

The Construction of Beauty among University Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the meaning construction of beauty among university students. Woman boy has turned into valuable commodity. Capital owners have taken advantages of this condition. Through media, they construct and define the new meaning of beauty. Instead of rejecting this situation, some women, especially adolescence, tend to follow what has been offered by the media and beauty industries and fall into what is called 'fetishism. Through symbolic interaction and social construction theories, this study attempted to analyse how university students construct the meaning of beauty and to what extent the fetishism had occurred.

Keywords: beauty, meaning construction, fetishism

Introduction

Mass media principally has a responsibility to what is now called as mass culture and popular culture. These cultures have 'occupied' other cultures in the process of proliferation. Mass culture refers to cultural product that is developed merely for mass market. Its main characteristic is product standardization and mass consumption in the use. Most of the time, the term 'mass culture' is used complementarily with 'popular culture'. Popular culture, according to Guinz and Cruiz (2005:9), is defined as people experience and the discrimination of the usage of commodity that is massively produced. Further explained by John Fiske (1989:70), popular culture consists of commodity that is produced and distributed industrially. In order to be successful and exist, popular culture provides varieties of cultural potentials and social formation.

Mass media plays pertinent role in relation to the distribution of popular culture. Mass media dominant advantages (television in particular) in persuading, shaping opinion and reaching wider public has made it classified as the distribution instrument for popular culture. Mass media is considered to be the instrument for shaping and

enhancing society's cultural homogeneity. Globalized mass media network has made it easier to those with strong capital ownership to distribute (occupy) various forms of popular culture to global society. Consequently, popular culture that grows and lives within society tends to be dominated by capital owners, despite the fact that this may not be society's need.

According to Mc. Quaill (2004), in relation to culture, mass media has become the main source for definition, latest social reality and expression for common identity. Mass media industry, compare to other institution, has also turned into a main focus for leisure time by providing 'culture environment' to many people. Within this understanding, mass media plays dominant role in shaping popular mass culture that becomes the reference to many people. Consequently, capital owners or mass culture production instrument owners play significant role, to what extent they want to shape and provide the culture to audience.

Based on the theoretical context above, it is not surprisingly if media has made society as its target for culture campaign. Woman can be classified as one of audience target that is commonly explored.

Through variety of articles, news, advertisements and programs, woman has become the endless object to explore by mass media industries. Society has high dependency toward mass media. This in turn has created an opportunity for the media to deliver various forms of messages. Fiske (1987) emphasizes this condition when criticizing television media by saying, “the meaning performed in television generally focused on the interest of dominant class (capital owner); other meaning is constructed under dominant-subordinate relationship...”

According to Suryawardhani (2007), mass media as information delivery instrument to public has freedom principle in conveying news and information independently. However, some facts show that mass media can't be separated from capital owner interests. At some point, mass media tend to ignore public or society's interests. Even worse, society has been positioned as the object of mass media industries.

Based on the above understanding, how do we perceive and give meaning to the relation between woman and beauty within the context of globalised mass media industries? This paper looks at this phenomenon by conducting a research as well as observing other researches in the issue of the construction of beauty among university students.

Construction of Social Reality

Basically, an approach to the understanding of the construction of woman and beauty within mass media can be comprehended using theory of social reality construction. This theory is described by philosopher Schutz (in Littlejohn, 1996: 179) as follows,

The world of my daily life is by no means my private world but is from the outset an intersubjective one, shared with my fellow men, experienced and interpreted by others in

brief, it is a world common to all of us. The unique biographical situation in which I find myself within the world at any moment of my existence is only to a very small extent of my own making.

Simply saying, understanding comes from communication process with other people, a reality thought that is strongly planted in the minds of Sociologists. This theory is developed by Berger, one of Schultz's students, who was interested in the discussion of reality construction socially. Berger is able to develop another theory about how the world is socially constructed. He thinks that social reality exists by its own and that the structure of social world depends on human as the subject. Thus, social reality objectively exists (as within functionalist perspective), but the meaning derives from and by subjective relation (individuals) with objective world (symbolic interactions perspective) (Poloma, 1996: 302).

