

DECODING GENDERED MEANINGS: A BARTHESIAN SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE 'THROUGH WASFA' INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT

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Abstract

Instagram illustrations are a key platform for the representation and negotiation of social and cultural meanings, as the amount of visual content being used on social-media platforms grows. But, illustrations dealing with gender are not just visual and verbal artefacts, they can build, produce and contest culturally ingrained assumptions about gender. The current study thus explores the ways in which selected illustrations on Instagram create and challenge gendered meaning and ways in which they contribute to the re-production, negotiation and re-signification of gender ideologies. The study is qualitative with the analysis of 11 purposively selected illustrations from the Instagram account @throughwasfa. The semiotic framework proposed by Roland Barthes(1972) is regarded as the main analytical framework and his notions of denotation, connotation, myth, ideology, and naturalization are used to analyze the visual resources, whereas Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar is applied as a supporting framework for the analysis of the organization of visual resources. The analysis shows that different meanings are created around beauty, skin color, body appearance, domesticity, marriage, motherhood, social surveillance, public behavior and women's autonomy by the interplay of visual and verbal signs. The results also reveal how culturally defined gender roles can be naturalized when they are represented as the normal and natural attributes of women. The illustrations, meanwhile, are often ironic, comical, exaggerating, contradictory, self-asserting, and defiant in challenging and re-letting these expectations—and re-signifying familiar gendered meanings. The study is important because it shows that the illustrations on Instagram can be a multimodal place for ideological reproduction and contestation. It helps readers gain insight into the role of visual and verbal resources in creating and contesting gendered meanings, and demonstrates the importance of Barthesian semiotics for the analysis of the ideological and cultural meanings of current social-media discourses.

Keywords: Barthesian Semiotics, Gender Ideology, Gender Representation, Instagram, Mit, Multimodality, Visual and Verbal Signs.

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1. Introduction

Language is a fundamental conduit for communication. Sociolinguistics explores how it both reflects and shapes the society. But in this digital era, meaning making transcends written or spoken words, so now multimodality plays a significant role for the purpose of communication. Multimodality refers to the accumulation of multiple modes such as auditory, visual, gestures etc. for effective communication. As Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, in their seminal work, 'Reading Images', define multimodality as, "texts are becoming increasingly multimodal- they communicate to us through graphics, pictures, layout techniques as well as through words." (2006). As the world is at its fast pace so to gain the maximum attention of others and viewers, multimodality plays an important role. Within multimodality, visual arts which is the artistic discipline that employ several visual elements to formulate various things such as paintings, photography illustrations have significant place for communication. Illustrations at various social media platform through its diverse categories is a remarkable medium to convey important messages. Donna Leishman in "Illustrations as Social Semiotics", defines illustration as 'the creative communicative art' (2024, pg.1). Illustrations, just like language, accompany with it meanings. They are not just signs or images but have many societal realities underly them. They through the use of various elements like colors, angels, characters, text etc. and by using digital platforms can represents truths of society, advocating social justice, raising awareness and much more. These images are "are never innocent or neutral reflections of reality...they re-present for us: that is, they offer not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it" (Midalia, 1999).

Among these functions, illustration also serves to reflect many ideologies. Ideologies are set of beliefs or values that shape the perception of humans about world. As van Dijk (1995,p.17) states that, "Ideologies are typically expressed and produced in discourse and communication, including nonverbal semiotic messages, such as photographs, movies etc." Gender ideology stands out as significant one, among many other ideologies that shape the human society by influencing upon their behaviors, perception and societal structures. According to Kroska (2007), "The term gender ideology refers to a set of social idealistic perspective towards appropriate role, rights and responsibilities of women and men and these are subtly conveyed or represented in the society through particular ways like social, political or economic system." Through illustrations many of the gendered ideologies are critiqued, reinforced and contested. It recuperates the voices of those who are marginalized through its potential to depict their efforts, confront the meta narratives, magnifying their vantage point in a manner that surpass linguistic and cultural boundaries. Consequently, power structures related to gender such as patriarchy, gender stereotypes, hegemonic masculinity, gender binaries that underly gender ideologies are either propagating or subverting the gendered narratives.

1.1. Statement of Problem

This study explores illustrations as sites of gendered meaning-making, where visual and verbal signs construct, reproduce, challenge and re-signify gendered ideologies. Illustration may seem to be the basic forms of artistic expression but their visual and linguistic qualities can convey culturally entrenched beliefs and assumptions about gender roles, identities, bodies, and social expectations. Despite their increasing significance in contemporary social-media landscape the semiotic aspects that construct and negotiate gendered meanings remain comparatively underexplored. This research thus employs Ronald Barthes'(1972) semiotic framework to analyse how denotative and connotative meanings contribute to the construction of gender ideologies and how dominant gender ideologies are reinforced, challenged, or re-signified in selected Instagram illustrations.

1.2. Significance of Research

This study is of paramount of importance because, through the semiotic analysis, it explores the ways visual media construct and contest gendered meanings and ideologies. This study underscores a deeper understanding of visual representation by examining how meanings extend beyond their surface level through the reinforcement, negotiation, challenge, or re-signification of gender ideologies. Furthermore, the study extends the understanding of contemporary social-media discourse by not just considering Instagram illustrations as artworks, but also as semiotic texts that construct cultural and ideological meanings. Applying Ronald Barthes'(1972) semiotic framework enables the study to analyse how the denotative, connotative, and mythic meanings operate within these visual representations and the ways dominant gender assumptions may be naturalized or challenged. The study can also serve as a useful reference for further research on gender representation, visual communication, social media discourse, and semiotic analysis.

In doing so, the illustrations make visible experiences and assumptions associated with gendered inequalities and provide a space in which dominant gender narratives can be questioned. Through their visual and verbal signs, the illustrations provide a space for questioning oppressive gender structures and dominant assumptions surrounding gender roles. Consequently, this research contributes to the field of sociolinguistics by demonstrating how visual and verbal forms of communication participate in the construction, reproduction, and contestation of gender ideologies.

1.3. Research Questions

- 1: How do visual and verbal signs in selected Instagram illustrations construct representations of gender?
- 2: What gendered ideologies and myths are produced, reinforced, challenged, or re-signified through these visual and verbal representations?
- 3: How are dominant gender norms reinforced, challenged, or re-signified through the semiotic construction of meaning in the selected illustrations?

1.4. Objectives

1: To examine how visual and verbal signs construct representations of gender in selected Instagram illustrations.

2: To identify the gendered ideologies and myths that are produced, reinforced, challenged, or re-signified through these representations.

3: To analyse how denotation, connotation, and myth operate in the construction and contestation of gendered meanings within the selected illustrations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Semiotics, Visual Meaning and Multimodality

Semiotics offers a way to interpret how meaning is made using signs, and how signs gain meaning in specific social and cultural contexts. Ferdinand de Saussure's (1974) structuralist description of the sign is a significant precursor of modern semiotic thinking, which builds upon the structuralism of the sign, seen as a relationship between the signifier and the signified (Saussure, 1974). The signifier is the form in which the meaning is conveyed, the signified is the meaning it conveys. Saussure's separation created the idea that meaning is not in the thing itself but is created by socially constructed systems of significations. The knowledge then informed the development of the theory of the semiotics that expanded the study of signs from the language to the broader world of cultures and images. Semiotic theory was further developed by Umberto Eco (1979), who discussed the relationship between signification, communication and systems of codes. His theory places an emphasis on culturally mediated codes and processes of interpretation rather than on any meaning outside of context and time. Eco's (1979) concepts of denotation, connotation and the interpretant, as well as the interaction between codes and messages, are important for understanding signs as they can create meaning within different semiotic fields. In today's media, the interpretation of meaning is increasingly visual, along with the verbal. Digital communication often incorporates images, typography, colour, composition, layout and other visual attributes along with written language. Such combinations enable the meaning to be conveyed via several semiotic resources - not just language. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) stress the role of visual design in organizing meanings, and show that visual resources are involved in socially and culturally situated processes of representation. This view is especially applicable to communication in social media, where images can accompany words to convey intricate social messages.

Illustrations can thus be read as communicative objects rather than simply aesthetic products, which can be used to represent and negotiate social meanings. Leishman (2024) views illustration through the lens of social semiotics and emphasizes the communicative nature of illustration as well as its connection to the social production of meaning. Likewise, Midalia (1999) argues that representations ought not to be taken as

a neutral reflection of reality, as it has to be selected and re-presented. These views can serve as a foundation for analyzing illustrations as semiotic text in which visual and verbal materials are used to form socially meaningful images.

2.2. Semiotic Approaches to Visual and Cultural Representation

Previous research demonstrates the usefulness of semiotic analysis for examining meanings that extend beyond the immediately visible or literal level of representation. For example, Putri, Inayah and Wageyono (2022) used Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to the scenes and dialogues of the film *Aladdin* (2019). They identified denotative, connotative and mythic meanings in the film and showed how Barthesian semiotics can be applied to studying the cultural meanings of visual and textual representations. Their study is pertinent to the present work because it provides an examples of how Barthes's framework can be applied to the study of media texts in which the visual and the verbal elements are employed in unison.

Likewise, Siregar (2022) used the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes to analyse the traditional wedding practice in Betawi, Palang Pintu. The study shows that cultural practices can convey messages beyond what is apparent at the surface level – messages of religious instruction and moral values.

The results demonstrate the potential of the semiotic approach in the uncovering of culturally encoded meanings that cannot be seen at the surface level. The present study is relevant because illustrations can also be culturally laden representations, as gendered in images, which rely on culturally thought and valued assumptions. As a whole, these studies illustrate the value of a semiotic approach in the study of the connection between visible signs and culturally situated meanings. They also show how Barthesian analysis can be applied to the investigation of how signs have a role beyond their immediate representational aspect in the production of meanings. These studies, however, are about film and cultural practices, not about gender-focused Instagram illustrations.

