

Stereotype Representation of Healthy Skin of East Asian Women in Somethinc Skincare Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Stereotype; Beauty; Semiotics;
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This study analyzes the influence of the representation of the stereotype of healthy skin of East Asian women in Somethinc advertisements on beauty perception in Indonesia. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, this research explores the visual signs in the advertisements to uncover how media reinforces global beauty standards that affect Indonesian women. The findings show that the use of a South Korean brand ambassador in the ad introduces and strengthens the beauty stereotype that women must have bright, smooth, and healthy skin. This creates pressure on Indonesian women, particularly younger generations, to meet these beauty standards, which can potentially harm their self-confidence and cause anxiety about their physical appearance. This study aims to provide insights for the beauty industry to become more sensitive to the diversity of beauty concepts and their social impact, as well as encourage more inclusive representation.

1. Introduction

Looking attractive and beautiful often boosts self-confidence. However, the media have constructed a representation that defines beauty as having smooth, fair, and flawless skin, creating pressure on women to appear perfect (Chinta, 2023). The definition of healthy skin shaped by societal stereotypes today differs from the medical or dermatological standards. The current beauty standards are heavily influenced by popular culture, especially from East Asian countries like South Korea, which introduced the ideal concepts of “ceramic skin” or “glass skin”—skin that looks smooth, bright, spotless, and translucent. In Indonesia, this beauty ideal has grown in popularity alongside the rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), which spreads through various media platforms such as Korean dramas, K-pop, and skincare advertisements (Jung & Lee, 2020).

The adoption of East Asian beauty standards has shifted local perceptions of beauty, which were once more diverse and natural. Mulyana (2008) found that mass media plays a major role in shaping women's perceptions of beauty, with visual representations in advertisements guiding women to follow constructed standards while neglecting individual uniqueness. Before Korean cultural influences took hold, Indonesian beauty standards emphasized natural beauty, characterized by warm, medium to tan skin tones (Nuril, 2018). The natural features of Indonesian women have traditionally been associated with health and harmony with nature. For example, in Javanese culture, beauty is defined not only by physical appearance—such as brown skin, soft facial features, and a proportional body—but also by gentle demeanor, manners, respect for tradition, and social harmony (Wessing, 1997). In other regions like Bali or Sumatra, beauty is more connected to physical strength and women's roles in the community. However, with the increasing popularity of the Korean-style “healthy skin” ideal, Indonesian women have begun to desire fair, smooth skin, which is often seen as a symbol of health and prosperity (Park, 2021).

Beyond economic factors, the representation of foreign beauty standards also has significant social implications. Many women feel the need to conform to these standards to be socially accepted

or to improve career opportunities. In South Korea, beauty enhancement is often achieved through plastic surgery, which is even considered a graduation or birthday gift from parents once their children reach legal age. This is seen as an investment in future social and career prospects, as appearance can impact job opportunities and social perception (Marx, 2015). This influence is slowly spreading to Indonesia, where many women feel pressured to alter their appearance through plastic surgery, skincare, or cosmetics to match trending beauty standards. This phenomenon illustrates how global beauty ideals, especially from East Asia, have become benchmarks that intensify pressure on Indonesian women to adapt to changing global beauty trends.

The beauty industry in Indonesia has undergone a significant transformation alongside the growing influence of South Korean popular culture, known as the Korean Wave (Hallyu). This phenomenon not only shapes entertainment preferences—such as Korean dramas and K-pop—but also reshapes the public perception of beauty standards. One clear example is the collaboration between the local beauty brand Somethinc and South Korean actress Han So Hee, who was appointed as a brand ambassador and beauty guru. According to Ardine (2024), the use of Korean celebrities in local beauty product advertisements can influence Indonesian women's perceptions of beauty standards, encouraging them to pursue fair skin like that of Korean celebrities.

In its product marketing campaigns, Han So Hee introduces her selected products under the label "Han So Hee's Picks," which include various makeup and skincare items. Since its launch in 2019, Somethinc has used the slogan "Be You, Be Somethinc," meaning the brand aims to meet consumers' needs. In line with this slogan, the products are marketed to help consumers achieve the glass skin look popular in South Korea—radiant, clear, and glowing skin. This approach reflects a shift in beauty representation in Indonesia, from highlighting local uniqueness to promoting global beauty standards. Initially, Somethinc featured Indonesian celebrities such as Aurel Hermansyah, Sabrina Chairunnisa, Kiki Saputri, and Syahrini as brand ambassadors.

