YAYASAN AKRAB PEKANBARU
Akrab Juara : Jurnal Ilmu-ilmu Sosial
Volume 11 Nomor 3 Edisi Agustus 2026 (1146-1151)
https://doi.org/10.58487/akrabjuara.v11i3.2899

2 THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF CUSTOM MOTORCYCLES AS A MEDIUM OF IDENTITY EXPRESSION FOR BUILDERS

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(Naskah diterima: 1 Juni 2026, disetujui 31 Juni 2026)

Abstract

Custom motorcycles have evolved beyond their function as transportation vehicles and have become a medium for expressing identity and personal values. This study aims to analyze the symbolic meaning of custom motorcycles as a medium of identity expression among builders. The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving three custom motorcycle builders. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while data validity was tested using source and technique triangulation. The findings reveal that custom motorcycles are interpreted as representations of personal identity reflecting character, life experiences, aesthetic preferences, creativity, and values held by builders. The shape, style, color, and modification elements of custom motorcycles function as symbolic representations used to differentiate oneself from others and communicate a unique self-image. Furthermore, custom motorcycles serve as a medium of symbolic communication through which builders convey messages, status, and identity within their social environment. Therefore, custom motorcycles possess personal, social, and cultural meanings beyond their functional role as transportation.
Keywords: *Builder; Custom Motorcycle; Identity; Self-Expression; Symbolic Meaning*

Abstrak

Sepeda motor custom telah berkembang melampaui fungsinya sebagai kendaraan transportasi dan telah menjadi media untuk mengekspresikan identitas dan nilai-nilai pribadi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis makna simbolis sepeda motor custom sebagai media ekspresi identitas di kalangan pembangun. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan tiga pembuat sepeda motor khusus. Analisis data dilakukan melalui reduksi data, tampilan data, dan penarikan kesimpulan, sedangkan validitas data diuji menggunakan triangulasi sumber dan teknik. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa sepeda motor custom ditafsirkan sebagai representasi identitas pribadi yang mencerminkan karakter, pengalaman hidup, preferensi estetika, kreativitas, dan nilai-nilai yang dipegang oleh pembangun. Bentuk, gaya, warna, dan elemen modifikasi sepeda motor kustom berfungsi sebagai representasi simbolis yang digunakan untuk membedakan diri dari orang lain dan mengkomunikasikan citra diri yang unik. Selain itu, sepeda motor khusus berfungsi sebagai media komunikasi simbolis di mana pembangun menyampaikan pesan, status, dan identitas dalam lingkungan sosial mereka. Oleh karena itu, sepeda motor custom memiliki makna pribadi, sosial, dan budaya di luar peran fungsionalnya sebagai transportasi.
Kata kunci: Pembangun; Sepeda Motor Kustom; Identitas; Ekspresi diri; Arti Simbolis.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The development of the creative industry has transformed the way individuals express identity, values, and preferences through various visual media. This phenomenon is evident not only in art, fashion, and digital media but also in the growing culture of custom motorcycles in Indonesia. Custom motorcycles are no longer perceived merely as modified vehicles; instead, they are regarded as visual creations that combine technical aspects, aesthetics, and self-expression. The custom motorcycle culture has expanded alongside the increasing public interest in vehicle modification as a form of creativity and self-representation. *Builders* not only modify the technical components of motorcycles but also design concepts, determine visual styles, select colors, and utilize specific components that represent their character and personal values. Through this process, custom motorcycles become a form of symbolic communication that enables *builders* to express their identities within their social environment. From a communication perspective, symbols play a crucial role in the construction of meaning. George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interaction Theory explains that meaning is formed through social interaction and individual interpretation of symbols encountered in everyday life. The shape, color, accessories, and modification details of custom motorcycles can therefore be understood as symbols carrying particular meanings for *builders* and the communities in which they participate.

