



Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest 'hunk' of them all? Negotiating a masculine notion of skin whitening for Malaysian men

* Huey Fen Cheong
hfcheong7@gmail.com
University of Malaya, Malaysia

Surinderpal Kaur
University of Malaya, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The increase in the number of men who have become more meticulous about their grooming and appearance, also known as metrosexuals, indicates that the beauty industry no longer focuses on females alone. While metrosexuality is making its presence felt in society, the increased sales of male fairness creams particularly in the East reveals another trend, male skin whitening. This trend challenges two gender norms: beauty practice and fair skin as a beauty ideal, which are traditionally associated with females. The semiotic analysis of product packaging investigates how L'Oréal Men Expert's (LME) whitening series, White Activ (sold in Malaysia), negotiates skin whitening among Malaysian men. Looking at L'Oréal Paris' (LP) whitening series, White Perfect, as a comparison, the study analysed how male skin whitening is represented differently from female skin whitening. The findings show that LME presents a different set of notions that form a male version of skin whitening and fair skin. It replaces key notions behind skin whitening, e.g. replacing skin whitening and skin lightening with skin brightening and non-whitening; passivity of the skin-whitening practice with activeness; as well as replaces the skin whitening rationales for fair skin as the physical marker of social status and wealth with fair skin as a physical indicator of strength and health; and for beautification with problem-solving. Also, LME projects another version of "fair skin" by redefining skin tone, complexion, and whiteness, in which related notions of fair skin, i.e. skin tone and purity, are replaced with skin brightness and cleanliness. The male version of skin whitening and fair skin separates men from femininity as well as draws a masculine space in the female domain of skin whitening. Such antifemininity forms a new gender binary, differentiating male and female skin whitening.

Keywords: ***gender, metrosexual; masculinity; male grooming; semiotics***

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of a perfect body image has traditionally been a feminine concern from body slimming (Lau & Zuraidah, 2013) to skin whitening (Foo, 2010; Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2002; Leong, 2006; Xie & Zhang, 2013). However, this is challenged by the current trend of male skin whitening in Asia, as shown in the increasing number of male skin-whitening products from brands such as Fair & Handsome, Olay Men, Garnier Men, and our subject — L'Oréal Men Expert (LME) *White Activ* series. The phenomenon of male skin whitening is closely associated with another phenomenon, metrosexuality, that refers to men's interest in their own physical beauty:

“The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis — because that’s where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference”. (Simpson, 2013, originally published in 2002)

Male skin whitening challenges two gender norms: first, the feminine pursuit of fair skin and second, the feminine beauty practice (Gottschall et al., 2008; Wolf, 2002). If the male perception towards male grooming (also referred to as metrosexuality) affects their consumption of grooming products (Cheng, Ooi, & Ting, 2010), the marketing of male skin-whitening products will pose a greater challenge, as it counters two gender norms (as mentioned above). Hence, this study aims to analyse how gender is negotiated by the beauty industry to promote male skin-whitening practice and eventually, their products.

Despite the Western skin-tanning trend, Baumann (2008) and Frost (1990, 2005) claim that the preference for fair women/dark men continues to prevail. This often makes the headlines, e.g. 'Why men prefer fair-skinned maidens and women like dark, handsome strangers', published in *Daily Mail* (Dolan, 2008). Our Malaysian study addresses Baumann's (2008) call for research about skin preference and gender in non-Western contexts. It also contributes to the literature on male skin whitening which is mainly focused in India, with little/no concern about gender (Raja & Kumar, 2014; Sandhya & Mohamed, 2009; Verma, 2011), save for a few studies like Chand and Chaudhary (2012) and Venkataswamy (2013). Furthermore, our study on multiracial Malaysians who represent various skin colours further adds depth and richness to the literature on skin colour that mostly centres around homogeneous societies. Moreover, male skin-whitening research is extremely limited in Malaysia where the trend started relatively later, compared to other countries like India where studies about male skin whitening were published as early as 2009 (see the citations above). Male skin whitening in Malaysia was only reported in the media around 2013, e.g. 'Male enlightenment' in *The Star* (Cheong, 2013).