Berger admits that objective reality does exist and this reality has its basic law which is order. Berger and Luckman (in Campbell, 1994: 255) argue that humans tend to forget that they are the social world writers and form social institutions by supposing as if these institutions have objective reality beyond human control.

Social construction is not always consistent and has variety of version. Nonetheless, most scholars have similar assumptions. Robyn Penmann (in Littlejohn, 1996) summarizes them as follows:

1. *Communicative action is voluntary.* Like the symbolic interactionists, most constructionists see that communicators make choices. This does not mean that people have free choice. Indeed, the social environment does constrain what can be and is done. Within a social group, people have the latitude to act in a variety of ways, but

they are also prevented by meanings, moral orders, roles and rules from unbridled action.

2. *Knowledge is a social product.* Knowledge is not something that is discovered objectively but is "achieved" through interaction with others in particular times and places. Language and how it is used are particularly powerful in determining meanings and influencing action.
3. *Knowledge is contextual.* Our meanings for events derive from interaction in particular times and places, in a particular social milieu. Our understanding of events change as times change, and each of us understands our experience in a variety of ways, depending on the context in which we are working.
4. *Theories create worlds.* Theories, and scholarly and research activity in general, are not objective tools for the discovery of truth, but contribute to the creation of knowledge. Scholarship, which itself is a social activity, has an effect on what is being observed and how experience is understood.
5. *Scholarship is value laden.* What we "see" in an investigation, or what we explain in a theory of communication, is always affected by the values embedded in the approach used.

In his further analysis of social construction, Penmann (in Littlejohn, 1996) describes four quality of communication. First, communication is constitutive. It means that communication creates our world. Second, it is contextual. Communication can only be understood within particular time and place boundaries. Third, it is various. Communication occurs in various forms. Finally, it is incomplete. Communication is always in process and changing.

There are three aspects of social constructions: self, emotion and consideration.

1. Social construction of self

Ron Harre placed assumptions of social construction as his main issue of research, that self is individual as well as social. Harre describes how individuals explain his behaviour in certain episodes, such as dinner, speech, debate and negotiating agreement.

Social groups or community, through interaction, create "theories" to explain their experience about reality. Theory of a group becomes characteristic of an episode and predicts the result of logical thinking within it. These "theories" are structural patterns of an anticipated action within the episode. Say, for instance, a couple who falls in love has a theory of what love is and how they must act. This theory becomes real when the couple is asked to describe, explain or justify their acts.

Meanings attached to events of an episode will create rules that lead to acts of participants of an episode. The participants know how to act due to rules that bond at certain time.

2. Social construction of emotion

We sometimes think that emotion is something 'built'. Harre states that emotion is a concept that is built, just like other aspects of human experience, because emotion is determined by local language and moral order of culture or social group.

James Averill is a scholar who has conducted research of a social construction about emotion. In his opinion, the ability to understand emotion is developed socially. Averill calls this as a syndrome, which is a group of responses. Emotional syndrome is developed socially because people learn through interaction, what sort of behavior to be taken and how to perform certain emotion. In his understanding, definition of positive emotion (action-oriented) and negative emotion (outside somebody's control) are the result of research based on our social construction.

In the research of the meaning of beauty among university students (Susilo, Prayudi, and Lestari, 2008), it is found that the feeling of self confidence is a result of social construction. Beauty can develop their self confidence in interacti with other people, even in facing work environment.

One of the ways people construct social realities is by making accounts, or explaining and justifying their behaviour. John Shotter provides a useful extension of constructionist thinking into subjects of responsibility and morality. Shotter believes that human experience cannot be separated from communication. Our speech both reflects and creates our experience of reality (in Littlejohn, 1999). Central to this link between communication and experience is the process of making accounts.

