

Beauty Beyond The Permit: Power Relations of Illegal Cosmetics Traders in Bone Regency, Indonesia

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Abstract

Introduction: Illegal cosmetics continue to circulate in Indonesia despite layered regulation, repeated seizures, and public warnings by the national food and drug authority. This study examines the power relations that enable business actors to sustain the circulation of illegal cosmetics in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi. A descriptive qualitative design was applied through in-depth interviews with a business actor who sells illegal skincare, consumers from different economic, educational, gender, and age backgrounds, and officials of the district food and drug control office, supported by observation and document analysis. The findings show that power over the illegal cosmetics market is not held by a single actor but is exercised within a network linking regulators, brand owners, distributors, resellers, digital platforms, and consumers. Regulation does not merely suppress the trade; it generates new business strategies, including self-made brands, mismatched notification numbers, claims of foreign origin, and prices kept low by avoiding registration costs. Power operates in a capillary manner through domicile-based reseller teams, social media accounts, marketplace listings, and market stalls that reach villages beyond the effective range of supervision. Official knowledge embodied in safety standards and notification numbers competes with counter-knowledge produced through testimonials, sellers' visible skin, and consumers' own experience, so that many users continue to apply harmful products even after redness and dark spots appear. The persistence of illegal cosmetics is therefore a relational and discursive outcome rather than a simple failure of enforcement. Collaborative supervision, credible criminal sanctions, platform accountability, and community verification literacy are required.

Keywords: Illegal Cosmetics; Power Relations; Regulatory Enforcement; Distribution Networks; Consumer Knowledge.

1 Introduction

The pursuit of lighter, clearer, and younger-looking skin has turned cosmetics from complementary goods into everyday necessities for many consumers in Asia. Skin-lightening practices are driven by sociocultural pressure to meet dominant beauty standards as well as by psychological factors such as body image concerns and diminished self-worth (Al-Sarraf et al., 2021). Experimental evidence shows that the skin shade of models in advertisements shapes women's confidence, body image, and purchase intentions (Craddock et al., 2025), while survey research indicates that social media and family members are the main sources of influence on the use of skin-lightening products (Rahiman et al., 2021). Beauty standards are therefore not private preferences but socially produced norms that create a large and persistent market for products promising rapid visible results. This market carries serious health risks when products escape safety control. Heavy metals such as mercury and lead in cosmetics are associated with neurological damage, kidney disorders, and cancer, and consumers in developing countries remain largely unaware of contamination risks where oversight is weak (Abed et al., 2024). A community-based study found that one-third of cosmetic users experienced adverse events, most commonly itching, redness, and pimples, with skincare products responsible for nearly half of these reactions (Kumari et al., 2023). Reviews of cosmetic ingredients further emphasise that consumer safety depends on the combined enforcement of regulatory standards across the product lifecycle (Couceiro et al., 2025).

Indonesia illustrates the scale of the problem. The Indonesian Food and Drug Authority (Badan Pengawas Obat dan Makanan, BPOM) seized illegal and hazardous cosmetics worth more than IDR 8.91 billion in October–November 2024, and an intensified operation in February 2025 uncovered 205,133 units from 91 brands worth more than IDR 31.7 billion, of which 60% were imported, 79.9% had no marketing authorisation, 17.4% contained hazardous substances, and 2.6% were expired. The category of illegal products is itself unstable, covering unregistered, falsified, counterfeit, and adulterated goods whose definitions vary across sectors (Shepherd et al., 2026). Research on falsified medical products identifies Southeast Asia as a major source region and stresses that the integrity of supply chains requires cooperation among health professionals, regulators, and enforcement agencies (Feeney et al., 2024).

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The persistence of illegal products cannot be explained by legal gaps alone. Indonesia has a comprehensive framework consisting of Minister of Health Regulation No. 1175/2010 on Cosmetics, the notification system administered by BPOM, and BPOM Regulation No. 25 of 2025 on the technical requirements of cosmetic ingredients. Yet evaluations of the Indonesian food control system show that its effectiveness depends on resources, stakeholder engagement, evidence-based practice, and enforcement capacity (Barinda & Ayuningtyas, 2022). Cross-national evidence indicates that institutional capacity and enforcement credibility, rather than regulatory quality on paper, determine vulnerability to economic crime (Al Naqbi et al., 2026). In Indonesia, collusion between business actors and state authorities has been documented as a key reason why affected communities fail to obtain redress (Berenschot et al., 2022), and studies of other illicit economies show that illegality is often a structural product of regulatory regimes rather than a simple deviation from them (Saaka, 2026).

