

THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION: REPACKAGING THE ENGLISH AFTERNOON TEA TRADITION FOR MODERN TOURISM

Evin Maryam¹, Suci Budiwaty²
Gunadarma University, Jakarta, Indonesia^{1,2}

evinmaryam19@gmail.com

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Abstract

In the digital era, cultural traditions are often reinterpreted and commodified through modern marketing platforms. The English Afternoon Tea tradition, once associated with aristocratic leisure and social refinement, has been transformed into a lifestyle attraction promoted through tourism and culinary branding. This study investigates how the commodification of the English Afternoon Tea tradition is represented semiotically in Brigit's Bakery's Instagram content. It aims to reveal how the brand redefines traditional English cultural values to appeal to modern audiences and global tourism markets. Employing Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, this qualitative research analyzes selected visual and textual materials from Brigit's Bakery's official Instagram account. The analysis focuses on the triadic relations of signs—icon, index, and symbol—to uncover how cultural meanings of Afternoon Tea are transformed into attractive and marketable representations. The findings show that Brigit's Bakery recontextualizes Afternoon Tea through visual nostalgia, elegant minimalism, and symbolic reinterpretation. The process transforms a cultural ritual of tradition and intimacy into a consumable experience emphasizing aesthetics, modern comfort, and tourism appeal. The commodification of Afternoon Tea in Brigit's Bakery's digital marketing illustrates a negotiation between authenticity and consumerism. Through semiotic transformation, English classical culture is preserved in form but adapted in meaning to suit modern lifestyle and tourism narratives.

Keywords- Afternoon Tea, Brigit's Bakery, Cultural Commodification, English Heritage, Instagram, Modern Tourism, Peircean Semiotics

Introduction

The Afternoon Tea tradition represents one of the most enduring symbols of English cultural heritage. Emerging in the nineteenth century as a social ritual of elegance and leisure, it has evolved into a global cultural icon that embodies the values of refinement and British identity. In recent years, however, this tradition has been recontextualized beyond its domestic roots, transforming into a marketable cultural experience within global tourism and hospitality industries.

This shift exemplifies cultural commodification, a process through which cultural traditions are repackaged and marketed as lifestyle symbols for modern consumers (Bhandri & Maiti, 2021). The transformation of Afternoon Tea from an aristocratic ritual into a commercial attraction illustrates how cultural authenticity is negotiated within consumer culture. Rather than erasing traditional meaning, commodification reframes heritage as an adaptable narrative that merges nostalgia with aesthetic appeal (Rahimi & Hall, 2022). Recent research highlights that global heritage consumption increasingly relies on digital branding practices that convert cultural identity into a desirable commodity within international tourism environments (Camilleri, 2021).

In today's digital landscape, social media platforms such as Instagram play a crucial role



in circulating and reshaping cultural meanings. Visual storytelling enables brands to communicate heritage identity and engage audiences through emotionally appealing imagery (Chen, 2021). Evans (2024) notes that digital tourism narratives rely heavily on visual culture to construct and reinforce symbolic identities, making platforms like Instagram central to contemporary cultural representation. In this context, Brigit's Bakery—a London-based company known for its Afternoon Tea Bus Tour—provides a vivid example of how English classical traditions are rebranded into contemporary tourism products. Its Instagram content integrates elements of historical nostalgia, linguistic framing, and lifestyle imagery to promote a modernized experience of English culture (Maulana, 2023).

Peirce's semiotic theory provides a useful analytical framework for understanding how meaning operates within this process. His triadic model of the sign—icon, index, and symbol—offers a structured approach to examining how visual and linguistic signs reinterpret heritage for new audiences. As Kurniawan (2023) explains, semiotic analysis reveals how cultural identities are negotiated through representational strategies that balance authenticity and commercialization.

Although previous studies have explored the relationship between tourism, heritage, and media communication (Mariani & Borges, 2022; Yılmaz, 2022), limited research has examined how Afternoon Tea is reimagined on social media as a form of digital cultural commodification. Therefore, this study analyzes how Brigit's Bakery's Instagram content semiotically commodifies the Afternoon Tea tradition, revealing how English classical heritage is redefined for modern tourism audiences.

Literature Review

The study of culture and tourism in the digital era has undergone significant transformation, particularly as cultural heritage becomes a medium for global marketing and identity construction. The commodification of culture—the process through which cultural symbols are packaged, promoted, and consumed—has become central to understanding how traditions adapt to global audiences (Bhandri & Maiti, 2021). Recent studies emphasize that cultural commodification is not merely about economic exchange but also about symbolic transformation, where meanings are reframed to match contemporary aesthetics and societal values (Rahimi & Hall, 2022).

