

Signs of Belonging: How Children Visualize the Imam Reza Shrine Through Semiotic and Psychological Lenses

Samaneh Eshraghi

Ivri Near East University, Cyprus,

sr.eshraghi@gmail.com

Simge Bardak

Assist. Prof. Interior Architecture, Near East University, Cyprus,

Zeynep Ustun

Onur Professor

Final International University, Cyprus.

Abstract

This study explores the integration of Peircean semiotic frameworks into visual communication strategies for urban heritage preservation, focusing on the Imam Reza Holy Shrine in Mashhad, Iran. Employing qualitative methods and an interpretive approach, the research investigates how semiotics enhances cultural sustainability by analyzing visual materials—specifically, 100 hand-drawn images by primary school children aged 7–13. Peirce’s triadic model of representamen, object, and interpretant guides the exploration of how children, as cultural interpreters, perceive and reconstruct symbolic urban landmarks. These visual representations reveal how young minds process both external imagery (such as logos and photos) and internal cognitive-emotional frameworks, generating implicit cultural narratives.

To deepen the analysis, Glasser’s Choice Theory is applied, which posits that all behavior aims to satisfy five basic psychological needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Children’s drawings are thus interpreted not only as artistic outputs but as behavioral expressions embedded in emotional and cultural meaning. The Imam Reza Shrine becomes a psychologically and symbolically significant object within each child’s internal “quality world.”

Findings indicate that while children often reproduce recognizable architectural symbols such as domes and minarets, they frequently omit human figures and environmental context. These choices reflect a combination of mediated graphic simplification and personal reinterpretation. By merging semiotic and psychological perspectives, this study offers original insight into the communication of urban heritage and contributes to culturally responsive strategies in visual communication. It aims to foster more sustainable and emotionally meaningful connections between cultural narratives and younger generations.

Keywords

Peircean Semiotics, Choice Theory, Cultural heritages, Visual Communication, Imam Reza Shrine

Introduction

In contemporary urban environments, cultural symbols play a pivotal role in shaping identity, memory, and collective belonging. Cities are not merely physical entities; they are semiotic landscapes rich with visual signs, symbolic architecture, and ritualistic expressions that carry layers of cultural meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Thellefsen et al., 2013). The Imam Reza Shrine has evolved in its perceived meaning among pilgrims and citizens over time (Motalebi, Eslami, Taheri, Gordi Takhti, & Mahdavi, 2017). Among these symbolic structures, sacred landmarks function as cultural anchors and visual markers that bind communities through shared narratives. The Imam Reza Holy Shrine in Mashhad, Iran—one of the most significant pilgrimage sites in the Shiite world—is both a religious institution and a powerful urban symbol embedded within the city's identity. (Molaei, 2023)

While the significance of urban symbols has been explored across architecture, semiotics, and heritage studies (Peirce, 1931–1958; Barthes, 1972), less attention has been paid to how children perceive and emotionally engage with such symbols. This gap is particularly noteworthy in relation to Generation Z, a cohort raised in highly visual, media-saturated environments. Their understanding of space and meaning is shaped not only by direct observation but also by digital imagery and mediated experiences (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2014; Tavin, 2005). Studying how children interpret these urban icons offers valuable insights into how cultural identity is formed, transmitted, and reimagined across generations. (Christensen & O'Brien, 2003)

This study applies Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory (Peirce, 1998; Chandler, 2017)—particularly his triadic model of sign, object, and interpretant—to investigate how children between the ages of 7 and 13 visually represent the Imam Reza Shrine. It also incorporates Glasser's Choice Theory, which posits that all human behavior is driven by the desire to fulfill five basic psychological needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1998). These theoretical lenses enable a nuanced reading of how children's artistic expressions reflect both cognitive and emotional dimensions of meaning-making. (Glasser, 1998; Erwin, 2004)

Through an analysis of 100 children's drawings, this study seeks to uncover how visual language mediates the cultural symbolism of sacred architecture. The goal is to illuminate the ways in which younger generations internalize, reinterpret, and transmit cultural symbols, contributing to urban identity and cultural sustainability. (Chawla, 1992; Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Dessein

et al., 2015). In doing so, this research offers interdisciplinary implications for educators, urban planners, and designers aiming to engage with youth through culturally resonant visual communication strategies. These findings carry implications for educators, designers, and urban planners seeking to foster culturally resonant engagement (Derr et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2013).

Literature Review

Urban cultural symbols significantly shape how individuals engage with cities, acting not only as visual anchors but also as repositories of collective meaning. Coyne (2017) emphasizes that interpreting such symbols involves more than decoding visual forms; it requires an affective and contextualized response informed by personal and cultural experience. This aligns with the Peircean view of semiosis, wherein meaning arises from the dynamic interaction between sign, object, and interpretant (Peirce, 1931–1958).

Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model offers a foundational lens for analyzing children's meaning-making processes. Unlike dyadic models, Peirce centers the interpretant—the sign's mental effect on the perceiver—as essential to understanding how signs function. Religious landmarks such as the Imam Reza Shrine operate as complex signs, often combining iconic, indexical, and symbolic elements. For children, the interpretant is shaped not only by exposure to architecture but by cultural memory, mediated imagery, and emotional resonance.

In Peirce's triadic model, meaning arises from the interaction between the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the mental effect produced in the interpreter). Coyne (2017) describes the interpretant as the sign's cognitive and emotional effect—"a kind of form or idea of the difference which the sign's being true or undeceptive would make." This resonates with Peirce's pragmatic stance, where meaning is defined by its consequences on thought and behavior. For example, a child's depiction of the golden dome of the Imam Reza Shrine reflects not only visual recognition but also a personal and cultural realization of its sacredness or emotional significance.

Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semiosis involves a triadic relationship among the sign (or representamen), the object it refers to, and the interpretant—the meaning formed in the mind of the interpreter (Peirce, 1931–1958). Peirce identifies three types of interpretants that together explain how meaning is constructed and understood. The **immediate interpretant** refers to the inherent quality or potential meaning of a sign—what it seems to mean at first glance, independent of specific context. The **dynamic interpretant** reflects the actual effect the sign has on a particular interpreter, including emotional, intellectual, or behavioral reactions, which are shaped by personal experience and context (Atkin, 2013). The **final interpretant** represents the ultimate, stabilized understanding that emerges

through reflection or within a community of interpreters, signifying the most reasoned or culturally accepted meaning of a sign (Thellefsen & Thellefsen, 2017). Together, these three layers of interpretation allow for a nuanced analysis of meaning-making, from personal perception to collective understanding.

The interpretant is further shaped by what Peirce called “collateral experience,” the background knowledge and familiarity required to interpret a sign meaningfully (CP 8.179). For children, these interpretants are filtered through a combination of lived experience, cultural memory, and media exposure. As Thellefsen et al. (2013) note, the interpretant is context-sensitive and inherently shaped by cognitive and emotional dimensions. In Generation Z, this interpretive process is heavily influenced by visual culture, including symbolic representations in textbooks, digital media, and public iconography.

Visual communication theory supports this understanding by emphasizing that visual language is not universal but culturally coded. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that images operate according to a “grammar of visual design” shaped by social conventions. In the urban environment, visual symbols such as logos, religious icons, and graphic simplifications serve as semiotic condensations of complex realities. Children absorb these simplified forms and reproduce them in drawings, reflecting both internalized meanings and visual habits.

Drawing, therefore, becomes more than artistic expression—it is a cognitive and cultural act. Freeman and Mathison (2009) view children’s visual production as a form of identity-making, while Zimmerman (2009) highlights how these expressions embody culturally embedded signifiers. Through drawing, children visually construct and communicate how they perceive, feel, and value sacred architecture like the Imam Reza Shrine.

Glasser’s Choice Theory (1998) offers a complementary psychological lens through which children’s visual expressions can be interpreted. The theory posits that all human behavior is motivated by the desire to satisfy five basic psychological needs: survival, love and belonging, power (achievement), freedom, and fun. Within this framework, individuals construct a “quality world”—an internalized model of people, places, and objects that fulfill these needs. In the context of this study, the Imam Reza Shrine is not simply a physical landmark but a symbol embedded within each child’s quality world, imbued with emotional, spiritual, and cultural resonance.

The children’s choices in representing certain elements—such as golden domes, radiant suns, or trees—can be understood as attempts to visually articulate emotional needs or psychological associations. For instance, the recurring appearance of warm colors and symmetrical forms might signify a desire for belonging or joy, while omissions of complex architectural detail or human figures could reflect a

prioritization of emotional clarity over literal accuracy. These visual choices illustrate how children's artistic outputs are not arbitrary but motivated acts of meaning-making.

Generation Z's interpretive lens is further shaped by their deep immersion in digital and visual culture. According to McCrindle and Wolfinger (2014), Generation Z is the most visually literate generation to date, constantly exposed to media-rich environments that influence their perception and aesthetic sensibility. Tavin (2005) emphasizes that popular visual culture plays a formative role in how symbolic meaning is absorbed and reproduced. For children raised in such visual ecosystems, representations of religious landmarks often blend firsthand experience with stylized imagery encountered through television, social media, educational materials, and digital design.

