

The Language of Desire: Decoding the Aesthetic Experience Through Art Festival's Promotional Materials on Xiaohongshu

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The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Over the past decade, art festivals have become a popular tool for spatial regeneration and cultural innovation. By transforming familiar spaces into new and unknown places, art festivals create a creative atmosphere and give new meaning to day-to-day life. In the pre-exposure stage of event design, promotional materials embody the organisers' creativity and provide room for the spectator's imagination of the place. Recently, new media has given organisers more possibilities to construct the event image. Interpreting visual and textual materials of event design helps to understand how place-making, mediated by arts festivals, shapes the image of the place and conveys values to stakeholders. The study applies a mixed-methods approach to analysing the festival's design patterns and semiotic elements. The collection of promotional materials is based on a keyword search of designs posted by the organisers on Xiaohongshu, one of China's most popular content creation platforms. The materials are first analysed through content analysis to summarise textual formats, meaning units, images, and representational objects. Subsequently, based on Echtner's guidelines (1999), a series of art festivals organised in Kulangsu are selected as typical cases for semiotic analyses of their promotional designs (What's Art Festival and Kopi & Art Festival). Treating promotional materials as design works, the result examines the actualities of lived experience and the creativity of the spectator's imagination to inform effective communication with stakeholders for future placemaking and event design.

Keywords: Aesthetic Experience, Art Festivals, Aesthetic Design, Promotional Materials, Social Media

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1. Introduction

In the long history of human society, arts festivals have been one of the human activities closely related to people's daily lives, culture and economy. Nowadays, art festivals serve not only as a platform for displaying artworks but also as a vital approach to social and cultural exchanges. It attracts visitors from diverse backgrounds and promotes cultural dissemination and exchange through vibrant activities and various art forms. From the perspectives of economics and marketing standpoints, art festivals are seen as an effective strategy for urban recovery and regeneration due to their cost-effective and quick feedback. Numerous cities host art festivals to attract tourists, enhance the city's image and stimulate local economic development. Beyond the economic advantages, the potential of arts festivals to promote community participation and social sustainability has been widely noticed and discussed in recent years. It promotes residents' participation and enhances community cohesion through a range of interactive activities and community projects. It transforms ordinary places into extraordinary ones, offering collective experiences and stimulating a renewed awareness and use of public space.

In contemporary daily life, people are more accustomed to searching for information on mobile apps. Especially after the pandemic, urban life has rapidly embraced online activities and lifestyles. Social platforms such as Instagram, X, Facebook, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu have become the first steps for most art festivals to market themselves and get closer to their potential visitors. Promotional materials for arts festivals also play a crucial role in the pre-exposure phase of a local event. They are an important way to build imagination of the event and destination, shaping initial impressions for potential participants. As art festivals are increasingly focusing on the design of their brand image and curating aesthetic experiences, this study seeks to explore how contemporary art festivals convey values and messages to the public. It aims to achieve this by analysing the online promotional materials design using Xiaohongshu, one of China's most popular social platforms, as a case study. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) Investigate the general profile of art festivals on Xiaohongshu.
- 2) Identify the design elements and meanings within art festivals' online promotion.
- 3) Interpret the thematic meanings embedded in the art festival's aesthetic design.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Art Festivals in a Digital Age

Festivals have long been intertwined with cities. They are often bridges between people and places, connecting individuals to collective experiences and geographies. Art festivals are festivities with a creative and arts theme, usually consisting of exhibitions, performances, and music, renowned for fostering highly aesthetic experiences (Finkel & Platt, 2020). They are regarded as image-makers, tourist attractions, and communities during the long-associated relationship with cities (Quinn, 2020). While the economic dividends of arts festivals may not rival those generated by large-scale sporting events, the significance of arts festivals in place-making and cultural tourism cannot be overstated. Art festival provides an interactive open space for visitors to exchange ideas. This interaction not only enriches the visitor's cultural experience and promotes the artists' works but also promotes the transformation of the insights into life (Pelowski & Akiba, 2011). Festivals are characterised by their temporary and inclusive nature. In terms of form, arts festivals can be comprehensive, large-scale international events, cultural events of a single art form, or small-scale community events

(Finkel & Platt, 2020; Huang et al., 2010). They are usually organised at a specific time and place, shifting the appearance of the space over a period of time and bringing a unique atmosphere of cultural celebration (Comunian, 2017). The inclusiveness of the festival is reflected in its acceptance of different cultures, styles and forms of artistic expression, encouraging innovation and experimentation (Adongo et al., 2019). Through various artworks and activities, the festival creates a celebratory atmosphere that provides a distinctive aesthetic experience for the audience (Akbar & Jachnow, 2022).