Digital commerce has further transformed how illegal cosmetics reach consumers. Electronic word of mouth on TikTok significantly shapes purchase intentions for local skincare brands in Indonesia (Indrawati et al., 2023), and Indonesian Generation Z consumers are driven by information quality, subjective norms, and expected outcomes when shopping through social commerce (Huwaida et al., 2024). A meta-analysis of e-commerce research confirms that trust exerts the strongest influence on online purchasing decisions, ahead of electronic word of mouth and perceived risk (Handoyo, 2024). These channels allow small traders to build brands, recruit resellers, and circulate testimonials at a speed that conventional market supervision cannot match.

Bone Regency in South Sulawesi reflects these dynamics at the district level. Although it is located far from the provincial capital, the regency is readily reached by illegal cosmetics through online reviews on e-commerce platforms, retail sales by business teams, and stalls in traditional markets. Local consumers tend to prioritise instant results, particularly rapid facial whitening, and affordable prices over long-term safety. Preliminary observation found residents whose facial skin had become reddened or marked by severe dark spots, yet who continued to use the same products in the belief that those products would eventually heal the damage. At the provincial level, a 2025 court ruling in a widely reported Makassar case of mercury-containing skincare imposed only ten months' imprisonment and a fine of IDR 1 billion, far below the maximum penalty under health legislation, signalling to traders that sanctions may function as an operating cost rather than a deterrent.

Most existing studies of illegal cosmetics in Indonesia approach the issue from legal, consumer protection, supervisory, or economic perspectives, and focus on the adequacy of regulation or on consumers' lack of knowledge. They have not explained how relations among regulators, business actors, and consumers are organised so that products declared illegal by the state continue to circulate. This study addresses that gap by drawing on Foucault's analytics of power, which treats power as exercised rather than possessed, as productive rather than merely repressive, as circulating through capillary networks, and as inseparable from knowledge (Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1980). The study aims to analyse the power relations of business actors in the circulation of illegal cosmetics in Bone Regency along these four dimensions.

2. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design, which enables researchers to understand meanings, practices, and relations as they occur in their social context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bone Regency was selected purposively because illegal cosmetics are widely used by local women and are distributed through both online and offline channels that reach rural areas. The research began with a pre-research survey to map the areas and channels through which illegal cosmetics circulate. Informants were selected purposively from three groups: a business actor who sells illegal skincare directly and manages a reseller network; consumers representing lower- and upper-middle economic backgrounds, female and male users, users with higher and lower education, and adolescent and adult users; and officials of the Food and Drug Control Office (Loka POM) in Bone Regency, which holds supervisory authority in the district. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation of selling points, promotional accounts, and product use, and analysis of regulations, BPOM press releases, enforcement reports, court decisions, and online promotional content.

Data were analysed with the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). Interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were coded according to the four dimensions of power as relation, productive power, capillary power, and power/knowledge, and were then organised into thematic matrices comparing the positions and practices of regulators, business actors, and consumers. Credibility was ensured through source triangulation across the three informant groups and method triangulation across interviews, observation, and documents, while dependability and confirmability were maintained by recording each analytical decision and checking interpretations against official records.

3. RESULTS

The findings are presented according to the four dimensions of power that sustain the circulation of illegal cosmetics in Bone Regency. The dimensions are interrelated: the relational structure of power explains why no single actor controls the market, productive power explains how regulation generates new business strategies, capillary power explains how those strategies reach consumers, and power/knowledge explains why consumers accept and defend the products they use.

Power as Relation: A Network Without a Single Sovereign

The circulation of illegal cosmetics in Bone Regency is sustained by a network of relations in which regulators, business actors, and consumers each exercise power, rather than by the dominance of any single party. Loka POM in Bone holds formal authority to supervise, sample, and withdraw products, but its civil servant investigators have no coercive powers such as arrest and must coordinate with the police for serious cases, a process that takes time while sellers have already moved their stock. Business actors, for their part, control brands, supply, prices, and the recruitment of resellers, while consumers exercise power through their purchasing choices, their loyalty to particular sellers, and their readiness to recommend products to relatives and neighbours. Each actor is therefore both constrained and enabled by the others, and the market persists because these relations remain in balance.

