

Digital Construction of Surabaya's Modern-Heritage Identity: A Visual Semiotic Analysis of Jalan Tunjungan on Instagram

Sutisna, Gusti

Social Science and Political Science Faculty, Master of Communication Science, Tujuh Belas Agustus
1945 Universtiy Surabaya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1306000272>

Received: 14 June 2026; Accepted: 20 June 2026; Published: 03 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This study investigates on how meanings are produced and how the myth of Jalan Tunjungan's urban heritage identity is being constructed through visual storytelling on social media platforms, specifically Instagram. Agaisnt the backdrop of the expanding digital tourism industry, visual narratives extend beyond their representational function. instead, they become instruments of symbolic power that shape place-branding strategies while simultaneously creating conditions for cultural commodification. Positioned within a constructivist paradigm, this descriptive-interpretive qualitative study analyzes 15 digital artifacts and has been selected through purposive sampling based on the principle of data saturation. To dissect these visuals, we employed a multi-layered analytical framework. This approach integrates Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design to examine micro-level visual structures. While Barthes' semiotics acts to interpret broader cultural meanings. And lastly, Bordieu's concept of symbolic power to contextualize the ideological processes underlying the identity construction.

The findings demonstrate that visual storytelling on Instagram discursively naturalizes the myth of Surabaya as a "Modern-Heritage City". This myth is sustained through three main ideological pillars: emotional ideology (nostalgia and therapeutic space), commercial ideology (consumption showcase), and social ideology (spectacular spectacle stage). Our analysis reveals that the selection of technical visual elements is not neutral. Instead, it acts as a practice of power by digital actors (government, community, and commercial entities) in negotiating the destination's cultural capital. Ultimately, this study concludes that these meaning production practices successfully create a dynamic hybrid spatial identity. However, they also leave behind a risk of cultural commodification specifically *The Instagrammable Gaze* where the depth of authentic historical values is potentially reduced to mere aesthetic commodities to satisfy the experience economy.

Keywords: Urban Heritage, Visual Storytelling, Visual Semiotics, Place Branding, Cultural Commodification.

INTRODUCTION

One of Surabaya's most important and unique urban historical sites, Jalan Tunjungan is now a modern public area. It can be seen from the preservation of colonial architecture combined with urban living activities. In this case, it has led to a notable rise in tourist visits between 8.000 and 12.000 on weekends itself, a notable growth with additional 4.000 people crowded Jalan Tunjungan for the weekend. The use of Instagram played a significant role and a key tool for destination branding. During this era, tourist's perception of one tourism site, in this particular research which Jalan Tunjungan; are largely created and constructed by digital visual narratives that set expectations for audience throughout the digital platform before they ever reached the destination. Consequently, the destination's image is mainly shaped by strong visual storytelling rather than being solely constructed by physical experience.

The massive practice of visual storytelling on the digital platforms raises a crucial issue regarding the risk of cultural commodification. When a historical heritage is reduced to a certain mere visual setting for content

aesthetics, its historical meaning is at risk of being diminished into a shallow attraction or plain gaze. Referring to the concept of *The Tourist Gaze* introduced by John Urry in 1990 which now has evolved into *The Instagrammable Gaze*. Urry stated that, audiences and content creators tend to evaluate historical spaces not by the depth of their past narratives, but by their level of visual aesthetics as a lifestyle commodity. Without a critical analysis of the production of these visual texts, Jalan Tunjungan could potentially lose its cultural capital and become trapped in the momentary currents of the experience economy.

A literature review over the past five years indicates that studies on cultural heritage tourism on social media are generally centered on three approaches. First approach involves digital ethnography and quantitative sentiment analysis focusing on audience behavior or *place-making*. The second approach is morphological semiotics studies that tend to view historical buildings as a static architectural objects. Finally the last approach encompasses macro-impact studies related to gentrification and digital space tourism. Based on this review, pathway to a clear research gap exists: there is a lack of comprehensive qualitative-interpretive studies in Indonesia that hierarchically dissect visual representations on social media platform, in this case : *Instagram* as deliberately constructed "active visual texts".

This study aims to fill that academic gap by uncovering the mechanisms of a meaning production and the construction of the urban heritage identity myth of Jalan Tunjungan through visual storytelling strategies on Instagram. The analysis is conducted by integrating Kress and van Leeuwen's *Grammar of Visual Design* at the micro-technical level and Roland Barthes' Semiotics at the macro-ideological level. Through this framework, this study will demonstrate how technical visual design elements are operationally used as instruments of symbolic power to naturalize the "Modern-Heritage" myth in the public mind.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive-analytical qualitative design and is based on an interpretive constructivist paradigm. This approach views visual representations on social media not merely as objective reflections of physical reality. Instead, they are seen as purposefully and actively created "visual texts" through symbolic interaction within the digital discursive space.

