

Brand narratives and economic identity: a semiotic analysis of Indonesian startup branding language

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ABSTRACT

Background: The growth of Indonesia's digital economy, valued at USD 82 billion in 2023, underscores the importance of understanding how startups construct brand identity through semiotic, narrative, and linguistic strategies. **Objective:** This study aims to examine how Indonesian startups employ logos, slogans, and storytelling to build economic identities that resonate with local cultural values while projecting global modernity. **Method:** Using a qualitative descriptive design, this research analyzed multimodal data from official websites, mobile applications, and social media campaigns of leading startups, applying semiotic analysis, narrative discourse analysis, and a brand linguistics framework. **Results:** The findings reveal that visual symbols such as logos and color schemes function not only as identifiers but also as cultural myths naturalizing inclusivity and progress; narrative storytelling consistently follows a problem-solution-transformation structure that situates startups as social enablers; and linguistic strategies employ hybridity, empowerment discourse, and metaphor to construct economic subject positions. Together, these results demonstrate that branding operates as both communication and ideology, embedding startups within national development narratives while simultaneously aligning with global capitalist aesthetics. **Implication:** The implications suggest that brand language in emerging markets is a powerful site of cultural negotiation, offering insights for scholars of discourse and practitioners of digital branding alike. **Novelty:** This study reveals how Indonesian startups strategically mobilize semiotic, narrative, and linguistic resources to construct hybrid brand identities that negotiate local cultural values while projecting global economic modernity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Indonesia's digital economy has made brand narratives and linguistic strategies increasingly central to startup success. According to Google, Temasek, and Bain's *e-Economy SEA Report 2023*, Indonesia's digital economy reached a gross merchandise value (GMV) of USD 82 billion, accounting for nearly 40% of Southeast Asia's digital market share. Startups such as Gojek, Tokopedia, Ruangguru, and OVO have not only attracted millions of users but also reshaped consumption patterns, employment models, and financial inclusion. Yet, their appeal extends beyond technology: it lies in the narratives, symbols, and linguistic framing they use to position themselves as more than mere service providers. In a country with strong communal values and diverse cultural identities, branding strategies that integrate semiotic signs,

linguistic cues, and economic identities have become critical tools of persuasion. This socio-economic reality underscores the urgency of studying the semiotic and narrative dimensions of Indonesian startup branding.

Scholarly attention to branding and discourse in digital economies has expanded significantly in recent years. Studies on global startups highlight how branding language constructs trust, identity, and consumer loyalty through multimodal narratives and cultural resonance [1], [2], [3], [4]. In Indonesia, prior research has examined consumer behavior in e-commerce platforms [5] and the role of cultural values in marketing communication [6]. However, few studies focus specifically on the semiotic construction of startup branding or its role in shaping economic identities through language. While linguistic landscape studies analyze public texts and signage [7], [8], there is a gap in applying semiotic and discourse frameworks to digital brand communication in Indonesian startups. This research thus positions itself at the intersection of branding linguistics, economic discourse, and semiotics, filling an important scholarly void in both linguistic and entrepreneurial studies.

The present study aims to investigate how Indonesian startups construct their brand narratives and economic identities through semiotic and linguistic strategies. Specifically, it addresses the following questions: (1) How do logos, slogans, and symbolic choices encode denotative and connotative meanings in the context of Indonesian digital startups? (2) In what ways do brand narratives and storytelling techniques frame entrepreneurial journeys, conflicts, and solutions? (3) How does the language of branding position startups as economic actors—empowering local communities, promoting innovation, or aligning with global capitalist discourses? By analyzing visual and linguistic signs in startup websites, mobile applications, and promotional campaigns, this study seeks to uncover the cultural and economic logic embedded in digital branding practices.

Preliminary observations suggest that Indonesian startups strategically employ branding language to position themselves as socio-economic enablers rather than purely commercial entities. Semiotic analysis reveals that minimalist logos, vibrant color palettes, and hybrid Indonesian-English slogans signify both global modernity and local resonance. Narrative discourse analysis indicates that storytelling often frames startups as heroic problem-solvers or facilitators of community empowerment, employing metaphors of challenge, disruption, and digital transformation. From a brand linguistics perspective, startups articulate economic identities—such as “tech-savvy modernist” or “inclusive innovator”—that resonate with Indonesia’s evolving digital ecosystem. These findings imply that branding language plays a crucial role in shaping how users imagine their participation in the digital economy. This research, therefore, not only contributes to theoretical discussions in semiotics and discourse studies but also offers practical insights into the socio-economic role of startups in emerging markets.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Semiotics

