

# SELLING HEALTH IN THE EMPIRE: A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF HEALTH ADVERTISING IN COLONIAL NORTH BORNEO

Anis Abdul Rahim<sup>1</sup>  
Mohamad Rashidi Pakri<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Academy of Language and Law Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu Kampus Dungun, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia (E-mail: [anisrahim@uitm.edu.my](mailto:anisrahim@uitm.edu.my))

<sup>2</sup> School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia  
(E-mail: [rashidi@usm.my](mailto:rashidi@usm.my))

\*Corresponding author: [rashidi@usm.my](mailto:rashidi@usm.my)

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**Abstract:** *Modernisation has seen how health and medicine are commodified in the name of profit. The focus of this study is to examine how health is commodified in colonial advertisements. This study examines colonial medicine advertisements in The British North Borneo Herald, a newspaper published in North Borneo during the British colonisation. This study employs Williamson's approach to studying ideology and meaning in advertising (1978), examining the language and visual images of advertisements to investigate the relationship between health and advertising, particularly in the era of colonialism. The findings show that the advertisements promote certain beauty ideals to the consumers, specifically women, even though the products advertised are medicines. Therefore, this study not only contributes to the understanding of ideology and the production of colonial advertisements but also highlights the continuity of such strategies in contemporary advertising discourse, where health and beauty remain commodified and tied to consumer identity.*

**Keywords:** *advertising, North Borneo, medicine, health, colonialism*

## Introduction

Advertising has become an integral part of people's daily lives. It is present everywhere; just by turning on the television and radio or flipping through the pages of newspapers and magazines, people are exposed to advertisements. In general, advertising serves to create and convey a message to a target audience (Hackley & Hackley, 2021; Wells et al., 2006). Advertisements do not exist in a vacuum, as the messages in advertisements may be indirect, hiding the ideologies behind them.

The promotion of medicine and health products coincides with the rise in manufacturing and product consumption, driven by urbanization and technological advancements, particularly in printing (Barker, 2009; Sharma, 2009). The advancement of technology has led to the innovation of printing, resulting in a wide range of printing products, including books, magazines, and newspapers (Cachin, 2023). The presence of newspapers means that there would be a section dedicated to advertisements, providing an opportunity for product manufacturers or sellers to advertise their products.

*The British North Borneo Herald* is a newspaper published from 1881 until 1941 in North Borneo, now known as Sabah, by the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company (Tregonning, 1965). The language used in the newspaper was English. It can be inferred that the target audience for the newspaper was people who could read and understand English. According to the 1921 census conducted by the government, the population of Europeans residing in North Borneo was 665 out of a total of 263,252 people. In 1940, it was estimated that there were 400 Europeans in North Borneo (Tregonning, 1965, p. 136). North Borneo also had missionary schools that offered English education for its students (Tregonning, 1965, p. 182). This number indicates that there was a possibility of English readers available during that period. Besides that, in the *Publisher's Notice* taken from *The British North Borneo Herald*, there is a notice for subscribers from Great Britain. This notice indicates that the newspaper was circulated outside North Borneo. Based on the census and the subscription notice, it can be inferred that the newspaper's audience consists of Europeans residing in North Borneo, students or former students of missionary schools, and subscribers from outside North Borneo, as these people were able to read the newspaper that was published in English.

The newspaper offered an advertising service, enabling manufacturers to promote their products within the publication. The content of the advertising section in the newspaper ranged from service and product promotions by brands to notices from the administration. The newspaper included subscription and advertising rates for future subscribers and advertisers, even in its earliest publication, indicating that there was a need for such product promotion to people residing in North Borneo.

To study the relationship between health and advertising, it is important to discuss ideology. Ideology can be defined as a set of beliefs and values that influence the way people think and act (Burch & Rautenberg, 2024; Simpson & Mayr, 2010), and it is represented through "a set of practices and institutions" (Althusser, 1968/2004, p. 693) such as the media. Advertisements, which are a part of the media, contain certain ideologies that are transmitted under the guise of promoting products. Eagleton (1978) asserts that "text", which advertisements are, is a production of ideology.