We chose one of the bestselling male grooming brands in Malaysia, LME, to investigate the brand's successful strategies for marketing communication. Mass brands such as LME have been performing better than the premium, luxury brands due to the pricing (Cheh, 2014; Euromonitor International, 2018; International Trade Administration, 2016). Based on a sales report collected by Cheh (2014) from a pharmacy store in the Malaysian capital city, Kuala Lumpur, the top three leading brands of men's skincare in the first half of 2012, in descending order from the most popular: Garnier Men, LME, and Gatsby. This result echoes Cheh's

(2014) own survey of 400 Malaysian men. Although Garnier Men topped the list, it was in tight competition with the second, LME. Between these two brands, we chose LME due to its global positioning, which has attracted much research interest across cultures, e.g. Min and Weiwei (2018). Additionally, cross-cultural studies on familiar brands create a common reference for cross-cultural comparison and interaction in the academia, having less interference from branding differences.

Since most cultural studies on marketing analyse advertisements, we chose to study product packaging to examine an alternative way of marketing communication. We analysed how LME's product packaging represents male skin-whitening practice and product through packaging colour, naming of product series and ingredients, etc., which are less commonly found in advertisements. Next, we analysed how these representations of skin whitening represent and negotiate gender. Like advertisements, product packaging can serve as both a branding/marketing tool and a cultural tool (see Cheong & Kaur, 2015, for the differences between marketing and linguistic approaches in analysing product packaging). Our linguistic interest is on the latter. In comparison with L'Oréal Paris (LP) *White Perfect*, we analysed how LME *White Activ* communicates differently in its appeal to men.

FAIR SKIN AS A BEAUTY IDEAL

The preoccupation with fair skin among women has been widely studied in the East (Ahn, 2015; Foo, 2010; Pan, 2013; Shevde, 2008), the West (Baumann, 2008; Frost, 1990, 2005; Raynor, 2009), and for East-West comparisons (Krishen, LaTour, & Alishah, 2014; Leong, 2006; Xie & Zhang, 2013). The literature recently expanded to include men, i.e. male skin whitening, particularly in India (Raja & Kumar, 2014; Sandhya & Mohamed, 2009; Venkataswamy, 2013; Verma, 2011). Fair skin serves as a “symbolic capital” (Glenn, 2008, p. 281) and “a visual agent in defining the boundaries of cultural identity, and in identifying a person's place in a local social hierarchy, if not an increasingly global one” (Leong, 2006, p. 167).

Colour and Status: Physical Marker of Wealth and Social Status

Fair skin has been a traditional marker for social status and wealth (Krishen et al., 2014; Leong, 2006; Pan, 2013; Xie & Zhang, 2013). The key reason for this is that people of a higher status do not need to work under the sun (Pan, 2013). In the 1700s and 1800s, Western aristocrats and rich burghers distinguished themselves from the working masses by applying lead oxide powder to preserve their pale skin (Leong, 2006).

However, the fair skin obsession had a drastic turn during the “bronze skin” phenomenon in the twentieth century, when the West embraced tanned skin as the new ideal (Leong, 2006; Pan, 2013; Xie & Zhang, 2013). Although modern Westerners prefer a tanned look, the tanned skin shares a similar connotation of high social status and wealth. Tanned skin signifies affluent lifestyle (Foo, 2010; Xie & Zhang, 2013) that affords vacations in exotic sunny places (Leong, 2006). However, we argue that such a connotation may be dying out soon, as airflights and faraway vacations are becoming more affordable and common. Nonetheless, we argue that fair skin is still preferred among Asians, who are the focus of our study. Xie and Zhang's (2013) study shows that the preoccupation with fair skin persists

among modern western-based Asians, as they retain the status-related meaning of skin colour based on the indoor-outdoor job bias. Their study shows that skin preference is determined by one's ethnicity, more than the social context where one is based. After all, skin colour often refers to one's ethnicity (see below).

Besides environmental factors, skin difference is also caused by genetic inheritance. Hence, as we associate skin colour with social status, we also relate social status to one's natural skin colour, i.e. one's ethnicity. This can be seen in most cases where dark-skinned people are discriminated as people from an ethnic that is of a lower class, e.g. in the Indian caste system (Glenn, 2008; Shevde, 2008) and slavery (Frost, 1990, 2005; Glenn, 2008).