Like other constructionists, Shotter believes that people are constantly assigning meaning to and making sense of their experiences. The meaning assigned to an event are closely tied to language used to account for the event in communication among participants. Simply saying, the relationship between communication (talking and making accounts and the experience of reality constitutes a loop: communication determines how reality is experienced, and the experience of reality affects communication.

In a research conducted by Susilo et al. (2008), there are some arguments for creating social construction of beauty among university students in Yogyakarta. Most informants consider that beauty is an important part of life in order that their life to be interesting and not bored. Further, beauty can attract more friends.

Woman and Media

Woman and media has long been a hot issue among researchers. The discussion tends to place woman as an object instead of subject that

determines media content. Woman existence is reduced and manifested to merely as physical appearance. News, ads, movies, infotainment, reality show or even video clips have become clear evidence of this condition.

Within media, the value of body lies on its ability to provide meaning, idea, concept and certain theme: sensuality, erotic, passion, sexiness, freshness, young, virginity and beauty. These themes are defined by man. The definition appears because most of media chain activities are dominated by man; namely producers, editor, reporter, photographer, distributor, agents and even the readers.

What follows this unbalanced condition is the description of woman's role that can't be separated from domestic (house-keeping) issues; or woman as object that is described as human with beautiful face, white skin, beautiful voice, skinny body with black, long and straight hair, as well as good behaviour. If this ideal condition does not appear on a woman, say the woman tends to appear as masculine, she is then considered to have deviated from the normal condition accepted by society. In relation to this issue, there are two main interests lie behind the media: economic and power interests, that form media content, information presented and meaning offered. Thus, media plays significant role in dictating and describing the ideal portrayal of woman. Media, directly and indirectly, has created a popular culture of the meaning of beauty within the minds of women.

Through media, public learn that the meaning of beautiful women are those with high posture, thin, long nose, straight hair and white and soft skin. The visualitation of beautiful women are those of Miss Universe winners or iconically is

represented through "Barbie" doll. Woman is made uncomfortable if she doesn't follow the criteria presented in the media. Thus, any attempts are required to obtain the "ideal" beauty.

Cosmetic business has turned into million dollar industries. Public is educated that the use of cosmetic is not merely for aesthetic purpose, but also for "beauty". Salon, spa, fitness centre, and skin specialists have turned into new "temples" for women. Comfort is not achieved unless these places are visited and the programs for beauty have been followed.

After body care centres have turned into new "temples", capital owners use celebrities to be the "evangelist", "preacher" (Rojek, 2001, Frow 1999 in Turner, 2004, p.6) or philosopher of "postmodern popular culture" (Ahmed in Ibrahim, 2004: xxvii). Movies, infotainment programs or advertisements are sorts of media that become the "guidance" for women to develop their understanding of beauty.

If any attempt to appear as "ideal" beauty is not achieved, capital owners have developed plan B. To fat women, for instance, a new meaning of beauty is created through a slogan "big is beautiful". To those with dark skin, "exotic" skin care is provided. If the industries fail to create woman as represented through "Barbie" doll, another business is created through a slogan "Reveal your inner beauty".

Based on the above understanding, it is clear that the meaning of beauty that is shaped in the mind of public strongly relate to the creation of meaning developed by consumption and production instrument owners. And undeniably, mass media industries have contributed to this process. The variety of mass media that are growing have indicated new shift within the field. Mass media

have grown into globalised industries that surpass the countries' boundaries. Thus, public is provided with variety of choice of mass media.

Some globalised female magazine that go national like *Cosmopolitan*, *Harpers Bazaars*, *Lisa* and *Cosmo Girl* are magazines that have been adapted to suit the culture of Indonesian woman. These magazines undeniably have offered beauty issues which values have been adopted from western cultures. This relates to copyright and identity of the magazines. Some television programs, for instance, also like to adopt reality show, quiz and movies without conducting any changes as they relate to franchise and broadcasting right. Namely *Deal or No Deal* quiz, which in some Western countries performs men and women as bag carriers to be guessed by the contestant; in Indonesia, the bag carriers are skinny and beautiful young women with sleeveless gown. Again, this evidence proves how woman has become an object or commodity within the media industry network that at the same time forms a popular culture.

