

Visual Semiotic Analysis of the Aesthetics of Pecel Lele Banners as a Medium for Basic Color Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the significance of colors in Pecel Lele banners through a visual semiotics approach and evaluate their potential as a medium for basic color literacy in the context of design education and the general public. This study uses a descriptive-qualitative method with visual analysis sourced from literature studies. The results of the study show that the use of color on these banners not only serves as an eye-catcher, but also forms a collective visual identity that has been internalized in society. Theoretically, the extreme color contrast on these banners can be used as a real case study in learning basic color theory, particularly regarding complementary harmony and color psychology in public spaces. This study concludes that popular cultural artifacts such as Pecel Lele banners have high value as contextual learning media that are closely related to the social reality of the audience.

Keywords: *Color, Education, Harmony, Psychology, Semiotics*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of “Pecel Lele” street stall banners represents an iconic collective visual identity in Indonesia’s street landscape. These banners are not merely business signs but cultural artifacts easily recognizable through their expressive illustrations of aquatic and terrestrial animals and the use of strikingly contrasting color schemes. The use of color in this medium aligns with Goethe’s theory (1810), which explains that color is a fundamental element in visual design that serves not only as an aesthetic attraction but also carries philosophical, psychological, and cultural values (pp. 306–329). In a local context, these banners represent a form of basic color literacy that exists in public spaces, yet is often regarded as a marginal design element.

The significance of research on visual communication in the street food sector has been explored from various perspectives over the past decade. First, Iswandi & Mubarat (20) analyzed about interpretation Lamongan Pecel Lele Banner. Second, Herwanto, et al (2024) explain about visual communication strategy of pecel lele lamongan advertising banner. Third, Billah et al (2024) analyzed using Clive Bell’s Theory for the image of Pecel Lele Banner. Forth, Kress & van Leeuwen (2021) just explaining The Grammar about Visual Desain that, that explaining about semiotics etc..Fifth, a socio-semiotic study by Al-Zubaidi (2024) highlights how color in food posters serves as a pragmatic instrument to instantly influence consumer behavior. This study expands upon these findings by positioning the Pecel Lele banner not merely as a promotional tool, but as a “visual laboratory” for basic color literacy as a subject often overlooked in formal design education that is overly oriented toward Western theory.

The purpose of this study is to deconstruct the semiotic meaning of color in Pecel Lele banners and to evaluate their potential as a medium for contextual basic color literacy for design students and the general public. To achieve this objective, this study employs a qualitative method using a visual semiotics approach. The analysis procedure was

conducted using the “visual grammar” framework by Kress & van Leeuwen (2002) to dissect how color elements function as signs that convey cultural and functional messages in public spaces. Using this method, the researcher will identify the relationship between neon color contrast and legibility, as well as the social identity formed in Indonesia’s urban environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture is a system that influence communication and also it cant be separated because culture will affect how people interpret as message. Culture is a view of life from a group of people in theform of behavior, beliefs, values, and symbols that they receive without realizing or thinking, which are all passed down through the process of communication and imitation from one generation to the next (Liliweri, in Paramita, 2018).

According to semiotics theory, a sign consists of two main components: the signifier (physical form) and the signified (the concept or meaning it represents) (DergiPark, 2026) The use of semiotic elements helps students establish meaningful connections between linguistic forms and their functions through visual aids. In visual communication, elements such as color, shape, and typography function as signifiers that convey cultural meaning, (LIER, 2025) Explains that visual elements (icons, colors, layout) are not merely aesthetic, but rather active mediators in cognitive and emotional processes that aid in memory retention. Visual semiotics examines how visual elements produce meaning in communication media. Studies in visual semiotics demonstrate that visual codes, including color and layout, can construct ideological, cultural, and emotional messages.

