

# Representation of beauty standards in social media: The analysis of hegemony concepts in cultural studies

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## ABSTRACT

Beauty is one of the critical aspects of human social life, which has long been a subject of discussion and thought. However, with the advancement of technology and the popularity of social media, the concept of beauty has undergone a radical transformation. This research attempts to explore how beauty standards in social media create a hegemony that influences people's views on beauty. The concept of hegemony, introduced by Antonio Gramsci's socio-political theory, is used as the analytical framework in this research. Through analyzing social media content, advertising campaigns, and relating them to the concept of hegemony, this research identifies various elements that contribute to the formation of hegemony in beauty standards.

## Introduction

As a study that learn the entirety of a wide range of scientific practices, cultural studies still doesn't have a clear field of study. This assumption comes from the definitions of various experts about the meaning of culture. One of the founders of cultural studies, Raymond Williams defines culture as including several aspects. Starting from the organization in a production, family structure, institutional structure that regulates social relations, including the characteristics of the community in communication (Sardar & Loon, 1999).

The breadth of cultural studies has led it to be called the study of (almost) everything. So, it can take whatever is needed from various disciplines and adopt it to suit its intended purpose. The concepts in cultural studies clearly still have something to do with literature and linguistics. With cultural studies, the study of literary texts that look at the relationship, role and function to the reader can be analyzed in a complex way.

## Representation

Chris Barker, Associate Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia, states that representation is the main study in cultural studies. According to Stuart Hall, representation is the ability to describe or imagine. Thus, language is a form of representation because culture is formed through meaning and language. Thus, representation becomes very important for the basic needs of



communication among living beings. Therefore, cultural studies requires the exploration of textual meaning formation and the disclosure of how it is produced in various contexts.

Text, as a unit that will always play a part in literary studies, is used as a form of representation that generally has many meanings. The meaning in a literary work will vary depending on how a reader understands it. This is certainly influenced by the background of each reader. This meaning will usually be realized or imagined by the reader as a social reality. Representation is "important" because it can clarify the core meaning of a text. Starting from the characters, problems that are built, events, etc. In addition, representation can bridge the intention that the author wants to convey to the reader. In this case, the author wants to express how their point of view responds to a particular topic.

### **Hegemony**

Hegemony, which is the result of thinking by Antonio Gramsci, political activist, Marxist philosopher and a founder of the Italian Communist Party, covers several aspects. Among them are government, formal power institutions, ideology, media, art, language, and popular culture. Cultural hegemony, according to Gramsci, is initiated by a group which in practice must obtain support from other groups. The trick is to generate legitimacy through cultural and moral domination. So that automatically, the dominant group will gain control over production and all aspects of it, as well as control over the media and other institutions.

Thus, this theory is very important to understand how power and identity are formed and maintained in society. Similar to politics, hegemony theory in literary or linguistic studies can be used as a theoretical framework to understand how power is shaped and maintained through literary texts or language in everyday life. For example, literary studies can help us to understand how literary works can create, change or challenge ideologies. Through literature, beliefs and faith in something will be very easy to maintain. Vice versa, something deviant will be easier to fight and change.

### **Beauty Standard**

There is an evolution of women's beauty standards that changes over time. In 1960-1970, the ideal beauty standard was thin, fair skinned, and wavy hair. While in the 1980s, the beauty standard was smooth skin. Furthermore, in the 1990s, curvy bodies and fair skin became the ideal beauty standard (Bender, 2021). Some of the media at that time that spread beauty standards through the content presented were TV, magazines and newspapers. Until the 2000 era, social media finally got involved in it.

As technology develops, the number of social media users also increases. The increase in the number of users, besides being a positive effect of information dissemination, also has a negative impact on several aspects, one of which is the standardization of beauty. Generally, beauty standards on social media are dominated by white skin, slim body, thin face, tall body that uses the body proportions of Western countries as standardization. The existence of this beauty standard is certainly influenced by the content circulating on social media. In TikTok, for example, there is a

lot of content that promotes the ideal and perfect body image. This kind of representation certainly does not represent the diversity of the human body, which has different ethnic backgrounds, different skin colors, different body sizes, and so on.

The relationship between beauty standards that is currently discussed in social media and also the concept of hegemony which is a cultural study field will be explained in the next chapter.

## Discussion

Social media with a very large number of users certainly affects representation. Accounts with a large number of followers will also receive great attention. So, if it is connected to the context of beauty standards, a person who uploads a different 'standard' photo or video will get a diverse response. This is then interpreted as representation. Representations in cultural studies include images, texts, sounds and language that are used to create meaning in culture. Ideology, an important concept in representation, is a combination of beliefs, values and norms held by society that can influence how representations of the world are created and accepted by society itself. For example, in the context of beauty standards, social media users will get a lot of information about how someone's appearance will get a response, even praise on social media.

