
THE IMPACT OF COLOURISM IN SOCIAL MEDIA ADVERTISING ON YOUNG CONSUMERS' ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR IN MALAYSIA

Nur Ikhlas Suhaimi

Universiti Sains Malaysia
ikhlas.suhaimi@gmail.com

Nur Atikah A Rahman

Universiti Sains Malaysia
atikaharahman@usm.my

ABSTRACT

Advertising has moved towards the notion that fair skin is the ideal standard of beauty. However, exposure to social media has opened the eyes of many, to issues such as colourism. Employing Critical Race Theory, this study explores the impact of colourism in social media advertisements on young consumers' attitudes and purchasing behaviour in Malaysia. In-depth interviews were conducted on 11 active social media users aged 19 to 27 years old. Thematic analysis was used and found that consumers' awareness of colourism has caused an unfavourable attitude towards ads. Moreover, consumers' behaviour towards products advertised were mostly impacted psychologically.

Keywords: *advertising, colourism, consumer attitude, consumer behaviour, social media advertising*

INTRODUCTION

For decades, the phrase "beauty comes from within" has been highly debatable. Although it may seem subtle, fair skinned people always had more privileges compared to those with darker tones. Most often, dark skinned people are discriminated and perceived to have unattractive appearance (Hunter, 2007; Picton, 2013). Not only that, associating white skin with wealth and desirability is also perceived normal among Asian community (Rusmadi et al., 2015), where fair skinned people have more privileges such as better income, education, neighbourhoods and marriage (Hunter, 2007).

Similarly, fairer skin has always been favoured historically and traditionally in Malaysia, and regarded as the ideal beauty (Suresh, 2021). Thomas (2020) mentioned that these impulses were influenced by racialised beauty stereotypes embedded in the past of colonialism and segregation. White skin bias has caused several people, mainly women, to

settle for skin bleaching or whitening products. Malaysia has seen nearly a 100% rise in sales of skin whitening products over the past five years, making them the largest single category of cosmetics sold in the nation (Shome, 2015). Not only in cosmetics advertisements, but there are also clear signs of colourism in modelling ads, magazine editorials and television (TV) commercials for household goods (Lee, 2016).

Instances of colourism in social media advertising have also been perpetuating across several social media platforms in Malaysia such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram (Tan, 2021). Not only do they primarily employ fair-skinned models, but these ads also present visuals of brown face or blackface as well as modify the models' skin to appear fairer. According to Mitchell (2020), there is a need to bring out change in the marketing communication industry by exploring the psychological effects of whitewashing in terms of self-worth, self-image and self-esteem of dark-skinned people. Nelson (2016) also mentioned how whitewashing has affected dark-skinned children in a way that they struggle to value their self-image because they do not see good images of themselves in the media daily.

In this paper, Critical Race Theory (CRT) constantly emerge to observe the roots of colourism and its effects (De La Garza & Ono, 2016; Hall, 2018; Mitchell, 2020). However, there has been limited understanding on CRT in terms of colourism in Asian context as it is based on racism in America, discussing more on White privilege and discrimination against African American people. Although there has been discussion of colourism among Asians in America (Burton et al., 2010), the experiences and occurrences of colourism might differ in Malaysia. Therefore, it is uncertain to what extent this theory can be adopted and applied in the Asian region, specifically in Malaysian context.

In short, this paper intends to understand the impact of colourism in social media advertisements on young consumers' attitude towards the content advertised in Malaysia. This is to understand whether the practice of skin tone bias in advertising affects Malaysian youths' attitude positively or negatively. Following this, this study also aims to investigate the impact of colourism in social media advertisements on consumers' purchasing behaviour towards the products advertised in Malaysia. This gives a clarification on the effectiveness of implementing colourism in advertisements in terms of the youths' point of view.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colourism refers to the discrimination that is based on skin colour or skin tone. It is a phenomenon that is influenced by one's skin tone and favours lighter over darker skin tones (Hunter, 2007). Interestingly, Asia stands out from other continents as there was already a prolonged tradition of choosing lighter skin tones over darker skin tones (Bettache, 2020). Due to their colonial histories, colourism in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines relate more to racial features as opposed to Japan where colourism has traditionally been linked to class (Bettache, 2020). Li et al. (2008) stated "whiteness" is a key component for female beauty standards in the Asian cultures. Huey and Kaur (2019) also said that to this day, fair skin is still preferable to Asians, regardless of gender. This ingrained culture has consequently affected the perspectives of many Asian countries including Malaysia.

Several scholars have explored the instances of skin colour discrimination in advertising (Qualls & Moore, 2006; Watson et al., 2010; Mishra, 2015; Mitchell, 2020; Tipa, 2020). Colourism in advertising can be seen through the lack of representation of dark-skinned people in advertisements (Qualls & Moore, 2006). Prior studies suggest colourism in advertising occurs

commonly with women in beauty and cosmetic industries (Li et al., 2008; Jacobs et al., 2016; Nelson, 2016). Women believed that the way skin lightening cosmetics are advertised on television forces them to choose lighter skin tones because the commercials often imply that black or dark-skinned women are depressed, neglected by men and have poor self-esteem (Jacobs et al., 2016). Due to fairness being portrayed as the idealised standard of beauty and competency in the media, it has made a big influence in the purchase and use of skin lightening products (Jacobs et al., 2016). Another form of colourism in advertising is the usage of blackface or brown face in advertisements. The portrayal of blackface reminds consumer on degrading and submissive traits associated to black people (Byrne, 2016).

