

Negotiating Cultural Identity through Social Media Storytelling: Digital Place Branding of Thematic Villages in Malang, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines how cultural identity is constructed and represented through social media storytelling in the place branding of thematic villages in Malang, Indonesia. The purpose of this research is to explore how digital narratives shape place identity while reflecting and negotiating local cultural values in online spaces. Thematic villages are conceptualized as socially embedded place brands whose meanings are produced through discourse, symbolism, and community participation on social media. The study recognizes that differences in digital literacy, access to resources, and decision-making authority may influence whose cultural voices are represented. It employs a qualitative critical approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework. Data were collected from visual and textual content published on official and community-managed social media accounts of thematic villages in Malang. The analysis focuses on textual features, discursive practices, and broader socio-cultural contexts shaping the production and circulation of digital narratives. The findings show that social media storytelling enhances the visibility and attractiveness of thematic villages by presenting them as creative and culturally distinctive destinations. However, dominant narratives prioritize aesthetic and tourism-oriented representations, often simplifying

local cultural practices and values. Cultural elements such as togetherness, social harmony, and local wisdom are highlighted to support branding objectives, while other perspectives receive less attention. Moreover, it reveals a tension between market-driven place branding and the preservation of cultural meanings within local communities. The study contributes to understanding how digital storytelling shapes cultural identity, place representation, and community-based tourism development.

Keywords: *Cultural identity, Place branding, social media storytelling, Thematic villages, Critical discourse analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of community-based tourism in Indonesia has encouraged the emergence of thematic villages as innovative tourism destinations that combine local identity, cultural preservation, and creative economic activities. In many cities, thematic villages have become important instruments for strengthening local tourism while promoting community participation and urban cultural revitalization. In the city of Malang, several thematic villages, including Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan (Jodipan Colourful Village), Kampung Budaya Polowijen (Polowijen Cultural Village), and Kampoeng Heritage Kajoetangan (Kajoetangan Heritage Village), have gained public attention through their distinctive cultural, historical, and aesthetic characteristics. These villages function not only as tourism destinations but also as symbolic spaces where local meanings are communicated through digital media.

The growing influence of social media has transformed how tourism destinations communicate with wider audiences. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube enable communities to circulate narratives that shape public perceptions of place, culture, and authenticity. Through images, captions, videos, hashtags, and online interactions, destinations increasingly rely on digital communication to attract visitors and strengthen their public image. Consequently, digital media has become an important component of tourism promotion and community representation. Social media has transformed destination promotion from one-way information dissemination into interactive storytelling (Hudson et al., 2015; Lund et al., 2018; Mariani et al., 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Storytelling has become one of the most influential communication strategies because it enables destinations to transform local cultural resources into meaningful narratives that strengthen destination identity, enhance visitor engagement, and differentiate places in an increasingly competitive tourism market (Mossberg, 2008; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Lichrou et al., 2017).

Within thematic villages, digital narratives are not merely promotional tools but also cultural practices through which identities are represented and negotiated. Social media content frequently highlights cultural symbols, traditions, artistic performances, and community activities considered attractive for tourism consumption. These representations are shaped by processes of selection and framing that may simultaneously preserve local culture and transform it into marketable tourism products.

Destination branding extends beyond conventional promotional activities aimed at attracting visitors. Rather than functioning solely as a marketing tool, it represents an ongoing process of constructing and communicating a destination's identity through the interaction of cultural values, local narratives, and stakeholder participation. A successful destination brand is therefore shaped not only by logos, slogans, or advertising campaigns but also by authentic stories that communicate the unique characteristics and lived experiences of local communities. Such narratives strengthen emotional connections between destinations and audiences while enhancing the credibility and distinctiveness of place identity in increasingly competitive tourism markets (Govers & Go, 2009; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Lichrou et al., 2017).

