

Murals as a Medium of Visual Communication: A Semiotic Analysis of Adeco's Murals in Semarang

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Abstract

Murals in urban spaces serve not only as aesthetic elements but also as a medium of communication that can represent institutions, social groups, and cultural identities. However, the meaning of a mural can change when a work created by the same artist is placed in a different spatial context. This study aims to analyze the construction of sociocultural meaning in three murals by Adeco in the city of Semarang through the lens of Roland Barthes's semiotics. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, using visual documentation of the murals at the PLN Office in Jatingaleh, Pak Widodo's Welding Shop, and Wardana Kopi as data. The data were analyzed through three levels of meaning denotation, connotation, and myth and then compared based on the spatial context of each mural. The results show that the PLN mural constructs a representation of public service and institutional image; the Bengkel Las mural represents worker identity and work culture; while the Wardana Kopi mural builds cultural identity and the image of Semarang City through a blend of historical, cultural, and popular culture icons. These findings confirm that spatial context plays a crucial role in shaping the construction of visual meaning. The novelty of this research lies in a comparative analysis of works by the same artist in different spaces, demonstrating that murals are adaptive in constructing sociocultural representations.

Keywords: Murals; Roland Barthes's semiotics; Social Representation; Visual Communication; Urban Identity

INTRODUCTION

Murals are increasingly occupying an important place in the urban visual landscape because they no longer serve merely as decorative elements, but also as a medium for communication and sociocultural representation. This phenomenon is evident in three murals by Adeco in the city of Semarang that are the subject of this study: the mural at the PLN Office in Jatingaleh, the mural at Pak Widodo's Welding Shop, and the mural at Wardana Kopi. Preliminary observations indicate that although created by the same artist, the three murals have distinct visual focuses. The PLN mural depicts workers, safety equipment, and service interactions; the Welding Shop mural highlights workers, tools, sparks, and work activities; while the Wardana Kopi mural features iconic landmarks of Semarang such as Lawang Sewu, Blenduk Church, Tugu Muda, Sam Poo Kong, and a Volkswagen vehicle. These differences indicate that the selection of visual symbols is related to the character of the spaces where the murals are located. Research developments show that murals have evolved as a medium of visual communication, a shaper of spatial identity, and a form of sociocultural representation. (Ari & Nuriarta, 2022) demonstrate that illustrations, typography, color, and layout play a role in shaping the message of a mural. (Andreas et al., 2022) discuss styles of visual communication in mural art, while (Diah & Lubis, 2023) highlight the contribution of murals to a city's visual identity. (Evitasari et al., 2023) demonstrate that murals can articulate local wisdom. The functions of murals have also expanded to include serving as a medium for education, religious representation, religious moderation, and the shaping of public spaces (Exel et al., 2025; Fairuz, 2025; Rahmatsyah Putra, 2023; Sandriani et al., 2025).

These findings confirm that murals should be understood as visual texts whose meanings are tied to social and cultural contexts. This complexity arises because a single visual element can evoke different interpretations when situated in spaces with distinct social functions. The figure of

a worker in a public service institution, for example, may be associated with professionalism and service, whereas the figure of a worker in a repair shop may represent skill, productivity, and work culture. Similarly, icons of historic buildings in commercial spaces can function as signs that connect a business to the city's image and cultural memory. Therefore, an analysis of murals must explain not only the objects depicted but also how these signs construct meaning within a specific context. Roland Barthes's semiotics is relevant to addressing this issue because it allows signs to be analyzed through the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, connotation to socio-cultural associations, while myth relates to broader cultural constructions of meaning. (Afriana et al., 2024; Hartiningrum, 2025; Hukubun, 2025; Patriansah et al., 2022) demonstrate that Barthes's approach can reveal the social, cultural, and ideological meanings underlying visual representations. In studies of murals, (Ifada & Azeharie, 2022) show that visual signs can shape social and ideological meanings, while (Oentoro et al., 2025) demonstrate that murals can represent local identity and multiculturalism through the relationship between signs and cultural context. Previous research still leaves room for further study. Some mural studies focus on specific issues, functions, locations, or communities, such as education, social criticism, religious moderation, local wisdom, and multiculturalism (Oentoro et al., 2025; Rahmatsyah Putra, 2023). Semiotic studies also generally analyze the meaning of a mural or group of murals within a specific context. Thus, there remains scope to examine how works by the same artist construct different meanings when placed in spaces with distinct social functions. This gap is particularly relevant to Adeco's three murals, which are situated in the contexts of public services, informal-sector workplaces, and commercial-cultural spaces.

