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Semiotics of informal economies: food carts, market signs, and visual communication in Indonesian urban margins

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ABSTRACT

Background: Informal food economies in Indonesian urban margins depend on visible, portable, and locally intelligible signs, yet food carts, handwritten menus, price boards, tarpaulin banners, and market displays remain underexamined within linguistic landscape and geosemiotic studies. **Objective:** This study examines how informal food signage constructs commercial visibility, trust, locality, and spatial legitimacy through multimodal visual communication. **Method:** This study applies qualitative multimodal semiotic and geosemiotic analysis to 20 publicly accessible primary visual items, supported by six scholarly sources and four contextual regulatory documents. **Results:** Roadside and market-corridor emplacement dominates the corpus, indicating that informal food signs gain meaning through spatial exposure, pedestrian circulation, and customer-facing placement. Commercial readability is organized mainly through recognizable food names, regional references, cart surfaces, and visible vending objects rather than through corporate-style branding. Trust and belonging are produced through ordinary food categories, locality markers, and public-facing vending forms, while digital-payment visibility appears as a limited but significant marker of transactional credibility. **Implication:** This study shows that informal signage is not visual disorder but a vernacular infrastructure of economic survival and urban communication. **Novelty:** This study advances Indonesian linguistic landscape research by centering mobile, low-cost, and precarious food signage as a key site of semiotic invention in urban margins.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's informal food economies occupy a crucial but analytically under-recognized position in contemporary urban life. In 2024, 59.2% of Indonesia's population lived in urban areas, while BPS recorded informal employment at 59.11% of total employment in 2023, indicating that informality is not peripheral to urban modernity but embedded within it. In Jakarta alone, 1.85 million workers, or 36.31% of employed residents, were engaged in informal-sector work in August 2024, with accommodation and food-service activities adding 27,000 workers over one year. MSMEs also account for 99% of Indonesian business units, confirming that small-scale commercial practices remain structurally central to economic life. Yet food carts, temporary stalls, handwritten menus, price boards, banners, tarpaulins, and market signs are often framed as visual disorder rather than as communicative systems. This omission matters because informal vendors must make livelihoods visible, credible, and spatially legible under conditions of mobility, precarity, competition, and uneven regulation.

Recent scholarship has substantially expanded understanding of linguistic and visual landscapes in Indonesia and beyond. Studies have examined dialogic urban signage, commercial shopfronts, tourism landscapes, heritage markets, multilingual schoolscapes, product branding, street art, graffiti, political posters, and metropolitan peripheries [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]. International studies have also advanced geosemiotic approaches to street markets, transnational commercial landscapes, culinary shop signs, shared streets, and informal vending spatiality [8], [9], [10], [11], [12]. However, existing work still gives limited analytical attention to food carts and market signs as everyday semiotic infrastructures of informal economies. What remains insufficiently explained is how low-cost, mobile, improvised, and vernacular signs organize commercial attention, construct trust, signal affordability, and negotiate marginal urban space.

This study addresses that gap by examining visual communication in Indonesian urban-margin food economies through multimodal semiotic and geosemiotic analysis. It asks how food carts, market signs, menu boards, price labels, banners, handwritten texts, images, colors, layout, material forms, and spatial placements produce commercial visibility and social meaning. More specifically, this study investigates how informal vendors use language choice, typography, food imagery, religious markers, price emphasis, regional references, and portable sign materials to communicate affordability, freshness, familiarity, speed, locality, and legitimacy. This study also asks how such signs mediate relations between vendors, customers, municipal order, and everyday mobility. Rather than treating informal signs as isolated graphic objects, this study reads them as situated public texts whose meanings emerge through placement, movement, materiality, and interaction. This focus allows this study to connect linguistic landscape research with informal urbanism, street economy studies, and visual communication.

This study advances a provisional argument that informal food signs operate as vernacular semiotic infrastructures: they do not merely advertise commodities but organize visibility, trust, and spatial belonging in urban margins. Their visual economy is practical rather than accidental. Large prices, handwritten typography, familiar food names, halal expressions, bright color contrasts, portable banners, and cart-front placements can be interpreted as semiotic strategies shaped by limited capital, unstable vending locations, and rapid customer decision-making. This argument extends earlier work on informal street vending, urban governance, gendered vending, and market community formation by foregrounding the communicative labor embedded in small-scale visual practices [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18]. By centering food carts and market signs, this study reframes Indonesian urban margins not as visually deficient spaces but as dense sites of semiotic invention, economic negotiation, and public meaning-making.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Semiotic

Semiotic approaches to urban visual communication begin from the premise that public signs are not neutral carriers of information but socially organized systems of meaning. In linguistic landscape and geosemiotic research, signs are understood through the interaction between language, image, materiality, placement, and social order. Foundational geosemiotic thinking emphasizes that meaning emerges from emplacement, interaction, and visual form, while recent Indonesian studies extend this view to multilingual neighborhoods, graffiti, political posters, tourism campaigns, heritage signage, and metropolitan peripheries [1], [19], [2], [4], [5], [7]. This perspective positions urban signs as contested forms of visibility.

