



**ANALYSIS OF BODY MYTH IN #GYMTOK
CONTENT ON TIKTOK USING ROLAND
BARTHES THEORY**

THESIS

By:

Lary Dwi Livedra Sitorus

20210600022

English Studies

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities

**BUDDHI DHARMA UNIVERSITY
TANGERANG**

2025



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**Submitted as one of the Requirement to Obtain the
Bachelor's Degree in the English Study Program
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
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Lary Dwi Livedra Sitorus

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FINAL PROJECT APPROVAL

Name : Lary Dwi Livedra Sitorus
Student Number : 20210600022
Faculty : Social Sciences and Humanities
Study Program : English Literature
Final Project Title : Analysis of Body Myth in #GymTok Content on TikTok
Using Roland Barthes Theory

The Final Project Proposal has been approved to examined as a partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Bachelor Degree

Tangerang, July 14th 2025

Approved by,
Supervisor

Acknowledged by,
Head of Department

Dr. Lilie Suratminto M.A

Riris Mutiara Paulina S S.Pd., M.Hum

NIDN : 8875430017

NIDN : 0427068703

UBD



**RECOMMENDATION FOR THE ELIGIBILITY OF THE
FINAL PROJECT EXAMINATION**

The undersign

Name : Dr. Lilie Suratminto M.A.

Position : Supervisor

Certifies that

Name : Lary Dwi Livedra Sitorus

Student Number : 20210600022

Faculty : Social Sciences and Humanities

Department : English Department

Title of the Final Project : Analysis of Body Myth in #GymTok Content on
TikTok Using Roland Barthes Theory

It has been eligible to take the final project examination.

Tangerang, 14th July 2025

Approved by,
Supervisor

Acknowledged by,
Head of Department

Dr. Lilie Suratminto M.A.

Riris Mutiara Paulina S. S.Pd., M.Hum.

NIDN: 8875430017

NIDN: 0427068703



THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS

Name : Lary Dwi Livedra Sitorus
Student Number : 20210600022
Faculty : Social Sciences and Humanities
Study Program : English Department
Thesis Title : Analysis of Body Myth in #GymTok Content on TikTok
Using Roland Barthes Theory

This thesis has been examined by the board of examiners on August 04th, 2025

1. Chair : Dr. Sonya Ayu Kumala S.Hum., M.Hum
NIDN: 0418128601
2. Examiner I : Riris Mutiara Paulina S. S.Pd., M.Hum
NIDN: 0427068703
3. Examiner II : Hot Saut Halomoan, S.Pd., M.Hum
NIDN: 0320046101

Acknowledged by,

Dean



Dr. Sonya Ayu Kumanla S.Hum., M.Hum

NIDN: 0418128601

STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY

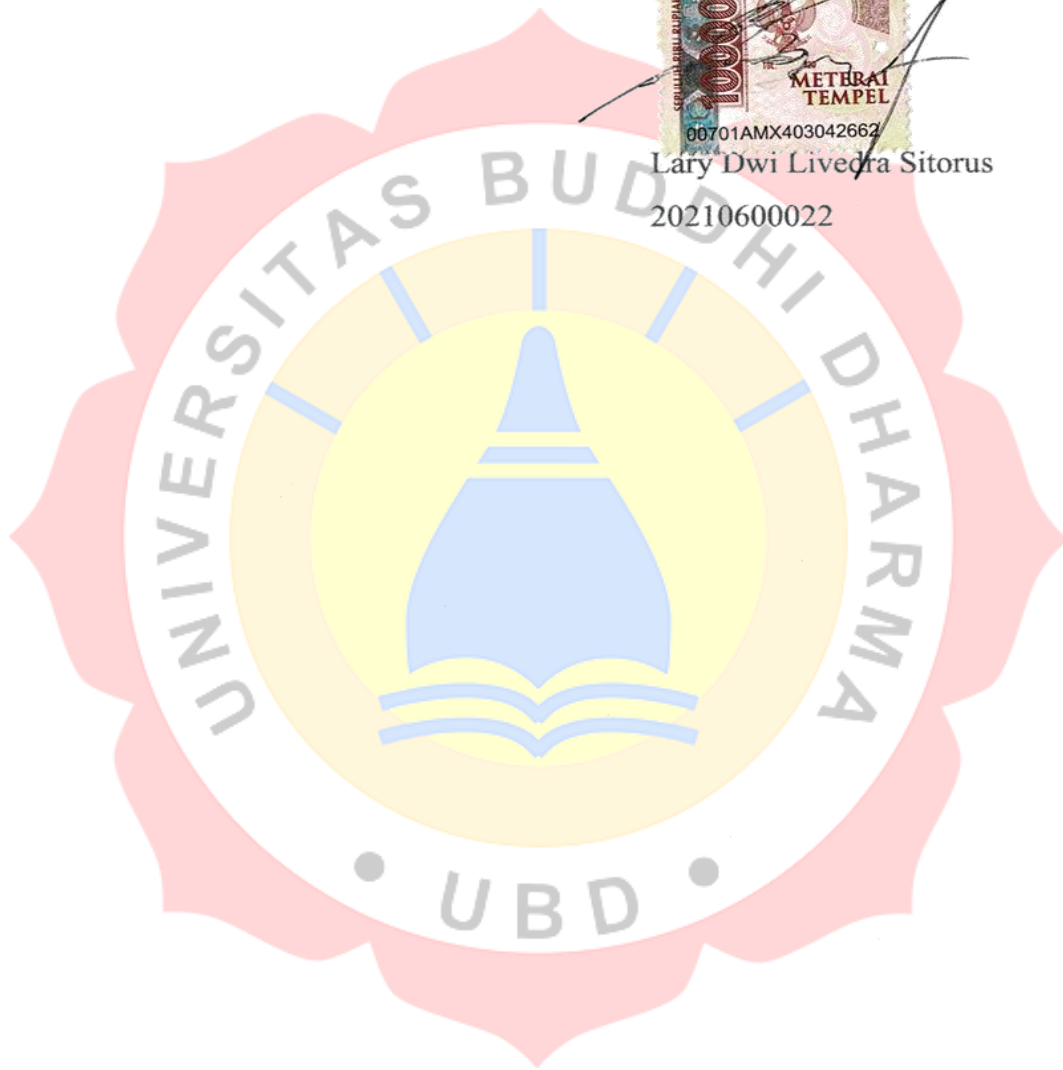
I honestly declare this final project is my own writing. This is true and correct that I do not take any scholar ideas or work from other dishonestly. All the cited works are quote in accordance with ethical code academic writing.

Tangerang, 14th July 2025



Lary Dwi Liveora Sitorus

2021060022



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The researcher

Lary Dwi Livedra Sitorus

20210600022



ABSTRACT

The #GymTok phenomenon on TikTok is a platform not only promotes a healthy lifestyle, but also shapes a myth about the “ideal body” of women through standardized fitness content. This research aims to identify denotative and connotative meanings found in #GymTok content and analyze them to a myth about the ideal body using Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory. The method used is a qualitative approach with semiotic analysis of 10 most popular TikTok #GymTok videos which have approximately 5000 likes and uploaded between January to May 2025. This research focuses on Roland Barthes’ three layers of meaning, there are denotation (visual/textual signs), connotation (the deeper meaning), and myth (how people see a certain thing, ideas, or even behaviours as a common sense which repeated frequently and accepted in society). The results of this research show that the content of #GymTok is dominated by lower-body workout routines such as squats and hip thrusts which related to the myth of the ideal body of women (having a perfect shape of glutes and slim body). In conclusion, #GymTok acts as a tool for the construction of an ideal body myth which is normalized by the society.

