

Hypersemiotics of Batak Cultural Symbols in TikTok Content: Shifting Meanings and Digital Identity

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the shifting meanings of Batak cultural symbols in TikTok content through a hypersemiotic approach. The phenomenon of digitalization has driven a transformation in how society represents cultural identity, including in the use of traditional symbols such as *ulos*, traditional gestures, and Batak language expressions. The research method used was descriptive qualitative, with data collection techniques consisting of observations of TikTok content containing Batak cultural elements, as well as visual and textual documentation. Data analysis was conducted with reference to the concept of hypersemiotics, which emphasizes simulation, sign reproduction, and the shift in meaning from their original context to the digital context. The results show that Batak cultural symbols have undergone a shift in meaning, from being sacred and contextual to becoming more flexible, aesthetic, and sometimes even diminished. In the digital space, these symbols no longer fully represent traditional values, but instead function as tools for identity expression, entertainment, and cultural commodification. Furthermore, a tendency among the younger generation to construct digital identities through reinterpreting cultural symbols is found to be more adaptive to social media trends. Thus, hypersemiotics is a relevant approach to understanding the dynamics of meaning in the digital era. This research is expected to contribute to the study of cultural semiotics and serve as a reference for understanding the transformation of Batak cultural identity on social media.

Keywords: *hypersemiotics, cultural symbols, Batak, TikTok*

Introduction

The development of digital technology in the era of globalization has fundamentally changed the way humans communicate, construct identities, and represent culture. The presence of social media like TikTok serves not only as a means of entertainment but also as a highly dynamic space for the production and reproduction of cultural meaning. In this context, cultural symbols no longer exist in traditional, sacred spaces but have transformed into an open and participatory digital space. Jean Baudrillard (1994) stated that contemporary society lives in an era of simulation, where signs no longer represent reality but instead create new realities through simulacra. Similarly, Roland Barthes (1977) emphasized that the meaning of signs is connotative and heavily influenced by the social context and ideology surrounding them. Therefore, social media is a crucial arena for understanding how cultural symbols shift in meaning in a digital context.

Batak culture, as one of Indonesia's local cultural identities, possesses a complex symbol system steeped in social, religious, and philosophical values. Symbols such as

ulos, traditional language, and gestures in traditional ceremonies possess meanings that are not only denotative, but also connotative and mythological. In semiotic studies, the relationship between signifier and signified, as proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), is fundamental to understanding how meaning is formed within a sign system. Meanwhile, Charles Sanders Peirce (1931) classified signs into icons, indices, and symbols, each of which has a distinct relationship to its object. However, in a digital context like TikTok, Batak cultural symbols no longer exist within a stable system of meaning but instead undergo reinterpretation influenced by media logic and audience preferences.

The use of Batak cultural symbols in TikTok content demonstrates a shift from sacred functions to profane and aesthetic ones. Many content creators use cultural elements such as *ulos* or Batak expressions as part of visual trends and entertainment, without considering the underlying cultural context. This reflects what Jean Baudrillard (1994) calls hyperreality, a condition in which the boundaries between reality and representation become blurred. Furthermore, Umberto Eco (1986) stated that in popular culture, signs can be overinterpreted, resulting in new meanings that no longer refer to their original meanings. Thus, TikTok is not only a medium for cultural distribution but also a space for the production of new meanings, often fragmentary and contextual.

The shifting meaning of cultural symbols in digital media is also closely related to identity construction, particularly among the younger generation. Cultural identity in the digital age is no longer fixed, but rather undergoes constant negotiation and reconstruction through technology-mediated social interactions. Stuart Hall (1997) stated that identity is a process of constant "becoming," not a finished product. Meanwhile, Manuel Castells (2010) emphasized that in a networked society, identity is formed through relationships in a global, connected digital space. In this context, the use of Batak cultural symbols on TikTok can be understood as a self-representation strategy that reflects not only ethnic identity but also a digital identity shaped by social media trends and algorithms.

However, the transformation of cultural symbols in social media also raises various issues, particularly related to the reduction of meaning and commodification of culture. Cultural symbols, which initially held sacred and contextual value, are often reduced to merely aesthetically appealing visual objects. Theodor W. Adorno (1991), in his critique of the culture industry, stated that culture in modern society tends to become standardized and lose its authentic meaning. On the other hand, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) emphasized that cultural practices are inseparable from relations of power and symbolic capital, which influence how culture is produced and consumed. In the context of TikTok, Batak cultural symbols are often treated as commodities with economic value and popularity, but they lack the depth of meaning inherent in them.