This mediated exposure contributes to a semiotic process where traditional sacred symbols are reinterpreted and, at times, abstracted. Children may, for example, substitute complex architectural details with simplified, emotionally salient features like domes, suns, or floral motifs—transforming the shrine into a symbolic representation that resonates with their internal emotional schemas. These findings reflect the hybrid nature of visual interpretation in younger generations, influenced both by cultural continuity and contemporary media saturation.

Environmental and heritage education literature also underscores the importance of engaging youth in processes of cultural sustainability. Malone (2002) and Soini and Birkeland (2014) argue that the preservation of cultural identity must involve the transmission and transformation of meaning across generations—not merely through formal instruction but through emotionally resonant and participatory practices. Children's drawings of sacred spaces thus serve as semiotic indicators of how effectively urban symbols are internalized, and where symbolic gaps or disconnections may exist.

Finally, drawing on Barthes' (1972) theory of "myth," repeated cultural symbols such as domes or minarets function as narratives embedded within collective consciousness. Yet, children's interactions with these myths are not passive. Their representations reflect processes of reinterpretation and renewal, in which visual elements are selectively reassembled to express individual values and needs. Through this lens, children emerge not only as interpreters of inherited cultural meanings but as agents of symbolic transformation, contributing to the ongoing evolution of urban identity.

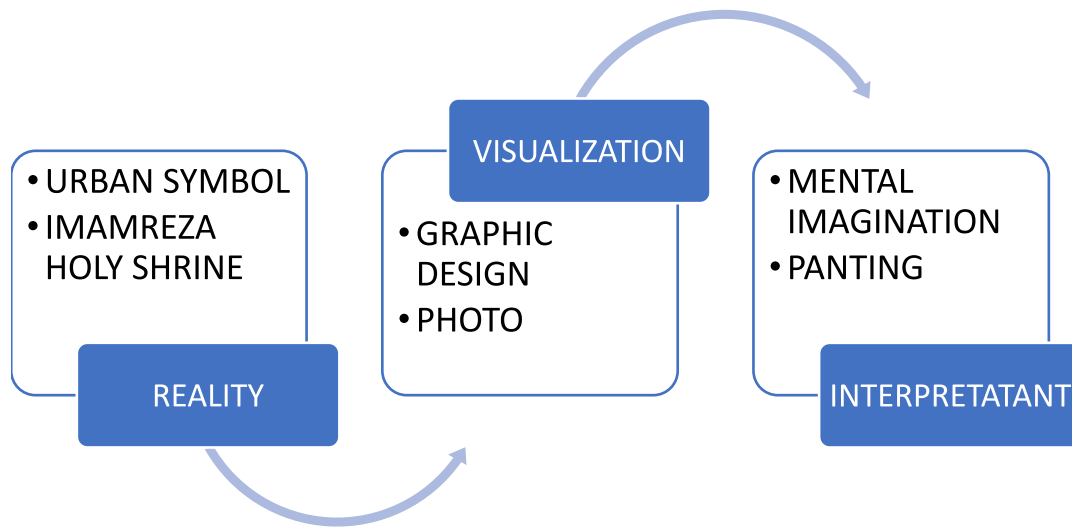


Diagram 01: designed by author

According to Peirce's triadic model, the process of meaning-making begins with the Object—in this case, the Imam Reza Shrine, understood as a culturally embedded urban symbol (*Reality*). This object is mediated through a Representamen, which includes visual forms such as graphic design, photography, or even direct visual impressions experienced by children during visits to the site. These visual stimuli function as signs, which children do not receive passively; rather, they interpret them through their own emotional and cognitive frameworks. The resulting Interpretant emerges in the child's mind as mental imagery and is externally expressed through drawing, transforming shared urban symbols into personalized visual narratives.

The diagram thus illustrates a dynamic process of semiotic transformation, in which children act both as interpreters and choosers, assigning meaning to sacred spaces through a blend of cultural perception and emotional agency. Across the collected drawings, certain recurring elements—such as human figures, natural motifs, and traditional dress—are occasionally visible. However, the golden dome and minaret consistently appear as dominant visual symbols in nearly all representations, reflecting their strong iconic and emotional significance for the children