Previous studies have examined custom motorcycles from various perspectives. Wicaksono and Winarno described custom motorcycles as a medium of self-expression, while Irawan, Rahayu, and Riyanto focused on the development of the custom motorcycle industry and consumer interest. Other studies have explored legal aspects, workshop certification, and business success in the custom motorcycle sector. However, research specifically examining the symbolic meaning of custom motorcycles as a medium of identity expression from the *builders* perspective remains limited. Based on this gap, this study seeks to understand how *builders* interpret custom motorcycles as a medium of identity expression and to reveal the symbolic meanings embodied in the visual elements of the motorcycles they create.

II. THEORETICAL STUDIES

Symbolic Interaction Theory

This study employs George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interaction Theory, which explains that human actions are based on meanings assigned to symbols emerging through social interaction. Meaning does not naturally exist but is created through communication and interpretation within social environments. Mead identified three central concepts: mind,

self, and society. Mind refers to an individual's ability to assign meaning to symbols. Self relates to the formation of identity through social interaction. Society refers to the social environment in which shared meanings and understandings are developed. In this study, custom motorcycles are viewed as symbols interpreted by *builders* through experience, interaction, and participation in custom motorcycle culture.

Identity and Self-Expression

Identity refers to how individuals understand and present themselves based on experiences, values, characteristics, and social roles. Identity is not solely internal but is also expressed through observable forms of self-presentation. According to Erik Erikson, identity develops through a process of self-discovery and interaction with the social environment. In this study, *builders* express their identities through the concepts, visual styles, color selections, and characteristics embodied in their custom motorcycles. These elements communicate personal values, preferences, and individual character to others.

Custom Motorcycles as a Medium of Symbolic Communication

Custom motorcycles are vehicles modified according to the concepts and preferences of their *builders*, resulting in characteristics that differ from standard factory-produced motorcycles. Beyond serving as transportation, custom motorcycles function as a medium of symbolic communication. The shape, color, components, and modification concepts employed by *builders* represent creativity, life experiences, personal values, and identity. From the perspective of symbolic communication, these visual elements can be interpreted as nonverbal messages used by *builders* to communicate who they are to society. Therefore, custom motorcycles serve not only a material function as vehicles but also a symbolic function as a medium for self-representation and social communication.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to understand the symbolic meaning of custom motorcycles as a medium of identity expression among *builders.* Informants were selected using purposive sampling and consisted of three custom motorcycle *builders*: Yassar Hidayah, M. Ismail, and M. Raja Shah Alif. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation involving Dr. Diah Widyawati, M.I.Kom. as an expert triangulator. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. to generate a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic meanings attached to custom motorcycles by *builders*

IV. RESEARCH METHODS

This research method uses a qualitative approach with a type of descriptive research to understand in depth the implementation of government policies in fulfilling the educational rights of the Tribe (SAD) in Sukajadi Village, Bathin VIII District, Sarolangun Regency. The research was carried out in February-May 2026 in the Anak Dalam Tribe settlement in Sukajadi Village, which was chosen because it is one of the locations for the implementation of education policies for indigenous peoples. The research informants were determined using a purposive sampling technique consisting of the Head of the Out-of-School Education Development Section of the Sarolangun Regency Education Office as the key informant, representatives of the Sumatra Pundi Institute, the Tribe Jenang, and the Tribe community as the main informants. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation with researchers as the main instruments supported by observation guidelines, interview guidelines, and documentation. The validity of the data is tested using source triangulation, triangulation techniques, and time triangulation to ensure consistency and credibility of the data. Data analysis was carried out using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña which included data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, so as to obtain a comprehensive picture of the implementation of government policies in fulfilling the educational rights of the tribe in Sukajadi Village.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

Custom Motorcycles as a Medium of Identity Expression

The findings indicate that *builders* interpret custom motorcycles as a medium for expressing identity, character, creativity, and life experiences. Custom motorcycles are viewed not merely as transportation vehicles but as representations of the *builders* themselves. Yassar Hidayah stated:

“For me, a custom motorcycle is not just a vehicle. Its shape, color, and even the smallest details reflect my character and preferences. People can understand who I am through the motorcycle I build.” (Yassar Hidayah, 11 June 2026). This statement demonstrates that custom motorcycles function as a medium for displaying personal identity through visual symbols. *Builders* consciously select forms, colors, and modification details to represent their personal characteristics and preferences. This finding can be explained through Mead’s concept of self, which suggests that identity is formed through social interaction and expressed through symbols used in everyday life. In this context, custom motorcycles become symbols through which *builders* construct and communicate their identities.

