

# Beauty Myths and Consumer Culture in Indonesian Chick-lit Novel

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**Abstract.** The discourse on women's beauty and femininity are inseparable from the patriarchal cultural construction. Women are to constantly strive to achieve a standard, that is known as 'beautiful' to men. The purpose of this research was to study the myth of beauty and consumer culture in a 'chick-lit' novel entitled *Beauty Case* by Icha Rahmanti. Data for this study was gathered from fundamental research that used a qualitative research design. This study utilized the notion of beauty in the various context presented by Wolf and the interpretation of beauty in marketing and colonial discourse raised by Priyatna, as it's a theoretical framework. Wilson and Wolby's idea of consumer culture was also employed to examine female consumer culture in this novel. The finding of this study is that the myth of beauty in *Beauty Case* revolves around profession, culture, and sexuality. This study also concludes that the consumer culture of the main and other female characters in this novel is very much influenced by the myth of beauty constructed by men. The female characters constantly try to look young and seek recognition from men in matters regarding their appearance. Besides that, Rahmanti's female characters also always try to gain the approval of their deeds from their society.

**Keywords:** *Myths of Beauty, Consumer Culture, Chick Lit, Beauty Case*

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## INTRODUCTION

The main issue faced by the female protagonist -Nadja- in *Beauty Case* (2005), written by Icha Rahmanti, is inferiority complex. Nadja faces financial difficulties and beliefs that she is not beautiful or as beautiful as other women around her. This character is the total opposite of Rahmi, Rahmanti's first female protagonist in *Cintapuccino* (2004). Rahmi is portrayed as a person with a stable financial standing and with an attractive appearance. The main issue of Rahmi is that, this character is obsessively in love with a man called Nimo. Thus, to explain the beauty myths and consumer culture in chick-lit in Indonesia, *Beauty Case* (2005) has been made a case study for this article. The question that is intended to be addressed in this article is: Does the novel support the patriarchal ideas of beauty, or does it challenge it? What notions of beauty myths that appear in the novel?

An exploration of the novel *Beauty Case* had previously done by [Intan and Tri Handayani \(2019\)](#) under the title *Romance Formulation in Chick-Lit Beauty Case by Icha Rahmanti: Feminist Criticism*. Several changing plots of the novel justified its infidelity to the standard pattern despite the position of chick-lit as a sub-genre of romance. Nevertheless, the happy ending of the novel remains reliable to romance formulation. The female main character of the novel did not strive to find true love but to pursue a self-identity instead. The man character has also been illustrated as noble unlikely to typical romance formulation. The narrator was the female main character, first-person, and single-subject pronoun, with an intimate, subjective, and limited as a regular romance formulation. Thereby, *Beauty Case* by Icha Rachmanti has been confirmed as a romance through a structural perspective but demonstrating several deviations in particular in its plot and characters.

Icha Rahmanti is one of the pioneering authors in the arena of chick-lit in Indonesia. Up to date, she has authored two best-seller novels. *Cintapuccino* was published in 2004 and hit the sales record of 50,000 copies. Subsequently, in 2005, Icha published her second best-seller novel entitled *Beauty Case*. Both her novels portrayed daily life issues and were written in an informal narrative style. Rahmanti's first chick-lit work was a model for other Indonesian chick-lit women authors such as Albertiene Endah, Fira Basuki, Windhy Puspitadewi, Clara Ng, Ika Natassa, and Esti Kinasih. Thus, [Rahmanti \(2005\)](#) in the preface of *Beauty Case* states that "the 21<sup>st</sup> century marks a juncture when women start to have their own stories". This does not mean that previously women were non-existent in the tradition of Indonesian literature, but, as stated by [Arimbi \(2009\)](#), "many of them were placed in the margin of the canonized literature".