To address this gap, this study treats three of Adeco's murals as a single visual corpus and analyzes them using Roland Barthes's semiotics. The analysis involves identifying figures, objects, colors, gestures, symbols, architectural icons, and composition, and then unpacking their denotative and connotative meanings as well as the resulting mythical constructions. This strategy allows the study to compare how spatial context relates to the construction of meaning in works by the same artist, without making claims about audience responses, as the study focuses on the murals as visual texts. Based on these issues and gaps, this study aims to analyze the construction of meaning in Adeco's murals in Semarang through Roland Barthes's semiotics, with a focus on identifying visual signs, analyzing denotative and connotative meanings, and revealing the socio-cultural construction of meaning across three distinct spatial contexts. The novelty of this study lies in its cross-contextual analysis of three murals by the same artist, specifically in public service spaces, informal sector workplaces, and commercial-cultural spaces. This perspective is expected to enrich the study of visual communication by demonstrating the relationship between visual signs, spatial contexts, and the construction of sociocultural representations in contemporary murals.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on the interpretation of visual signs and the construction of sociocultural meaning in murals, rather than on statistical measurements or audience responses. The research subjects consist of three murals by Adeco in the city of Semarang: the mural at the PLN Office in Jatingaleh, the mural at Pak Widodo's Welding Shop, and the mural at Wardana Kopi. These three murals were selected purposefully because they possess distinct visual characteristics and spatial contexts: a public service space, an informal sector

workspace, and a commercial-cultural space. The research was conducted from February to May 2026. The primary research data consisted of visual documentation of the three murals. The elements observed included human figures, objects, colors, gestures, symbols, architectural icons, typography, and visual composition. Data collection was carried out through direct observation at the mural sites, observation of mural documentation on Adeco's social media, photographic documentation as primary data, and a literature review as supporting data regarding murals, visual communication, and Roland Barthes's semiotics. The three murals were treated as a single visual corpus so they could be analyzed individually while also being compared based on their spatial contexts.

Data analysis was conducted using Roland Barthes's three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The denotation stage was used to identify objects and visual elements as they appear in the mural. The connotation stage involved linking visual signs to social and cultural associations based on the relationships between elements and the spatial context. Next, the mythic level was used to uncover the cultural or ideological constructions of meaning formed through these relationships between signs. This procedure was applied to each mural, and the results were then compared to identify similarities and differences in the construction of meaning across different spatial contexts (Adrianda & Agya, 2023; Afriana et al., 2024; Ifada & Azeharie, 2022). To ensure a systematic analysis process, the study employs a semiotic analysis algorithm consisting of four main stages. The first stage involves collecting and organizing visual data through observation and documentation. The second stage involves identifying signs by sorting relevant visual elements, such as figures, objects, colors, gestures, symbols, icons, typography, and composition. The third stage is semiotic analysis, which involves interpreting signs at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. The fourth stage is interpretation and comparison, which involves connecting the analysis results to the spatial context and comparing the three murals to identify patterns in the construction of sociocultural meaning.

Figure 1. Research Flow Design



Source: Developed by the researcher(s)