Colour and Prejudice: Stereotyping of an Individual's Value, Quality, and Morality

Although fair skin symbolises high social status, Frost (1990, 2005) discovered that fair skin is actually preferred across social classes and races, as he traced the history of colour prejudice among the Europeans during the Middle Ages. Some examples include the mentioning of fair skin as a beauty ideal in peasant folklore and classic literature; and the increasing value (price) of a slave according to the degree of skin fairness in multi-ethnic slavery. His study also revealed that skin fairness was associated with an individual's value and qualities, e.g. beauty and working capability.

Baumann (2008), on the other hand, provides a meaning-based explanation of the skin ideal in the West. His study discovered that fair and dark skin are linked to sexual behaviours that signify virtue and immorality, respectively. Fair skin is preferred for women as it connotes 'sexually virtuous woman' with traits like 'purity', 'modesty', 'goodness', 'delicacy', and 'innocence'; whilst dark skin is preferred for men as it signifies 'vitality, exposure, sexuality, and experience' (Baumann, 2008, pp. 18-19).

The good/evil connotation of light/dark skin can also be found in numerous contexts. For instance, the Indian religious and mythological background associates fair skin with virtue, as gods and the priestly Brahmins are usually fair-skinned, as opposed to dark-skinned devils (Chand & Chaudhary, 2012). In East Asia, the preference for fair skin is also derived from traditional and cultural values. White facial powder on Japanese women symbolises the national identity since the Edo period; South Koreans relate fair skin with 'pale jade' that implies 'noble and attractive' (Xie & Zhang, 2013, p. 541).

Colour and Power: Male Dominance and Cultural Imperialism

Political power is another explanation for the fair skin interest. In terms of gender politics, skin fairness serves the patriarchal interests with the idea of restricting female freedom by keeping them indoors. As cited by Kitagawa from the 11th-century Japanese epic, *The Tale of Genji*, 'the feminine ideal during the Han period for women of the court was almost unearthly light white skin', and they were rarely seen 'in direct light' ("Skin whitening...", 2009). Baumann's (2008) meaning-based explanation of fair women/dark men (see the previous section) relates fair skin to typical-yet-restricted feminine behaviours—'purity, modesty, and goodness', in which beauty ideal and social control on women 'mutually reinforces and naturali[s]es' each other (pp. 17-18).

Some also blame Western cultural imperialism for fair skin obsession in non-Western contexts. It is attributed to the westernising of non-Western beauty standards (see Foo, 2010;

Glenn, 2008; Leong, 2006; Pan, 2013; Raynor, 2009). Along with tall and blonde, fair skin forms the westernised package of 'beauty myth' (Wolf, 2002).

Colour and Media: The Media Influence of Fair Skin as a Beauty Ideal

The media helps in reinforcing the Western white ideal in the non-Western context. This has been widely reported in the media, e.g. *Skin whitening big business in Asia* (published in *Public Radio International* on March 30, 2009) and the documentary, *China's Tortured Beauties: Make Me Look Western* (produced by Journeyman Pictures on June 3, 2013). McLoughlin's (2013) study of women's beauty represented in *Asiana*, a magazine for British Asian women, uncovers the creation of 'universal' beauty that is 'persistently white, western and wealthy' (p. 15).

Besides the Western influence, the fair skin obsession in India is also due to the influence of light-skinned celebrities, especially Bollywood actors (Chand & Chaudhary, 2012; Shevde, 2008). Shevde (2008) blames the Bollywood entertainment industry for promoting fair skin, which is strengthened through Bollywood celebrities' endorsements for skin-whitening products. Similarly, Ahn (2015) contends that the white mixed-race celebrities influence Koreans to desire whiteness.

GENDER AND SKIN FAIRNESS

Although numerous factors have been attributed to the preoccupation with fair skin, they are entirely focused on women. This reflects how beauty standards are commonly imposed on women, which often results in the accusation of objectifying and sexualising women. As Wolf (2002, p. 12) states, beauty is the embodied patriarchal standard by which women are evaluated and assigned 'value'. Hence, women are far more likely to be judged for their appearance than men, as well as have higher self-expectation for their looks. This is shown in Krishen et al.'s (2014) study that revealed women face stronger pressure for desired skin tones. As such, male skin whitening calls into question gender norms and challenges not only the fair women/dark men tradition, but also for men being attentive to their own appearance.

