

## **A Semiotic Analysis of Fashion Domination through Signs in Music Videos**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper entitled “A Semiotic Analysis of Fashion Domination through Signs in Music Videos” aims to investigate domination issues in the form of fashion by examining denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings of selected scenes in three music videos. The three music videos are Ailee’s “I Will Show You”, Taylor Swift’s “You Belong with Me”, and Super Junior M’s “Super Girl” as the representatives of Korean, American, and Chinese music videos. The orders of signification were used as the semiotic tools to analyze the data. The results show that a change of appearance emerges in the music videos as a form of domination to maintain the dominant ideology.

**Keywords:** *Connotation, Denotation, Domination, Fashion, Myth, Semiotic*

## INTRODUCTION

The music video is one of the most favored forms of entertainment in the world today. The fast growth of people's interest in music videos has started since the website *YouTube* was launched in 2005. *YouTube* is a website where people can share their videos. Through *YouTube*, music videos from around the world can be shared globally. Worldwide people can view music videos easily by opening the website. There are also other similar websites that enable them to upload videos, even though not as popular as *YouTube*, such as *Dailymotion*, *Metacafe*, and *Vimeo*. The ease of Internet browsing and advanced technology these days make those websites, especially *YouTube*, effortlessly accessible.

A music video can show various kinds of issues from around the world. As a kind of entertainment which is abundant and easily accessed, it is unavoidably part of people's daily lives. Music videos carry issues and ideologies in society which can be constructed consciously or unconsciously. In the previous research by Mezey and

Niles (2005), it is shown that film and television have major roles in creating public assumptions on law. Knowledge about law for many common people is obtained mostly from those two forms of entertainment: television and film. Therefore, the ideologies of film and television may affect how people think of law. These depictions that film and television make about law can influence society to some extent. As another form of entertainment, music videos also have the same ability as film and television in portraying image and delivering ideologies.

This research focuses on identities based on fashion. Fashion as non-verbal communication conveys identity and also constructs it at the same time (Barnard, 2011). Previous research by Svensson (1991) emphasizes the role of clothing as a means of communicating identity. It shows that clothing can also be powerful to defend the sovereignty of ethnic culture groups. It exhibits the ability of clothing beyond its usual function as a form of communication.

Therefore, in this present research, fashion was examined as an indicator of identities in society.

Related to the previous studies, this present research attempts to analyze domination in fashion against another fashion which identifies certain identities that belong to particular members of a community. In this research, three music videos taken for analysis were selected because these videos depict a comparison between two different fashion styles where one is oppressed, while the other one dominates. These three music videos are Taylor Swift's "You Belong with Me" (American), Super Junior M's "Super Girl" (Chinese), and Ailee's "I Will Show You" (Korean). The preference of clothing as shown in the music videos seems natural and agreeable by society. However, there is nothing that is truly natural because every culture and society has their own ideology. This is what Barthes called as a myth: a complicated system of communication to serve the dominant ideologies and to make

culture seem natural (in Sukyadi, 2011).

A myth, as described by Barthes (1977, in Chandler 2002), naturalizes the dominant ideologies and culture to make it seem common, standard, normal, just the way it is, "Borgeois ideology...turns culture into nature" (Barthes, 1974: 206, cited in Chandler, 2002: 145). Therefore, ideology is hidden because it seems natural and real. It is accepted by society's convention. Everyone seems to see it as a 'reality' and just accepts it without reason or argumentation. That is why ideology in music videos can be seen as natural and many people see it as 'reality' not ideology.

Ideologies in music videos are hidden because they are mystified and they need demystification to be deciphered. One way to demystify them is by analyzing the meaning based on Barthes' orders of signification. A myth is described as the third order of signification (not by Barthes himself) (Chandler, 2002), where the first and the second are denotation and connotation. Denotation is the

first order of signification which consists of signifier and signified, while connotation is the second order of signification where its signifier is the sign (signifier and signified) of the denotation. Barthes argues that denotation and connotation unite together to create ideology (ibid). Thus, the denotation and connotation can lead the analysis to the quest of myth.

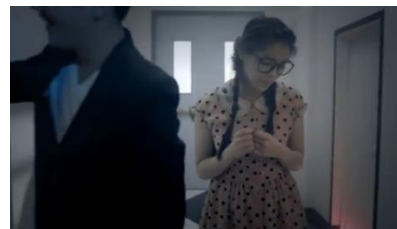
### **METHODOLOGY**

The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to describe and interpret the data. The data were selected scenes from three music videos: Korean, American, and Chinese music videos. The selected scenes were described as the denotative meaning analysis and interpreted as the connotative meaning analysis. Moreover, the values obtained from the connotative meaning analysis were compared as binary oppositions. From the binary opposition, hidden mythical meanings can be deciphered.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Fashion Domination through Signs in the Korean Music Video**

The selected scenes show that the girl has two fashion styles: before the change and after the change. There are two selected scenes for each of the styles to be compared.



