

Reading the Visual Signs of “Young, Different and Dangerous” in Fashion Spread of *NYLON* Indonesia Magazine January 2012

Vinanda, F.¹, Handojo, P. F.² and Nugroho, A. D.³

^{1, 2, 3} English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, East Java, INDONESIA

E-mails: felkizavinanda@yahoo.com, priskafebrinia@petra.ac.id, aylanda@peter.petra.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims at showing the visual signs used to signify the concept of “Young, Different and Dangerous” in a magazine’s fashion spread. The visual signs are observed by using Dyer’s theory of human signs (1982) and the analysis is focused on the reading of visual signs at two orders of signification, the denotation and connotation. The findings show that the model’s appearance, manner, activity and setting of place are reflections of the magazine’s desired concepts, which suggested by the editor-in-chief. By understanding this, the visual images in fashion magazine, especially *NYLON* Indonesia, are constructed in such a way to reflect the magazine’s identity and to communicate the magazine’s branding as well.

Keywords: Visual images, Visual signs, Fashion magazine, Denotation and Connotation

When reading fashion magazines, there is a pile of visual images featuring models in latest fashion trend from well-known designers or retailers, uninterrupted by advertisements and accompanied by texts (or ‘by-lines’). This type of feature in fashion magazine is what Moeran (2006, pp. 729-732) called as “fashion well” or widely known as fashion spread. A fashion spread is prepared and arranged under the concept of the magazine’s editors. Yet, the final decision is made by the editor-in-chief since he/she has the “overall editing responsibilities in any mass media including print and does quality control of the content, language and aesthetics of the articles or documents appearing on the specified medium” (Patil, 2012, para 2). Due to the fact, Ein Halid, the editor in chief of *NYLON* Indonesia, possesses the right to select the most appropriate theme or concept for each edition in the magazine.

Born on January 12, Ein Halid has been the editor-in-chief of *NYLON* Indonesia since the magazine’s first issue in January 2011. *NYLON* Indonesia is a franchise magazine from the original *NYLON*, a New York-based “bicoastal fashion and lifestyle magazine for women in their 20s” (Colford, 2001, para 4). For this reason, *NYLON* Indonesia follows the “avant-garde formula” of the original *NYLON* which was initiated by Marvin Scott Jarett, the founder of *NYLON*. As mentioned in Cox (2001), Jarett claimed that his magazine has “more of a personality than most of the magazines in the women’s category” on its fashion, beauty and accessories coverage (para 12). This also includes for the magazine’s bold use of “white space and innovative photography” (Cox, 2001, para 14). Following this fact, one of the features in *NYLON* Indonesia which shows the formula is the fashion spread in January 2012 issue, the first anniversary issue. As the editor-in-chief, Halid (2012) introduced a concept underlying the making of the magazine, that is “Young, Different and Dangerous” as seen in the “Letter from the Editor” section (p. 6). Therefore, that concept affects the making of the magazine’s fashion spread as well.

As the data of this study, I choose a fashion spread entitled “Two Can Play This Game” since it is the featured fashion spread on the magazine’s table of contents (*Nylon Indonesia* January 2012, p. 4) and it is the local fashion story implying the concepts of “Young, Different and Dangerous”. In “Two Can Play This Game”, there are nine pages of photographs showing two female models in different poses, make-ups, and most obviously, color-clashing clothes from various brands of designers or retailers. These nine photographs are in the form of visual images which are significant to be explored. To support this view, Rose (2012) stated that photographs are “never innocent” because they “interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways; they represent it” (p. 2). Thus, it is possible that the nine photographs in “Two Can Play This Game” represent the concepts

of the magazine, the “Young, Different and Dangerous”, so that we are curious to know the visual signs used to signify the concept of “Young, Different and Dangerous”.



Picture 1. The Nine Photographs in “Two Can Play This Game”
Source: *NYLON* Indonesia (January 2012, pp. 105-113)

In order to show the visual signs, I would use three main theories. Firstly, I would collect the textual definition of “young”, “different” and “dangerous” as a guideline to match the visual signs with the meaning of “Young, Different and Dangerous” itself.

Next, I would apply the theory of human signs proposed by Dyer (1982) in order to reveal the denotative visual signs in each nine photographs. This includes four aspects of human which are appearance, manner, activity and props and settings. The appearance includes age, gender, national and racial, hair, body, size and looks (pp. 97-98). The manner includes expression, eye contact, pose and clothes (pp. 99-100). The activity includes touch, body movement and positional communication (pp. 101-104) and the properties include the products and objects used in ads, while settings include the background of the models (pp. 104-105).

