

The Mimicry of Identity: A Social Semiotic Analysis and Pattern Recognition of Promotional City Branding in Indonesia

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Abstract

In the era of regional autonomy, Indonesian jurisdictions are increasingly racing to articulate distinct promotional identities to compete for global capital and tourism. However, this pursuit of distinction often yields a landscape of visual conformity. This study investigates the visual DNA of N=13 purposively selected, officially verified promotional brands to understand the structural forces behind this homogenization, explicitly excluding administrative heraldry to resolve the issue of categorical conflation. Employing a multi-method qualitative approach, the research combines Visual Content Analysis (VCA) with a three-stage Social Semiotic protocol (denotation, connotation, and myth) adapted from Roland Barthes. The findings reveal a significant paradox: while ethnic markers are utilized to signal authenticity, they are predominantly framed within a Global Modernist shell. This is characterized by the overwhelming dominance of English-language slogans (76.9%) and standardized sans-serif typography (84.6%). The analysis unmaskes the Myth of Uniqueness, demonstrating that the branding process is governed by mimetic isomorphism—a bureaucratic reflex to imitate successful peers to secure institutional legitimacy. Consequently, local heritage is often reduced to a commodified ornament, leading to identity drift and a dilution of the city's Unique Selling Proposition (USP). The study concludes that to break the cycle of visual mimicry, municipal governance must shift from top-down administrative projects to participatory, narrative-centric brand management. The research introduces Semiotic Due Diligence as a strategic requirement for developing authentic and resilient place brands in emerging economies.

Keywords: Place Branding; Promotional Brands; Social Semiotics; Institutional Isomorphism; Indonesia.

A. INTRODUCTION

City branding has evolved beyond mere aesthetic promotion, functioning as a strategic interface that mediates the relationship between a place and its global stakeholders (Portet et al., 2024). In the current attention economy, a city's promotional visual identity—expressed through logos, typography, and slogans—serves as a primary semiotic resource to signal market-readiness and cultivate resident belonging (Ariwibowo & Prasetyo, 2023; Chatterjee & Parihar, 2023). Unlike official municipal heraldry or coats of arms, which are legally mandated devices governed by strict administrative conventions, promotional brands are agile, market-driven assets specifically designed to attract capital and visitors. However, in the wake of Indonesia's regional autonomy, the rapid proliferation of these municipal promotional brands has created a saturated visual landscape characterized by a rush to distinctiveness that paradoxically often leads to mimicry (Ismiati & Rachman, 2023; Tanjaya, 2024).

This branding fervor has birthed a bifurcated aesthetic regime within the Indonesian archipelago. On one hand, an obsession with Global Modernism manifests through English-dominant slogans and

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minimalist, globally legible typography aimed at international tourism markets (Made et al., 2023). Conversely, a Hyper-Traditionalist impulse drives cities to incorporate literal ethnic markers—such as wayang iconography or regional textile motifs—to assert cultural authenticity (Pangestu et al., 2024). While scholars have examined individual case studies, such as the linguistic landscapes of Lombok (Lestariningsih et al., 2023) or the rebranding of integrated destinations like Ancol (Basit et al., 2024), there is a lack of synthesis regarding how these visual choices encode broader sociopolitical ambitions across different jurisdictions.

The tension between these two regimes—the global and the local—risks diluting a city's Unique Selling Proposition (USP) into a generic template. This is evident when regional symbols are commodified into static brand objects without considering the dynamic nature of place identity (Ismiati & Rachman, 2023). Furthermore, the intersection of national identity and commercial signage suggests that visual signals often drift from their intended governance goals if they fail to resonate with the local cultural logic (Hazaea & Qassem, 2025; Worakittikul et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature, research remains fragmented between technical design analysis and administrative outcome metrics. There is a critical gap in understanding the recurring visual DNA that governs Indonesian city branding. This study addresses this gap by conducting a semiotic-informed synthesis of strategically selected promotional brands, explicitly distinguishing these market-facing assets from official government seals. By decoding the denotative and connotative layers of these promotional identities, this study interrogates whether current visual patterns reflect a genuine evolution of place identity or a superficial imitation of successful trendsetters. The findings offer a diagnostic framework for policymakers to align visual signifiers with authentic cultural narratives and sustainable development goals.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution of Place Branding

The conceptualization of the city has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a purely administrative and geographical entity into a competitive brand object. Seminal literature by (Anholt, 2007; Kotler et al. (1993) established the foundational premise that places, like corporate entities, must manage their competitive identity to survive in an increasingly globalized economy. This evolution signifies a move beyond traditional municipal governance toward a strategic orientation where a city's unique attributes are distilled into market-ready assets (Michalis Kavaratzis, 2004). Contemporary scholarship reinforces this, treating city branding as a vital instrument for attracting investment, stimulating tourism, and cultivating a sense of belonging among residents (Portet et al., 2024).