The validity of the interpretation was established by comparing the results of direct observation, visual documentation, supporting information from Adeco's social media, and relevant literature. The interpretation was not determined based on a single symbol in isolation, but rather by considering the relationships between visual elements and the spatial context in which the mural is located. This approach was used to maintain consistency in interpretation and reduce the likelihood of overly subjective interpretations. This study did not include interviews with the artist or the audience. Therefore, the findings are limited to the construction of meaning found in the mural's visual text based on Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis. The study is not intended to explain the public's reception or perception of the murals, but rather to reveal how the visual signs

in the three murals by Adeco form denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings within different spatial contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on observations, visual documentation, and Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis of three murals by Adeco in Semarang, it was found that murals serve not only as aesthetic elements in public spaces but also as a means of conveying social and cultural messages and the city's identity. The three analyzed murals those at the PLN Office in Jatingaleh, Semarang; Pak Widodo's Welding Shop; and Wardana Kopi Semarang demonstrate the systematic use of visual elements such as color, illustration, symbols, typography, and composition to construct specific meanings related to urban life. The research findings indicate that Adeco's murals possess communicative and contextual visual characteristics, enabling them to establish a connection between the artwork, public space, and the community as the audience. In addition to serving as artistic expressions, the murals also present social representations closely tied to the daily experiences of urban residents. Thus, the murals can be understood as visual texts containing social and cultural messages that are interpreted on multiple levels by the community. All three murals display Adeco's distinctive visual style, characterized by the use of contrasting colors, semi-realistic and cartoon-like illustrations, and dynamic visual compositions. Bright colors such as orange, red, blue, and yellow create an energetic and expressive impression, while the dense visual arrangement fosters an interactive visual experience. The research findings reveal that the symbols used by Adeco are closely tied to the social reality of Semarang's community, making the visual messages easier for the public to understand. In addition to enhancing the aesthetic value of the space, the use of familiar figures and symbols also fosters an emotional connection with the audience. This demonstrates that the murals are designed not only to be visually enjoyed but also to foster social awareness and the city's cultural identity.

1. Depictions of Public Services in the Mural at the PLN Jatingaleh Office in Semarang



Figure 1: Adeco's Mural at the PLN Office in Jatingaleh, Semarang

Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSxbancT2/>

The research findings indicate that Adeco's mural at the PLN Office in Jatingaleh, Semarang, represents public service, professional work ethics, and social solidarity. Denotatively, the mural depicts PLN workers wearing safety gear, symbols of electrical energy, and illustrations of urban residents interacting with one another. The predominance of blue and curved visual lines creates an active and dynamic impression. The open visual composition highlights the relationship between the public service institution and the community as service users. PLN workers are

positioned as central figures who play a vital role in sustaining the community's social activities. These workers are interpreted as symbols of dedication and social responsibility. The handshake gesture represents harmonious relationships and public trust in the service institution. The color orange conveys energy, optimism, and a spirit of service, while green represents balance and sustainability. From a Barthesian semiotic perspective, these visual signs construct a narrative about a public institution that is humanistic and responsive to the needs of urban communities. These findings indicate that murals are used as a visual strategy to reinforce the institution's positive image through a more communicative and persuasive approach.

2. Representations of Urban Work Culture in the Murals at Pak Widodo's Welding Shop



Figure 3: Adeco's Mural at Pak Widodo's Welding Shop

Source: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/iyYbnPYJisAgQWX98>

Unlike the PLN mural, which emphasizes the image of a public institution, the mural by Adeco Bengkel Las Pak Widodo highlights the working-class identity and aesthetics of the informal industrial sector. The depiction of active and strong welders represents the work culture of the urban working class, which is synonymous with technical skills, perseverance, and solidarity among workers. The mural depicts welders in the workshop engaged in welding activities, complete with safety gear and sparks from the welding torch. The horizontal composition and lighting effects create a dynamic and energetic work atmosphere. The workers are prominently featured, drawing the audience's attention to the ongoing work activities. This representation positions technical workers as the central subjects within the mural's visual narrative. The mural conveys meanings related to hard work, worker solidarity, and the economic struggles of urban communities. The sparks from the welding torch are interpreted as symbols of vitality and productivity, while the color orange represents courage and optimism. According to Barthes's semiotic analysis, this mural constructs a social myth about technical workers as a group that makes a significant contribution to modern society. Additionally, the mural serves as a visual branding strategy that reinforces the workshop's identity as a creative and professional industrial space. Thus, the mural functions not only as a spatial decoration but also as a representation of appreciation for the profession of urban workers.

