

Interpreting Campus Culture through Landscape: A Study of Cultural Transmission and Discontinuity among Students at SUSE's New Campus

Huang Sijing^{1,4}, Norsidah Ujang², Nor Azlina Abu Bakar^{3*}

¹Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang Selangor

²Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang Selangor

³Department of Architecture, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang Selangor

⁴School of Fine Arts, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong Sichuan, China

*Corresponding author: ab_azlina@upm.edu.my

Abstract

University campus culture plays a crucial role in shaping students' values and identities, yet its transmission across campuses and regions is often overlooked. In China, the transmission of campus culture in new campuses is facing challenges due to the prevalence of the multi-campus model and insufficient communication carriers between the old and new campuses, raising concerns about its potential discontinuity and erosion. To explore this issue, this study examines how university students perceive and experience campus culture and its continuity. Adopting a transparent qualitative approach as proposed by Guest et al. and employing Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, we conducted in-depth interviews with students from the new campus of Sichuan University of Science and Engineering (SUSE). The findings reveal nuanced patterns in how students interpret, engage with, and reinterpret campus characteristics, traditions and values. While some cultural elements are embraced and reshaped, others are forgotten or misunderstood, reflecting a dynamic yet fragile process of cultural transmission. The study offers insights into how higher education institutions can better support meaningful cultural continuity through intentional design, communication, and engagement strategies.

Keywords: Campus Culture; Cultural Transmission; Cultural Continuity; University Campus Landscape

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Introduction

Background

In China, to adapt to enrolment expansion (Wang, 2020), make up for the lack of educational resources (Xu, 2019), and educational development (Zhang et al., 2020), the construction of new university campuses has developed rapidly. The multi-campus model has become the development trend of university construction in contemporary China (Xu, 2019). However, there is a risk of discontinuity in cultural transmission across regions, which may lead to the interruption of campus cultural inheritance after universities have activated and relocated their new campuses (Wang, 2020).

Campus culture is not only the spiritual symbol of universities (Xu, 2019), but also the spiritual power for their survival and development (Dong, 2013). Meanwhile, as a crucial carrier of ideological and political education (Song, 2019), campus culture has a lasting, subtle and comprehensive role in education (Chen et al., 2022). In addition, campus culture may promote students' place identity and sense of belonging (Yang, 2019). Therefore, university campus culture plays a crucial role in shaping students' values and identities.

Insufficient carriers of cultural inheritance between the old and new campuses, and the lack of humanistic architectural landscapes are considered important reasons hindering the inheritance of campus culture in new campuses (Wang, 2020). Landscape, as a physical component of the campus, is a carrier for adapting and integrating campus culture in new environments (Fu, 2023) and is regarded as a vital medium for continuing the campus culture (Xu, 2019).

The Sichuan University of Science and Engineering (SUSE) has a 60-year history. Due to development needs, the university has undergone several campus relocations. And its new campus (Li Baihe Campus), the case of this study, has been activated since 2021. In the campus design stage, the university leaders attached importance to the role of landscape in the campus cultural inheritance and proposed that the landscape design should reflect the university's characteristics, development history, campus culture, university spirit and national sentiment to ensure the new campus would not forget the past (Kang, 2020; Wu, 2020).

Literature Review

In China, there is no unified definition of university campus culture currently. According to the previous research (Li et al., 2022; Fang, 2022; Wang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020), campus culture is considered to be formed and developed during the process of running a university (such as teaching, scientific research, social service and cooperation of cultural communication), and has the characteristics of continuous development, historical accumulation and influence by the external environment. There are two common classifications: in a broad sense, it includes material culture, spiritual culture, institutional culture and behavioral culture; in a narrow sense, it contains spiritual culture such as core concepts, motto and spirit, and academic and teaching styles, which embody the spirit of a university.