Based on this background, this research focuses on a hypersemiotic study of Batak cultural symbols in TikTok content. The hypersemiotic approach was chosen because it can explain the phenomenon of shifting meanings in the context of digital media, which is rife with the simulation and reproduction of signs. Jean Baudrillard (1994) explained that in hypersemiotics, signs no longer have a clear reference to reality but instead become part of an autonomous simulation system. Meanwhile, Roland Barthes (1977) emphasized that the meaning of signs is always open to various interpretations influenced by social and ideological contexts. Therefore, this approach is considered relevant for analyzing the dynamics of the meaning of Batak cultural symbols in the digital space.

The research questions in this study were formulated to address the complexity of the phenomena described above. First, how are Batak cultural symbols represented in TikTok content? Second, how does the meaning of these symbols shift from a hypersemiotic perspective? Third, how do these cultural symbols play a role in shaping users' digital identities? These questions were formulated based on the theoretical frameworks of semiotics and hypersemiotics developed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1931) and Jean Baudrillard (1994), which emphasize the importance of the relationship between signs, meaning, and context in the interpretation process.

The purpose of this study is to uncover and analyze the shifting meanings of Batak cultural symbols in TikTok content through a hypersemiotic approach. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify the forms of representation of Batak cultural symbols in TikTok content, (2) analyze the shifting meanings of these symbols in a digital context, and (3) understand the role of cultural symbols in the construction of digital identities. These objectives align with the thinking of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) regarding sign systems and Umberto Eco (1986), who emphasized that meaning is always open to new interpretations in different cultural contexts.

The benefits of this research are divided into two: theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of cultural semiotic studies, particularly in understanding the phenomenon of hypersemiotics in the digital era. Furthermore, this research can also enrich the literature on the transformation of local culture in the context of globalization and digitalization, as proposed by Stuart Hall (1997) and Manuel Castells (2010). Practically, this research is expected to serve as a reference for the public, especially the younger generation, in understanding the importance of preserving the meaning and value of cultural symbols amidst the current of modernization. Furthermore, this research can also serve as a reference for content creators in producing more responsible and contextual cultural content.

Thus, this research has high urgency in the context of the current development of digital culture. Through a hypersemiotic approach, this study seeks to uncover the complexity of the meaning of Batak cultural symbols, which not only undergo transformation but also reinterpretation in the digital space. Umberto Eco (1986) stated that meaning is never fixed, but always open to various possible interpretations. This is reinforced by Jean Baudrillard (1994), who emphasized that in the era of simulation, reality and representation become inseparable. Therefore, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between culture, signs, and technology in the ever-evolving digital era.

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. This qualitative approach was chosen because it focuses on the meaning, interpretation, and analysis of Batak cultural symbols in the context of digital content, specifically on the TikTok platform. Descriptive methods are used to systematically describe the hypersemiotic phenomenon that occurs, namely the shifting meaning of Batak cultural symbols when represented in digital media and their transformation into new identities in the virtual space.

The object of this research is TikTok content featuring Batak cultural symbols, such as traditional clothing (*ulos*), Batak language, traditional music, dance, and elements of traditional rituals displayed in short videos. The research subjects include TikTok content creators who actively produce Batak cultural-themed content, as well as

audiences who interact through comments, likes, and shares. Objects and subjects were selected using purposive sampling, considering the relevance of the content to the hypersemiotic theme and the intensity of the resulting digital interactions.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly from TikTok content in the form of videos, captions, hashtags, and user comments related to Batak cultural symbols. Secondary data was obtained from scientific literature such as journals, books, and previous research discussing semiotics, hypersemiotics, Batak culture, and digital media. The use of these two types of data aims to strengthen the analysis and provide a sufficient theoretical foundation.

Data collection techniques were conducted through non-participant observation, documentation, and library research. Non-participant observation was conducted by directly observing TikTok content without engaging in interactions as an active user. Researchers noted various forms of representation of Batak cultural symbols that appeared in the content, including how these symbols were used, modified, or even parodied. Documentation techniques were employed by archiving content in the form of screenshots, video recordings, and transcripts of comments relevant to the research. Meanwhile, library research was used to examine theoretical concepts supporting the analysis, such as semiotics and hypersemiotics theory.

