

SEMIOTIC STRATEGIES OF AUTHENTICITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN INDONESIAN TOURISM MARKETING

*(Strategi Semiotika untuk Autentisitas dan Keberlanjutan dalam Media Pemasaran
Pariwisata Indonesia)*

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Abstract

This study investigates how sign systems in heritage tourism marketing construct and communicate the intertwined concepts of authenticity and sustainability. By integrating Saussurean and Peircean semiotic frameworks, it develops a dual-layered analytical approach to decode both the structural composition of signs and the interpretive processes through which meaning is produced. Focusing on promotional materials from the Borobudur Temple, Sindutan Artwork at Yogyakarta International Airport, and the Dieng Plateau Culture Festival, this research shows how iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs generate multilayered meanings that shape visitors' perceptions of heritage. Iconic signs evoke visual authenticity through resemblance; indexical signs anchor heritage in credibility and continuity; and symbolic signs articulate sustainability as the enduring transmission of cultural values. Beyond descriptive analysis, the study argues that sustainability in heritage tourism operates as a semiotic process—semiosis—in which meaning itself becomes a vehicle for cultural preservation and adaptation. This theoretical reframing advances semiotic studies by positioning authenticity and sustainability not merely as managerial outcomes but as evolving sign systems. Practically, the findings guide heritage marketers and policymakers in designing communication strategies that maintain cultural integrity while remaining resonant with contemporary audiences.

Keywords: *semiotics, authenticity, sustainability, and tourism marketing*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana sistem tanda dalam pemasaran pariwisata warisan budaya mengonstruksi dan mengomunikasikan konsep autentisitas serta keberlanjutan yang saling terkait. Dengan mengintegrasikan kerangka kerja semiotika Saussurean dan Peircean, penelitian ini mengembangkan pendekatan analisis berlapis ganda untuk membedah komposisi struktural tanda serta proses interpretatif dalam memproduksi makna. Berfokus pada materi promosi Candi Borobudur, seni ilustrasi Candi Sindutan di Bandara Internasional Yogyakarta, dan Festival Budaya Dataran Tinggi Dieng, penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana tanda-tanda ikonik, indeksikal, dan simbolik menghasilkan makna berlapis yang membentuk persepsi pengunjung terhadap warisan budaya. Tanda ikonik membangkitkan otentisitas visual melalui kemiripan, tanda indeksikal menambatkan warisan budaya pada kredibilitas dan kontinuitas, dan tanda simbolik mengartikulasikan keberlanjutan sebagai transmisi nilai-nilai budaya yang bertahan lama. Di luar analisis deskriptif, studi ini berargumen bahwa keberlanjutan dalam pariwisata warisan budaya beroperasi sebagai proses semiotika di mana makna itu sendiri menjadi kendaraan bagi pelestarian dan adaptasi budaya. Pembingkai ulang teoretis ini memajukan studi semiotika dengan memosisikan autentisitas dan keberlanjutan bukan sekadar sebagai hasil manajerial, melainkan sebagai sistem tanda yang terus berevolusi. Secara praktis, temuan ini

memandu pemasar warisan budaya dan pembuat kebijakan dalam merancang strategi komunikasi yang menjaga integritas budaya sekaligus tetap relevan bagi audiens kontemporer.

Kata-kata kunci: semiotika, autentisitas, keberlanjutan, dan pemasaran pariwisata.

INTRODUCTION

Heritage tourism -- the practice of visiting sites and engaging with experiences that represent a place's historical and cultural identity -- has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors in global tourism. Unlike mass tourism, which prioritizes scale and consumption, heritage tourism emphasizes meaning, memory, and identity, offering visitors opportunities to connect with both tangible artifacts and intangible traditions. (Timothy, 2018; Geçikli et al., 2024; Qiu et al., 2022; ORTS-CARDADOR et al., 2024). This shift from passive sightseeing to immersive cultural engagement highlights heritage sites not only as physical destinations but as semiotic landscapes — spaces where symbols, narratives, and representations actively shape how culture is experienced and valued, making their semiotic significance central to understanding heritage tourism.

