

THE IDEALIZATION OF FEMALE MODELS IN VICTORIA'S SECRET FASHION SHOW

(*IDEALISASI MODEL PEREMPUAN DALAM PERAGAAN BUSANA VICTORIA'S SECRET*)

Muhammad Putra Wibowo

Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Padjadjaran
Jalan Raya Bandung Sumedang Km 21, Jatinangor (45363), Sumedang, Indonesia
Pos-el: mpwibowo@gmail.com

Lia Maulia Indrayani

Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Padjadjaran
Jalan Raya Bandung Sumedang Km 21, Jatinangor (45363), Sumedang, Indonesia
Pos-el: lia.maulia.i@gmail.com

Abstrak

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dan mendeskripsikan pesan di balik peragaan busana Victoria's Secret dengan menggunakan teori semiotika Roland Barthes. Berdasarkan teori tersebut, makna denotatif dari peragaan busana Victoria's Secret dari segi fungsi dan tujuan adalah pertunjukan atau parade busana semata, sedangkan makna konotatif dari peragaan busana ini adalah tontonan yang menyampaikan pesan bahwa merek tersebut secara praktis mengidealisasikan para modelnya. Idealisasi ini terlihat dari cara para model dihadapkan dengan persyaratan standar bentuk tubuh, cara mereka digambarkan sebagai panutan bagi model lain dalam menggapai karir yang sukses, dan cara mereka diharuskan untuk menampilkan kesempurnaan kepada penonton. Konsep idealisasi ini, dalam sudut pandang semiotika, merupakan sebuah mitos dalam budaya masyarakat global yang dikonstruksi oleh pertunjukan tersebut.

Kata kunci: *semiotika, idealisasi perempuan, peragaan busana Victoria's Secret*

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze and describe the message behind Victoria's Secret Fashion Show, using semiotics theory by Roland Barthes. Based on the theory, the denotative meaning from Victoria's Secret Fashion Show is that the show, in terms of function and purposes, is a mere fashion parade or clothing exhibition, while the connotative meaning of the show is that Victoria's Secret Fashion Show is a spectacle which conveys message that the brand practically idealizes the models. The idealization are seen from the way models are met with the requirements of body shape standards, how they are pictured as the models for other models in achieving successful career, and how they are supposed to present perfection to the spectators. This concept of idealization, in the perspective of semiotics, is a myth constructed by the show which lies within the culture of the global society.

Keywords: semiotics, female idealization, Victoria's Secret Fashion Show

1. Introduction

Victoria's Secret Fashion Show is an annual show sponsored by an American lingerie and sleepwear brand Victoria's Secret. It is known as a sophisticated event with luxurious clothing, various music by leading entertainers, and high-tech set design according to the different themes running within the show. Being not only as a mere fashion parade or exhibition, the models of Victoria's Secret Fashion Show have important role in the event. These models are presented as idealized women who have achieved their dreams on becoming successful models. This concept of idealization comes as a connotative interpretation upon Victoria's Secret Fashion Show. Using Roland Barthes' model of semiotics analysis, this research aims to analyze and describe the concept of idealization of female models in Victoria's Secret Fashion Show.

Like all sign systems, in terms of semiotics study, fashion is interconnected with other elements of culture and can be used as an analytical tool for examining the indications of various aspects of cultural significance. It was not until the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century that the lack of critical analysis in fashion was broken. Fashion theory is grounded in the principle that "fashion" is a cultural construct that embodies consumers identities (Barnard, 2014). The term "fashion theory" was now finally considered an interdisciplinary field that studied fashion as a meaning system within which cultural and aesthetic portrayals of the clothed body are produced (Barnard, 2014).

As Roland Barthes (1915—1980), a French philosopher, linguist, and semiotician, had widened the study of semiology to include reading any system of signs (image, gesture, sound, and object), it is become possible and probable to deeply analyze the meaning or the interpretation of fashion. It teaches us that through learning to translate signs, we can open our eyes to the connotation behind the text (Barthes, 1988). He stated that the signifier, with reference to clothing was the denotation, or the clothing code, the clothing, as it appeared to be (Barthes, 2013). Meanwhile, the signified was the connotation, or the fashion code, the idea that there is more than meets the eye (Barthes,

2013).

The development of fashion through the ages led to an event which makes the subject even more dynamic: fashion show. It is an event where fashion designers or particular fashion brands showcase their upcoming items to the public. There is no clear history about the world's first fashion show and its detailed development as Valerie Steele, chief curator and director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, says in Fortini (2006), "The topic of fashion shows remains to find its historian." However, while the exact origin of fashion show remains obscure, its popularity began approximately in the early 1900s, when American retailers put on first fashion show in the country to promote merchandise and capture the attention of middle-class female shoppers, and also to improve a store's status in the eyes of its clientele (Fortini, 2006).