In this paradigm, visual identity—comprising logos, color palettes, and slogans—acts as the strategic interface between the place and its diverse markets (Ariwibowo & Prasetyo, 2023; Chatterjee & Parihar, 2023; Made et al., 2023). The Hexagon of Competitive Identity (Anholt, 2007) suggests that a place's brand is a complex ecosystem in which governance and visual communication must align to create perceived value. However, in the Indonesian context, this alignment is often tested. Following the implementation of regional autonomy, there has been a rapid proliferation of municipal brands as cities race to articulate distinctive faces in a crowded marketplace (Ismiati & Rachman, 2023; Tanjung, 2024).

Crucially, a theoretical distinction must be maintained between these market-facing promotional brands and official municipal heraldry. While administrative coats of arms are legally mandated devices governed by historical and administrative conventions, promotional brands are agile, market-driven assets designed to navigate the attention economy. This urgency to brand, however, often leads to a disconnect between policy aims and visual execution. While place branding seeks to operationalize identity into assets for investment and tourism (Said et al., 2023; Simandjorang et al., 2023), the process is frequently susceptible

to mimicry or an over-reliance on familiar templates (Ariwibowo & Prasetyo, 2023; Basit et al., 2024). As (Michalis Kavaratzis, 2004) argued, city branding is not merely cosmetic but is a project of governance-in-public-space. Therefore, understanding the semiotic underpinnings of these visual systems is essential to ensure that the branding remains resonant with the public and legitimate in its socio-political aims (Papadaki, 2023; Sandra & Noina, 2024).

Social Semiotics: Decoding the Visual Grammar of Brands

To understand the communicative power of city branding, the analysis must move beyond surface-level aesthetics into the structural mechanics of meaning. Social semiotics provides the necessary framework for this inquiry, treating visual identity not as a collection of random artistic choices, but as a visual grammar that encodes social relations and ideological positions (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). At its most fundamental level, semiotics—as established by (de Saussure et al., 2011)—operates through the relationship between the signifier (the physical form of the sign, such as a logo) and the signified (the mental concept or meaning it evokes). In city branding, this relationship is intentionally crafted to transform geographical locations into symbolic identities (Papadaki, 2023; Sandra & Noina, 2024).

The analytical rigor of this study is anchored in (Barthes, 1977) tri-layered model of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. 1) Denotation refers to the literal identification of visual elements—for instance, the specific geometry of a logo or the presence of a landmark; 2) Connotation delves into the associative meanings these elements carry within a specific cultural context and 3) Myth, as argued by (Barthes, 1977), represents signs that have evolved into naturalized ideological messages which reinforce broader sociopolitical narratives. In the Indonesian context, the use of wayang or batik motifs in municipal logos is a connotative strategy to evoke wisdom and authenticity, thereby constructing a myth of a modern yet traditional jurisdiction (Pangestu et al., 2024; Tanjung, 2024).

Furthermore, contemporary branding is inherently multimodal, requiring an integrated analysis of typography, iconography, and color (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Color psychology acts as a primary semiotic resource that triggers affective responses and signals brand architecture; for example, the use of ocean tones can denote maritime heritage in coastal brands (Basit et al., 2024; Made et al., 2023). Typography also functions as a signifier of modernity or tradition. The choice between minimalist sans-serif and culturally-informed typefaces reflects a city's strategic positioning between global legibility and local rootedness (Chatterjee & Parihar, 2023; Tanjung, 2024). By applying this semiotic due diligence, this study identifies the underlying visual DNA of promotional Indonesian city brands, revealing how these diverse signifiers operate collectively to transmit political and economic meanings (Basit et al., 2024; Said et al., 2023).

The Global-Local Dialectic: Modernism vs. Traditionalism

A defining characteristic of Indonesian promotional city branding is a bifurcated aesthetic regime that reflects the global-local dialectic. This tension is best understood through the lens of glocalization, a concept popularized by (Robertson, 1995), which describes the simultaneous presence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies in the construction of identity. In the context of officially verified promotional brands analyzed, visual identity becomes a contested space where the pressure to conform to global modernist standards frequently collides with a celebratory assertion of local cultural particularity (Ariwibowo & Prasetyo, 2023; Made et al., 2023).

