

Visual Semiotics of Mural Art in Yogyakarta: Negotiating Cultural Identity in Urban Spaces

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ABSTRACT: This research investigates how local identity is represented in mural artworks created by urban communities in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study methodology, the study examines murals from three locations Kampung Code, Jl. Tirtodipuran, and Sayidan employing visual semiotics and thematic analysis. Findings reveal that these murals utilize traditional symbols such as wayang, batik patterns, and agrarian motifs to assert cultural continuity and communal values. The murals in Kampung Code emphasize resistance through traditional iconography, while those in Jl. Tirtodipuran depict everyday rural life, reinforcing social bonds. In Sayidan, a hybrid aesthetic emerges as young artists integrate traditional elements with contemporary street art, expressing fluid and pluralistic urban identities. The research illustrates that murals in Yogyakarta are not merely decorative but serve as powerful mediums for cultural negotiation, identity formation, and community engagement. Through public art, communities assert their presence and preserve their heritage in the face of urban change. The study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions in urban studies, visual culture, and cultural geography by offering empirical evidence on how community-based murals articulate identity, resist gentrification, and sustain cultural heritage in Yogyakarta's evolving urban landscape.

Keywords: Mural Art, Local Identity, Yogyakarta, Visual Semiotics, Urban Community, Cultural Resistance, Hybrid Aesthetics.



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INTRODUCTION

In Yogyakarta, a city renowned for its cultural vibrancy and artistic communities, mural art has emerged as a powerful medium of cultural expression that reflects identity, tradition, and urban transformation. Among the various forms of street art, mural painting occupies a unique position due to its public visibility, narrative capacity, and participatory nature. In Indonesia, the city of Yogyakarta stands out as a vibrant epicenter for urban art. Its reputation as a cultural hub is anchored not only by the presence of art institutions like the Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) but also by the active engagement of local communities in producing public art. Murals in Yogyakarta

transcend mere decorative functions; they serve as visual narratives that communicate local identity, critique social issues, and reflect the evolving dynamics of urban life.

This transformation of public space through mural art in Yogyakarta represents more than artistic innovation; it signifies an ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity, local identity and global influences. Community-based murals incorporate symbols, figures, and metaphors drawn from traditional Javanese culture, such as wayang puppetry, batik motifs, and folk legends. These elements are reinterpreted through contemporary visual styles that are often provocative and reflective. As such, murals in Yogyakarta function not only as artistic statements but also as sociopolitical texts that engage with broader public discourses.

The rise of this visual phenomenon is intertwined with the social, political, and spatial transformations of the city. Murals are not produced in a vacuum; they engage actively with the socio-cultural fabric of the community and the architecture of the urban environment. They respond to the pressures of urbanization and the global visual culture that continues to influence local modes of expression. These factors raise critical questions about how local identity is constructed and communicated in mural art, and how these works speak to both local and international audiences.

Although earlier research has examined mural art as a tool for community empowerment, few studies address how Yogyakarta's community murals specifically represent local identity through visual semiotics and cultural narratives (1,2). Specifically, few studies have examined these murals through the combined lens of visual semiotics and cultural studies. This gap is particularly significant given Yogyakarta's role as a contested space of Javanese identity and symbolic representation (3,4).

Scholars have highlighted the role of street art in shaping cultural identity within Southeast Asian cities, pointing to its capacity to foster community participation and address socio-political issues (5,6). Urbanization, as scholars note, has dramatically reshaped cultural practices, transforming traditional forms of expression into hybrid representations that resonate with contemporary urban realities (7). Murals, situated at the intersection of local heritage and urban development, often serve as symbolic acts of resistance and collective memory, amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and challenging dominant narratives (8).

Moreover, the intersection of global visual culture with local identity invites a deeper inquiry into the authenticity and agency embedded within these public artworks. As noted by Sarbu et al. (2023) and Xu et al. (2024), artists today operate in a transnational visual environment where influences cross borders, and cultural symbols are recontextualized. In this landscape, mural art becomes a site of negotiation between inherited traditions and global aesthetics, between communal values and individual creativity (9,10).

Yogyakarta, in particular, has been recognized for its vibrant art scene and its role in cultural diplomacy. Its murals reflect an ongoing engagement with both national and international narratives, making it an ideal site for examining the interplay between urban identity, public space,

and cultural representation (3). The city's complex cultural ecosystem supports artistic expressions that are at once deeply rooted in local values and responsive to global currents.

This study seeks to address the research gap by analyzing how local identity is represented in community produced murals in Yogyakarta. The research focuses on the symbolic elements, visual narratives, and socio cultural contexts underlying the creation of these artworks. Employing a qualitative methodology that integrates case studies, visual analysis, and semiotic interpretation, this study aims to contribute to the scholarly understanding of public art as a medium of cultural identity expression.

