



DIGITAL CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, TOURISM AND CREATIVE ECONOMY OF NORTH SUMATERA PROVINCE FROM ROLAND BARTHES' SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to uncover layers of meaning in the digital content of the North Sumatra Disbudparekraf, in order to understand more deeply how visual communication strategies and digital narratives are utilized to shape public perceptions of cultural and creative economic development in North Sumatra. The theory used is Barthes' theory, such as myths, signification systems, and the relationship between signifiers and signifieds. This study uses a qualitative approach with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to examine the meaning in the digital content of the North Sumatra Disbudparekraf on Instagram and YouTube 2024. The analysis was carried out on the denotative and connotative meanings of visual elements and cultural symbols. Data were analyzed using visual content techniques and validated with theory triangulation. The results of the study show that visual symbols in government digital media not only convey information, but also play a role in forming modern myths that can influence public opinion and collective image. Thus, digital content has great potential as a tool for cultural diplomacy, tourism promotion, and strengthening local identity in a global context.

Keywords: *semiotics, digital content, Disbudparekraf Sumut, cultural image, visual diplomacy*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has brought significant changes in the way humans interact, communicate, and convey messages. Mass media has developed so rapidly that it has become a center for the dissemination of information (Sunaraya & Azhar, 2022). One of the most striking forms of digital transformation is the use of social media and digital platforms such as YouTube as a means of conveying information and promoting culture, tourism, and the creative economy by government agencies. In this context, the Office of Culture, Tourism, and Creative Economy of North Sumatra Province (Disbudparekraf Sumut) utilizes their official YouTube channel,

@disbudparekrafsumut, as a strategic medium to display various visual content that is full of cultural messages and regional creative development (Kholil et al., 2024). YouTube allows institutions such as Disbudparekraf Sumut to convey various messages effectively through the power of visual, audio, and narrative signs because of its audiovisual and multimodal nature. In contemporary communication studies, the existence of these signs cannot be understood literally, but requires an analytical approach that is able to uncover the implied meaning behind these signs. The semiotic approach, especially the model developed by Roland Barthes, provides space to see that every sign in the mass media contains not only denotative meaning (literal meaning), but also connotative (ideological or symbolic meaning) that can shape certain social realities (Ari & Azhar, 2023; Dalimunthe, 2022).

Roland Barthes views that the media has the power to reproduce cultural myths through a system of signs. In his framework of thought, Barthes introduced two levels of meaning, namely the first level (denotation) and the second level (connotation), where connotative meaning often hides the ideological power that works behind the visual narrative (Pranata & Deni, 2024). Therefore, it is important to analyze digital content delivered by government institutions, because indirectly, they participate in the process of forming cultural identity and public perception of certain areas.

The digital content produced and distributed by the North Sumatra Provincial Disbudparekraf through their YouTube channel is not only intended as a medium of information or entertainment, but also as a regional development communication strategy. In videos such as "Indian Ambassador's Visit to the North Sumatra State Museum", "Creative Economy Ecosystem Development Workshop", and "Bukit Lawang Ecotourism Promotion", there are visual representations that show how North Sumatra is constructing its regional image as a region rich in culture, history, and competitive creative economy potential.

In contemporary semiotic studies, visual representation in digital content becomes an ideological field that is full of values and meanings. This kind of representation not only presents reality, but also shapes it through symbolic constructions that have been selected and curated. As stated by Rahman and Yulianita (2024), in the digital era, visual communication has become a dominant means of shaping public opinion and conveying ideas that are often stronger than verbal communication. Therefore, this study aims to reveal the denotative and connotative meanings of the digital content of the North Sumatra Disbudparekraf using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, in order to determine the extent to which this institution participates in shaping cultural discourse and regional creative identity through digital media.

The importance of this study lies not only in the academic realm, but also in its relevance in the practice of strategic communication of local governments. Sihombing et al. (2024) stated that local governments, especially in the cultural

and creative economy sectors, have a strategic role as actors driving the local economy. The use of digital media is the main instrument in supporting inclusive, transparent, and local culture-based communication strategies. In other words, analysis of the digital content of institutions such as the North Sumatra Disbudparekraf is important to find out how they frame messages to the audience.

