

Commodification Of Cultural Identity: A Qualitative Visual Analysis Of The Semar Figure In Trademark Logos

Yayah Rukiah

Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Surakarta, 57127, Jawa Tengah
rukiah.yayah13@gmail.com

Ranang Agung Sugihartono

Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Surakarta, 57127, Jawa Tengah
ranang@ds.isi-ska.ac.id

Sarwanto

Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Surakarta, 57127, Jawa Tengah
sarwanto@isi-ska.ac.id

Sunardi

Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Surakarta, 57127, Jawa Tengah
gunowijoyo@gmail.com

Abstract

Logos are important identity markers in a trademark. This becomes interesting when many local trademarks originating from Central Java use the figure of Semar in their logos. Through observation on trademark registration sites, there are 208 trademarks that use the figure of Semar in their logos, with 108 of them officially registered. This study examines how the mythological figure of Semar is transformed and interpreted as a modern visual identity through the approach of Stuart Hall's theory of representation and identity, as well as Gillian Rose's visual methodology in the realm of the site of audiencing. The research analyzed several logos taken based on purposive sampling, then discussed in detail the visuals of the logos that contain deep historical and social significance. The results of the analysis show that the shift in medium from shadow puppets to logos changes the mechanism of audience meaning, from a narrative-pedagogical approach to instant and associative visual recognition. The use of the figure of Semar in trademark logos is not merely an aesthetic strategy, but a representational practice that negotiates Javanese cultural identity in the contemporary public space. This article concludes that the cultural identity

represented by Semar is not static, but is continuously reconstructed by the audience to build emotional bonds and cultural legitimacy amid the dynamics of modernization, one of which is through cultural commodification in the form of trademark logos.

Keyword: Commodification; Cultural Identity; Semar Figure; Trademark; Logo

1. Introduction

A Trademark is a graphic sign that differentiates one producer's goods or services from those of others, while also assisting producers, merchants, and consumers in the processes of valuation, promotion, and selection (Prasomya & Santoso, 2022). Trademarks and logos function not only as legal identifiers of goods and services but also as visual instruments through which producers distinguish products, communicate value, and shape public recognition. In contemporary visual culture, however, logos do more than mark ownership. They frequently absorb cultural symbols, memories, and local narratives, thereby turning visual identity into a site where economic interests and cultural meanings intersect

This intersection is particularly significant in Indonesia, where cultural identity remains closely tied to inherited symbolic systems, local values, and collective historical experience (Afdhal & Sayuti, 2023; Hermanto & El Adawiyah, 2020). Although technological development and media circulation have intensified cross-cultural influences, cultural symbols continue to function as important markers of local identity and social legitimacy (Hendra, 2019). In the Javanese context, cultural transformation does not necessarily eliminate foundational values, especially because Javanese culture has long operated through signs, symbols, and layered philosophical meanings (Dwikurniarini, 2015; Siswanto, 2012). One of the most enduring symbolic systems in Javanese culture is wayang, which historically functioned not only as a performance but also as a medium of communication, moral instruction, and spiritual signification (Mukti et al., 2024).

Within this Javanese symbolic tradition of wayang, Semar occupies a particularly important position. In wayang kulit purwa, Semar is not merely a supporting character, but a pamomong who embodies wisdom, ethical guidance, balance, humility, and closeness to ordinary people (Oktama et al., 2024; Rukiah et al., 2024; Siswanto, 2019; Ulfah et al., 2025). Because of this symbolic density, Semar has not remained confined to traditional performance. In contemporary public life, the figure appears as a business name, mascot, icon, and brand identity. This

transformation is especially visible in trademark practices. Based on the observation of the DJKI database, 208 trademarks were found using the figure of Semar, of which 108 were officially registered, with the strongest concentration located in Central Java, particularly Surakarta. This phenomenon indicates that Semar is not only a cultural artifact of the past, but also a living symbolic resource mobilized in the modern visual economy.

Previous studies relevant to this phenomenon may be grouped into three clusters. First, studies on the commercialization and commodification of cultural heritage generally show that when local cultural forms are adapted into commercial media, they often experience contextual reduction or a shift in meaning. Ginting et al., (2025), for example, demonstrate that the commercialization of Saung Angklung Udjo tends to weaken participatory cultural values, while Budiyanto et al. (2025) show that the reproduction of heritage in commercial art markets may shift emphasis from spirituality to market aesthetics. More broadly, studies on globalization and cultural heritage also indicate that visual heritage increasingly operates as a marketable source of brand value and creative-economy identity (Kusuma et al., 2025; Marsela, 2026; Mustakimah et al., 2024).

Second, studies on Semar itself have predominantly examined the figure within the domains of philosophy, ethics, literature, history, performance, and fine arts. Semar has been discussed as a symbol of Javanese wisdom, leadership, humility, and moral exemplarity, whether in philosophical analysis, batik creation, multicultural counseling, or contemporary painting (Al Mutaqqim & Sami, 2025; Oktama et al., 2024; Rukiah et al., 2024; Setyaputri, 2017). These studies are important in establishing the symbolic significance of Semar. Yet, they largely position him as a cultural-philosophical figure rather than as an active element in modern commercial visual systems.

Third, studies on traditional symbols in contemporary visual media suggest that cultural symbols may be repackaged for modern audiences without fully erasing their underlying meanings. Maryam & Budiwaty (2025) show that traditional symbols can be rearticulated for aesthetic and commercial purposes through contemporary visual media, while Mitchell (2005) and Rustan (2021) help clarify that visual transformation across media involves not merely formal reproduction, but also changes in the way meaning is organized, circulated, and recognized.

