

## SELF-EXPRESSION AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN GRADUATION PHOTOGRAPHS ON INSTAGRAM

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### Abstract

*This article examines graduation photographs on Instagram as a contemporary visual practice that reflects a shift in the meaning of graduation. Employing a descriptive qualitative method grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotic approach at the level of connotation encompassing trick effects, pose, objects, photogenia, and Aestheticism. This study analyzes expressive graduation photographs by drawing visual data from three Indonesian cities with the highest student populations: Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta. The findings indicate that graduation photographs on Instagram not only represent academic achievement but also function as a medium of self-expression and identity negotiation across personal, relational, and cultural dimensions. The analysis further reveals that graduation is interpreted as a multifaceted transitional event in which institutional symbols coexist with personal and context specific self-narratives. This article contributes to visual and cultural studies by demonstrating how graduation is re-signified as a plural transitional practice, where institutional legitimacy is articulated alongside personal and contextual narratives through photographic representation.*

**Keywords:** graduation photographs; identity negotiation; Roland Barthes' semiotics; self-expression; visual semiotics.

### INTRODUCTION

Graduation photography has conventionally been understood as a medium for documenting academic ceremonies that are formal and institutional in nature. Within this context, graduation photographs function as symbolic rituals of academic achievement, marked by official attributes, standardized poses, and visual compositions that affirm the authority of educational institutions (Assiva et al., 2024). Such visual documentation is closely aligned with the function of documentary photography, which is to capture significant moments in social life and to reflect prevailing socio-cultural conditions (Thanaya et al., 2025).

However, the development of digital visual culture, particularly through social media platforms such as Instagram, has shifted the ways in which academic rituals are interpreted and represented. A growing body of research indicates that social media encourages the personalization of visual representation, whereby individuals no longer merely perform institutionally prescribed social roles but actively construct self-identity through curated imagery (Nugraeni, 2024) (Putri, 2016). In this context, photography functions not only as documentation but also as a performative practice that mediates self-expression and public interpretation.