Semiotics, broadly defined as the study of signs and symbols in communication, provides a foundation for analyzing the visual and linguistic aspects of branding. Ferdinand de Saussure introduced semiotics as a system of signifiers (forms) and signifieds (concepts), while Charles Peirce conceptualized signs through a triadic model of representamen, object, and interpretant [9], [10]. Roland Barthes later extended the scope of semiotics to cultural analysis, differentiating between denotative and connotative meanings embedded in media texts [11]. Scholars differ in how they approach semiotics: Saussurean traditions emphasize structural relations between signs, while Barthesian semiotics highlights ideology and myth. In branding studies, semiotics has been employed to explain how logos, colors, and slogans signify not only product attributes but also broader socio-cultural identities [1], [5]. Thus, semiotics provides the analytical framework to unpack how Indonesian startups visually and linguistically construct meaning within their brand narratives.

Semiotic analysis of branding often unfolds across several dimensions [12]. Denotative meaning refers to the literal function of a sign, such as a startup’s logo symbolizing mobility or trust. Connotative meaning relates to cultural and emotional associations, such as Gojek’s green color palette suggesting inclusivity and environmental awareness. Barthes (1977) also introduces the concept of myth, wherein signs naturalize social ideologies [11]; for instance, Tokopedia’s “wishing star” logo embodies not only e-commerce but also aspiration and empowerment. Visual semiotics has been operationalized through categories such as icon, index, and symbol [13], while linguistic semiotics examines how slogans and taglines act as verbal signs encoding economic identities [14]. Scholars argue that brand semiotics must be studied holistically, combining visual and textual dimensions to reveal hidden ideological work [15], [16]. In this research, semiotic categories guide the interpretation of how Indonesian startup branding materializes cultural, economic, and political imaginaries.

2.2. Narrative discourse

Narrative discourse, the second conceptual foundation of this study, refers to the structures and strategies by which stories are told. Burnell et al (2023) distinguished between “histoire” (the story) and “discours” (the telling), emphasizing narrative temporality, focalization, and voice [2]. Within branding, narrative discourse is understood as the way companies construct stories about their origins, missions, and relationships with users [3]. Scholars debate whether brand storytelling functions primarily as persuasion [6] or as identity construction [1]. While classical narratology stresses textual structure, contemporary discourse analysis emphasizes performance, context, and interactivity—particularly relevant in digital marketing where audiences co-create narratives [17]. For Indonesian startups, narrative discourse analysis helps uncover how branding constructs entrepreneurial journeys, heroes and villains, and the promise of socio-economic transformation. Thus, narrative theory provides a lens to interpret brand texts as socially embedded stories rather than mere marketing tools.

Brand narratives are often analyzed through categories such as plot structure, characters, conflict, and resolution. According to Fluhrer (2025), effective brand stories follow a three-act structure: a challenge faced, a struggle or transformation, and a resolution that aligns with the brand’s value proposition [3]. Characters can be the brand itself, the consumer, or broader societal groups. Conflict is central, as it frames the brand as either solving inefficiencies or empowering users to overcome adversity [2]. Narratives also involve themes, such as progress, empowerment, or disruption. In digital branding, the use of pronouns like “we” and “you” constructs inclusion and intimacy, aligning with findings from discourse-pragmatic studies. These categories highlight how startups not only tell stories of technological efficiency but also frame themselves as moral actors within socio-economic change. Hence, narrative discourse analysis enables critical examination of branding as a form of cultural storytelling.

2.3. Brand linguistics

Brand linguistics, an emerging interdisciplinary field, focuses on the role of language in constructing brand identity, positioning, and consumer relationships. Rooted in sociolinguistics and discourse studies, it examines lexical choices, stylistic devices, and interactional strategies in branding texts [7]. Scholars conceptualize brand language as both symbolic capital and pragmatic resource, shaping perceptions of authority, modernity, and inclusivity [8]. While some definitions emphasize strategic communication—how brands persuade and differentiate [4]—others highlight identity work, viewing brand language as a site of ideological negotiation [18]. In Southeast Asia, linguistic hybridity is common, as English terms blend with local languages to signal global modernity while retaining cultural familiarity. In Indonesian startups, hybrid slogans such as “scale up bisnis” or “solusi digitalisasi” exemplify this trend [19]. Thus, brand linguistics enables systematic analysis of how economic identities are linguistically articulated within startup branding.