2.3. Semiotic Studies of Gender Representation

Semiotic techniques have also been used to study the representation of gender in the media. Jha, Raj and Gangwar (2017) used the semiotic analysis approach to analyze the constructed gendered meanings in magazine advertisements published in *Femina* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines. Their results suggest that women are often stereotyped as being submissive, dependent, and sexual, while men are stereotyped as independent, self-sufficient, and dominant. The study illustrates the ways in which visual representations can reproduce culturally established gender roles and how they can help to construct gendered expectations. The issue of representation has also been explored in relation to gender in the Pakistani media. In the study of Pakistani TV advertisements by Mahmood et al. (2022), a semiotic method and critical discourse analysis were used. Their research focuses on the objectification of women in the representations that stress appearance and

attractiveness. The results show how sign and symbol in advertising may be used to express gendered meaning as well as reference to a wider cultural value and assumption. The importance of these studies in the current research is that they point to the fact that representation of gender is not merely the representation of the male and female figure but the construction of social meanings, using the resources of language and image. They also point to the role of media in reproducing the existing gender roles, stereotypes and assumptions. The analysis of the representation of gender needs to also take into account the cultural significance of specific signs and representations. Although these studies present valuable insights in gendered semiotic representation, the center of their study is conventional advertising and television or magazine media. In contrast, less focus is placed on illustrations created and disseminated via current social media outlets, including those that explicitly challenge, question, and/or reimagine gendered assumptions.

2.4. Visual Representation, Social Media, and Illustration

Visual Semiotic analysis has taken on greater significance in the context of digital media, due to the growing importance of visual communication. In a semiotic analysis of an activist image related to the Gezi Park protest, Onursoy (2015) shows the use of visual imagery as a means for resistance, cultural identity, societal values, and collective meanings to be communicated. The examples in the study show how images in social media situations can be part of broader social and ideological processes, and not only as a visual record. Visual communication thus can serve as a tool to help represent and contest social positions. The communicative value of illustration is significant in digital environments, where illustrations can incorporate imagery, written language, colour, typography, facial expressions, representation of the body and more. Leishman (2024) discusses the sociosemiotic view of illustration, in which illustration is seen as a communicative language in which meanings are developed in specific social contexts. Illustrations can thus be considered as semiotic texts in which meaning is constructed as a result of many representational resources.

A knowledge of representation and gender is also essential for an understanding of such visual texts. Midalia (1999) does not accept the idea that representation reflects the reality of any situation, and instead highlights the role of representation as a way to build specific understandings of gender. Social-media illustrations are significant with this in mind: the use and positioning of verbal and visual signs can highlight a certain gendered experience, at the same time marginalizing or challenging another. Therefore, illustrations can offer a place where taken-for-granted notions of genders, bodies, identities, relationships and social norms are reproduced or challenged.

The literature so far thus shows the relevance of semiotics to the visual representation, the gender, cultural meaning and the images of social media. The research cited above is, however, mostly focused on films, ads, cultural practices and activist

images. Despite the significance of this research for visual channels, there is still limited focus on the gender-related Instagram illustrations as multimodal semiotic texts.

2.5. Research Gap

The literature reviewed provides several significant dimensions for the present study. The first is that through semiotic studies, it is found that signs have meanings beyond their literal meanings (Putri et al., 2022; Siregar, 2022). Second, studies on gender representation in visual media reveal that visual media can create and reinforce gender roles, stereotypes, and expectations (Jha et al., 2017; Mahmood et al., 2022). Thirdly, the studies on the imagery related to social media suggest that visual signals can serve as an instrument for influencing social values, resistance and ideology (Onursoy, 2015). Lastly, scholarship about illustration and representation helps to view illustrations as communicative and socially meaningful forms and not just aesthetic objects (Leishman, 2024; Midalia, 1999). Gender-oriented Instagram illustrations, however, are comparatively overlooked in the literature examined in this study, as the semiotic texts in which visual and verbal resources work together to construct, reproduce, question, and re-signify gender-oriented meanings. Specifically, the field of Barthesian semiotics and the representation of gender in the illustrated form on Instagram is less developed in the reviewed scholarship. The present study takes a step towards this direction by analysing some of the illustrations posted by the Instagram account, @throughwasfa, as sites of gendered meaning making. The semiotic approach of Roland Barthes (1972) is used as a basis to examine the denotative, connotative and mythic meanings, which dominate the selected illustrations, while the concepts of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar are used to understand the organization of visual resources. The study examines the role of the selected illustrations in the reproduction, negotiation, challenge and re-signification of leading gender ideologies.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework employed in this study is *Roland Barthes' theory* (1972) *on the semiotic signification*, especially his two notions of the first order and second order of signification in order to analyze the ways verbal signs construct gendered meanings. Barthes' semiotic approach is particularly applicable to the current study as it enables signs to be examined not only in terms of denotative meanings but also the cultural connotations, assumptions or ideologies associated with them. The framework thus offers a mechanism to shift from the immediate representation of an illustration to the wider gendered meanings that can be naturalized through them. The corpus is multimodal containing visual, spatial and verbal resources, so *Kress and van Leeuwen's* (2006) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* is incorporated as a supplementary visual-analytical framework. Their model assists to describe representational, interactive and compositional resources in a systematic manner, meanwhile Barthes (1972) remains

the prime and main approach for interpreting denotation, connotation, myth, naturalization, and ideological meaning. So, the two frameworks complement each other, rather than compete: Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) assist to identify and describe the visual resources through which meanings are organized; Barthes offers the central interpretive framework for the examination of cultural and ideological significance.

2.6.1. Roland Barthes and Semiotic Signification

Building upon the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), Roland Barthes' (1972) examined the signs; ability to function beyond their immediate linguistic or representational context and acquire culturally specific meanings. His seminal work known as *Mythologies* (1957), is particularly significant for comprehending how everyday cultural forms convey ideological meanings. He developed a framework for interpreting the signs with respect to cultural symbols and underlying ideologies. Instead of viewing myth as merely a traditional narrative or fiction, Barthes conceptualizes myth as a certain way of communicating meanings. He referred "*myth as a system of communication*" and describes it as "*a message*" (Barthes, 1957).

Therefore, for Barthes, myth is not limited to verbal language. Any cultural object, image, representation or discourse that is made to convey a culturally constructed meaning can become a part of mythic system. Because of this, Barthes' (1972) framework is particularly relevant to the examination of social, media illustrations in which images, colors, bodily representations, spatial arrangements and written language function together as signifying resources.

He extended his theory on Saussure's foundational insights on semiotics. This includes signifier which refers to the visible, tangible form of sign whereas signified alludes to the idea or concept associated with that form. The combination of both signifier (a sound image) and signified (concept which image arises in mind). Barthes (1972) further develops this relationship by proposing that the sign generated at the first level of signification can itself become the signifier of a second-order system. The process can thus be represented as:

Signifier signified → *Sign*

This resulting sign can then serve as:

1st order system (Sign): 2nd order system (Signifier): Mythic/ideological signification

This distinction is used as a theoretical underpinning for the analysis of selected illustrations.

2.6.2. First-Order Signification: Signifier, Signified, Sign and Denotation

The first order deals with the basic signifying relationship in which the sign is created. In this stage the researcher can recognize the content/thing or form that can be felt by the sign and the concept that is conveyed by the sign. The signifier is represented

visually or verbally, for example by a person, an object, a colour, a gesture, a piece of clothing, a facial expression or a spatial arrangement, and the signified is the concept represented by the signifier. Signifier and signified = the sign. An example of this is an illustration that shows a woman wearing a hijab, the description of which would be first order without immediately giving it a wider ideological meaning. The known factors involved in the signifying process are the hijab, the woman, the surrounding text, her body position, and other factors that can be seen. This is the first level that is closely related to denotation. In Barthesian analysis, denotation is the primary or first order of meaning of a sign. It's helpful in helping to determine what is represented before moving to culturally associated meanings of the representation. It is important to remember however, that denotation is not a description or neutral portrayal in an entirely objective or culture-free sense, as the choice of visual elements, for instance, is itself embedded in a particular social and cultural context. Instead, it offers an analytical lens to examine what is materially and representationally present in the sign.

Based on this, the first-order analysis for the present study is devoted to such questions as:

- What people, objects, actions or settings are depicted?
- What words are used to express the concept?
- Are any colors, body poses, faces or other visual elements particularly noticeable?
- What is the positioning of the visual and verbal elements?
- What is there to identify at the representational level?

In this stage, a descriptive basis for the second order interpretation is built.

2.6.3. Second-Order Signification: Connotation

The second order level is started at first level when the sign made at the first level is used as the signifier for another system of meaning. At this stage, the sign is not simply looked at in terms of what he/she represents, but is also analysed in respect to the cultural, social, historical and ideational associations of the sign. This is what is at the heart of connotation. Connotation is the meaning that arises through culturally and socially established connections. Connotation is different from denotation because it is concerned with the meaning that the denotation might have in a specific culture.

For instance, a pictorial depiction of a woman in front of a mirror can be interpreted as a woman in front of or near a mirror at first order level. At the second order, however, the mirror can become linked to the self-surveillance, social judgement, body image or culturally determined feminine appearance. Likewise, the woman's reflection can carry the implication of the socialization of the female body. The original visual sign to which this is added, then, becomes part of a wider cultural signification. This distinction is especially significant for the current research due to the fact that the illustrations chosen often portray

women's bodies, clothing, relationships, social expectations, and experiences in a visual representation that is combined with written expressions. These combinations enable the illustrations to function not just literally, but in broader cultural discourses about gender.

Thus, the analytical movement can be represented as:

Denotation → Connotation → Myth/Ideological Signification

Denotation is the literal meaning of the word, Connotation is the emotional meaning of the word, and Myth/Ideological Signification is the implied meaning of the word. The transition from denotation and connotation does not imply that literal meaning disappears. Instead, the first order sign is used as the basis to create further cultural meanings.