3. Representation of the City's Identity in the Wardana Kopi Mural in Semarang



Figure 3: Adeco's Mural at Wardana Kopi in Semarang

Source: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/Ek8UP5M462kCN6pP7>

Research on the Wardana Kopi mural in Semarang reveals representations of local cultural identity and the city's tourism image. Denotatively, the mural features icons of Semarang such as Lawang Sewu, Blenduk Church, Tugu Muda, Sam Poo Kong Temple, Volkswagen (VW) vehicles, and figures of local residents with cheerful expressions. The use of bright colors and a dense visual composition creates a dynamic and interactive atmosphere. The presence of VW vehicles moving among the city's landmarks evokes a sense of urban exploration and an enjoyable tourist experience. These findings indicate that the mural was designed to present Semarang as a creative city open to popular culture. The VW vehicles are interpreted as symbols of freedom, exploration, and nostalgia for popular culture. Lawang Sewu, Blenduk Church, Sam Poo Kong Temple, and Tugu Muda represent Semarang's historical identity, while the figures of people with cheerful expressions convey the meaning of an inclusive and communicative tourism experience. From a Barthesian semiotic perspective, these visual signs construct a myth about Semarang as a modern city that continues to preserve its cultural identity. In addition to serving as aesthetic elements of commercial spaces, the murals are also used as a visual branding strategy that reinforces the identity of the place and the appeal of public spaces.

DISCUSSION

1. The Construction of Meaning in Adeco's Murals in Different Spatial Contexts

The research findings show that Adeco's three murals exhibit a relatively consistent visual style through the use of contrasting colors, semi-realistic and cartoon-like illustrations, and dynamic compositions. However, these stylistic similarities give rise to different interpretive orientations depending on the spatial context. The mural at the PLN Office in Jatingaleh represents public service and professionalism; the mural at Pak Widodo's Welding Shop represents worker identity and work culture; while the mural at Wardana Kopi represents cultural identity and the image of the city of Semarang. Thus, the meaning of a mural is shaped not only by the depicted objects but also by the relationship between visual signs and the social space in which the work is situated. In the PLN mural, the figures of workers, safety equipment, symbols of energy, service activities, and the handshake gesture denotatively depict work activities and interactions with the

community. On a connotative level, these signs point to meanings of professionalism, safety, responsibility, service, and trust. The handshake gesture, in particular, constructs a harmonious relationship between the institution and the community. On the mythical level, these signs collectively shape the representation of PLN as a professional, humanistic, and responsive public institution.

These findings expand upon the perspective of (Ari & Nuriarta, 2022), who argue that murals are a form of visual communication that constructs messages through illustrations, colors, typography, layout, as well as denotative and connotative meanings. While that study emphasized visual elements as the shapers of the message, this study demonstrates that the institutional context also directs that message toward the construction of a service image. Workers depicted in the PLN mural are thus not merely visual objects but serve as a human representation of the institution intended to be communicated to the public. In contrast to the PLN mural, the mural at Pak Widodo's Welding Shop places workers at the center of the narrative. The figures of workers wearing safety gear, engaged in welding activities, surrounded by sparks, and arranged in a dynamic composition denotatively depict technical work activities. Connotatively, these signs evoke associations of hard work, skill, productivity, perseverance, and solidarity. At the mythical level, technical workers are represented as a productive group possessing social value. The difference between the PLN mural and the Bengkel Las mural demonstrates that worker figures that are denotatively similar can generate different social meanings. In the PLN mural, workers represent the institution and its services; in the welding shop mural, workers are subjects who embody skill and work culture. This finding reinforces (Jeremiah, 2024) research that murals in specific spaces can shape identity and atmosphere, but this study expands upon it by demonstrating that such functions also emerge in institutional and workplace settings.

Meanwhile, the Wardana Kopi mural constructs meaning through Lawang Sewu, Blenduk Church, Tugu Muda, Sam Poo Kong, Volkswagen vehicles, and figures from the community. Denotatively, these symbols represent the historical, cultural, and urban life of Semarang. Connotatively, this combination evokes associations with history, cultural diversity, tourism, mobility, and popular culture. On a mythical level, the mural constructs Semarang as a modern and creative city that remains rooted in its history and culture. This finding aligns with (Oentoro et al., 2025), who demonstrate that murals can shape representations of local identity and cultural diversity through visual symbols. However, this study expands upon those findings because Semarang's identity in the Wardana Kopi mural is constructed not only through cultural heritage but also through the intersection of historical icons, popular culture, and commercial spaces. The presence of the Volkswagen alongside the city's icons demonstrates that local identity can be constructed in a hybrid manner that is, by bringing together historical elements with contemporary urban experiences.

