Unmasking the Persona: A Barthesian Semiotic Study of Ahmad Dhani's Instagram Self-Branding

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Social media platforms provide celebrities with strategic opportunities to construct and project identities, yet studies employing semiotic frameworks remain limited. This research investigates how Indonesian musician and public figure Ahmad Dhani constructs self-branding through a single Instagram post, analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Employing a qualitative case study, the study examines how visual and textual elements interact to create layered meanings across denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings reveal that Dhani's post—featuring orchestral imagery and the textual message "Sorry if I am different"—functions not as an apology but as an affirmation of uniqueness. At the denotative level, the tuxedo, conductor's stance, and blurred audience emphasize authority, refinement, and public recognition. Connotatively, the warm color palette and self-referential caption highlight creativity and authenticity. At the mythic level, the post transforms perceived arrogance into a narrative of leadership, positioning Dhani as a visionary figure whose difference signifies intellectual depth and cultural capital. This analysis underscores how Instagram can serve as a site for myth-making, where visual and textual signs operate as strategic tools for personal branding and reputation management. While the study offers insights into the cultural work of celebrity self-representation, its scope is limited to a single post. Future research should extend this analysis to multiple figures and longitudinal datasets to capture the evolving dynamics of digital identity construction.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has transformed the ways individuals construct and convey their identities. Unlike traditional media, where representation was controlled by those in positions of power, social media has shifted this dynamic (Curran, 2020). Power, as defined by Dahl (1957), is the ability of an individual or group to influence others to do something they would not otherwise do. In the context of media, power traditionally resided with owners and executives who determined which news and perspectives were broadcast, thereby guiding public discourse. However, the emergence of social media platforms enables users to freely express their self-identities through images, words, and audio. This shift has decentralized media control from traditional power holders while simultaneously introducing a new power structure (Agadagba et al., 2011). This new structure is shaped by visibility, algorithmic influence, and audience engagement, which ultimately determine which narratives gain

traction and attract attention (Dovbysh, 2021). These factors significantly affect how individuals construct their online identities and personal representations in social media environments.

One example of this phenomenon is the assertion of uniqueness, which Ditchfield (2020) describes as a strategy whereby users deliberately construct distinct identities to stand out on social media. Khamis et al. (2016) further argue that this strategy is often employed to attract and maintain a larger audience. However, the specific ways in which individuals use images, symbols, and words to create a sense of uniqueness have not yet been fully explored. Semiotics, defined by Chandler (2007) as the study of signs and symbols in communication, offers a useful lens to analyze these processes.

Although previous studies have examined different types of Instagram posts using frameworks from Ferdinand de Saussure or Charles Sanders Peirce, the question of how users employ semiotic strategies to assert uniqueness and self-representation remains underexplored. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to investigate how a single Instagram post constructs and communicates a sense of personal uniqueness through the interplay of visuals and signs. Drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory—particularly his concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth as outlined by Jadou and Ghabra (2021)—this research deciphers the layered meanings embedded within the post. In Barthes' framework, *denotation* refers to the literal or explicit meaning of the sign, while *connotation* encompasses its cultural and emotional associations. *Myth* represents the second-order signification, where connotations are transformed into seemingly naturalized narratives that reinforce broader cultural ideologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early semiotic studies of Instagram focused on institutional messaging and brand identity. Yanti et al. (2023) analyzed the World Health Organization's (WHO) COVID-19 posts using Saussure's verbal signs and Barthes' framework of denotation and connotation, identifying eight key verbal signifiers that paired literal health instructions with communal values. Sutiah et al. (2023) extended this analysis to café advertising, distinguishing between icons (beverage photos), indexes, and symbols (logos) to demonstrate how advertisers stimulate consumer desires. Similarly, Cara (2018) mapped "instagrammatics" and "instagrammism" to illustrate how brands employ metaforms, visual metonymies, and ironic images to craft campaign moods that move beyond uniform brand aesthetics.

In the realm of influencers, Porteous (2020) conducted a social semiotic analysis that linked five visual resources—participant distance, gaze, framing, modality, and entextualization—to "like" counts, showing that fashion influencers' strategic use of close-ups, mood filters, and text overlays amplifies perceived authenticity and drives audience engagement. Likewise, Ramadhan et al. (2018) applied Peirce's triadic model (representamen, object, interpretant) to eight random user images, revealing how visual and textual signs co-produce energetic and emotional interpretants in acts of self-expression. Arif (2018) similarly catalogued icons (portraits, emojis), indexes (location tags), and symbols (memes) in student Instagram Stories, uncovering how undergraduates use these three sign types to document achievements, moods, and affiliations.