2.6.4. Myth and Ideology

Myth has an central role in Barthes' (1972) theory. As Barthes puts it, the myth is a second order semiological system in which a sign from the first order system is a signifier of a larger, cultural message. Myth is thus not just a false narrative. Organizing and communicating meaning, in which historically and socially created interpretations can seem natural. Barthes stresses that the cultural meanings become apparent natural meanings through myth. In speaking of the functioning of myth, he claims that myth “, ‘Myth purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification (Barthes, 1972). This formulation is especially important for gender, as many preconceptions about femininity and masculinity, women's bodies, marriage and motherhood, appearance and mobility, and social behavior are cultural and can seem natural or inevitable.

Myth thus has an ideological function. An expectation unique to a culture may become a common-sense expectation. For instance, the concept of a "baby doll" body may be socially constructed via the media, family discourses, advertising, peers, and other social strategies. If these expectations are constructed as normal, desirable, or required, social history and power dynamics involved in them can become less apparent.

This study defines ideology as sets of culturally and socially located beliefs, values, assumptions, and relations of power, which can help sustain or challenge particular understandings of gender. Myth and ideology are thus connected, but are not synonymous. Ideology is used more generally for the system of assumptions and values, while myth can be used to denote a semiotic mechanism that makes it possible to convince people that the cultural meaning of something can be seen as natural or self-evident.

The analysis is not therefore making the assumption that all illustrations are myths. Rather, a myth is recognized when a culturally created gendered assumption turns into an apperceived, 'natural', 'normal', 'universal' or 'self-evident' meaning.

2.6.5. Naturalization of Gendered Ideologies

Naturalization is one of the main elements of a myth. Naturalization is the way socially and historically created meaning becomes natural, normal, inevitable or universally valid.

The notion of gender norms, and especially the one that is linked to the present study, is often met in daily life as apparently normal expectations, which is why it is very relevant. Women's social value is linked to marriage and motherhood, women's mobility is to be supervised, women's care is to be taken care of by women, women's beauty is to be conformed to a set norm, are just some of the non-culturally produced norms, which can be represented as ordinary expectations.

Selecting specific illustrations is useful for studying this process because many times it is possible to see this process both through the visual and verbal signs. For example, an illustration can show a woman with comments to her body. The denotative level of these comments are just bits of written language in the image. However, at the connotative level, their repetition may imply the body control of women in a social way. Judgments at the mythic level might reveal an assumption that women's bodies are suitable for judgment and correction.

The analytical interest of the issue of naturalization thus rests on the examination of the shift of a culturally generated expectation to a sense of self-evidence of one's own gender. That is not to say that a single illustration "produces" such an ideology, but rather to explore the ways in which the illustration represents, reproduces, exposes, or challenges pre-established social meaning(s).

2.7. Demystification and Re-Signification

Barthes' (1972) theory also allows for the analysis of instances in which natural sense is revealed as a cultural construct. In this study, the process is called "demystification" and "re-signification" in relation to the concepts.

Demystification is the process of making meanings that have become natural "visible" as constructed. A representation can, therefore, break through the 'myth' by highlighting social assumptions which lie beneath what seems 'natural' or 'inevitable'. As applied here re-signification is the semiotic or cultural repositioning of a familiar sign in a new context, or its cultural reorientation, which does not simply transfer an established sign to a new position, but rather breaks and disrupts, challenges or alters its meaning. This familiar representation of gender can then be employed, however, to reveal or critique a dominant assumption.

The selection of these illustrations is crucial because they do not have the same ideological role. Some representations might reflect or materialize existing gender norms, while others might directly question or mock gender norms. The analysis thus examines whether a given illustration legitimizes, reveals, challenges, refutes, or restates a gendered

meaning as opposed to taking it as a given that all illustrations are either oppressive or resistant.

In some cases, for instance, an illustration that illustrates the socially imposed beauty norms may at first produce recognizable signs of femininity and the physical attractiveness of that femininity. If, however, those signs are intentionally placed in conjunction with medical apparatus, checklists, or other key statements of text, familiar signs may take on new meaning. The illustration can therefore reveal the contractedness of the beauty ideal, rather than just reproduce it.

In this study, demystification and re-signification are therefore considered as analytical potentialities, which arise from the intersection between signs, cultural meanings and ideological bias.

2.7. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar as a Supporting Framework

Considering the multimodal nature of the illustrations in the corpus, the study also relies on some support points from *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (van Leeuwen and Kress 2006). Their model gives systematic descriptions of the role of visual resources in constructing meaning, and considers visual design in three general terms: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning.

Representational meaning relates to what happens in the image and whom, what, how and when happens in the image. The dimension is used to provide the researcher visual clues to identify the relationships, actions, people and objects shown in an illustration.

Interactive meaning is the relationship that is established between the elements represented and the viewer. Gaze, social distance, perspective and angle can help to determine the positioning of the viewers of the represented participants.

Compositional meaning deals with the arrangement of the parts of the image into a sensible whole. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain that the placement of components, their salience (how they stand out), and their linkage or dis-junction (how they are separated or connected) are important to meaning in systems of information value, salience and framing.

The present study does not consider Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework as a second competing theory of ideology. Rather, it is employed to enhance the account of the visual materials that are being used to create Barthesian meanings. In other words, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) offer one way to ask questions about the organization of the visual resources, and Barthes offers the main basis for asking questions about the cultural, mythic and ideological meanings those sign resources can produce.

It is important to distinguish since the research questions of the present study explicitly foreground denotation, connotation, myth, naturalization, and gender ideology. The theoretical approach of Barthes (1972) is thus the main approach, and Kress and van

Leeuwen (2006) the auxiliary approach used to describe the multimodal organization of the illustrations.

2.8. Application of the Theoretical Framework to the Present Study

The selected illustrations on Instagram are used according to the combined framework in a successive analytical process.

Firstly, the visual and verbal resources of each illustration are identified and described. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) ideas relating to representational, interactive and compositional meaning are applied when appropriate, to explain the arrangement of visual components.

Second, the illustration is looked at at the first order of signification. Signifiers, signifieds and resulting signs are identified and the denotative content of the illustration is described.

Third, the analysis is taken at the second order level where the first order signs are analyzed for connotative meanings. This is when culturally and socially-rooted connections with gender, femininity, masculinity, bodies, relationships, appearance, mobility, marriage, and motherhood, and other connected ideas are taken into account.

Fourth, the analysis investigates if these connotative meanings help to construct a myth of some sort, where a culturally produced gendered assumption is made into a natural, normal, universal, or self-evident fact. When relevant, the study outlines the ideological premises of this myth and reflects on naturalization.

Lastly, the analysis explores whether or not the illustration strengthens the meaning identified or if it reveals, questions, challenges, or re-signifies it. This last point is especially significant because the chosen illustrations may be used as a means not just for visualizing the gendered experience, but also for displaying dominant gender meanings and, perhaps, questioning them.

The process of analysis is summarized as:

Visual and Verbal Resources

Kress and van Leeuwen Visual Organization

Representational→ Interactive→ Compositional

↓

Barthes: First-Order Signification

Signifier+ Signified →Sign→ Denotation

↓

Barthes: Second-Order Signification

First-order sign → Connotation

↓

Myth and Ideology

Naturalization of culturally constructed gendered meanings



Critical Signification

Demystification→ Re-signification→ Contestation

In this regard, the theoretical approach helps the study go beyond describing the visual elements of the illustrations and to analyze the role of the visual and verbal signs in the construction, re-construction, negotiation and contestation of gendered meanings. Barthes (1972) offers the interpretative reading frame for this shift from signification to ideology, and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) offer complementary concepts for developing a descriptive framework of the visual resources that are organized to produce those meanings.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The research design used in this study is qualitative research. The qualitative research aims to investigate the meaning that is constructed and communicated through visual and verbal signs in some selected illustrations from Instagram. A qualitative approach is suitable for this study since it concentrates on the interpretation of visual representations, cultural meanings, gendered assumptions, and ideological implications, as opposed to numerical measurement. The analysis is mainly based on the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes (1972) and his notions of denotation, connotation, myth and the naturalization of the ideology. As a supporting framework, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar is used to analyze the organization and communicative functions of the visual resources that are used in the chosen illustrations.

3.2. Data Source

The data used for this study are eleven illustrations from Instagram account (throughwasfa). The account was chosen because it illustrates a variety of issues concerning social and gender issues—using visual and verbal signs. The illustrations chosen are considered as multimodal semiotic texts and are the main data analyzed, not just as works of art. Relevant illustrations were retrieved from the publicly available Instagram account, and chosen based on the relevance to the research focus on gender representation and gendered ideologies. The study examines the semiotic elements that can be found in the chosen illustrations which include characters, bodily representation, facial expression, clothing, colour, objects, spatial arrangement, typography and written statements.

3.3. Sampling and Selection Criteria

Purposive sampling was used to choose the illustrations for analysis. The selection was based on the relevance of the objectives and research questions of the study. Illustrations were added when they included identifiable visual and/or verbal depictions that referred to gender roles, gender expectations, women's identities, women's bodies,

women's agency, social relationships, or culturally established gender norms. Eleven illustrations make up the final sample. The illustrations are chosen by offering relevant examples of how gendered meanings are constructed and reproduced, but also how they can be questioned and re-signified by the interaction of visual and verbal signs.

3.4. Analytical Procedure

The chosen illustrations were analysed on an individual basis, using a two-level semiotic procedure. On the first level, the research identifies and describes the visual and verbal elements represented in each illustration that is immediately there. This involves character identification, object identification, clothing, gestures, facial expression, colour, space arrangement, written statements and other salient visual elements. Within Barthes' (1972) first order signification these elements are analyzed as signifiers, and the signified as the concept represented.

The culturally and socially related meanings that emerge from these signs are explored at the second level. Signs and their combination are examined in relation to connotative meanings and the construction of more encompassing gendered assumptions is specifically noted. The analysis then examines whether these meanings are involved in the process of construction or naturalization of gendered myths and ideology. At the visual level, the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) is included as an analytical support. Where applicable, the use of representational, interactive and compositional resources is taken to be an explanation of the way in which visual elements are organized and how they communicate meaning. The observations are then analyzed in terms of Barthes' (1972) terminology to explore the larger cultural and ideological meaning of the observations.

