

“The Fairest of Them All”: Analysis of Skin Whitening Advertisements in Malaysian English Women’s Magazines

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Abstract

Women have desired to attain fair skin for countless of decades, a beauty standard culturalised by the mass media. There has been a deep traditional belief that fair skin is associated with higher social status and wealth, creating a preference for fair skinned women, regardless of gender. To understand this preoccupation better, a content analysis study onto five skin whitening magazine advertisements is conducted to analyse its advertisement contents, too see if these have contributed to shaping women’s thoughts and behaviour towards attaining fair skin. These skin whitening advertisements are publish in fashion magazines circulated in Malaysia, and target women as its audience. Several themes are identified by the researcher, focusing on images and words used alongside these products to attract readers when disseminating information on the product. These findings are then recorded and interpreted to derive to the conclusion of this study, revealing that advertisements in mass media do play a significant role in shaping the perception of ‘ideal’ beauty among women, particularly through symbolic association.

Keywords: Skin whitening, Advertisement, Women, Magazine, Content analysis

Mentakrif Putih Itu Cantik: Analisis Iklan Produk Pencerahan Kulit Dalam Majalah Wanita Terpilih

Abstrak

Kajian berkenaan pemaparan iklan produk kecantikan sejak dahulu lagi telah membuktikan bahawa keinginan wanita untuk memiliki kulit cerah dan cantik telah berakar umbi dan dipupuk berdekad lamanya dan terus berkembang menjadi piawai kecantikan yang dibentuk dan diperkuatkan oleh institusi media massa. Berdasarkan kepercayaan popular, kulit cerah dan cantik biasanya dikaitkan dengan status dan kedudukan sosial yang lebih tinggi. Hal ini memupuk prioriti untuk seseorang wanita memiliki kulit cerah untuk mencapai standard cantik. Untuk memahami isu ini dengan lebih baik, analisis kandungan kualitatif ke atas lima sampel iklan majalah produk pencerahan kulit telah dijalankan. Kajian ini ingin melihat apakah kandungan sedemikian boleh menyumbang kepada pemaparan yang membentuk pemikiran dan mendorong perlakuan wanita untuk memiliki kulit putih yang cantik. Iklan produk pencerahan kulit ini diterbitkan dalam majalah fesyen yang diedarkan di Malaysia, dan mensasarkan wanita sebagai pembacanya. Beberapa tema telah dikenalpasti oleh para penyelidik. Tumpuan dalam sampel kajian diberi kepada imej dan teks yang digunakan bersama produk ini untuk menarik perhatian pembaca melalui maklumat dan paparan produk tersebut. Dapatan kajian ini merumuskan bahawa iklan dalam media massa telah membentuk persepsi kecantikan 'ideal' dalam kalangan wanita melalui penggunaan simbolik dalam imej dan teks.

Kata Kunci: *Pencerahan kulit, Iklan, Wanita, Majalah, Analisis Kandungan*

Introduction

Wanting to look beautiful is synonymous with women. Even so, being beautiful is never the same for everyone, as beauty standards depend on social and cultural influence in determining the level of "attractiveness." In Southeast Asia for instance, its idea of beautiful is to have fair and flawless skin. Women go to great lengths in their quest to attain this

beauty standard, spending thousands every year including purchasing products that shield their skin against sun rays (Kamran, 2010).

According to Jones (2013), fair skin is seek after due to positive associations of better social status and wealth. This symbolic connotation is understood to stem from the traditional cultural belief that fair skin people are exempt from laborious work, often under the sun, which enables them to preserve their natural paleness, unaffected their original skin tone, indicating a privileged status (Jones, 2013). The stigma of having dark skin continues as men show a higher preference for fair skin women, particularly in the Indian community, and being married to the latter brings them a sense of pride (Nakamura, 2015).