Brand linguistics can be analyzed through categories such as lexical choice, metaphor, code-switching, and linguistic positioning. Lexical choice involves selecting words that signal values like innovation (“smart”, “digital”) or empowerment (“untuk UMKM”). Metaphors frame abstract economic ideas in accessible terms, e.g., “digital bridge” or “ecosystem of growth” [7]. Code-switching between Indonesian and English constructs an aspirational modern identity while appealing to bilingual audiences [20]. Linguistic positioning, meanwhile, situates brands within socio-economic hierarchies: some startups emphasize grassroots empowerment, while others highlight global competitiveness. Research shows that such linguistic strategies directly influence consumer perception of trust, inclusivity, and relevance [21]. By analyzing these categories, scholars can reveal how brand language not only reflects but actively shapes economic identities. For Indonesian startups, this entails understanding branding as both a linguistic practice and a socio-economic discourse with far-reaching cultural implications.

3. METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study consists of visual texts and linguistic symbols embedded in the branding practices of Indonesian digital startups. These include slogans, taglines, logos, color palettes, and storytelling narratives present in official websites, mobile applications, and digital promotional campaigns. The rationale for focusing on these elements is that branding discourse operates not only through product features but also through symbolic and narrative constructions that shape economic identities. As Naz et al (2025) emphasizes, semiotics of brands provides insight into how signs are mobilized to generate consumer meaning [1]. To ensure systematic coverage, the corpus was selected purposively from leading startups with significant digital presence and socio-economic impact. Table 1 summarizes the types of corpus data analyzed in this research.

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design with a semiotic and discourse-analytic orientation. A qualitative approach is appropriate since the study aims to interpret meanings rather than measure quantitative variables. According to Creswell (2011), qualitative designs allow researchers to explore cultural and symbolic dimensions embedded in texts, especially when dealing with multimodal

materials [22]. The descriptive nature of the study ensures a focus on detailing how startup brands deploy linguistic and visual strategies to construct narratives and economic identities. The integration of semiotics, narrative discourse analysis, and brand linguistics aligns with a multi-framework design that captures the layered nature of brand communication. The research does not test hypotheses statistically but instead builds interpretive accounts that contribute to both theoretical refinement and practical understanding of branding language in emerging economies.

Table 1. Corpus of data

No	Type of Data	Example Corpus Data	Source
1	Slogan & Tagline	- “Bangun Bisnis Jadi Gampang” (Mekari) - “Lebih Baik Tokopedia” (Tokopedia) - “Traveloka, Your Lifestyle Superapp” (Traveloka) - “Pendidikan Tanpa Batas” (Ruangguru) - “Ayo Mulai #LifeAtOVO” (OVO)	Official websites, apps, PlayStore descriptions
2	Logos, Colors & Visual Symbols	- Tokopedia: Hijau cerah + burung hantu (ikon edukasi & ramah pengguna) - Gojek: Swirl hijau hitam (gerak dinamis, inklusivitas) - Ruangguru: Biru muda dengan tipografi rounded (kesan edukatif & terpercaya) - OVO: Ungu elegan (asosiasi finansial modern & premium) - Shopee Indonesia: Oranye dengan ikon keranjang belanja (praktis, dekat dengan keseharian)	Media kit resmi, brand guideline, AppStore
3	Brand Narratives (Storytelling)	- Tokopedia: “Membantu UMKM naik kelas dan menjadi bagian dari ekonomi digital Indonesia” - Gojek: “Solusi dari keresahan sehari-hari, dari transportasi hingga layanan keuangan” - Ruangguru: “Kami hadir untuk anak-anak Indonesia agar bisa belajar di mana saja, kapan saja” - Mekari: “Kami lahir dari keresahan pelaku bisnis kecil agar lebih mudah mengelola karyawan dan keuangan” - Traveloka: “Berawal dari kesulitan mencari tiket pesawat, kini menjadi superapp gaya hidup”	Instagram brand, LinkedIn posts, YouTube ads

The primary sources of information are the branding materials officially released by selected startups, including websites, mobile applications, and verified social media channels such as Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn. These platforms serve as authoritative representations of brand identity and ensure that the data reflects intentional corporate communication. To strengthen credibility, only startups with strong national recognition and digital penetration were included, such as Gojek, Tokopedia, Ruangguru, Traveloka, OVO, and Mekari. Secondary sources consist of academic literature on branding, semiotics, and discourse analysis, which provide conceptual grounding for interpreting the data. Journals such as *Journal of Business Research* and *Discourse & Society* are consulted to establish analytical rigor. Using multiple sources allows for triangulation, thereby enhancing the reliability of findings [23]. This combination of primary and secondary data ensures that the study is both empirically grounded and theoretically informed.