Before the change

The four selected scenes of Ailee's "I Will Show You" music video reveal a fashion domination issue. The issue is shown through the visual elements of the selected scenes. The girl in the music video changes her fashion style so that the scenes of the first style were compared with the scenes of the second style. The setting of the first style scenes denotatively displays dark background while the second one is bright. Dark background can

signify boredom, sadness, negativity, and fear (Stone, 2006). The girl has a braided hairstyle and she wears polka dots clothing, a Peter Pan collar style, and glasses. A polka dots pattern is a kind of pattern that is usually used by children so that it connotes childishness (Pearson, n.d.). The Peter Pan collar style and braided hairstyle can also radiate youthfulness and innocence images (Mc-Mahon, 2013, and Mannino, 2013). Glasses can indicate intellectuality (Berger, 2010). Therefore, the first fashion style signifies childishness, youthfulness, innocence, and intellectuality values.



After the change

After the change, the background turns white which can mean perfection (Stone, 2006). In the second scene, there is a red carpet

which can symbolize a high class event for popular or important persons. The girl wears a sleeveless, mini skirted, and tight body shaping dress with wide neck opening. These features reveal the body of the wearer so that the dress can exude the value of exhibitionism. She also wears earrings and a necklace as her jewelries. Jewelry is generally expensive because the materials used are usually precious metal and gemstones. Therefore, the second style implies perfection, exhibitionism, and luxury.

In the scene of the first fashion style, there is a man beside the girl who wears a suit. A suit is formal clothing that is usually expensive. Therefore, it can be assumed that the man comes from a high class society. In the scene of the second fashion style, there are four men behind the girl who wear casual clothing. Casual clothing is usually not too expensive. Therefore, the four men may come from a middle class society.

The girl with the first fashion style has flat expression and her head bows down. These gestures can

indicate gloominess and depression (Murphy, 2013). Moreover, the man beside the girl frowns at her which can imply that he dislikes the girl. As stated before, the man may come from a high class society. Therefore, there is a comparison between the girl and the man. The man who comes from a high class society dislikes the girl who can be assumed comes from a class lower than the man. Therefore, there is oppression to the girl who wears the first fashion style.

On the contrary, the girl with the second fashion style has happy expression and she waves her hand to the crowd. The four men behind her chase her while carrying a piece of paper. It can be mean that the four men are the girl's fans. While in the second scene, there is a crowd gather beside the red carpet and the crowd takes pictures of her with their cameras. The crowd signifies paparazzi while the girl symbolizes a "famous actress". Therefore, after the fashion style change, the girl is famous as if she is a Hollywood actress and she already has fans. This is in contradiction with what happens

to her when she wears the first fashion style. Thus, the second fashion style dominates the first one.

### **Fashion Domination through Signs in the American Music Video**

There are six selected scenes of Taylor Swift's music video "You Belong with Me" which show domination issues. The scenes were analyzed to compare the three scenes of the protagonist and the three scenes of the antagonist. Through the signs in the music videos, it is shown that the antagonist dominates the protagonist.



The protagonist's scenes

The setting of the first scene of the protagonist is located in a room. In the cabinet behind the girl, there are books and a globe. A room is a place enclosed by walls which can symbolize boundaries and limitation. The window grille can be seen layering the scene which also can signify prison bars and captivity. The books and the globe in the cabinet can signify knowledge and intellectuality. Therefore, the protagonist is associated with intellectuality, but at the same time she is also associated with limitation and captivity.



### The antagonist's scenes

The first scene of the antagonist is located in a stadium or a field where a sport game is held. The antagonist is a cheerleader member and she stands in the middle at the front row of the other members. In the back, there are spectators who are sitting on the bleachers. The scene may indicate that the antagonist is the cheerleader captain and she has power in their society. The spectators behind her also can symbolize that they are the followers and the girl is the leader. Therefore, the scene associates the antagonist with power. On the contrary with the protagonist who is in captivity, the protagonist has power. Therefore, the antagonist dominates the protagonist.

