



Construction of Women's Beauty in Newspaper Advertisements in Batak Land, North Sumatra, 1940–1945

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ABSTRACT

This research examines newspapers in North Sumatra that published beauty advertisements, catering to the aesthetic needs of individuals, especially women seeking self-care and beauty enhancement. The study aims to track the development in types and content of cosmetics advertisements and the advertising stages during the period from 1940 to 1945. Employing semiotics and discourse analysis, this research integrates data collection through interviews and analysis techniques to explore advertisements on women's beauty in mass media published in the Batak region of North Sumatra from 1940 to 1945. Advertisements in these media often depict European women, reflecting an ideology that positioned Europeans as inherently superior to natives. Through visual and narrative strategies, cosmetics advertisements propagated a concept of Western beauty to the indigenous population of the archipelago. This article discusses beauty concepts, such as the allure of a slim physique, a prominent nose, and curly hair, as conveyed by pre-independence media advertisements.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted 16/07/2024
Revised 04/11/2024
Accepted 12/11/2024
Published 06/12/2024

KEYWORDS

Beauty standard; cosmetics advertisements; North Sumatra; semiotics; discourse analysis; colonial ideology.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34007/warisan.v5i2.2296>

INTRODUCTION

The term "press" has two primary meanings: one broad and one narrow. In a general sense, the press refers to mass communication media—such as radio, newspapers, film, and magazines—designed to convey or disseminate information, news, concepts, or thoughts from individuals or groups to the public. Among the elements of the press, newspapers stand out. The first newspapers were published in Europe during the 17th century (Utari, [2023](#)).

Recognizing the essential role of newspapers in disseminating information to the public, this responsibility closely involves journalists who gather, cover, and write the news ultimately delivered to readers (Azhari, Sidiq, & Sari, [2022](#)). Overall, newspaper development has experienced fluctuations due to factors such as difficulties in sourcing news, as well as the complexities and conveniences associated with advertising (Siregar, [2019](#)). In those early days, newspapers needed only to print a few sheets of paper to produce an edition; some, like *Waspada* in 1948, managed with just two sheets per issue (Rumah Sejarah Medan) (Said, [1976](#)).

In the period from 1940 to 1945, newspapers were widespread and offered captivating stories or the latest information. During Indonesia's pre-independence era, the printed press held a vital role in society (Eriyanto, [2002](#)). One of the mainstays of newspaper content was advertising, which served as an invitation and enticement for consumers to purchase the advertised products. In Batak land, advertisements often introduced new models or expressions that resonated within urban life (Adam, [2003](#)).

Advertising practices reflect how advertising and marketing goals are constructed. This underscores how groups of product marketers convey and socialize a product's value through advertising, projecting it into the market environment via newspapers (Wolf, [2009](#)). Consequently, in North Sumatra's Batak land, advertising became a crucial element in the product marketing strategies of the 20th century. Advertisements spread widely across Batak newspapers, often inviting consumers to purchase various products such as shampoo, soap, toothpaste, perfume, and powder, catering to essential human needs (Treacy & Wiersema, [1995](#)).



Moreover, newspapers played a significant role as a promotional medium for products sought by the community. Items showcased in these ads frequently met basic human needs, appealing especially to women who aspired to look attractive and charming through the products advertised (Stokes, [2006](#)). Newspaper publications frequently informed readers of promotions encouraging the purchase of goods highlighted in the ads. Between 1940 and 1945, newspaper advertisements in Batak land evolved significantly, crafted to emphasize the human aspect and individuality, especially among women.

Women in these ads symbolized a constant flow of excitement, desire, and pleasure directed at popular cultural products, often presented in an exploitative manner. Advertisements of various products consistently featured women not as subjects but rather as objects, essentially signifying allure. The portrayal of beauty in these ads often implied limited autonomy for women, reducing their options and control. Representations of women in newspaper ads were reductive and stereotypical (Wolf, [2009](#)). In beauty-focused ads, the diversity of women's faces was often constrained, reinforcing a narrow view that conditioned women to see their options as restricted.