3.5. Application of the Theoretical Framework

The study is primarily based on Barthes' (1972) semiotic approach. The analysis takes the reader from the denotative to the connotative level and then, if there is data to support it, to the mythical and/or the ideological level. The denotative level of analysis determines what is illustrated in the illustration. It considers the signs' cultural and social connotations at the connotative level. The analysis is at the myth level, in which culturally created gender assumptions can be seen as natural, normal, or self-evident. The analysis also looks at cases where the chosen illustrations offer a disruption and/or challenge to the prevailing gendered meanings. When the illustration transforms a familiar sign or cultural assumption, making it question the conventional meaning, this is taken as a form of re-signification. Accordingly, the analysis does not presuppose that each illustration exemplifies hegemonic gender ideology; rather, each illustration is analysed to see how the semiotic construction of the image reinforces, negotiates, challenges or re-signifies gendered meanings. This process is meant to link the formal organization of the visual and

verbal sign with its wider cultural and ideological significance without losing Barthes' (1972) semiotic approach as the main interpretative point of departure.

4. Analysis and Interpretation

The chosen illustrations have been analyzed using a two-level semiotic approach. The first level highlights the visual and verbal cues represented in each illustration, giving these signified elements their denotative meaning. The second level deals with culturally attached meanings created by the interaction of these signs with a focus on connotation, myths of gender, presuppositions, and naturalization or re-signification. The concepts of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) are invoked where relevant to explain the organization of the visual resources, while Barthes' (1972) notion is the main principle for the interpretation of the broader cultural and ideological meaning of the resources.

4.1 Illustration 1: Hijab, Agency, and Gendered Representation

First-Order Signification: Denotation



First-Order Signification (Denotation)

The first picture shows three women holding placards and wearing hijabs and face coverings. The wording on the placards is:

- 'Hands off my hijab!'
- 'My head is covered, not my brain!'

• **‘Sorry, I cannot hear your bullshit through my hijab!’**

There are more women in the background wearing hijab behind the three figures in the foreground. The clothes that the figures are wearing are relatively muted, while the written statements on the placards have a stronger visual emphasis. Hence, at the denotative level of meaning, the illustration depicts a community of women engaged in a common activity where they are protesting by writing messages. The imagery is suffused with women, hijab, placards and text, creating the foundation of visual and verbal cues from which additional meanings are created.

Second-Order Signification:(Connotation\myth)

The connotative level is for the hijab more than a piece of clothing. In the drawing, it comes to signify issues of personal agency and identity, intellectual capability and women's bodies. The statement “My head doesn't have a brain on it” emphasizes this meaning by setting up a contrast between intellectual capability and physical covering. The declaration is an attack on the perception that those who wear the hijab must be intellectually weak or passive. Likewise, “Hands off my hijab!” creates the space of personal choice and bodily autonomy for the hijab. The imperative tone is clearly setting up opposition to control. The third, “Sorry I can't hear your bullshit through my hijab!”, is presented in a clearly confrontational manner, and continues the active-speaker-passive-represented dynamic of the women. Women are also foregrounded in the background, contributing to the meaning of collective representation. The illustration does not make the hijab a unique feature of one woman, but rather, is visually linked to a larger group of women. The foregrounded placards and the strong verbal messages therefore serve as strong resources which the represented women can use to present their position.

Myth, Ideology, and Re-signification

The illustration will serve to defy a gendered myth that claims hijab is a given fact or proof of oppression or backwardness or that women have no agency. If one reads the hijab as a historically and culturally specific reading that is now naturalized as an "obvious" meaning, Barthes' (1972) interpretation of such a reading as a myth does not seem to be incorrect. The image breaks this naturalization by having the women become the voice of the subject. The signs around the hijab then evoke a different kind of connotative association: hijab is associated with agency, autonomy, intellectual identity, resistance. The drawing thus is not just another depiction of the hijab, it is a re-signification of the sign, a new context. Self-definition and resistance are associated here with a sign that might be linked with passivity within one discourse. The visual and verbal markers thus question the passivity and voicelessness of Muslim women. One can thus read the image and the text as a place of contestation, where the dominant gendered reading is challenged and a new meaning is created by the interplay of image and text.

4.2. Illustration 2: Child Abuse, Victim Blaming, and Gender Expectations



First Order Signification (Denotation)

The second image shows a grassy outdoor scene with four children standing. There is a boy and three girls. The children's faces are not individually described, rather it is bodies, positioning and interaction that are described. Their heads are topped with halos.

. The dialogue present in the bubbles contains:

- 'Why are you here?'
- 'But you are a boy.'
- 'You are even dressed properly.'

The illustration also consists of hashtag at the right corner is #stopchildabuse.

Second-Order Signification (Connotation)

The meanings of the visual and verbal signs are widened when considered together. This statement, "But you are a boy", is one that brings the gender dimension into the portrayal of child abuse. Instead of this abuse being a thing girls specifically experience, a boy among children proves that male children are not spared of this vulnerability. There is another association that is culturally significant that comes into play with the statement "You are even dressed properly". Clothes is placed as a potential cause of abuse, and thus reinforces the concept of "victim-blaming" in the dialogue of the illustration. The sign is significant because it shifts attention from the actions of the perpetrator towards the appearance or behavior of the victim.

The halos contribute another layer of meaning. They are linked with innocence, thus highlighting the role of children as helpless victims, not as agents in the abuse of others that is discussed in the surrounding discourse. The hashtag #stopchildabuse reinforces the wider social theme of the illustration and helps to interpret against the abuse theme.

Myth and Ideological Meaning

This illustration takes on two assumptions about gender. The first is that it challenges the notion that boys are less victim to abuse due to the cultural connection between manhood and invulnerability. Second, it reveals the reasoning that can lead to a victim's clothing and/or appearance being used as a justification for abuse. Since culturally constructed notions about gender and victimhood can be taken for granted as common and natural, these meanings can be understood using Barthes' (1972) notion of myth. In the statement *'But you are a boy'*, this is made explicit instead of taking it for granted.

Likewise, *"You are even dressed properly"* reveals the very troublesome link between wearing and the responsibility of abuse. The text is integrated into an illustration and is clearly identified as a critical representation (#stopchildabuse), not as a social truth. The illustration thus not only makes these assumptions comprehensible, but also renders the gendered logic visible. It is not just about child abuse; it's about the cultural values that can lead to the victim being categorized, questioned or blamed. The picture, thus, defies the expectations of masculinity and victimhood. It redefines children as subjects that are vulnerable, which cannot be measured by gender and outfit.

4.3. Academic Achievement and the "Perfect Gol Roti"



First-Order Signification (Denotative)

In the third picture, the hands are decorated with henna and are bearing a rolling pin, which is tied with a blue ribbon, like an academic scroll or degree. There is a gol roti (flatbread like a tortilla) on a graduation cap underneath the scroll. Graduation cap has the words **‘Bachelors in Perfect Gol Roti’**.

The denotative level of the illustration merges items from two different areas — education performance and cooking at home. The cap and degree symbolize education, and the rolling pin and gol roti symbolize home cooking.

Second-Order Signification (Connotation)

The juxtaposition of these signs produces a contrast between formal education and domestic competence. The graduation cap typically represents graduation or academic success, and the rolling pin and gol roti hold cultural significance related to home cooking. The roti is symbolically placed on top of the graduation cap, and the term Bachelors in Perfect Gol Roti was deliberately chosen for educational success to be juxtaposed with domestic expectations. The henna-dyed hands and red nail polish add culturally identifiable connotations to the feminine, marriage, beauty, and tradition. The elements used to beautify or enhance the woman's appearance in the illustration reinforce the connection between the feminine and the home.

The meaning of “Perfect Gol Roti” is important too because the word perfect adds a new dimension to the cooking activity and can be used as a benchmark to judge women. The image, therefore, makes a juxtaposition between the things that a woman learns in school and the things she is expected to learn at home.

Myth and Ideology

The image represents a rejection of a myth that creates a gender-specific image of the competent woman as a natural part of being a good woman. The problem is not cooking but the notion that women's worth is determined by their role in cooking the house. The academic qualification is thusly turned into a “Bachelors in Perfect Gol Roti” in the image, making this speculation perceptible. The ability to prepare a perfect rotis takes the place of the conventional symbol of academic achievement that brings with it social recognition.

The juxtaposition thus serves to reveal a conflict between women's educational identities and the traditional expectations of domestic femininity. The illustration suggests that academic achievement does not necessarily remove gendered expectations; instead, women may continue to be evaluated according to domestic standards. The Barthesian (1972) approach to demystification provides a way of working out the picture because it identifies a standard that has been constructed in a culture and might not seem obvious or normal. The domestic role is not defined as a given trait of femininity, but rather it is revealed as a yardstick of female “perfection” that is open to critique.

The image thus presents a challenge to and a re-signification of the concept of female achievement. It uses the familiar symbols of academic achievement to mix with the domestic symbolism to reveal unequal expectations of women's identities.

4.4. Illustration 4: “White Is Beautiful” and the Re-signification of Beauty



First-Order Signification: (Denotative Meanings)

The drawing features a woman with dark skin, black hair, black eyes, and red lips wearing sunglasses. The slogan "I AM PRETTY AND I KNOW IT" is written on the sunglasses she wears. The Urdu/Roman Urdu saying “Apki Soch Kali Hai” (Your thinking is black) is written above the woman, which means that she is a black thinker. The woman is depicted in a bold and assertive pose, and the inclusion of bright colors helps to highlight her presence and the accompanying text.

Denotatively, the drawing of the woman, her body, her sunglasses, facial features, her posture, her colour and her verbalisations are combined with the represented woman. Verbal and visual elements are combined and do not stand alone – the dark complexion of the woman is highlighted by the text that reacts to beauty and skin color judgements.

