Exploring the Evolution of Female Identity: A Case Study of Karina in Mobile Legends

Danny Susanto*
Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia
Email: danny8332@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the portrayal of female characters in the popular mobile game, Mobile Legends, focusing on the character Karina, and its implications for gender representation in the gaming industry and broader societal contexts. Drawing from feminist theories and semiotics by Roland Barthes, the research examines how Karina's characterization challenges or reinforces patriarchal norms within gaming narratives. The analysis delves into the appeal of Karina for both male and female players, exploring how her portrayal embodies a blend of masculine strength and feminine charm. Through the lens of feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Spivak, the study evaluates whether Karina's depiction in Mobile Legends aligns with or counters traditional gender stereotypes, particularly regarding the perceived inferiority of women. Furthermore, the research examines the implications of Karina's characterization for players of different genders, considering how it reflects and potentially shapes broader societal attitudes towards gender roles and equality. Ultimately, the findings highlight the complex interplay between gender representation in gaming and societal perceptions, advocating for more inclusive and empowering portrayals of women in digital entertainment narratives.

KEYWORDS	*Female Identity, Genders, Mobile Legends*

Danny Susanto

INTRODUCTION

Online gaming has revolutionized the gaming landscape by providing interactive experiences over the internet. Unlike traditional offline games, online games offer additional features such as chat rooms, enhancing the gaming experience. In Indonesia, the popularity of online gaming has surged, with an increasing number of users engaging in action strategy games, particularly in the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) genre. Baruah (2012) defines online games as cyber-mediated environments where users interact through virtual avatars, spanning textual, two-dimensional, or three-dimensional forms. The term MOBA has gained traction among gaming enthusiasts, driven by the proliferation of smartphone-based games like Mobile Legends and Free Fire.

MOBA games pose significant challenges to players, requiring both individual skill and teamwork for success. These games represent a new medium in the technological landscape, influencing identity formation in society. The rise of new media platforms, fueled by internet connectivity, has facilitated seamless communication and connectivity. Gaming, alongside traditional media forms like film and television, plays a pivotal role in shaping societal constructs and perceptions.

As a prominent online game, Mobile Legends strives to maintain relevance by introducing captivating characters. Character design undergoes meticulous planning to resonate with diverse player preferences. Given Indonesia's robust online gaming market, characterized by a burgeoning player demographic, Mobile Legends strategically crafts characters to cater to user interests.

Indonesian society serves as a thriving market for online gaming commodities in Southeast Asia. Mobile Legends, in particular, has garnered widespread acclaim, dominating app downloads on platforms like Google Play. The pervasiveness of mobile games in Indonesia underscores their accessibility and appeal to a broad audience. Furthermore, online gaming, akin to film and television, influences societal constructions and perceptions, embedding ideologies subtly within its narratives.

The representation of women in gaming narratives often perpetuates stereotypes and commodifies female bodies. Women are portrayed predominantly in terms of beauty and physical appearance, reinforcing societal norms. This phenomenon underscores the need for critical analysis, combining semiotic frameworks with feminist perspectives to deconstruct representations of women in gaming.

In this context, the researcher seeks to investigate the representation of women, focusing on the character Natalia in Mobile Legends. Natalia, a favored hero among Assassin users, embodies various gameplay attributes, prompting player unease and strategic challenges. Additionally, the portrayal of Karina, another prominent character in Mobile Legends, warrants scrutiny, particularly regarding the commodification of women's bodies within gaming narratives.

The researcher posits two central research questions: Based on the conclusion provided, here are two potential research questions:

1. How does the portrayal of female characters, exemplified by Karina in Mobile Legends, challenge or reinforce patriarchal norms within the gaming industry?
2. What are the implications of Karina's characterization in Mobile Legends for players of different genders, and how does it reflect broader societal attitudes towards gender roles and equality?

Theories

In this research, Roland Barthes' semiotics theory is utilized. Barthes, a semiotician, expanded on Saussure's work in "Cours de linguistique générale" and explored the application of semiotics beyond linguistics. Initially introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure, the concept of semiotics revolves around the dichotomy of signs: signifier and signified. This concept posits that meaning arises from the relationship or absence thereof between the signifier and the signified. A sign constitutes a unit comprising a signifier with a concept or signified. Put simply, the signifier is the sound, writing, or image with meaning. Hence, the signifier represents the material aspect of language, encompassing what is spoken or heard and what is written or read.

