



Interpreting Psychiatrist's Book Cover Design as Personal Branding Through Barthes' Semiotics

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Abstract

Book cover design is a critical element of visual communication that shapes how readers perceive both the content and the identity of an author. Within the mental health profession, the visual language of a book cover extends beyond aesthetics it carries personal values and reflects the professional character of its creator. This study analyzes the visual signs on the cover of *Buku Seorang Wanita yang Ingin Menjadi Pohon Semangka di Kehidupan Berikutnya*, a book by psychiatrist dr. Andreas Kurniawan, Sp.KJ, and interprets their semiotic meaning through Roland Barthes' theoretical framework. A qualitative-descriptive semiotic approach was adopted, applying Barthes' three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Analysis focused on visual elements including color palette, illustration, typography, and compositional layout. The findings reveal that the combination of soft green tones, a female figure surrounded by natural symbols, and sans-serif typography collectively project a visual impression that is calm, reflective, and humanist. At the mythological level, the design constructs ideological narratives centered on emotional healing, inner strength, and the psychiatrist's identity as an empathetic, approachable figure. Taken together, the visual communication design of this book cover plays a strategic role in reinforcing the professional personal branding of a mental health practitioner.

Keywords: *visual communication design, semiotics, personal branding, mental health, psychiatrist*

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1. Introduction

Before readers ever open a book, the cover is what greets them first and that initial encounter carries more weight than it might seem. The visual and textual elements that make up a cover must therefore be composed with genuine intentionality (Genette, 1997). As the reader's first point of visual contact, a cover has the quiet power to shape interest and draw someone in before a single page is turned (Prasetyo & Hapsari, 2021). Gbadamosi (2022) takes this further, arguing that the cover is where first impressions of an author's credibility and character are formed in the audience's mind. Long before readers engage with the words inside, they are already receiving and processing visual cues through color, illustration, symbol, and typography each of which carries symbolic weight that quietly steers interpretation before the text itself begins (Mawaidi, 2024).

Book cover design does not merely serve as an eye-catching visual element; it functions as a medium of communication that conveys the identity, values, and

image of the author. A cover operates as a sign system that transmits meaning through visual composition, color, and typography, making it part of the semiotic process in message construction (Barthes, 1977; Rose, 2016). In the context of mental health professions, visual representation on a book cover carries an additional function as a form of self-representation, aligning with Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management through social symbols. These visual representations can influence the construction of professional personal branding because visual elements contribute to how the public perceives competence and professional identity (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Labrecque et al., 2011).

Within the field of visual communication design, a book cover is a complex space for the articulation of meaning. It simultaneously fulfills informative, persuasive, symbolic, and differentiating functions. Haslam (2019) underscores that book design including covers and jackets is constructed through decisions about format, typographic hierarchy, visual imagery, and the organization of spatial fields, all of which must

align with the nature of the content. Accordingly, the cover operates as a sign system that can be read semiotically: each visual choice is not neutral but carries layered meaning produced through cultural codes and the reader's visual experience.

This phenomenon is clearly evident on the cover *Buku Seorang Wanita yang Ingin Menjadi Pohon Semangka di Kehidupan Berikutnya*, authored by psychiatrist dr. Andreas Kurniawan, Sp.KJ. The cover presents a distinctive visual through an illustration of a female figure, natural elements, and a soft, pastel color palette that together evoke a calm, reflective atmosphere. Within Barthes' semiotic framework, visual signs can be analyzed through three layers of meaning denotation, connotation, and myth each of which reflects cultural values, ideology, and deeper representations of identity (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2017). This aligns with personal branding scholarship, which affirms that professional identity is built through the consistent management of narrative and visual representation (Labrecque et al., 2011; Gorbatov et al., 2018).

Existing scholarship on book covers has largely focused on marketing functions, legibility, or the visual-genre relationship, while personal branding research has been predominantly oriented toward digital media and online professional profiles. Few studies have brought together a semiotic reading of book covers and the construction of professional personal branding in the mental health field. This gap provides the central rationale for the present study. Its novelty lies in the effort to read the book cover as a design medium that simultaneously functions as an instrument of professional identity representation for a psychiatrist.

Through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotics, this study explores how the book cover produces meaning and how that meaning contributes to the formation of the public identity of a psychiatrist in an era of visual culture. The study has three primary objectives: (1) to analyze the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings of the book cover's visual elements using Barthes' semiotic theory; (2) to identify the representations of professional identity and values reflected through symbols, illustrations, color, and typography on the book cover; and (3) to explain the role of book cover design as a personal branding strategy for a psychiatrist in constructing a professional image in the public sphere.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method. The research object is the cover of *Sampul Buku Seorang Wanita yang Ingin Menjadi Pohon Semangka di Kehidupan Berikutnya*, authored by dr. Andreas

Kurniawan, Sp.KJ (Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2024). A qualitative approach was selected because the study aims to understand the symbolic and ideological meanings embedded in visual signs rather than to measure variables numerically (Creswell, 2014).

