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THE ROLE OF AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN MEDIATING THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL SEMIOTIC ELEMENTS ON BRAND ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract. The rapid growth of social media has transformed how brands connect with consumers, emphasizing visual and narrative strategies that evoke emotional resonance. This study explores how digital semiotic elements, namely visual appeal, sensory excitement, brand narrative, narrative symbol, and symbolic iconography, influence brand engagement, with affective experience serving as a mediating factor. A quantitative approach was applied through an online survey of social media users who follow brand accounts in Indonesia. The collected data were analyzed using Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) to assess the reliability and relationships among constructs. The results show that visual appeal, brand narrative, and semiotic elements significantly enhance affective experience, while sensory excitement exhibits a positive yet insignificant effect. Moreover, affective experience strongly predicts brand engagement and partially mediates the influence of semiotic elements on engagement. These findings highlight that visual aesthetics and meaningful symbols play a crucial role in nurturing consumers' emotional connections and long-term engagement with brands in digital environments.

Keywords; Visual Appeal, Brand Narrative, Semiotic Elements, Affective Experience, Brand Engagement.

1. Introduction

The advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed how brands build relationships with their consumers. Social media today is not merely a platform for sharing information but has evolved into a symbolic space where brands construct identity and emotional experiences for their audiences. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok facilitate communication that is no longer one-directional but interactive, visual, and meaning-driven. Through the use of imagery, color, narrative, and symbols, brands can create experiences that are not only aesthetically appealing but also emotionally engaging and psychologically resonant with users (Furquim et al., 2025).

Digital communication today has evolved into a space where semiotic elements such as visual appeal, sensory excitement, and narrative symbolism play a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and strengthening brand attachment. According to (Furquim et al., 2025), the success of digital communication strategies does not merely depend on how frequently consumers interact with brand content but rather on how deeply such content can evoke affective responses that lead to emotional engagement. These affective experiences encourage consumers to participate more actively with brands through comments, shares, and even brand advocacy.

However, most previous studies have predominantly focused on global or luxury brand contexts, leaving limited attention to how digital semiotic elements function within local brands that possess distinct cultural characteristics (Worakittikul et al., 2024). Moreover, past research on digital semiotics has largely applied qualitative socio-semiotic approaches such as interpretive thematic analysis without empirically testing the

causal relationships between semiotic elements, affective experience, and brand engagement. (Naeem et al., 2025), Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for explaining how signs and symbols on social media are transformed into emotional experiences that drive consumer engagement, particularly in digital environments where meaning-making is strongly shaped by visual and symbolic cues.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze how digital semiotic elements including visual appeal, sensory excitement, brand narrative, narrative symbol, and symbolic iconography influence brand engagement, with affective experience serving as a mediating variable. The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions by expanding the understanding of symbolic interaction within digital brand communication, as well as practical implications for industry practitioners in designing content strategies that are not only visually appealing but also capable of generating deep emotional resonance among consumers.

2. Research Methodology

The population of this study consisted of active Instagram and TikTok users who had interacted with brand content within the last three months, and respondents were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: aged 18 years or older, active on social media at least three times per week, and having engaged with branded content through likes, comments, or shares. A total of 400 valid responses were collected, exceeding the minimum requirement of 330 respondents determined based on the 66 measurement indicators used in this study. Data were obtained using an online questionnaire employing a 10-point semantic differential scale to capture respondents' perceptions with greater sensitivity. Each construct visual appeal, sensory excitement, brand narrative, narrative symbol, symbolic iconography, affective experience, and brand engagement was measured through several indicators whose validity and reliability were assessed through factor loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). To minimize common method bias, procedural remedies were implemented by randomizing item order and varying item phrasing. The collected data were analyzed using Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) with AMOS 24 and SPSS 27, which involved data screening, assumption testing (including normality and outlier detection), construct evaluation, model fit assessment, and hypothesis testing for both direct and mediating effects. All assumption tests indicated that the data met the requirements for CB-SEM analysis and were therefore suitable for further model estimation.