Data collection was conducted through digital ethnography, which emphasizes observing and retrieving textual and visual artifacts from online platforms. Official websites and applications were systematically reviewed to extract slogans, logos, and branding narratives. Additionally, screenshots and archived posts were collected from social media campaigns to capture the performative dimension of brand storytelling. Following Rozalisa et al (2023), digital ethnography allows researchers to analyze cultural practices as they unfold in digital environments [24]. The collection process applied purposive sampling, targeting campaigns launched between 2020 and 2024 to ensure contemporary relevance. Each data item was catalogued in a coding sheet that identified brand name, type of symbol (visual or linguistic), source platform, and date of publication. This structured documentation ensures consistency in data handling and provides a clear audit trail, supporting the transparency and replicability of the research design.

Data analysis proceeded in three interconnected stages. First, a semiotic analysis based on Barthes' model was applied to interpret denotative and connotative meanings of visual and linguistic signs, including logos, colors, and slogans. Second, narrative discourse analysis was employed to examine how brand stories construct characters, conflicts, and resolutions that align with entrepreneurial identities. Third, a brand linguistics framework was used to identify lexical choices, metaphors, and code-switching strategies that articulate socio-economic positioning. Coding was both deductive, guided by theoretical categories, and inductive, allowing new themes to emerge from the data. NVivo software supported data management, enabling systematic coding and thematic mapping. The combination of semiotic, narrative, and linguistic approaches ensures a holistic interpretation of how Indonesian startups construct brand narratives that shape economic identity.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Semiotic construction of startup symbols

The semiotic analysis begins with a comparative overview of visual symbols used by leading Indonesian startups. Table 2 presents selected logos, dominant color schemes, and associated slogans, which form the central corpus of this study. The data highlight how Indonesian startups combine linguistic slogans and visual semiotics to embed cultural and economic meaning. These branding choices are not arbitrary; rather, they reflect carefully curated symbolic repertoires designed to resonate with local audiences while aligning with global digital aesthetics.

Table 2. Semiotic data of startup logos and slogans

Brand	Logo/Color Scheme	Slogan/Tagline	Symbolic Connotation
Tokopedia	Green + Owl Icon	"Lebih Baik Tokopedia"	Wisdom, accessibility, trust
Gojek	Green Swirl Icon	"Pasti Ada Jalan"	Mobility, inclusivity, solution
Ruangguru	Light Blue Logo	"Pendidikan Tanpa Batas"	Learning, openness, reliability
OVO	Purple Wordmark	"Ayo Mulai #LifeAtOVO"	Modern finance, premium lifestyle
Traveloka	Blue Bird Icon	"Your Lifestyle Superapp"	Freedom, aspiration, connectivity
Mekari	Bold Typography	"Bangun Bisnis Jadi Gampang"	Productivity, ease, empowerment

The logos and color palettes exhibit a striking pattern of minimalist design and saturated hues, a trend consistent with global tech branding [15]. Green dominates in platforms like Tokopedia and Gojek, which semantically link to growth, trust, and inclusivity, values that align with collectivist cultural orientations in Indonesia [25]. Blue appears prominently in Ruangguru and Traveloka, denoting reliability, education, and aspirational mobility. Meanwhile, OVO's purple signals modernity and financial exclusivity, distinguishing it from competitors in the fintech sector. Slogans reinforce these semiotic cues: Tokopedia's "Lebih Baik Tokopedia" invokes everyday utility, while Mekari's "Bangun Bisnis Jadi Gampang" positions itself as an enabler for entrepreneurs. The data suggest that color and logo design act as semiotic anchors, while slogans serve as linguistic elaborations that frame the brand's symbolic promise. Together, these elements construct a multimodal discourse of trust, innovation, and empowerment.