Destination branding is increasingly understood as a dynamic process of identity construction rather than a one-way promotional activity. From an identity-based perspective, destination brands emerge through the continuous interaction between local identity, stakeholder engagement, and external perceptions, making branding an ongoing process of negotiating and communicating the distinctive characteristics of a place (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

In Indonesia, thematic and creative villages have increasingly been developed as community-based tourism destinations that strengthen local identity while contributing to urban branding initiatives. Previous studies have shown that creative villages enhance destination competitiveness by integrating local culture, community participation, and place branding into sustainable tourism development (Yusuf & Purwaningsih, 2021). However, limited attention has been paid to how storytelling practices construct destination identities and communicate cultural meanings through digital media.

Previous studies on thematic villages in Malang have primarily focused on tourism promotion, destination branding, and audience engagement through digital media. Agustina et al. (2024), for instance, examined the role of Instagram storytelling in enhancing destination visibility, whereas Kusumawati and Agustina (2026) investigated the effectiveness of narrative promotional videos in strengthening destination branding at Kampung Budaya Polowijen. While these studies underscore the growing importance of digital communication in tourism, they pay limited attention to how storytelling constructs destination identities and communicates local cultural meanings through digital media.

Relatively few studies have critically examined how social media reflects tensions between tourism branding and the preservation of local cultural values. Tourism-oriented narratives often privilege visually appealing and marketable representations that simplify local traditions, community experiences, and social meanings. Values such as togetherness, mutual cooperation, social harmony, and local wisdom may be selectively framed within aestheticized tourism discourse. Consequently, it is important to investigate how digital representations negotiate the relationship between cultural authenticity and market-driven branding.

Drawing on place branding theory and cultural identity perspectives, this study conceptualizes thematic villages as socially embedded place brands constructed through discourse, symbolism, and community participation in digital spaces. The research applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, to examine how visual and textual narratives construct and represent cultural identity.

CDA is especially useful for revealing ideological tensions between market-driven branding and the preservation of local culture. However, because Fairclough's model was originally developed for linguistic analysis, it offers limited guidance for examining the visual and algorithmic dimensions of image-centered platforms such as Instagram. Therefore, the findings should be understood within the analytical scope of CDA.

This study aims to critically examine how cultural identity is constructed and represented through social media in the place branding of thematic villages in Malang, Indonesia. Specifically, it investigates how digital narratives shape representations of local identity and cultural values while reflecting tensions between tourism commodification and cultural preservation. By focusing on representation as a discursive practice, the study contributes to discussions of digital tourism communication, place branding, and cultural representation within community-based tourism contexts.

Ultimately, this research contributes to tourism, media, and cultural studies by demonstrating that social media functions not only as a promotional medium but also as a mechanism through which understandings of identity, authenticity, and local belonging are produced and negotiated. Achmad and Febrianita (2025) specifically examine how people preserve Javanese culture through digital media, meaning digital platforms function as spaces where cultural identity and belonging are maintained and negotiated rather than merely promoted it. The study therefore highlights the importance of critically examining digital tourism narratives to better understand how local cultures are represented and transformed within contemporary tourism branding practices.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative critical research design to examine how cultural identity is constructed and represented through social media storytelling in the place branding of thematic villages in Malang, Indonesia. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on meaning-making processes, symbolic representation, and the interpretation of cultural narratives embedded within digital media content (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Fairclough's

three-dimensional framework, examining textual and visual content, discursive practices, and broader socio-cultural contexts to explore how digital narratives construct place identity and negotiate cultural values within tourism communication.

The research focuses on three thematic villages in Malang: Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan (Jodipan Colourful Village), Kampung Budaya Polowijen (Polowijen Cultural Village), and Kampong Heritage Kajoetangan (Kajoetangan Heritage Village). These villages were selected purposively due to their prominence as urban tourism destinations and their active use of social media for destination branding and public communication. Across the three villages, social media content frequently emphasizes visual attractiveness, cultural performances, heritage imagery, and visitor-oriented experiences, while everyday community activities and diverse resident perspectives receive less attention. Although each village employs distinct narrative strategies reflecting its historical and cultural context, all demonstrate tensions between tourism branding and the representation of authentic community experiences.

