The Female Gaze and the Negotiation of Masculinity in Indonesian Visual Culture: A Historical Reading of Brisk Advertisements (1976-1984)

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Abstract
This research examines the representation of the female gaze in Indonesian visual culture in print advertisements circulating during the New Order era. This research analyses how female figures look at male bodies in a series of Brisk Hair Cream advertisements from 1976-1984. The analysis combines Rose's three sites of visuality with Malabou's concept of plasticity. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with advertising viewers to reveal interpretations of these representations. The research found that, even though the advertising visuals display a different configuration from conventional representation patterns, viewers' interpretations are still shaped by the dominant male gaze framework. These findings show that visual dynamics in authoritarian contexts do not only take the form of direct resistance, but also of subtle plastic adaptation and negotiation. The representation of the female gaze in the Brisk advertisement does not necessarily constitute a radical reversal of patriarchal visual hierarchies. Instead, the female gaze operates as a form of visual agency negotiated within the ideological constraints of New Order gender politics and within the logic of a capitalist visual economy. This study offers an analytical perspective on how visual practices can become a space for negotiation between state ideology, market logic, and the possibility of gender agency in visual culture. By situating advertising as a site of visual-cultural production rather than merely commercial communication, this study contributes to discussions of gender, visual culture, and media history in Indonesia.

Key words: *Female Gaze; Visual Culture; Plasticity; New Order; Indonesian Advertising.*

Introduction

In contemporary visual culture studies, the act of seeing can no longer be understood as a neutral biological perception. Seeing is now a cultural practice shaped by customs, conventions, and systems of meaning within society. The way

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of seeing depends on what a culture knows, believes, and normalises (Berger in Rosenberg, 2023; Smelik, 2016). Therefore, seeing is not merely a biological issue, but rather a relationship between images, subjects, and the dynamics of power that frame the visual experience. In modern visual culture, seeing has intensified into gazing, which encompasses historically and politically institutionalised ways of seeing, and is closely related to everyday consumption practices (Mirzoeff, 1999). The media function as a cultural mechanism that determines who is allowed to see, who is worthy of being seen, and how audiences ultimately interpret this relationship.

As a popular visual cultural product, advertising is one of the most repetitive and widespread institutions in everyday life. Advertisements play an important role in shaping perspectives through repeated images, body movements, visual compositions, and seemingly ordinary narratives. In Indonesia in particular, this visual repetition extends far beyond commercial persuasion. Visual repetition works ideologically to shape meaning at the audience's affective and cognitive levels. Advertising also reflected strict regulation of women's bodies and their visibility during the New Order era. The Ministry of Information's strict censorship of images of women at that time shows that the body was the main site of state discipline. Such practices constructed 'what can be seen' and produced a mentality that has been culturally inherited to this day. This repetition, once again, is not merely commercial in nature, but functions as an 'ideological apparatus' that disciplines bodies and desires (Althusser, 2014).

Advertising can also be seen as a cultural event that visually produces and negotiates social relations, particularly those related to gender. Recurrent representations of the body, the positions of viewing and viewed subjects, and the direction of the gaze play a crucial role in shaping understandings of masculinity, femininity, and the power relations that accompany them. These processes align with Mulvey's fundamental critique of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975; Smelik, 2016; Gong & Liu, 2026). Mulvey reveals how the visual structure of the media systematically positions women as objects to be viewed by men, or in other words, as subordinate to men. Although this concept remains important for reading gender relations in visual representations, it has inevitably sparked debate about the potential for an 'alternative gaze', that is, a gaze that refuses to fully submit to this logic of oppression.

Studies on gender in advertising have been conducted extensively, but most are still based on Mulvey's classic critique. Mulvey revealed that screen culture systematically frames women solely as objects of the male gaze. These studies successfully map the visual and linguistic mechanisms that maintain certain power structures in advertising visuals. In the Indonesian context, Heryanto's (2015) work on screen culture politics during the New Order era shows how visual pleasure and gender identity are subtly produced through seemingly natural representations in popular media, even as they operate under the symbolic control of the state. Similarly, Suryakusuma (1996), through the concept of state ibuism, describes how New Order ideology strictly positioned women as pillars of family and state

stability, a role that was essentially a 'mandate' enforced even in the symbolic and visual realm of public space. Despite numerous studies on visuality, gender, and state ideology, analyses that specifically focus on the female gaze in New Order advertisements are still very limited. Most studies tend to position women as visual objects or mere complements to masculine narratives. For example, Dwiatmaja & Perbawani (2021) focused on male endorsers in women's cosmetics and their influence on audience attitudes. Similarly, Riskiy & Hapsari (2022) examined the construction of masculinity in visual advertisements from a male perspective. Research centred on women remains rare, with one exception: Putera et al. (2023), which examines the visual image and perceptions formed by women as the main characters in advertisements.

