

Engineering, Woman and Beauty: Breaking or Strengthening the Stereotypes? A Deconstructive Discourse Analysis of Woman Representation. A Case Study of Lauren Howe, Beauty Pageant Engineer in Miss Universe Canada and Miss Universe 2017

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Abstract— “Stereotypes were made to be broken” is the tagline of Lauren Howe’s website (<https://laurenhowe.ca/>) where she exposes the two sides of her inspiration: Side A-Engineering and Technology and Side B-Media and Entertainment. Howe is beauty pageant engineer winning Miss Universe Canada 2017 and a top ten finalist of Miss Universe 2017. She has attempted to break the stereotype of STEM association to man by developing her personal campaign and personality profiling. This study attempts to apply deconstructive discourse analysis of textual and visual representation of woman and beauty in Howe’s website, centring on the question whether the dominating woman stereotypes have truly been broken. The binary oppositions and metaphysic hierarchies will be subverted as to expose the deeper spread of meanings. The study concludes that even though Howe’s worldwide efforts have been successful to break the stereotypes, she is still unconsciously trapped in conceptualizing and representing woman and beauty from male-dominated industry and standpoint.

Keywords— *Engineering, Woman, Beauty*

I. INTRODUCTION

Engineering, more specifically STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), is a field mostly and stereotypically identified as one that belongs to male field. When female individuals wish to get into the STEM world, they must appropriate themselves to comply with the characteristics of STEM. Quoting Schreiner (2006), Kessels (2014) has highlighted that a lot of students see science subject as “dull, authoritarian, abstract, theoretical, fact-oriented and fact-overloaded, with little room for fantasy, creativity, enjoyment, and curiosity and difficult and hard to understand...students tend to perceive these subjects as offering fewer opportunities to form and express their own ideas than the arts and languages do” (281). Moreover, gender-wise, STEM subjects are seen as boys’ subjects, unfeminine or masculine subjects. Kessels further concluded that “such stereotypes predict attitudes toward STEM, competence beliefs, and finally, career preferences”. In Indonesia, this

stereotyping culture is no exception. STEM is considered as appropriate for male world and only exceptional females go into this world.

In the real world of employment, women are still at the margins despite the fast-growing ICT sectors: “According to EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality), there are four times more men than women in Europe with ICT-related education” (<https://www.europeandatajournalism.eu>). Meanwhile, in Southeast Asian countries, according to The Sasakawa Peace Foundation: “women’s workforce participation could contribute considerably to economic development in Southeast Asia, yet there remains a significant, 23-percentage-point gender gap (while)...Over the next decade up to 80% of jobs will demand ICT skills”. Women used to mostly work in sectors that require few or even no skills in ICT in this region. However, with the ongoing digital revolution, where manufacturing and services sectors are forced to be digitalized, the women’s jobs are at risk of being automated and digitised that will consequently reduce or even erase their vacancies and opportunities if women don’t get better access to STEM and make themselves digitally savvy. This study attempts to elaborate the struggle against the stereotype by a special woman, a beauty pageant, and discuss if the struggle has successfully broken the stereotype or counterproductively strengthened it. Deconstructive discourse analysis is employed to critically discuss the texts concerning the beauty pageant’s discourses built through her website contents and personal statements.

II. DECONSTRUCTIVE CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The object of this study is discourse, a variety of language expressions presented in online communication verbally and visually. To understand the issue discussed in this paper is at the first place to understand the discourse itself.

