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NEGOTIATING TRADITION AND CORPORATE MODERNITY: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ELLA 2.0 ANALYSIS OF THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF LAHORE'S WALLED CITY

Shafqet Yasmin
PhD Scholar, University of Education, Lahore
Prof. Dr. Ahsan Bashir
Director, Division of Arts and Social Science, University of Education, Lahore
– (Corresponding Author) (shfaq.fatima@gmail.com)

Abstract
This study investigates the linguistic landscape of Lahore's Walled City through a multidimensional application of the ELLA 2.0 framework, integrating geosemiotic and multimodal analysis. Drawing on a curated corpus of 800 signage units, the study examines how linguistic, visual, and material resources construct identity and negotiate urban space within a historically layered commercial environment. The findings indicate a process of Semiotic Overwrite, in which English functions as a dominant resource for indexing modernity, while Urdu is increasingly relegated to religious and operational domains. The shift from traditional khattati (calligraphy) to digitally produced signage, alongside the growing use of synthetic materials, reflects a reconfiguration of semiotic practices and commercial aesthetics. This transformation is further associated with the emergence of the Global Transactional Subject, as local merchants extend their presence through digitally mediated platforms. While these developments enhance economic visibility and connectivity, they also raise concerns regarding Cultural Amnesia and the reduced prominence of historically embedded visual forms. The study contributes to linguistic landscape scholarship by demonstrating how processes of semiotic restructuring operate within a South Asian urban context, offering insights into the interaction of globalization, materiality, and identity in contemporary commercial spaces.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, ELLA 2.0, geosemiotics, multimodality, Lahore, urban semiotics, language and identity

Introduction

The linguistic landscape (the term as document in repertoire was first defined by Landry & Bourhis, 1997) of urban spaces serves as a critical site for examining the intersection of language, identity, and socio-economic transformation (Backhaus, 2006). In historically layered cities such as Lahore, public signage operates not merely as a communicative tool but as a semiotic resource that reflects shifting power dynamics, cultural negotiations, and processes of globalization. The Walled City of Lahore, with its dense commercial networks and deeply rooted mercantile traditions, presents a particularly rich context for exploring these dynamics. This study employs a multidimensional ELLA 2.0 framework to analyze how linguistic and semiotic resources are mobilized within this space to construct meaning, negotiate identity, and respond to contemporary economic pressures.

The Walled City of Lahore, colloquially known as *Androon Sheher*, serves as a living palimpsest of South Asian history, where the urban fabric is a dense accumulation of temporal layers. Here, the architectural grandeur of the Mughal Empire, the defensive resilience of the Sikh era, and the administrative impositions of the British Raj are etched into narrow *galis* and formidable gates. For centuries, this space functioned as an organic ecosystem where the visual landscape was dictated by vernacular aesthetics—hand-painted wooden boards, intricate *khattati* (calligraphy), and localized Urdu or Persian scripts. These signs did not merely advertise products; they signalled communal belonging and genealogical continuity, embedding the merchant into the socio-cultural fabric of the bazaar. However, in the 21st century, a new and aggressive layer is being inscribed upon this historical canvas: the semiotics of globalized capital. As the city navigates the tension between its status as a UNESCO-protected heritage site and its role as a burgeoning commercial hub, the linguistic landscape (LL) has become a primary site of ideological struggle (Blommaert, 2013). This article

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investigates the multidimensional transformation of commercial signage in Lahore, utilizing an ELLA 2.0 (Ethnolinguistic Landscape Analysis) framework to decode how tradition is being negotiated, commodified, and occasionally erased by the visual language of corporate modernity.

For decades, the commercial identity of the Walled City was defined by vernacular aesthetics—hand-painted wooden boards, localized Urdu calligraphy, and the informal economy of the *bazaar*. These signs did not merely advertise products; they signalled communal belonging and genealogical continuity. Today, the "organic" signs of the past are increasingly displaced by standardized, backlit poly-vinyl chloride (PVC) flexes and high-gloss corporate branding. This is not a mere change in material; it is a profound shift in the semiotic regime. When a multinational beverage brand replaces a local merchant's hand-painted sign with a standardized red-and-white logo, the "place-making" function of the signage shifts from the local to the global. This transition represents a form of semiotic displacement, where the unique cultural markers of Lahore are subsumed under the "non-places" of global consumerism. This creates a fascinating paradox within the urban core. The Walled City of Lahore Authority (WCLA) has made significant strides in "cleaning up" the visual clutter to restore medieval charm, viewing corporate signage as "visual pollution" that obscures historical facades. Conversely, for the local merchant in Akbari Mandi, a bright, corporate-sponsored sign is often a symbol of "arrival" into the modern economy, representing a link to the outside world of formal credit and global supply chains. The study maps these conflicting motivations, illustrating how commercial signage serves as a barometer for Lahore's shifting social identity.