Previous studies have examined the commodification of heritage, the philosophical and cultural meaning of Semar, and the adaptation of traditional symbols in contemporary visual media. However, they have

not specifically explained how the figure of Semar operates in registered trademark logos as a form of visual communication design within a modern commercial space, nor have they sufficiently examined how its cultural meaning is negotiated by audiences through processes of logo-based representation and branding. In other words, the literature has not yet adequately addressed Semar as a commodified cultural sign functioning simultaneously as a trademark, a brand identity, and a medium of cultural legitimacy.

The research problem of this article, therefore, lies in the lack of scholarly explanation regarding why business actors adopt the figure of Semar into trademark logos and how that adaptation reconstructs Javanese cultural identity in the public sphere. This problem is important because the migration of Semar from wayang to trademark logos is not a neutral formal shift. It changes the mode of meaning-making: in wayang, meaning is built gradually through narrative, dialogue, and performance; in logos, meaning must operate through condensed, immediate, and associative visual recognition (Mitchell, 2005; Rustan, 2021; Ulfah et al., 2025).

This study addresses that problem through the following research question: how and why is the figure of Semar adapted into trademark logos, and what kind of identity is expressed and negotiated through that adaptation in contemporary commercial space? To answer this question, the study employs Stuart Hall's theory of representation and identity together with Gillian Rose's visual methodology, particularly the site of audiencing, in order to examine the relationship between visual form, audience interpretation, and cultural meaning (Hall, 1997; Rose, 2012).

This study offers novelty in four respects. First, it treats Semar not as a purely philosophical or performative figure, but as a visual communication object operating in registered trademark logos. Second, it situates Semar within the specific context of commercial identity formation and cultural commodification in Central Java. Third, it combines Hall's representation framework with Rose's site of audiencing to explain not only how logos are visually constructed, but also how they are socially interpreted. Fourth, it shows that commodification in this case does not simply erase cultural meaning, but selectively reconstructs Semar's symbolic legitimacy for market circulation.

Accordingly, this article aims to examine the visual representation of Semar in trademark logos as a construction of cultural identity in contemporary audience reception. By doing so, it contributes to studies of visual culture, visual communications, and branding and trademark by

showing how a traditional cultural symbol survives, adapts, and acquires renewed legitimacy in modern commercial practice.

2. Method

This research is a qualitative study focusing on visual culture. Visual culture is defined as a form of human culture that can be perceived by the sense of sight and is intertwined with meaningful culture (Wardoyo, 2020). In this study, visual aesthetics are understood not only aesthetically but also practically as generating, displaying, and interacting with social norms in the public sphere. Therefore, the Semar figure in trademark logos is utilized not merely as a design element, but also as a cultural representation operating at the intersection of tradition, identity, and the contemporary visual economy. The methodology employed is Gillian Rose's Visual Methodology, which emphasizes that visual materials can be analyzed in three ways: the site of production, the site of the image, and the site of audiencing (Rose, 2012). Based on these three sites, this research specifically focuses on the site of audience, as its primary objective is to demonstrate how the Semar figure in trademark logos is perceived, understood, and repurposed by society, particularly by brands or business actors and individuals who are aware of Javanese culture.

The main methodology used is the visual research method developed by Gillian Rose. Rose interprets a work from three perspectives, namely the site of the image itself, the site of production, and the site of audiencing (Rose, 2012). This study places particular emphasis on the site of audiencing. The site of audiencing approach, as seen highlighted in Figure 1, is used to analyze how a visual image is actively interpreted by its audience when interacting in everyday practices, particularly by business actors (brand owners) who act as both cultural audiences and producers of meaning.

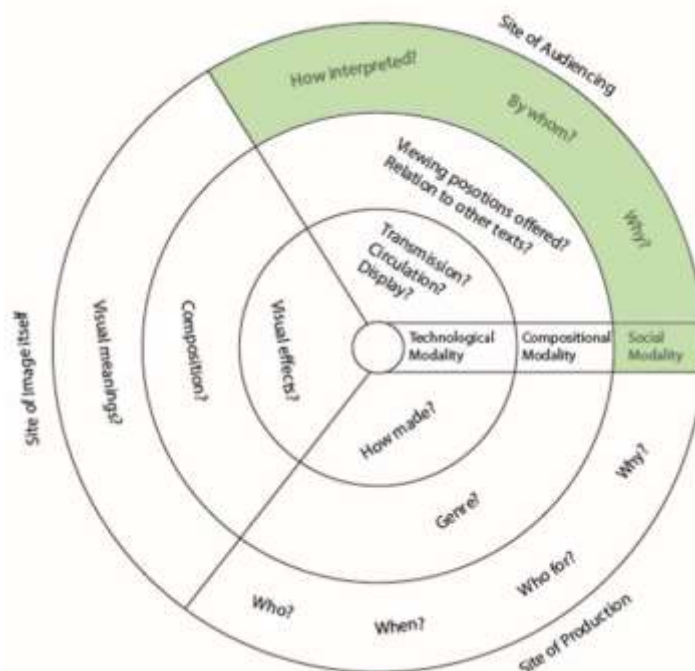


Figure 1. Research positioning within Gillian Rose's Visual Methodology framework

Source: Gillian Rose, modified by Rukiah, 2026

Based on the aforementioned diagram, this research focuses on the site of audience as the center of analysis because the Semar figure is understood as the result of the interaction between visual quotations, social interactions, memory culture, and the context of use. In this regard, the analysis is conducted in three steps: how interpreted?, by whom?, and why?