Keywords: #GymTok, semiotic, body myth, Roland Barthes

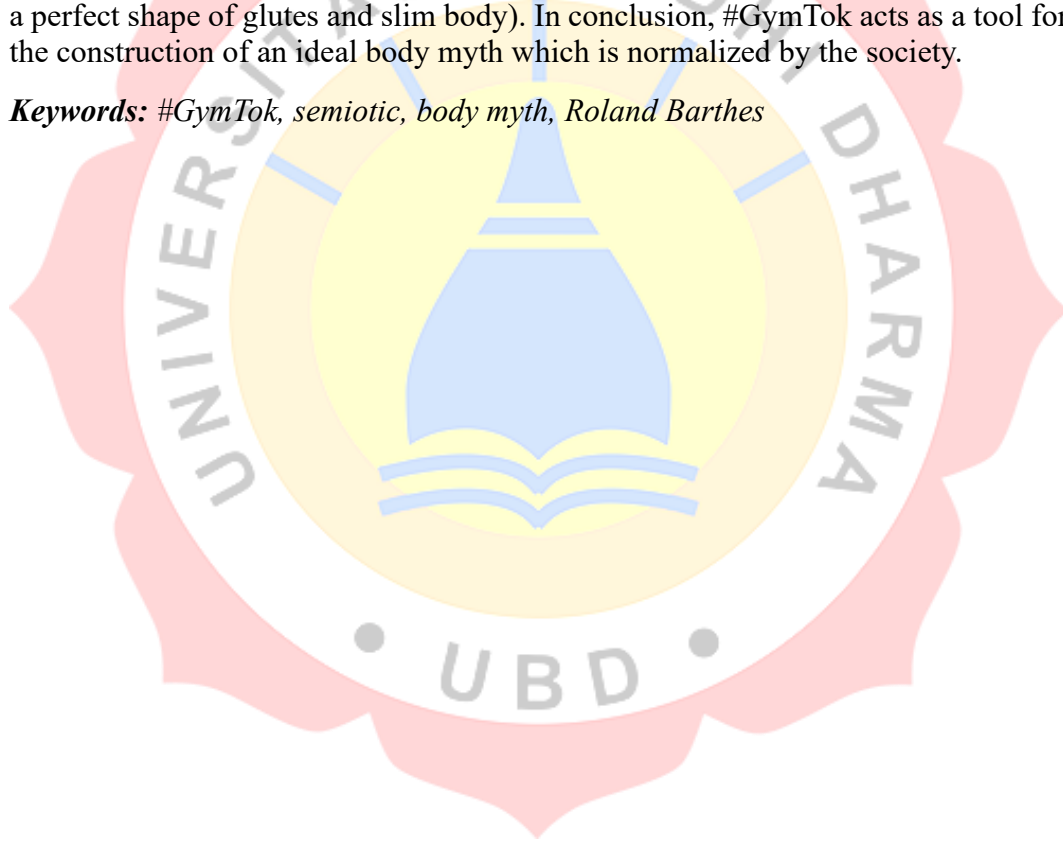
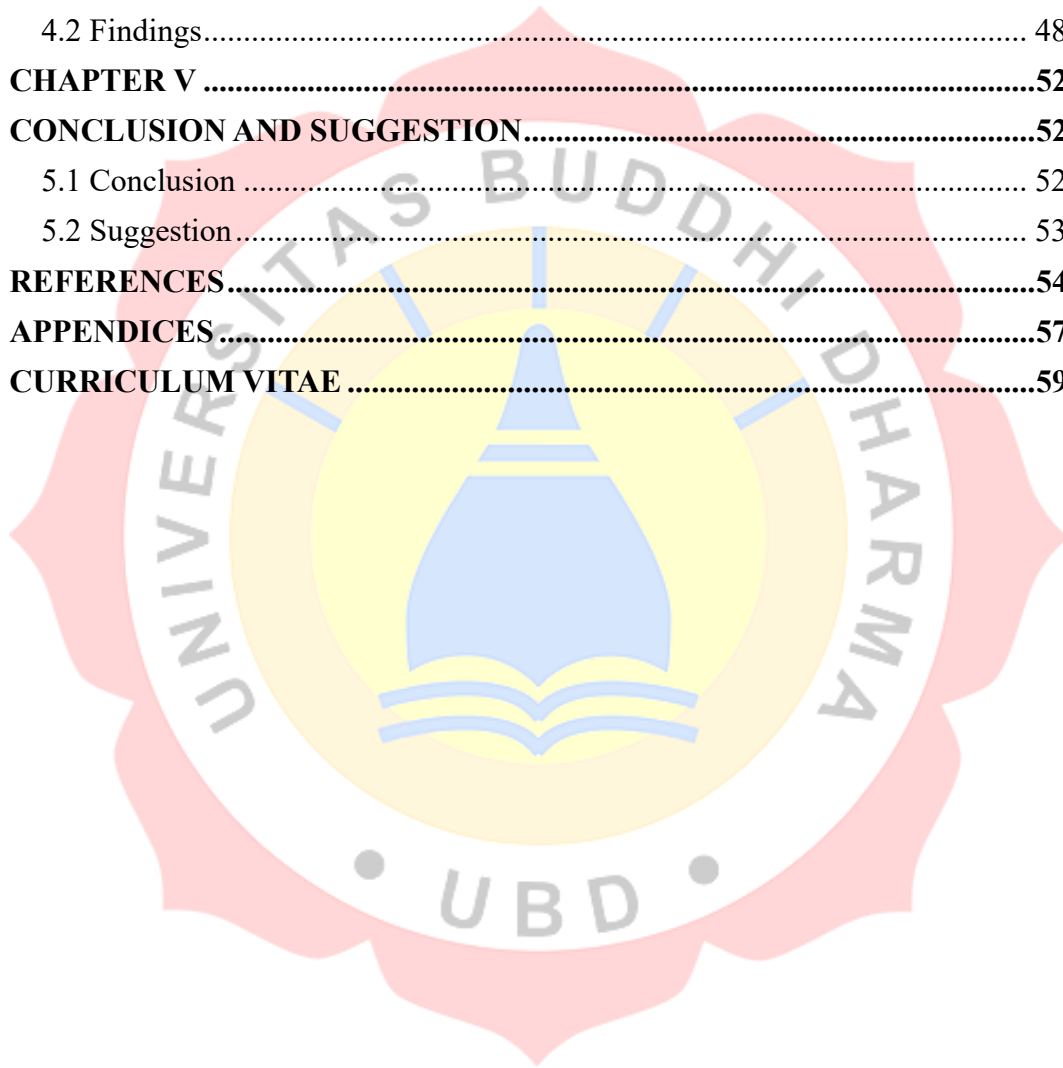


TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	v
ABSTRACT	vii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF TABLES	xi
CHAPTER I	1
INTRODUCTON	1
1.1 Background of the Study	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem	5
1.3 Research Questions	5
1.4 Goals and Functions	6
1.4.1 Goals	6
1.4.2 Functions	6
1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study	7
1.6 Conceptual Framework	7
CHAPTER II	9
PREVIOUS STUDY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	9
2.1 Review of Previous Study	9
2.2 Theoretical Framework	11
2.2.1 Semiotic	11
2.2.2 Charles Sanders Peirce’s Semiotic Theory	14
2.2.3 Ferdinand de Saussure’s Semiotic Theory	16
2.2.4 Roland Barthes’ Semiotic Theory	17
2.3 Body Myth	20
2.3.1 The Representation of the Ideal Female Body in Gym Culture	20
2.3.2 Popular Women’s Workout Routines in #GymTok	21
2.4 Denotation and Connotation in #GymTok Signs (Visual and Textual)	22
CHAPTER III	23
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	23
3.1 Research Approach	23
3.2 Data Types	24
3.3 Data Sources	24

