

RESEARCH TITLE

**THE VISUAL IDENTITY OF AMMAN:
Analysis of Commercial Signage**

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Abstract

The spread of commercial signs in the streets and on the facades of buildings has become a feature of the identity of cities around the world in general and in Jordan in particular. Some of them have also caused visual pollution in the built environment and thus in Jordan. The study seeks to unveil the underlying messages conveyed by these signs, exploring their influence on the perceptions of individuals. The intricate relationship between visual elements, cultural context, is scrutinized to uncover challenges posed by visual pollution. By shedding light on the negative impacts on both aesthetics and functionality, the study aims to foster critical discussions and propose potential solutions. In the global competition for attention and appeal, Amman's visual identity emerges as a key player. This research contributes valuable insights toward developing a visual design framework that restores harmony to the city's commercial streets.

Key Words: : Visual Identity, Commercial signage, City Image, Visual Pollution.

Introduction

In the ever-evolving global urban landscape, cities are not merely geographical entities but intricate narratives competing for attention, investment, and residency. Amman, the capital of Jordan, stands at the crossroads of cities competition, where visual identity plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and influencing critical decisions. As we navigate the city streets, we are surrounded by a symphony of visual elements, each contributing to the unique visual narrative that defines Amman. Amidst this visual tapestry, commercial signage emerges as a prominent player, acting as both storyteller and influencer. The proliferation of these signs, however, brings forth unintended consequences, giving rise to visual pollution—a challenge that requires accurate scrutiny and thoughtful solutions. City branding, once an abstract concept, is now tangible in the myriad signs that populate the cityscape. What narratives do these signs convey? and how do they influence the perceptions of those who traverse the city streets? So, Visual pollution, a consequence of unchecked proliferation, emerges as a central theme. This study sheds light on the negative impacts of visual pollution on the aesthetics and functionality of Amman's commercial streets. The clutter and disarray resulting from the overuse and poor placement of signs not only hinder the visual appeal but also influence the overall experience of the city. As Amman competes on the global stage, the need for a harmonious and visually appealing city identity becomes paramount. In the subsequent sections, we will delve deeper into the analysis of Amman's commercial signage, exploring the challenges, opportunities, in the pursuit of a more harmonious and captivating visual identity.

Research Problem:

The visual identity of a city is a critical factor in shaping how its inhabitants and visitors perceive and interact with their surroundings. In Amman, commercial signage plays an integral role in this visual landscape, yet its influence on the city's visual identity has not been thoroughly examined in existing literature. This research aims to fill this gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of commercial signage in Amman, exploring how these elements contribute to the formation of the city's visual identity.

Research Boundaries:

1. Geographical Limitation: The study will focus exclusively on commercial signage within the city limits of Amman, Jordan.
2. Objective Limitations: The research will primarily analyze external commercial signage visible from public streets and spaces. This includes storefront signs, billboards, and other forms of outdoor advertising. Interior signage within businesses will not be included.
3. Time Frame: The study will consider signage that is current as of the date of research, 2023-2024.

Research Objectives:

1. Analyze the current state of commercial signage in Amman.
2. Understand the impact of signage on Amman's visual identity.
3. Explore the relationship between signage and cultural identity.
4. Contribute to academic discourse on city visual identity.

Research Methodology:

Literature Review/Previous Studies Approach.

This process will involve a thorough exploration of relevant academic articles and books, all of which pertain to the nuances of city visual identity, the intricacies of signage design. Key resources will be sourced from a diverse array of academic databases and library collections, ensuring a comprehensive and multifaceted collection of data. The methodology will focus on juxtaposing and integrating the findings from these varied sources, aiming to fuse diverse viewpoints and methodological approaches prevalent in the realm of city visual identity studies. The ultimate goal is to amalgamate these varied insights into a unified, well-rounded perspective that enriches our understanding of the topic at hand.

1. History of Amman City

Amman's origins are deeply rooted in the Neolithic period, evidenced by the ancient site of Rabbath Ammon. Yet, the Amman we recognize today in Jordan has emerged more recently. The late 19th century marked a pivotal point in its history with the arrival of Circassian refugees, initiating a period of uninterrupted human settlement. This influx heralded the city's gradual transformation. Initially a modest community with about 5,000 residents in 1921, Amman has undergone substantial growth, expanding into a vibrant metropolis in recent years (Pilder, 2011). The city's rich historical narrative spans over five thousand years, illustrating its enduring importance. Throughout its diverse history, Amman has been under the rule of various civilizations such as the Greeks, Romans, and Islamic empires, each contributing distinctively to the city's cultural and architectural fabric. Entering the 20th century with a relatively small population, Amman underwent significant changes, particularly after 1921 when it was declared the capital of the Hashemite Kingdom. This status change sparked a surge in urban development and cultural enrichment. The city's evolution was further accelerated by migrations from neighboring countries like Palestine, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Iraq, alongside internal movements within the Kingdom. This demographic influx brought a blend of cultures and traditions, infusing Amman with a rich diversity that has been instrumental in shaping its current urban and cultural identity. The interweaving of Amman's historical legacy and these new influences has been central to the city's contemporary development and character (Gharaybeh, 2011).