The first step, how interpreted?, is used to examine how the Semar figure in logos is interpreted by the audience through visual elements, cultural associations, social experiences, and everyday contexts. The data for this phase consists of trademark logos using the Semar figure, obtained through observation, analysis, documentation, and visual classification within the DJKI database. Based on initial observations, there are 108 registered trademarks using the Semar figure. From this population, a sample was selected using purposive sampling, which is a sample selection method based on criteria relevant to the research objectives (Suriani et al., 2023). The criteria used include: the logo clearly depicts the figure or attributes of Semar; it possesses a registered status; it covers a variety of business products; it contains visual elements; and it

demonstrates historical and contemporary relevance. Based on these criteria, four logos were selected and analyzed comprehensively: Batik Semar or Sang Semar, Semar Nusantara, Cap Semar, and AKJ Semar. These visual data were then categorized, compared, and contrasted based on the most representative aspects, such as figure style, Semar's iconic characteristics, gestures, silhouettes, expressions, ornaments, colors, typography, and the relationship of the visual forms to Javanese culture.

The second step is by whom?. This refers to the stage shaped by the producers of meaning or the interpreters of the Semar figure in the logo. At this stage, attention is focused on the social issues contributing to the Semar figure, both as a symbolic product and as a religious or spiritual leader. To analyze this significance, this study employs Stuart Hall's theory of representation as a starting point, while the circuit of culture is examined in terms of production, consumption, regulation, representation, and identity. Considering the aforementioned framework, the analysis focuses not only on the visual logos but also reveals how the Semar figure is produced as a visual identity, consumed by audiences, interacts within everyday and commercial contexts, and is depicted as a specific identity. This data is derived from the results of the first step's analysis, which is then further explored and analyzed using semi-structured interviews with informants consisting of business owners or brand managers, such as Diantoro, Tio, and Akbar, as well as Javanese cultural experts or practitioners, such as Zuliyanto, Nyi Rumiyati, Sumanto, and Darmoko. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow the researcher to address the core questions while also providing room to explore the use of the Semar figure, the cultural construction emphasized in the logo, brand identity considerations, and social interpretations of the visual representation. This interview data is used to examine the position of the interpreting subject, uncover the background of meaning production, and build a more direct relationship between visual perception and the social, cultural, and identity contexts.

The third step is why? This is the interpretative phase used to explain the phenomenon of the Semar figure's emergence in logos within a contemporary context. This phase is a synthesis of the two previous phases; therefore, the "why" question is answered by connecting the reading results on how the Semar figure is interpreted (how) and the parties who produce and interpret the intended meaning (by whom). Through this phase, the research examines the cultural, social, symbolic, and commercial aspects of the Semar figure's emergence as a visual identity for the trading community, including its relationship with religious beliefs, cultural legitimacy, the development of emotional bonds

with consumers, and modern marketing logic. The entire research workflow is summarized in Figure 2.

