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## **Symbolic Exchange and Brand Construction: Business Communication in Garut Leather's Product Design**

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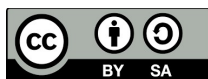
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### **ABSTRACT**

Garut's leather industry has experienced significant growth in response to increasing consumer demand for high-quality local products. Despite this development, previous studies have largely focused on production techniques and market performance, leaving limited attention to how symbolic communication embedded in product design contributes to brand identity construction. Addressing this gap, this study examines how business communication manifested through functional, aesthetic, and innovative design elements shapes consumer perceptions of Garut leather products. The research explores the following problem: how do symbolic meanings embedded in product design contribute to the development of brand identity and competitiveness among Garut's micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs)? Employing a qualitative content analysis, the study integrates market observations, consumer feedback analysis, and in-depth interviews with local producers. Data were processed through iterative coding using NVivo to identify dominant themes related to symbolic values and consumer interpretation. The findings reveal that design innovations such as RFID-blocking technology, enhanced compartment organization, and environmentally friendly materials not only serve functional purposes but also communicate modernity, trust, and craftsmanship. These symbolic attributes strengthen consumer-brand relationships and elevate market competitiveness. The study concludes that communicative product design constitutes a vital strategy for MSMEs to position cultural products effectively in both domestic and global markets.

**Keywords:** Business Communication; Garut Leather Product Design; Symbolic Exchange

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### **ABSTRAK**

*Industri kulit Garut menunjukkan perkembangan signifikan seiring meningkatnya permintaan terhadap produk lokal berkualitas. Meskipun demikian, sebagian besar studi terdahulu masih berfokus pada produksi dan*

*pemasaran, sehingga belum banyak menelaah bagaimana nilai simbolik dalam desain produk berperan dalam membangun identitas merek. Mengisi gap tersebut, penelitian ini memfokuskan pada permasalahan mengenai bagaimana elemen desain yang meliputi fungsionalitas, estetika, dan inovasi yang berfungsi sebagai bentuk komunikasi bisnis yang membentuk persepsi konsumen terhadap produk kulit Garut. Penelitian ini menggunakan tipe penelitian kualitatif dengan metode qualitative content analysis dan berlokasi pada sentra UMKM kulit di Kabupaten Garut. Data diperoleh melalui observasi pasar, analisis umpan balik konsumen, dan wawancara mendalam dengan produsen lokal. Analisis data dilakukan melalui tahap pengkodean terbuka, aksial, dan selektif dengan bantuan NVivo untuk mengidentifikasi tema-tema utama terkait nilai simbolik dalam desain. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya kebaruan berupa pemaknaan simbolik pada fitur desain seperti teknologi RFID-blocking, pengaturan kompartemen yang lebih terstruktur, serta penggunaan material ramah lingkungan yang merepresentasikan modernitas, kepercayaan, dan keterampilan tangan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa desain yang komunikatif menjadi strategi penting bagi UMKM untuk memperkuat identitas merek dan meningkatkan daya saing pada pasar domestik maupun global.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Desain Produk Kulit Garut; Komunikasi Bisnis; Pertukaran Simbolik*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary markets, products no longer compete solely through material quality or price but through the meanings they communicate. Design has thus evolved into a strategic medium of business communication, enabling firms to convey values, identity, and credibility to increasingly meaning-oriented consumers. This shift poses both challenges and opportunities for traditional craft industries, particularly micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), whose competitiveness depends on their capacity to translate cultural heritage into contemporary brand narratives. The leather craft industry in Garut, especially in the Sukaregang district, exemplifies this tension between inherited craftsmanship and modern market demands.

Garut's leather artisans are widely recognized for their specialized skills and intergenerational knowledge, which together constitute a strong form of cultural capital embedded within their products (Suryanto, 2021). Despite this asset, Garut leather goods have achieved limited penetration in global and higher-value markets. One key constraint lies in the weak integration of traditional craftsmanship with contemporary design approaches that address evolving consumer expectations. Global consumption trends increasingly favor products that balance authenticity with enhanced functionality, emotional resonance, and modern aesthetics (McDonagh & Thomas, 2022; Chen, 2020). This transformation highlights the need for design strategies that bridge artisanal heritage with contemporary symbolic and functional value creation.

