A semiotic analysis of body positivity in Meghan Trainor's 'You Don't Know Me': A study on symbolism and representation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the semiotic analysis of body positivity in Meghan Trainor's music video entitled You Don't Know Me, by the approach of a study on symbolism and representation, particularly the Roland Bathes' semiotic sign theory. With that, this study aims to find out the denotative and connotative meanings of the symbols contained in the images and song lyrics of the video clip. The study reveals how Meghan Trainor's music video challenges conventional beauty norms and promotes body positivity by analyzing its visual and lyrical elements using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The body positivity celebrates the diversity of body types, skin colors and features. After all, this study argues that Trainor's music video contributes to the body positivity movement and demonstrates how popular media can challenge entrenched beauty myths and foster more inclusive ideals regarding attractiveness and self-worth.

Keywords: semiotics, body positivity, video clips, Meghan Trainor

INTRODUCTION

Discussing beauty standards, Chuklin et al. (2023) statement of "beauty is perception" shows that beauty is subjective and relative. Everyone has their own view of beauty and cannot be generalized. Beauty will continue to change over time. Each individual has a different body shape, such as a fat or thin body, a short or even dwarf body, curly or fluffy hair, a dark and uneven skin color, a face with acne, and other forms of flaws that are considered less attractive in the media, and thus forming the view that it does not match the existing beauty standards (Chuklin et al., 2023). Therefore, a movement emerged that promotes acceptance of body shape, size, and appearance as it is. This movement is called body positivity (R. Cohen et al., 2019). Body positivity originated from the fat rights movement that began in the 1960s. Connie Sobczak and Elizabeth Scott founded The Body Positive in 1996, which aims to teach people "how to reconnect with their innate body wisdom so they can have more balanced and joyful self-care, and a relationship with their whole self that is guided by love, forgiveness, and humor." (Matacin & Simone, 2019).

According to Luce Irigaray in Tong (1998), women must be seen as "feminine women" in order to be considered women. Luce also mentions that the concept of sameness in beauty standards hinders the advancement of women's thinking, which is a result of the concept of narcissism and masculine singularity. This is also in line with postmodern feminism's view that women are forced to submit to the symbolic order,

so women are expected to be free from obsessive thoughts of the symbolic order. Because postmodern feminism assumes that women are different or diverse. So, the physical differences between women are still women.

The term "beauty myth," which was coined based on Naomi Wolf's concept, is mainly driven by beauty standards. The idea of beauty, which places a strong emphasis on outward appearance and creates beauty standards as guidelines that women must adhere to in order to be considered beautiful, is known as the beauty myth (Wolf, 2002).

Representing body positivity and seen from Naomi Wolf's concept, followers of the Body Positive Movement use various Internet platforms to share narratives and images about their relationship with beauty culture (Lianawati, 2008). This movement is also voiced by several world figures and singers, one of which is Meghan Trainor. Based on this social phenomenon, Meghan Trainor will be the focus of this study in observing this phenomenon. This is because Meghan Trainor is an American singer-songwriter who is known to be active in the body positivity movement. Therefore, Meghan Trainor has been widely covered by the media and media as a progressive celebrity who is a positive and inspiring role model for consumers of her music media content, especially pre-teen girls and young women. Critics and other media experts have stated that Meghan Trainor has made a significant impact on body positivity through her songs. (Smith, n.d.-a)

With the release of her body positivity-themed songs, such as "You Don't Know Me", it seems that Trainor is openly defying the stereotypical representation of the ideal beautiful woman that has been known and embedded in people's minds. In the content of her music videos, she strongly advocates for women to accept all body shapes (Smith, n.d.-a). Then, the music video "You Don't Know Me" was chosen because it is related to the theme of body positivity. The songs encourage listeners to be confident and accept different physical appearances. "You Don't Know Me" invites listeners not to compare themselves with others and accept their uniqueness.

Previous research is used with the aim of obtaining comparison and reference materials. Not only that, to avoid the assumption of similarity with this research. Research that carries the theme of body positivity is research conducted by Valida Achsani and Arif Ardy Wibowo (2023) with the title Analysis of Acceptance of Body Positivity Meaning by Audiences in Video Clips "Tutur Batin" by Yura Yunita. Through interviews, various results are obtained, differences influenced by the background of each informant. From the results of the analysis, it was found that of the ten informants studied, six informants were in the hegemonic dominant category. Meanwhile, four other informants were in the negotiation position, and no informants were found in the oppositional position. The second research using Roland Barthes analysis is research by Kezia Judith Carolina Poetiray, I Gusti Agung Alit Suryawati

& I Dewa Ayu Sugiarica Joni (2020) with the title Representation of Feminism in God is a woman Video Clips (Roland Barthes Semiotics Analysis). The results showed that the video clip of the song "God is a woman" represents postmodern feminism as shown by the female character portrayed by Ariana Grande who has freedom like men without trying to eliminate gender differences, who can express herself, who dares to fight patriarchy, and has power over her own body.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SIGNS IN MUSIC VIDEOS