In Indonesia, chick-lit is a popular genre. The number of publications and copies sold that reach more than 3.000 copies in three months, according to the publisher Gramedia Pustaka Utama, can be considered a best-seller achievement ([Wulan, 2013](#)). This commercial consideration shows how much the genre has been heavily commodified. Best-seller novels usually stand a very high chance of being adapted as a film. Such is the case with *Eiffel, I'm in Love* (Rachmania Arunita, 2003), *Me Versus High Heels* (Maria Ardelia, 2005), and *Cintapuccino* (Icha Rahmanti, 2007). These are chick-lit novels that were adapted and screened on the silver screen.

Dewojati (2010) states that there are more than 180 chick-lit novelists in Indonesia. 98% of that number are woman authors. The high demand for chick-lit novels among its fanatic readers and chick-lit novel creates competition between publishers such as PT. Gramedia Pustaka Utama and GagasMedia (Taufiqurrohman, 2010; Noor 2018). Studies on popular novels have also increased among scholars, especially on the subject matter on women. But many scholars oppose the acceptance of chick-lit genre into the literary category and justify this rejection by saying its subject matter is that of mediocrity. Contrary to this, are those who consider chick-lit as an important piece of literature that represents the Indonesian female voice that upholds the patriarchal culture (Subekti, 2017).

Chick-lit is regarded as a 'feminine' genre, partly due to its female author and readership statistics. The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, according to Mujiningsih (2016), marks the golden era for woman authors in Indonesia, most of whom wrote chick-lit. Having a distinctive target from teen-lit, where the readers are mostly young, female characters in chick-lit present an image of women at older range of age which commonly known as *TWITS* or *Teenage Women in Their 30s*. In chick-lit, the protagonist is usually a single, independent, cosmopolitan, and heterosexual woman that encounters various problems in her love relationship (Taylor, 2012). Discussing chick-lit means discussing singleness and the behavior of woman characters who enjoy single life (Mujiningsih, 2016). The term 'chick-lit' refers to 'Chiclets', a brand name of chewing gum product, implying that reading a work of chick-lit is as easy as chewing a gum. In other words, chick-lit means easy reading; one does not need to allocate a special time and frown to read it.

Discussions about the beauty myths and consumer culture which universally entwine women have yet to be resolved. In Indonesia, studies on the beauty myth have been conducted by, among others, Saguni, Syam, and Baharman (2016). Entitled *the Beauty Myths and the Female Body in Indonesian Modern Litterature: A study of Indonesian Short Stories*, the study concludes that the beauty myths has always been associated with perfect physical appearance, sexy, slim, and symmetrical body. Based on the study, the works analyzed also present the concept of beauty as a new instrument of oppression against woman. It is the society that holds the authority as to what being a woman means to a woman. In this relation of meanings, woman is positioned as a repressed object because what she means to herself is determined based on how the society decides what being a woman means. Woman internalizes this construction uses it as a standard for reproducing the meaning(s) of woman for herself. Another discussion was proposed by Dwiningtyas (2016) entitled *The value of women against The Construction of Myths of Beauty in Online Media Femaledaily.com*. The research showed how myths of beauty have developed within the new platform, and many beauty rituals performed by women to fulfill the ideal standard of beauty constructed by media.

Consumer culture has been analyzed as conducted by Safitri, K. (2006) who had discussed the *Postmodern Lifestyle Construction of Career Women in the Novel Cintapuccino*. The female main character in this first novel of Icha Rahmanti inflicted by the complexity of the problem that such single career women could bore. She was intensely troubled by her career, love, fashion, body, and finance which

occurred equivalently in *Beauty Case*. Rosida (2018) had also discussed *Female Body in Consumer Culture: Between Pleasure, Social Status and Patriarch Value*. She had uncovered that consuming seemed to be a natural behavior in consumer culture, regarding to what was written in a novel entitled *Miss Jinjing Belanja Sampai Mati* (2008). Such a situation is an undeniable impact of the domination of giant ideologies. Capitalism, consumerism, and patriarch ideology are nowhere removable from the female character within the novel, which controls her lifestyle as a consuming urban woman of Jakarta. In such a situation, the body becomes a site of contestations of ideologies which strive to perpetuate themselves yet without refuting each other, creating a room for coherence among themselves. Assuming that these ideas also appear in *Beauty Case*, this study attempts to explore the beauty myths, which is part of the patriarchal ideology.