Interestingly, it doesn't mean that this phenomenon is neglected. Some aware and critical female groups show some "resistances". These resistances have taken the form of sporadic to systemic movements. Nonetheless, this awareness as well as empowerment movement does not really bring significant impacts to change woman representation in the media. They seem like facing a wall. As Horace said, "we may be able to chase away nature with gardening fork, but nature will soon return" (in Crittenden, 2002: 1).

On the other hand, advertising strongly relates to mass media industries. Advertising industries also contribute to the formation of popular culture. Advertising often uses woman—either in terms of beauty, body as well as voice—as

the representation of product offered to consumers. There have been many research reports on woman and advertising. One of them was carried out by Ariwibowo (2007) who said that woman in daily activities tended to be subordinated as weak, dependent and suitable merely to stay at home and took care of children. However, different perspective is found when looking at woman as an object of art. Woman is regarded as beautiful object with body that contains mystery and passion that are sometimes considered by man worth enough to explore or even exploit. For the women themselves, they have the nature to enjoy spoiling their faces and bodies which at particular level can be considered to have adored beauty. This issue is known as fetishism.

The portrayal of the condition above, according Irwan Abdullah, occurred when private issue of woman goes to public sphere. What makes it interesting is the fact that this process does not change the new portrayal of woman, rather more on the return to old portrayal of woman as the object of sex (in Baidan, 2002, p.183).

It has to admit that media globalization has change the representation of beauty. There has been some process of beauty construction within community. First, the meaning of beauty grows from within the community. Secondly, the meaning of beauty is constructed by globalised mass media industries. Thirdly, the meaning of beauty is the acculturation process of between global and local meaning of beauty. It is the second as well as third construction process-with the help of media-that has developed into popular culture. This condition is supported by the fast growing number of woman, within the context of this research, in Indonesia. Handajani (2005) says that Indonesian women have grown into a significant social group due to national history and nation development.

Therefore, I argue that the construction of beauty and body worship among university students cannot be separated from the construction of the meaning of beauty and body worship represented in the mass media. Further, global mass media that goes national has contributed to the construction of the meaning of beauty in order to develop popular culture that principally contains Western culture which in some part may have against Indonesian culture and social values. Similar opinion is given by Handajani (2005) who says that media globalization is represented as modernity that comes from the West.

The relation between media, woman and beauty is within a market system developed by capitalist industry. It is connected through the formation of popular culture that constructs the meaning of beauty and places woman as the target. Within this understanding, what interests mass media editorial board and owner will be offered to audience. Meaning, idea, concept and theme are formed in such a way to suit the need of capital owner. Consequently, issues of sensuality, erotic, passion, sexiness, freshness, young, virginity, and beauty often appear in mass media.

Merry's white (1995) who conducted a research on teen magazine said that what the market need from teen magazine was a homogenous consumers. Single characteristic of consumer is a lot easier to manage than consumers that are various demographically. Issues of woman and beauty presented in mass media have created certain interests and social class; which based on Handajani's (2005) finding was middle o upper class. By presenting the latest trend in beauty and body treatment, mass media has created an opinion in the mind of its readers to accept the change in order to be called beautiful, thin, white and so on.

Constant changes created by the media have created dependence whilst at the same time formed popular culture for particular social group within society. The changes offered can be seen as mass media attempt to turn woman to become part of popular culture developed by capitalist industry.

As the consequence of the above condition, woman's bargaining power toward what issue must be published and how this issue is constructed becomes weak. Female readers in the end turn the magazine to be reference guide for issues relate to femininity such as face and body caring as well as clothing. What appears on media is considered the best and ideal description of how woman should have behaved and performed.

Beauty in the end has turned into a commodity that is packed as a popular culture that is continuously and constantly renewed. Woman, on the other hand, is in a position who always wants to look beautiful and attractive. These connected things have created an excessive concept of body fetishism within the mind of woman. This condition, on the other hand, has benefited capital and production instrument owners of mass media. At the theoretical level, the domination power of capitalist groups within the process of popular culture formation becomes greater. Trends, changes or styles within society are more as a consequence of media formation rather than cultural exploration of particular society. The representation of beauty within mass media has become the portrayal of power relation within community.

