

# Picture Taking Tradition after Undergraduate Thesis Examination: A Sociosemiotic Ethnography Study

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**Abstract**—Taking picture/photos with a mobile phone can be perceived as a cultural event. The event selected as object of this study was photo-taking tradition after the students of Faculty of Cultural Studies Universitas Brawijaya passed the undergraduate thesis examination. By employing qualitative research, this study aimed to explain the meaning of the photo-taking tradition. The data in this study included field data, namely information on the tradition gathered from the interviews with the students of Faculty of Cultural Studies Universitas Brawijaya who were selected by purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods, and literary data, namely data related to the tradition taken from articles, journals and research reports. The data were then analyzed by employing Sociosemiotic Ethnography proposed by Phillip Vannini (2006). The results showed that the meaning of photo-taking tradition after undergraduate thesis examination was as a realization of gratitude and continuation of the existing tradition. The attributes worn when taking pictures were considered as special characteristics of the activity and a symbol of success. The steps of rituals of the tradition were situational and spontaneous with an emphasis on the importance of the presence of closest people. The identified semiotic resource were photos with attributes and photos with closest people. The modality could be categorized as sensory, namely visual which served as index of self-existence and success (of being graduated). Semiotic change happened in relation with the meaning of “beauty pageant” attribute.

**Keywords**— picture taking, tradition, socio-semiotic ethnography

## I. INTRODUCTION

Picture taking activities, including *selfie* or *wefie*, with cellphone or smartphone and sharing the pictures to social media can be regarded as a cultural issue. This is based on Frosh's (2015) study stating that pictures shared on social media is related to the act of self-representation through photographs, as a form of social networking culture that ties one person to another through responses to the shared photos. This finding bridges the relation between the study of photography and contemporary culture. Thus, we decided to conduct a study on picture taking activities in cultural perspective by switching the focus from photographic objects uploaded on social media to the subjects of photography, given the fact that the subjects of photography are actors of social networking culture.

Being indulged in picture taking activities may lead someone to take pictures in various places and situations. In Universitas Brawijaya (UB) where we work, for example, picture taking activities are commonly carried out in the *Tugu UB* roundabout area, in a park or in front of a faculty building, in an office, and on a sidewalk. Based on our observation, these activities are not only done spontaneously due to the attractive photo spots but also related with special occasion, which is associated with the location of picture taking. The latter led us to conduct a study about picture taking behavior and special occasion in which it is often done along with its meaning from the perspective of the subjects. Field study was implemented because we did not focus on textual analysis, for example the aesthetic aspects of photos, the meaning of gestural images, and/or sign systems existing in photographic objects. We focused on the scope of cultural practice of picture taking and its role as an identity of a group of individuals, which cannot be explained sufficiently by examining photographic objects.

From a number of possible choices, the events chosen for observation in this study are picture taking sessions after the students have passed an oral defense of undergraduate thesis exam. It is chosen for three reasons: first, the activity is often done by the students during certain weeks, especially ahead of the turn of the semester; second, the activity is an individual and, at the same time, a communal celebration, meaning it is intended for someone who has successfully passed an oral defense but is also a “ceremony” for his group mates; and third, it is informal but there are formal nuances in the use of certain attributes. The scope of observation is limited to Faculty of Cultural Studies of Universitas Brawijaya (FCS UB). Based on preliminary observations (11th January 2017), we found that three students who had passed the exam were photographed with several friends using certain attributes in the form of: flower bouquet, sash bearing the name and titles, colorful balloons, crowns, and/or alphabet shaped balloons that represent abbreviations of a bachelor's degree. These attributes were prepared and brought by their friends and given to them after leaving the examination room. Picture taking took place inside and outside of the Faculty building in various locations.

In view of cultural practice, the picture taking conducted by FCS UB students can be identified as tradition, because: first, it is done repeatedly and continuously in a group (across generations); second, it is forming or confirming identity of the group, and, third, it is identified by the group as something that has a certain meaning and needs to be done (See: Sims & Stephens, 2005: 65-68). The aforementioned group is students who are undergoing the final period of their study, especially those who are writing undergraduate thesis. The tradition is actualized in the form of a ritual involving symbols represented by the worn attributes. These attributes distinguish between the students who are entitled with status “passed the exam” and other students who have not arrived at that stage.

