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Urban Cultural Representation in Student Photography: A Case Study of the “Warna-Warni Jakarta” Exhibition

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Abstract: This study examines the representation of urban culture in student photography showcased in the "Warna-Warni Jakarta" exhibition as a visual medium rich in social and symbolic meanings. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach and case study method with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, this research aims to identify the visual elements used by students, interpret the implied cultural meanings, and understand young people's perspectives in interpreting the realities of Jakarta. Data were collected through direct observation of the exhibited works, in-depth interviews with student photographers and visitors, and visual documentation. The findings reveal that student photography does not merely present aesthetic beauty, but also voices social criticism, displays community solidarity, and reflects inequality within urban society. Through visual symbols such as street murals, cramped spaces, and citizen activities, students construct an inclusive and reflective cultural narrative. In this context, photography serves as an effective and strategic tool of cultural communication that contributes to shaping the collective consciousness of urban dwellers.

Keyword: Visual Representation, Urban Culture, Student Photography, Semiotics, Jakarta

INTRODUCTION

Jakarta is a complex and dynamic social space where modernity and tradition coexist in a state of ongoing tension. The massive urbanization that has occurred over the past few decades has produced a city landscape full of contradictions—on one hand, rapidly developing as an economic and cultural hub, and on the other, facing challenges such as traffic congestion, social inequality, and a crisis of cultural identity. In this context, urban culture is not merely understood as a lifestyle or collection of city symbols, but as an ongoing negotiation of meaning among various social actors (Susanto & Fauzan, 2023).

One of the most potent mediums for portraying and representing the dynamics of urban culture is photography. As a form of visual expression, photography can capture everyday

realities while conveying strong symbolic messages. This aligns with Rose's (2016) assertion that visual imagery plays a central role in the construction of social and cultural meaning in today's visual era. Especially among university students, photography functions not only as a documentation tool but also as a medium for articulating personal experiences, critical perspectives, and expressions of social identity. In this regard, student photography reflects the younger generation's interpretation of their social environment, including the city as a cultural space. Culture, according to Rafi'i (2021), will continue to accompany and shape the life of its society.

The student photography exhibition titled *Warna-Warni Jakarta* (The Colors of Jakarta) serves as a concrete example of how the city's visualization can represent urban culture from the viewpoint of youth. The event drew considerable attention from a wide range of audiences—including students, academics, practitioners, journalists, and the general public—as seen in the photo below:



Figure 1. Source: Researcher's personal document. Friday, June 20, 2025

Through the lens of a camera, students captured various aspects of urban life—from cramped residential spaces and street murals to complex social interactions. These representations do not stand alone but contain cultural narratives that reflect solidarity, resistance, or even irony in response to the urban realities they encounter daily (Wulandari, 2024).

In the study of visual communication, cultural representation is a vital aspect that not only explains how meaning is constructed but also how it is disseminated and interpreted. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that representation is not a passive reflection of reality but an active process of meaning-making through systems of signs. In other words, the photographs created by students do not merely depict “what is seen” but also “what is meant,” viewed through particular social and cultural lenses.

This study is significant due to the limited number of investigations that specifically examine student photography exhibitions as a medium for representing urban culture. Most prior research has focused more on the use of social media (Triary & Susilo, 2023) or professional photography in constructing city imagery (Novianti et al., 2022). Therefore, this

study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing a student photography exhibition at Dian Nusantara University as a case study.

Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework and Stuart Hall's theory of representation, this research aims to uncover how the visual elements in student photography portray Jakarta's urban culture. The primary focus lies in exploring the implied social and cultural meanings within the visual works, as well as understanding how students—as part of the creative class—produce narratives about the city from their unique perspectives.

Previous studies on urban culture and visual representation have underscored the significance of photography as a medium of social expression and construction. For instance, Baetty and Sari (2023) analyzed student photography in the context of human interest and concluded that a semiotic approach effectively uncovers hidden meanings behind seemingly ordinary images. Their study emphasized that photographs are not just visual documentation but also cultural texts that can be read critically.

In another study, Herry (2023) discussed how social narratives are constructed in student photography, particularly within the human-interest genre. His findings highlight that symbolic interpretation in student photos functions as social criticism of urban conditions. These conclusions align with Barthes' (1977) concept of two layers of meaning in images: denotative and connotative—both of which can be analyzed to uncover cultural significance.

