# UNIVERSITY EMBLEM SYMBOL CONSTITUTION AND CONNOTATION ON THE BASE OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION -- TAKE 985 UNIVERSITY AS AN EXAMPLE

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## ABSTRACT

The emblems of universities, as symbols of their identity, incorporate the unique characteristics and development goals of each institution. Based on Identity Construction Theory, this paper uses Saussure's two-axis analysis method to examine the symbolic composition of the emblems of 39 domestic 985 universities at the levels of personal, social, role, linguistic, and interactive identities, while exploring their underlying design thinking and connotations. According to these five levels, the design form is divided into five categories: history and culture, geographical indications, education features, school mottos, and dynamic development. It is concluded that the symbols in the university emblem have multi-dimensional connotations and promote the identity construction of universities to varying degrees. This study aims to provide new ideas from a design perspective for the identity construction of universities and offers new perspectives on image shaping and identity recognizing.

*Keywords: University Emblems, Identity Construction, Symbolic Composition, Design Thinking*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

As higher education is emphasizing by China, the development and construction of universities have become one of the cores of social progress. As cultural symbols, university emblems can reflect a university's history, characteristics, and cultural philosophy. They are crucial for both internal and external promotion and help enhance the university's reputation and influence[1]. Despite the diversity in the design of university emblems in China, there are common design patterns that allow people to intuitively perceive the similarities and differences between different university emblems, reflecting each institution's construction concepts and methods of identity building.

### 1.2 Research Ideas

Based on this social context, this study utilizes Identity Construction Theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the emblem designs of 39 Chinese 985 universities, exploring their identity construction in terms of personal identity, social affiliation, role positioning, linguistic expression, and interactive relationships, refer to Figure 1. This research aims to deconstruct emblem designs using Saussure's two-axis analysis method, extracting semantic keywords and analyzing the symbolic elements to reveal the thinking patterns and connotation embedded in the emblem designs. Furthermore, it seeks to provide innovative perspectives for universities and other organizations in shaping their image and constructing their identity through design.
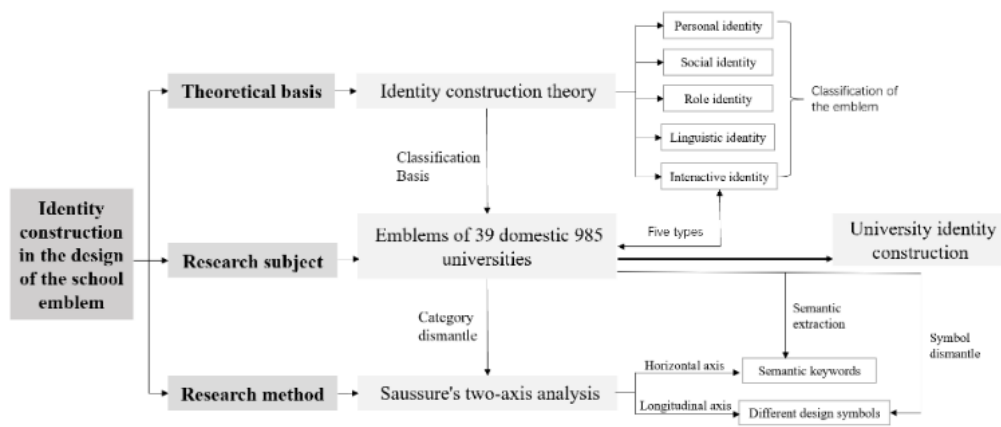
*Figure 1. Framework diagram of research ideas*

## 1.3 Review of University Emblem Design Research

The design of university emblems has been analyzed in terms of design cognition by scholars at home and abroad from different aspects. Ahn (2013) put forward the connection between university emblems and dentities, and through user research on the preference analysis of South Korean university emblem designs, it was concluded that emblems with the types of vision, ideas and directions are more influential[2]. SJ Go (2021) further compared the emblems of South Korean universities with Chinese universities and pointed out the problems existing in the design of Chinese university emblems[3]. ČÁBYOVÁ et al. (2020) took the emblems of several universities in Slovakia as examples, pointed out the importance of visual identity in university communication, divided them into categories such as figure marks and abbreviations of names, and gave corresponding design strategies[4]. Bayirli (2022) took the emblems of 200 universities in Turkey as examples and analyzed their design trends in terms of form, color and background[5]. At present, foreign research on university emblems is relatively sufficient, and corresponding research has been carried out with the emblems of different countries as representatives. However, in China, there is relatively less research on the design of university emblems, and there is a lack of research on its internal identity construction.