A substantial body of literature has examined innovation and branding as drivers of competitiveness in small and medium-sized enterprises. Sansome, Wilkie, and Conduit (2024) emphasize brand transparency - defined by proactivity, clarity, and objectivity - as a critical factor shaping consumer trust and brand evaluation. Similarly, Shafi et al. (2022) and Cheba et al. (2020) identify innovation and brand development as key determinants of SME performance and long-term sustainability. Within cultural and creative industries, cultural resources are increasingly recognized as strategic assets rather than purely symbolic attributes. Chishty and Sayari (2024) demonstrate that SMEs frequently mobilize cultural capital to enhance legitimacy and market positioning, reinforcing the instrumental role of cultural value in entrepreneurial practice.

Recent scholarship on contemporary design further extends this discussion by highlighting how meaning is embedded within products. Su et al. (2023) argue that design encompasses not only aesthetics but also usability, sustainability, and emotional value, thereby deepening symbolic interpretation. Complementing this view, Chen et al. (2023) conceptualize entrepreneurial growth within digital business ecosystems as a dynamic interaction between internal knowledge capabilities and external technological, cultural, and market networks. Together, these perspectives suggest that innovation, cultural value, and symbolic meaning are interdependent elements in contemporary product and brand development.

Despite these insights, limited research has examined product design as a simultaneous process of symbolic exchange and brand construction. Existing studies often treat innovation and branding as parallel domains, resulting in fragmented understandings of how visual, material, and functional attributes communicate identity and values. This gap is particularly evident in traditional craft industries, where symbolic value is central to product appeal yet frequently underarticulated in design practice. Field observations in Garut indicate that many artisans continue to rely on conventional forms with minimal functional innovation and weak brand narratives, constraining symbolic communication and market competitiveness.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how product design operates as a mechanism of symbolic exchange within Garut's leather MSMEs. Focusing on wallets as everyday artefacts of identity expression, the study analyzes how innovations such as RFID-blocking technology and modular compartments function not only as technical improvements but also as symbolic carriers of security, personalization, trust, and modernity. By situating these design choices within broader theories of symbolic meaning, innovation, and branding, this research provides a conceptual foundation for the subsequent Literature Review, which elaborates the theoretical intersections between symbolic exchange, product design, and brand construction.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study examines how symbolic and functional values embedded in Garut leather product design shape consumer perceptions in digital marketplaces. Although Garut leather products possess strong cultural and economic significance, their role as communicative artefacts conveying identity, craftsmanship, and modernity remains insufficiently explored from the standpoint of consumer interpretation. Given the growing mediation of consumer–brand interactions by online platforms, consumer reviews provide a naturalistic corpus in which symbolic meanings embedded in design features emerge without researcher intervention. Accordingly, this study focuses on aesthetic, material, and technological design elements as strategic carriers of symbolic value within MSME business communication.

A qualitative content analysis approach was employed, following methodological principles outlined in *The Handbook of Qualitative and Quantitative Content Analysis* (Schneijderberg, Wiczorek, & Steinhardt, 2024). The dataset comprises 150 purposively selected consumer reviews of Garut leather wallets collected from Tokopedia. Inclusion criteria required a minimum of fifteen words and explicit references to design features, material quality, functionality, or overall product evaluation.

Data analysis adhered to the systematic procedures proposed by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2023). All reviews were imported into NVivo, followed by iterative open coding through repeated close readings. Codes were inductively consolidated into five thematic categories: design and aesthetics, functionality, material quality, brand symbolism and identity, and emotional experience. NVivo analytical tools were used to examine thematic relationships. Intercoder reliability was established through double coding of 25% of the dataset, yielding an agreement rate of 86%. A cross-product comparison was conducted to ensure analytical robustness across brands and models within Garut's MSMEs.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Research Results**

Consumer feedback on Garut leather products, particularly wallets, provides critical insights into consumer perceptions of design, material quality, functionality, and symbolic value. Analysis of customer reviews from Tokopedia shows that consumers evaluate products holistically, integrating assessments of craftsmanship, usability, and

identity-related meanings. Consistent with Sulaiman et al. (2024), who emphasize the importance of market-driven feedback under competitive turbulence, consumer reviews function as a key empirical source for understanding market responsiveness in the Garut leather industry. User-generated reviews play a strategic role in product innovation by revealing authentic user experiences that expose both strengths and limitations of existing designs. Positive feedback commonly highlights durability, craftsmanship, and aesthetic appeal, while negative evaluations point to issues such as inconsistent stitching, unsuitable sizing, and inadequate packaging. These patterns indicate that consumer evaluation is shaped by material consistency, production techniques, responsiveness to contemporary lifestyle needs, and alignment with modern symbolic cues. When systematically incorporated into production processes, such feedback supports iterative improvement and competitive advantage.