Evolving from traditional religious and folklore festivals, arts festivals have gradually become a strategy for urban cultural development and a tool for place-making (Fenwick, 2021). The organisation of arts festivals is also constantly being innovated, from government-led to community-initiated organisations, and the diversity and flexibility of arts festivals are constantly increasing. In the digital age, the promotional strategies and design strategies of arts festivals have also changed due to the rise of social platforms. Social platforms provide a powerful tool for festival promotion and information delivery, enabling festivals to reach a wider audience at a lower cost and with a wider scope. New media has become a potent tool for arts festivals to showcase themselves and engage with prospective participants. Compared to old media, new media are open, demand-driven, and mainly based on images (Kirillova et al., 2014). By featuring event previews, design interpretations, artist interviews and behind-the-scenes footage on the platform, the festival can capture the audience's attention and pique their interest even before the event begins. The internet has revolutionised cultural semiotics, transforming the portrayal of places and experiences into hyperreal simulations. As Baudrillard suggests, individuals now possess the ability to 'control everything remotely' through social media, the internet, and other digital platforms. From this viewpoint, online promotional materials do not merely advertise actions; they create a simulacrum of a destination or append additional layers of meaning to festivals, shaping their image and allure. Through social media platforms, festivals can build a persistent online community, extending the festival's outreach and fostering novel forms of cultural exchange within the digital sphere.

2.2 Construct Aesthetic Experience Through Design

Aesthetic experience is a vague concept. Traditional investigations into aesthetic experiences primarily focused on the epistemology of appreciating fine art (Ingarden, 1961). From Husserl's phenomenology, the concept of 'experience' relates to epistemology; it is a way of confirming self-existence (Casey, 2010). Experience can denote the object of experience and the way that object is being experienced. From the perspective of hermeneutics, experience is searching for and confirming meanings. The process of experience, therefore, can be viewed as an intentional explanation for the living world or text according to specific narratives or history. Dewey maintained that aesthetic experience can also occur in everyday life. His concept broadened this notion to encompass everyday moments and objects as potential sources of aesthetic encounters (Gumbrecht, 2006; Ratiu, 2013). Aesthetic experience, in this perspective, is a self-intention spiritual activity with aesthetic imagination or intuition of conformity to the aim of the life world (Gumbrecht, 2006; Melchionne, 2013).

In this study, aesthetic experience is defined as the combined perceptual, emotional, and cognitive experience that an individual has when exposed to a work of art or an aesthetic object. Various factors influence the construction of an aesthetic experience in an arts festival (Huang et al., 2010). Different audiences may have different perceptions and aesthetic judgments of the same aesthetic object due to their different growing environments,

educational backgrounds and personal experiences (Kirillova et al., 2014). This paper is not intended to be a philosophical enquiry into aesthetic experience but rather an attempt to place aesthetic experience in the context of design to explore the construction of aesthetic symbols and the messages they convey. Regarding design as a means of communication, the online promotional materials for the festival can be seen as a combination of symbols, forms and meanings. The theoretical framework proposed by Folkmann (2010) can be used to analyse the design of aesthetic experiences at art festivals. This framework encompasses two aspects: 'aesthetic function' and 'reflection of ideas.' Based on these two dimensions, the formulation and construction of aesthetic meaning in design can be categorised into four types: 'concept' design, 'lifestyle design', 'natural mapping', and 'anonymous design' (Folkmann, 2010).