It is observed that there is a commodity of human and societal values in advertising (Lister, 2015; Livas, 2020). Feelings and emotions are closely tied to the products, and advertisements

often promote these feelings and emotions more than the products themselves, as they become an integral part of our way of life (Miles, 1998). Williamson (1978) also discusses the issue of consumerism, advertising, and ideology. Consumers create themselves through advertisements by adopting certain emotions, feelings, or lifestyles associated with consuming products or services promoted.

## Literature Review

### Colonial Advertisements

During the era of imperialism and colonialism, vast quantities of products were transported to the colonies from the colonizing empires (Rosman & Abdullah, 2018). Advertisements published during this era reveal that some, if not most, aspects of advertising were influenced by the colonising powers (Ghandeharion & Badrlou, 2018; Jain, 2018; Rahim & Pakri, 2022). The advertisements may portray certain lifestyles and cultures, mostly those of Western colonisers, intended to be disseminated to the locals (Mbure & Aubrey, 2017; Nongbri, 2021), such as the practice of tea drinking, the use of Western medicines, and Eurocentric beauty standards. However, colonial advertisements also contain elements of local cultures and religious beliefs (Jain, 2018; Sharma, 2009), as well as the ideas of nationalism and independence (Okonkwo, 2018), and even modernity (Riyanto et al., 2022). The incorporation of local elements in advertisements can be a double-edged sword, as it has the potential to construct either positive or negative representations of the local population.

### Health Advertising

Advertisers capitalise on medical endorsements as a way to promote their products, making their claims more believable. Some advertisers in colonised countries adopt Western medical and health advertising methods, such as promoting brands by posing some problems and their solutions (Wong, 2000). Additionally, other health advertisements often feature testimonials (Holden et al., 2021; Loeb, 1994) and medical endorsements as a means of promoting the products (Barker, 2009; Hands, 2018). Consumers are attracted to endorsements and testimonials, believing they can attain similar results as those endorsed in the advertisements.

Health advertising also exposes how health is being commodified in the name of profits. This aligns with the Marxist perspective, which views capitalist medicine as primarily focusing on curing diseases rather than preventing them (Collyer, 2015; Rahim & Pakri, 2022). Health advertisements not only promote the products sold, but they also convey underlying messages related to purchasing those products. For instance, advertisements exploit individuals' insecurities by associating health products with ideals of body image (Mackert, 2021). By consuming these products, consumers are led to believe that they can attain the body types covertly promoted in the advertisements.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the ideology in the chosen advertisements to study how health is commodified through colonial advertisements in the name of profit. Such analysis is crucial to uncover how colonial advertisements for health products reveal underlying ideologies, reflecting power structures and capitalism disguised as public well-being.

## Methodology

This study utilises Williamson's approach in studying ideology and meaning in advertising (1978) by examining three advertisements published in *The British North Borneo Herald* in 1936. The advertisements purposively selected for analysis are from *Kalzana* (a tonic marketed

as a remedy for fatigue and poor appetite), *Sanatogen* (a health supplement promoted as strengthening nerves and vitality), and *Wincarnis* (a tonic wine advertised as restorative). These three were chosen because they represent some of the most frequently advertised health products in *The British North Borneo Herald*. Each illustrates how health and medicine were commodified through colonial advertising discourse. Focusing on three advertisements also enables a more detailed multimodal analysis within the scope of this study.

The advertisements are analysed qualitatively through the analysis of signs to unearth the meaning behind them. Williamson (1978) focuses on sign, signifier, and signified in advertisements and their connection to ideology. There are four linear stages to explain how meaning works in advertising and its connection to the consumers Williamson (1978, p. 41):

- 1) How we create meaning from the product
- 2) How we take meaning from the product
- 3) How we are created by the advertisement
- 4) How we create ourselves in the advertisement

The stages are connected by ideology, and Williamson (1978) stresses that “in ideology, assumptions are made about us which we do not question because we see them as ‘already’ true” (p. 41). This study derives the meanings of advertisements promoting health products based on the stages of analysis introduced by Williamson and creates connections between derived meanings and ideology. The analysis was conducted by examining the advertisement elements, linguistic features, and the portrayal of women in the advertisements to discuss the underlying meanings found in the advertisements, and then relating the analysis to Williamson’s stages of meaning-making.