Visual narratives in digital content are an important part of destination branding efforts and community involvement within the framework of creative economy development. Syafitri and Nisa (2024) explain that the creative economy is growing rapidly in Indonesia because it is driven by the integration of local cultural potential and the use of digital technology. Digital content not only promotes tourist attractions or culture, but also becomes a space for local creative actors to participate and build a community-based creative economy ecosystem. This is where Barthes' semiotics becomes relevant to examine how the content presents representations of local values, identities, and social constructions of the North Sumatran community. Cultural representation in digital media is greatly influenced by the way visuals, symbols, and narratives are presented (Putri et al, 2023). The media is never neutral in conveying messages; there are always interests and ideologies working behind it. When the North Sumatra Disbudparekraf presents a narrative about the success of a creative workshop, the beauty of Bukit Lawang, or appreciation from outside parties such as the Indian ambassador, they are indirectly building a myth about the progress of culture and tourism in North Sumatra. This reinforces Barthes' idea that myths in modern media are no longer fictional, but have become social realities that are constructed and believed (Nurdiana & Yuwita, 2022; harianto et al., 2023).

In the context of public communication, managing messages through aesthetic and symbolic digital media is part of a visual persuasion strategy. Prima (2022) states that films and videos have the ability to transmit values and ideologies subtly through a system of signs that work behind every scene, dialogue, and background music. Therefore, a semiotic analysis of the YouTube video @disbudparekrafsumut is not only a study of the media itself, but also a study of ways of thinking, how to build identity narratives, and the government's visual communication strategies in the digital era.

Digital literacy is not only related to the technical ability to access technology, but also to the critical ability to understand the meaning behind digital content (Naila et al, 2021). This is also explained by (Aksenta et al, 2023) that digital literacy shows how to use technology properly. This study is part of an effort to increase critical public awareness in interpreting media messages, especially those coming from government institutions, so that they can become active audiences and not just passive consumers.

The use of Roland Barthes' semiotic approach in this study is in line with the trend of critical methodology in media and communication studies. Barthes taught that behind every representation there is always a structure of meaning that stores

dominant ideology. Aziza et al. (2024) remind that representations in digital media, especially those featuring women or certain cultural groups, must be analyzed critically because they can reproduce stereotypes or hegemonic norms. Therefore, analysis of the content of the North Sumatra Disbudparekraf must also pay attention to how the symbols used can influence people's perspectives on culture, space, and government authority.

This study aims to open up layers of meaning in the digital content of the North Sumatra Disbudparekraf by utilizing Roland Barthes' semiotic approach so that we can understand more deeply how visual communication strategies and digital narratives are used to shape public perceptions of cultural development and the creative economy in North Sumatra. By looking at the meaning behind the signs, we not only understand digital content as a media object, but also as an ideological construction that holds values, power, and hopes for the future of the region.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method used in this journal is a qualitative approach with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method to examine the representation of meaning contained in digital content belonging to the North Sumatra Province Culture, Tourism, and Creative Economy Agency (Disbudparekraf). This approach was chosen because it is considered capable of revealing layers of meaning hidden behind visual signs and text in digital content, which not only convey denotative messages, but also connotative ones according to Barthes' theoretical framework. The data in this study were obtained from the collection of digital content published through the official social media accounts of the North Sumatra Province Disbudparekraf, especially Instagram and YouTube, during the period from January to December 2024. The selection of this media was based on the reason that these two platforms are the main channels for disseminating digital information by the local government related to the promotion of culture, tourism, and the creative economy. The data collection technique was carried out purposively with the criteria of content that displays visual elements, narratives, and local cultural symbols.

The analysis procedure was carried out in two main stages according to Barthes' semiotic model, namely denotative reading and connotative reading. The first stage is the identification of denotative meaning, namely the literal or descriptive meaning of the visual elements that appear in the content, such as objects, colors, backgrounds, and texts. The second stage is the interpretation of connotative meaning, namely the meaning that is socially and culturally constructed, which is often related to local values, ideologies, and identities that government agencies want to highlight in order to form a positive image of North Sumatra Province.