Social Media Advertising

Social media advertising is the process of using sponsored advertisements on social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and other platforms (Ohajionu & Mathews, 2015). The source effect and message content are considered as one of the creative elements of social media advertising (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Source effect refers to the effectiveness of an advertising impacted by the consumer's impression of the ad's source (Steyn et al., 2011). Some source effect factors include media vehicle source effects, as well as different spokesperson effects (e.g., attractiveness), ethnicity, celebrity status, and credibility, to name a few (Steyn et al., 2011).

On the other hand, the aspects of message content include visualisation and text (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Visuals would refer to the video or photo of the ad. Conversely, textual content refers to copy, headlines and slogans in the ad. This aspect refers to what the advertisers are saying to create an impression and attract the consumers (Egbeh et al., 2020). Even in textual form, a slogan or headline of an ad could also illustrate skin tone bias. For example, a Thai skincare firm, Seoul Secret had to remove an advertisement that shows two women, one with fair complexion and the other with blackface, used a controversial slogan, "white makes you win," which led to the reaction (Lim et al., 2019).

Impact of Colourism on Youths' Physical and Mental Health

According to Craddock et al. (2018), colourism can affect youths at school and college, as well as the workplace, in the criminal justice system and the media they consume. Several literatures have touched on the issue of colourism on adolescents and young adults aged between 10 to 29 years old (Irving, 2008; Elmore, 2009; Ryabov, 2013; Craddock et al., 2018; Abrams et al., 2020). Craddock et al. (2018) stated that the practices and usage of skin-lightening products are often done by older adolescents aged from 15-25 years old. The practices of skin-lightening have caused numerous physical health problems such as skin damage (Rusmadi et al., 2015), skin cancer (Jacobs et al., 2016) as well as liver and kidney failure (Agorku et al., 2016). Regardless, Rusmadi et al. (2015) found that although there is awareness on the dangers of skin-lightening products, young women in Malaysia prefer to continue using these products because they conclude that having a lighter skin tone will improve their self-satisfaction. However, with the emergence of social media, youths are now more aware of issues such as colourism due to the vast information they can find on the internet where the "standards of beauty are evolving and ethnic women are at the forefront today" (Norwood, 2015, p. 604).

Consumer Attitude towards Advertising

Attitude is an individual's personal evaluation, emotional feeling and propensity of action towards some objects or ideas (Kotler, 2000). Haddock and Maio (2008) suggests that attitude consists of three components which are cognitive, affective and behaviour. The cognitive aspect refers to the values, ideas and attributes associated with a specific object. The affective component relates to feelings or emotions associated with a particular object. According to Kumar and Raju (2013), exposure to advertisement leads to cognitions, such as memory on advertisements or the brand, which in turn will lead to attitudes, such as product liking and purchasing attitude that eventually leads to habits, such as buying the advertised product. In other words, customers who have a positive attitude towards the advertised product are more likely to make a purchase. While consumers who develop negative attitudes or behaviours (i.e., having no interest with advertised products) will have no intention of purchasing the product.

Malaysian Consumer Behaviour

According to Haddock and Maio (2008), behaviour refers to past behaviours with respect to an attitude object. Based on Muniady et al. (2014), consumer behaviour in Malaysia involves a mixed process of psychology, sociology, anthropology and economic elements. There might be a change in Malaysian consumption practices caused by unfavourable economic positions, such as a financial crisis or inflation (Chan, 2018). Muniady et al. (2014) also stated that Malaysian consumer behaviours can be affected by their lifestyle, which are conditioned and formed through their social interaction experiences particularly through their family traditions.

Loyal customers serve as information channels, informally connecting networks of associates, family and other potential customers to the product (Chan & Mansori, 2016). In addition, Smith et al. (2008) mentioned that consumption may be used to create and reinforce a sense of identity as well as to convey social distinctions. The more the brand's image matches the consumer's self-image, the more often consumers would infer that using the brand would satisfy their desire for self-esteem (Muniady et al., 2014). Due to the obvious democracy allowed in social media, the users as consumers can now interact with each other, exchange information on products and services, which forces marketing companies to change their traditional tactics to match the new needs of consumers, and communicate directly to them as individually as possible, particularly in their purchasing behaviour, by using social media as a marketing channel (Ertemel & Ammoura, 2016).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an intellectual motion that aims to explain how white supremacy is replicated and preserved as a legal, cultural and political condition, especially in the United States (De La Garza & Ono, 2016). This study has applied CRT to discuss colourism in advertising and to understand its impact on the attitude and behaviour of young consumers in Malaysia. Thus, the tenets and themes of CRT are applied to this study in the context of colourism.

Colourism in Critical Race Theory

Even though CRT is adopted in many disciplines, there are several themes in CRT that correspond to colourism. According to Mitchell (2020), there are four common themes in CRT which relate to colourism. The first theme, *interest convergence*, refers to dominant racial groups claiming to be helping, but the support is in their own self-interest underneath the surface (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). The second theme social construction is where race is a social construct dependent solely on physical traits (Mitchell, 2020). As mentioned by Hall (2018), *race* has long been constructed to designate light-skinned members of the “superior” – Caucasian race community. The use of pale skin as a “superior” race metaphor is a sociological phenomenon that stems from colourism’s remnants (Hall, 2018).

The third theme, *racialisation*, refers to the phenomenon of White people constituting stereotypes to minorities to support their own interest. However, these stereotypes may vary according to their needs (Mitchell, 2020). The fourth theme, *intersectionality*, is the concept of everyone has multiple identities that may or may not overlap. Scholars argued that identity is never legitimately described solely in terms of race, but rather as an intersection of several factors including gender, class, sexuality and nationality (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). For example, a person can be Black, gay and a republican; it is possible that the three distinct identities will intersect (Mitchell, 2020).

