



# Reflecting on the Integration of Visual Media in Urban Branding

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**Abstract.** As cities become increasingly homogenous, unique local tourism resources are growing in value. Consequently, the use of visual media to localize and disseminate city brands is of paramount importance. By analyzing popular online tourism trends in Zibo and Harbin, this paper suggests that city brands' visual media should be deeply rooted in local culture and heavily digitized. Embedding the interactive process in community conversations can enhance visual immersion.

**Keywords:** city brand, visual media, localization, digitization, immersion.

## 1 Introduction

In today's society characterized by highly developed urbanization and increasingly prominent digitalization, the construction of urban brands requires distinctive features and easily communicable characteristics. This article explores methods and applications for promoting the value of urban brands from the perspective of visual media, aiming to create city visual media that are immersive and localized, thereby collectively building urban brands in both physical and digital networks. Through the reproduction, dissemination, and construction of urban brands via visual media, a large number of tourists are attracted to experience, fulfilling the important task of brand image dissemination. Local residents contribute to the construction of a modern collective memory and the localization of the brand image.

## 2 Visual Construction of City Brands

The emergence of city branding coincides with the rise of city marketing, capitalizing on its clear and unique characteristics to provide consumers with direct information, thereby augmenting competitiveness. As times change, city brands have evolved from relying solely on traditional media to embracing digital media and the internet. Consequently, the visual construction requirements for city brands have diversified. This

creates an urban visual construction that builds a shared memory among residents and facilitates its communication and application on digital media.

## **2.1 Concept of City Brand**

The exploration and study of city brand-related subjects stem from the rise of city marketing in the 1980s. Traditional city brand images often create a city's first impression through its history, culture, strong industry, and geographical landscape. The target audience of the brand typically includes non-residents, leveraging the brand's competitiveness and differentiation. City brands serve as significant intangible assets and external images, providing a direct visual explanation for non-residents who are potential consumers, minimizing risk perception, and encouraging potential tourism and culture-related consumption.

Before the rise of digital information and the internet, city branding was primarily managed by local government departments and organizations through traditional media like TV stations and newspapers. However, with the advent of digital media, the competition in branding cities has increased, requiring diverse and dynamic visual designs to engage residents and attract tourists effectively. This long-term, organization-driven process now includes interactive and sustainable elements to create a memorable "explosive point" for the city's marketing efforts in the digital age [1].

## **2.2 Visual Components of City Branding**

Whether it's through traditional media or the fragmented information distribution led by short videos, a city's brand image is deeply rooted in its historical and cultural heritage. Firstly, in the realm of visual media, a city's architecture often serves as a key visual component. This is because landmark buildings in cities are often coupled with public activity spaces or tourist centers, making them deeply intertwined with the daily life of city dwellers and forming a shared memory among residents of all ages. Their size and stature make them a prominent visual component in the cityscape.

Furthermore, these iconic structures in urban areas are highly recognizable, making them effective communication tools when represented visually. Additionally, a city's natural landscape contributes to its brand image. China's famous mountains and rivers, often linked with poetry, imbue the scenery with a unique cultural essence, resonating deeply with the Chinese people. The city's distinctive cuisine, like the spiciness of Sichuan-Chongqing or the mild flavors of Jiangnan, also plays a significant role in representing its character. These culinary delights, widely shared on digital platforms, serve as prominent visual components that capture attention. Lastly, local celebrities, whether historical figures or modern internet sensations, serve as strong visual elements. Thus, smaller cities often leverage celebrities as key visual components in their branding efforts.

### **2.3 Application of Visual Media in City Branding**

In this era of information technology, modern media has gradually permeated our daily lives. Significant icons that are an integral part of our lives influence the formation of our memories. David Gross suggested that social memory is shaped and graphic planning, like a framework, influences the formation of social memory and the way people acquire memory [2]. Therefore, city branding is not only a tool for external promotion but also a means of shaping the shared memory of local residents.

Visual media plays a crucial role in city branding, with dynamic visual effects and catchy slogans on official TV broadcasts being particularly memorable. Public service posters at subway stations, bus stops, and landmarks subtly influence residents' perceptions with consistent visual elements. This design-oriented approach can also generate revenue through cultural products and attract tourists. Popular among young people, these items serve as marketing tools for attractions and cities, drawing tourists through online exposure. Collectively, these visual elements form an integral part of a city's brand identity, shaping its image and attracting visitors.

## **3 Exploring the New Form of Urban Brand Communication**

The digital media-based communication of city brands significantly differs from the traditional one-way mode of communication. The surge in Zibo and Harbin tourism illustrates that city brand communication via digital media requires two-way interaction and mutual promotion between the audience and the city brand. The influence that a single crowd can generate on the internet is much more significant than before. City residents and local governments' astute capture of public opinion aligns real travel with digital media, extending and enriching tourists' experiences, and thereby fostering the spread of city brands.

### **3.1 Analyzing the New Forms of Urban Brand Communication Using Zibo and Harbin as Examples**

In 2023, Zibo's rising popularity brought fresh perspectives. City residents volunteered to assist tourists, enhancing the visitor experience. Despite having 4A-level attractions like Zhou Village and the China Ceramic Glass Museum, Zibo's tourism visibility was low. However, through deep interaction via digital media, a unique digital community was created involving local authorities, enterprises, residents, and tourists. This strengthened the emotional connection of tourists to Zibo, fostering a new form of urban brand communication.

Harbin, with its unique natural and cultural resources and strategic location, surpasses Zibo. Known as the birthplace of Chinese ice and snow culture, Harbin features iconic buildings and cuisine influenced by Soviet Russian style and ethnic heritage. The city is a popular winter travel destination, especially after Beijing hosted the 2022 Winter Olympics. In 2023, Harbin's ice and snow industry received significant policy support, leading to increased utilization of venues and enhanced travel experiences. Despite a ticket refund issue at Harbin Ice and Snow World, the city's prompt and sincere

response in a letter to tourists showcased a commitment to visitor satisfaction, marking the start of its growing popularity.

