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Representation of Local Cultural Identity and Storytelling on Bu Rudy's Chili Sauce Packaging: A Semiotic Analysis by Roland Barthes and Iconography by Erwin Panofsky

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ABSTRACT

The product packaging of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) serves as a means of visual communication that reflects cultural identity through the use of product-related symbols and narratives. However, the relationship between visual elements, storytelling techniques, and cultural interpretation in the packaging of Sambal Bu Rudy has not been comprehensively elaborated in existing literature. This study endeavors to interpret the representation of local cultural identity along with the storytelling contained within the packaging of Sambal Bu Rudy. The uniqueness of this research lies in the integration of Roland Barthes' visual semiotics and Erwin Panofsky's iconography to analyze the relationship between the meaning of symbols, cultural background, and product identity narratives. This research adopts a qualitative methodology with an interpretive approach. Data collection was conducted through visual observation of the packaging, documentation of visual artifacts, and interviews with respondents, including the role of informants. Data analysis includes Barthes' denotation, connotation, and myth reading, as well as Panofsky's pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation. The investigation results indicate that the main visual elements signify the discovered cultural meanings, while other visual elements construct narratives about the origin, tradition, or identity of the product according to the research findings. The most significant finding is the primary cultural myth, formed from the interaction between visual signs and cultural values or beliefs. This interpretation aligns with/differs from the understanding conveyed by the informants regarding the intended use of visual elements. This research underscores that Sambal Bu Rudy's packaging communicates cultural identity through the correlation between visual symbols and product narratives. These findings can serve as a guide for MSME actors and designers in creating packaging that contextually conveys cultural narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

In the realm of food product marketing, packaging serves a dual role, acting as both a protector of the product and a communication medium that bridges brand identity, product information, and cultural representation. Visual elements such as images, colors, typography, and the interaction between text and illustrations enable packaging to convey meanings that extend beyond the physical characteristics of the food. For traditional culinary products, these elements also have the potential to evoke associations related to origin, local experience, and the inherent value of the product. A study by Heriyanto et al. (2021), which examined the branding and packaging of traditional Sundanese food and beverages in Garut, underscored the importance of linguistic and extralinguistic elements in connecting products with their cultural context and tourism promotion. Therefore, packaging can be viewed as a communication artifact that requires in-depth understanding through the relationship between visual signifiers, product narratives, and the social environment in which the product derives its meaning.

The significance of this issue becomes more prominent when traditional food packaging is faced with the need for visual identity renewal. A literature review indicates that discussions on packaging have shifted from merely product presentation aspects to the introduction of cultural identity and adaptation to contemporary markets. For instance, Wulansari et al. (2022) conducted an evaluation of Indonesian and Thai consumer perceptions regarding Indonesian cultural symbols displayed on traditional food packaging. This research positions objects, motifs, and colors as crucial elements whose ability to communicate cultural identity needs to be tested. The findings and orientation of this research suggest that the use of local symbols does not automatically guarantee clear cultural recognition; the readability of symbols also heavily depends on the audience's knowledge and context.

The dynamic between identity preservation and design modernization is further evident in the research by Steila and Erlyana (2026), which focuses on the packaging of Roti Kecik Ganep Tradisi Solo. By integrating Barthes' semiotics, visual grammar, and heritage branding, the study successfully identified challenges in conveying fragmented connotative meanings and formulated a design strategy called "Neo-Traditional." This case illustrates that the modernization of traditional food packaging involves the issue of how cultural heritage signifiers can still be communicated amidst the adjustment of product presentation to market preferences. This shift in orientation provides a crucial context for research on local food business packaging: visual renewal must be assessed not only based on its attractiveness but also on the continuity of the cultural meaning it carries.

In the context of Surabaya, Sambal Bu Rudy presents a relevant case for exploring the relationship between business history, visual identity, and local culinary representation. The official website of Depot Bu Rudy states that the business began with selling Madiun-style mixed rice and pecel through a mobile cart. Chili paste was then developed as an

accompaniment to fried shrimp, before finally being marketed in packaging with a yellow lid and the Bu Rudy logo. This history provides evidence that packaging plays a significant role in the evolution of a product from a mere side dish to a branded product. Meanwhile, the Indonesia Travel website places Bu Rudy within the context of souvenir destinations and Surabaya's culinary identity. Both sources highlight a correlation between the business's historical trajectory, its packaged products, and spatial associations that are culturally interesting to examine.

The selection of Sambal Bu Rudy as the object of this research is based on its relevance to the issue of cultural representation. First, the business history provides a background for tracing the connection between the product's origin and its brand narrative. Second, the use of the yellow lid and logo mentioned in the official history serves as an empirical starting point for analyzing how packaging signifiers acquire meaning throughout the business's development. Third, the product's association with the Surabaya souvenir market allows the research to explore how place identity is communicated through packaging. Interestingly, the business history mentions Madiun specialties, while the brand's public representation associates it with Surabaya. The complexity of this inter-contextual relationship raises questions about how origin, business development location, and culinary identity are articulated in the product narrative. This relationship is an analytical issue that requires testing through data, rather than merely initial evidence of a shift in cultural identity.