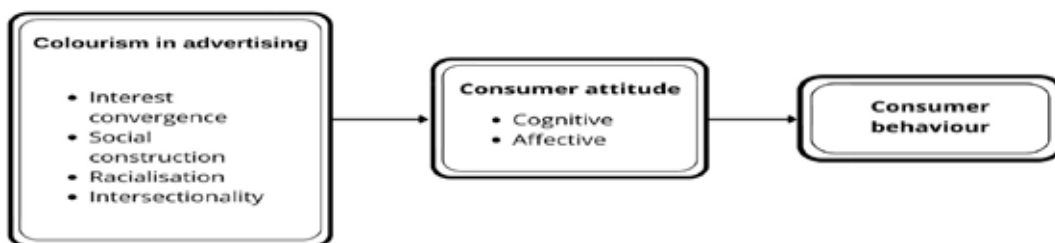


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework on The Impact of Colourism in Social Media Advertising on Consumers' Attitude and Behaviour

This study implemented the four themes above in the process of analysis. These themes were adopted in the context of Malaysia’s advertising. Regarding *interest convergence* (Mitchell, 2020), the concept is adopted to explore Malaysia’s practice of colourism in advertising. The second theme which is *social construction* (Mitchell, 2020), relates to the social construction of skin colour in Malaysian advertising. *Racialisation* (Mitchell, 2020) refers to the stereotypes of dark-skinned people in Malaysia that are imposed by the people with fair skin and in Malaysian advertising. *Intersectionality* (Mitchell, 2020) refers to the intersection of identities seen in Malaysia’s advertising practices. The themes of colourism in CRT were employed in the context of colourism in advertising, where this study then observed their impact on young consumer’s attitude. Subsequently, this study uncovers how the attitude of the consumers directly influences their behaviour towards advertising.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured in-depth interview with 11 active social media users aged from 19 to 27 years old. The data stops at 11 participants as

it has reached data saturation. The participants were chosen through a purposive sampling technique, where the main targets are Malaysian youths. Yunus and Landau (2019) considered youths from 15 to 30 years old. But this study focused only on youths between age 18 to 29 years old as this age group is the most exposed to the internet (Müller, 2021) and spend approximately six hours using social media daily (Hruska & Maresova, 2020). This is because the Internet is quickly becoming one of the most popular ways for people in business and private life to communicate and interact (Horbal et al., 2017). Not to mention, Internet (online) advertising is likely to be one of the most successful targeting strategies for online consumers (Horbal et al., 2017).

Social media was utilised to reach out to the potential participants of this study through various platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Whatsapp. The researcher has sought help from friends and acquaintances online to spread the invitation as they have a wider range of followers online who could help reach the people relevant to the research objectives. Several people expressed interest in participating in the study after the researcher had reached out through social media. For a more accurate result and to reduce time wasting, the researcher filtered the number of participants to fit the sampling criteria including youth between 18-29 years old and are active on social media. Accordingly, the difference in gender and race was allowed for this study as this study’s focus is among Malaysian youths of various skin colours. However, it was preferable to select youths who have experience with colourism.

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics	No. of Participants (N)	Participants
Gender		
Male	2	P2, P5
Female	9	P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11
Age		
19	1	P8
20	2	P6, P7
24	5	P1, P2, P3, P4, P11
25	1	P9
26	1	P5
27	1	P10
Ethnicity		
Malay	9	P1, P2, P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11
Indian	1	P4
Others	1	P5

With regards to the current COVID-19 outbreak, all the interviews were conducted through video call (Google Meet) to ensure the safety of both the participants and researcher. An Interview Protocol were given to the participants a week before their interview to allow the participants to understand the questions. The interview begins by familiarising the topic to create good relationships with participants and make them feel more comfortable to share their feelings and opinions. Considering that this research could be sensitive to some participants, the researcher established consent throughout the interviewing process by asking them if they still wish to continue (Ryan et al., 2009).

The researcher also asked for the participants' permission to audio-record the interview session. Written notes were also collected during the interview to keep record of the crucial points. The interviews continued for approximately 30 to 50 minutes. Field notes were written during the interview to keep track of the important details such as time and date of interview, a code to differentiate interviewees and titles. A total of 15 questions were asked during the interview excluding the probe questions that occasionally arise during the interviews. The questions were separated into three divisions which are demographic and research objectives.

In conducting the data analysis, thematic analysis was applied as it may provide a more detailed analysis of some aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts from the interview were analysed in three different steps, which include familiarising with the data, identifying patterns from the categories and placing them according to themes and lastly, grouping relevant quotations of the interview with regards to the identified themes. Themes help recognize something important about the data relating to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS

The research findings are divided into three parts, namely colourism in advertising; the impact of colourism on young consumers' attitude towards advertising content; and the impact of colourism on young consumers' behaviour towards products advertised.

Colourism in advertising

The form of colourism in advertising was determined by how participants explain the details of advertisements viewed across all social media platforms. The sub-theme that has been identified was *negative portrayal of dark skin*. The participants mentioned that online advertisements from beauty industries commonly showcase negative representation of dark skin. For example, Participant 4,

“...the ad mostly is like “this girl has no confidence in herself or low self-esteem” just because her skin is dark. So, then she tries out this product that basically whitens your face or brightens, lightens, any term... So, when she lightens her face, she suddenly has confidence, high self-esteem, like you know, she’s a better person...” (P4)

The quotation above suggests the instances of colourism in social media advertisements that showcase negative stereotypes of dark-skinned people. Phrases like “ugly,” “no confidence” and “low self-esteem” are used to describe how the advertisements portray people with dark skin, implying that being dark skinned has a negative connotation.