Roland Barthes employed the signifier-signified theory and introduced the theory of connotation. The primary distinction lies in Barthes' emphasis on myths and specific cultural contexts. Barthes posited that all seemingly rational phenomena in society are the products of connotation processes. Another difference lies in the emphasis on contextualization in signification. Barthes used the term "expression," referring to the form, expression, for signifier, and "content," representing the textual content, for signified. Theoretically, language as a system is static; for example, a green table means a green table. This is referred to as language as a first-order sequence. However, language as a second-order sequence allows the phrase "green table" to carry the meaning of "experiment." This secondary layer is termed connotation. The signified refers to the signified, which then refers to the reference or reality. Zoest (1991) explains that "The arbiter signified refers to the reference field without limits. References can be concrete, abstract, or imaginary. References may exist, have existed, or may exist in the future." Based on the above quotation, it can be said that everything in the human mind can be a reference.

Based on Saussure's definition, Barthes argued that signification can be divided into denotation and connotation. Barthes states:

"La dénotation est le niveau premier du sens, celui de la description objective et littérale des choses. Elle renvoie à la signification directe d'un signe, à son sens immédiat et universellement reconnu. En revanche, la connotation est le niveau second du sens, celui de l'interprétation subjective et culturellement située. Elle renvoie à l'ensemble des associations d'idées, d'émotions, de valeurs qui

s'attachent à un signe, en fonction du contexte social, historique, et personnel dans lequel il est employé."(1964)

(The denotation is the primary level of meaning, that of the objective and literal description of things. It refers to the direct significance of a sign, to its immediate and universally recognized meaning. On the other hand, connotation is the secondary level of meaning, that of subjective and culturally situated interpretation. It refers to the set of associations of ideas, emotions, and values that are attached to a sign, depending on the social, historical, and personal context in which it is used)."

Additionally, Roland Barthes is also the creator of myths, essentially extending Saussure's ideas regarding the relationship between language and meaning or between the signifier and the signified. For Barthes, myths operate within the regional signs at the second level or at the level of language connotation. If Saussure stated that meaning is symbolized by a sign, Barthes added this definition to meaning at the connotation level. Myths are meanings at the connotative level, where connotations have been naturalized, accepted as normal and natural, acting as a conceptual map of meaning used to understand the world. Barth. In Le mythe aujourd'hui(1957) (Myth Today), he expressed resentment towards the frequent confusion of Nature and History in the contemporary narrative, and expressed a desire to investigate the underlying ideological manipulation within the conventional portrayal of these concepts.

Since the character Karina under study is a woman, this research also employs feminist theory. Mass media constructions of women portray that in social life, the relationship between women and men positions women in a subordinate role, always defeated and viewed as fulfilling men's desires and complementing the male world. This phenomenon is implicit in research findings on mass media advertisements conducted by Burhan Bungin (2008) which states that "what women do in the media is only to please humans, especially men, while she herself is part of the effort to please rather than enjoying her own pleasure, she is only happy when others are happy". So far, many media outlets including the internet exploit women as objects, which in turn breeds a society full of violence against women.

The feminist theory employed is from Gayatri Spivak, who states that initially, feminism was a French term and spread in Europe, the United States, and their colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries. Initially, this term was intended to denote a women's movement seeking to advance women's positions. This movement then grew larger and was not even confined by space and time. Spivak uses "subaltern" taken from the early Marxist era, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). In his book, "The Prison Notebooks," which contains complaints during Mussolini's fascist rule in Italy, Spivak explains the paradox, which is often misunderstood by many. Spivak understands women's position as members of the subaltern group. She argues that in post-colonial feminist discourse, as a subaltern group, third-world women have disappeared because we have never heard them talk about it. The main problem with the subaltern is not only about categories of

oppressed people or oppressed working classes, but also about anyone whose voice is restricted by access representing them. They do not have the freedom to speak; they can be seen as Subaltern Spivak wants to state that women's position as inferior will not find space in social life. Women as a subaltern group must be given opportunities and voices. Spivak's desire is to choose subaltern women in history. In this regard, Spivak understands that her desire to choose the subaltern in history is shaped by ideological formation.

