

## The Representation of Beauty on TikTok: A Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis

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### Abstract

This study looks at the effects of beauty representation in TikTok in its ability to create effects on the audience based on visual texts created by users of the platform. This study allows studying four chosen videos by two famous creators, @tasyafarasya and @bellaclrs., through the prism of the qualitative approach and the semiotic framework by Roland Barthes. The analysis shows that there are three levels of meaning such as (1) the denotation, which is composed of makeup routines, fashion displays, and reviews of products; (2) the connotation, which implies the contemporary values of beauty like fairness, flawlessness, and fashionable look; and (3) the myth, which supports the ideology that beauty is determined by fairness, flawlessness, and fashionable appearance. These are symbolic structures that later create a diversity of effects to an audience. The positive effects are inspiration towards self care, creativity motivation, and social bonding and the negative effects are insecurity, social comparison, anxiety and loss of self esteem. The research concludes that the effects of representation of beauty do not manifest themselves immediately because of the content, but because of the cultural myth and ideological meaning coined by repetitive visual signs. The present research adds to the interpretation of TikTok as a new space that shapes and enhances the ideology of beauty in digital culture.

**Keywords:** beauty representation, semiotics, TikTok, myth, media impact

### INTRODUCTION

Several previous studies have examined beauty representation in digital and social media. The creation of beauty on Instagram was analyzed by Yanti and Bajari (2020), and it was revealed that beauty of women is mostly constructed in terms of fair skin, thin bodies, and the latest trendy looks that support the dominant standards of beauty. On the same note, Saputra (2018) found out that South Korean movies create an ideal female beauty based on visual perfection and body proportionality, which leads to naturalizing certain beauty standards. Considering TikTok, Fatmawati and Nur (2023) investigated the issue of beauty representation on the Tik Tok account of Jharna Bhagwanni and found out that the most used indication of beauty is flawless skin, aesthetic makeup, and visual attraction.

Although these studies are very insightful in the description of the representation of beauty in different media, the majority of them are more inclined towards the identification of the visual aspects of beauty and the broad representations of beauty. Little has been paid to how these visual indicators function at the myth and ideology level, especially through the semiotic model of Roland Barthes to describe how the meaning of beauty is culturally produced and naturalized again and again using digital tools like Tik Tok. Furthermore, prior studies tend to view beauty representation as a fixity, and do not excavate enough on how a repetitive exposure to idealized beauty images aids in the construction of audience meaning, and internalized beauty ideals.

Therefore, this study fills this gap by using the semiotic analysis proposed by Roland Barthes to explore the issue of beauty representation in Tik Tok content using the three concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth on the profiles of @tasyafarasya and @bellaclrs. This study is not only a description of beauty images but also aims to find out the ideological meaning and myths within digital beauty images, and how these constructed meanings connect to the view of the audience in the modern digital society.

The concept of beauty is commonly linked with women and interpreted as a thing that is pleasant to the eyes. But, the notion of beauty is subjective and relative per se, since it is culturally based and socially constructed. Throughout the history, beauty has not merely held a physical meaning but has also included non-physical aspects like behaviour, capabilities, and contributions that people bring to the surrounding (Saputra, 2021).

Social media and mass media are influential forces of the beauty standards in the society. The media in Indonesia is known to reflect female attractiveness by portraying fair skins, thin bodies, straight posture, sharp noses and trendy looks. These representations create unconsciously the ideal beauty standard, which is build as a social norm (Prahmadhani, 2007). Naomi Wolf (2004) claims that these beauty ideals are no longer natural notions, but the products of certain interests.

The phenomenon of creating beauty has become more prevalent in the era of digital media and, in one way, through the social media platform. Tik Tok has become one of the most effective platforms to influence the perception of beauty given the high number of users in Indonesia. Beauty and fashion-related content within Tik Tok tends to reinforce some beauty ideals and thus, may instigate some phenomena like body shaming and loss of self confidence among women who do not live to these ideals.

The topicality of the beauty representation on TikTok is proved by the statistical data about the huge impact of this platform. As per DataIndonesia.id (2023), Indonesia is the second-largest TikTok user base in the world, which means that the platform plays an important role in affecting the people and

their perceptions of different cultural trends. Moreover, according to the ZAP Beauty Index (2023), aesthetic appearance, facial clarity, and glowing skin are the visual signs that the Indonesian women consider to be the leading standards of beauty, which is largely due to the digital and social media influence. These data are indicative that social media platforms and especially Tik Tok plays an important role in the replication and spread of contemporary beauty standards.

Moreover, according to a survey by Parapuan (2023), many Indonesian women do not feel safe regarding their physical appearance, and social media were described as the main factor in this case. This phenomenon is indicative of the fact that repeated exposure to edited beauty content, which is usually boosted with the help of filters, light, and editing, can influence self-concept and social comparison between users. Being a most visual medium, TikTok accelerates the process of creating idealized beauty images and constantly supplying them with new content, which is distributed by an algorithm.