Generally, up to the present, no research that relates the variable of myths of beauty and consumer culture as a whole entity of research contextualized to feminist criticism in the novel of *Beauty Case* has been found. In our study we attempt to fill the gap left by previous study by approaching the intersecting ideas of the beauty myths and consumer culture in *Beauty Case* from a feminist critical perspective.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Adriany (2017) pointed out that the concept of beauty is strongly rooted in the society hence the term ‘beauty’ becomes a single barometer to define women. The word ‘Beautiful’ has oftentimes been interpreted as universal and similar. Being a beautiful woman is generally having a fair complexion, straight-loosed- long hair, and a perfect slim body. Priyatna (Wolf, 2017) viewed that the values conserved in the public as an inherited legacy from colonialization rather than a sole obsession. This was also confirmed by bell Hooks (1992), cited by Priyatna (2018), as a sentiment of “colonial nostalgia” or probably “colonial trauma”. Beauty construction which leans on colonial values by any chance could determine oneself, social class. A woman with fair complexion would be considered belongs to higher social class as she is assumed to be seldomly exposed to sun radiation whereas dark-complexioned woman belongs to lower social class. However, the paradigm is still open to change. Wolf (2017) conceived that myths of beauty, as occurred to another ideology of femininity could be mutated to be more adaptable to recent conditions, and also to tackle women’s attempt to enhance empowerment.

As Wolf (2004: 29) argues, the beauty myth assumes that there are qualities of “beauty” that apply objectively and universally; that women want to look beautiful and men want beautiful women. Yet, the pressure to be beautiful is felt only by women, not men. The desire for beauty is considered a natural thing. Being beautiful is desired because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary in nature. Narratives about men’s grandeur, nobility, and greatness have always included scenes to win a beautiful, sexually attractive and fertile woman. Since this sex-based system came into work, beauty has become a standardized concept.

In Wolf’s view (2004), this situation could not be separated from the success of the feminist movement in the 1970s. Since then, women’s legal and reproductive rights began to be recognized and opportunities were open for women to pursue

higher education. Celebrating their liberation, women started to pay more attention to themselves, including their physical appearance, their face, hair, and fashion style. This trend sparked off the headset pros and cons of woman's liberation and beauty. According to [Julian \(2016\)](#), it was the time when patriarchy was evolving and transcending the boundaries of the private to public space, from inside to outside home. Replacing old forms of patriarchy, the beauty myth became a construction used to intimidate women in diverse areas of life using organized and systematic ways. In other words, the standard largely used to determine a woman's beauty is a cultural construction. Men view women in ways that create boundaries and measurements that define what beauty is or is not. Constantly viewed using such a standard, women find ways to meet that standard to be considered beautiful. The beauty myth, therefore, resulted from efforts made to justify this new myth ([Wolf, 2004](#)).

[Priyatna \(2018\)](#) maintains that the discourse of woman's beauty and femininity is inseparable from the patriarchal cultural construction that gives man authority to recognize woman's femininity on the one hand, yet at the same time imposes woman to seek recognition from men regarding their femininity. Admitted or not, how a woman makes her body look is what a man wants to see. In relationships among women, the beauty myth makes a woman believe that she cannot approach other women she does not know. Other women are preoccupied with suspicion before one can even approach and engage them in a conversation simply because they are Other Women. Furthermore, preoccupation with the idea of beauty draws women to approach other women as enemies until they all are convinced that they can be acquaintances ([Wolf, 2017](#)).

Desire to be (more) beautiful drives women toward consumerism. [Priyatna \(2018\)](#) maintains that the market has urged women to perform a natural act of culturization. In the process, nature and culture mirror each other. As Franklin, Stacey, and Lury explain in *Global Nature, Global Culture* (2000), a woman's "natural" beauty is the result of a "acts of culturization", if not "conquest of nature". Each act is assumed to be performed or processed "naturally". It is thus clear that in gender discourse the concept of beauty is linked to the institution of patriarchy, contestation among women, and the capitalistic industry ([Julian, 2016](#)).

