

Symbolic Economy And City Branding: Visual Semiotics Of Batam's Instagram Promotions

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Keywords

City Branding; Symbolic Economy; Visual Semiotics; Cultural Authenticity

Abstract

Existing research has examined the role of Instagram in city branding and tourism promotion, yet the formation of city identity within the symbolic economy, especially through visual meaning-making, remains underexplored. Drawing on the symbolic economy perspective, this study investigates the construction of Batam's destination brand. The study analyzed 470 posts from the official Instagram account of the Batam City Tourism and Culture Office using a qualitative visual semiotic approach. Peirce's semiotic framework and Cohen's authenticity dimensions were used to interpret representations of Malay culture. The findings show that Malay cultural elements function as symbolic resources expressed through the dimensions of origins, creativity, and genuineness. The study further suggests that social media contributes to destination promotion while functioning as a space where cultural meanings are produced and local culture acquires symbolic value in city-branding practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Cities and tourist destinations can be viewed as social and cultural spaces whose identities emerge through processes of representation and meaning-making rather than developing naturally (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2021)(Stors, 2022). Previous studies suggest that cultural heritage, collective memory, and local identity contribute substantially to the formation of cities as tourist destinations, while also providing distinctive attributes that differentiate destinations within an increasingly competitive tourism market (Qiu, 2023; Qiu et al., 2023; Zhu, 2023; Zhou et al., 2024).

From this perspective, cities as tourist destinations are defined not solely by their physical attributes but also by the symbolic meanings, narratives, and cultural interpretations through which they are perceived by tourists and local communities. In this context, city branding has developed as a way to communicate identity while also building a distinctive destination image (Chan et al., 2021).

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Recent scholarship suggests that the formation of destination identity is shaped by cultural heritage and collective memory alongside symbolic culture, urban aesthetics, and digital communication practices (Hernandez, 2021; Poulot, 2021; Speake & Kennedy, 2022). The expansion of digital platforms has transformed how destinations are represented and interpreted by audiences. Visual content, user-generated media, and platform-based interactions contribute to the formation of urban imaginaries and destination perception in digital environments (Degen & Ward, 2022; Törnberg, 2022; Törnberg & Chiappini, 2020). In this process, social media has provided a key arena for destination representation. Instagram has become a prominent platform on which destinations, cultural practices, and travel experiences are visually constructed and communicated to potential visitors (Korani et al., 2025; Yoo & Kang, 2025; Qian, 2022; Caliandro & Graham, 2020).

Existing research has established the importance of digital representation in contemporary city branding and destination development. Nevertheless, less is known about how symbolic value is generated and mobilized through social media-based branding practices. The symbolic economy perspective, which emphasizes the importance of symbols, meanings, and cultural representations as sources of urban value formation (Zukin, 1995), has seldom been adopted in studies examining Instagram-based destination branding.

Research on destination branding has largely examined cultural heritage, collective memory, creative district development, or digital placemaking as separate lines of inquiry. The relationship between cultural representation, destination branding, and the production of symbolic value in tourism promotion remains insufficiently explained.

Evidence from the city branding of Xi'an, China, shows that cultural symbols can serve as an important source of branding value, while social media representations provide a space for the production of symbolic values (Y. Wang & Feng, 2021). Nevertheless, symbolic economy was referenced primarily at a conceptual level rather than being employed as an analytical framework. The analysis was also limited to TikTok video content, leaving Instagram-based branding practices unexplored. This is particularly relevant given Instagram's role as a visual arena where place meanings are produced, circulated, and interpreted.

Authenticity provides an important lens for understanding how cultural representations operate in destination branding. Tourism research has consistently linked authenticity to the quality of tourist experiences because it shapes how visitors interpret and evaluate local culture (Nattapong & Kittichai, 2025; Liberato et al., 2022; Chen, 2023). Beyond its

influence on tourist experiences, authenticity can reinforce the differentiation and legitimacy of a destination's culture, making it an important source of symbolic value (Frenkel & Walton, 2000).

From this perspective, authenticity functions as a social resource whose meaning is continuously shaped through representation and communication. Its relevance becomes particularly apparent in digital environments where cultural symbols can be selected, framed, and circulated through visual media. In tourism studies, authenticity is commonly examined through the dimensions of origins, creativity, and genuineness, each of which contributes to the construction and communication of cultural meanings (Cohen, 2007).