When a festival receives attention and popularity on social platforms, it is perhaps closely related to its aesthetic qualities and not solely because of its reputation and scale (Folkmann, 2010). The promotion of the art festival on social media bridges the distance between the aesthetic experience and the daily life of the audience. The festival's atmosphere, which previously had to be experienced in person, can be accessed and appreciated through social media and mobile applications at any time and from any place. This makes the aesthetic experience of the festival part of everyday life at the level of visual perception. Exploring the aesthetic experience of art festivals can build an understanding of the meaning and value conveyed by contemporary art festivals, perhaps informing subsequent research into improving the design of the festival experience and understanding participant motivation.

3. Methodology

The existing studies analysed the aesthetic judgement of art festivals (Kirillova et al., 2014), models of transformative aesthetic experience (Pelowski & Akiba, 2011), and philosophical inquiries about the aesthetic experience (Goldman, 2013; Nedelcu, 2014; Pałęga, 2015). As a highly aesthetics-led activity, the aesthetic construction of art festivals has been mentioned rarely. In the digital age, when posting is readily accessible to all, the expressive form of art festivals has become more diverse, with their embedded social values becoming more prominent. Studying contemporary art festivals' current situation and image construction appears essential and can aid in designing future art festival activities. This study thus endeavours to interpret the construction of aesthetic experience in art festivals through a design-oriented lens.

This study employed a mixed method and selected Xiaohongshu as the database. Xiaohongshu, also translated as RedNote, is a content-creation platform that has been remarkably popular in China in the past decade. It has more than 200 million active monthly users, with the majority in mainland China, and it also covers users from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas countries. Social media posts on Xiaohongshu revolved around personal experiences and fashion reviews, travel recommendations, lifestyle tips, and interests. While the posts usually emphasise authentic experiences and provide unheard cultural exploration, Xiaohongshu is now reshaping tourism and consumption. The app's influence is not only within the country but also extends to Mandarin-speaking communities worldwide. Given the influence of Xiaohongshu, it has been chosen as the dataset.

In this study, the content analysis aims to identify the representations and design symbols of art festival promotional materials, categorising them into recognisable types. This process offers an initial categorisation of the images and design symbols of contemporary art festivals.

Semiotic analyses are then employed to interpret the meanings and values the symbols convey.

3.1 Sampling

The online keyword searches followed a purposive sampling strategy that involved searching for ‘festivals’ and ‘arts festivals’ in Chinese and English and filtering the results (Figure 1). As one of the objectives of the study was to understand how festivals communicate with their audiences, only the posts published by the event organisers were retained, and a screenshot of the homepage of each organiser's account was used as an analytical unit to ensure that the layout of the analysis was broadly consistent.

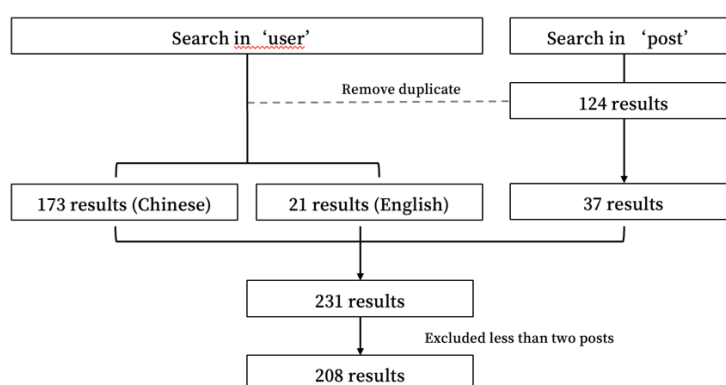


Figure 1: Purposive Sampling Process

The initial search yielded 194 results in the category of ‘users’, of which 173 originated from Chinese searches and 21 from English. Considering that some festival organisers may not use the word ‘festival’ in naming their accounts, the sample included another 124 results from the ‘posts’ category. After de-duplication with the ‘users’ category, 37 results were retained. Finally, a total of 208 screenshots were used for content analysis after removing accounts with less than two posts and individual accounts that were weakly related to art festivals.

3.2 Content Analysis of Denotative Representations

Content analysis is a method for systematically describing and interpreting the meaning of qualitative materials. It follows a coding frame to classify materials by assigning them successively parts. Coding helps to relate materials to concepts and examine the meanings of materials. It links data and concepts and helps us consider how one concept can relate to another. Describing denotative meaning is usually the first step while conducting semiotic analysis. Conducting a content analysis before semiotic analysis can also make the analysis process systematic.

