

MYTHOLOGY CONSTRUCTIONS IN COSMETIC ADVERTISEMENTS AND CONSUMERS' COGNITION

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses about mythology constructions in cosmetic advertisements which influence the consumers' cognition. Semiology, particularly Barthes' mythology, is used as an analysis to reveal the the process of imposition or appropriation of the cultural-connotative meaning into the cosmetic advertisements through linguistic and non-linguistic signs. This article is based on the research which was conducted in 2010 as the part of Roland Barthes' Mythology study which is applied to cosmetic advertisements in Television. The constructed Myth through linguistic and non-linguistic signs, namely myth of "white skin", can persuade the consumers' cognition to buy the cosmetic products. The result of this research shows that the connotative meaning imposed to the signs can trigger the consumers to buy the products. This evidence can be identified through the consumers' perception in interview.

Keywords: mythology construction, semiology, connotative meaning, linguistic and non-linguistic signs, cosmetic advertisements, consumers' cognition

INTRODUCTION

Myth or mythology construction is one of cultural and linguistic analyses employed to identify connotative meaning of cultural product including advertisement. A term "construction" in this analysis refers to a set or process of signification which consists of two level namely linguistic level or denotative and myth level or connotative. In this mode of signification, there is an ad-infinitum process of semiosis in which meaning is continually added an imposed to a particular sign in order to image a new signification (Eco, 1976). While relation between sign and its meaning is arbitrary, the possibility to the meaning imposition in the process of communicating something is enabled and it depends on the interest or ideology of the speaker toward his hearer or interactants. Meaning or message is the smallest semiotic form that has a concrete existence (Gunter and Kress, 1988). Message

has a source and a goal, a social context, and purpose. Furthermore, the existence of a message in a particular social context and cultural product is to reach a certain purpose delivered by source to a goal.

As Saussure stated in his *course in general linguistics* (1966) that a sign consists of signifier and signified which has no internal or natural relationship. One signifier can represent unlimited numbers of signifier, and vice versa, one signified can be represented by unlimited numbers of signifier. Dealing with this statement, Barthes (1957) argued that it is important to distinguish between natural vs cultural or general vs particular signification. Due to the unnatural relationship, in particular context of sign exchange, sign and its meaning encoded to reach a certain goal especially triggering someone to do a purposeful action.

According to Barthes, myth is a second order of semiological system. The first order is linguistic level where a sign has its literal meaning, while the second order is mythical level where a sign has its particular or cultural meaning. In advertisement which contains a complex sign with its levels, product is not only introduced literally such as its brand, price, or size, but it is related with cultural meaning such as the product images a beauty, life style, masculinity, modernity, and the like. Moreover, the following interest of this myth is to motivate the consumers to see the product from different angle, not only the intrinsic elements of product, but also the imposed image to the product.

One important issue regarding this construction is, from the advertizers and sellers' interest, it can enhance the number of product selling and benefit. However, from the consumers' perspective, cognitively they tend to be consumptive without comprehending ideological or capital interest behind the cosmetic advertisements.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is descriptive qualitative to describe the aspects of mythology construction in cosmetic advertisements and the consumers' perception as well as their motivation. The data of this paper were partly taken from my M.A thesis, which was based on the interview in Makassar for two months and the recording of 4 cosmetic advertisements. All of the informants were 5 female university students ranging from 20 to 25 years old and they were also the consumers of 4 cosmetic products advertized in television.

These informants were interviewed to know their perception about the advertisements and motivation to buy the products. In each setting, conversations were recorded among informants of similar age and status. Most conversations were recorded naturally; however, informants were informed in advance. Therefore, all of them already knew my research goal beforehand.

Sign and Sign System. In the theory of sign, Saussure said that sign consists of *signifier* and *signified*. *Signifier* is concrete thing, that is string of sound or sound image, where as *signified* is abstract thing, that is mental or concept that signifier represents. The sound image is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory and if I happen to call it "material", it is the only in that sense, by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract (Saussure, 1966).

The psychological character of our sound images becomes apparent when we observe our own speech. Without moving our lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite mentally a selection of verse. This combination of signifier and signified tells us that sign can not be formed if one of them is missing. Signifier brings a concept of its signified, and signified is a basic concept to create a signifier.

The Saussure's thesis rejects the statement that a sign is just a case of name and object. A word is not a "name" but it is just a representation, whereas an "object" is just a concept or idea of that object. A human mind conceptualizes an object that is looked at, and signifies it to become a word. This concept will be clear by showing in figure 1.

