



Visual Storytelling on Instagram by Eco-Print SMEs: Visual Semiotic Analysis and Brand Communication Strategy of Tiva Craft

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital platforms has created new opportunities for micro, small, and medium enterprises (SMEs) to strengthen brand identity through visual communication. Eco-print-based SMEs possess unique visual assets derived from natural materials and handcrafted processes; however, these potentials are often underutilized in social media branding. This study aims to analyze how Tiva Craft's Instagram content constructs brand narratives through visual storytelling and to develop a strategic framework for strengthening eco-print SME branding. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed using Roland Barthes' visual semiotic analysis. Data were collected from 30 purposively selected Instagram posts from the @tiva_craft account during a one-year observation period. The analysis focused on visual elements, caption narratives, and content patterns at denotative, connotative, and mythological levels. The findings reveal that Tiva Craft's Instagram content is predominantly oriented toward product documentation, particularly products worn by models during activities and event participation, while content highlighting raw materials, production processes, and product uniqueness remains limited. The visual analysis indicates that existing posts primarily communicate literal product information and have not fully developed deeper brand meanings related to sustainability, craftsmanship, and authenticity. This study proposes a five-dimensional visual storytelling framework consisting of raw materials, creative process, finished products, brand values, and community engagement. The framework can support eco-print SMEs in developing more consistent and meaningful digital brand communication. The study concludes that systematic visual storytelling strategies are essential for transforming eco-print products into distinctive brand narratives on Instagram.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the creative economy in Indonesia has increasingly underscored the vital role of micro, small, and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) as drivers of national economic growth. One of the most rapidly expanding SME segments is the nature based handicraft industry, including eco-print products. Eco-print is a technique of printing natural patterns from leaves, flowers, and plants onto fabric using natural dyeing processes, producing unique motifs that cannot be identically replicated (Siti Zahra Fatimah et al., 2025). This uniqueness constitutes a significant selling point amid growing consumer awareness of environmentally

friendly and artistically valuable products (Danko et al., 2025; Nazara, 2025; Omeke & Okafor, 2025; Ottman, 2017).

In the digital era, Instagram has become the primary marketing platform for SMEs, including eco-print producers. With its visually centric features, Instagram offers SMEs opportunities to build brand identity through photo and video content. However, this potential is not always optimally utilized (Fatorachian et al., 2025; Febrianti et al., 2025; Kasianenko, 2025). Many SMEs continue to treat Instagram merely as a medium for documenting activities, rather than as a strategic brand communication tool (Sugiyarto et al., 2026). Tiva Craft is an eco-print-based handicraft SME located in West Java. With the Instagram account @tiva_craft, which has been active for over three years, Tiva Craft has considerable potential to build a strong brand image through the platform. However, preliminary observation indicates that the published content is still dominated by activity documentation such as products worn by models at various events and participation in SME bazaars without a structured brand narrative. The captions used tend to be descriptive in nature, with minimal visual consistency.

This situation reflects a significant gap between the distinctive visual potential of eco-print as a brand communication asset and its actual utilization on Instagram. The natural motifs formed in eco-print products inherently carry profound narratives about local wisdom, creative processes, and values of sustainability that could serve as powerful brand differentiators. Yet this visual storytelling potential remains unexploited by Tiva Craft. Visual storytelling is a communication strategy that integrates visual elements and narrative to build emotional connections between a brand and its audience (Saputri & Wirasari, 2023). In the context of Instagram, visual storytelling goes beyond the aesthetic display of products it constructs a consistent narrative about the brand's values, processes, and identity. Research on visual storytelling for SMEs on Instagram remains relatively limited, particularly in the context of eco-print products, which possess unique visual characteristics (Andriyansah, 2025; Hendradi & Hartanti, n.d.; Indarti et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2023).

Prior research provides a useful but incomplete foundation for understanding this problem. Saputri and Wirasari (2023) analyzed business development strategy for an online thrift platform using SWOT analysis, but did not examine the meaning constructed through the visual content itself. Sugiyarto, Hanum, and Ardynata (2026) documented a branding and packaging design training program for an Indonesian SME, yet stopped short of analyzing how existing visual content already communicates, or fails to communicate, brand meaning. Megadini and Anggapuspa (2021) designed an Instagram feed for a regional food product but did not apply a semiotic lens to interpret the brand narrative embedded in the visuals. None of these studies combines a systematic semiotic reading of existing SME content with a craft product whose raw material itself carries inherent visual narrative value, as is the case with eco-print.