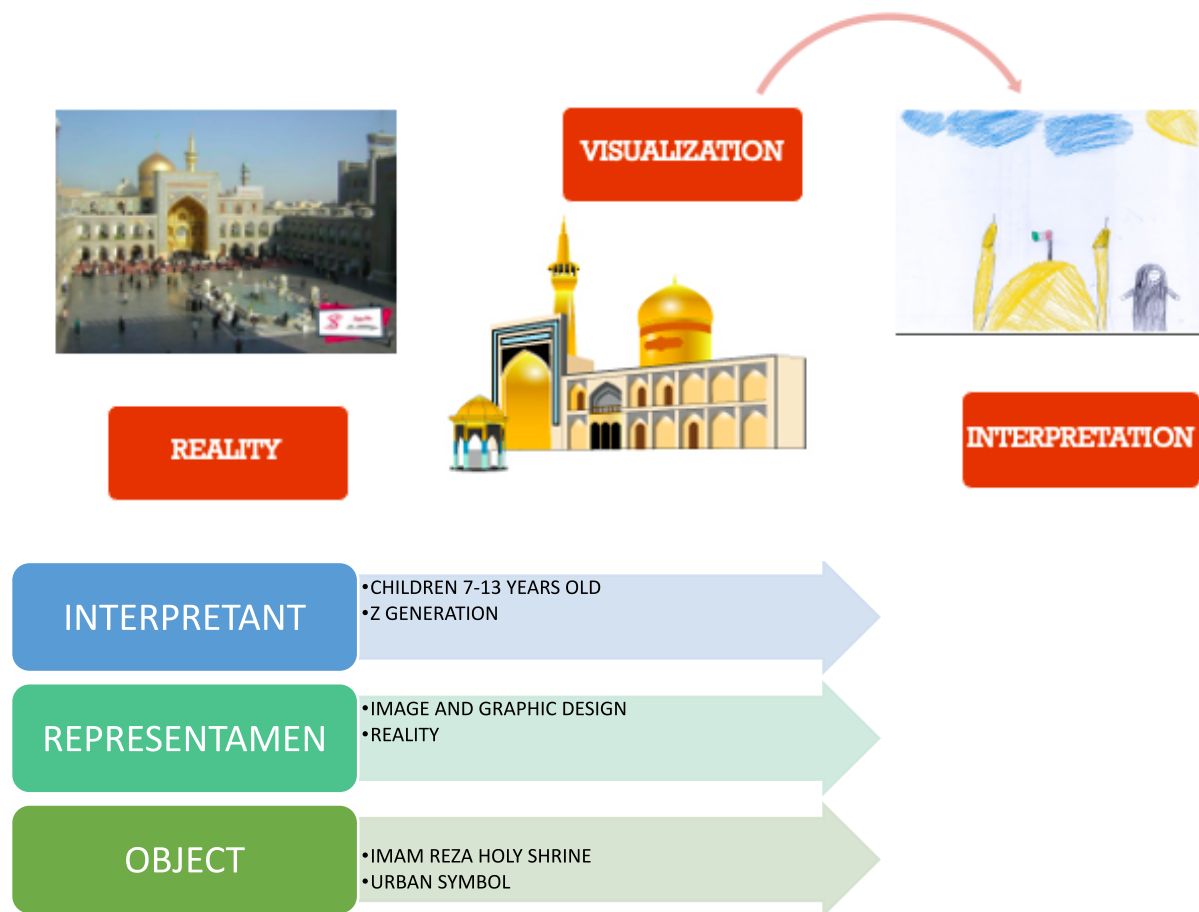


Diagram 02 designed by author

Based on Peirce's triadic model, the Imam Reza Holy Shrine functions as the object, while children's drawings act as the representamen, shaped by both reality and mediated images. The interpretant is caused by the interpretation of the generation z child - which again is constrained by the object, being the imam Raza's holy shrine, the torment by the object whose personal experiences and emotional needs influence how the shrine is visually and symbolically reconstructed. This model shows that meaning emerges not directly from the object, but through the child's active interpretation, blending cultural memory with psychological expression.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology to investigate how children perceive and represent the Imam Reza Holy Shrine as a significant cultural and urban symbol. The study sample consisted of 100 primary school students between the ages of 7 and 13, by Elham Eshraghi Iviri, selected from a variety of educational institutions to ensure diversity in

socio-cultural backgrounds, visual literacy, and familiarity with religious spaces. This age group was intentionally chosen as it represents a developmental phase in which children begin to form symbolic associations and express complex ideas through visual and narrative means.

Each child was given an A4 sheet and a standardized set of coloring materials, then asked to create a drawing of the Imam Reza Holy Shrine based solely on memory, imagination, or prior experience—without the aid of any visual references. This approach aimed to capture authentic internalized representations and minimize external influence. The drawings thus became semiotic expressions shaped by personal experience, cultural exposure, and emotional association.