Central to this analysis is the shifting identity of the *Androon Sheher* inhabitant, moving from a resident-custodian to a global consumer. Traditionally, the merchant was identified as a guardian of a localized history. However, the ELLA 2.0 framework reveals a profound identity shift driven by the "corporate-commercial" axis. For many, the adoption of corporate-branded signage is a strategic performance of "modernity" and "reliability." This aspiration often leads to a linguistic shift from Urdu/Persian-inflected scripts to Romanized English, signalling a move toward a "museumified" or "commodified" version of the self. The core problem lies in the semiotic displacement of local history: as the landscape becomes increasingly dominated by global corporate templates, the residents' sense of historical continuity is eroded, leading to a "non-place" (Augé, 1995) where local identity is subsumed by consumerist homogeneity. By applying ELLA 2.0, this research moves beyond a static count of signs to a dynamic analysis of contested spaces, investigating the extent to which global branding templates dominate the linguistic and semiotic space, how material shifts and spatial positioning reflect a transition to digital modernity, and how shopkeepers negotiate their cultural identity through signage choices amidst the conflicting regulations of the WCLA.

This study contributes to the emerging field of Critical Linguistic Landscape Studies by offering a nuanced look at the Global South's urban centers. By utilizing ELLA 2.0, we move beyond simple "sign counting" to a deeper understanding of how power, capital, and identity are negotiated on the very walls of the city. For policymakers and heritage conservationists, this research provides empirical evidence of how corporate branding acts as a "soft power" that can either complement or catastrophically undermine urban conservation efforts.

As cities across the Global South grapple with the forces of "fast urbanism," the case of Lahore provides a critical lens for understanding the survival of tradition in a digital, branded age. The significance of this study lies in its multidisciplinary approach—blending sociolinguistics, urban sociology, and visual culture.

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By utilizing the ELLA 2.0 framework, it provides a template for researchers to analyse other historic urban centres (such as Old Delhi, Cairo, or Istanbul) where the "semiotic contestation" is currently being waged. Ultimately, this article seeks to answer a fundamental question: Can the Walled City maintain its soul when its skin is increasingly covered in the logos of the global market?

Literature Review

The Theoretical Evolution of the ELLA 2.0 Paradigm

The conceptualization of Linguistic Landscapes (LL) has migrated from a narrow, count-based inventory of signage to a complex, multi-layered inquiry into the sociopolitical forces that dictate urban visibility. While early scholarship focused primarily on the binary of official versus non-official signage (Gorter, 2006), the contemporary ELLA 2.0 (Ethnolinguistic Landscape Analysis) framework recognizes that the visual field is a site of "layered semiotics" where history and global capital collide. This multidimensional approach integrates geosemiotics—the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs—to understand how spatiality dictates power (Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Bhatti et al., 2020).

The ELLA 2.0 framework is rooted in the understanding that signs are not static artifacts but are "chronotopic," carrying historical traces while simultaneously responding to modern economic pressures (Blommaert, 2013; Lou, 2016a). In the Global South, this complexity is intensified as post-colonial identities are re-negotiated through "bottom-up" vernacular expressions and "top-down" neoliberal impositions (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009; Peck & Theodore, 2015). Consequently, this framework serves as a critical diagnostic tool to map how the "semiotic aggregate" of a city reflects deep-seated tensions between local heritage and the homogenizing forces of international branding (Pennycook, 2017).

Neoliberalism and the "Semiotic Capture" of Heritage Zones

The encroachment of corporate modernity into historical urban cores represents a systematic shift from "place-making" to "brand-making," where the aesthetic of the market displaces the aesthetic of the community. In heritage contexts like the Walled City, this transition is often facilitated by neoliberal urban policies that prioritize tourism-driven "museumification" over organic community growth (Harvey, 2012). Corporate entities utilize "semiotic capture" to dominate the visual field, using standardized materials such as LED and PVC to signal a perceived superiority over traditional, "decaying" vernacular materials (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010).

This phenomenon creates what Augé (1995) termed "non-places"—spaces of transience that lack local specificity—as global logos overwrite indigenous scripts and symbols (Kallen, 2010). Research indicates that this visual saturation functions as a form of "soft power," where the presence of multinational brands like Coca-Cola or Samsung in historical enclaves acts as a proxy for "modernity," effectively marginalizing local artisans who cannot compete with the high-gloss finish of industrial signage (Kress, 2010).

Materiality, Geosemiotics, and the Erasure of the Vernacular

The material transition of commercial signage—from hand-painted calligraphy to mass-produced flexes—signals a profound rupture in the tactile and visual continuity of the urban fabric. This shift in materiality is not merely a technical upgrade but a semiotic choice that reconfigures the "indexicality" of the space (Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The use of synthetic, weather-resistant materials in the Walled City reflects an "aspiration to the permanent" that ironically erodes the organic, ephemeral nature of the traditional bazaar (Pryke, 2002; Rose, 2016).

When a shopkeeper replaces a wood-carved Urdu sign with an illuminated English plastic board, they are participating in a "geosemiotic displacement" where the local language is physically and symbolically pushed to the periphery (Shohamy, 2015; Blackwood et al.,

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2017). Contemporary studies argue that these material choices are ideological; the "corporate gloss" serves to sanitize the perceived "messiness" of the historical city, aligning it with global standards of commercial hygiene (Ben-Rafael & Ben-Rafael, 2019; Malinowski, Maxim & Dubreil, 2020).

