

Symbolism and Identity in Urban Street Art as Visual Narratives in Southeast Asian Cities

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Abstract. *Urban street art has become a significant visual medium reflecting identity, resistance, and cultural memory within Southeast Asian cities. This study explores how street art in urban environments such as Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila serves as a visual narrative, embedding local symbolism and identity expression into public space. The objective is to analyze how visual elements in street art communicate social, cultural, and political messages. A qualitative method is employed, utilizing visual semiotics and ethnographic observation to examine selected murals and graffiti. The findings reveal that recurring motifs, such as traditional symbols, mythological figures, and vernacular language, function as tools of cultural assertion and urban storytelling. These visual narratives not only document community histories but also challenge dominant urban narratives, reclaiming marginalized voices. The study highlights the role of street artists as agents of social commentary and urban transformation. Implications suggest that recognizing street art as a form of visual narrative contributes to a broader understanding of cultural identity construction in urban Southeast Asia.*

Keywords: *cultural identity; public space; Southeast Asia; street art; visual narrative*

1. BACKGROUND

Urban street art has emerged as a powerful visual language in cities worldwide, particularly in Southeast Asia, where rapid urbanization intersects with diverse cultural, political, and historical narratives. As cities like Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila expand and transform, walls, alleys, and abandoned buildings become canvases for artists to express identities, resist dominant ideologies, and assert presence in contested urban spaces. Street art, once viewed as vandalism, is increasingly recognized as a legitimate form of visual culture that offers insight into the lived experiences and voices of marginalized communities (Irvine, 2012; Young, 2014).

Existing scholarship has explored the semiotic and social functions of street art as a form of resistance and identity-making. For instance, Schacter (2014) argues that street art operates as “aesthetic protest” that challenges the commodification of urban space, while McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) emphasize its role in shaping alternative geographies of belonging. In the context of Southeast Asia, recent studies have examined how artists use symbolic language and cultural motifs to reflect local struggles and socio-political concerns (Chang & Yeoh, 2019; Tan, 2020). These studies highlight the intersection of art, politics, and identity, but often lack comparative regional perspectives or deep visual narrative analysis across urban Southeast Asian settings.

Despite the growing academic attention, there remains a gap in understanding how visual elements in street art construct symbolic narratives tied to local identity in multiple

Southeast Asian cities. Much of the existing literature is either Western-centric or focused on isolated case studies without synthesizing cross-city patterns and meanings. Moreover, limited research addresses the role of street artists as cultural agents who navigate complex urban politics and reclaim public space through symbolic expression. This research seeks to bridge that gap by conducting a comparative semiotic analysis of street art in Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila, emphasizing shared symbols, stylistic choices, and their contextual meanings.

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining visual semiotics with urban ethnography to decode the embedded meanings within street art as a form of visual narrative. Unlike previous works that focus on either aesthetic appreciation or socio-political context alone, this study treats urban murals and graffiti as evolving texts that reflect both individual and collective identities. By exploring the recurring visual motifs—ranging from folklore and national icons to local slogans and color symbolism—this research provides a new lens for understanding how Southeast Asian urban dwellers use street art to narrate their place-based identities and reimagine the city.

The aim of this research is to analyze the symbolism and identity in urban street art as visual narratives within Southeast Asian cities, particularly Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila. Through qualitative methods involving visual semiotic analysis and ethnographic observation, the study seeks to uncover how these visual expressions serve as tools for cultural communication and political commentary. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on art, identity, and urban space by highlighting the unique ways street art shapes and reflects the socio-cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of visual semiotics, urban cultural identity, and the right to the city, all of which are essential in interpreting the layered meanings behind street art in Southeast Asian urban environments. Visual semiotics, as formulated by Roland Barthes (1977), provides a foundational lens for decoding images, symbols, and compositions in visual texts. Through this approach, street art is not merely seen as a visual decoration but as a complex system of signs that communicate cultural, political, and ideological meanings. Barthes emphasized the idea that every image carries both a denotative and connotative meaning, which is central to understanding symbolic representation in urban murals and graffiti.