3.4 Techniques of Data Collection Methods	25
3.5 Techniques of Data Analysis	25
CHAPTER IV	27
ANALYSIS	27
4.1 Data Analysis	27
4.1.1 Visual Signs	28
4.1.2 Textual Signs	43
4.2 Findings	48
CHAPTER V	52
CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION	52
5.1 Conclusion	52
5.2 Suggestion	53
REFERENCES	54
APPENDICES	57
CURRICULUM VITAE	59



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.....	8
Figure 2. Charles Sanders Peirce Semiotic Process	15
Figure 3. Ferdinand de Saussure Semiotic Process.....	17
Figure 4. The semiological scheme of myth in Barthes's Mythologies.....	19



LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.....	28
Table 2.....	30
Table 3.....	31
Table 4.....	33
Table 5.....	34
Table 6.....	36
Table 7.....	37
Table 8.....	39
Table 9.....	40
Table 10.....	42
Table 11.....	43
Table 12.....	44
Table 13.....	44
Table 14.....	45
Table 15.....	46
Table 16.....	46
Table 17.....	47
Table 18.....	47
Table 19.....	51

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTON

1.1 Background of the Study

Social media has become one of the communication tools that we use in our daily lives. Among the many social media applications, TikTok is one of the media that is widely used for entertainment, especially among the youth generations. TikTok is a social media that provides short videos such as memes, tutorials, achievements, and many other things. TikTok (in Chinese: DouYin) is today one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms worldwide. Since its launch in September 2016, TikTok has quickly become a global phenomenon, especially popular among young people who use the app to watch, create, and interact with short videos, often starting fun “lyp-sync” clips and growing into much more (Montag, Yang, & Elhai, 2021). With its short videos, smart algorithm, and fast moving trends, TikTok has become a space where people openly share their daily routines, milestones, and a personal journey, especially when it comes to fitness and self transformation.

One of the content phenomena on TikTok is content with the hashtag #GymTok. #GymTok is a popular trend on TikTok, a hashtag that contains gym routines, gym tutorials, their before-after progress during gym, which it all can be motivation for many people. More than just a digital workout videos, #GymTok acts as a media where certain body types especially women’s which creates the ideal body nowadays. Culturally, the pressure to achieve the ideal body is no longer occurs only at certain times, but TikTok has reinforced this through trends of fitness, diet, and visually impressive body image. Watching videos on TikTok and the desire to improve one’s appearance makes people tend to compare themselves with those who are considered more ideal (Ariana, et al., 2024). Additionally, the influence of social media leads many people to internalize thin body standards. Those factors may reduce body satisfaction, particularly among women (Ariana, et al., 2024). In addition, a study by Xeniadis (2024) in Australia showed that just a few minutes of watching TikTok fitspiration can trigger an increase in state appearance comparison

and negative mood, which mediates a decline in body image, although it does not directly increase body dissatisfaction (Gurtala & Fardouly, 2023).

However, behind it all lies a deeper meaning, which often communicates deeper cultural meanings about success, discipline, masculinity, femininity, and the ideals of beauty. Among the various videos under #GymTok, there is a familiar pattern emerges, showing off a particular kind of female body as desirable or ideal, intense workout clips, and motivational quotes. In this case, the body becomes more than just a body. It turns into a sign of myth about health or fitness. The ideal female body, as portrayed on #GymTok content, is not a natural form. Instead, it is a socially constructed concept shaped by repeated visual and verbal representations. It leads to an expectation about how a woman is tied to a specific beauty standard. As Susan Bordo (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body*. University of California Press, stated that the female body becomes a cultural text, shaped by the audience or viewer of the content and media to characterized the female ideal body by their slim waist, flat stomach, lifted glutes, and overall lean figure.

In many #GymTok content on TikTok, women are frequently seen to perform specific exercises such as squat, hip thrusts, lungers, and HIIT routines. They all associated with building the ideal of the female body. These exercises are frequently used in fitness regimens and have been shown to be scientifically effective (Schoenfeld, 2010). Yet, their frequent appearance in the media also gives them symbolic meanings such as a flat stomach may represent social desirability for women and squats may suggest beauty.

Additionally, the 'male gaze' theory by Laura Mulvey (1975) introduced in her seminal essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*" published in the journal *Screen*, claimed that women as passive objects of desire in visual culture and film and men are usually portrayed as the active subjects of the story (Virgiena, Awaludin, & Assiddiqi, 2022). According to Mulvey, cinematic techniques often reflect the ideology of patriarchy and portraying the female character through the men's lens as an object of visual pleasure. Although TikTok allows the female

creator to take full control of their own account, the existing of beauty standards will still influence the self-representations and still be in line to the ideal shaped by men. This can be seen by how the female creator on TikTok unconsciously portray their bodies through actions that validate the general public's perspective.

Images shown on social media often go unquestioned, as if they are simply normal or naturally desirable. As people keep seeing and sharing these kinds of videos, they start to connect how someone should look ideally with health and discipline. Fitness related content is not new in the context of media studies. Mass medias have observed how people view the ideal body. Human body should be understood not merely as a biological organism, but as a cultural text, one that is inscribed with meanings shaped by dominant societal norms and ideologies (Bordo, 1995). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press. According to Bordo, the way individuals perceive, maintain, and modify their bodies are not solely matters of personal choice or biology, but are deeply embedded in cultural expectations. This perspective suggests that bodies reflect the values and power structures of the societies in which they exist, serving as sites where cultural ideals, such as beauty, discipline, and gender roles are both expressed and reinforced. The patterns in #GymTok content on TikTok not only indicate about fitness but also contributes to the signs which convey the literal meaning (denotative) and cultural meaning (connotative). Over time, it forms into contemporary body myths about how the body should look and how it should appear. This pattern fits Barthes' theory of semiotic, especially on myths. The content in #GymTok not only shows what the ideal body looks like but also shows that the body has its own meaning, such as the myth of the ideal body of women in society.

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation, offers a powerful analytical framework to explore this issue (Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, 1893). According to Saussure (1916), a sign is composed of the signifier (the form of a word or image) and the signified (the concept it represents). In a structural semiotic theory, the concept of meaning goes beyond simple signs and symbols. One of the most significant developments in this field is the idea of

myth as introduced by Roland Barthes, which he describes as a second order semiological system. This means that in addition to the basic level where a sign consists of a signifier (the form) and a signified (the concept), there exists a deeper layer where meanings are further shaped by cultural narratives and ideologies. In this second layer, everyday objects, images, or practices take on symbolic meanings that re-enforce dominant social values and beliefs. For instance, something as ordinary as an advertisement or a fashion trend can carry deeper messages about gender roles, success, or power. In this way, modern semiotics does not just analyze how signs function on the surface, but also how they contribute to constructing and perpetuating myths within society.

Barthes' theory of semiotic offers a powerful lens for the research of #GymTok phenomenon, where TikTok users construct and share fitness or gym related content. Many of the content are consist of soliciting or promoting specific ideals of the body. For example, every content of #GymTok consist of before-after body transformation, protein shake preparation, gym fashion, and even time-lapse of workout sessions. If we look at the surface, it may only seem that they are just trying to show their routines, but on a deeper level through Barthes' perception, the contents contain a deeper meaning. All the contents are constructed and sometimes reflect dominant ideologies about health, productivity, discipline, and even attractiveness. For example, one of the TikTok video under #GymTok shows the creator flexing in front of a mirror with a caption "Grind mode" supported with upbeat music as a background. This content not only show or promote the healthy life and muscular body, but also a connection of discipline and the results of it. The myth of ideal body becomes what people say normal in everyday life. The content of #GymTok on TikTok reinforce signs and symbols which connect to body myths.