Two interrelated concepts dominate contemporary discourse on heritage tourism: authenticity and sustainability. Authenticity refers to the perceived genuineness of cultural expressions, artifacts, and experiences, while sustainability concerns the preservation of cultural, social, and environmental values for future generations. Scholars have argued that authenticity underpins sustainability by fostering local pride, safeguarding traditions, and attracting visitors who value genuine cultural encounters. (Bratić & Kardum Goleš, 2023). However, authenticity is also subject to commodification and staging, as destinations may present curated versions of their heritage designed to meet tourist expectations rather than reflect lived cultural realities — a tension famously described by MacCannell (2013). At the same time, staged authenticity has become an increasingly strategic narrative in

heritage marketing, signaling ecological responsibility, community participation, and cultural continuity amid concerns over overtourism and cultural exploitation.

Semiotic studies frequently focus on symbolic representations or typologies of authenticity without addressing sustainability. Conversely, sustainability research often emphasizes managerial and operational policies while overlooking how sustainability is communicated through signs and symbols. This study aims to bridge this gap by proposing that authenticity and sustainability are not separate variables or mere managerial outcomes, but are fundamentally semiotic constructs. This approach reassures readers of the significance of semiotics in understanding heritage narratives, emphasizing that these concepts are co-constructed meanings within the discourse of heritage tourism, which can inform effective strategies.

Focusing on three contrasting heritage tourism contexts in Central Java and Yogyakarta — Borobudur Temple, the Sindutan artwork at Yogyakarta International Airport, and the Dieng Culture Festival — this study examines how promotional materials deploy iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs to construct narratives of authenticity and sustainability. By doing so, it advances two main contributions. Theoretically, it reframes sustainability as a semiotic process (*semiosis*), conceptualizing it as the continuity of cultural meaning rather than merely environmental or managerial performance. In practice, it provides heritage marketers and cultural policymakers with strategies for crafting communications that preserve cultural integrity while engaging contemporary

audiences, thereby ensuring sustainable heritage promotion.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Semiotics as a Framework for Heritage Tourism.

Despite extensive research on authenticity, sustainability, and heritage representation, these strands of inquiry have developed mainly in isolation. Semiotic studies often focus on the symbolic representation of heritage or typologies of authenticity. (Thomsen & Vester, 2016); Paraskevaidis & Weidenfeld, 2021) without connecting these meanings to sustainability discourses. Conversely, sustainability research frequently emphasizes managerial practices, operational policies, or community engagement (Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011; Laing, 2011; Chhabra, 2009) while overlooking how sustainability itself is communicated through signs and symbols. This study aims to bridge these domains, as explored by Papadaki (2024) and Vallverdu-Gordi & Marine-Roig (2023), who investigate how semiotic strategies convey ecological values alongside heritage narratives. However, these studies remain partial: they often limit analysis to specific media or treat authenticity and sustainability as separate variables rather than as interdependent.

Tourism marketing operates as a complex sign system in which meaning is produced through the interaction of signs, contexts, and interpretations. This study integrates two foundational semiotic traditions to decode these systems. The Saussurean dyadic model reveals how the structural link between a signifier (the form) and a signified (the concept) encodes authenticity and sustainability.

To capture the dynamic nature of interpretation, the study also employs the Peircean triadic model, consisting of the representamen (the sign), the object, and the interpretant (the meaning produced). Within this framework, signs are categorized as iconic (resemblance), indexical (evidence), or symbolic

(convention). This dual approach encourages curiosity about how cultural meanings evolve as they are 're-semiotized' from their original contexts into modern tourism discourse, inspiring a deeper understanding of cultural change.

Drawing on both Saussure (1981) and Peirce (1934) semiotic models, the research adopts a dual analytical perspective: the Saussurean dyadic model reveals how signifiers and signifieds are structurally linked to encode authenticity and sustainability, while the Peircean triadic model illuminates how meanings emerge interpretively through representamen, object, and interpretant. This innovative integration of semiotic models aims to intrigue readers and demonstrate a comprehensive approach to understanding heritage discourse.