Han So Hee gained recognition in Indonesia through her dramas broadcasted on local television. This popularity encouraged Somethinc to collaborate with her to fulfill consumer desires and expand internationally. However, by showcasing Han So Hee's "healthy skin," Somethinc indirectly reinforces the Korean beauty stereotype that influences how consumers view ideal beauty standards. Han So Hee's fair, smooth, and glowing skin becomes the visual benchmark. Such representations reinforce a beauty stereotype that pressures women to achieve skin similar to Han So Hee's.

This research analyzes several Somethinc advertisements featuring Han So Hee, both on Instagram and Somethinc's official YouTube channel. In the ads, Han So Hee is seen with one hand on her cheek and the other holding a Somethinc product. She expresses that she uses Somethinc products daily to maintain her skin's health after a long day, starting from facial cleanser to other skincare routines. Han So Hee also states that she is proud to be the beauty guru for an Indonesian brand, as many of her fans use Somethinc products. Somethinc's Instagram posts featuring Han So Hee also highlight user polls showing that many claim Somethinc helped brighten their skin, fade dark spots, and give a glowing appearance within just four weeks.

Seeing this reality, the researcher aims to explore how the stereotype of healthy East Asian women's skin is represented in Somethinc skincare advertisements. This phenomenon is considered interesting for further study due to its connections with various aspects. The objective of this research is to understand how East Asian beauty stereotypes are represented in Somethinc's skincare ads.

Previous research by Lee and Han (2019), titled "*Psychological Impact of Beauty Standards on Young Women*," found that stereotypes focusing on physical aesthetics, such as flawless white skin, create social pressure and tendencies among young women to chase unattainable beauty ideals. Appearance-related anxiety also leads to lower self-confidence in those who feel they don't meet these standards. Somethinc uses advertising strategies that visually guide consumers toward achieving the "ceramic skin" look through its products, thereby reinforcing pressure on Indonesian women to follow foreign beauty trends.

This is also supported by a study by Jung and Lee (2020), titled "*The Hallyu Effect on Southeast Asia's Beauty Standards*," which found that advertisements featuring idealized beauty representations are linked to increased consumer interest in cosmetics and skincare, ultimately benefiting the beauty industry commercially. The media's depiction of beauty is often shaped by the business interests behind it, turning women into targets for profit, particularly through advertising.

Mass media plays a significant role in shaping women's attitudes, views, and beliefs about beauty. It implants the idea that beauty should be judged primarily based on physical appearance (Mulyana, 2008).

Another relevant study was conducted by Madani et al. (2024), titled "*Representation of Indonesian Women's Beauty Standards in Emina Skincare Ads.*" The research aimed to examine how beauty standards were represented in Emina's skincare ads, specifically *Emina Sun Battle* and *EminaAuteentic*. Through a semiotic approach, it found that flawless, blemish-free skin was portrayed as the ideal beauty desired by many Indonesian women.

Similarly, Sari (2021), in her study "*Representation of Women's Beauty in Wardah Advertisements,*" analyzed how Wardah ads portrayed bright and healthy skin as a primary beauty feature. The ads encouraged the perception that women with fair skin are more attractive.

The difference between these previous studies and the current research lies in the focus. While prior studies analyzed how media representations shape general beauty stereotypes, this research specifically investigates the representation of healthy East Asian women's skin in Somethinc advertisements—examining how the brand attempts to shift Indonesian beauty standards and establish a new benchmark for what is considered "healthy skin" for Indonesian women.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to examine the representation of healthy skin stereotypes of East Asian women in Somethinc skincare advertisements. Barthes' semiotic approach is used because it allows for the uncovering of signs and symbols embedded in advertisements, as well as how those meanings are constructed and interpreted by society. Barthes distinguishes between two levels of meaning within a sign: denotation and connotation.