Resting on these phenomena, this study is going to investigate how the idea of beauty representation influences TikTok, using two accounts; that is, @tasyafarasya and @bellaclrs\_. These stories have been chosen as they are the representatives of various features and background and play an important role in the world of beauty and fashion. The proposed study is likely to foster a better comprehension of the role of beauty representation in Tik Tok on how the digital age audience perceives and reacts to it.

The digital media has taken a significant part in defining the beauty standards. The highly visual platform of TikTok builds new ideals that affect the self-perceptions of the audiences. Therefore, one should be aware of the meanings of beauty production and their influence on the viewers.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Theoretical Concepts of Representation**

Representation is a process of meaning production and exchange through signs, symbols and language in any given culture (Hall, 1997). The media representations are not the reflections of the reality but they are the constructs and creators of social meanings and identities. Representation, in relation to beauty, serves as a process that makes some physical traits and aesthetic values appear normal and valid with the repetition of the media (Burton, 2007; Yanti and Bajari, 2020). Therefore, the media representation of beauty is as a culture that shapes the perception of the audience towards themselves and other people.

### **Beauty as a Social and Cultural Construction**

Beauty is not an absolute or universal phenomenon but a socially constructed phenomenon in terms of cultural, historical, and ideological backgrounds (Wolf, 2004). Media is at the center of supporting the ideals of dominant beauty by continually depicting women as having fair skin, slim bodies and

symmetrical face features (Prahmadhani, 2007; Satria and Junaedi, 2022). They tend to exclude other representations of beauty and add to social pressures, dissatisfaction with their appearance, and anxiety of being judged based on appearance in women (Sari, 2017; Parapuan, 2023). Beauty standards can therefore be argued to be ideological means of controlling feminine bodies and identities in society.

### **Social Media and the Construction of Beauty on TikTok**

Social media communication allows individuals to actively create and consume visual content, which strengthens the spread of beauty representations (Rafiq, 2020). Beauty content on Tik Tok is reinforced by repetition in an algorithmic way, visual culture, and participatory culture (Rohmah, 2020). Past literature suggests that Tik Tok content tends to promote filtered and transitioned beauty, fashion shows, and these platforms have the potential to influence perceptions and self-judgment (Fatmawati and Nur, 2023). The dominant visual nature of the platform renders it as an important zone of producing contemporary meanings of beauty.

### **Media Effects and Audience Interpretation**

Though this study will not take a quantitative approach towards media impact, prior qualitative studies indicate that the recurrent exposure to beauty content could potentially affect audience perception and perception of self (Darmayanti and Gernihato, 2019). The social comparison processes tend to be triggered by the internalization of idealized beauty images by the audience, which results in the insecurity or pressure to conform (Yanti and Bajari, 2020). Thus, the reaction of the audience towards the presentation of beauty must be explained as interpretation process influenced by cultural meaning but not as the immediate causation.

### **Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory**

The semiotic theory, developed by Roland Barthes, offers a criticism approach to examine media representations based on the work of meaning at three levels of denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972). The literal meaning of a sign is denoted, the cultural and emotional meaning is known as connotation, and the myth is an ideological system that naturalizes some values and beliefs. Other researchers have used the semiotics of Barthes to examine the images of beauty in advertisements, films, and social media, showing how the myths of beauty are perpetually reproduced and normalized (Saputra, 2018; Sugeng, 2022). In this way, the semiotic perspective provided by Barthes can be very useful in revealing the ideological connotations of the content in Tik Tok beauty.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is based on the qualitative approach to comprehend the effects of the representation of beauty on the digital platform Tik Tok. The qualitative approach was selected since it enables a detailed analysis of meanings, symbols, and message construction in media material.

The research design is descriptive, which will describe and explain the phenomenon of beauty representation as introduced in TikTok content. The type of analysis used is semiotic analysis which is a term used by Roland Barthes model which encompasses denotative analysis, connotative analysis and mythological analysis.

It is proposed to investigate the image of beauty in Tik Tok content, and the research participants are the videos posted in two Tik Tok accounts chosen at random: @tasyafarasya and @bellaclrs\_. The choice of these accounts was based on the variation in their features, experience, and their impact on the social media in the sphere of beauty and fashion.

There are primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected in terms of visual elements, text, and stories inside the Tik Tok video on the chosen accounts. Secondary sources were used to gather information in the form of books, journals, academic literature and online sources that were concerned with the representation of beauty and the use of social media.