Previous research has laid important groundwork, albeit with different focuses. Heriyanto et al. (2021) explored the relationship between the verbal and visual elements of Sundanese product packaging with cultural and tourism contexts. Wulansari et al. (2022) focused on evaluating consumer perceptions of Indonesian cultural symbols. Steila and Erlyana (2026) directed a semiotic reading of Ganep packaging towards visual identity modernization strategies. Based on this comparison, the research space lies in explaining how the visual signifiers of Sambal Bu Rudy packaging interact with the business history and local identity narrative, and how this interaction can shape connotative meanings and cultural myths. This focus broadens the scope of discussion from symbol identification to tracing the relationship between visual artifacts, historical contexts, and the interpretations of stakeholders involved in the production of brand narratives.

To answer these research questions, a qualitative approach is employed, utilizing Roland Barthes' visual semiotics and Erwin Panofsky's iconography. Barthes' approach is directed towards deciphering denotative, connotative, and mythic meanings, while Panofsky's approach is utilized to explore visual descriptions, iconographic themes, and iconological meanings within historical and cultural frameworks. Observations of the packaging and documentation of visual artifacts are combined with interviews to compare the researcher's interpretations with informants' explanations regarding the use of packaging elements. Thus, cultural meanings are not solely determined by general associations with colors or images but are examined through the connections between various data sources.

This research seeks to articulate how the visual elements of Sambal Bu Rudy packaging communicate storytelling and the representation of local cultural identity. The contribution offered lies in the reading of the relationship between visual signifiers, product history, and cultural narratives through the utilization of two analytical frameworks with complementary functions, supported by interview data. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the understanding of packaging as a cultural communication practice. Practically, its results can serve as a consideration for food business players and designers

in maintaining coherence between packaging appearance renewal, brand history, and the product's cultural context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology based on an interpretive paradigm and a single case study design. The qualitative method is chosen to delve into an in-depth understanding of meanings constructed through individual experiences, collective actions, and social contexts. Meanwhile, case studies allow for a comprehensive exploration of phenomena with specific boundaries (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The subject of this research is the representation of cultural identity manifested through visual elements on Sambal Bu Rudy packaging, within the context of the culinary industry and typical Surabaya souvenir products. Three packaging variants will be analyzed as a single brand case unit, rather than as independent cases. The case study design is chosen to investigate the interconnections between packaging artifacts, product historical narratives, and information from informants within a defined environment (Yin, 2018).

The interpretive paradigm views visual meaning as a construction that requires clarification through the relationship between the visual components of packaging and their domain of use. The primary focus of this study is the relationship between visual elements, storytelling, and the embodiment of the product's cultural identity. Packaging is conceptualized as a visual communication medium, while informants serve as primary sources of information regarding product history, design considerations, and the utilization of packaging elements. The analysis will encompass visual form as well as production context and its interpretation, in line with the principles of critical visual methodology outlined by Rose (2022).

This study focuses on three designs of Sambal Bu Rudy packaging, including the Sambal Ijo, Sambal Bawang, and Sambal Bajak variants. These packages were obtained from a location referred to in the research notes as Wisata Rasa Bu Rudy in Kupang Indah, Surabaya, in January 2026. The time limit of the research refers to the period of acquisition and documentation of the packaging, not the entire evolution of the brand's packaging design. Packaging selection was done purposively, based on its high relevance to the research objectives. This purposive approach aims to identify information-rich cases or data sources that are directly related to the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion criteria include: (1) packaging of Bu Rudy brand chili paste products whose origin of acquisition can be traced; (2) the presence of clear visual and textual elements for observation; (3) conformity with the research timeframe; and (4) the potential for analyzing the relationship between brand identity, variant markers, and product narrative. In the selection process, there were no initial requirements regarding the presence of specific cultural symbols, as cultural meaning is a result to be explored through the analysis process.

Exclusion criteria include packaging of products other than chili paste, visual documentation that is insufficient for analysis, packaging whose authenticity is questionable, and promotional materials that do not represent the packaging within the case study boundaries. Packaging with identical designs will be categorized as a single design. Differences in size will be treated as separate units only if there are significant changes in visual elements or layout relevant to this study.

The unit of analysis includes the entire packaging and the interconnections between elements such as figures, logos, color schemes, typography, text, illustrations, and layout. Each element will be interpreted in relation to other elements and the overall packaging

context, to avoid interpretations based solely on associations with isolated signs. This reading approach aligns with the focus of visual methodology on composition, production processes, and the social background of an image (Rose, 2022).

In-depth interviews will be conducted with three informants selected through a purposive method, based on their expertise, experience, and involvement in this research case. This selection follows the principle of choosing informants who can provide relevant and in-depth data regarding the phenomenon being studied (Palinkas et al., 2015). The business owner or manager will be selected based on their knowledge of the product's history, business development, and brand identity. Individuals involved in the design process will be selected based on their direct participation in the design, selection of visual elements, or packaging modifications. The role and justification for selecting each informant will be documented in detail to ensure traceability of the relationship between the informant's competence and the information provided.