In the context of English heritage, Afternoon Tea exemplifies how a historical ritual can evolve into a global tourism symbol. Once associated with domestic and aristocratic practices, it now signifies British cultural sophistication and nostalgia. According to Yılmaz (2022), this shift—from a private social ritual to a marketable lifestyle commodity—illustrates how cultural heritage is communicated through visual and emotional narratives. Urry and Larsen (2022) similarly argue that contemporary tourism relies heavily on digital visuality, where cultural symbols are circulated, adapted, and reinterpreted through online media to shape global tourist imagination. Maulana (2023) adds that digital platforms allow heritage products to reach international audiences by transforming them into lifestyle-oriented brands that blend authenticity with modern consumer preferences.

The growing prominence of digital media in heritage commodification has encouraged researchers to examine its semiotic dimensions. Platforms such as Instagram operate as visual stages where culture is displayed, performed, and consumed. Chen (2021) explains that visual storytelling enables brands to construct participatory cultural experiences that emotionally connect audiences to heritage symbols. Mariani and Borges (2022) further demonstrate that digital representations employ semiotic strategies—such as color, composition, symbolic motifs, and thematic framing—to communicate authenticity and exclusivity in tourism branding.

Peirce's semiotic theory offers a critical analytical lens for interpreting how signs function within this digital context. His triadic model of the sign—comprising icon, index, and symbol—provides a systematic way to understand how meaning is produced and negotiated through representational processes (Kurniawan, 2023). Recent scholarship highlights the increasing use of Peircean semiotics to examine cultural identity construction and adaptation within tourism discourse (Stylianou-Lambert & Boukas, 2021). Through this framework, Afternoon Tea can be

viewed as a symbolic construct—an assemblage of signs that convey English refinement while being reimagined to suit global tourism expectations.

Despite the expanding body of work on digital tourism and semiotics, limited research has focused specifically on the semiotic commodification of English cultural traditions. Existing studies tend to explore broader themes of heritage branding without examining how individual rituals—such as Afternoon Tea—are reframed through digital media (Chen, 2021; Maulana, 2023). This study, therefore, contributes to current scholarship by analyzing how Brigit's Bakery's Instagram content semiotically commodifies the Afternoon Tea tradition, revealing how English classical heritage is reconstructed for modern tourism audiences.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design using semiotic analysis based on Charles Sanders Peirce's theoretical framework. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of meanings, symbols, and representations that emerge through cultural texts, particularly in visual digital environments. This approach aligns with recent qualitative research that examines meaning-making and visual representation within social media contexts (Gunawan & Wijaya, 2023; Hartono, 2022; Mariani & Borges, 2022). This method is particularly appropriate for understanding how cultural values and heritage are constructed and communicated through visual and textual forms on social media platforms.

The object of this study is the official Instagram account of Brigit's Bakery, a London-based company renowned for its Afternoon Tea Bus Tour. The account (@brigitsbakery) features various posts that integrate visual imagery, linguistic expressions, and symbolic cues to promote the Afternoon Tea experience. Data were collected from posts shared during the brand's active promotional period, focusing on visual and textual elements that represent cultural, aesthetic, and thematic aspects of English classical heritage.

Data were gathered using documentation and observation techniques. The researcher identified, downloaded, and categorized selected Instagram posts that contained visual and textual references to Afternoon Tea traditions. Each post was analyzed for its semiotic content—specifically the use of color, composition, linguistic expression, symbols, and cultural imagery. All data were organized and coded according to thematic categories, such as “heritage symbolism,” “modern reinterpretation,” and “tourism appeal,” following qualitative data organization strategies proposed by Creswell and Poth (2021).

The analysis follows Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the sign, which consists of three interrelated elements: icon, index, and symbol. Icons refer to signs that resemble their objects (e.g., visual imagery of tea sets or London landmarks); indexes indicate causal or contextual connections (e.g., linguistic expressions like “British tradition” or “heritage experience”); and symbols rely on cultural conventions (e.g., the use of English flags, colors, or tea-related idioms). By applying this model, the researcher interprets how each post constructs meaning and redefines Afternoon Tea as a commodified form of English heritage.

Following Rahimi and Hall (2022) and Kurniawan (2023), the interpretation process in Peircean semiotics involves three stages: representamen, object, and interpretant. Representamen refers to the sign itself (image, text, or symbol); the object denotes what the sign represents (English Afternoon Tea culture); and the interpretant is the meaning constructed by the viewer (the perception of Afternoon Tea as an elegant, marketable cultural experience). Through this analytical process, the study reveals how traditional symbols are recontextualized for modern tourism discourse.