Color plays an essential role in visual communication because it functions as both aesthetic and symbolic elements. Research in color semiotics suggests that color meanings can be interpreted as iconic, indexical, or symbolic signs depending on cultural context, like (Koutsikou et al., 2023) emphasize the importance of “materiality” and cultural context in interpreting visual color cues, moving beyond the traditional signifier/signified dichotomy. In learning contexts, color also supports cognitive processes. Studies show that the use of color in visual materials can influence memory, attention, and comprehension among learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive method, which is sourced from literature studies. The selection of this method is based on the research objective to explore visual aesthetic phenomena that have taken root in society's culture through relevant visual documents and academic texts. Data was collected through literature searches covering scientific journals, design theory books, and visual documentation of Pecel Lele banners as material objects. Analysis was conducted using visual content analysis techniques, in which the color elements on the banners were deconstructed to understand their meaning semiotically. (Creswell, 2014) Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (p. 4).

DISCUSSION

Pecel lele banners are one of the most easily found visual artifacts in Indonesia's urban visual landscape. These banners not only serve as a medium for promoting culinary delights, but also form part of an informal visual communication system that has developed within society. In the context of visual culture, pecel lele banners can be understood as a form of vernacular graphic design that arose from the practical communication needs of street vendors. Visually, pecel lele banners have several relatively consistent main characteristics, namely the use of large and bold typography, bright colors with high contrast, and simple illustrations depicting food items such as catfish, fried chicken, or fried duck (Sviličić, Radek, & Grabar 2024) Colors communicate abstract and concrete concepts, emotions, and perceived characteristics, and their meanings may be universal or culturally specific depending on the context in which they appear.. These visual characteristics make the banners easily recognizable by the public even from a considerable distance. In the context of visual communication, this strategy is a form of adaptation to public spaces that are full of various visual stimuli competing for attention. From a visual communication design perspective, the use of simple yet contrasting visual elements on pecel lele banners demonstrates basic design principles such as contrast, visual hierarchy, and legibility. Although these designs are not always created by professional designers, this

visual practice shows that people intuitively understand how visual elements can be used to convey messages effectively . In addition, the visual uniformity often found in pecel lele banners also creates a collective visual pattern that is part of the visual identity of street food in Indonesia. This pattern can be seen in the use of bright colors, specific typography styles, and the relatively similar arrangement of visual elements between one banner and another. This uniformity indicates a process of visual reproduction in the visual culture of society, where vendors often imitate or adapt designs that are considered effective in attracting consumers' attention.

I used Roland Barthes' semiotic method with two levels of analysis: connotation and denotation. At the denotative level, semiotic analysis focuses on identifying visual elements that are immediately apparent without additional interpretation of meaning. In the context of pecel lele banners, several key visual elements can be clearly identified. The first is the use of large typography, which usually displays the words “PECEL LELE” as the main information. This typography typically uses capital letters with a bold and simple font. The large font size aims to improve readability from a distance, making it easier for potential customers to recognize the type of food being sold. The second element is the food illustration, which is usually a picture of catfish, chicken, or duck. These illustrations are often drawn simply with contrasting colors. The main function of these illustrations is to provide a visual representation of the available food menu. The third element is the use of bright colors such as red, yellow, green, and blue. These colors are usually used dominantly in the background and typography elements to create a strong visual contrast. The fourth element is a relatively simple layout. In many cases, catfish pecel banners use a symmetrical or linear composition with a clear visual hierarchy. The main information is placed in the center or at the top of the banner so that it is easily visible to drivers or pedestrians. At the denotative level, all of these elements serve primarily as a medium of information conveying the types of food sold by the vendor (Astiti & Agung 2023) Semiotic analysis examines how visual signs convey meaning through elements such as images, colors, and typography. And At the connotative level, the visual elements on pecel lele banners can be interpreted as signs that have specific symbolic meanings in the context of the community's visual culture. One of the most interesting elements to analyze is the use of color. Red is often used as a background or as the main color in typography. In the context of color semiotics, red is often associated with energy, courage, and attractiveness.