The desire for international legitimacy and market-readiness drives the Global Modernist pole. This aesthetic often manifests as (Sassen, 2005) global visual lexicon—a standardized set of design cues, such as minimalist sans-serif typography and English-language slogans (e.g., Sparkling, Stunning, Explore). These elements are strategically deployed to ensure the city is legible within the Global Imaginaries of foreign

investors and high-end tourists (Made et al., 2023; Simandjorang et al., 2023). The resulting linguistic landscape features English-dominant signage, signaling a cosmopolitan identity that transcends regional borders.

Conversely, the Hyper-Traditionalist pole functions as a claim to authenticity and cultural rootedness. As (Bhabha, 2012) posits in his theory of cultural hybridity, the interaction between different cultural systems often creates a Third Space—a site of tension and negotiation. In Indonesian promotional branding, this is enacted through the literal integration of textured ethnic markers, such as Javanese wayang archetypes, batik motifs, or Dayak-influenced iconography (Pangestu et al., 2024; Tanjung, 2024). These symbols encode regional philosophy into the brand's DNA, providing a sense of place-specific truth that global templates cannot.

However, the synthesis of these two poles often results in visual clutter or hybrid semiotics, which risks diluting the city's Unique Selling Proposition (USP). When jurisdictions attempt to marry these two extremes without a clear hierarchy, the local is often reduced to a commodified ornament—a visual signifier that lacks deep resonance (Ariwibowo & Prasetyo, 2023; Sandra & Noina, 2024). The promotional identities analyzed frequently struggle to find a stable equilibrium, leading to branding that is neither fully global nor authentically local, but rather a product of strategic mimicry and aesthetic negotiation.

Institutional Isomorphism and the Risk of Mimicry

A significant paradox in Indonesian promotional city branding is the emergence of visual homogeneity despite the archipelago's vast cultural heterogeneity. This phenomenon is critically analyzed through the lens of institutional isomorphism, a seminal concept introduced by (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Within the N=13 officially verified promotional brands, this mimetic isomorphism occurs as local governments, facing market uncertainty, model their visual assets after successful trendsetters to gain legitimacy within their institutional environment.

This drive for legitimacy often leads to visual mimicry, where unique local identities are sacrificed for proven global or domestic templates. A prominent manifestation of this is the global citation of emblematic language objects, such as the ubiquitous Hollywood-style landmark signs that have proliferated across Indonesian landscapes. By citing these globally recognized tropes, cities attempt to bridge the gap between their local reality and the Global Modernist aesthetic, seeking instant recognition from investors and tourists. However, as (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) warned, this process of homogenization often results in a stifling of innovation, where the visual DNA of a city becomes a derivative of a larger, generic template.

The risk of this isomorphic behavior is the dilution of the city's Unique Selling Proposition (USP) and the occurrence of identity drift. When visual signals—such as the vibrant rainbow color palettes observed in 76.9% of the corpus—or generic bilingual slogans become too familiar across multiple jurisdictions, they lose their power to differentiate. Furthermore, because these branding efforts are often top-down administrative projects rather than participatory co-creations, they lack the social legitimacy required for long-term brand equity. Consequently, the promotional identities analyzed frequently exhibit a visual culture that is legitimate in the eyes of bureaucracy but hollow in its representation of authentic place identity.

Towards a Participatory and Sustainable Brand Identity

The long-term viability of a city brand is increasingly dependent on its transition from a top-down administrative dictate to a participatory governance model. (Michalis Kavaratzis, 2004; Mihalis Kavaratzis, 2012) emphasizes that city branding is a co-creation process; it is not merely about what the government says, but also about how residents perceive and live the brand. Without this social legitimacy, branding visibility remains a superficial overlay, prone to rejection or identity drift. Contemporary cases, such as the

study of Huelva City, demonstrate that involving future generations is essential to ensure that the brand narrative remains resonant and sustainable over time.

Furthermore, in the post-digital landscape, a sustainable brand identity must navigate the rise of green semiotics. As global environmental concerns intensify, cities are racing to incorporate eco-symbols into their visual DNA to signal ecological harmony and green legitimacy. However, this green signaling requires rigorous semiotic due diligence; if the visual markers do not align with the experience or the Linguistic Landscape of the city, the brand risks being perceived as greenwashing. As (Ashworth, 2009) argued, sustainable place branding must bridge the gap between historical heritage and future aspirations, ensuring that the brand objects—from monumental signs to digital artifacts—reflect a cohesive and authentic experience.