The empirical focus of this study is Batam City, which in recent years has actively developed its tourism sector through various digital media-based branding initiatives, while also positioning Malay culture as an important part of the regional identity. This commitment is reflected in Regional Regulation Number 1 of 2018 on the Advancement of Malay Culture (Government of Batam City, 2018).

Alongside these cultural initiatives, local government agencies and tourism stakeholders continue to employ digital media and various tourism activities to attract both domestic and international tourists (Suali & Heryenzus, 2024). Together, these developments position Batam as a relevant case for examining how cultural symbols are incorporated into destination branding and their transformation into symbolic resources within digital communication practices.

This study focuses on the mobilization and representation of Malay cultural elements in Instagram-based destination branding practices undertaken by the Destination Management Organization (DMO) of Batam City. Three complementary perspectives inform the analysis: symbolic economy, authenticity, and visual semiotics. Drawing on symbolic economy (Zukin, 1995), authenticity (Cohen, 2007), and Pericean semiotics (Metro-Roland, 2009; Pennington & Thomsen, 2010), the analysis explores the production of cultural meanings in visual representations and their conversion into symbolic value within tourism promotion. This research contributes to ongoing debates in communication and tourism concerning the role of digital platforms in shaping the production, circulation, and commodification of cultural meanings in city branding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Place Making, City Branding, and Digital Representation

A city or other geographical tourism site emerges through social and cultural processes that shape the meanings attached to particular places (Q. Wang et al., 2024). These processes allow cities to accumulate meanings, memories, and emotions that are collectively shared by particular groups (Alesaily & Albialy, 2025).

Research on destination identity consistently highlights the role of cultural heritage and collective memory in shaping destinations and differentiating them from competing urban brands (Qiu, 2023) and (Qiu et al., 2023). These representations strengthen visitors' attachment to place while simultaneously providing a space where identities are negotiated, as observed in diaspora tourism context (Zhu, 2023). Cultural heritage and collective memory also help sustain the social and emotional significance of urban spaces by framing destinations as dynamic assemblages of symbols, memories, and meanings rather than fixed geographical entities (Zhou et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship extends this discussion by linking spatial production to symbolic culture, urban aesthetics, and city branding practices. The transformation of urban areas into tourist destinations increasingly relies on aesthetic representation, urban imaginaries, and the commodification of space alongside historical narratives and collective memory (Hernandez, 2021; Poulot, 2021; Speake & Kennedy, 2022).

Symbolic culture plays a key role in forming urban attractiveness through artistic scenes, heritage districts, and curated urban aesthetics produced by government, local communities, and tourism actors. Critiques of symbolic consumption-based urban development have prompted calls for more inclusive and socially responsive approaches to spatial justice (Čamprag, 2023).

Contemporary processes of city branding are closely intertwined with digital infrastructures and the platformization of urban space. Digital media continue to shape public perceptions of urban environments through the visualization of cities and the projection of urban futures (Degen & Ward, 2022). Research on Airbnb further highlights the role of authenticity narratives, community identity, and user-generated data in producing new urban imaginaries within digital environments (Törnberg, 2022; Törnberg & Chiappini, 2020). As destination representation more deeply embedded in digital media, symbolic place construction extends outside official branding campaigns and institutional narratives. Digital

platforms now serve as central arenas forming destination representations, interpretations, and audience experiences.

Social media occupies a central position in the circulation of destination meanings and urban identities within contemporary digital environments. Particularly, Instagram serve as a platform where urban identities are visually constructed, negotiated, and communicated through curated images and aesthetic practices (Korani et al., 2025; Yoo & Kang, 2025; Qian, 2022; Caliandro & Graham, 2020). Selective representation of places, cultures, and experiences participate in the production of destination meanings and values among potential visitors.

Authenticity in Tourism and Destination Branding

Authenticity remains a key concept in tourism studies because it influences the ways tourists interpret and evaluate their travel experiences. In cultural tourism, destination attractiveness derives from experiences that reflect local life, traditions, and culture alongside the availability of tourism attractions and resources (Trisoko et al., 2024), including authentic local gastronomy (Buenaño-Allauca et al., 2026). For this reason, authenticity strengthens the appeal of cultural destinations by fostering experiences that tourists perceive as meaningful (Nattapong & Kittichai, 2025).