The research design incorporated a two-phase analysis:

Manual Thematic Analysis:

A team of researchers specializing in semiotics, visual communication, and art education conducted a detailed review of the children's drawings. Each image was coded based on visual elements such as architectural motifs (domes, minarets, calligraphy), color use, spatial composition, symbolic exaggeration, and emotional tone. Particular attention was paid to symbolic simplifications and abstract representations, which were interpreted as reflections of the children's internal value systems and cultural cognition.

AI-Assisted Visual Comparison (Claude AI):

In the second phase, Claude AI—a pattern recognition tool—was employed to digitize and analyze all 100 images. The platform compared visual elements in the children's drawings with real-world imagery of the Imam Reza Shrine, including official architectural graphics, logos, and media-based representations. This computational analysis allowed for pixel-level pattern matching and identification of stylistic trends across the dataset. The use of AI enriched the qualitative insights by introducing a quantitative dimension to the analysis of visual commonalities and deviations.

By combining interpretive thematic analysis with AI-supported image comparison, this methodology provides both depth and breadth. It not only reveals how children visually and emotionally engage with urban cultural symbols but also highlights how their representations align with or diverge from institutional imagery. The methodology also captures generational

shifts in semiotic perception, offering insight into how Generation Z internalizes, transforms, and transmits cultural meaning through art.

This dual-method approach contributes to ongoing discussions in visual semiotics, cultural sustainability, and youth engagement. It positions children not merely as passive recipients of cultural knowledge but as active interpreters and creators of meaning. Furthermore, the integration of digital tools underscores the relevance of interdisciplinary and technology-enhanced methods in contemporary cultural research.

Discussion

This study offers a unique interdisciplinary perspective by integrating Glasser's Choice Theory into the semiotic interpretation of urban cultural symbols, specifically through the lens of children's visual expressions. Glasser's framework posits that all human behavior is purposefully directed toward fulfilling five intrinsic psychological needs: survival, love and belonging, power (achievement), freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1998). Central to this theory is the concept of the "quality world"—a personal mental model of meaningful people, places, and symbols that fulfill these needs.

By applying this theory to the children's drawings of the Imam Reza Shrine, we gain a deeper understanding of not just what elements were depicted, but why certain features were emphasized or omitted. For example, the frequent inclusion of domes, suns, and symbolic colors can be seen as reflecting emotional needs such as joy (fun), spiritual belonging (love), or identity affirmation (power). On the other hand, the omission of architectural complexity or human figures may reflect a preference for simplified emotional resonance, rather than a lack of awareness or skill.

The Imam Reza Shrine, in this context, is not merely a religious structure but a psychologically loaded object situated within each child's quality world. Some children associate it with a sense of sacredness and community (belonging), while others interpret it as a symbol of authority and pride (power), or even as an aesthetic and imaginative space (freedom and fun). These subjective associations guide the children's visual choices, turning the act of drawing into a meaning-making process rooted in internal motivation.

From a semiotic standpoint, Peirce's model offers a valuable framework for interpreting these drawings as signs composed of representamen (the image), object (the shrine), and interpretant (the child's mental understanding). However, when augmented by Glasser's psychological lens, the child as interpreter is no longer merely decoding signs but actively choosing how to engage with and transform them. Meaning, therefore, is not only constructed through cultural exposure and visual familiarity but also through emotional and psychological drives.

Furthermore, children's exposure to stylized imagery in media, digital culture, and educational materials appears to influence the way they reconstruct urban symbols. Their drawings often reflect a blend of mediated representations and personal imagination, suggesting that cultural identity is being shaped as much by visual communication trends as by direct spatial experience. This aligns with the view of visual culture scholars such as Tavin (2005), who argue that young people internalize symbolic meaning through both popular and institutionalized imagery.

The findings also highlight the limitations of traditional architectural or heritage-based communication strategies that rely heavily on static or adult-centric representations of sacred spaces. Children, as emerging citizens, have their own cognitive and emotional frameworks through which they interpret the built environment. Their drawings offer a lens into how cultural identity is dynamically reformulated across generations, signaling the importance of incorporating child-centered perspectives into urban design and heritage education.

By merging semiotic analysis with motivational psychology, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on cultural sustainability and visual communication. It emphasizes that visual meaning-making, particularly in younger populations, is not merely a cognitive decoding of symbols, but a value-driven, emotionally infused act. Understanding these processes is essential for creating urban and educational environments that resonate meaningfully with the next generation.

This theoretical integration enriches the semiotic model you use (particularly the Peircean triad) by suggesting that the *interpreter* in the triad is not a passive decoder but an active agent choosing how to engage with the representamen and object. When considered alongside Thellefsen's pragmatic semiotics, which emphasizes context, cognition, and purpose in sign interpretation, Glasser's Choice Theory offers an added dimension of motivational psychology. It

grounds the interpreter's behavior in human need fulfillment and situates the visual production of cultural symbols as a choice-based act.