Constructing Authenticity: Between Genuineness and Staging

Authenticity is a cornerstone of the heritage experience. However, it is often commodified and is famously described as "staged authenticity," in which curated versions of heritage are presented to meet tourist expectations rather than reflecting lived realities. Previous scholars have categorized authenticity into various typologies, often focusing on the perceived "realness" of the visitor attraction (Zhang et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2024). However, modern research argues that authenticity must be viewed as a dynamic and multifaceted process—a semiotic outcome produced through signs that evoke emotional and historical resonance.

Sustainability as a Process of Semiosis.

While traditional sustainability research emphasizes managerial practices and community engagement, this study reframes the concept through a semiotic lens. Sustainability is conceptualized as a process of **semiosis**—the ongoing continuity and reinterpretation of cultural meaning across different media and temporal contexts. For policymakers and

heritage managers, understanding this semiotic process can inform strategies that adapt heritage narratives to changing audiences, ensuring long-term cultural relevance and preservation.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach grounded in semiotic analysis to investigate how signs in heritage tourism promotional materials construct and communicate authenticity and sustainability. (Lin & Liu, 2018; Zhang & Yin, 2020; Yi et al., 2022). Rather than treating semiotics merely as a descriptive tool, this research adopts it as an interpretive framework for understanding how cultural meaning is produced, circulated, and recontextualized through sign systems. By integrating both Saussurean and Peircean models, the analysis captures the dual nature of meaning-making: the structural relations between the signifier and the signified, and the dynamic interpretive process connecting the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. (Włodarczyk, 2022)(Kilstrup, 2015). This transformative power of semiotic analysis illuminates the intricate process of cultural meaning production in heritage tourism.

The empirical material consists of official promotional texts and visuals representing three distinct heritage contexts in Central Java and the Special Region of Yogyakarta: (1) the Borobudur Temple brochure, representing a global UNESCO heritage site; (2) the Sindutan artwork at Yogyakarta International Airport, illustrating urban cultural identity and commodification; and (3) the Dieng Culture Festival poster, representing a community-based ritual event. These cases were purposefully selected for their contrasting approaches to heritage representation—global institutionalization, cultural branding, and community-led continuity—enabling a comparative exploration of semiotic strategies across different types of heritage tourism.

The analysis followed a three-stage interpretive process. First, identification of sign systems. This process involves Identifying Visual and textual elements within the promotional materials as potential signs. This included linguistic expressions (such as slogans, taglines, and typographic choices), visual imagery (including temples, rituals, and natural symbols), institutional markers (logos and certifications), and narrative structures (storylines or sequences implied by the visuals). Second, semiotic classification and interpretation. In this process, each sign was analyzed through both Saussurean and Peircean lenses. In the Saussurean dyadic framework, the relationship between the signifier (form) and the signified (concept) was examined to reveal how the meanings of authenticity and sustainability are structurally encoded. The Peircean triadic model was then applied to interpret how representamen, object, and interpretant interact to produce layered meanings and how these meanings evolve through audience interpretation. Signs were categorized as iconic, indexical, or symbolic, revealing different modalities of meaning construction: resemblance, evidence, and convention, as well as third-order, contextual, and meta-semiotic interpretation. In the last process, beyond classification, the analysis engaged with the *meta-semiotic* dimensions of the signs, examining how meanings shift as cultural symbols move from their original contexts into tourism discourse—a process known as re-semiotization. This stage explored how heritage is not merely represented but *transformed* through promotional media, how authenticity may be curated or staged, and how sustainability is articulated as a symbolic continuity of cultural values.

Departing from conventional managerial definitions, this study conceptualizes sustainability as a semiotic process—a continuity of meaning-making across temporal, spatial, and media contexts. Rather than measuring environmental, economic, or social

performance, the analysis investigates how sign systems preserve and reinterpret cultural values, traditions, and identities for contemporary audiences. This approach situates sustainability within the realm of *semiosis*, highlighting how heritage survives through ongoing reinterpretation rather than static preservation.