**Table 1. Keyword Frequency and Symbolic Meaning**

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Frequency No</b>	<b>Meaning in Symbolic Context</b>
<b>Design</b>	45	Visual appeal, structure, first impression
<b>Color</b>	38	Elegance, status, symbolic style
<b>Small</b>	31	Critique of functionality, limited capacity
<b>Thin</b>	29	Fragility, minimalism, sometimes lack of value
<b>Good</b>	42	General praise, trust in quality
<b>Elegant</b>	35	Classiness, modern masculinity
<b>Complete</b>	30	Versatility, practical features
<b>Expensive</b>	28	Quality perception, brand image
<b>Card</b>	33	Utility, daily practicality
<b>Practical</b>	26	Ease of use, functional symbol
<b>Neat</b>	24	Craftsmanship, visual order

Source: Author's NVivo analysis of 150 Tokopedia customer reviews (2025)

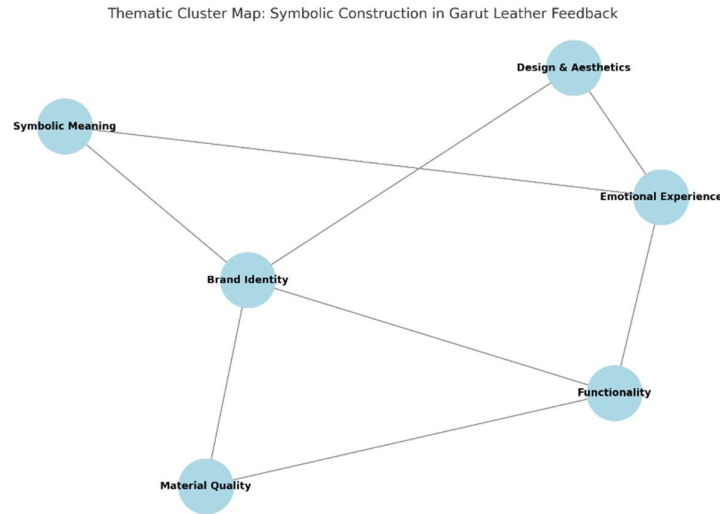
Beyond evaluation, reviews function as symbolic texts that reflect collective meanings and identity construction (Ramadhani, Riyantini, Emiliana, & Hervira, 2023; Ramadhan, Poerana, & Lubis, 2023). These symbolic narratives contribute to brand identity formation, reinforcing Soehardjo and Mukaromah's (2023) argument on symbolic competencies in commercial communication. As noted by Gemilang and Putri (2024), effective digital communication enables firms to translate symbolic consumer

sentiments into strategic branding initiatives, strengthening brand positioning and long-term consumer loyalty. Table 1 presents the frequency of prominent keywords alongside their interpreted symbolic meanings. The keywords such as “design,” “elegant,” and “good” dominate consumer feedback, illustrating the core dimensions that shape consumer interpretations of Garut leather wallets. This quantitative foundation aids in prioritizing elements requiring refinement in product development.



**Figure 1. Word Cloud from Consumer Feedback on Garut Leather Wallets**  
Source: Author's NVivo analysis of 150 Tokopedia customer reviews (2025)

Figure 1, *Word Cloud from Consumer Feedback on Garut Leather Wallets*, visually reinforces this pattern by highlighting the dominance of terms associated with aesthetic quality, material perception, and practical features. This visualization provides an intuitive overview of sentiment concentration across the dataset. Figure 2, *Symbolic Construction in Garut Leather Feedback*, presents the interpretative framework derived from the qualitative coding process. It illustrates how consumers associate Garut leather wallets with values such as craftsmanship heritage, lifestyle identity, and perceived social status. These symbolic associations deepen understanding beyond frequency counts, demonstrating nuanced consumer meanings that shape brand loyalty and influence purchasing decisions.