In cultural studies, the issue of women concerning social construction and consumer culture is essential. As elaborated by [Steedman \(1986\)](#), female identity is much constructed by their act of consumption. What comes to their mind is "if we step into a landscape, and see ourselves as a subject, we might have to consider what to wear there". This has made women not only an image and subject but positioned them within the structure of society and the economy. According to [de Beauvoir \(2003\)](#), when a woman is placed into their social dynamics, she would immediately be an object of public judgment. She then needs to choose the context of presenting herself/body, whether it's the 'traditional culture' or patriarchal culture. A woman is not perceived as an independent person but as a controlled subject. She is a subject to men's desire, and this is manifested through women's fashion, a physical appearance which includes a slim body, made-up faces, and wearing jewelry.



Theorization of consumption and development of consumer culture are the core issues in reviewing modernity as a whole (Thornham, 2010). Despite its inaccuracy, 'modernity' as terminology is still applied to summarize social, cultural, and economic changes, indicated by industrialization in the western capitalist society (Wilson, 1985). In the context of women, modernity and urban life seem to allure them to the image of luxury and sexuality (Bowlby, 1985). Bowlby (1993) also explains two types of consumers the first is the victim or the hedonist type. They are frequently manipulated and deceived through advertisements. The second is the rational type, they are calculative, efficient, and aware of their needs and objectives.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Data for this study was gathered from fundamental research that employed a qualitative research design. This study utilized the notion of beauty in the various context presented by Wolf and the interpretation of beauty in marketing and colonial discourse raised by Priyatna, as it's a theoretical framework. Wilson and Wolby's idea of consumer culture was also employed to examine female consumer culture in this novel.

A fundamental research type with a qualitative research design was formulated to find answers to the research question of this article. Content analysis was the main research instrument to gather data. The selected novel, printed resources as books and digital resources such as online journals was referred to gather data. Feminist literary criticism is an approach deployed in analyzing myths of beauty and consumer culture functioning as main variables in the research. According to Culler, cited by Sugihastuti (2010), feminist literary criticism brought up to build a reader's consciousness in disclosing acts of gender injustice and fights to be liberated from patriarch ideology within the literature. Having a feminist perspective, Klein (1983) favored that the methods utilized are destined to women, beneficent for women, and possibly invites subjective awareness among women to learn about women (Humm, 2007).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The *Beauty Case* portrays the love life of its protagonist -Nadja Sinka Suwita-, a freelance interior designer. Nadja is the internal narrator in this novel. The protagonist is portrayed as a 25 years old woman, who leads a metropolitan lifestyle in Jakarta. Her best friends, Diana and Obi, claim that Nadja has a bad financial situation and is also involved in a vague love relationship. Her career allows her to be in contact with famous personalities, including Dania, a super-beautiful model, and the Ambassador of Gals Indonesia. She also meets Max, the male character who eventually makes Nadja understand the meaning of the true beauty of a woman. Unlike most chick-lit novels, *Beauty Case* has a cliffhanger ending which makes it realistic and different from the rest.

### Beauty Myths in Workplace, Culture, and Sexuality

In *Beauty Case*, most female characters in workplace settings are constantly engaged in discussion and perception of beauty. These characters tend to pursue a certain physical appearance that they consider beautiful and they are obsessed to appear pretty and attractive. The assumptions of beauty among women cause misery to some women who think they have yet to meet those standards. As a result, this inferiority complex causes uneasiness, loneliness, and insecurity for some female characters in this novel.

At work, for instance, the higher a woman climbs the hierarchical career ladder, the more strongly the beauty myth works to break every rung she steps on (Wolf, 2017). There is and will always be the demand for a woman to be flawless on any occasion, moreover, if she works in a field in which being beautiful is pretty much the order of the day. This is what *Beauty Case* is about. The novel depicts not only the love affair of the main character, Nadja but also her career development. As a freelance interior designer, she must dress neatly and appear chic to give herself the impression of being “decent and smart”, traits which she needs to get and maintain jobs. Wearing a casual outfit that a man is typically allowed to wear would be absolutely out of the question.