The data were collected from official and community-managed Instagram accounts: @kampung_warna_warni, @kampungbudayapolowijen, and @kayutanganheritage. Instagram was selected because it emphasizes visual storytelling and digital place representation through images, captions, hashtags, and short narrative texts. The study focuses on official accounts because they represent the primary channels through which thematic villages communicate branding narratives. However, the exclusion of user-generated content, such as visitor posts, comments, and shares, limits the analysis to the production of narratives rather than audience reception, negotiation, or contestation.

The data consist of visual and textual content published between January 2023 and May 2024. Purposive sampling was used to select posts representing cultural identity, local traditions, historical narratives, community activities, and tourism branding practices. The data were obtained from journal articles, books, news reports, and other academic sources related to cultural identity, digital storytelling, tourism communication, and place branding. Although this period enables the identification of recurring discursive patterns,

the findings may not fully capture longer-term changes influenced by seasonal tourism cycles, temporary cultural events, community initiatives, or changes in Instagram's platform features and algorithms.

The units of analysis in this study include visual images, captions, hashtags, symbolic representations, and narrative texts contained within Instagram posts published by the selected thematic villages. These elements were analyzed to identify recurring cultural themes, identity constructions, and branding discourses represented in digital storytelling practices.

The data were analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, consisting of: textual analysis, discursive practice analysis, and socio-cultural practice analysis. Textual analysis focused on language use, visual symbolism, and narrative structure within social media content. Discursive practice analysis examined how digital narratives were produced, circulated, and consumed through tourism promotion and community participation. Meanwhile, socio-cultural analysis explored broader ideological meanings related to cultural identity, tourism branding, and the negotiation between local cultural values and market-oriented representation. The analysis process also involved thematic coding and cross-case comparison among the three thematic villages to identify similarities and differences in storytelling patterns and cultural representation.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed data triangulation through multiple data sources, including visual content, textual narratives, and supporting literature. Interpretive consistency was strengthened through repeated reading, thematic categorization, and comparative analysis across the selected thematic villages.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Social Media Storytelling, Place Branding, and Cultural Identity Construction

Using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study examines how cultural identity is represented through

social media storytelling in the place branding of thematic villages in Malang City. The analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions: (1) textual representation in captions, hashtags, images, and videos; (2) discursive practices involving content production and circulation through Instagram; and (3) broader socio-cultural practices related to tourism, urban branding, heritage discourse, and community identity.

Textual Representation

This study analyzed three different social media accounts: @kampung_warna_warni, @kampungbudayapolowijen, and @kayutanganheritage. In this section, the findings were categorized into five representations: the representation of heritage identity to attract tourists, the representation of local culture and historical narratives as the authenticity of the place, the representation of multicultural and religious identity, the representation of community and collective identity as a nostalgic place, and the representation of creative tourism and urban lifestyle. In addition, the hashtags were also analyzed. These findings were described below;

Table 1. The results of textual representation from three accounts of its tourism attraction

Analytical Category	Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan	Kampung Budaya Polowijen	Kayutangan Heritage
Village Identity and Uniqueness	Identity is constructed through colorfulness, creativity, and visual attractiveness. The village is branded as a <i>rainbow village</i> and a colorful urban destination. Hashtags such as	Identity is constructed through traditional arts and cultural preservation. The village positions itself as a cultural village associated with Topeng Malangan, local performances,	Identity is constructed through heritage, nostalgia, and historical memory. Terms such as <i>heritage</i> , <i>tempo doeloe</i> , and <i>Malang Heritage</i> repeatedly