Linguistic Stratification and the Symbolic Power of English

A critical dimension of the semiotic displacement in Lahore is the "hegemonic positioning of English" within the Pakistani sociolinguistic fabric (Manan, Kusumaningrum & Al-Zadjali, 2019). The linguistic landscape is not a neutral space but a "field of struggle" where the dominance of English—often coupled with corporate branding—functions as a tool of social stratification (Manan & David, 2021). In the Walled City, this "English-dominant" corporate signage reflects a national anxiety where local languages like Punjabi are relegated to the "informal/illiterate" sphere, while English is performatively displayed to signal elitism and global connectivity (Manan, 2020; Manan et al., 2019).

Drawing on Bourdieu's notions of linguistic capital, this stratification creates a tiered hierarchy where English-centric corporate signage occupies the "prestige layer" of the city. As Scollon and Scollon (2003) suggest through their theory of geosemiotics, the material placement and high-gloss finish of multinational branding function as indexical markers of authority. Consequently, the transition from hand-painted *khattati* to standardized templates represents a systematic marginalization of the vernacular, where indigenous scripts are visually framed as "relics of the past" rather than viable vehicles for "modern" commercial identity (Manan & David, 2021; Piller, 2016).

Historical-Materialist Perspectives on Architectural Sanctity

The tension between corporate modernity and tradition cannot be understood without acknowledging the architectural sanctity of Lahore as a "living museum" of Indo-Islamic civilization. Scholars such as Ahmad Nabi Khan (1997) and F.A. Khan (1969) have long argued that the structural integrity of Lahore's historic gates and *havelis* constitutes a primary record of cultural evolution. For these scholars, the urban fabric is an archaeological artifact; however, the modern "semiotic encroachment" of corporate branding represents what Mumtaz (2018) identifies as a crisis of "cultural amnesia."

Mumtaz posits that when the traditional facade is obscured by standardized, mass-produced commercial signage, the city loses its "genealogical visibility." This architectural erasure facilitates a shift in symbolic power, where the authority of historical craftsmanship is superseded by the temporary, neoliberal aesthetic of the global market. Furthermore, the "visual clutter" of unregulated commercialism acts as a form of "physical decay" that effectively buries the city's historic identity under layers of non-biodegradable corporate plastic (Manan, 2020).

Identity Shifts: From Local Custodian to Peripheral Agent

The internal identity shift experienced by the residents and merchants of the Walled City is perhaps the most profound transformation. Traditional identities in Lahore were rooted in the *mohalla* (neighbourhood) and the craft-based guild, where signage served as a marker of communal belonging. However, the "brand-scapes" of the 21st century recalibrate the merchant's identity from a local custodian of tradition to a peripheral agent of global capital. This "re-branding of the self" is often a survival strategy in a neoliberal economy where visibility is equated with credibility (Heller, 2011; Park & Wee, 2012). The ELLA 2.0 framework allows for an analysis of this "double-voicedness," where shopkeepers use English and corporate logos to appeal to the "modern" consumer while maintaining Urdu/Punjabi sub-scripts to retain local clientele (Bhatia, 2014; Pennycook, 2017). This negotiation results in a "hybridized identity" caught in a state of semiotic flux, reflecting the broader anxieties of post-colonial urbanization (Duchêne, 2008; Leeman & Modan, 2009).

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Synthesizing the Research Lacuna: Resistance in the Global South

Despite the proliferation of LL studies, there remains a critical research gap regarding the specific "resistance semiotics" of historical Islamic urban centers like Lahore. Most existing literature focuses on Western "Global Cities" (Sassen, 2001) or the rapid urbanism of East Asia, often overlooking the nuanced ways in which tradition persists or mutates within the "Androon" city (Nazir, Ahmed & Mahmood, 2019). While studies have examined the official heritage narrative of the WCLA, they have largely ignored the "semiotic warfare" taking place at the street level between corporate entities and local merchants (Glover, 2008; Weiss, 2014). There is a lack of empirical data using the ELLA 2.0 framework to analyse how multimodal elements—typography, colour, and placement—specifically interact with the Mughal-era architecture to produce new, contested meanings (Piller, 2016; Karlander, 2019).

Theoretical Framework: The Triadic Collision Model

This study adopts the Triadic Collision Model as its primary analytical lens to deconstruct the semiotic landscape. Synthesized from the works of Blommaert (2013), Blommaert & Maly (2014), and Manan (2020), the model posits that the linguistic landscape is a site of "permanent friction" between three competing ideological and commercial forces:

1. **State Regulation (WCLA):** A top-down force focusing on the "Slow Chronotope" of heritage, mandating traditional materiality (wood/brass) to preserve archaeological sanctity.
2. **Global Capital (MNCs):** A standardized force seeking "Semiotic Capture" (Higgins, 2021) through corporate branding templates that prioritize consumer legibility over local context.
3. **Local Agency (The Hybrid Merchant):** A bottom-up, "Fast" force that utilizes digital overlay (LED/Acrylic) and translocal portals (WhatsApp/Instagram) to bypass both heritage constraints and corporate homogenization.