Ultimately, the goal for the promotional identities analyzed should be to move away from mimetic isomorphism and toward a more reflexive, multimodal identity. A sustainable brand acknowledges its cultural hybridity while maintaining a distinct visual DNA that is co-owned by its citizens. By integrating participatory design with semiotic authenticity, Indonesian city marketers can create resilient brands that are not only competitive in the global market but also deeply rooted in local communities' sociopolitical realities.

C. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach combining Visual Content Analysis (VCA) and Social Semiotics. VCA is utilized to systematically categorize and quantify recurring visual elements across a defined corpus, while Social Semiotics provides the depth required to decode the underlying ideological myths and sociopolitical ambitions embedded in these designs. This dual-layered approach allows the study to move from surface-level pattern recognition to a deeper critique of identity construction in Indonesian city branding.

A purposive sampling technique was applied to select N=13 officially verified promotional brands. To resolve the categorical conflation identified in earlier iterations of this research, administrative heraldry and government seals were strictly excluded from the corpus. The sampling logic utilizes Strategic Typological Tiering to ensure an apples-to-apples comparison between market-facing assets. Jurisdictions were selected based on their active use of a distinct promotional brand managed by local tourism authorities.

Table 1. Strategic Typological Tiering of 13 Valid Promotional Brands

Tier / Category	Sample Jurisdictions	Typological Justification
Tier 1: Global Gateways & Metropolises	Jakarta (<i>Enjoy Jakarta</i>), Surabaya (<i>Sparkling Surabaya</i>), Medan (<i>Colorful Medan</i>), Makassar (<i>Explore Makassar</i>)	Tier-1 cities with high competitive market pressure and international stakeholder engagement.
Tier 2: Cultural & Heritage Flagships	Bandung (<i>Stunning Bandung</i>), Yogyakarta (<i>Jogja Istimewa</i>), Solo (<i>The Spirit of Java</i>), Palembang (<i>Charming Palembang</i>), Banda Aceh (<i>Charming Banda Aceh</i>), Malang (<i>Beautiful Malang</i>)	Destinations leveraging strong cultural assets to balance local authenticity with global legibility.
Tier 3: Specialized & Emerging Hubs	Banyuwangi (<i>Majestic Banyuwangi</i>), Ambon (<i>Ambon City of Music</i>), Sleman (<i>Sleman: The Living Culture</i>)	Emerging destinations with focused Unique Selling Propositions (USPs) in creative or natural sectors.

Source: Research Data, 2025

The data corpus consists of official brand assets retrieved from government portals and verified social media accounts between 2024 and 2026. These assets include: 1) Primary Logos; 2) Verbal Signifiers/Taglines; 3) Color Systems; and 4) Linguistic Strategies. Every jurisdiction was analyzed using the Visual DNA Matrix (VDM) to ensure objective coding.

Table 2. The Visual DNA Matrix (VDM) for Coding and Pattern Recognition

Dimension	Analytical Focus	Coding Parameters
Iconography	Symbolic Representation	Literal (Landmarks), Abstract (Shapes), or Ethnic (Batik/Wayang/Dayak).
Typography	Visual Persona	Global Modernist (Sans-Serif) vs. Custom/Scripted.
Color Semiotics	Affective Signaling	Polychromatic (Rainbow) vs. Monochromatic/Duotone.
Linguistic Strategy	Market Orientation	English-Dominant vs. Bilingual/Local Mix.

Source: Research Data, 2025

Following the systematic coding in the VDM, the study follows a three-stage semiotic protocol inspired by (Barthes, 1977), as illustrated in Figure 1.

