



Postmodern visual communication strategies and symbolic audience engagement on Instagram

Afqira Syafa'ati Sya'ban¹, Ferry Darmawan^{1*}, Kiki Zakiah¹

¹Communication Science Department, Islamic University of Bandung, Jalan Jalan Tamansari No.01, Bandung, West Java, Indonesia

*Email: ferry@unisba.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study repositions audience engagement on Instagram not merely as a performance metric but as a postmodern process of symbolic meaning-making shaped through visual communication strategies. While existing studies predominantly examine engagement quantitatively or within commercial branding contexts, this research offers a semiotic perspective on locality-based community accounts. Focusing on the Instagram account @cianjurkuy, the study investigates how visual narratives, cultural symbols, and aesthetic consistency construct emotional resonance and social identity among audiences. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with the creative team, systematic observation of visual content, and documentation of Instagram insights from January to March 2025. Roland Barthes' semiotic framework was applied to analyze visual meaning at the denotative, connotative, and mythic levels, positioning engagement as an interpretive response rather than a causal effect. The findings reveal that recurring visual themes—daily nostalgia, culinary togetherness, and local pride—operate as symbolic devices that naturalize collective myths about regional identity. The account's engagement rate of 2.41%, exceeding the national average, reflects not only audience activity but also the success of locality-based visual storytelling in fostering emotional and cultural connections. Theoretically, this study contributes to digital visual communication scholarship by demonstrating that engagement and visual meaning are mutually constitutive processes within postmodern social media environments, particularly in grassroots community accounts.

Keywords: : *Visual Communication Strategy; Audience Engagement; Instagram; Semiotics; Local Identity*

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of locality-based Instagram accounts that curate cultural narratives, everyday experiences, and regional identity represents a growing yet underexplored phenomenon in digital visual communication research. Accounts such as @cianjurkuy function not merely as information channels but also as spaces in which visual storytelling, collective memory, and symbolic representations of place are continuously produced and negotiated by audiences. Unlike corporate brand accounts or influencer-driven platforms that dominate existing studies, these community-driven digital spaces construct engagement through cultural proximity and shared identity rather than commercial persuasion. This characteristic positions locality-oriented Instagram practices as a unique research object that reflects how digital media reshapes the relationship between visual communication and social belonging.

While social media has evolved into a dynamic environment for interaction, identity formation, and meaning production (Avalle et al., 2024), previous studies largely focus on large brands, influencers, or political communication contexts. Instagram's visual nature enables users to communicate through images, short videos,

and narrative aesthetics (Romney & Johnson, 2018), and visual elements have been shown to enhance emotional resonance and audience participation (Rietveld et al., 2020). Visual communication, therefore, becomes a central strategy in shaping participatory relationships between digital accounts and audiences, where cultural symbolism and narrative coherence contribute to stronger engagement (Lim & Childs, 2020; Rebelo et al., 2019; Cohn, 2019).

Recent scholarship has emphasized locality-oriented visual practices on Instagram, where everyday experiences and cultural symbols are curated to represent place-based identities (Adami & Jewitt, 2016; Bronsvort & Uitermark, 2021). In the Indonesian context, the Instagram account @cianjurkuy exemplifies this phenomenon through the consistent presentation of culinary imagery, urban atmosphere, and culturally embedded storytelling. The observed engagement rate of 2.41%, exceeding the national average of 0.98% (Hutchinson, 2024), indicates that audience interaction is closely connected to how visual narratives resonate with shared cultural experiences. Previous studies highlight the importance of visual consistency and locality-based storytelling in fostering emotional closeness within digital communities (Darmawan, 2018). However, the mechanisms through which visual meaning translates into audience engagement remain insufficiently explored.

Despite the growing body of research on Instagram communication, existing scholarship predominantly examines commercial branding, advertising effectiveness, or influencer-driven content (Karpenka et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2024; Muliatie et al., 2024). Semiotic analyses have also tended to focus on corporate or promotional visual contexts (Afriana Afriana et al., 2024), leaving grassroots locality-oriented visual practices relatively underexamined. Consequently, engagement is frequently conceptualized as a quantitative performance indicator rather than as a symbolic response emerging from cultural narratives and shared identity construction. This limitation highlights the need for a qualitative and semiotic perspective that examines engagement as part of an interpretive meaning-making process embedded in visual communication practices.

The novelty of this study lies in repositioning audience engagement not merely as a behavioral metric but as an interpretive practice shaped by symbolic visual communication within locality-based digital spaces. By focusing on @cianjurkuy as a case of place-identity visual storytelling, this research extends digital visual communication scholarship beyond commercial branding frameworks and introduces a postmodern perspective that integrates visual aesthetics, cultural symbolism, and social participation.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how visual communication strategies on Instagram construct symbolic meaning and how audience engagement can be understood as a form of social response to these meanings. Rather than identifying visual elements descriptively, the research analyzes the relationship between visual narratives, cultural symbols, and engagement patterns through Roland Barthes' semiotic reading, positioning engagement as part of an ongoing process of meaning production in digital environments.