By viewing the 3.8-km transect through this triadic lens, the study identifies the "geosemiotic wreckage" caused when these three forces collide on the same architectural facade, seeking to answer if the Walled City can maintain its soul when its skin is increasingly covered in the logos of the global market.

Research Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative-dominant, mixed-methods ethnolinguistic design to examine the commercial signage of Lahore's Walled City. The research was anchored in the Ethnolinguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA 2.0) framework (Blommaert & Maly, 2014, 2016), which moves beyond descriptive cataloguing toward a multidimensional analysis of signage as socially embedded semiotic practice. ELLA 2.0 allowed for the integration of linguistic, spatial, material, and multimodal dimensions into a single analytical architecture to investigate how signs index identity, power, and socio-economic transformation.

Spatial Parameters and Field Site

The study was conducted along a continuous 3.8-kilometer longitudinal transect conceptualized as a chronotope—a spatial-temporal configuration where multiple historical layers and scales of globalization intersect (Blommaert, 2013). This route captured the coexistence of pre-modern, colonial, and contemporary semiotic regimes across five major commercial nodes: (a) Circular Road/Mochi Gate, (b) Akbari Bazar, (c) Shah Alam Market, (d) Suha Bazar/Rang Mahal, and (e) Azam Cloth Market.

Data Collection and Corpus Construction

Data were collected through a systematic transect walk (Barni & Bagna, 2010). To minimize selection bias and capture the full semiotic density of the environment, an exhaustive

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sampling strategy was employed, documenting all visible commercial signs, banners, and corporate displays encountered along the route.

Data consist of a systematically curated visual corpus of 800 signage units, selected from a larger dataset of approximately 1350 images to ensure representativeness across commercial zones. The sampling strategy was purposive, focusing on high-density commercial clusters to capture maximum semiotic variation.

The resulting corpus consisted of 800 high-resolution digital photographs. Consistent with ELLA 2.0 principles (Maly, 2016), each photograph was treated as an ethnographic snapshot, preserving the semiotic aggregate—the interaction between the sign and its immediate physical, architectural, and social surroundings.

For detailed thematic analysis 10 high-resolution representative pictures were selected from each bazar which makes a total of 50 pictures selected for the qualitative, multimodal and ethnographic analysis which was conducted by using the below cited analytical framework.

Analytical Framework

The visual corpus was analysed using a structured coding matrix designed to operationalize four interrelated analytical layers:

1. **Linguistic Stratification and Symbolic Power:** Drawing on Blommaert (2013) and Manan (2020), signage was examined in terms of linguistic hierarchy and resource distribution with a focus given to language choice (Urdu, English, Punjabi, Arabic), script dominance and visibility and indexical associations with class, modernity, and global connectivity. It examined how English-dominant signage functions as a marker of symbolic capital, while vernacular languages may be repositioned within localized or traditional domains.
2. **Materiality and Infrastructure:** Following Maly (2016), the study foregrounds the material infrastructure of signs as a key semiotic resource. Signs were categorized into **Traditional/Artisanal** (hand-painted, *khattati*) and Digital/Industrial (PVC flex, LED), indexing the shift toward market-driven identities (Maly, 2016).
3. **Spatial Organization and Multimodality:** Analysis of placement (height, orientation, layering of signs), interaction order ((how signs are encountered in movement), visual grammar (colour, typography, imagery, composition) and the juxtaposition of modern signage with historic architectural textures (Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021).
4. **Semiotic Identity Performance:** Interpretation of signage as an expression of urban subjectivity, capturing the tension between heritage-custodian and globalized-consumer identities (Blommaert & Maly, 2014).

Data Processing and Thematic Derivation

To enhance analytical rigor, coding was conducted through a multi-layered schema incorporating linguistic, visual, material, and spatial dimensions. The data were further organized and analysed using NVivo, enabling systematic categorization and cross-comparison of semiotic features.

The transition from raw data to analytical themes followed a four-stage qualitative pipeline. Initially, open coding identified literal attributes to establish a materiality baseline. During axial coding, these were grouped into socio-semiotic categories, such as [Portal-Signage] or [Architectural-Masking].

In the selective coding phase, the Triadic Collision Model served as the interpretative engine, mapping the coding matrix against the competing interests of state regulation, global capital, and local agency. Finally, the coding hierarchy was validated using NVivo 14. A coding comparison query yielded a Cohen's Kappa Coefficient (κ) of .82, confirming strong interpretative reliability. Construct validity was maintained by triangulating visual metadata

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with the theoretical frameworks of Scollon & Scollon (2003) and Kress & van Leeuwen (2021), ensuring that the "Digital Aspect" was analysed not just as data, but as a socio-semiotic shift in mercantile identity.