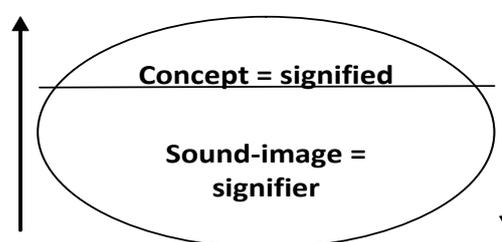


Figure 1. Human Mind Conceptualizes

Mythology Construction. According to Barthes (1957), a signified can have several signifiers; this is the case in linguistics and psycho-analysis. It is also the case in the mythical concept; it has at its disposal an unlimited mass of signifiers. This means that

the concept is much poorer than the signifier, it often does nothing but re-present itself.

In the representation of sign, it is needed to comprehend it from the functional perspective. It means that the appearance of sign should be looked at its functional implication in discourse. Further, in the semiological system, there is an *ad-finitum* semiological chain. In myth, there are still three dimensional patterns which have been described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. "But myth is a peculiar system", in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: *it is a second-order semiological system* (Barthes, 1957). In the signification of myth (figure 2), there are two levels; they are language level as the first and myth level as the latter. The sign in the first level becomes a signifier in the second level. In addition, meaning in the first level is primary or denotative meaning, and in the second level is secondary or connotative meaning.



Figure 2. The Signification of Myth

In language level, signifier is called meaning, but in myth level, the signifier is called *form* and the signified is called *concept*. The correlation between those two elements is called *signification*. Myth presents itself in an ambiguous way. It is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other.

When it becomes form in myth level, from the linguistic sign to the mythical level, it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, and History evaporates; only the letter remains. This signifier is then implanted with a *concept*. The problem in myth is how *this concept* is implanted to *the form* and form a signification. A form will not be meaningless, in language level it represents a signified, but this form in mythical level is then implanted with a new concept. The first question is what this new

concept is and the second is how this form-concept correlation signifies a new one.

The concept is *something* determined, it is at once historical and intentional, and it is the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered. The concept is not *something* universal, but it is full of particular intention and motivation. We can say the appearance of a myth is appropriated with the context. The context covers: time; when the signification is appeared, place; where it is, history; the whole mechanism of social segregation, culture or tradition; the custom and the way of tradition is interpreted, and some others.

According to Barthes (1957):

"What is invested in the concept is less reality than certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge. In actual fact, the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless association".

The concept of myth is how to correlate a structure and signification of an object or particular action with the system where the object functions. The signification is much influenced by the cultural artifact or code where the signification appears. From this point of view, myth is not a natural signification, but it is a cultural. It is just suitable with a particular community. "The elements of the form are related as to place and proximity: the mode of presence of the form is spatial. The concept, on the contrary, appears in global fashion, it is a kind of nebula, condensation, more or less hazy, of certain knowledge" (p. 122).

In myth, the meaning is distorted by the concept. Meaning in language level is distorted by implanting the signifier with intentional or motivational concept in order to function it in a particular community. The characters of the concept are ideological choices. A speaker will choose *this* and not *that*. "Myth is a type of speech defined by its intention" (p.124).

In language level, the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary. There is no internal relationship which compels those sign elements to become a sign. On the other hand, in mythical signification, the relation between the signifier (the form) and the signified (the concept) is motivational or intentional. The motivational concept means the signification of myth is appropriated to the particular receiver.

Advertisement. Advertisement is one of the objects of Semiology. It can be analyzed in two points of view, economics and semiotics. In economic study, advertisement is a process of goods exchange, but in semiotics, it is a process of message transfer. It contains a message from a producer to consumer(s). The producer delivers primary and secondary meaning of a message related to the products to the consumers, so that the consumers buy those products.

Advertisement is a particular communication form to represent the marketing function. In this case, what is informed is not only a simply information, however it should persuade the consumers to do a purposeful action. In this case, the function of the language is a speech act potential (Hartman, 1968; Searle, 1966). In The language level, meaning of utterance is not only a tool of communication. It is a kind of action. When a speaker utters something to the hearer called illocutionary act, it produces some effect to the hearer; that is perlocutionary act to do something based on the presupposition of the utterance. The message is oriented to the *semiotic* process, the social process by which meaning is constructed and reconstructed. The message is about something, which supposedly exists outside itself.

What is important in the semiotic analysis of advertisement is how the message is constructed, delivered, and received by the hearers. In advertisement, a product is imposed by a particular concept to construct a new meaning. Here, there are two levels of meaning to discuss, denotative and connotative meaning. Denotative is primary

meaning that consists of literal meaning of sign, or it is in semantic level, and connotative refers to units of concept that lies on the outside of the primary meaning, that is secondary meaning. Further, Barthes stated the connotative meaning depends on the cultural knowledge and it should be decoded (Noth, 1995).

Myth of White Skin and its Constructions. Myth of white skin can be found in two kinds of text namely linguistic and non-linguistic texts in cosmetic advertisements.