The children's drawings of the Imam Reza Holy Shrine illustrate how visual elements function as signs within Peirce's semiotic triad, consisting of the representamen (sign), object, and interpretant. Common features such as the yellow-colored golden dome, flanking minarets, the black Chador¹, and symbolic elements like birds, trees, and the sun serve as representamens. These visual elements refer to the shrine and its surrounding cultural and religious environment, forming a collective object that is deeply rooted in the children's socio-spiritual context. The inclusion of *Panjar-e-Foulad*², a sacred metal lattice window significant to pilgrims, further emphasizes the representational depth and specificity of these drawings.

Through the lens of Peirce's interpretant theory, we can discern multiple layers of meaning construction. The immediate interpretant emerges through the children's recognition of familiar cultural and religious symbols—the yellow dome signals the shrine, and the chador identifies female religious identity. The dynamic interpretant is revealed in the emotional tone of the artworks: many drawings depict joyful children and maternal figures in a harmonious setting, suggesting that the shrine evokes feelings of safety, spiritual warmth, and communal belonging. This emotional response is not only individual but also reflective of a collective internalization of the shrine's role in their daily lives.

The final interpretant consolidates these symbolic representations into a stable cultural meaning shared across the community. These all-girl students in Mashhad—where Imam Reza's shrine stands as a central religious symbol—communicate their inherited values and religious identity through visual storytelling. Their depictions are not mere reproductions of a place, but semiotic constructions that express the shrine as a living, sacred symbol of Iranian Islamic identity, maternal care, and moral guidance. In doing so, their drawings reflect the community's deeper

¹ A chador is a large, cloak-like garment that covers the body and hair, often worn by Muslim women, especially in Iran and other countries with large Shia populations

² The Panjar-e-Foulad (Steel Window) of Imam Reza is one of the most famous and significant windows in the Imam Reza Shrine, located in the Enqelab Courtyard in Mashhad. This window was constructed during the Safavid era and has become a symbol of generosity and the fulfillment of pilgrims' wishes. Many pilgrims turn to Imam Reza at this window to pray for their needs and desires to be fulfilled, often tying a piece of cloth or handkerchief to it as a sign of devotion and hope.

ideological and cultural codes, thereby offering insight into how cultural sustainability is visually communicated and preserved across generations.

By merging semiotic and psychological theories, your study offers a more holistic view of urban symbol interpretation among children, laying the groundwork for future urban design and communication strategies that genuinely resonate with younger generations. (Picture 01-05)



Picture 01: drawing selected from 100 drawing from primary school of mashhad iran 7-13 years old girl drawing by primary school girl (Pic By Elham Eshraghi Ivvari)



Picture 02: drawing selected from 100 drawing from primary school of mashhad iran 7-13 years old girl (Pictures gathering By Elham Eshraghi Ivvari)



Picture 03 drawing selected from 100 drawing from primary school of mashhad iran 7-13 years old girl
(Pictures gathering By Elham Eshraghi Iviri)



picture 04: drawing selected from 100 drawing
from primary school of mashhad iran 7-13 years old girl (Pictures gathering By Elham Eshraghi Iviri)
(Pic By Elham Eshraghi Iviri)



picture 05: drawing selected from 100 drawing from primary school of mashhad iran 7-13 years old
(Pictures gathering By Elham Eshraghi Ivani)

Element	Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3	Picture 4	Picture 5
Central structure	White outline, rectangular with dome	Yellow, large semicircle	Yellow, two rectangles with triangle top	Yellow, rectangle with dome-like top	Yellow and gray, rectangle with dome-like top
Minarets/Towers	Yellow, tall rectangles with pointed tops	Yellow, tall thin triangles	Yellow, tall rectangles	Light blue, tall rectangles with pointed tops	Gray, tall rectangles
Sun	Yellow, circular	Yellow, partial circle	Not present	Orange/Yellow, large circle	Yellow, circle with radiating lines
Sky	Not present	Light blue, irregular patches	Not present	Light blue, small patches	Blue, irregular curved shapes (clouds)
Ground/Base	Colored shapes (blue, pink, green), rounded	Not present	Not present	Gray, horizontal lines forming grid	Not present
Additional elements	Not present	Dark gray figure, rectangular	Green grid with small circle, multicolored triangle base for figure	Green and brown tree (oval on stick), faint gray figures	Blue and orange stick figures, blue circular shapes (flowers)
Text/Scribbles	Not present	Not present	Black irregular lines	Not present	Pink curved lines (Arabic script)
Background	White (paper color)	White (paper color)	White (paper color)	White (paper color)	White (paper color)