Video clips are videos that illustrate the meaning of a song and contain signs in the song. These signs can be referred to as semiotics. Moller (2011:34) explains that a music video is a video accompanied by music, which is usually a song. According to Austerlitz (2017), music videos are made to bring the song to television and uploaded to the YouTube platform. Video clips are increasingly being developed with various creative and innovative ideas such as meaningful or hidden messages behind them. You Don't Know Me in the context of body positivity, this message can be related to the importance of understanding and accepting oneself without being affected by the expectations or views of others regarding physical appearance or body identity. Although not explicitly addressing this issue, these lyrics can be interpreted as a call to defend an individual's right to their own personality and identity.

BODY POSITIVITY

Luce Irigaray actively used her position as a respected feminist critic to advance women's social causes. The direction of Luce Irigaray's thinking departs from the use of language and cultural developments within the subject world. This then becomes a problem that triggers criticism, thus presenting a new view that language does not shape the speaker's worldview but only tends to shape the subject's particular view of the world (Tong, 1998).

This research uses one of the feminist theories, namely Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth. According to Naomi Wolf in her book entitled "The Beauty Myth", she criticizes the beauty standards applied by society and mass media which are often unrealistic and put pressure on women. Naomi argues that beauty standards built by the beauty industry and the media are a form of social control that limits women's freedom and potential. Naomi Wolf's opinion on beauty standards is based on her feminist views and emphasizes the importance of combating the bad press experienced by women to achieve an idealized image of beauty by society and the media (Wolf, 2002). Wolf's ideas emphasize the importance of women being able to change the patriarchal system and fight pressures caused by the social environment, such as not having the right to education, politics, and the right to get a job (Warsito & Fitria, 2022).

Body positivity is actually a movement that encourages people to love their bodies. Everyone is expected to feel satisfied with their body, regardless of their skin color and body shape. The Body Positivity movement has several goals, including fighting society's view of the body, encouraging acceptance of various body shapes, strengthening self-confidence and body acceptance, and challenging unrealistic body standards (Anisa & Winduwati, 2021).

According to Nicholei L Wood-Barcalow, Tracy L Tylka, and Casey, in 2010 in their research journal entitled "But I Like My Body": Characteristics of a positive body image and a holistic model for young adult women. This study used three characteristics of body positivity, because these three characteristics are very much displayed in the video clip that the author will analyze, namely:

Appreciation

It is a form of appreciation for the body by saying thank you for being functional, healthy, and productive. A healthy balance between accepting and appreciating certain things about the shape, substance, and function of the body (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

Body acceptance and love

Recognizing and loving the body can be done by loving yourself, recognizing your physical shortcomings, and focusing on the things you have. Those who acknowledge and love their bodies will try to maximize their potential rather than focusing on their shortcomings (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

Inner positivity affects outward behavior

The inner positivity of a woman with a positive body image is reflected in her outward appearance which radiates happiness, comfort, and confidence in herself and her body (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

BARTHES SEMIOTIC THEORIES

The key to analyzing Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is the concept of denotation and connotation. Denotation and connotation are terms used to visualize the relationship between signifier and signified. Denotation is the primary sign visualized by the literal sign against the object. Meanwhile, connotation is a secondary sign that describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the reader's emotions or feelings and cultural values (Wibowo, 2013, pp. 21-22).

Myth is a type of meaning, a form that in the use of myth must give this form to historical limitations, and the conditions for using myth, and to bring society back to

the myth that describes it as a form that has meaning. (Barthes, 1957). The sequence of mythological characteristics according to Barthes is divided into three forms as follows.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach for a better understanding to view the social issues of body positivity as represented in Meghan Trainor's music videos. The Roland Barthes' theory will be used to evaluate and expand the symbolisms in the music videos. Among the music videos being analyzed, this study focused on the music video of the song "You Don't Know Me" released in 2016. The symbolisms of body positivity are contained in both visual data and lyrics and hence those become the corpus to analyze. This study resulted in an in-depth understanding of how Trainor conveys messages about body positivity through song lyrics and visual data in her music videos. By focusing on specific lyrics and visual elements, this study explains in detail the representations of body positivity contained in Meghan Trainor's selected works.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SIGNS IN *YOU DON'T KNOW ME* MUSIC VIDEOS

Meghan Trainor's music videos consistently showcase powerful body-positive symbols, celebrating diversity in body type, skin color, and hair texture. The video for "You Don't Know Me" challenges conventional beauty standards by featuring confident plus-sized dancers, highlighting natural features like curly hair, and using personal jewelry as an expression of self-love rather than conforming to societal beauty norms. Through both visual and lyrical elements, Trainor's work promotes self-acceptance, critiques unrealistic beauty ideals perpetuated by media and toys, and creates a new narrative of inclusive beauty that values confidence and individuality over adherence to narrow social standards. This is evident in the following findings.