Meanwhile, Novianti et al. (2022) in their study of professional urban photography focused on aesthetic aspects and city identity representation in visual campaigns. Although not conducted by students, this research is relevant as it illustrates how symbols and visual composition are used to construct urban narratives. Still, there is a lack of studies that explicitly discuss urban cultural representation from the perspective of students as producers of alternative culture.

On the other hand, Triary and Susilo's (2023) analysis of the @jakarta_tourism social media account indicates that visual media significantly influences public perception of urban cultural identity. They highlight the importance of visual signs in shaping urban cultural discourse in digital spaces. This suggests that city representation occurs not only physically but also within visual and symbolic realms.

In summary, existing literature supports the importance of visual analysis as a method for understanding cultural representation in urban contexts. However, a gap remains regarding how students, as creative agents, construct cultural narratives through visual media such as photography. Therefore, this study aims to address that gap by examining student photography exhibitions as a form of articulating identity, social critique, and the construction of contemporary urban culture.

This research is grounded in three main theoretical frameworks:

1. Roland Barthes' Semiotics

Roland Barthes developed a semiotic approach that distinguishes two levels of meaning in signs: denotative (literal meaning) and connotative (a second layer of meaning involving social, cultural, or ideological values). In the context of photography, Barthes (1977) asserts that an image not only displays visual reality but also contains hidden cultural messages. Barthes' semiotic analysis enables the interpretation of symbolic meaning in student photography, reflecting social critique and urban cultural representation.

2. Stuart Hall's Representation Theory

Stuart Hall (1997) emphasizes that representation is not merely a reflection of reality but an active process of meaning production through sign systems. Visual representation serves as a medium for constructing discourses about identity, power, and social structures. In this study, student photography is seen as a visual discourse that shapes and communicates their social perspectives on urban life in Jakarta.

3. Urban Culture and Creative Class Theory (Richard Florida)

Richard Florida (2014) introduced the concept of the “creative class” in urban cultural studies. He explains that groups such as artists, designers, and art students play a significant role in shaping the city’s image through their creativity. In this context, students as part of the creative class have the capacity to represent cultural values, express identity, and voice social criticism through their visual works. This concept reinforces the role of students as cultural actors in the contemporary urban landscape.

These three theories complement each other in analyzing the visual meanings in student photography and situate the works as part of the broader process of urban cultural construction.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of urban cultural representation through student photography in the context of the *Warna-Warni Jakarta* exhibition. A qualitative approach is suitable for exploring meaning, symbols, and subjective experiences captured in visual media (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The subjects of this research were students from Dian Nusantara University who participated as photographers in the exhibition. The research objects consisted of the photographic works displayed, the visual contexts of each piece, and the socio-cultural interpretations embedded within them.

The study was conducted at Dian Nusantara University, West Jakarta, the venue of the *Warna-Warni Jakarta* photography exhibition. Data collection took place between April and May 2025.

1. Visual Observation: Direct observation of the exhibited photos, documenting visual elements, themes, symbols, and presentation techniques.
2. In-depth Interviews: Conducted with three student photographers and three exhibition visitors to explore perspectives, symbolic meanings, and the creative processes behind the artworks.
3. Documentation: Additional data were collected in the form of exhibition catalogs, photo documentation, and promotional materials to support analysis.

The use of urban photography as a method of visual ethnography enabled the researcher to explore the city’s social dynamics more deeply (Koskinen, 2018).

Data were analyzed using Roland Barthes’ semiotic approach, which involves three levels of meaning:

1. Denotative: Describes the literal objects or situations depicted in the photos.
2. Connotative: Interprets the symbolic meanings embedded in the visuals, including cultural values, social critiques, or community identities.
3. Myth: Represents a chain of messages that frames social and cultural values as natural and unquestionable.

The analytical process included the following steps:

1. Data reduction based on relevance to the theme of urban culture.
2. Data presentation in narrative descriptive and visual forms.
3. Drawing conclusions based on emerging patterns of cultural representation.

The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation, which involved comparing the findings from observations, interviews, and documentation. In addition, member checking was conducted with key informants to ensure that the interpretations aligned with their intended narratives (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The student photography exhibition titled *Warna-Warni Jakarta* presented a variety of visual works that symbolically represent the dynamics of Jakarta's urban culture. Based on visual observation, semiotic analysis, and in-depth interviews with student photographers and exhibition visitors, it was found that the photographs conveyed a wide range of rich social messages. Novianti et al. (2023) also emphasized that visual symbols and compositions in urban photography can construct city narratives and reinforce urban cultural identity.