This research focuses on three case studies within a specific regional context (Central Java and Yogyakarta), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the analysis is based on promotional representations rather than visitor experiences or policy outcomes. Future research could expand the scope by including cross-regional comparisons, ethnographic fieldwork, and audience reception studies to further examine how semiotic representations align with lived experiences and influence perceptions of authenticity and sustainability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION (50%)

Results

This section examines the semiotic strategies employed in three heritage tourism materials: the official Borobudur Temple brochure (front page and back description), Sindutan artwork at Yogyakarta International Airport, which represents the city's cultural atmosphere, and the official Dieng Culture Festival poster, which portrays an indigenous event.



Figure 1. Borobudur Temple's Official Brochure: Data 1a Front cover and Data 1b) Back description

Source: <https://borobudur.injourneydestination.id/en/brochure-page-2/> downloaded on 02 October 2025

Using the Saussurean model, the elegant typography of the word Borobudur in the brochure signifies prestige and cultural authenticity. The temple's size and distinctiveness are highlighted by the slogan "The Largest Buddhist Temple in the World," underscoring its significance worldwide. While official logos like UNESCO and Wonderful Indonesia imply legitimacy and authority, an image of a Buddhist statue surrounded by stupas conveys a sense of sanctity and spirituality. In addition, the cross-sectional illustration provides information and clarification, while a diagram of Borobudur's architectural layout represents the spiritual philosophy. The temple's height and the amount of stone used are numerical elements that emphasize the monument's magnitude and legitimacy.

Then, highlighting the 1991 UNESCO recognition demonstrates global approval and a commitment to conservation. Using this perspective, the brochure illustrates how various components function as signifiers to produce layered meanings: the back of the brochure offers factual and philosophical support, while the front cover highlights Borobudur's sacred and monumental attributes.

According to the Peircean model, the photograph of the temple serves as a representation, with the actual Borobudur Temple as its object and the perception of the temple as a sacred and significant location worldwide as its interpretant. The "Wonderful Indonesia" tagline represents the country's tourism identity, while the UNESCO emblem signifies global recognition. The diagrams and images on the reverse serve as symbols of the temple's architectural shape. As indices, numerical statistics provide evidence of the temple's size. Viewers are led to see Borobudur as a symbol of a spiritual journey through the explanation of Buddhist cosmology, which reveals its symbolic meaning. This method illustrates how various sign types —

namely, iconic, indexical, and symbolic — elicit different interpretations.

Overall, both the front and back covers employ a dual semiotic strategy to promote Borobudur. The front appeals to the senses and emotions by presenting the temple as sacred, monumental, and visually impressive, while the back appeals to reason by offering information on history, architecture, and spiritual philosophy. This combination presents Borobudur not just as a tourist attraction but as an authentic heritage site worthy of preservation. By linking emotional appeal with rational validation, the brochure reinforces Borobudur's image as a cultural treasure and a heritage destination that embodies both authenticity and sustainability.

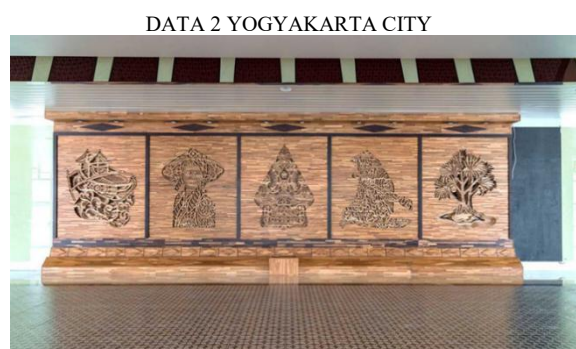


Figure 2. *Sindutan* Artwork Showcased at The Yogyakarta International Airport
Source: <https://theyakmag.com/artjog-mmxxi/> downloaded on 02 October 2025

From a Saussurean perspective, the carved ship in one of the panels serves as the signifier of Yogyakarta's maritime history, with the signified being the extensive history of trade and journeys that have connected the Indonesian archipelago. The human figure in traditional attire signifies local identity and hospitality, highlighting the importance of cultural pride in daily life. The *gunungan* motif serves as a signifier of cosmological order, signifying the natural cycle of life and the balance between the physical and spiritual realms. Similarly, the depiction of a farmer or fisherman represents agrarian values, with labor signified. Finally, the tree symbolizes fertility and sustainability, representing harmony between humans and nature. Together, these signs create a visual order that begins with a journey leading to

identity, balance, effort, and ultimately, harmony.