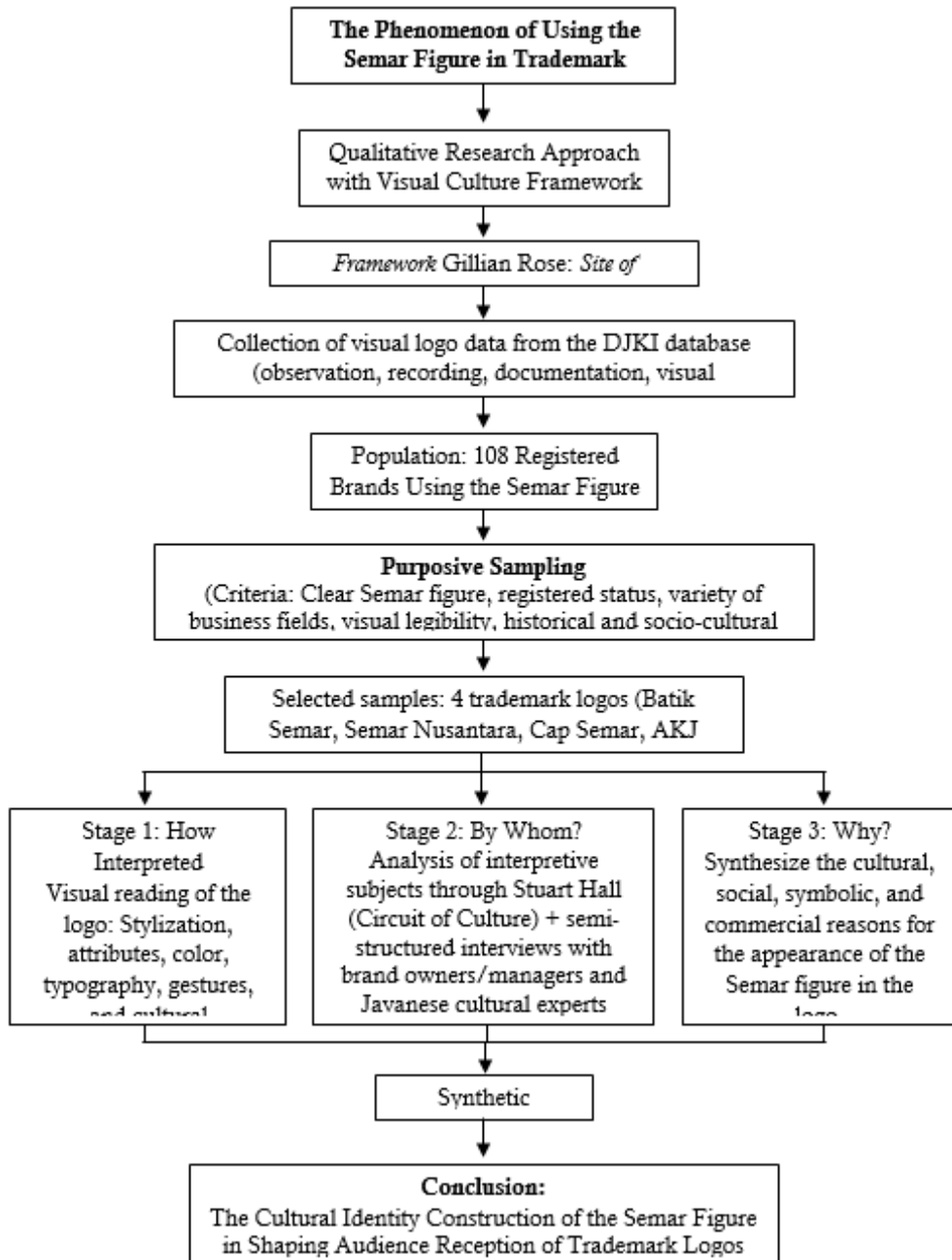


Figure 2. Workflow
Source: Rukiah, 2026

Figure 2 illustrates the research workflow. The study begins by identifying the phenomenon of using the Semar figure in trademark logos as a symbol of transforming tradition into modern commercial spaces. Following Gillian Rose's framework, this phenomenon is then examined through qualitative research within the discipline of visual culture and methodologically applied to the site of audiencing. To identify the population of trademarks using the Semar figure, visual data were collected through observation, recording, documentation, and classification within the DJKI database. Purposive sampling was employed to narrow down and select samples from this population based on criteria of visual, historical, social, and cultural relevance, ensuring that the most representative visual objects could be analyzed comprehensively. The data were then analyzed to determine how the Semar figure is interpreted, aiming to understand how the Semar figure is presented and interpreted through its visual elements. This was followed by a semi-structured interview approach with Javanese cultural experts and brand owners or managers (by whom?), and subsequently analyzed using Stuart Hall's theory of representation and the Circuit of Culture. The results from these two stages were then synthesized in the why? phase to explain the background of its emergence and the enduring phenomenon of using the Semar figure in trademark logos. Through this approach, the research focuses on the construction of Semar's cultural identity in shaping audience reception toward the logos.

3. Results

In answering the first research question on how and why the figure of Semar is adapted into trademark logos, this research starts with conducting an observation of the DJKI database. Observation of the DJKI database identified 208 trademark entries using the figure of Semar, of which 108 had registered status and were used as the empirical basis of this study. The regional distribution of these registered trademarks is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Regional Distribution of Registered Semar-Based Trademarks

| No. | Region | Total |
|-----|-----------|----------|
| 1. | Jakarta | 14 marks |
| 2. | Bandung | 10 marks |
| 3. | Bekasi | 7 marks |
| 4. | Tangerang | 9 marks |
| 5. | Depok | 2 marks |

| No. | Region | Total |
|-----|---------------------|----------|
| 6. | Central Java | 53 marks |
| 7. | East Java | 8 marks |
| 8. | Outside Java Island | 5 marks |

Source: DJKI database.

Table 1 shows that Central Java has the highest concentration of registered Semar-based trademarks, with 53 marks, followed by Jakarta (14), Bandung (10), Tangerang (9), East Java (8), Bekasi (7), regions outside Java (5), and Depok (2). The dataset also indicates that the use of Semar appears across multiple business contexts rather than in a single industrial segment.

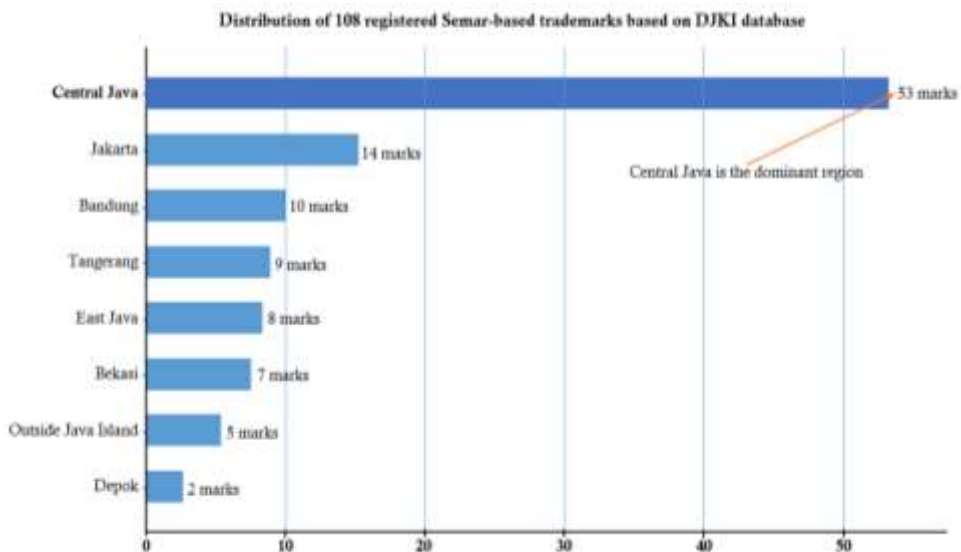


Figure 3. Regional Distribution of Registered Semar-Based Trademarks
Source: Rukiah, 2026

Afterward, the data observed from the DJKI database are separated into four main categories. The first category is picturemark. This category compiles the trademarks with a logo consisting only of images. The second category is lettermark. This category compiles the trademarks with a logo consisting only of text. The third category is picturemark and lettermark combination. This category compiles the trademarks with a logo consisting of both images and text that exist in a separate form or are not bound to each other. The fourth category is picturemark and lettermark at once. This category compiles the trademarks with a logo

consisting of both images and text that are bound to each other. Table 2 shows how the data from the DJKI database are grouped into these four categories.