Tourism experience depends as much on visitors' engagement with local social and cultural environment as on the places they visit. The position of authenticity in tourism studies has strengthened as various studies show its relevance to the quality of the tourism experience. The presence of traditions and cultural practices still observed in local communities is known to enrich the visitor experience, while perceptions of cultural authenticity are associated with more positive assessments of tourism destinations (Liberato et al., 2022).

Evidence from recent studies suggests that tourists increasingly seek closeness with the local culture and environment they visit (Chen, 2023). This growing interest has implications that extend beyond the quality of tourist experiences. In the context of competition between destinations, DMOs often draw on authenticity to cultivate distinctive identities and strengthen their appeal to visitors (Son et al., 2023; Karagöz & Uysal, 2022). When local cultural elements are perceived as authentic, these elements gain the capacity to create appeal that is not easily replicated by competing destinations.

Under these circumstances, authenticity becomes more than a cultural attribute. Its values in its capacity to support destination identity formation and reinforce place distinctiveness. This understanding is consistent with the symbolic economy perspective, which views symbols, meanings, and cultural representations as important sources of value in development of places (Zukin, 1995). From this perspective, authenticity is closely associated with cultural legitimacy and destination distinctiveness in tourism market (Frenkel & Walton, 2000).

Nevertheless, authenticity is not understood only as a characteristic intrinsically attached to a culture, tradition, or destination. In tourism practice, what is deemed authentic is often the result of selection, interpretation, and representation of particular cultural elements involving various actors, such as tourists, government agencies, tourism service providers (de Andrade-Matos et al., 2022), marketers (Paraskevaidis & Weidenfeld, 2021), local communities (Syafii et al., 2025), and tour guides (Abdellatif, 2026).. Authenticity therefore depends not only on the existence of a tradition or cultural heritage, but also on how these traditions and heritage are constructed and communicated to the public to acquire specific meaning and legitimacy.

Within tourism studies, authenticity is commonly approached as a multidimensional concept encompassing origins, creativity, and genuineness (Cohen, 2007). These dimensions highlight different ways in which authenticity may be understood and evaluated. Origins relate to historical and cultural roots, creativity emphasizes the creative process in representing culture, whereas genuineness concerns perceptions that cultural representations are perceived as sincere.

METHODS

A qualitative approach was adopted to investigate the representation of Malay culture in Batam City's branding practices through tourism-related visual materials shared on Instagram. This approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in those visual contents. Data for this study consisted of visual materials posted on the official Instagram account of the Batam City Culture and Tourism Office, also known as the Public Destination Management Organization (DMO). At the time of the research, the account featured 515 posts comprising 1,095 images and videos as we can see at figure 1.



Figure 1. Batam Department of Culture and Tourism's Official Instagram Account

These visual materials were selected purposively using two criteria that reflect the objectives of the study. Posts that merely conveyed administrative information or event announcements were excluded because they contribute little to destination-brand formation, since the study concentrated on static visual representation (Photos), video materials were also removed. This filtering process resulted in a final dataset of 470 images. The data collection and filtering processes spanned approximately one month, from early November to early December 2025.

This study interprets visual material through a Peircean semiotic framework that has been adapted to tourism studies, in which a sign is conceptualized as a triadic relation between the sign, object, and interpretant (Pennington & Thomsen, 2010; Thomsen & Vester, 2016). This framework is applied operationally to identify three categories of visual signs: icon, index, and symbol. Within this perspective, signs may appear in different forms. Icons resemble what they represent, indexes point to a factual relationship with an object, whereas symbols acquire meaning through shared cultural understandings and conventions (Echtner, 1999). The framework guided the interpretation of how Batam was visually portrayed and communicated as tourism destination across the selected Instagram posts.

The data were analysed using a two-phase visual analysis model, moving from denotative description to interpretative reading (Hunter, 2016). The first phase focused on identifying denotative meanings within the selected images. A directed content analysis was conducted using tourism authenticity framework (Cohen, 2007) as the basis coding. This

framework encompasses the dimensions of origin, creativity, and genuineness. Each image was examined to determine which dimension of authenticity was most strongly reflected in its visual elements. The coded materials were then grouped into thematic categories, allowing recurring visual patterns and dominant authenticity dimensions to be identified across dataset. This stage helped explain the ways authenticity was constructed and communicated through Batam's destination branding visuals.

