



The Semiotic Turn to Authenticity: Three-Dimensional Model Construction of Scenic Area Public Art Designs

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Abstract. As the demand for cultural tourism grows, public art in scenic spots gradually shifts from material existence to cultural meaning production system. The dualistic paradigm of "author-work" is limited to static, which is difficult to explain the fluid meaning generation of art signs and the dynamic decoding process of tourists. This study introduces the theory of tourism authenticity and constructs a three-dimensional framework of "authenticity - Pierce's semiotics - tourists' cognition" to deconstruct the interpretive cycle of art signs in the tourism field. This interdisciplinary study makes up for the shortcomings of semiotics, which neglects the receiver's dimension, and places semiotic reference in the dynamic tourism context to reveal the impact of public art on tourists' imagery and the effectiveness of its design, and to provide a theoretical path for the design paradigm under the dual perspective of the host-guest position.

Keywords: Peircean Semiotics, Tourism Authenticity, Public Art, Design Efficiency

1 Introduction

Public art is an important medium to convey the spirit and culture of the city, with the growth of cultural tourism demand, scenic public art has become a core element to attract tourists, and its design needs to take into account the aesthetic value and tourist perception to shape a good scenic imagery. Public art has proved to be a medium for harmonizing collective demands with individual expression, in having both "publicness" and "artistry". The essence of public art can be defined as a creative system situated at the intersection of sociology and art. Through the medium of public participation and field intervention, it serves to visualize social emotions and facilitate inter-subjective aesthetic negotiation, thereby disrupting the conventional mode of creation and establishing a symbiotic value system between "creator" and "audience". It is imperative for artists to decode social grammar, balance individual aesthetics and group cultural identity, and incorporate public opinion into design logic. In tourism contexts, scenic public art transcends mere aesthetics, acting as a cultural representation system that bridges heritage, local identity, and tourist perception. This specificity requires it to break through the boundaries of a single discipline and integrate multidisciplinary

perspectives to ensure the communication of cultural authenticity as well as the dynamic needs of the visitor's experience, ultimately serving as a medium that connects cultural heritage, local identity, and visitor perception.

Most of the current research focuses on sign design from the designer's point of view, ignoring the limitations of the process of sign meaning formation. This paper is based on Pierce semiotics and tourism authenticity theory, combined with interdisciplinary (tourism, art and design, sociology), to carry out the research of scenic public art design. Exploring the path of scenic area public art design aims to bridge the gap between design intention and tourists' experience, providing theoretical and practical support for cultural branding and design optimization.

2 Semiotic Analysis of Public Art

Peirce's semiotics divides signs into three categories: icon, index and symbol, which is Peirce's trichotomy of semiotics. Iconic signs are signs that have a similarity to the object they represent. This similarity can be physical, structural, or functional. When a public artwork as an iconic sign means that the public artwork is perceived as being able to represent an object, person, phenomenon, or idea. The understanding of an iconic sign depends on the perception and experience of the observer. There is a dichotomous causal or physical connection between the index sign and the object it represents. Indexical signs are often used to indicate the presence or occurrence of an event, and indicative signs are closely related to the visitor's understanding of the phenomena associated with a work of public art. To understand indexical signs, it is necessary to understand the physical connection between the sign and the object it represents. The relationship between a symbolic sign and the object it represents is based on social customs or conventions. These types of signs have no direct physical or causal connection, but are given meaning through shared cultural understanding. Symbolic signs are the signs most used by artists, or signs that are constructed with focus as the ultimate goal. Peirce also put forward a triadic semiotic theory, that a sign consists of three parts: the sign itself, the object of the sign and the interpretive item of the sign. Among them, the sign "reproduces body" (Representamen) refers to the perceptible part of the sign, such as shape, texture, color, etc., "Object" (Object) is the person or thing to which the sign refers, and "Interpretant" (Interpretant) refers to the interpretation of the sign [1]. "(Interpretant) refers to the interpretation of the sign, that is, the "meaning" of the sign. Peirce's triadic theory is more complex, emphasizing the dynamic interpretive process of signs and unlimited referential behavior. In Pierce's triadic model of semiotics, the interpretive term is not a simple correspondence between sign and object, but a dynamic meaning generated by the subject based on experience, culture and context. This feature enables the semiotic analysis of public art to break through the closedness of Saussure's model, allowing multiple perspectives to coexist. The production of semiotic meaning is transformed from a one-way transmission to a multi-subjective dialog.