To ensure validity and reliability, this study applied data triangulation by comparing visual and textual findings and validating them against prior studies on cultural semiotics and digital tourism (Chen, 2021; Stylianou-Lambert & Boukas, 2021). The researcher also maintained reflexivity throughout the interpretation process to minimize subjective bias, following the recommendations of Denzin and Lincoln (2022) for qualitative research credibility.

Results and Discussion

The analysis focused on selected Instagram posts from the official account of Brigit's Bakery (@brigitsbakery), which were purposively chosen to represent semiotic categories in Peirce's model of the sign: icon, index, and symbol. Each post was examined to reveal how visual and linguistic elements convey meanings related to the English Afternoon Tea tradition and how these signs reconstruct cultural heritage within a modern, touristic framework.

The findings are presented and discussed according to the three levels of semiotic interpretation.

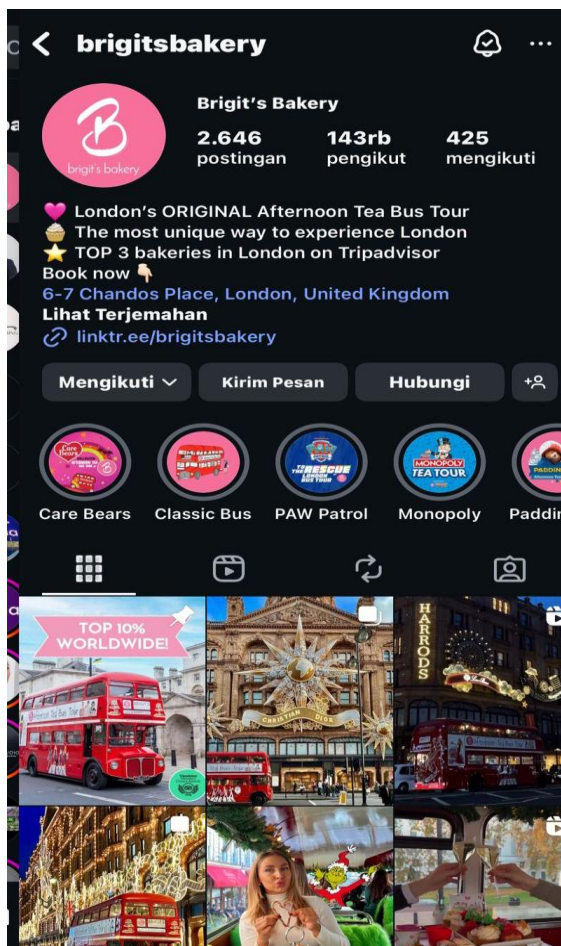


Figure 1. The official account of Brigit's Bakery (brigitsbakery)
Source: Instagram (@brigitsbakery).

Iconic Representation: Visual Resemblance to English Heritage

The iconic quality of the Afternoon Tea tradition is reflected through visual elements that closely mirror the atmosphere of a classic English tea setting. The image features a patterned teapot with ivy-like motifs and a floral teacup, both of which are strongly associated with traditional British tea culture. The captured gesture of pouring tea reinforces the familiarity of the ritual and highlights one of the most recognizable actions within the Afternoon Tea experience.

The presence of a tiered stand filled with pastries in soft pink tones adds to the sense of elegance and refinement typically linked to English hospitality. The coordinated pastel palette, along with the neatly arranged desserts, creates a scene that resembles the aesthetic harmony of classic Afternoon Tea presentations. These elements act as icons because they visually approximate real Afternoon Tea practices, enabling viewers to immediately connect the scene with English cultural heritage and traditional refinement.



Figure 2. Iconic Representation of English Elegance through Traditional Tea Imagery.
Source: Brigit's Bakery Instagram (@brigitsbakery).

Indexical Meaning: Contextual and Emotional Engagement

The indexical dimension emerges through visual cues that signal the spatial and experiential context of the Afternoon Tea Bus Tour. The scene is situated inside the moving bus, as revealed by the seating layout, interior decorations, and the window view overlooking the Thames River and central London. These elements function as indexes by directly pointing to the real environment in which the experience takes place, linking the cultural practice of Afternoon Tea with the sensory act of exploring the city.

The guest's relaxed posture and warm expression suggest emotional involvement, indicating that the experience extends beyond consuming tea and pastries to include enjoyment, sightseeing, and leisure. Through this blend of visual indicators and human engagement, audiences are positioned not merely as observers but as participants in a dynamic cultural experience. This indexical connection reinforces Afternoon Tea as a living tradition that adapts to contemporary travel habits and urban tourism settings.



Figure 3. Indexical Connection between Cultural Experience and Emotional Appeal.

Source: Brigit's Bakery Instagram (@brigitsbakery).