Representation can be a tool to strengthen existing power or to challenge and change power. Power functions within the institutions's surrounding network, within social interactions, and is wielded by individuals from various background. For example, in the context of beauty standards, media and cultural representations can be used to reinforce and maintain narrow beauty standards, or to challenge and expand views of beauty that are more inclusive and diverse. An example of the expansion of diverse beauty is done by Yura Yunita, an Indonesian musician who successfully represents "beauty that shouldn't be compartmentalized" in her songs and social media account. Meanwhile, in promoting "narrow" beauty standards, social media often represents beauty with 'white skin' and 'slim body'. Through the content produced in the media, such as advertisements, magazines, television, and others, it forms beauty standards that unwittingly influence the audience or readers (Rahardaya, 2021).

One of the effects of having beauty standards is feeling the need to constantly compare oneself to others. This will also encourage someone to do more risky things, such as body modification. Body modification has considerable risks, including health and psychological risks. The modification also does not rule out the possibility that there will be other things that are still lacking in a person, so that feelings of dissatisfaction will continue to come on another day. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) found that self-objectification when constantly feeling 'less' can lead to depression and eating disorders. Personal qualities or achievements that have been received will be immediately forgotten because they feel they are useless if their appearance is still nothing until gain the beauty standards. Women go to great lengths to change their bodies and appearance through fashion, exercise, diet, beauty products, and even worse through surgery and eating disorders (Mckay, 2013).

Beauty standards belong to the social construction of society's view of how a person should or 'ideally' look. This social power and domination produced by certain groups is called hegemony. Hegemony, broadly speaking, is defined as a power that can control people's thinking. Thus, someone who feels a deficiency in themselves because of beauty standards can be said to be affected by hegemony. Hegemony is the work of Antonio Gramsci, a political activist, Marxist philosopher and founder of the Italian Communist Party. Hegemony covers several aspects, they are government, formal power institutions, ideology, media, art, language and popular culture.

Cultural hegemony, according to Gramsci, is initiated by a group which in practice must obtain support from other groups. The trick is to generate legitimacy through cultural and moral domination. So that automatically, the dominant group will gain control over production and all aspects of it, as well as control over the media and other institutions. Hegemonic beauty standards relate to features associated with Eurocentric aesthetics, namely the ideal of a thin body and the investment of an idealized appearance. In the United States, appearance values are white skin, light-colored eyes, long and straight hair, a small face, and a thin body (Awad et al, 2015). In contrast, African aesthetics are characterized by larger bodies, curly and short hair, and full lips, which are considered less attractive. Thus, this forces women to achieve beauty that they do not yet have and is not considered ideal. It is not uncommon for women to invest a lot of money in clothes, cosmetics, hairstyling, etc.

Gramsci's idea of hegemony can be used to create an image of beauty that is considered true by a group of people with large variables. For example, in cosmetic companies, people's perception of beauty will be present because the advertisements they share on social media feature the faces of famous celebrities who are white, tall and slim. In relation to beauty standards, there are several aspects related to hegemony:

**First**, the dominance of western culture. Universal beauty is dominated by western ideals, such as round eyes, a thin face, and a sharp nose. The proliferation of western media and widespread content has meant that the beauty and attractiveness of non-western people has been criticized for being 'different'. This has influenced beauty standards around the world.

**Second**, media control. In this case, the media often creates unrealistic looks. For example, photo editing in the advertising media industry and magazines. To display perfect results on the screen, advertisements and magazines often carry out an editing process that can change the appearance of the model or artist. Such as making her body seem slimmer, brighter face, thinner cheeks, and so on. This performance can certainly have a negative effect on the audience who eventually feel less confident because they think they are not like the advertising model.

**Third**, economic power. Economic power affects beauty standards because individuals or companies that have great power will control market behavior. Goods and services offered by companies in the beauty field are quite diverse. Economic power plays an important role here so that consumers feel they must have many products or services from these companies. Driving consumers is of course done by means of promotion, one of which is on social media. Consumers will feel the desire to buy and

hope to achieve the existing beauty standards. Conversely, if consumers cannot afford to buy the product, anxiety and stress will come over them because they feel they cannot make themselves like other people.

## Conclusion

The discussion of beauty standards and the concept of hegemony by Gramsci are related to each other. With the concept of hegemony involving social power and domination, a certain person or group with 'greater' hegemony can certainly be a strong power. In the context of beauty standards, someone who is considered 'fit with beauty standards' will have greater power than those who are not.

In addition, there are three aspects of beauty standards that related to hegemony, they are the dominance of western culture, media control, and economic power.

Beauty standards that have spread can only be stopped when an individual start doing self-acceptance. Self-acceptance can be done with several perspectives that exist in the scientific field. In psychology, self-acceptance can be achieved by changing mindsets and perceptions about their body. This can be done by forming a positive self-concept, improving self-esteem, and fostering self-compassion. Self-acceptance in this way will be very effective because someone can already accept their strengths and weaknesses.

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