Lastly, I would use the denotation and connotation theory in semiotics in order to demonstrate the signification of the visual signs. According to Barthes (as in Chandler, 1994, chap. 7), there are three orders of signification, “denotation”, “connotation” and “myth”. For this study, we only use the first two orders of signification, denotation and connotation. Chandler (1994, chap. 7) explained that denotation is the first order of signification which consists of a signifier and a signified. For Barthes, denotation also refers to the physical reality of the object that is signified. Chandler (1994, chap. 7) defined connotation as the second order of signification consisting of the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier, in which an additional signified is attached to it. Additionally, Crow (2010) explained that connotation is the level where the reader is playing a part “by applying their knowledge of the systematic coding of the image”. Therefore, when reading an image at connotation level, the readers give meaning based on rules or conventions that they have learnt (Crow, 2010, p. 55).

The Representation of the Concept of “Young” through Visual Signs

First of all, I have discovered that there are three different aspects signifying the concept of “young” such as the model’s appearance (age and body), manner (color and shape of clothes) and activity (body movement). As an example of the aspect of appearance, the model’s age has particular meaning. In the nine photographs, the models seem to be in their late teen to young adult age period, between 18 to 23 years old. This age range signifies the Wyn & White (1997)’s theory of youth age, which claimed that ‘youth’ as an age category “generally starts at age 13 and continues until age 25” for institutional and policy purposes (p. 1). As a result, the connotation given to the model’s age is “young age”.

Under the aspect of manner, the example would be the model’s colors of clothes, which also signify being “youthful”; specifically yellow and orange colors. For Chau (2007), yellow color, especially the yellow lemon, can make “an aging person look a lot younger” (para 1). From her statement, it is obvious that yellow can convey the youthful spirit. In the same way, orange is often associated with youth. As stated in *Color Psychology* (2013), orange is “highly accepted among young people and orange shall be incorporated in designs relating to topics that are fun, easy going and youthful” (para 7). For these reasons, both yellow and orange are colors that the magazine used to signify “young”



Picture 2. The Yellow and Orange Colors in the Model’s Clothes
Source: *NYLON Indonesia* (2012, pp. 106-108)

On the other hand, the most noticeable illustration for the aspect of activity that can signify “young” is the model’s body movement. According to Dyer (1982), body movement is related to what the actor and it can be “exaggerated, ridiculous or child-like, calling into question the competence of the performer” (p. 101). From this point, the body movement of the models can convey particular meaning to the readers. In the fashion spread, the models conduct “youthful” activities. For example, Anna, the model in pink hair, is slightly stretching her partner’s pants. In another picture, Anna is also depicted while stretching out her blouse and tossing her hair up. Those three different activities show typical children habits as the model is likely to ‘play’ with her friend’s pants by carefully touching the surface of the cloth and picking it, then she also ‘plays’ with her blouse by stretching it out and ‘plays’ with her hair by tossing it up. ‘Playing’ is typically associated with children activity and thus, those particular body movements suggest the idea of “youthful activities”.



Picture 3. The Model's Child-like Body Movements

Source: *NYLON Indonesia* (2012, pp. 108-112)

Up to this point, the connotations of every denotative visual signs found in the text are “young age”, “youthful colors” and “child-like activities”. These connotations correspond with the textual definitions of “young” based on Dictionary.com (n.d.): “1) being in the first or early stage of life or growth, 2) having the appearance, freshness, vigor, or other qualities of youth, 3) of or pertaining to youth, 4) inexperienced or immature, 5) not far advanced in years in comparison with another or others”. Thus, this indicates that there are several visual signs used in “Two Can Play This Game” to signify the concept of “young” such as the model’s appearance, manner and activity.

The Representation of the Concept of “Different” through Visual Signs

The visual signs used to signify the concept of “different” are the model’s appearance (hair and body) and manner (color and shape of clothes and styling of accessories). As the first example, the model with pink hair is the most visible sign connoting the idea of “different”. Although Felsenthal (2011) thinks that pink hair has “migrated from the realm of the super weird to the realm of the fashion forward” (para 2), pink hair is considered “unusual” and will automatically make someone’s look different because we are used to see human in neutral hair colors such as black, brown, red, blonde or white.



Picture 4. The Model's Pink Hair

Source: *NYLON Indonesia* (2012, pp. 105-113)

Another example that reflects the concept of “different” is the model’s design of clothes and accessories, which derived from the manner aspect. In the nine photographs, the models wear unique blouses, outerwear, necklaces, headpiece and shoes that make them “different” from our everyday style.