The Impact of Colourism on Young Consumers' Attitude towards Advertising Content

Colourism in advertising affects two types of attitudes which are cognitive and affective. The deducted themes on understanding the impact of colourism on young consumers' attitude towards advertising content consist of *cognitive* and *affective aspects of consumer attitude*.

Cognitive Aspect of Consumer Attitude

The attitude of the consumers is based on the participants' reaction and impression towards the content of the advertisements such as values, ideas, and attributes connected with a certain object (Haddock & Maio, 2008). The sub-themes identified for the cognitive aspects of consumer attitude are *influence of public figures, lack of correlation, past experience at young age, indirect negative message in ad, awareness on colourism, unappealing visuals and misleading information*.

Influence of public figures

Public figures are one of the factors that influence a consumer attitude towards an advertisement (Mishra, 2015; Tan, 2021; Tan, 2021). The participants indicated that the role of public figures in educating as well as representing the people is important. For example,

“...There are not many idols or actresses who have darker skin, like making appearances in ads and umm yeah, there's not much– it still can be counted, those who have relatively darker complexion in this industry...” (P5)

Lack of correlation

Results also found that cognitive aspect of consumer's attitude includes consumers' perception on the relevancy of the advertisement to capture their interest. Specifically, consumer engagement is influenced by how well a company communicates its messages - through visual content (Okoli, 2016). However, the visual material must be relatable enough to capture the interest of the audience. For instance,

“...the way our skin tone looks, our pigmentation looks, doesn't affect our confidence... it shouldn't affect our confidence. It should not define how hard we work; it should not define how we portray ourselves. But the way the ads show that people with darker skin tone is someone who lacks strength, confidence, self-esteem and they always look tired. But it doesn't, it's just skin tone, it's just colour. We all are just human beings, we move the same, we have the same strength, we have the same effort... I don't think it's quite correct to show that...” (P1)

The quotation above indicates that most of the content of the advertisements have no correlation with what they are promoting. Thus, this has negatively affected the consumers' attitude towards the ad content.

Past experience at young age

Furthermore, the findings also showed that young consumers can also be affected by their experience with a similar advertisement involving colourism. Besides that, their personal experience with colourism at a younger age can also affect them negatively. According to Participant 11,

“...And back then they're always like “Kau ni gelap la”, you know how aunties are when they see you, “Kau ni gelap la”, “Anak angkat la”, “Kau dah terlebih kicap la”, those types of comments. So, when it's 2017, you grow up, and you started to embrace your skin colour, and suddenly these things are coming back and then, you supposedly want to depict your inner beauty, true love exists despite being

dark skinned like... stupid, in a way. Like, that is a very bad way to execute your ideas actually..."

Indirect negative message in ad

In addition, findings also concluded that consumers' interest can be determined if the visualisation and text in the advertisement appeal to them. Results indicated that participants perceived that there are underlying or messages behind a certain content of an advertisement, which leads to negative perception of the advertisement.

Awareness on colourism

Moreover, results also showed that youth are now more aware of colourism due to the easy access of information online. Online accessibility undeniably benefits youths in terms of empirical medical knowledge, digital exposure, creativity, self-awareness, a feeling of identity and civic involvement (Kusuma, 2020).

"...I think it was social media and my friends. I think my friends; they were either African or they were Islanders like from New Zealand or from Samoa. So, they all had darker skin tones and I just always thought they were pretty. So obviously with social media at the time, I think darker skin toned models came out. I think it's from my own perspective because umm, I just saw how confident they were in embracing their own beauty. So, it made me feel confident as well..." (P8)

Unappealing visuals

Results also illustrate that the participants discussed their thoughts on the visuals of the advertisements and whether they appeal to them or not.

"...The visual was actually like; you could see it was also a cheap production. Umm, and also the visual, it wasn't very impactful. It didn't actually disturb me or anything. I feel like this is kind of like a cheap promotion for some people, maybe believe that colour- skin colour actually plays a vital role in the society..." (P7)

The quotation above showed that the ad visuals did not appeal to them and words such as "cheap production" and "unappealing" reinforce the study's analysis as a negative attitude.

Misleading information

When it comes to obtaining information regarding product characteristics, buyers frequently rely on companies. To take advantage of this, some companies utilised 'false advertising', which involves making inaccurate or exaggerated product promises (Rhodes & Wilson, 2018).

"...They had this trick to measure your skin colour. Then after a while... They included numbers like after 2 weeks or after 3 weeks of using the product your skin will go to a different colour which is a brighter colour..." (P3)

The quotations above showed that advertisements nowadays include inaccurate or exaggerated promises about the product, affecting their judgement towards the product and the brand.

Affective Aspect of Consumer Attitude

The affective attitude of the consumers is based on the participants' feelings or emotions towards the content of the advertisements (Haddock & Maio, 2008). The sub-themes identified for the affective aspects of consumer attitude are *understanding the perspective of others*, *annoyed by ad*, *feeling of disappointment* and *offended by ad*.

Understanding the perspective of others

Although some consumers might not relate to the advertisements, there is a possibility that the ad can affect another person where they can empathise with others. Participants indicated that they think about the perspectives of children and teenagers after watching the ads.

“...Especially if kids watch it and then they tend– ‘Cause I’ve seen people, I mean I’ve seen kids playing around going like “Oh, kau dah la hitam!” you know? Umm, it becomes an insult, instead of people embracing people with dark skin. I feel like it’s not good...” (P10)

Annoyed by the ad

Additionally, consumers may also either establish positive or negative attitudes towards the ad after the exposure and participation in the ads (Kok et al., 2013). Consumers who develop negative attitudes or behaviours will most likely have no intention of purchasing the product. For example, participant 4 felt annoyed after watching an advertisement.