This study uses the visual content analysis method as a basic technique for deconstructing sign elements. This technique is used to observe and record the frequency of appearance of certain signs and the tendency of themes or narratives that are constructed visually. Furthermore, the results of these observations are interpreted based on the main concepts in Barthes' theory, such as myths, systems of signification, and the relationship between signifiers and signifieds.

Data validity is maintained through theory triangulation and peer discussion to avoid subjective bias in the interpretation of meaning. In addition, cross-checks are also carried out between digital content and policy documents or strategic plans issued by the North Sumatra Provincial Disbudparekraf to ensure the consistency of the representation of cultural identity and the public communication strategy that is built.

With this approach and method, the research is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of how the North Sumatra Provincial Disbudparekraf uses cultural symbols in its digital communication strategy and how these messages are transmitted and interpreted by the public through Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Representation of Cultural Diplomacy: Visit of Indian Ambassador to North Sumatra State Museum

The first video documents the visit of the Indian Ambassador, Shri Sandeep Chakravorty, to the North Sumatra State Museum, and serves as a concrete example of how cultural diplomacy is communicated through digital media. From a denotative perspective, this content shows a series of activities that include welcoming state guests, introducing museum collections, and interactions between Indian embassy representatives and local officials.

At the connotative level, this visualization displays symbolic meanings that are closely related to diplomatic values, such as respect for local cultural heritage as a form of appreciation for national identity. The video shows the museum not only as a storage space for historical objects, but also as a stage to showcase cultural richness that serves as a bridge between countries.

The myth formed through the visual and audio narratives in this video shows that North Sumatra plays an important role in Indonesia's cultural diplomacy as a whole. The visit of international figures to the regional museum gives the impression that this region has a strategic position in broader public diplomacy. This refers to the concept of Barthesian myth as a form of naturalization of ideology, namely making local cultural identity an inseparable part of global diplomacy.

This finding is supported by research by Pratiwi et al. (2024), which highlights the importance of media in displaying local cultural symbols as part of

strengthening identity in global communication. Media is developing so rapidly that it has become a center for the dissemination of information, where the messages conveyed are not always explicit, but are often packaged through metaphors and symbols that contain deep meaning (Kartini & Deni, 2022). In the same context, Kurniadi (2019) also shows how national tourism videos often use local cultural elements to form a collective image of Indonesia in the eyes of the international world. This video implicitly conveys the message that North Sumatran culture is a representation of Indonesia that is open, rich, and globally competitive. The use of a cinematic format with a shooting angle that focuses on cross-cultural interactions such as when the Indian Ambassador touches a collection object and shows interest in Batak history strengthens the emotional impression and authenticity of the cultural diplomacy being built. In the context of Roland Barthes' semiotics, this scene can be analyzed through the relationship between sign and signifier. The act of touching a collection object becomes a signifier that refers to respect, interest, and recognition of local cultural values. Meanwhile, the sign formed from the scene produces connotative meaning in the form of emotional closeness between cultures and symbolic support for the preservation of cultural heritage. This kind of visual narrative not only conveys factual information, but also builds a myth about the importance of North Sumatra's role in bridging diplomatic relations through a warm and inclusive cultural approach.

Creative Economy Ecosystem: Development Workshop in North Sumatra

The second video documents the implementation of a creative economy ecosystem development workshop in North Sumatra. At the denotative level, the video shows formal activities in the form of presentations, group discussions, and training attended by business actors, community representatives, and government officials. The visual composition is technically quite dynamic, with a shift in focus from the resource person to the participants and the creative economy products on display.

At the connotative level, this workshop is interpreted as a manifestation of the spirit of collaboration between the public and private sectors in building a more sustainable and innovation-based economic ecosystem. The narrative built through the capture of participants actively discussing and displaying local products also strengthens the image that local communities have high competitiveness and creativity.

The myth constructed from this representation is that the creative economy is the path to the future of regional development. North Sumatra is depicted as a region that is not only rich in culture, but also adaptive and innovative in managing its resources. This approach implies a narrative of regional modernity and progressiveness in facing global challenges, especially in the post-pandemic era where digitalization and creativity are the main foundations of the economy.