The protagonist in the first and the second scenes has dark colors clothing: black and gray. These colors imply sadness, boredom, negativity, and fear (Stone, 2006). On the other hand, the antagonist wears a cheerleader uniform in the first scene and pink clothing in the second scene. Cheerleader uniforms are usually

mini skirted and sleeveless. These features show the wearer's body so that it can be assumed that the uniform supports exhibitionism. The color pink also can suggest love and power. In the second scene, she is also in a red car with her boyfriend. The red car can signify power and richness, while the boyfriend can imply love. Therefore, the antagonist is associated with power, love, richness, and exhibitionism, while the protagonist is associated with sadness, boredom, fear, and negativity. Again, the protagonist is dominated by the antagonist.

However, in the last scenes where the protagonist changes her fashion style, the associations also change. The protagonist changes her fashion style into a white dress and she is in the center of the scene while the other guests looking at her. White can indicate perfection and her position also can indicate that she is the center of attention. The antagonist, on the other hand, is rejected by her boyfriend and she looks angry. The rejection can imply that she loses her power and love. Therefore, it can be concluded that

by changing her fashion style, the protagonist can gain power and at the same time makes the antagonist to lose hers. Therefore, in the last scene the protagonist overpowers the antagonist by using her fashion style.

### **Fashion Domination through Signs in the Chinese Music Video**

There are four selected scenes of the Super Junior M's Super Girl music video that show fashion domination issues. The scenes are compared based on the actor's fashion style change. The signs in the music video suggest that the second fashion style of the actor dominates the first one.



Before the change

Before the actor changes his fashion style, he has a greased and parted hairstyle and wears a



bowtie, a buttoned-up shirt, and eyeglasses. A greased and parted hairstyle can suggest phoniness and untrustworthiness (Berger, 2010). A bowtie also supports this value. Eyeglasses can exude intellectuality (ibid). A buttoned-up shirt is a contradiction of exhibitionism which believes that body is must be celebrated by the exhibition. Therefore, the first fashion style connotes phoniness, untrustworthiness, and intellectuality.



After the change

After the actor changes his fashion style, he wears a jacket, a white T-shirt with wide neck opening, and skinny jeans. The T-shirt with wide neck opening and the skinny jeans reveal the body of the wearer so that it can be assumed that

this style supports exhibitionism. This is in contradiction with the first fashion style which opposes the idea of exhibitionism.

In the scene, the actor with the first fashion style is rejected by the girl in the party and because of that, he looks sad in the next scene. These scenes associate the first fashion style with rejection, sadness, and unpopularity values. On the other hand, the actor with the second fashion style manages to mingle in the party by dancing together with the crowd. He is in the middle of the crowd leading the dancing. The girl who rejected him before accepts him and she looks happy to be with him. These scenes associate the second fashion style with popularity, happiness, attractiveness, and power. Therefore, after the fashion style change the actor manages to gain power and popularity in the party so that the second fashion style overpowers the first one.

### The Myths

The three music videos were all made to make people believe that the second fashion style is better than the

first one by inserting certain values to each fashion style. It may seem that the values are naturally pasted but actually it is not the case. These values are not naturally attached to each fashion style. The values in each fashion style were made and forced by the signs. The signs in the music video make each fashion style connote particular values, which in this case the values that make the second fashion style better than the first one. The signs were made purposely in a certain combination to convey the ideology. Therefore, it can be concluded that the associations between the values and the styles are not the reality. Those are myths.

The values are not only inserted in the fashion style, but are also created in association with outside signs. The association occurs by placing the fashion style with other signs in the same scene. Then, the values of the surrounding signs associate with the fashion style. In the end, the values of the surrounding signs will be attached to the fashion style.

Moreover, fashion can be used not only to communicate, but also to hide the wearer's social status (Marx, 1954 in Barnard, 2011). In all of the three music videos, the main actor and actresses change their appearance. Thus, changing their appearance signifies that they attempt to hide their original social status and communicate their "new" social status as a disguise. The change happens as an improvement from lower social class fashion to higher social status fashion.

Fashion is also described as a tool to construct, practice, and comprehend social relation (Barnard, 2011). Not only as a message of identity, but fashion can also construct, practice, and comprehend the relationship between many identities in society. In the music videos, the social relations of the original protagonists' fashion styles and the new ones are constructed by their fashion. The first fashion styles make them unaccepted by the society. On the other hand, the second fashion styles make them accepted. Therefore, their fashion

styles contribute to their social relations in the society.