“...Sometimes I report the ad you know? I’m angry towards the ad so maybe sometimes I would say I don’t like this ad; you know I can’t relate to the ad...” (P4)

Feeling of disappointment

Disappointment can be described as a sense of sadness or displeasure induced by the failure to meet one’s wishes or expectations. Based on the results, participants have mentioned feeling disappointed after watching the content of the advertisements as well as the culture in the nation.

Offended by the ad

Moreover, results also indicated that when the content of the advertisement has unpleasant or insensitive content, consumers may feel offend, that can come from both visual and textual content.

“...I’m confused that “are you sending to the wrong person? Or are you sending it to the right person?” in such a way. I’m quite a little bit awkward about it because I didn’t want to, like, highlight it that I’m a tanned person. I don’t need it. And I also don’t want to be white [laughs]. So basically, it wasn’t necessary to be honest...” (P9)

The Impact of Colourism on Young Consumers’ Behaviour towards Product Advertised

Similar with past literature on consumer behaviour, the themes that emerge in terms of consumer behaviour on colourism in advertising include *psychological impact*, looking into the impact of colourism mentally, *cultural impact* which consists of family traditions, social

status and social media culture, and lastly, the *marketing impact* which refers to the brand's approach on advertising the products.

Psychological Impact on Consumer Behaviour

According to Muniady et al. (2014), consumer behaviour in Malaysia involves the process of psychology. Likewise, results showed several sub-themes such as *mental effects of colourism, reaffirmation by others, disgusted by product, concerned of product ingredients and past experience with products*.

Mental effects of colourism

According to the results, participants shared that there are mental effects of colourism in their purchasing decisions. For example,

"...I used to make– like, wanted to be so light. I actually tried not just one product, like I've actually stopped doing sports because I thought sunblock wouldn't just like– you know, like even going out would actually make me dark. It was like, bad, because– just because of my own mindset saying that I'm thinking that I'm dark you know..." (P7)

Reaffirmation by others

Participants also disclose that they consume a certain product to reaffirm other people's perception on whether to buy or avoid the advertised product. Specifically,

"...I think first of all the main reason why I purchased the product before was because of what people around me are saying... they do think that people with lighter skin tones are prettier... you know? And when I see the ads, it just reaffirms what I heard. So, I think that "oh maybe I should purchase this product so I can become whiter! I can become fairer! so that I can feel whatever the people around me are saying because in this product it is shown that everyone can be fair..." (P1)

Disgusted by product

The findings also illustrate that consumers express their feelings (positive or negative) on the products advertised based on their prior experience. Some are disgusted due to the content that shows misleading, nonsense and cringe messages that has elements of colourism.

Concerned of product ingredients

Most of the participants have also shared their concerns about the quality of the product and how that can influence their product purchase. Participant 4 mentioned,

"...Sometimes I'm curious whether that product really can make our skin fair, like a few tones different in a few weeks itself... And also, did they really use good ingredients inside it? Like you will never know until you use the product, right? 'Cause some products they use mercury..." (P4)

Past experience with products

Besides price and quality, prior experience is crucial in determining a product's worth (Akir & Othman, 2010) and it can affect a person's behaviour toward purchasing or repurchasing a product.

“...Uhh no, it didn’t have any like, side effects from my using... Obviously there’s like really bad chemicals in whitening products but I didn’t have any of those. But it did affect me like, mentally. It was just like, “Why do I need to do this type of thing?” It just made me realise, “Oh yeah, thanks” (P8)

The quotation above suggests the participants have purchased skin lightening products and had negative experience with the products in the past. This may affect their behaviour towards the products advertised as they are mostly skin lightening products and skincare products.

Cultural Impact on Consumer Behaviour

The behaviour of the consumers in this section is based on the cultural impact and how it affects their purchasing decision. The sub-themes identified for the cultural impact of consumer behaviour are *influence of family*, *influence of social status* and *social media influence*. The influence of family and upbringing have an effect on consumer’s behaviour towards a product. The participants have shared similar experiences, to a certain extent when it comes to family traditions,

“...I think it was my mom as well, because she did have, like, insecurity– until now, she still has insecurities about her skin tone, she always wants to be paler, so I think it affected me as well. She did also like– But now she likes how confident I am in my own skin. So, I just hope one day she will as well...” (P8)

The quotation above suggests that consumer behaviour can be affected by family members and their traditions when growing up. Most of the participants shared that their family members were the reason they purchased skin lightening products. Other than that, the social status of a person can also affect consumer’s behaviour such as financial crisis or inflation. And recently, with the emergence of social media, consumers’ lifestyle is showing signs of paradigm shifts. People are more aware on whitewashing issues as well as how to appreciate someone’s beauty, regardless of their skin tone.

Marketing Impact on Consumer Behaviour

This study also found that participants perceived that marketing could affect their purchasing behaviour. The sub-themes identified for the marketing impact of consumer behaviour are the *importance of brand’s marketing approach* and *reaction from the ad*. For example,

“...I think they want attention for them. Because they have their products, so they have an established product, so they need to get attention right from the people? So, they will post this offensive ad to get attention, and then they will take down, the media will be like “Oh sorry we apologize. But you can just still buy our products.” Yeah, that’s like a very normal social media tactic to get attention, right? Ya, it’s a marketing strategy. Even the negative attention is still attention. Like there are more people knowing their brand. They can intentionally use the issue to raise attention, to get people to know their products...” (P4)

The quotation above showed that the brand’s marketing approach has an impact towards the consumer behaviour. Most of the participants feel that the brands in Malaysia are using colourism in their advertising as a marketing tactic. The participants also shared that the

brands that they noticed have been using colourism in their advertisements are small local brands compared to big brands.