Semiotic analysis was used to explore the relationship among visual forms, cultural contexts, and the meanings associated with them. In this study, icons highlighted visual similarities associated with Malay cultural practices and artifacts. Indices pointed to contextual link between cultural expressions and contemporary social settings that reflect creativity. Meanwhile, symbols were interpreted in relation to shared cultural conventions through which meanings of genuineness were communicated.

The findings of the semiotic analysis were interpreted alongside the dimensions of authenticity identified in the earlier stage of analysis (Cohen, 2007). Combining these analytical perspectives allowed the study to move beyond visual classification and examine the ways cultural elements contributed to the construction of authenticity in destination branding. This stage linked visual sign structures to the cultural meanings conveyed in the images and showed how authenticity was communicated and reinforced within Batam's Instagram-based destination branding.

This approach aligns with previous studies that have used Peircean semiotics to examine the production and stabilization of destination meanings (Pennington & Thomsen, 2010). By applying the application of semiotics and authenticity frameworks sequentially, the analysis linked visual structures to broader cultural narratives and examined the transformation of Malay culture into symbolic values within Batam's Instagram-based city branding.

Procedure / Stage of Data Analysis	Description of Data Analysis Process
Level 1 Analysis	Interpretation of each sign element in the data, consisting of several stages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each denotative element is analogized with reality and then interpreted literally. • Interpretation of each element that has been interpreted in the previous stage through theoretical and/or cultural perspectives.
Level 2 Analysis	Interpretation of the thematic relationships between particular signs and their objects using three approaches: 1. Index 2. Icon 3. Symbol
Synthesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing key elements of symbolic economy representations (authenticity). • Describing the visual themes of the symbolic economy (authenticity). • Describing various implications and presenting recommendations.

Table 1. Stages of Data Analysis

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Drawing on the symbolic economy perspective, the visual elements analyzed in this section are understood as cultural resources that acquire symbolic through city-branding practices (Zukin, 1995; Frenkel & Walton, 2000). The representations reveal how local culture is selectively reworked and circulated to strengthen destination identity and recognition. Four recurring sub-themes emerge within the broader Malay cultural theme: kenduri, gasing, kompong dan tanjak.

Kenduri

Kenduri refers to a communal celebration or ceremonial gathering practiced by Malay community for purposes such as expressing gratitude, commemorating major holidays, or conducting certain rituals. Several forms of kenduri remain part of contemporary Malay cultural life, including “Kenduri Pompong Baru” (Mardiana et al., 2022), “Kenduri Tolak Bala” (Hasbullah et al., 2017), and “Kenduri Sudah Tuai” (Arifianto et al., 2018).

Among the Bengkalis Malay community, the kenduri tradition carries significant meaning, encompassing both religious and social dimensions. Religiously, this tradition provides an opportunity to practice Islamic teachings within the framework of Malay traditional rituals. Socially, it acts as a catalyst for strengthening social relations among

community members, reinforcing family ties and brotherhood, and promoting social values such as mutual cooperation and communal togetherness (Mursela et al., 2023).

The Malay community of Batam routinely arranges Malay festivals featuring artistic and cultural performances from different regions of Indonesia and the wider Malay world. Festival performances were also presented by the local DMO into promotional materials for Batam's tourism destinations.

The prominence of the *kenduri* sub-theme can be interpreted indexically because it points to continuing presence of Malay cultural traditions (Figure 2). As a practice that remains widely observed, *kenduri* serves as a visual reference through which the tourism authority represents the existence of the Batam Malay community within the city's destination branding.

The *kenduri* theme may also be interpreted iconically in promotional materials for urban destinations. Visual representations of *kenduri* depict recognizable features of Malay culture, including traditional Malay attire, groups of individuals wearing *tanjak*, and traditional musical instruments.



Figure 2. Some examples of content highlighting the Malay *Kenduri* which performs various traditional arts of the Malay community

Gasing

Gasing has long been recognized as a traditional game within Malay culture and is regarded as part of the community's cultural heritage (Hassan et al., 2016). Today, *gasing* extends beyond its role as a traditional heritage art and is also played as a competitive sport game. The game has likewise developed into a cultural attraction for visitors (Nurul Aqillah binti Zaini, Siti Nor Ayna binti Mohd Ayu, 2021).