By drawing on theoretical frameworks from visual semiotics (Barthes, 1977), representation theory (Hall, 1997), and cultural geography (Lefebvre, 1991), this research situates mural art within broader discourses of space, identity, and urban transformation (11–13). It posits that murals are more than aesthetic interventions they are dynamic texts that articulate local identity and mediate the tensions between tradition and change.

Ultimately, this study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions in urban studies, cultural anthropology, and visual arts by illustrating how mural art in Yogyakarta functions as a visual medium of identity negotiation. It highlights the potential of public murals to engage communities, preserve cultural heritage, and foster inclusive urban environments. Through this lens, mural art is not merely visual ornamentation, but a potent tool for social commentary, identity formation, and cultural continuity.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study methodology. The aim is to explore how local identity is visually represented in mural artworks created by urban art communities in Yogyakarta. The case study design allows for an in depth examination of symbolic elements and cultural narratives embedded within specific mural sites, and is especially appropriate for understanding complex socio cultural phenomena in real life contexts (14).

Three key locations were selected for this study: Kampung Code, Jl. Tirtodipuran, and Sayidan in Yogyakarta. These areas were chosen due to their rich artistic presence and active participation in mural production. Each site represents different socio cultural backgrounds and artistic orientations, providing a comprehensive view of how local identity is negotiated and expressed through mural art. Particular attention was given to works associated with known local collectives, such as Mulyakarya and the Jogja Street Art Syndicate.

Data were collected over four months (March–June 2024) using participatory observation, literature review, and informal interviews. A total of 15 murals were systematically selected across Kampung Code, Jl. Tirtodipuran, and Sayidan using criteria of visibility, cultural symbolism, and community recognition. Triangulation was conducted by cross-referencing field notes, visual documentation, and interviews with 10 respondents (6 mural artists, 2 community leaders, and 2

local residents). A procedural flowchart was designed to illustrate stages of site selection, documentation, coding, and interpretation (15).

Second, a literature review was conducted using academic journals, art catalogues, and local media reports. This provided a foundational understanding of mural art practices in Yogyakarta and the broader discourses surrounding street art and identity.

Third, informal interviews were conducted where possible with mural artists and members of local art communities. These interactions, though unstructured, offered valuable insights into the motivations behind mural creation, intended messages, and perceptions of identity representation.

The primary analytical framework employed in this study is visual semiotic analysis. Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, the analysis focuses on both denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural and ideological) meanings of visual symbols (16). This method allows for a nuanced interpretation of how identity is constructed and conveyed through visual language.

While semiotic analysis is valuable for decoding layers of symbolic meaning, it also presents limitations, particularly when isolated from socio cultural context (17). To address this, the analysis was situated within broader cultural and spatial dynamics by incorporating field observations and contextual readings. This integration ensures a more holistic interpretation of public mural art.

After the initial visual analysis, thematic coding was used to identify recurring motifs, narratives, and identity markers across the three sites. Codes were derived inductively from the data, allowing themes to emerge organically rather than being imposed a priori. These themes were then interpreted in relation to theories of cultural identity, public space, and urban transformation.

The triangulation of participatory observation, literature review, and visual analysis strengthens the validity of the findings and enables a multifaceted understanding of mural art as both visual and social practice. Ultimately, this methodological framework aligns with the research goal of capturing the complexity of local identity representation in urban Yogyakarta through public art.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Mural Locations, Dominant Motifs, and Local Identity Interpretations

Mural Location	Dominant Motifs/Symbols	Interpretation of Local Identity
Kampung Code	Wayang puppets, batik parang	Attachment to classical Javanese culture and historical heritage
Jl. Tirtodipuran	Farmer figures, gamelan	Representation of labor and daily life of the local community
Sayidan	Fusion of modern and ethnic motifs	Urban-hybrid identity: local values in contemporary expression

The murals in Yogyakarta reflect a layered articulation of local identity through visual symbolism. In Kampung Code, traditional motifs like wayang and batik parang emphasize a deep-rooted cultural heritage, linking the community to Javanese classical values. Jl. Tirtodipuran showcases everyday life through depictions of farmers and gamelan, highlighting the social identity of working-class locals. Meanwhile, Sayidan presents a blend of ethnic and modern imagery, signaling a hybrid urban identity that negotiates tradition within a contemporary visual language. These murals collectively function as cultural texts that preserve, adapt, and communicate local narratives in an evolving urban space.

Kampung Code: Traditional Iconography and Cultural Resistance

The murals in Kampung Code present a compelling visual narrative that merges traditional symbolism with contemporary socio political commentary. Dominated by iconic figures such as Semar and motifs like batik parang, the artworks reflect a conscious effort to preserve and assert Javanese cultural identity in the face of urban transformation and gentrification.