The research instrument in this qualitative study was the researcher herself (human instrument), who served as data collector, analyst, and interpreter. Furthermore, the researcher used supporting instruments in the form of observation and documentation guidelines. The observation guidelines contained indicators used to identify Batak cultural symbols in TikTok content, such as symbol type, context of use, visualization form, and audience response. The documentation guidelines were used to ensure that the collected data was systematically organized and traceable. Furthermore, the researcher used digital tools such as video downloaders and qualitative data processing software to assist in the data organization process.

The data analysis technique in this study refers to an interactive analysis model consisting of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and focused on data relevant to the research objectives, namely content that demonstrates shifts in the meaning of Batak cultural symbols. The data presentation stage was carried out by organizing the data in the form of descriptive narratives, tables, or categorizations based on the type of symbol and its representation. The final stage is drawing conclusions, which involves interpreting the data to understand how hypersemiotics influences changes in meaning and the formation of digital identity in the Batak cultural context.

To ensure data validity, this study employed triangulation techniques: source triangulation and theory triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from various TikTok content and user interactions to ensure consistency of findings. Theory triangulation was conducted by using various theoretical perspectives in semiotics and hypersemiotics to strengthen data interpretation. Furthermore, the researcher double-checked the collected data to avoid interpretative bias.

With this method, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of how Batak cultural symbols undergo a transformation in meaning in the digital space, as well as how the phenomenon of hypersemiotics plays a role in shaping new cultural identities in the social media era, particularly through the TikTok platform.

Results

This study analyzed 20 TikTok contents containing Batak cultural symbols during the period of January–March 2026. The contents were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on hashtags such as *#Batak*, *#Horas*, *#Ulos*, *#TortorBatak*, and *#BudayaBatak*. The research data consisted of videos, captions, hashtags, and user comments that reflected the representation of Batak cultural symbols in digital spaces.

Table 1. Forms of Representation of Batak Cultural Symbols in TikTok Content

No.	Type of TikTok Content	Batak Cultural Symbol	Form of Representation	Hypersemiotic Indication
1.	Modern fashion videos	<i>ulos</i>	Used as an accessory in modern outfits	Shift in meaning from sacred to aesthetic
2.	Trend dance videos	<i>Tor-tor</i>	Combined with modern remix music	Cultural hybridization
3.	Comedy content	Batak language expressions	Used as humor and stereotypes	Reduction of cultural meaning
4.	Culinary content	Traditional Batak food	Used as entertainment and promotional visuals	Cultural commodification
5.	Motivational videos	<i>"Horas"</i> greeting	Used as a marker of digital identity	Identity construction
6.	Wedding content	<i>mangulosi</i> procession	Displayed briefly in visual form	Simulation of tradition
7.	Vlog content	<i>gorga</i> ornaments	Used as decorative visual backgrounds	Aestheticization of cultural symbols
8.	Music content	Traditional Batak songs	Remixed with popular music trends	Production of new meanings

Based on the data above, Batak cultural symbols are predominantly represented in visual forms rather than through explanations of their original cultural meanings. Symbols such as *ulos* and *gorga* are more frequently used as aesthetic elements to enhance the visual appeal of videos. Of the 20 videos analyzed, 14 contents displayed cultural symbols merely as visual complements without providing explanations regarding their philosophical values.

In addition, the study found that the use of the Batak language on TikTok has undergone a functional shift. Originally used within the context of customary communication and kinship relations, the Batak language on TikTok is more commonly employed for entertainment, humor, and stereotypical portrayals of Batak characters perceived as expressive and amusing. This phenomenon was identified in 8 comedy videos that utilized Batak expressions to attract audience engagement.

The research also revealed the reproduction of cultural meaning through the combination of Batak cultural symbols with global TikTok trends. For example, *tor-tor* dance performances were combined with modern DJ remix music and popular TikTok

visual transitions. This phenomenon indicates that cultural symbols are no longer maintained exclusively within their traditional contexts, but are instead adapted to contemporary digital culture.

Table 2. Shifts in the Meaning of Batak Cultural Symbols on TikTok

Cultural Symbol	Traditional Meaning	Representation on TikTok	Form of Meaning Shift
<i>ulos</i>	Symbol of affection, prayer, and social status	Fashion and visual accessory	Sacred → Aesthetic
<i>tor-tor</i>	Ritual traditional dance	Entertainment and trend content	Ritual → Entertainment
Batak language	Language of customary communication	Digital humor language	Formal → Comedic
<i>"Horas"</i>	Greeting of respect and kinship	Social media caption and slogan	Cultural → Identity branding
<i>gorga</i>	Symbol of life philosophy	Decorative visual element	Philosophical → Ornamental

The data demonstrate that Batak cultural symbols have experienced significant transformations in meaning within digital media. Cultural symbols no longer fully represent traditional values and philosophies, but instead undergo reproduction of meaning according to the logic of social media, which prioritizes visibility, trends, and audience interaction.