Fashion can function in two ways: to unite and to isolate (Simmel, 1971 in Barnard, 2011). In Taylor Swift's music video, the change in the protagonist appearance can make her unite with the boy she likes and at the same time unite her with the antagonist because her fashion style becomes similar to the antagonist's fashion. In Ailee's music video, the first fashion style makes her isolated from her boyfriend. After she changed her fashion style, the change makes her unite with her boyfriend. In Super Junior M's music video, the nerdy style makes the boy isolated from the people in the party. After he has changed his style, he can unite with the people in the party and be with the girl he likes. All of the protagonists' first fashion styles are not suitable with the surroundings so that the first fashion styles are isolated. On the other hand, the second fashion styles are suitable with the society so that the second fashion styles can unite and be accepted.

Fashion functions to construct and communicate identity of an individual or a community (Barnard, 2011). Therefore, the change in the three music videos implies that they also change their identity and locate their membership in a new community. It also suggests that a particular community or individual is better than the other. Thus, the original Ailee, the protagonist version of Taylor Swift, and the boy before the change in Super Junior M are considered to be not as good as the second fashion styles. This is the form of domination through fashion in the music videos.

Every culture has their own standard of fashion and values (Barnard, 2011). Hence, the cultures of the three music videos have the same standard of fashion and values. All of them regard the first style as the style that does not meet their standard of fashion. The values attached to it are the negative ones. On the other hand, the second fashion style is regarded as the style that meets their standard of fashion because the values attached to it are the positive ones.

Fashion as clothing is originally neutral, but it can become biased according to its purpose. The purpose can be culturally or socially biased which considers fashion as a survival weapon and an effort to achieve power and domination (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979 in Barnard, 2011). Therefore, the change of appearance in the three music videos indicates that fashion is employed as a survival weapon to achieve power and domination. The change makes the protagonists in the music videos powerful in their social lives as opposed to the condition before they changed their fashion style.

The result also matches the idea of fashion exhibitionism which views that fashion functions to attract and give attention to the body (Barnard, 2011: 79). The second fashion in Ailee's music video makes the girl gain attention from the people around her and make her treated as a famous star. The second fashion style in Super Junior M's music video makes the boy gain the attention from the people in the party and makes them join him dancing.

Fashion not only can purely attract people, but it also can specifically attract the opposite sex. Therefore, fashion is used as a tool of sexual attraction. The protagonists of the three music videos in the end can be with the boys or the girl they like after they changed their appearance. Thus, the main goal of the change according to the music videos is to attract the opposite sex.

There is a notion that women choose men based on their reliability to protect family, while men choose women based on their attraction (Rouse, 1989 in Barnard, 2011). However, in Super Junior M's music video the boy experiences different treatments from the people and the girl in the party because he has changed his appearance. Hence, the music video shows that not only men, but also women can consider appearance as a form of attraction. Thus, both male and female can possibly consider appearance as important in their social lives.

Fashion is defined as changes or discontinuity (Polhemus and Procter, 1978 in Barnard, 2011), which is in accordance with the

changes in the music videos. All of the three music videos display changes of appearance from one fashion style to another fashion style. This is the basic nature of fashion: changes of style over time. The old fashion style will be replaced by the new ones and so on. The changes will continue to occur and only the “prevailing fashion” will survive. Therefore, the music videos show their ideologies of which fashion style survives and which fashion style does not. This is the domination issue that emerges in the music videos as a myth that naturalizes the prevailing ideology to maintain the domination.

## CONCLUSION

The research aims to investigate denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings of the selected scenes in three music videos: Ailee’s “I Will Show You”, Taylor Swift’s “You Belong with Me”, and Super Junior M’s “Super Girl”. The denotative meaning analysis shows that the three music videos tell a story about a person who changes his or her appearance to be a better person. The

connotative meaning analysis discovers that the second fashion style is better than the first fashion style or the original style. The connotative meanings are obtained by interpreting the signs inside and outside the fashion. The signs outside the fashion associate its values so that the values are attached to the fashion.

In the end, the values of the first and the second fashion style are compared as binary opposition. By comparing the values as binary opposition, it can be seen that the second fashion style dominates the first fashion style. The values of the second fashion style are considered as positive while the values of the first fashion style are regarded as negative. Therefore, the second fashion style is better than the first one. This representation is made as if it is natural. It looks like it is the reality and the truth. However, it is actually a myth that naturalizes ideology into reality.

The myth that the second fashion style is better than the first one is purposely made in order to maintain the dominant ideology. The

second fashion style which belongs to the high class society or dominant class is created as if it is the best and better than the other fashion style so that their dominancy will be maintained. Therefore, the second fashion style is better than the first fashion style is a myth and it is not the reality.

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