**Figure 2. Symbolic Construction in Garut Leather Feedback**

Source: Author's NVivo analysis of 150 Tokopedia customer reviews (2025)

Following the tabulated data, Figure 1. Word Cloud from Consumer Feedback on Garut Leather Wallets (Source: Author's NVivo analysis of 150 Tokopedia customer reviews, 2025) visually represents the prominence of these keywords. The word cloud corroborates the frequency data by highlighting consumer emphasis on aspects such as "elegant design," "soft leather," and "compact size," thereby offering an intuitive grasp of consumer sentiment patterns. Furthering the analysis, Figure 2. Symbolic Construction in Garut Leather Feedback (Source: Author's NVivo analysis of 150 customer reviews from Tokopedia, 2025) illustrates the qualitative, interpretative framework derived from the data. This symbolic construction unveils how consumers associate Garut leather wallets with values such as craftsmanship heritage, social status, and lifestyle identity. Such interpretations deepen understanding beyond mere frequency counts, showing nuanced consumer meanings that influence brand loyalty and preference.

## **Discussion**

The findings demonstrate that consumer evaluations of Garut leather wallets converge around three interrelated dimensions - design, leather quality, and functionality - thereby offering a theoretically integrated view of how symbolic and material values co-constitute product meaning. Design-related reviews foreground aesthetics, compartment structure, colour, and stylistic coherence, indicating that consumers interpret design simultaneously as a semiotic system and a utilitarian interface. Leather quality emerges

as a second dimension, where sensory attributes such as softness and texture are praised, while inconsistencies in thickness and rigidity signal disruptions in perceived craftsmanship. Functionality forms the third dimension, encompassing internal organization, card capacity, and closure mechanisms that directly influence satisfaction. Together, these findings extend the symbolic narratives identified by Ramadhani et al. (2023) and Ramadhan et al. (2023) by empirically demonstrating how semiotic interpretation is inseparable from material performance in consumer meaning-making.

Theoretically, this study contributes by positioning product design as a mediating structure between symbolic communication and functional evaluation. The prominence of design reflects heightened exposure to global aesthetic norms that demand coherence between appearance and usability (Irawan, Abdillah, & Taryanto, 2022). Concerns over material quality substantiate prior claims that symbolic brand value is contingent upon upstream production processes such as tanning effectiveness and quality control (Ayele et al., 2021; Kurniawan et al., 2021; Donkor & Ossei-Gerning, 2023). Functional expectations, shaped by digitalization and evolving financial practices, further illustrate how everyday objects are assessed within contemporary lifestyle logics (Audretsch et al., 2023; Hadiwijaya et al., 2023). Symbolic meaning thus emerges through visual and rhetorical cues embedded in form, colour, and structure, reinforcing classic and contemporary perspectives on visual semiotics in design (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Amalia et al., 2025; Abeer, 2025).

By integrating these dimensions, the study advances branding and business communication theory by showing that symbolic exchange in craft-based products is not abstract or detached from functionality but grounded in consumers' lived experiences. Consumer narratives actively participate in identity construction and brand meaning formation (Soehardjo & Mukaromah, 2023; Gemilang & Putri, 2024), while also shaping trust and electronic word-of-mouth dynamics (Hendrayana, 2024). In comparison with prior studies on visual rhetoric (Birdsell, Tatsuta, & Nakamura, 2022), material performance (Ayele et al., 2021), and functional organization (Stephenie & Prahutama, 2020; Susilo et al., 2020; Rifa Ramadhani et al., 2023), this research contributes a context-specific yet theoretically generalizable insight into how symbolic design operates within MSME craft industries. The limited salience of sustainability in consumer narratives -

despite its prominence in global discourse (Donkor & Ossei-Gerning, 2023; Fachria et al., 2020; Nana Rukmana et al., 2022; Barrera Torres et al., 2025) - further refines theoretical assumptions about value hierarchies in emerging-market consumption. Overall, these findings substantiate the role of market-driven symbolic communication as a central mechanism of brand construction (Sulaiman et al., 2024).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that consumer evaluations of Garut leather wallets are shaped by the integrated interplay of design, material quality, and functionality, revealing that symbolic meaning and material performance are inseparable in product interpretation. By reconceptualizing product design as a mediating mechanism between symbolic communication and functional evaluation, this research advances branding and business communication theory in craft-based MSMEs. The findings show how consumer narratives actively co-construct brand meaning in digital marketplaces. Although limited to a single product category and platform, the study opens pathways for comparative and longitudinal research on symbolic design and MSME competitiveness in cultural industries.

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