DISCUSSION

The findings showed that the most common instances of colourism seen on advertisements in Malaysia are negative portrayal of dark skin. The negative portrayal of dark skin comes in different forms such as blackface, associate dark skin with low confidence and self-esteem, fair skin as the ideal skin tone and dark skin is dirty and ugly.

Using storytelling suggested by CRT, consumers shared that there is preferential treatment towards fair skinned people in advertisements based on their knowledge and experience of colourism. CRT aims to demonstrate how something that is seen as "normal" involves a strong and deep prejudice towards white culture (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Consumers mentioned that from their experience, they often receive backhanded compliment about their skin colour, indicating a negative connotation and prejudice towards dark skin despite it being an innocent comment.

Although race is the main component of CRT, this study focuses on colourism within the racial groups in Malaysia as the use of light skin as a "superior" race metaphor is a sociological phenomenon that stems from the traces of colourism (Hall, 2018). This study found that colour caste systems exist in Malaysia, which legitimise various opportunities and social positions based on skin tone differences and phenotypic features (Burton et al., 2010), particularly in social media advertisements in Malaysia.

The negative portrayal of dark skin in these ads has also confirmed the themes of colourism in CRT. The first theme of colourism is *interest convergence* which refers to dominant racial groups claiming to be helping, but the support is in their own self-interest underneath the surface (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). This element of colourism can be seen in Malaysia's practice of advertising, where the insertion of colourism is done to profit their own businesses.

The second theme is *social construction*, where race is a social construct dependent solely on physical traits (Mitchell, 2020). This relates to the social construction of skin colour in Malaysian advertising where they associate skin colour with beauty and self-worth.

The third theme is *racialisation* which refers to the phenomenon of White people constituting stereotypes to minorities in order to support themselves to their own interest (Mitchell, 2020). This describes the Malaysian prejudices towards dark-skinned individuals enforced by persons with fair complexion, as well as the negative stereotypes mentioned by the participants that they have seen in Malaysian advertising.

The fourth theme is *intersectionality*. The concept of intersectionality is that everyone has multiple identities that may or may not overlap. Identity is never properly defined merely in terms of race, but rather as a combination of numerous elements such as gender, class, sexuality, and nationality (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). The intersection of identities of dark-skinned people can be seen in Malaysia's advertising, however it is commonly portrayed in a negative way and the context is usually the same in every advertisement. For example, all the participants described the dark-skinned characters in the ads as women who appear low class and unworthy of attention and affection. Thus, all the themes of colourism in CRT can be used to describe colourism in Malaysian advertising.

As CRT is founded on the American experience of racism and colourism (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011), the findings demonstrate that colourism in America is comparable to that in Malaysia. Although Malaysia's deep-seated culture of colourism may be grounded by European colonisation (Burton et al., 2010), the practice of colourism in American media, which is fairly recognised worldwide, might be one of the causes for its persistence. However, the fast-growing trends in America where "bronze skin" is currently celebrated (Huey & Kaur, 2019), might also possibly influence a change in the practice of colourism in Malaysia's advertising. There are a few beauty brands in Malaysia that have shown more inclusivity towards dark skinned people in their advertisements as well as the products that they sell, according to the participants. Although colourism in Malaysian advertising may gradually stop, it is impossible to say if colourism in Malaysian culture will ever cease as it is too embedded within the lifestyle of not only Malaysians, but Asians in general.

In terms of the cognitive aspects of attitude, the participants' impression towards the ad had changed due to the knowledge on colourism they had gained from social media. Not only does the current advanced technology provide information at your fingertips, but the existence of social media allows people to interact and discuss various issues with one another (Kusuma, 2020). Thus, they can share their experiences and knowledge on colourism as well as celebrate each other's differences.

While in the affective aspect, the consumers felt a sense of empathy towards others, especially those younger than them. The findings indicate that the practice of colourism in advertising affects young consumers, both male and female, negatively. However, the results show that colourism in advertising might have a positive impact towards adolescents or teenagers, in terms of their attitude in purchasing the products advertised. Similarly, Irving (2008) noted that most adolescents have a difficult time finding an identity that is both individualistic and distinct while simultaneously conforming to the multiple sociocultural pressures. The participants mentioned that they would have purchased the product advertised in their teenage years, indicating that the ad is convincing teenagers.

Findings also found that psychological impact of colourism in advertising towards the consumer behaviour was seen the most compared to other aspects. The past experience with skin lightening products had a big influence on the consumers' behaviour towards the product advertised. Furthermore, psychological impact can be interconnected with cultural impact in terms of family traditions. The infatuation towards fair skin in the family culture can affect the consumers psychologically by making them believe that fair skin is the ideal skin tone. Thus, making them purchase skin lightening products.

Nonetheless, young consumers who are on the right platforms are no longer buying into the usage of colourism as a marketing strategy. It can be seen that local brands in Malaysia are known to use insensitive issues and misleading information to gain attention for their products. Youths who are in the right circle whether in family traditions, friends, or social media platforms, however, become less interested in purchasing the product advertised after being used to this common marketing scheme.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has found that consumers have unfavourable attitudes towards colourism in advertising due to their awareness of colourism and their empathetic nature to worry about others. This study also discovered psychological, cultural, and marketing

impact of colourism in advertising on consumers' behaviour. The Critical Race Theory has also been applied in this study to identify and recognise the instances of colourism in the advertisements in Malaysia.