	#kampungwarnawarni, #rainbowvillage, and #colorful reinforce this image.	and traditional heritage.	appear in captions and hashtags.
Local Culture and Cultural Heritage	Local culture is represented through festivals and community performances, such as traditional dance performances during Festival Kali Brantas.	Cultural heritage is the dominant discourse. Posts focus on Topeng Malangan, Panji stories, traditional dances, local rituals, and cultural education.	Heritage is represented through historical narratives, colonial architecture, heritage buildings, and stories about Malang's past, including the sugar industry and locomotive monument.
Community and Collective Identity	Community identity is represented through resident participation, social collaboration, festivals, and partnerships with educational institutions. The UMM collaboration portrays Jodipan as a socially active community.	Community members are represented as custodians of culture who actively preserve and transmit traditional knowledge and artistic practices.	Community identity is represented through collective participation in festivals, tourism activities, and UMKM development. The captions emphasize togetherness and local involvement.
Tourism and Place Branding	Tourism branding focuses on visual appeal, photography spots, murals, and visitor experiences. The village is marketed as an attractive destination for leisure and social media content creation.	Tourism branding emphasizes cultural tourism through traditional performances, cultural festivals, workshops, and heritage education.	Tourism branding combines heritage tourism with lifestyle experiences such as culinary tourism, pre-wedding photography, festivals, and heritage walks.
Values and Symbolic Meanings	Captions frequently communicate positivity, optimism, motivation, and happiness. The village identity is associated with emotional well-being and cheerful experiences.	Values emphasize cultural preservation, local wisdom, respect for tradition, and continuity of cultural heritage. The symbolism of Topeng Malangan conveys	Values include nostalgia, multiculturalism, religious harmony, tolerance, nationalism, and community empowerment. Posts commemorate

	loyalty, goodness, and prosperity.	religious and national celebrations while promoting social cohesion.
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The findings demonstrate that social media storytelling functions not merely as a promotional activity but as a discursive mechanism through which meanings of culture, place, and identity are constructed and legitimized. Across the three thematic villages—Kampung Warna-warni Jodipan, Kampung Budaya Polowijen, and Kampong Heritage Kajoetangan Instagram content selectively represents cultural values, traditions, and local identities in ways that align with tourism-oriented branding strategies.

At the textual level, the analysis reveals recurring linguistic and visual patterns that emphasize attractiveness, authenticity, creativity, and nostalgia. Captions frequently employ persuasive and emotionally engaging language, while hashtags such as #exploremalang, #heritage, and #kampungwarnawarni function as discursive tools that place the villages within broader tourism imaginaries. Visual elements such as colorful murals, traditional costumes, ritual performances, and colonial-era buildings become symbolic markers repeatedly associated with each village's identity.

Discursive Practices

At the level of discursive practice, social media storytelling is shaped by interactions between local communities, tourism managers, institutional collaborators, and digital audiences. Instagram posts are carefully curated to maximize visibility, engagement, and tourism appeal.

At this level, the analysis was categorized into five elements to understand how narratives are circulated and how audiences are expected to interpret and engage with the narratives. The five categories and the results are scrutinized below.

Table 2. Discursive Practice Analysis

Dimension	Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan	Kampung Budaya Polowijen	Kampoeng Heritage Kajoetangan
Content Producer	Village management and tourism administrators produce content emphasizing colorful transformation and visitor experiences.	Cultural activists, artists, and cultural community members produce content focused on preserving local traditions and Topeng Malangan heritage.	Village administrators, tourism stakeholders, UMKM actors, and local communities produce content promoting heritage tourism and urban revitalization.
Storytelling Strategy	Motivational storytelling and visual storytelling dominate. Captions frequently contain inspirational messages and colorful imagery.	Educational storytelling dominates. Captions explain cultural symbols, traditional dances, historical figures, and local wisdom.	Heritage storytelling dominates. Captions narrate historical buildings, local history, festivals, and nostalgia associated with old Malang.
Content Format	Mostly short captions, tourism hashtags, photographs, reels, and promotional videos. Videos are frequently used to showcase visual attractions.	Videos dominate the account, often documenting performances, rituals, and cultural activities.	A combination of photographs, event posters, user-generated content, pre-wedding photography, and event documentation.
Audience Targeting	Domestic tourists, young travelers, social media users, and photography enthusiasts.	Visitors interested in culture, students, researchers, cultural communities, and heritage tourists.	Heritage tourists, local residents, families, culinary tourists, photographers, and event participants.
Audience Engagement Strategy	Encourages emotional engagement through motivational quotes and visually attractive content.	Encourages cultural appreciation and learning through cultural narratives and performances.	Encourages participation in festivals, heritage walks, culinary activities, and community events.

