, while folk art patterns contributed accent colors and symbolic motifs for special events. These cultural elements were integrated into a core logo, modular pattern system, primary and secondary color palettes, typography system, and refined IP characters ("Bamboo Gentleman" and "Peach Fairy"), resulting in a visually coherent and culturally meaningful brand identity system that strengthens aesthetic appeal, recognition, and local identity.

3. Development of Taojiang Brand Design Strategy

In accordance with the third objective, a comprehensive brand design strategy was developed, structured around four interconnected components. The Visual Identity System integrated logo, patterns, color, and typography into a unified design language. Spatial application guidelines ensured aesthetic consistency in signage, wayfinding, urban furniture, and materials. Stakeholder coordination mechanisms, including a steering committee and review panel, aligned efforts across government, cultural, and tourism departments. Finally, an implementation roadmap provided a phased, systematic approach for rolling out the design strategy across the county. This strategic framework translates cultural resources into actionable design solutions, enabling Taojiang to present a

cohesive urban image and reinforce its cultural identity while enhancing aesthetic value.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide clear insights corresponding to the three research objectives, highlighting the challenges and opportunities in designing an integrated urban brand for Taojiang County.

First, regarding the analysis of Taojiang's urban image from a design and visual system perspective, the study confirms that the county's urban branding suffers from fragmentation, inconsistent visual application, and superficial cultural representation. The gaps identified visual inconsistency, weak cultural integration, lack of identity guidelines, fragmented stakeholder coordination, and limited aesthetic coherence align with Kavaratzis's (2004) argument that city branding must be multidimensional, incorporating physical space, communication, and perception. Similarly, Keller's (1993) Brand Equity Theory underscores that inconsistent application reduces brand recognition and weakens the city's imageability. These results indicate that the problem is not the absence of cultural resources but the lack of a structured visual and strategic system capable of translating those resources into a coherent urban identity. This reinforces the importance of evaluating urban image not merely by the presence of design elements but through the lens of systemic consistency, cultural fidelity, and spatial legibility.

Second, in relation to synthesizing Taojiang's distinctive cultural elements into cohesive and aesthetically appealing brand identity components, the study demonstrates the successful translation of bamboo weaving craftsmanship, peach blossom traditions, bamboo forest landscapes, and folk art motifs into an integrated visual system. The development of logos, modular pattern systems, typography, and color palettes grounded in these cultural elements exemplifies

Aaker's (1996) Brand Identity System Theory and Wheeler's (2017) visual identity framework. Furthermore, the reinterpretation of traditional elements in line with Verganti's (2009) Design-Driven Innovation Theory shows how design can mediate between cultural heritage and contemporary expression. This synthesis not only strengthens aesthetic coherence but also embeds meaning and local identity into visual outputs, addressing prior gaps in superficial cultural representation and enhancing both cognitive recognition and emotional connection for audiences.

Third, concerning the development and articulation of a brand design strategy for Taojiang, the proposed four-component framework comprising a visual identity system, spatial application guidelines, stakeholder coordination, and an implementation roadmap effectively addresses the weaknesses identified in current practices. By integrating stakeholder perspectives, providing standardized design guidelines, and coordinating visual applications across departments and public spaces, the strategy exemplifies Buchanan's (1992) concept of design as a systemic solution to "wicked problems." The validation results from expert feedback and questionnaire surveys indicate that the strategy is culturally grounded, visually coherent, aesthetically appealing, and practically applicable, confirming that strategic design can transform fragmented visual communication into a cohesive, recognizable, and sustainable urban brand. Additionally, the strategy enhances aesthetic value, aligning with Dewey (1934) and Arnheim (1974) by creating visual order, structural clarity, and experiential coherence in the public environment, which collectively strengthen perception, memory, and attachment to the city.

Recommendation

In the study entitled “Brand Design Strategies to Enhance the Aesthetic Value of Urban Image and Cultural Identity in Taojiang County, Hunan Province,” the findings indicate that Taojiang County possesses strong potential for urban image development due to its rich natural and cultural resources, particularly bamboo culture, bamboo weaving craftsmanship, peach blossoms, folk arts, and local intangible cultural heritage. However, current urban branding practices still face several limitations, including visual inconsistency, insufficient cultural representation, the absence of visual identity guidelines, fragmented stakeholder coordination, and a lack of aesthetic coherence in public spaces. Therefore, the recommendations are as follows: 1. Recommendations for Applying the Research Findings 1.1 Taojiang County Government should adopt the proposed brand design strategy as the official framework for urban image development, visual communication, tourism promotion, and public space design. This would help ensure that Taojiang’s cultural identity is communicated consistently across government media, tourism materials, signage, public spaces, and digital platforms. 1.2 Taojiang County Government should establish a Brand Steering Committee and develop an official visual identity manual to coordinate cultural, tourism, planning, and media departments. The manual should clearly define standards for logo usage, brand colors, typography, graphic patterns, IP characters such as “Bamboo Gentleman” and “Peach Fairy,” and application guidelines across print, digital, and environmental media. 1.3 Relevant agencies should support sustainable implementation through training, digital brand asset management, pilot applications, and continuous evaluation. Training should be provided for government officers, designers, contractors, tourism operators, and communication staff, while pilot applications should begin in key locations such as tourist information centers, cultural tourism sites, city entrance signage, and official online platforms. 2 Recommendations for Future Research 2.1 Future

research should examine the perceptions of residents, tourists, and stakeholders after the implementation of the proposed brand design strategy. This would help assess whether the visual identity system can enhance recognition, cultural understanding, aesthetic appreciation, and emotional connection with Taojiang County. 2.2 Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of the visual identity system in real application contexts, such as signage, wayfinding systems, public spaces, tourism sites, digital media, cultural products, and local festivals. This would provide empirical evidence on how brand design contributes to urban image, cultural identity, and aesthetic value. 2.3 Comparative and extended studies should be conducted with other county-level or culturally rich cities in Hunan Province or nearby regions. Future studies may also explore the roles of local communities, craftsmen, youth, cultural entrepreneurs, and digital technologies in co-creating and sustaining city brands.

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