



# ANALYSIS OF THE MEANING OF LOCAL CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN THE 74TH ANNIVERSARY ADVERTISEMENT "TOWARDS A SUPERIOR INDONESIA" GUDANG GARAM CIGARETTES

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## Article Info

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the semiotic construction of local cultural symbols in Gudang Garam's 74th-anniversary advertisement, titled "Towards an Excellent Indonesia." Using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, the research explores how visual and auditory elements—such as traditional costumes, dances, landscapes, and nationalistic narratives—are strategically employed to build a brand image that aligns with nationalism and cultural pride. The analysis reveals that at the denotative level, the advertisement portrays Indonesia's cultural richness through aesthetic visuals. At the connotative level, however, it embeds ideological narratives that associate the Gudang Garam brand with national unity and excellence. Through the concept of myth, the advertisement constructs a symbolic link between cigarette consumption and national identity—a connection that is manufactured rather than organic. Audience interpretations vary: some fully accept the nationalistic message (dominant reading), while others negotiate or reject it due to concerns about the ethical implications of using cultural symbols to promote tobacco products. The study concludes that while the advertisement successfully elicits national pride, it simultaneously raises critical ethical issues regarding cultural commodification in commercial advertising. The findings highlight the complex interplay between visual communication, ideology, and cultural identity, emphasizing the need for a more ethical and culturally respectful approach in future advertising strategies.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 74th anniversary advertisement by Gudang Garam, titled "Towards an Excellent Indonesia," represents a compelling form of visual communication that warrants critical scholarly attention. This advertisement does not merely promote a product but also engages in the symbolic construction of national identity through the strategic use of local cultural elements. Amid increasing regulatory constraints on tobacco advertising in Indonesia, such indirect marketing approaches—through cultural storytelling—have become both a creative strategy and a subtle form of ideological persuasion.

Indonesia, as a culturally diverse nation, provides a rich tapestry of traditional symbols, attire, dances, and landscapes that are often appropriated by the advertising industry. The inclusion of such cultural elements can create strong emotional resonance and foster national pride among audiences. However, their

use—particularly by tobacco companies—raises significant ethical questions regarding the commodification of cultural heritage and the blurring boundaries between promotion and manipulation. The use of culture as a visual language in commercial messaging becomes especially problematic when it is linked to products that pose public health concerns, such as cigarettes.

Gudang Garam, one of the largest cigarette producers in Indonesia, has long employed cultural imagery as a key branding tool. This strategy aligns with broader trends in global advertising, where local identity and nationalism are mobilized to craft emotional narratives and enhance brand appeal. However, such practices demand critical inquiry: What meanings are being constructed through these symbols? How are these meanings received and interpreted by the public? And to what extent do these advertisements shape cultural and social perceptions in a media-saturated society?

To answer these questions, this study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to examine the symbolic layers within the advertisement. Barthes distinguishes between denotative (literal) and connotative (ideological) meanings, and introduces the concept of myth—a constructed narrative that presents social values as natural or self-evident. This framework enables the analysis to uncover the deeper ideological work performed by the advertisement beyond its surface-level aesthetics.

Moreover, from a socio-cultural perspective, this study is positioned within a growing body of literature that critiques how media representations of culture intersect with commercial interests. Prior studies have shown that while cultural representation in advertising can strengthen brand identity, it also risks oversimplifying or distorting the authenticity of cultural values (Khamis, 2019; Oktavia & Nasution, 2023). This tension is particularly salient in the context of tobacco advertising, where cultural symbols are often employed to distract from the controversial nature of the product.

Therefore, this study aims not only to analyze the visual construction of cultural symbols in the Gudang Garam advertisement but also to explore audience interpretations and the broader implications for cultural identity and ethical advertising. By doing so, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of visual semiotics in contemporary marketing and invites reflection on the responsibilities of media producers in respecting cultural integrity.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore the symbolic construction of local cultural elements in the 74th-anniversary advertisement of Gudang Garam titled "Towards an Excellent Indonesia." The qualitative paradigm is chosen to allow for an in-depth interpretation of signs and symbols embedded in the advertisement, focusing on meaning-making processes rather than quantifiable measurements.

The case study method is deemed suitable for analyzing a single, specific media artifact with rich cultural content. It enables a focused examination of how visual and auditory elements function semiotically within the advertisement to construct meaning. This methodological choice facilitates a detailed investigation of the symbolic strategies employed by the brand and the socio-cultural messages conveyed through these strategies.

The analysis is grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which distinguishes three key levels of meaning: Denotation, or the literal and surface-level representation of signs (e.g., traditional clothing, dance, and landscapes); Connotation, referring to the deeper, often ideological meaning attached to those signs (e.g., national pride, unity, and identity); Myth, which Barthes defines as a socially constructed narrative that naturalizes certain cultural values, presenting them as universal or self-evident truths (e.g., the implied link between smoking and nationalism).

The advertisement is dissected frame by frame using visual documentation and descriptive analysis to identify recurring symbols, color schemes, gestures, soundtracks, and narration that serve both aesthetic and ideological functions. Each sign is interpreted through the Barthesian lens to reveal the layers of meaning constructed by the advertisement and how these meanings reinforce certain brand messages.