The relational character of power is most visible at the points where enforcement meets the market. Administrative sanctions in the form of withdrawal of a product batch, suspension of activities, or fines interrupt a single product but leave the production capacity, supplier relations, and customer base of a brand intact, so the same products reappear under new batches or new names. The business actor anticipates these interventions by distributing stock across resellers, shifting between online and offline channels, and relying on customers who continue to order through personal contacts. Consumers, in turn, rarely report adverse effects to the authorities because they regard the seller as a trusted acquaintance rather than as an offender. Research on governmentality shows that modern power works most effectively through the consent and freedom of subjects rather than through coercion (Clegg & Ninan, 2023), and in Bone the consent of consumers and the tolerance of the wider community are what allow the network to survive each enforcement action. These positions are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Actors and the exercise of power in the circulation of illegal cosmetics in Bone Regency

Actor	Basis of power	Practice of power	Effect on circulation
Loka POM Bone / BPOM	Legal authority, testing, notification system	Sampling, product withdrawal, administrative sanctions, public warnings	Interrupts single batches; limited reach without police coercion
Police and local government	Coercive and territorial authority	Joint operations when cases are escalated	Slow coordination gives sellers time to relocate stock
Brand owner / business actor	Capital, supply, brand, pricing	Recruiting resellers, rebranding, relabelling	Rebuilds supply after each seizure
Distributors and resellers	Local social ties and domicile	Door-to-door sales, personal orders, market stalls	Spreads risk across many small sellers
Digital platforms	Visibility and reach	Listings, reviews, livestreams, short videos	Extends circulation beyond physical supervision
Consumers	Purchasing choice and recommendation	Repeat buying, loyalty, word of mouth, non-reporting	Sustains demand and legitimises sellers

Source: Interviews, observation, and document analysis, processed by the authors (2026).

These findings confirm that power in the illegal cosmetics market is exercised through relations rather than possessed by the state. Power is not a commodity held by one institution and applied to others, but a set of relations in which every position is at once a point of exercise and a point of resistance (Foucault, 1978). The regulator exercises power through notification and withdrawal, but the business actor exercises counter-power by rebuilding supply, and consumers exercise power by continuing to buy, recommend, and protect their sellers. The findings also extend the view that disciplinary power works through networks of surveillance and normalisation (Foucault, 1977), because in Bone the most effective form of surveillance is exercised by consumers over one another's appearance rather than by the regulator over the market. Consequently,

enforcement directed only at products cannot dissolve a market held together by relations. Loka POM Bone should build a collaborative supervision network involving the district government, police, village authorities, marketplace operators, and community groups, as the effectiveness of the Indonesian food and drug control system has been shown to depend on stakeholder engagement and enforcement capacity rather than on regulation alone (Barinda & Ayuningtyas, 2022).

Productive Power: Regulation as a Generator of Business Strategies

Because no single actor controls the network, regulation does not simply eliminate illegal cosmetics but provokes business actors to invent new ways of operating. The notification requirement, the list of prohibited ingredients, and periodic enforcement operations have produced a repertoire of adaptive strategies: building self-made brands that can be abandoned and relaunched, printing notification numbers that do not match the registered manufacturer or product, claiming that products are imported directly from abroad, and selling blue-label skincare, which is intended only for individual patients under medical supervision, as general retail goods. Prices are kept low because traders do not bear the costs of registration and notification, which gives illegal products a competitive advantage over legal ones. Studies of illicit economies show that illegality can be produced by the design of regulatory regimes themselves (Saaka, 2026), and in Bone each rule creates a corresponding space that traders learn to occupy.

The same productive logic applies to sanctions. When criminal proceedings are rare and penalties are modest compared with the revenues of successful brands, sanctions are incorporated into business calculations as a risk to be managed rather than a boundary to be respected. The business actor reduces exposure by keeping limited stock, using personal accounts rather than registered stores, and relying on resellers who carry the immediate risk of detection. Digital platforms make these strategies accessible to small traders, since platform adoption in Indonesia's informal economy follows existing spatial and social infrastructures rather than formal business status (Amin et al., 2026). Enforcement thus stimulates a cycle of seizure, reappearance, and further seizure, in which illegal trade becomes normalised as an ordinary economic opportunity, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Regulatory provisions and the business strategies they generate

Regulatory provision	Business strategy generated	Productive effect
Mandatory BPOM notification	Self-made brands; notification numbers that do not match the registered product or manufacturer	Products appear legal while avoiding registration costs
Import controls and customs inspection	Claims of foreign origin; supply through informal forwarders	Imported image raises perceived quality and price legitimacy
Restriction of blue-label (etiket biru) products to medical supervision	Sale of blue-label products as general retail skincare	Clinical aura is converted into a marketing asset
Prohibited ingredients (mercury, hydroquinone, retinoic acid)	Labels listing safe-looking compositions	Hazardous content is concealed behind reassuring labels
Batch-level withdrawal and administrative sanctions	Rebranding, relabelling, small stock, rotating sellers	Enforcement is absorbed as an operating risk
Criminal penalties rarely applied	Continuation of trade after sanctions	Illegal trade is normalised as an ordinary business opportunity

Source: Interviews, observation, BPOM press releases, and court records, processed by the authors (2026).