A. *What is discourse?*

Rudman and Dennhardt, quoting Cheek, 2004 and Fairclough, 2009, have referred to discourse as “any instance of communication, language used in a particular field of practice, or to instances of talk or text that contain particular properties” (Nayar & Stanley, 2015: 138). Simply and linguistically, discourse is “any piece of extended language, written or spoken, that has unity and meaning and purpose” (<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk>). Foucault has defined discourse in a more comprehensive way as “Systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, and courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (<https://literarydevices.net>). It is a broad spectrum of language “games” that someone can play with a specific purpose, direct or indirect, also with an open possibility of consequences. Generally, discourse can be classified into four categories: exposition (e.g. definition, comparative analysis), narration (stories, folklore, drama), description (using the senses/mental pictures), and argument (using logic/reasoning, e.g. lecture, essay, prose). In literary world, we know poetic, expressive and transactional discourse. Poetic discourse focuses on special expressions of feelings, emotions, ideas, imaginations, events, and places through specific literary devices such as rhymes, rhythms, and figurative languages. Expressive discourse deals with a reflection of our emotions in a form of basic or entry-level such as academic essays and diaries. Lastly, transactional discourse deals with the way “to convey the message in such a way that it is clearly understood without any confusion...no ambiguity – everything is clear for the reader...in active voice. Examples include instructions, guidelines, manuals, privacy policies, and patient instructions as written by doctors” (<https://literarydevices.net>).

To have a better understanding and more comprehensive coverage of discourse, Macleod (2002) has quoted from diverse sources, highlighting that discourse has been described as “any regulated system of statements; a system of statements which constructs an object; a particular of network of meanings, their heterogeneity and their effects; discernible clusters of terms, descriptions, commonplaces and figures of speech often clustered around metaphors or vivid images and often using distinct grammatical constructions and styles; a form of social practice, rather than a purely individual activity or a reflex of situational variables; products and reflections of social, economic and political factors, and power relations; a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation; socially organized frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done; historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth; a multi-faceted public process through which meanings are progressively and dynamically achieved” (pp. 17-18). These definitions help much in understanding discourse not as simplistic but rather as a complex and multidimensional idea in this modern and digital era.

Macleod (2002) has further added by quoting Fairclough (1992) and Parker (1990a) to show the difference between discourse and text, and the broader coverage of discourse, saying that “Within linguistics, ‘discourse’ is used to refer to extended samples of either spoken or written language, while ‘text’ is regarded as one dimension of discourse: the written or spoken product...it is appropriate to see discourse as realised in other symbolic forms such as visual images and special arrangements” (p. 19).

B. *Deconstruction*

“*Deconstruction* is not synonymous with *destruction*, however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word *analysis*, which etymologically means ‘to undo’—a virtual synonym for ‘to de-construct.’ The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of the warring forces of signification within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading that analyzes the specificity of a text’s critical difference from itself” (Johnson, 1980:5). Subversion or teasing of a text is done carefully by undoing the established signification process. Deconstruction is a process of revealing the contradictions and inconsistencies (warring forces) within a text or discourse. Derrida (1997) himself has stressed a technique of critical analysis known as deconstructive reading: “And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*” (p. 158). The aim of deconstructive reading is to expose the unperceived, unspoken, or unconscious parts of the text where the writer or speaker does not intentionally communicate in the discourse. Barry (2017) has offered three stages of deconstructive analysis called verbal, textual and linguistic stage. Verbal stage involves looking paradoxes and contradictions purely based on the words used in the text. Textual stage looks for shifts, gaps, breaks, and omissions in the continuity of the text where instabilities of attitude, position, focus, time, point of view, tone, pace, vocabulary, grammar, etc. Linguistic stage finally seeks for moments in the text “when the adequacy of language itself as a medium of communication is called into question. Such moments occur when, for example, there is implicit or explicit reference to the unreliability or untrustworthiness of language. It may involve, for instance, *saying* that something is unsayable; or saying that it is impossible to utter or describe something and then doing so; or saying that language inflates, or deflates, or misrepresents its object, and then continuing to use it anyway” (Barry, 2017: 71).

C. *Deconstructive Discourse Analysis*

In relation to discourse analysis, Derridean deconstruction is utilized in analyzing the discourse, thus

the term Deconstructive Discourse Analysis (DDA) is introduced. Macleod (2002) has highlighted the aim of this DDA: “(It) is an approach to discourse that attempts to de-stabilize it. It aims neither at destroying the text nor assessing it as to its truth value. Instead, it questions discourses by exploring (deconstructing) them in terms of their claims of presence, and their dependence on absences... Thus, deconstruction focuses on dominance, contradiction and difference. In so doing, it enables us to envisage ways of disrupting the dominant discourse, and to construct positions of resistance” (p. 20). What is unsaid contributes to the signification process where the unspoken or omission is inseparable from the spoken discourse, “what it says is systematically related to what it does not say... Meaning is a function of presence (the written or spoken) and absence (the chain of suppressed signifiers upon which the meaning of the present is based” (Macleod, 2002: 21).