The vocabulary of fashion has been including expressions such as "concepts", "happenings", and "installations" (Taylor, 2005). Fashion's attachment to art nowadays is significant. Taking the show of Chanel, Alexander McQueen, and John Galliano as examples, Ginger G. Duggan suggests that according to the classification of contemporary fashion shows in their relation to performance art, the shows are spectacles that are closely connected to the performing arts of theater and opera, as well as feature films and music videos (Duggan, 2001). He also explains that spectacle designers create shows around specific themes that are easily translated via set design, props, lighting and music.

As an entertaining spectacle, a fashion show has an important element in each of the event: the models. In Victoria's Secret Fashion Show, the models have roles not only as the ones who wear the products on the runway, but also as the entertainers. As entertainers, they are met with certain standards in gaining the chance to be the models of the show, or in other words, they are idealized into the standardization.

This research aims to find, analyze, and describe this concept of idealization in Victoria's Secret Fashion Show using semiotics model of Barthes which influenced by Hjelmslev's model. The model identifies "a level of expression (E) and a level of content (C); these two levels are linked by a relation (R), and the ensembles of

levels and their relations form a system (ERC)” (Barthes, 1990, p. 27). “(R)” can be viewed as adding an “(E)” and “(C)”; so, “(ERC)” is equivalent to E+C. Those elements integrate in the two ways below:

Figure 1. Barthes’ Semiotics Model

System 2 (Connotation)

Expression ERC=E+C		Content
Expression	Content	

System 1 (Denotation)

System 2 (Connotation)

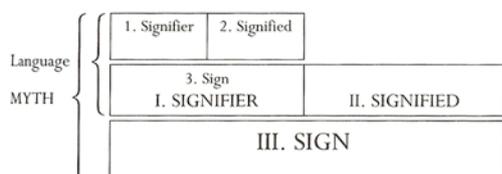
Expression	Content ERC=E+C	
	Expression	Content

System 1 (Denotation)

For the advance reference, Expression (E) corresponds to the Signifier (Sr) and Content (C) corresponds to the Signified (Sd), which will be fully explained in next section. System 1 is “the level of denotation,” and system 2 is “the level of connotation” (Barthes, 1990, p. 27). The secondary system (System 2) can be constituted in two different ways: (1) the level of expression of the secondary system is the integration of the primary system (System 1)’s level of expression and level of content; (2) the level of content of the secondary system (System 2) is the combination of the primary system’s (System 1’s) level of expression and level of content. Hjelmslev designated “(ERC) R C” ((E+C)+C) as “connotative semiotic” and “E R (ERC)” (E+(E+C)) as “metasemiotic” (Taverniers, 2008).

From this, Barthes (1991) then developed another model of denotative and connotative signification, which also influenced by semiotics model by Ferdinand de Saussure:

Figure 2. Barthes’ Denotative and Connotative Signification



2. Methods

This study uses descriptive qualitative method in analyzing and describing the data. The data for this study are the phenomena related to the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show including the events of the fashion show, the models, and the issues related to them, which are collected from several sources such as the brand’s website, social media, and news media. These phenomena are considered a sign, which is then treated as the data to be analyzed from the perspective of semiotics.

The theory of Barthes’ denotative and connotative signification model that is explained earlier is used in this research to analyze and describe the concept of idealization of female models in Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. The goal is to study the myth conveyed by the show and see its relation to the culture within common society.

3. Finding and Discussion

Based on the semiotics theory from Barthes (1991), the denotative interpretation of Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show is that the show, in terms of function and purposes, is a mere fashion parade or clothing exhibition. It is only supposed to show upcoming items from the brand, which are presented along with the models who wear it. However, connotatively, Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show conveys message that the brand practically idealized the models. The idealization of the female models can be considered as the myth of Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show, as a sign system. The myth is seen from the way models are met with the requirements of body shape standards, how they are depicted as the models for other models in reaching successful career, and how they are supposed to present perfection to the spectators. This explanation is described in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. The Idealization of Female Models in Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show

1. Signifier Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show	2. Signified Fashion Parade/ Clothing Exhibition	
Fashion Parade/Clothing Exhibition		Idealization of Female Models
Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show Idealizes Female Models		

3.1 Requirements of Body Shape

Standards

The casting for Victoria's Secret Fashion Show is held two to three months prior to the show each year. It has a selective and secretive casting process since there is no publication leaked about it unless from the Victoria's Secret's posts on its social media. Seen and summarized from the posts, during a casting, the prospective models are asked to walk on a catwalk wearing black underwear and heels. After the model walks the runway, a panel of four judges will ask them a series of questions before telling them the casting result. A small audience, camera crew, and Victoria's Secret Angels are also present for the casting.