Denotative, Connotative, and Mythical Representations in Student Photography



Figure 2. Source: M. Khairil Mujaki, Friday, June 20, 2025 – Warna-Warni Jakarta Exhibition, 6th Floor Auditorium, Dian Nusantara University

“The image above tells the story of tradition meeting modernity. The photo captures a youth performance in the Pasar Minggu area, featuring the elegance of ondel-ondel puppetry against the backdrop of a bustling market. A fleeting moment in which ancient traditions find new life in contemporary settings.” (M. Khairil Mujaki)

Denotative Meaning

The photograph literally shows a group of teenagers performing a traditional *ondel-ondel* dance on a street corner in Pasar Minggu. In the background, a crowded market scene is visible, with shop houses, passing vehicles, and bustling pedestrians.

“I tried to capture the simple interaction between cultural performers and urban space. What appears to be just kids dancing and people watching is actually a depiction of Jakarta today.” M. Khairil Mujaki (20 June 2025)

It is evident that the photograph depicting a group of teenagers performing an *ondel-ondel* show in the Pasar Minggu area is not merely a visual documentation of a cultural moment, but a profound representation of Jakarta's complex urban reality. Denotatively, the image presents a seemingly simple scene—children dressed in traditional Betawi costumes dancing on the roadside, with a backdrop of a busy market, tightly packed shop houses, passing vehicles, and the constant movement of people. However, behind this literal depiction lies a broader social reality: the convergence of cultural heritage and the currents of modern urban life.

Khairil Mujaki's statement about his intention to capture "a simple interaction between cultural actors and urban space" suggests that the image conveys more than what appears on the surface. What seems to be a casual street performance is, in essence, a micro-portrait of the dynamics of urban identity. The presence of *ondel-ondel* amidst the hustle and bustle of the market's economic activity reflects how tradition continues to seek space for expression—even if not always in formal or ceremonial contexts. Tradition, in this case, becomes part of everyday life, woven into the fast-paced and pressure-filled rhythm of the city.

This kind of public appearance of *ondel-ondel* can be understood as a symbolic statement on the endurance of local culture in the midst of modernity. Jakarta is not solely defined by its towering buildings or monumental infrastructure, but also by spontaneous and context-specific cultural expressions that emerge within its society. This is where the strength of student photography lies—not only in capturing what is seen, but also in framing what is meaningful.

From this perspective, such photographic work challenges the audience to reconsider urban space not merely as a site of movement and economic transaction, but as a dynamic cultural arena. The image affirms that culture is not alienated from the city; rather, it is intimately embedded, alive in the small gestures often overlooked. The children's performance becomes a symbol of a modest yet resilient tradition that continues to assert its presence amid the noise of modernity.

In this way, the photograph demonstrates how students, as part of the creative class, play a crucial role in interpreting and articulating urban reality. They are not merely passive observers, but active producers of meaning who invite the public to reflect critically on shared urban space. Photography thus becomes an expressive medium that bridges collective memory, cultural identity, and the ever-evolving social dynamics of urban life.

A visitor named Rizky, an information technology student, shared his response to the visual presented in Khairil's photograph:

"What I see in this photo is very real—kids performing in ondel-ondel costumes by the roadside, while behind them, the busy market, motorcycles, and street vendors create a typical Jakarta scene. It's something we often encounter, yet rarely pay close attention to."

Rizky's statement reinforces the visual interpretation of Khairil Mujaki's work, which captures an *ondel-ondel* performance amidst the lively atmosphere of Pasar Minggu. In his view, what is depicted in the photo feels "very real," as it reflects scenes he frequently encounters in his daily life in Jakarta—though often overlooked or taken for granted.

This response highlights that the power of photography lies not merely in visual beauty, but in its ability to elevate the ordinary into the extraordinary. What may initially appear trivial—such as children performing in traditional costumes in a bustling market—becomes a meaningful entry point for understanding the cultural identity of the city. The image does not present a rare or exceptional event; rather, it successfully captures what is usually rendered invisible by its familiarity.

Rizky's comment demonstrates that the visual representation in this photograph carries a reflective function, directing the audience's attention to the nuances of urban life that are typically ignored. From his technical and personal perspective, Rizky reveals that Jakarta's reality is shaped not only by megastructures and symbols of modernity, but also by the overlapping layers of daily life filled with cultural, economic, and social dynamics.

This suggests a process of "meaning activation" by the audience. In this context, the photograph serves as a catalyst for reflection, bridging personal memory with the city's collective narrative. Through Rizky's testimony, Khairil's work succeeds in reviving an awareness that Jakarta is not merely a dense physical space, but also a social space where cultural interaction persists—often unnoticed, yet deeply meaningful.