Second-Order Signification (Connotative Meanings):

The connotative level of significance is when the woman's dark complexion is used as an accompaniment to the statement “I AM PRETTY AND I KNOW IT.” The language doesn't only capture the look of her, but it's also a declaration of confidence and self-recognition. The first person “I AM” makes the woman herself the source of the claim

about her beauty rather than leaving it up to an external observer to decide if she is beautiful.

“Your thinking is black” redirects the attention away from the woman's skin colour, and towards the thoughts used to assess it. The word black is often used in a negative way in some cultural and linguistic communities and is turned away from the body of the woman and towards the thinking of the observer. This juxtaposes the woman's dark skin with the perceived bad judgment of the dark skin.

The connotative meaning of the illustration can also be attributed to the sunglasses. The words on them are not just an article of clothing or decoration, they are a visual carrier of the woman's assertion. Likewise, the woman's sense of confidence and self-assertiveness in her posture and presentation are suggestive of confidence, not of shame or inferiority.

The illustration thus highlights a cultural correlation between fairness and beauty. It doesn't just show a dark-skinned woman; it shows a woman's appearance in a discussion about skin colour and how it is judged for the appeal of a woman.

Myth, Ideology, and Re-signification

A Barthesian (1972) approach to the link between fair skin and beauty is that the connection becomes an association when a culturally produced preference becomes “natural,” “obvious” or “self-evident.” The illustration assumes this, as it depicts a dark-skinned woman who is asserting her beauty. “The I AM PRETTY AND I KNOW IT” therefore redefines the connection between colour of skin and beauty. The illustration does not go with the grain of the culture, putting faith and self-determination in the centre of the image, rather than fairness and attractiveness. The term “Your thinking is black” also helps to defuse the assumption by shifting the issue from the woman's appearance to the discriminatory thinking that goes along with it. So the picture isn't just substituting the beauty standard for a different one. Instead, it challenges the notion that skin colour should be perceived as a natural gauge of feminine beauty. It is a combination of the visual and verbal elements which is used to question the normalization of beauty defined by colour and to create an other meaning that gives the represented woman a control over her appearance and identity.

4.5. Marriage, Motherhood, and the “Perfect Solution”



First-Order Signification:(Denotative Meanings)

The photograph shows a scene with two adults sitting on chairs, one holding a baby, and a third person standing. One of the seated women says, “We have a problem marriage,” and the woman with the baby says, “Perfect solution = Have a baby!” The baby is shown with no facial details or expression. The background is sea green with relatively simple design, which serves as a neutral backdrop for the characters' interaction.

The denotative aspect of the picture consists of the image of the married couple, the woman holding the baby, the baby, the seating place, and the two verbal expressions. The central link between marital difficulty and childbirth is established by the equation: Perfect solution = Have a baby!

Second-Order Signification:(Connotative Meanings)

The equation between marital difficulty and having a child creates a culturally recognized meaning at the connotative level: childbirth is made to look like a common remedy for a difficult marriage or a way to strengthen a marriage. Of course, the word “solution” is important because it takes the child out of the role of human subject and puts him or her into the role of being a possible response to an adult relationship issue.

“Perfect solution” resonates with the language of certainty, as well. The statement does not imply that parenthood is one of many options available to one, rather it is a playful statement that having a child is a panacea. The irony of this formulation lets the illustration reveal the assumption that is made in giving the advice. The relative lack of a face in the baby's illustration adds to this meaning. Because there is no individual identity for the child, he/she seems less to be a subject that has been characterised as such and more a

symbolic object that is part of the adults' conversation. The visual representation is then used to complement the verbal equation between childbirth and marital stability.

Also, the illustration is gendered because the cultural experiences of mothering may put special pressure on women to be responsible for maintaining relationships by providing care and raising children. But the immediate object of the illustration is not the motherhood itself but the hypothesis that having a child means that problems will be solved within a marriage.

Myth, Ideology and Resignification:

The Barthesian (1972) view of the illustration reveals a gendered myth for the following reasons: 1) It shows a familiar cultural assumption to be strange and funny. In certain social contexts, the notion that a child can be a "solution" to parent problems might be regarded as "common sense." The illustration breaks this naturalization down by presenting the assumption in an exaggerated manner.

The image is not therefore a condemnation of the role of motherhood and childbirth itself. Rather, it challenges the cultural logic that gives birth the role of maintaining a relationship despite the difficulties in it. This is key because it is not about motherhood, but about the instrumentalization of motherhood.

The picture thus redesignifies the concept of the "perfect family solution". The humour of the visual context suggests that a statement like 'Perfect solution = Have a baby!' is a social construction and not a universal truth. Such representation encourages viewers to reflect on the idea that women are expected to enter into and/or maintain a marriage for the purpose of producing offspring, and thus highlights women's autonomy in marriage and reproduction choices.

4.6 Illustration 6: The "Perfect Girl" and the Construction of Beauty



First-Order Signification (Denotative Meanings)

The image shows a woman with various beauty treatments applied to her face and body. Has dark skin, strong red lips and a fairly neutral facial expression. Her face and body are encircled by multiple gloved hands, presumably performing medical or cosmetic procedures. The procedures that are visible are a syringe in the vicinity of the lips, a thread-shaped instrument pulling the cheek and the area of the eyebrow, another instrument aimed at the chin and another instrument around the eye. To the upper right corner there is a checklist with these requirements:

The check list includes:

- **Perfect Eyes**
- **Fair complexion**
- **No Acne**
- **Big lips**
- **Perfect Eyebrow**
- **Slim figure**

The text above the girl read as '**Perfect Girl**' which is written in bold, stylized font. The dark red background further adds a layer to a dramatic and unsettling environment.

The illustration at the denotative level is thus a representation of a woman's body, cosmetics equipment, gloved hands, a checklist, and the word "Perfect Girl," serving as the "textual" criterion of appearance.

Second-order Signification (Connotative meaning)

This connotative meaning is created from the woman's body and the checklist of necessary body features. The list turns beauty into a set of quantifiable criteria: eyes should be "perfect," skin should be "fair," lips should be "big," eyebrows should be "perfect," and the body should be "slender. The checklist is especially important because it symbolizes beauty as a standard to which it can be compared. Both the word "Perfect" in the checklist and in the heading "Perfect Girl" set an implicit standard by which the woman who is being represented is being judged.

The Cosmetic Instruments and the gloves give another dimension to this representation. The hands are unnamed, so the picture does not specify who was behind the modification of the woman's appearance. The anonymity they go by can therefore be interpreted as a visual metaphor of the pressure they feel from outside rather than of any one particular person. Meanwhile, the woman's body is relatively still, marked by a relatively inaction expression.

The need for a "Fair Complexion" is particularly important because it is linked to the previous depiction of the beauty standards associated with colour. The checklist is

offered as a kind of fairness—no a personal selection, but one component of a lot more extensive standards for the perfect female looks.

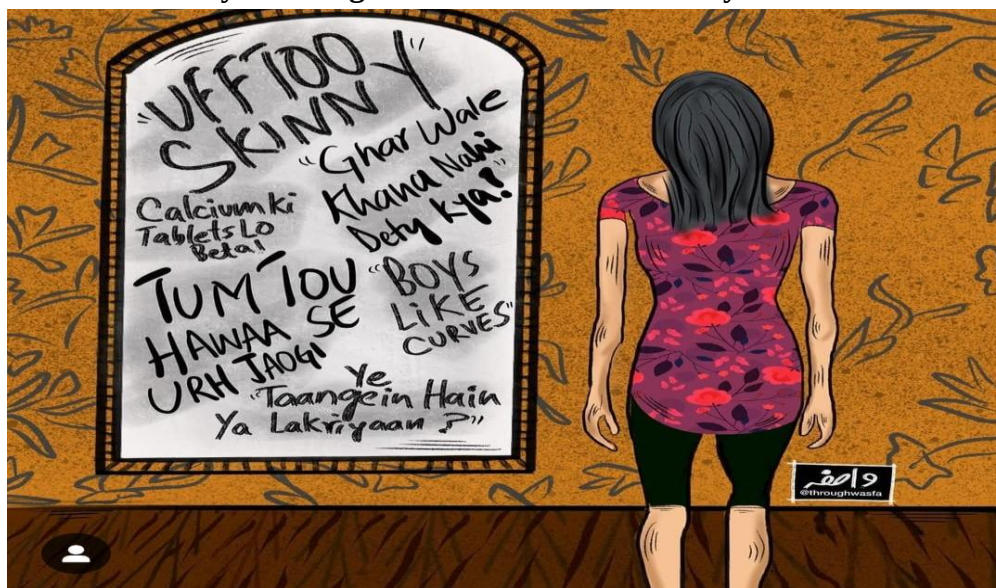
Myth, Ideology, and Re-signification

The image can be read as myth, because it reveals the ways in which culturally-created norms of appearance can be regarded as natural norms of femininity. The label “Perfect Girl” seems to have a definition of an ideal feminine identity and the checklist has a list of the body parts that make it a perfect girl. The myth is played when these historically and culturally specific ideas about beauty or womanliness are presented as if they were simply a condition of being beautiful or feminine. The illustration makes it explicit, however, that they are constructed by making them into a literal checklist. What could seem like an indisputable beauty standard is described as a series of imposed standards that have to be met.

The background of the illustration can also be a red hue which can help set the tone of the illustration. Assigning a universal meaning to red isn't necessarily a good idea, because its use in conjunction with invasive cosmetic procedures and bodily modifications can create a sense of tension and unease. The visual environment therefore fosters the critical interpretation of the procedures, rather than the view that they are simple activities of beautification.

The image in turn helps to dispel the myth of the perfect girl. Instead of perfection as a natural attribute, it portrays perfection as one that is achieved after repeated assessment, adjustment and adjustment to external standards. So, its criticism is against the naturalization of the beauty conditions and the reduction of the woman identity to physical.