Denotation refers to the literal or direct meaning of a sign. At this level, the signs or visual elements used in advertisements can be objectively identified without the influence of deeper interpretation. There is no involvement of cultural or social interpretation; only the physical or visual representation of the sign is considered. In contrast, connotation refers to the deeper or symbolic meaning carried by the sign. This meaning is tied to cultural, social, or emotional associations attached to a visual element or symbol. A sign in this context does not merely depict healthy skin at a surface level but also conveys deeper messages related to social and cultural expectations of beauty (Barthes, 1972).

In addition to denotation and connotation, Barthes also introduces the concept of myth as a way for ideologies or social values to be conveyed and accepted through signs such as images, texts, or symbols. Myth functions to obscure the original meaning, transforming socially constructed values into something perceived as natural or given—as if those norms are unchangeable. In this context, myth does not refer to fictional stories or legends, but rather to how certain ideologies or values are accepted as "truth" within a society without being questioned. The formation of myth occurs when a sign is interpreted not only at the denotative level, but also through its connotative meaning, which carries ideological value. In the context of skincare advertisements, myth is used to reinforce the perception that the advertised product is the key to achieving the desired beauty standard (Barthes, 1977).

The semiotic analysis in this study involves identifying the signs present in the advertisements, which consist of the signifier and the signified. These signs appear in the form of images, texts, or sounds extracted from shots and scenes within video advertisements or posters. The analysis then explores the denotative and connotative meanings of these elements, ultimately revealing the myths or ideologies hidden behind the representations in Somethinc's skincare advertisements featuring Han So Hee.

3. Result and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of the research findings related to the Somethinc skincare advertisements featuring Han So Hee as the brand ambassador. The researcher divided the analysis into three segments based on the method used, which is Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis—focusing

on denotation, connotation, and myth. In this study, the researcher selected several advertisements from the Somethinc X Han So Hee campaign as the primary data for analysis. Below are several selected scenes and advertisement excerpts from Somethinc X Han So Hee:



Figure 1. Scene from the Q&A Segment: Han So Hee X Somethinc on Somethinc's Official YouTube Channel

Denotative Meaning: Denotatively, the Somethinc advertisement features South Korean actress Han So Hee sitting calmly in a room. She appears with her long hair neatly tied up, revealing a clean face with skin that looks smooth, radiant, and glowing. In the video, a question appears on the bottom left of the screen: “*You are known as a hardworking person. How do you take care of your skin amidst your busy schedules?*” Han So Hee responds by saying she uses a range of products from Somethinc to maintain her skin’s health and encourages viewers to try the products she uses. The visuals and accompanying text literally convey a beauty routine of a celebrity using specific skincare products.

Connotative Meaning: The connotation of this scene suggests that Han So Hee’s glowing skin is not merely a physical trait but a symbol of perfection and the ideal standard of beauty prevalent in East Asian popular culture, particularly in South Korea. In Korean cultural discourse, bright, flawless, and healthy-looking skin is often associated with high social status, purity, and self-discipline (Kim & Choi, 2019). This idea is further supported by Holliday & Elfving-Hwang (2012), who state that in Korean culture, physical appearance is a symbol of hard work and self-control, reflecting one’s moral and social values.

The statement portraying Han So Hee as a “hardworking” individual who still manages to maintain her skin strengthens the notion that beauty is not merely inherited but earned—through dedication and self-care. This positions the ideal woman as someone capable of managing time, career, and appearance harmoniously (Jung & Lee, 2020). In this context, Han So Hee serves as an aesthetic role model, inspiring women to be successful not only professionally but also in terms of appearance. The narrative suggests that using Somethinc products is essential to achieving this ideal balance.

Myth: At the level of myth, the advertisement constructs a narrative that healthy, glowing skin is a prerequisite for achieving perfect beauty—even amidst extreme busyness. Skin becomes a visual marker of personal success and social status; the more flawless the appearance, the higher the individual’s public image. This creates an implicit social pressure for women to maintain perfection at all times—not just as professionals or public figures but as individuals responsible for their own bodies and appearances.

The ad implicitly reinforces a modern myth that beauty is not something natural, but rather something that must be achieved and maintained through the consumption of specific products. In this representation, Han So Hee embodies not only professional success but also the ideal aesthetic female figure.