The limitations of existing studies reveal a significant gap in understanding how the female gaze operates as a practice of negotiating meaning within established ideological and visual boundaries. Existing literature tends to view women's representations as merely subordinated, with little consideration of more complex practices of negotiating meaning. Malabou's (2008) concept of plasticity offers a useful perspective on how visual forms can adapt and change through a gradual process of negotiating meaning. The Brisk hair cream advertisements that circulated in Indonesia between 1976 and 1984 demonstrate an interesting anomaly in visual cultural practices. These advertisements appeared in Intisari, Tempo, and HAI magazines. The visuals consistently position the male figure as the visual centre, the focus of attention, and the narrative protagonist. Meanwhile, the female figure in the background is directed to actively gaze at and evaluate the male body. This representation is repeated amidst a socio-political backdrop dominated by the masculine gender ideology of the New Order.

The New Order was rife with symbolic control over women's bodies and their roles in public space. This condition makes the presence of the female gaze in these advertisements impossible to reduce to a reversal of the structure of the male gaze, or to a direct reproduction of the dominant male gaze. Rather, amidst authoritarian ideologies and visual economies that strongly normalise certain brands of masculinity, the female gaze emerges and operates in an ambivalent space. Women emerge as observing subjects while remaining within the confines of controlled representation. This paradoxical condition raises fundamental questions about how the female gaze functions as a cultural practice, negotiated historically and ideologically in New Order advertising.

To uncover the complexity of the female gaze, this study analyses how it functions as a negotiated visual practice within advertising visual culture during the New Order era. The study adopts a qualitative approach, employing Rose's (2022) Three Sites of Visuality framework: Production Site, Image Site, and Audience Site. This framework is combined with Malabou's (2008) concept of Plasticity of Meaning. This integration aims to understand how visual meaning can be shaped, transformed, and negotiated within the constraints of certain ideologies. Through this approach, this study attempts to answer the following main questions: How can the female gaze in Brisk advertisements be understood not as a radical

reversal of the patriarchal visual hierarchy, but rather as a plastic visual practice? How was the female gaze able to adapt and negotiate within the ideological constraints of the visual economy during the New Order era?

The Genealogy of the Gaze and Gender Representation

The concept of the gaze did not arise in a vacuum, but from a long history of thinking about the relationship between visuality and power. Long before the digital age, Berger (in Hart, 2025; Smelik, 2016) asserted that "the way of seeing" is always tied to power relations. Foucault (2020) later developed this concept, showing how the practice of seeing often operates as a mechanism of social discipline in modern power regimes. Building on this framework, Mulvey laid a foundational critical basis through her male gaze theory (Buckland, 2025). Through a psychoanalytic perspective, Mulvey examined how cinema and mass media systematically construct 'visual pleasure' through the female body to fulfil patriarchal desires. In this paradigm, women are positioned as passive objects or subordinate to men. Mulvey's binary logic seems to ignore the agency of the female subject. Doane (1982) and Kaplan (1983) criticised the neglect of female spectator agency in Mulvey's analysis.

Furthermore, in recent studies of visual culture, the concept of the female gaze has gradually entered academic discourse as a new ontological proposition. The female gaze can function as a much more subtle, layered, and interconnected space for negotiation. This aligns with Hall's (1997) reception theory, which argues that subjects never accept dominant ideologies without filtering them. Meaning is always negotiated through social context and cultural experience.

Several recent studies show that women can use the gaze as an evaluative instrument for the visual representations they encounter (Chen & Gong, 2023), as well as a form of visual expression that negotiates gender norms in popular culture (Caldeira & Machado, 2023). When linked to feminist studies, the practice of gazing can have important political dimensions. bell hooks (1992) introduced the concept of oppositional gaze to explain how marginalised groups use the gaze as a form of resistance against dominant representations. This perspective then developed into a broader discourse on gender performativity. In this view, gender identity is not essential, but formed through repeated social practices. In this context, visual practices can become an arena where gender identity is negotiated and questioned (Butler in Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018).