## 2 CLASSIFICATION OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN EMBLEM DESIGN

Identity is a sociological concept that refers to the social attributes of individuals or groups, presenting as their positions or statuses in certain social relationships, or the roles they play in society, reflecting the division of social roles in a specific society[6]. Identity Construction Theory is a multidimensional social psychology theory that explores how individuals or collectives form and develop identity through social interaction[7]. Stryker (1980) proposed Identity Theory, suggesting that the roles individuals play in society are internalized as identities, and the integration of these identities constitutes the self[9]. From the perspective of social psychology, Tajfel and Turner (1986) proposed Social Identity Theory[8], which forms social identity through processes of social categorization, social comparison, and positive distinctiveness[10]. Simon (2004) proposed the Identity Self-Orientation Model, where the self includes personal attributes and characteristics, and identity possesses both cognitive and social aspects[11]. As research gets deeper, scholars have gradually recognized that identity construction is a dynamic, multi-level, and strategic process[12], influenced by various factors such as social structure, cultural background, and individual psychology[13]. By organizing these theories, it can be found that the core of identity construction theory mainly involves five levels: personal, social, role, language, and interactive identities.

In emblem design, Identity Construction Theory can help understand how emblems reflect and shape a school's identity. The diverse symbolic language in emblem design also exhibits certain regularities and can form generalized classifications. Emblems usually contain symbols such as the school's history and culture, educational philosophy, and social status, and convey the university's collective identity through visual symbols[14]. This paper chooses to extract and classify the most typical features reflected in the emblems of 39 domestic 985 universities according to the five levels in Identity Construction Theory. These correspond respectively to History and Culture representing the university's personal identity, Geographical Indications representing social identity, Educational Features representing role identity,

School Mottos representing linguistic identity, and Dynamic Development representing interactive identity. The universities included in each category are listed in Table 1.

*Table 1. Classification of school emblem design symbols*

| No. | Identity Construction | Classification | University |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Personal Identity | History and Culture | Peking University |
| | | | Fudan University |
| | | | Renmin University of China |
| | | | Nanjing University |
| | | | Nankai University |
| | | | Beijing Normal University |
| | | | Tianjin University |
| | | | East China Normal University |
| | | | Sichuan University |
| 2 | Social Identity | Geographical Indications | Wuhan University |
| | | | Sun Yat-sen University |
| | | | Southeast University |
| | | | South China University of Technology |
| | | | Hunan University |
| | | | Shandong University |
| | | | Northeastern University |
| | | | Lanzhou University |
| 3 | Role Identity | Educational Features | Shanghai Jiao Tong University |
| | | | Beihang University |
| | | | Xi'an Jiaotong University |
| | | | Harbin Institute of Technology |
| | | | University of Electronic Science and Technology of China |
| | | | Chongqing University |
| | | | Ocean University of China |
| | | | Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University |
| | | | National University of Defense Technology |
| | | | China Agricultural University |
| | | | Northwestern Polytechnical University |
| 4 | Linguistic Identity | School Mottos | Tsinghua University |
| | | | Xiamen University |
| | | | Huazhong University of Science and Technology |
| 5 | Interactive Identity | Dynamic Development | Zhejiang University |
| | | | Tongji University |
| | | | Beijing Institute of Technology |
| | | | Central South University |
| | | | Dalian University of Technology |
| | | | Jilin University |
| | | | Minzu University of China |
| | | | University of Science and Technology of China |

# 3 DECONSTRUCTION AND ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLIC COMPOSITION IN EMBLEM DESIGN

The design symbols within university emblems are the core elements of identity construction, capable of conveying information intuitively and effectively[15]. In different emblem designs, these symbols exhibit both commonalities and differences. By deconstructing them using Saussure's two-axis method, we can further determine the symbolic composition in each category of emblem design and the connotations they represent.