The technical process of DDA deals with the practice where oppositions are turned into supplements by inverting the binary oppositions, the absent is highlighted, the stability of the text is undermined or teased. The process is described in three ways (Macleod, 2002: 22-23). Firstly, “identify an opposition, and show how one of the terms is dominant in the truth stakes over the other”. Secondly, “subvert the opposition between two terms by demonstrating that the privilege the dominant term enjoys can be made untenable”. Thirdly, “Sabotage the conceptual opposition... by extending the meaning of the term to include what we commonly label the opposition”. Haryatmoko (2016) has emphasized the aim of DDA to undo the metaphysical hierarchy through exposing the undecidable as metaphysical hierarchy is heavily attached to language. Thus, deconstruction puts the binary oppositions and negations under suspicion because they hide domination relationship and hierarchy. Therefore, a strategic step to do is to neutralize the oppositions after reversing the hierarchical relationship (pp. 218-219).

III. BREAKING OR STRENGTHENING THE STEREOTYPES?

The case of the beauty pageant Lauren Howe is interesting to discuss due to the fact that she is a graduate from engineering department that is stereotypically considered as unfeminine or masculine world away from beauty and femininity. This part will critically deconstruct the narrative discourses around the beauty pageant based on what she has posted in her personal website regarding her opinions and actions. Visual images, spoken and written statements will be considered as her discourse concerning women stereotypes and Howe’s involvement in Miss Universe Canada and Miss Universe 2017. Again, as discussed before, the aim of this DDA is not to find weaknesses or assess the truth value, but to reveal another side of the truth mostly suppressed in the mainstream view point.

There are three narrative discourses to be elaborated. Firstly, Howe’s tagline in her website home page (<https://laurenhowe.ca/>) that writes “Stereotypes were made to be broken”. The main website page shows her

beautiful face, sporty and slim appearance and activities including boxing, jogging, and skipping with the city background. The website reads: LAUREN HOWE: ENGINEERING □ MEDIA PERSONALITY □ STORY TELLER. Then the website is divided into two sides. SIDE A: ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY and Side B: MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT. In side A she talks about what industrial engineering is and her activities there, and in side B she discusses how she falls in the world of media and entertainment. She illustrates her experience as follows: “You could say that, in a way, I fell into the world of media. While I loved the idea of storytelling, film and photography as a child, I always felt conditioned that if I loved and was good at Math and Science, I should pursue a career in that path... this was the original plan... but you know how life works!” On the surface, obviously Howe wishes to stress her struggle against the stereotypes as the tagline is placed right on her website homepage. This is strengthened by her division of the main page into side A and B which seems to present the divide (the stereotypes) in the society between STEM and non-STEM (media and entertainment), especially regarding women’s role and involvement. The message is clear: Howe can do both, so the stereotypes have been broken. She can look beautiful, feminine and fashionable, yet working in the field of STEM.

On a deeper look at the narrative discourse, however, contradiction and inconsistency happen. Her attitude in dividing the website homepage into two opposing sides reflects her perspective that it is necessary to divide the STEM and non-STEM world. She has strengthened the binary opposition established in the society of men for STEM and women for non-STEM. She has, at the same time, contradicted her own struggle to break the stereotypes by stressing that the divide is there and although women may enter both sides, the division is unavoidable, established, and unbroken (unbreakable).

Further, when she confidently states, “Stereotypes were made to be broken”, she assumes that stereotypes are consciously made, while they are not. Caprariello, Cuddy, and Fiske (2009) have proven that “Social structure shapes cultural stereotypes and emotions”. Howe’s assumption that stereotypes are made is against the social reality that stereotypes are socially structured, mostly unconsciously established, through everyday social practices, strengthened by both men and women. Thus, while Howe consciously attempts hard to break the stereotypes, she at the same time produces online/internet “social structure” that shapes cultural stereotypes by unconsciously dividing the STEM and non-STEM sides. Her web visitors will be made aware of this division once they visit the website, that the divide is still real.