Primary data were gathered through close, systematic observation of the book cover's visual elements, while secondary data were collected through a literature review drawing from journals, textbooks on visual communication design, semiotics, and personal branding. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and adequate theoretical referencing.

The units of analysis encompass six visual components: (1) the central figure; (2) supporting objects; (3) spatial background; (4) color palette; (5) typography; and (6) compositional relationships between elements. Analysis was conducted in three stages. The first stage denotation involves describing all visual elements literally and objectively. The second stage connotation involves interpreting symbolic meaning based on visual-cultural context, color psychology, and the character of the book cover medium. The third stage myth involves formulating the dominant ideology or narrative that is naturalized by the overall visual composition.

To maintain analytical traceability, the researcher constructed a sign-reading matrix mapping visual elements, literal descriptions, symbolic interpretations, and their implications for the formation of professional image. The validity of interpretation was upheld through sufficient theoretical referencing, repeated examination of the object, and consistency between visual findings and the conceptual frameworks of semiotics and personal branding.

3. Results and Discussions

The book cover features an illustration of a woman sitting comfortably on an orange sofa, holding a slice of watermelon. Behind her, a window reveals a view of sunflowers and a butterfly in flight. To the left is a small shelf with a potted plant and a Maneki-Neko figurine; to the right stands a wheelchair. The dominant colors are soft pastels green, orange, and yellow creating a warm, tranquil atmosphere. Overall, the visual is simple yet soothing and positive in character.










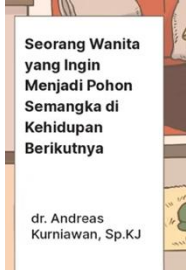
Figure 1. Cover of the Book *A Woman Who Wants to Become a Watermelon Tree in Her Next Life* (Sumber: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2024)

3.1 Denotative Analysis

At the denotative level, analysis identifies each visual element in a literal, non-interpretive way without imposing psychological or ideological weight. The researcher inventories the visible elements and their positions within the composition. The results of the denotative analysis of each visual element are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Denotative Analysis of Visual Elements on the Book Cover

Visual Element	Denotative Meaning
<p>Female Figure</p> 	<p>A young woman sitting casually on an orange sofa, wearing simple clothing (a soft yellow loose top, dark brown skirt, white socks). Her hair is down, her face calm with a gentle smile, and she holds a slice of watermelon. She is the compositional focal point.</p>
<p>Watermelon</p> 	<p>A slice of watermelon with red flesh, a green rind, and visible bite marks. Its color contrasts with the overall soft palette, making it a visually prominent element.</p>
<p>Room Background</p> 	<p>A simple interior: a sofa, window, potted plant, and a soft-colored wall. A shelf holds a framed photo of three individuals, a houseplant, and a Maneki-Neko figurine. Sunflowers are visible outside the window.</p>
<p>Sunflower & Butterfly</p> 	<p>A large sunflower outside the window with green grass, and a yellow butterfly</p>

Visual Element	Denotative Meaning
	<p>flying nearby, creating a bright, life-affirming atmosphere.</p>
<p>Dominant Colors</p> 	<p>Pastel and warm tones prevail: soft green, gentle orange, pale yellow, and white. There are no dark or extreme contrasting colors.</p>
<p>Wheelchair</p> 	<p>A wheelchair is positioned to the right of the scene as an everyday object within the space, suggesting a physical limitation of the figure.</p>
<p>Title Typography</p> 	<p>Bold sans-serif font for 'A Woman Who Wants to Become a Watermelon Tree in Her Next Life' on a white rectangular background with a thin light-grey border. The author's name appears in regular weight below the title.</p>

Source: *Researchers' Analysis* (2026)

The denotative meaning of this illustration depicts a woman sitting comfortably in a room while enjoying a piece of watermelon, against a warm, domestic backdrop. At this stage, analysis purely describes what is physically present on the surface of the visual without emotional or symbolic association. Denotatively, the cover presents a simple, intimate domestic scene. Notably, there are no direct medical symbols—no stethoscope, clinical setting, or medical equipment. The deliberate absence of such elements is itself a significant design decision, as the visual emphasis is redirected toward emotional experience and inner atmosphere.