Similarly, Al-Adaleih (2012) believes colours of black and white too carry its symbolism and association. Black can mean mischief, death, evilness, and a person consumed with hate words described as a black-hearted person. White is a polar opposite association, relating it to innocence, purity, and peace (Al-Adaleih, 2012).

Moreover, favouring of skin colour in the mass media has only worsened the situation, reinforcing the cultural standard of beauty by equating fair people with higher physical attractiveness, apart from transmitting economic and political importance in society (Xie & Zhang, 2013; Malefy & Moeran, 2003).

Problem Statement

As technology in media expands, physical appearance is given greater weightage, creating consciousness towards beauty (Wolf, 2002). Physical appearance creates a burgeoning demand for skin whitening products, encouraging companies to jump on the bandwagon and mass produce with minimal concern for health effects. In a study by Siti Zulaikha, et al. (2015), 60 percent of recorded sales in the Asian skincare market attributed to skin lightening products, and it is currently a multimillion-dollar global industry.

This discussion in this paper is focused onto magazine commercials of fair skin equals beauty. Much is said about advertising's powerful

and persuasive influence over audience's attitude and behaviour. Advertisement reflects a society's aspirations through its socio-cultural narratives with the use of perfected images, creating a desire for people to attain such level of perfection.

In these magazine advertisements, its stereotypical depiction of women especially, is extensive. has been propagating fair skin as the ideal beauty and makes it as a factor to attain anything in life. This is viewed as racism in beauty and is demoting a woman's capabilities to solely depend on physical appearance.

This portrayal is not limited to advertisements in Asia alone. Countries like the United States and Australia too have promoting stereotypical roles of women, in which traditional roles are preferred, omitting women's actual potential. Such phenomenon is related to Gerbner's cultivation analysis, to delve on media effects. Based on the theory, it is believed that heavy media consumption can overwhelm audiences, cultivating normative ideas on existing cultural constructs of body image and gender roles. Reinforcement of this later dominated the media, exerting a hegemonic process.

Advertisement concepts like substance, music and pictures, paralanguage, situation, co-text, intertext, participants, and function are all analysed to describe how the influence occur. It can be said that these women characters in the advertisement were only able to get social approval from friends, family, and society after seeing results of fairer skin. It shows how women are objectified and this increased marginalization onto people of darker skin. A woman's capabilities and talent is undermined by her skin colour.

It is difficult to eradicate such hegemonic representation of women in advertisements as constant use of it has made it become normalized. Therefore, more scholarly engagement is hoped to be able to turn the table around.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the images (model, objects) used in English language women's magazine advertisements?
- 2) What are the words used in English language women's magazine advertisements?

Research Objectives

- 1) To examine the images (models and objects) used in English language women's magazine advertisements.
- 2) To identify the words used in English language fashion women's magazine advertisements.

Realizing the powerful influence carried by mass media, particularly in the scope of beauty advertisements, this study will analyse the relationship between advertisement contents regarding visual and words, and how it reinforces fair skin as the ideal beauty. This study will be based on five print advertisements appearing in Malaysian English circulated women's magazines which targets women as consumers.

Literature Review

Images

With more and more skin whitening products made available in the market, advertisers need to stand out from the crowd. Applying effective images such as beautiful models, or even objects complementing the product into an advertisement is one of the strategies to coerce consumers to make purchases. According to Dyer (1988, 92), proper placement of models or objects are required. At times, these too can substitute words, developing strong associations of ideas, interpreted from the symbols (Barthes, 1977). Mizerski and White (1986) further explained this strategy through the example of a soda drink advertisement, whereby a Fanta drink was taken from a refrigerator, to denote a sense of refreshing environment and coolness.

Words

Words carry advertisement's messages, arousing consumers' inner desires and sense of ownership, and is a focal necessity in getting the

meaning across. Its strategies include emotional words and glittering generality to attract consumers towards the selling point of the product. In a study by Burke and Edell (1989), advertisers use 'feeling words' to make viewers feel strongly about the portrayed individual or product. This strategy triggers the subconscious mind, making one feel guilty, sad, or happy through its word play (Burke & Edell, 1989), thus presenting and effective advertising.