Data collection will be carried out through visual observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews. Observation will use an observation sheet instrument that includes identification of variants, packaging condition, visual elements (figures, logos, colors, typography, illustrations), text, and layout. Observation notes will distinguish between objective descriptions that are observed and interpretive assumptions. This separation is important to ensure that interpretations can be re-verified based on the analyzed artifacts. Documentation will include physical packaging and detailed photographs of relevant parts of the packaging. Each documentation item will be assigned an artifact code, date of acquisition, and source. Supporting documents will be used to trace the product history, packaging evolution, and the context of visual element usage. Promotional materials and the brand's website will be treated as statements or representations from the brand, not as independent evidence of consumer perception. The utilization of visual documentation and images as research material will refer to Rose's (2022) discussion on photographic documentation and its application in data collection.

Interviews will be conducted using a semi-structured approach, using the packaging or photographs of the packaging as discussion triggers. The semi-structured interview method allows the researcher to follow a prepared question guide while also developing follow-up questions based on the informant's responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Questions will cover packaging history, reasons for choosing figures and colors, use of brand names, design changes, and the correlation between packaging and product origin and local identity. The question design will be open-ended to give informants the freedom to express their views without being directed towards confirming the researcher's interpretations.

Data analysis will be conducted iteratively using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework and Erwin Panofsky's iconography. Both approaches will be used complementarily, while respecting their distinct analytical functions. Barthes' semiotics will be applied to examine the relationship between visual and verbal signs and the formation of denotative and connotative meanings (Barthes, 1977). Barthes' concept of myth will be used to analyze how socially constructed meanings can be presented as if inherent or natural to the product (Barthes, 1972). Panofsky's framework will be used to distinguish between pre-iconographical description, iconographical identification, and iconological interpretation (Panofsky, 1955). The stages of analysis will be elaborated as follows. First, the researcher will inventory the three packages and describe their visual and textual elements in detail. Second, Barthes' semiotic reading will be applied to identify denotative meanings, possible connotative associations, and the formation of myths. Connotative interpretations and

myths will be verified through analysis of the relationship between signs, informant accounts, and supporting contextual data. The determination of colors or figures as markers of authenticity, tradition, or local identity will not be done directly without adequate evidence. Third, Panofsky's approach will be applied through three levels of analysis. Pre-iconographical description will record observed forms and visual elements. Iconographical analysis will trace the identity of figures, themes, or representational conventions based on supporting evidence. Iconological interpretation will examine the correlation between these representations and the business history, cultural values, and social context of the product (Panofsky, 1955). The application of this framework to packaging is an adaptation of methods developed in visual art studies; therefore, identification and interpretation will remain based on empirical evidence from the case studied. Fourth, the reading results from each package will be compared and correlated with interview data and documentation to explain the product narrative formation process. Data will be organized in a matrix containing package codes, visual descriptions, semiotic reading results, iconographic reading results, supporting evidence, and possible alternative interpretations. This matrix will also record whether each interpretation is supported, limited, or contradicted by the existing data. Conclusions will be drawn based on the integral relationship between signs, context, and empirical evidence, not solely based on adherence to theoretical frameworks.

The credibility of the findings will be ensured through methodological triangulation and source triangulation. Triangulation involves using multiple methods or data sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Carter et al., 2014). Methodological triangulation will be conducted by comparing the results of packaging observation, interviews, and document analysis to answer the same analytical questions. For example, the identity and function of the female figure will be examined through its appearance on the label, informant explanations, and brand history documents. Packaging photographs will be used to verify the accuracy of visual descriptions, but will not be treated as independent evidence of cultural meaning. Source triangulation will be carried out by comparing accounts from the three informants and related documents on similar themes. The comparison will include aspects of consistency, complementary information, and differences in explanations. The number of informants does not automatically guarantee triangulation; its implementation is evident from the results of data comparison in the analysis matrix. Statements from the producers will be treated as clarifications of brand intent or representation, and not automatically considered as consumer interpretation.

The researcher will maintain the traceability of the analysis through an inventory of artifacts, observation notes, interview transcripts or notes, analysis matrices, and documentation of any changes in interpretive decisions. Reflective memos will be used to record the researcher's initial assumptions and identify the potential influence of the researcher's position on data interpretation. Recording reflections during the interview and analysis process will help the researcher evaluate the interpretation formation process (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Possible alternative interpretations, such as the function of color as a variant differentiator rather than a cultural symbol, will also be examined.

Ethical aspects of the research include providing clear information about the research objectives, data usage, confidentiality of identities, and the informants' right to refuse to answer or stop the interview. Written consent will be obtained before interviews and recording are conducted. Ethical considerations, participant relationships, and data utilization are integral components of semi-structured interview planning (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Informant identities will be presented in accordance with the agreements made. Direct quotes will be matched with transcripts or recordings and accompanied by

informant codes and interview dates. Summaries by the researcher will be presented in paraphrased form without quotation marks.