Picture taking tradition done by FCS UB students after their oral defense undergraduate thesis exam can be perceived as a social process involving factors of tradition and as a sign that contains certain meanings implied through the attributes worn in ritualistic procession. Therefore, we employ sociosemiotic ethnography proposed by Phillip Vannini. Sociosemiotic ethnography is a research strategy that seeks to combine fieldwork and theory in an attempt to systematically understand and interpret social processes (Vannini, 2007: 121). The application of the sociosemiotic ethnographic approach to picture taking tradition done by FCS UB students after undergraduate thesis examination is expected to be able to explain that the traditional practice in the field is an interpretative narration that functions as (in Bakhtin's terms, 1975/81: 67, quoted by Vannini, 2007: 121) “decentralization and disunification process”.

This study aims to explain how the picture taking tradition of Faculty of Cultural Studies of Universitas Brawijaya (FCS UB) students after undergraduate thesis examination is interpreted by students and how it can be interpreted in sociosemiotic ethnography perspective proposed by Vannini in his pedagogical article, *Social Semiotics and Fieldwork: Method and Analytics* (2007). The intended interpretation is about how the signs are interpreted in social processes and, according to Vannini's terms (2007: 121-122), in a more humanistic and not deterministic context but still systematic.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative research method. Adapting Creswell's proposition (2012: 205), the steps of qualitative research carried out in this study can be elaborated in five steps, namely: (1) Identifying informants who will be selected to be interviewed. In this case, the informants are determined by using the *purposeful sampling* and *snowball sampling* method. Both methods are chosen because the research situation does not allow researchers to know the best people to be source of information because of the complexity of events (See: Creswell, 2012: 209). (2) Obtaining access to informants by getting permission in the form of willingness to be interviewed and to provide information to answer research questions. (3) Considering the best type of information that will answer the research question, that is, information about the meaning of the picture taking tradition after undergraduate thesis examination of FCS UB students. (4) Designing protocols or instruments to collect and record information,

including: researchers (as interviewers), informants (as speakers), question guide that will be addressed to the informants, tape recorders and stationery that will be used to document the results of interviews with informants, and relevant written documents and/or audio visuals that will provide additional information. (5) Managing data collection by employing the principles of field research (related to interviews with informants) and library research (related to written data, photographs and audio visuals).

The research subjects are the students of FCS UB. The subjects are the students who are in the last period of their studies and who have undergone and passed an oral defense of undergraduate thesis exam. Data collection is done by employing semi-structured interviews, that is by preparing several relevant questions that can be modified if it is necessary during the interview process (Ary, et al., 2010: 438). Interviews conducted are in-depth interviews aiming to obtain necessary information regarding the meaning of the picture taking tradition. In addition to primary data collection, secondary data collection is also done to provide supporting data. The implementation of data analysis is as follows: (1) processing the results of interviews obtained from informants; (2) reducing the data, (3) grouping the data, (4) interpreting the data, and (5) concluding the data. The data will be interpreted on the basis of sociosemiotic ethnographic interpretation strategies proposed by Vannini (2007).

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Employing *purposeful sampling* techniques, we obtained three informants, they are: Galuh (French Language and Literature Study Program, class of 2013), Aditya (Japanese Language Education Study Program, 2012), and Fajri (Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program, 2011). Through *snowball sampling* technique from the three initial informants, six (6) next informants were obtained, they are Rungu (French Language and Literature Study Program, 2012), Ayu (Japanese Literature Study Program, 2013), Yusi (Japanese Literature Study Program, 2013), Buntar (Chinese Literature Study Program, 2011), Fina (English Literature Study Program, 2013), and Fani (Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program, 2011). The mention of the names of the nine informants in this study has been approved. The chosen informants are from different classes (class of 2011-2013) and different study programs because we need to confirm that the picture taking tradition has been going on for several generations and become a custom among students of FCS UB. In accordance with the arguments of Sims & Stephens (2005: 64), “...tradition is simply the sharing of something of cultural significance from group member to group member”, thus it can be said that the picture taking custom has become a tradition. The “group members to group members” in the context of this study are groups of one generation of students to the next generation.

The informants assessed the tradition of taking pictures after undergraduate thesis exam as a momentum to celebrate gratitude for the success of completing a series of lectures. As

a tradition, all informants agreed that the photos after the thesis exam with certain attributes such as balloons, sash, flowers, and crowns had been carried down from generation to generation. No one knows for sure who started the tradition. However, one of the informants, Buntar (class of 2011) said that the behavior had begun since the class of 2010 (interview 9th June 2017). This tradition is interpreted as two things. First, as an act of "perpetuating" the habit that has been carried out by the previous the generations. Five informants: Fina, Yusi, Fajri, Rungu, and Aditya agreed with Buntar. Rungu (class of 2012), for example, said, "... *this is indeed tradition. Our classmates have done this, and in my opinion this is a good thing. If I look at it, this is my own initiative initiated by tradition.*" (Interview 9th June 2017)