4.7. Illustration 7: Body Shaming and the Ideal Female Body



First-Order Signification (Denotative Meanings)

The figure in the image is a thin woman standing in front of a mirror, facing away from the viewer. Reflected in the mirror are a number of comments made about her body such as:

- • ‘Uff too skinny’ (You are too skinny!)
- • ‘Calcium ki tablets lo beta’. (Take calcium supplements, dear.)
- • ‘Ghar waly Khana Nahi detay Kya?’ (Does your family not feed you)
- • ‘Tum Tou Hawa Sy Urh Jogi’ (You will fly away with wind!)
- • “Boys like curves”
- • ‘Ye tanghin Hain yeh lakriyan?’ (Are these legs or sticks?)

The floral background or wallpaper reflects possibly the domestic settings. The woman is standing right in front of a mirror with the comments surrounding her reflection.

Second-Order Signification

This illustration's central aspect is the mirror, as it is traditionally used to view oneself. In this place, however, comments from others take the place of the reflected space. This makes commentary a form of social judgement, therefore changing the mirror from a device of self-observation into a visual documentation of social judgement.

The line “Too skinny” sets the baseline of what is a problem with a woman's body, while “Boys like curves” brings up another one. The two comments are important when combined as they indicate that the desired female figure is not necessarily consistent—the woman may be dismissed as too thin at the same time as being urged to conform to another body figure desired by the culture. The remarks about the food and how the legs look, similarly turn normal parts of the body into an object of public scrutiny. The surrounding voices repeatedly classify and assess the woman's body, instead of the woman defining her own body.

The phrase “Boys like curves” is especially relevant in that it is an assumption of male preference which builds up the appearance of the girl. The woman's body is therefore presented as not just something that's looked at, but something that is evaluated based on the expectations of others.

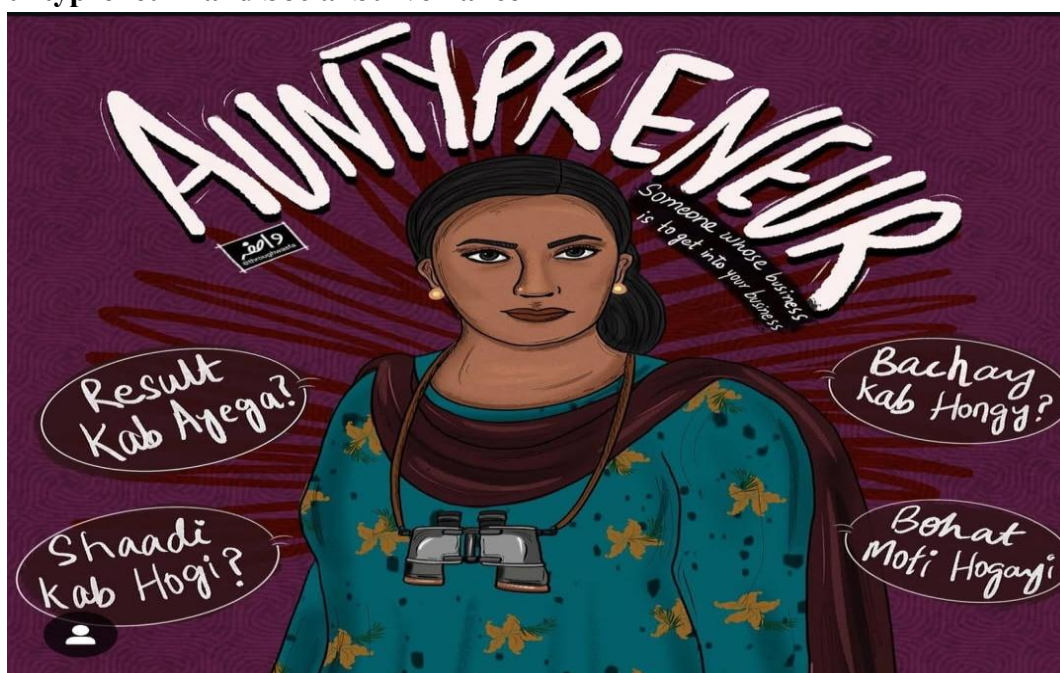
Myth, Ideology, and Re-signification

Understanding the illustration with the concept of Barthes is possible, because there are socially constructed expectations regarding the "appropriate" female body, which can be naturalized as common sense norms. The comments seem normal and informal, but they add up to the ideology of those people. This process is visually represented by the mirror. Judges surround the woman's surface, indicating the possibilities of social comments that become part of one's self-perception. The picture thus reveals the process whereby external cultural evaluations can become internalized.

Meanwhile, the seemingly conflicting messages of being too thin, yet being told that “boys like curves” undermine the idea of an objective ideal body. Such a paradox illuminates and defuses the notion of the right or desired body in any specific woman.

This illustration thus helps to deconstruct the myth of a perfect female body and emphasizes the fluid nature of socially constructed ideals. It's not so much about any specific body type but about the habit of making women's bodies constantly be judged by an outside body.

4.8. “Auntypreneur” and Social Surveillance



First order Signification

The image shows a woman from South Asia dressed in traditional attire with a kameez and dupatta. She has her hair in a bun and is wearing earrings. She is holding a pair of binoculars around her neck. There are a number of speech bubbles that are intrusive with her, such as the following:

- ‘Result kab aye ga?’ (When will you get your results?)
- ‘Bachy Kab Hogi?’ (When will you have kids?)
- ‘Shadi kab hogi?’ (When will you get marry)
- “Bohat Moti hogi ho?” (You have gained a lot of Weight)

The word “Auntypreneur” is written at the head of illustration with its definition as: “Someone whose business is to get into your business.”

Second-order Signification

The binoculars, plus the inquisitive questions, make for a strong link between observation and social surveillance. The binoculars are not used for normal

communication, but serve to make it appear that one is observing and keeping an eye on other persons' lives.

The questions also address various aspects of women's lives where they might be assessed socially—academic success, marriage, reproduction, and physical appearance. The link between these two is important as it indicates that there can be multiple areas of women's lives where evaluation can take place. The term "Auntypreneur" is an 'invented word' that gives the illustration a satirical twist. The image playfully depicts aunty as an entrepreneur, with the questioning activity being represented as a profession or business. The definition "Someone whose business it is to get into your business" is consistent with the focus on the breach of private space as the target of the humour.

Important to note, however, that the illustration does not prove that this is the only way that all older women act. Instead, the "aunty" in the picture is a familiar icon in a culture, and the picture is a commentary on a type of social surveillance.

Myth, Ideology, and Re-signification

The illustration highlights from a Barthesian perspective the naturalization of expectations regarding what women should accomplish and when they should accomplish it in gendered ways. The questions of marriage, children, education and weight can be a regular conversation, but when repeated, they can become a tool for reinforcing socially desirable feminine characteristics. The illustration attempts to show this process through the exaggerating and satirising. The binoculars make it seem like everyone is out there watching them, and "Auntypreneur" makes the questions seem like they were made up. The amusing make-up of this practice obscures it from view or makes it look entirely natural.

The image thus re-signifies the culturally familiar figure of the "aunty" and her "auntys," too. It's not a benign kind of questioning, but it's an example of how questions can be used as social regulation. It's a criticism of the phenomenon of gendered surveillance, specifically of how women are subjected to public scrutiny on issues of marriage, reproduction, education, and appearance.

4.9. Male Gaze, Public Space, and Resistance



First Order Signification

The image shows a woman walking down a street, wearing a colorful yellow dress. The pathway is marked with the words "Stop This." There are buildings on both sides of the street like shops and comments are written towards the woman such as:

- **"Gurya Yeh Dekho."** (Look at this doll)
- **"Maal Tight Hy"** (objectified comment on the figure of women)
- **"Masha Allah"** (God has willed it)
- **"Idhar Bhi Dekho"** (Look here also)
- **"Chalti Hy kia"** (Catcalling remark)
- **"Kahan ja ri ho Idhar Ayo"** (Where are u going come here)
- **"Subhan Allah"** (Glory be to God)

The shops also contain numerous eyes directed towards the woman. All these visual elements are present when she circulates in public space.

Second Order Signification

The eyes are the main focus in the picture, as they are used to monitor the street continuously. It does not represent any particular observer, but the multiple eyes make the impression that the woman is being observed from many angles. This is a visual surveillance enhanced by verbal comments. Gurya, 'doll' is an expression that visually describes the woman, and the imperative such as 'Idhar bhi dekho' and 'Idhar aao' tries to dictate her direction of gaze and movement through space. As a result the woman is made the object of an unsolicited public gaze through the visual and verbal intrusion. The sign "Stop This" is written directly on the pathway, thus creating a contrast. The path is an overt rejection of surveillance and objectification while the surrounding eyes and comments create surveillance and objectification. This verbal resistance can then be interpreted in conjunction with the woman's path in the street. The path of the woman in the street can then be read alongside this verbal resistance.

Myth, Ideology, and Re-signification

The illustration reveals a myth of women's unsolicited observation/harassment in public space that can become "normal" behaviour, joke, compliment or culture. This is a normal behaviour that is noticeable because of the accumulation of comments and eyes.

The repeated eyes especially help to demystify the act of looking, as it is no longer hidden or invisible. The use of religious expressions like "Masha Allah" and "Subhan Allah", which are very common across cultures, but take new roles when they become intrusive, also shows the way in which culturally familiar words can be given a new function in their new context. The illustration is not an example of expressions that are necessarily offensive per se; it is just an illustration of how even common expressions can be part of an uncomfortable interaction when directed towards an unwilling subject.

The expression “Stop This” sets up a clear counter-sign for the illustration. It defies normalization of objectification and changes the space from a space of surveillance to a space of resistance. This figure of the woman is not just a subject of the gaze, the picture shows her moving and a rejection of the surrounding behavior in the path of the woman's gaze. In turn, the image redefines public representation by calling into question the idea that women need to endure unwarranted attention and commentary as an accepted facet of public life.