First Advertisement: Cosmetic Product A. The former text is identified in some utterances such as “flawless white”, “memiliki kulit putih hanya dalam tujuh hari”. While, the non-linguistic texts are eyeglasses, handbag, diary, lift, office building, parking place, working suit, a crowd, and cars. These non-linguistic signs inter-relate each other to construct the concept of working situation. In this first advertisement, there is an appropriation between the concept of white skin and the concept of working situation in order to construct the myth: *white skin woman is high style working class woman*. The signification of linguistic text of this first advertisement is shown in table and non linguistic texts are in table 2.

Second Advertisement: Cosmetic Product B. The linguistic texts of the second advertisement are “White Radiance”, “terbukti secara klinis [clinically proven]”, and “lotion pemutih masa depan [futuristic whitening lotion]”. In addition, the non-linguistic texts are “laboratory”, “microscope”, “cell”, “working bag”, “white working suit”, and “shining pack”. This second advertisement of cosmetic product also constructs the concept of white skin which related to the concept of healthy, smart, and scientific woman to construct the myth: *white skin woman is smart and educated*. The signification of linguistic and non-linguistic texts of this second advertisement is shown in table 3 and 4.

Third Advertisement: Product C. The linguistic texts of the third advertisement are “total moisture”, “soft and healthy”, “nutrients

and vitamin E". In addition, the non-linguistic texts are "a crowd", "a halter neck", "a working bag", "a smile", "a white liquid pouring". This third advertisement of cosmetic product appropriates the concept of white skin and the concept of health to construct the myth: *white skin woman is a healthy woman*. The signification of linguistic and non-linguistic texts of this third advertisement is shown in table 5 and 6.

Fourth Advertisement: Product 4. The linguistic texts of the fourth advertisement are "lasting youth", "Look Younger", and "you are beautiful". In addition, the non-linguistic texts are "flower", "halter", "honey", "flower shop", and "growing plants". This fourth advertisement of cosmetic product appropriates the concept of white skin and the concept of ageless to construct the myth: *white skin woman looks younger*. The signification of linguistic and non-linguistic texts of this fourth advertisement is shown in table 7 and 8.

Cognition of Consumers on Myth of White Skin. The consumers' perception and their motivation to buy the whitening lotion products can be identified at the some extracts of conversation below:

Extract 1 (Informant uses Product A, MEL):

Researcher : *What is "beautiful girl"?*

Informant : *beautiful is identical with white skin*

Researcher : *Then, if you use that product, you will feel more beautiful?*

Informant : *If I have white skin, I will feel more beautiful and have more self-confidence.*

Extract 2 (Informant uses Product A, Nu):

Researcher : *What is the quality of white skin if compared with other skin colors?*

Informant : *Look more interesting, beautiful, and clean*

Researcher : *What is your aim buying this product?*

Informant : *To be more beautiful, white, clean*

Extract 3 (Informant uses Product C, Ha):

Researcher : *The next question is what is your aim using this product?*

Informant : *To have white skin*

Researcher : *If it is compared with other skin colors, why does woman want to have white skin?*

Informant : *Probably, having white skin will look brighter, dark skin will look dull*

Extract 4 (Informant uses Product C, LNM):

Researcher : *In your point of view, what is a beautiful girl?*

Informant : *In my mind, beautiful girl is tall, slim, and white*

Researcher : *What is your opinion about the dark and other skin colors?*

Informant : *Probably, it is less interesting*

Extract 5 (Informant uses Product D, NH):

Researcher : *In your point of view, what is a beautiful girl?*

Informant : *Physically, beautiful girl has white, healthy, and moist skin, and her performance is attractive*

Researcher : *By using this product, will you feel more beautiful?*

Informant : *Personally, yes. By having white skin, I will be more confidence and attractive*

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored the mythology constructions of cosmetic advertisement and their influence to the consumers' cognition. This is based on the fact that all of the interviewees or informants in this research believe that to be a beautiful and attractive woman, they should have white skin. White skin symbolizes or represents the concept of beauty which is opposed to the dark or other skin colors. This myth is very efficacious to persuade the consumers to buy and use the whitening lotion products.

It is found that mythology construction in advertisements can increase the numbers of product selling. With skin is also appropriated or associated with the concept of high style working woman, educated, smart, and scientific woman, heathy skin, and the concept of ageless.

Advertisers in the advertisements try to construct the myth of white skin as the standard of beauty by appropriating some linguistic texts and non-linguistic texts in the process of intertextuality. This appropriation deals with the ideology of advertizers and sellers to sell their product in order to accumulate their capital and profit.