Urban semiotics can be analyzed through several interrelated indicators: linguistic choice, typography, spatial placement, material durability, image–text relations, color hierarchy, and institutional or vernacular authorship. Indonesian studies show that public signs often combine national language, local languages, English, Arabic expressions, and graphic symbols to produce layered meanings of identity, commerce, tourism, piety, modernity, or belonging [20], [21], [3], [6], [22]. Yet these studies tend to privilege formal shopfronts, institutional sites, or tourism-oriented spaces, leaving mobile and low-cost vending signs less systematically examined.

2.2. Informal economies

Informal economies refer to livelihood practices that operate outside, beside, or in partial relation to formal regulatory and commercial systems. They should not be reduced to illegality or disorder because street vending often sustains urban food access, employment, social interaction, and neighborhood economies. Recent work on street vendors emphasizes empowerment, spatial negotiation, gendered mobility, safety, marketing adaptation, and urban governance [13], [14], [15], [16], Pattiradjawane et al. (2025), [18]. However, this literature generally foregrounds regulation, livelihood, and spatial conflict more than the communicative labor of signs.

The informal street economy can be examined through indicators such as mobility, temporariness, material improvisation, customer proximity, price visibility, spatial encroachment, gendered occupation, and negotiated legitimacy. Peimani and Kamalipour (2022) [12] show that informal vending is spatially embedded rather than randomly distributed, while Tan et al. (2024) [17] demonstrate how street markets

foster supportive community relations. Addi et al. (2024) [14] and Wang et al. (2024) [18] further indicate that governance and spatio-temporal patterns shape who can appear, sell, and remain visible. These insights suggest that vending signs should be read as spatial tactics through which informal actors make commerce recognizable under constraint.

2.3. Visual branding and multimodal persuasion

Visual branding and multimodal persuasion provide another key framework for understanding food carts and market signs. Branding is commonly associated with formal firms, yet small vendors also use names, colors, photographs, menu categories, religious markers, price labels, and slogans to build recognition and trust. Studies of culinary shop signs, product branding, coffee shops, street food vendors, creative markets, and *angkot* signage show that commercial meaning is produced through combined semiotic modes rather than words alone [23], [24], [25], [11], [26]. Such branding is practical, relational, and locally situated.

Indicators of vernacular visual branding include handwritten typography, bright color contrasts, food photography, menu sequencing, price prominence, cart-front placement, portable banners, local naming, halal expressions, and repeated graphic motifs. These elements differ from corporate design because they are often improvised, materially fragile, and responsive to immediate street conditions. Research on street posters, digital visual signs, environmental murals, commemorative walls, and algorithmic urban imagery shows that visual culture becomes meaningful when linked to authority, memory, authenticity, and everyday circulation [27], [28], [29], [30], Wasiqah (2026). This study therefore positions informal food signage as vernacular semiotic infrastructure.

3. METHOD

This study treats one visually bounded vending sign or sign cluster as the unit of analysis. The material object may appear on a food cart, temporary stall, street-market table, handwritten menu board, price label, tarpaulin banner, laminated display, or cart-front panel. Each item is examined as a public visual text rather than as a proxy for vendor intention or customer response. This unit is appropriate because meaning is produced through the relation between language, typography, colour, image, material surface, placement, and urban frame. The dataset consists of primary visual items, secondary scholarly sources, and contextual regulatory documents, allowing visual description to be interpreted without detaching it from informal urban economies.

Table 1. Dataset composition

Code	Data Type	Source	Period	Number	Main Characteristics
PRV-01–PRV-20	Primary visual data	Public visual repositories, mainly Wikimedia Commons categories on Indonesian food carts, street food, *warung*, and street markets	2019–2026	20	Food carts, street-food stalls, handwritten signs, banners, price displays, cart panels, market scenes
SEC-01–SEC-06	Secondary literature	Peer-reviewed journal articles supplied in reference list	2021–2026	6	Linguistic landscape, geosemiotics, informal vending, market signs, street economy, visual branding
CTX-01–CTX-04	Context documents	Official regulation records and PDFs from public legal databases	2014–2024	4	Street-vendor regulation, public order, spatial governance, urban management
ALL-01–ALL-30	Full corpus	Combined primary, secondary, and contextual sources	2014–2026	30	Multimodal and documentary corpus linking visual form, space, and informal economy

This study uses a qualitative multimodal semiotic design with geosemiotic orientation. This design is suitable because informal food signage is not reducible to verbal content alone; it operates through combined modes of writing, layout, colour, materiality, photographic food imagery, symbolic marking, and emplacement. Geosemiotics provides an analytical bridge between sign form and spatial order, while linguistic landscape research helps examine how public visibility is distributed across formal and informal actors. Visual semiotics is used to interpret graphic hierarchy, typographic emphasis, and symbolic familiarity. This design therefore enables this study to read food carts and market signs as situated communicative practices within urban margins.

Information sources were selected to create a layered corpus rather than a single-source archive. Primary visual data were drawn from publicly accessible image repositories containing food carts, street-food scenes, *warung*-related signage, and street-market documentation in Indonesia. Secondary literature was taken from recent studies on Indonesian linguistic landscapes, geosemiotics, market signage, informal vending, street economies, visual branding, and urban spatial governance, including work by Tamtomo and Goebel, Purnawati et al., Setiarini et al., Abdullah et al., Peimani and Kamalipour, Addi et al., and Kurnia et al. Context documents were taken from official regulation records to situate visual practices within municipal governance and street-vendor regulation.