This color has the ability to quickly attract attention, so it is often used in promotional media. Yellow also often appears in pecel lele banners, both as a letter color and as a decorative element (Hannele Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2018) Colour functions as a semiotic resource capable of communicating symbolic meanings, emotional responses, and cultural associations in visual communication. In color psychology, yellow is often associated with cheerfulness, warmth, and high visibility. This color also has a high level of luminance, making it easy to see even in low light conditions. In addition, green is often used to give the impression of freshness to food. In the culinary context, green is often associated with fresh or natural ingredients. Therefore, the use of green in pecel lele banners can strengthen consumers' p (Itten, 1973) (Afrilian, 2024) (Kristi, 2025) (Mulyawan, 2026) (Orderbill, 2024) (Tempo, 2023)erception of the quality of the food being sold. The typography used in pecel lele banners also has a specific connotative meaning. Large, bold capital letters give a strong, assertive, and direct impression. This typographic style reflects the straightforward and practical nature of visual communication often found in informal trade contexts. Simple food illustrations also have a connotative function in reinforcing the visual message. The illustrations not only provide information about the type of food, but also create visual appeal that can stimulate consumers' appetites. Thus, at the connotative level, pecel lele banners function not only as a medium of information but also as a medium of visual communication that utilizes various visual elements to influence consumer perception and attention.

Table 1. Connotative and Denotative Semiotic Analysis

Visual Element	Denotative	Connotative
Large lettering that reads “PECEL LELE”	Signs showing the names of food items for sale	Giving a firm, clear, and direct impression to consumers
Red color on the background or letters	Red as the dominant visual element	Attract attention, energy, and enhance visual appeal

Yellow color in typography or decoration	Bright colors used to make the writing clearer	Cheerfulness, warmth, and high visibility
The color green in illustrations or decorative elements	Green as an additional element	Fresh, natural, and healthy food
Illustration of a catfish	Image of catfish as a representation of the menu	Appealing to the senses and providing quick visual identification
Illustration of a chicken or duck	Additional menu items besides pecel lele	Variety of food choices
Contrasting primary colors (red, yellow, blue)	Combination of different bright colors	High visual contrast for easy recognition
Simple layout	Uncomplicated visual element arrangement	Visual communication efficiency
Capital letters	Letters that are easy to read from a distance	Ketegasan dan kejelasan informasi
Repetition of similar banner designs in various locations	Many banners with similar visual styles	Visual familiarity for the community

Source : Author's work (2026)

The semiotic analysis table shows that each visual element in the pecel lele banner not only has an informative function, but also produces symbolic meaning in the context of the visual culture of society. At the denotative level, visual elements such as typography, color, and illustrations serve as markers of information about the type of food being sold. At the connotative level, these elements generate certain associations related to visual appeal, food freshness, and the vendor's communication strategy in attracting consumers' attention.

In addition to their communicative and cultural significance, pecel lele banners also have the potential to serve as a medium for contextual visual literacy in people's daily lives. As stated by Aris & Thompson, (2023), public spaces are powerful informal learning environments. This aligns with the phenomenon of the Pecel Lele banner, where high color contrast not only attracts attention for commercial purposes. One aspect of visual literacy that can be studied is color literacy. Color literacy is the ability to recognize, distinguish, and understand the relationships between colors in a visual context. In formal learning processes, color concepts are usually taught through educational media such as books, pictures, or teaching aids. However, in everyday life, people can also learn color concepts through various visual objects found in their surroundings. Pecel lele banners are one example of visual objects that indirectly introduce basic color concepts to the community. The use of primary colors such as red, yellow, and blue in these banners creates easily recognizable visual patterns. Menurut (Chen, 2021), penggunaan warna primer yang berani dalam lanskap komersial perkotaan bukan sekadar pilihan estetika, melainkan kode semiotik yang merepresentasikan "keterjangkauan" dan "kesegaran" yang dipahami secara kolektif. The repetition of these colors in various banners scattered throughout public spaces can aid the process of color recognition through everyday visual experiences. In the context of visual education, this phenomenon can be understood as a form of informal learning that occurs through people's interaction with their visual surroundings. Children who often see pecel lele banners in their neighborhood will indirectly become familiar with the various color combinations used. In addition, the high color contrast on pecel lele banners also helps to clarify the differences between one color and another. The use of high-contrast colors in everyday environments has been shown to enhance color discrimination and pattern recognition, particularly during early stages of cognitive development (Miller & Raj, 2024). This can aid in the process of recognizing basic colors and improve visual abilities in distinguishing between different colors.