2.1 Problems in the Application of Theory

Pierce's classification of signs provides a theoretical basis for public art research, emphasizing that the combination of Peirce signs can optimize the design effect [2,3,4]. However, the dynamic nature of Pierce's triadic semiotic theory (e.g., the infinite derivation of interpretation [1]), which leads to the difficulty of anchoring symbolic perceptions and the obstruction of operational analysis.

The nature of symbolic meaning flow of public art requires breaking through the static framework and introducing a dynamic research perspective, it is necessary to integrate the authenticity theory of tourism. Authenticity is defined as the tourists' perception of the reality of the experience [5]. and its dimensions can provide a yardstick for evaluating symbolic meanings and constraining the scope of meaning flow. Tourism authenticity research has shifted from the study of tourism object authenticity to the study of tourism subject experience authenticity, focusing on the empirical analysis of tourists' subjective perception. This shift in perspective fits with the "inter-subjectivity" of public art, and provides a new path for design analysis: through the mapping of sign types and the dimensions of authenticity, not only the accuracy of the cultural heritage can be safeguarded, but also the dynamic needs of the tourists' experience can be met, ultimately reconciling the creative intention and the perception of the tourists. In the end, it can reconcile the creative intention with the perceptual bias and enhance the communication efficiency of the art medium.

3 The Theory of Authenticity

The concept of authenticity, as initially theorized within the domain of museology, pertains to the congruence between artifacts and their purported values. This notion has evolved into a foundational theory within the ambit of tourism studies, disseminating its influence across multiple disciplines, including sociology and anthropology. Its significance lies in its capacity to link the supply side of tourism (cultural resource development) with the demand side (tourist perception) [6], the application of authenticity is more conducive to sustainable tourism. Despite the absence of a unifying academic definition of authenticity, it can be distilled into four types from the ontological and epistemological perspectives: Objective Authenticity, Constructive Authenticity, Existential Authenticity and Postmodern Authenticity. This is the categorization that prevails among the majority of scholars in the field of tourism.

Kolar and Zabkar proposed a consumer-based model of authenticity, revealing that authenticity is a key mediator between cultural motivation and tourist loyalty [5], triggering subsequent studies to focus on the relationship between authenticity and loyalty [7,8] and satisfaction [9,10,11]. Some scholars have introduced Peircean semiotics into tourism research by considering scenic spots as symbolic systems and exploring their perceivability and authenticity typologies [12,13,15]. The study points out that Pierce's semiotics provides a structured analytical framework for authenticity through the division of icon, index and symbol to enhance theoretical coherence and inclusiveness, and that the combination of the two can optimize the mechanism linking cultural motivation

and experiential perception and deepen the dynamic meaning resolution of tourism signs.

4 Three-Dimensional Model Construction of Scenic Public Art Design

Pierce's semiotics is widely used in public art research, but the infinite derivation of "sign-object-interpretation" conflicts with the traditional research paradigm. Based on the perspective of tourism authenticity, the introduction of authenticity theory can bridge this conflict: authenticity sets the evaluation scale for symbolic meaning, and through the mapping of "symbolic type-authenticity dimension", the dynamic cognitive framework of "symbolic interpretation-authentic perception" is constructed. We can take Pierce's semiotic sign type trichotomy as a link to bring authenticity into the analysis of scenic public art design. Interdisciplinary grafting of semiotics and authenticity theory can not only reveal the cognitive bias between designers (encoding) and tourists (decoding), but also diagnose the symptoms of symbolic communication from a dual perspective of subject and object. This paradigm breaks through the static analysis, takes into account the cultural fidelity and experiential attraction, and provides a theoretical depth and practicability path for the design of public art in scenic spots.

According to Robert C. Thomsen and Stine Printzlau Vester, authenticity can be categorized by Peirce's theory of sign types into indexical authenticity, iconic authenticity and symbolic authenticity [12]. "Iconic authenticity" means that something is considered authentic if it resembles the original. Visitors must believe that the public artwork on display resembles the real thing to a large extent. "Indexical authenticity" refers to signs that have a factual relationship to the original. Visitors believe that public art has a factual or spatial or temporal connection to a historical or heritage site. "Symbolic authenticity", perceived authenticity is related to the subjective representation of visitors and tourists, and this authenticity does not depend on a direct connection to the object, but on the visitor's understanding of the cultural significance and social value. In order to better serve theoretical research, the concept of authenticity needs to be further clarified. Thomsen and Vester focus on the need to test the authenticity of a destination in a twofold context: first, how it is represented, and second, how it is perceived by tourists. In this study we will put aside the debate on the concept of authenticity and focus on the subject-object perspective in tourism practice. Therefore, tourism authenticity can be divided into object (attraction) authenticity and subject (tourist) authenticity. From the tourism object perspective, authenticity can be defined as the intrinsic attributes that the attraction of the scenic spot, i.e., the tourism object itself, has, such as historical value, artistic value and cultural value. Wang proposed the concept of constructive authenticity, which is the "projection of authenticity onto the tourist object" by tourism producers in order to represent what they believe to be real [14]. The verb "to project" is more graphic, which leads to the concept of projected authenticity [15], which will be used in this study. From the perspective of the tourist subject, authenticity can be defined as the tourist's enjoyment and perception of the tourist

experience from his or her own perspective [5]. In this study it is referred to as perceived authenticity.