The other contradiction and inconsistency can also be seen in her visual image in her side A where she puts her feminine, fashionable, tidy, and cheerful look among the other STEM individuals who still fall into the fossilised stereotype: unfeminine, untidy, unfashionable, etc. Howe is the only one who breaks the stereotypes. This will be

discussed in relation to Howe's other narration on being confidently beautiful and the danger of comparison.



Figure 1. About side a stem

Source: <https://laurenhowe.ca/about/side-a-stem/>

The second narrative discourse is Howe's statements: "To be confidently beautiful" and "Comparison is the death of happiness". The first is, of course, connected to Miss Universe motto "Confidently Beautiful" as she joined the competition and won Miss Universe Canada 2017 and placed the Top Ten at Miss Universe 2017. The motto has been continuously asked to many contestants and they come up with answers beyond physical appearance, such as the following responses as taken from Miss Universe official website:

"Truly loving yourself; when she is confident with who she is and is unapologetically herself...who follows their passions and dreams with enthusiasm despite challenges and obstacles. The most beautiful thing we can wear is confidence; being strong, confident, driven, independent and knowing that she is comfortable in her own skin...knowing and accepting who she is as a person...knowing your limitation and focusing on your strong points...loving yourself one hundred percent; the inner peace and acceptance of who you are as a woman, despite society's ever changing ideologies of what beauty is all about; knows her qualities and doesn't let anyone put her down, but also doesn't put anyone down; the ability to have a voice and use it for those who are voiceless; has a positive outlook on life...her attitude towards any situation or person around her reflects her personality and charisma; a woman with persistence and determination and passion. She knows exactly what she wants to achieve in life...aware of all obstacles that she may encounter and still does not hold back...mentally prepared to confront any challenge before her, because she is confident that her hard work will take her along the road of self-realization and self-achievement" (<https://www.missuniverse.com/post/1093>).

The list still keeps continuing, and mostly reflects what is known as inner beauty. However, the principle business of beauty pageant does not lie on inner beauty but outer one. This can be traced from the history and selection process, and criteria for judgement. Historically, this present contest was established in 1952 by Pacific Knitting Mills, a California-based clothing company and manufacturer of Catalina Swimwear. Although the present president, Paula Shugart, says that "Our organization believes that confidence is the most important quality for a person to possess" (<https://www.missuniverse.com/about>), the emphasis is still put on outer beauty—including the importance of physical appearance in swimsuit and evening gown—as stated in the rules: "Each competition begins with preliminary interviews that include a swimsuit or athletic wear and evening gown presentation show. These preliminary events are especially important as it will be the first time the judges and fans really get to know the contestants. The preliminary competition is the driving force in selecting the Semi-finalists" (<https://www.missuniverse.com/about#rules>). The word "beauty" itself is actually disqualifying for women because language is more than just a means of communication, but also has the power to construct the reality that beauty when uttered has at the same time suggested the ugly or the disqualified non-beauty. Beauty actually implies reference to a myth built in a certain society that disqualifies those who do not comply with the myth. Wolf (2002: 1) has elaborated in her book *Beauty Myth* that women are suffering due to their attempts "to meet the demands of the thin ideal; black, brown, and white women—women who looked like fashion models—admitted to knowing, from the time they could first consciously think, that the ideal was someone tall, thin, white, and blond, a face without pores, asymmetry, or flaws, someone wholly 'perfect,' and someone whom they felt, in one way or another, they were not". This beauty myth—mainly physical—is unavoidably enhanced in the selection of beauty pageant contestants. Research shows that there is a "natural tendency towards beauty in humans...that behavioural preference for beauty is driven by an inherent natural tendency towards beauty than explicit social cognitive processes" (Mo, Xia, Qin, & Mo, 2016: 1). Further, Griffin and Langlois (2006) also found out that "Unattractive women are at a disadvantage relative to either medium or attractive women. It is more often the case that unattractiveness is 'bad' than that beauty is 'good'...evidenced the disadvantage of unattractiveness as the principal and most consistent expression of stereotyped judgements based on facial attractiveness" (p.201). This means that being physically (facially) beautiful or attractive is advantageous and being physically ugly is disadvantageous, emphasizing that beauty is good and ugly is bad. Sadly, in professional world, as Wolf (2002) has referred to PBQ (The Professional Beauty Qualification), the principles do not apply for men. As for men the inverse can be true, for example in journalism world, a professional female