In this study, audience engagement is not treated as an isolated performance indicator but as an interpretive response emerging from the semiotic construction of visual meaning. Likes, comments, and shares are understood as traces of how audiences read, negotiate, and circulate symbolic narratives embedded within visual

content. Drawing on Barthes' semiotic method, this research examines how images naturalize ideological narratives through layers of denotation and connotation. Recurring themes such as daily nostalgia, culinary togetherness, and representations of urban warmth are interpreted as expressions of an ideology of harmonious locality and nostalgic cultural authenticity that frames regional identity as natural and desirable. By positioning ideology as a central dimension of visual communication, this study bridges semiotic analysis with audience engagement patterns, demonstrating that engagement reflects how audiences participate in reproducing and circulating symbolic meanings within locality-oriented visual storytelling on Instagram.

METHOD

The study employs a qualitative research design to examine how visual communication strategies construct symbolic meaning and how audience engagement can be interpreted as a semiotic response to visual narratives. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for this research because the focus lies on interpreting cultural signs, symbolic representation, and ideological meaning embedded in digital visual content rather than measuring causal relationships (Creswell, 2018; Sugiyono, 2019)

Data were collected from the Instagram account @cianjurkuy through three primary sources: (1) in-depth interviews with the creative team to understand visual production strategies, (2) systematic observation of visual posts uploaded between January and March 2025, and (3) digital documentation of Instagram insights, including likes, comments, and shares. These multiple sources allow triangulation between production intent, visual representation, and audience response.

The unit of analysis consists of selected Instagram posts that represent dominant visual themes and exhibit relatively high engagement rates. Content selection was conducted purposively, with consideration of visual consistency, thematic relevance, and interaction intensity. Engagement metrics were not used as variables for statistical testing but served as contextual indicators to identify posts that generated significant audience response and were therefore suitable for semiotic interpretation.

This study adopts Roland Barthes' semiotic reading as a methodological framework to analyze how visual meaning and ideological narratives are constructed through digital imagery. Barthes' approach emphasizes the layered interpretation of signs, consisting of denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotative analysis focuses on literal visual elements such as objects, settings, color composition, and photographic style. Connotative analysis explores the emotional and cultural associations that emerge from visual presentation, including nostalgia, familiarity, and representations of locality. At the mythic level, analysis seeks to reveal ideological narratives that naturalize particular views of regional identity, such as the ideology of harmonious locality and nostalgic cultural authenticity.

Rather than treating engagement and semiotics as separate analytical domains, this research positions audience engagement as evidence of how audiences interpret and circulate symbolic meanings embedded in visual content. Likes, comments, and shares are therefore read as interpretive traces that reflect audience participation in the reproduction of visual myths within a digital community context.

The analytical process was conducted in several stages. First, selected posts were catalogued based on thematic patterns and engagement intensity. Second, visual elements were described at the denotative level to establish observable features. Third, connotative meanings were interpreted by relating visual composition to cultural context and narrative framing derived from interviews and captions. Finally, myth-level analysis examined how recurring visual patterns contributed to the naturalization of ideological narratives about regional identity. Throughout the analysis, engagement data served as contextual support for understanding how audiences responded to symbolic visual meaning rather than as quantitative measures of effectiveness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Community accounts @cianjurkuy were chosen as the object of research because of their consistency and power in utilizing locality-based visual communication. The content displayed is always related to the daily life of the people of Cianjur, ranging from culinary to tourist destinations to cultural symbols. This visual strategy not only emphasizes aesthetics but also integrates cultural messages that are easily recognizable to the audience. With sizable follower bases and high active response rates, these accounts provide a representative space to examine the relationship between visual communication and audience engagement.

Audience engagement is measured through likes, comments, shares, and save indicators, which directly reflect the level of engagement with content. This indicator is considered important because it describes the extent to which the audience is engaged with the message conveyed through visuals. Interaction data not only provides a quantitative portrait of account performance but also serves as a basis for assessing the effectiveness of the visual communication strategy. In other words, engagement rate serves as a bridge to understand how visuals shape social relations in the digital space.

In addition to numerical engagement, this study considers it important to understand the quality of interactions. Many comments with emotional nuances, nostalgia, and local identity show that the audience is not just pressing the like button. They build conversations, share memories, and even provide input on new content. This phenomenon demonstrates how visual communication by @cianjurkuy serves as a unifying medium for locally based digital communities.

Roland Barthes' semiotic framework is used to read more deeply the visual meaning that this account presents. Denotations describe what appears on the surface, connotations reveal emotions and cultural values, while myths form a grand narrative of local identity and pride. This analysis is important because a high engagement rate is impossible without the resonance of the visuals' meaning. Thus, quantitative data and semiotic interpretation complement each other to capture audience engagement more fully.

Against this background, the next discussion focuses on analyzing the engagement performance of the @cianjurkuy account. The results of the engagement rate calculation are the first step to understanding how the power of visual communication is used. After that, audience interaction will be further examined to see how visual communication can foster emotional, social, and cultural engagement

that strengthens the identity of digital communities. This study will then show how Roland Barthes' semiotic framework helps explain the meaning contained in content, from the level of denotation to the formation of cultural myths that bind the identity of digital communities.

Engagement Rate as a Semiotic Indicator of Audience Meaning-Making

Engagement rate is one of the primary indicators of how much audiences interact with content on social media (Schivinski et al., 2016). In general, engagement rate is calculated by comparing the total number of interactions, such as likes, comments, shares, and saves, to the number of account followers (Syrdal & Briggs, 2018). This indicator provides an overview of how content can attract attention, encourage participation, and build relationships with audiences. According to Vinerean & Opreana (2021), Engagement rate is used as a standard for evaluating the performance of social media accounts because it can show not only how much an audience is viewing content, but also how well they are responding and actively connecting.