By integrating Peircean semiotics with tourism authenticity theory, this study constructs a three-dimensional framework (see Fig. 1) that maps symbolic typology to authenticity dimensions. As shown in Fig. 1, the model categorizes authenticity into projected (designer's intent) and perceived (tourist's interpretation) layers, enabling systematic analysis of symbolic communication gaps in public art design. By comparing the categorization of the designer's "projected authenticity" and the tourist's "perceived authenticity", the deviation of symbolic meaning communication can be identified to help the designer form a design strategy.

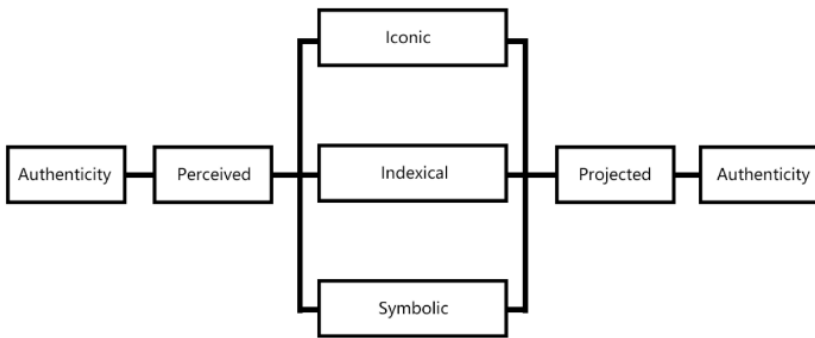


Fig. 1. two-perspective model of authenticity based on Peirce's semiotic typology(Self-drawn illustrations by the author)

Based on the analytical framework constructed in this study, Peirce's semiotic method can be relied upon in the practice of public art design in scenic spots, which can help the researcher to analyze the multiple meanings of public artworks, including their signifiers, indications and signs. Guiding designers in choosing more effective symbolic strategies by matching sign types to dimensions of authenticity. At the same time, the authenticity projected by the designer and the authenticity perceived by tourists are systematically categorized and compared. Specifically, iconic, indicative and symbolic signs correspond to the dimensions of iconic authenticity, indicative authenticity and symbolic authenticity respectively, forming a practical way of "sign type-authenticity mapping". Adjusting symbolic applications with the help of visitor perception data to avoid cultural distortion. For instance, when a weathering steel sculpture is employed as an iconic sign, the designer projects its rusted texture as "historical" (projected authenticity). However, visitors may perceive it as "shabby" due to a lack of historical knowledge ("perceived authenticity bias"). In such cases, the causal link must be reinforced by additional explanatory systems (e.g., indexical signs). Semiotics provides a tool for cultural translation, and authenticity theory establishes a validation scale to avoid sign distortion. This paradigm not only anchors the direction of sign meaning production for designers, but also provides empirical evidence for designers to optimize sign use and strategy choices from the perspective of tourists' perceptions. Tracking the effect of sign use and tourist perception data to support decision optimization.

5 Conclusion

This study integrates Pierce's semiotics and tourism authenticity theory, and constructs a three-dimensional framework of “sign type-authenticity dimension-subject-object perception” to analyze the dynamic interaction mechanism of public art signs in scenic spots. The framework breaks through the limitations of static analysis, and synergizes symbolic fluidity and experiential dynamics to achieve threefold innovation: (1) Theoretical integration: through the mapping of sign types and authenticity dimensions, it provides cross-disciplinary analytical tools to resolve the contradiction between symbolic significance dynamics and methodological stativity. (2) Design optimization: Establishing a “sign-authenticity” matching mechanism to guide strategy development and reconcile the tension between cultural fidelity and experiential attractiveness. (3) Methodological upgrading: Cross-validation of subject and object perspectives, synergizing the “cultural projection” of designers and the “perceptual feedback” of tourists, to provide an empirical path for art communication. Meanwhile, the limitation of the study is that the universality needs to be verified through multiple cases. In the future, we can combine various technical means to reveal the flow of meaning of signs, provide designers with design advice from viewers, and promote public art design research.

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