Visual Economy and New Order State Capitalism

Among the visual regimes in Indonesia, the New Order was a markedly masculine era. It was not merely a period of political rule dominated by the state apparatus. The New Order was also a regime of bodily discipline that operated through massive visual control. In line with Foucault's (2020) argument that power permeates subtly through cultural institutions, this practice is consistent with the canonical study of media politics by Sen & Hill (in Adiprasetio, 2025). The regime actively transformed television screens into an apparatus for standardising national culture (Gitlin, 2017; Kitley, 2000). This practice of visual surveillance was further

reinforced by Barker's (in Bateson, 2021) findings regarding the territory of fear and obedience deliberately maintained by state officials. As a result, the authorities left almost no room for autonomous visual representation for their citizens. This is in line with Strassler's (in Spiegel, 2020) reading, which shows that Indonesian visual culture at that time was forcibly constructed from the top down.

In the realm of gender, this visual control operates through a specific ideology. The state positions women's domestication as a pillar of national stability, while simultaneously depriving them of political agency. Riyani (2021) historically demonstrates how repressive state authority interweaves with religious narratives and patriarchal structures to subjugate women's autonomy and sexuality. These repressive practices extend beyond public policy to the formation of patriarchal culture (Budianta, 2003). Brenner's (1999) empirical study of popular print media convincingly demonstrates the depth of this repressive representation. Brenner found that images of women in the public sphere were strictly monitored to ensure they do not deviate from the narrative of the obedient mother (Oktaviani et al., 2021). A similar analysis by Heryanto (2015) confirms this finding.

Advertising was expected to operate as an extension of the state's moral authority. This situation created structural tension within the advertising industry. Capitalism always requires desire to propel consumption. These commercial demands forced a structural compromise (Pigmaier, 2020). While the state demanded that women lower their gaze, advertising's commercial logic was forced to temporarily revise this rule. A recent study by Eisend (2019) confirms that the visual composition of advertisements essentially always functions as an arena for highly fluid gender negotiations. Women were given a small space to gaze at men's bodies in order to trigger purchasing power. The visual composition of gender in advertisements always reflects this kind of power struggle (Goffman in van Dijk, 2008). This ambivalent shift is very much in line with local discourse on the eternal dilemma of women in the media (Platt et al., 2018; Setyaningrum et al., 2022). They are caught between the desire for bodily autonomy and the vortex of commodification. This dissonance between state moral repression and commercial pressures creates a space of visual negotiation (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

The visual economy of the New Order was thus not only a space for commercial products but also a crucial field of ideological contestation. Advertising became a site where multiple interests converged and interacted: state ideology, market logic, and cultural practices. Advertising's visual compositions expose the tension between social norms and the demands of commerce, allowing for more ambiguous representations.

The Plasticity of Meaning and the Negotiation of Three Visual Sites

Making sense of the dynamics and complexity of the female gaze in Brisk advertisements, and of how visual meaning is produced and interpreted, requires an appropriate analytical approach. Rose (2022) formulated a methodological framework through three main visual sites, consisting of the production site, the image site, and the audience site. This approach emphasizes that visual meaning is

not only determined by the visual creator, but is also influenced by the conditions of production and the way viewers interpret it.

From this perspective, state institutions do not fully control the practice of gazing. Catherine Malabou (2008) offers an ontology of plasticity as a dual capacity to both receive and destroy form. This concept helps explain how visual meaning is not only received by the audience but can also be transformed through interpretation. Plasticity in the context of gender can help explain how women interact with visual representations, which are often shaped by patriarchal structures. Audiences can reinterpret and negotiate meaning rather than passively accept it. This is consistent with hooks's (1992) notion of the gaze as a form of resistance and Butler's (2015) notion of gender identity as always open to renegotiation. Gong and Liu (2026) also note that the female gaze is not just a passive flip of the male gaze. It is a way for women to consciously challenge masculine representations and to claim their own subjectivity.