Pecel lele banners not only have aesthetic value and a communicative function, but also have the potential to serve as a medium for contextual visual literacy in community life.

Table 2. Analysis of Color Composition on Pecel Lele Banners

Color Element	Types of Colors (Color Theory)	Visual Function	Psychological Meaning	Role in color literacy
Red	Primary Color	Attracting attention and becoming the dominant color	Energy, passion, strength	Introducing easily recognizable primary colors
Yellow	Primary Color	Provides high contrast with dark colors	Joy, warmth, visibility	Assists in the process of recognizing bright colors in the visual environment
Blue	Primary Color	Balancing contrasting color compositions	Trust, stability	Introducing primary color variations in visual composition
Green	Secondary Colors (Blue and Yellow Combination)	Giving a fresh impression to the design	freshness, natural	Showing the relationship between colors in the color spectrum
Black	Neutral Color	Used for outlines or letter shadows	Assertiveness, clarity	Enhancing the readability of other colors
White	Neutral Color	Providing contrast space for visual elements	Simplicity, cleanliness	Helps distinguish other colors visually
Red-Yellow Combination	Warm Bright Color	Making banners easily visible from a distance	High energy and attractiveness	Introducing the concept of color contrast in real-world environments
Red-Green Combination	Complementary Contrast	Enhancing visual appeal	visual dynamics	Teaching complementary color relationships
Yellow-Black Combination	High Contrast	Improving the readability of writing	Warning, visibility	Examples of strong visual contrast in design
Bright Color Repetition	Simple Color Harmony	Creating a distinctive visual identity for banners	Visual familiarity	Helping people recognize recurring color patterns

Source : Author's work (2026)

The color composition of pecel lele banners shows the use of colors with high saturation levels, which aims to increase visibility in public spaces. The use of primary colors such as red, yellow, and blue is an effective visual strategy because these colors have a strong contrast level, making them easily recognizable to the human eye (Zaqhid 2025). Visual semiotic elements such as images, icons, and color cues influence how individuals interpret information and engage cognitively with visual media. According to Johannes Itten's color theory, color contrast is one of the important principles in visual composition (Itten 1973). Pecel lele banners often use contrasts between warm colors such as red and yellow with neutral colors such as black or white to improve text readability. This contrast allows the

information on the banner to be read quickly by drivers or pedestrians. In addition, the use of secondary colors such as green also provides visual balance in the color composition. The color green is often associated with the freshness of food, thereby reinforcing positive perceptions of the culinary products being offered. From a visual literacy perspective, the color composition on pecel lele banners can serve as an informal learning medium for basic color concepts. The repeated use of primary colors and high contrast in various banners scattered throughout public spaces allows the public to indirectly recognize and understand the relationship between colors through their daily visual experiences.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study shows that pecel lele banners have aesthetic value and significant visual meaning in the context of Indonesian visual culture. Through a visual semiotics approach, it can be concluded that pecel lele banners are a form of vernacular graphic design that has developed organically within society. The use of bright colors serves as a visual communication strategy to attract consumers' attention. The colors on pecel lele banners form a system of signs that are easily recognized by the community. Pecel lele banners have the potential to be a medium for basic color literacy in the daily lives of the community.

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