Saussure's two-axis analysis method is a concept he proposed in his linguistic theory, which includes two types of relations: "syntagmatic relations" and "paradigmatic relations"[16]. Syntagmatic relations refer to the meaningful ways in which linguistic symbols are combined in specific contexts; this relation is horizontal. Paradigmatic relations refer to the potential series formed in the human mind by linguistic symbols; this relation is vertical and involves relationships between symbols that can be mutually substituted[17]. By deconstructing each type of emblem design according to these horizontal semantic keywords and vertical symbolic representations, a clear understanding of their symbolic construction can be gained.

## 3.1 Personal Identity Symbols—History and Culture

The construction of personal identity in university emblems is mainly manifested through the institution's developmental history and the culture embodied in its evolution. Due to the characteristics of Chinese historical culture, most emblem designs can reflect developmental journey and features of Chinese culture, including calligraphy, patterns, and other elements. By deconstructing representative emblem designs in the history and culture category that reflect personal identity construction, four semantic keywords are extracted: Text, Humanistic Thinking, Implication, and Quality. By selecting and combining typical emblem of Peking University, Nanjing University, Tianjin University, and Sichuan University, the two-axis diagram of personal identity symbols is shown in Figure 2.
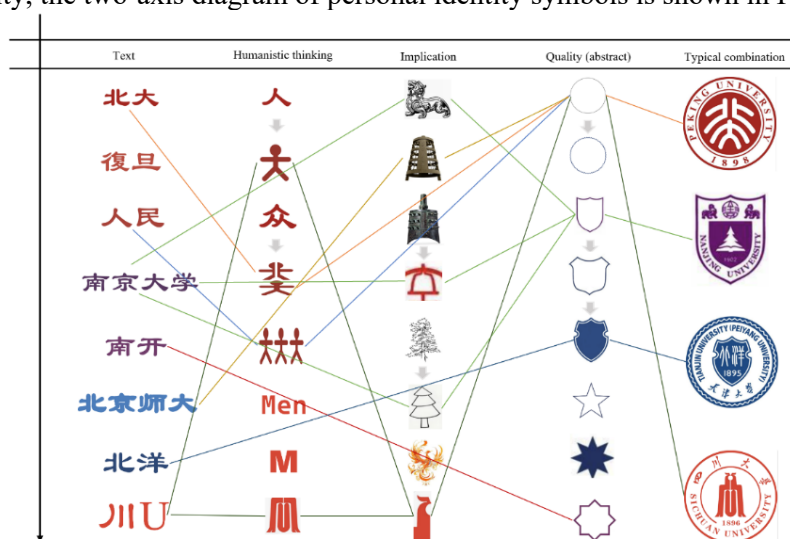


*Figure 2. Two-axis diagram of personal identity symbols*

By deconstructing these designs, it can be seen that university emblems that use history and culture as symbolic forms for constructing personal identity often deform and redesign the textual forms of their school names. They choose historical fonts, such as Small Seal Script, or select historical names like "Beiyang" to convey a sense of profound history. Besides, they utilize variations of the character "人" (meaning "person") to incorporate the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of "people-oriented" into the emblem design, thereby expressing the educational philosophy inherent in the university. Simultaneously, they convey cultural connotations through typical traditional Chinese symbols like the Pixiu (a mythical creature) and cedar trees, and they incorporate abstract geometric symbols that can represent qualities cultivated through education—such as circles expressing inclusiveness, shields symbolizing resilience, and polygons representing all-round development—into the emblem design. Through such symbolic construction that represent history and culture, universities can further construct a distinctive and meaningful personal identity.