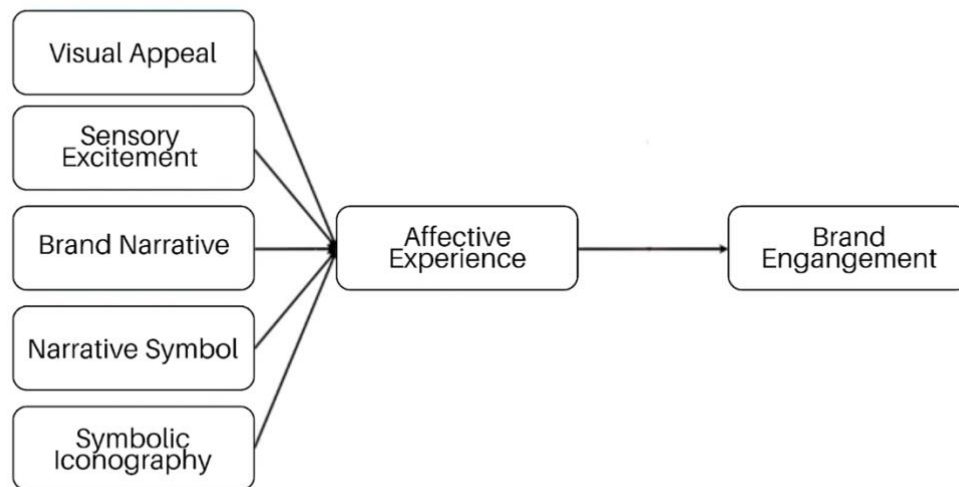


Fig 1. Research Model

3. Results and Discussion

This research involved 400 qualified respondents who met the inclusion criteria. The respondents were categorized according to gender, age, and frequency of social media usage. All participants were active users of Instagram and TikTok who had recently engaged with branded content, including advertisements, digital campaigns, and narrative-based posts. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 1.

4. Results

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Attribute	Total	%
Age	<18 years	2	0,5
Age	18–24 years	301	75,3
Age	25–34 years	61	15,2
Age	35–44 years	30	7,5
Age	≥45 years	6	1,5
Have you ever interacted with brand content on social media?	Yes	393	98,3
Have you ever interacted with brand content on social media?	No	7	1,7
Frequency of viewing brand content on social media per week	1-2 times	47	11,8
Frequency of viewing brand content on social media per week	3-4 times	66	16,5
Frequency of viewing brand content on social media per week	5 times or more	287	71,8

From the 400 collected responses, the majority of participants consisted of Gen Z and early millennial users, predominantly female, who are generally highly interactive and responsive toward visually engaging brand content on social media. This demographic aligns with the primary user base of Instagram and TikTok, platforms characterized by strong visual appeal and short-form content formats that encourage active participation. The dataset was further analyzed using Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) with IBM AMOS 24 to test the proposed model. The analytical procedure began with the development of a conceptual framework based on prior studies, followed by hypothesis formulation and a thorough assessment of data completeness and SEM assumptions. Normality testing indicated that the data were normally distributed, as shown by a multivariate critical ratio value of 1.119, which falls within the acceptable threshold of ± 2.58 . Outlier analysis also confirmed the absence of problematic cases, with univariate z-scores ranging from -2.948 to 2.020 (within ± 3) and the maximum Mahalanobis distance value (28.543) remaining below the chi-square critical value (87.901). After confirming that the data met both normality and outlier-free assumptions, validity and reliability evaluations were conducted to ensure that each item accurately represented its latent construct and demonstrated internal consistency. Upon satisfying these criteria, the measurement and structural models were analyzed for model fit and hypothesis testing in accordance with the guidelines recommended by Hair et al. (2021).

Table 2. Measurement, Loadings, CR, and VE

No	Questionnaire Statements	Construct	Indicator	Loading Factor	CR	AVE
1	The brand content has attractive, harmonious colors.	<i>Visual Appeal</i>	V1	0,872	0,920	0,744
2	Brand content is arranged in a neat layout.		V2	0,836		
3	Huruf pada konten brand mudah dibaca.		V3	0,809		
4	The letters on the brand content are easy to read.		V4	0,93		
5	Brand content is fun to look at.	<i>Sensory Excitement</i>	SE1	0,85	0,917	0,788
6	Musik dalam konten menambah daya tarik.		SE2	0,924		
7	Music in the content adds to the appeal.		SE3	0,888		
8	The brand story feels honestly relevant.	<i>Brand Narrative</i>	BN1	0,79	0,88	0,72
9	Brand stories reflect value identity.		BN2	0,93		
10	The brand story matches the product offered.		BN3	0,83		