Thus, the interaction between the visual work and audience responses such as Rizky's serves as evidence that student photography is capable of establishing a strong relationship between visual expression and the cultural consciousness of urban society. The photograph is not merely viewed; it is relived by the audience through memory, emotion, and personal interpretation—enriching the layers of meaning within the city's reality.

Connotative Meaning

Beyond a mere street performance, the image symbolizes the encounter between tradition and contemporary urban life. The presence of *ondel-ondel*—a Betawi cultural heritage—in the middle of a modern economic setting delivers a visual message about how cultural values adapt amid modernization.

"I wanted to show that tradition is not dead—it lives, blends, and survives among concrete buildings and honking horns. It's not just a dance, but a statement of presence." M. Khairil Mujaki (20 June 2025)

It is evident that the core strength of this photograph lies not only in its depiction of physical reality, but also in its ability to reveal the symbolic relationship between tradition and modern life. More than merely documenting a street performance, the image presents a complex visual symbol of the encounter between local cultural heritage and the fast-paced rhythm of the urban economy. The presence of *ondel-ondel*—a traditional icon of Betawi culture—situated in the middle of a bustling market, flanked by shop houses, traffic, and the crowd of daily city life, offers a composition rich in connotative meaning.

In this context, *ondel-ondel* is not simply a folkloric symbol but a representation of the resilience of local culture amidst the pressures of modernization. Traditionally associated with ceremonial spaces, the *ondel-ondel* figure here appears in an informal public setting, competing with the sound of honking horns, dense traffic, and economic transactions. Culture, therefore, does not appear as a static artifact, but as a fluid, adaptive entity—capable of infiltrating and blending into the fabric of contemporary urban life.

Khairil Mujaki, the photographer, asserts: "Tradition is not dead—it exists, blends, and continues to live among concrete buildings and the sound of car horns." This statement reflects a collective awareness among the younger generation, who do not regard tradition merely as a relic of the past, but as an active element of today's urban experience. It demonstrates an understanding that culture finds ways to survive—even in unconventional forms. Even when performed as a modest street act, *ondel-ondel* does not lose its significance as a marker of identity, presence, and living local history.

This stands as a powerful form of representation. When tradition coexists alongside the symbols of capitalism and modernity, the relationship is not always antagonistic; instead, it reveals a unique form of coexistence. Tradition is not defeated by modernity but finds new pathways to be seen and heard. The photograph testifies that the urban landscape does not entirely erase traditional values; rather, it creates small openings through which cultural expressions can re-emerge—even within constraints.

Khairil Mujaki's work does more than capture a visual moment; it frames a reflective cultural discourse. He effectively uses the medium of photography to convey that tradition is not merely nostalgic, but a living and continuous presence amid Jakarta's complexity. Visuals like this are vital, as they nurture the understanding that a city's identity is not solely anchored in buildings and technology, but also in symbolic heritage that persists across space and time.

One of the exhibition visitors, Ririn, shared her emotional response to the artwork:

"When I saw the photo of ondel-ondel in the crowded market, I felt like I was being reminded that Jakarta isn't just about skyscrapers and traffic jams. There's still a cultural heartbeat that's trying to survive."

The emotional response expressed by a visitor at the exhibition illustrates how visual representation in photographic works can evoke a reflective form of cultural awareness. When Ririn stated that seeing the *ondel-ondel* figure amidst the hustle and bustle of the market reminded her that Jakarta is not only about tall buildings and traffic congestion, her comment affirmed the connection between visual imagery and the collective consciousness of urban identity.

This response indicates that photography functions not merely as visual documentation, but also as a catalyst for memory and reflection. In the context of Jakarta, a city often reduced to symbols of physical development and infrastructure, the presence of traditional elements like *ondel-ondel* offers a counter-narrative—one that suggests that beneath the spectacle of modernity lies the enduring pulse of local culture still struggling to remain visible and acknowledged.

In this case, the photographic work successfully revives layers of meaning that are often obscured by the dominant visual narratives of modern urban life. The symbol of tradition, when presented in a densely occupied public space, serves not simply as aesthetic decoration, but as a cultural statement affirming the continuity of local identity amid the pressures of globalization and cultural homogenization.