The Construction of Beauty: Student's Perception

To obtain the representation of the meaning construction of beauty, data gathering techniques like focus group discussion, in-depth interview and

observation were employed. This research successfully formulates the meaning of beauty from female students of four universities in Yogyakarta: the University of Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Yogyakarta, the University of Atma Jaya Yogyakarta, the Indonesian Islamic University, and the State University of Yogyakarta. The analysis and interpretation of the meaning of beauty was based on social construction theory.

In general, the informants constructed the meaning of beauty as attractive appearance, both physically (body and face) and mentally (intellectual intelligent). Most interviewed informants agreed the necessity of the equality of the meaning of beauty from outside (physical appearance) as well as inside (intelligence). Informants disagreed if beauty is merely considered as physical appearance and disregard knowledge. They also added that polite behavior is pertinent. One of the informants, FK, states,

In my opinion beauty can be seen as something from outside as well as inside. Beauty from outside, for instance, include clean and white skin face, slim body, soft skin, tall and so on. Beauty from outside include wide and smart thinking and so on. I have to agree that beauty from outside is important as basically a person tends to see other person from physical appearance. Then he will see his behavior. That is why, sometimes, physical beauty can be deceiving (FGD result, 9 August 2007).

Another meaning of beauty appears as follows:

The definition of beauty is something that comes from a person. It doesn't necessarily relate to physical appearance, rather more on how he or she behaves. Beauty must be seen from two sides, physics and inner beauty (interviewed with Andien, student of Atma Jaya Uni, August 2007).

Thus, yielded from this research, the beauty is represented through clean, soft and white face skin, high and slim body. The symbols of inner beauty are smartness, wide knowledge and good behaviour. The construction of beauty is gained through a person's interaction with other people. It is also gained through the interaction with mass media. As one of the informants said:

I know the meaning of beauty from friends and mass media. The media that I read is a biweekly magazine named 'Cita Cinta'. The content relates to fashion and beauty. I also like to read issues on health and beauty that are regularly published in *Aura* tabloid, *Sindo* and *Kompas* dailies. I also like to watch beauty program as well as TV series presenting fashion and beauty on television. I obtain my inspiration about beauty from the media (interview with informant in UAJY, 25 August 2007).

It has to admit that female media has cleverly targeted their audience and created their own readers. As said by the editor-in-chief of *Gadis*

magazine, “Gadis readers are teenagers who live in big cities, who are also open to the development of technology. They are smart, active, stilysh and love music” (in Handajni, 2005). In her research, Handajani emphasizes that female magazine is a mean where globalization meets with Indonesia identity from the side of media content. It is quite often that Indonesian culture becomes sub ordinates of global culture under the name of modernity. And woman often becomes the symbol of modernity itself. Thus, how the appearance of Western woman presented via media tends to become reference for Indonesia woman. Some research indicates how appearance becomes main study in some female magazines. Mass media becomes one of information sources about beauty. It offers model, style, supporting facilities, and ways to obtain beauty. This condition indicates strong intervention of capitalism within the world of beauty. It offers facilities, material, and popularity which is easily reached through variety of ways.



1. Sample of front cover of female teenager magazine with beautiful look, slim, and white skin models.



Picture 2. Citra White Lotion: the demand to have white skin to gain man's recognition

Picture 3. Mustika Putri Whitening Complex: white skin suits with your gown



Picture 4. Pond's Institute: white as symbol of modernity.

The samples of magazine front cover and beauty ads above indicate how the pictures and ideas presented via media build the concept of beauty with woman's mind. This at the same time affirms how woman beauty has been used by media industry (capitalist) to become commodity addressed for woman. In adolescent and adult woman magazines, the meaning of white skin equals to fashion is constructed, besides beautiful face and slim body.