These findings demonstrate that power in the regulation of cosmetics is productive rather than merely repressive. Power produces reality, domains of objects, and rituals of truth, and its effects cannot be described solely in terms of exclusion and prohibition (Foucault, 1977). In Bone, the rules that prohibit unregistered and hazardous cosmetics generate a new field of practices, including rebranding, false notification numbers, claims of foreign origin, and the commercial use of blue-label products. The prohibition therefore does not remove the market but reorganises it, producing traders who are skilled in operating at the edge of legality and consumers who come to regard illegal products as ordinary goods. This also confirms that where there is power there is resistance, and that resistance takes the form of everyday adaptation rather than open defiance (Foucault, 1978). Enforcement should therefore shift from batch-level administrative sanctions toward credible criminal

prosecution of brand owners and tracing of their assets and supply networks, since institutional capacity and enforcement credibility, rather than the formal quality of regulation, have been shown to be the dominant factors reducing vulnerability to economic crime (Al Naqbi et al., 2026).

Capillary Power: From Brand Owner to the Village Reseller

The strategies generated by regulation reach consumers through a capillary distribution structure that extends from brand owners to the smallest units of village life. Brand owners, many based outside the regency, supply distributors who recruit resellers according to domicile and territory, and these resellers sell to neighbours, relatives, colleagues, and members of religious and social gatherings. Alongside this personal chain, products circulate through social media accounts, marketplace listings, livestreams, and stalls in traditional markets. Each node handles small volumes, which makes the network difficult to detect and allows it to regenerate quickly when one node is removed. Indonesian consumers' social commerce decisions are strongly influenced by subjective norms and information quality (Huwaida et al., 2024), and in Bone these norms are embedded in the everyday relations between resellers and their customers.

Capillary circulation turns everyday interaction into a mechanism of power. Traditional word of mouth significantly strengthens customer engagement and repurchase intention on social commerce platforms (Herzallah et al., 2025), and parasocial relationships built through beauty content deepen followers' attachment to the people who promote products (Zhou et al., 2024). In Bone, resellers combine both forms: they display their own skin in photos and videos, share customers' before-and-after pictures, and follow up with buyers personally through messaging applications. The adolescent and adult consumers encountered in this study were reached through different capillaries, the former mainly through short videos and influencer testimonials and the latter through long-standing relations with a regular seller. Because these capillaries operate within intimate and trusted relations, they reach places where the regulator is absent and where warnings from official channels arrive late or not at all. The structure is summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Capillary structure of illegal cosmetics circulation in Bone Regency

Node	Channel	Mode of power	Reach
Brand owner / producer	Own brand, supply contracts, informal forwarders	Control of supply and brand narrative	Provincial and national markets
Distributor	Territorial recruitment of resellers	Allocation of stock and sales targets	District and sub-district level
Reseller	Neighbours, relatives, social gatherings, messaging apps	Personal trust and follow-up	Village and household level
Online shop and social media	Marketplace listings, short videos, livestreams, reviews	Visibility, testimonials, parasocial attachment	Beyond territorial boundaries
Market stall	Traditional markets and small shops	Physical availability and low prices	Rural buyers with limited digital access
Consumer	Word of mouth, repeat purchase	Recommendation and normalisation	Family and peer networks

Source: Interviews and observation, processed by the authors (2026).

These findings show that power in the illegal cosmetics trade operates at the capillary level, where it reaches into the everyday lives of individuals rather than descending from a single centre. Power must be analysed at its extremities, in its local and regional forms, where it becomes embedded in techniques and practices (Foucault, 1980). In Bone, the decisive exercise of power does not occur in the regulator's office or the brand owner's warehouse, but in the reseller's message, the neighbour's recommendation, and the influencer's before-and-after video. This capillary structure explains why supervision focused on large warehouses and registered outlets leaves most of the market untouched, since the market is reproduced through countless small interactions that each appear insignificant. It also reveals that the state's power remains centralised while the traders' power is dispersed, producing an asymmetry that favours circulation over control. Platform accountability should therefore be extended to small social commerce channels, with marketplace and social media operators obliged to verify notification numbers and to submit to independent audits, as platform regulation focused only on the largest operators leaves blind spots in which smaller harmful channels continue to operate (Laux et al., 2021).