However, there is a gap between the social media-constructed reality and a critical comprehension of these signs. Despite the fact that #GymTok content is viewed and reproduced daily, there is little awareness of how those contents reinforces cultural myths and normalized an ideal body. Many viewers only consume these contents passively without realizing the cultural messages contained. For young generation, the impact of #GymTok content might raise a lot

of question such as body image, followed with self-esteem and society perception of physical appearance. While previous studies have examined body image on social media and the psychological effects of fitness content, few have used a semiotic lens to analyze how meaning is constructed and circulated in TikTok's #GymTok community.

Additionally, the myth of the ideal body has been criticized for reinforcing unrealistic body standards and even promoting body dissatisfaction especially among young generation (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). The researcher chose this title "A Semiotic Analysis of Body Myth in #GymTok Content on TikTok Using Roland Barthes Theory" to explore and uncover the myths which represented the body on social media. The benefit of this research is, it applies Barthes' theory of semiotic to modern digital platform and offers a theoretical framework to interpret how meaning is created and how the myth is constructed.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The #GymTok content produced by female creators presents their bodies as the result of specific fitness routines. This representation indirectly propagates the myth that the ideal female body must be shaped through specific exercises such as squats, leg presses, or face pulls. In this case, the body becomes not only a visual object but also a symbol of beauty standards shaped by digital culture. This study focuses on how body representations in #GymTok content is constructed through Roland Barthes' theory, focusing on denotative, connotative, and myth.

The researcher aims to uncover how the ideal body is represented or formed in gym world by analyzing the verbal and non-verbal signs of these videos. Specifically, this study will examine how denotative signs (literal meanings) and connotative signs (cultural meanings) in #GymTok contents contribute to the myths about the ideal body and how it influences people's perceptions of the standard ideal female body

1.3 Research Questions

Based on the denotative and connotative meanings and myths in #GymTok content, here are the research questions:

1. What are the denotative and connotative meanings of body representations in female-created #GymTok content on TikTok?
2. How do these denotative and connotative meanings contribute to the creation of myths of the ideal female body in #GymTok?

1.4 Goals and Functions

The researcher has constructed and developed the precise goals and functions of the research in order to give it a clear direction and purpose. Every step of the research process has provided the framework for directing the overall analysis and ensuring that the research stay focused and relevant. The following goals and functions of this research are detailed as follows:

1.4.1 Goals

1. To identify denotative and connotative meanings found in selected #GymTok content created by female user of TikTok
2. To analyze the contribution of denotative and connotative meaning to the myth of the ideal body female in #GymTok

1.4.2 Functions

1. Theoretical Function: to contribute to the development of semiotic analysis in the field of cultural studies with applying Roland Barthes' myth theory. This research also includes incorporating of feminist theories by Susan Bordo and Laura Mulvey to broaden the scope of body representation in digital culture
2. Academic Function: to provide a useful reference for future researcher who are also interested in studying body image or self-representation in the context of social media.
3. Practical Function: to raise awareness among social media users about the hidden message behind every content on TikTok related to body myth through hashtag #GymTok, encouraging a more critical way of interpreting what people see online.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

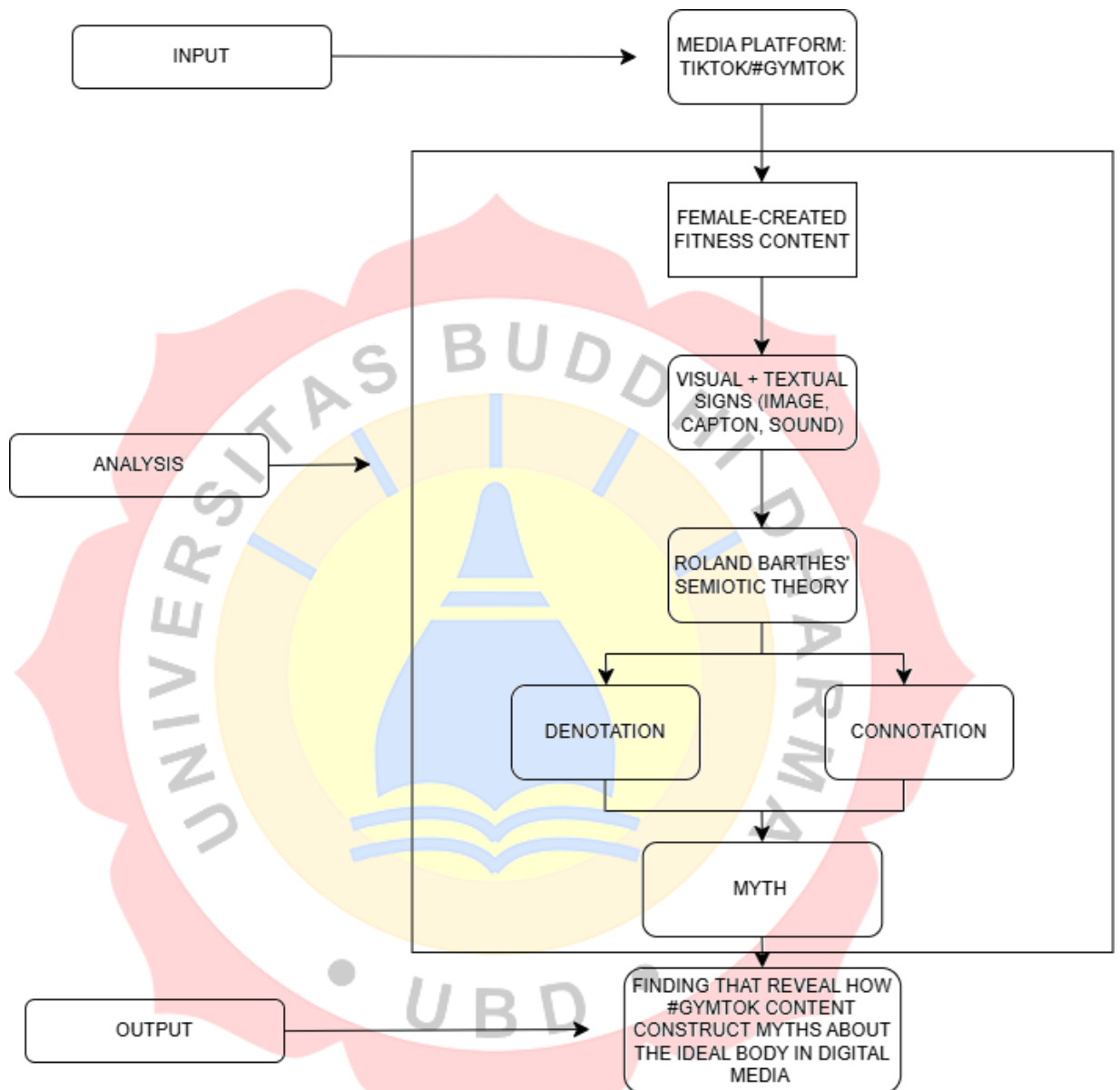
1. This study focuses on analyzing TikTok video of #GymTok with before/after transformations, workout routines, or a day in my life content
2. The study limited to identify the denotative, connotative and myth meanings about body image found in #GymTok content, using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory.
3. The object that will be used in this study is 10 top #GymTok videos to ensure relevance to current trends and representation within the #GymTok community and limited the content created by female users.
4. Then content that will be used for this study must have a number of likes above 5000 which uploaded between January to May 2025.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

Creating a conceptual framework is a crucial part of this research in order to explain how researcher explain the flow of this research and how the theories connect to the data in order to answer the research questions. This study adopts Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Barthes framework helps researcher to analyze the textual and visual signs of #GymTok content on TikTok. The conceptual framework of this research are as follows:

1. The researcher started to collect the selected #GymTok content from TikTok by screen capturing according to the scope and limitation of this research.
2. The data then divided into verbal and non-verbal signs of each content.
3. The researcher described the denotative and connotative meaning using the Roland Barthes' theory of semiotic.
4. The researcher revealed the myths about the ideal female body.