Appropriation to seniors, according to Rungu, is necessary to continue. This behavior gives the impression of "joining in" so that the celebration after the thesis exam is merely interpreted as a celebration of success. Different meanings are understood by Galuh, Fani, Buntar, and Ayu. They considered the celebration as a form of gratitude for their success in completing the study which was marked by the accomplishment in writing undergraduate thesis. The expression of gratitude does not only come from informants, but also from informants' friends. In this case, it was actually the informants' friends who took the initiative and celebrated their success in passing the exam. Therefore, an alternative meaning is created: the celebration of taking pictures after a thesis exam with its various attributes is not only normative (preserving habits across generations) but also substantial (the realization of gratitude celebrated by the student's friends). It is in contrast to the usual celebration of an achievement that originates from individuals who achieved his goals; the initiative to celebrate this tradition comes from someone else.

Two models of understanding of the tradition of taking pictures after undergraduate thesis exam as mentioned above confirm that the meaning is polysemic. This, according to Vanini (20017: 125), occurs because the meaning is influenced by how someone experiences, uses, practices, talks, contests, criticizes, understands, and interacts with semiotic resources. In this context, the intended semiotic resources are picture taking activities, the attributes that are worn when taking pictures, the procession, and the people who are involved in the activity.

Related to the attributes that are worn or carried when taking pictures, there are differences of opinion between each informant. Nevertheless, there are two things that can be underlined. First, all informants agreed that the attributes such as balloons, sash, bouquet of flowers do not have to be there. The most important thing for them is to take pictures with their friends. Second, the informants did not know the specific purpose of each attribute they wore and carried. Completeness and type of attributes are not binding. What determines is the "special" characteristics, depending on who runs the tradition. For example, Galuh (class of 2013) received a fruit from a close friend when taking a photo because he thought his friend intended to support him for his diet, Aditya (class of 2012) got Harry Potter's special attributes because he liked the fictional

character, and Ayu (class of 2013) get a tumbler from his closest friend. For informants, there is no specific meaning for each of their attributes. However, the existence of these attributes signifies one main thing, namely the symbol of their success after struggling to complete the study.

There is influence of popular culture on the meaning of the attributes the students wear, which is the beauty pageant. One of the attributes commonly encountered in the contest, a sash, was adopted as a sign of the success of students in completing studies. The marker is the sash with the name and title that the student will officially bear. The frame of meaning this tradition is different from the frame of meaning of the sash in the beauty pageant. According to the research of Sulistyaningrum (2011: 7), the sash in the beauty pageant in America became a medium for women to demand progress for their people, containing slogans about women's thoughts at that time. However, currently the sling is only one of the mandatory accessories and is only a sign of the identity of the origin of the finalists. Thus, the sash worn by students after being declared to pass the thesis exam experiences what is called Vanini (2007: 130) as semiotic change or semiotic transformation; that is how meaning changes over time. Changes in meaning can occur in several groups but may not occur in other groups. In the context of this study, changes in the meaning of sash occurred in groups of students who celebrated the success of their thesis examinations.

Regarding the meaning of the composition of the picture taking tradition, which is related to procession and people who are involved in the tradition, the informants agreed in two ways. First, the tradition is spontaneous and situational and can be mapped in three stages, namely: providing information on the schedule of thesis exams, celebrating after the thesis exam, and uploading celebratory photographs. Information about the thesis exam is obtained through information directly from the students who will undergo the exam through social media and/or online communication groups. It should be underlined that according to all informants the students who will undergo the exam do not explicitly invite his closest people and friends to come, but simply ask for prayer. The implicit message is that their friends, for their own awareness and sensitivity, will come to provide support to them. This can be known, for example, through the following statement from Fajri (class of 2012): "*I don't plan and invite, just friends who are in the initiative*" (interview 26th May 2017). Second, in the celebration, the factor of the presence of the closest people and friends is more important than the completeness of the attributes and gifts brought by their friends. All informants agreed that the presence of the closest people and friends (although they did not bring anything) was very meaningful to them. This can be seen, for example, from Aditya's statement (class of 2012): "*They don't bring anything, it doesn't matter, the important thing is that they come even though they don't bring anything, it doesn't matter. The important thing is to use it, not the prize.*" (Interview 9th June 2017)

The presence of the closest people in this case is not only limited to classmates, study programs, departments, faculties, universities, and/or organizations (in the case of Galuh,

Aditya, Fajri, Ayu, Fani, and Buntar) but also includes brothers, high school friends (in the case of Rungu and Yusi) and friends from other universities (in the case of Fina). Thus, it can be said that the celebrations are also interpreted as a time of togetherness.