Spivak proposes a theory of subalternity in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1992) In this essay, she highlights the limitations of subalterns, questioning "Can the Subaltern Speak?". By "subaltern," Spivak means the oppressed subjects or more generally those "of inferior rank. She further adds that Within the framework of colonial production, the marginalized individual lacks a recorded history and a voice; moreover, when considering the marginalized individual as female, their oppression is further obscured.. Spivak concludes the essay by reiterating her standpoint that the subaltern actually cannot speak. Her statement has ignited controversy in the post-colonial context. Spivak's statement is actually a one-stop answer for all the questions. It is an outcome of her lifelong search for truth and is formulated based on socio-cultural backgrounds. The theory formulates that the subaltern can speak but others do not have the patience to listen to them. The message conveyed by the sender does not reach the receiver as it is hindered by the element of noise. Articulation is an involuntary act by human beings, but to interpret things in the real sense takes conscious effort on the part of the listeners. Morton clarifies the wide discrepancy between articulation and interpretation of subaltern women in the following words: Spivak's conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak is often misinterpreted to mean that subaltern women have no political agency because they cannot be represented. Such a reading is contrary to the very situated theoretical framework that Spivak establishes in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak certainly does not want to deny the social agency and lived existence of disempowered subaltern women. The crucial point, however, is that these disempowered women receive their political and discursive identities within historically determined systems of political and economic representation.

RESEARCH METHOD

Through a case study of Karina's character in the Mobile Legends game. Karina was chosen as the object of her research because of her prominent role and her potential to represent various aspects of women's identity in the context of video games. The research will identify and analyze the changes that have occurred to Karina's character in terms of character design, story narrative, and role in gameplay since it was first introduced until now. The research methods used include content analysis of various sources of information such as game updates, character guides, and player responses and interpretations to the evolution of these characters. This research aims to provide in-depth insights into how the representation of female

characters in video games may evolve over time and how this may affect gender perceptions within the player community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis

The following is an analysis of the character Karina:

Karina is depicted as a beautiful woman of Aryan race (white race), as seen from her fair skin color, sharp nose, thin lips, and tall, slender figure. Her long hair is light blue. Her eyes gaze sharply, and her mouth is closed. Her body is proportional, and her breasts are prominently displayed. She wears typical Knight attire, which appears to be made of iron and is dominated by purple color, accompanied by various accessories in purple, light blue, and silver. She also wears a pair of iron boots in purple and silver, with bright green decorations on them. In this depiction, she is drawing two swords, her weapons of choice, which are light blue in color. She is shown in a ready-to-fight stance within a circle of dark blue, indicating her preparedness for battle. The ground or floor where she stands is black, and the background is predominantly black with hints of dark blue and light blue.

The details of the image are denoted signs, according to Barthes, or what he calls the first-order signification. However, Barthes does not stop at the first-order signification but proceeds to the second level, or second-order signification, known as connotation.

The choice of Karina as a woman of Aryan descent, evident from her fair skin color and tall, typically Western female figure, suggests that the gender equality movement generally originates from Europe or North America. In fact, women from these regions are the most active in advocating for gender equality compared to women from other parts of the world. History shows the existence of the women's liberation movement, a collective struggle for equality that was most active during the late 1960s and 1970s. This movement sought to free women from male oppression and supremacy. The movement consisted of women's liberation groups, advocacy, protests, consciousness-raising, feminist theories, and various individual and group actions in the name of women and freedom.

Based on the desire to create gender equality, Karina is depicted with highly feminine physical characteristics, such as facial features, nose, and lips, even though her role in the game is that of a fighter. This reinforces the connotation about Western women's desire for equal rights and also shows that women can also do things typically done by men, such as fighting. Furthermore, her prominently displayed breasts affirm her femininity, distinguishing her from men, but indicating her desire to challenge male dominance by appearing as a warrior.

The contrast between the feminine and masculine sides is also evident in Karina's long, light blue hair, which matches the color of her sword. The long, soft blue hair accentuates femininity because long hair is a characteristic of women, as is the soft color used. The harmony between the hair color and the killer sword highlights both the aesthetic sense of a woman and her desire to be equal to men. Blue is the color of the sky and the sea, often associated with depth and stability. Blue is perceived as a symbol of trust, loyalty, wisdom, intelligence, faith, truth,

and heaven. In reality, color is one of the design elements widely used for aesthetics, function, and symbolic elements.