4.10 Marriage Pressure and the “Perfect Gift”



First-Order Signification

The image shows a young woman sitting at a table with a plate of food. Her expression seems disinterested or displeased. One side of the image shows a hand holding a traditional red dress, looking like bridal attire. The person being held on the hand is not shown. The following statement is included:

“I got a perfect gift for your 25th birthday.”

The red bridal dress, the woman's expression and the written statement of her twenty-fifth birthday set up the main visual and verbal connection in the illustration.

Second-Order Signification

The red bridal dress serves as a culturally identifiable symbol of marriage, and the adoption of a culturally sanctioned marital status. As a “gift” it also conveys an additional message, that marriage is an expected and desired goal and should follow the woman's age. It is also important to note that the woman's 25th birthday is mentioned. The illustration attempts to make readers associate a specific age with a bridal dress, which creates an association between gender (females) and marital expectation. Dress thus not only becomes a piece of clothing, but also an expectation of society on the right time of marriage. The woman has a contrasting sign on its face. She doesn't seem happy or excited, but rather indifferent to the suggested “gift.” This is a form of irony between what the man thinks is “perfect” and what the woman seems to desire. It's important to remember that

there is also an unseen speaker. The pressure isn't linked to any one person, since only the hand is represented. Rather, the partial representation serves as a sign of a social expectation from the outside that is aimed at the woman.

Myth, Ideology, and Re-signification

The image debunks the idea that marriage is a natural or required step in a woman's life when she reaches a certain age. In Barthes' sense, this belief can be called mythic, when the expectation, produced by the historical and cultural event, is presented as common sense. This is made especially evident by the naturalization's term 'perfect gift'. It assumes that the bridal dress will be accepted as fitting for the woman's stage of life, as a fitting reward or a fulling of her life. However, the woman's face challenges this idea. No enthusiasm contradicts response of expected socialization and the response of the represented socialization.

The illustration therefore does not simply reject marriage itself. Instead, it challenges the notion that marriage must go with fulfilment for women, or that a woman's age is the prerequisite for marriage. The woman's apparent resistance is juxtaposed with the culturally recognizable bridal dress, putting her resistance in the context of what society may consider an ideal milestone – but not necessarily an individual's life choice.

4.11. Illustration 11: Gendered Restrictions Across the Female Life Cycle



First Order Signification

The image shows an older woman who appears to be challenging or rebelling against something. All around her are statements that curtail women's mobility and independence in various phases of life. These include:

- “Abhi tum itni bare nahi hoi k akelay bahar jao” (You’re not old enough to go out alone).
- “Apne miyaan ke saath jaana tour par” (Go on a trip with your husband).
- “Ab buddhi hogayi ho, ghar mein baitho” (You’re old now, stay at home).

The three statements are about young, adult and elderly women.

Second-Order Signification

The statements also establish a timeless order, in which the mobility of women is repeatedly restricted based on age and marital status, at the connotative level. The first statement is that of the need to restrict and supervise the youth; the woman is seen as being not yet grown up enough to go by herself. The second clause changes the age to marital status as the basis of regulation. Travel with your husband” assumes that a married woman's mobility is legitimate when it's done via an approved relationship. She is thus directly connected with her place in marriage in her ability to move independently.

This final restriction comes in during old age: “Ab buddhi ho gayi ho, ghar mein baitho.” Again, age is the reason for restricting mobility. The sequence thus produces a fascinating pattern: at one point, the woman is too young, at another, her movement is syncretized with her husband, and at yet another, the woman is too old. The repeated statements are necessary because they take different forms, yet the concept of women's autonomy is still apparent.

Myth, Ideology, and Re-signification

The illustration can be read as a Barthes "myth" because it reveals the socially constructed ideas that can seem like "facts" or "naturals" when it comes to women's movement. All three statements are given as typical pieces of advice or instruction, but the order in which they are presented allows one to see a wider pattern of ideas.

The life-cycle structure is of special importance. This woman's independence is not limited only at a specific age, but rather at different ages, the reasons for her limitations are different. Youth is protected, marriage is a reason to be dependent on a man, and old age is the excuse for withdrawing from public areas. The illustration emphasizes the continuity of the restrictions by grouping the statements in an illustration of the same woman represented. The attitudes of protection, marital propriety or age appropriateness become a constant system of restrictions on the autonomy of women.

These limitations are counter-balanced by the woman's defiant expression. It helps it not be read as a commonplace fact of social reality; rather, it treats statements as items to be critiqued. The illustration thus suggests that women's independence does not have to depend on age or marriage, or even socialization.

The illustration does not imply that all women suffer these types of restrictions in exactly the same way, but rather that there is a particular pattern of gendered regulation that can be illustrated through a series of culturally recognizable statements. The re-

signification is that these seemingly mundane constraints are made visible as social expectations and not as a natural part of women's lives.

5. Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the eleven selected illustrations from Instagram shows that gendered meanings are created through the interplay of visual and verbal signs. Gender is depicted in multiple ways, such as concerns about appearance, bodily standards, domesticity, marriage, motherhood, social surveillance, public behavior, autonomy, and culturally prescribed expectations, throughout the data set. The results also show that such representations are not just about the reproduction of dominant gender norms. The illustrations, too, reveal and challenge assumptions that might seem commonplace or natural, via irony, humour, exaggeration, visual contradiction, self-assertion and counter-representation. The results are examined in the light of the questions raised in the study and the Barthesian semiotic framework used in this study as mentioned below.

5.1. Construction of Gender through Visual and Verbal Signs

The first important conclusion is that gender is not produced as a visual, or verbal, sign alone, but as both together. The selected illustrations employ characters, body, clothing, facial expressions, gestures, objects, colour, spatial organization, typography and written statements to create specific representations of gender. All of these are combined to convey meanings beyond the literal visual elements.

In illustration 1, for instance, the purpose was to let women know that they were not supposed to be the ones to be handled by others while simultaneously providing them with written expressions from placards, like “hands off my hijab!” and “my head is covered, not my brain!” The denotative level of the illustration shows women wearing religious coverings and holding statements. The images of women, however, along with their assertive vocal style, situates them as active agents in their own image and identity, at the connotative level. The verbal signs then modify and reinforce the meanings that are created by the visual representation.

In Illustration 3, the rolling pin, the graduation cap and the “Perfect Gol Roti” are used in conjunction with the text “Bachelors in Perfect Gol Roti”. The objects have identifiable significance when isolated from the ensemble but when seen together, they form a contrasting depiction of academic success and housekeeping skills. The visual signs set up the home and the academic space, and the verbal statement brings about the ironic link between the spaces. Meaning thus arises out of the interplay of the two semiotic modes.

The following is another example (illustration 6). The picture of the cosmetic procedure comes with a checklist of “Perfect Eyes,” “Fair Complexion,” “No Acne,” “Big Lips,” “Perfect Eyebrow” and “Slim Figure.” The visual signs are the markings of bodily

modification and the written signs are the explicit marking of the qualities of the represented ideal. The combination constructs femininity as something subject to evaluation and modification.

Similarly, in Illustration 9, a number of eyes are shown, and verbal comments are given to the woman in the street. While written comments convey the verbal forms through which this observation becomes "gendered attention and objectification," the eyes create a visual space of observation. The meaning of the surveillance is thus created by the interplay of image and language.

The results of this study support the multimodal approach to visual communication as used in this study. At this level, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar has advantages because the resources of representation, interactivity, and composition can explain the organization of visual elements and their involvement in meaning making. The Barthesian approach is, however, central to the interpretation because as well as consideration of what is represented, this study focuses on the cultural meanings and ideological assumptions produced through these representations.

5.2. Gendered Ideologies and Myths

The second major finding concerns the gendered ideologies and myths embedded within apparently ordinary social expectations. Femininity is repeatedly linked to specific ideals of appearance, and domestic skills, and to marriage and motherhood, and to bodily presentation, and to social behaviour, and to mobility, throughout the illustrations. From Barth's point of view, these expectations gain importance when the culturally produced meanings seem to be natural, normal, and self-evident.

Illustrations 4, 6 and 7 are particularly representative of the construction of gender through the expectations associated with the body and appearance. In the case of an illustration called 'I AM PRETTY AND I KNOW IT' (Illustration 4), the association between beauty and skin colour is challenged using the statement 'I AM PRETTY AND I KNOW IT' and the accompanying 'Apki Soch Kali Hai' (My mind is spoiled). On the denotative level, the image is a dark-skinned woman that confidently proclaims herself to be beautiful. The contrast between the woman's self-assertion, and the reference to "black thinking", draws attention to the prejudice that underlies the judgement, a reference at the connotative level. So, the illustration poses a challenge to a cultural link between fairness and beauty.

In illustration 6, the "ideal" female appearance is made more explicit in the creation of the woman. The list of physical needs offers beauty from a list of measurable characteristics. The appearance of cosmetic tools is another visual manifestation of the modification of the body in order to satisfy these demands. The Barthesian approach reveals a myth, and how culturally specific tastes for female appearance can be expressed as a condition of femininity. The following illustration, #7, also undermines the notion of

an unchanging and shared female body ideal. Some of the comments made to the female are contradictory: “Uff too skinny” or “Boys like curves”. The paradox is great because the body of the woman is assessed based on evolving and competing standards. The illustration is therefore revealing and revealingly constructed in that it doesn't point to some singular body type as the “right” one, but rather reveals the constructed nature of bodily expectations.

Domestic and marital expectations are another way that gender ideology is manifested. The expectation of domestic skills in order to get a “Perfect Gol Roti” is revealed in Illustration 3, which ties academic achievement to the capacity of a woman to be a good cook. In illustration 5, the concept was that giving birth is a “Perfect solution” to marriage troubles. The formulation suggests that motherhood is a means to addressing problems in marriage and thus highlights the assumption that childbirth can solidify a relationship. In the same way, marriage is depicted as a common goal in illustration 10 by presenting the bridal dress as a “perfect gift” for women's 25th birthday.