3.2 Connotative Analysis

At the connotative level, each visual element carries deeper symbolic meaning, conveying psychological states and emotional values. The color green is connotatively associated with harmony, balance, and healing (Swasty & Wirania, 2024; Yang, 2022). The

composition of a female figure within a tranquil setting is consistently used in design to evoke introspective and contemplative impressions. A minimalist compositional approach suggests calm, simplicity, and focus on internal dimensions (Ferguson, 2023; Albert et al., 2020). The connotative analysis of each visual element is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Connotative Analysis of Visual Elements on the Book Cover

Visual Element	Connotative / Symbolic Meaning
Woman with Calm Expression	Symbolizes someone who has reached a state of self-acceptance, representing a process of emotional healing. The calm facial expression and relaxed gesture connote well-being and positive mental health (Fredrickson, 2001). The choice of a female figure may also be read as representing gentleness and vulnerability accepted with grace.
Watermelon	As a fresh, vibrant, brightly colored fruit, the watermelon becomes a symbol of life, self-reward, and the capacity to enjoy simple pleasures after a period of difficulty. It can be understood as a metaphor for finding joy in small things amid life's complexity. Its red interior contrasts with the overall pastel palette, making it a natural focal point.
Orange Sofa	The color orange connotes warmth and optimism. The sofa represents a comfort zone—a safe, nurturing space in which to rest and find peace.
Sunflower	The sunflower, which always grows toward the light, is a universal symbol of hope and optimism (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996).
Butterfly	A symbol of transformation and inner metamorphosis—the journey toward a better version of oneself.
Wheelchair	Represents physical limitation alongside the strength to continue living and adapting. Within the overall composition, where the central figure appears calm and content, the wheelchair reinforces the message of resilience and the capacity to find peace in the face of adversity.
Green Color & Plants	Balance, tranquility, and emotional healing reinforcing the atmosphere of a healing environment.
Maneki-Neko Figurine	A symbol of good fortune and positive energy in Japanese culture. Its presence can be read as an expression of hope and optimism for a better future.
Sans-Serif	Simplicity, rationality, and modernity;

Visual Element	Connotative / Symbolic Meaning
Typography	clear and professional communication free of dramatization.
White Background (Title)	Calm, clarity, and space for reflection—symbolizing a safe space for readers to engage with their emotions without pressure.

Source: *Researchers' Analysis (2026)*

The cover's visual composition reflects a deliberate design strategy that avoids excessive dramatization. Rather than depicting intense emotional expression, the illustration is built through a soft, measured, and intimate visual approach. This is particularly relevant in the context of a book on mental health, as it provides a calming visual experience from the reader's first encounter. From a visual communication design perspective, this constitutes an alignment between message, medium, and audience the cover does not force readers into a heavy emotional narrative but instead invites them through an atmosphere of safety, reflection, and support (Haslam, 2019; Rose, 2016). The use of a pastel palette amplifies this effect, with the dominance of green, yellow, and orange forming a warm, friendly, and reassuring visual harmony. Color here functions not merely as surface aesthetics but as an affective device that shapes reader perception of the character of a work. On this cover, color is directed not toward building intensity or tension but toward reducing emotional distance between the book and its prospective reader, thereby reinforcing associations with safety, balance, and psychological comfort (Swasty & Wirania, 2024; Wong, 1993). The sans-serif typography of the title underscores a clean, accessible visual communication strategy. Unlike decorative typefaces that tend toward formality or excessive artistry, sans-serif typography here supports high legibility while conveying a contemporary sensibility. In the context of professional personal branding, legibility is significant because it reflects clarity of message, communicative efficiency, and design maturity. Typography therefore serves not only as a vehicle for verbal information but also as a marker of a professional, relevant, and reader-centric visual identity (Haslam, 2019; Ambrose & Harris, 2011).

3.3 Mythological Analysis

In Roland Barthes' (1977) theory, myth is a second-order sign system in which connotative meaning evolves into ideology or socially accepted belief. Myth is not falsehood; rather, it shapes how society perceives a given subject through visual signs. The book cover under analysis constructs four primary myths.

Myth of Quiet, Natural Healing

The visual of a woman sitting peacefully while enjoying a watermelon, surrounded by green tones and

natural elements, constructs an ideological narrative that emotional healing can be approached gently, calmly, and organically. Modern society often understands mental healing as a complex, clinical process. Yet through this visual, the myth presented is that psychological balance can begin with simple gestures, enjoying silence, natural beauty, and ordinary moments. The ideological implication is that mental health is not merely a clinical matter but a profoundly human process, accessible in the texture of everyday life.