To enhance analytical rigor, the study also considers the broader social and regulatory context of tobacco advertising in Indonesia, particularly in relation to how brands navigate legal restrictions by relying on cultural representation. Ethical considerations and public reception are discussed in conjunction with the textual analysis to understand how meaning is received, negotiated, or resisted by different audience segments.

In summary, this methodological framework allows for a comprehensive interpretation of the advertisement as a text of cultural and ideological significance, offering insight into the interplay between commercial interests and cultural symbolism in contemporary visual media.

### 3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

#### *Results*

Through the application of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the analysis reveals that Gudang Garam's 74th-anniversary advertisement, titled "Towards an Excellent Indonesia," strategically employs various local cultural symbols to construct a compelling narrative of nationalism and brand identity. The denotative reading highlights the visual portrayal of Indonesia's cultural wealth, represented by traditional clothing, regional dances, iconic landscapes, and national flags. These elements are intentionally composed to evoke familiarity and national pride.

At the connotative level, these signs are imbued with ideological messages. The use of red and gold colors symbolizes courage and excellence, while the harmonious blend of ethnic visuals and traditional music underscores a message of unity in diversity. This symbolic layering presents Gudang Garam not just as a product but as a cultural entity aligned with Indonesia's national identity.

At the level of myth, as conceptualized by Barthes, the advertisement attempts to naturalize the association between cigarette consumption and national pride. The act of smoking, though not shown directly, is implied as a shared cultural experience that binds the people to a spirit of struggle and patriotism. This mythological association seeks to mask the controversial nature of tobacco by embedding it in a seemingly noble national narrative.

Visual documentation confirms that the product itself is barely visible, suggesting a calculated strategy to comply with advertising regulations while still embedding the brand in the public consciousness through culturally resonant symbols.

#### *Discussion*

These findings affirm that the advertisement functions not merely as a commercial tool but also as a discursive space where cultural meanings are constructed, circulated, and contested. Drawing upon Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, it is evident that while the intended (encoded) message emphasizes cultural pride and national unity, audiences may decode the message in diverse ways:

1. Dominant readings accept the association between brand and nationalism as intended.
2. Negotiated readings appreciate the cultural representation but recognize it as a commercial strategy.
3. Oppositional readings reject the commodification of cultural values and view it as a veiled promotion of a harmful product.

This multiplicity of interpretations reflects the complex interaction between visual texts and audience consciousness, reinforcing Hall's assertion that meaning is never fixed but shaped by social context, ideology, and cultural background.

The ethical dimension of this practice warrants critical attention. While the advertisement succeeds in promoting local culture and evoking emotional resonance, it simultaneously risks trivializing cultural heritage by linking it with a product known to endanger public health. This aligns with Khamis (2019) and Oktavia & Nasution (2023), who warn against the exploitation of cultural identity for commercial gain, especially when it conflicts with the well-being of society.

Moreover, the advertisement exemplifies what scholars describe as visual ideology—where aesthetics serve to normalize and legitimize underlying values and practices. By embedding the brand within the narrative of a "superior Indonesia," the advertisement blurs the line between national pride and consumer identity, a phenomenon increasingly prevalent in branding strategies of transnational and local corporations alike.

In conclusion, the Gudang Garam advertisement should be viewed not only as a creative product but as a cultural artifact—one that simultaneously celebrates and manipulates identity. It reflects the potency of semiotic communication in shaping public discourse and raises important questions about corporate responsibility, cultural authenticity, and the future direction of ethical advertising in Indonesia's media landscape.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Gudang Garam 74th-anniversary advertisement, "Towards an Excellent Indonesia," utilizes local cultural symbols not merely as aesthetic enhancements, but as strategic instruments to construct a compelling and ideologically loaded brand narrative. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the analysis reveals three distinct layers of meaning:

1. At the denotative level, the advertisement showcases traditional cultural elements—such as dances, costumes, and regional landscapes—as representations of Indonesia’s diverse heritage.
2. At the connotative level, these symbols are charged with ideological messages of nationalism, unity, and pride, constructing a narrative that closely aligns the brand with Indonesian identity and excellence.
3. At the level of myth, the advertisement subtly embeds the idea that Gudang Garam, as a cigarette brand, is inherently tied to the spirit of national struggle and cultural pride. This myth serves to naturalize a connection between cultural identity and tobacco consumption—a linkage that is constructed rather than intrinsic.

Audience responses to the advertisement reflect a spectrum of interpretations, in line with Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding theory. While some audiences embrace the message uncritically, others question or reject the underlying commercial motives and ethical implications, particularly concerning the commodification of culture in service of a controversial product.

Importantly, this research demonstrates that visual advertising, especially within regulated industries like tobacco, functions not only as a tool of persuasion but also as a medium of cultural discourse. It shapes how identities are imagined, how values are associated with brands, and how the public navigates the tension between pride and manipulation.

Thus, while the advertisement effectively capitalizes on cultural resonance to generate emotional appeal, it simultaneously raises critical ethical concerns. The use of cultural heritage in commercial messaging—especially for harmful products—necessitates a more reflective, culturally sensitive, and ethically responsible approach.

This study contributes to the field of communication and cultural studies by highlighting the symbolic power of advertising and the role of semiotics in unraveling hidden ideological messages. Future research is encouraged to further explore how visual media construct meaning in contexts where commercial, cultural, and ethical boundaries intersect.

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