1. Data Collection Instruments

In this research, the researcher acts as the primary instrument, supplemented by a semi-structured interview guide, visual observation sheets, and artifact documentation forms. The interview guide is designed to elicit in-depth information from participants regarding the historical background of the products, the rationale behind packaging element choices, design evolution, and the interplay between brand identity and cultural context. The questions posed are tailored to the participant's role and utilize the packaging as a starting point for discussion. Follow-up questions are formulated to obtain concrete examples, justifications, and supporting evidence without leading participants toward pre-determined conclusions by the researcher.

Observation sheets are applied to three distinct packaging types: Sambal Ijo, Sambal Bawang, and Sambal Bajak. This instrument differentiates between descriptive recording and interpretation. Descriptive recording encompasses elements such as figures, color palettes, typography, logos, text, illustrations, and overall layout. Interpretive analysis involves the application of denotation, connotation, and myth concepts based on Barthes' framework, as well as pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation according to Panofsky's framework. Both of these analytical frameworks are presented in separate columns to maintain clarity regarding their distinct analytical functions.

Table 1. Packaging Product Identification
(Source: Aryanto. 2026)

No.	Product Photo	Sambal Varieties	Jenis Kemasan	Packaging Type	Target Market	Product Function
1		Sambal Ijo	Glass Jar	gram	Souvenirs/ Consumption Household	Chili paste ready Consume
2		Sambal Bawang	Glass Jar	gram	Souvenirs typical of Surabaya	Accompanim chili sauce
3		Sambal Bajak	Glass Jar	gram	Local Consumers and Tourists	Chili sauce Traditional

This visual observation guide has been systematically designed into three main components: artifact identification, narrative description, and interpretive analysis. Artifact identification includes encoding packaging, product variants, documentation dates, acquisition origins, material of the container, net weight as stated on the label, and the

packaging section that is the focus of observation. The narrative description component includes recording visual figures, color palettes, typographic styles, logos, presented text, illustrations, and layout arrangements. In this stage, the researcher records the observed elements without interpreting cultural meanings at the initial stage. Furthermore, interpretive analysis utilizes indicators from Barthes and Panofsky presented in separate columns. Barthes' framework is applied to examine denotative meanings, connotative associations, and the potential formation of myths that tend to normalize certain values or ideas. Meanwhile, Panofsky's framework is used to expose visible forms and actions at the pre-iconographic level, identify figures or themes through supporting references at the iconographic level, and interpret intrinsic meanings within the historical context of the industry and the socio-cultural landscape at the iconological level. The separation of these columns aims to emphasize the distinct purposes of these two frameworks, despite potential overlaps in the visual data used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the three packaging designs reveals a consistent pattern: brand identity is reinforced by the female figure and the brand name "Bu Rudy," while product variations are distinguished by the color of the bottle cap, colored areas on the label, and the name of the chili sauce variant. The representation of local identity is evident when these visual patterns are interpreted alongside the business history and brand narrative associated with Surabaya. Therefore, the connection between packaging and local culture is forged through the interconnection of symbols and their context, not solely through isolated visual elements like color or figures. The subsequent discussion will detail observation findings, identifications requiring external source support, and interpretations developed by the researcher.

1. Visual findings on the three packaging variants

The object of study in this research is the packaging of Sambal Ijo, Sambal Bawang, and Sambal Bajak products. Based on research records, these packages were obtained in January 2026. Product photo documentation shows a transparent container equipped with a screw-on lid. There is a label in the middle of the container that contains an image of a woman, the brand identity "Bu Rudy", and flavor variant descriptions. The transparent nature of the container allows the product's contents to be an integral part of the overall visual presentation. It is important to distinguish the color of the product contents visible through the container from the colors applied to the lid and label, considering these two elements have different origins and representational purposes.

Table 2. Comparison of the Three Packaging's Visual Elements
(Source: Aryanto. 2026).

Element	Sambal Ijo	Sambal Bawang	Sambal Bajak
Package lid	Green	Yellow	Red
Visible label field	Green center field with red sides	Yellow center field with red sides	Red center field with red-toned sides

Element	**Sambal Ijo**	**Sambal Bawang**	**Sambal Bajak**
Figures and brands	Female figure and the name Bu Rudy	Female figure and the name Bu Rudy	Female figure and the name Bu Rudy
Variant text	Sambal Ijo	Sambal Bawang	Sambal Bajak
Place and content	Transparent container; contents appear darker in photo	Transparent container; content appears brownish-orange	Transparent container; contents appear reddish-brown
Composition patterns	Figure above is the brand name; text below is the variant	Figure above is brand name; text variant below it	Figure above is brand name; text variant below it

The color naming in this study is descriptive, referring to visual observations of product photos, and not based on calibrated color quantification. Comparative analysis shows variations in color application on the packaging surface. For the Sambal Ijo product, green is visible on the cap and the central area of the label. The Sambal Bawang product displays a dominant yellow color in that area, with red accents on the sides of the label. Meanwhile, Sambal Bajak shows red on its cap and label. Therefore, the claim that the Sambal Bajak packaging has an overall dark red color is less accurate if not distinguished from the color of the product inside. Furthermore, variations in lighting in the photos also limit the accuracy in determining color nuances.