Two researchers were employed to sort and code the 208 screenshots to prevent micro-analysis and bias (Collier & Collier, 1999). Referring to Hunter's content analysis strategy for Seoul's online destination image, the coding process in this study followed three principles (Hunter, 2016). First, the coded indicative symbols contain elements such as images and words that respond to the characteristics of the art festival. Any number of natural landscapes can be included in the ‘natural landscape’ symbol. Second, the coding selects the most recognisable and basic types of indicative symbols in the screenshot. Since this study is not meant to be an inductive categorisation of festival images but rather an analysis of design

symbols and compositions, more than one code can be included in each basic unit of analysis. Thirdly, the sorting process is based on mixed-coding. While synthesising the literature on the components and objects of aesthetic experience, along with design aesthetics, the codes were supplemented with additional codes based on the content to form the coding scheme.

Table 1: Denotative Representations of Art Festivals' Aesthetic Design

Category 1. Representations of concepts (290)			
Aesthetics representations directly displaying the idea through original designs or creations.	1	Logo	152
	2	Typography	61
	3	Color Scheme	55
	4	Slogan	22
Category 2. Representations of lifestyles (150)			
Aesthetics representations indirectly mediating the idea based on the redesign of object images or elements.	5	Interaction	51
	6	Family and Friendliness	43
	7	Daily Moment	34
	8	Ongoing Daily Life	22
Category 3. Representations of attractions (177)			
Functional representations directly displaying the idea through original designs or texts.	9	Celebrity	52
	10	Performance	50
	11	Artworks	35
	12	IP	26
	13	Food	8
	14	Sports	6
Category 4. Representations of existing views (133)			
Functional representations indirectly mediating the idea based on the ready-made elements and sites.	15	Natural Landscape	59
	16	Cityscape	44
	17	Cultural and History	30

This category resulted in 17 non-mutually exclusive types of design symbols (Table 1). From a design perspective and in association with previous research on analysing aesthetics in design (Folkmann, 2010), these 17 types of signs were theoretically categorised into four thematic categories as follows:

- 1) Representations of concepts: Aesthetic representations directly display the idea through original designs or creations.
- 2) Representations of lifestyles: Aesthetic representations indirectly mediate the idea based on the redesign of object images or elements.
- 3) Representations of attractions: Functional representations directly display the idea through original designs or texts.
- 4) Representations of existing views: Functional representations indirectly mediate the idea based on the ready-exist elements and sites.

3.3 Semiotic Analysis of Connotative Representations

Semiotic analysis and content analysis share the same goal of describing denotative meaning. While content analysis aims to analyse and categorise the materials from a specific respect, semiotic analysis focuses more on individual cases and can provide an in-depth description of meanings. It is concerned with uncovering the underlying structure of meanings and identifying the code and patterns in a sign system (Echtner, 1999). The connotative signs

complement the denotative signs. The interpretation of the connotative signs provides a deeper understanding of the message art festivals wish to convey to the audience.

Following Echtner's guidelines (1999), this study selected Kulangsu, a small island in Southern China, as a system of signs for semiotic analysis. Kulangsu serves as a prime example of utilising art festivals as placemaking tools to activate the local place. It has initiated a series of combined art festivals in the past three years (2021-2024), and it is still ongoing to this day. These combined art festivals usually include creative markets, performances, lectures, exhibitions, and co-creation with the local residents.

4. Interpretive Analysis and Results

Each festival organiser displays roughly the same form and content elements on the homepage of their Xiaohongshu accounts. The basic information about the organisers and the post showcasing the art festival's activities each comprise about fifty per cent of the screen size. Most of the account's avatars are branded with the festival's logo. The account profile is below the avatar and username. Some organisers also customise the background image to enrich their brand image. The consistent identity of the visual appearance and communication is one of the vital points for the success of the process in an event design. Nearly seventy per cent of the festivals have their own brand logo, and some have designed typography, colour schemes, and slogans. These representations of concept reflect the self-reflexive 'aesthetic function' adding to the appearance of art festivals (Folkmann, 2010). The physical construction of landmarks, heritage sites, and nature landscapes becomes secondary and subordinate to their online presentation.