Ririn's remarks underscore that the experience of engaging with visual art can prompt a reinterpretation of the city as a space that is far from singular. Jakarta, in this observation, emerges as a paradoxical environment—caught between rapid development and cultural legacy, between the noise of vehicles and the subtle echoes of tradition that still persist. This reflects the idea that audiences are not merely passive spectators, but active participants in reshaping the meanings offered by visual works.

Such a response serves as a strong indicator that student photography exhibitions can serve not only as a visual platform but also as a powerful medium that provokes cultural and existential awareness among urban communities. Tradition, when visualized in the context of the city, is not merely a nostalgic object—it becomes a symbol of cultural vitality, continuously negotiating its existence amid the relentless currents of change.

Mythical Meaning

At the level of myth, the photo frames the narrative that local culture is an inseparable part of Jakarta's urban identity. The appearance of *ondel-ondel* in urban space transcends popular entertainment—it becomes a symbol of resistance against the homogenizing layers of global culture. Tradition is mythologized as the "soul of the city," ever-present despite being marginalized by modern dominance.

"I believe that as long as we can still see ondel-ondel on the streets, it means Jakarta hasn't lost its true face. There's a silent resistance in tradition that still wants to be seen and recognized." M. Khairil Mujaki (20 June 2025)

At the level of myth, the photograph depicting *ondel-ondel* in a public space constructs a deeper cultural narrative—suggesting that local culture is not merely a traditional ornament, but an essential part of Jakarta's urban identity. The presence of *ondel-ondel* can no longer be interpreted simply as a form of folk entertainment; rather, it becomes a symbol of resistance against the dominance of global cultural forces that tend to be uniform and homogenizing.

In this context, tradition acquires mythological meaning—it is understood as the "soul of the city" that continues to live on, even as it is often marginalized by rapid urban development and the flow of modernity. The appearance of *ondel-ondel* on the roadside, amidst a busy market and heavy traffic, acts as a silent marker of the tension between the local and the global, between cultural roots and the demands of modernization.

Khairil Mujaki's statement—that as long as *ondel-ondel* can still be seen on the streets, Jakarta has not lost its true face—reinforces this interpretation. His belief reflects the view

that tradition possesses symbolic resilience, a cultural force not easily erased by the passage of time. Tradition here becomes a quiet yet meaningful form of resistance, continuously present as a counterbalance to urban progress narratives that frequently ignore historical and cultural dimensions.

This visual framing positions tradition not only as something that physically survives, but also as a symbolic presence embedded in the city's collective consciousness. The myth evoked in the image casts *ondel-ondel* as a representation of Jakarta's authenticity—something that cannot be replaced by modern infrastructure or technological advancement. Through this mythological lens, the city is read as a space of silent resistance, where older values continue to resonate in humble yet persistent forms.

Thus, this photographic work does more than depict tradition within the urban landscape—it reproduces cultural meaning that strengthens the city's identity. *Ondel-ondel* appears not simply as an artifact, but as a living narrative that continually negotiates its place within Jakarta's contemporary social and visual structures.

In addition to Rizky and Ririn, another visitor named Yadi, a communication student, also shared his thoughts on Khairil Mujaki's work:

"I see that photo as a snapshot of the struggle of local culture trying to survive in an increasingly dense and fast-paced city. It's not just about performing arts, but about existence—how tradition keeps trying to speak even as the city keeps changing."

The response from Yadi, a communication student who observed Khairil Mujaki's work, adds depth to the visual interpretation of local cultural representation within the urban context. His description of the photograph as a "small glimpse of the struggle of local culture" underscores that tradition is not merely an artistic expression, but rather an existential struggle within an urban landscape that is constantly developing and rapidly changing.

This response affirms that the *ondel-ondel* figure in the photograph is not merely a symbol of performance or entertainment; it becomes a metaphor for the tension between cultural continuity and the acceleration of urbanization. Tradition does not appear in sterile or symbolic spaces, but within the crowded everyday life of the city—amid traffic, economic pressure, and spatial constraints. As Yadi notes, tradition is "struggling to speak"—trying to assert its presence in an environment increasingly dominated, both visually and structurally, by modernity.

From the perspective of visual research, Yadi's comment reflects that audiences are not simply reading images aesthetically, but are also interpreting them as part of a narrative of cultural resistance. In this context, tradition emerges as an active subject, seeking visibility, recognition, and voice, even as it coexists with the swiftly transforming realities of the contemporary city.