The three product variants are consistent in the placement of visual elements such as figures, brand names, and product text. The position of the figure above the brand name links the representation of a human figure with the product's brand identity. Below it, the variant text provides specific information about the type of chili sauce. The consistency in the placement of these elements reinforces visual continuity at the brand level. Differences in color and variant names serve as differentiating elements within this framework of continuity. These findings outline the information structure on the packaging; however, its effectiveness in facilitating consumers to identify or choose products still requires further evaluation.



Figure 1. Packaging Sambal Ijo, Sambal Bawang, and Sambal Bajak (Source: Aryanto. 2026).

2. Pre-iconographic, iconographic, and iconological reading

At the pre-iconographic level, the visual representation on the label is identified as an image of a woman associated with the name Bu Rudy. This description encompasses the manifestation of physical form and its connection to textual elements and colored areas. The determination of this figure as the founder, matriarch, or a representation of a heritage recipe is not within the scope of direct empirical observation. This classification aligns with Panofsky's (1955) framework, which distinguishes between the description of visual forms and the identification of subjects and interpretation of meanings within a cultural landscape.

At the iconographic level, the combination of the female figure and the verbal marker "Bu Rudy" indicates an interpretation focused on brand personalization. The visual is not presented independently of its verbal identity but is integrated as an essential component of the overall label design. The historical narrative regarding the origin of the business, as outlined in the text, also positions the figure of Bu Rudy as the main protagonist in the product's evolution (Depot Bu Rudy, n.d.). Nevertheless, this narrative correlation does not entirely negate the urgency to verify the visual identity through supporting evidence such as photographic documentation, design archives, or verifiable informant accounts. Therefore, confirmation of the figure's status as the founder is essential before it can be categorized as a final finding.

At the iconological level, the figurative repetition accompanying a personal name can be interpreted as a strategy to solidify human existence within the realm of a product's commercial identity. Although the three variants display different product characters, they remain tied to a single brand persona. This interpretation underscores the potential transformation of a business's history into a visual marker consistently integrated into the product. The female figuration opens a forum for discourse on the visibility of women in the narrative of the food business; the currently available data is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions about whether women's empowerment is an intrinsic goal of the design or a message successfully conveyed to consumers.

Local identity should also be understood as a relational construct that evolves throughout the historical trajectory of an enterprise. As elaborated in the introductory section, the brand's historical trajectory links the initiation of the business with authentic Madiun cuisine, while the narrative of the business's evolution places it within the spatial framework of Surabaya. This discrepancy indicates that the culinary origin, the location of business growth, and the spatial identity do not always correspond perfectly. In the context of this case study, the affiliation with Surabaya is more accurately described through the lens of the brand's development and representation in that city, rather than through the assumption that all its visual elements are inherently representative symbols of Surabaya.

3. Denotation, Connotation, and the Mechanism of Cultural Myth Formation

Analysis of myths requires explication that goes beyond mere symbolic marking. Barthes (1972) defines myth as a second-order semiotic system, where a sign that already has meaning is repurposed to convey specific social concepts. Consequently, relationships shaped by historical context are then presented as if they were inherent. Based on this framework, the following packaging study explores the observed signifiers, the possible connections, the values assumed to be natural, and the conditions concealed by this process. The use of the term "myth" here is not intended to imply falsehood in the product or brand narrative. The main focus is on how a representation creates an illusion of inevitability in the connection between product, authenticity, and local identity.

3.1 Female figures and the naturalization of authenticity

At the denotational level, the three labels display an image of a woman and the name Bu Rudy. The visual and name repetition functions as a collective signifier, binding together the various iterations. At the connotational level, this unity facilitates the interpretation of the product's association with a specific persona. The branding's inscription directs the perception of this figure to be linked with the product, not merely as a general illustration of a female figure. The signifying function of this text aligns with Barthes's (1977) argument regarding the interplay between verbal messages and visual imagery.

In the context of Indonesian address terms, the predicate "Bu" opens potential associations with social closeness and mature womanhood. When integrated with narratives of culinary experience, the brand persona can be associated as a source of expertise and a legacy of flavor. However, this predicate is also a form of respect applied beyond the familial sphere. Therefore, interpretations of maternal nurturing, domestic care, or heirloom recipes are possible readings, not inherent characteristics of every female figure or the experiences of all Indonesian consumers.

The transformation into myth occurs when the link between persona and product is interpreted as a guarantee of authenticity that no longer requires further justification. The visual representation of a woman associated with a personal name, initially serving as brand identity, transforms into a secondary indicator implying that food products originating from this figure are inherently original, quality-assured, and possess consistent taste. What is naturalized is not merely the existence of the woman but the correspondence between the persona's presence and the product's authenticity. In such an interpretation, authenticity appears directly identifiable through the product label.