In the cosmetics advertisements published in Batak land, North Sumatra, beauty was often portrayed as following current trends, encouraging consumers to embrace cosmetics products to attain attractiveness. If consumers resisted the featured cosmetics products, their appearance risked being seen as outdated. Publications like *Soera Batak*, *Soera Tapanuli*, *Bintang Oemoem*, and *Pertjatoeran* often portrayed women in enticing ways, using models displaying their attractiveness and valuable physical features. These representations aimed to capture attention and prompt purchases.

Research on the construction of female beauty in Batak land's newspaper advertisements remains limited. This study aims to explore various cosmetics advertisements circulating in North Sumatra's Batak region between 1940 and 1945. Thus, this research introduces: 1) the development of newspapers in Batak land, North Sumatra; 2) the types of cosmetics advertisements published in Batak land, North Sumatra; and 3) the evolution of cosmetics advertisement content in North Sumatra's newspapers.

METHOD

This research employs a historical method using both heuristic and semiotic approaches (Abdullah & Surjomiharjo, [2016](#)). The heuristic approach serves as a guide for researchers to locate sources, collect data, analyze, and present a clear depiction of the research topic through the interpretation of collected sources (Kuntowijoyo, [2013](#)). Additionally, this study incorporates a communicative semiotic approach, emphasizing the theory of sign production (A. A. Berger, [2010](#)).

This approach to communication semiotics is evident across various mass media platforms, including advertisements, newspapers, radio, and other tools of mass communication. The data sources for this research comprise both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include newspaper documents, particularly those published in Batak land, as well as North Sumatran newspapers featuring advertisements. Secondary sources consist of data from press history books, magazines, interviews, and newspapers containing advertisements. Data collection methods included literature review, wherein data was gathered from newspapers, processed, and analyzed. Furthermore, interviews and literature relevant to the research topic were conducted, as outlined in the following table:

Data analysis in this research proceeded through several stages. Initially, newspapers relevant to the research topic were gathered from the Medan Historical House collection. These data were then categorized into primary and secondary sources according to the research objectives. Following categorization, newspapers containing advertisements, along with magazines, interview records, and history books, were analyzed and documented. The next step involved constructing the data—connecting grouped data to interpret and discuss it meaningfully. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the analysis, producing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Table 1. Data Collection Techniques

Activities	How to	Results
Literature study	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reading, editing, analyzing newspapers that contain advertising data in the Batak land of North Sumatra. 2. Read, edit, analyze women's magazines and newspapers. 	Obtain, synthesize advertisement data from newspapers that match the research objectives.
1. Observation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Search for the name of a newspaper type. 2. Search for cosmetics products featured in advertisements. 	Obtain, find advertising data in newspapers related to cosmetics advertisements contained in newspapers published in North Sumatra in 1940-1945 in accordance with the research objectives.
2. Searching for data in the form of newspaper analysis of each type of newspaper in the Medan Historical House collection.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Search for the name of a newspaper type. 2. Search for cosmetics products found in newspaper advertisements, and outside cosmetics advertisements. 3. Record each edition of advertisements published in the newspaper. 4. Discourse on images of women in advertisements. 	
Field study interviews with:		
1. Dr. Edward Mckinnon (historical researcher)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowing the development of newspapers in 1940-1945 in the Batak land of North Sumatra. 2. Knowing the use of newspapers in 1940-1945 in the Batak land of North Sumatra. 3. Know the types of advertisements circulating in newspapers 	From the results of interviews from historians and users of cosmetics products, conclusions can be drawn in accordance with the researcher's objectives, namely the construction of female cosmetics in newspaper advertisements in the Batak land of North Sumatra 1940-1945.
2. Sakinah (cosmetics product user)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowing the types of advertisements used in 1940-1945 2. Knowing the usefulness of using cosmetics products 3. Knowing the types of products used in 1940-1945 by comparing advertisements in newspapers. 	