*So, before I present my skill, I can't miss the chance just because she DOESN'T LIKE my appearance. [...] She HAS TO like how I look first, then I can get the chance to show my capacity. "Ok, got the point. You are in a classic trouble 'I-have-nothing-to-wear', while piles of clothes lie in front of you ?" (Rahmanti, 2005: 24)*

In the passage, Nadja is expressing the anxiety she feels towards her best friend Dian. In Nadja's view, Dian believes that she [and her appearance] is not attractive enough for the potential client who is going to interview her. For Dian, it is only when she has met the standard criteria of a “well-dressed and decent-looking” career woman that she would be able to show her full capacity as a competent interior designer. Nadja is consciously aware of the view that in a materialistic society “packaging” is always more important than “content”.

Before women's emancipation, good-looking professional working women were regarded as anonymous people who had a low status and therefore were (Wolf, 2017). As women had become more empowered, more prestige, popularity, and fortune were granted to professional women (models, actresses, dancers, and sex workers), whose jobs involved the display of their bodies. *Beauty Case* highlights the idea that in a working world where appearance significantly matters, beauty becomes an important asset. This is what happens to Cynthia, the presenter of a program called *Her Diary*, who, due to pressing demand for a higher rating, is replaced by Dania, who looks more beautiful but is not very smart, verging on a bit *lemot* or ‘slow’ (Rahmanti, 2005: 96). The image of a pretty but ‘slow’ woman is a recurrent object of ridicule even among women themselves.

The closer a woman is to power, the more aware she becomes of her physical appearance and the sacrifice demanded from her. Being beautiful is a

prerequisite for taking a further step (Wolf, 2017). In Nadja's workplace, her co-female workers constantly try to maintain their good looks. This constant strive is part of their effort to be close to power, which also requires some amount of sacrifice. Beauty is portrayed as an important feature for a woman's career development in this novel. This need is also the main factor for rivalry and envy among female employees at Nadja's workplace. Thus, it is manifested through how one dresses to the workplace in this novel. Rahmanti describes the need for female characters to outdo one another in a workplace setting.

*Maya Indira is hilarious, pretty, dark-complexioned, and has a slim body. Even when wearing super low jeans (exposing her navel and flat belly) folded at the ankle, a tight white t-shirt, and pearl necklace, she really looks expensive and sophisticated. But Dania ... wow, even from a distance, she looks outrageously beautiful, that makes Maya look mediocre by standing next to her, even if she is only wearing khaki trousers and a tight white shirt. (Rahmanti, 2005: 87)*

The outfits described here are figure-hugging and revealing for male sexual gratification. The phrase 'she really looked expensive' shows that the woman is being looked at as a commodity for male exchange and pleasure. Apart from being beautiful, some women think that a single woman has a higher value compared to a married woman. This perception is narrated in this novel through Obi's character when she comments on Cynthia. "Why Cynthia? yes she is cute, but she's married," said Obi in an affected way [...] (Rahmanti, 2005). In its context, although married women are beautiful, they have lost their sexual appeal to men. This is because married women belong to another man, while single females are free to be pursued by men.

The construction of an ideal body shape propagandized by such media as fashion magazines has set a very high bar concerning how women are expected to treat and shape their own bodies. The image of an ideal boy and flawless beauty that appears recurrently in the media tends to influence and even urge "ordinary-looking" women to compare their body to the ideal image presented in the media. Women's magazines barely, if not never, campaign for women's solidarity (Wolf, 2017). Instead of promoting such a cause, these media fuels desire for gossip as well as evoke envy and prejudice. In *Beauty Case, Gals*, the magazine Nadja frequently reads, feeds her not only information about beauty and young girls' lifestyle, but also leads her to believe that, as the magazine consistently portrays that good-looking men belong only to good-looking women. The image of Dania as the magazine's ambassador serves to affirm this perspective, which Nadja unconsciously internalizes as a reader. The gap between her present situation and the image offered by the magazine through Dania's representation sown the seeds of dissatisfaction in Nadja.