By applying this model to #GymTok content on TikTok, the study aims to reveal how such content contributes to the normalization of certain body ideals.



CHAPTER II

PREVIOUS STUDY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Review of Previous Study

In order to build a strong theoretical foundation, the researcher refer to several research that applied semiotic analysis in various media context. These previous studies provide insight into how signs, both visual and textual construct meaning, and validate the relevance of semiotics, particularly Barthes' theory, in analyzing digital content.

One relevant study is by Dr. Rabia Noor, Tuba Akram, Huma Zafar. "Exploring Body Image and Identity: A Semiotic Study of Viral TikTok Reels in Pakistan" (2024). The researchers conducted a qualitative semiotic analysis to examine how Pakistani TikTok creators use visual signs such as clothing, makeup, body gestures, and settings to construct and communicate body image and identity. The study found that TikTok content acts as a platform for users to actively perform and negotiate their identities through symbolic choices, with Symbolic Interactionism and the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). In this context, the body is not only a biological entity but also a cultural symbol which carry meanings associated with self-expression, gender, and confidence. This study is relevant to the present study because it demonstrates how TikTok content can be comprehended through semiotic analysis, especially in the way that body represent and perceived. While Noor examined body image and identity from a cultural perspective on Pakistani content, the current study employs Roland Barthes theory of semiotic (denotation, connotation, and myth) to examine #GymTok content on TikTok.

Second relevant study is by Isnania, Siti, and Tiya Agustina. "COVID-19' MEME IN SOCIAL MEDIA: STUDY OF ROLAND BARTHES SEMIOLOGY". (2020). The research conducted a qualitative descriptive study analyzing COVID-19 memes on social media such as blogs, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sites. According to their analysis, textual and visual components on memes

serve as signifiers that go beyond their literal meaning, conveying meaning that represent societal attitudes, fears, and criticisms during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study deconstructing these signs and highlights how memes serve as a platform for public discourse. This previous study is relevant to the current study because the application of Barthes semiotic theory in a digital content. This previous study focuses on pandemic related memes while this present study analyze #GymTok content on TikTok, exploring how gym and fitness related visual and textual signs which constructed to the myths of the perfect body in a digital world.

The third relevant study is done by Silvia Natasya (2019) from Buddhi Dharma University entitled “Semiotic Analysis of the Packaging of Tolak Angin and Antangin”. This study used a theory of Myth by Roland Barthes. The aim of this study was to identify how the packaging of two traditional herbal such Tolak Angin and Antangin conduct meaning through visual and textual signs. A descriptive qualitative approach is conducted on this study to examined visual signs (colors, imagery, layout) and textual signs (words, slogan). This study found that Barthes’ semiotic framework effectively reveals how packaging for these herbal medicines constructs specific cultural meanings. This study reveals that both herbal medicines have differences in the identity of each product which shown characteristics such as picture and color. This study is relevant to help this recent study because it highlights how denotation, connotation, and myth function to build viewers’ perceptions. This contrast to the recent study, because the previous study is more general, while this recent study focuses on #GymTok content by female creator on TikTok, specifically the myth of the ideal body. This contrast shows how semiotic can be adapted to various digital platforms.

The last relevant study which helped contribute on this research is an article done by Yosua Ade Putra, Yulius Kurniawan, Eka Fadilah (2024) entitled “Representation of Indonesian’s Beauty Concept in “Citra” Hand & Body Lotion Advertisement Using Roland Barthes’ Semiotic Approach”. This article explores a representation of beauty concept in Indonesian advertisements. The research aims to analyze the denotative, connotative and myth in Citra brand advertisement. The research used a qualitative descriptive method and used a primary data sourced from

online media, which is YouTube. The findings of this research are signs in the Citra hand and body lotion advertisement. There are 2 types of signs found in the research, which are verbal language signs and non-verbal language signs. The result of this research is a cultural diversity in various concepts of beauty in Indonesia. This research also find that the advertisement wants to break the beauty myth which is a bright skin is the ideal beauty of Indonesia. This research focuses on beauty myth from the advertisement, while the recent study focuses on the myth of the ideal female body. This is relevant to recent study because both studies are focused on the myth of the ideal beauty standard. The differences is by the data collection method and the data analyze. The previous study is focused on the advertisement, while the recent study focused on the content on TikTok which collected by the researcher.

After reviewing all the previous study, the writer finds the similarity between this study and previous study. While the previous studies provide useful insights of how semiotic is applied in media of TikTok, memes, and product packaging, this research brings a new perspective by focuses on female-creator of #GymTok content on TikTok. It examines how this content construct cultural myths about the ideal female body, using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory as the main lens of analysis.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This research is based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory in order to understand how #GymTok videos on TikTok shape and share ideas about what an ideal body should look like and how those contents can be considered common to become a role model in societ

2.2.1 Semiotic

Humans are often referred to as *homo signans* (sign-making beings) and *homo culturalis*, meaning we exist within culture. This emphasizes that humans cannot be separated from signs because everything around us, from gesture and words, to social media posts is a system of meaning. Therefore, semiotic is an important tool for understanding how we produce and interpret meanings. "Semiotics is concerned

with everything that can be taken as a sign.” (Eco, 1979) Language, pictures, fashion, architecture, and digital content like that on TikTok are all included in this.

Semiotic is the study of signs and how they are used to convey meaning. In our daily lives, we are constantly surrounded by signs, not just in the form of written or spoken language, but also in images, colours, facial expressions, and symbols. As Daniel Chandler explains, “Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as ‘signs’ in everyday speech, but of anything which ‘stands for’ something else” (Chandler, 2007). In other words, the images, pictures, or even sounds can be a sign if it contributes to a deeper meaning. Semiotic is divided by two types: structuralist semiotics and pragmatic semiotics.

2.2.1.1 Structuralist Semiotics

The structural semiotic study was proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure with a dyadic model, which a sign act as the signifier (the form of the sign, such as a word or image) and the signified (the concept it represents). Saussure highlighted that between a word or image and what it represents isn’t natural, rather it is something we all agree based on shared cultural habits (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1916). By extending the Saussure’s theory of semiotics, Roland Barthes took semiotics a step further by using it to examine media and common cultural practices. In his seminal works, Barthes showed that cultural indicators, whether in popular media, fashion, cuisine, or advertising, do more than just express simple, literal meanings (what he called denotation).

These signs also carry connotative meanings, deeper and often hidden layers of ideology and cultural values that shape how we interpret the world around us. The concept of meaning in media was expanded by Roland Barthes in 1972. Barthes helped us see that sign, like images, words, or even gestures don’t just tell us what something is but also tell us what it means in a cultural sense. Taking inspiration from Saussure, Barthes explained that meaning isn’t fixed or neutral, but instead signs carry deeper meaning or messages which is shaped by the society (Barthes, 1972). Barthes theory of semiotic broke down into three layers:

1. Denotation is what we literally see or hear.

2. Connotation adds more meaning like the idea which represents something.
3. Myths are when those meanings get repeated often in society, which then feel normal, it becomes what Barthes calls myths, ideas which shapes into how we see the world without us realizing it.