These empirical studies are underpinned by Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which provides a foundational framework for interpreting sign systems. According to Jadou and Ghabra (2021), Barthes' early work in the 1950s and 1960s was grounded in structuralism, aiming to uncover universal codes governing cultural products. However, by the 1970s, Barthes shifted toward a post-structuralist stance, emphasizing that meaning is shaped by the reader's cultural and historical context. This shift is encapsulated in his famous assertion that "the author is dead," suggesting that interpretation lies with the audience rather than the creator.

Barthes' semiotic theory is structured around three interpretive levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. *Denotation* is a literal description, the surface meaning of a sign. *Connotation* refers to the cultural and emotional associations attached to signs through individual or collective experiences. *Myth* represents a second-order signification that naturalizes ideologies embedded within signs. As

Ala (2011) explains, Barthes often used photography to illustrate these distinctions. For instance, a photograph of a thin child with an empty plate on the ground denotes exactly what the camera captures. The image's connotation, however, might suggest the broader issue of world hunger. At the mythic level, such images can unconsciously reinforce the ideology that "thin children equal societal hunger," rooted in cultural understandings of poverty and food scarcity. Thus, Barthes' tripartite model offers a systematic and scalable approach for interpreting sign systems, from magazine advertisements to Instagram posts, and for exposing the cultural work they perform.

METHODS
Research Design
This study adopted a qualitative single-case study design to examine how semiotic strategies construct celebrity self-branding on Instagram. A case study approach was considered the most appropriate because it enables in-depth exploration of a bounded system—here, a single post by Ahmad Dhani—within its real-life context. Case studies allow researchers to trace the interplay of symbolic elements, context, and interpretation, yielding nuanced insights into meaning-making processes. The qualitative orientation of this research prioritizes depth over breadth, aligning with Sharp's (2001) assertion that qualitative designs emphasize interpretive richness rather than statistical generalizability.

Data Collection
The data comprised a publicly accessible Instagram post published on March 7, 2025, from Ahmad Dhani's verified account. This post was selected through purposive sampling, based on its clear self-representational intent and relevance to the research question. Several criteria guided the selection process:
1. Visibility and Accessibility: The post was public and therefore open to analysis without breaching ethical boundaries.
2. Content Richness: The post integrated both visual (orchestral attire, setting, and crowd) and textual elements (on-image text and caption), allowing for multi-layered semiotic interpretation.
3. Contextual Significance: The post was published shortly after Dhani faced public criticism, making it a suitable case for examining reputation management and myth-making.

Figure 1. *Ahmad Dhani's Instagram post*

The data were collected via screenshot documentation to preserve the original multimodal elements (image, overlay text, and caption). This approach aligns with digital ethnographic methods, where researchers systematically capture and archive online texts for subsequent analysis (Pink et al., 2015). As context, Ahmad Dhani is not only a renowned Indonesian musician and leader of the band Dewa 19 but also an active political figure serving in the House of Representatives. He is publicly recognized for both creativity and controversy—admired for his artistry but also criticized for arrogance and provocative statements. This duality makes him a compelling subject, as his Instagram activity often functions to negotiate between criticism and legitimacy.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed Roland Barthes' semiotic framework of denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972). This three-tiered approach enables researchers to move from surface-level description to uncovering deeper cultural and ideological meanings. The analytical process unfolded in three stages:

1. Identification of Denotative Signs: All observable signs were catalogued, including attire, gestures, background, textual overlays, and caption. This stage captured the literal, surface-level elements without interpretation.
2. Interpretation of Connotations: Each sign was examined for its cultural and emotional associations. For example, the tuxedo was linked to formality and authority, while the warm orange background was interpreted as evoking passion and creativity. Contextual knowledge of Dhani's public persona was integrated to ground these interpretations in socio-cultural reality (Hall, 2013).
3. Examination of Mythic Layer: The interplay of signs was analyzed to uncover second-order significations, or myths. In this case, the post was interpreted as transforming Dhani's perceived arrogance into a myth of leadership and authenticity. This aligns with Barthes' notion that myths naturalize cultural ideologies, rendering them as "common sense."

To enhance analytical rigor, triangulation was achieved by comparing interpretations with existing literature on self-branding, celebrity studies, and digital semiotics (e.g., Marwick, 2015; Khamis et al., 2016). Researcher reflexivity was also observed, acknowledging potential biases in interpreting celebrity representation.