Not only is the beauty myths linked to work and culture, but it also affects a woman's sexuality. The relation between beauty and sexuality have been always misunderstood. It is commonly believed that women should have a good look to be sexual, but not vice versa. Women value her body according to the social and



cultural context she lives in (Mulyana, 2005). Nadja does not regard too much of herself and thinks she is worthless. She thinks it is unfair for not being born pretty and elegant. Wolf (2017) finds that if women feel ugly, it is their fault, and they have no inalienable right to feel sexually beautiful.

But Nadja began to change and improve herself gradually when she was advised by her best friend and her sister. Nadja is required to advise, assurance, and affirmation from people around her to construct her self-esteem. She realized her dependency on her sister for a home, and that she is an impulsive consumer in which it affected her financial situation. Nadja also comes to terms that she has no steady job, forgetful, and clumsy. Nadja believes that she is not as beautiful as her sister or other women she knew, but she had decent facial features that attracted men.

*“You’re pretty Naj... you look beautiful the way you are, you don’t need to join to such beauty pageant” added Shana softly. “Plus, you are very smart ... very talented.” [...] Shana’s hair is thick and long, just as exquisite as seen in a shampoo ds, while mine is frizzy too curly and hard to manage unlike Papa’s. Shana takes after mama’s beauty and tender face, who comes from Solo, and she behaves so elegantly just like a princess of a Javanese royal monarch. Me? Hmm ... When it’s come to face, I think God is fair. He made me a fair oval face to compensate for my height. Many say my bold facial line makes me look prominent, not to mention my expressive eyes, and my pointed nose which I take after my father who happens to be a Sulawesi-Arabian. I have no serious problem concerning my face. (Rahmanti, 2005)*

Nadja feels inferior towards her beautiful co-workers. Her inferiority complex is elevated when she comes in contact with Dania. Nadja claims, *“I am not confident when I compare myself with those girls, I am just a mediocre! Especially when I compare myself with Dania Soedjono?” (Rahmanti, 2005: 115)*. Nadja has underlined that she does not look too bad, yet every time she thinks about or is standing face-to-face to the dazzling model, everything that she possesses in her suddenly feels unbecoming.

*“Every part of my body is a mistake! The shape of my nose, my height (especially), my eyes, my hair (which normally, even without comparing to Dania’s, is a total mess), my clothes, my shoes, my nails, my perfume... All of it is a mistake! I feel like the ugly duckling facing a beautiful and magnificent swan. (Rahmanti, 2005: 98).*

Nadja’s conviction towards beauty as a result of a social construct. She believed that beauty is an essential feature to be happy. The fairytales of princess and prince charming have been embedded in her mind since she was a child. Witnessing the Royal Wedding of Princess Diana and Prince Charles on television was another event that further strengthened her conviction (Rahmanti, 2005: 4). Nadja believed that it is fortunate to be a beautiful lady. Her imagination was, a

woman who gained love and respect from men are those who had a perfect physical appearance. Thus, she imagined all those beauty pageant contestants who had a tall, slim body, beautiful face, and who wore a gorgeous gown.

*My childhood dream was to be a winner of a beauty pageant: become rich and popular because of my beauty, crowned with an exquisite tiara decorated with diamonds and wear the yellowish gold sash, my presence to attract the spotlight, flashing blitz, summoning crowd, but most importantly was to be surrounded by remarkable men, most potential and handsome, so that I can choose one of them to be my prince charming. And later we got married and lived happily ever after. Full stop. (Rahmanti, 2005: 3)*

Nadja was disappointed in herself for not meeting her imagined characteristics of beauty. Nadja was also in despair to discover that Dania-her rival-was a kind-hearted person and that many favored her. Nadja had no hope to feel any better than Dania, for she couldn't find any flaw in her rival.

*Dania Soedjono is not only pretty but EXTREMELY nice to people –also really cheerful. A cheerleader types. Dania is a figure of perfection. She not only has a beautiful face but also inner beauty. (Rahmanti, 2005: 99)*

Through the discussion, it is clear that myths of beauty are constantly at work in the life of the main character as seen in how she always ponders about beauty and the political advantages of being beautiful. The next section presents an analysis of the consumer culture that engulfs women as a result of the myths of beauty.