This response illustrates that photographic works go beyond mere image presentation; they prompt audiences to engage with the symbolic dynamics between the old and the new, between cultural roots and modern urban structures. Tradition is shown not only to endure physically but also to survive symbolically in the collective consciousness of urban society—serving as a reminder that cities are shaped not only by infrastructure, but also by the inherited values and meanings embedded within them.

Within this context, Khairil Mujaki's work succeeds in situating traditional cultural visuals into a discursive space relevant to today's urban conditions. He positions *ondel-ondel* not as a relic of the past, but as an active participant in ongoing conversations about identity, continuity, and cultural resistance within contemporary urban society.

Denotative and Connotative Representations in the Work of Rizki Maulana Saputra



Figure 3. Source: Rizki Maulana Saputra, Friday, June 20, 2025 – Warna-Warni Jakarta Exhibition, 6th Floor Auditorium, Dian Nusantara University

The photograph clearly conveys the denotative meaning of the density and busyness of urban life, as seen in the crowd of train commuters walking along the station platform on their way to work, dressed in formal shirts and shoes. However, from a deeper connotative perspective, a striking contrast emerges: underage children—who ideally should be playing or attending kindergarten—are instead walking alongside their parents, helping them earn a living while wearing faded black clothes and sandals.

More than just a visual observation, this point was elaborated by Rizki Maulana Saputra during the *Warna-Warni Jakarta* exhibition, held on Friday, June 20, 2025:

“Amid the hustle of the passengers, a pair of small and large feet walk in sync, creating a visual narrative of contrast between the present and the future. Steps on the platform are not merely a physical journey, but a portrayal of warmth, connection, and an invisible inheritance that continues amid the chaos.”

The visual representation in Rizki Maulana Saputra’s work reveals the complexity of social dynamics within urban spaces through simple yet powerful symbols. On a denotative level, the photograph captures the typical routine of city life: streams of commuters at a train station, individuals walking briskly in clean shirts and work shoes—illustrating the fast-paced, individualistic rhythm of modern urban existence.

However, when viewed connotatively, the image holds much deeper layers of meaning. A striking contrast is visible between office workers and the presence of underage children walking along the same platform. These children—who ideally belong in play areas or kindergartens—are instead seen accompanying their parents in the pursuit of daily income, dressed in worn clothing and makeshift sandals. This contrast is not only visual, but also symbolic, exposing the social inequality and structural disparity often hidden behind the dazzling narrative of city life.

Rizki Maulana Saputra’s statement during the *Warna-Warni Jakarta* exhibition—describing the small and large footsteps on the platform as a “narrative contrast between the present and the future”—demonstrates a narrative sensitivity in interpreting social realities. For Rizki, the journey along the train platform is not merely about physical movement; it reflects emotional connection, family bonds, and an invisible social legacy that continues to

unfold amid the noise and pace of urban life. This shows that the image does not stop at representing reality, but contains a critical interpretation of the social conditions that often unfold unnoticed.

This visual narrative illustrates that urban spaces such as train stations are not simply sites of physical mobility, but also arenas of social interaction, value reproduction, and the distribution of inequality. Here, the connotative meaning works effectively—highlighting how everyday symbols can reflect broader structural disparities. The photograph subtly but powerfully raises issues related to children's rights, poverty, and marginalization, presenting them as a form of social discourse capable of eliciting empathy and raising collective awareness.

From a research perspective, this work succeeds in framing the city not merely as an architectural environment, but as a social landscape saturated with burden and hope. The interaction between working adults and children in a commuter space signals the encounter of two generations along a shared line of struggle—yet burdened with vastly unequal conditions and opportunities. This photograph serves as a powerful reminder that behind the prevailing narratives of urban modernity, there exist countless small stories carrying the weight of survival and perseverance.

Not much different from the statement by Aulia, a visitor and admirer of the photo exhibition held on the 6th floor of the building:

“Even just by looking at these photographs, I can truly sense the reality of Jakarta. The works honestly represent actual life—more honest than words can express and harder to manipulate. Ultimately, they create a cultural awareness of how complex this city truly is.”

A wealth of insight can be gained simply by viewing the photo exhibition—ranging from learning how to appreciate others despite differences in social status, to realizing that both office workers and informal laborers are equally striving for the survival of themselves and their families. Ultimately, they are all in search of peace and harmony amid diversity.

Denotatively, the photographs depict typical urban scenes such as traffic congestion, densely populated settlements, public activities in open spaces, and symbols of modernity such as skyscrapers and city infrastructure. However, on a connotative level, these visual elements carry deeper meanings. For instance, the depiction of children playing in narrow alleyways suggests simple joy amidst spatial limitations, while murals on city walls reflect expressions of resistance and the identity of urban communities.