The potential of such a mechanism is significant because the packaging presents a personal identity on products traded as commodities. The human signifier can encapsulate the business history into the perception of a direct relationship between the producer and the food product, while aspects like labor division, raw material sourcing, manufacturing processes, and design decisions become invisible on the label. The absence of this visibility does not necessarily indicate issues in production practices. Instead, it highlights the selective nature of representation: the packaging foregrounds an easily recognizable persona and limits the complexity of the business process presented. The symbolic implication advantageous for the brand is the potential acquisition of legitimacy through personal connection; this study has not empirically measured whether consumers indeed confer such legitimacy.

Discussion with Panofsky highlights the limits of this interpretation. Iconographical identification serves to ascertain the identity of the depicted figure through traceable references. Subsequently, iconological interpretation connects this identity to the persona's role within the historical trajectory of food practices. Barthes's analysis extends this inquiry by exploring how this identity can be constructed into an apparently inherent guarantee. There are three distinct analytical stages: establishing the figure as a founder, interpreting their historical significance, and naturalizing their authenticity. Although photographs and names on labels strengthen the personalization aspect, interview quotes or design archives remain essential for confirming the figure's identity and intended use.

3.2 Green color and the possible myth of naturalness

In the context of Sambal Ijo, the green color appears on the lid and the central area of the label, while the variant name explicitly refers to green chili paste. This correspondence

provides a stronger denotative basis compared to a mere general statement that the entire packaging is green. In the realm of connotation, the alignment between color and name allows for associations with the product's ingredients or visual presentation characteristics. Further interpretation regarding freshness and authenticity requires further testing, as color choices can also be based solely on the need for differentiation between variants.

The narrative surrounding authenticity will be effective when green markers not only indicate the type of chili sauce but are also used to display natural quality as an inherent product characteristic. The combination of visual markers (green color), variant names, and relevant verbal descriptions can transform visual cues into symbolic assurance. At this stage, knowledge of raw ingredients and processing methods can be replaced by impressions derived from visual appearance. This mythical phenomenon arises from the naturalization of the relationship between appearance and quality, not from the green color itself.

This analysis also reveals potential overlooked issues: the green appearance provides no information about the origin of ingredients, the addition of additives, preservation methods, or specific processing techniques. However, current data does not indicate that the "Sambal Ijo" label claims all these aspects, nor that manufacturers intend to convey them. Therefore, the idea of an authenticity myth should be positioned as a speculative and unverified interpretation. More substantial visual evidence is the function of color as a differentiating element between product variants. Restricting this interpretation prevents a theoretical framework that forces every color to be associated with specific cultural meanings.

Case studies of Sambal Bawang and Sambal Bajak further strengthen the urgency to analyze color relationally. The yellow color on the cap and label area of Sambal Bawang, and the red color on Sambal Bajak, function within a system of inter-product differentiation. The yellow color does not directly imply spiciness level, while the red color does not automatically prove ancestral heritage recipes. The presence of different colors under the same visual elements and brand names indicates that brand identity continuity and product diversification can occur simultaneously. Connotative analysis must first explain these relationships before making claims about cultural meaning.

3.3 Branding and naturalization of Surabaya's culinary identity

The correlation between the packaging and the city of Surabaya cannot be drawn solely based on the female figure or the color scheme of the packaging lid. Its contextual validity lies in the brand's formal narrative that links the evolution of the business with the city. The same narrative outlines the transformation of chili and onion sauce from a food accompaniment to a packaged product with a yellow lid and the Bu Rudy logo (Depot Bu Rudy, n.d.). Thus, one characteristic of the packaging can be placed within the product's historical trajectory, while the association of the other two elements with design history still requires further documentation.

On a connotative level, the brand's persona configuration and the context of business development allow the product to be interpreted as part of Surabaya's culinary landscape. However, local identity is not equivalent to the origin of all recipes or ingredients. Formal narratives also refer to Madiun's signature dishes in the early stages of the business's establishment. The interconnection between these locations indicates that the brand's culinary identity can be shaped through its business trajectory and its position within the urban space. Surabaya functions as a context for growth and brand representation, not as automatic proof that every product component exclusively originates from the city.

The potential for myth-making arises when the historical relationship between the business and the city is naturalized into the assumption that a particular brand is an inherently valid representation of Surabaya's cuisine. Formal statements about a culinary experience considered incomplete without Bu Rudy's dishes provide a foundation for understanding this mechanism. This language of completeness transforms the experience of a business into a standard for measuring the experience of a city. On a secondary level, brand markers not only identify the producer but also communicate an idea of authentic local experience. The statement of origin specifically refers to Bu Rudy's Shrimp Rice; its application to chili paste is interpreted through the same brand identity, not as an explicit claim on the entire product label.

Critically, this mechanism simplifies the diversity of the city's culinary landscape into an experience that can be represented by a single brand. The relationship formed through business growth and commercial communication becomes less visible when the product is assumed to be an inherent part of the city's identity. Packaging can perpetuate this symbolic relationship by displaying brand figures and names on distributable goods. However, acceptance of this relationship can vary between native Surabaya residents, visitors, and consumers who only know the product. This research interprets the representation offered by the brand; it has not yet proven public consensus or a social obligation to consume the product.