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First Advertisement

“Flawless White” [putih sempurna atau tanpa noda]

Table 1. signification in linguistic text

Signifier	Signified
Flawless	<i>Perfect or without fault</i>
White	<i>White colour or pigment</i>

Table 2. signification in non-linguistic text

Signifier	Signified
Glasses	<i>A pair of lenses in a frame that rests on the nose and ears</i>
Handbag	<i>A container made of flexible material, eg paper, plastic, cloth or leather, with an opening at the top, that is used for carrying things from place to place</i>
Diary	<i>A book, sometimes with spaces for each day of the year, in which one writes about one’s daily experience, records one’s private thoughts</i>
Lift	<i>A mechanical container or platform that moves up and down within a building used for taking people or goods from one floor or level to another</i>
Working suit	<i>A set of outer garments of the same material, usually a jacket and trousers and sometimes a waistcoat, or a jacket and skirt for a woman to work</i>
Cars	<i>A road vehicle with an engine and usually four wheels</i>
Building	<i>A structure with a roof and walls</i>
Crowd	<i>A large number of people gathered together, especially outside</i>

Second Advertisement

“White Radiance” [cahaya yang bersinar cerah dan putih]

“Clinically proven” [telah terbukti secara klinis]

“Futuristic Whitening Lotion” [lotion pemutih masa depan]

Table 3. signification in linguistic text

Signifier	Signified
White	<i>White colour or pigment</i>
Radiance	<i>Shining or glowing brightly</i>
Clinically	<i>Attribute of or for the direct examination and treatment of patients and their illness: clinical research</i>
Proven	<i>Has been tested or demonstrated</i>
Futuristic	<i>Looking suitable for the future or extremely modern, not traditional</i>
Whitening	<i>To become or make something white or whiter</i>
Lotion	<i>A liquid medicine or beauty product for use on the skin</i>

Table 4. signification in non-linguistic text

Signifier	Signified
Cell	<i>A very small unit of living matter</i>
Laboratory	<i>A room or building used for scientific research, experiment, and testing</i>
Microscope	<i>An instrument for making very small object appear larger</i>
Working bag	<i>A container made of flexible material, eg paper, plastic, cloth or leather, with an opening at the top, that is used for carrying things from place to place; used for working activity</i>
White working suit	<i>A set of outer garments of the same material, usually a jacket and trousers and sometimes a waistcoat, or a jacket and skirt for a woman to work; its color is white</i>
Shining pack	<i>A small paper or cardboard container in which several of the same items are packed together. Additionally, it is appeared shining in advertisement</i>

Third advertisement

“Total Moisture” [kelembaban total]

“Soft and Healthy” [lembut dan sehat]

“Nutrients and Vitamin E” [nutrisi dan vitamin]

Table 5: signification in linguistic texts

Signifier	Signified
Total	<i>Complete, absolute, a total number or amount</i>
Moisture	<i>Tiny drops of water on a surface, in the air</i>
Soft	<i>Changing shape easily when pressed, not hard or firm to the touch</i>
Healthy	<i>Having good health; wealth and able to resist disease</i>
Nutrients	<i>A substance that helps living thing to grow</i>
Vitamin E	<i>Any of a number of organic substances which are present in certain foods and are essential to the health and growth of humans and animals. Vitamin E is essential to the skin</i>

Table 6: signification in non-linguistic text

Signifier	Signified
Crowd	<i>A large number of people gathered together, especially outside</i>
Halter-neck	<i>A style of woman's dress with the top held up by a strap passing round the back of the neck, leaving the back and shoulder bare</i>
Working bag	<i>A container made of flexible material, eg paper, plastic, cloth or leather, with an opening at the top, that is used for carrying things from place to place; used for working activity</i>
A smile	<i>An expression of the face in which the corners of the mouth turn up, showing happiness, amusement, pleasure, etc.</i>
A white liquid pouring	<i>A substance that flows freely, eg water, milk or oil. The color of this liquid is white</i>

Fourth advertisement

“Lasting Youth” [muda dalam waktu yang lama]

“Look younger” [nampak muda]

Table 7: signification in linguistic texts

Signifier	Signified
Lasting	<i>Continuing to exist or have an effect for a long time</i>
Youth	<i>The time when a person is young, especially the time before a child becomes an adult</i>
Look	<i>To turn one’s eyes in a particular direction in order to see something</i>
Younger	<i>The compare of young of a person’s appearance attitudes or behavior</i>

Table 8. signification in non-linguistic text

Signifier	Signified
Flower	<i>The part of a plant from which the seed or fruit develops, often brightly colored and lasting only a short time</i>
Halter neck	<i>A style of woman’s dress with the top held up by a strap passing round the back of the neck, leaving the back and shoulder bare</i>
Honey	<i>A sweet sticky yellowish substance made by bees from nectar</i>
Flower shop	<i>A building or part of building where goods or services are sold to the public.</i>
	<i>Goods, in this case, is flower</i>
Growing plants	<i>A living thing that grows in the earth and usually has a stem, leaves, an roots</i>