However, in the context of this study, @cianjurkuy's engagement is not interpreted solely as an indicator of platform performance. The relatively high engagement rate reflects how audiences recognize, negotiate, and reproduce symbolic meanings embedded in the account's visual narratives. Rather than signaling mere popularity, likes and shares indicate audience alignment with the ideological construction of harmonious locality and nostalgic cultural authenticity presented through recurring visual themes. Comments reveal interpretive participation, where audiences connect personal memories and collective identity to the imagery displayed. Thus, the engagement rate can be understood as a semiotic trace of how visual myths circulate and gain legitimacy within a locality-oriented digital community.

The engagement rate is considered more representative than simply examining the number of followers or impressions (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). This is because engagement metrics emphasize the quality of interactions, not just the quantity of the audience (Liu et al., 2021). For example, an account with many followers but a low engagement rate indicates that the content presented is less relevant or interesting. In contrast, accounts with relatively small followings but high engagement rates demonstrate success in creating content that resonates with their audiences. Thus, engagement rate is not only a statistical measure but also an indicator of the quality of visual communication and interaction strategies implemented by an account on social media. Figure 1 shows the engagement of the @cianjurkuy account.

Analysis of @cianjurkuy's Instagram accounts during the January-March 2025 period reveals a high level of engagement. The calculation was done by summing the total interactions (likes, comments, and shares) for the four uploaded items analyzed. In the January upload, there were 4,055 likes, 91 comments, and 118 shares, resulting in a total of 4,264 interactions. The first February upload generated the highest engagement with 6,297 likes, 157 comments, and 339 shares, bringing the total to 6,793. The second February upload garnered 2,376 likes, 48 comments, and 24 shares, resulting in a total of 2,448 interactions. Meanwhile, the March upload received 762

likes, 56 comments, and 148 shares, totaling 966 interactions. If totaled, the total engagement from the four uploads reached 14,471 interactions.



Figure 1. Instagram Reach, Insights, and Engagement @cianjurkuy
Source: [instagram.com/cianjurkuy/](https://www.instagram.com/cianjurkuy/)

Among the total interactions, the combined engagement rate was 2.41%, well above the national average of 0.98% (Hutchinson, 2024). These results demonstrate that the visual content uploaded by @cianjurkuy has high appeal and successfully creates significant audience engagement, as shown in Figure 2. This high engagement rate also confirms that the locality-based visual strategies employed, such as the use of natural color tones, cinematic compositions, and narratives that resonate with the audience's daily lives, are effective in increasing active participation among followers.

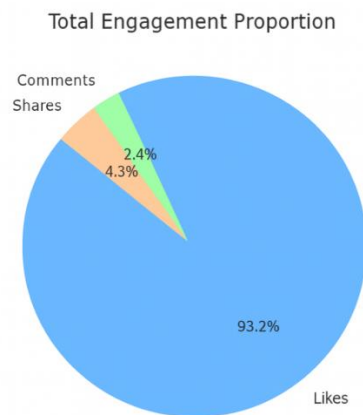


Figure 2. Instagram Engagement Rate Chart @cianjurkuy
Source: Author's analysis (2025)

Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of total audience engagement on the Instagram account @cianjurkuy, consisting of likes, comments, and shares. The data reveal that likes dominate with 93.2%, indicating that audience interaction is primarily passive. In contrast, shares account for 4.4% and comments for only 2.4%, suggesting limited active engagement.

This pattern suggests that while @cianjurkuy's content effectively attracts attention and appreciation through its visual appeal, it generates relatively low conversational or participatory responses. Therefore, enhancing interactive elements—such as prompts, discussions, or user-generated content—could foster greater active engagement.

The calculation of engagement rate not only provides a quantitative view of account performance but also reflects the effectiveness of visual communication in fostering audience interaction and emotional connection. These results serve as a basis for a qualitative analysis of visual strategies and the symbolic meaning behind @cianjurkuy's content.

From an interaction standpoint, likes are the fastest and easiest response the audience can give. Likes to indicate that the visuals displayed are instantly attention-grabbing and considered relevant to what they like. Elements such as warm colors, soothing shooting angles, and everyday objects make the audience feel familiar with the content. This response indicates that visual communication is effective at creating a positive first impression, though it is not always accompanied by deeper emotional involvement.

Comments show a more active form of engagement, as audiences not only see but also want to be part of the conversation. In several uploads, comments contain stories of personal experiences, place recommendations, and expressions of longing for the atmosphere of Cianjur. This shows that the visuals evoke memories, emotions, and a sense of belonging to the social space they represent. The comment column is a social interaction space where audiences respond to each other, not only to accounts, but also to fellow users.

Meanwhile, sharing content reflects the audience's desire to bring that visual message to a wider social circle. The content shared is usually considered to have informational value or emotional meaning that others should know, such as portraits of natural environments, tourist recommendations, or stories about community activities. When audiences choose to share content, they indirectly act as a connector between the account's narrative and their own social network.

If these three forms of interaction are viewed together, it appears that audience engagement doesn't stop at just viewing content. The audience moves from enjoying the visuals to talking, then to spreading the message. This pattern shows that the visuals used serve not only as aesthetic displays but also as triggers for social interaction and the exchange of meaning among users in the digital space.