Denotative Signs
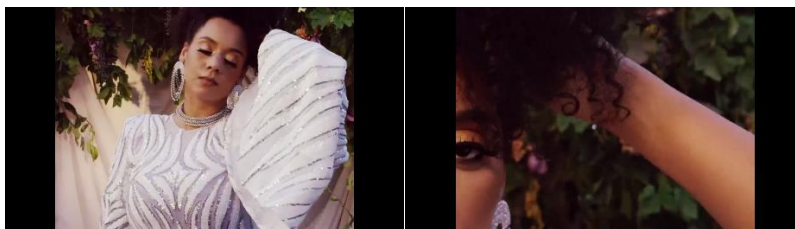
Picture 1.

Minutes 00.28 to 00.27 are depicted in Picture 1. The words "*Goodness sake, You so, you so fake*" are being sung while a woman with a dark skin tone and curly hair poses for the camera. She is also decked out in jewelry around her neck and ears.
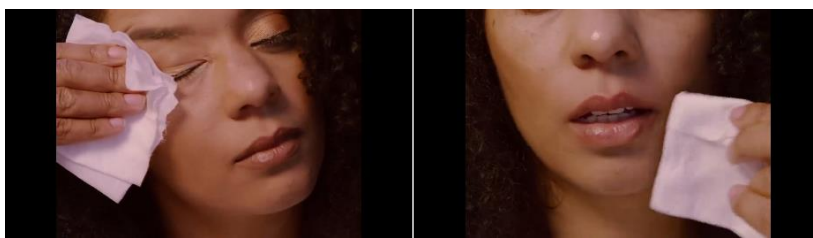

Picture 2.

The scenes in Picture 2 are from minutes 00.33 to 00.43. With confidence, the woman started to remove the jewelry from her neck and ears. *"I know you love to hear the sound of yourself speaking,"* the lyrics go on.

Picture 3.

There are sequences from 00.44 to 01.07 in Picture 3. The woman could be seen taking off her artificial eyelashes and untying her hair to display her wavy, curly hair. In addition to the line, *"Tell me again how much you love me, but you don't even know me,"*

Picture 4.

Scenes 01.11 – 01.42 are depicted in Picture 4. Using a cotton swab, the woman removes all of her makeup—lipstick, mascara, eyeshadow, and eyeliner—and reveals her natural eye and lip appearance.

Picture 5.

The scene in Picture 5 is from 02:06 to 03:31. The woman strips off all of her clothes, exposing her plus-size figure and the fat folds on her tummy. She then stands boldly with her larger-than-life figure till the end of the video.

Connotative Meaning

Picture 1 depicts a dark-skinned woman with curly hair posing in front of a camera to demonstrate admiration for beauty diversity. The model's odd appearance underlines that various skin tones and hair textures should be valued and celebrated. The woman's confident pose in front of the camera demonstrates acceptance and affection for her own body. The confident pose helps her appear at ease in her own skin and represents a rejection of social pressure to conceal or alter physical characteristics that do not meet norms. The use of jewelry can be seen as a sort of self- adornment. Figures 18 and 19 depict a dark-skinned woman with curly hair posing in front of a camera to demonstrate admiration for beauty diversity.

The lyrics "*You don't, you don't know me, What's my name? Who am I, what are my dreams*" convey the idea that a person shouldn't be judged solely by their physical appearance but rather through deeper personal interactions. Her confident camera pose signifies a robust inner positivity. These lyrics underscore the significance of understanding someone beyond their exterior, highlighting how personality influences perception and social interaction. This blend of imagery and lyrics underscores the importance of staying true to oneself and resisting societal pressures to conform.

Picture 2 depicts the act of confidently removing jewelry, symbolizing an appreciation of one's natural self. This act can be seen as a representation of liberation from societal beauty standards, emphasizing that true beauty lies in one's personality rather than external adornments. The lyrics "I know you like to hear yourself speak" suggest valuing one's own opinion and judgment over others. By removing accessories, it is affirmed that women have control over their appearance, symbolizing self-acceptance and self-love. Her confidence in appearing without accessories demonstrates a strong inner positive attitude. This scene illustrates how inner self-acceptance, and confidence can manifest in bold actions. The combination of visuals

and lyrics conveys that one does not need to constantly heed others' judgments about their appearance.