Semar, a central figure in Javanese mythology, is portrayed as a moral guardian and spiritual guide. In the mural depictions, Semar is often rendered with expressive lines and set against traditional batik backgrounds, embodying resilience and collective wisdom. This choice of iconography operates as a cultural anchor, reminding viewers of the community's historical and moral foundations. The character's presence functions both as a symbolic protector of local values and as a critique of cultural erosion brought on by rapid urbanization (18–20).

The visual style of the murals incorporates elements from classical Javanese aesthetics while adapting to modern street art techniques. This combination serves to draw connections between past and present, forging a continuum of identity that remains relevant in contemporary urban life. The inclusion of batik patterns, particularly parang motifs, reinforces this continuity by invoking collective memory and heritage. The murals thus function as sites of symbolic resistance, engaging the community in a dialogue about cultural preservation and transformation (21,22).

Jl. Tirtodipuran: Agrarian Narratives and Everyday Life

Murals located along Jl. Tirtodipuran depict agrarian themes that center on the daily lives and values of local communities. The artworks highlight imagery such as farmers, traditional tools, rice fields, and communal rituals. These representations are not merely nostalgic references but active affirmations of the agrarian roots that continue to shape local identity within the urban context.

The scenes portrayed are vivid and grounded in the lived experiences of Yogyakarta's residents. By illustrating everyday labor and domestic activities, the murals celebrate resilience, cooperation, and the dignity of work. The integration of these elements underscores the significance of local knowledge and practices in shaping the social fabric of the city (23,24).

Artists employ dynamic compositions and vibrant color palettes to bring these scenes to life. The use of sequential storytelling techniques, wherein each mural segment flows into the next, creates a sense of narrative continuity. This approach transforms static walls into active storyboards that

foster community interaction and participation. Moreover, the familiarity of the depicted themes enables viewers to connect personally with the artworks, deepening their emotional and cultural resonance (20,25).

These murals also serve an educative function, especially for younger generations who may be distanced from traditional practices. Through visual storytelling, the murals transmit communal values and reinforce a collective sense of place, identity, and intergenerational continuity. They become tools for cultural education and memory preservation in an increasingly digitized and transient urban environment.

Sayidan: Hybrid Aesthetics of Urban Local Identity

Sayidan, known for its vibrant youth culture and experimental art scene, showcases murals that blend traditional motifs with modern visual languages. These artworks reflect a hybrid aesthetic wherein local cultural elements are recontextualized through contemporary forms and themes.

The murals feature stylistic juxtapositions traditional figures set against graffiti like backgrounds, ethnic motifs intertwined with pop culture references, and symbolic imagery layered with abstract expressionism. This hybridity exemplifies how young artists navigate cultural inheritance and urban modernity, crafting new forms of identity that are fluid and dynamic (2,26).

Artworks in Sayidan often emerge from collaborative processes involving multiple artists and community members. This participatory approach fosters inclusivity and ensures that the murals resonate with a broad demographic. It also allows for a diversity of voices and styles to be represented within the same visual space. As a result, the murals become communal palimpsests layered texts that reflect collective aspirations, struggles, and negotiations (27).

In thematic terms, Sayidan's murals tackle issues such as youth identity, cultural hybridity, and urban marginality. The use of localized symbols modified wayang figures, stylized flora, or reinterpretations of batik serves to anchor these narratives in place while also opening them up to global discourses. This dual function situates the murals as both locally grounded and globally conversant.

Importantly, the aesthetics of hybridity challenge traditional notions of authenticity. By blending diverse influences, the murals resist fixed categorizations and instead affirm the pluralistic realities of contemporary urban life. This visual strategy aligns with broader theoretical discussions on cultural fluidity and identity construction in urban settings (28).

Overall, the Sayidan murals exemplify how public art can serve as a platform for identity negotiation, offering a space where tradition and innovation intersect. Through their hybrid forms and participatory ethos, these artworks contribute to a more inclusive and reflective urban cultural landscape.

The findings of this study confirm that urban murals in Yogyakarta serve as more than mere decorative elements; they are potent mediums for articulating and negotiating local identity within dynamic urban landscapes. Through diverse visual strategies, these murals engage with tradition,

modernity, resistance, and community memory, offering rich insights into the spatial politics and cultural negotiations that define contemporary urban life.

In Kampung Code, the representation of Semar as a spiritual guardian illustrates how traditional figures are reactivated as political tools of cultural resistance. This corresponds with Lefebvre's theory of space production, where symbolic motifs reclaim urban walls as contested cultural territory. This reflects the argument made by SUN (2025) and Batu (2016) that visual symbols in public art perform complex cultural functions they act not only as visual mnemonics but also as communicative devices that sustain collective identity (16,29).