The finding above is similar to the research finding of Putri (in <http://veggy.wetpaint.com>, accessed September 2007) who tended to see beauty as merely an accessory and commodity. This is an unwanted condition as plurality requires space and media that has ability to unite all differences. As in beauty product advertisements, a woman shall fulfil certain elements for her to be called beautiful. These elements or conditions are created in such a way for the benefit of market. Only some informants that were not affected by mass media offer due to strong personality.

As long as society is still offered with misleading meaning of beauty, the expectation for a better understanding of the meaning itself is hardly achieved. Moreover, this condition is supported with informant's behaviour in their attempt to create beauty through body and skin care. Following is the statement from an informant, namely MJ, a female student from Environmental Engineering Department, UPN 'Veteran' Yogyakarta:

I want to look beautiful and sexy, so that people is interested in me. To realize my wish, I take good care of my body by routinely go to saloon at least once a month. My favourite saloon is LBC. I usually have facial, chemical pilling, manicure, and pedicure treatments. I usually buy some medicine like morning, night and anti-irritation creams for facial treatment. I regularly go to saloon for body treatment. Apart from these treatments, I frequently

swim once a week (Interview with informan at UPNVY, 30/08/07).

For the sake to obtain physical beauty, female students under study said that they were willing to allocate some budget for body and facial treatments, despite the fact that they did not work and still received money from parents. According to the interview, they allocate around IDR 150,000 to IDR 300,000 per month for beauty. This equals to 25%-35% of their monthly allowance that they got from their parents. Interestingly, they do this by reducing their spending on other items, or some even talked to their parents and got additional budget for beauty. As one of the informant says:

For facial and body treatment, I allocate a special budget around 30 % from the money I receive from my parent. I am willing to spend that amount of money as I want to appear beautiful, so that people will look with interest in me as well as an additional factor to apply for a job. My friends told me that it is a lot easier to look for a job if we are beautiful. Good result of study is useless if we can not appear beautifully. Thus, beauty cost is something worth doing (interview with informant at UNY, 16/08/2007).

From the above interview indicates how woman, especially adolescent, is willing to spend some money for facial and body treatment in order to look beauty physically. Within critical analysis, this phenomenon shows how female students have become a commodity for themselves. The interaction with friends, family and media has contributed to the construction of the meaning of beauty within the minds of female students and driven them to do anything to be beautiful. The meaning of beauty itself has become a popular culture that grows among women. To be called modern, women must follow trend in beauty, which is developed by beauty

industries. It is interesting to look at how female students that principally still receive allowance from parents are willing to allocate budget from their allowance for beauty. Moreover, some cases indicate how any efforts to look beauty have led to negative sides to body as well as face of women?

Beautiful appearance, according to one informant, will increase self confidence. Considering the importance of self confidence, it is not surprising if female students are willing to spend some money for beauty treatment. While other informant gives her reason as follows:

I am spending some money for beauty to look better in performance in order to support future career. One of the advantages that a woman can get with beautiful appearance is an easiness to get attention as well as a job (Interview with Dian, a student at UAJY, August 2007).

Nevertheless, all interviewed informants carefully select beauty treatment centres that suits with their budget. They also consider the side effects of the treatment that they want to take. For instance, it is unlikely that they will change beauty centres as different centre provide different way of beauty treatment which may affect their body or face. This has been the case of one of the informant. That's why, at some point, beauty treatment may cause a high dependent of its costumer.

Although this research shows that female students are sensitive toward beauty issues and are willing to spend time and money to beautify themselves, they are critical on certain issues of beauty. They, for instance, disagree with beauty treatment like plastic surgery that they consider as dangerous for body and regret those who have taken advantage from this situation..

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the meaning construction of beauty among female students is formed through a process of social interaction with friends, family as well as media. All these factors construct what "beauty" looks like and should be in the mind of female students. Further, these factors drive female students to obtain beauty they way they understand the meaning of beauty itself. Female students, as one of social groups within society, are sensitive toward issues of beauty.

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