Glittering generality, on the other hand, is a presentation of words informing consumers what they want to hear. This may sound factual, for instance, "XX product is non-chemical, and made fully of natural ingredients," but at the same time, could be inaccurate as it could not be examined by viewers (Wallis, 2007). Often, words of virtue such as peace, love, goodness, and home are incorporated to stir positive feelings (Wallis, 2007), subconsciously persuading consumers to try it for themselves.

Role of Skin Whitening Products

The formation of beauty standards particularly given skin colour, as presented by mass media, has left a burgeoning negative effect on society. While it may not seem obvious to the naked eye, constant pressure to conform to this standard has disempowered women, as it is not attainable by all (Ford, 2004).

Promises for easy and quick results in solving beauty problems is the reason why such products are so appealing. Skin whitening advertisements constantly convince consumers that the 'ideal' colour is an achievable goal, by portraying its advertisement model turning progressively fairer after constant use of their products (Jha, 2016; Chaipraditkul, 2013). This has increased women's expectations for faster and successful results, posing a health threat if its ingredients are not scrutinized.

Women's Magazines and Fashion Magazines

Advertising is one of the strongest communication tools in mass media. While it is informative regarding introducing products and services available in the market, it also can influence consumers' thoughts and behaviour (Asma, et al., 2014). Among the mediums used to spread

advertisement is through women's and fashion magazines.

Conlin and Bissell (2014) explained fashion magazine to encompass published articles and illustrations of beauty, lifestyle, health or fitness and targets women as its audience. While it can be educational, it does not go into deep details as magazines are meant for light reading (Conlin & Bissell, 2014). It is also easily found, as it is sold at grocery and convenience stores.

In a survey conducted by Synovate Malaysia, 51% of women in reading one or more fashion magazines (Alagappan & Selvaratnam, 2014). Though the researchers could not identify the exact number of readers, another source has revealed a staggering number of readerships for both Malaysia and Singapore, totaling up about 1 million readers (Magazine, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework draws a relationship between the two constructive variables; images used in advertisements, words used in advertisements, and their implication to skin whitening product advertisement contents in print media, specifically in fashion section of women's magazines.

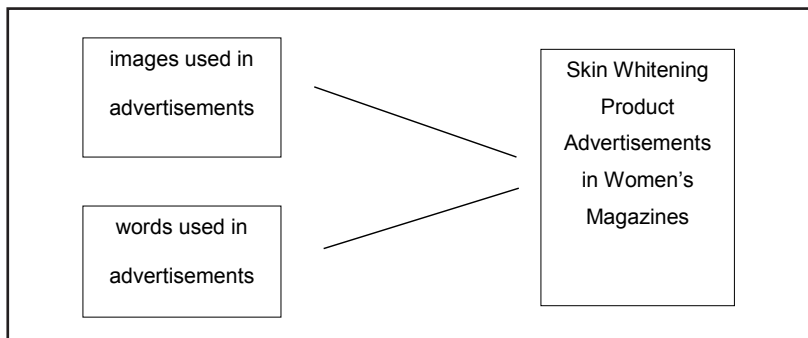


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Framing Theory

Goffman (1974) believes mass media to carry a direct influence on people's minds and behaviour. He realized that there existed strategies for people to make sense of occurrences, which are otherwise seen as meaningless, thus developing the framing theory (Goffman, 1974). Supporting this notion, Gitlin (1980) added that such strategy is often seen in the news, where information is packaged effectively to its target audiences, leading them to their interpretation and later, coming to their conclusion.

In other words, framing theory discusses the manipulation of context to achieve the desired outcome. Certain facts too, need to be altered to allow framing to come into effect (Borah, 2011). The advertising field applies a somewhat similar strategy to framing theory as it helps consumers understand what is present (Deighton et al., 1994). It influences what content should retain in memory through the use of visual images, catchphrases, and representations of emotional play (Borah, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This research applies a qualitative content analysis method, requiring the researcher to gather, analyse, and interpret data (Schreier, 2012). Emphasis is placed on descriptive research to explore an area where published knowledge is limited.