## Analysis and Discussion

The study employed three advertisements that promote *Kalzana*, *Sanatogen*, and *Wincarnis*, respectively. The advertisements selected are shown below:



Figure 1: Kalzana advertisement

Source: *The British North Borneo Herald* (1936)



Figure 2: *Sanatogen* advertisement

Source: *The British North Borneo Herald* (1936)



Figure 3: *Wincarnis* advertisement

Source: *The British North Borneo Herald* (1936)

This section is divided into three sub-sections: the analysis of text types and linguistic features, the analysis of the portrayal of women in the advertisement, and the discussion of the analysis of health advertising and its underlying messages.

## The analysis of advertisement elements and linguistic features

### Headline

The advertisements contained headlines, and these headlines had a varying degree of apparentness regarding their meanings and target audience. The headline of *Kalzana's* advertisement, "Should women dread the approach of a perfectly natural event?" (*Kalzana*, 1936, p. iii), contained the information on the target audience, which is women. However, there was no indication that this advertisement was a medicine advertisement. The headline was in

interrogative form, enticing the audience to read further to find the answer to the question asked. The headline for the *Sanatogen* advertisement read “Why be ‘nervy’ when you can be healthy!” (*Sanatogen*, 1936, p. vii). The content of the advertisement was understandable; it was an advertisement for a health product. The word “nervy” was in quotation marks, indicating that there was an emphasis by the advertiser. Based on the headline alone, it was evident that the target audience was individuals who felt nervous or jittery. However, there was no indication that this advertisement was targeting women. The *Wincarnis* advertisement contained a headline that says, “Beauty can be maintained” (*Wincarnis*, 1936, p. viii). This headline was concise, and the message was very clear. It gave the idea of what the advertisement was about. A reader who read the headline would understand that the advertisement promoted something that can maintain beauty, and the target audience might be women. However, the headline did not indicate that the advertisement was for a health product.

### Slogan

The brands’ slogans were present in all advertisements. A slogan serves as the motto of the brand, typically in the form of an interesting catchphrase that is used continuously for an extended duration (Wells et al., 2006). *Kalzana*’s slogan was “The mineral food for better health” (*Kalzana*, 1936, p. iii), while the slogan that represented *Sanatogen* is “The true tonic food” (*Sanatogen*, 1936, p. vii). For *Wincarnis*, the slogan was “It must do you good” (*Wincarnis*, 1936, p. viii). Only *Kalzana* and *Sanatogen*’s slogans described the type of products they were selling based on the slogans alone. *Wincarnis*’s slogan was more ambiguous due to the use of “it” instead of a product. *Kalzana* used “mineral food” while *Sanatogen* used “tonic food”. The use of these phrases indicated that both brands were selling health products.

### Body Copy

All advertisements had lengthy body copy in several paragraphs. *Sanatogen* employed a testimony in the body copy. The testimony read, “After using *Sanatogen*, I feel happy again. *Sanatogen* made a tremendous difference in my whole life” (*Sanatogen*, 1936, p. vii). There was no mention of the person who wrote the testimony. Only quotation marks and the use of the word “I” indicated that this was a testimony from someone. The anonymity of this testimony appears contradictory because, on the surface, the lack of attribution lessens its credibility, as readers cannot verify the source. At the same time, however, the absence of a specific speaker generalised the statement, allowing any consumer to identify with the anonymous “I.” In this way, the advertisement simultaneously weakened authenticity while strengthening relatability, using anonymity to invite readers to imagine themselves as the satisfied consumer. Consumers can feel like they are part of a certain community because of the experiences they share through public testimonials (Loeb, 1994). Besides that, the content of the testimony sends a different kind of message beyond health. There is a relationship between health and happiness: “If I use *Sanatogen*, I will be happier”. The product goes beyond providing health benefits to evoke certain emotions in consumers. The act of buying and consuming products generates emotions in consumers (Williamson, 1978).