One photograph shows an online motorcycle taxi driver waiting for a passenger at a street corner. Literally, the image portrays a scene from everyday urban life. Connotatively, however, it highlights the nature of informal labor that characterizes the contemporary urban economy, along with the social inequalities that accompany it. Another photograph, depicting residents collaborating to clean a drainage canal, expresses a sense of community solidarity amid the limitations of public infrastructure.

Student Perspectives as the Creative Class

As Ismanto (2019) explains, urban photography is effective in capturing social dynamics and constructing narratives of urban life. Students, as photographers, act as producers of meaning—not merely documenting reality but also interpreting it. In interviews, the students stated that their works were not intended solely to display visual beauty, but to raise social awareness and invite the audience to reflect on the condition of the city. This indicates that students function not only as artists but also as cultural communicators who actively shape public discourse through their visual works.



Figure 4. Source: Muhammad Farhan Nasir, Friday, June 20, 2025. *Warna-Warni Jakarta* Photography Exhibition. 6th Floor Auditorium, Dian Nusantara University.

Audience Response to the Visual Works

The audience expressed that they felt emotionally connected to the visual narratives presented. Many visitors acknowledged that the photographs prompted reflection on Jakarta's condition as a city full of contradictions—vibrant and energetic, yet burdened with numerous problems. This reinforces the notion that student photography can serve as a communication bridge between personal experiences and the collective consciousness of urban residents.

Nabila, one of the visitors, shared her feelings when viewing the *Warna-Warni Jakarta* exhibition, stating:

“When I looked at the photos, I felt as if I were seeing Jakarta through someone else’s perspective, yet at the same time, there was something deeply familiar to my own experience. The photos felt honest and full of meaning, as if inviting me to reflect more deeply on life in this city—not just to enjoy its visual appearance.”

Audience responses to the *Warna-Warni Jakarta* exhibition reveal that the photographic works displayed possess a strong affective power, capable of forming emotional connections with viewers. Many visitors acknowledged that the visual narratives presented were not only aesthetically pleasing but also opened a space for contemplation regarding the complexity of Jakarta—a city full of paradoxes: on the one hand, vibrant and full of energy, and on the other, burdened by various structural and social challenges.

The statement by one of the visitors, Nabila, reinforces this sense of connection. She expressed that while viewing the photographs, she felt as though she were seeing Jakarta through someone else’s perspective, yet at the same time, there was something deeply personal and familiar with her own life experience. This indicates that student photography can create a visual experience that is both reflective and dialogical, offering audiences the possibility to perceive the city not merely as a physical space, but as an emotional and social landscape as well.

In the context of this research, such responses strengthen the position of photography as an effective medium of cultural communication. Visual works do not deliver messages in a one-directional manner; instead, they resonate with the audience’s lived experience, building a bridge between individual subjectivity and the collective consciousness of the city. These photographs function as connectors between personal memory and public narrative—transforming the exhibition into more than just an artistic showcase, but rather into a space of meaning-making, where social realities meet inner reflection.

Nabila's recognition of the honesty and depth of meaning within the photographs suggests that the audience does not engage with the works passively. A process of internalizing meaning takes place, wherein the visuals evoke emotion, provoke questions, and invite contemplation on urban life. This affirms that student photography, as presented in the exhibition, is not only capable of representing the city—but also of reintroducing it to the minds and emotions of its viewers in new and impactful ways.

Thus, it can be concluded that the visual works in this context successfully function as a meeting space between individual experience and social discourse. Responses such as Nabila's represent the exhibition's success in fostering empathy, awareness, and audience engagement with the realities of Jakarta—not merely as a city to inhabit, but as a meaningful space continually negotiated through visual language, narrative, and shared reflection.

As explained by Aji and Tajū (2022), visual materials in photography do not merely convey messages, but also build social power and contribute to the collective memory of the city.

Photography as a Medium of Social Critique

The findings of this study show that student photography is not merely an aesthetic endeavor, but also a tool for social critique. Through the use of symbols, visual composition, and subject selection, students are able to voice issues such as inequality, resistance, local identity, and community solidarity. In the context of an ever-evolving urban culture, these works become part of an inclusive and reflective city narrative. Urban photography not only documents city life but also serves as a medium of artistic expression and social criticism toward the dynamics of urban society (Astuti, 2016).