### **Women's Consumerism as an Implication of Beauty Myths**

To fulfill the demands of appearance and self-presentation at the workplace, Nadja had to makeover herself. Nadja also had to appear pretty to gain attention from Budiansyah (Budi) whom she was attracted to. Beauty for Nadja was a standard that she derived from the Gals magazine and Dania. Thus, she went to a beauty parlor, tried reducing weight, indulge in sports, and bought lots of beauty products. Not satisfied with her physical appearance, Nadja indulges in frequent shopping activity for beauty products and expensive clothes. She aims to look beautiful, and that for Nadja meant spending money on products that will enable her to achieve her desire.

Nadja considers shopping as an investment and a self-appreciation act. She indulges herself in buying branded products namely Mango, Lolita Lempicka, Nine West, Giordano, L'Oréal, and Prada. Brand names are an indicator of a characters' social class. Possession of such brands gives satisfaction to women. The shopping activity helps Nadja to deal with her inferiority complex in terms of her physical appearance. Apart from clothes, footwear, and cosmetics, two other important matters that women in this novel spend their money on are *anti-aging* products and a series of beauty treatments to maintain a young look.

*“We try to lose our weight, whiten our skin, straighten our hair, buy stuff we don’t really need, spend lots of money on make-up, anti-acne cosmetics, anti-aging crème, perfumes, clothes, shoes, and bags, do some painful things such as facials, waxing, and so on ...” (Rahmanti, 2005: 109).*

Beauty and youthfulness, therefore, are no longer natural things because they have become an achievement, a trophy that requires hard efforts to gain. Aging is a process that many women are afraid of facing. In reality, many women do not feel comfortable when other people think that they are older than they actually are. Conversely, many women would feel flattered when people say they always look young. Many women take great lengths to stay and be viewed as always “youthful”. The characters Marina, Nadja’s superior, for example, always ensures that she looks ‘trendy’ by wearing expensive clothes, having a haircut like an Astro Girl model, and using “gue” and “lo” to refer to herself and other people in conversation with her employees.

*Marina’s age probably the same as Obi’s mother. But, you know, money can buy anything, including stylish fashion, young and fresh look à la Marina, or Obi’s mother. Hard to tell her age because she is a jet-set lady, she has everything it takes to look and remain young. (Rahmanti, 2005: 26)*

The passage reflects how the beauty myth works in such a way as to make women refuse to get older or to be considered old although getting older is naturally a certainty. Marina, who is well established financially, has the power to maintain her youthfulness in any way she can, including by undergoing a plastic surgery. According to Priyatna (2018b), this is a sign of youth culture domination[...]. It means an aged person associates her femininity -primarily related to her sexuality- to an ideal beauty construction.

Indulging in extensive shopping for beauty products is also a sign of beauty consumerism. Women who see beauty as wealth tend to open themselves to the system of direct financial reward, which replaces the indirect system of reward in marriage. Beauty has come to play in women’s status-seeking the same role as money plays in that of men: a defensive proof to aggressive competitors of womanhood or manhood. Nadja is in denial of being a *shopaholic*. She is defensive about her impulsive shopping behavior. Nadja claims that she is in control when she shops and that she could self-restrain whenever she overdid her shopping. The truth about Nadja and her impulsive shopping is that she frequently gave herself a reason to shop. For Nadja, it was a form of investment and an act of self-reward for her hard work.

*Please, don’t call me a shopaholic because I know what a shopaholic means. If we inspect their wardrobe, we’d discover rows of shopping bags that have yet to be done, a pile of clothes that haven’t been worn, still with price-tag and not admitting about purchases and its price. Dare to be indebted in the name of lifestyle, being unable to control herself when shopping, even forget to eat or*

*drink, and usually unavailable for a phone call, just like losing self-control. Developing a great euphoria while shopping but then overcoming it when they have the product in their possession (Rahmanti, 2005: 36-37).*

Nadja is aware that she needs beauty and all those accessories related to it to support her career, especially because in her line of work appearance is a priority. As quoted by Jerković (2014:148), “by creating dissatisfaction with physical appearance, fashion and beauty industries directly address the young woman from whom they demand perfecting her appearance in order to accept herself and be accepted by others”. Despite her unstable financial situation, she is willing to invest in fashion and every other little fancy things she needs to be fashionable. This behavior is also fueled by her refusal to lose in the beauty competition against the perfectly looking rival Dania.