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No	Questionnaire Statements	Construct	Indicator	Loading Factor	CR	AVE
11	The brand symbol is easily recognizable.	<i>Narrative Symbol</i>	NS1	0,915	0,901	0,752
12	Brand symbols convey an emotional impact.		NS2	0,866		
13	Brand symbols are in line with the respondent's culture.		NS3	0,819		
14	The brand logo is easily recognizable.	<i>Symbolic Iconography</i>	SI1	0,84	0,857	0,668
15	Brand icon emojis are used consistently to strengthen identity.		SI2	0,831		
16	The brand symbol is different from competitors.		SI3	0,779		
17	Brand content creates a sense of joy.	<i>Affective Experience</i>	AE1	0,787	0,897	0,746
18	There is an emotional closeness to the brand.		AE2	0,862		
19	Brand content is in line with personal experiences.		AE3	0,937		
21	Brand information is carefully considered.	<i>Brand Engagement</i>	BE1	0,777	0,905	0,705
22	Brands that fit your lifestyle.		BE2	0,755		
23	There is an emotional connection with the brand.		BE3	0,873		
25	Active participation with brands through digital interactions.		BE4	0,783		

The measurement model results reveal strong psychometric properties across all constructs. All factor loadings range from 0.755 to 0.937, exceeding the minimum recommended value of 0.70 and indicating that each indicator accurately measures its intended latent construct. Composite Reliability (CR) values fall between 0.857 and 0.920, demonstrating high internal consistency among the items within each construct. Similarly, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values range from 0.668 to 0.788, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.50 and confirming the convergent validity of each construct. Taken together, these results affirm that the measurement model is both reliable and valid, providing a strong foundation for subsequent structural model analysis.

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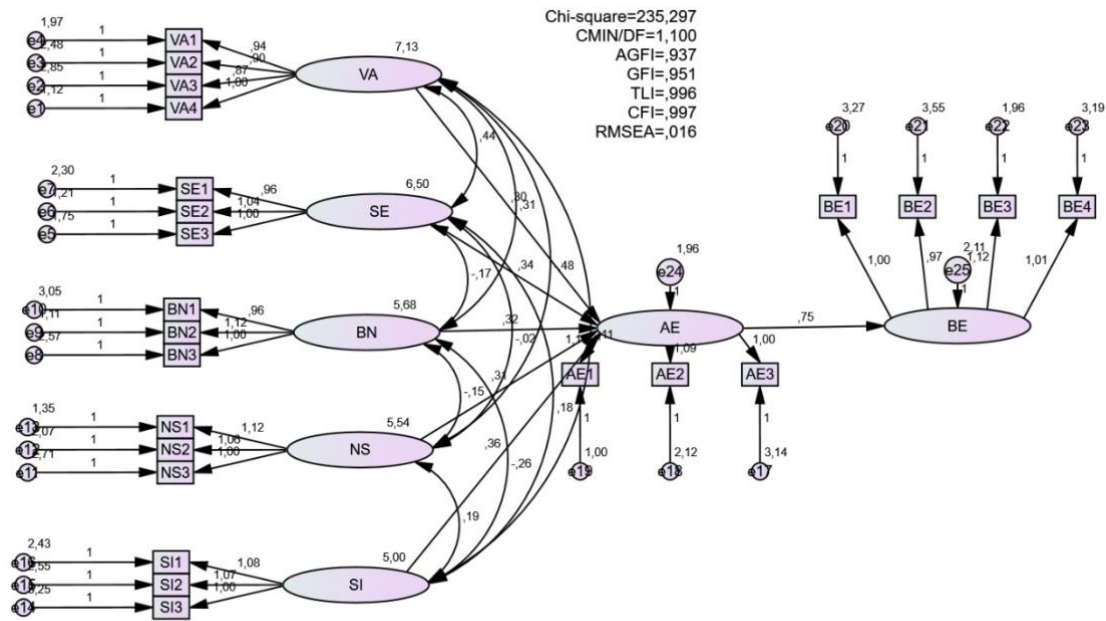


Figure 2. Model

Table 3. Godness Of Fit (GOF)

<i>Goodness of Fit</i>	<i>Result Analysis</i>	<i>Cut of Value</i>	<i>Evaluating Model</i>
<i>Chi-Square</i>	235,297	Expected to be small	Marginal Fit
<i>CMIN/DF</i>	1,100	< 2.000	Fit
<i>AGFI</i>	0.937	> 0.90	Fit
<i>GFI</i>	0.951	> 0.90	Fit
<i>TLI</i>	0.996	> 0.95	Fit
<i>CFI</i>	0.997	> 0.95	Fit
<i>RMSEA</i>	0.016	< 0.80	Fit

The Goodness of Fit indices collectively demonstrate that the proposed model exhibits an excellent level of fit. All major indicators including GFI, AGFI, TLI, CFI, and RMSEA fall within the recommended thresholds, indicating that the structural model adequately reflects the empirical data. The exceptionally low RMSEA value further confirms that the model represents the observed covariance matrix with minimal error. Accordingly, the model is deemed appropriate for subsequent hypothesis testing.