From Seeing to Gazing: Advertising as a Repetitive Visual Apparatus

Visual repetition can naturally shape the habit of "certain ways of seeing." Seeing is a learned and normalised cultural practice, no longer simply a neutral biological activity. According to Berger (2022), ways of seeing are always shaped by historical experiences, visual habits, and cultural values that are continually reproduced. Within this framework, advertising can be understood not only as a promotional medium, but as a visual practice that helps shape relations of seeing. This means that the direction of the gaze in the advertisement is not simply a matter of image composition, but rather part of the cultural mechanism that determines who is positioned as the viewing subject and who becomes the object of the gaze.

The Brisk advertisement cannot be understood simply as an individual representation of the male body. The Brisk advertisement should also be understood as part of a broader visual system, which works through the repetition of images and the habituation of certain ways of seeing.

Image Site: Visual Composition and Gaze Direction in Brisk Advertisements

The male figure in advertisements is always placed at the centre of the visual, appearing in the foreground with sharp focus. The image of a man with neat, shiny hair, formal attire, and controlled body movements in public spaces is intended as a symbol of modern masculinity. Slogans such as "Pria Brisk, gaya wajar masa kini" (Brisk men, today's natural style) or "Hanya tampan Brisk yang menarik perhatian" (Only handsome Brisk attracts attention) reinforce the association between body care and the social identity of modern men. Female figures, by contrast, are consistently placed in the background. Interestingly, even though they are spatially behind, the women's gaze in these four advertisements is consistently directed at the male figures. The women consistently stare at the men's bodies, especially their heads and hair. This pattern can be seen in the four advertisements shown in Figure 1.



(1) (2) (3) (4)

Figure 1. (1) Brisk Ads 1976 (2) Brisk Ads 1978 (3) Brisk Ads 1982 (4) Brisk Ads 1984

Source: (1) Intisari October 1976 (2) Intisari August 1978 (3) Tempo 1982 (4) HAI 1984

Using Barthes' semiotic framework, the woman's gaze can be read as a symbolic signifier that links the man's body with meanings of attractiveness, social desirability, and modern masculinity. Interestingly, however, the male figure never returns the woman's gaze. This gesture creates an impression of independence while also emphasising men's position as figures oriented towards the public sphere. In this visual structure, women are not entirely objects of the gaze; rather, they function as figures who symbolically affirm the values of masculinity represented by men.

Mulvey's conception of the male gaze assumes that the visual structure of media often places women as objects viewed by male subjects. Based on Hall's framework of representation, the meaning of masculinity in advertisements such as these does not appear naturally. Rather, a system of signs produces it by linking visual imagery, advertising language, and broader cultural values.

The male body in the Brisk advertisements is not a biological body, but a symbol of social identity expected in Indonesian popular culture. The position of women in the advertisement does not entirely subvert the dominant structure of gender relations. Although women are present as figures who look at and observe the male body, the function of this gaze is still directed at affirming masculinity. The female gaze does not solely function as a form of visual liberation or a reversal of the male gaze. Rather, it is a symbolic mechanism that continues to operate within a broader representational framework.

Production Site: The New Order as a Regime of Visual Normalisation

Advertising also functioned as a mechanism of the state's visual cultural regime during this period. The New Order regime actively normalised values, shaped identities, and disciplined society's perspectives on public space. New Order screen culture operated through visual pleasures packaged as natural, safe, and conflict-free, while beneath it remained a highly restrictive apparatus of symbolic control (Heryanto, 2015). Women's representation was also constrained by the state's gender ideology known as State Ibuism (Suryakusuma, 1996). This doctrine limited women's political position by viewing them solely as instruments supporting family and state stability. The state systematically relegated women to the domestic sphere and excluded them from the public arena (Swastika, 2023). Women's bodies were consistently treated as a political threat to be viewed with suspicion, including through the purge of progressive artists and the erasure of women's historical records (Kurniawan & Aris, 2021).

These mechanisms took the form of rules on visual imagery that determined when women could appear, how they were viewed, and the direction of viewing. The presence of women in print advertising was always under the shadow of this symbolic surveillance. To avoid the regime's ideological wrath, all forms of women's visibility had to be carefully negotiated.

This study interprets the Brisk advertisements as a visual cultural practice that straddles compliance and negotiation. From the perspective of ideology theory, this kind of media representation can be understood as part of the Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 2014). This apparatus shapes public consciousness not through threats, but through the repetition of compelling images and the gradual inculcation of certain ways of seeing.