This combination constitutes the central research gap addressed in the present study. Barthesian semiotics has been applied to literary texts (Raka Jayaningsih et al., 2025) and to advertising content more broadly, yet its application to the everyday Instagram feed of an Indonesian eco-print SME, where the product's natural motif is itself a sign system rich in cultural and aesthetic meaning, remains unexplored. This gap is theoretically significant because it tests whether a semiotic framework developed for mass media texts can illuminate brand meaning construction in the comparatively modest, vernacular visual production of a

micro enterprise, and practically significant because eco-print SMEs need an evidence based, actionable framework for translating their products' narrative richness into consistent brand communication.

Building on this gap, this study seeks to answer the following research question: how does Tiva Craft's Instagram content construct, or fail to construct, brand narrative meaning at the denotative, connotative, and mythological levels, and what visual storytelling framework can be derived from this analysis to strengthen eco-print SME branding on Instagram? Specifically, this study aims to (1) map the dominant content categories and the degree of visual consistency on the @tiva_craft Instagram feed; (2) analyze the brand meanings constructed at Barthes' three levels of signification across these content categories; and (3) propose a content framework that translates eco-print's inherent narrative potential into systematic, implementable brand communication.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using visual semiotic analysis. The qualitative approach was selected because the study aims to understand in depth the meanings and patterns embedded in the visual content of Tiva Craft's Instagram account, rather than to measure statistical relationships between (Firdaus Haidar, 2021). Visual semiotic analysis was chosen for its capacity to reveal layers of meaning concealed beneath the visual signs displayed in Instagram content.

Research Object and Subject

The object of study is the Instagram content of the @tiva_craft account, with a specific focus on posts featuring eco-print products. The research subject is Tiva Craft, an eco-print-based handicraft SME located in West Java that has maintained an active Instagram presence for over three years, with a follower count ranging from 500 to 1,000 accounts.

Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through systematic observation of the @tiva_craft Instagram account. Purposive sampling was employed to select 30 posts containing eco-print product content as the research sample, covering a one-year observation period. Inclusion criteria for the sample were as follows: (1) posts featuring eco-print products, whether presented as flat lay images, worn by models, or shown in activity contexts; (2) posts accompanied by captions written in Indonesian; and (3) regular feed posts (excluding Reels or Stories).

The sample size of 30 posts was considered adequate for this study because qualitative semiotic analysis prioritizes interpretive depth over statistical generalizability; by the later stages of coding, no substantially new visual or narrative patterns emerged across the three content categories, indicating that the sample had reached a reasonable point of thematic saturation for the purpose of this analysis (Patton, 2002). The one-year observation window was chosen to capture a complete annual cycle of Tiva Craft's posting activity, including recurring seasonal events such as SME bazaars, thereby reducing the risk that the sample would over represent a single, atypical period of activity. Regular feed posts were prioritized over Reels and Stories because the feed constitutes the platform's permanent, grid-based display and is therefore the primary visual surface through which long term brand identity and aesthetic consistency are constructed and perceived by followers, whereas Stories are ephemeral and

Reels follow a distinct, video-based narrative logic that falls outside the scope of this study's static visual semiotic analysis.

The collected data comprised three components: (1) visual photo elements, including composition, dominant color, lighting, background, and displayed objects; (2) caption text, including language style, caption length, hashtag use, and the presence or absence of a call to action; and (3) upload context, including the type of activity, location, and time of posting.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using Roland Barthes' visual semiotic framework through three stages. The first stage involved denotative analysis a literal description of the visual elements visible in each content sample. The second stage involved connotative analysis the identification of cultural, emotional, and social meanings embedded in the visual signs. The third stage involved myth identification the formulation of ideological values constructed through the overall visual content of Tiva Craft.

In addition to semiotic analysis, content pattern analysis was conducted to categorize the types of content published and to assess the degree of visual aesthetic consistency in the @tiva_craft Instagram feed. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, comparing semiotic interpretations across the 30 sample posts to check for internal consistency, and through theoretical triangulation, grounding each interpretation in Barthes' established framework rather than in the researcher's subjective impression alone. Reliability was further supported through a self-audit procedure: denotative descriptions for each sample were re-examined against the original images at a separate sitting to verify descriptive consistency, while connotative and mythological interpretations were cross-checked against the theoretical literature reviewed in the preceding section to ensure they were grounded in established constructs rather than ad hoc judgment. As a single-researcher qualitative study, this analysis does not employ formal inter-coder reliability testing; this limitation, and corresponding avenues for strengthening it in future research, is acknowledged in the Conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content Patterns on Tiva Craft's Instagram