journalist should meet the standard of being young, sexy, single, thin, and beautiful, while for male journalist being old, bald, wrinkled, fat, etc. is considered professional as this signifies maturity and experience (p. 34). And again, it is human natural tendency to have this beauty stereotype. Therefore, beauty disqualifies many women and beauty pageant counts much on outer beauty than the inner one.

So, when Howe promotes the idea of “confidently beautiful” after her decision to join the beauty contest, she is also disqualifying so many women who cannot meet the ideal beauty myth although they are confident with their inner beauty. The picture above speaks about this disqualification where Howe—with her slim, white, tall, blonde, and fashionable physical appearance—is standing out among those who are not. This is strengthened by Howe’s motivating slogan on YouTube that “Comparison is the death of happiness”. Her slogan wishes to educate women not to compare themselves to others and images outside such as on social media because they are not always real or already fabricated, and comparison is not the same as inspiration. She says that it is OK to get inspiration from others but it is not OK to compare themselves to others. This narrative discourse is actually contradictory to the fact of what Howe herself is doing. By joining the Miss Universe Beauty Pageant, she has been compared to many others (contestants, admirers, dreamers, etc.) in the process and so many women will compare themselves to her and find out they are not because beauty contest is essentially a contest of comparison in the process based on the rules and criteria set by the organization. Howe has advised women not to compare but she herself is the very comparison, more than just an inspiration. The comparison is obvious because the contest disqualifies those who are not beautiful in any ways.

Lastly, Howe’s favourite and fun feminist quote: “*You don’t need a superman when you’re a wonder woman*”. This quote stresses on women’s independence of men, probably enhancing the “confidently beautiful” motto where women can stand on their own because they are confident. However, the slogan may imply the other way that “you need a (regular) man if you are not a wonder woman”. Lauren Howe may be one of the wonder women with her success, but what about millions of other women who are regular (unbeautiful, unattractive, fat, dark-skinned, etc.)? They need men. Or, don’t wonder women need supermen at all? Again, the way the slogan is formulated still belongs to the binary opposition hierarchy, saying that (super) men are superior and always needed unless women are wonder. Most of all, this slogan is only a supposition, which means that it is not happening now.

Regarding feminist ideas in the above narrative discourse, actually Howe’s decision to join the contest is somehow against feminism because despite the success she may reach through it, women are unavoidably objectified for business purposes. This can be traced through the process of contestant selection which starts

with the obligation for a local company or a person from country to buy the local rights of the competition through a franchise fee, implying that the further selection processes will be heavily business wise: the winners must be model-look to be good enough to advertise and sell the relevant products. Moreover, the event itself is a showcase of saleable beauty to billions of viewers where male gazes and female envies are fed. It is hard not to see women objectification in this context. The contradiction and inconsistency are clearly traced here because on one hand Howe struggles to break the negative stereotypes about women’s minority in STEM, dependence, beauty and confidence, but on the other hand she is still trapped in representing women as contesting and disqualifying one another and complying with men’s standard in the industry.

IV. CONCLUSION

The deconstructive discourse analysis has proven that Lauren Howe and her participation in beauty pageant has showed contradictory standing points. She has struggled to break the stereotypes that STEM is only for men by getting into it successfully, but at the same time she still divides clearly her world as STEM and Non-STEM. She is against comparison as comparison is the death of happiness, but her joining and winning the beauty pageant is all about comparing and competing without which the event will never even exist. She is against male domination by being independent, but her part-taking in the Miss Universe Beauty Pageant Contest has enhanced the male gazes and female envies through the participants’ dominant showcase of physical attractiveness than inner beauty. Overall, it is concluded that despite her success to superficially break the negative stereotypes about women, Howe is still unconsciously trapped in conceptualizing and representing women and beauty from male-dominated industry and standpoint. She is still actually strengthening the women stereotypes.

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