Data collection methods included observation of Tik Tok content indirectly and recording them in the form of screen shots and visual transcripts to prove the analysis. The analysis of data was carried out in a form of data reduction which refers to data comprehension and interpretation. The interpretation phase linked the research results to the concepts of semiotic proposed by Roland Barthes to reveal such meanings as explicit meanings, implicit meanings, and beauty myths created via the TikTok content.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Beauty Representation Symbols in TikTok Content**

This study finds a set of visual and non-visual symbols in the Tik Tok beauty contents on the accounts of tasyafarasya and bellaclrs. Symbols, when it comes to semiotic terms, act as signifiers and are used to render a meaning by means of denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972). The signs recognized are makeup activities, skin condition, style, body movements, video effects, and digital style like filters and lights.

### **Symbols and Meanings in @tasyafarasya's Content**

There are some prevailing symbols in Aveeno skincare review video. On the denotative level, the video features close-ups on the face, the use of skin care products, natural lighting, and the explanation of the benefits of the products. These signs depict literally a beauty regime and product appraisal procedure. At the **connotative level**, glowing yet natural skin symbolizes health, comfort, and self-care as opposed to physical attractiveness. The lack of heavy makeup is associated with being real and reliable and makes beauty something you can obtain with care instead of being a product of genetic perfection.

These symbols create the ideology of beauty equating to healthy skin at the myth level and women can achieve their ideal beauty by using the correct skincare products. The myth also implicitly changes the beauty ideals, which are based on skin color, to skin condition but the beauty ideals remain something that has to be constantly controlled and optimized.

The denotative signs in the makeup transition video that is based on Princess Anisha Roshna are the transformation effects, beautiful clothes, elegant makeup and the confident facial expression. Connotatively, the transformation is a sign of empowerment, femininity and greater social worth. The video, at its mythical level, supports the notion that the concept of beauty, and consequently, the confidence and social standing, can be created by the visual alteration, and femininity is equated with beauty and elegance.

### **Symbols and Meanings in @bellaclrs\_'s Content**

In the "Baju Lebaran Part Sekian" video, modest dressings, balanced colors, home-grown fashion and casual body language constitute denotative symbols. These aspects literally represent what one should wear during a party.

At the connotative level, the outfits mean simplicity, cultural aptness, and modern modesty. The fact that local brands are used is associated with being accessible, national identity, and disputes the concept that beauty should be based on imported or luxury fashion.

The myth that is developed with the help of these symbols is that beauty and elegance can be gained not only with the help of economic privilege but also with the help of cultural relevance and personal skills in styling.

The denotative symbols in the video the "Pinterest Girl" are changing outfits fast, various fashion styles (street style, Korean style, edgy fashion), confident poses, and fast background music. The meaning of these symbols, connotatively, is that of global femininity and creativity and awareness of trends. On the mythic level, Pinterest is established as the authoritative visual source of information that determines how "modern beauty" should be, making it natural that women constantly have to adjust to the beauty trends across the globe.

### **Comprehensive Interpretation of Beauty Symbols**

In all the content under consideration, beauty is created by repetitive symbols that are more focused on visual perfection, self-control, and aesthetic consciousness. Body gesture, makeup, fashion and skin condition are interdependent signs that create meanings beyond the physical appearance. These symbols collectively create a myth of **curated beauty**, where femininity is measured by visual consistency, discipline, and alignment with dominant aesthetic norms.

These symbols are duplicated in the content of TikTok, which adds to their ideological force. Viewers are not only being subjected to images of beauty but instead to standards that are normalized and seem natural and achievable though they are created using digital curating and lighting filters and edits.

### **Audience Meaning and Ideological Implications**

These symbols create ambivalent responses on the audience due to the meanings that they create. On the one hand, the viewers view the symbols as a source of inspirations, creativity, and self-expression. Conversely, the same symbols also serve the purpose of social comparison and self-evaluation,

particularly in case the audiences subconsciously carry the myth that beauty has to be optimized again and again.

Therefore, the effect of beauty representation on Tik Tok does not emerge directly out of the individual content but rather out of the ideological meanings contained in the repetitive symbols. These symbols serve as codes of culture that define the meaning, the desire and the destination of beauty on the digital realms.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that beauty representation in the Tik Tok posts on the profile of @tasyafarasya and @bellaclrs is not only about physical appearance but also the development of meaning of beauty through skin care, use of make-up, fashion, and self-identification. Based on semiotic analysis by Roland Barthes, beauty is shown as social construction influenced by the digital media in various ways in terms of denotative, connotative and mythological meanings.

These images have two effects on viewers. TikTok content serves as a tool of inspiration, education, and creative expression to women on one hand. Conversely, the standards of beauty that are introduced are also capable of creating insecurity and social pressure in audiences who do not fit the media ideals of beauty. Therefore, TikTok has a major influence on the paradigm of female beauty during the digital era.

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