Table 4. Hypotesis Testing

Parameter	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
AE <--- VA	,299	,034	8,685	<,001
AE <--- SE	,336	,037	9,069	<,001
AE <--- BN	,321	,040	8,070	<,001
AE <--- NS	,314	,040	7,765	<,001
AE <--- SI	,363	,044	8,206	<,001
AE <--- AE	,749	,057	13,053	<,001

All hypothesized paths were found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating robust relationships between the constructs. Each semiotic element visual appeal, sensory excitement, brand narrative, narrative symbolism, and symbolic iconography emerges as a salient antecedent of affective experience. The path from

affective experience to brand engagement also demonstrates a strong and highly significant effect, suggesting that emotional responses serve as a pivotal mechanism driving consumers' behavioral engagement. These results reinforce theoretical assertions that emotional activation mediates the translation of symbolic cues into interactive brand behaviors.

Table 5. Mediation Test Result

Parameter	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
VA > AE > BE	,224	,169	,275	,005
SE > AE > BE	,252	,196	,314	,004
BN > AE > BE	,241	,185	,303	,005
NS > AE > BE	,235	,163	,299	,009
SI > AE > BE	,272	,208	,337	,007

The mediation analysis confirmed that affective experience significantly mediated all relationships between the semiotic elements and brand engagement. The indirect effects for all paths were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating partial mediation. This suggests that semiotic cues influence brand engagement both directly and through affective experience as an emotional mechanism.

5. Discussions

The results of this study reveal that digital semiotic elements visual appeal, sensory excitement, brand narrative, narrative symbols, and symbolic iconography significantly influence affective experience, demonstrating that these cues function not merely as aesthetic attributes but as meaning-making devices that activate emotional responses essential for deeper consumer engagement. Visual appeal and symbolic iconography exert the strongest effects, suggesting that coherent design, symbolic familiarity, and culturally resonant cues enhance cognitive fluency and emotional interpretation, thereby strengthening consumers' psychological attachment to brands. The strong predictive effect of affective experience on brand engagement further highlights that engagement in digital environments is fundamentally emotion-driven, supporting semiotic and emotional-processing theories that posit affect as the central pathway through which symbolic stimuli translate into behavioral outcomes. The indirect effect test confirms that affective experience partially mediates all relationships between semiotic cues and engagement, indicating that while semiotic elements exert direct influence, their impact is amplified when processed emotionally. Theoretically, these findings advance digital semiotics by providing empirical evidence of the causal mechanism linking symbolic communication, emotional activation, and engagement an area previously dominated by descriptive rather than explanatory approaches. Practically, the results underscore the need for brands to prioritize emotionally resonant design strategies by employing coherent visual identity, culturally aligned symbols, and narrative-rich content to evoke affective responses that foster active participation, loyalty, and sustained engagement within visually driven platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study reaffirm the central research question by demonstrating that digital semiotic elements significantly shape affective experience, which in turn

drives brand engagement, thereby addressing the theoretical gap concerning how symbolic meaning is internalized through emotional processing within digital environments. These results highlight that semiotic cues function not merely as visual markers but also as emotional triggers that translate meaning into behavior, providing empirical explanation for the symbolic affective behavioral pathway that has been underexplored in prior literature. From a managerial perspective, brands should implement actionable strategies such as using consistent color palettes to enhance visual fluency, employing culturally resonant icons to strengthen symbolic recognition, and developing short-form storytelling on platforms such as Instagram Reels and TikTok to evoke emotional relevance and encourage active user participation. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged, including the use of self-reported survey data that may not fully capture implicit affective responses, a single-country sample dominated by Gen Z respondents, and the exclusive application of the CB-SEM method, which may restrict generalizability and overlook platform-specific behavioral dynamics. Therefore, future research is encouraged to incorporate physiological or behavioral measures such as eye-tracking and engagement trace data, expand the context to cross-platform and cross-cultural settings, develop a more comprehensive set of semiotic constructs, and employ actual behavioral data along with longitudinal or experimental designs to validate causal mechanisms more precisely and to better understand how semiotic cues operate dynamically across various digital ecosystems.

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