Based on the observation of 30 sample posts on the @tiva_craft Instagram account, three dominant content categories were identified. The distribution of these categories is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Content Categories on @tiva_craft Instagram

Content Category	Frequency	Percentage
Eco-print products worn by models at activities/events	17	56,7%
Documentation of SME bazaars and community events	9	30,0%
Eco-print products flat lay / close up	4	13,3%
Total	30	100%

The content distribution in Table 1 reveals the dominance of documentary function over communicative narrative function. Content with the greatest visual storytelling potential namely, content that highlights the unique eco-print motifs in a focused manner is the least frequently published (13.3%). Not a single post was found to document the eco-print production process, from material selection and printing to the finished product. This production sequence represents the most powerful narrative asset of eco-print products and a key differentiator from mass produced fashion.

In terms of visual consistency, analysis of the color palette, lighting style, and photo composition revealed minimal patterns of coherence. Posts on the @tiva_craft feed exhibit a wide variety of backgrounds (indoor, outdoor, white backdrop, natural settings), uneven lighting, and compositions that vary without a planned grid aesthetic. This results in a feed that lacks a distinctive and recognizable visual identity.

These patterns matter beyond mere description. In Barthesian terms, a feed without a planned aesthetic forecloses the formation of a stable connotative register: when backgrounds, lighting, and composition vary unpredictably from post to post, followers receive inconsistent secondary signs, which weakens the cumulative process through which repeated visual choices ordinarily harden into a recognizable brand myth (Barthes, 1977). This finding echoes Habib Rizieq et al. (2025), who similarly found that Indonesian creative SMEs tend to use Instagram reactively rather than as a planned communication platform, and it is consistent with Kaur and Kaur's (2021) experimental finding that consistent visual identity, rather than any single image, is what drives audience appreciation and trust on social media; Tiva Craft's fluctuating aesthetic suggests that this consistency mechanism is not yet being activated. The complete absence of production process content is similarly significant: because the eco-print motif is generated through a visible, hands on technique, its production stages constitute a readymade sequential narrative, the kind of conflict-character-resolution structure that Muhammad Arya Dipo Sianani (2025) identifies as central to effective brand storytelling, yet this narrative resource is currently left entirely unused.

Visual Semiotic Analysis

Visual semiotic analysis was conducted on three representative samples, each corresponding to one of the identified content categories.

Product in Activity Context

At the denotative level, content in this category depicts a person wearing eco-print patterned fabric or clothing at an event or activity, with backgrounds that vary according to the location. At the connotative level, this content communicates that Tiva Craft products are suitable for a range of occasions, reinforcing the perception that eco-print is not merely a craft item but a fashionable and functional garment.

However, the predominance of busy event backgrounds causes the viewer's attention to be split between the product and its surroundings, so that the eco-print motif as the key differentiating element does not receive adequate visual prominence. At the mythological level, this content constructs a narrative that associates Tiva Craft eco-print products with community spaces and social activities. While this is a positive association in terms of community identity, it fails to engage the dimensions of naturalness, artisanal craftsmanship, or sustainability that constitute the core strengths of the eco-print brand.

Bazaar Documentation

At the denotative level, this content depicts the Tiva Craft stall at an SME bazaar, with various products on display. At the connotative level, it communicates the existence and active participation of Tiva Craft within the local SME ecosystem, which may build prospective consumers' trust in the legitimacy and consistency of the business.

From a brand building perspective, however, bazaar content offers limited differentiation value, as virtually all SMEs produce similar content. Posts of this type do little to distinguish Tiva Craft from the hundreds of other SMEs that also participate in bazaars, and their contribution to the formation of a unique brand image is therefore minimal.

Close Up Product Images

At the denotative level, this content presents the detail of eco-print motifs produced by the imprinting of leaves or flowers onto fabric. At the connotative level, close up images of eco-print motifs communicate messages of uniqueness, naturalness, and meticulous craftsmanship. Of the three content categories, this category holds the highest visual storytelling potential, as the eco-print motif itself already constitutes a powerful visual narrative: each motif is the imprint of a specific plant, bearing a visual character that cannot be identically replicated.

At the mythological level, close up eco-print content can construct myths of exclusivity and authenticity the notion that every product is a unique work that cannot be matched by manufactured goods. Regrettably, this category is the least frequently published (13.3%), and the accompanying captions do not explore the uniqueness of the motifs in depth.