There are a few recommendations for future studies based on the gaps of this study. Future researchers should investigate the impact of colourism in advertising on adolescents and their purchasing behaviour towards skin whitening products in this social media age as it is revealed by the participants that their experiences with colourism started at a younger age. Moreover, investigation and comparison of the impact of colourism among the three main races in Malaysia is crucial to explore differences in perspectives and experiences. Based on the lack of coherent theoretical framework, researchers should develop a theoretical framework to explain colourism extensively. CRT focuses on racial inequality among White and Black Americans, however there should be an addition to discuss the preference and prejudice of lighter-skinned Black Americans over darker-skinned Black Americans to give a better understanding of colourism in the perspective of CRT.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, J. A., Belgrave, F. Z., Williams, C. D., & Maxwell, M. L. (2020). African American adolescent girls' beliefs about skin tone and colorism. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 46(2-3), 169-194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798420928194>
- Agorku, E. S., Kwaansa-Ansah, E. E., Voegborlo, R. B., Amegbletor, P., & Opoku, F. (2016). Mercury and hydroquinone content of skin toning creams and cosmetic soaps, and the potential risks to the health of Ghanaian women. *SpringerPlus*, 319(5), 1-5. DOI: 10.1186/s40064-016-1967-1
- Akir, O., & Othman, M. N. (2010). Consumers' shopping behaviour pattern on selected consumer goods: empirical evidence from Malaysian consumers. *International Review of Business Research Papers*, 6(4), 279 – 294.
- Ashley, C., & Tuten, T. (2015). Creative strategies in social media marketing: An exploratory study of branded social content and consumer engagement. *Psychology and Marketing*, 32(1), 15–27.
- Bettache, K. (2020). A call to action: the need for a cultural psychological approach to discrimination on the basis of skin color in Asia. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(4), 1131–1139.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. DOI:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Burton, L. M., Bonilla-Silva, E., Ray, V., Buckelew, R., & Freeman, E. H. (2010). Critical race theories, colorism, and the decade's research on families of color. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 440-459. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00712.x
- Byrne, K. (2016). The tautology of blackface and the objectification of racism: A "how-to" guide. *The European Legacy*, 21(7), 664.
- Chan, K. Y. (2018). The experiences of Malaysian youth with Korean cosmetic product. *BERJAYA Journal of Services & Management*, 9, 101-114.
- Chan, Y. Y., & Mansori, S. (2016). Factor that influences consumers' brand loyalty towards cosmetic products. *Journal of Marketing Management and Consumer Behavior*, 1(1), 12-29.

- Craddock, N., Dlova, N., & Diedrichs, P. C. (2018). Colourism: A global adolescent health concern. *Current Opinion in Pediatrics*, 30(4), 472-477.
- De La Garza, A. T., & Ono, K. A. (2016). Critical race theory. In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy* (Vol. 1, pp. 1-9). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. DOI:10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect260
- Egbeh, P.C., Oguguo, F.C., Edomobi, O., & Iwuoha, B.C. (2020). Advertising and the social media: A synthesis. *International Journal of Innovative Information Systems & Technology Research*, 8(3), 25-36.
- Elmore, T. G. (2009). *Colorism in the classroom: an exploration of adolescents' skin tone, skin tone preferences, perceptions of skin tone stigma and identity* [Dissertation]. <https://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI3395695>
- Ertemel, A. V., & Ammoura, A. (2016). The role of social media advertising in consumer buying behavior. *International Journal of Commerce and Finance*, 2(1), 81-89.
- Haddock, G., & Maio, G. R. (2008). Attitudes: Content, structure and functions. In *Introduction to social psychology: A European perspective* (4th ed., pp. 112-133). Oxford: BPS Blackwell.
- Hall, R. E. (2018). The globalization of light skin colorism: From critical race to critical skin theory. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(14), 2133–2145. DOI: 10.1177/0002764218810755
- Horbal, N., Naychuk-Khrushch, M.B., & Orlykova, B. (2017). Internet advertising: The specifics, tendencies of development and impact on sales. *Econtechmod. An International Quarterly Journal*, 6(1), 37–46.
- Hruska, J., & Maresova, P. (2020). Use of social media platforms among adults in the United States—behavior on social media. *Societies*, 10(27), 1-14. doi:10.3390/soc10010027
- Huey, F. C., & Kaur, S. (2019). Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest 'hunk' of them all? Negotiating a masculine notion of skin whitening for Malaysian men. *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 11(1), 57-76.
- Hunter, M. (2007). The persistent problem of colorism: skin tone, status, and inequality. *Sociology Compass*, 1(1), 237-254.
- Irving, J. A. (2008). *An exploration of the influence of media, advertising, and popular culture on the self-esteem, identity, and body image in adolescent Girls* (Masters Thesis) Smith College, Northampton, MA.
- Jacobs, M., Levine, S., Abney, K., & Davids, L. (2016). Fifty shades of African lightness: A bio-psychosocial review of the global phenomenon of skin lightening practices. *Journal of Public Health in Africa*, 7(2), 67-70. DOI:10.4081/jphia.2016.552
- Kok, A. L.-M., Teoh, B. W., Hussin, M., & Nik Mat, N. K. (2013). The predictors of attitude towards online advertising. *International Journal of Applied Psychology*, 3(1), 7-12.
- Kotler, P. (2000). *Marketing management: The millennium edition*. Prentice Hall.
- Kumar, D.P., & Raju, K. V. (2013). The role of advertising in consumer decision making. *Journal of Business and Management*, 14(4), 37-45.
- Kusuma, A. (2020, December). Impact of social media on youth. ResearchGate. Retrieved April 23, 2021, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347437746_Impact_of_Social_Media_on_Youth
- Lee, E. Y.J. (2016). Why do so many Asian brands hire white models? *High Snobiety*. Retrieved April 6, 2021, from <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/asian-fashion-brands-white-models/>