Table 2. Category of logo in trademarks

| No | Category of logo in trademarks | Amount |
|----|---|--------|
| 1. | <i>Picturemark</i> | 1 |
| 2. | <i>Lettermark</i> | 19 |
| 3. | <i>Picturemark and Lettermark Combination</i> | 43 |
| 4. | <i>Picturemark and Lettermark At Once</i> | 45 |

Table 3. Example of trademarks in each category

| <i>Picturemark</i> | <i>Lettermark</i> | <i>Picturemark and Lettermark Combination</i> | <i>Picturemark and Lettermark At Once</i> |
|---|---|---|--|
| Lukisan Semar | Sang Semar | Semar Nusantara | Batik Semar |
|  |  |  |  |
| Code: 29 (2015-2025) | Code: 25 (2011-2021) | Code: 16 (2021-2031) | Code: 25 & 30 (2011-2031) |

Source: DJKI database.

Table 2 shows the number of logos in each of the categories, and Table 3 shows some examples of the trademarks in each category. The picturemark category only has one trademark, which is the trademark *Lukisan Semar*. The lettermark category has 19 trademarks, with an example of the trademark *Sang Semar*. The picturemark and lettermark combination has 43 trademarks, with an example of the trademark *Semar Nusantara*. Meanwhile, the picturemark and lettermark combination has 45 trademarks, with an example of the trademark *Batik Semar*.

Based on the data presented in the previous tables, the result shows that the figure of Semar is mainly adapted into trademark logos by using the identification of the image of Semar through picturemark, and by using the identification of the name of Semar through lettermark. The use of picturemark and lettermark, both the “combination” and “at once”

categories, dominated the way the figure of Semar is adapted into the trademark, with a total of 88 trademarks.

This dominance is not incidental but indicates a deliberate visual strategy in adapting Semar into trademark logos. Of the 108 registered marks, 88 (81.5%, rounded to 82%) employ either a picturemark and lettermark combination or a picturemark and lettermark at once, suggesting that business actors tend to mobilize Semar through dual identification: the image provides immediate visual recognition, while the verbal element stabilizes naming, recall, and product association. In logo and branding studies, effective logos are expected to enhance recognizability and memorability, while brand logos more broadly function as condensed carriers of brand meaning that may influence consumer response and firm performance (Henderson & Cote, 1998; Park et al., 2013). Likewise, research on logo descriptiveness indicates that textual and visual logo elements can strengthen processing fluency and brand equity when they communicate the brand clearly (Luffarelli et al., 2019), and recent work also demonstrates strong memory effects for pictorial brand elements in comparison with names alone (Ghosh et al., 2022). In this study, based on in-depth interviews with brand owners such as Diantoro and Tio, this specific combination is considered significantly more effective in communicating the brand's core message to the target audience, indicating that the Semar figure becomes more communicatively effective when the visual character is accompanied by the brand name because audiences can more easily connect the cultural symbol to a specific business identity. Therefore, the prevalence of picturemark-and-lettermark formats suggests that Semar is adapted not only as a cultural image but also as a practical branding device that facilitates identification, differentiation, and cultural recognition in the marketplace.

Based on the dataset and sample classification, four empirical findings may be summarized. First, the use of Semar in trademarks is empirically widespread, with 208 identified entries and 108 registered marks. Second, the strongest concentration occurs in Central Java, indicating a clear regional clustering pattern. Third, purposive sampling shows that Semar is used across different business codes and commercial contexts. Fourth, the selected visual corpus demonstrates more than one mode of adaptation, ranging from stylized modern condensation to relatively detailed retention of wayang form.

Taken together, these findings show that the adaptation of Semar into trademark logos is not confined to Central Java but extends across multiple cities in Java and even outside the island. Nevertheless, Central

Java remains the dominant center of registration, confirming the continued cultural embeddedness of Semar in regions historically close to the wayang tradition. More importantly, 88 of the 108 registered trademarks (82%) adopt Semar through combined picturemark and lettermark formats, suggesting that business actors tend to prefer concise verbal visual strategies that are easier to recognize, easier to remember, and more effective in linking cultural symbolism with brand identity. These empirical patterns provide the basis for the next section, which examines how the visual condensation of Semar operates as a negotiation between cultural legitimacy and commercial communication

4. Discussion

The discussion section will discuss the results presented before in order to answer the second research question on what kind of identity is expressed and negotiated through the adaptation of Semar in contemporary commercial space. This is done by using Rose’s visual methodology in three steps, namely How Interpreted? By Whom? And Why?

In the first step, the study selected four samples from the 108 registered trademarks through purposive sampling. The criteria in choosing the samples included registered status, clarity of Semar-related visual attributes, variation in business sector, presence of identifiable visual elements, and socio-historical relevance (Suriani et al., 2023). The selected samples are listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Samples of analyzed trademark logos

| No. | Trademark | Region | Business Code |
|-----|-------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| 1. | Bawang Goreng Cap Semar | Bekasi | 29 |
| 2. | Batik Semar | Surakarta | 24 & 25 |
| 3. | Semar Nusantara | Surakarta | 14 |
| 4. | AKJ Semar | Bogor | 43 |

Source: DJKI database.