The role played by the campus landscape of China's universities in campus culture inheritance has received some attention. Scholars have explored the design principles (Zuo, 2022), ideas (Tian, 2018), strategies (Wang, 2022; Zhang, 2020), approaches (Zuo, 2022; Wang, 2019), and carriers (Xu, 2019; Wang, 2019; Yang, 2019) for the transmission of campus culture by the landscape. However, previous studies mostly focused on the pre-design level, with little exploration of transmission effects. In addition, the few existing studies on effects mainly used Likert scales to understand the degree of cultural inheritance (Chen, 2020; Li, 2020), and descriptive statistics to analyze students' impressions of campus culture (Zhang, 2020), lacking an in-depth understanding of the perception process.

Furthermore, there have been several empirical studies based on theories of environmental psychology to explore the impact of the physical environment on teaching and learning by using the campus as the research site, such as studying the impact of classroom features (acoustics, lighting, carpets and decoration) on the quality of the educational process (Bonnes, 2017). The mentioned studies mainly focused on the indoor environment and examined its impact on the quality of teaching and learning in professional education. And from the environmental psychology perspective, the campus landscape also plays a subtle influence on students' behavior and perceptions (Wang, 2022). However, there is still a research gap in exploring the effectiveness of campus cultural transmission as an ideological education using the outdoor environment - landscape as the research site.

Problem Statement and Significance

In China, there is currently no unified definition of university campus culture, which makes empirical analysis and strategic development difficult. Several studies (Liu & Hu, 2021; Zhang, 2018) offer diverse perspectives on what constitutes campus culture, yet a cohesive theoretical or institutional framework is lacking. Although previous research has investigated students' attitudes toward campus culture, mainly through Likert-scale questionnaires, such quantitative approaches often fail to capture the complexity of students' lived experiences and subjective meanings. This creates a research gap in understanding how students perceive and engage with campus culture in everyday contexts. Therefore, a qualitative approach is needed to explore these dimensions in greater depth, particularly regarding the continuity or reinterpretation of cultural practices among students.

The study focused on the interaction between outdoor landscapes and university ideological education, which could expand the application boundaries of environmental psychology theories. At the same time, the study would help to understand the landscape design approaches to effectively transmit campus culture in the construction of new university campuses in contemporary China. Meanwhile, it could provide university leaders and planners with a basis for campus construction decisions, thus facilitating the realization of the environment-based education.

Based on the above problem statement and the significance, the study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do students perceive the cultural messages embedded in the campus landscape?
2. What cultural messages do students perceive through landscape, and to what extent do these align with the university's intended meanings?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore how students perceive and engage with campus culture.

Participants

A total of six participants (Table 1) were selected through purposive sampling, guided by administrative access limitations at SUSE. Although the sample size was small, it was justified through a transparent saturation assessment method proposed by Guest et al. (2020). Considering a precise tracking of added information, a base size of three participants was chosen to determine the initial body of information, the run length was set to one participant, and the new information threshold was set to 5%. Saturation was tracked using a data saturation grid, and the ratio was less than 5% after the sixth interview, confirming sufficiency (Table 2).

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Participant ID	Profession	Time on this campus (years)
PT1	Environmental Design (Landscape)	3
PT2	Fashion Design	3
PT3	Visual Communication Design	3
PT4	Environmental Design (Landscape)	4
PT5	Environmental Design (Landscape)	1
PT6	Fine Arts	3

Table 2: Saturation Ratio¹

Participant No.	1	2	3	4	5	6
New codes per participant	18	7	9	3	6	1
New codes in run	34			3	6	1
% change over base				8.8%	17.6%	2.9%

¹This table is adapted from Figure 3, "Hypothetical data for example of saturation assessment at base size 4 and run length 2", in *A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research* by Guest et al. (2020, p. 9).

Data Collection and Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in Mandarin in June 2024 at SUSE's new campus. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes and was carried out in the first researcher's studio, which was quiet and private. Audio recordings were made with participants' informed consent. A back-translation procedure was applied to ensure semantic consistency in transcript translation from Mandarin to English.

The six-phase reflexive thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clark was chosen, and the themes emerged naturally during the analysis rather than being pre-defined (Byrne, 2022). The analysis was supported by NVivo 12 software, with Excel and Word used to review and adjust themes conveniently.