The presence of the *gasing* theme in the dataset is best understood indexically because it refers to a cultural practice closely associated with Malay identity. When featured in destination-promotion content, *gasing* connects Malay cultural identity with representations of Batam's tourism attractions. Its visual representation reinforces the association between Malay communities, its cultural heritage, and Batam as a tourism destination.

The dataset also contained visual representations of *gasing* performances (Figure 3 & Figure 4). As a longstanding element of Malay cultural heritage, *gasing* carries strong cultural associations. The theme is accompanied by various symbols reflecting the character or identity of the Malay community, strongly reinforcing Batam's status as a Malay destination.



Figure 3. Some examples of promotional materials depicting traditional Malay ethnic art performances called the “gasing” game



Figure 4. Depiction of the Malay cultural monument "Tugu Gasing" located in the center of Batam city

Kompong

Kompong is a traditional musical instrument commonly performed by Malay communities during ceremonial and religious occasions, including weddings, circumcision ceremonies, and religious celebrations. The continued use of kompong has been documented among Malay communities in several regions of Indonesia, including Jambi (Anugrahi, 2022) Bengkalis Riau (Ramadona et al., 2014), Tanjungban Bintan (Rakasiwi et al., 2018).

Made from wood and goat skin, the kompong is typically performed by a group of artists who may play while sitting, standing, and walking (Novison et al., 2023). In Bengkalis, the performance of the kompong often includes coordinated movements accompanied by recitations from the Barzanji, creating a more engaging experience for audiences.

Historically, kompong is intricately linked to Malay and Islamic art. This association stems from the role of kompong within hadrah performances, which have long been integrated into Malay Islamic culture (Anugrahi, 2022). He further noted that the relationship between Malay culture and Islam in kompong art is evident through the incorporation of various Malay cultural elements when playing this instrument. Such elements include Teluk Belango attire, songket cloth or sarongs, and the chanting sholawat (Ramadona et al., 2014),

recitations related to the pillars of Islam, and performing other songs with an Islamic essence (Rakasiwi et al., 2018).

The visual representations of *kompang*, such as a group of performers playing these musical instruments and a monument resembling the shape of *kompang* (figures 5 and 6) may be interpreted through multiple semiotic dimensions. First, it serves as an indexical sign. Although *kompang* originated from Arab cultural traditions, it has become closely associated with Malay cultural practices.



Figure 5. **Traditional music performance playing a Malay traditional musical instrument called kompang**

In contemporary times, this musical instrument has become integral to traditional Malay society. It has been incorporated into various Malay rituals and traditional events. Additionally, numerous Malay poems are recited with the accompaniment of this musical instrument at official local government events, including Malay ceremonies and rituals. Consequently, many individuals regard the musical instrument as an essential component of Malay culture and heritage.

The representation of *kompang* can be interpreted as indexically, because it refers to the close association this musical tradition and the Malay community itself. When featured in destination promotion materials, *kompang* reinforces the representation of Batam as a destination rooted in Malay culture.

Second, these representations may also be interpreted symbolically. This interpretation is supported by several aspects. Although *kompang* is associated with Malay culture, it is also used by other communities to accompany religious songs performed at various religious events.

There is no direct relationship between *kompang* and the Batam Malay community. Originating from Arab community traditions, *kompang* was later adopted and integrated into Malay cultural practices. Given the prominence of the Malay community as one of the city's dominant ethnic groups, *kompang* has come to symbolize the presence of the Malay community in Batam (in Figure 6). The symbolic status of *kompang* is further reflected in local government initiatives through the construction of monuments featuring several traditional Malay musical instruments, such as the *kompang*.



Figure 6. A monument in the city of Batam is designed to resemble a *kompang* and other traditional Malay musical instruments

Tanjak

The final theme identified in the dataset is *tanjak*, a traditional headgear worn by Malay males. This headdress is crafted from a long piece of folded songket cloth and is often styled in a distinctive way. For the Malay community, *tanjak* serves not only as a head covering but also embodies various philosophical meanings.

Within Malay culture, the *tanjak* carries multiple layers of meanings. Its upward-tapering form symbolizes the importance of reason, respectful communication, fairness, and virtuous conduct. The *tanjak* also conveys social identity and status, while the knot at its peak represents unity at both regional and national levels. Its use during traditional ceremonies further reflects its association with individuals who possess cultural knowledge and familiarity with customary practices (Putriana, 2023).