Symbolic Representation: Cultural Identity and Commodification

The symbolic dimension of Brigit's Bakery's branding is reflected in its strategic use of culturally recognizable icons that evoke a sense of English identity. The image of the red double-decker bus, a globally recognized emblem of London, functions as a symbolic marker that encapsulates the city's cultural identity. Its association with urban mobility, nostalgia, and British tradition positions the bus as more than a mode of transport—it becomes a cultural commodity embedded within the visual narrative of the Afternoon Tea experience.

The prominent placement of Paddington Bear on the bus façade further amplifies this symbolic meaning. As a character rooted in British children's literature, Paddington represents warmth, friendliness, and the charm of British cultural storytelling. His appearance within the commercial branding of the Afternoon Tea Bus Tour transforms a literary icon into a marketable visual asset. Through this process, Paddington ceases to function solely as a fictional character and instead becomes a symbolic mediator between English cultural memory and contemporary tourism.

By integrating these symbolic elements into a cohesive visual composition, Brigit's Bakery effectively recontextualizes Englishness as both a cultural heritage and a lifestyle product. The symbols displayed—such as the red bus, Paddington imagery, and branded signage—work collectively to encode messages of nostalgia, authenticity, and cultural prestige. In doing so, the brand transforms traditional markers of British identity into consumable aesthetic experiences that appeal to local and international audiences alike.



Figure 4. Symbolic Recontextualization of English Identity through Digital Branding.
Source: Brigit's Bakery Instagram (@brigitsbakery).

The three figures collectively demonstrate how Brigit's Bakery's Instagram account operates as a site of cultural reinterpretation, where English heritage is visually reshaped for contemporary tourism. Through iconic representations, the brand retains recognizable elements of the Afternoon Tea ritual—such as traditional tea sets, pastries, and aesthetic visual cues that resemble classical English refinement. Indexical signs further strengthen the experiential dimension of the tradition by linking cultural practices to the spatial context of London and the emotional engagement of visitors. Meanwhile, symbolic elements—such as the use of Paddington Bear, red double-decker buses, and other British cultural motifs—transform heritage into a marketable identity within the digital space.

These findings align with Rahimi and Hall (2022), who argue that digital tourism media recontextualize cultural heritage through emotional resonance and visual storytelling. Similarly, Kurniawan (2023) observes that online representations of tradition increasingly shift from preservation toward creative reinterpretation to accommodate global audience expectations. Dias and Patuleia (2023) further argue that digital platforms reconstruct heritage narratives through layered visual and symbolic strategies, demonstrating how cultural identity is continuously reshaped within mediated tourism environments.

This study extends these discussions by illustrating how Brigit's Bakery negotiates authenticity through semiotic layering. Icons preserve familiarity, indexes create experiential proximity, and symbols attach cultural prestige to the brand's digital identity. Rather than diminishing cultural authenticity, these layers work collectively to reposition English heritage as a consumable aesthetic experience. The findings demonstrate that commodification within digital media does not necessarily erase tradition; instead, it situates heritage within new commercial and lifestyle frameworks that appeal to diverse audiences.

Following Peirce's conceptualization of the representamen-object-interpretant relationship, meaning in these posts emerges through the interaction between visual signs, the cultural object they reference, and the audience's interpretation. Through this process, Instagram becomes a semiotic arena where cultural identity, commercial branding, and creative reimagination intersect.

However, this study is limited to semiotic observations within a single Instagram account and does not examine audience responses or user-generated interpretations. Future research may incorporate comparative analyses across multiple platforms or investigate audience engagement patterns to deepen the understanding of how cultural commodification unfolds within digital tourism media.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Brigit's Bakery's Instagram content reinterprets the English Afternoon Tea tradition through layered semiotic processes involving iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs. Iconic representations preserve cultural familiarity by visually mirroring traditional tea sets and classical English aesthetics, while indexical cues situate the experience within London's touristic landscape and evoke emotional engagement. Symbolic elements—such as the use of Paddington imagery, red double-decker buses, and British cultural motifs—further reconstruct heritage as a branded and consumable identity in the digital sphere.

The findings demonstrate that cultural commodification on social media does not necessarily diminish authenticity. Instead, digital platforms enable heritage to adapt through negotiated meaning, aligning traditional values with contemporary visual and lifestyle expectations. Through Peirce's semiotic framework, this study highlights how Brigit's Bakery transforms Afternoon Tea into an interpretive and affective experience, illustrating the role of social media as a semiotic arena where culture, identity, and tourism are continuously redefined.

In a broader perspective, this research contributes to the understanding of how traditional cultural practices can remain relevant within rapidly evolving digital environments. Future studies may expand this analysis by examining audience reception, comparing branding strategies across different cultural or touristic products, or exploring the long-term implications of digital representation on the sustainability of cultural heritage.

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