Audience Site: Tension Between Interpretation and Plasticity of Meaning

Analysis of the audience site reveals an interesting dynamic between the analytical reading of this study and the visual memories of the informants. Interviews with three informants show that all three tend to understand the Brisk advertisement as a representation that fully follows the male gaze pattern. These informants believe that the placement of women in the background is a form of gender subordination. Blurred focus and women's unreturned gazes at male figures also reinforce all three interpretations.

This reading is likely influenced by patriarchal visual conventions that have long shaped the way society understands gender relations in the media. Visual elements such as front and back, centre and periphery, and focus and blur are spontaneously associated with a visual hierarchy that places masculinity at the centre of attention. Interestingly, this difference in interpretation suggests that visual meaning is never completely stable. Meaning is always shaped by historical experiences and viewing habits that develop within a culture.

In a broader visual cultural perspective, visual images can be understood as a cultural arena where values and ideologies are contested (Gadamer in Sugiharto, 2019). Therefore, the difference in interpretation between research analysis and audience memory actually confirms that the meaning of images is always open to various possible readings.

The Female Gaze as a Practice of Plastic Negotiation

Based on an analysis of the three sites, the female gaze in Brisk advertisements cannot be considered a form of radical resistance. The female gaze is forced to work silently through narrow negotiations, trying to survive the pressure of authoritarian gender ideology and the market economy. This gap merely allows women to breathe as subjects who gaze, without ever being given full power to dictate the meaning of their own gaze. This kind of visual manoeuvre finds its most appropriate explanation through Malabou's ontological concept of plasticity, which describes a form that is not completely fluid, easily evaporating and disappearing,

yet not completely rigid and easily broken by external pressures either. Plasticity is the capacity of a form to accept extraordinary repressive pressure, adapt, and quietly produce new meanings without having to destroy the main structure that imprisons it. The female gaze in the Brisk advertisement operates with a high degree of plasticity. It appears without undermining the New Order's visual construction yet refuses to surrender to it or accept it as a passive reproduction.

This plastic dynamic of the 1970s and 1980s provides a crucial historical foundation for current studies. Recent studies show that female audiences' visual resistance often does not take the form of a radical reversal of hierarchies (Bai et al., 2025; McGill, 2023). Instead, it operates through subtle, compromised, and deliberate negotiations of norms that are constantly negotiated under hegemonic power. This phenomenon of symbolic negotiation is reminiscent of the Javanese philosophy of "menang tanpo ngasorake" (winning without humiliating) advocated by R.M. Pandji Sosrokartono.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Although women are always spatially marginalised in visual composition, the direction of their gaze and their narrative function indicate an important shift. The Brisk ad series positions women not only as visual objects, but also as subjects who gaze at and evaluate male figures. The female gaze in the context of Brisk ads operates within a space of negotiation that is limited by the New Order's gender ideology and the visual economic logic of the advertising industry.

The research found interpretive tensions between the researcher's analytical reading and the informants' visual memories. This suggests that the meaning of images in advertisements is never completely final. Historical experiences and evolving viewing habits within a society can influence visual interpretation. Therefore, the female gaze in the Brisk advertisement can be understood as a limited yet significant form of visual agency. The female gaze does not necessarily challenge or undermine dominant representational structures; instead, it opens the possibility of alternative readings. Thus, these findings demonstrate the importance of understanding visual culture beyond the binary opposition between domination and resistance. Visual practices can also operate through more subtle and ambivalent processes of negotiation.

This research demonstrates that visual representations can adapt to ideological pressures and can even generate new meanings without completely destroying existing structures. This principle appears in the Javanese philosophy of "menang tanpo ngasorake" (winning without demeaning others), a form of symbolic negotiation without direct confrontation. This local perspective shows that the practice of negotiating meaning has long been present in Indonesian cultural traditions and can be read productively through the framework of plasticity developed by Malabou.

Future research could expand this study by comparing similar representations in different historical periods. Analysing other visual media, such as television or digital media, and exploring differences in interpretation between generations of audiences would be very helpful in understanding visual culture in Indonesian society. This approach will also help map how viewing practices and visual habits continue to evolve within the ever-changing dynamics of visual culture.

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