3.4 Assessing the wealth of local ingredients

The naming of variants such as Sambal Ijo, Sambal Bawang, and Sambal Bajak indicates product diversification. However, this evidence is insufficient to confirm sambal as a representation of local foodstuff richness. The reason is that these product names do not specify the origin of the raw materials or the specific natural resource richness of a region. If the concept of local foodstuff richness is to be analyzed, its status must be clarified as a claim or interpretation that requires further justification, not as a conclusion based on direct empirical observation.

The statement can be categorized as a mythological reading if the diversity of commercial products is used as a secondary marker for the idea that a region's natural wealth is inherent and accessible through a single trademark. The process involves transforming the diversity of product variants into a symbol of a region's natural abundance, and then considering that relationship as a certainty. Crucial questions that require answers include the types of raw materials used, the geographical origin of these materials, the parties linking product variants to local identity, and the evidence supporting these claims. Without relevant supporting information, the only conclusion that can be drawn convincingly is the existence of product variations under a single brand identity. Rejection of claims that are not supported by evidence is an integral part of the analysis, not a deficiency to be covered with added symbolism.

4. Storytelling as a synthesis of visual signs and product history

Storytelling on packaging functions through narrative condensation. Characters and personal names serve as character markers, while the chili paste name clarifies the culinary object. The repetition of the composition then maintains the connection between variants. The business's historical background provides context not fully stated on the label. Therefore, packaging is more accurately seen as a catalyst or connector of the story, rather than a complete narrative detailing the sequence of events.

This connection can be formulated as a product identity narrative: the three chili paste variants are under the same brand persona umbrella, and this persona gains local context through the business's development history. Color aids product differentiation, while characters and names maintain character continuity. The narrative regarding the recipe, business origin, and its connection to Surabaya comes from contextual sources. This differentiation indicates which parts of the story are supported by the label and which parts require documentation or interviews for further explanation.

Panofsky and Barthes have complementary functions in this synthesis. Panofsky helps identify the representation of characters or themes and their relationship to business history. Barthes helps explain how the interaction between images and text creates associations and the potential naturalization of values. Iconology is not equated with myth; the historical interpretation of a character does not automatically naturalize ideology. Similarly, denotation and pre-iconographic descriptions can refer to the same artifact but are used to answer different analytical questions.

5. Critical dialogue with previous research and study contributions

Research by Heriyanto et al. (2021) identified a correlation between verbal and visual elements on traditional Sundanese food packaging with cultural representation and tourism. Their analysis of Haruman bandrek linked the name and mountain imagery to the geographical context, while the Choco-dol packaging featured representations of Sundanese attire and art. This comparison is relevant because it highlights more explicit cultural indicators compared to the figures and colors on Bu Rudy's products. In Bu Rudy's case, the association with Surabaya is primarily clarified through its persona and business background. This study confirms the importance of the relationship between imagery, language, and context, while also limiting the view that all brand markers are automatically regional icons.

This difference also underscores the analytical contribution of this research. Packaging does not merely function to communicate culture through traditional motifs or place imagery. In the analysis of Bu Rudy's case, the business narrative becomes the bridge between brand markers and locality. However, this relationship should not be reversed into a claim that consumers will inherently recognize Surabaya from its labels. Visual findings, documentary context, and audience reception are different types of evidence. By distinguishing these three, the analysis shifts from an inventory of symbols towards an explanation of how local identity is constructed and at what point its interpretation is still limited by the available data.

Wulansari et al. (2022) present a comparison through the evaluation of cultural symbols and packaging design by Indonesian and Thai consumers. Their study indicates that symbols identified as cultural representations are not always the most preferred choice when applied to packaging. Responses also varied among respondent groups and stimuli. These findings challenge the assumption that the direct use of cultural markers results in uniform preferences or meanings. The implication for Bu Rudy's study is that the consistency of figures and colors can be described, but their influence on emotional closeness, perception of authenticity, and purchasing decisions requires testing through audience research.

The comparison of these two studies yields two important limitations. First, the connection of a sign to culture requires a source that explains this relationship; the mere presence of an image is not sufficient. Second, the representation offered by producers is not necessarily the same as the meaning received by consumers. Therefore, the contribution

of this research is an explanation of the possible mechanisms of identity construction in a specific case, rather than proof of marketing effectiveness or the attitude of society as a whole. Reception research can test whether the proposed interpretations are accepted, negotiated, or rejected by the audience.

The discussion between Panofsky and Barthes deepened this comparison. Panofsky (1955) helped situate representation within a historical and social context, while Barthes (1972) allowed for a critique of how these historical relationships are presented as if they were natural. In the case of Bu Rudy, the first analysis traced the role of the persona in the business narrative; the second analysis questioned whether the persona was used as a guarantee of authenticity and whether the brand's association with Surabaya represented the city in a seemingly natural way. These two perspectives are not considered identical: iconography does not automatically generate myth, and connotative associations are not sufficient to prove the naturalization of a value.

Practically, this analysis provides a basis for brand managers to document the relationship between the figure, the business background, and the evolution of packaging. Designers can maintain shared identity elements while clarifying differences between variants. The strengthening of local narratives needs to be based on verifiable history and sources. Testing with audiences is then necessary to ascertain whether the narrative is understood as intended and whether there are alternative interpretations that have not been considered by the producers.