Data collection followed a structured documentary procedure. Search terms included "food carts in Indonesia," "street food Indonesia," "*warung* signage," "street markets in Indonesia," "Indonesian market signs," "*pedagang kaki lima* regulation," and "informal street vending Indonesia." Items were included when they showed publicly visible food-cart, street-food, or market signage with sufficient visual clarity, source traceability, and contextual relevance. Items were excluded when they represented formal restaurants, private interiors, unreadable signs, non-food advertising, or duplicated visual material. Metadata were recorded for title, date, source, link, location, image description, visual actor, visual symbol, colour, layout, frame, transcript, screenshot reference, and verification notes.

Data analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each item was coded geosemiotically by examining spatial placement, mobility, material form, frame, interaction order, and governance visibility. Second, each item was coded multimodally by identifying linguistic content, typography, colour salience, layout hierarchy, image–text relation, and branding or menu logic. Third, patterns were compared across primary visual data, secondary literature, and contextual documents to interpret how informal food signs construct commercial visibility, spatial legibility, and vernacular branding. This staged analysis avoids causal claims and treats signs as situated evidence of communicative practice, not as proof of vendor motivation, consumer behavior, or economic outcome.

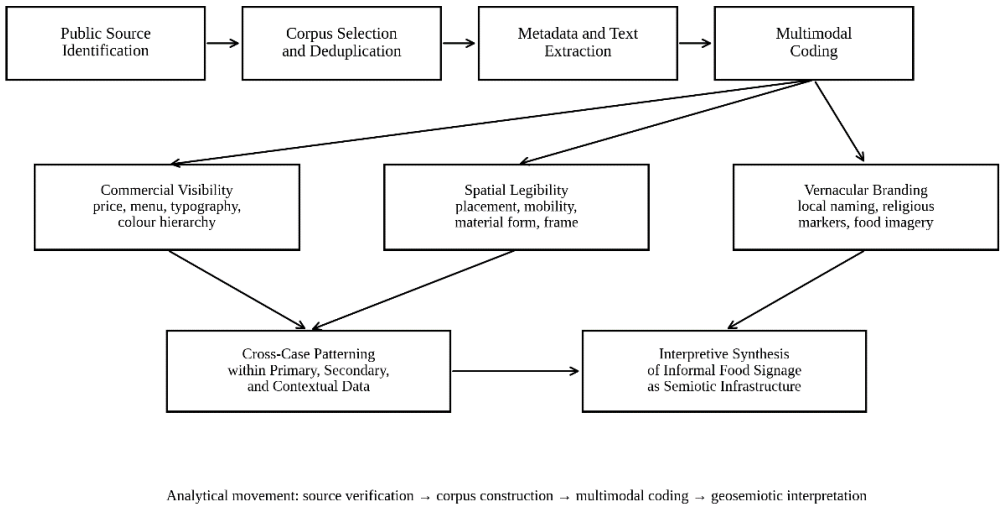


Figure 1. Operational analysis matrix

4. RESULTS

4.1. Spatial emplacement and visibility strategies in urban-margin food signage

Urban-margin food signage is organized first through emplacement. Across 20 primary visual items, roadside and market-corridor visibility dominates with 11 items, or 55% of the corpus, followed by mobile or temporary cart emplacement with four items, or 20%. Smaller clusters appear in semi-fixed market spaces, semi-fixed cart-based vending, and digitally marked cart visibility. This distribution shows that informal food communication is not detached from urban form; it depends on where signs can be seen, how bodies pass through a corridor, and how vendors position carts, banners, façades, and serving surfaces toward potential customers. The table therefore foregrounds spatial placement as a central condition of informal commercial meaning, consistent with geosemiotic work on public signs, emplacement, and interaction order.