2.2.1.2 Pragmatic Semiotics

Another explanation in semiotics is from Charles Sanders Peirce, who introduced a more dynamic way of thinking about signs through his triadic model. Peirce proposed that a sign is composed of three interconnected components, which are the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. In Peirce's view, meaning is not something inherent in the sign itself, rather it is produced through interpretation, which is shaped by the observer's context, knowledge, and cultural-dependent, and shaped by an ongoing process of interpretation (Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 1934). While both Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce played an important part in the development of semiotic theory, it is Saussure's structuralist approach that has had a more direct and lasting influence on modern cultural and media semiotics. This concept served as the foundation for structuralism, a movement that profoundly influenced how academics interpreted language, society, and meaning

Additionally, in the context of TikTok's #GymTok content, for example a video of someone showing their muscular body shows that they have worked hard to reach that body. But on top of it, it gives a deeper meaning than a muscular body. For example, the idea about going to the gym with discipline can lead to a deeper meaning, in other word is myth, which is how the body determines the value or success of someone who is often going to the gym. Semiotic study can unpack how such content contributes to understanding or forming perceptions that are focused on fitness or self-worth. In this research, semiotic analysis uses Barthes' theory to find out how #GymTok content builds and spreads myths about the ideal body that influence viewers on how they see the world of gyms and the appearance of the ideal body for people who like to exercise.

In this research, semiotics provides a theoretical lens to explore and decode how #GymTok content on TikTok produces signs of the ideal body. By interpreting

these signs, the research aims to reveal the myth contained in the signs. This research adopts Roland Barthes structuralist semiotic theory as the primary lens to analyze how #GymTok content on TikTok constructs and normalize body myths. The researcher looks into the layers of denotation, connotation, and myth to decode the visual and textual signs such as body poses, body transformation, and hashtags communicate deeper ideological messages to audience.

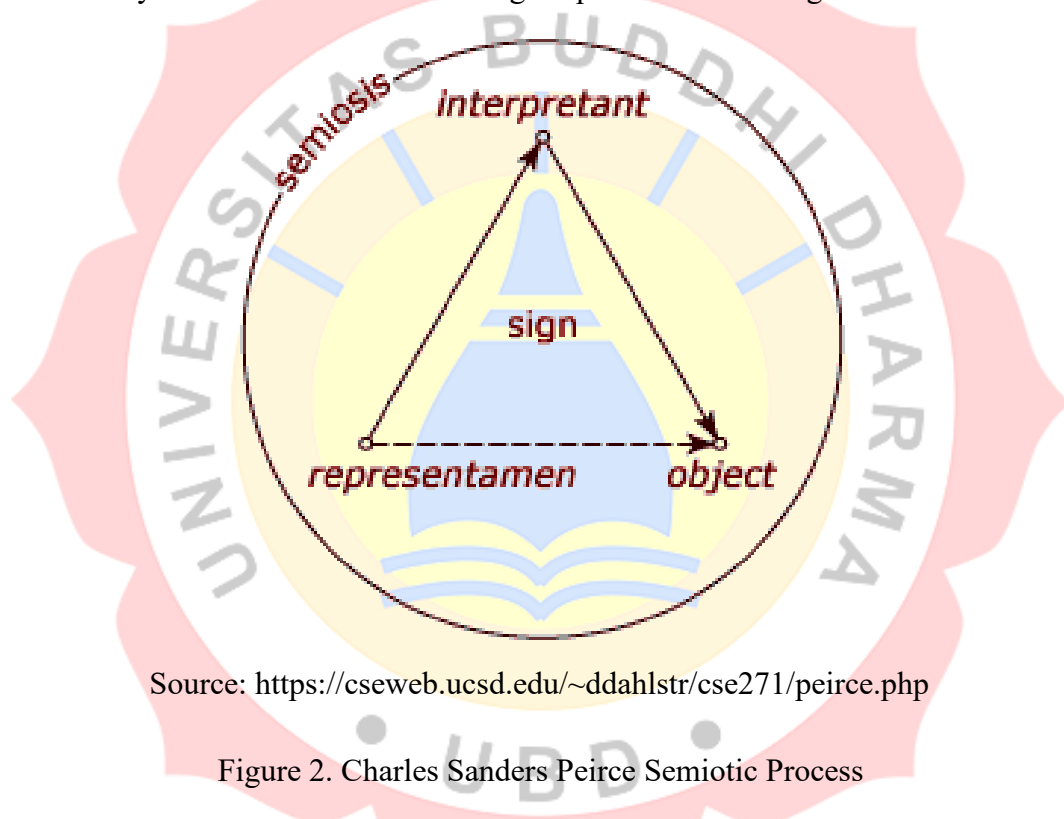
2.2.2 Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory

As Peirce said, *"I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that later is thereby mediately determined by the former."* (Atkin, 2023). What the researcher tried to say is that the Peirce theory of signs consists of three inter-related parts, which are a representamen (the form of a sign), an object (that the sign refers to), and an interpretant (the meaning which is produced).

Peirce's semiotic model is different from Saussure's linguistic and structural theory of semiotic. Peirce sees signs as part of a thought process that is interpreted repeatedly. The sign structure developed by Peirce is as follows, representamen which is the form of a sign that can be seen such as the image in a TikTok video, object which refers to a concept that is aimed at by a sign such as "discipline", "ideal body". The last one is interpretant which refers to meaning or understanding that is absorbed and produced by the audience, such as TikTok users who consider gym videos as hard work to achieve an ideal body.

This statement emphasizes the fact that the meaning produced is not directly on the object, but rather through a process of audience interpretation that varies depending on the social and cultural context. Peirce argues that meaning-making is an endless cycle, what he called 'unlimited semiosis' where each interpretation gives new layers of understanding. He also stated that our habits and experiences shape how we decode signs. Peirce then distinguish between three types of signs based on the relationship between the representamen and the object (Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 2012):

1. Icon: a sign that physically resembles what it represents. For example, a video of a muscular body on TikTok visually resembles the actual body it represents.
2. Index: a sign that is directly connected to its object through a casual or existential link, like sweat or muscle tone signifying intense workout effort.
3. Symbol: a sign whose relationship to its object is arbitrary and based on social convention. Words like “fit” or hashtags like “#gymmotivation” are symbols because their meanings depend on cultural agreement.



The figure above illustrates Charles Sanders Peirce’s triadic model of signs. It consists of the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. The representamen refers to the physical form of the sign (word, image, or symbol). The object refers to the actual thing, concept, or idea which representamen refers to. The interpretant is the meaning or idea which is formed in a person’s mind when they see a sign. These elements form a further process of meaning. This model of signs emphasizes interpretation as a key part of how meaning is constructed. Peirce’s model

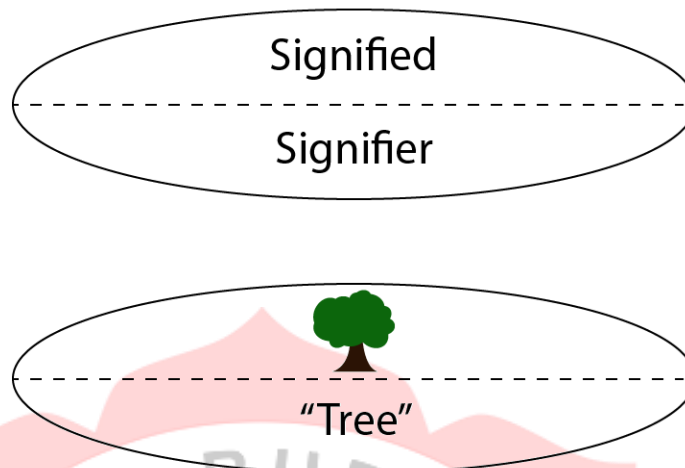
highlights that meaning is not fixed, but rather created through the process of interpretation.