Ethical Considerations

Since the data originated from a publicly available Instagram account, no direct consent from the subject was required. However, care was taken to contextualize interpretations academically and avoid sensationalism. The post was analyzed strictly for scholarly purposes, respecting both ethical guidelines in digital research and the principle of fair use.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of this research is Ahmad Dhani's Instagram post (comprising both the image and its caption) published on March 7, 2025. The image depicts Ahmad Dhani dressed as an orchestral conductor, wearing a tuxedo and hat with his hands raised, accompanied by the overlay text "MAAF, JIKA SAYA BERBEDA," which translates to "Sorry if I am different."

As a semiotic study, the goal of this research is to uncover the deeper meanings constructed through the post's visual and textual signs. The study adopts Barthes' three-tiered semiotic approach by: identifying the denotative elements of the post; interpreting their connotative associations; and revealing the underlying myth or ideological narrative. The first step of the analysis involves summarizing the denotative and connotative meanings of each sign present in the post. The next step is to examine the myth or ideological message that emerges from the interplay of these signs.

Denotation and Connotation Meaning

The denotative analysis includes listing all visual and textual signs in the post, and its connotation is interpreted in context. The findings have been listed below:

Table 1. *Denotation and Connotation of Semiotic Elements*

No	Denotation	Connotation
1	A Man in tuxedo and hat in the center	The suit (tuxedo and hat), which has many different variations based on each nation's culture, are typically worn in formal events. It shows social status, social standing, and professionalism. An example of fashion as one of the signs that conveys human social status and cultural existence. Based on facial features, the man in the picture is Ahmad Dhani.
2	Man's gesture (stands straight, hands open and raised)	A stance commonly found on orchestral conductor. It shows that the user is confident and is leading a group of people. The open-handed gesture shows authority and control
3	Stick the man hold	Thin stick such as the one on the man's hand can be found in various length and width among various different occupation. Often used as an extension of an arm, especially used to points at something (e.g. a teacher showing details on the board, a presenter pointing at particular part of the material, etc.). One similarity of each use is that the user usually leads something (lecture, presentation, etc.) meaning it symbolizes authority.
4	The set (conductor's music stand, microphone, microphone stand, papers) in front of the man in formal attire	The set shows there is a performance happening. It also shows expertise, professionalism, and formality. The presence of the set shows that the event is a proper, high-class event by showing a high-quality object. They also show and compliments the theme of the image well, an orchestra The microphone itself shows that the man talks to an audience, indirectly indicates that the man is in authority. Overall, reinforces the man's authority and professional legitimacy.
5	Blurred crowd in the background	The blurred crowd in the background signifies fame and attention. The crowd being blurred also means that the identity of the crowd is not important, meaning whether the crowd is homogeneous or from various different ethnicity is not the details that is being shown. The important part, however, is that the crowd is present and many people wants to pay attention to the man. The crowd being blurred also shows that the crowd is not the main focus of the image, rather, the man is the main focus.
6	Orange background color palette	The warm orange color created a warm and dramatic atmosphere. This color often connotes passion and creativity. Signifying that Ahmad Dhani is a man full of passion and creativity
7	On-image-text "MAAF, JIKA SAYA BERBEDA"	The sentence means "Sorry, that I am different". On the surface level, the sentence may be perceived as an apology. However, it implicitly acts as an acceptance and declaration that the man is different. The text can be understood not as an apology, but an instrument to further emphasize that his ideology and value is different from the norm than Indonesia' culture.

No	Denotation	Connotation
		Based on the time of the post publication, the researcher found that a few days prior, Ahmad Dhani, who, at the time during the research was written (20th of May 2025) is a member of The House of Representatives in Indonesia, has incited public' wrath for his controversial statement. The researcher believes that the post is related to this case, based on the content's relevance, time of publications, and myth about his personality.
8	Post's caption "Sejak usia dini, memang saya berbeda."	The sentence means "Since I was a child, I have always been different". The researcher perceives this as a follow up statement for the on-image-text "Sorry, that I'm different", which is aimed to emphasize that he is different since early age and that he is born unique.