As mentioned at the introduction, in analyzing the picture taking tradition we need to take into account the perspective of the doers because we, as researchers, have limitations. Regarding this, socio-semiotic ethnography provides a solution. Vanini (2007, p. 125-126) stated:

*As a form of postmodern ethnography, sociosemiotic ethnography recognizes the limitations of "expert discourse". Sociosemiotic ethnographers make it a point of seeking how social agents interpret meanings in its complexity and contradictions because they reject the prescriptive character of the ontological and epistemological omniscience of the expert, who interprets the truth of the person's experience back to her and prescribes "diagnosis"*

One of the things needed in sociosemiotic analysis is modality. Modality is a way to obtain the value of reality (Vanini, 2007: 128). Vanini then explained that there are 3 semiotic models according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) and Van Leeuwen (1999) namely: linguistic, sonic and visual. The tradition of picture taking after thesis examinations conducted by students of Faculty of Cultural Studies Universitas Brawijaya can be categorized into the realm of visual semiotic mode because the photos taken are intended to be seen.

In Peircean semiotics the phenomenon is called index. Peirce distinguishes icon, index, and symbol as semiotic mode. Index is a system of signs related to sensory features or five senses. Chandler (2006: 37) says that index is a mode in which signifier and signified are not arbitrarily related - in this case the linkages are naturally related to each other. For example, pronunciation of a particular word indexes a particular area or social group. Therefore, the index is also considered to be the strongest modality because there is a link between the picture-taking traditions using certain attributes after the thesis examination conducted by students of the Faculty of Cultural Studies Universitas Brawijaya with the reality justifying their condition of graduating from college despite the revision to be made. Thus, it can be concluded that the picture taking becomes an index of one's own existence. When the taken picture after the thesis examination is uploaded to the media, it means to show that the informant has undergone a thesis examination and is declared to pass the examination meaning that he is titled a graduate. And it is expected that the uploaded pictures can be a tool for the informant to show his existence. In this case there are personal and instrumental goals.

There are also students who consider that uploading pictures after thesis examination with certain attributes is not to be seen by social media friends, but rather to appreciate the

upperclassmen who have already done this tradition. In addition, there are also students who undergo this picture taking tradition with certain attributes as a natural process carried out by all students, they just do it without knowing who has initiated the tradition and what is the meaning of the tradition.

Barthes (1972) says that what is considered natural and treated as tradition is called myth. However, in interpreting this, it cannot be separated from cultural and social associations. The celebration, i.e. picture taking after thesis examination is a form of appreciation for what they have tried, or a form of gratitude, or just taking part in carrying out the tradition, and all of which are related to modality. Celebration with complete attributes, such as balloons, flowers, sash, and crown can be associated with the selection of a beauty queen, where the winner will get a bouquet of flowers, sash and crown. Social and cultural associations indirectly become tools to achieve reality values. Herein lies the role of sociosemiotic ethnography in analyzing social phenomena needed. The diversity of meanings in various phenomena is related to modality - how to get a reality value - which is needed to make an analysis become more reliable.

In sociosemiotic ethnography there is a term that also plays a role in knowing the meaning of social phenomena, namely the function of semiosis. Semiosis, which is related to the sign system, presents what Halliday (1978) says as a source that gives 'agents' freedom to be able to achieve their goals for example informative, imaginative, heuristic, personal and / relational, regulatory, or instrumental. What obtained from the tradition of taking picture after thesis examination with certain attributes is a sign of semiosis that has a specific meaning and purpose. Based on the results of the interviews with all informants, it can be concluded that the purpose of uploading photos is for relational, informative, or instrumental purposes. The attributes involved in the process of picture taking are also very instrumental in determining the special meaning because everyone will get special attributes like tumblers, puppets, and certain craft with quote from Al Qur'an, in which the gifts represents the person given the gifts.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Sociosemiotic ethnographic research on the tradition of taking pictures after undergraduate thesis examination using certain attributes provides a more objective space for researchers. Sociosemiotic ethnography is considered as an approach that can provide a way for deeper analysis because in addition to involving structural semiotics such as Peirce's semiotics, sociosemiotic ethnography also considers the data obtained from interviews. From the analysis, it can be concluded that this study does not form a single meaning, that the tradition of taking pictures after a thesis exam using certain attributes performed by students of the Faculty of Cultural Sciences of Brawijaya University does not only contain narcissistic value but also existential and friendship. If it is associated with the function of semiosis offered by Halliday, then there are certain goals intended by uploading celebratory

photos of social media, namely instrumental, personal, and relational functions.

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