User interactions on TikTok also indicate the construction of digital identities based on cultural symbols. Comments such as "Proud to be Batak," "Batak culture is amazing," and "Strong Batak vibes" demonstrate that cultural symbols are used as markers of ethnic identity in digital spaces. However, these identities are flexible because they are combined with global popular culture and social media trends.

Overall, the findings indicate that TikTok functions as a hypersemiotic space in which Batak cultural symbols experience simulation, reproduction, commodification, and shifts in meaning. Cultural symbols no longer function solely as representations of tradition, but also as instruments of entertainment, visual aesthetics, and digital identity formation among younger generations.

Based on an analysis of TikTok content containing Batak cultural symbols, several patterns were found that indicate a transformation of meaning from a hypersemiotic perspective. The results of this study are presented in the following subheadings:

1. Dominance of Visual Representations of Batak Cultural Symbols

The results show that Batak cultural symbols in TikTok are predominantly represented in visual form, such as the use of *ulos* (traditional clothing), *gorga* ornaments, and traditional clothing. This representation tends to emphasize aesthetic aspects over the symbolic meaning inherent in the symbols. In much of the content, cultural symbols are used as visual backdrops without contextual explanation. This indicates a shift in the function of signs from a system of meaning to a visual system. This phenomenon aligns with Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) concept of the sign, which states that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and can change depending on context. Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) also emphasized

that in visual media, meaning is shaped more by representational and compositional aspects than contextual meaning.

2. Shifting Meaning from Sacred to Aesthetic

Batak cultural symbols, which initially held sacred meaning in traditional contexts, have transformed into aesthetic symbols in digital content. *Ulos*, for example, which in Batak culture holds spiritual and social significance, is now often used as a visual accessory in entertainment content. The Batak language has also shifted in function to become a tool for humor or informal expression. This indicates a significant reduction in symbolic meaning. This finding aligns with the concept of hyperreality proposed by Jean Baudrillard (1994), where signs no longer represent reality but create a new reality that is more dominant than reality itself. Furthermore, Roland Barthes (1977) stated that connotative meaning can change according to the surrounding social context.

3. Production and Reproduction of Meaning in Digital Space

TikTok content demonstrates that creators actively produce and reproduce the meaning of Batak cultural symbols through diverse interpretations. Cultural symbols no longer have a single meaning, but are instead plural and open to multiple interpretations. Much content combines Batak cultural symbols with global trends, resulting in new, hybrid meanings. This demonstrates that digital media has become an autonomous space for the production of meaning. This finding aligns with Umberto Eco's (1986) view that signs in popular culture can be overinterpreted, resulting in new meanings. Furthermore, Peirce (1931) emphasized that the interpretation of signs is dynamic and dependent on the interpreter.

4. Commodification of Cultural Symbols in Digital Platforms

The results show that Batak cultural symbols in TikTok are often used as a strategy to increase content appeal and engagement. Culture is treated as a commodity with economic value on digital platforms. Creators tend to choose visually appealing symbols to attract audience attention, without considering their deeper cultural meaning. This indicates a shift in the function of symbols from cultural to economic value. This phenomenon aligns with Theodor W. Adorno's (1991) critique of the culture industry, which states that culture in modern society tends to experience commodification and standardization. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) emphasized that cultural practices are influenced by symbolic and economic capital.

5. Digital Identity Construction through Cultural Symbols

Batak cultural symbols on TikTok also play a role in the formation of digital identity, particularly among the younger generation. Users use cultural symbols as a tool to demonstrate their ethnic identity while adapting to global trends. The identities they construct are flexible and dynamic, influenced by interactions in digital spaces. This finding aligns with Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of cultural identity, which states that identity is a continuously evolving process. Furthermore, Manuel Castells (2010) also emphasized that identity in a networked society is formed through interactions in digital spaces.

Discussion

The research results show that Batak cultural symbols on TikTok have undergone a significant transformation that can be explained through a hypersemiotic approach. The dominance of visual representations indicates that digital media has shifted the function of signs from a system of meaning to an aesthetic system. In this context, cultural symbols are no longer understood based on their traditional meaning, but rather on their visual appeal. This suggests that meaning in digital media is constructive and

influenced by the logic of the platform. Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) stated that the meaning of signs is determined by the relationships within the system, so that changes in context will result in changes in meaning. Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) emphasized that visual media has its own logic in shaping meaning.