For example, a TikTok video showing a woman performing a squat (representamen) refer to fitness or strength (object). This is interpreted by viewers as a sign of beauty or ideal (interpretant). This model is relevant in analyzing media content like #GymTok, because signs do not only contain a surface meaning, but also interpreted and reinterpreted through cultural ideas.

2.2.3 Ferdinand de Saussure's Semiotic Theory

Ferdinand de Saussure is a Swiss linguist who considered as one of the founding figures of semiotics. The semiotic theory by Saussure is a structural way about language and meaning. According to Saussure, a sign consists of two components, which is the signifier (the form the sign takes such as word, sound, image) and the signified (the mental concept or meaning of the sign represents) (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1916). Saussure also distinguished between language and parole. Language refers to the structure such as grammar, trends or even norms that everyone in a community follows when creating a content.

On the other hand, parole is the creative, individual acts of expression or speech. Another important distinction by Saussure theory of semiotic is between synchrony and diachrony. Synchrony refers to the structure of signs and diachrony refers to the studies of how signs evolve over time. Saussure also conducted meaning with two types of relationship, syntagmatic and paradigmatic. Syntagmatic refers to how signs are combined in a sequence to create meaning, while paradigmatic refers to the alternative signs that could be replaced. Saussure structuralist theory became the foundation for cultural semiotics. Later on, Roland Barthes applied semiotic theory to broader field. Barthes expanded semiotic theory to analyze how signs in media carry hidden meaning and construct myth.



Source: <https://callumhonoursproject.wordpress.com/2015/11/04/review-semiotics-the-basics/>

Figure 3. Ferdinand de Saussure Semiotic Process

The signifier refers to the form of the sign, such as written word, sound, or image. For the figure above, the word is "tree". The signified, is the concept or mental image associated with the word (what we think of when we hear or see the word "tree"). Together it creates meaning. Saussure explain that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, which means there is no natural connection between the word "tree" and the actual concept of a tree.

2.2.4 Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Roland Barthes is known as one of structuralist thinkers who introduced the concept of denotation and connotation as key elements in semiotic. Roland Barthes introduced the concept of myth in the world of semiotic and explained that connotations are further naturalized and accepted as "common sense" in society. "Myth is a type of speech. Everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse" (Barthes, 1972). The idea of myth as a second-order semiological system was first proposed by Barthes (Barthes, 1972). Roland Barthes conducted four level which are denotation, connotation, myth, and ideology. This research only focus on three level which are denotation, connotation, and myth.

Denotation

In the first order of meaning, denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign of what we directly see, hear, or read without any adding interpretation. For example, in a road sign shows a red circle and a black human figure. This sign literally shows a person walking and a red boundary without assigning any symbolic or cultural meaning. When applied to media such as TikTok videos under the hashtag #GymTok, identifying the denotations involves describing what is literally shown. As an example, taken from one of the contents on the #GymTok hashtag on TikTok, a video shows a woman doing a glute bridges workout or squats. The resulting denotation is what we exactly see, which is a woman doing a lower body workout.

Connotation

Connotation is a term used by Roland Barthes to explain the second order of meaning of signs functions. According to (Fiske, 1992), connotation refers to “the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture”. In other words, connotation is not just about what a sign literally means or shows, but it also connects to cultural beliefs. It plays the role in how media such as text, videos turn into social messages or meaning. These connotations become accepted as “natural” when they are used frequently. According to Barthes, myths work as they make culturally particular values seem universal. When applying to the context of #GymTok on TikTok, when we see someone showing a video of them posing and showing their body transformation may denote as a fitness journey. On the other hand, when it comes to connotatively, it may seem like a self-discipline of being healthy. When this connotation repeats frequently, it may become a myth of how a body of human being should look.

Myth

According to Roland Barthes, a myth is not just a traditional story which made by society. A myth is how people see a certain thing, ideas, or even behaviours as a common sense which repeated frequently and accepted in society. Building on Ferdinand de Saussure’s foundational ideas of semiotic, Roland Barthes developed his own model of communication to explore how language and signs work in

everyday life. While Saussure focused on the structure of the sign as a relationship between the signifier and the signified, Barthes extended this by exploring how signs are used in social and ideological contexts. His goal was to go beyond the surface and reveal the hidden meanings and cultural assumptions behind the signs and messages. Barthes' theory of myth or second-order signification reveals how signs are loaded with additional layers of meaning that shows a cultural belief.

In mythologies, Roland Barthes explains that in a myth, signs don't just carry natural meaning, they take on a second, deeper meaning that feels natural. Normally, signs are arbitrary, meaning there is no natural reason why a certain word or picture should mean a specific thing. In the second layer of meaning, what Barthes calls the myth, this randomness disappears. The sign starts to feel like truth or common sense.

For example, a photo of a woman doing squats may seem like it just shows exercise (first meaning), but over time, it starts to suggest ideas like attractiveness, or being an ideal woman (second meaning). This second order meaning turns the sign into a myth that society accepts.

1. <i>signifier</i>	2. <i>signified</i>	
3. <i>sign</i>		(langue)
I. SIGNIFIER	II. SIGNIFIED	
III. SIGN		(myth)

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-semiological-scheme-of-myth-in-Barthes-Mythologies_fig1_311361585 [accessed 1 Jul 2025]

Figure 4. The semiological scheme of myth in Barthes's *Mythologies*

Based on the figure above, the process of signification begins with the first order, where a signifier (word, image, sound) is directly linked to a signified (the concept it represents). This basic relationship is called denotation, the literal or surface meaning of signs. However, meaning does not end at the denotative level. Signs often carry deeper layers of meaning shaped by cultural and social contexts. In the second order of signification, denotation becomes a new signifier, which then linked

to a broader signified. At this stage, connotation is formed. Connotation is a level where signs begin to carry deeper meanings. Roland Barthes explained that when connotative meanings are repeated often enough, they begin to feel normal. Over time, meanings become myths. Myth is shaped by how people think and feel about certain things, even when it all built by cultural beliefs/

In this research, the writer selected Roland Barthes' theory of semiotic of all three experts mentioned above. Barthes explored how signs can carry deeper cultural meanings. These deeper meanings when repeated often, become myths which feels normal in society. Peirce and Saussure helped this research form the basic information about signs, while Barthes theory used them to explain how we see the world, especially things like ideal body.

2.3 Body Myth

Body myth refers to the construction of cultural idea of an ideal human body. The construction of this idea may reinforce by social media or advertising. Through Roland Barthes' theory, myth is a second order semiological system where denotation (literal meaning) gain connotation (cultural meaning) which appear natural to society. In the context of human body, the "ideal" body becomes a symbol which represents attractiveness for women.

2.3.1 The Representation of the Ideal Female Body in Gym Culture

In contemporary media culture, the female body is more than a biological entity, it becomes a symbolic space where cultural values and expectations are reproduced. As Susan Bordo (1995) stated, the body is a "text of culture", shaped by discipline of practice. On platforms like TikTok, particularly under the hashtag #GymTok, the representations of a female body often prioritize a toned but curved lower body, especially the glutes, reinforcing the ideal of femininity. These videos show content like gym workouts, before and after body transformation that reinforce a desirable female body.