Such representations resonate with Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, which posits that urban space is not a passive container but a construct shaped by social practices and symbolic meanings. In this framework, murals transform physical walls into cultural texts that assert local claims over contested urban environments. They reinforce spatial belonging while also functioning as resistance to cultural erasure brought about by gentrification and urban development (30).

The visual narratives of Jl. Tirtodipuran offer further insight into the social function of murals as everyday chronicles of communal life. The celebration of agrarian identity and rural practices within an urban setting challenges binary oppositions between the rural and the urban, suggesting instead a continuity of cultural values across spatial domains. Such depictions underscore the durability of communal ethics and collective labor in shaping urban identity, aligning with García and Reyes Schade's (2023) findings on the socio symbolic power of urban public art (7).

Moreover, these murals contribute to what Sarbu et al. (2023) term "urban storytelling," whereby public art not only conveys cultural memory but also invites participation and dialogue (9). The use of sequential visual techniques and accessible iconography fosters inclusivity, allowing viewers to see their daily lives and experiences reflected in public space. In this sense, murals also perform pedagogical roles, transmitting cultural knowledge and social norms across generations.

The murals in Sayidan illuminate the processes of cultural hybridity and negotiation in a globalized urban setting. Here, the blending of traditional and modern aesthetics reflects Appadurai's (1996) notion of "scapes" fluid cultural domains shaped by global flows. Sayidan's murals embody an aesthetics of hybridity that resists fixed definitions of authenticity and instead valorizes pluralism and innovation. This hybridization is not a dilution of tradition but a dynamic rearticulation that speaks to evolving urban identities (2,17).

The participatory nature of mural production in Sayidan also aligns with broader frameworks in postcolonial and cultural studies that emphasize collaborative cultural production as a mode of resistance and empowerment (28). By involving community members and young artists in the creative process, these murals democratize cultural expression and expand the social function of art. They contribute to what Delgado Baena and Sianes (2024) describe as the reclamation of space through collective artistic action (6).

Murals also operate as interventions in the politics of memory and identity. As public and visible cultural artifacts, they enable communities to assert historical narratives that might otherwise be marginalized or forgotten. This aligns with Xu et al. (2024), who argue that murals can be

instruments of counter memory, challenging dominant histories and enabling alternative readings of urban space (10).

Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad perceived space, conceived space, and lived space offers a valuable lens for interpreting these findings. Murals reflect the lived experiences of local communities (lived space), mediate design intentions and ideologies (conceived space), and intervene in the material cityscape (perceived space). Through this framework, murals are not only outcomes of artistic labor but also agents of spatial transformation, making visible the cultural politics embedded in everyday urban life.

Crucially, these murals exemplify what Wallerstein et al. (2023) and Boston et al. (2017) identify as the potential of community art to foster civic participation and social cohesion (19,25). In creating and interacting with these artworks, communities participate in the cultural governance of their spaces. Murals thus act as accessible platforms for dialogue, enabling collective reflection on identity, belonging, and social justice.

In a broader theoretical context, this study affirms that public art is a vital medium in the negotiation of urban identity. The findings contribute to an interdisciplinary understanding of how art shapes, and is shaped by, spatial dynamics, community relationships, and cultural heritage. The Yogyakarta case highlights the specificities of Southeast Asian urbanism, where local traditions and global modernities intersect in unique configurations.

Ultimately, this research reinforces the idea that murals are living archives constantly evolving with the communities they represent. They encapsulate tensions, aspirations, and histories in visual form, offering a democratic and dynamic avenue for cultural articulation. As such, they warrant further attention within the fields of urban studies, visual culture, and participatory design, particularly as cities continue to grapple with issues of inclusion, heritage preservation, and spatial justice.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that mural art in Yogyakarta is more than a visual embellishment of public space; it functions as a dynamic medium for negotiating and expressing cultural identity. Murals in Kampung Code reaffirm Javanese heritage and act as cultural resistance against urban transformation, while those in Jl. Tirtodipuran highlight agrarian values and social cohesion rooted in everyday life. In Sayidan, hybrid aesthetics produced by young artists illustrate how traditional motifs can be reinterpreted through contemporary visual languages, reflecting pluralistic and fluid urban identities. Together, these findings emphasize the role of mural art as a living archive that preserves collective memory and mediates the interplay between tradition and modernity.

Beyond its empirical contributions, this research offers practical and theoretical implications. Policymakers and urban planners in Yogyakarta could integrate community mural initiatives into urban development strategies to strengthen cultural resilience and inclusive participation. For academia, future studies should investigate the long-term impacts of public art on intergenerational identity formation and community empowerment, particularly in contexts facing rapid urban

change. In this sense, mural art in Yogyakarta stands as both a cultural resource and a civic instrument, shaping more inclusive, expressive, and resilient urban environments.

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