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Decoding the Taboo: A Semiotic Look at Bincang Ranjang

TITO MAHESA WIJAYA
Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: titomahesawijaya@gmail.com

NIKEN HAFSHAH AABIDAH
Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: nikenhafshah@gmail.com

DICK JUAN VALENTINO
Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: dickjuan1402@gmail.com

AHMAD AQILA FARID FADILLA
Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: argafica12@gmail.com

Abstract. This study examines the YouTube podcast Bincang Ranjang, an Indonesian show in which guests, mostly women, openly discuss their sex lives, a topic traditionally treated as private and taboo. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic concepts of denotation/connotation, myth, and second-order signification, this research analyzes two texts: a primary episode transcript and a secondary interview with the show's host, Anisa Alatas. The findings show that the show negotiates the line between taboo and public acceptability through a consistent lexicon of euphemism, verbal purification rituals, a visual-verbal contradiction in how the host presents herself, and a moral closure that restores conventional gender norms after each story. These findings suggest that Bincang Ranjang does not eliminate the taboo surrounding sexuality in Indonesian pop culture, but rather constructs a sign system that allows taboo content and public acceptability to coexist.

Keywords: semiotics, taboo, euphemism, Roland Barthes, Bincang Ranjang.

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality in Indonesia has long been treated as a private matter, something considered unsuitable for open, public discussion, particularly when spoken about by women. The YouTube podcast Bincang Ranjang, hosted by Anisa Alatas, directly challenges this convention by inviting guests, most of them women, to recount explicit personal stories about their sex lives in a recorded, publicly distributed format. With hundreds of

thousands of subscribers and hundreds of millions of views, the show has become a significant pop culture phenomenon in Indonesia.

This research problem centers on how a media product built entirely around a culturally taboo subject manages to remain publicly acceptable and popular rather than being rejected or censored. This study argues that the show achieves this through a specific system of signs, word choice, narrative structure, and moral framing, that allows taboo content to be spoken about without fully breaking social norms. This research uses a semiotic approach, focusing on identifying the symbols, language, expressions, and narratives that appear in the show's content, and interpreting the cultural meaning constructed through them. The aim of this study is to answer three research questions: (1) What words or symbols are used to talk about sex without saying it directly? (2) How does the show make explicit content feel okay to watch? (3) What lesson or moral does each story end with?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research relies on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, particularly three interrelated concepts. First, denotation and connotation: denotation is the literal, dictionary meaning of a sign, while connotation is the additional cultural or emotional meaning attached to that sign depending on context (Barthes, 1977). Second, myth: a process by which a specific cultural meaning is presented as though it were natural, obvious, or universal, concealing the fact that it is actually a social construction shaped by history and ideology (Barthes, 1972).

Third, second-order signification: the process by which a sign that already carries a first-level meaning is layered with an additional, second meaning, this is the mechanism through which myth operates. These concepts are relevant to studying Bincang Ranjang because the show constantly works at this second level of meaning: ordinary words are given new connotations related to sex, and its content is framed through moral and religious language in a way that makes taboo topics feel natural and acceptable to discuss publicly.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a semiotic analysis method based on Roland Barthes' framework.

The data for this study consists of two transcribed texts: (1) the primary data, an episode of Bincang Ranjang titled "MASIH BRONDONG UDAH GEDONG!!! PANTESAN MAU TIAP JAM!", featuring a guest's story about a one-night-stand encounter; and (2) the secondary data, a transcript of a separate talk show interview in which host Anisa Alatas discusses the background and philosophy of Bincang Ranjang.

Both transcripts were read closely to identify recurring words, expressions, and narrative patterns. These patterns were then interpreted using Barthes' concepts of denotation/connotation, myth, and second-order signification to determine what cultural meaning is being constructed.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the semiotic analysis, organized into five parts corresponding to the sign patterns identified across the primary and secondary data.