Thus, it can be concluded that Kampung Warna Warni Jodipan utilizes visually oriented and motivational content to attract tourists. While Kampung Budaya Polowijen employs educational storytelling to preserve and disseminate cultural

heritage. Lastly, Kampung Heritage Kajoetangan integrates narratives, community participation, and tourism promotion to position itself as a living heritage destination. Through these practices, Instagram functions not merely as a communication platform, but as a strategic site where cultural identities are continuously produced, circulated, and negotiated. As a result, cultural identity is mediated through platform-driven aesthetics and tourism expectations. Certain narratives are amplified because they are visually attractive, emotionally resonant, and commercially valuable within digital tourism culture.

Furthermore, one unique example is from Kampung Warna Warni Jodipan's Instagram post, which documents the *Sahur on the Road* activity organized collaboratively with Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM). The activity included communal *sahur* meals, storytelling sessions, and TikTok content creation during Ramadan. Although the event reflects important social and religious values such as togetherness, solidarity, and communal participation, these meanings are not explicitly framed as central elements of the village's identity. Instead, the activity appears as temporary event documentation designed primarily for audience engagement.

This selective representation demonstrates how discourse privileges certain meanings while marginalizing others. The dominant narrative foregrounds visual attractiveness and tourism visibility while backgrounding deeper social realities and cultural complexity. Consequently, culture becomes commodified through aesthetic consumption.

Socio-cultural practices

At the broader socio-cultural level, the findings indicate that place branding reflects larger discourses surrounding urban tourism, cultural commodification, heritage preservation, and creative economy development in Indonesia. Social media storytelling does not simply represent culture but actively shapes public understandings of what constitutes "authentic" local identity. Consequently,

cultural identity becomes a negotiated and contested construct influenced by tourism markets, digital media logic, and local community participation.

Table 3. Socio-cultural Practices

Social Practice Dimension	Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan	Kampung Budaya Polowijen	Kampoeng Heritage Kajoetangan
Tourism Development	The village is promoted as a colorful tourist destination through hashtags such as #kampungwisata, #wisatamalang, and #rainbowvillage. Tourism discourse focuses on attracting visitors through visual appeal and recreational experiences.	Tourism development is linked to cultural tourism. Traditional performances, Topeng Malangan, and cultural events are presented as attractions that educate visitors while preserving local culture.	Tourism is developed through heritage tourism, festivals, culinary events, and public activities. The village is positioned as a key tourism destination in Malang.
Cultural Commodification	The colorful environment, murals, and visual aesthetics are transformed into tourism commodities that attract visitors and social media engagement.	Traditional culture becomes a marketable tourism resource through performances, Topeng Malangan exhibitions, and cultural storytelling. Cultural heritage is packaged as a tourism experience.	Heritage buildings, historical narratives, festivals, and pre-wedding photography are commodified as tourism products. Heritage spaces become venues for tourism consumption.
Urban Revitalization and Local Development	The discourse reflects the transformation of an ordinary settlement into a recognized tourism destination through environmental beautification and place branding. Repeated references to colorfulness symbolize urban renewal.	Revitalization occurs through cultural preservation and community-based cultural activities. Traditional arts are used to strengthen local identity and maintain cultural continuity.	Urban revitalization is explicitly connected to heritage conservation, pedestrian development, and local economic growth. The account highlights the emergence of UMKM and increased public activities.

Identity Construction	Identity is constructed as creative, colorful, youthful, optimistic, and visually attractive. The village is branded as a symbol of urban creativity and transformation.	Identity is constructed as a cultural village that preserves traditional arts, local wisdom, and the heritage of Topeng Malangan.	Identity is constructed as a heritage village characterized by nostalgia, historical memory, multiculturalism, and urban heritage preservation.
Relationship between Culture and Economy	Visual identity and tourism attractiveness contribute to visitor engagement and economic opportunities for local residents.	Traditional culture functions as both a cultural asset and an economic resource through cultural tourism and heritage-based activities.	Heritage resources support tourism development, local entrepreneurship, festivals, culinary businesses, and community-based economic growth.