Data collection relied on a combination of few digital participant observation and digital archiving. This approach allowed for capturing of high-resolution visuals alongside their metadata to secure the data. The unit of analysis comprised 15 Instagram artifacts published between January 2021 and May 2026. We selected these samples using a purposive technique governed by strict inclusion criteria. Specifically, the Jalan Tunjungan corridor had to be the central visual subject rather than a blurred background, and the posts needed captions to serve as meaning anchors. The final sample of 15 artifacts was decided upon reaching data saturation, to a point where new data no longer produced novel codes or construct ideological myths. To guarantee a comprehensive discourse, we drew these artifacts from three distinct clusters which is : official city authority pages, community lifestyle accounts, and commercial groups.

For the data dissection process, we divide visual semiotics in two hierarchical stages. First stage is Kress and van Leeuwen's *Grammar of Visual Design*. We then utilize it to examine the micro-structural elements. This step involved breaking down representational meanings, interactive meanings (such as social distance and camera angles), and compositional layouts. The second stage is the macro-cultural level, we adopted Roland Barthes's signification model to uncover denotative and connotative meanings, ultimately identifying the naturalized myths. Finally, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of symbolic power framed these findings to reveal how different actors negotiate the cultural capital of the historical street.

Data validity and qualitative rigor in this study were measured using Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria. Validity was maintained through theoretical triangulation (integrating visual design grammar and Barthes-ian semiotics), peer debriefing to minimize subjectivity bias, and transparent audit trails throughout the digital artifact archiving process.

RESULT

The analysis of 15 digital artifacts on the Instagram platform indicates that the practice of visual representation of Jalan Tunjungan is dominated by three clusters of actors : official city authorities, communities/lifestyles, and commercial tourism entities. The findings from the visual text dissection are elaborated based on two levels of analysis: visual technical structure and cultural signification.

1.1. The Practice of Visual Design Grammar (Micro-Structural)

The analysis utilizing the *Grammar of Visual Design* reveals systematic and non-neutral patterns of technical manipulation in constructing historical spaces:

1.1.1. Manipulation of Angle and Social Distance:

Photos or images with nostalgic storylines frequently utilize *offer images* from an eye-level perspective and medium social distance to create an illusion of intimacy, inclusivity, and audience participation as pedestrians. In contrast, to construct the authority and global prestige, content creators use high-angle (drone camera) and extreme public social distance to provide an illusion of visual superiority (*tourist gaze*) over a magnificent and ordered landmark.

1.1.2. Shifts in Salience (Visual Attraction) :

There is a visual compositional struggle between historical and modernity elements. In preservation narratives, colonial facades illuminated by warm tones (dim yellow lights) are positioned at the central point as the ideal form. However, in urban lifestyle narratives, modern commercial elements (such as minimarket neon lights, massive typography, and crowds of youth) overtake the highest salience, thus suppressing colonial architecture into just a passive background layer.

1.2. The Construction of the "Modern-Heritage" Myth (Macro-Cultural)

Findings at the semiotic level demonstrate that the structural elements above operate discursively to naturalize the primary myth, namely Surabaya as a "Modern-Heritage City". This myth is sustained by three negotiating ideological pillars :

Visual representations of past architecture often convey more than just static, rigid structures; they triggers the idea of these spaces as "healing environments." Rather than being seen as the only historical artifacts, the historic streets are portrayed as emotional places where urban society can find a place to break, recharge, and rejuvenate. These streets serve as sanctuary in the middle of a stress of modern metropolitan life. In the end it offers a sense of peace and restoration for those who exhausted by the city's fast moving pace.

1.2.1. Emotional Ideology (Myth of Nostalgia and Therapeutic Oasis) :

Visual representations of past architecture often tells more than just a stactic, or rigid structures. they inspire the idea of these spaces as a "healing environments", rather than being seen only as a historical artifacts. The historic streets are portrayed as an emotional places where urban society can find a momentarily break and rejuvenation. These streets serve as calming landmark or cityscape for the high paced society and stress of modern metropolitan life. Jalan Tunjungan offers a sense of peace and restoration for it's people during the rush-hour-day or daily-high-paced-commuting-life in Surabaya.

1.2.2. Commercial Ideology (Myth of Consumption Showcase) :

The historical value of a place often reffered to as it's cultural capital, it becomes significant when it is transformed into a consumable showcase. In this case, Jalan Tunjungan has become the

fusion of a cyberpunks aesthetics from its vibrant neon lights and contemporary hangout culture that shapes the perception of the street as an exotic, unique, and consumable space. Consequently, it turns history into more than a visually appealing rather than only a backdrop to a city landmark. In the end, it raises concern about the commodification of a culture where rich and deep historical narratives risk being oversimplified or exploited for commercial gain.