- Li, E. P.H., Hyun, J. M., Belk, R. W., Kimura, J., & Bahl, S. (2008). Skin lightening and beauty in four Asian cultures. *Advances in consumer research. Association for Consumer Research (U.S.)*, 35, 444-449.
- Lim, S. S., Puspanathan, C. A., Balwant Singh, N. S., & Subramaniam, D. C. R. (2019). Does dark complexion matter? A comparative analysis of selected online advertisements from Watsons and Guardian in 2017. *International Journal of Management, Innovation & Entrepreneurial Research*, 5(1), 01-09.
- Littlejohn, S. W., & Foss, K. A. (2011). *Theories of human communication* (10th ed.). Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press.
- Mishra, N. (2015). India and colorism: The finer nuances. *Washington University Global Studies Law Review*, 14(4), 725-750.
- Mitchell, T. A. (2020). Critical race theory (CRT) and colourism: A manifestation of whitewashing in marketing communications? *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(13-14), 1366-1389.
- Muniady, R., Al Mamun, A., Permarupan, P. Y., & Zainol, N. R. (2014). Factors influencing consumer behavior: A study among university students in Malaysia. *Asian Social Science*, 10(9), 18-25. DOI:10.5539/ass.v10n9p18
- Nelson, K. (2016). Where 's the representation? The impact of white washing on black children. Academic Symposium of Undergraduate Scholarship, 35. Retrieved May 9, 2021, from https://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/ac_symposium/35
- Norwood, K. J. (2015). "If You Is White, You's alright..." Stories about colorism in America. *Washington University Global Studies Law Review*, 14(4), 585-607.
- Ohajionu, U. C., & Mathews, S. (2015). Advertising on social media and benefits to brands. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 10(2), 335-351.
- Okoli, D. (2016). *Visual content, social commerce and consumer behaviour* [Dissertation], Northumbria University City Campus.
- Picton, O. (2013). The complexities of complexion: a cultural geography of skin colour and beauty products. *Geography*, 98(2), 85-92.
- Qualls, W., & Moore, D. (2006). Stereotyping effects on consumers' evaluation of advertising: impact of racial differences between actors and viewers. *Psychology and Marketing*, 7(2), 135-151.
- Rhodes, A., & Wilson, C. M. (2018). False advertising. *The RAND Journal of Economics*, 49(2), 348-369. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1756-2171.12228>
- Rusmadi, S. Z., Syed Ismail, S. N., & Praveena, S. M. (2015). Preliminary study on the skin lightening practice and health symptoms among female students in Malaysia. *Journal of Environmental and Public Health*, 4, 1-6. DOI: 10.1155/2015/591790
- Ryabov, I. (2013). Colorism and school-to-work and school-to-college transitions of African American adolescents. *Race and Social Problems*, 5(1), 15-27. DOI 10.1007/s12552-012-9081-7
- Ryan, F., Cronin, P., & Coughlan, M. (2009). Interviewing in qualitative research. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, 16(6), 309-314. DOI:10.12968/ijtr.2009.16.6.42433
- Shome, D. (2015, April 1). *Why you should be wary of skin-lightening products*. The Health Site. <https://www.thehealthsite.com/beauty/why-you-should-be-wary-of-skin-lightening-products-18926/>

- Smith, J. R., Terry, D. J., Manstead, A. S. R., & Louis, W. R. (2008). The attitude–behavior relationship in consumer conduct: the role of norms, past behavior, and self-identity. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 148*(3), 311-333. DOI: 10.3200/SOCP.148.3.311-334
- Steyn, P., Ewing, M. T., Heerden, G. V., Pitt, L. F., & Windisch, L. (2011). From whence it came: Understanding source effects in consumer-generated advertising. *International Journal of Advertising, 30*(1), 133-160.
- Suresh, S. (2021, February 4). *Why brownface is dangerous and (really) not funny*. Buro. Retrieved May 11, 2021, from <https://www.buro247.my/culture/malaysians-brownface-problem.html>
- Tan, M. Z. (2021, January 25). Malaysian musician Haoren defends use of brownface to promote skin whitening drink. *Malay Mail*. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/showbiz/2021/01/25/malaysian-musician-haoren-defends-use-of-brownface-to-promote-skin-whitenin/1943825>
- Tan, M. Z. (2021, February 17). Blackface... Again: Malaysian celeb Syatilla Melvin the latest to don racist makeup in Tiktok video. *Malay Mail*. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/showbiz/2021/02/17/blackface...-again-malaysian-celeb-syatilla-melvin-the-latest-to-don-racist/1950495>
- Thomas, L. M. (2020, November 30). *The skin lightening industry's history of colorism and the impact of black lives matter*. Quartz Africa. <https://qz.com/africa/1939107/black-lives-matters-impact-on-skin-lightener-marketing-colorism/>
- Tipa, J. (2020). Colourism in commercial and governmental advertising in Mexico: 'International Latino,' racism and ethics. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 15*(2), 112–128. doi: <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.379>
- Watson, S., Thornton, C. G., & Engelland, B. T. (2010). Skin color shades in advertising to ethnic audiences: the case of African Americans. *Journal of Marketing Communications, 16*(4), 185-201. DOI: 10.1080/13527260802707585
- Yunus, A., & Landau, E. (2019, July 3). 'Youth' now defined as those between 15 and 30. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved April 25, 2021, from <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/07/501288/youth-now-defined-those-between-15-and-30>