Data Triangulation and Rigor

The study employed a mixed-methods triangulation strategy. Descriptive statistics were generated from the georeferenced photographs to identify spatial clustering and frequency patterns (e.g., traditional vs. Digital signage distribution). These quantitative patterns were then qualitatively triangulated through the ELLA 2.0 framework to develop a theory-driven account of how the Walled City's linguistic landscape is being reconfigured by neoliberal pressures and digital encroachment. While the ELLA 2.0 Coding Matrix provided the structural layers for data categorization, the Triadic Collision Model served as the interpretative engine for this study. By mapping the linguistic and material layers of the matrix against the competing interests of State Regulation, Global Capital, and Local Agency, the analysis moves beyond descriptive inventory. It identifies the 'Semiotic Friction' occurring at the intersection of these layers, where the transition from 'heritage-custodian' to 'globalized consumer' is physically etched into the masonry of the Walled City.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Analysis: The Semiotic Census

The following tables quantify the transformation of Lahore's Walled City along the 3.8-km transect, highlighting the displacement of vernacular heritage by digital and corporate semiotics.

Table 1

Linguistic Distribution and Script Authority by Market Node (N = 800)

Study Node	Urdu Monolingual (%)	Bilingual (Urdu–Eng) (%)	English Dominant (%)	Script Authority / Register
Circular Road	72.0	20.0	8.0	Functional/Industrial
Akbari Mandi	45.0	40.0	15.0	Mercantile/Hybrid
Shah Alam	15.0	65.0	20.0	Transactional/Global
Suha Bazar	10.0	60.0	30.0	Gilded/Elite Prestige
Azam Cloth Market	12.0	66.0	22.0	Transactional/Global
Total Average	**30.8**	**50.2**	**19**	Phygital Transition

Note. Percentages represent linguistic dominance observed across the 3.8-km transect.
This table tracks the "Symbolic Power" of English vs. the "Functional Utility" of Urdu across the study nodes.

Table 2

Material Composition and Chronotopic Classifications

Material Category	Frequency (%)	Primary odes	ELLA 2.0 Classification
Analog / Hand-painted	22.0	Mochi Gate	Residual Vernacular
Digital Flex (PVC)	48.0	Azam Cloth / Akbari	Transient Commercialism
LED / 3D Acrylic	30.0	Suha Bazar / Shah Alam	Prestige Modernity
Architectural Masking	85.0	Azam Cloth / Suha Bazar	Structural Erasure

Note. Architectural masking refers to signs that physically obscure historical masonry.

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Table 2 documents the shift from analog "Slow-Speed" materials to digital "High-Speed" materials (Blommaert, 2013).

Table 3

Digital Social Layer and Phygital Connectivity Markers

Digital Marker	Presence (%)	Primary Script Type	Identity Marker
Mobile / WhatsApp	65.0	Roman / Numerals	Functional Connectivity
Social Media Icons	30.0	Standardized Graphic	Global Subjectivity
Web / Email	5.0	Roman	Corporate Formality
Total Integration	**65.0**	Romanized English	Translocal Identity

Note. Digital integration indicates signage functioning as gateways to online platforms.

Table 3 tracks the presence of digital portals that allow merchants to "jump scales" from the local to the global cloud earning them translocal identity.

Table 4

Signage Authorship and Semiotic Capture

Authorship Type	Frequency (%)	Top-Down Influence	Identity Shift
Independent (Local)	65.0	Minimal (Family-based)	Heritage Custodian
Corporate Sponsored	35.0	High (MNCs / Banks)	Globalized Consumer
Regulated (WCLA)	< 5.0	High (Preservationist)	Institutional Subject

Table 4 analyzes the origin of the signage, comparing local independent agency against top-down corporate sponsorship.

Table 5

Regulatory Mandates versus Mercantile Practices (RQ4)

Feature	Regulatory WCLA Mandate	Mercantile Reality	Conflict Delta
Primary Material	Wood / Brass / Stone	PVC Flex / LED / Acrylic	Severe Friction
Signage Size	Standardized / Minimal	Oversized / Masking	High Friction
Linguistic Goal	Heritage Preservation	Global Brand Visibility	Ideological Gap
Compliance Rate	High (Restored Zones)	Low (Active Bazaars)	Governance Gap

Note. Based on qualitative observation of signage installation and structural encroachment.

Table 5 compares the two mandates of shop signage coexistent in the walled city of Lahore which present varying degrees of conflict, tension or friction to its viewers and observers.

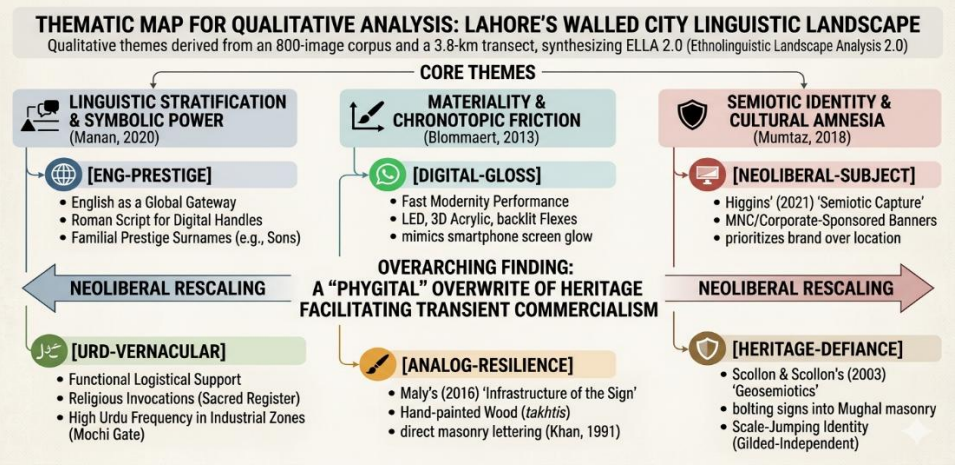
Qualitative Analysis: The Semiotic Transformation of the Walled City