According to Stuart Hall (1997) in today's digital era, media is one of the tools that plays a major role in shaping perceptions of the ideal body, especially through visual platforms such as TikTok. In this case, the body function as a semiotic site,

where meaning is produced and disseminated through media such as TikTok. Media doesn't simply show what a woman body looks like, but it often repeats a specific body type such as a flat stomach, well-shaped glutes, sexy back as if those are natural and normal for every woman. This reflects Barthes' idea of myth, where cultural meanings are shaped by repeated content on TikTok that we consume in daily life.

Additionally, this also align with Michael Foucault's (1997) concept of the *docile body*, which shaped by discipline or normalization. This way, TikTok become a stage where the ideal body are displayed, admired, and reproduced. In Barthes' theory of semiotic, #GymTok content can be analyzed as a sign system that not only conveys visual information about physical activity, but also forms myths about the body, health, and certain aesthetic values.

2.3.2 Popular Women's Workout Routines in #GymTok

In #GymTok content, the types of exercises featured generally focus on shaping specific body parts considered to support the ideal female appearance. Based on observations of trends on TikTok, lower body muscles exercises such as squats, hip thrusts, and lunges are the most popular and frequently showed by women. This is because these exercises are believed to shape the glute muscles which considered attractive according to popular beauty standards (Contreras & Schoenfeld, 2011). Furthermore, core exercises such as planks, Russian twists, and leg raises are also frequently featured, the goal is to form a flatter stomach and strengthening body.

Cardio exercises such as treadmill, stair climbing, and HIIT (High-Intensity Interval Training), play an important role in effective fat burning and weight loss (Boutcher, 2011). Upper body exercises also effective such as shoulder presses to tone muscles and improve posture. Finally, a combination of whole body exercises that included weights is often used to create an overall lean and fit body.

From Roland Barthes' perspective, these types of exercises can be interpreted as signs that have denotative and connotative meanings. On denotative, workout videos or content shows a specific exercise movement. On connotative, these workouts represent the myth of the ideal body where muscle, glutes, and flat

stomach refer as symbols of attractiveness and ideal body types of women. These exercises on #GymTok not only shows fitness trends but also a part of the construction of ideal body for women

2.4 Denotation and Connotation in #GymTok Signs (Visual and Textual)

In order to understand how #GymTok content construct myths about the ideal body, it is essential to analyze both visual and textual signs by two levels of meaning, denotation and connotation which introduced by Roland Barthes.

On the denotative level, the signs refer to the literal meaning. In this research, the denotative can be seen from #GymTok content which is a video of a woman doing workout routines. These signs indicate gym routine, body appearance without other explanation. On the connotative level, the same signs lead to a deeper meaning. Those repetitive workout routines content on TikTok indicates the ideal body, especially for women.

It is essential to understand and comprehend both the denotative and connotative meaning in #GymTok content on TikTok in order to answer this study's research questions. This section provides more thorough examination of how TikTok serves as a semiotic space that generates cultural ideas about the perfect body by defining and the denotative and connotative signs which are displayed in the content and how their meanings add to the creation of body myths.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach in order to explore how meanings are created and conveyed in #GymTok content on TikTok. Specifically, it employs Roland Barthes' theory of myth to conduct a semiotic analysis. Because it enables a deep interpretation of signs and symbols within social and cultural contexts, qualitative approach is suitable for this study. The primary aim of this study is to uncover how body images in #GymTok content on TikTok generate deeper meanings that construct myths surrounding the "ideal body"

3.1 Research Approach

According to Yusuf (2017), research techniques is the process of gathering factual information while doing direct fieldwork without adjusting for unknown variables. This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the semiotic meanings and conveyed by collecting #GymTok content on TikTok, specifically focusing on the fitness related and female creator of #GymTok content.

A qualitative approach emphasizes non-numerical data, such as observation or interviews, to emphasize meaning or viewpoints (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In contrast, the quantitative method employs numerical or statistical data gathered from experiments or surveys to measure and analyze. Both types of research approach are determined by the sort of data being studies, but qualitative research is interpretative and more flexible, while quantitative research is analytical and systematic.

The methodology of this research used to analyze the #GymTok content on TikTok using the Roland Barthes' semiotic theory as a guiding framework. The writer used qualitative method to analyze the myth which conducted in #GymTok content on TikTok. By applying Barthes's concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, the research uncovers how these TikTok videos construct myths of the ideal

female body. The qualitative method allows the researcher to examine not only what is literally seen, but also the cultural messages hidden in the surface.

3.2 Data Types

This study relies on two types of data in qualitative, there are primary data and secondary data. Primary data involves visual and textual content from #GymTok content on TikTok. Secondary data involves the existing information such as existing literature studies on semiotic resources in libraries or digital platform which accessible for the research. In this study, the researcher focuses on using the primary data to directly analyze the semiotic elements of #GymTok content on TikTok. Primary data provides a full understanding of how signs including visual or texts are constructed and interpreted in the digital environment. By focusing on primary data, the researcher ensures the collecting data by actively searching for 10 contents related to #GymTok uploaded by female creator with likes over 5000 likes to ensure relevance to current trends and representation within the #GymTok community featuring “ideal body” phrases.

3.3 Data Sources

The primary data in this study was collected from #GymTok content on TikTok. These videos were chosen based on female creator only and their popularity with likes over 5000, particularly content related to body transformation, gym routines, and motivational messages which promoting physical ideals and uploaded within January to May 2025. The researcher herself obtained the data by taking screenshots of each selected video, including captions, hashtags, and background songs. The content was selected based on popularity to make sure the relevance cases nowadays using hashtags #GymTok.

These selected #GymTok videos often portray specific types of gym exercises typically associated with achieving the ideal female body as defined in popular media. These routines focus on building a specific body parts of women which emphasized attractiveness for women. The workout types are valid and widely used or recognized by professional fitness training literature. Common exercises include:

1. Lower body workouts such as squats, hip thrusts, and lunges to emphasize glute development.
2. Core exercises like planks, Russian twists, and leg raises to build a flat stomach or visible abs.
3. Cardio activities (treadmill running, stair climbing, HIIT) aimed at fat loss and slimming the body.
4. Upper body training including resistance band arm workouts and dumbbell shoulder presses to tone without bulking.
5. Full-body routines combining weight training with dynamic movements to achieve a lean and fit look.

These various types are aligned to target particular muscle and enhance some features of a woman's body. By analyzing these visual and textual elements, the study seeks to understand how the myth of the ideal female body is constructed and circulated on #GymTok through both verbal and non-verbal signs, in line with Barthes' semiotic theory of myth.

3.4 Techniques of Data Collection Methods

The researcher collected the data by screen capturing the selected #GymTok content on TikTok. Videos or content with high levels of engagement, likes, comments, and shares were chosen because they demonstrate the popularity and impact to viewers. Researcher collected 20 videos with body transformation content, gym routines, even motivational messages which related to physical appearance or gym related. Each of the content was screen captured and organized. This method allows a detailed examination of visual and textual data for researcher to do the analysis of body myth using Roland Barthes theory of semiotic

3.5 Techniques of Data Analysis

The data of this research was collected using Roland Barthes theory of semiotic, which functions on three level, denotation, connotation, and myth. Each of the data was examined through these levels to conduct the real meaning and how cultural ideologies are created. First, the researcher identified the denotative meaning of each content, looking at the visual and textual sign of each video. The analysis then

moved to the connotative level, where the elements such as quotes, captions, images, and hashtags are interpreted in terms of the cultural association such as strength, attractiveness, or success. Then on the myth level, these connotative meanings are explored to broader particularly belief in the society. As Barthes (1972) explained that myths are culturally constructed meanings which naturalized and perceived as “common sense”.