Kevin, one of the visitors, shared his thoughts after viewing the *Warna-Warni Jakarta* exhibition, stating:

"In my opinion, photography is not just about technical skills or capturing visually appealing images. More than that, it is a way to communicate messages that are difficult to express directly. Through images, I can highlight inequality and reveal sides of Jakarta that are often seen as ordinary, yet contain many underlying issues."

The findings of this study indicate that student photography should not be understood merely as an aesthetic visual product, but as a powerful medium of social critique. Through the exploration of symbols, thoughtful visual composition, and deliberate subject selection, students have succeeded in voicing a range of social issues embedded in the urban context—including economic inequality, resistance to cultural homogenization, the affirmation of local identity, and solidarity among marginalized communities. Within the ever-shifting dynamics of urban culture, these works function as part of an inclusive and reflective urban narrative—a narrative that portrays the city not only as a physical space, but also as a space of discourse and resistance.

In this context, urban photography becomes more than a tool for recording events; it transforms into a medium of artistic expression that encapsulates ideas, critiques, and social interpretations of the complexities of urban life (Astuti, 2016). The visuals produced by students go beyond documentation, offering alternative perspectives that challenge the dominant narratives surrounding the city.

This dimension is reinforced by a statement from Kevin, one of the exhibition visitors. For him, photography is not solely about technical skill or the pursuit of visually appealing compositions. More importantly, he views photography as a form of communication that conveys messages often difficult to express through words. Kevin's insight—that images can highlight inequality and reveal aspects of Jakarta often seen as ordinary yet contain profound social issues—demonstrates the effectiveness of visual work in presenting a critical reading of the city.

Such responses indicate that student photography has the capacity to create a contemplative space for audiences. It shows that urban problems do not always appear in overt forms, but are often hidden within everyday life and rendered invisible by routine. These visual representations then function as a mirror, reflecting back aspects of the city that have long been overlooked or deliberately omitted from the dominant discourse of modern and glamorous urban life.

Within this framework, photography emerges as a transformative tool of cultural communication. It does more than present images—it activates awareness. It opens up spaces for social dialogue, sharpens empathy, and encourages audiences to identify the social problems that surround them. The student works presented in this exhibition position themselves as part of a visual communication strategy that is not neutral, but takes a stance—a stance for social truth, diverse voices, and the continuity of local culture in the face of rapid urbanization.

By employing Barthes' semiotic approach, this study successfully reveals visual meaning on two levels: the surface and the deeper layers. The first layer depicts urban life in a literal sense, while the second contains cultural messages that illustrate how the younger generation interprets and responds to their social environment.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that students possess critical capacity in representing Jakarta's urban culture through photography. By exploring visual elements such as narrow alleys, public spaces, community interactions, street murals, and symbols of modernity, students convey a variety of social messages that reflect the realities of city life—including community solidarity, symbolic resistance, and critiques of social inequality and urban exclusion.

Roland Barthes' semiotic approach enables the interpretation of visual meaning on two levels: first, the denotative meaning as a literal representation of urban life; and second, the connotative meaning, which carries social, cultural, and ideological values. Thus, student photography serves not only as visual documentation, but also as an articulation of critical readings of Jakarta as a social space filled with symbolic tensions.

As part of the creative class, students emerge as cultural actors who produce counter-narratives to mainstream urban discourse. They are not mere observers; rather, they participate in creating inclusive cultural communication spaces through visual language. The findings also show that audiences respond emotionally and reflectively—acknowledging photography as a powerful medium that bridges personal experiences with collective urban awareness.

Therefore, the *Warna-Warni Jakarta* exhibition confirms that student photography is not merely an aesthetic medium, but an effective cultural communication instrument for voicing social conditions, reinforcing identity, and cultivating public consciousness within the framework of contemporary urban culture.

Recommendations

1. For Educational Institutions

Stronger support is needed for student-led visual expression activities that contain elements of social critique, such as photography exhibitions. These initiatives can enhance students' visual literacy, cultural awareness, and reflective thinking in an increasingly media-driven cultural landscape.

2. For Curators and Exhibition Organizers

It is recommended that curatorial approaches emphasize not only aesthetic value but also the social, historical, and cultural relevance of the exhibited works. This is essential in transforming art spaces into educational and dialogic platforms for urban communities.

3. For Future Researchers

Future studies are encouraged to expand this visual exploration using interdisciplinary approaches—including the integration of new media such as video, digital art, and extended reality (VR/AR) technologies. Such approaches may broaden the reach of urban cultural representation studies and engage wider audiences in increasingly complex digital communication landscapes.

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