Table 01: Object: analyze drawing elements inside children painting Object

Element	Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3	Picture 4	Picture 5
Central structure	White outline, domed	Yellow dome	Yellow structure with triangle top	Yellow building with dome	Yellow/gray building with dome
Minarets	Yellow, tall	Yellow, tall	Yellow, tall	Blue, tall	Gray, tall
Sky elements	None	Blue sky, yellow sun	None	Blue sky, yellow sun	Blue clouds, yellow sun
Ground/Base	Colored shapes	None	Green grid	Gray grid	None

Additional elements	None	Dark figure	Multicolored figure	Tree, stick figures	Stick figures, flowers
Text	None	None	Black scribbles	None	Arabic script

Aspect	Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3	Picture 4	Picture 5
Focal point	Essential mosque features	Dome centrality	Geometric abstraction	Mosque in nature	Mosque in community
Cultural context	Basic Islamic architecture	Islamic architecture with human scale	Possible educational setting	Natural and built environment	Linguistic and social context
Emotional tone	Neutral, informative	Possibly reverent	Playful, diverse	Harmonious, balanced	Joyful, communal
Symbolism	Minimalist representation	Human-divine relationship	Structure and diversity	Integration with nature	Language and social interaction
Child's understanding	Basic structural recognition	Scale and importance	Abstract concepts of space	Environmental context	Cultural and social aspects

Table 03: Interpretant (The sense made of the sign) The children's drawings serve as visual signs that represent their understanding of the Imam Reza Shrine. The **immediate interpretant** appears in their

recognition of key physical elements such as the golden dome and black chador, which signify religious identity. The **dynamic interpretant** reflects emotional associations like safety, spirituality, and familial warmth conveyed through joyful scenes and sacred imagery. Ultimately, the **final interpretant** reveals a shared cultural meaning, where the shrine is understood not just as a physical structure but as a deeply rooted symbol of faith, memory, and identity within the girls' socio-cultural world.

Aspect	Image 1 (Stylized)	Image 2 (Photograph)	Image 3 (Child's Drawing)
Form	Geometric, stylized	Detailed, realistic	Simple, childlike
Color	Gold/yellow dominant	Gold, blue, white	Yellow, blue
Nature	Abstract, none	Sky visible	Sky and sun represented
Human	None present	Many small figures	One stick figure

Table 04: compare between real photos and graphic and children's painting adapted to diagram 02

This table compares three visual representations of the Imam Reza Shrine—a stylized image, a photograph, and a child's drawing—based on four key visual aspects: form, color, nature, and human presence. From a Peircean semiotic perspective, each image functions as a different representamen of the same object (the shrine), but each produces a distinct interpretant depending on its form, medium, and audience.

The stylized image presents a geometric and abstract form, with a dominant gold/yellow color, emphasizing iconicity and symbolic clarity. It omits nature and human presence, turning the shrine into a

static and idealized religious icon. The photograph, on the other hand, offers a realistic and detailed view, incorporating gold, blue, and white, as well as sky and many human figures. This version reflects the shrine's lived, social, and environmental context, making it a more indexical sign connected to real experience.

In contrast, the child's drawing reduces complexity to simple, childlike forms, focusing on yellow and blue, and includes symbolic elements like a sun and sky, along with a single stick figure. This simplified composition highlights how children select emotionally salient features—such as the golden dome and minaret—to recreate symbolic meaning through their internalized emotional frameworks. Drawing from Glasser's Choice Theory, such selections reflect children's core needs: the shrine's bright colors and heavenly features may address belonging, power, or freedom, while omission of crowds may reflect a preference for personal, emotional resonance over social detail.

Overall, the comparison illustrates how meaning is reconstructed differently across media: from symbolic idealization (stylized), to documentary realism (photograph), to emotional reinterpretation (child's drawing)—each revealing different dimensions of how urban religious symbols are seen, simplified, and reimagined by younger generations.

Conclusion

This study reveals how children from Generation Z perceive and represent urban cultural symbols through a semiotic and psychological lens. By analyzing 100 drawings of the Imam Reza Holy Shrine, the research demonstrates that children's visual expressions are not merely artistic renderings but meaningful choices rooted in both cultural memory and psychological need. Their interpretations align in some aspects with formal visual representations, such as domes and minarets, yet frequently diverge through the omission or transformation of human figures, environmental details, and emotional elements. (Table 05)

These visual simplifications and adaptations mirror the symbolic reduction seen in graphic design, indicating how mediated representations influence children's internal imagery. However, the frequent inclusion of emotionally charged elements—like suns, trees, and bright colors—signals the children's intuitive engagement with the shrine as more than just a physical space. Instead, the shrine emerges in their drawings as a personalized, emotionally resonant icon within their “quality world,” shaped by their need for belonging, identity, joy, and connection.