For the @cianjurkuy account, this pattern of engagement reinforces its position as an account that not only presents information but also builds closeness with its followers. Ongoing interactions increase content visibility while shaping the brand's image as a reference for local stories and experiences. The relationship built is not based solely on content consumption, but also on a sense of connection between accounts and audiences, which continues to be maintained through daily interactions on social media.

Audience Engagement as Semiotic Response to Locality-Based Visual Narratives

Audience engagement within the @cianjurkuy account is interpreted here not as a performance metric but as a semiotic trace of how audiences respond to symbolic visual narratives. Likes, comments, shares, and saves are therefore analyzed as forms of interpretive participation that reveal how visual meanings circulate within a locality-oriented digital community.

Furthermore, interviews with @cianjurkuy's creative team revealed that engagement extends beyond statistical data. Audiences demonstrate deeper

engagement through emotional interactions sparked by nostalgia-themed or locality-themed content. For example, when content about old-fashioned children's games or Cianjur culinary specialties is displayed, many audiences write personal stories, share past experiences, and even engage in dialogue with fellow users in the comments. This emphasizes that engagement is not measured solely by clicks, but also by social interactions in the digital space.

This phenomenon reveals that engagement on social media encompasses two key dimensions: digital performance and relationship quality. Statistics are important for mapping engagement outcomes, but what is more meaningful is the extent to which audiences feel part of the digital community. This aligns with Choi et al. (2020), which confirms that audience engagement increases significantly when content is emotionally relevant, socially close, and resonant with everyday experiences. Thus, engagement is not only a quantitative indicator but also a manifestation of the emotional bond between the audience and the accounts they follow.

An identity formed through emotional interaction and active participation makes @cianjurkuy more than just a provider of information; it is a cultural space that embodies local pride (Ulfah & Rosmiati, 2024). It demonstrates that local community accounts are effective in strengthening regional identity and boosting citizen participation through locality-based visual communication. With a visual strategy that highlights cultural values, everyday stories, and interactivity, @cianjurkuy effectively builds a connection that extends beyond simply providing information. The audience not only consumes content but also helps shape the meaning and direction of digital narratives, fostering a sense of belonging to Cianjur's local identity.

Nostalgic-themed content proved to be the most effective trigger for engagement. The creative team mentioned that when they upload content about 90s children's games or school snacks, the comment column is immediately filled with long stories from the audience. They not only hit the like button but also share personal memories and interact with other users' comments. This phenomenon demonstrates participatory engagement, where the audience feels a part of the narrative woven into the content.

In addition to nostalgia, culinary content is another category that is very effective in building engagement. Many audiences immediately tag friends or provide additional recommendations in the comments section. Visual strategies, such as close-ups of food with warm color tones, have been proven to be both appetizing and stimulating to interaction. Food, as a universal symbol, serves as a medium that connects personal experiences with local identities. The audience sees food not only as an object but also as an entrance to togetherness and pride in Cianjur culture.

Audience interaction is also driven by a simple call-to-action strategy implemented by the creative team. Invitations to "tell me about your experience" or "tag your friends" often lead to more comments and shares. For example, in a tour post, using small text on the last slide with a call to tag a friend resulted in a significant increase in engagement. This strategy emphasizes that visual design is not only aesthetic, but also functional as a tool to drive participation.

Based on interviews with the @cianjurkuy team, the audience often provides direct feedback through comments. Many content ideas are born from audience suggestions, such as requests to cover certain places or regional cuisines. The creative team then adapts the input into new content, creating more dynamic two-way

communication. This shows that audience engagement is not only reactive but also proactive in shaping the account's narrative.

From an emotional perspective, audience engagement is seen in the quality of long, narrative, and personal comments. For example, in rain-themed content or city atmosphere, many audiences write stories about memories of school or experiences coming home in a pedicab. The quality of this interaction shows the depth of meaning received by the audience, in accordance with Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which emphasizes layers of denotation, connotation, and myth. Simple visual content, such as rain in the square, can be interpreted as a representation of the collective longing for the city's atmosphere.

Involvement also arises from a sense of community. Audiences often feel part of the @cianjurkuy community, whether through "our city" comments or by actively tagging friends and family. This identity shows how community accounts can function as more than just providers of information, but also as shared spaces to celebrate local identity. Engagement born here is not just a relationship between individuals and content, but a horizontal interaction between community members.

From a strategic perspective, the creative team regularly evaluates Instagram insights to assess engagement. The number of likes, shares, saves, and reach is used to determine advanced content. However, as revealed in the interview, this figure is always combined with an evaluation of the quality of the comments. This means that visual strategies are not only oriented towards viral numbers, but also towards emotional resonance and local relevance.

Audience engagement is also strengthened through the consistency of visual identity. Consistent colors, typography, and visual styles make it easy for audiences to recognize @cianjurkuy content without even reading the account name. This consistency fosters familiarity and loyalty, ultimately strengthening engagement. When audiences encounter visual traits that consistently convey a sense of locality, they are more likely to connect emotionally and encourage ongoing interaction.

Overall, audience engagement on @cianjurkuy's account suggests that the main strength lies in a combination of visual strategies that resonate with people's daily lives. Content that raises the value of locality can convey a sense of closeness and pride, so that the audience is not only a passive spectator but also participates in building a digital community narrative. The interactions that emerged, ranging from personal stories to shared nostalgia to active participation in providing content suggestions, show that @cianjurkuy has succeeded in positioning itself as a digital cultural space that represents Cianjur's identity. Thus, the practice of visual communication not only produces an aesthetic image but also creates a shared experience that strengthens the social and emotional bond between the account and the audience.