Picture 5. The Model's Unique Clothing and Accessories (from left to right and bottom to left: Picture 2, Picture 3, Picture 5, Picture 6 and Picture 8)
 Source: *NYLON Indonesia* (2012, pp. 106-112)

The necklaces that the models wear are in the form of doll's part of body and drawing tool. Obviously, these designs differ with the usual necklace we used to see in daily lives. The dictionary even defines necklace as "a piece of jewelry consisting of a string of stones, beads, jewels, or the like, or a chain of gold, silver, or other metal, for wearing around the neck" (*Dictionary.com*, n.d.) and the material used for the necklaces do not match with the definition. In contrast, the necklaces are made from plastics, specifically in the form of doll's hands and legs and also crayons. Therefore, the necklaces used in *NYLON Indonesia* do not follow the custom so that connotatively, they are considered different.

The design of the shoes is also "different" since the sneakers' tongue is in the form of panda doll head. This contrasts to any other sneakers whose tongue parts are usually made from flat leathers.

Furthermore, the design of the model's blouse and outerwear are also rather uncommon. In one of the photographs, the model wears a cut-out crop top with weaving details. While it is common to wear top with plain details, *NYLON Indonesia* has proven that a plain yellow top can be striking by adding some handmade cut-out and weaving details. The cut-out details on the t-shirt is originally made by the wearer him or herself, no sewing involve, only by cutting the t-shirt using scissors (*KentWired.com*, n.d., para 1) and then weaving it. As a result, the wearer will look different for the unique details on his or her t-shirt.

The red origami bolero also makes the models look "different" since it is unusual for someone to wear clothes made by origami, which is usually used for decoration not clothes.

To summarize, the connotations that are related to the concept of "different" are the model's different hair color, clothes and accessories design. These connotations match with the textual definition of "different" as stated in *Dictionary.com* (n.d.): 1) not alike in character or quality; differing; dissimilar, 2) not identical; separate or distinct, 3) various; several, 4) not ordinary; unusual". Therefore, it can be concluded that there are several visual signs in the fashion spread signifying the concept of "different" such as the model's appearance and manner.

The Representation of the Concept of "Dangerous" through Visual Signs

I have also revealed the visual signs that demonstrate the idea of "dangerous" such as the model's manner (facial expression and clothes), activity (body movement) and place setting (black background color).

As an illustration from the aspect of manner, the model's fierce facial expressions in several pictures are to confirm that she is "dangerous" to the society environment. In order to observe the model's fierce face, a conventional cultural code is used as suggested by Dyer (1982, p. 99) that "most expressions are based on socially learned, conventionalized cultural codes, which vary from culture to culture". In some of the photographs, the model gazes with sharp eyes, sometimes looks directly at the viewers and sometimes looks away as called "shifty eyes"; and wears pursed lips. When someone gazes with sharp eyes, he or she usually reflects anger. Then, when someone shifts her eyes, this may indicate that he or she and this expression implies discomfort, displeasure or even anger since noted that shifty eyes "reflects a guilty discomfort, as does the attempt to minimize eye

contact” (Jaskolka, 2011, p. 166). Whereas, the model’s pursed lips usually indicate that a tense expression as supported by her eyes gesture. These qualities of “discomfort” and “intense” are likely to trigger a fight between one person to another, so that the model’s facial expression would likely lead to dangerous situation if occurs in daily lives.



Picture 6. The Model’s Fierce Facial Expressions
Source: *NYLON Indonesia* (2012, pp. 105-110)

Another example of the model’s manner that can influence the society to commit bad actions is the model’s revealing clothes. In several photographs, the models are seen wearing bralet, crop top, mini shorts and mini-skirt. For example, the mini-skirts suggest a ‘sexy’ look due to the display of woman’s legs. Svendsen (2006) claimed that once women show their legs, “these became the most erotic part of the body” (p. 87). This particular argument appeared when women generally wore clothes such as long dresses or long sleeves to cover their body. For this reason, the exposure of (supposed-to) covered legs can affect the society’s attitude toward mini-skirts, which is to claim it as “sexual”. As a result, this act of promoting sexuality can trigger an act of physical abuse to woman’s body such as raping and this is really unsafe for women.



Picture 7. The Model’s Revealing Clothes
Source: *NYLON Indonesia* (2012, pp. 105-113)

From the aspect of activity, the model’s body movement is considered harmful in several pictures. In one of the photographs, the model is aggressively stretching her yellow blouse. If the model keeps committing this particular act in the future, the elasticity of the fabric of her blouse can be reduced. Therefore, the model shows a destructive activity toward her blouse and it is considered “dangerous” for the durability of the blouse.

The last aspect is from the setting of place of where the photographs are taken, which is the black background color. In daily lives, this setting can suggest strange and fearful feelings that originated from being at darker place. As a matter of fact, the use of black background color can produce a feeling of strange and also being far from daily, conscious experience. It is because human beings react to the absence of lighting as Logan (as cited in Birren, 1982) explained:

We are natural creatures originating in the subtropics, attuned to high levels of natural illumination. We can operate for less, for a penalty —poorer health, shorter life expectancy” (p. 13).