These findings are consistent with Wicaksono and Winarno's study, which identified custom motorcycles as a medium of self-expression and character representation. However, this study highlights that identity expression is not limited to motorcycle owners but also involves *builders* who conceptualize and create the motorcycles.

Symbolic Meaning in Custom Motorcycle Design

The study found that every element of a custom motorcycle carries symbolic meaning. Vehicle shape, color, accessories, and components are selected according to the message and concept *builders* wish to communicate. M. Ismail explained:

"When people see my custom motorcycle, I want them to recognize my unique characteristics. That's why every detail is chosen for a reason." (M. Ismail, 12 June 2026)

This statement suggests that modification details are carefully considered rather than randomly selected. Visual elements function as symbols representing identity, creativity, and uniqueness. According to Symbolic Interaction Theory, individuals act based on meanings assigned to objects. *Builders* first assign meaning to shapes, colors, and components before incorporating them into the motorcycle. This process reflects Mead's concept of mind, which emphasizes the interpretation of symbols.

The findings support previous studies suggesting that modified vehicles function as symbolic communication media representing social and cultural identities. This study extends those findings by demonstrating that symbolic meanings are actively constructed by *builders* during the creative process. The Role of Community in Meaning Construction. The findings indicate that communities play an essential role in shaping how *builders* understand and interpret custom motorcycles. Through interactions within custom motorcycle communities, *builders* gain inspiration, references, and knowledge regarding symbols and philosophies. M. Raja Shah Alif stated:

"The community helped me understand the meaning behind custom motorcycles. It's not just about modification; it's also about character and identity." (M. Raja Shah Alif, 13 June 2026)

This statement demonstrates that meaning construction is influenced by continuous social interaction. Communities become spaces where experiences and knowledge are exchanged, fostering shared understandings of symbolic meanings. This finding is closely related to Mead's concept of society, which argues that meaning emerges through social interaction. Communities influence how *builders* interpret and use symbols in their lives.

The findings align with previous research highlighting the role of symbolic communication in shaping social identity through group interaction. In this study, custom motorcycle

communities function as social spaces where shared meanings regarding symbols, values, and identities are developed.

Custom Motorcycles as Material and Symbolic Objects

The study reveals that *builders* perceive custom motorcycles as both material and symbolic objects. Besides functioning as transportation, custom motorcycles communicate identity, character, and self-image. Yassar Hidayah explained:

"A motorcycle still has to be comfortable and safe to ride. But beyond that, it should have a character that reflects its *builder*." (Yassar Hidayah, 11 June 2026)

This statement indicates that *builders* consider not only technical functionality but also symbolic aspects. Custom motorcycles combine practical and representational functions.

From a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, custom motorcycles are symbols carrying meanings for both individuals and society. *Builders* use visual symbols embedded in motorcycles to communicate identity, creativity, and values. These findings support previous studies indicating that custom motorcycles possess symbolic value related to identity and creativity in addition to their practical function as vehicles.

V.CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that custom motorcycles are interpreted by *builders* as a medium of identity expression through which they communicate character, creativity, life experiences, and personal values. This meaning is embodied in various visual elements, including vehicle shape, style, color, components, and modification details designed according to specific concepts and philosophies. Consequently, custom motorcycles function not only as modified vehicles but also as representations of the *builders t*hemselves. Furthermore, the symbolic meaning of custom motorcycles is formed through both individual interpretation and social interaction, as explained by George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interaction Theory. *Builders* assign meanings to their motorcycles and use them as symbols to communicate identity, while social environments and communities contribute to shaping and reinforcing these meanings. Therefore, custom motorcycles can be understood as symbolic communication media carrying personal, social, and cultural significance beyond their primary function as transportation.

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