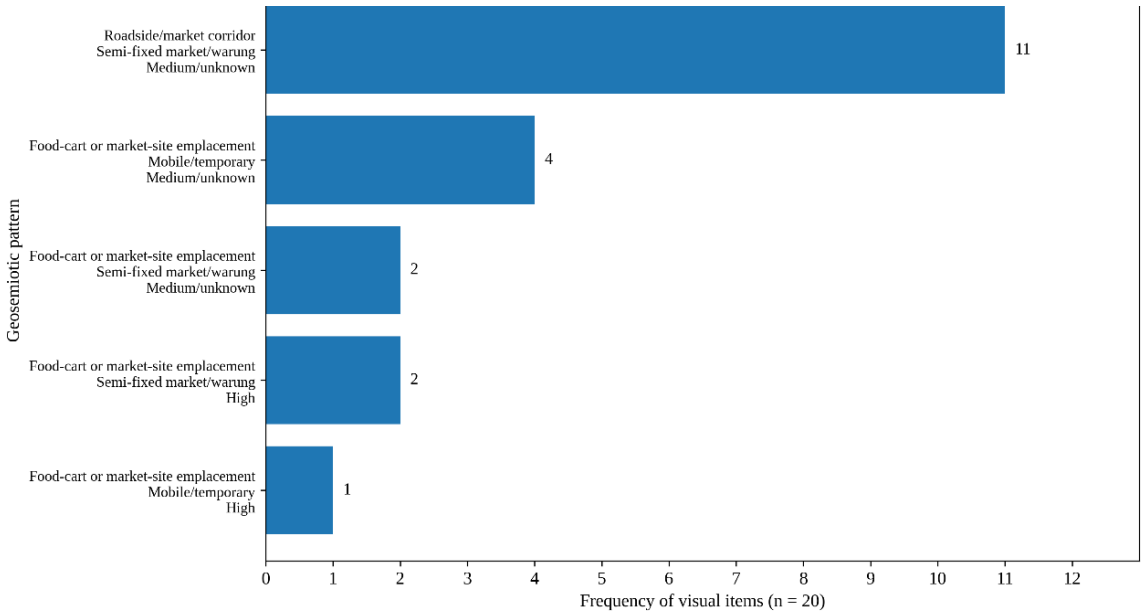


Figure 2. Spatial emplacement and visibility strategies in urban-margin food signage

The dominant pattern is corridor-based visibility rather than isolated object-based branding. Items such as "*Bakso* on the Street (Sanur, Bali)" and the "Jalan K.H. Agus Salim, Semarang, 2025" sequence show food selling as a public-facing activity embedded in road edges and market corridors. Mobile cart items, including "*gerobak tahu gejrot*," "*Gerobak siomay*," and "*Pedagang keliling Mie Bangka*," indicate a different visual logic: signs travel with vending infrastructure and must remain materially portable. High-governance visibility appears only in three items, including "Food cart with QRIS on window," "Pasar Santa," and "*Pedagang srabi Solo di Pasar Pon*." The pattern suggests that most informal food signs gain legibility from repetition, proximity, and everyday exposure rather than from formal institutional framing.

These patterns support the argument that informal food signs function as vernacular semiotic infrastructures. Their communicative power lies less in polished branding than in spatial readability, material adaptability, and customer-facing orientation. This reading extends Indonesian linguistic landscape studies that examine shopfronts, tourism signs, political posters, graffiti, and multilingual urban peripheries by shifting attention toward low-cost and mobile visual economies [1], [2], [4], [5], [7]. It also connects with informal urbanism research showing that street vending is shaped by mobility, regulation, safety, and negotiated access to public space [13], [12], [14], [16]. Here, visibility is not merely aesthetic; it is a spatial strategy for economic presence.

Table 2. Spatial emplacement and visibility strategies in urban-margin food signage

Main Category	Subcategory	Indicator	Frequency	Percentage	Data Variation	Example / Corpus Excerpt	Data Codes	Analytical Reading
Roadside-market visibility	Roadside or market corridor	Semi-fixed stall or *warung* with medium/unspecified governance visibility	11	55%	*Bakso* cart, *warteg* façade, Semarang street-market sequence, market corridor scenes	"*Bakso* on the Street (Sanur, Bali)"; "Jalan K.H. Agus Salim, Semarang, 2025" sequence	INF-VIS-002, INF-VIS-005–INF-VIS-014	Visibility is produced through corridor exposure, repeated street-market presence, and customer-facing emplacement rather than through highly formal signage.
Mobile cart emplacement	Food-cart or market-site emplacement	Mobile or temporary vending object with medium/unspecified governance visibility	4	20%	*Tahu gejrot* cart, *siomay* cart, mobile noodle vendor, crispy tofu vendor	"*gerobak tahu gejrot*"; "*Gerobak siomay*"; "*Pedagang keliling Mie Bangka*"	INF-VIS-003, INF-VIS-015, INF-VIS-016, INF-VIS-018	Mobility becomes a semiotic condition: signs must remain portable, quickly readable, and attached to moving or temporary vending infrastructure.
Institutionalized market visibility	Food-cart or market-site emplacement	Semi-fixed market or *warung* with high governance visibility	2	10%	Creative market environment and traditional market food vendor	"Pasar Santa"; "*Pedagang srabi Solo di Pasar Pon*"	INF-VIS-004, INF-VIS-017	Visibility is partly stabilized by recognizable market space, allowing informal or small-scale food commerce to appear within more legible urban frames.
Semi-fixed cart visibility	Food-cart or market-site emplacement	Semi-fixed vendor with medium/unspecified governance visibility	2	10%	*Es doger* vendor, sate vendor, food-cart presence in public leisure or roadside space	"*Penjual Es Doger Padjadjaran*"; "Sate vendor in City Park Pekanbaru"	INF-VIS-019, INF-VIS-020	Semi-fixed vendors combine cart-based mobility with recurring public presence, creating a middle position between mobile vending and fixed retail.
Digitally marked cart visibility	Food-cart or market-site emplacement	Mobile or temporary cart with high governance and payment visibility	1	5%	Food cart marked by QRIS payment display	"Food cart with QRIS on window"	INF-VIS-001	Digital payment signage makes informal vending visually compatible with formal transactional systems without transforming it into formal retail.