2. The City Image of Amman

Since the dawn of the 20th century, Amman's journey from a small, serene village to becoming the dynamic heart of Jordan is a tale of significant urban transformation. Its rise to prominence as a center of culture is particularly remarkable when juxtaposed against the backdrop of historic urban centers like Beirut, Cairo, and Baghdad. The metamorphosis of Amman has been most pronounced post-1943, a period marked by rapid and extensive urban growth. The city witnessed a dramatic rise in its population, ballooning from about 30,000 to a staggering 1.8 million, largely owing to the influx of refugees from neighboring regions such as Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq. This demographic boom prompted an intensified focus on developing critical urban infrastructure, notably in the realms of housing and educational facilities, which have played a pivotal role in shaping the modern character of Amman (Lawrence, 2002). The distinctive socio-spatial composition of Amman has significantly influenced its city identity. The city's topography is defined by the Amman Stream, rolling hills, and its architectural character, notable for its extensive use of natural stone, modestly scaled buildings, and grand staircases. This architectural style, particularly the prevalence of white limestone, has earned Amman the moniker "White City." The spread of the city from the central downtown area, along the Amman River and into the hills, has resulted in unique urban features, such as public staircases that are both functional and emblematic. Amman's Islamic heritage is palpable, with landmarks like the al-Husseini Mosque, established in 1924, serving as a focal point amidst a blend of commercial and public structures. The downtown

area further exemplifies the city's character through its vibrant markets, squares, and a seamless blend of historical sites. The architectural landscape of Amman is dominated by multi-story buildings, commonly ranging from four to six floors, creating a layered visual dynamic. This arrangement adds to the city's unique aesthetic, particularly at sunset, when the interplay of light and shadows casts distinctive silhouettes against the skyline. In recent times, Amman has undergone a stylistic and cultural transformation, evident in the construction of skyscrapers and the growing influence of Western lifestyle, particularly in the city's eastern region. This evolution marks a departure from the historical essence of Amman, reflecting a city that is continually adapting and reshaping its identity in response to modern influences and trends (Zalloom, 2015).

3. Amman's Commercial Streets

Urban thoroughfares, encompassing roads, pathways, and public spaces, are integral to the fabric of city life. The necessity for open, accessible spaces is heightened in urban environments where private outdoor areas are scarce. Consequently, squares and pedestrian-friendly streets are crucial for fostering social interactions within a city's populace. Globally, many urban areas are reorienting their street designs to prioritize pedestrian accessibility and social engagement. Yet, in Amman, Jordan, the development trajectory of streets is still heavily inclined towards vehicular traffic, overshadowing the need for spaces that encourage social connections among residents. This approach has led to a lack of enthusiasm among Amman's residents for socializing in street environments, driving a preference for public spaces that offer a more inclusive and amenity-rich urban experience (Al Odat & Al Kurdi, 2021). In Amman, the manifestation of information overload is evident in the proliferation of signage. The prevalence of this overload varies based on factors such as location, traffic conditions, stress, time of day, weather, legibility, and graphic design. Consequently, observers are consistently exposed to a surplus of visual elements, surpassing the eye's immediate capacity for perception and the mind's ability for rapid processing. Notably, the most enduring and least mutable aspect of downtown Amman is presently the disarray and visual perplexity induced by the excessive use and suboptimal placement of signs. This sentiment resonates widely among the local populace, with many individuals acknowledging a reliance on verbal directions rather than the information presented on the buildings' signage, which is often deemed unhelpful (Abu-Ghazze, 1997).

4. The Rise of Commercial Signage

The development of commercial signage has a long history, originating in ancient times with signs on artifacts and tombs that served various purposes, from identification to displaying royal decrees or laws. In later centuries, commercial and advertising signs evolved, especially from the onset of the modern era around the mid-17th century, which saw significant scientific and technological advancements. The industrial revolution marked the beginning of a new phase in advertising, introducing simpler and more direct forms of advertising like engraved wooden or metal signs. Over time, these advertising mediums have undergone various transformations, adapting to technological advancements and societal changes. The stages of development include the industrial era's basic signs, the introduction of electric signs, the use of acrylic in signs, the neon era, and the modern era of electronic printing. Each stage reflects the evolving techniques and materials used in advertising, showcasing a journey from simple artistic methods to advanced technological applications in sign-making (Alzaheer, 2011).

5. The Functional Dynamics of Commercial Signs in Amman

The significance of naming in various socio-cultural settings is profound, as it symbolizes

identification and reflects attitudes and beliefs. This concept is extended to commercial shop signs, particularly in Amman, where they serve not just as identifiers but also as marketing tools, attracting customer attention through the strategic use of language and imagery. These signs are carefully crafted to resonate with potential customers, making language and visual design key elements in their creation. The study of these signs offers insights into the linguistic and cultural landscape of the area, revealing societal norms and personal attitudes. Commercial signs are more than just advertising; they are a complex semiotic field, rich in meaning and indicative of broader socio-cultural dynamics (Hussein, Nofal & Mansour, 2015).