This means that human beings are more likely to feel strange, dreadful and unsafe with the absence of lights. Therefore, the most appropriate associations for the setting are strange and dreadful place.

To end with, several connotations which related to the concept of “dangerous” are “high-risk” facial expression, clothes, body movement and “unsafe” place. These connotations match with the definition of “dangerous” as stated in Dictionary.com (n.d.): “1) Full of danger or risk; causing

danger; perilous; risky; hazardous, unsafe, 2) Able or likely to cause physical injury". From this matching, I have finally understood that the visual signs reflecting the concept of "dangerous" are the model's appearance, manner, activity and place setting.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that all visual signs in the fashion spread correspond with the magazine's three fundamental concepts, "Young, Different and Dangerous". These visual signs ranged from the model's appearance, manner, activity and place setting. The concept of "young" is reflected through the model's young age, orange and yellow clothing, and child-like body movements, while the model's pink hair, color-blocking outfits, unique design of clothing and accessories project the idea of "different". For "dangerous", it is shown through the model's fierce facial expression, revealing clothes, harmful activity and the photograph's black background color.

By understanding this, I have learned that the magazine producers use visual images to communicate its identity to the readers. In preparing the fashion spread, the magazine producer initially considers the market they have been focused on. For example, *NYLON* Indonesia magazine considers those who love alternative fashion and pop culture so that *NYLON* Indonesia needs to find out the values that the readers carry. It can be seen from the fashion spread "Two Can Play This Game", in which *NYLON* Indonesia carefully selected the visual images they have published.

In order to select the most appropriate visual images, the magazine producer needs to either consciously or unconsciously consider the denotation and connotation of every image. For instance, the magazine producer picks several images that can signify their main concepts for each edition which are "young", "different" and "dangerous".

To conclude, visual images are indeed never innocent. It implies underlying meanings that people need to pay attention. In the context of *NYLON* Indonesia as a fashion magazine, these meanings refer to the magazine's identity or branding, specifically the expressive and individual style with the spirit of "young, different and dangerous" as in "Two Can Play This Game".

REFERENCES

- 10 ways to cut up your tee shirt*. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://kentwired.com/10-ways-to-cut-up-your-tee-shirt>
- Birren, F. (1982). *Light, Color & Environment: Revised Edition*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Inc.
- Chandler, D. (1994). *Denotation, Connotation and Myth*. Retrieved from: <http://users.aber.ac.uk/dgc/Documents/S4B/sem06.html>
- Chau, A. K. (2007). *Wearing Certain Color's Can Make You Look Years Younger*. Retrieved from: <http://voices.yahoo.com/wearing-certain-colors-look-years-younger-569992.html>
- Crow, D. (2010). *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics in the Visual Arts 2nd Edition*. Switzerland: AVA Publishing SA.
- Colford, P. (1999, March 3). *Nylon Not a Stretch for the Man Behind Ray Gun*. Retrieved from: <http://articles.latimes.com/print/1999/mar/03/news/cl-13368>
- Color Psychology*. (2013). Retrieved from: <http://www.digitalskratch.com/color-psychology.php>
- Cox, J. (2001, April 6). *Sniff, we're Nylon, and we're downtown*. Retrieved from: http://www.medialifemagazine.com:8080/news2001/apr01/apr02/5_fri/news2friday.html
- dangerous*. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/dangerous>
- different*. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/different>
- Dyer, G. (1982). *Advertising as Communication*. London: Routledge.
- Felsenthal, J. (2011). *Pink Hair Is All the Rage—Just Like it Was in 1914*. Retrieved from: http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2011/05/12/pink_hair_is_all_the_rage_just_like_it_was_in_1914.html
- Halid, E. (2012). Letter from the editor. *NYLON Indonesia, January 2012*, 6.
- Jaskolka, A. (2011). *The Picture Book of Body Language: The only language in which people can't lie*. Berkshire: Foulsham.
- Moeran, B. (2006). More Than Just a Fashion Magazine. *Current Sociology*, 54(5), 725-744.
- necklace*. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/necklaces>
- Nylon Indonesia Januari 2012*. (2012). Jakarta: MPG Media.

- Patil, S. B. (2012, January 23). *Editor In Chief Responsibilities*. Retrieved from: <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/editor-in-chief-responsibilities.html>
- Rose, G. (2012). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials Third Edition*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Svendsen, L. (2006). *Fashion: A Philosophy*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Wyn, J., & White, R. (1997). *Rethinking Youth*. New South Wales: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd.
- young*. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/young>