Thus, this representation does not merely offer a solution for healthy skin but also builds an ideology that women’s beauty is something that can and should be consciously constructed through particular products and lifestyles. By encouraging the audience to use Somethinc, the ad further cultivates the myth that beauty and skin health can only be achieved through the consumption of specific products. It implies that skincare is the primary key to reaching certain beauty standards, surpassing even natural genetics. As asserted by Lee and Han (2019), beauty standards in contemporary Asian visual culture impose significant psychological pressure on women, urging them to pursue aesthetics that are not always realistic in order to be accepted in modern society.



Figure 2. Scene from the greeting Han So Hee X Somethinc in the official Somethinc YouTube post

Denotative Meaning: In the second scene of the Somethinc advertisement, Han So Hee greets the audience while displaying several Somethinc products on her right. She expresses her pride in being a "Beauty Guru" for the well-known beauty brand in Indonesia and mentions that she is a "bucin" (*budak cinta*) when it comes to Somethinc. This expression is delivered in Indonesian, creating a sense of closeness with the local audience.

Connotative Meaning: The term "bucin" used by Han So Hee carries a strong emotional connotation, suggesting a personal bond between herself and the Somethinc brand. By referring to herself as "bucin," Han So Hee creates the image that her love for the products is not just professional but also based on personal experience. This is a form of emotional branding, a strategy commonly used in marketing to build an emotional connection between consumers and products (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Her statement that Somethinc is "the best brand in Indonesia" reinforces the product's image as the top choice for skincare. This connotation not only indicates the superior quality of the product but also functions as a symbolic endorsement, with Han So Hee representing healthy and ideal skin. It creates the perception that using Somethinc is a legitimate and trustworthy way to achieve healthy and glowing skin like Han So Hee's, thereby reinforcing the symbolic status of beauty through a specific brand.

Myth: This advertisement creates the myth that healthy and glowing skin, like Han So Hee's, can only be achieved through the use of Somethinc products. According to Roland Barthes' media mythology theory, myths work by making social constructs appear natural and unquestionable (Barthes, 1972). By calling herself "bucin," Han So Hee introduces the idea that a strong emotional connection with a brand is key to becoming a loyal user and achieving the ideal beauty standard.

Furthermore, the statement that Somethinc is the best beauty brand in Indonesia strengthens the myth that this product is the primary, and only, solution for achieving socially recognized healthy skin. This creates a consumerist myth, the belief that beauty can be bought and achieved through the consumption of certain products (Jhally, 1990). This myth also generates social pressure for women to always appear perfect and maintain their appearance, in line with Wolf's (1991) findings in *The Beauty Myth*, which state that the media often instills the idea that women must constantly beautify themselves for social acceptance and personal success.



Figure 3. Han So Hee X Somethinc Fresh Juicy Glass Skin Effect in the official Somethinc Instagram post

Denotative Meaning: In the third image, Han So Hee smiles subtly with a healthy, glowing complexion. She holds one of Somethinc's products in her hand, with the text "fresh juicy glass skin effect," implying that the product provides a fresh, glowing, glass-like skin effect.

Connotative Meaning: Han So Hee's visual with fresh, glowing skin associates beauty with perfection, smooth skin, and flawlessness. The term "glass skin" in K-Beauty culture refers to skin that is exceptionally smooth, radiant, and almost translucent, which has become an ideal beauty standard in East Asia. By using words like "fresh," "juicy," and "glass skin effect," Somethinc positions its product as the ultimate solution to achieving perfect, glass-like skin. This connotation suggests that the product offers not just ordinary skincare but an extraordinary effect that makes the skin appear flawless and unmatched in terms of radiance and freshness. Fresh and glowing skin reflects a balance between intensive self-care and natural results, emphasizing that true beauty comes from proper and consistent care.

Myth: The claim of "glass skin effect" builds the myth that the ideal healthy skin can only be achieved by having smooth, bright, and glass-like skin, as demonstrated by Han So Hee. In Roland Barthes' (1972) framework of media mythology, such myths are the result of the naturalization of social constructs, making a beauty standard appear as an inherent, universal truth. This myth creates the idea that perfect-looking skin is the benchmark of healthy skin, so skincare products like Somethinc become an essential tool that one must have.