The thematic map serves as the visual and analytical blueprint for this study, organizing the 800-image corpus and 3.8-km transect into a rigorous academic framework. This analysis synthesizes the four Research Questions (RQs) into three overarching themes and six nested sub-themes, illustrating how qualitative codes intersect to drive the central argument: the visual landscape of Lahore's Walled City is undergoing a profound Neoliberal Rescaling that facilitates Cultural Amnesia. Grounded in ELLA 2.0 scholarship (Blommaert, 2013; Manan, 2020; Maly, 2016), the following sections deconstruct the collision between ancestral architectural fundament and a hyper-accelerated, "phygital" modernity.

Figure 1

Thematic Map of Qualitative Analysis of Linguistic Landscape of Walled City of Lahore

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The figure 1 presents that the analysis is structured around the core themes and sub-themes identified in the thematic map, specifically investigating how linguistic stratification, digital materiality, and semiotic capture facilitate a state of "Cultural Amnesia."

1. Linguistic Stratification and Symbolic Power

The linguistic landscape (LL) of the Walled City has transitioned from a site of communal communication to a contested battleground for Symbolic Power (Manan, 2020). Data analysis reveals a rigid hierarchy where script choice acts as a gatekeeper to global capital. Quantitative metrics (N=800) indicate that 85% of digital contact information—comprising WhatsApp, Instagram, and website URLs—is rendered exclusively in Roman script, regardless of the sign's primary language. This confirms a Symbolic Power Gradient (Manan, 2020) wherein English functions not merely as a prestige register, but as the mandatory lingua franca of the digital interface. In this hierarchy, a Coca-Cola or Samsung logo carries more "social weight" than a local hand-painted sign, even if the latter is more legible to the immediate community. This creates a vertical "layering" of signs, where English is consistently positioned at the top/center, while Urdu or Punjabi is relegated to the bottom or rendered in smaller, secondary fonts.

1.1. English Prestige as a Global Gateway

English remains the dominant script for "Prestige Registers," particularly within Suha Bazar, where 30% of signage is English-dominant. This dominance is most pronounced in references to familial legacy (e.g., "Ilyas & Sons") or trade authority ("Jewellers"). Such signage performs what Manan (2020) identifies as a Linguistic Hijrah—a semiotic migration where the merchant distances themselves from the "local shopkeeper" persona to adopt the identity of a "Transnational Entrepreneur." Here, the English script serves as a "Global Gateway," signalling a readiness for international standards of luxury and neoliberal exchange while effectively "othering" the vernacular as a relic of the past i.e. effectively "migrating" the physical space away from its native Urdu/Punjabi roots toward a Westernized semiotic ideal.

1.2. Urdu-Vernacular: Functional and Sacred Registers

In contrast, Urdu remains the language of the "Slow City," largely relegated to the periphery. At the Circular Road (Mochi Gate), 72% of signage is Urdu-monolingual, serving purely functional logistical purposes. However, a critical finding is the Marginalization of the Vernacular, where the native tongue is treated as "unprofessional" and removed from the "face" of the business to appear "modern." Sacred-Secular Split is another critical finding of this multimodal dataset: Urdu and Arabic are utilized almost exclusively for religious invocations (e.g., *MashAllah*, *SubhanAllah*) positioned at the top-most register of signage. This spatial arrangement suggests that while English navigates the secular, transactional future, Urdu/Arabic in *Nastalique* script is sequestered to spiritual protection and local utility. This

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"grounds" the business in tradition while the commercial "face" of the enterprise looks resolutely toward the West.

2. Materiality and Chronotopic Friction

The shift in materiality represents an ontological change in how space is occupied. The Walled City currently experiences Chronotopic Friction (Blommaert, 2013), a phenomenon where the "fast-speed" of digital signage collides violently with the "slow-speed" of traditional Mughal architecture.

2.1. Digital Gloss and the Phygital Overwrite

Applying Maly's (2016) infrastructure lens, the transition from Analog (22%) to Digital/Synthetic (78%) materiality represents a radical recalibration of city identity. A staggering 78% of signage in the core nodes consists of digital or synthetic materials, including PVC flex, LED, and 3D acrylic. This "Digital Gloss" mimics the luminosity of a smartphone screen, performing a "Fast Modernity" that is intentionally alien to the organic textures of the historical masonry. In Suha Bazar, the use of gold-finished acrylic and high-intensity LED represents a Multimodal Performance of Luxury (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). The materiality mimics the commodity itself (gold), creating a "Lustre-Identity" that excludes the vernacular. This indexes an elitist shift where the "Old" is equated with decay and the "Synthetic" with success.