Table 5. Comparative Visual Categories of the Four Selected Logos

| Trademark | Region | Business Code | Visual Style | Retained Semar Attributes | Color/ Typography | Cultural Identity Orientation |
|--------------------------------|--------|---------------|--|---|--|--|
| Bawang Goreng Cap Semar | Bekasi | 29 | Stylized circular emblem with a recognizable | Profile face, pointing gesture, rounded | Monochromatic brown/sepia; no visible typography | Strong Javanese wayang reference in simplified |

| Trademark | Region | Business Code | Visual Style | Retained Semar Attributes | Color/ Typography | Cultural Identity Orientation |
|------------------------|---------------|----------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Batik Semar | Surakarta | 24 & 25 | Stylized emblem with a simplified Semar figure inside a gunung-like frame | body, patterned traditional cloth Semar silhouette, gunung association, central figure | Olive green–cream palette; integrated serif “BATIK SEMAR” typography | commercial logo form Strong Javanese cultural identity adapted into a refined batik-oriented commercial logo |
| Semar Nusantara | Surakarta | 14 | Colorful figurative logo with a recognizable Semar character and moderate stylization | Profile face, elongated nose, mustache, pointing gesture, rounded body, patterned traditional cloth | Multicolored palette; bold serif “SEMAR” with smaller “Nusantara” typography | Javanese cultural sign adapted into a broader commercial and national identity frame |
| AKJ Semar | Bogor | 43 | Combined logo mark and wordmark with moderately stylized Semar figure | Profile face, elongated nose, mustache, crouched posture, pointing gesture | Multicolored emblem; bold red “AKJ SEMAR” wordmark with outline/shadow; decorative script in logo mark | Javanese cultural sign translated into a more overt commercial identity format |

Table 5 shows that the selected logos represent variation in region, business code, and degree of visual transformation. At the corpus level, the sample includes both more stylized and more literal visualizations of Semar. Figure 4 below shows a conceptual diagram based on a purposive and comparative visual classification of four selected Semar-based trademarks.

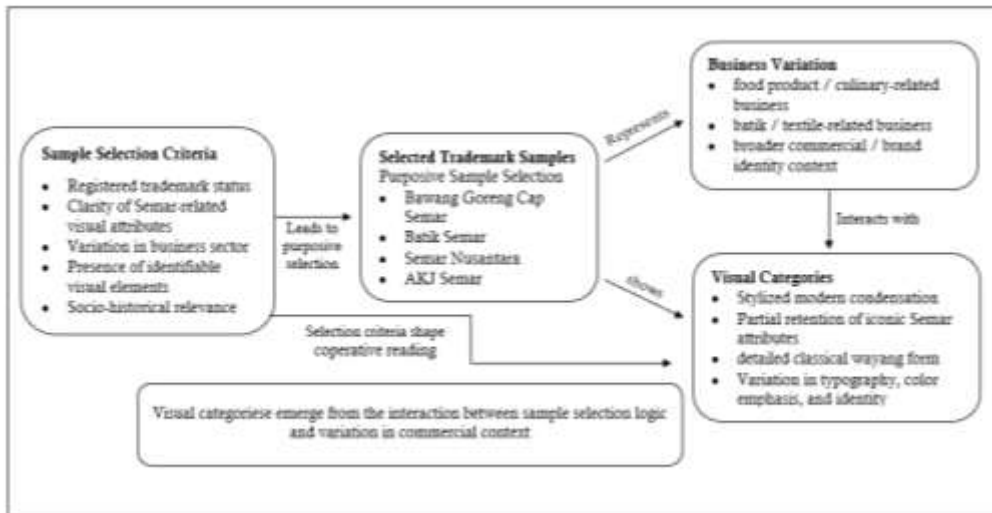


Figure 4. Relationship Between Sample Selection Criteria, Business Variation, and Visual Categories

The clearest documented transformation process in the sample appears in the Batik Semar logo. The data show a sequence from the traditional figure of Semar in wayang kulit, to an earlier circular logo featuring Semar and a gunungan at the center, and then to a more contemporary logo in which Semar is positioned within a gunungan shape and supported by a green supergraphic and the “BATIK SEMAR” typography.

At the sample level, as seen in Figure 5, the corpus also shows variation in the degree of simplification. Batik Semar represents a stronger process of stylization and condensation, whereas AKJ Semar retains a more detailed wayang kulit form with relatively minimal simplification. These differences indicate that the transformation from wayang figure to trademark logo does not occur through a single visual pattern.



Transformation from traditional performative representation to condensed

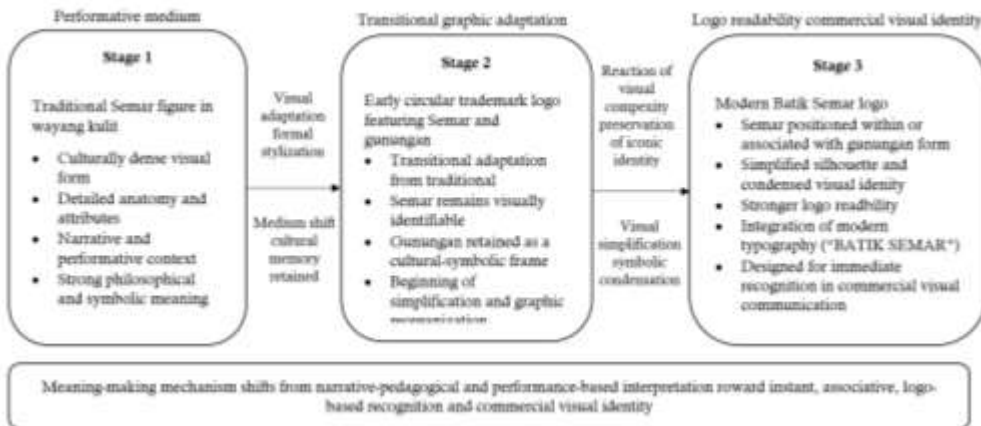


Figure 5. Visual Transformation Process of the Semar Figure from Wayang to Trademark Logo
Source: Rukiah, 2026