Audience engagement patterns on the @cianjurkuy account align with findings by Yu et al. (2024), which state that visuals that build an emotional atmosphere more easily trigger the audience's affective response. This also strengthens the view of Hao et al. (2025) that visual consistency, the use of cultural symbols, and communicative narratives play a big role in building audience connection with content. In @cianjurkuy's uploads, these elements are present through natural color tones, depictions of daily activities, and short narratives that are close to local experiences, so that the audience feels familiar with the stories shown.

These findings are also in line with Stokes & Price (2017), which confirms that visual-based social media functions as a space for identity representation, where cultural symbols are produced and consumed together. When audiences interact through comments and content sharing, the process not only shows an interest in visuals, but also participation in the production of social meaning about the area and daily life. The interactions that arise are part of communication practices that build a sense of closeness and connectedness between users.

Additionally, the audience's tendency to engage with nostalgic and culinary-themed content supports Choi et al.'s (2020) findings that engagement increases when visuals relate to personal experiences and daily activities. Visuals work not only on an aesthetic level, but also on an emotional and social level, encouraging audiences to express their memories, feelings, and attachments through digital interactions. By reference to these findings, audience engagement on @cianjurkuy's account can be understood as a result of visual communication that successfully presents emotional relevance, social closeness, and experiential representation.

Table 1. Audience Engagement Patterns and Visual Communication Practices on Accounts @cianjurkuy

Visual Content Aspects	Featured Visual Features	Form Audience Response	The Meaning of Visible Engagement
The daily atmosphere of the city	Natural color tones, cinematic shooting, citizen activities	Like high, comments about personal experiences	The audience feels close to the atmosphere displayed and associates it with their own experience
Nostalgic content	Old game visuals, school snacks, past atmosphere	Long comments contain childhood stories, reciprocate comments	There is emotional engagement and social conversation between audiences
Local cuisine	Close-up of food, warm colors, dining atmosphere	Tag friends, additional recommendations, share	Content becomes a social invitation and a shared activity plan
Local cultural symbols	Distinctive visual motifs, typography with regional nuances	Expression of regional pride, mention of local identity	Visuals are understood as representations of community identity and pride
<i>Interactive captions</i>	Invitation to share a story or tag a friend	Increased comments and shares	Visuals serve as a trigger for community participation and dialogue

Source: Processed Researcher (2025)

Visual Communication as a Process Reflected in Engagement Rate

Engagement rate on @cianjurkuy's account can be understood as a summary of how audiences respond to visual stories presented repeatedly. This number records the accumulation of the process when the audience sees the content, feels a sense of closeness, and then expresses engagement with visuals they find relevant and

meaningful. Therefore, engagement rate can be seen as a trace of the continuous visual communication process within the account.

Visual communication works through how visuals build atmosphere, present stories, and display aspects of life that are easily recognizable to the audience. Kusuma et al. (2024) explained that visuals that evoke emotions and a sense of familiarity more easily encourage audiences to engage in digital interactions. When content features simple activities, typical food, or a familiar urban atmosphere, the audience not only receives the information but also feels the atmosphere offered through the visuals.

Responses in the form of likes, comments, and content sharing can be understood as audience participation in the visual stories they encounter. This participation is not always born of rational impulses, but from an emotional engagement with visuals that are considered close to personal or collective experience. Cohn (2019) mentions that visual consistency and the use of cultural symbols can strengthen the audience's sense of connection to the content, so that interaction appears as a form of recognition of the perceived meaning.

Consistent visual patterns help shape the audience's habits in responding to content. Audiences begin to recognize the color styles, shooting angles, and story themes that are often presented. This familiarity helps the audience understand the visual message more quickly, without needing a long explanation. This recognition process then develops into a habit of interacting repeatedly with various uploads.

The short narrative that accompanies the visuals also shapes how the audience interprets the content. Sentences that invite you to remember certain experiences or allude to longing open up space for the audience to link visual stories with their personal experiences. Adami & Jewitt (2016) emphasize that visual media in the digital space serve as a means of producing social meaning, where audiences not only consume content, but also build a shared meaning through interaction.

When audiences write down stories, share memories, or tag friends, the process shows that visuals have become a trigger for social interaction. Interaction not only occurs between accounts and followers, but also between fellow audiences who respond to each other's comments. Gatti & Procentese (2021) noted that visuals on social media create space for users to share and string stories about their lives, thereby shaping local identities and social experiences through interactions among users. The series of responses that appear repeatedly on various uploads then accumulate into the intensity of engagement, which is reflected in the engagement rate. The number does not reflect a single upload, but rather a record of the audience's continued response to the ever-maintained visual communication pattern. Engagement rate is a marker that visual communication does not stop at a single moment but unfolds as a series of stories that the audience continues to follow. When audiences feel connected to the story being shown, they are more likely to continue following and responding to subsequent posts. This consistent pattern of engagement is then recorded in a relatively stable engagement rate.