## 3.2 Social Identity Symbols—Geographical Indications

In Identity Construction Theory, social identity construction is related to developmental backgrounds and distinctive social classifications[18]. In university emblems, social identity is connected to the school's geographical location and social status. Some of the emblem designs of the 985 universities use geographical indications or characteristic architectural forms as typical symbols. By deconstructing the emblems that reflect social identity construction through geographical indications, three semantic keywords are extracted: University Buildings, Regional Features, and Geographical Traits. We selected typical emblems of Sun Yat-sen University, Southeast University, Shandong University, Northeastern University, East China University of Science and Technology, and Hunan University to combine, resulting in Figure 3.
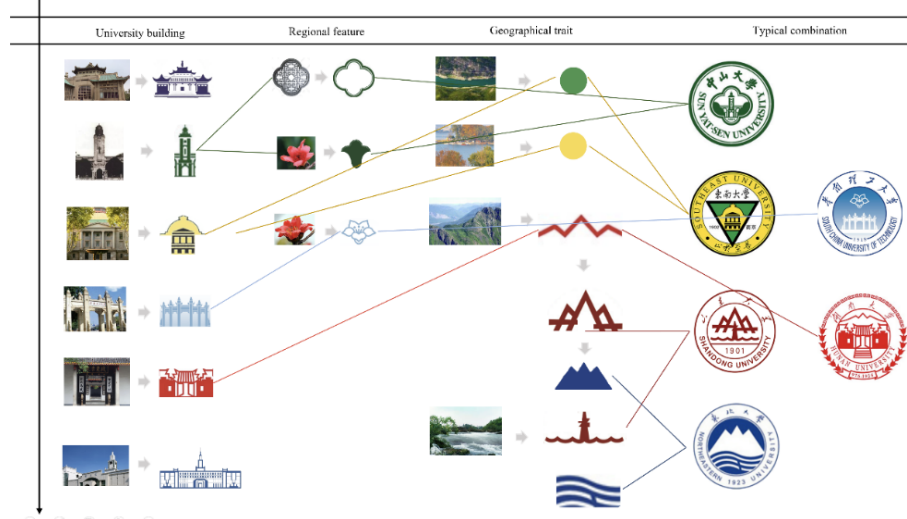


*Figure 3. Two-axis diagram of social identity symbols*

By deconstructing these designs, it can be seen that social status and geographical location are also important symbols in emblem design. In terms of architecture, emblem designs commonly choose buildings with historical and educational significance, such as libraries and monuments, simplifying and abstracting them to form symbols. For regional features, they often select local specialties or iconic vegetation to highlight the regional differences from other areas—for example, the kapok flower representing the Lingnan region. When choosing geographical traits, identity construction often relies on geographical locations and their representative landscapes, such as the "White Mountains and Black Waters" where Northeastern University is situated. Therefore, constructing social identity requires selecting representative symbols related to the local area while creating unique symbols based on their own identity. Combining the two allows universities to effectively construct their social identity.

## 3.3 Role Identity Symbols—Educational Features

Role identity construction is a multidimensional concept that involves how individuals or groups form and develop identity in different social and cultural contexts and interactions[19]. An important aspect of identity construction research is how role identity dynamically evolves in social communication interactions to meet specific communicative needs. By deconstructing the emblem designs of educational features that reflect role identity construction according to social positioning, two semantic keywords are extracted: Academic Features and Educational Identity. Academic Features can be further divided into six categories: Engineering, Aviation, Ocean, Electronic, Defense, and Agriculture. Representative universities are selected according to these six categories—namely, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Beihang University, Ocean University of China, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, National University of Defense Technology, and China Agricultural University—to combine, resulting in Figure 4.
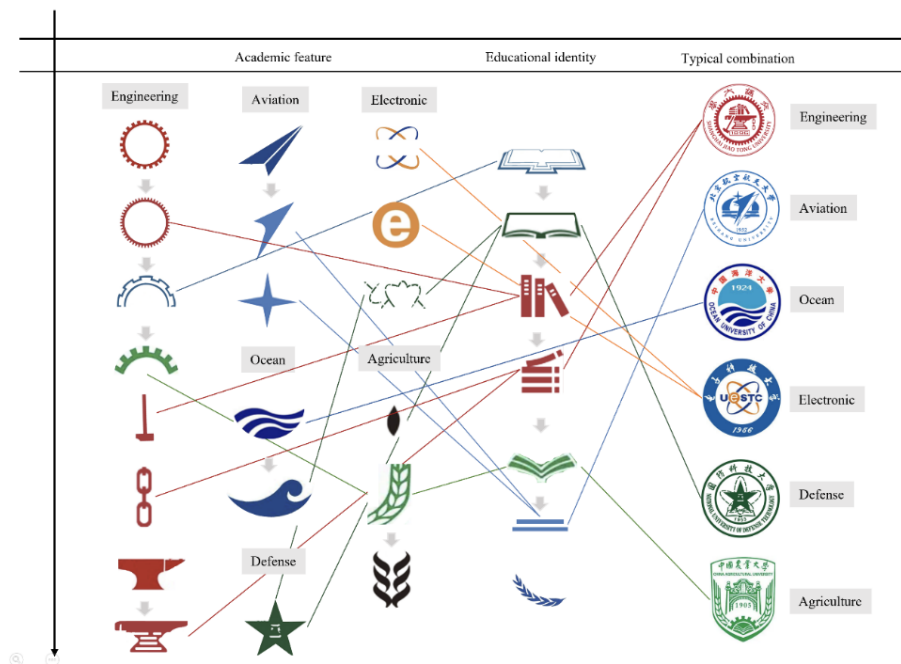
*Figure 4. Two-axis diagram of role identity symbols*