At the broader socio-cultural level, Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan’s branding reflects contemporary urban tourism discourse in which creativity and visual transformation are promoted as indicators of successful place development. The village’s identity is shaped through tourism-oriented representations that align with digital media culture and market-driven visibility. While this strategy has successfully increased tourist attention and economic opportunities, it also risks reducing cultural identity into consumable imagery detached from everyday lived experiences.

Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that aesthetic storytelling has empowered the village by transforming public perceptions of a formerly marginalized urban area. Social media visibility has contributed to tourism growth, economic activity, and broader recognition of the community. Thus, the discourse of creativity simultaneously functions as empowerment and commodification.

Lastly, the findings suggest that Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan’s storytelling could become more culturally meaningful by integrating narratives about local history, social transformation, religious traditions, and everyday community experiences. Such integration would allow place branding to move beyond visual spectacle toward deeper cultural representation.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that social media storytelling constructs place branding through selective representation and discursive framing. While these narratives increase tourism visibility and strengthen destination identity, they also simplify cultural complexity by privileging representations that are aesthetically appealing and marketable. Therefore, social media storytelling simultaneously functions as cultural preservation, identity construction, and commodification.

This study aims to scrutinize how digital narratives shape place identity by reflecting and negotiating local cultural values in online spaces. The findings reveal that social media storytelling in the thematic villages of Malang operates as a discursive mechanism through which cultural identity is constructed, circulated, and legitimized. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study demonstrates that place branding is not a neutral promotional activity but a socially situated process shaped by language, visual representation, ideology, and power relations. Across the three villages, social media narratives selectively frame culture in ways that align with tourism objectives, platform visibility, and audience expectations.

At the textual level, the analysis shows that captions, hashtags, visual compositions, and recurring lexical choices consistently foreground positivity, creativity, authenticity, nostalgia, and attractiveness. In Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan, discourse is dominated by colorful imagery and celebratory language that frame the village as vibrant, cheerful, and visually engaging. Terms associated with tourism, creativity, and public events appear repeatedly, reinforcing an identity centered on spectacle and urban transformation. The discourse privileges visibility and visual consumption, while social inequalities, historical struggles, and everyday community experiences remain largely absent. This reflects how digital branding transforms culture into consumable imagery designed for platform engagement.

The findings reveal that each thematic village constructs a distinctive place identity through social media storytelling. Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan

emphasizes colorfulness, creativity, and positive emotional experiences, while Kampung Budaya Polowijen foregrounds traditional culture and artistic heritage. In contrast, Kampoeng Heritage Kajoetangan relies heavily on historical narratives and nostalgia. These findings support Kavaratzis and Ashworth's (2005) argument that place brands are socially constructed through discourse and symbolic meanings rather than merely reflecting physical locations. Through captions, hashtags, images, and videos, the villages actively produce narratives that shape how audiences perceive and experience the destinations.

In Kampung Budaya Polowijen, the discourse shifts toward cultural continuity, ritual preservation, and historical identity. Captions and visual narratives frequently reference traditional performances, ancestral heritage, and communal rituals such as the Ragil Kuning Mask Dance. Unlike Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan, Kampung Budaya Polowijen's storytelling contains stronger contextual explanations and historical references, producing a discourse of authenticity and cultural legitimacy. However, CDA reveals that these traditions are also strategically framed to appeal to tourism audiences. Rituals are selectively visualized through aesthetically appealing performances and ceremonial moments that are easily circulated on Instagram. Consequently, tradition becomes simultaneously preserved and commodified through digital mediation.

Meanwhile, Kampoeng Heritage Kajoetangan constructs its identity through nostalgic discourse and urban memory. Social media posts emphasize colonial architecture, heritage streets, vintage aesthetics, and historical landmarks, positioning the village as a symbolic representation of Malang's past. Through repetitive visual framing and nostalgic language, the discourse naturalizes the idea that heritage primarily resides in material architecture rather than in contemporary social life. Current residents and everyday community dynamics receive limited representation, indicating what Fairclough (1995) describes as discursive exclusion, where certain realities are foregrounded while others are

marginalized. The dominance of architectural imagery reflects broader heritage discourses that privilege material preservation and visual authenticity over lived social experience.