By integrating Peircean semiotics with Glasser's Choice Theory, this study highlights the active role of children as meaning-makers who reinterpret and emotionally internalize cultural symbols. It underscores that the child's visual language is both culturally informed and psychologically driven, offering a rich perspective on how symbolic heritage is understood and transmitted across generations. (diagram 03)

The findings have important implications for designers, educators, and urban planners. If cultural sustainability is to be meaningfully achieved, visual communication must resonate with the lived experiences and emotional worlds of young people. Children are not passive recipients of culture—they are active interpreters who will shape the future identity of cities. Incorporating their perspectives into heritage communication and urban design is not just beneficial—it is essential. (Table 05 element frequency in 100 children's drawing)

Element Category	Element	Number of Drawings
Form	Dome	95
	Minarets	88
	Rectangular base	92
Color	Yellow (building)	75
	Blue (sky/elements)	60
	Green (nature/elements)	40
	Other colors	55
Human	Stick figures	45
	Detailed figures	15
Nature	Sun	70

	Clouds	50
	Trees	30
	Flowers	25
Text	Arabic script	20
	Other text/scribbles	35

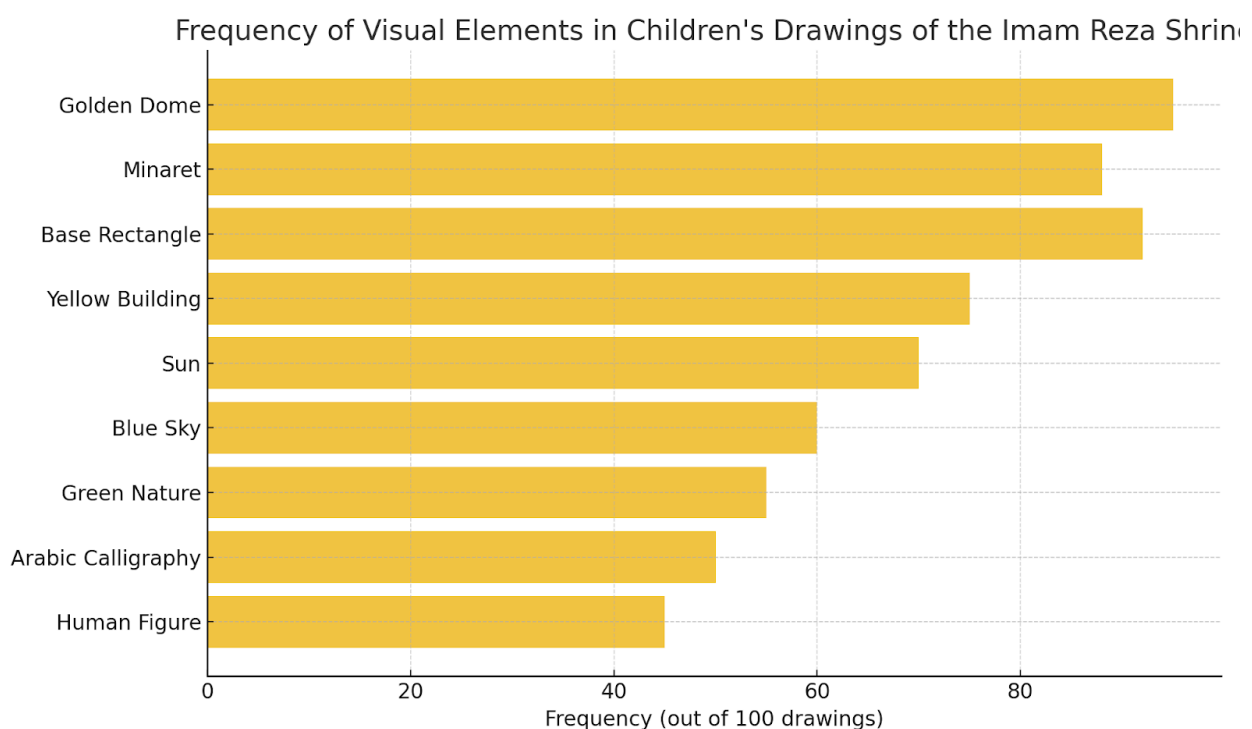


Diagram 03: element frequency in 100 children's drawing

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