The *tanjak* theme reflects both indexical and iconic dimensions within the visual materials. At the indexical level, *tanjak* signifies the presence of the Malay ethnic community. Its recurring appearance in destinations-promotion materials associates Batam's tourism identity with Malay cultural presence and supports the positioning of the city as a Malay destination. Figure 7 also suggests an iconic dimension through the mosque design, which incorporates a form resembling a *tanjak*. Because *tanjak* is widely recognized as part of Malay cultural heritage, this visual resemblance reinforces the Malay character of the destination.

These signs identified through Peirce's semiotic triangle were subsequently interpreted using authenticity dimensions of origin, creativity, and genuineness. Practices, ancient or traditional ways of local communities, including customs, are part of the concept of authenticity in the dimension of origin (Cohen, 2007). Viewed through the origins dimension, the depiction of *kenduri* in figure 3 reflects authenticity because the practice remains closely associated with traditional Malay celebrations and rituals. This sense of authenticity is further strengthened by the depiction of Malay costumes and various traditional Malay musical instruments played by the artists (Figure 2).

The representation of *gasing* performances, Malay dance performances at the *kenduri* event, and *kompang* dance reflects the local DMO strategies to establish Batam as an authentic Malay destination in the dimension of creativity. These three data points highlight local artists displaying their artwork. In tourism settings, artistic performances contribute to perceptions of authenticity by showcasing creative cultural expressions in the form of dance, music, and other works of art (Daniel, 1996).

Taken together, the representations of gasing, kenduri, tanjak, and kompiang suggest that Batam's destination branding does not rely on isolated cultural elements, but on a coordinated visual strategy based on symbolic economy logic. This study shows that, while origins, creativity, and genuineness are useful analytical frameworks for understanding how authenticity is articulated, they serve as mechanisms through which cultural elements are selected, aestheticized, and transformed into symbolic meaning. This process involves visual representations that do more than just depict Malay culture, but also shape meaning and destination identity.



Figure 7. Numerous instances of content underscore the Tanjak as an integral aspect of Malay cultural heritage

The recurring visualization of monuments resembling gasing and tanjak, along with staged performances of kenduri and kompiang, indicates a branding strategy by which cultural symbols are repurposed as symbols of place, out of their everyday contexts. This illustrates institutional priorities influencing the visual grammar of destination promotion, and corresponds with the Batam City Government's cultural policy orientation, which positions Malay culture as the city's defining identity.

From this perspective, genuineness emerges not solely from historical accuracy, but also from the strategic alignment between selected cultural signs and the projected image of Batam as a Malay destination. These signs circulate through Instagram as visual references that decode complex cultural meanings into recognizable visuals. Therefore, Instagram

functions as a space for curating, standardizing, and disseminating cultural authenticity in support of city branding initiatives.

Viewed within this visual-symbolic process, Batam's destination promotion is less an exercise in cultural documentation, than a systematic representation of the destination. Those cultural elements are mobilized as a means of enhancing destination appeal, fostering differentiation within Batam's competitive tourism market, and reinforcing Batam's institutional narratives. This implies that the symbolic economy is more than mere background information, but is an active mechanism that structures how cultures are represented, valued, and commodified in social media-based city branding.

Discussion

The findings of this study support previous research emphasizing role of cultural elements in placemaking and destination formation. Intangible cultural heritage does not merely distinguish one city from another, but also serves as a source of differentiation in shaping destination identity and representation on social media (Qiu, 2023).

Comparative studies likewise show that institutional contexts and heritage-utilization strategies influence destination production across regions (Qiu et al., 2023). Cultural representation has likewise been shown to function not only as a marketing instrument, but also as a political arena and a site of identity negotiation in diasporic tourism (Zhu, 2023). Related studies identify collective memory as an important mechanism in shaping place attachment and destination narratives (Zhou et al., 2024).

The study findings also resonate with research on city branding within the symbolic economy. Cultural representation and visual aesthetics appear to generate symbolic value rather than functioning solely as promotional devices (Hernandez, 2021), (Poulot, 2021) and (Speake & Kennedy, 2022). Through selection and framing, cultural symbols become value-bearing assets whose meaning and appeal are actively shaped.

These findings add to discussions of local culture as symbolic capital in branding. In Batam, Malay culture operates as a marker of destination identity while simultaneously circulating as a visual commodity through digital platforms, shaping urban narratives and influencing how places are experienced and interpreted. Similar studies have been reported in digital city-branding research, where social media provide a space for cultural heritage to be reframed within contemporary tourism narratives. Under these conditions, cultural

symbols acquire symbolic and promotional value, strengthening destination appeal and supporting differentiation from competing destinations (Y. Wang & Feng, 2021).