Color can be a sign. Each color has its own codification, distinguishing one color from another. At the concrete or concrete stage, we interpret color as well as color gradations in the light spectrum. This is elaborated in detail by MacLaury (Anthropology of Color: 4-5), who explains: "Perception is shaped by the knowledge and practicality of a culture, and cultural factors that influence the development of differences in vocabulary, including in color vocabulary. Color naming systems develop separately from color vision." The blue color of Karina's hair is associated with awareness and intelligence. Blue is a masculine color; according to research, it is highly accepted among men. Dark blue is associated with depth, expertise, and stability.

However, the light blue color used here is a soft, feminine blue. Additionally, her swords, which are of the same color, reinforce the contrast between the feminine and masculine sides of Karina. The two swords she wields, and the number two, which is the most feminine among all numbers and closely related to qualities such as softness, wisdom, diplomacy, forgiveness, and understanding. Thus, what is emphasized here is that even in a battle, women always want to appear beautiful, attractive, and fashionable, and there is pride and dignity in patiently facing their male enemies. Karina's beautiful eyes with a sharp gaze are a contrast between women who have a seductive gaze of the opposite sex, but also a sadistic gaze full of desire to kill, as an affirmation that women are not always weaker than men.

Her sensual and sexy mouth, tightly closed, indicates that with her charming appearance, she can also be firm like a man. The contradictory nature is also shown through the headpiece she wears, which is silver with blue accents. Silver is a strong color that can bring mental, physical, and emotional harmony. The meaning of silver color includes glamour, sophistication, and respectability. In addition, silver is used to describe things that are slim, masculine, and modern. Therefore, the masculine colors of blue and silver contrast with the feminine decorative function of the head accessory. The protruding ends pointing towards the sky symbolize optimism and courage, ideal characteristics constructed for men. The costume she wears is made of iron, a symbol of resilience, violence, toughness, and rigidity, typical characteristics of men.

However, the color of her costume is purple, which is formed from the stable blue with the energetic red. Purple is associated with royalty and is a symbol of power, glory, luxury, and ambition. Furthermore, purple is also associated with wisdom, dignity, independence, and creativity. This feminine color is combined with silver color, again showing the contrast between femininity and masculinity. In addition to these two colors, her costume is complemented by accessories in a soft light blue, a combination of masculine and feminine colors. Karina also wears a pair of boots in a combination of purple and silver, and there are bright green decorations on her knees. Originally, boots are synonymous with the military world, which is very synonymous with the male world.

The boots worn by Karina are a resistance to this norm, especially since the color of her boots is a contrasting combination of feminine (purple) and masculine (silver) colors. The green accessories covering her knees are the color of nature,

symbolizing harmony, balance, and peace, indicating that as a fighter, Karina can remain calm when facing her enemies. This calmness is her added value compared to her mostly male enemies. Furthermore, in this image, Karina stands within a circle of dark blue, which connotes protection, in accordance with the knightly spirit she possesses as a warrior. In reality, the circle is often symbolized by the sun or boundaries in curves symbolizing defense and protection, similar to the function of Karina's character.

The dark blue circle strengthens the impression of protection, which is generally considered the duty of men. Additionally, the floor or ground where Karina stands is black, a color representing strength, confidence, drama, mystery, classicism, and masculinity. The predominantly black background combined with dark and light blue hints at a strong masculine element, although there is still a feminine element present, portraying Karina as a woman who, by her nature as a woman, seeks not to be dominated by men, as befits her role as a warrior in this game.

Thus, from the connotation analysis, almost all signs indicate a struggle between the masculine and feminine sides of the character Karina, which gives rise to the myth of the conflict between the two genders, or more precisely, the desire of women to not only play the role of objects for the opposite sex. From a feminist perspective, women have indeed been constructed as objects, as stated by Simone de Beauvoir and also Spivak. According to a 2017 study, one in five people worldwide believes that women are inferior to men and should stay at home. Meanwhile, they believe that men are more capable of working and going to school, according to a global survey published Tuesday on International Women's Day.

Almost all of the 17,550 people surveyed agreed that men and women should have equal rights, but three out of four indicated that women continue to experience social, political, and financial inequality. "It's heartening that the majority of men and women worldwide believe in equal opportunities (...) but at the same time, the majority still believe that true equality has not been achieved," said Kully Kaur-Ballagan, director of Ipsos MORI, the survey's author. Half of the survey respondents, conducted in 24 countries including Brazil, Canada, Russia, Britain, India, and Sweden, declared themselves "feminists," but a quarter said they were "scary" defending women's rights. About half of those surveyed in China, Russia, and India said that men are superior to women and better at making money and getting an education, according to the survey. UN Women has described the global wage gap of 24 percent as the "largest theft" from women, while the World Economic Forum said in its 2016 wage gap index that men and women would not achieve economic equality for 170 years. Through the character Karina, the aim is to deconstruct these myths and place women in a respected position, able to act as subjects like men.