Additionally, the use of terms like "fresh" and "juicy" carries sensual and emotional associations with instant and pleasurable results. This creates an expectation that the product can provide a magical effect in a short period. As explained in Craig's (2006) study, modern beauty advertisements often create fantasies of instant transformation, manipulating consumers into believing that beauty products have extraordinary powers in a short time. This myth obscures the scientific fact that healthy skin requires a long process, consistency, and other internal factors such as genetics and lifestyle (Jones, 2020). As a result, consumers are trapped in a market logic that forces beauty to be seen as the result of consumption and adherence to dominant visual standards.



Figure 4. Han So Hee X Somethinc SKINGOALS Advertisement and Official Somethinc Instagram Post

Denotative Meaning: The fourth image shows Han So Hee taking a selfie while holding a large Somethinc product. The advertisement includes the text "skin goals Silk Creme" and "brightens skin in 4 weeks."

Connotative Meaning: The phrase "skin goals" implies that by using Somethinc, one can achieve the desired skin (healthy, radiant, and glowing). Han So Hee's selfie pose, holding the product while showcasing her perfect healthy skin, enhances the idea that this product is one way to achieve skin like hers. A selfie is a way for someone to show pride and confidence in their appearance. Self-image has a significant influence on one's confidence when posting selfies on social media (Yulinar, 2022). This connects the use of Somethinc products with self-confidence, where the product not only provides physical results but also boosts one's sense of self to present themselves to others.

The text in the fourth image, “brightens skin in 4 weeks,” carries the connotation that the product provides quick and effective results. It implies that in a short time, skin that may have appeared dull or lacking radiance will look brighter and healthier. This emphasizes the idea that this product is very effective and fast in delivering visible results, making skincare more practical and efficient.

Myth: The claims “brightens skin in 4 weeks” and “skin goals” also reinforce the myth that healthy skin can be achieved quickly through the use of Somethinc. This creates the expectation that bright and healthy skin can be obtained in a short time, even though in reality, it requires time and consistent use to express success and show it to others through selfies.



Figure 5. Han So Hee X Somethinc 4 Weeks Brightening Result

Denotative Meaning: The fifth image shows Han So Hee applying Somethinc product. The text includes “4 weeks brightening result,” “brightens skin in 4 weeks, users agree: 100% skin looks brighter, 90% dark spots look faded, and 92% skin looks more glowing,” along with the hashtag #skinsolver - brightening.

Connotative Meaning: The text with percentages (100% skin looks brighter, 90% dark spots look faded, and 92% skin looks more glowing) suggests that Somethinc is an effective product, providing consistent and reliable results. This builds the impression that the product can deliver real changes to the skin in a short time, boosting users' confidence with clear outcomes. Meanwhile, the claim “4 weeks brightening result” strengthens the expectation that skin will appear bright and healthy in a short time, making Somethinc an appealing choice for those seeking fast and satisfying results.

Myth: The claim in the text “4 weeks brightening result” reinforces the idea that ideal beauty can be achieved in a short time, even though skin requires long-term consistency. The percentage claims (100% skin looks brighter, 90% dark spots look faded, and 92% skin looks more glowing) also create the myth that Somethinc will provide positive results for everyone, even though individual skin conditions vary. Furthermore, it builds the myth that bright and glowing skin is a symbol of achievement, making those who possess it appear successful in reaching the ideal standard of healthy skin.

4. Conclusion

This study examines how the stereotype of healthy East Asian women's skin is represented in Somethinc's skincare advertisement featuring Han So Hee. Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the ad reinforces beauty standards that focus on smooth, bright, and glowing skin, reflecting the ideal skin influenced by East Asian culture, particularly South Korea. Somethinc products are

promoted as a solution to achieve the “glass skin” standard, creating a myth that perfect skin can only be attained through consistent effort, especially by using certain skincare products. The advertisement also builds an ideology that links physical beauty with social and professional success, encouraging Indonesian women to follow global beauty standards. Overall, the Somethinc advertisement featuring Han So Hee not only introduces a product but also reinforces the stereotype of healthy skin that pressures women to pursue physical perfection. This influences public perception of ideal beauty and drives them to invest time, money, and energy in skincare routines to meet the standards portrayed in the advertisement.

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