Qualitative studies encourage interpretation, as its underlying messages are often less obvious to others, such as beauty advertisements where messages transmitted can be indirect, and literal meanings not explained. Instead, pre-existing knowledge on cultural context is needed to capture its intended meaning (Vare, 2014).

This is the reason the researcher chose a qualitative approach, to explore how advertisement contents can develop society's acceptance towards a particular phenomenon. As such, the criteria for selection of samples are five print advertisements from English language fashion magazines, collected from the year 2013 to 2016. These fashion magazines recorded

at least a minimum of 5000 readerships, to ensure exposure to these advertisements has reached the masses, enabling the researcher to answer her purpose of the study.

These women’s magazines targeted women as its main audience selected due to its illustration of one or more skin whitening product advertisement as part of its content in Cleo, Her World, and Female magazines. Meeting such criterion of data collection is known as purposive sampling technique. This technique is commonly applied to sample selections that meet with required characteristics proposed by the researcher (Schreier, 2012).

The table below explains the researcher’s justification for selection, and the themes wished to be identified in these advertisements to answer the research questions.

Table 1: Skin Whitening Advertisements from Fashion Magazines

Characteristics of Document

Skin whitening product/ brand	Magazine’s Name	Year Pub- lished	Readership Statistic
White Perfect Transparent Rosy Whitening by Lóreal	Female & Cleo	2013	164,000 & 177,000
Tanaka White by Bio-es- sence	Cleo	2014	177,000
Extra White Firming Body Serum SPF 33 by Nivea	Her World, Female	2015	148,000 & 164,000
Sakura White by Garnier	Her World	2016	148,000
Whiten Up by Clinelle	Cleo	2016	177,000

Table 2: Categories in Images

Coding Sheet

Theme	Categories	Subcategories	Description
Images	1) Model	-	A symbol added to associate with a product, for an added value. For example, L'oreal employs a celebrity Michelle Reis as the product ambassador.
	2) Object		In Garnier's advertisement, a tree branch from a Sakura tree is used to illustrate renewal, a 'new' skin.

Table 3: Categories in Words

Coding Sheet

Theme	Categories	Description
	1) Emotional Words	A word that used to stir feelings of happiness, sadness or guilt
	2) Glittering Generality	Information portrayed as a fact, but its accuracy could not be examined. Words can represent values of goodness, honour, peace, love, or worthiness.

In ensuring the reliability of these instruments, a pilot study was first conducted before data collection. A second coder was asked to independently code the advertisements based on face value, meaning that interpretation of the content was not required, to avoid any biasness in the research.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Images in Women's Magazine Advertisements

a. Model

Upon observation of all five advertisements; L'oreal, Bio-essence, Nivea, Garnier and Clinelle, the inclusion of a model was present. These models were all women, depicted to have fair skin and endowed with beautiful physical appearance. Three of the advertisements employed celebrities as their product ambassador, and these are Michelle Reis representing L'oreal (Figure 2), Vivian Hsu for Bio-essence (Figure 3), and Ella Chen for Clinelle (Figure 6).

Their celebrity status was magnified from the fine print of their names next to their image. Such strategy allows these women better advantage, compared to just being a pretty face, meaning that they were able to use their international status symbol to attract fans and women alike into purchasing the product to the targeted audience.

b. Object

Similarly, objects like a Sakura tree branch was visible in Nivea's (Figure 4) and Garnier's (Figure 5) advertisements. In the Nivea's advertisement, a loop-like shape of gold pearls was the object associated with the product. The loop was connected to the shapely figure of the model on one end and connected to the product on its other end. Since ancient times, pearls were symbols of feminine charm and unblemished perfection, while gold had been symbols of power and dignity, often carried by early Christian emperors to display their rank (Dilloway, 2006). Such use gave a sophisticated and alluring appeal, and its connotation of unblemished perfection is in line with the products aim to whiten and firm parts of the body.