4.2. Multimodal commercial readability and vernacular branding

Commercial readability in this corpus rests primarily on food recognisability. Among 20 primary visual items, 14 items, or 70%, foreground food identity and market visibility, while five items, or 25%, use regional or place-based naming. Only one item, or 5%, foregrounds digital-payment visibility. This distribution indicates that informal food signs depend less on abstract brand identity and more on immediate recognition: what is sold, where it belongs, and whether customers can quickly read the offer. The unit of analysis remains one visually bounded sign or sign cluster attached to carts, stalls, storefronts, or market surfaces. The pattern is consistent with multimodal linguistic landscape research that treats public signs as combinations of language, object, surface, and emplacement.

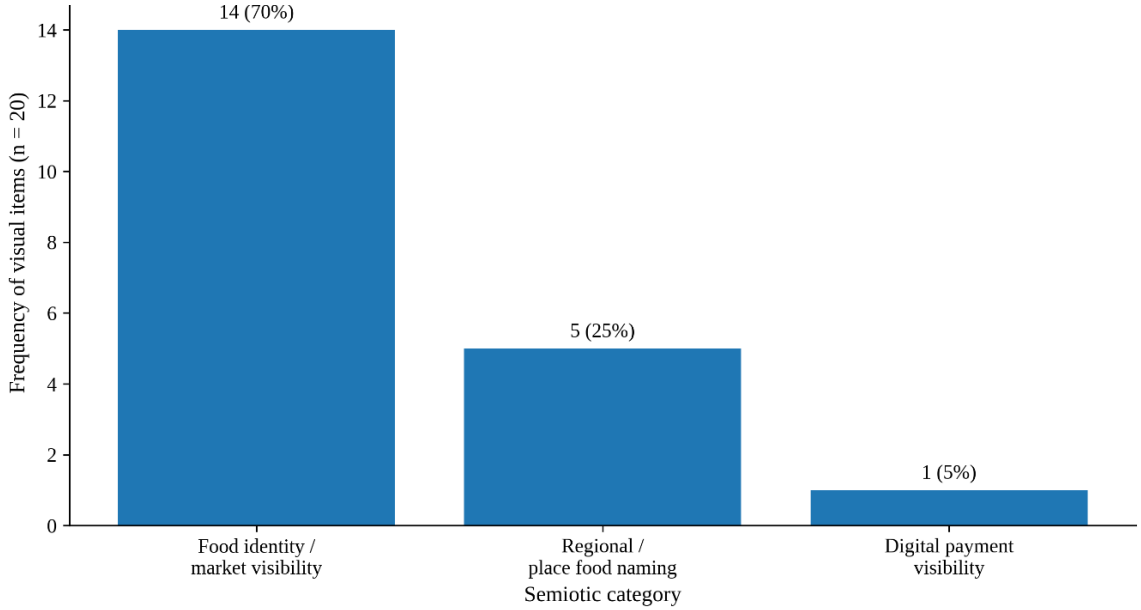


Figure 3. Multimodal commercial readability in food-cart and market signage

The dominant pattern appears in corpus excerpts where food names and vendor objects become inseparable. "*Bakso* on the Street (Sanur, Bali)," "*gerobak tahu gejrot*," "Warteg Kharisma Bahari," "*Gerobak siomay*," and the "Jalan K.H. Agus Salim, Semarang, 2025" sequence show commercial identity through everyday food categories and street-market display. Regional naming forms a smaller but analytically important cluster: "Mie Bangka," "*srabi* Solo," "*Tahu Crispy Di Kebumen*," "Es Doger Padjadjaran," and "Sate vendor in City Park Pekanbaru" attach food signs to remembered places. "Food cart with QRIS on window" differs from these patterns because credibility is communicated through payment infrastructure rather than menu naming. The corpus therefore shows three layered modes of commercial legibility: food type, locality, and transaction.

This pattern strengthens the claim that informal food signage works as vernacular branding rather than as weak imitation of formal advertising. Food names, regional markers, cart surfaces, and payment notices become practical semiotic devices for producing trust under conditions of speed, mobility, and low-cost display. This interpretation extends studies on Indonesian product branding, culinary signage, and commercial linguistic landscapes, which show that public commerce is organized through multimodal combinations of wording, image, surface, and spatial placement [24], [11], [26], [6]. It also aligns with informal economy research arguing that street vendors adapt marketing practices to constrained urban conditions [13], [15], [12].