Through visuals that showcase everyday life and local identity, audiences are not only viewers but part of a story that unfolds within the account. The feedback that comes through comments and content sharing is part of the communication dynamics that extend the continuity of the visual story. This process shows that engagement grows from shared experiences built through visuals and narratives. In this way,

engagement rate represents the intensity of audience participation in the ongoing practice of visual communication. The number summarizes how visuals, stories, and audience responses interact to shape the experience of interacting on social media. On @cianjurkuy's Instagram account, engagement rate can be read as a trace of visual communication that successfully conveys emotional closeness, a sense of togetherness, and social participation in a locality-based digital space.

Semiotic Analysis of @cianjurkuy Content

Visual communication is the process of conveying messages through visual elements, such as images, colors, typography, symbols, and layouts, that attract attention and form meaning for the audience (Darmawan, 2018). In social media practice, visual communication serves not only to beautify appearances but also as a strategy to convey certain values, identities, and narratives that an account aims to establish (Schreiber, 2017). Through visual communication, messages can be communicated more quickly, effectively, and emotionally, as visual language has a universal appeal (Wibowo, 2020). Therefore, visuals on social media are not just images; they are a strategic medium for fostering emotional closeness and connecting audiences with broader cultural messages (Rietveld et al., 2020).

Roland Barthes, a significant figure in the study of semiotics, emphasized that visual signs possess a layer of meaning that extends beyond their literal appearance (Rohmaniah, 2021). It divides meaning into three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to an immediate meaning or what is visible, such as a physical object in an image. Connotations are additional meanings that are emotional, symbolic, or cultural, arising from the audience's experience and knowledge. Myth is the deepest layer of meaning, which is a significant narrative or ideology attached to the visual, thereby forming an understanding in society (Barthes, 2021). With this framework, Barthes demonstrates that visuals always carry cultural content, are not neutral, and serve as a tool to shape social perspectives.

Visual communication on the @cianjurkuy Instagram account stands out through the presentation of content that displays culinary, natural scenery, and the typical atmosphere of the city of Cianjur. These visual elements are literal representations of the objects being displayed. However, with the application of targeted photographic techniques, a neat composition, and the right choice of lighting, simple objects such as food or natural landscapes acquire meaning beyond their ordinary appearance. At this point, visual communication plays a role not only in conveying information but also in shaping the region's typical image.

At the denotative level, culinary photos, such as maranggi satay, depict food in a literal sense, showing shapes, colors, and textures. This representation provides the audience with a basic understanding of the object on display. However, visual communication does not stop at this surface level. Through certain framing, such as close-ups of satay pieces against the backdrop of a restaurant atmosphere, the visuals are directed to emphasize the peculiarities of local cuisine while presenting a more evocative visual experience.

The meaning of connotation arises when the audience interprets the visual through personal and cultural experiences. Figure 3 of Cianjur's legendary chicken porridge is not only understood as food but also evokes nostalgia for family

togetherness, the warmth of a typical Cianjur breakfast, or even memories of returning home. Here, visual communication effectively conveys emotional resonance, extending the literal meaning into a more nuanced and culturally rich interpretation. This connotation demonstrates how visuals can foster emotional closeness with the audience.

Furthermore, the connotation evolves into a collective myth. Cianjur's legendary chicken porridge becomes more than just a culinary delight—it transforms into a symbol of local identity that deserves celebration and preservation. This myth unites the audience in a shared narrative about the importance of maintaining culinary traditions as an expression of regional pride. Roland Barthes emphasized that myths in visual communication naturalize certain values, making them appear inherent to society. In this case, local cuisine functions as a symbol of togetherness and cultural identity.

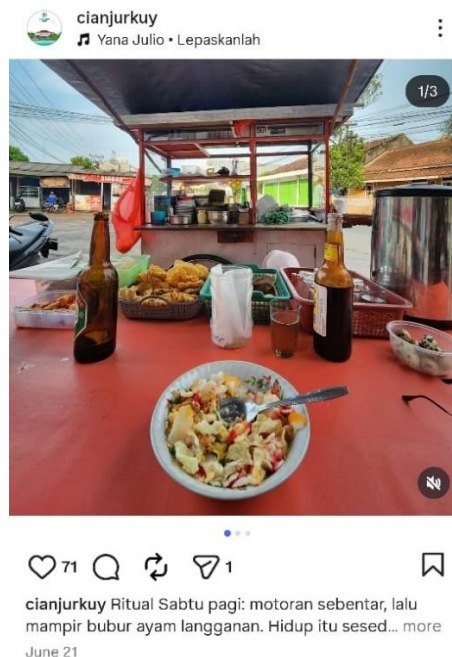


Figure 3. Breakfast cuisine in Cianjur
Source: @cianjurkuy Instagram

The same phenomenon can be observed in tourism content that features green rice fields, blue skies, or the city's atmosphere. Denotatively, the image is just a representation of nature and public space. However, the cinematic visual style and consistent natural color tones create a more aesthetic visual experience. This triggers connotations of tranquility, freshness, and closeness to nature. The audience then interprets the visual not only as an ordinary landscape, but as a representation of a living space that is soothing and proud.

These connotations further developed into myths about the harmony between humans and nature. The beauty of rice fields or blue skies is understood as a symbol of ecological balance and the collective identity of the Cianjur people. Through this visual narrative, @cianjurkuy reinforces the cultural myth that Cianjur is a beautiful,

quiet, and traditional area (Figure 4). Thus, visual communication not only presents an image but also contributes to the production of local ideologies that foster collective pride.