Trustworthiness and Limitation

To enhance trustworthiness, the study incorporated researcher reflexivity, full participation, and maintained a clear audit trail throughout the data collection and analysis process. Internal validity was supported through data triangulation, while external validity was ensured through rich and thick descriptions, enabling transferability.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and limited generalizability due to institutional and contextual constraints. However, the depth of qualitative insight contributes meaningfully to understanding the dynamics of cultural continuity in higher education environments.

Results

Themes under Research Question 1

Corresponding to the research question "How do students perceive the cultural messages embedded in the campus landscape? (RQ1)", three main themes were identified: landscape identification, perception establishment and other influences (Table 3).

Table 3: Themes and Their Features under RQ1²

Themes	Description (What it represents)	Case Counts (No. of Participants)	Code Counts (No. of Empirical Indicators)	Sub-themes
landscape identification	Students' identification and analysis of the design attributes, material carriers and creation methods of campus landscapes are the initial steps in their perception of campus culture.	6	116	design attributes, material carriers, creation methods
perception establishment	The attention pathways, perception methods and motivation process collectively influence the establishment of students' perception of campus culture, forming the core part of their perception.	6	60	attention pathways, perception methods, motivation process
other influences	Students are also subject to some external influences in the process of perceiving campus culture, and these factors and channels play a supporting role.	6	53	influencing factors, supplementary channels

²This table is adapted from Table 13.3, "Themes and Their Features Under GM Concerns Factors (RQ1)", in *A Step-by-Step Guide to Qualitative Data Coding* by Adu (2019, pp. 350-351). The same goes for Table 4.

Landscape Identification

Landscape Identification was a prominent theme in how students established their cultural perception through the campus landscape. Within this theme, the sub-themes of *Design Attributes* (with six case counts and 54 code counts) and *Material Carriers* (with six case counts and 51 code counts) were particularly notable.

In the *Design Attributes*, text and graphics, forms, and design styles were the top three elements, followed by color and cultural implications, and material ranked last. All six participants mentioned perceiving the design attributes of campus culture through text and graphics in the landscape (with 31 code counts), demonstrating its significant role in cultural expression. For example, one participant noted:

"Whether professionals or non-professionals, textual introductions could most directly transmit the original intention, concept and goals of the design. I believe text and graphics could effectively show the design thinking and ideas." (PT1)

When asked how to better inherit campus culture through the modification of campus landscapes, participants' suggestions further confirmed the importance of text and graphics in cultural transmission.

"Could specific locations be marked so that non-professional students, such as those from other faculties, can understand the design through text or graphics?" (PT4)

However, text and graphics did not always result in positive perceptions. During the design process, other aspects such as the richness of information and the aesthetic appeal of the carrier need to be comprehensively considered. One participant commented:

"My major (visual communication design) emphasizes simplicity and plainness in expression. However, when I saw the landscape stone with the words '652' Lake, I didn't feel the campus culture but thought it looked unattractive." (PT3)

In terms of *Material Carriers*, sculptures and buildings that paid homage to the old campus emerged as a particularly prominent type (with four case counts and 16 code counts), highlighting their significant role in cultural transmission. Participants commented:

"The new campus has incorporated many sentimental elements from the old campus in its landscape design... such as the mushroom-style pavilion and the road planted with plane trees." (PT4)

"The new campus landscape has re-planned and designed some of the symbolic nodes of the old campus. This reflects the university's nostalgia, the continuation of its previous spirit, and the transmission of its history." (PT1)

"There are two main landscapes that make me feel the campus culture. One is the statue of Madame Curie because the university was initially a chemical engineering school, and it reminds me not to forget our origins, like a spiritual pillar... The other is the stone mill. Besides its inherent meaning, I feel the 'Dao' of traditional Chinese culture - the steadiness, and the need to stay true to one's path and persevere." (PT5)

It can be seen that their perceptions of campus culture established from the sculptures and buildings that tribute to the old campus were different and highly subjective. For instance, PT4 felt the campus sentiment; PT1 focused on the continuation of the school history and spirit; while PT5 perceived a more in-depth meaning with deep personal characteristics.