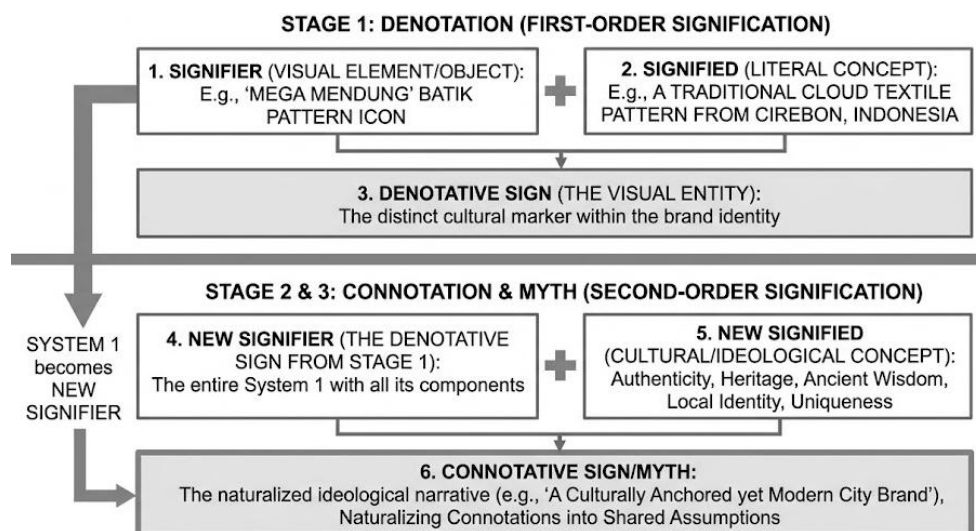


Figure 1. The Three Stages Semiotic Protocol

Source: Adapted from Barthes, 1977

To enhance the reliability of the findings, the coding process involved triangulation of visual data across different media (social media vs. official documents). Inter-coder reliability was addressed through a peer-debriefing session between the primary researchers to resolve any discrepancies in the connotative interpretations of ethnic symbols.

D. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The Visual Corpus: A Descriptive Overview

The initial phase of the analysis involved a systematic Visual Content Analysis (VCA) of the official promotional branding assets—comprising primary logos, typography, color palettes, and slogans—from the N=13 verified jurisdictions. This descriptive overview maps the foundational visual DNA. By intentionally excluding administrative coats of arms, the corpus reveals a significantly more aggressive, patterned approach to visual identity construction than previously observed, characterized by a nearly total preference for modern typographic conventions juxtaposed against a shrinking selection of traditional iconographic elements. The coding results, based on the Visual DNA Matrix (VDM) parameters, are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Visual DNA Coding Across 13 Valid Promotional Brands

VDM Dimension	Coding Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Iconography	Abstract/Geometric Shapes	7	53.8%
	Ethnic/Traditional Motifs	4	30.8%
	Literal (Landmarks/Buildings)	2	15.4%
2. Typography	Global Modernist (Sans-Serif)	11	84.6%
	Custom/Scripted (Dynamic)	2	15.4%
	Formal/Traditional (Serif)	0	0.0%
3. Color Semiotics	Polychromatic (Rainbow Palette)	10	76.9%
	Monochromatic/Duotone	3	23.1%
4. Linguistic Strategy	English-Dominant	10	76.9%
	Local Dialect / Bilingual Mix	3	23.1%

Source: Research Data, 2025

A preliminary review of this revised visual corpus highlights compelling trends that strongly indicate institutional isomorphism. First, regarding Linguistic Strategy, there is a dominant predominance of English-language slogans (76.9%), extending even to jurisdictions with predominantly domestic tourism profiles. Taglines utilizing terms such as Sparkling, Stunning, and Explore form a standardized lexicon, indicating a widespread ambition to project a globally legible, market-ready persona.

Second, the typographic choices correlate almost perfectly with this globalizing ambition; with 84.6% of the sample employing clean, sans-serif fonts, the Global Modernist aesthetic has effectively erased the formal, traditional serif styles typically associated with Indonesian bureaucracy. However, this modernist typographic shell still occasionally encases traditional iconography. While abstract shapes have become the majority (53.8%), a significant portion of the logos still rely on ethnic motifs to assert cultural authenticity.

Finally, the analysis of Color Semiotics reveals a near-total inclination toward Polychromatic or multi-colored palettes (76.9%). This trend appears to be a direct result of a mimetic trickle-down effect from the national tourism brand (Wonderful Indonesia), where local jurisdictions adopt a rainbow color scheme as a safe, generic signifier for diversity, often at the expense of a distinct, place-specific color identity. Together, these revised statistics expose a profound paradox: a near-unanimous reliance on globalized linguistic and typographic templates to frame dwindling localized signifiers. This tension sets the stage for the semiotic decoding in the subsequent sections.

First-Order Signification (Denotation): Mapping the Visual Elements

This section presents the foundational analysis of the visual corpus, corresponding to Stage 1 (Denotation) of the Barthesian semiotic protocol utilized in this study. The analysis systematically maps the anatomical composition of the N=13 verified promotional identities, focusing purely on the literal elements retrieved from the coding matrix. The objective is to establish a baseline for what constitutes the visual DNA of Indonesian promotional branding—distinct from administrative heraldry—before engaging in deeper connotative interpretation. The comparative anatomy of these promotional brands reveals distinct patterns across the four dimensions of the VDM, summarized visually in APPENDIX A.