Source: Data processed by the researcher

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The development of the press in Sumatra commenced following the relocation of the printing center to Padang and the increasing influence of Dutch colonial power in the region. By the mid-19th century, several newspapers began emerging in Sumatra, such as *Deli Courant*, first published on March 18, 1885, and *Sumatra Courant* in 1859 in West Sumatra (Adam, 2003). In Aceh, the first newspaper, *Pemberita Aceh*, was published in 1906 in Kutaraja (now Banda Aceh), using the Malay language. Generally, the evolution of print media differed from that of magazines due to the latter's more complex production process, including book-like formats with illustrations. In contrast, newspapers of the time typically consisted of only a few sheets, such as *Waspada* in 1948, which contained just two pages per issue.

The rapid development of newspapers in Indonesia included North Sumatra, which has a rich press history. For instance, *Deli Courant* was the first newspaper in Medan, launched on March 18, 1885. Published by Jacques Dees in Dutch, it was issued twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, marking the end of East Sumatra's reliance on the Malay Peninsula press for news directed at both the local community and the Dutch East Indies government (Said, 1976). *Deli Courant's* first office was located on *Huttenbach Strast* (now Jalan Kebudayaan) in a modest 5x25 meter wooden building.

The first nationally recognized newspaper in North Sumatra was *Pewartar Deli*, established in 1910 with Dja Endar Moeda as its editor-in-chief. Published by the limited liability company *Naamlooze Vennootschap Boekhandel & Drukkerij "Sjarikat Tapanuli"*, it utilized a basic printing press acquired from Aceh. Subsequently, on February 1, 1912, the newspaper *Andalas*, funded by Chinese investors under N. V. *Sumatrasche Handelsdrukkerij*, was also published in Medan (Said, [1976](#)).

The primary role of mass media, especially newspapers, is to disseminate information to the public, a role fulfilled by journalists who gather, report, and write news for readers. In North Sumatra's Batak region, the press's establishment was heavily influenced by Dutch colonial forces. During this time, newspapers were created primarily to meet the community's commercial and informational needs, without much regard for nationalist concerns. Some newspapers of the period even included religious and ethnic content, reflecting specific local needs at the time.

Table 2. Types of Cosmetics Advertisements in North Sumatra Newspapers, 1940–1945

No.	Brand/Title	Number of Advertisements/Articles
1	Lux	25
2	Ponds	25
3	Coltage	20
4	Hazeline Snow	5
5	Kaloderma	8
6	Palmolive	9
7	Lifebuoy	25
8	Madam Blanche	12
9	Sweet May	5
10	Kaloderma	9
11	Pilot-Pen	10
12	Colibrita	15
13	Bar Soap	7
14	Purol Powder	17
15	Kemiri Har Olie	5
16	Palace	8

Source: Rumah Sejarah Medan

The data in table 2 illustrates those cosmetics advertisements, particularly for Lux soap, appeared most frequently in early 20th-century newspaper editions. Each issue featured a Lux soap advertisement, using a promotional appeal intended to attract consumers. While other cosmetics soap brands were also advertised, their limited frequency and space constrained the diversity of cosmetics products represented in newspapers (Aisyiyah, [2013](#)).

In an interview with a 105-year-old woman named Sakinah, who still has a vivid memory, researchers explored her use of cosmetics products during her youth. Sakinah recounted that as a teenager, she primarily used large bar soaps, similar in size to a modern-day brick, as a more affordable cosmetics product (Rahmadhani, [2013](#)). Soaps at the time had distinct scents, such as lemongrass, which was popular among young people. Premium products like Lux and Lifebuoy were prohibitively expensive, making them inaccessible to her. The portrayal of women's beauty in North Sumatra in the early 20th century significantly impacted women's aspirations toward attractiveness, influenced by the news and advertisements they encountered in newspapers (Kadarsih, [2010](#)).

Similarly, an interview with British historian Edward Mckinnon revealed that early 20th-century newspapers included a variety of advertisements, from cosmetics and household products to nightlife and home furnishings. Access to newspapers was limited to affluent individuals, including the wives of aristocrats, plantation owners, and members of the nobility. This exclusivity, owing to high newspaper prices, meant that the lower working class, such as laborers, neither had the means nor the time to engage with the content. Berger and Luckmann (1973) note in *The Social Structure of Reality: Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge* that common understandings of reality are rooted in present conditions, emphasizing the body's physical presence in particular locations (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, [1973](#)).