Identical to the on-image-text, the word "different" should not be taken lightly by questioning whether the different is in a good or bad way. Rather, the word "different" should be understood as a declaration of uniqueness, a quality and values that many people bound to possess. Also, by publicly announcing this statement, it can be understood that he is building his identity and image to be a unique person. |

Myth
Self- Branding & Authority

This analysis of Ahmad Dhani's Instagram post, focusing on its mythological layer, unveils how the image functions as a deliberate self-branding strategy aimed at reshaping his public image. By aligning himself with the image of an orchestrator, Dhani constructs a narrative of difference that elevates his status from controversial figure to visionary leader. The use of orchestral imagery, coupled with the statement "sorry if I am different," represents not a genuine apology but rather a proclamation of his uniqueness and authority. This aligns with Barthes' (1972) framework, where denotative elements in an image serve as a vehicle for connotative meanings that transcend the literal interpretation, infusing the image with ideological messages about identity and authority.

Dhani's portrayal as a conductor, rather than a social pariah, supports the idea that his deviance from the norm is not a flaw but a marker of authenticity and intellectual depth. According to Blackwood (2021), on platforms like Instagram, "connotations submerge primary meanings," thus making the ideological and cultural significance of Dhani's image more prominent than its literal depiction. His position in the conductor's role can be seen as a visual assertion of leadership and expertise, which positions his difference as a necessary condition for his visionary status. Dhani's strategic use of orchestral imagery can be interpreted as emblematic of cultivation theory, which posits that repeated exposure to specific symbols in media can shape audience perceptions and expectations. In this context, the image of a conductor—a figure associated with leadership, creativity, and mastery—positions Dhani as an authority figure within the cultural landscape, effectively countering any negative associations stemming from his public controversies. This orchestral metaphor enhances his narrative as someone who orchestrates not just music but also ideas and transformations in public consciousness, this framing transforms what could be interpreted as a flaw into a virtue, aligning with Hearn's (2008) theory that self-branding is a process of constructing a narrative designed to project particular values and uniqueness.

Authenticity and Individuality

Furthermore, Dhani's message of "I have always been different" suggests that his identity as a nonconformist is not a recent development but an inherent part of his persona. This aligns with Kim

and McDonald-Liu's (2023) analysis of micro-celebrities, where the emphasis on individuality is a key component of self-presentation in digital spaces. By framing his difference as something intrinsic, Dhani reinforces his authenticity and positions his deviance as a key characteristic of his personal brand. The conceptualization of authenticity in personal branding is widely discussed in contemporary literature. Matthews et al. (2020) assert that personal authenticity not only influences consumer perceptions but also acts as a mediator through trust and perceived quality. This suggests that Dhani's portrayal of himself as a nonconformist is strategically aligned with audience expectations of authenticity, potentially enhancing his connections with followers. Such authenticity resonates particularly well in visual social media contexts, where individuals often seek relatable and genuine representations of identity.

The text overlay on the post, "Forgive me if I am different," further reinforces this narrative, suggesting a defiance of social norms while simultaneously asserting the value of his uniqueness. This dual message of apology and affirmation fits into the broader framework of personal branding, as highlighted by Gorbatov et al. (2018), who argue that effective personal branding relies on highlighting one's uniqueness. By constructing this visual and textual narrative, Dhani taps into the cultural capital associated with classical music, positioning himself as an artist whose difference is synonymous with creative genius. Moreover, the interplay of apology and affirmation in Dhani's statement can be interpreted through sociocultural frameworks that examine the impact of social media on identity construction. Research discusses how social media platforms allow users to explore and express aspects of their identities while negotiating societal expectations. Dhani's post exemplifies this negotiation process, indicating a self-aware engagement with his public image while seeking validation and acceptance from his audience. This dynamic is particularly relevant given his past controversies, where such a balancing act becomes essential for maintaining a positive public persona amidst criticism.

Dhani's use of classical artistry as a signifier of refinement, intellectual depth, and cultural capital helps counterbalance the negative associations that may arise from his public controversies. As Blackwood (2021) notes, images are not neutral; they are laden with cultural and ideological connotations. In this case, the use of orchestral imagery serves to elevate Dhani's public persona, positioning him not as a deviant but as an admirable figure whose difference should be respected and celebrated. This aligns with Barthes' (1972) idea of myth, where images become repositories for hidden cultural narratives that shape public perception. Dhani's decision to depict himself through classical music not only transforms him into an admirable figure but also helps counterbalance the stigma that might arise from his more controversial public persona. His framing of difference as something worthy of celebration aligns with the idea that individuals can actively construct narratives around their identities in ways that resonate positively with audiences. The significance of cultural signifiers, like classical artistry, can be employed to construct identity narratives that challenge conventional perceptions (Prieur & Savage, 2011). By leveraging these narratives, Dhani positions himself as a conduit for innovative artistic expression, thereby reframing his identity within a more elevated context.