Sihombing et al. (2024) emphasize that the strategic role of local governments is as facilitators and accelerators in the development of the creative economy. In this context, the video shows the active role of the government in uniting cross-sector actors, creating synergies, and connecting local potential with wider networks. The emphasis on cross-sector cooperation is also explained by Syafitri & Nisa (2024), who highlight the importance of connectivity between creative communities, the education sector, and industry players as the key to the success of the creative economy in Indonesia. This video implicitly conveys a message about the change in development paradigm from the conventional top-down approach to a more participatory and inclusive model based on local potential. From Barthes' semiotic perspective, the visualization of local community participation in cultural activities or symbolic interactions in the video acts as a signifier that indicates the active involvement of the community in the development process. The sign produced is not just a depiction of activity, but a connotative meaning that development is not only physical or infrastructural, but also includes cultural and symbolic aspects.

Exotic Nature and Culture: Bukit Lawang Promotion

The third video features a promotion of the Bukit Lawang ecotourism destination, an area known for its orangutan conservation and tropical natural landscape. Denotatively, the visuals in the video show natural scenery, tourist activities such as rafting and trekking, and interactions between tourists and local guides.

At the connotative level, the visual narrative emphasizes the harmony between humans and nature, depicting a balanced and sustainable ecological relationship. The use of cinematics with drone perspectives and slow-motion reinforces the exotic nuances and almost magical natural beauty. Soft background music and the dialogue of the local guides help create an impression of authenticity and closeness to nature.

The myth built from this video is that North Sumatra is a hidden paradise that offers an authentic tourism experience, not only as a place to escape, but as a contemplative space that reunites humans with nature. This idea is in line with media representations of sustainable tourism based on local wisdom.

Research by Nurdiana & Yuwita (2022) shows that visual aesthetics in tourism promotion plays an important role in shaping the perceptions of potential tourists, especially in the era of highly visual social media. This is also emphasized by Khasbi (2025) in his dissertation which emphasizes the importance of visual power in elevating local cultural values in the digital economy. Bukit Lawang is represented not just as a destination, but as a myth that reflects the harmonious relationship between local culture, nature conservation, and tourism spirituality. By raising the narrative of conservation, this video also emphasizes that tourism is not just a

consumption activity, but also a form of respect for the ecosystem and local communities.

Integration of Findings and Implications

The three videos analyzed reveal the visual communication strategies used by the North Sumatra Disbudparekraf in building a narrative about its regional identity. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, it was found that each video conveys political, cultural, and ideological messages through three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth.

These narratives complement each other in forming a complete picture of North Sumatra: as a center of cultural diplomacy, as a pioneer of a collaboration-based creative economy, and as an authentic natural tourism paradise. All three are important elements in building a positive image of North Sumatra in digital media. This strategy shows Disbudparekraf's good understanding of the dynamics of digital communication, where visuals are not only a documentation tool, but also a medium for building identity, meaning, and emotional closeness with the audience. As stated by Putri et al. (2023), cultural representation in digital media can strengthen regional identity and create appeal for a global audience.

However, challenges remain, especially in maintaining the sustainability of the narrative and audience engagement. As stated by Rahman & Yulianita (2024), the success of digital communication depends not only on the quality of the content, but also on understanding audience preferences, changing media trends, and sensitivity to the evolving socio-cultural context.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has discussed how digital content produced by the North Sumatra Provincial Culture and Tourism Office contains complex representations of meaning through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Through the analysis of three officially published videos, it was found that the representation of culture, creative economy, and tourism is not only present in denotative form as documentation of activities, but also contains connotative meanings and myths that shape perceptions about regional identity and potential.

The North Sumatra Provincial Culture and Tourism Office strategically uses visual media as a means of public communication to build a progressive, culturally rich, and open regional image to the outside world. The visualizations chosen not only represent facts, but also convey values, ideologies, and grand narratives about the role of North Sumatra in the national cultural and economic map. Through planned symbolic representation techniques, these contents have succeeded in forming new meanings that can influence the way audiences view the region.

This analysis proves that the semiotic approach, especially that developed by Barthes, is very relevant to understanding how meanings are constructed and

conveyed in digital visual communication. This study also provides insight for public communication managers to be more critical and strategic in designing digital content that is not only aesthetically appealing, but also culturally and ideologically meaningful. Thus, local government digital content can be an effective tool in building identity, strengthening cultural diplomacy, and encouraging community participation in inclusive development narratives.

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