The advertiser of *Wincarnis* includes an interesting line to attract the audience to become consumers of the product. This is observed through this sentence: “For fifty years and more doctors and nurses have prescribed *Wincarnis* as a tonic, for they have proved times without number that it has not an equal as a remedy for debility, anaemia and lassitude” (*Wincarnis*, 1936, p. viii). What is interesting about this sentence is that the advertiser includes a “claim” that this product helps cure diseases, which is based on information obtained from medical professionals, who are also notably anonymous, and there are no statistics to support the claim.

This method reflects a broader advertising practice of the period, where endorsements from doctors and nurses were strategically used to lend authority to health products, even when the sources were unverifiable. In 1914, the Commission on Patent Medicines questioned Mr. William Rudderan, general manager of the *Wincarnis* manufacturer, to explain the medical endorsements found in *Wincarnis* advertisements. Upon observation, it was found that endorsements or recommendations from medical professionals were often obtained through return coupons to receive free samples of products (see Hands, 2018). Medical professionals signify credibility and knowledge when discussing health (Barker, 2009; Hands, 2018). If a doctor recommended the product, it must be that the product is effective, which is what the slogan says. Including medical endorsements creates a sense of legitimacy for the benefit claims made by the advertiser. Doctors and nurses become the signifiers of trust, as consumers trust the feedback from medical professionals when purchasing and consuming medical products.

### The Use of “You”

The use of “you” in the advertisement is a typical linguistic feature of advertising discourse, functioning to create direct address and personalisation (Goddard, 2002). The advertisers for all advertisements addressed the consumers by using the word “you”. The examples of the use of “you” in the advertisements are as follows (the word “you” is bolded by the author):

- Sanatogen*: Start taking Sanatogen to-day, then **you** will soon feel thoroughly healthy again.  
*Wincarnis*: The truth is that **you** can only look beautiful if you are in perfect health.  
*Kalzana*: Nature never intended **you** to suffer unduly.

The use of “you” created a connection between the advertiser and the consumers. The consumers would feel that the advertiser was addressing them directly, but this is not the case. The advertiser did not personally know the audience; therefore, it was almost impossible for the advertiser to address the consumers directly. Consumers were led to believe that the advertisement was specifically directed at them. The advertisement was sent out to everyone who has access to it; however, it is perceived individually (Williamson, 1978). The audience had to replace the subject in the advertisement with themselves to make themselves relatable to the advertisement.

### The Portrayal of Women in the Advertisements

All advertisements selected focused on women and had images of a woman as a ‘model’. The women in these advertisements were depicted; they were not ‘real’ women, but rather illustrations of what was portrayed as feminine. These women had different expressions on their faces. The woman in the *Sanatogen* advertisement had a big smile on her face, while the *Kalzana* woman had a forlorn look on her face. The women in the *Wincarnis* advertisement were mirror images of each other; one had a stoic face, while the other had a grim expression. It is interesting to note that the woman’s position is like facing a mirror. There was no physical mirror present anywhere, but the headline somehow worked like one, dividing the two images. The woman on the right was supposed to be the consumer, while the woman on the left was the ideal image of what a woman was supposed to look like, especially after consuming *Wincarnis*. Despite their expressions, the women in the advertisements were consistently depicted with styled hair and a polished appearance, which conveys a specific message to the audience. The women, despite their imperfect health, maintain impeccable appearances. They were supposed to be ‘you’, the audience, but at the same time, they are not. They are the ideal women; the women the audience should aspire to be.

It can be observed that the advertisements were targeted at women. The illustrations of women already indicate that the target audience is women. However, other instances in the advertisements also suggested that the target consumers are women. The headlines, specifically in *Kalzana* and *Wincarnis*, were geared towards women. The question posed by *Kalzana* in its headline, “Should women dread the approach of a perfectly natural event?” was intended for the women’s audience, who are curious whether they also suffer from the same issue as the “women” in the headline, and the issue might be referring to the lethargy women face during menstruation. Referring to the previous discussion on the use of the word “you,” the word “women” in this context presented a similar argument. The women’s audience, who were initially individuals in their own right, identified with a group of people who shared the same problem, creating a connection between them and the problem presented in the advertisement; thus, indicating that there was a need to consume the product to address the problem mentioned. The word “women” or “woman” also appeared multiple times in all advertisements. The words “you” and “women” were present simultaneously, creating an illusion that the advertisers were constantly trying to solve ‘your’ problem as an individual, while at the same time placing ‘you’ in a group with other ‘women’ who shared the same problem.