Newspaper advertisements function as media texts that permeate daily life. As Stokes (2006) points out, media texts are integral to modern society and often provoke social discourse, both within and outside of academia. The study of these texts enhances our understanding of cultural life (Stokes, [2006](#)). Newspapers' effectiveness as a medium of

expression facilitated the spread of idealized beauty concepts through cosmetics product advertisements. Social structure, shaped through organized society, influences groups of individuals, establishing a causal relationship that mirrors the construction of ideal beauty. In *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf (2002) explains why society continues to promote stereotypical images of female beauty, often disconnected from actual experiences (Wolf, 2009).

This study categorizes advertisements from North Sumatra newspapers, including cosmetics and non-cosmetics ads published across various editions. The research aims to analyze the content of these ads to understand their role in constructing beauty ideals, particularly for women. Research indicates that media, including newspapers, substantially influences body image standards. For instance, studies on body image show that 25% of Canadian women manage their weight in response to media images of beauty. Cosmetic surgery, a rapidly growing field, serves 87% female clients, promoting ideals of slimness, fair skin, straight hair, and youthfulness (Kadarsih, 2010). This social construction of beauty often aligns with racial hierarchies, with lighter-skinned groups holding superior social status, a perspective supported by racial classifications developed by Linnaeus in the colonial era (Hellwig, 2007).

Table 3. Overall Data on the Types of Advertisements Published in North Sumatra, 1940-1945

No.	Title	Category	Newspaper
1	Boekoe Ina Ina	Book	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
2	Belandja Roemah Tangga	Household Equipment	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
3	Toko Boekoe	Book	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
4	Boekoe Ina Ina	Book	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
5	Reclame	Poster	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
6	Khoen Yeap & Co	Shoes	<i>Oemoem</i>
7	Kie Hoei Seng	Glasses and Dental Products	<i>Bendera Kita</i>
8	Hazeline Snow	Powder	<i>Bendera Kita</i>
9	Palmolive	Soap	<i>Oemoem</i>
10	Lux	Soap	<i>Oemoem</i>
11	Pilot-Pen	Eyebrow Pencil	<i>Sinar Baroe</i>
12	Kemiri Har Olie	Hair Oil	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
13	Coltage	Cosmetics Soap	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
14	Balashin Sai Tjap Matjan	Medicine Tablets	<i>Sinar Baroe</i>
15	Lifebuoy	Soap	<i>Sinar Baroe</i>
16	Mas Imitasi	Gold	<i>Sinar Baroe</i>
17	Toko Tapanuli	Fabric	<i>Bendera Kita</i>
18	Yoek Chan	Photographer	<i>Oemoem</i>
19	Chronometer Olter	Watches	<i>Oemoem</i>
20	Anggoer Obat	Medicine Tablets	<i>Oemoem</i>
21	Optio	Eye Medicine	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
22	Ramboet Netjis	Hair Oil	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
23	Madam Blanche	Skin Embroidery	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
24	Sweet May	Soap	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
25	Kaloderma	Perfume	<i>Oetoesan Sumatera</i>
26	Kaloderma	Powder	<i>Oetoesan Sumatera</i>
27	Pendapotan Hotel	Hotel	<i>Oetoesan Sumatera</i>
28	Pasar Malam	Public Entertainment	<i>Andalas</i>
29	Pilot	Shipping/Post	<i>Andalas</i>
30	Planta	Margarine	<i>Andalas</i>
31	Balashin Tjap Matjan	Cough Medicine	<i>Bendera Kita</i>
32	Blue Band	Margarine	<i>Bendera Kita</i>
33	Influenza Poeders	Fever, Headache, and Sore Throat Medicine	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
34	Palace	Cosmetics Powder	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
35	Anggoer Obat	Blood and Appetite Booster Medicine	<i>Bintang Oemoem</i>
36	Derkos	Cigarettes	<i>Oemoem</i>
37	Poepoer Kaloderma	Perfume	<i>Oemoem</i>
38	Ketjap Benteng Lo Soe Fan	Soy Sauce	<i>Bintang Batak</i>
39	Saboen Tjap Batang	Bar Soap	<i>Bintang Batak</i>
40	Binta Form	Diarrhea Medicine, etc.	<i>Andalas</i>