A. Euphemism as a Sign System

Across both texts, explicit sexual vocabulary is consistently avoided in favor of everyday, familiar words such as “itunya,” “main,” “gedong,” “servis,” and “engas.” In Barthes' terms, these words operate at the level of connotation: their literal, denotative meaning is mundane, but their contextual, cultural meaning clearly signals sexual content.

> *“...itunya udah berdiri gitu. Udah keras lah ya, Kak.” / “Gedong.” (Bincang Ranjang, 00:06:03-00:06:12) - Euphemistic terms used to describe explicit anatomy without direct vocabulary.*

This pattern is stable across the corpus rather than being one-off improvisation, showing that the show has built its own sign system for making taboo topics speakable. The show's own title works the same way at a larger scale: “Bincang Ranjang” (“bedroom talk”) is itself a euphemism, letting the show circulate on mainstream platforms without being formally classified as adult content.

B. The Episode Title as Myth-Making

The episode title “MASIH BRONDONG UDAH GEDONG!!! PANTESAN MAU TIAP JAM!” demonstrates second-order signification. At the first level, it simply describes a story about a young man. At the second level, through all-capital letters, exclamation marks, and the word “pantesan” (no wonder), the title signals urgency and titillation, borrowing codes from tabloid and viral-video conventions. This naturalizes the idea that explicit personal stories are ordinary, consumable entertainment content, which is precisely how Barthes' concept of myth operates: a constructed cultural message is presented as though it were simply “how things are.”

C. Verbal Purification Rituals

Both texts show explicit statements quickly followed by religious or apologetic markers such as “Hampura” and “Astagfirullah,” or by a disclaimer at the start of the episode.

> *“...jangan-jangan mau dibahas itu ya boleh...” [Disclaimer opening] (Bincang Ranjang, 00:00:44) - Disclaimer stating the content is not meant to be imitated and is intended only for married viewers.*

This functions as a myth-management device, it allows taboo content to be spoken while still preserving the speaker's and viewer's moral image. In the primary data, this purification happens proactively through a single disclaimer block; in the secondary data, it happens reactively, sentence by sentence, throughout the host's conversation.

D. Visual-Verbal Contradiction

In the secondary data, the host explicitly notes that she chose modest sleepwear instead of her usual more revealing outfit specifically because she is discussing Bincang Ranjang.

> *“...karena gue enggak punya lingury, gua punyanya baju tidur begini.” (Talk show interview, 00:01:19-00:01:25) - The host comments on her choice of modest sleepwear instead of her usual more revealing outfit.*

This is a clear denotation/connotation split: the visual sign (modest clothing) contradicts the verbal sign (explicit discussion), and this contradiction itself carries meaning, it signals that explicit talk is acceptable as long as it is visually packaged as modest and respectable.

E. Moral Closure and Gender Norms

The primary episode briefly inverts conventional gender expectations, a woman pursuing a younger partner, participating in a shared-room encounter. However, the story's closing moral fully restores conventional norms.

> *“Bojangan untuk para cewek-cewek lah di luar sana... jaga kehormatan kita sebagai wanita.” (Bincang Ranjang, 00:48:14-00:49:56) - Closing moral advice directed specifically at women, warning them to guard their honor and be careful in social settings.*

Viewers, specifically women, are warned to guard their honor, to be careful about health risks and pregnancy, and are advised to seek financially stable partners rather than pursue desire for its own sake. In Barthes' terms, this is the moment the myth completes its function: transgression is voiced and experienced, then neutralized back into familiar, patriarchal logic before the episode ends.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that Bincang Ranjang does not erase the boundary between taboo and acceptable content, it builds a sign system that allows both to coexist. Through euphemism, verbal purification rituals, visual-verbal contradiction, and conventional moral closure, the show actively produces a new way of talking about taboo topics in Indonesian pop culture, rather than simply representing them.

Future research could expand this analysis to a larger sample of Bincang Ranjang episodes to test whether these sign patterns hold consistently across the show's full catalog.

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