Perception Establishment

Under the theme of *Perception Establishment*, the three sub-themes - *Attention Pathways* (with six case counts and 24 code counts), *Perception Methods* (with six case counts and 20 code counts), and *Motivation Process* (with five case counts and 16 code counts)- were relatively balanced.

In the *Attention Pathways*, the assignment (case counts = 5, code counts = 17) was a high-frequency code. Other common pathways included hanging out and passing by. For *Perception Methods*, vision (case counts = 5, code counts = 10) and association (case counts = 5, code counts = 18) were the most dominant, with occasional mentions of listen and interaction as additional methods of perception. In the *Motivation Process*, curiosity (case counts = 3, code counts = 5) and exploration (case counts = 5, code counts = 11) were noted, with a progressive relationship between the two. It is worth noting that these three aspects under the *Perception Establishment* theme were interconnected and may dynamically change. For example, some participants mentioned:

"When I walked around the campus and looked, I usually learned about the university's historical development, such as timelines and other related content, but the level of attention was not very high. However, when doing assignments, I delved deeper into understanding campus culture according to the requirements and themes of the assignments and extended this understanding in my work." (PT3)

"The pillars next to the library have some words engraved on them, but I can't recall the exact content. However, when I saw these words, I wondered if they were the mottos of any faculty in our university. Previously, I even compared them with the motto of our faculty." (PT2)

"My initial impression of campus culture came from one of my teachers. Before assigning homework, he introduced the university's culture to us, which sparked my interest. From then on, I was inspired to have a stronger desire to explore and take the initiative to go deeper." (PT4)

Other Influences

The theme of *Other Influences* had a certain supplementary nature. Analyzing the codes for the two sub-themes - *Influencing Factors* and *Supplementary Channels* - revealed that a student's profession was a key factor affecting their perception of campus culture (five participants mentioned). Several participants directly expressed concern about the perception differences caused by their professional backgrounds.

"I know the designer intended to extend or promote the university's historical culture. I think this goal has been achieved to some extent, mainly effective for those who are familiar with the landscape. Other students from different professions or those who haven't taken such cultural courses might just see it as a normal pergola." (PT1)

To remedy the difference in cultural perception caused by professions, the introductory function of the landscape could be enhanced (five participants affirmed the significance of introductions). In this regard, some participants believed that public landscaping should be designed with an introductory function.

"However, the existing landscape on campus lacks some universal elements that require a deeper understanding to appreciate their significance. If there are some explanations, even laypeople could get a general idea of it, even if they couldn't fully grasp its deeper meaning." (PT5)

Moreover, some participants suggested that the teacher's explanation in the course

should be increased (four participants mentioned), which could further enhance the effect of cultural transmission as a supplementary channel.

Themes under Research Question 2

Corresponding to the research question “What cultural messages do students perceive through landscape, and to what extent do these align with the university’s intended meanings? (RQ2)”, four main themes were identified: cultural types, cultural development, cultural connotation and cultural extension (Table 4), and the correlations and distinctions between students’ interpretations and intended landscape message were found.

Table 4: Themes and Their Features under RQ2

Themes	Description (What it represents)	Case Counts (No. of Participants)	Code Counts (No. of Empirical Indicators)	Sub-themes
cultural types	Refers to the different dimensions of campus culture that students establish through the campus landscape, including spiritual culture, symbolic culture and behavioral culture.	6	24	spiritual culture, symbolic culture, behavioral culture
cultural development	Refers to the historical development process that students understand through the campus landscape, including the achievements and contributions of the university and its alumni.	6	18	development history, achievements & contributions
cultural connotation	Refers to the different depths of campus culture that students comprehend based on the campus landscape, including cultural atmosphere, cultural cultivation and cultural essence.	4	10	cultural atmosphere, cultural cultivation, cultural essence
cultural extension	Refers to the culture established by students through the campus landscape that extends beyond the campus to the local area and broader social environment, while remaining closely linked to the campus.	3	7	local culture, social culture

Cultural Types

The *Cultural Type* was a prominent theme in the campus culture perceptions established through the landscape. Among these, the most notable sub-theme was *Spiritual Culture* (explicitly mentioned by all six participants). Specifically, high-frequency codes included the “652” Spirit (case counts = 6, code counts = 16) and the school motto (case counts = 4, code counts = 4). Notably, perceptions of the “652” Spirit varied among participants, and the corresponding interview contents with the five participants are as follows.