Through iconic, indexical, and symbolic indicators, the panels utilize the Peircean model to uncover additional levels of meaning. The ship is recognizable as a vessel, serving as an indexical reference to Yogyakarta's maritime history and as a representation of inclusivity and cross-cultural interaction. Symbolically representing hospitality and identity, the human figure is an iconic representation of a person and is indexically linked to Javanese society. The *gunungan* is a staple of Yogyakarta culture and, as part of *wayang*, represents cosmic philosophy. The farmer or fisherman is iconic in depicting work, indexical of the subsistence economy, and symbolic of dignity in labor. The tree is iconic as a tree, indexical of natural resources, and symbolic of growth and balance. Applying the Peircean model reveals that the artwork is both descriptive and interpretive, linking literal representations with deeper philosophical and cultural meanings that align with Javanese worldviews.

The *Sindutan* panels demonstrate authenticity and sustainability as analytical dimensions in cultural presentation. Authenticity is conveyed through Javanese symbols that retain their traditional meanings while being presented in a modern context, such as an airport. Sustainability is reflected in the visual narrative, which progresses from journeys and identity to cosmic balance and human labor, culminating in harmony with nature. This sequence suggests that cultural values are not only preserved but also adapted for contemporary contexts. In this way, the artwork transcends mere decoration, showcasing how Yogyakarta preserves its traditions while promoting a sustainable vision of cultural tourism.



Figure 3. Dieng Cultural Festival 2025 Official Poster
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DNo8R0tywYo/?igsh=bGldHY1NW8yNDZh>
downloaded on 02 October 2025

Using the Saussurean framework, the poster's signifiers include visual and textual elements such as the golden typography "Dieng Culture Festival," the tagline "Back to the Culture", and images of Dieng temples, traditional rituals, and cultural performances. The signified refers to Dieng's cultural identity, heritage, and collective memory as a sacred and historic landscape. The textual list of programs, including *Cukur Rambut Anak Gimbal* (Cutting the Hair of Children with Dreadlocks) and *Kirab Budaya* (Culture Parade), emphasizes the continuity and revival of tradition. Together, these signifiers and signifieds convey that the festival is not only a cultural tourism event but also a representation of Dieng's authentic heritage.

From the Peircean perspective, the representamen is the poster's visual layout featuring traditional icons such as temples, rituals, masks, and performances. The actual Dieng cultural customs and the actual locations where they are practiced are the objects. Subsequently, the interpretant is when viewers perceive the poster as a call to engage with and rediscover genuine heritage, presenting the occasion as a link between historical customs and contemporary festivities. Ancient imagery combined with modern design elements, such as typography and digital layout, also suggests that heritage can still be

appreciated in a way that is both respectful and innovative.

By emphasizing Dieng-specific ritual practices (particularly *Cukur Rambut Anak Gimbal*), the poster's semiotic approach highlights authenticity. This sense of authenticity is further reinforced by the phrase "Back to the Culture," which conveys the event as a return to its roots rather than a staged performance. The festival's communal and recurring nature serves as a vehicle for sustainability, guaranteeing the preservation and transmission of cultural practices to future generations. The poster connects cultural sustainability with current tourism appeal by combining heritage imagery with contemporary promotional design.

DISCUSSION

Authenticity and Sustainability as Semiotic Constructs

This study demonstrates that semiotic strategies in heritage tourism do more than promote destinations; they actively construct and negotiate the meanings of authenticity and sustainability for both visitors and local communities. (Suprapti & Iskandar, 2020; Chua, 2021; Kirtiklis et al., 2023). Through the deliberate selection of images, narratives, and symbols, tourism marketing becomes a site of semiosis, where cultural heritage is continuously reinterpreted, commodified, and legitimized. This aligns with Kirtiklis et al. (2023) and Chua (2021), who argue that sign systems not only reflect but also shape heritage discourse in contemporary contexts.