When the three murals are compared, a clear pattern emerges: Adeco's visual style is relatively consistent, but its representational function shifts according to the spatial context. PLN focuses on service and institutional image; Bengkel Las on worker identity and work culture; and Wardana Kopi on cultural identity and the city's image. From Barthes's perspective, these differences indicate that spatial context contributes to a shift in the signs' meaning from the denotative to the connotative and mythological. This finding expands upon previous mural studies—which have largely analyzed the meaning of a specific work or theme by demonstrating that works by the same artist can produce different constructions of meaning when placed in different social spaces. Previous research on murals has also demonstrated their function as a form

of social communication and representation; however, the aspect of cross-spatial comparison of works by the same artist remains an important area for further development. Spatial context plays a role in directing the construction of visual meaning. Adeco's murals can be understood as adaptive visual communication: the artist's aesthetic character is maintained, but the visual signs acquire different representational functions according to the social needs of the space. This demonstrates that murals represent a convergence of aesthetics, spatial function, and the construction of sociocultural representation.

2. Murals as a Strategy for Social Representation and Identity

Research findings indicate that Adeco's murals serve not only as a medium of visual communication but also as a representational strategy that connects a space with the social identity it seeks to convey. The three murals display distinct patterns: the PLN mural represents the institution through depictions of workers and service relationships; the Bengkel Las mural represents a group of workers through their activities and technical skills; while the Wardana Kopi mural represents the identity of the city of Semarang through historical, cultural, and popular cultural icons. Thus, murals function by selecting, highlighting, and organizing specific signs to form a representation of who or what is being depicted. These findings reinforce the work of (Ari & Nuriarta, 2022), who demonstrated that murals can function as a medium for conveying messages through illustrations, colors, typography, layout, as well as denotative and connotative meanings. Their research positions murals as a form of communication capable of conveying information and building persuasion among the public. This study expands on that understanding by showing that murals not only convey messages but also construct representations of specific subjects. In other words, Adeco's mural does not merely say something about PLN, auto shop workers, or Semarang, but rather selects specific signs to construct a visual version of all three.

This representation is clearly evident in the PLN mural. The figures of workers wearing safety gear and performing service-related tasks not only convey information about their jobs but also build the institution's image through the portrayal of professionals who are safe and close to the community. In the Bengkel Las mural, the representation shifts from the institution to social groups. Workers are portrayed as skilled individuals who are productive and contribute to the community's economic life. Meanwhile, the Wardana Kopi mural takes a broader approach by representing the city through a selection of historical and cultural icons blended with elements of popular culture. These three patterns demonstrate that mural representations are selective: not all of reality is depicted; rather, specific aspects are chosen to construct an identity deemed relevant to the space. This finding aligns with (Vera, 2025), who demonstrated that community murals in Suryatmajan serve not only as decoration but also as representations of local identity and cultural influence ranging from the local to the global level. Through Barthes's semiotics, that study showed that visual icons in murals can shape narratives regarding cultural diversity, social history, and *communal* values within society. The difference lies in the fact that the study by Oentoro et al. focused on community murals that express collective identity and multiculturalism, whereas this study identified three distinct directions of representation in the works of the same artist: institutional representation, representation of worker groups, and representation of urban identity. This distinction demonstrates that the representational function of murals can shift from community identity toward institutional imagery and professional identity.