Table 3. Multimodal commercial readability in food-cart and market signage

Main Category	Semiotic Subcategory	Indicator	Frequency	Percentage	Modal Carrier	Layout / Material Variation	Example / Corpus Excerpt	Data Codes	Analytical Reading
Commercial food recognisability	Food identity / market visibility	Food-name visibility, menu recognition, ordinary market presence, vendor-object display	14	70%	Cart, stall, storefront, market corridor, food-vendor surface	Street-market sequence, cart panel, *warung* façade, market interior/exterior surface, attached signage	"*Bakso* on the Street (Sanur, Bali)"; "*gerobak tahu gejrot*"; "Warteg Kharisma Bahari"; "*Gerobak siomay*"; "Jalan K.H. Agus Salim, Semarang, 2025" sequence	INF-VIS-002–INF-VIS-015	Commercial meaning is organized mainly through instantly recognizable food identity rather than through elaborate institutional branding.
Localized food naming	Regional/place food naming	Place-linked food identity, regional menu association, neighborhood or city reference	5	25%	Cart/stall/display surface	Mobile or semi-fixed cart surfaces carrying food names tied to Bangka, Solo, Kebumen, Padjadjaran, Pekanbaru	"*Pedagang keliling Mie Bangka*"; "*Pedagang srabi Solo di Pasar Pon*"; "*Tahu Crispy Di Kebumen*"; "Es Doger Padjadjaran"; "Sate vendor in City Park Pekanbaru"	INF-VIS-016–INF-VIS-020	Locality becomes a branding resource, allowing food signs to convert place names into trust, familiarity, and cultural recognisability.
Transactional credibility	Digital payment visibility	QRIS or formal payment marker attached to informal vending infrastructure	1	5%	Printed or laminated payment notice on cart window	Vertical cart frame with QRIS sheet positioned on visible cart surface	"Food cart with QRIS on window"	INF-VIS-001	Digital payment signage introduces formal transactional legibility into informal vending without removing cart-based informality.

4.3. Trust, local belonging, and spatial legitimacy in informal food signage

Informal food signage in this corpus constructs commercial meaning through overlapping markers of trust, belonging, and spatial legitimacy. Unlike the previous subsection, which classified signs by commercial readability, this subsection treats markers as multi-coded semiotic functions attached to the same 20 visual units. Food-name familiarity appears in 19 items, or 95%, while digital-payment visibility appears in one item, or 5%. Place-name or locality markers appear in 15 items, or 75%, and all 20 items show some form of public-facing vending object or sign. These values indicate that trust and legitimacy are not communicated through one isolated sign feature but through the combination of recognizable food, visible placement, and locally intelligible vending form.

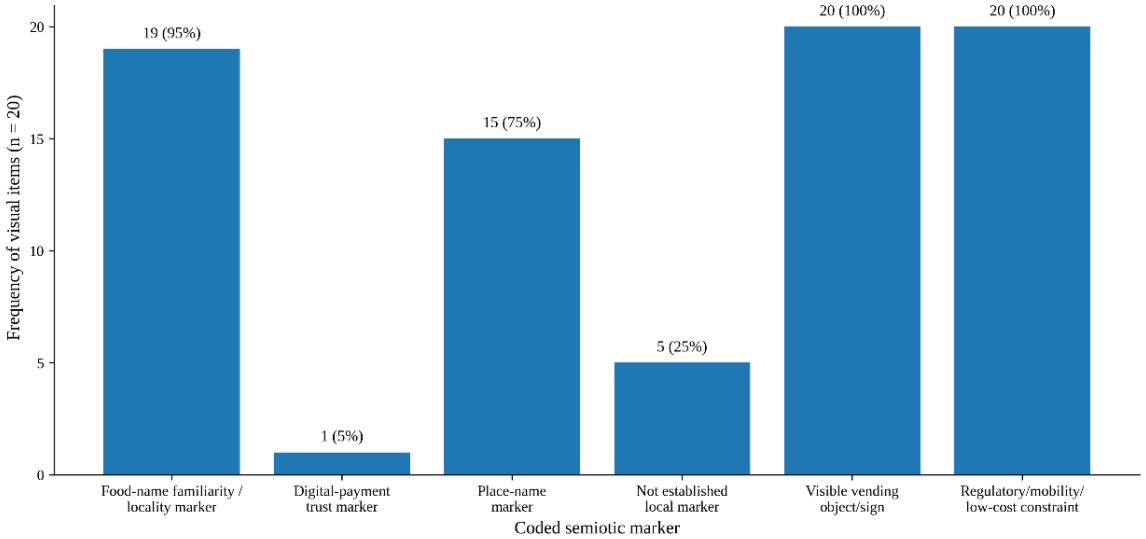


Figure 4. Trust, belonging, and legitimacy markers in informal food signage

The dominant pattern is the use of familiar food names as trust devices. Corpus excerpts such as "*Bakso* on the Street," "*gerobak tahu gejrot*," "Warteg Kharisma Bahari," "*Gerobak siomay*," "*Pedagang keliling Mie Bangka*," and "*srabi* Solo di Pasar Pon" show that food naming works as immediate evidence of offer, taste category, and social familiarity. Place-based markers add another layer: "Sanur, Bali," "Telanaipura, Kota Jambi," "Jalan K.H. Agus Salim, Semarang," "Kebumen," "Padjadjaran," and "Pekanbaru" link vending signs to routes, neighborhoods, and regional memory. In contrast, "Food cart with QRIS on window" shows trust through transactional infrastructure, where payment visibility supplements rather than replaces vernacular food recognition.

These findings position informal food signs as practical systems of public credibility. Their legitimacy does not depend primarily on institutional design, but on recognizable food categories, repeated local emplacement, and material exposure to public circulation. This supports work on Indonesian linguistic landscapes that reads public signs as spatially situated forms of visibility and belonging [1], [5], [7]. It also extends informal economy research by showing that vendors do not only negotiate space through occupation or mobility; they also negotiate it through signs that make their presence intelligible, approachable, and socially ordinary [13], [14], [12], [18]. Thus, visual communication becomes part of informal economic survival.