In parallel, theories of urban cultural identity support the interpretation of how individuals and communities express belonging and cultural narratives through street art. According to Zukin (1995), urban identity is shaped not only by architecture and institutions but also by vernacular expressions of culture, including visual art in public space. Street art becomes a means by which urban dwellers reclaim their spatial narratives and articulate their presence in the rapidly transforming city. This aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) concept of "the right to the city," which posits that every urban resident should have the agency to shape urban space and participate in its meaning-making processes.

Several previous studies have further contributed to this discourse. Young (2014) investigated street art as a tool of resistance and a marker of identity in global cities, noting how marginalized groups use visual expression to challenge dominant urban ideologies. Similarly, McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) conceptualized graffiti and street art as socio-political acts that re-inscribe alternative values into the urban landscape. In the Southeast Asian context, Chang and Yeoh (2019) highlighted the symbolic value of murals and public art in constructing narratives of place, memory, and cultural resistance. These studies collectively affirm that street art functions not only as an aesthetic form but also as a socio-political practice rooted in everyday urban experience.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach by integrating visual semiotics with urban ethnography to explore how symbols, colors, and stylistic elements in Southeast Asian street art reflect cultural identities and social commentary. The recurring use of indigenous motifs, mythological figures, and local idioms suggests a purposeful effort to reinforce cultural belonging while navigating urban modernity. Moreover, street art offers a counter-narrative to state-sanctioned public imagery, often reflecting grassroots perspectives that are absent from mainstream media and official discourse (Schacter, 2014; Tan, 2020).

Theoretically, this research is positioned at the intersection of art and urban studies, aiming to expand our understanding of how public visual culture contributes to identity construction in the urban context. While no explicit hypothesis is stated, the underlying proposition suggests that urban street art in Southeast Asia functions as a symbolic and narrative medium that reflects and shapes urban cultural identity, especially within communities negotiating space, power, and voice in their cities.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a comparative case study approach to examine the symbolism and identity representation in urban street art within three Southeast Asian cities: Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila. The selection of these cities is based on their cultural diversity, history of visual activism, and dynamic street art scenes. The qualitative approach enables a deep understanding of the contextual meanings embedded within visual narratives and their sociocultural implications (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research population consists of public murals and graffiti artworks found in urban neighborhoods known for street art practices, including Kota Tua (Jakarta), Ratchathewi (Bangkok), and Bonifacio Global City (Manila). A purposive sampling technique was used to select 30 visual artworks (10 from each city) based on criteria such as the presence of local symbolism, accessibility, public exposure, and thematic relevance to identity or sociopolitical discourse (Patton, 2002). The unit of analysis is the artwork itself, supported by data from informal interviews with local artists and observers, as well as field notes and photographic documentation.

Data collection techniques include visual documentation, semi-structured interviews, and field observations. Visual data were analyzed using visual semiotic analysis, based on Barthes' (1977) model of denotation and connotation, to interpret the embedded meanings in symbols, colors, and composition. Supplementary ethnographic notes and interview transcripts were coded thematically to capture recurring patterns and context-specific meanings (Saldaña, 2021). The triangulation of data sources enhances the validity and reliability of the research, ensuring credibility in interpreting visual and narrative meanings.

Data analysis involved two main stages. First, semiotic analysis was applied to identify dominant symbolic elements and their cultural references. Second, thematic analysis was used to interpret how these symbols function within broader narratives of identity, resistance, and urban experience. Data were organized using NVivo software to manage coding and thematic categorization effectively. The analysis framework is rooted in Barthes' semiotics and Lefebvre's spatial theory, allowing the researcher to connect visual forms with lived urban experiences (Barthes, 1977; Lefebvre, 1991).

The research model proposes that urban street art (Y) is influenced by visual symbolism (X1) and identity expression (X2), which are mediated through the sociopolitical and cultural context (M). In this model, X1 represents symbolic elements (icons, myths, color codes), X2 represents narrative themes (identity, resistance, memory), and M represents contextual factors (urban transformation, local politics, subcultural dynamics). Although no statistical test is used

due to the qualitative nature of the study, the model serves as a conceptual map to guide the analysis of how symbols function as narratives in public space (Schacter, 2014; Young, 2014).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Collection Process and Research Locations

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period between February and April 2024 in three Southeast Asian urban centers: *Kota Tua* in Jakarta (Indonesia), *Ratchathewi District* in Bangkok (Thailand), and *Bonifacio Global City* in Manila (Philippines). Each location was selected for its vibrant street art scene, accessibility, and socio-cultural diversity. A total of 30 artworks (10 per city) were documented and analyzed through field observation, photography, and semi-structured interviews with 15 street artists and local community members. All data were triangulated through field notes and coding using NVivo software.