By deconstructing these designs, it is found that universities with a focus or strong disciplines often use symbols representing their academic features in their emblem designs to construct their role identity. For example, universities primarily centered on engineering often adopt symbols like gears and chains; universities specializing in electronic information tend to use symbols such as particle trajectories and electromagnetic waves. In emblem designs, the educational attributes of universities are usually symbolized by books. The use of these two types of symbols enables universities to establish clear characteristics and advantages, forming a representative role identity, thereby positively promoting their identity construction.

### 3.4  Linguistic Identity Symbols—School Mottos

Linguistic identity construction focuses on how identity is dynamically constructed, negotiated, managed, and disseminated in discourse interactions. Specific identities are built through discourse, emphasizing the contextual attributes when particular social identities connect with the immediate context[20]. In the design of university emblems, linguistic identity is manifested through variations in the font of school name and the inclusion of school mottos. Statistical analysis shows that among the 985 universities, Tsinghua University primarily constructs its identity through linguistic symbols, namely its school motto. Additionally, Huazhong University of Science and Technology and Xiamen University have incorporated their school mottos into their emblem designs. Their emblem designs are shown in Figure 5.
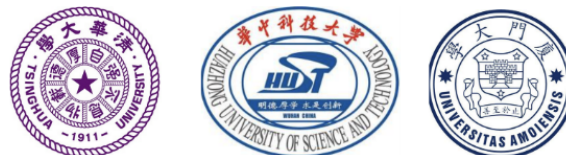


*Figure 5. Design of the 3 emblems constructing linguistic identity*

These three universities all use their school mottos as core design symbols, conveying the spirit of the mottos through a combination of text and images. The school mottos themselves, as language, can more intuitively convey the core philosophy compared to abstract symbols or images, and simultaneously serve to state identity. Using text as a symbol for graphical expression can make the meaning of the image explicit and clear. This method of directly constructing identity using the language of the school motto mainly involves the layout and transformation of the text, and uses the specific content of the language to perform the most direct linguistic identity construction.

## 3.5 Interactive Identity Symbols—Dynamic Development

Interactive identity construction is an important concept in identity construction theory. It emphasizes that identity is dynamically constructed in social interactions. The core idea is that it views identity as a dynamic phenomenon generated through the interaction within specific contexts. In interactive identity construction, identity is no longer a static concept but is continuously redefined and reshaped through ongoing social interactions[21]. Therefore, in the design of university emblems, symbols corresponding to interactive identity construction are defined as the dynamic development category. The same semantic elements can produce different expressions and symbols and convey dynamic effects. In this category, the selected semantic keywords are Forge Ahead and Relationship. Relationship can be divided into Union, Peace, and Responsibility. The representative emblems selected are Dalian University of Technology, Beijing Institute of Technology and University of Science and Technology of China, as shown in Figure 6.
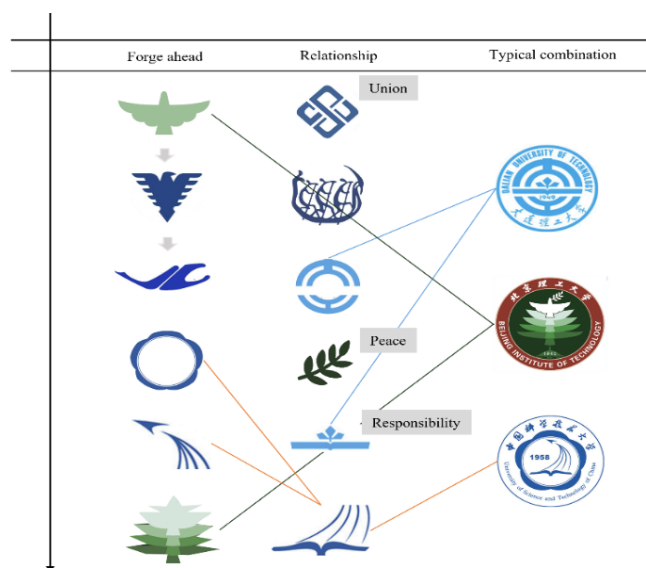