Within the symbolic economy, authenticity functions less as a fixed cultural attribute than as a process through which cultural representations acquire credibility, recognizability, and economic significance. In this way, digital media become an important tool for translating cultural identity into symbolic and economic value, leading us beyond the traditional definition of authenticity.

The findings of this study also are likewise consistent with research suggesting that platform-based urban branding facilitates the commodification of cultural representation (Törnberg, 2022). In this context, culture is redefined not merely as an indicator of local identity, but as a form of symbolic capital, achieved through visual curation and digital narration. A similar pattern emerge in this study, where digital platforms shape and disseminate cultural representations for market purposes through the processes of selecting and commodifying community identity (Törnberg & Chiappini, 2020).

Viewing Batam's branding practices within a broader digital context highlights the role of platforms not only as promotional tools but also as infrastructures that mediate spatial production and influence the consumption of urban imaginaries. In this environment, authenticity emerges as a crucial resource for stabilizing and disseminating symbolic value through visual representations.

This pattern is consistent with studies on platform urbanism and digital placemaking, which describe digital visualizations as symbolic infrastructures that shape urban imaginaries and mediate the interpretation and consumption of space (Degen & Ward, 2022). This dynamic aligns with the authenticity framework, wherein the dimensions of origins, creativity, and genuineness act as mechanisms for transforming cultural expressions into forms of commercial value (Cohen, 2007). In the context of Batam, the representation of Malay culture on Instagram not only affirms the city's identity as a destination but also exemplifies how authenticity is operationalized as symbolic capital within a visually driven branding economy.

This study integrates authenticity and platform-based placemaking within a single analytical framework, illustrating how symbolic value is constructed at the representational level through digital media. Instead of considering authenticity merely as a descriptive category, this study positions it as an operative dimension within the symbolic economy that actively influences the circulation of cultural meaning. The findings further suggest that the

commodification of culture in developing cities emerges through context-specific interactions among platform infrastructures, institutional agendas, and local cultural resources.

For Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and policymakers, the study findings highlight the importance of treating cultural authenticity as a source of symbolic value in visual branding. Cultural elements can be curated as narrative resources that strengthen destination identity while supporting promotional objectives and differentiating Batam from competitive tourism markets. Attention should also be paid to more reflexive forms of digital branding governance so that local culture is not reduced to surface-level aesthetics.

CONCLUSION

This research examined Batam's destination-branding strategies in relation to cultural commodification and the dynamics of symbolic economy. The findings indicate that Malay cultural elements such as kenduri, gasing, tanjak, and kompang are selectively incorporated into representations of Batam as a genuine Malay destination. These visual and narrative elements differentiate the city within the tourism market while presenting cultural identity as a symbolic asset.

The analysis shows that authenticity is expressed through three interrelated dimensions: origins, creativity, and genuineness. Origins emerge in representation of communal Malay traditions, creativity appears in the stylized presentation of cultural performances, and genuineness is associated with emblematic artifacts that represent heritage. Together, these dimensions demonstrate how Batam's branding creates a recognizable destination identity while incorporating local culture into a symbolic economy where authenticity acquires exchange value.

The findings also point to a tension between cultural values and market-driven branding strategies. Although the use of Malay culture enhances Batam's symbolic standing in competitive tourism markets, it involves selection and standardization that may narrow the range of cultural expressions presented. In this context, authenticity functions simultaneously as a cultural resource and a branding instrument, reflecting the competing demands of cultural preservation and market-driven representation.

This study contributes to discussions of authenticity and city branding by demonstrating the role of platform-based branding practices in shaping cultural meanings. It shows how

cultural symbols are converted into symbolic and economic assets through digital visualization and highlights the importance of the symbolic economy in contemporary city branding strategies.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis relies on visual representation from a single platform and therefore may not capture the wider dynamics of symbolic production across other media environments or stakeholder groups. Future research may broaden the scope by comparing different platforms, integrating additional actors, or examining audience responses to explore how these representations are interpreted, negotiated, and challenged. Such efforts may provide a more comprehensive account of the ways city branding and the symbolic economy operate across diverse digital and social settings.

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