Power/Knowledge: Official Standards and Counter-Knowledge

The capillary network is sustained by competing forms of knowledge about what is safe, effective, and trustworthy. Official knowledge is embodied in BPOM safety standards, the notification number, laboratory testing, the list of prohibited ingredients, and public warnings, and it defines which products are legal and which are dangerous. Business actors and consumers, however, produce their own knowledge through testimonials, visible skin results, claims of imported quality, labels that appear safe, and personal experience. In Bone, this counter-knowledge often carries greater authority than official knowledge because it is visible, immediate, and delivered by trusted people. Information credibility determines whether electronic word of mouth is adopted and translated into purchase intention (Ngo et al., 2024), and the credibility and attractiveness of endorsers shape consumers' perceptions of trustworthiness and product quality (Hossain et al., 2025).

The authority of counter-knowledge is most evident in consumers' interpretation of side effects. Consumers who experience redness, stinging, or dark spots interpret these symptoms as a phase of adjustment or as evidence that the product is working, and continue to use the same product in the belief that it will eventually heal the skin. Consumers with higher incomes and higher education also use illegal products, which indicates that the problem is not simply a lack of money or information but the trust placed in sellers and the attraction of instant results that legal products do not promise. Male consumers who buy facial products through marketplaces rely on the same forms of testimonial knowledge as women. Research on trust shows that influencer credibility and informational support build emotional attachment that mediates consumer decisions (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023), while subjective norms and attitudes shape the purchase of personal care products in Indonesia (Amalia & Darmawan, 2023). The contest between official and counter-knowledge is summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Official knowledge and counter-knowledge in the circulation of illegal cosmetics

Domain	Official knowledge (regulator)	Counter-knowledge (traders and consumers)	Outcome
Legality	Notification number verified in the BPOM database	Printed numbers that do not match the registered product	Consumers accept a printed number as proof of legality
Safety	Laboratory testing and prohibited-ingredient lists	Safe-looking composition labels and claims of imported quality	Hazardous content remains hidden
Effectiveness	Gradual and safe results of registered products	Instant whitening shown in before-and-after testimonials	Instant results are preferred over safety
Side effects	Redness and dark spots as signs of harm	Redness and dark spots as adjustment or healing	Continued use despite visible damage
Trust	Public warnings through official channels	Personal trust in regular sellers and influencers	Official warnings are discounted

Source: Interviews, observation, and analysis of BPOM publications and promotional content, processed by the authors (2026).

These findings confirm that the circulation of illegal cosmetics is governed by the relation between power and knowledge. Power and knowledge directly imply one another, since there is no power relation without the constitution of a field of knowledge and no knowledge that does not presuppose power relations (Foucault, 1977). BPOM standards and notification numbers constitute a regime of truth that defines what is legal and safe, but in Bone this regime is contested by a counter-regime produced through testimonials, sellers' bodies, and consumers' experience. Each regime of truth is sustained by the mechanisms and instances that distinguish true from false statements (Foucault, 1980), and the counter-regime prevails locally because its mechanisms are embedded in trusted social relations while the official regime is mediated by distant institutions. This contest also explains why consumers become subjects who discipline themselves toward instant beauty standards and defend the very products that harm them. Verification literacy should therefore be delivered through local trusted networks, including village cadres, health workers, and religious and women's groups, using simple warning symbols and visible checks of notification numbers, since the effect of hazard information on consumer behaviour depends strongly on how clearly that information is designed and communicated (Boman et al., 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

The circulation of illegal cosmetics in Bone Regency persists because it is embedded in power relations rather than because regulation is absent. Power over the market is exercised by a network of regulators, brand owners, distributors, resellers, digital platforms, and consumers, so that enforcement directed at single products leaves the network intact. Regulation itself generates new business strategies, including self-made brands, mismatched notification numbers, claims of foreign origin, the retail sale of blue-label products, and low prices obtained by avoiding registration costs, while modest sanctions are absorbed as operating risks. These strategies reach consumers through a capillary structure of domicile-based resellers, social media accounts, marketplace listings, and market stalls that operates in trusted everyday relations beyond the range of supervision. Official knowledge about legality and safety competes with counter-knowledge produced through testimonials, sellers' visible skin, and consumers' own experience, which leads many users to continue using harmful products even after visible damage appears.

Weakening the illegal cosmetics trade therefore requires measures that address relations and knowledge as well as products. Collaborative supervision involving the district government, police, village authorities, and platform operators is needed to match the networked character of the trade. Credible criminal prosecution of brand owners, platform obligations to verify notification numbers, and verification literacy delivered through trusted local groups are required to reduce the incentives and the legitimacy that sustain circulation. This study is limited to one regency and to qualitative evidence from a small number of informants. Further research should compare districts with different levels of supervisory capacity and combine qualitative analysis with data on seizures, online listings, and reported adverse effects to trace how illegal cosmetics networks adapt over time.

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