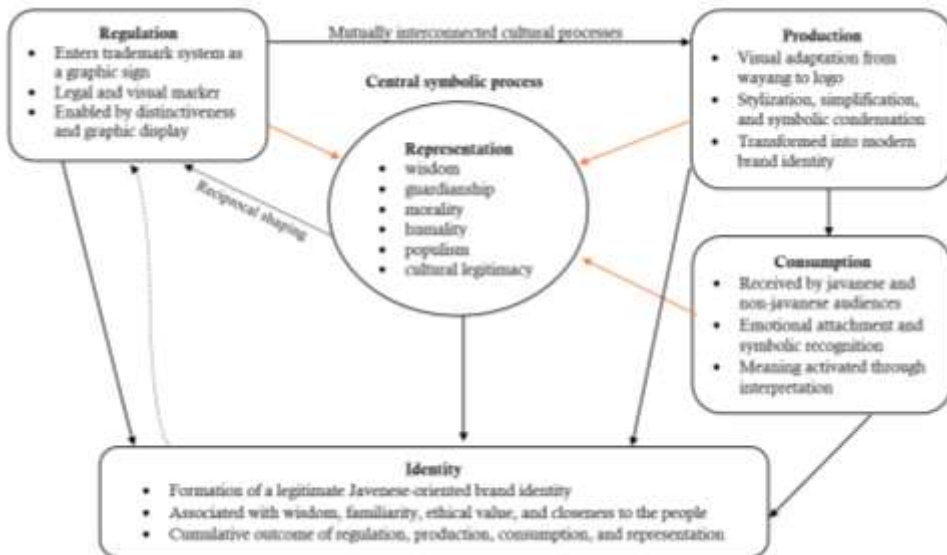


Figure 6. The Circuit of Culture of the Semar Figure in Trademarks
Source: Rukiah, 2026

Figure 6 shows that regulation, production, consumption, and representation do not operate separately; rather, they influence one another and together culminate in the formation of identity. In the case of Semar, regulation enables this cultural symbol to enter the trademark system as a graphic sign; production reconstructs its form into the

language of modern visual design; consumption demonstrates how the symbol is received and interpreted by both producers and audiences; while representation becomes the central element that gives cultural weight to the entire process. In other words, logo regulation, trademark logo production, and consumption are all shaped by the representation of Semar, and these four aspects collectively form identity within society (Hall, 1997). Semar functions as both a cultural symbol and a commercial logo identity, culminating in culturally legitimate brand formation.

The main contribution of this study lies in repositioning Semar from a predominantly philosophical and performative figure into a negotiated sign within the field of visual communication design and commercial identity. Earlier studies have convincingly established Semar as a symbol of wisdom, ethical guardianship, humility, and Javanese philosophical balance (Endraswara, 2010; Hardjowirogo, 1982; Kresna, 2012; Rukiah et al., 2024; Siswanto, 2019; Ulfah et al., 2025). However, those studies largely discuss Semar in relation to wayang, cultural philosophy, counseling, painting, or artistic creation (Al Mutaqqim & Sami, 2025; Oktama et al., 2024; Setyaputri, 2017). This article extends that conversation by showing that, once transferred into trademark logos, Semar does not cease to be a cultural figure; rather, he becomes a visual sign whose meaning is renegotiated through branding, audience recognition, and market circulation.

This is precisely where Hall's concept of representation becomes analytically productive. In the logo medium, Semar is no longer encountered through extended narrative performance, but through condensed visual cues that must work immediately and associatively (Hall, 1997; Mitchell, 2005; Rustan, 2021). The present study shows that business actors do not choose Semar merely because he is visually recognizable, but because he carries symbolic legitimacy already sedimented in Javanese cultural memory. The interviews with cultural informants and brand actors further demonstrate that Semar is interpreted as a figure of wisdom, guardianship, morality, and social closeness. Through Rose's site of audiencing, this means that the logo is not merely produced as an image; it is activated through audience interpretation, social memory, and cultural familiarity (Rose, 2012).

Accordingly, this study fills the research gap by demonstrating that Semar in trademark logos functions as a negotiated cultural sign: neither a simple continuation of traditional meaning nor a complete break from it. Instead, the trademark logo becomes a site where visual reduction, cultural memory, and commercial intention intersect.

A second important finding is that commodification in this case does not result in the total erosion of cultural meaning. This point partly differs from previous studies on the commercialization of heritage. Ginting et al. (2025) argue that commercialization may weaken participatory local values, while Budiyanto et al. (2025) show that heritage reproduction in commercial formats can shift emphasis from spirituality to market aesthetics. Those studies are important because they reveal how market adaptation can reduce socio-cultural depth. However, the present study indicates a more complex pattern. In the case of Semar-based trademark logos, commercialization is accompanied by selective retention of symbolic value, especially values associated with wisdom, humility, populism, and the pamomong character.