### Health Advertising and Underlying Messages

Based on the analysis of advertising elements and linguistic features, as well as the portrayal of women, it is observed that the four stages of meaning-making proposed by Williamson (1978) were evident in the analysis. The first stage, which explains how we create meaning from the product, describes how the products themselves reflect their inherent nature, specifically as health products. For instance, the *Sanatogen* headline described the type of product advertised by including the word “healthy”. The use of this word established the expected meaning of the product and its capabilities. Even though all advertisements focused on promoting health, the *Wincarnis* advertisement went beyond promoting health. It promoted a certain external appearance. *Sanatogen* subtly created a connection between health and happiness, but it was more internal and from within (although the illustrated woman is shown smiling happily).

The second stage, how we take meaning from the product, involves how consumers are able to relate themselves to the advertised product. For instance, the body copy of the *Wincarnis* advertisement opens with a sentence, “A great many women, while they are not actually ill, are only half-fit” (*Wincarnis*, 1936, p. viii). The phrase “a great many women” assures readers that they were not the only ones who had this problem; many other women suffered from the same issue. The audience was immediately placed in a group of women seeking ways to maintain their beauty. Besides, there was also an instance that demonstrated how this advertisement appealed to a female audience through the enticement of a beautiful appearance. The headline, “Beauty can be maintained” (*Wincarnis*, 1936, p. viii), served as a solution to a problem. It implied that there was a problem regarding appearance for women, and the only way to solve this problem was by consuming the advertised product; this idea relates to the next stage.

The next stage focuses on how consumers are created by the advertisement. Here, consumers are responsible for consuming the products to achieve the intended health benefits. The advertisements also conveyed an overt message through this sentence, as seen in the following statement: “The truth is that you can only look beautiful if you are in perfect health” (*Wincarnis*, 1936, p. viii). It implied that no matter how much makeup they wear or how beautiful their hair is, like the woman in the advertisement, women would never look beautiful. They should be healthy to be called beautiful. The *Wincarnis* advertisement also promoted an overt message: If you want to be beautiful, read this. The instances mentioned here show how the

advertisements perpetuated the idea of how women should be and what they can do to achieve the ideal promoted in the advertisements.

The last stage involves how consumers create themselves in the advertisement. All advertisements included illustrations of attractive women to signify women consumers. However, the illustrations created an illusion that women should resemble the illustrated women, even when they were ill; their hair should be properly styled, and their faces should be beautifully adorned with makeup. Probably only high-class or wealthy ladies had the time and money to dedicate to beautifying themselves, even in the midst of illness. The advertisements, placed in a North Bornean newspaper in 1936, were arguably aimed at the wives of British officers and Western traders who had the capital to afford such products, far away from their homeland. Although they were the colonisers, they were subjected to such ideals just like any other women. There were also chances that local or non-European women came across these advertisements, and they were also subjected to the same ideals as many colonial advertisements promoted Eurocentric beauty ideals (Mbure & Aubrey, 2017). The advertisers capitalised on women's inferiority in regard to their appearance by connecting health to emotions and appearances. The products created a distinct identity for the consumers. They are the consumers, yet they are also the product of the products.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how health was commodified in colonial advertisements, and the analysis has demonstrated how colonial advertising commodified health by incorporating beauty ideals and consumer identity into its discourse. By analysing advertisements in *The British North Borneo Herald* through Williamson's framework, it becomes clear that such texts did more than promote products; they constructed ideological assumptions about health and femininity. Although the study is rooted in the colonial past, its findings resonate with contemporary advertising practices, where health and beauty remain commodified, and consumers are still positioned as subjects whose identities can be shaped through consumption. Therefore, the advertisements were engaged in more than commercial activity as they were actively selling health in the empire, a process that is still prevalent in contemporary advertising. In this sense, colonial advertisements not only highlight the ideology of their time but also provide a critical lens for understanding how advertising continues to perpetuate the idea of consumption in the present.

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