### **3.2 Visual Media's Digital Communication**

In unfamiliar cities, one can acquire information about the city's food, accommodation, transportation, leisure, entertainment, and so forth through various media spaces. QR codes are visible throughout the city on buildings, vehicles, installations, goods, and even plants and animals. These create complex information transmission channels and form intersecting media spaces. They eliminate time constraints, geographical restrictions, and simultaneously serve social functions. As digital public spaces form, personal living spaces are being transformed by digital media. The software we freely use and the cashless purchasing methods leave traces in media spaces. We share content in the internet's "public space." [3]

In our modern lifestyle, digital media is becoming increasingly prevalent, replacing traditional urban building propaganda posters with LED and photoelectric systems on skyscrapers in major Chinese cities. These colorful displays and scrolling screens create vibrant cityscapes at night, serving as a digital medium to communicate city brand concepts and create a virtual world for residents and tourists. While this high-tech visual medium facilitates online communication, its commercial nature driven by capital poses a risk of erasing historical memory and homogenizing urban brands. The evolution of urban brand communication through digital media has revolutionized city-resident and tourist interactions, expanding engagement and strengthening emotional connections. The cases of Zibo and Harbin offer valuable insights into navigating this evolving urban brand communication landscape.

## **4 The Digital Application of City Brand Visual Media**

Urban brands are essential advertising tools and cultural assets. With the rise of digital platforms and online showcases, cities can promote their brands through digital communities and interactive visual media. By linking individual stories and content, cities can create a cohesive narrative that enhances brand awareness and continuity. Deep, immersive interactions foster a lasting connection with residents, creating a collective memory of the city brand.

### **4.1 New Applications of Intangible Cultural and Creative Products**

Cultural and creative products often depend on the city brand's iconic elements, employing visual elements for sales and promotion, particularly utilizing unique food and humanistic elements. These products are frequently seen in urban art galleries and museums, featuring cultural items like silk scarves, T-shirts, key chains, and jigsaw puzzles. Material cultural and creative products can be combined with digital media, like the Shaanxi History Museum's postcard initiative, where each postcard features a high-definition image of a cultural relic, which becomes three-dimensional when scanned

using a WeChat mini program. Although innovative, the visual media and elements used are still too simplistic to appeal to young people.

Improving digital literature and creation competitiveness, and designing for young people is crucial. The rise of meta-universe communities and digital collections have led to the launch of digital collections and avatars on social networks aimed at young users. The rarity of digital collections and the community culture they foster have attracted many users. The cultural and creative design can leverage this to promote the digitalization of cultural and creative products, contributing to the creation of product-related online communities. The emergence of these online communities allows for lower marketing costs and steadily expanding product influence, thereby boosting offline brand competitiveness.

## **4.2 New Approaches to using Visual Digital Media**

Creating a city brand involves practical experience, user interaction, and the spontaneous experiences of city residents, whether through online or offline marketing. Specific travel experiences are physical and mental encounters that occur when a user integrates with a travel destination, characterized by embodiment, situation, mobility, and generation. The theory of embodiment posits that the body is the foundation of the tourism experience, and embodied experiences arise from the interaction of body, scene, and their interplay [4].

Hence, the application of visual digital media isn't just a standard visual representation, but an emotional resonance with tourists and residents, creating a shared historical memory. Modern digital media are often placed in high-traffic areas like scenic spots or museums, but future development could see them embedded in communities. By attaching to a specific urban bus line or creating a new public transportation route for check-in travel, building a storyline around urban culture, history, and architecture, and setting up visual digital media interaction points in everyday public places, a collective urban memory can be built. These visual digital media are like puzzle pieces that, when connected, complete the loop. When audiences experience the entire interactive route, they also complete the embodied experience and achieve a deep integration of body and mind with the city. Online community discussions and communication naturally expand, and the shared memories of tourists and residents make the tour more immersive, unveiling the city's features more extensively.

## **4.3 The Anticipated Benefits of Digitalizing Visual Media**

Digitalizing visual media can enhance tourists' experiential interactions, providing deep engagement and fostering interpersonal connections not possible through traditional methods. Participants in digital media take on roles in interactive processes, shaping subjective experiences. Each participant serves as an author and critic, contributing to self-improvement, mutual understanding, and trust. Common objectives lead to collaborative themes, advancing interactions from individual to group and city levels, enhancing urban environments, governance, and ethical standards. [5].

The digitalization of visual media can fully immerse participants' senses, while the online visual experience extends the duration of tourists' travels. When tourists engage with relevant digital visual topics, they inadvertently partake in travel activities. The transition from online visual content activity communities to offline digital visual media constitutes a complete travel process. After completing the offline urban travel experience, the digitalization of visual media can further follow up on the post-travel experience, enriching the city brand's meaning and long-term impact. The interplay of virtual and real interactions strengthens the emotional bond between tourists and the tourist city, encourages local identity and attachment formation, and facilitates participation in the construction and dissemination of tourist city brands.

## 5 Conclusions

The utilization of city brands within visual media is progressively becoming digitized, establishing online communities in the process. Guided by a visual approach, the dissemination of city brand information is continuously collected and distributed. The digitization of visual media can prolong the post-travel experience, bolster the recognition of city brands, and enhance the immersive interaction between reality and the virtual world for both tourists and city residents. The digital deployment of city brand visual media effectively augments the collective memory of users, fortifies the immersion and localization of city brands, thereby enabling them to stand out amidst the increasingly homogenized urban development of today.

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