*Only a few weeks ago Dania had joined the Her Diary team, and I have spent more than what I needed, such as two pairs of Nine West footwear, three Mango blouses, two trousers in Giordano, and a few shirts and accessories from a sudden shopping activity at boutiques around Kemang, Tanah Abang, Mangga dua, and Melawai, also the Glam Shine Sorbet from L’Oreal, a perfume Island Kiss by Escada (Rahmanti, 2005: 101).*

Women who seek financially established men are considered to have complex understanding of the capitalist concept of beauty, namely that beauty is linked closely to the ability to buy beauty products. Women want needs some kind of guarantee that they can continue to maintain their beauty. However, according to J.P. Morgan, as quoted by Syaifuddin (2013), if beauty is considered as capital, its value will continue to depreciate each year as one gets older. Therefore, women must have other forms of values to ‘sell’.

*[...] and the more I pay attention, many cute ladies, typical to Miss Jakarta with a perfect outfit and hairdo were there, of course with their perfect boyfriend: handsome boys with a forehead stamped: WEALTHY (Rahmanti, 2005: 115).*

Nadja realizes that women need the fortune to appear beautiful. On the other hand, beauty itself is an investment that generates money. Thus, through her observation, she found a direct correlation between beauty and money. Since the first page of the novel, Rahmanti has reminded her reader that the perception of most women, including Nadja, of beauty and its myth could backfire if improperly dealt with.

*I have read an interesting idea about beauty: “Beauty is filthy rich. Our society is still the same old capitalist society which is making a woman’s beauty as the value on the open market, where the most beautiful girl gets the richest man.” (Franz Lebowitz, Beauty is Filthy Rich, what is Beauty). I assume then, maybe, this world is just a stage of beauty contest, which is actually destined to us,*

women. We compete to win the grand prize which we have been dreaming of: Our Prince Charming-who gets all of us to think about the ‘live-happily-ever-after’ ending. (Rahmanti, 2005: 1).

Through *Beauty Case*, the author expects to remind the reader of a world shaped by patriarchy in which women are driven to unconsciously compete to beautify themselves to get men’s attention. Women are drawn into an endless rivalry to the extent of expelling one another to please men. Yet, men do not do the same thing for women. The capitalistic consumer culture continuously (re)produces the idea that buying relentlessly is good for women, and this situation would always continue as long as the beauty myth is perpetuated.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study have shown that in line with Wolf’s view, the various forms of the beauty myth presented in *Beauty Case* revolve around the spheres of work, culture, and sexuality. Consumer culture among women is depicted as an impact caused by the beauty myth, particularly by the desire to be seen, the demand of the social environment, and the desire to always appear youthful. In the beginning of the story, the main character is portrayed as a manipulated consumer. However, in the course of time, she learns how to decide between need and desire, making her a more rational consumer. Her middle-class metropolitan lifestyle and her involvement in the professional world that requires her to appear modern are the root cause of her consumptive behavior. From the actions and words conveyed by the female protagonists, it is revealed that the chick-lit *Beauty Case* negotiate the values of the beauty myth posed by patriarchal system. As a consequence of beauty myths, Nadja is trapped in consumer culture although she chooses to be a rational shopper.

Rahmanti, through her novel, *Beauty Case*, cautions her readers about the world that is constructed by patriarch and which drives women to compete among themselves to appear beautiful and gain attention from men. Women go through serious rivalry, do whatever it takes and overcome their competitor, just to please men. Meanwhile, men do not have to do the same for women. Consumer culture, in the background of this novel, confirms that purchasing culture is good for women and this will carry on as long as the myths of beauty remain.

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