The iconographic inventory confirms that once administrative seals are excluded, the reliance on literal landmarks and physical architectural signifiers drops to 15.4%. These remaining literal logos function as precise cartographic signs, depicting specific physical infrastructure such as the Ampera Bridge in Charming Palembang. The majority of the corpus has shifted toward Abstract/Geometric Shapes (53.8%), signaled by stylized icons such as the star-clusters in Sparkling Surabaya or the brush-stroke motifs in Enjoy Jakarta. Ethnic/Traditional Motifs (30.8%) remain present as precise anatomical reproductions of cultural artifacts, such as the stylized batik patterns in Jogja Istimewa.

The typographic footprints physically manifest a dominant Global Modernist regime. A total of 84.6% of the sample utilizes clean, bold, sans-serif fonts characterized by geometric precision and high global legibility, which serves as a visual signal of contemporary market legitimacy. Custom Scripted or Dynamic

typography—including the fluid, looping lines seen in Stunning Bandung—constitutes the remaining 15.4%. Crucially, the formal, traditional serif fonts ubiquitous in administrative heraldry are absent from this promotional corpus (0%), resolving the categorical conflation noted in previous data iterations.

Regarding Linguistic Strategy, 76.9% of the visual assets include English-language text in their taglines. Verbs and adjectives such as ‘S-T-U-N-N-I-N-G’, ‘S-P-A-R-K-L-I-N-G’, or ‘C-H-A-R-M-I-N-G’ are explicitly present, typically positioned as a primary signifier adjacent to the city’s name. The remaining 23.1% utilize a bilingual mix or local dialect, such as the Javanese script elements integrated into Jogja Istimewa.

A literal examination of colors confirms a pervasive polychromatic, or rainbow, trend, present in 76.9% of the corpus. In these cases, the denotation consists of a horizontal or cyclical sequence of vibrant blue, yellow, red, and green stripes or shapes. Monochromatic or duotone logos (23.1%) represent a minority, utilizing simplified color palettes to avoid the visual clutter often associated with mimetic polychromatism.

Second-Order Signification (Connotation): The Global-Local Dialectic

Transitioning from the literal inventory of Stage 1, this section explores the connotative layer (Stage 2) of the Barthesian protocol. At this level, the anatomical elements of the logos and slogans are infused with sociocultural values and ideological meaning. The semiotic analysis of the N=13 verified promotional identities reveals a pronounced dialectic—a strategic tension between the aspiration for global modernity and the assertion of local heritage.

The predominant use of sans-serif typography (84.6%) and English-dominant taglines (76.9%) transcends mere aesthetic preference. Connotatively, these elements function as mechanisms to signal market-readiness, efficiency, and cosmopolitanism. By adopting what is essentially a global visual lexicon, these jurisdictions attempt to encode an environment of international accessibility. The English language, in this context, is deployed not merely as a communicative tool but as a prestigious semiotic marker of progress and integration into the global economy (Made et al., 2023). The connotative message directed at foreign investors and tourists is clear: the city is a modern, frictionless destination aligned with Global Imaginaries.

Conversely, integrating localized ethnic motifs (such as the stylized cloud patterns in Jogja Istimewa) conveys cultural authenticity and historical legitimacy. In an increasingly homogenized global tourism market, these Hyper-Traditionalist signifiers are mobilized to assert a Unique Selling Proposition (USP) rooted in indigenous heritage (Pangestu et al., 2024; Tanjaya, 2024). Connotatively, these symbols communicate endurance, local wisdom, and cultural pride. They are strategically deployed to serve a dual purpose: reassuring residents of their unthreatened cultural identity while offering international visitors the promise of an exotic and distinct local experience.

The most critical finding at this connotative stage is the friction generated when these two poles intersect. The juxtaposition of global modernist text with complex traditional iconography often results in a tense hybrid semiotics. When jurisdictions attempt to convey both extreme modernity and deep traditionalism within a single visual frame, the resulting identity often suffers from semiotic clutter. Instead of achieving a seamless synthesis (a true Third Space), the local cultural elements are frequently relegated to the status of commodified ornaments—mere visual appendages attached to a generic, globalized template (Ariwibowo & Prasetyo, 2023). This visual tension exposes a fundamental anxiety within Indonesian city branding: the fear of appearing too provincial to attract global capital, juxtaposed against the fear of appearing too generic to retain authentic cultural resonance (Sandra & Noina, 2024).