This shift in meaning from sacred to aesthetic indicates a transformation of cultural values in the digital context. Symbols that originally had spiritual and social significance are now reduced to decorative visual objects. This reflects a state of hyperreality in which representation dominates over reality itself. Jean Baudrillard (1994) explained that in hyperreality, signs no longer have a clear reference to reality. Meanwhile, Roland Barthes (1977) emphasized that connotative meaning can change according to ideology and social context.

The production of meaning in digital space demonstrates that TikTok is not merely a distribution medium but also an active space for the production of meaning. Creators not only represent culture but also create new meanings through diverse interpretations. This demonstrates that meaning is pluralistic and no longer bound by its original context. Umberto Eco (1986) stated that signs in popular culture are open to multiple interpretations. Furthermore, Peirce (1931) emphasized that the process of semiosis is infinite, so meaning is always evolving.

The commodification of cultural symbols demonstrates that culture in digital media is inseparable from economic logic. Cultural symbols are used as tools to attract attention and increase the popularity of content. This demonstrates that culture has become part of the profit-oriented creative industry. Theodor W. Adorno (1991) stated that the cultural industry tends to transform culture into a commodity. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) emphasized that cultural practices are influenced by symbolic and economic capital.

The construction of digital identity through cultural symbols demonstrates that social media has become a crucial space for identity formation. Identity is no longer static, but dynamic and constantly changing according to social and technological contexts. The use of Batak cultural symbols on TikTok demonstrates the younger generation's efforts to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to global trends. Stuart Hall (1997) stated that identity is a constantly evolving process. Meanwhile, Manuel Castells (2010) emphasized that identity in a networked society is formed through digital interactions.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that Batak cultural symbols on TikTok have undergone a complex transformation, involving shifts in meaning, the production of new meanings, commodification, and the construction of digital identities. A hypersemiotic approach provides a relevant framework for understanding this phenomenon, as it explains how cultural signs undergo change in the context of digital media, which is rife with simulation and hyperreality.

Conclusion

This study examines the hypersemiotic phenomenon of Batak cultural symbols in TikTok content, focusing on shifting meanings and the construction of digital identity. Based on the findings, the transformation of Batak cultural symbols in digital media reflects changes in function, meaning, and symbolic value within modern communication practices. The representation of Batak cultural symbols on TikTok demonstrates the dominance of visual aspects over contextual meanings. Symbols such as *ulos*, Batak language expressions, and traditional cultural elements are no longer positioned exclusively within traditional cultural frameworks, but increasingly function as aesthetic and performative components. This condition confirms that signs in digital

media are shifting from systems of meaning into visual systems emphasizing attraction and rapid audience consumption. From a semiotic perspective, the relationship between signifier and signified becomes dynamic because it is influenced by social context and media logic. Furthermore, this study identifies a shift in meaning from sacred and contextual interpretations toward profane and flexible uses. Cultural symbols previously associated with spiritual and traditional values are increasingly utilized for entertainment, trends, and contemporary self expression online. This transformation reflects a condition of hyperreality where cultural representations no longer fully refer to traditional realities, but instead create alternative meanings within social media.

Third, TikTok functions as a space for the active production and reproduction of cultural meaning in contemporary digital society. Content creators not only represent Batak cultural symbols, but also reinterpret and reconstruct their meanings according to digital trends, audience preferences, and platform demands. Consequently, the meanings attached to cultural symbols become plural, flexible, and continuously negotiated through online interactions. This phenomenon demonstrates that meaning in the digital era is never fixed, because social media encourages constant reinterpretation through communication technologies and participatory culture. Furthermore, this study reveals the commodification of Batak cultural symbols within digital platforms. Cultural symbols are strategically employed to increase audience engagement, visual attractiveness, popularity, and economic value in social media content. As a result, culture is no longer understood solely as valuable heritage, but also as a commodity integrated into creative industry practices and digital capitalism. Finally, Batak cultural symbols on TikTok contribute significantly to digital identity construction, especially among younger generations. These symbols function as markers of ethnic identity while simultaneously shaping hybrid self representations combining local cultural values with global digital influences today. Overall, this study confirms the relevance of hypersemiotics for understanding cultural transformation, reinterpretation, preservation challenges, and symbolic negotiation within digital media.

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