“My understanding of campus culture includes unique features like the ‘652’ Spirit. Our university is the only one in our country with this spirit, reflecting our distinctive campus culture.” (PT2)

“I just know there is the ‘652’ Spirit, but I can’t figure out what it’s about.” (PT6)

“My main impression of campus culture is ‘652’. I know this name came from the place our university moved from, but I don’t know much more.” (PT3)

“I learned that our university was founded in February 1965, and the ‘652’ Spirit includes three phrases - ‘With a heart for the world and a passion for the nation’...” (PT1)

“My impression of campus culture is mainly the ‘652’ Spirit and the spirit of the Third Front Movement. These spirits emphasize endurance and perseverance. Even facing numerous obstacles and setbacks, we must continue to move forward, carrying on the red revolutionary spirit of the older generation... Indeed, some university cultures can influence a person to avoid laziness and strive to do everything well.” (PT5)

The “652” Spirit was considered the most representative aspect of campus culture by several participants. However, the level of comprehension varied among them. PT6’s understanding was limited to the superficial text; PT3 was aware of the historical origins of the “652” Project; PT5 provided a more detailed personal interpretation, going beyond the literal text. However, there were also some misunderstandings. For instance, PT1 mistakenly believed that the “2” in “652” refers to the month that the university was founded. In fact, “652” (Project) was the external abbreviation of the university’s predecessor, the East China University of Science and Technology (ECUST), for reasons of secrecy in history.

In this regard, the campus landscape has generally achieved the goal of highlighting its spiritual culture (e.g., the “652” spirit and the Huangling spirit) as expected (Wu, 2020). However, most participants had no idea or had misunderstandings about what the specific spiritual culture entailed. Only PT4 and PT5 further mentioned the sense of devotion to both family and nation, and the hard work and perseverance contained in the culture. Therefore, it showed that the spiritual culture perceived by most participants was superficial.

Cultural Development

Cultural Development was another prominent theme, with the sub-theme of *Development History* being particularly notable. The spread of development history is also one of the intended goals of the campus landscape (Wu, 2020). Although every participant mentioned an impression of the development history presented by the landscape, it had the character of polarization. Among them, PT2 provided a detailed description of how the landscape transmitted the university’s historical development. Here is her description:

“The stepped landscape shows us the university’s campus culture, from its origins with the ‘652’ Project, to the branch of the ECUST, to the merger with the Normal School and other schools in Zigong, and finally to today’s SUSE.” (PT2)

Although there were additional details in SUSE’s development history, this participant already recalled several key historical milestones of the university’s evolution. However, other participants’ recollections of this aspect were more general, for example:

“After entering the school gate, the timeline landscape on the ground to the left and right introduces the university’s development history.” (PT1)

Cultural Connotation

Cultural Connotation was also an important theme, with four out of the six participants mentioning it. Within this theme, the sub-theme of *Cultural Essence* accounted for seven out of the 10 code counts. An interesting phenomenon was observed: participants’ descriptions of cultural essence were not solely positive but also included some negative aspects. Here are examples of both perspectives:

“This plane tree avenue pays tribute to the road at the Huangling Campus (the old campus). Initially, the plan was to transplant the trees from the old campus. But due to high costs, it was decided to purchase and plant the same species instead. This significantly enhanced the cultural essence of the university.” (PT4)

This participant felt a stronger sense of cultural essence through the detailed design of the botanical landscape. Conversely, some participants perceived shortcomings of the new campus landscape compared to other campuses, which negatively reinforced their impression of cultural essence:

“Actually, I wish the new campus could be more like the Huidong Campus (another operational campus), which feels more culturally rich. The Huidong Campus has many trees, and the dense foliage makes you feel like you are entering a university,

rather than a modern-style space. In contrast, everything at the new campus is built in a more modern style, making it feel no different from the outside world.” (PT2)

According to these two participants, trees could be one of the design elements creating the cultural connotation. On the one hand, it could be used to create a boulevard to give the university a distinctive character from its surroundings. On the other hand, tree species could be selected to continue the landscape of the old campus.

In this regard, the university was expected to emphasize its unique characteristics through the landscape (Wu, 2020). In terms of plant selection, the new campus has planted plane trees in specific areas as a tribute to the Huangling Campus; and to create a modern, technological, artistic and fashionable atmosphere, the new campus has used the jacaranda trees as street trees, forming a distinctive blue-purple botanical landscape (Wu, 2020). However, according to the above participants, they naturally compared the botanical landscape of the new campus with that of other campuses, rather than looking at its characteristics, which was quite different from the planner's anticipation.

Cultural Extension

Cultural Extension, though having relatively fewer case counts and code counts, was still noteworthy as it developed outside the campus while maintaining a close connection to it, and formed a unique culture type. Specifically, *Local Culture* was mentioned by three participants. The new campus is located in Zigong City, Sichuan Province, which is known as the “*City of Lanterns*” and the “*Land of Dinosaurs*” in China. Some participants considered the lantern culture and dinosaur culture as part of the campus culture and explained why these should be included:

“Our university is located in Zigong, which has a thriving lantern culture. The campus also has lantern sculptures, so I think lantern culture could be considered a part of campus culture, and it is quite distinctive. Similarly, the dinosaur culture is also included.” (PT6)

“I believe campus culture and local culture complement each other. For instance, without the artistic skills of our school's students, the effect of the lanterns might not be as impressive.” (PT4)

When planning and designing the new campus, it was hoped to incorporate the features of the major faculties and professions in the campus landscape (Kang, 2020). Interviews revealed that the aforementioned participants from the School of Fine Arts associated the colored lanterns and sculptures on campus with professions of environmental design and fine arts and indeed felt the campus culture through them.

Summary

The campus landscape was designed to reflect and reinforce the university's core values, institutional identity, and historical legacy. This divergence between intended landscape messaging and actual student interpretation highlights a gap in cultural communication. By comparing institutional planning documents and remarks from administrators against students' narrative accounts, we employed triangulation to identify where cultural transmission through landscape succeeds or fails. In cases where alignment was observed — such as the commemorative garden dedicated to the old campus — it often correlated with supplementary orientation or guided activities.

Thus, the findings suggest that landscape symbolism alone may not be sufficient to convey cultural meaning unless it is reinforced through active engagement strategies. This triangulated comparison helps avoid overgeneralization by

contextualizing student interpretations within the institutional narrative and spatial design intentions.

Discussion

This study set out to examine whether and how the landscape of SUSE's new campus facilitates the transmission of campus culture—a process that some scholars argued may be disrupted by campus relocation (Wang, 2020). Drawing on the cultural transmission theory (Taylor & Thoth, 2011) and principles of environmental psychology (Bonnes & Carrus, 2017), this discussion evaluated the perception processes and contents reported by students to assess the extent and effectiveness of cultural transmission.

Perception Process and Theoretical Framing

A conceptual framework was developed to articulate how the landscape of SUSE's new campus facilitates the transmission of campus culture (Figure 1). The process begins with landscape identification, where students engage with the design attributes (e.g., text, graphics, forms), material carriers (e.g., buildings, sculptures), and creation methods (e.g., visual cues, sensory atmosphere). These elements act as mediators in the cultural transmission process and reflect how physical spaces can encode and convey symbolic meaning.