*Figure 6. Two-axis diagram of interactive identity symbols*

By deconstructing these designs, it becomes apparent that the symbols used to construct interactive identity often possess dynamic characteristics, such as an eagle with spread wings or a figure rowing a boat. These dynamic symbols can convey a spirit of striving and progress, aligning with the developmental philosophy of universities. Additionally, through the combination and arrangement of symbols, connections and relationships between different elements are established, showcasing interactivity through the construction of these relationships. In emblem design, the use of symbols with dynamic and interactive qualities can represent a dynamic development direction and continually evolving inner spirit of the university. Such dynamic symbols are conducive to making the identity construction more dynamic, creating interactive effects, and thereby promoting the advancement of university in keeping with the times.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Conclusion

Based on Identity Construction Theory and employing Saussure's two-axis analysis method, this study conducted an in-depth analysis of the emblems of 39 domestic 985 universities. The research findings indicate that university emblems contain rich connotations through the use of symbols and facilitate the construction of university identities. Through analysis, this paper discovers that the design symbols in university emblems primarily exhibit the following characteristics in identity construction:

### 1. *Personal Identity Construction*

Emblem designs show the historical and cultural heritage of universities and their people-oriented educational philosophies through methods such as text deformation, the use of traditional symbols, and expressions of traditional qualities. The combination and transformation of these symbols further construct a distinctive and meaningful personal identity for the universities.

## 2. Social Identity Construction

Symbols representing social identity—such as buildings with historical and educational significance, regional characteristics, and geographical features—not only reflect the geographical location and social status of the universities but also enhance the recognition and sense of belonging associated with the emblems, which greatly construct social identity.

## 3. Role Identity Construction

Universities display their advantageous research fields and educational functions through academic features and educational identity symbols in emblem designs. This composition of symbols helps universities establish representative images and promotes the positive development of their identity construction.

## 4. Linguistic Identity Construction

As important carriers of linguistic identity, school mottos occupy a significant position in emblem design. Through specific font choices and linguistic expressions, school mottos directly convey the core philosophy of the university's development, facilitating the construction of the university's unique linguistic identity.

## 5. Interactive Identity Construction

The use of dynamic development symbols in emblem designs demonstrates the universities' dynamic development direction and their continuously evolving inner spirit. This enhances the interactivity and recognizability of the emblems and contributes to constructing the dynamic identity of universities.

## Discussion

Through an in-depth analysis of the emblems of 985 universities, this study reveals the significant role of emblem design in identity construction. However, there are still some issues and future research directions worth further exploration.

## 1. Diverse Choice of Symbols

While this study has identified the commonalities and differences in the use of symbols in emblem designs, there is limited analysis on the reasons behind the selection and usage of symbols among different universities. Future research could delve deeper into the underlying reasons for these differences and their impact on university identity construction.

## 2. Other Elements in Emblem Design

This study focuses on the internal symbol composition, but lacks the research on the aesthetic characteristics of the school emblem such as form and color, which needs to be discussed at a deeper level based on relevant literature in the future.

## 3. Historical Evolution of Emblem Design

With the progression of time and societal changes, university emblem designs are continually evolving. Future studies can focus on the historical evolution of emblem designs, exploring the characteristics and changes of emblem designs in different historical periods, and how these changes contribute to shaping university identity recognition.

## 4. Cross-Cultural Comparison

This study primarily focuses on the emblem designs of domestic universities. Future research could expand to an international scope, conducting cross-cultural comparisons to explore the similarities and differences in university emblem designs across different countries and regions, and how they construct identity under different cultural backgrounds.

## 5. Innovation and Development of Emblem Design

With continuous advancements in design concepts and technologies, university emblem designs are also constantly innovating and developing. Future research can pay attention to the innovative trends and development directions in emblem design, exploring how to utilize new technologies and concepts to promote the innovation and development of emblem designs and their identity construction.

In conclusion, university emblem design plays a crucial role in identity construction. By deeply researching and discussing the symbolic composition and connotations of emblem designs, the process of constructing university identity is better understood. Future research can further broaden perspectives and methods to deeply explore the relationship between symbolic expressions in different designs and identity construction.

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