At the level of discursive practice, the findings indicate that social media storytelling is shaped by the logic of platform-mediated visibility. Instagram encourages visually attractive, emotionally engaging, and easily shareable content, influencing how villages construct their narratives. Community administrators and local stakeholders strategically produce content that aligns with algorithmic preferences and tourism imaginaries. Metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and reposts indirectly influence which cultural representations are repeated and amplified. As a result, storytelling practices gradually converge around marketable themes such as colorful aesthetics, festivals, heritage imagery, and symbolic cultural icons.

This process demonstrates that place branding involves negotiation between local identity and external expectations. Communities exercise agency in selecting how they wish to be represented, yet these choices operate within structural constraints imposed by platform algorithms, tourism markets, and dominant visual cultures. CDA highlights that discourse production is inseparable from power relations because visibility itself becomes regulated by digital systems that reward certain narratives over others.

At the level of discursive practice, Instagram functions as more than a promotional platform; it serves as a space where cultural meanings are produced, circulated, and consumed. This finding supports the findings of Agustina et al. (2024), who demonstrated that social media plays an important role in enhancing tourism visibility and destination promotion.

At the broader socio-cultural level, the findings reveal tensions between cultural preservation and commodification. Social media storytelling contributes positively to tourism promotion, cultural visibility, and local economic

development. However, it also risks simplifying culture into symbolic fragments that are visually attractive but detached from deeper social realities. Cultural identity becomes filtered through branding logic, where only selected aspects of community life are amplified.

This selective representation contributes to what could be described as the normalization of performative culture. Villages increasingly reproduce narratives that align with tourism expectations because such narratives generate higher engagement and symbolic recognition. Consequently, culture is not only represented digitally but also gradually reshaped through repeated performances designed for visibility. In this sense, digital place branding actively participates in reconstructing cultural identity rather than merely reflecting it.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that social media storytelling creates unequal narrative visibility. Certain voices, spaces, and practices become central to the place brand, while others remain peripheral or invisible. Community members who do not participate in tourism-oriented activities rarely appear in dominant narratives. Everyday labor, social challenges, generational tensions, and economic inequalities are largely excluded from representation. CDA therefore demonstrates how digital storytelling simultaneously produces inclusion and exclusion within the construction of place identity.

In sum, the findings confirm that social media storytelling is deeply intertwined with discourse, ideology, and power. Cultural identity within thematic villages is selectively curated through processes of framing, repetition, and visual mediation that align with tourism branding and platform visibility. Understanding digital place branding therefore requires critical attention not only to what is represented but also to what is omitted, marginalized, or normalized through discourse. Furthermore, in the Ethical Representation and the Contestation of Cultural Identity concluded that social media storytelling involves ethical tensions concerning authenticity, representation, and community participation. Although

thematic villages are promoted as community-based tourism spaces, the dominant narratives frequently prioritize external attractiveness over internal complexity. This raises important questions regarding who has the authority to define cultural identity and whose perspectives are legitimized within digital place branding.

Through this analysis, it becomes evident that discourse operates ideologically by presenting selective cultural representations as natural and desirable. In Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan, for instance, the repeated emphasis on colorful aesthetics and cheerful tourism activities constructs an image of harmony and creativity that obscures social realities and historical transformation. Similarly, in Kampong Heritage Kajoetangan, nostalgic narratives privilege colonial-era architecture while minimizing contemporary urban challenges and everyday resident experiences. These discursive patterns reveal how branding discourse can romanticize place identity while depoliticizing social complexity.

Kampung Budaya Polowijen presents a relatively more balanced representation because storytelling incorporates historical context, ritual meaning, and communal participation. Nevertheless, even within this case, traditions are strategically framed to align with tourism appeal and digital circulation. The findings therefore indicate that no representation is entirely free from branding logic, as all narratives are shaped by broader economic and technological structures.