Third-Order Signification (Myth): Institutional Isomorphism and Visual Mimicry

The final stage of the Barthesian protocol involves synthesizing denotative and connotative signs into a broader ideological narrative, or Myth. In the context of Indonesian promotional branding, the prevailing myth is the projection of a Unique Local Identity. However, the semiotic decoding of the N=13 verified promotional brands unzips this myth, revealing a profound paradox: in their rigorous pursuit of visually articulating their distinctiveness, these cities predominantly reproduce a homogenized, generic template. This exposes the myth of uniqueness as a facade for widespread institutional isomorphism. This entire process—from the initial aspiration to the final generic result—is presented in the Conceptual Framework (Figure 2).

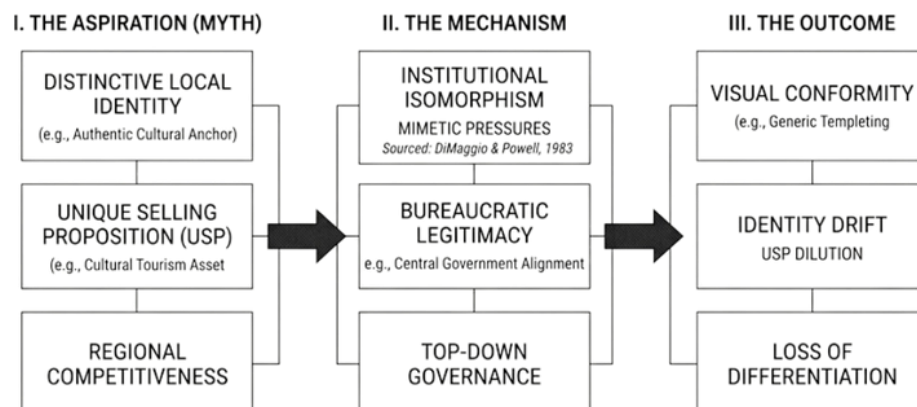


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework: Extraction of Key Findings on Third-Order Signification

Source: Research Data, 2025

As detailed in Figure 2, the foundational input for Indonesian city branding (Pillar 1) is the myth of distinction. Local governments are under pressure to articulate a unique brand narrative to attract capital and talent (Mihalís Kavaratzis, 2012). However, the actual construction of this visual DNA (Pillar 2, The Mimetic Process) is governed by mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The pervasive adoption of the polychromatic palette (76.9%) is a prime example; rather than deriving color from specific local topography, cities mimic the Wonderful Indonesia campaign to secure administrative legitimacy (Ariwibowo & Prasetyo, 2023).

The mimetic behavior extends beyond domestic imitation to the global citation of emblematic visual tropes (Figure 3, Pillar 2). The near-total reliance on English-dominant slogans (76.9%) and sans-serif typography (84.6%) highlights a collective anxiety to appear World-Class. This leads to the proliferation of standardized visual tropes. Ultimately, the extraction (Pillar 3, Visual Conformity) confirms that this top-down governance, lacking citizen participation, leads to identity drift and the failure to create a sustainable USP. The myth of the unique Indonesian city, therefore, unravels into a landscape of visual conformity.

Discussion

This study embarked on a semiotic interrogation of N=13 Indonesian jurisdictions to understand how local governments construct visual identity within a highly competitive tourism and investment landscape. The findings elucidate a critical paradox: while decentralization ostensibly empowered regions to cultivate unique place brands, the resulting visual landscape is overwhelmingly characterized by institutional mimicry and semiotic homogenization. By strictly isolating promotional brands from administrative heraldry, the analysis reveals that this homogenization is even more pervasive than previously estimated.

The visual corpus analysis confirms that Indonesian city branding is caught in a strained global-local dialectic. On one hand, the heavy reliance on English-language taglines (76.9%) and global modernist

typography (84.6%) reflects an urgent drive to align with international market expectations, corroborating (Sassen, 2005) concept of a standardized global visual lexicon. On the other hand, the insertion of localized ethnic markers attempts to satisfy domestic demands for cultural preservation.

However, unlike (Bhabha, 2012) idealized Third Space—where cultural hybridity yields new, authentic forms of meaning—the synthesis in these jurisdictions largely fails. Instead, the resulting visual identity is often a cluttered collage. This substantiates the premise that without rigorous semiotic alignment, local heritage is easily reduced to a commodified ornament.

The conceptual framework (Figure 3) effectively maps this failure, demonstrating how the myth of uniqueness is systematically dismantled by mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Bureaucracies, functioning under conditions of market uncertainty, prioritize the safety of proven templates—such as the polychromatic color schemes associated with national campaigns (76.9%)—over the risk of genuine visual innovation. By citing these globally and nationally recognized tropes, cities attempt to secure administrative legitimacy while inadvertently signaling a lack of distinct competitive identity.