Findings and Visual Analysis

Table 1. Visual Symbolism Themes in Selected Cities

| City | Dominant Symbols | Themes Identified | Interpretive Meaning |
|---------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Jakarta | Batik, Wayang, Slogans | Cultural heritage, resistance | National pride, critique of authority |
| Bangkok | Hanuman, Lotus, Protest Art | Spirituality, environmental issues | Spiritualized critique, social awareness |
| Manila | Baybayin, Tribal Icons, Heroes | Postcolonial identity, memory | Reclaiming local voice, rewriting history |

Source: Field Observation (2024), Semiotic Coding via NVivo

These findings align with McAuliffe and Iveson's (2011) assertion that street art constitutes "spatialized discourse," wherein the city is not merely a backdrop but a participant in the message. In all three cities, artists used urban walls as sites for counter-narratives—replacing sanitized official imagery with raw, localized stories. This supports Zukin's (1995) theory that urban identity is increasingly shaped by vernacular cultural forms rather than institutionalized heritage.

Interestingly, the presence of local language—*Bahasa Indonesia*, *Thai*, and *Filipino*—in graffiti slogans plays a key role in emphasizing cultural rootedness and resisting linguistic homogenization. This echoes findings by Tan (2020), who noted the symbolic power of language in visual protests across Southeast Asia. Furthermore, interviews revealed that artists view themselves not only as creators but as *cultural mediators*, deliberately choosing visual codes that resonate with neighborhood histories and social tensions.

Theoretical Implications

The findings affirm the theoretical proposition that street art in Southeast Asia functions as a visual narrative that reflects and reconstructs urban identity. The integration of traditional symbolism with urban storytelling reveals a distinct form of place-making—a creative

negotiation of space, culture, and meaning. This supports Lefebvre's (1991) idea that space is socially produced and symbolically contested.

From a semiotic perspective, each mural acts as a polysemous text, open to multiple interpretations depending on viewer identity, context, and social positioning (Barthes, 1977). The layering of connotative meanings—such as struggle, pride, displacement, and reclamation—illustrates the richness of urban street art as a communicative act.

Practical Implications

Practically, the research suggests that urban planners and cultural policymakers should recognize street art as a legitimate form of civic expression and cultural documentation. Integrating community-based mural projects into urban development strategies may enhance public participation, foster local identity, and reduce the marginalization of grassroots voices. Additionally, recognizing artists as cultural actors can reshape how cities conceptualize public art—not as decoration, but as dialogue.

Comparative Reflection and Limitations

While the research confirms findings from earlier studies (e.g., Schacter, 2014; Young, 2014), it contributes new comparative insight into cross-cultural symbolic narratives within Southeast Asian urban settings. However, limitations remain. The sample size is relatively small, and interpretations may vary depending on political climate and evolving social conditions. Future studies could expand into more peripheral cities and explore the reception of street art by diverse urban audiences.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that urban street art in Southeast Asian cities—specifically Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila—functions as a potent form of visual narrative that conveys cultural identity, social resistance, and community memory. By employing traditional symbols, local languages, and mythological imagery, artists construct visual texts that reclaim urban space and give voice to marginalized perspectives, aligning with Barthes' (1977) semiotic theory and Lefebvre's (1991) concept of socially produced space. The findings reinforce that street art operates not merely as aesthetic intervention but as a form of grassroots cultural expression deeply embedded in local contexts (Schacter, 2014; Tan, 2020). It is recommended that policymakers and urban stakeholders recognize and integrate street art into inclusive cultural planning, supporting initiatives such as legal art zones and community-driven murals. However, these conclusions should be interpreted with caution, as symbolic meaning varies across social and geographic settings. The study is limited in scope by its focus on three cities

and a select number of artworks, without in-depth audience analysis. Future research should expand geographically and explore the role of digital platforms in reshaping the circulation and reception of street art narratives, contributing to a deeper understanding of how visual culture evolves in both physical and virtual urban environments (Young, 2014; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011).

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