6. The Role of Commercial Signage in City Image

Signage and advertisement boards are crucial in bolstering business activities, acting as a bridge of communication between consumers and businesses. The significance of these advertising tools within urban settings can be encapsulated in three key aspects:

- Firstly, they serve an informative purpose by alerting passersby to the nature of activities and services available in a particular vicinity or within a building.
- Secondly, they contribute aesthetically to the environment, becoming an integral part of the architectural landscape surrounding them.
- Lastly, when designed thoughtfully, these advertising entities can enhance the overall appearance of the streetscape, adding to its unique character and ambiance (Wubie, 2018).

In his exploration of the role of symbols in commercial signage and advertising, psychologist Haber highlights the intricate nature of visual perception. His research delves into both the process of observing and the subsequent retention of visual information. Haber's studies reveal differentiated memory processes for images and words, indicating a seemingly boundless capacity for storing images. Environmental psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan discuss how humans inherently filter a small portion of their sensory inputs, underlining the importance of structured perception in one's surroundings. Lynch and Rivkin, together with Downs and Stea, suggest that people naturally simplify their environment by categorizing and condensing information to prevent cognitive overload. This natural tendency towards simplification, as noted by Rapoport, presents a potential complication in the context of signage, whose core function is to convey information and guide understanding of locations and services. The challenge lies in ensuring that the simplification process does not dilute the effectiveness of signage in communication. Achieving a delicate equilibrium is key, where the use of symbols in signage must aid in clarity and understanding without diminishing the depth of the information being conveyed (Abu-Ghazze, 1997).

7. Strategies for Mitigating Visual Pollution in Amman

In Amman, commercial streets are governed by specific regulations, particularly concerning the architectural design and spacing for construction. Streets like Wasfi al-Tal Street necessitate special regulatory measures to accommodate arcades in front of shops. These arcades, initially meant for protection from weather and to add aesthetic value, are often repurposed for other commercial uses, which can impede movement and disrupt their original purpose. Over time, due to the lack of consistent oversight and variation in construction materials, there has been a disparity in the architectural design of buildings along these streets. This inconsistency has affected the street's distinctiveness and readability. Moreover, the proliferation of commercial signs adds to this visual clutter. Amman's thriving trade is reflected in its markets, such as Souk Al-Sukar, showcasing the city's commercial dynamism (Dardakah, 2012). The implications of these findings for signage are significant. The

discomforting sense of clutter and overload, exacerbated by unexpected messages intermingled with anticipated ones from signs lining the street elevations of commercial spines in Amman, becomes apparent. The challenge lies in reconciling the crucial role of signage in conveying information with the recognized limitations imposed by visual and psychophysiological constraints, ultimately aiming for a balanced and effective communication strategy in city Identity (Abu-Ghazze, 1997).

8. Amman's Commercial Signs as Identity-Bearers

Amman, Jordan's capital, has transformed significantly from a quaint town to a dynamic metropolis, a change mirrored in its commercial signage. These signs are more than mere advertising; they encapsulate the city's evolving identity. They showcase Amman's cultural, economic, and social dynamics, blending traditional Arabic calligraphy in older areas with contemporary designs in newer parts. This represents a fusion of historic heritage with modern trends. The commercial signage in Amman serves as cultural markers, highlighting its unique position in the region. The mix of Arabic and occasionally English or bilingual signs underlines the city's linguistic diversity and global connectivity, reflecting its cosmopolitan nature and role as a Middle Eastern cultural junction. However, this proliferation of signs has created visual clutter, leading to challenges in urban aesthetics and identity. This has sparked discussions among urban planners and environmentalists, emphasizing the need for regulations that harmoniously blend commercial needs with the city's visual and cultural essence. Amman, facing a longstanding challenge of visual clutter due to unregulated commercial signage, attempted a significant change in 2017. The Greater Amman Municipality initiated a campaign aimed at relocating commercial signs. They moved these signs from the front of the arcades lining the streets to the inside. This initiative was intended to reduce visual pollution on the streets. However, this solution overlooked a critical aspect of signage: its role in guiding and attracting consumers. By moving the signs indoors, they lost their functional and aesthetic impact. The signs, now placed inside the arcades, became less visible and effective. This was partly due to the arcade columns obstructing parts of the signs and the absence of self-illumination, which previously helped in highlighting the signs' colors and designs. This relocation resulted in an uncomfortable visual experience, failing to address the core issue of maintaining both the utility and aesthetic appeal of commercial signage in Amman (Dardakah, 2012).

9. Conclusion

The commercial signs of Amman are not just tools for business advertisement; they are integral components of the city's identity. They tell the story of a city at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, reflecting its cultural richness and diversity. As Amman continues to grow and evolve, it is crucial to manage these signs in a way that preserves their identity-bearing role while ensuring the visual harmony of the city's landscape. Through thoughtful regulation and community involvement, Amman can maintain its unique character, ensuring that its commercial signs continue to serve as proud bearers of its identity.

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