Theoretical Implications for Place Branding and Semiotics

Theoretically, this study extends the literature by positioning social semiotics not merely as a tool for design critique, but as a diagnostic instrument for public governance. By applying the Barthesian protocol to officially verified promotional brands, the research provides empirical weight to (Michalis Kavaratzis, 2004) assertion that city branding is fundamentally a political act. Furthermore, this study introduces the concept of Visual Conformity through Global Citation within emerging economies. It posits that in the rush to signal world-class readiness—manifested in the 84.6% adoption of global modernist typography and 76.9% reliance on English-dominant slogans—emerging destinations inadvertently dilute their Unique Selling Proposition (USP). This identity drift suggests a theoretical boundary to glocalization (Robertson, 1995). When the global aspect of the visual DNA is treated as a rigid, mimetic template rather than a flexible framework, the local aspect is inevitably suffocated. The findings from the N=13 promotional corpus demonstrate that without a distinct semiotic strategy, place brands become geographically interchangeable and structurally hollow, serving bureaucratic legitimacy rather than authentic cultural representation.

Practical and Governance Implications (Destination Management)

The findings present urgent implications for municipal governments, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), and tourism stakeholders. First, there must be a paradigm shift from top-down logo creation to participatory brand ecosystem management. Visual identity should not be an administrative reflex or a project of bureaucratic mimicry, but a co-created narrative that resonates with the lived reality of local communities and industry practitioners. A sustainable brand requires effective resonance, which cannot be achieved when promotional assets are treated as mere superficial overlays. Second, jurisdictions must conduct rigorous semiotic due diligence before launching rebranding initiatives. This involves an audit of how proposed visual signifiers—such as the pervasive rainbow color palettes observed in 76.9% of the sample—align with actual spatial realities and tourism masterplans. If a city brands itself through a specific cultural or modern motif, the physical infrastructure, digital touchpoints, and urban experience must substantiate that claim. Branding must transition from a superficial promotional tool into a strategic asset that guides urban planning, investment allocation, and experiential learning for visitors, ensuring that the myth of the city is supported by its material reality.

E. CONCLUSION

This research has decoded the visual DNA of N=13 verified Indonesian promotional brands through a multi-layered semiotic and content analysis, revealing the underlying structural forces that shape contemporary city branding in the archipelago. The study concludes that while the era of regional autonomy (Otonomi Daerah) theoretically provides a platform for diverse cultural expression, the actual visual landscape is characterized by a profound paradox: homogenization through the pursuit of distinction. By strictly isolating market-facing promotional assets from administrative heraldry, this research unmasks a degree of visual conformity that is more systematic than previously recognized.

The findings elucidate that the Myth of Uniqueness—as visualized in the Conceptual Framework (Figure 3)—is systematically undermined by mimetic isomorphism. Local governments, driven by the need for bureaucratic legitimacy and international market-readiness, frequently abandon authentic place-narratives in favor of proven, generic templates. This is manifested in the widespread adoption of English-dominant slogans (76.9%), global modernist typography (84.6%), and rainbow color schemes (76.9%) that mimic national branding archetypes. Consequently, the literal ethnic markers intended to signal authenticity often serve merely as commodified ornaments, leading to identity drift and the dilution of each city's Unique Selling Proposition (USP).

Ultimately, the study argues that successful city branding in a post-digital, globalized economy requires a fundamental shift from top-down logo-centric projects to participatory, narrative-centric governance. For Indonesian jurisdictions to break the cycle of visual mimicry, they must employ Semiotic Due Diligence, ensuring that their visual signifiers are deeply rooted in the lived realities of their residents and the destination's physical infrastructure. Only by moving beyond superficial citations of global visual tropes can Indonesian cities cultivate a resilient, authentic identity that resonates both locally and globally.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides a robust semiotic mapping of brand visuals, it acknowledges certain limitations. The analysis is primarily constrained to official government-issued promotional visual assets, explicitly excluding the administrative seals that often carry different semiotic weights. Future research should triangulate these findings by incorporating qualitative interviews with the key architects of these brands—including policymakers, design agencies, and local tourism stakeholders—to explore the political economy behind specific design decisions. Additionally, investigating the reception of these visual identities through tourist sentiment analysis or resident surveys would provide a holistic understanding of how these institutional myths are consumed, ignored, or contested in the public sphere.

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APPENDIX A

Cities	Visual Branding
Jakarta	
Surabaya	
Medan	
Makassar	
Bandung	

Yogyakarta



Solo



Palembang



Banda Aceh



Malang



Banyuwangi



Ambon



Sleman