1.2.3. Social Ideology (Myth of the Spectacle Stage) :

Research findings reveal a dual nature in how this social space functions. On one hand, sidewalks are portrayed as inclusive, democratic public spaces where social interactions and transactional activities can occur freely without the influence of economic condition. On the other hand, during large-scale events and integration of a high-end hospitality tourism, the same area is transformed into a grand state of spectacle. Here, the street functions as a carefully engineered showcase a “society of the spectacle” that legitimizes the city’s iconic landscape or image, and the authority not only on a national scale but also in the global scale or stage.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that the representation of Jalan Tunjungan on Instagram are beyond mere physical architectural images and documentation. Rather, it functions as a discursive practice that actively constructed the "Modern-Heritage City" as a myth. Through the integration of visual design grammar and Barthes-ian semiotics, it is found that technical visual elements are utilized as instruments of symbolic power by various actors (city authorities, communities, and commercial entities) to negotiate the identity of this public space.

1.3. The Practice of Symbolic Power and Negotiation of Cultural Capital

Referring to Bourdieu's sociological framework, the choices made in visual composition such as the transitions between offer and demand images, or the deliberate use of high and low camera angles are not neutral. These technical decisions serve as expressions of symbolic power, shaping, and controlling the discourse around the question of “who truly owns” Jalan Tunjungan. In digital representations, colonial architecture is no longer viewed only as a static bricks and mortars. Instead, it is framed as cultural capital that is continuously contested and renegotiated. This ongoing discursive battle is particularly visible in the tension between the city authority’s narrative which portrays as “spectacular spectacle stage” aligning with Guy Debord’s theory of the society of the spectacle. Finally, the community’s lifestyle narrative reduces historical heritage to an exotic backdrop for modern urban consumption.

1.4. The Risk of Cultural Commodification and *The Instagrammable Gaze*

The success of digital actors in combining past heritage narratives with modern capitalism births a dynamic hybrid identity. Consequently it triggers a massive risk of cultural commodification. Drawing from John Urry's concept of *The Tourist Gaze*, which in the digital media era has evolved into *The Instagrammable Gaze*. Audiences and content creators are proven to be inclined to consume Jalan Tunjungan based on superficial visual appeal to satisfy lifestyle expectations. The historical space is reduced in its functionality to a therapeutic commodity (*healing space*) and an aesthetic showcase to actively stimulate and sustain the continuous cycle of consumer engagement and economic transactional activity. In the end, this visual practice confirms academic concerns that without strong educational narrative interventions, the depth of authentic historical memory is vulnerable to fading, as well as being buried and exploited by momentary visual trend attractions.

1.5. Implications for Destination Branding

As an implication of these findings, the sustainability strategy of destination branding for urban heritage tourism in the digital space can no longer rely on the exploitation of architectural beauty. Stakeholders and policymakers are obligated to add authentic historical substance into every visual storytelling

tactic they might implement, so that the preservation of local cultural capital remains authentic and is not eroded by shallow commercialization.

CONCLUSION

Based on a descriptive-interpretive qualitative analysis of 15 digital artifacts on Instagram, this study concludes that the destination image of Jalan Tunjungan is no longer defined solely by its physical architectural presence. Instead, it is actively shaped and constructed through "visual texts" in the digital domain. Meaning production in this digital domain unfolds through a hierarchical chain of signification. Rather than being static, various actors use visual storytelling to constantly negotiate various connotative meanings. In the end, this discursive practice constructed a new myth in the public mind which is the formation of a 'Modern-Heritage Identity'.

In addition, the *Grammar of Visual Design* serves as a practice of symbolic power. Dominant visual elements, such as the manipulation of interactive meaning (angles and social distance) and compositional meaning (ideal real placement and salience framing), are implemented to dominate the discourse. These technical decisions, which inherently carry certain biases and are not neutral. These are carefully implemented to frame and present the local historical heritage.

Furthermore, the presentation serves a dual purpose, it evokes nostalgic feelings among local communities who have a personal or cultural connection to the heritage, while simultaneously making the heritage-landmark or cityscape more accessible and appealing to a global audience through an aesthetic lens or *Instagram Gaze*. In this way, the heritage is constructed not only as a cultural memory but also as a commodified object for international appreciation and consumption.

Despite this branding success, our study warns of a severe risk which is cultural commodification. The authentic history of Jalan Tunjungan could easily turn into just another visual commodity or a fleeting lifestyle backdrop (society of the spectacle). For destination branding to survive in the long run, policymakers and creators need to ground their visual aesthetics in real historical narratives. Only by doing so the street's cultural capital can withstand the heavy wave of superficial digital commercialization.