No.	Title	Category	Newspaper
41	Prodent	Toothpaste	Andalas
42	Mas Imitatie and Prima Kwaliteit	Jewelry Store	Bintang Oemoem
43	Moon Apotheek	Eye Medicine	Bintang Oemoem
44	Harladji Tangan Merk Chronometer	Watch Store	Bintang Oemoem

(Source: Rumah Sejarah Medan)

This emphasis on cosmetic surgery has established an ideal beauty standard characterized by a slim figure, smooth white skin, straight black hair, and youthfulness. According to Kadarsih (2010), mass media—including newspapers—serves as a semiotic vehicle for conveying ideologies, particularly in cosmetics advertisements, which use symbolic systems to attract consumers to products perceived as high-quality (Kadarsih, 2010). Historically, the construction of beauty has been intricately linked to race and a hierarchy based on skin color, with white or light-skinned individuals typically occupying superior positions in society.

This perspective draws on scientific studies of race, such as those by Grayson and the classifications of Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778), who categorized Homo sapiens into four racial groups based on geographic regions and physical characteristics, including skin color. During the era of colonialism and slavery, Linnaeus' classification evolved to further the distinction between white-skinned Europeans as colonizers and darker-skinned individuals as the enslaved, associating dark skin with primitive and uncivilized characteristics (Hellwig, 2007).



Figure 1. Various Cosmetics Advertisements Featured in Newspapers from the Batak Region, North Sumatra
Source: *Oetoesan Sumatera* and *Oemoem* Newspapers

Analysis of cosmetics advertisements in Tanah Batak, North Sumatra, from 1940 to 1945 reveals parallels with advertisements across other regions in Indonesia. During this period, advertisements for cosmetics, medical, and household products became widespread. This phenomenon reflects a narrow construction of beauty, where a "beautiful" woman is typically depicted as slim, fair-skinned, with glossy black hair, and youthful. The symbolic system

in newspaper advertisements fosters an image of beauty that resonates with a broad audience. In today's information-driven society, the influence of mass media and popular culture has become even more pronounced, as these media outlets continue to shape social reality through advertisements, both directly and indirectly (Baay, [2010](#)).

The structure of the advertisement depicted above demonstrates the woman's concerns about her "unusual" appearance. Initially, her skin was normal, but over time, she began to notice signs of aging, including wrinkles, dark spots, and dullness (Pitts-Taylor, [2008](#)). Consequently, this product was marketed through Lux advertisements, targeting young women's fear of skin aging and physical changes. Lux soap products were meticulously packaged to entice consumers, aiming to reinforce the notion that a beautiful woman is one who takes "extra" measures to enhance her appearance. The advertisements convey the idea that beautiful women must be fair-skinned and youthful. This discourse attempts to shape an idealized vision for its audience, particularly women, implying that they must maintain a youthful, fair-skinned appearance, free from signs of aging. From the advertisement's perspective, youthful skin and a face unmarred by age-related changes are the community's aspirational ideals.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, the researcher concluded that cosmetics advertisements in newspapers in North Sumatra in the early 20th century significantly shaped people's perceptions of ideal beauty. One of the strategies used was to display a female figure, in this case played by an advertising star with a face characterized by a graceful, sharp-nosed, curly-haired European woman. The image attracts the attention of consumers and builds the expectation that by using the advertised product, they can achieve a beautiful face like the figure in the advertisement. These advertisements effectively construct the discourse of female beauty, through visual effects that seduce and invite consumer interest.

The discourse created through cosmetics advertisements then became one of the main factors in determining the beauty standards of women's skin and face. For example, in newspaper advertisements in the Batak region of North Sumatra in 1940, women were portrayed as a desirable ideal, and in 1945 images of beautiful, young women emerged as proof that by using certain cosmetics products, they could achieve this look. Furthermore, the education of girls in North Sumatra at that time also influenced women's views on beauty, encouraging those who read the news in the mass media to aspire to be beautiful and attractive, in accordance with the idealized images presented in the advertisements.

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