Myth of Stillness as Strength

Popular culture often depicts the 'strong person' as active, ambitious, and productive. This cover, however, repositions that meaning: stillness and self-acceptance are also forms of strength. The presence of a wheelchair in the composition affirms that while the body may be limited, the spirit can remain strong and at peace. This myth quietly challenges the social paradigm that measures human worth through achievement, replacing it with a new set of values: inner well-being and self-awareness as the highest attainment.

Myth of the Humanist, Empathetic Psychiatrist

The cover simultaneously functions as a personal branding instrument for dr. Andreas Kurniawan. Through its soft visuals, warm palette, and narrative illustration style, the cover generates the myth that the psychiatrist is not a distant, clinical figure but an empathetic, reflective person who understands the emotional world of others. The public image of a psychiatrist is often associated with clinical detachment. Through this design, dr. Andreas introduces a revised myth: the psychiatrist can be a companion in storytelling, not merely a dispenser of diagnoses. This is reinforced by the loose, doodle-like illustration style, the pastel tones that project safety and warmth, and the personal, intimate visual narrative that is close to everyday life.

Myth of Self-Awareness and Spiritual Renewal

The book's title itself adds an additional layer of myth the desire to become something alive, simple, and transformative, a symbol of spiritual rebirth. In Eastern cultural frameworks, the desire to 'become part of nature' signifies humility and an awareness of humanity's interconnectedness with the cosmos. The ideological implication is that happiness is not found outside the self, but in the consciousness of living in harmony with nature and embracing one's whole self.

3.4 Relevance to the Psychiatrist's Personal Branding

The book cover serves not only to support the content within but also as a personal branding tool for dr. Andreas Kurniawan. Personal branding refers to the process of constructing an identity comprising traits, actions, and competencies that is attached to an individual in public perception (Mukhlis, 2024). In this

context, dr. Andreas builds a powerful personal brand as a humanist, reflective, and empathetic psychiatrist through the medium of visual communication design. Table 4 summarizes the personal branding dimensions constructed through the cover's visual strategy.

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Table 3. Relevance to the Psychiatrist's Personal Branding

Dimension	Image Constructed	Visual Strategy
Empathetic & Humanist	A psychiatrist who understands patients' feelings, not merely a diagnostician	Pastel tones, a warm female figure, soft typography
Approachable & Relatable	Opening a space for dialogue with readers and the general public	Narrative illustration resembling a slice of everyday life
Reflective & Poetic	Conveying mental health ideas through a literary and artistic approach	Metaphorical title and introspectively nuanced illustration
Credible yet Relatable	Maintaining a professional identity while remaining emotionally accessible	Balance between professional signals and emotional warmth

Source: Researchers' Analysis (2026)

The personal branding of dr. Andreas Kurniawan can be understood as a deliberate effort to construct a warm and relatable professional identity one that departs from the stereotype of the rigid, formal physician. This image reinforces his position not only as a medical professional but also as a public figure engaged in mental health education and destigmatization through visual and narrative media. Accordingly, the cover performs a dual function: as a visual communication instrument for mental health literacy, and as a personal branding strategy that

humanizes the psychiatric profession in the eyes of the public.

4. Conclusions

The book cover of A Woman Who Wants to Become a Watermelon Tree in Her Next Life presents a visually rich construction of meaning through Roland Barthes' three semiotic layers. At the denotative level, the cover highlights the visual harmony of a simple, quiet everyday scene. At the connotative level, it introduces emotional depth through themes of healing, self-acceptance, and inner growth. At the mythological level, the design constructs ideological narratives around organic healing, stillness as a form of strength, the humanist image of a psychiatrist, and spiritual self-awareness as the foundation of happiness. These findings demonstrate that visual communication design plays a strategic role in building professional personal branding within the mental health field. Visual elements do more than strengthen aesthetic identity—they function as communicative instruments that convey human values and empathy to the public. Book cover design can therefore be understood as a form of strategic communication that fuses artistic and psychological dimensions to construct a meaningful and authentic personal image. This study has an inherent limitation in that analysis is confined to a single book cover. Future research is encouraged to conduct a comparative examination of covers from books authored by other psychiatrists or mental health professionals, as well as to integrate audience reception analysis for a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of personal branding through visual media.

Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	W
Elisabeth Pratiwi	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Mochamad Charis Hidayah tullah		✓				✓		✓	✓

- C : Conceptualization
- M : Methodology
- So : Software
- Va : Validation
- Fo : Formal analysis
- I : Investigation
- R : Resources
- D : Data Curation
- W : Writing - Review

Conflict of Interest Statement

Authors state no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.


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