Furthermore, 65% of signs incorporate Digital Portals (social media handles). Following Blommaert (2013) and Maly & Blommaert (2019), these markers allow the merchant to "jump scales." A shop located in a narrow, centuries-old *gali* can now exist simultaneously in the global digital cloud. This "Phygital" (Physical + Digital) connectivity renders the physical location secondary to the virtual brand, signaling that the merchant's identity is now Translocal. Conversely, at Mochi Gate, "Operational Vernacularism" emerges; here, hand-painted mobile numbers serve functional rather than performative roles, highlighting a Functional Rescaling (Maly, 2016) where digital communication supports the "slow" labor of traditional logistics. A specific code emerged for "Operational Vernacularism" at Mochi Gate. Here, mobile numbers on hand-painted boards serve a purely functional, rather than performative, role. This highlights a Functional Rescaling (Maly, 2016), where the "Fast" speed of digital communication is harnessed to support the "Slow" labor of traditional logistics, creating a rare hybrid identity.

2.2. Analog Resilience: The Residual Vernacular

Analog materiality—hand-painted wood or direct masonry lettering—has been pushed to the margins, surviving in only 22% of the corpus. This "Analog Resilience" is found primarily in industrial zones where the speed of trade is secondary to the utility of information. This reflects Maly's (2016) "Infrastructure of the Sign," where a lack of gloss indexes a lack of neoliberal aspiration, marking these zones as "operationally traditional" rather than "prestige-modern."

3. Semiotic Identity and Cultural Amnesia

The final theme explores the psychological cost of this shift, as the Walled City transitions from a site of Communal Custodianism to one of Transient Commercialism. The geosemiotics of the transect reveal a process of Architectural Masking. In Azam Cloth Market, oversized banners achieve 90% total erasure of the underlying Mughal masonry.

3.1. The Neoliberal Subject and Semiotic Capture

In wholesale hubs such as Akbari Mandi and Shah Alam Market, 35% of the landscape is dominated by corporate-sponsored banners from multi-national corporations. This constitutes **"Semiotic Capture"** (Pennycook, 2007), where standardized visual grammars erase local "Industrial Vernacularism." By accepting sponsored signage, merchants trade their unique familial identities for the symbolic power of a global brand. Consequently, the merchant

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identifies no longer as a "Custodian of the Gali," but as a globalized consumer of corporate aesthetics.

3.2. Heritage Defiance: Geosemiotics and Conflict

Addressing RQ4, the data reveals a state of Heritage Defiance: 85% of signs across core nodes utilize Architectural Masking, where oversized banners are physically bolted into Mughal arches. In Azam Cloth Market, this reaches 90% total masking, representing a "Violence of Materiality." Merchants trade ancestral visual markers for Top-Down Corporate Branding (e.g., Nestlé, Tapal). This visual overwrite creates a state of Cultural Amnesia, where architectural heritage is reduced to a mere substrate for transient, disposable commercialism. While the Walled City Lahore Authority (WCLA) mandates "slow" heritage-compliant materials, the merchant prioritizes "fast" visibility. By burying the historical facade under a "Digital Skin," the populace asserts their "Right to the City" as transactional subjects, effectively facilitating Cultural Amnesia—a state where the "modern" identity is built on the literal burial of ancestral history.

Discussion: Rescaling Identity in the Neoliberal City

The synthesis of these findings illustrates a city undergoing Neoliberal Rescaling, where the Walled City is being "flattened" into a standardized commercial grammar. Linguistic stratification and digital materiality work in tandem to create a "Secondary City"—a synthetic corridor of light and plastic existing atop decaying masonry. As noted in the Triadic Collision Model, merchants utilize digital handles to bypass the "slow-speed" regulations of heritage authorities.

In the Pakistani context, this mirrors recent scholarship by Manan et al. (2019), who emphasize that the marginalization of Urdu and vernacular languages like Punjabi in commercial spaces is a symptom of a deeper identity crisis. Locally, this results in a "repackaging" of identity to suit a digital-global gaze. Globally, while it reflects the "Super-diverse" landscapes documented by Blommaert and Maly (2016), Lahore faces a unique "heritage cost." The "Phygital" shift creates a "Fast City" that lives on screens, rendering the "Slow City"—the actual 18th-century architecture—semiotically invisible and culturally erased.

The conflict identified in RQ4 reflects a deeper sociological tension between State-led Heritage Narratives and Bottom-up Neoliberal Identities. The WCLA's focus on the "Historical Slow-Speed" of the city (Khan, 1997) is in direct friction with the "Digital Fast-Speed" required by 21st-century commerce (Blommaert, 2013). Manan et al. (2019) suggests that top-down regulations often fail because they treat the Linguistic Landscape (LL) as a static museum rather than a living, transactional network. Our findings argue that the local populace views the "Digital finish" and "English-Medium Identities" as essential tools for survival in a globalized economy. By bolting modern signage into Mughal masonry, merchants are not merely "vandalizing" heritage; they are asserting their Identity as Global Traders over their role as Heritage Custodians. This "Identity Performance" (Blommaert & Maly, 2014) highlights a failure in urban planning: the WCLA regulates the *material* of the sign, but the merchants are competing for *symbolic power* in the digital cloud, rendering physical architectural preservation a secondary concern to the "Phygital" visibility of the brand. The answer to RQ4 provides a critical contribution to the global discourse on Linguistic Landscapes and Neoliberalism (Pennycook, 2007). In the Pakistani context, the "Digital Encroachment" is not merely a technological update; it is an Identity Hijrah.