6. Research limitations

This study is limited by its interpretive aspects. The analysis of connotative, iconographic, and mythological meanings is heavily influenced by the researcher's knowledge background, experiences, and perspective on food and the local cultural context. Although the use of two theoretical frameworks facilitates more focused analytical questions, it does not automatically yield fully objective interpretations. Careful separation between visual descriptions and the interpretation process, as well as evaluation of alternative explanations, for instance, the role of color in differentiating variants, helps clarify the basis for analytical decisions. Findings regarding personal closeness and authenticity should be considered as the results of an argumentative reading, rather than as the sole inherent meaning of the packaging.

The next limitation pertains to the scope of participants and the verification of interview data. Although the methodological design identified three intentionally selected informants, this number does not automatically guarantee the completeness of information or the achievement of data saturation. The informants involved in the production of the main brand were able to explain the design objectives and business history; however, this perspective does not fully represent the diversity of interpretations among consumers. Furthermore, quotations referring to the use of figures in the initial draft of the manuscript were not accompanied by informant identification, dates, or transcript references. Consequently, the identity of the figures and the reasons for selecting certain elements could not be ascertained solely based on these quotations. The conclusions drawn regarding the producers' intentions are limited by the extent to which the interview evidence can be validated.

The scope of artifact analysis is limited to three variants within a single brand case, as well as documentation that, according to research notes, is related to an acquisition in January 2026. This study has not yet covered the entire design development, size variations, promotional materials, or other chili sauce brands. Observations of color gradation based

on photographs are influenced by lighting conditions, resolution, and image reproduction; consequently, the results obtained are visual descriptions, not calibrated color measurements. Therefore, the identified patterns cannot be directly generalized as packaging characteristics of all MSMEs in Surabaya or as design changes from period to period.

Official historical sources provide access to the narratives constructed by the brand, but their selective nature and driven by representational interests limit their usefulness. These sources can support the analysis of narratives put forth by producers, but they do not serve as independent evidence that claims of authenticity, naturalness, or urban identity are accepted by the public. The absence of data regarding audience reception limits conclusions about the mechanisms of myth-making at the level of social acceptance. This research is able to demonstrate possible marking mechanisms in artifacts and brand narratives, but has not yet been able to measure their strength, reach, or impact on consumer behavior. Further study is needed to compare producer explanations with audience interview findings and other historical sources to test the transferability and limitations of the proposed interpretations.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that the graphic elements on Sambal Bu Rudy packaging create a *visual narrative* through the correlation between feminine figures, color palettes, typography, product illustrations, and aesthetic arrangements. The female figure serves as the focal point of the narrative, symbolizing the producer's identity. Meanwhile, the choice of colors and typography maintain brand identity consistency across the packaging for Sambal Ijo, Sambal Bawang, and Sambal Bajak. Product illustrations and information flow further complement the narrative by linking the producer's identity with the characteristics of the culinary product. Thus, the representation of cultural identity on the packaging is realized through the interconnection of visual elements and product context, going beyond the mere presence of a specific symbol.

The findings of this research address the research gap concerning the relationship between visual elements, *storytelling*, and cultural reception in the packaging of Sambal Bu Rudy. The integration of Barthes' semiotics and Panofsky's iconography facilitates a layered analysis of this relationship: Barthes is utilized to examine denotative and connotative meanings, as well as the potential reinforcement of cultural values, while Panofsky is employed to connect visual forms with figure identity, representational themes, and historical and socio-cultural landscapes. The contribution of this study lies in explaining the construction of visual signs into product identity narratives, as well as differentiating between visible elements, source-supported identification, and cultural interpretations by the researcher. However, this interpretive reading cannot be generalized to conclude that all consumers interpret the packaging narrative uniformly.

Based on these findings, SMEs are advised to document their business history, the identity of key figures, and the justifications behind packaging element choices as a foundation for brand narrative development. This documentation can be transformed into concise narratives on product labels or through additional information accessed via QR codes. Designers are encouraged to develop visual identity guidelines that establish permanent elements, such as figures and logos, as well as differentiating elements between variants, such as colors and product names. Packaging designs should also undergo testing with potential consumers to evaluate information clarity, ease of variant recognition, and alignment of narrative comprehension with the intended message. For regional authorities

or institutions supporting SMEs, these research findings can serve as a reference in developing packaging design assistance programs that integrate business history exploration, cultural narrative validation, and visual communication testing.

Further research is recommended to examine the comparison between the intentions of owners or designers and consumer interpretations from various demographic backgrounds to assess the suitability and variability in reading cultural identity. Longitudinal studies on packaging evolution are also relevant to understand the mechanisms of maintaining or adapting brand narratives as businesses develop. Additionally, applying the combined Barthes and Panofsky framework to other SME brands can test the effectiveness and limitations of this approach in articulating the relationship between visual symbols, *storytelling*, and cultural context. These research directions will strengthen the significance of research from a single case study towards a comparative understanding of cultural communication through SME product packaging.

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