Negotiation of Reputation and Identity

Additionally, this post operates as a form of self-defense and reputation management in response to public criticism. Following his controversial remarks in early March 2025, Dhani used this post to reframe his public persona, shifting the narrative from a man criticized for his sexist and racist comments to an artist who has always embraced his difference. This strategic use of Instagram aligns with Hearn's (2008) concept of self-presentation as a detachable, saleable image, designed to circulate cultural meanings and reinforce his position in the public eye. Additionally, this strategic use of social media to manage reputation aligns with findings from (Stenger, 2014), which discuss the increasing relevance of online reputation management, particularly in the context of heightened consumer participation and scrutiny on platforms like Instagram (Stenger, 2014). The ability for individuals to

cultivate a positive public image, even in the face of backlash, underscores the transformative potential of social media as a reputation management tool. This is especially critical for public figures like Dhani, who face the challenge of addressing allegations while simultaneously working to reinforce their brand narratives.

Moreover, (Horn et al., 2015) highlight that organizations and public figures must create a portfolio of response strategies to effectively manage reputation threats. Dhani's reaffirmation of his unique identity serves as a strategic counter-narrative that could mitigate potential damage from previous controversies (Horn et al., 2015). By positioning his difference within a framework of artistic authenticity, he not only legitimizes his past choices but also cultivates a narrative that can resonate with followers who value deviation from the norm. in addition, the broader implication of social media as a tool for expressing individuality and managing reputation resonates similarly across different contexts (Griffis et al., 2014). In this light, Dhani's post serves as an embodiment of this cultural shift, leveraging the power of digital platforms to simultaneously defend and redefine his public identity.

Social Media as a Space of Identity Construction

Ahmad Dhani's Instagram post functions as a multi-layered semiotic strategy, integrating visual artistry, textual declarations, and cultural symbolism to reframe his public identity. On the surface, the post might appear to be a simple act of self-expression, yet its layered meanings reveal a deliberate negotiation of identity in the highly visible arena of social media. By framing "difference" as a virtue rather than a flaw, Dhani reshapes public perception of his persona, constructing a mythological narrative in which nonconformity becomes synonymous with authority, creativity, and leadership. This reframing is crucial, given his history of public controversies, as it enables him to convert potential liabilities into symbolic capital that sustains his personal brand.

More broadly, the post highlights how social media operates as a site of identity construction where representation is neither static nor neutral. Celebrities like Dhani are compelled to balance audience expectations, personal authenticity, and reputation management. In doing so, their digital self-representations move beyond individual communication to participate in larger cultural narratives of what it means to be unique, authoritative, and authentic in a mediated society. Social media's immediacy and interactivity provide opportunities for direct audience engagement, but also expose figures to heightened scrutiny. Dhani's post demonstrates how strategic use of semiotic resources can transform this vulnerability into a form of control, allowing him to guide interpretations of his identity. Thus, the post is not merely a defensive reaction to criticism but an intentional act of myth-making that reinforces his authority and legitimacy in the public sphere (Blackwood, 2021; Hearn, 2008).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Ahmad Dhani's Instagram post through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, showing how visual and textual signs combine to construct a myth that reframes personal difference as authority and authenticity. The analysis demonstrated that at the denotative level, Dhani's attire, gestures, and setting signaled refinement, professionalism, and leadership. At the connotative level, elements such as the warm color palette and textual declarations highlighted creativity, passion, and individuality. At the mythic level, these signs converged to transform perceived arrogance into a cultural narrative of visionary leadership, effectively legitimizing his controversial persona.

The findings underscore the broader significance of social media as a site of identity construction. Dhani's post illustrates how celebrities use multimodal strategies not only to engage audiences but also to actively shape their public image, strategically negotiating between authenticity and authority. This highlights the capacity of digital platforms to function as spaces of myth-making, where narratives of selfhood are embedded within cultural ideologies and circulated to mass audiences. By re-signifying difference as a positive attribute, Dhani demonstrates the power of digital self-representation to manage reputational threats while reinforcing personal branding.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital semiotics and celebrity culture by applying Barthes' tripartite model to the analysis of online identity performance. Practically, it provides insights into how public figures strategically use social media to transform vulnerabilities into assets, a practice increasingly relevant in an era where visibility and controversy often coexist.

Nevertheless, the study's scope is limited to one Instagram post, restricting the generalizability of its findings. Future research should incorporate comparative or longitudinal analyses across multiple celebrities or platforms to capture the evolving dynamics of digital identity and branding strategies. In doing so, scholars can further explore how myth-making processes adapt to shifting cultural, political, and technological contexts.

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