The Gap Between Visual Storytelling Potential and Actual Practice

Based on the findings above, a significant gap was identified between the visual storytelling potential inherent in Tiva Craft's eco-print products and their actual depiction in Instagram content. Eco-print inherently possesses extraordinary visual narrative richness: motifs formed from local plants carry stories of nature and indigenous knowledge; the production process, which demands precision and patience, carries narratives of artisanal skill; and finished products that are never identical carry stories of exclusivity and authenticity.

This potential has not been articulated through the @tiva_craft Instagram content. The captions used tend to be informational addressing product type, pricing, and ordering without exploring the narratives behind the motifs or the production process. The complete absence of behind-the-scenes content documenting the eco-print process means that audiences miss the opportunity to connect emotionally with the brand through a production narrative that is, in essence, profoundly meaningful.

Recommended Visual Storytelling Framework for Tiva Craft

Based on the research findings, a visual storytelling framework grounded in five brand narrative dimensions is proposed for Tiva Craft. This framework is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Five-Dimensional Brand Narrative Visual Storytelling Framework for Tiva Craft

Dimension	Content Type	Brand Narrative Constructed
Raw Materials	Photos/videos of selecting and collecting leaves, flowers, and natural dyes	<i>"Every motif begins with the nature around us"</i>

Dimension	Content Type	Brand Narrative Constructed
Creative Process	Behind the scenes of the printing process, color fixing, and finishing	<i>"Every piece of fabric is a handcrafted work that demands patience"</i>
Finished Product	Close up detail of eco-print motifs with optimal lighting	<i>"No two motifs are alike yours is the first of its kind in the world"</i>
Brand Values	Content communicating naturalness and sustainability values	<i>"Creating with nature, for nature"</i>
Community	User generated content, customer testimonials, workshop documentation	<i>"Together, we celebrate our love for handmade crafts"</i>

The framework in Table 2 is designed for rotation within weekly content planning, ensuring that each dimension receives equitable representation. The implementation of this framework is expected not only to enhance the quality of brand narratives, but also to create stronger visual consistency through a clear thematic thread running through all published content.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the @tiva_craft Instagram content has not systematically applied visual storytelling strategies. The published content remains dominated by documentary function product photos in activity contexts and bazaar documentation with minimal visual consistency and weak brand narratives in the captions. The inherently rich visual narrative potential of eco-print products has not been articulated as a storytelling strength that differentiates Tiva Craft from other SMEs. The visual semiotic analysis reveals that Tiva Craft's existing content operates primarily at the denotative level displaying products as they are, without constructing connotative layers of meaning that would shape a distinctive brand image. The eco-print motifs, which inherently constitute visual signs rich in connotative meaning (naturalness, uniqueness, artisanal skill), have not been exploited as key elements of visual storytelling. Theoretically, this study contributes by demonstrating that Barthes' three level semiotic framework, originally developed to analyze mass media and literary texts, can be productively extended to the vernacular, low budget visual production of a micro enterprise, revealing that the absence of a planned aesthetic is not merely a stylistic shortcoming but a failure to construct the connotative and mythological layers through which a brand image is built. This extends prior applications of Barthesian analysis in Indonesian scholarship, which have largely focused on literary and advertising texts (Raka Jayaningsih et al., 2025), into the empirically distinct and practically urgent domain of SME social media branding. This study recommends the implementation of a visual storytelling framework grounded in five brand narrative dimensions: raw materials, creative process, finished product, brand values, and community. The adoption of this framework is expected to optimize the visual storytelling potential of Tiva Craft's eco-print products and strengthen brand image on the Instagram platform. In practical terms, Tiva Craft and similar eco-print SMEs can begin by building a simple content calendar that rotates posts across the five dimensions rather than defaulting to

activity documentation, fixing a consistent color palette and lighting style to be applied across future uploads, and writing captions that narrate the production story (material sourcing, the printing process, the artisan's hand) rather than only naming the product. Where in-house design capacity is limited, even a brief collaboration with a visual communication designer or design student to establish a feed template and caption tone guideline could meaningfully improve consistency at low cost. Beyond Tiva Craft, this framework offers a transferable starting point for other Indonesian craft-based SMEs whose raw materials or production processes carry similar untapped narrative value. This study is limited by its reliance on content observation alone, without incorporating the direct perspectives of the SME owner or quantitative analysis of engagement rates. The analysis was also conducted by a single researcher without formal inter-coder reliability testing, which is common in interpretive semiotic research but means the interpretations offered here should be read as one rigorous reading rather than a definitive one. Future research is encouraged to include in-depth interviews with the SME owner, to integrate engagement rate analysis in order to empirically measure the effectiveness of visual storytelling strategy implementation, and to involve a second coder to strengthen interpretive reliability.

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