Traditionally, it was thought that aesthetic experience was incompatible with everyday life, as it was seen as transcending the everyday. However, the Arts and Crafts movement in 19th-century socialism, John Dewey, and the avant-garde movement of the early 20th century all attempted to integrate art and life, aesthetic experience and everyday experience (Ingarden, 1961). It cannot be argued that the idea of such efforts to bring art and life closer together has a certain utopian flavour (Gumbrecht, 2006). The everyday aesthetic can refer to acknowledging daily moments, such as the morning coffee, the evening sunset, the play with pets, or the scrawl on the street corner (Melchionne, 2013). From this perspective, we can see the linkage between the festival's themes and daily life. 'Interaction' is one of the most prominently expressed symbols in the images and texts of festivals, especially small, community-based local festivals. Leveraging casual elements as signifiers, these festivals attract visitors seeking respite from routine existence, offering a glimpse into an idyllic world through themes like "weekend outdoor play," "vacation," "where to go," "pet," "relax," and more.



Figure 2: Promotional Materials of 1st and 3rd What's Art Festival in Kulangsu
(Source: <https://www.xiaohongshu.com/user/profile/638998240000000023028998>)

According to the profiles provided by the organisers, apart from the Guangzhou Illustration Art Festival and the Shanghai International Art Festival, which are large-scale comprehensive art events, about a quarter of the festivals are either local place-making activities in locations or bottom-up platforms for artists' networking. The organisers of the latter are mainly artists, designers and art amateurs. They are adventurous, interested in art and cultural narratives, and passionate about revitalising local culture (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005). They want to uncover overlooked cultural nuances, use their expertise to promote artistic change and embrace innovation and collaboration. Take Kulangsu Island (Gulangyu in Mandarin), a small island in Fujian Province in southeastern China, for example. Over the past two years, a series of place-making experiments have been carried out on this small island in the form of art festivals, including What's Arts Festival, Happy Together Kopi & Arts Festival, Back to Kulangsu, Gulangyu Poetry Festival, and more. All of these events were held at Kulangsu Art Park. The upcoming third What's Art Festival at the end of 2024 consists of six units (Figure 2). According to the event's poster, each unit is illustrated with objects from everyday life, which reflects the blending of art with aesthetics and everyday life. Like the words used in the titles of these events, "What is", "back", "together", this series of events attempts to create a sense of accessibility, familiarity, and common sense for the audience. This differs from the elite artistic taste that comprehensive festivals try to present.

5. Conclusion

As global urban environments increasingly embrace festivities, there arises a need for a more comprehensive exploration of contemporary festivals, their mechanisms, outcomes, and impacts (Finkel & Platt, 2020). The image of the art festival provides hybrid aesthetic imagery of everyday experiences, daily moments, and pleasant experiences. In contrast to top-down art festivals primarily serving as city branding initiatives, community-centric arts festivals emphasise elements of everyday life. The theme and identity of art festivals are

starting to focus on the everyday aesthetic experience, including ordinary, daily life, domestic, and routine (Nedelcu, 2014).

By titling this study "Language of Desire," This study draws inspiration from Forty's seminal work "Objects of Desire" in design history. Art festivals nowadays embody multifaceted expectations—building local brand identity, showcasing exquisite artworks, promoting creative works, revitalising public spaces, and offering temporary respite from the mundane.

The limitation of this study is that it does not analyse aesthetic experience as an ongoing process. Within the aesthetic experience, experience flow consists of temporal and spatial perspectives. The sense of other feelings, such as touch, smell, and taste, also should be included in the analysis of aesthetic experience. Future research needs to explore the process by which the festival experience flows from online to offline, as well as investigate and compare participants' perceptions to add additional perspectives in order to develop models of inclusive festival design.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the Eric C. Yim Endowed Professorship in Inclusive Design (PolyU Ref.: 8.73.09.847K) and PolyU postgraduate studentship for supporting this research.

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