The analysis also demonstrates that visibility in digital spaces is unevenly distributed. Narratives associated with visual beauty, heritage symbolism, and performative culture are amplified because they align with dominant platform aesthetics. Meanwhile, less visual but socially significant aspects of community life—such as labor practices, social negotiations, environmental concerns, or local conflicts—receive limited attention. This imbalance illustrates how social media platforms influence not only communication practices but also collective understandings of culture and identity.

This finding supports Sari and Putra (2026), who argue that digital spaces function as symbolic arenas where meanings, identities, and social positions are continuously negotiated rather than merely represented. In the context of Malang's thematic villages, Instagram serves as a space where communities selectively emphasize particular cultural elements to construct distinctive place identities and strengthen their tourism brands. Thus, social media storytelling functions not only as a promotional practice but also as a process of identity negotiation that shapes how local culture is understood and consumed by wider audiences.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that communities are passive victims of digital branding. Rather, local actors actively use social media to gain recognition, promote tourism, strengthen community pride, and improve economic opportunities. Social media storytelling provides villages with symbolic visibility within competitive tourism landscapes and enables communities to participate in shaping their own public image. However, this participation remains conditioned by platform structures and market-oriented expectations that privilege specific forms of representation.

The study therefore highlights the ambivalent nature of digital place branding. On one hand, social media storytelling empowers communities by increasing visibility and promoting local culture. On the other hand, it risks commodifying identity through selective narratives that simplify complex cultural realities into visually consumable representations. Cultural identity becomes simultaneously preserved, negotiated, and transformed through digital discourse.

At the final stage, the discussion underscores the importance of critically reflective storytelling practices in digital place branding. More inclusive and ethically grounded narratives should move beyond surface aesthetics and tourism-oriented imagery by incorporating everyday experiences, local voices, historical complexities, and contemporary social realities. Storytelling practices that acknowledge multiple perspectives would enable thematic villages to construct

place brands that are not only attractive to visitors but also meaningful and representative for local communities themselves.

As a whole, this study demonstrates that social media storytelling is a contested discursive practice that shapes how culture is seen, valued, remembered, and commodified. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, the research reveals that place branding in thematic villages is inseparable from issues of representation, ideology, visibility, and power. Digital storytelling does not merely communicate place identity; it actively constructs and regulates cultural meaning within contemporary tourism and media environments.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that social media storytelling plays a central role in constructing and circulating cultural identity within the place branding of thematic villages in Malang. Through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study demonstrates that social media functions not only as a promotional platform but also as a discursive space where meanings of culture, heritage, and community are selectively produced and legitimized. Thematic villages are represented through curated visual and textual narratives that frame them as creative, nostalgic, culturally authentic, and tourism-oriented urban spaces. Although these representations successfully enhance visibility and symbolic value, dominant discourses tend to prioritize aesthetic appeal, heritage symbolism, and marketable imagery while marginalizing deeper social realities, historical complexities, and everyday community experiences.

The findings further reveal that social media storytelling is shaped by broader power relations embedded in digital culture and tourism branding. Community narratives are influenced by platform algorithms, audience expectations, and market-oriented visibility, causing culture to become simultaneously preserved and commodified through digital representation. As a result, cultural identity is often filtered through selective narratives that emphasize tourism consumption

over holistic representation. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of developing more critical, inclusive, and ethically grounded storytelling practices that incorporate local voices, contemporary social realities, and diverse community experiences. Such an approach would support more culturally sustainable and socially meaningful forms of digital place branding.

The findings suggest several practical implications for local communities, policymakers, and tourism managers. For local communities, storytelling initiatives should encourage broader participation from different social groups, including women, youth, elders, and cultural practitioners, to ensure that diverse cultural perspectives are represented in digital narratives. For tourism managers, social media content should move beyond purely promotional imagery by incorporating stories of everyday community life, cultural practices, and local knowledge, thereby presenting a more balanced and authentic representation of place identity. Policymakers can support these efforts by developing guidelines for culturally responsible digital branding, providing digital literacy training, and promoting community-based participation in tourism communication strategies. Collaboration among these stakeholders is essential to ensure that digital place branding not only enhances destination visibility and economic opportunities but also safeguards cultural values, strengthens community ownership of cultural narratives, and supports the long-term sustainability of local heritage.

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