The convergence of minimalist visuals and culturally resonant color schemes reflects startups' dual aim of aligning with global design conventions while embedding local meanings. Semiotic theory, particularly Barthes' (1977) distinction between denotation and connotation, helps explain this phenomenon [11]. At the denotative level, a green swirl may simply signify motion; at the connotative level, it naturalizes ideologies of inclusivity and national progress. For example, Gojek's swirl icon extends beyond transportation to symbolize socio-economic connectivity, embodying the myth of digital solutions for everyday struggles. Similarly, Tokopedia's owl signifies not just wisdom but also accessible knowledge, resonating with Indonesia's educational aspirations. The preference for hybrid linguistic-visual symbols reflects broader trends in emerging economies where technology brands act as cultural mediators [5]. Thus, Indonesian startups position themselves not merely as commercial entities but as mythic symbols of empowerment, digital transformation, and national modernity.

4.2. Entrepreneurial narratives and brand storytelling

The second dimension of the analysis concerns the narrative discourse employed by Indonesian startups. Table 3 presents selected storytelling excerpts from official websites and promotional campaigns that illustrate how brands frame their entrepreneurial journeys. These narratives provide explicit linguistic evidence of how startups use storytelling to position themselves as social and economic actors beyond mere technology providers.

Table 3. Startup brand narratives in digital platforms

Brand	Narrative Excerpt (Storytelling)	Narrative Function
Tokopedia	“Membantu UMKM naik kelas dan menjadi bagian dari ekonomi digital Indonesia.”	Empowerment of local businesses
Gojek	“Solusi dari keresahan sehari-hari, dari transportasi hingga layanan keuangan.”	Problem–solution framing
Ruangguru	“Kami hadir untuk anak-anak Indonesia agar bisa belajar di mana saja, kapan saja.”	Educational access
Mekari	“Kami lahir dari keresahan pelaku bisnis kecil agar lebih mudah mengelola karyawan dan keuangan.”	Entrepreneurial facilitation
Traveloka	“Berawal dari kesulitan mencari tiket pesawat, kini menjadi superapp gaya hidup.”	From problem to lifestyle solution

A clear pattern emerges across the brand narratives, consistent with the three-act storytelling model described by Patel (2025), most adopt a problem–solution–transformation structure [26]. The “problem” is often framed through terms such as *kesulitan*, *tantangan*, or *keresahan*, which resonate with consumer struggles in transportation, finance, or education. The “solution” is embodied by the startup itself, framed through inclusive pronouns like *kami hadir* or *untuk kamu*, establishing emotional proximity. Finally, the “transformation” presents the broader socio-economic benefit, such as empowering UMKM, democratizing education, or enabling lifestyle mobility. Importantly, the narratives situate consumers as co-actors, not passive recipients, thereby fostering identification and loyalty. This narrative strategy allows brands to not only differentiate themselves in a competitive market but also to weave their services into the everyday struggles and aspirations of Indonesian society.

The reliance on entrepreneurial narratives reflects deeper socio-cultural and economic discourses in Indonesia’s digital economy. By framing themselves as “born from problems” (*lahir dari keresahan*), startups align with the national ethos of resilience and collective progress. This narrative move transforms commercial services into moral projects, legitimizing their role as enablers of socio-economic mobility. Discourse analysis indicates that inclusive pronouns (*kami*, *kita*) function as linguistic tools of solidarity, projecting startups as part of the community rather than distant corporations [3]. Moreover, metaphors of “journey” and “solution” naturalize disruption as both necessary and beneficial, echoing global entrepreneurial rhetoric [2]. In this sense, branding narratives operate ideologically: they present technology not merely as utility but as destiny, framing startups as heroic actors in Indonesia’s digital transformation. The analysis reveals that narrative discourse is central to constructing trust and identity within a rapidly evolving market.

4.3. Economic identity and linguistic positioning

The final layer of analysis focuses on the linguistic strategies startups employ to construct economic identities. Table 4 summarizes selected slogans, hybrid phrases, and metaphors that appear across branding campaigns. The evidence shows that Indonesian startups employ not only Bahasa Indonesia but also hybrid Indonesian-English registers and metaphorical expressions to articulate economic subject positions.