REFERENCE

1. Barthes, R. (1977). Rhetoric of the image. *Image, Music, Text*, 32-51. Fontana Press.
2. Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.
3. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
4. Budiman, S. (2024). *Komodifikasi spasial koridor Tunjungan Romansa: Negosiasi kapital budaya dan gaya hidup Gen-Z di Surabaya* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Universitas Airlangga.
5. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
6. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
7. Eco, U. (1980). Function and sign: The semiotics of architecture. In G. Broadbent, R. Bunt, & C. Jencks (Eds.), *Signs, symbols, and architecture* (pp. 11-69). John Wiley & Sons.
8. Felasari, S., & Purnomo, H. (2022). Exploring collective memory and place attachment using social media data. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 1058(1), 012015. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/1058/1/012015>
9. Giaccardi, E. (Ed.). (2012). *Heritage and social media: Understanding heritage in a participative culture*. Routledge.
10. Gravari-Barbas, M., & Guinand, S. (2021). The Instagrammable historic city: Marketing heritage, gentrification, and visual consumption. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 27(8), 751-764. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1846152>
11. Kavaratzis, M. (2004). From city marketing to city branding: Towards a theoretical framework for

- developing city brands. *Place Branding*, 1(1), 58-73. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990005>
12. Kim, J. O. (2023). *Iconic architecture through the lens of Instagram: Case studies of iconic urban heritage* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
13. Kotler, P., Bowen, J. T., & Makens, J. (2016). *Marketing for hospitality and tourism* (7th ed.). Pearson.
14. Krampen, M. (1979). The semiotics of architectural facades: Reading the urban text. *Semiotica*, 27(1-3), 205-234. <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.1979.27.1-3.205>
15. Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
16. Larasati, D. A. (2023). *Place attachment dan pemaknaan sejarah lokal pada ruang pedestrian Jalan Tunjungan pasca-revitalisasi* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Universitas Gadjah Mada.
17. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
18. Lund, N. F., Cohen, S. A., & Scarles, C. (2022). The power of visual storytelling in destination branding on social media. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 23, 100-114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2021.100652>
19. Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. MIT Press.
20. Nasar, J. L. (1990). The evaluative image of the city. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 56(1), 41-53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944369008975742>
21. Neuman, W. L. (2014). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (7th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
22. Pan, B., & Li, X. (2011). The long tail of destination image and online marketing. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38(1), 132-152.
23. Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
24. Pratama, A. Y., & Wijaya, K. (2023). Kajian nilai arsitektural kawasan berpotensi wisata sejarah dengan pendekatan semiotik: Studi kasus ruko kolonial Surabaya. *Sinektika: Jurnal Arsitektur*, 20(2), 142-151.
25. Putra, M. R., & Rahmawati, E. (2025). Strategi destination branding dinas kebudayaan dan pariwisata melalui media sosial Instagram @surabayasparkling. *Jurnal Komunikasi Aktual*, 7(2), 112-126.
26. Ramadhan, F. (2026). *Analisis semiotika komunikasi visual penanda cagar budaya koridor kota lama dan Jalan Tunjungan Surabaya* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember.
27. Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
28. Sari, I. P., & Utomo, A. B. (2024). Konservasi kebijakan kualitas visual pada koridor penghubung area historis di Surabaya pusat. *The Journal of Indonesia Sustainable Development Planning*, 5(2), 201-215.
29. Smith, A., & Jones, M. (2022). Visualizing the city: Instagram as a platform for urban tourism place-making. *Information Technology & Tourism*, 24(2), 185-208. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-022-00227-x>
30. Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of heritage*. Routledge.
31. Stylianou-Lambert, E. (2012). Tourists with cameras: Images of photography. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(4), 1817-1838. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2012.06.002>
32. Tasci, A. D., & Gartner, W. C. (2007). Destination image and its functional relationships. *Journal of Travel Research*, 46(4), 413-425.
33. Teguh, et al. (2021). The Fight for the 2024 Presidential Election Within the PDIP Within the Framework of Tempo (Roland Barthes' Semiotics Study on the Cover of the May 2021 Edition of Tempo Magazine). *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*.
34. Tussyadiah, I. P. (2014). Toward a theoretical foundation for digital marketing in tourism. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 31(5), 587-596. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2014.896767>
35. Urry, J., & Larsen, J. (2011). *The tourist gaze 3.0*. SAGE Publications.
36. Wang, Q., Zhang, L., & Liu, Y. (2024). Morphological and semiotic analysis of historic urban facades. *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, 13(1), 88-102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2023.09.004>
37. Widiastuti, R., & Setiawan, B. (2021). Konstruksi citra visual ruang publik kota berbasis media sosial di Surabaya. *Jurnal Tata Kota dan Daerah*, 13(1), 25-36.
38. Yang, R., Xie, Y., & Liu, Z. (2026). From place attachment to behavioral intention: Mechanisms in heritage and cultural consumption. *Sustainability*, 18(4), 1432. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su18041432>