In the Wardana Kopi mural, the strategy of identity representation becomes increasingly complex because local identity is not constructed solely through traditional symbols. Icons such

as Lawang Sewu, Blenduk Church, Tugu Muda, and Sam Poo Kong are combined with Volkswagen vehicles and figures of local residents, resulting in an intersection of history, culture, tourism, and popular culture. This demonstrates that the city's identity in the mural is hybrid in nature shaped by the convergence of cultural heritage and contemporary urban experiences. This finding expands upon the research by (Evitasari et al., 2023), which showed that murals can serve as a medium of visual communication for local wisdom. In the case of Adeco, locality is not only preserved through cultural symbols but also negotiated with symbols of popular culture, resulting in a more contemporary image of the city. The "Bengkel Las" mural demonstrates that representational strategies can also function as a form of symbolic legitimization for groups of workers. Technical workers who in daily life are often understood primarily through their economic function are instead granted visual space as the central subjects in the mural. The depiction of work activities, safety equipment, and sparks transforms technical labor into a narrative about skill, productivity, and professionalism. Thus, murals not only reflect social reality but also imbue that reality with symbolic value. This reinforces the view that murals can be part of the construction of social meaning in public spaces, as also demonstrated by research on " " murals as a medium of communication and the shaping of social space (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Sandriani et al., 2025). Previous research has shown that murals can serve as a medium for communication, social critique, local identity, education, and multiculturalism. (Pradana et al., 2024), for example, emphasize the visual communication function of murals, while (Oentoro et al., 2025) highlight the role of murals in representing identity and cultural diversity. This study brings these two perspectives together by demonstrating that murals can function as a representational strategy that aligns visual messages with the identity of their spatial context. Thus, murals are not merely a medium that "conveys" reality, but also help determine what aspects of social reality are made visible, highlighted, and valued.

Adeco's three murals demonstrate that social representation and identity are constructed through the relationship between the depicted subjects, the chosen visual symbols, and the significance of the space where the murals are located. PLN is represented as an institution through its employees; the workshop is represented as a workspace through the identity of its workers; while Wardana Kopi is represented as a space connected to Semarang's identity through cultural and historical icons. This pattern demonstrates that murals have the capacity to serve as a medium for shaping spatial identity, rather than merely decorating a space. This finding is significant because it shows that identity in murals is not something that arises naturally, but is constructed through the process of selecting and organizing visual signs in accordance with their social context. Adeco's murals function as a strategy of representation, as each work not only depicts objects but also constructs a specific image of the institution, the workers, and the city. This serves as a powerful bridge to the third point: the novelty of the research namely, how spatial context shapes the construction of meaning in works by the same artist.

The research findings indicate that Adeco's visual characteristics are relatively consistent, but the orientation of their meaning shifts according to the social function of the space: PLN focuses on representations of service and institutional image; Bengkel Las on worker identity and work culture; and Wardana Kopi on cultural identity and the image of the city of Semarang. These findings expand upon the study of murals and Barthes's semiotics by demonstrating that the spatial context is not merely the setting in which a mural is located, but rather an integral part of the process of meaning formation. In the process of denotation, signs may appear similar, but at the level of connotation and myth, signs acquire different social orientations depending on their space.

Thus, murals can be understood as adaptive visual texts: the artist's aesthetic identity remains intact, while their representational function adapts to the character of the space. This finding reinforces the understanding that visual meaning is not entirely inherent in the object but is formed through the relationship between the sign, context, and the sociocultural system. The contribution of this research, therefore, is not only to explain the meanings of Adeco's three murals but also to offer the perspective that differences in spatial context can be a key factor in explaining the differentiation of meaning in visual works by the same artist. This perspective complements previous research, which generally analyzed murals based on a single work, location, theme, or specific community.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Adeco's murals in Semarang serve as a medium of visual communication that constructs sociocultural meaning through the relationship between visual signs and spatial context. The three murals produce distinct representational orientations: service and institutional image at PLN; worker identity and work culture at Pak Widodo's Welding Shop; and cultural identity and the image of Semarang at Wardana Kopi. The novelty of this study lies in the finding that spatial context is a key factor driving the differentiation of meaning in works by the same artist, thereby allowing murals to be understood as adaptive visual texts that bring together aesthetics, spatial function, and identity construction. The study's limitation lies in its focus on analyzing visual texts without incorporating the perspectives of either the artists or the audience; future research could expand upon these findings through reception studies, interviews, and comparisons of murals within a broader urban context.

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