Whereas, in Garnier's advertisement, the Sakura tree or cherry blossoms is deeply adored by the Japanese. Intimately related to Japanese culture, Sakura symbolises eternal life and beauty. It evokes many other similar notions of beauty, including fertility and renewal or beginning of life (Atsushi, 2007). Such displayed features attract people to look at the

advertisement and mentally establish a subconscious memory on the product viewed. At the same time, the implied meaning could trigger the mind to positively associate the products with the symbols, thus influencing thoughts and behaviour towards consumer purchase.

Words Used in Women's Magazine Advertisements

a. Emotional Words

In L'oreal's advertisement (Figure 2), it tries to catch attention with its line "reveal your true inner fairness!" This is a powerful sentence whereby it invites consumers to unleash a hidden potential, and this product could help you materialise it. The same could be said for Bio-essence's advertisement (Figure 3), stating "4X anti-dark fighters for flawless, radiant white skin". The word "4X" was made bigger than other words to imply the effectiveness of the product, and its superiority over other similar functioned products.

b. Glittering Generality

Glittering generality is often applied to catch attention. Described as 'factual' information that is difficult to verify, an example of glittering generality was seen in the sentence "get fairer and firmer skin in 14 days," in Nivea's advertisement (Figure 4). While such information sounds appealing as it encourages consumers that they too can attain fairer skin, it is too vague and could not be proven if results can materialize within the short period.

Another example is seen in Garnier's advertisement (Figure 5) "5000 Sakura pearls in super hydrating gel". At first glance, this line portrays goodness to entice readers (Wallis, 2007), but upon closer scrutiny, one is left wondering on the advantages of including pearls as an ingredient, or if it is safe for daily consumption, especially as a face wash, where the skin is most sensitive.

In summary, the strategies used to attract consumers, by use of images and words in magazine advertisements are meant to stimulate consumerism, an act of greater acquisition for goods and services. With multiple reinforcements from of these advertisements, it can at the same time, concoct a desire to attain an 'ideal' reality, to conform with the masses (Prasanna & Venkateswara, 2013).

Conclusion

Based on the findings, skin whitening advertisement in magazines have indeed played a significant role in creating Malaysian women's preoccupation with fair skin. Consumers normally would view the advertisement as it is, at face value, without realizing that its content can influence the subconscious part of the brain, arousing desire, especially after having constant exposure to the same advertisements, or the same implied messages. Featuring identical beauty advertisements is common among many of women's magazines, as they need advertisers to fund their projects and maintain the publishing company as a whole.

Nonetheless, the repetition of implied messages using strategies of model's images and objects, along with powerful words which stirs human emotional and glittering generality have created a cultural pressure for women to comply with the ideal standards of beauty, thus in the end, benefit companies, in the long run, leaving us to ponder if we will ever be satisfied with our natural beauty.

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APPENDIX



Figure 2 : White Perfect Transparent Rosy Whitening by L'oreal
Source: L'oreal. (2013, March). [Advertisement for White Perfect Transparent Rosy Whitening]. Cleo, (209).



Figure 3 : Tanaka White by Bio-essence
Source: Bio-essence. (2014, October). [Advertisement for Tanaka White]. Cleo, (228).



Figure 4 : Extra White Firming Body Serum SPF 33 by Nivea
Source: Nivea. (2015, August). [Advertisement for Extra White Firming Body Serum SPF 33]. Female.



Figure 5 : Sakura White by Garnier

Source: Garnier. (2016, June). [Advertisement for Sakura White]. Her World.



Figure 6 : Whiten Up by Clinelle

Source: Clinelle. (2016, October). [Advertisement for Whiten Up]. Cleo, (242).