The visual communication employed in this account demonstrates how simple signs can be interpreted on multiple levels. Roland Barthes, through his semiotics, emphasizes that signs are never neutral but are always open to diverse interpretations, ranging from literal meaning to ideological implications. With this framework, @cianjurkuy's content can be understood as a practice of meaning-production that not only informs but also builds social and cultural narratives. Visual signs become a medium to connect the audience's individual experience with the collective identity of the region.



Figure 4. The natural beauty of Cianjur as shown on IG @cianjurkuy
Source: @cianjurkuy Instagram

The practice of visual communication @cianjurkuy proves that visual-based social media can be an important space in building local identity. The uploaded content is not only informative but also strengthens the audience's emotional and cultural connection to their region. By integrating layers of denotation, connotation, and myth, this account creates a digital space that embodies pride. @cianjurkuy can thus be seen as a visual communication medium that binds aesthetics, narratives, and ideologies into a single unit, able to strengthen the local identity of the Cianjur people.

Visual communication on the @cianjurkuy account is also evident in the use of explicitly displayed cultural symbols. Elements such as Cianjur batik motifs or typography with Sundanese accents do not only function as aesthetic elements. Its presence is a visual marker that affirms the region's identity. Thus, these symbols have a broader representational value than mere decorative ornaments.

At the level of denotation, this cultural symbol can be understood simply as a visual embellishment inherent to the content's design. However, its existence holds additional meanings that enrich visual communication. The use of batik motifs, for example, not only showcases artistic patterns but also emphasizes the connection between the content and Cianjur's cultural roots. The denotations here open up space for a deeper layer of meaning.

In context, these cultural symbols evoke a sense of pride, nostalgia, and emotional attachment among local audiences. Seeing Sundanese-accented typography or typical batik patterns can make the audience feel closer to their regional identity. This connotation shows how visual communication can raise collective awareness that the content displayed is not only a digital representation but also an expression of cultural values that live in society.

From this connotation, a larger myth was born. The consistent cultural symbols presented reinforce the narrative that Cianjur is an area rich in tradition while also able to adapt to modernity. This myth binds audiences in pride and normalizes the view that local culture is relevant, worth celebrating, and can still coexist with contemporary lifestyles.

Visual communication on this account is further strengthened by the captions that accompany each upload. Roland Barthes emphasized the importance of the relationship between images and text, known as anchorage and relays. Captions clarify, emphasize, or even expand the meaning of the visual. The presence of text in @cianjurkuy's uploads, whether in the form of short stories or participatory invitations, produces a richer and more targeted message for the audience.

The integration of images and words shows that visual communication does not stand on its own but works synergistically with the written narrative. Emotional visuals become stronger when reinforced with contextual text. In contrast, captions become more vivid when supported by aesthetically strong visuals. This combination encourages more interactive communication, where audiences not only see but are also encouraged to respond.

The visual communication strategies used by @cianjurkuy also show a tendency to avoid explicit promotional approaches. Culinary, tourist, or cultural content is not displayed as direct advertising but through an emotional visual narrative that is close to the audience's daily life. This creates a more authentic experience, making messages more receptive. With this kind of strategy, the audience feels invited to experience it, not just given information.

This approach makes visual communication a subtle yet effective means of persuasion. Instead of offering promotions directly, @cianjurkuy prioritizes visuals that build emotional closeness. The message conveyed does not seem forceful; rather, it comes naturally as part of the local narrative. This makes the applied visual strategy more effective in strengthening emotional bonds and building audience loyalty to the identity of the Cianjur region. Audience interaction born from this visual shows that visual communication has succeeded in penetrating the emotional realm. Long



comments, nostalgic stories, and active participation show that visuals are not only watched but also spark dialogue. At this point, visual communication serves as a trigger for social conversations. Barthes sees visuals not just as signs, but as triggers for social myths that strengthen community bonds. This is evident in @cianjurkuy's practice.

Visual consistency is also an important element in building effective visual communication. Natural color palettes, cinematic photography styles, and distinctive typography create an easily recognizable visual identity. Audiences can recognize @cianjurkuy's content without even reading the account name. This consistency reinforces the myth that the account is an authentic representation of Cianjur in the digital space. A stable visual identity is the capital to build sustainable engagement.

Overall, the visual communication on the @cianjurkuy account reflects how visual signs operate across the three levels outlined by Roland Barthes: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, content presents literal objects—culinary offerings, tourism sites, and urban atmosphere—that are easily recognized by audiences. These representations develop into connotative layers that evoke nostalgia, warmth, and regional pride. From these connotations emerges a broader myth: a narrative of Cianjur as a locality rich in tradition, harmonious with nature, and simultaneously relevant to modern life. Through this layered process, visual communication functions not merely as aesthetic display but as a mechanism for producing and circulating ideological meaning through audience engagement. The integrated relationship between visual signs, ideological construction, and participatory engagement is conceptually synthesized in Figure 5.