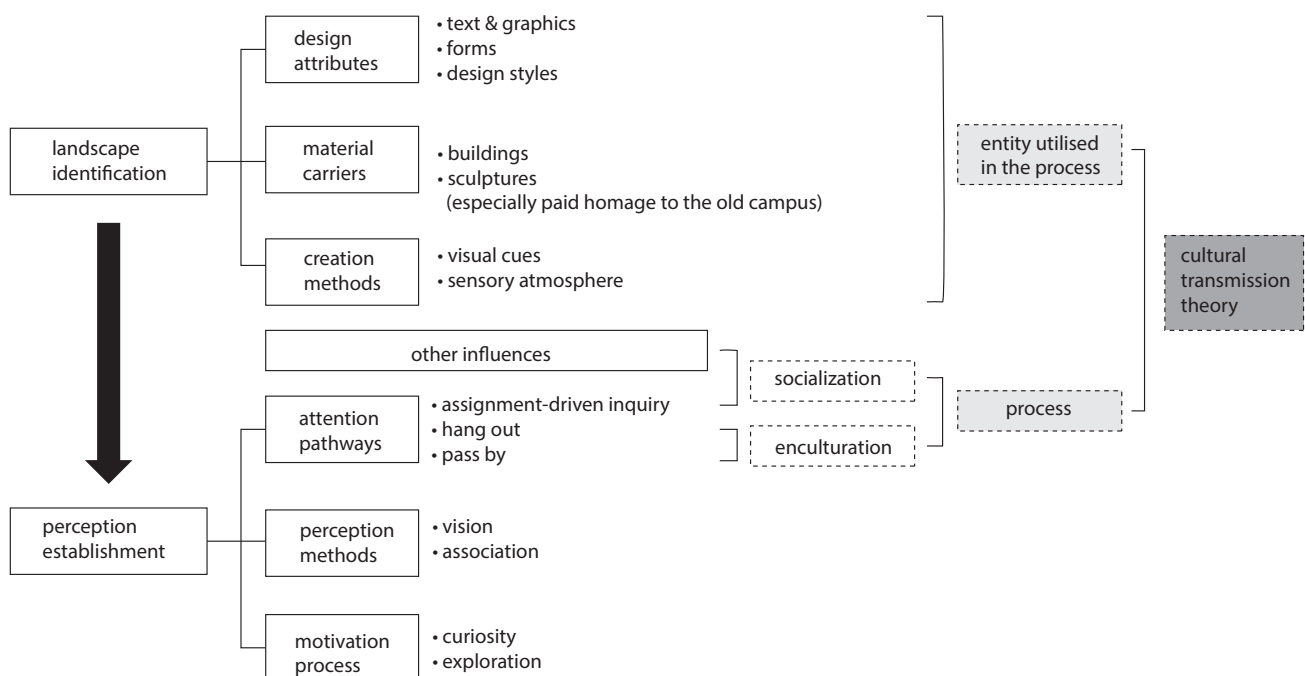


Figure 1: The Framework for Students' Perception Process of Campus Culture through Landscape³

³The cultural transmission theory part of this figure is adapted from Figure 1, "Cultural Transmission Theory", in *Spiritual Practice as Tourism Experience: An Application of Cultural Transmission Theory* by Nautiyal et al. (2025, p. 3).

This aligns with environmental psychology's view that the built environment subtly shapes individuals' cognition and behavior (Bonnes & Carrus, 2017). It also echoes Taylor and Thoth's (2011) cultural transmission theory, which posits that cultural messages are not passively absorbed but are interpreted based on individual needs, motivations, and social contexts. For example, the dynamic interaction among attention pathways (e.g., passing by, hanging out, assignment-driven inquiry), perception methods (e.g., vision, association), and motivation

process (e.g., curiosity, exploration) illustrates how landscape cues are selectively perceived and internalized.

This model suggests two modes of cultural learning through landscape: enculturation—informal, passive absorption through repeated exposure; and socialization—intentional, guided transmission, such as through assignments or teacher explanations. These modes coexist and reinforce each other, depending on the context and student background.