Table 4. Linguistic strategies in startup branding

Brand	Linguistic Strategy Example	Economic Identity Projected
Mekari	“Bangun Bisnis Jadi Gampang”	Entrepreneurial empowerment
Tokopedia	“Bersama Kita Bisa”	Collective participation in economy
Gojek	“Pasti Ada Jalan”	Everyday resilience and inclusivity
Ruangguru	“Ruang semua bisa belajar”	Democratic access to education
Traveloka	Hybrid phrase: “Lifestyle Superapp”	Tech-savvy modern consumer
OVO	Hashtag: “#LifeAtOVO”	Aspirational financial lifestyle

Across the corpus, three recurrent patterns of brand linguistics are evident. First, empowerment discourse frames startups as facilitators of individual and collective progress, with slogans explicitly referencing UMKM, workers, or students. Second, hybrid registers combine Indonesian with English loanwords such as “scale up,” “superapp,” and “digitalisasi,” signaling global modernity while maintaining local resonance. This linguistic hybridity mirrors broader sociolinguistic trends in Southeast Asia, where English functions as a prestige code [27]. Third, metaphorical framing translates abstract economic ideas into accessible images, such as “digital bridge” or “ruang belajar,” which position startups as enablers of

opportunity and connectivity. These strategies reveal a deliberate alignment of brand language with the aspirations of Indonesia's growing digital middle class. Collectively, they constitute a linguistic repertoire through which startups project themselves as both culturally embedded and globally competitive actors.

The linguistic positioning of Indonesian startups reflects their effort to balance global legitimacy with local inclusivity. From a critical discourse perspective, these strategies naturalize startups as socio-economic enablers rather than merely profit-driven firms. Empowerment-oriented slogans construct consumers as active economic agents, aligning with neoliberal discourses of self-reliance while also invoking collectivist cultural values [8]. The hybrid Indonesian-English register reinforces aspirations of global modernity, signaling that participation in the digital economy requires bilingual and technologically literate subjectivities. Meanwhile, metaphors of bridges, spaces, and journeys reframe abstract digital transformation as tangible and relatable. This dual orientation—toward local solidarity and global competitiveness—explains why startup branding resonates deeply in Indonesia's digital ecosystem. Ultimately, linguistic choices not only market services but also construct economic identities that reconfigure how individuals and communities imagine their place in the national and global economy.

5. DISCUSSION

The semiotic findings reveal that startup logos, colors, and slogans perform crucial cultural work by encoding trust, innovation, and inclusivity. The function of these symbols: they do not merely identify a company but also legitimize its presence in the socio-economic landscape. When Tokopedia's owl or Gojek's swirl becomes ubiquitous, these symbols function as shorthand for national progress and everyday convenience. The implication is that visual semiotics enables startups to naturalize themselves as indispensable actors in Indonesia's digital ecosystem. Yet, this function may also carry dysfunctions: reliance on global minimalist aesthetics risks homogenizing local identities, reducing rich cultural diversity into standardized visual codes [5]. Thus, while semiotic branding supports rapid recognition and consumer trust, it also raises questions about cultural erasure and the commodification of national values through simplified symbolic repertoires.

The structural reasons behind these semiotic choices lie in both global design conventions and local socio-cultural orientations. Minimalist and saturated color palettes are part of Silicon Valley's global aesthetic, signaling modernity and technological efficiency [1]. Indonesian startups adopt this structure to claim legitimacy in competitive global markets, while simultaneously embedding local resonances through culturally meaningful color associations—green for collectivism and growth, blue for reliability and education. This dual coding reflects what Roland Barthes described as the “mythic” function of semiotics, where everyday signs embody broader ideologies [11]. In this case, startups strategically align their identities with discourses of digital transformation and national empowerment. The correlation suggests that visual branding is not arbitrary but systematically shaped by the underlying tension between global homogeneity and local differentiation. Thus, semiotic branding choices reveal structural pressures that shape how Indonesian startups articulate their symbolic presence.

The analysis of entrepreneurial narratives demonstrates their role in transforming commercial services into moral and social projects. The storytelling does not only inform consumers but also mobilizes affect and identification. When Gojek claims to solve “keresahan sehari-hari” or Ruangguru frames itself as enabling “pendidikan tanpa batas,” the brand positions itself as a hero within a collective journey. Functionally, this strategy strengthens consumer loyalty and aligns startups with national development goals. However, the dysfunction arises when such narratives romanticize disruption, masking structural inequalities and precarity within gig economies [3]. By narrating themselves as saviors, startups may obscure exploitative labor practices or the uneven accessibility of digital resources. Thus, the implication is that narrative discourse functions as both empowerment and ideology, enabling startups to weave themselves into the social fabric while potentially normalizing problematic economic structures.