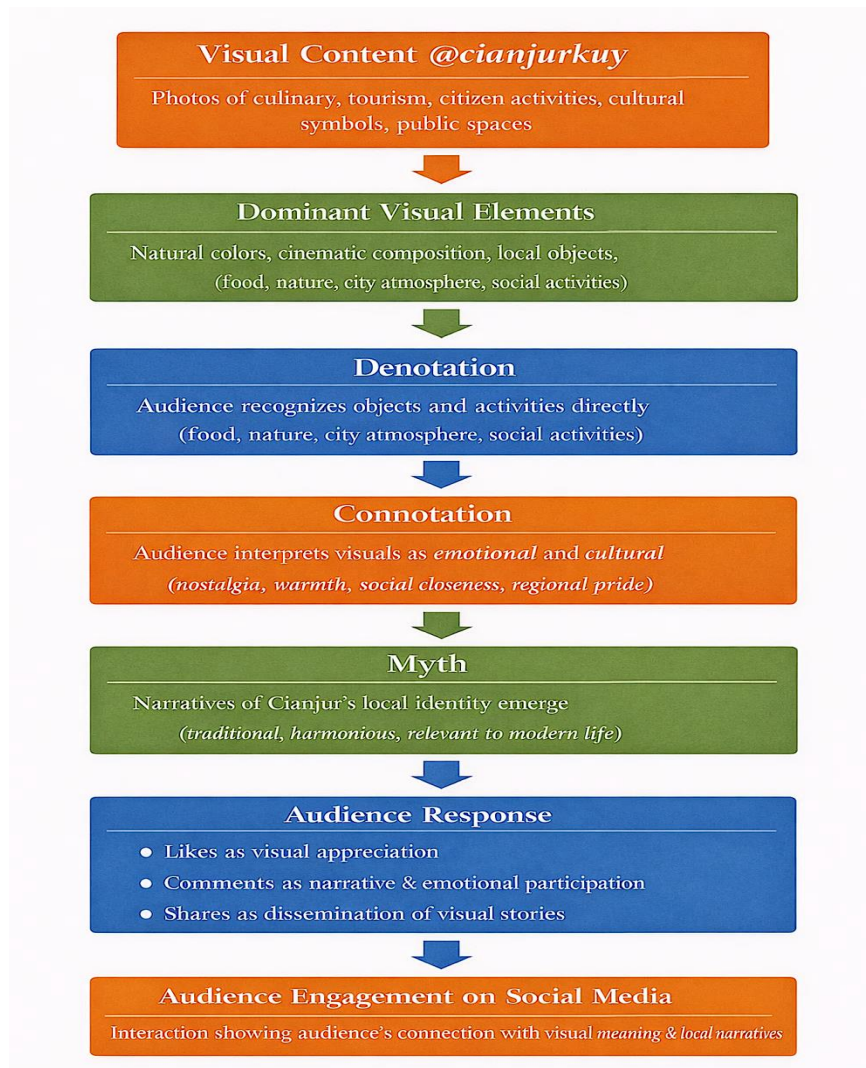


Figure 5. The Formation of Visual Meaning and Audience Engagement on Instagram Content @cianjurkuy Based on Roland Barthes' Semiotics
Source: Processed Researcher (2025)

The process of forming meaning shows that visual communication in this community account is carried out consciously as a strategy to integrate local aesthetics, emotions, and ideologies. Ideology is understood here as a set of values and perspectives that shape how a group interprets social reality and determines what is considered important to display in public spaces (Federico & Malka, 2021). In the visual practice of @cianjurkuy, this ideology is reflected through the view that the daily life of the community, local traditions, public spaces, and social interactions of Cianjur residents are part of an identity that deserves to be displayed and is proud of. The visuals chosen are not only concerned with beauty, but are also designed to foster a sense of social connectedness and cultural pride. This strategy makes @cianjurkuy more than just an information or entertainment account; It exists as a digital cultural space that strengthens social ties, builds identity, and affirms the position of local culture in the social media landscape. Within Barthes' framework, it can be seen that visual communication practices like this can form meaningful shared experiences among the people of Cianjur.



Theoretically, this study emphasizes that the study of visual communication on social media should be understood alongside the accompanying pattern of audience engagement. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis helps explain how visual elements, content themes, and cultural symbols in Instagram posts @cianjurkuy form symbolic meaning at the level of denotation, connotation, and myth. Meanwhile, forms of audience engagement, such as likes, comments, and shares, can be read as expressions of social responses to visual meanings that audiences capture within the context of local experiences and identities. Thus, audience engagement is not positioned as a measure of communication effect, but rather as part of the process of meaning that takes place in the practice of digital visual communication. This finding expands the perspective on visual communication theory by showing that visual meaning and audience response are interconnected in shaping communication dynamics, especially in local community accounts on social media.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that audience engagement on Instagram should be understood not merely as a performance metric but as a semiotic response to symbolic visual communication. Through the case of @cianjurkuy, engagement emerges as a form of interpretive participation in which audiences recognize, negotiate, and circulate visual meanings embedded in locality-oriented narratives. Rather than functioning solely as aesthetic content, recurring visual themes operate as cultural signs that naturalize an ideology of harmonious locality and nostalgic cultural authenticity within digital space.

Theoretically, this research contributes to digital visual communication studies by integrating Barthes' semiotic reading with audience engagement analysis, repositioning engagement as part of an ongoing meaning-making process. This perspective challenges dominant approaches that treat engagement primarily as a quantitative indicator and instead highlights its role in sustaining symbolic narratives and in the construction of collective identity on social media.

Conceptually, the findings suggest that locality-oriented visual storytelling enables audiences to participate in the reproduction of ideological meaning through everyday digital interaction. Engagement, therefore, reflects not only attention or popularity but also the circulation of cultural myths within a networked visual environment. Future research may extend this framework by comparing different place-identity digital practices or by examining how visual myths evolve over time and across platforms, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of visual communication as a dynamic process of ideological negotiation in digital culture.

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