By prioritizing the "Digital Portal" over the "Architectural Fundament," merchants are participating in a collective Semiotic Erasure. The "WhatsApp Economy" documented at Mochi Gate and the "Instagram Prestige" of Suha Bazar suggest that the Walled City is being "rescaled" to fit into a global neoliberal grid. These findings align with scholars who argue that

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the digitalization of traditional South Asian bazaars often leads to a "loss of place-sense," where the unique geosemiotics of the historic city are sacrificed for the standardized legibility of the smartphone screen.

Thus, the findings suggest that the Walled City is undergoing a "Neoliberal Rescaling" (Blommaert, 2013). The shift in identity is not accidental but is driven by the perceived Symbolic Power of being "Global-Ready."

The contrast between the Circular Road (Operational Vernacular) and Suha Bazar (Prestige Digitalism) illustrates a Semiotic Gradient. At the periphery, the landscape is resilient and functional; at the core, it is synthetic and performative. This "Gilded Neoliberalism" suggests that the more valuable the trade (gold/jewelry), the more aggressive the erasure of the vernacular history. The digital handles (WhatsApp/IG) act as the final stage of this transition, allowing the merchant to "jump scales" from the local bazaar to the global cloud, rendering the physical heritage architecture semiotically redundant.

The findings demonstrate that the LL of Lahore's Walled City is undergoing an irreversible "Semiotic Overwrite" where English remains the primary tool for indexing "modernity," while Urdu is marginalized to religious or operational roles. The move to digital/synthetic materials is a performative rejection of the "Old Lahore" identity. The transition from traditional calligraphic scripts to digital acrylic represents a shift from communal custodianism to transient neoliberalism. The integration of digital portals has rescaled the merchant's identity from a local resident to a Global Transactional Subject prioritizing virtual connectivity over physical preservation. This evolution, while economically efficient, facilitates Cultural Amnesia, where the city's visual soul is traded for corporate legibility. The "Semiotic Overwrite" documented in this visual corpus serves as a warning sign. However, the increasing presence of digitally produced signage and English lexical insertions does not signify complete linguistic replacement but rather the emergence of hybridized communicative practices. This aligns with broader patterns of linguistic stratification and globalization, where local identities are reconfigured through new semiotic assemblages. Without heritage-sensitive signage policies, the Walled City risks becoming a synthetic corridor of light and plastic—a space where the digital "now" is erasing the historical "then."

Conclusion

This study concludes that the linguistic landscape of Lahore's Walled City functions not merely as a site of representation but as a space of semiotic negotiation and contestation that is undergoing the process of "Semiotic Overwrite," in which English functions as a primary resource for indexing modernity, while Urdu is increasingly associated with religious and operational domains. The shift toward digital and synthetic materials reflects a reorientation of visual communication practices, where the aesthetics of "Old Lahore" are being selectively reconfigured rather than entirely displaced. The transition from traditional khattati (calligraphy) to digital acrylic signage indicates a movement from communal custodianism toward more commercially driven and standardized semiotic practices.

The integration of digital portals has rescaled the merchant's identity from a locally embedded actor to a Global Transactional Subject, oriented toward visibility and connectivity beyond immediate spatial contexts. While this transformation enhances commercial reach and efficiency, it also raises concerns about Cultural Amnesia, particularly in relation to the diminishing visibility of historically grounded semiotic forms.

The notion of "Semiotic Overwrite," as observed in this 800-image corpus, therefore captures not a total erasure of the past, but an ongoing restructuring of the relationship between tradition and modernity. In the absence of heritage-sensitive signage policies, this trajectory may further privilege standardized, digitally mediated forms of representation, with implications for the long-term preservation of the Walled City's semiotic and cultural

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distinctiveness. This study contributes to linguistic landscape scholarship by extending ELLA 2.0 into a South Asian commercial context. Future research may explore longitudinal transformations or comparative urban settings.

Future Recommendations

1. The Walled City of Lahore Authority (WCLA) should consider implementing "Semiotic Zoning" frameworks that encourage the use of traditional materials and *khattati*, supported through incentive-based rather than purely regulatory approaches.
2. Future research may explore how digital portals (e.g., QR codes) can be integrated into traditional signage to bridge "Fast Commerce" and "Slow Heritage."
3. Studies could incorporate spatial and digital mapping techniques (e.g., 3D mapping) to document and monitor the "Speed of Erasure" of vernacular signage.
4. Longitudinal research is needed to examine patterns of **"Digital Encroachment"**, particularly the potential shift toward AR-based or fully mobile-mediated commercial interfaces.

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