5.3. Social Surveillance, Objectification, and Gendered Regulation

The other major discovery is that women's lives are constantly monitored, judged and regulated. This pattern is especially apparent in Illustrations 8, 9 and 11 as well as other forms of regulation are present elsewhere in the data.

Illustration 8 depicts the “Auntypreneur” with questions related to examination results, marriage, childbirth and body size. The binoculars around the character's neck is a visual representation of the activity of observing and monitoring. The phrase “Someone whose business is to get into your business” transforms social intrusion into a satirical form of occupation. The image is thus a depiction of questioning as an everyday form of surveillance and assessment of the life of women.

Illustration 9 is an extension of this into public space. The woman is surrounded with comments about her appearance, her movement, and eyes are visible around the visual environment. The eyes are denotative objects of the scene at the denotative level. At the connotative level, their repetition creates an atmosphere of continuous observation. The comments that accompany this image are also an element in constructing the woman as an object of unsolicited attention. The accompanying comments also contribute to constructing the woman as an object of unsolicited attention. The word “Stop This” is an explicit counter-sign, which challenges the normalisation of such behaviour.

Religious expressions that are seen in the comments in Illustration 9 need to be put into context. They are not per se a problem, but should not be regarded as such. The importance they have in the illustration lies in their juxtaposition with the unconsulted, objectifying comments, where they present a critical commentary on the experience of public attention focused on women.

The gendered regulation is presented here visually and verbally in Illustration 11. In the different ages a statement addressed to a woman limits her mobility on different reasons: as an adult she is supposed to go out accompanied by her husband and as a senior citizen she is expected to stay at home. The age and marital status dependent reasons vary, but the common denominator is limiting independent mobility.

The results consequently indicate that the regulation of gender in the selected illustrations takes place not by one rule but by varying social justifications. Protection, the role of marriage, age, reputation and expected behavior can serve as specific arguments to justify the control of women's autonomy and mobility.

5.4. Reinforcement, Challenge, and Re-signification of Gender Norms

One of the conclusions of the study is that the selected illustrations are not merely reflecting dominant gender ideologies. Rather, they tend to express common gender expectations in ways that bring these expectations to the fore and invite them to be considered. The function of the illustrations thus has an ideological aspect, a representational aspect, and a contestative one.

For example, Illustration 3 taps into the familiar connection between femininity and domestic skills in cultures. But when cooking is given the status of “Bachelor's”, there is a contradiction between education and home expectations. The illustration then challenges the notion that “domestic competence” is an indicator of female success.

Likewise, Illustration 5 introduces the concept that childbirth can be the “Perfect solution” to marital problems. The over-simplified formulation assumes the assumption, instead of asserting it as a self-evident truth. A similar approach is taken with illustration #10, which depicts a bridal gown as a “perfect gift”, while the bride's reaction is not aligned with the positive response of the public to the gift. The visual and verbal contradiction creates distance between the socially expected meaning of marriage and the individual's apparent preference.

Other illustrations use more direct re-significations. In Illustration 4, the same relationship between skin colour and beauty is rehashed, but the represented woman is confident about her appearance. Instead of a one-size-fits-all model of the ideal body, Illustration 7 reveals conflicting standards of the body. Illustration 9 is opposite the scene of surrounding objectifying comments, and Illustration 11 is opposite to the statements about the restriction of the mobility of women. In the same way, the hijab in Illustration 1 is re-signed by an assertive voice of the women who wear it. From these examples, it is clear that the illustrations are often used in situations where a well known gendered meaning is presented and then challenged. The illustrations manifest culturally constructed meaning in a Barthesian way, making it more visible and thus more opportunities for demystification. Re-signification takes place when a sign or association which is familiar

and conventional in one representational context is moved into a new representational context that presents a challenge to its conventional meaning.

5.5. The Construction of the “Ideal” Woman

A consistent theme in the data is the creation of an ‘ideal’ woman, based on a number of and sometimes conflicting expectations. The ideal is not conveyed by the one characteristic. In contrast, the illustrations all link the feminine to beauty, fairness, body conformity, household skills, marriage, motherhood, modesty, socially acceptable behaviour, and mobility.

It is especially important for this pattern to be noted in illustrations 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10. This is not insignificant, however, as the “perfect” terminology that can be found in several illustrations introduces a mechanism of evaluation, which is used over and over again in the construction of a gender. Femininity is discussed within the framework of standards by which women can be measured, such as "Perfect Gol Roti," "Perfect Girl," and "perfect gift. Meanwhile, some of the pictures reveal inconsistencies in these standards. Women can be faulted as being too thin, or not thin enough, as illustrated in 7. Women can be asked questions about education, marriage, childbirth, and body size at the same time (as illustrated in 8). Women's attitudes to mobility may shift throughout the life course and still limit their autonomy (as illustrated in 11).

So, the results indicate that the “ideal” woman built across the data set is not a definite and consistent category. Rather, it is created through a number of socially expected roles which can be contradictory to each other. These contradictions are brought to the fore in the illustrations and thus challenge the naturalness of the standards themselves.

5.6. Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

The findings provide answers to the three research questions of the study.

RQ1: How do visual and verbal signs in selected Instagram illustrations construct representations of gender?

Results show that gender is a process of construction through interaction of visual and verbal resources. Gendered identities and experiences are represented through the combination of characters, bodies, clothing, facial expressions, gestures, objects, color, spatial arrangements, typography and written statements. Marriage and motherhood, mobility, body, social surveillance, beauty, domesticity, and femininity are recurring themes in these signs.

RQ2: What gendered ideologies and myths are produced, reinforced, challenged, or re-signified through these representations?

Analysis focuses on gendered assumptions about ideal female body, fairness and beauty, domestic competence, motherhood, marriage, proper public behavior, social surveillance and female mobility. These assumptions become myths as the culturally produced expectations become normal or self-evident. These assumptions, when

expressed in the illustrations, are often ironic, contradictory, exaggerated and satirical, which calls their naturalization into question.

RQ3: How are dominant gender norms reinforced, challenged, or re-signified through the semiotic construction of meaning in the selected illustrations?

The results show that dominant gender norms are mainly represented to be challenged and critiqued. In some illustrations, the combination of both verbal and visual aspects is familiar, but the elements take on a different meaning, resist, or are ironic. The illustrations disrupt the notions of beauty, domesticity, motherhood, marriage, public behavior, body norms, and independence. Re-signification happens when familiar signs, like the hijab, beauty of women, marriage, or the mobility of women are introduced into new semiotic fields, thereby challenging their traditional connotations.

5.7. Overall Discussion

In general, the results show that the illustrations selected on Instagram can be defined as multimodal spaces where the construction and contestation of gender are carried out. All the illustrations are based on culturally known references of what women should be, what they should do, when they should marry, if they should marry, when they should become a mother, if they should become a mother, how they should act in public places, and how they should be judged and valued by their body. These meanings are not just presented explicitly, but are created as a result of the interaction of visual and verbal sign(s).

The meaning of the findings is that the findings are moving from the level of representation to cultural meaning and then to myth and ideology, from Barth's perspective. The illustrations reveal assumptions that can be tacit, and even normalized, if kept in common by repetition over time. In the process, their employment of humor, irony, exaggeration, contradiction, and self-assertion generates other interpretations that can challenge such assumptions.

So, the chosen illustrations show a semiotic double capacity: they evoke and highlight established gendered meanings and meanings while questioning and challenging them. Their importance is not just in terms of the fact that they symbolize gender inequality or gender expectations, but that they expose (or make visible) the cultural construction of these expectations around gender. In this regard, the findings validate the utility of Barthesian semiotics in understanding how meanings of gender are naturalized and how images and words can work in questioning and re-signifying these.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the ways in which visual and verbal signs create, solidify, negotiate and re-signify gendered meaning in selected illustrations from the @throughwasfa Instagram account. The study was based principally on the semiotic model of Roland Barthes, which shifted from first-order signification (the sign itself and its

denotative meaning), to second order signification (the connotations the sign receives in a given culture and ideology, and the possibilities it might have to co-create myth). The results indicate that women's gendered meanings are conveyed not only verbally, but also through the familiar visual imagery of beauty, marriage, motherhood, domesticity, bodily appearance, public behavior, and public surveillance, as well as through women's autonomy. The analysis identified a few constant gendered norms around women's bodies and looks, such as about skin colour, body size, cosmetic alteration etc. Other illustrations included marriage, motherhood and domestic competence, as socially valued aspects of femininity, while other illustrations discussed the questioning, monitoring and control of women's bodies, choices and movements. The representations illustrate that the gendered expectations can be embedded in the ordinary or assumed meanings of everyday social interactions. The research thus demonstrates that by using visual and verbal cues, culturally inherited conceptions of femininity can be made visible in the social media discourse of today.

In parallel, the results show that the chosen illustrations do not just reflect the prevailing gender norms. Some of the illustrations are based on familiar gendered expectations, but many of them employ irony, humour, exaggeration, contradiction, self-assertion and resistance to challenge these expectations. Familiar gendered signs are being constructed through the representations of hijab, skin colour, body standards, marriage pressure, public harassment, and the mobility of women. In this way, the illustrations "become" sites of questioning and contestation within the strategies.

The concepts of Barthes, myth and naturalization, are especially suited to this process. The results show that cultural production of meanings can give them an ideological valence when they seem to be natural or normal, such as when a certain body is perceived as beautiful, marriage is seen as a prerequisite for life, motherhood is seen as a solution to marriage problems, or movement of a woman is limited based on her age and marital status. The selected illustrations are made apparent as ironic, contradictory and exaggerated assumptions that disrupt the naturalness of such illustrations, providing opportunities for demystification and re-signification.

The study overall highlights the potential of Instagram illustrations as multimodal spaces of ideological reproduction and contestation. Signs are not just words or images, but they function in conjunction to create cultural meanings that can normalize, question and reinsignify gender expectations. The study thus underscores the significance of Barthesian semiotic analysis in analyzing the nature of gendered meaning making in the current social media discourse and the potential of visual representation to offer spaces for contesting and reconceptualizing the gendered meanings.

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