While the framework captures the multilayered nature of perception, it does not incorporate temporal change, as participants did not significantly reflect on evolving perceptions over time. This limitation, acknowledged in the study, highlights a future research direction: a longitudinal design could reveal how prolonged exposure to landscape elements gradually shapes or reshapes cultural understanding.

Perception Content and Cultural Discontinuity

The perception contents identified in this study partly reflect the university's intended cultural messages. Students recognized elements of spiritual culture (e.g., "652" Spirit), historical development, and disciplinary characteristics, which the campus landscape was designed to convey (Wu, 2020). However, the depth of understanding varied considerably. While some participants interpreted these messages in detail, others misunderstood or only vaguely grasped the meanings, suggesting a gap between symbolic intention and student interpretation—a core concern in cultural studies (Yang, 2019).

The findings also indicate a partial cultural discontinuity, especially in the superficial or confused interpretations of spiritual and symbolic elements. For instance, the use of abstract symbolism in design (e.g., sculptural forms, motif inscriptions) often lacked the contextual grounding necessary for full comprehension. This supports critiques in cultural studies that emphasize the risk of misalignment between symbolic landscapes and users' interpretive frameworks (Yang, 2019).

Another critical insight is the selective perception of cultural extension—the blending of local and university identities. Participants incorporated regional icons (e.g., lanterns, dinosaur motifs from Zigong) into their understanding of campus culture, even though these were not part of the original cultural narrative. This illustrates the porous boundary between ontological, regional, and epochal culture (Wang, 2022), and supports the cultural transmission theory's argument that learners reconstruct meaning based on environmental and personal relevance (Taylor & Thoth, 2011).

Implications for Landscape Design

These findings have important implications. First, symbolic design elements must be paired with interpretive aids (e.g., signage, QR codes, guided tours) to ensure deeper engagement. Second, cultural transmission is not just about embedding meaning in space, but also about activating interaction. As students are more likely to engage deeply when prompted by assignments or instruction, curriculum and landscape design should be integrated. Finally, while the new campus successfully localized its design by including regional cultural elements and disciplinary features, students often compared it unfavorably with other campuses. This reflects a broader identity negotiation process, where the sense of place (and culture) is shaped not only by what is present but also by what is missing or remembered from previous spaces. Landscape designers and administrators should therefore adopt a participatory approach, involving students in co-creating meaning and recognizing the layered, evolving nature of campus cultural identity.

Conclusion

This study examined how students at SUSE's new campus perceive and internalize campus culture through its landscape, identifying both the process (landscape identification and perception establishment) and the content (types and meanings of culture perceived). By applying reflexive thematic analysis and integrating cultural transmission theory, the study developed a nuanced framework showing that campus landscapes function not just as aesthetic or functional spaces, but as active carriers of institutional identity and educational values.

While students generally recognized core cultural elements—such as the “652” Spirit, development history, and local symbolism—there were noticeable variations in depth of understanding. These ranged from detailed interpretations to superficial or misinformed perceptions, revealing gaps between intended symbolic messages and actual student reception, and highlighting a potential risk of cultural discontinuity. These gaps underscore the need for clearer interpretive tools, greater integration between landscape design and curriculum, and more participatory, student-responsive planning approaches.

Importantly, this study contributes both theoretically and practically to the field of campus planning and design. It expands the application of environmental psychology and cultural studies to outdoor educational environments and introduces a flexible perceptual framework that accounts for diverse student experiences. Practically, the study's findings can inform landscape planning strategies for SUSE and other universities undergoing similar multi-campus expansion. By emphasizing the role of symbolic clarity, interactive engagement, and local cultural integration, university planners can design campus landscapes that promote cultural continuity, reinforce institutional identity, and enhance student connection to place.

In this regard, the study offers valuable insights not only for SUSE but also for universities in comparable developmental contexts—particularly in China and other countries where rapid campus expansion and relocation are reshaping the educational landscape. Ensuring that landscape design effectively supports cultural transmission is essential to sustaining the humanistic spirit and institutional memory across campuses.

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