The injustices experienced by women have prompted the application developers to use the character Karina to counter the myths that women are considered second-class (Simone de Beauvoir) and that women are Subaltern. In fact, this character is highly liked and even the most preferred in this mobile legend game. She is positioned as a great fighter who is sadistic and kills many people, most of whom are men and are difficult to defeat. Karina, who is included in the hybrid Mage/Assassin category, is strong in her first skill, which makes her immune to basic attacks and increases her movement speed for three seconds.

This skill allows her to effectively kill enemies without fear of running out of blood. Additionally, her powerful combination of skills is reinforced by the cooldown reduction effect if she can kill enemies or get assists. Therefore, in the late game, Karina is difficult to defeat even by the enemy team, even when fighting alone. Furthermore, Karina has a very powerful passive skill when she is in the battlefield. After attacking the target twice in succession, the third attack will deal true damage to the target equal to 10% of the enemy's missing health. Karina also has the active skill Elusiveness, which makes her disappear for 3 seconds and immune to basic attacks, as well as increasing movement speed by 35%. In this state, the next basic attack will slow down the opponent while also becoming an extra 165/175/185/195/205/215 magic damage crit attack.

Getting a kill or assist will reduce the cooldown by 60%. So, you will be faster to use skills in the next battle. Karina is also armed with the active skill Dance of Death; swinging her twin swords and dealing 260/280/300/320/340/360 points of magic damage to enemies around her. Getting a kill or assist will reduce the cooldown of the skill by 60%. Karina is one of the charge/reap heroes with very strong magic damage. By using the ultimate skill called Shadow Rush, this hero quickly runs towards the target, dealing 430/530/630 magic damage. Killing enemy heroes will end the cooldown of this skill, while getting assists will reduce the cooldown time by 80%. Continuously pursue the next enemy target.

Based on the explanations above, the designation of women as subaltern proposed by Spivak and as the second sex by Simone de Beauvoir seeks to be eliminated through the character Karina. However, on the other hand, the feminine side as an object is still maintained through appearance, accessories, and even her primary weapon. Thus, on one hand, the myth that women can only do things that are constructed for them is being broken through the signs displayed.

However, the existing myth that women can succeed because of their attractiveness remains. The application developers' efforts to attract users from both genders have succeeded. On one hand, male users find Karina's feminine side attractive and satisfying. On the other hand, female users who thirst for recognition of equality can also identify themselves with the character Karina, who represents women's resistance to male domination. From a social cognitive perspective, as a result of the construction of a patriarchal society that positions men as subjects and women as objects, women are always in a suppressed and powerless position in the face of the "fate" that befalls them.

CONCLUSION

In patriarchal societies around the world, women have always been considered inferior to men. Even in the 21st century, this perception persists, resulting in women still not achieving equality. Mobile Legends, a popular mobile game, chose the character Karina to be featured as one of the game's characters in the hope of attracting as many players as possible. Through myths created and perpetuated, app developers aim to attract users of both genders. For male players, Karina is interesting because she is a strong character equipped with various skills that allow her to defeat her enemies. On the other hand, Karina still offers the typical charm and sensuality of women, which is appreciated by men. For female players,

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Karina is not only relied on because of her fighting power, but also a forum for women to identify with women who break male dominance. The feminist claim of Simone de Beauvoir and Spivak that women are always positioned below men is not fully proven in this game.

Women, whom they claim to be the second or subaltern sex, are not seen as such, as Karina emerges as dominant and is capable of outpowering men. Nevertheless, the stereotype of women as objects of sensuality remains clear. The gaming industry, which is profit-oriented, undoubtedly aims to make its products successful and sell well. The app's developers have managed to lure players of both genders through the myths presented and broken. In essence, the conclusion of this study is that in Karina's character, Mobile Legends shows signs that women should not be placed as subalterns. Karina's character is able to represent women, showing that women are strong and capable of fighting and are also capable of intelligent thinking, even in war. If we look at our country, Indonesia, in the real world, we can also see that women should not be underestimated as subaltern. This can be proven by the number of female heroes who died on the battlefield, such as Tjoet Nyak Dien and others.

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