Table 4. Trust, belonging, and legitimacy markers in informal food signage

Main Category	Semiotic Subcategory	Indicator	Frequency	Percentage	Data Variation	Example / Corpus Excerpt	Data Codes	Analytical Reading
Trust and affordability	Food-name familiarity / locality marker	Familiar food names, ordinary menu labels, recognizable vending objects, everyday food categories	19	95%	*Bakso*, *tahu gejrot*, *warteg*, *siomay*, Mie Bangka, *srabi* Solo, tahu crispy, es doger, sate	"*Bakso* on the Street"; "*gerobak tahu gejrot*"; "Warteg Kharisma Bahari"; "*Gerobak siomay*"; "*Pedagang keliling Mie Bangka*"	INF-VIS-002–INF-VIS-020	Trust is built through recognisable food categories and ordinary menu familiarity rather than through formal certification or corporate branding.
Trust and affordability	Digital-payment trust marker	QRIS or payment-code visibility attached to cart surface	1	5%	Cart-window payment notice	"Food cart with QRIS on window"	INF-VIS-001	Transactional trust appears through a formal payment sign embedded in informal vending infrastructure.
Local belonging	Place-name marker	City, area, market, or regional food reference	15	75%	Sanur, Telanaipura, Semarang, Pasar Pon, Kebumen, Padjadjaran, Pekanbaru	"Sanur, Bali"; "Telanaipura, Kota Jambi"; "Jalan K.H. Agus Salim, Semarang"; "*srabi* Solo di Pasar Pon"	INF-VIS-002, INF-VIS-005–INF-VIS-014, INF-VIS-017–INF-VIS-020	Locality operates as a semiotic resource that connects food selling to remembered places, routes, and urban familiarity.
Local belonging	Local marker not established	No clearly coded place or regional identity marker in visual metadata	5	25%	Cart or market image without explicit place-based food marker	"Food cart with QRIS on window"; "*gerobak tahu gejrot*"; "Pasar Santa"; "*Gerobak siomay*"; "*Pedagang keliling Mie Bangka*"	INF-VIS-001, INF-VIS-003, INF-VIS-004, INF-VIS-015, INF-VIS-016	Some signs rely on object visibility and food type rather than explicit place naming.
Spatial legitimacy	Visible vending object/sign	Cart, stall, banner, façade, market table, or serving surface facing public circulation	20	100%	Mobile carts, semi-fixed stalls, market corridors, *warung* façade, street-food displays	Full primary visual corpus	INF-VIS-001–INF-VIS-020	Spatial legitimacy is produced through public-facing visibility: vending objects make commercial presence readable in urban margins.
Constraint and exposure	Regulatory, mobility, and low-cost production constraint	Portable sign surface, temporary emplacement, cart-based display, market-edge visibility	20	100%	Cart panels, tarpaulin/banner surfaces, handwritten or low-cost display logic, market-corridor exposure	Full primary visual corpus	INF-VIS-001–INF-VIS-020	Informal signage communicates under conditions of spatial uncertainty, mobility, and limited material investment.

5. DISCUSSION

The dominance of corridor-based and roadside-market visibility indicates that informal food signage functions as a spatial technology of economic presence. Its significance lies not only in making food commodities visible, but in making marginal livelihoods publicly intelligible within urban space. When signs are attached to carts, façades, market tables, or roadside stalls, they convert temporary occupation into readable commerce. This finding extends geosemiotic work on public signage by showing that meaning is not contained in textual inscription alone, but in the relation between sign, movement, street edge, and customer approach. It supports Tamtomo and Goebel's account [7] of Indonesian urban signage as dialogic, yet shifts the focus from formal shopfronts to fragile and mobile commercial surfaces. The dysfunction is also clear: visibility remains dependent on exposure to circulation, which makes vendors vulnerable to displacement. Thus, visibility becomes both resource and risk within informal urban economies.

The spatial pattern observed in this corpus is best understood as an effect of underlying urban structure rather than individual graphic preference. Food carts and market signs cluster around corridors, road edges, and market environments because these spaces provide pedestrian flow, low entry cost, and immediate customer contact. This does not establish a causal relationship between placement and sales, but it suggests a strong association between informal commercial communication and accessible public circulation. Peimani and Kamalipour [12] argue that street vending has spatial logics rather than random distribution, while Addi et al. [14] show that governance systems shape where informal vendors can appear and remain. This corpus reflects that structure semiotically: signs must be placed where vendors can be seen without owning formal retail space. Therefore, visual communication in urban margins is structured by mobility, exposure, regulatory uncertainty, and the uneven distribution of legitimate commercial frontage.

The second pattern shows that informal food signs prioritize commercial readability over brand sophistication. The implication is important: vernacular food signage should not be judged by corporate design standards, because its primary function is immediate recognition. Food names, cart surfaces, menu labels, regional associations, and payment notices compress information into forms that can be understood quickly by moving customers. This finding aligns with Papadima and Kourdis [11] on culinary shop signs and with Purnamasari and Affandi [26] on visual branding among Indonesian coffee shops and street-food vendors, but it also complicates conventional branding theory. In this corpus, branding is not primarily about distinctiveness, market segmentation, or polished identity systems. It is about reducing hesitation: customers must recognize what is sold, where it belongs culturally, and whether interaction feels familiar. Informal branding therefore functions as a low-cost communicative infrastructure rather than as decorative commercial surplus. This resonates with work on price-discount and bonus-pack marketing among small online businesses [31], which likewise treats inexpensive promotional cues as a practical means of attracting customers.