Picture 3 shows the symbolic acts of untying hair and removing fake eyelashes, representing the shedding of the "mask of self" often worn to meet common beauty standards. Displaying naturally curly and wavy hair signifies an appreciation of one's natural physique and the acceptance and celebration of features often deemed "not ideal" by societal norms. Embracing naturally curly and wavy hair exemplifies body acceptance and love, challenging narrow beauty standards and encouraging the embrace of natural physical traits. The lyrics "Tell me again, how much you love me" can be interpreted as a call for validation that someone loves them for who they are, beyond physical appearance, affirming their worthiness of acceptance and love. The lyrics "But you don't, you don't, you don't even know me" highlight the desire to be appreciated for their entire being, not just their exterior. The combination of shedding the "mask of self" and these lyrics underscores the longing to be valued as a whole person, beyond just physical appearance.

In Picture 4, the act of removing eye and lip makeup (eyeshadow, eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick) symbolizes a release from societal and beauty industry standards. Displaying a natural face without makeup represents complete self-acceptance, including features often labeled as "flaws" by conventional standards. This act highlights the importance of valuing oneself in a natural state, showing that true beauty comes from authenticity rather than concealment or alteration. This scene challenges the audience to reconsider what truly defines beauty, indirectly criticizing the beauty industry's promotion of products as necessary for "improving" appearance. It suggests that women are inherently beautiful without makeup and encourages resistance to the pressure of appearing perfect. Choosing to show a natural face not only fosters a positive self-image but also influences outward appearance. The act of removing makeup demonstrates that genuine beauty emanates from feeling positive and comfortable with one's true self, affirming that true beauty comes from within, not from cosmetic products.

In Picture 5, a woman confidently removes her clothes, revealing her plus- sized body, symbolizing the acceptance and rejection of conventional beauty standards. She proudly displays her body, including the fat folds on her belly, which are often considered "flaws" by society, without shame. Her confident pose throughout the video makes a strong statement about the right of every individual to feel comfortable and proud of their body, regardless of size or shape. This scene represents tangible body acceptance and love, challenging social stigma against plus-size bodies and promoting positive self-acceptance. By unapologetically showing her belly fat, the woman advocates for body positivity and encourages others to embrace their bodies without feeling the need to hide or alter them. Her self-acceptance and pride are evident in her body language and confident expression, illustrating how inner positivity can enhance

one's external appearance and demeanor. Her confident pose shows that when someone is comfortable and proud of themselves, it radiates outwardly. Overall, this scene conveys that beauty and confidence are not confined to a specific body size. The confident display of plus-sized bodies contributes to normalizing diverse body shapes and sizes in media and society.

MYTHS IN *YOU DON'T KNOW ME* MUSIC VIDEOS

The natural beauty myth in the "You Don't Know Me" video clip conveys that true beauty stems from self-acceptance and the courage to appear as you are, rather than conforming to societal standards. This myth challenges common perceptions of beauty by presenting the idea that beauty is not confined to a single skin color, hair type, or body size. True beauty emerges when one dares to reveal their authentic self.

Scenes and symbols:

Dark-skinned woman with curly hair removing jewelry, makeup, and clothes. This act symbolizes shedding layers of artificiality to reveal the true self, emphasizing that true beauty lies in a natural and genuine appearance, not in societal polish.

Myths:

Jewelry

It is often associated with wealth, elegance, and femininity, removing jewelry can be seen as rejecting traditional beauty standards.

Makeup

While makeup is believed to cover flaws and serve as self-expression, removing it represents self-acceptance and a rejection of societal beauty standards, suggesting that women are beautiful without makeup.

Curly hair

In some societies, curly hair is viewed as less attractive or professional than straight hair. Displaying curly hair celebrates diversity, asserting that beauty encompasses various hair types, not just straight hair.

Plus-size body and fat folds

Beauty is often associated with slim bodies. Confidently showcasing plus-size bodies challenges this myth, promoting the idea that all body sizes should be valued and celebrated.

The video clip unravels existing beauty myths by removing elements associated with conventional beauty (jewelry, makeup, clothes) and presenting oneself confidently as they are. It creates a new narrative of beauty and self-acceptance that is more inclusive and diverse.

CONCLUSION

Visual and lyrical elements often dismantle common beauty myths, such as those concerning race, hair type, or body shape as prerequisites for attractiveness. Meghan Trainor's music videos create a new narrative around beauty and body image that is more inclusive and diverse than typical media representations. Meghan's central theme revolves around challenging conventional beauty standards by promoting "inclusive beauty" and celebrating the diversity of body types, skin colors, and features. The "You Don't Know Me" video clip challenges myths about fair skin, straight hair, and the need for makeup to be considered attractive. This analysis demonstrates that Trainor's work contributes to the body positivity movement by normalizing diverse body types and encouraging self-love and acceptance of various physical attributes. Overall, this research argues that Trainor's music videos significantly contribute to the body positivity movement by normalizing diverse body types and promoting self-acceptance. The analysis shows how popular media can challenge entrenched beauty myths and foster more inclusive ideals of attractiveness and self-worth.

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