This finding is closer to the argument of Maryam & Budiwaty (2025), who show that cultural symbols may be repackaged for contemporary audiences without entirely losing their cultural referents. Yet the present study extends that argument in a more specific way by demonstrating how such selective retention operates within trademark logos. The logo does not preserve the whole philosophical universe of Semar. Rather, it condenses and prioritizes those dimensions most compatible with brand identity and consumer recognition. In this sense, commodification works through selection: the positive, familiar, and legitimizing dimensions of Semar are emphasized, while more ambiguous, paradoxical, or critical dimensions tend to be reduced.

Therefore, the article does not argue that the market simply preserves culture, nor that the market simply destroys it. Instead, the findings suggest a process of selective cultural translation. Semar survives in the modern market because he is reformulated into a symbolic resource that remains culturally resonant while also becoming commercially functional (Barthes, 1972; Hall, 1997; Mukhlis et al., 2025; Mustakimah et al., 2024).

The differences between this study and earlier research can be explained by at least five factors: object, context, medium, method, and analytical framework. First, the object of analysis here is not a heritage destination, tourism performance, or contemporary artwork, but registered trademark logos. Because trademarks function as repeated and everyday visual identifiers, the symbolic work they perform differs from the episodic display of culture in tourism or fine art. Second, the context of this study is strongly rooted in Central Java, where the cultural familiarity of Semar remains particularly strong. This regional embeddedness affects both production and reception.

Third, the medium matters. In wayang, the meaning of Semar emerges narratively through performance and character relations; in a logo, meaning must be condensed into a visual sign that can be grasped quickly (Mitchell, 2005; Rustan, 2021; Ulfah et al., 2025). This medium shift helps explain why only certain symbolic aspects of Semar are emphasized in branding contexts. Fourth, the method also influences the findings. Unlike earlier studies focused primarily on philosophical reading, historical interpretation, or artistic representation, this article combines visual analysis with semi-structured interviews and places special emphasis on audience interpretation. That methodological choice makes it possible to show not only what Semar looks like in the logos, but also how producers and cultural audiences understand him.

At the same time, the findings also align with previous studies in important ways. They confirm that Semar continues to be associated with wisdom, guidance, humility, and social legitimacy, as shown in the literature on Javanese philosophy and Semar symbolism (Budi & Susilo, 2025; Endraswara, 2010; Hardjowirogo, 1982; Kresna, 2012; Rukiah et al., 2024; Siswanto, 2019). In that sense, this article does not reject previous scholarship; it extends it by demonstrating how those same symbolic associations are reactivated in commercial visual practice. The article also supports the broader claim that traditional symbols may remain meaningful in contemporary circulation, although their meanings are necessarily reorganized according to the communicative demands of modern media and the logic of branding (Maryam & Budiwaty, 2025; Mitchell, 2005).

This study contributes theoretically to representation, cultural identity, cultural branding, and trademark scholarship by showing that commodification in Semar-based trademark logos is not simply a one-way process of cultural loss, but a negotiation involving reduction and selective preservation. Through Hall's theory of representation and Rose's site of audiencing, the article argues that the meaning of a cultural logo emerges not only from visual form but also from the interaction among image, producer, audience, and cultural memory (Hall, 1997; Rose, 2012), thereby positioning trademark logos as legitimate sites of identity production rather than merely functional commercial graphics. In this context, Semar functions not as neutral ornamentation but as a legitimizing sign that generates familiarity, affective attachment, moral resonance, and regional belonging. Practically, the findings suggest that designers and brand owners should treat local cultural symbols as meaningful assets rather than mere decoration, because stronger cultural resonance, emotional branding, regional authenticity, and even cultural

survival in market spaces depend on retaining recognizable symbolic elements and grounding design decisions in symbolic literacy rather than stylistic borrowing alone.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results and analysis, this research indicates that the figure of Semar in trademark logos functions not only as a visual element or an aesthetic strategy, but also as a religious symbol utilized through audience research and branding techniques. Findings from 208 initial observations and 108 registered trademarks, with dominant usage in Central Java, demonstrate that the Semar figure still possesses strong cultural vitality, particularly in regions with historical proximity to the wayang tradition. An in-depth reading of Batik Semar further emphasizes that the transformation of wayang into a logo does not dismantle the Semar tradition, but rather transforms it into a modern visual style that is more instant, communicative, and easily recognizable.

The use of the Semar figure in logos belies interactions between regulation, production, consumption, representation, and identity. Semar is featured as the primary graphic in the trade system, produced through stylization and form simplification, consumed by Javanese and non-Javanese audiences via emotional and symbolic imagery, and subsequently portrayed as a figure of morality, wisdom, populism, and a social protector. This entire process focuses on creating a culturally authentic sense of self, but also highlights the fact that modern culture has evolved through adaptation. At the same time, this transformation highlights the potential for cultural appropriation and the modification of traditional culture. This is because traditional symbols reintroduced into commercial spaces run the risk of experiencing simplification, domestication, and a reduction of meaning to better suit market logic.

This study has implications for the field of visual communications and visual culture, especially on how brand strategy works in a culturally rich society. However, this study has limitations regarding the scope of the sample selected through purposive sampling, with interviews mostly focused on business owners and several relevant cultural informants. Furthermore, the geographic and cultural focus of this research is still dominated by the Javanese context, particularly in areas with strong ties to the wayang tradition. These limitations raise opportunities for further research, such as the need to compare the object of study with other Javanese cultural symbols or cultural figures from other regions and a more thorough examination of consumer behavior regarding cultural branding, cultural commodification, and cultural appropriation.

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