This readability pattern emerges from the material and temporal conditions of street vending. Informal food commerce depends on short encounters, passing attention, and rapid decision-making, so signs must privilege legibility over visual complexity. Kaur and Bhardwaj's work [15] on marginal street-vendor marketing helps explain why vendors adapt the marketing mix through available resources rather than through formalized branding strategies. Likewise, Lestariningsih et al. [24] show that product branding in Indonesian public space is multimodal, but this corpus demonstrates a more constrained version of multimodality: typography, food naming, cart placement, and image-text relations must work within small, portable, and often temporary surfaces. The association between food identity and readability therefore reflects an underlying economy of attention. Vendors do not simply display information; they organize visibility under material limitation. This explains why recognizable food categories dominate more strongly than abstract visual identity or institutional certification. Research on home industries as a micro-enterprise empowerment strategy [32] similarly treats small-scale production and vending as a livelihood strategy that depends on locally legible, low-cost ways of reaching customers.

Markers of trust, belonging, and legitimacy show that informal food signs also perform social work. Familiar food names, locality markers, regional references, and public-facing vending objects help make vendors appear approachable and ordinary rather than anonymous or intrusive. The implication is that informal signs contribute to urban belonging by connecting small-scale commerce to shared food memory, neighborhood circulation, and everyday habit. This finding extends Aini's [1] and Sain and Assya'bani's [5] work on linguistic landscapes and spatial belonging by showing that belonging is not only produced through multilingual identity display, but also through ordinary commercial food repertoires. However, this form of belonging remains uneven. Signs can make vendors socially recognizable, yet they do not necessarily secure legal protection or infrastructural support. Thus, vernacular visibility produces partial legitimacy: enough to invite customers, but not always enough to protect vendors from marginal urban governance.

The structure underlying these trust and belonging markers is the unstable relation between informal commerce and public authority. Vendors must appear trustworthy without always having access to formal retail architecture, institutional signage, or secure tenure. This helps explain why the corpus relies heavily on familiar food categories and visible vending objects, while only one item foregrounds digital-payment credibility. QRIS visibility suggests a link between informal vending and formal transactional systems, but it remains embedded in cart-based informality rather than replacing it. Abdullah et al. [13] and Wang et al. [18] show that street vendors negotiate empowerment, mobility, and spatial constraint; this study adds that such negotiation is also semiotic. Trust is built through signs that make informality socially legible, locally meaningful, and transactionally possible. The broader implication is that Indonesian urban margins are not visually deficient spaces; they are dense communicative environments where economic survival depends on being seen, understood, and tolerated. Abdullah et al.'s (2025) [33] study of visual representation in the 2024 presidential campaign, although set in a different domain, similarly treats visibility as a condition of public recognition.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that food carts, market signs, handwritten menus, price labels, banners, and cart-front displays in Indonesian urban margins operate as vernacular semiotic infrastructures rather than minor commercial decorations. Its central lesson is that informal economic actors produce visibility, trust, locality, and spatial legitimacy through ordinary visual resources: food naming, corridor placement, portable materials, regional references, and customer-facing layout. This study contributes to linguistic landscape, geosemiotic, and informal urbanism scholarship by shifting attention from formal shopfronts, institutional signage, and tourism branding to mobile, low-cost, and precarious visual economies. It also refines methodological focus by treating each sign cluster as a situated multimodal unit of analysis.

This study remains limited by its reliance on publicly accessible visual and documentary data, which restricts interpretation to visible signs, metadata, and contextual regulation rather than vendor intention, customer response, sales effect, or longitudinal change. Because this study does not include interviews, ethnographic observation, or transactional data, it avoids causal claims about how signs influence income, customer trust, or municipal tolerance. Future research should combine multimodal corpus analysis with field observation, vendor narratives, pedestrian interaction data, and comparative mapping across cities. Such work could examine how gender, regulation, digital payment systems, religious markers, and neighborhood class differences shape informal food signage over time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Author states no conflict of interest.

AI USE DECLARATION

The author used artificial intelligence tools to assist with the generation of illustrative figures and with the formatting and layout of this manuscript. AI was not used to generate the substantive content, conceptualization, data, analysis, or conclusions of the research, all of which remain the sole responsibility of the author.

INFORMED CONSENT

Not applicable – this study did not involve direct human participants. Data consisted solely of publicly accessible visual items depicting food carts, street-food stalls, and market signage, together with secondary scholarly literature and public regulatory documents.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research did not involve human or animal subjects; it analyzed publicly accessible food-cart and market-sign imagery together with scholarly literature and public regulatory documentation, and therefore no institutional review board approval was required. Where research does involve human subjects, the author

affirms that such research would be conducted in full compliance with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies, in accordance with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki, and would be approved by the author's institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The corpus of publicly accessible primary visual items, secondary literature, and contextual regulatory documents analyzed in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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