A key insight of this study is that authenticity and sustainability emerge as semiotic constructs rather than static attributes. Authenticity is not inherent in a site or artifact; it is produced through signification processes that evoke emotional, historical, and cultural resonance. Similarly, sustainability is not limited to ecological or managerial practices. However, it can be understood as a *semiotic continuity* — the ongoing

reinterpretation of cultural values through signs across changing contexts and media. This approach reframes sustainability as a process of meaning-making (*semiosis*), in which cultural heritage persists not solely through preservation but through continual re-signification and adaptation.

The Integration of Saussurean and Peircean Frameworks

The integration of Saussurean and Peircean models sheds light on this dynamic from complementary perspectives. The Saussurean dyadic model reveals how signifier and signified are systematically linked to communicate authenticity and identity, demonstrating how promotional materials structure meaning through stable associations. The Peircean triadic model, meanwhile, emphasizes interpretation as a dynamic process, illustrating how meaning evolves through the interaction between the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. Combining these models highlights that heritage meaning is produced both structurally and interpretively, reinforcing Su (2018) and Dai et al., (2021) argument that authenticity must be understood as a dynamic, multifaceted process rather than a fixed property.

Modes of Re-semiotisation in Heritage Representation

The findings further reveal three semiotic strategies in representing heritage: (1) global branding through iconic imagery, (2) commodification through cultural representation, and (3) reinforcement of community-led rituals. These strategies illustrate different modes of *re-semiotisation* — the transformation of cultural signs as they move from their original contexts into tourism discourse. For instance, Borobudur's sacred symbolism is reframed through institutional logos and global heritage narratives; Yogyakarta's cosmological motifs are recontextualized within a modern transportation hub; and Dieng's ritual practices are translated into

visually engaging festival promotions. Such processes exemplify how the *semiosphere* (Lotman)—the evolving space of cultural meaning—helps heritage remain relevant by continuously integrating new sign systems without severing ties to tradition.

This study also underscores the interplay between sensory and symbolic dimensions in shaping authenticity and sustainability. Iconic signs, such as images of temples and rituals, generate immediate sensory recognition and emotional resonance, anchoring authenticity in perception. Indexical signs, including institutional endorsements and numerical data, link these representations to verifiable realities, reinforcing continuity and legitimacy. Symbolic signs, such as slogans and cosmological narratives, elevate authenticity and sustainability to shared cultural values, framing heritage as a living tradition rather than a static relic.

Ultimately, the results suggest that meaning itself operates as a form of sustainability. Through continuous cycles of signification, reinterpretation, and adaptation, cultural heritage endures as a dynamic discourse rather than a preserved artifact. This semiotic perspective invites heritage scholars and practitioners to look beyond material conservation and engage with the processes by which heritage is communicated, reimagined, and made relevant to contemporary audiences. It positions semiotics not merely as an analytical tool but as a conceptual framework for understanding how authenticity and sustainability function as evolving, interdependent sign systems in the modern tourism landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how semiotic techniques in advertising materials for heritage tourism in Borobudur, Yogyakarta, and Dieng contribute to the sustainability and authenticity of these destinations. The investigation, which employed both the Peircean triadic and Saussurean dyadic frameworks, demonstrated that the structural links between signs and their

signifieds, along with the interpretive processes that shape tourists' interpretations, are the sources of meaning in tourism promotion. Symbolic signals express sustainability as the preservation of cultural values, iconic signs communicate visual authenticity, and indexical signs offer credibility and continuity. Overall, the results suggest that authenticity and sustainability are evolving symbolic concepts in heritage marketing, used to reinterpret tradition through semiotic representation. This demonstrates how meaning itself serves as a form of sustainability, ensuring that a legacy remains relevant and culturally understood in the context of modern tourism.

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