The structural explanation for these narrative patterns lies in the global entrepreneurial discourse that valorizes disruption and resilience. Burnell et al (2023) argue that entrepreneurial storytelling provides “cultural resonance” by situating businesses within broader social struggles [2]. Indonesian startups adopt this model but adapt it to local collectivist values through pronouns like *kami* and *kita*, which construct solidarity rather than individual heroism. The correlation here is between narrative form and cultural context: while Western startups often emphasize the lone visionary, Indonesian startups embed the community as a co-actor. This reflects Purnama et al (2025) findings on collectivist societies, where identity is relational rather than individual [6]. At the same time, these narratives align with neoliberal structures that encourage self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit, reinforcing the state's digital economy agenda. Thus, the underlying structure reveals a hybrid discourse: local collectivism blended with global neoliberalism, producing narratives that resonate widely yet carry ideological contradictions.

The linguistic findings highlight how startups construct economic identities through lexical choice, hybridity, and metaphor. The question here asks: what does this linguistic positioning achieve? Functionally,

empowerment-oriented slogans like “untuk UMKM” or “Bangun Bisnis Jadi Gampang” articulate startups as socio-economic enablers, legitimizing their role in national development. Hybrid Indonesian-English terms, such as “superapp” or “digitalisasi,” signal cosmopolitan modernity and appeal to bilingual digital natives. Metaphors like “jembatan digital” transform abstract technological processes into tangible opportunities. However, dysfunction arises when linguistic hybridity privileges English-speaking, urban middle classes, potentially alienating rural or monolingual users [27]. Moreover, empowerment discourse may shift responsibility onto individuals—framing digital adoption as personal failure if not achieved—while obscuring infrastructural inequalities. The implication is that brand linguistics not only promotes inclusion but also risks reinforcing socio-economic divides, embedding neoliberal subjectivities under the guise of empowerment.

The structural reasons for these linguistic patterns stem from both sociolinguistic hierarchies and global capitalist logics. English functions as a prestige code in Southeast Asia, associated with technological competence and international status [7]. By incorporating English into slogans, startups align with global markets and project legitimacy beyond national borders. Simultaneously, collectivist linguistic markers such as *bersama* or *untuk kita* root these brands in local cultural ideologies of solidarity. This hybridity reflects a deeper correlation: startups must negotiate between global competitiveness and local belonging. The metaphors of bridges, journeys, and spaces echo broader discourses of modernization, framing digital technology as both inevitable and universally beneficial [4]. Thus, the underlying structure reveals that branding language is not a neutral medium but a site where power, identity, and economy intersect. Startups’ linguistic strategies are shaped by structural tensions between inclusivity, exclusivity, global aspirations, and local realities.

6. CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that Indonesian startup branding is not merely a commercial exercise but a cultural and socio-economic practice constructed through semiotic symbols, narrative discourse, and linguistic positioning. The most important lesson lies in understanding how logos, colors, and slogans function beyond visual identity to embody national aspirations of inclusivity and progress. Similarly, brand storytelling situates startups as moral actors, transforming private enterprises into symbols of collective empowerment. Linguistically, the use of hybrid registers and metaphors reveals how startups balance global modernity with local resonance. The strength of this study lies in its multi-framework approach, combining semiotics, discourse analysis, and brand linguistics to uncover deeper cultural and ideological layers of branding. By doing so, it contributes to scholarly debates on how digital economies in emerging markets produce new forms of economic identity, offering fresh perspectives on the interplay between language, culture, and entrepreneurship.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the corpus is limited to selected nationally recognized startups, which may exclude smaller or regionally based brands whose symbolic strategies differ. Second, the analysis focuses on official brand materials, leaving out user-generated content that also shapes perceptions of economic identity. Third, while qualitative analysis provides depth, it lacks the statistical generalizability that might confirm broader trends across Indonesia’s digital economy. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating a wider range of startups, including those operating in rural areas, and by analyzing consumer responses through surveys or ethnographic methods. Cross-cultural comparisons with other Southeast Asian markets could also illuminate regional similarities and differences in branding language. Such studies would deepen our understanding of how startups navigate global pressures while embedding themselves in local contexts, ensuring that the insights remain relevant for both academic inquiry and practical application.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Ahmad Qosim: conceptualization (lead), semiotic analysis (lead), writing – original draft (lead), writing – review and editing (lead).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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