The models who attend the casting are invited several days before. Seeing the prospective models who attend the casting and, more apparently, the ones who accepted to walk at the fashion show, it can be seen that there are standards that goes on among the models. According to Helmer (2017) on www.thebalance.com, there are basic requirements for becoming Victoria's Secret Fashion Show models, such as to be between the ages of 18–30, healthy and in great shape, having slim build, and be between 5'8" and 6'0" tall.

Although those requirements are not officially stated nor released by Victoria's Secret itself, it still can be considered as true by seeing the facts of the topic in reality. The average American woman is 5'4" and 140 lbu, whereas the average model is 5'11" and 117 lb (National Eating Disorders Association, 2002). Researchers also find that fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women (Smolak, 1996). About this idealization of women's body, Strahan, Lafrance, Wilson, Ethier, Spencer, and Zanna (2008) stated that women's body dissatisfaction is influenced by sociocultural norms for ideal appearance that are pervasive in society and particularly directed at women, and that Victoria's Secret has a role for sending that message.

These standardization and idealization of the female models' body by Victoria's Secret for its fashion show makes clear that the brand is practically has strict focus on the models beside the fashion products itself. The models need to

meet some standard which considered as ideal to be successfully counted on in the event. This concept hints that the models are being idealized and objectified as selectable choices based on the standard requirements, which denotatively has nothing to do with the purpose of the show, since it is a fashion show rather than a woman show.

3.2 Depiction of the Models as Ideal

Female Models

Victoria's Secret Fashion Show is filmed and broadcasted globally on television channels. It is also reported on many mass media, fashion blogs and websites, and as well social media accounts. One of the segments which become routinely reported is the backstage documentary. The segment shows the audience how the models are being touched up, put on the clothing, and briefed, taken care, and pampered by the crew, both in video or picture format. The documentary also features the model's personal activities such as taking self or group pictures with the other fellow models, which later commonly posted on their social media accounts.

This backstage reporting makes a sense that Victoria's Secret Fashion Show is trying to send the idea that its models are the most successful ones for being able to be the member of the show. The brand is portraying the excitement among the models for having been selected to walk in the show, and that they are portrayed as inspiration for other models. The audiences, as spectators, consume the reporting of the model's backstage activity as if it is a documentation of a movie's behind-the-scene. The models are put there to give extra effort to the content of the show, and supposed to convey an inspiring message about being in a place they have been dreamed of where they are treated like a queen by the crew.

3.3 Presentation of Perfection to the Spectators

Alike the process of movie making, the filming production of Victoria's Secret Fashion Show involves a number of editing process. One of the methods used in order to do so is by recording the show twice for each event. The

models are supposed to walk two times, with identical concepts, but shot in different angles. It is done for the sake of perfection; the result of edited films later can be broadcasted as a full documentary to all over the world flawlessly. One of the practical examples of this method is when a Victoria's Secret Angel Elsa Hosk hit the face of Ariana Grande, the singing performer at the show, when she walked at Victoria's Secret Fashion Show 2014. Although there are leaked amateur films went viral about the incident, it was not featured on the official television show.

In a play, for instance, an unexpected incident involving the actors is something that will catch audiences' attention. It also occurs in the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show. Take for example the fall of model Ming Xi on the runway of Victoria's Secret Fashion Show 2017. The incident went viral on the internet and reported on many top fashion media such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *ELLE*, and *TeenVogue*, and also on common mass media such as Daily Mail Online, USA Today, and Express.

The case of the fall of Ming Xi that went globally viral, regardless the fact that it is the first fall incident in Victoria's Secret Fashion Show, proves that the brand has put standardization and idealization for its event. The concept of perfection which is built by the brand has affected the society, making an unexpected fall of a model to be considered as an inappropriate

thing. It also proves that Victoria's Secret has successfully presented its models as the supposedly-idealized person to be consumed by the public.

4. Closing

4.1 Conclusion

Victoria's Secret Fashion Show is not only about a fashion exhibition where the upcoming products of the brand are presented. It is also about an entertainment spectacle, where the female models are the focus of the show. These models are supposedly presented as idealized women who have achieved their dreams on becoming successful models. This concept of idealization comes as a connotative interpretation upon Victoria's Secret Fashion Show. It is a myth constructed by the show which lies within the culture of the global society.

4.2 Suggestion

The idealization are seen from the way models are met with the requirements of body shape standards, how they are pictured as the models for other models in reaching successful career, and how they are supposed to present perfection to the spectators. Because a myth can be related to history, and can dynamically change over times, it is necessary to examine the topic diachronically in further study.

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