A Malaysian news article, *Male Enlightenment* (Cheong, 2013), suggested novelty or even controversy in male skin whitening. The news report, however, distinguishes male skin whitening as 'skin brightening'. Nevertheless, according to Frost's (1990) justification for fair skin as women's ideal beauty, female skin has a higher reflectance of light, and beautiful women were described in Old French literature with the adjective *cler*, which means facial brightness. Hence, the term 'skin brightening' may merely suggest another lexical alternative for 'skin whitening'. Similarly, terms like 'hydration' and 'revitalising' found in male grooming products replace common terms like 'moisturising' and 'anti-ageing' in female beauty products (Thornborrow, 1994, p. 141).

Another Malaysian news article, *New Range Just for Him* (published in *The Star*, on July 20, 2007), revealed that male skin whitening has been a phenomenon in Malaysia for more than a decade. Yet, it remains a highlight today in male grooming research (see Euromonitor International, 2018). According to *New Range Just for Him*, our subject, *White Activ*, was the last series introduced by LME, after *Pure & Matte*, *Hydra Energetic* and *Vita Lift*. From treating oily skin and dry skin to ageing skin, the introduction of *White Activ*

continues to break gender boundaries by promoting a fair-skinned look as the new beauty ideal for men. The whitening series that was introduced last suggests that fair skin may be the most gender-challenging.

Other Asian countries also perceive male skin whitening as a new practice that challenges gender norms. Chand and Chaudhary (2012) presented their analysed subjects, i.e. two Indian advertisements featuring a female skin-tanning and a male skin whitening, as counter-discourses. Skin fairness is also highly gendered in the Chinese culture. Fair-skinned women are perceived as beautiful, as claimed in the Chinese saying, '一白遮三丑' ('*yi bai zhe san chou*'), translated as 'a white complexion hides three faults' (Leong, 2006; Pan, 2013; Xie & Zhang, 2013). However, fair-skinned men are perceived as '小白脸' ('*xiao bai lian*') that is directly translated as 'little white face', which refers to men who stay at home and depend on women's money.

In the West, the fair women/dark men preference persists across status (Frost, 1990, 2005) and time (Baumann, 2008), despite the contemporary tan ideal. However, such skin preference only occurs in the homogenous context. According to Frost (1990), skin colour is initially perceived as differences 'between individuals (sexes) rather than between races' (p. 671), as he traced the history of skin colour in Medieval Europe. He rationalises this with their rare contact with other races before colonialism. This reinforces the gendered difference in skin colour. Baumann's (2008) analysis of advertisements in 1970, 2003 and 2004 extends Frost's (1990, 2005) account of fair women/dark men from the Middle Ages to the 21st century. Fair women/dark men that transcends time may be explained via Frost's (1990, 2005) biological theory. According to him, female skin has less melanin (dark pigments) and haemoglobin (red blood cells), giving them paler skin as well as higher reflectance. Men, in contrast, are browner and ruddier.

Nonetheless, cross-cultural studies seem to oppose the fair women/dark men claim as they show a contrast in skin preferences between Eastern and Western women, who prefer *fair* and *tanned*, respectively (Krishen et al., 2014; Xie & Zhang, 2013). Xie and Zhang (2013), however, argue that both Eastern and Western contexts still advocate the 'fair women, dark men' concept. As emphasised by Baumann (2008) and Frost (1990, 2005) on *homogeneity*, Xie and Zhang blame their sample's racial composition for their opposing findings. While their homogenous Chinese sample shows that fair skin remains 'a sexual cue' to distinguish women from men in homogenous China, the multi-ethnic, heterogeneous United States loses its 'feminine connotation of fair skin' and pursues the tanning trend instead (Xie & Zhang, 2013, p. 549). Hence, we are interested to find out how this will apply to heterogeneous (multiracial) Malaysia.

All in all, the vast literature shows the social preference for fair women/dark men in both Western and non-Western contexts, though with a few exceptions concerning homogeneity. Nevertheless, with the growing trend of male skin whitening particularly in Asia, this gendered concept is slowly breaking down.

GENDER AND MARKETING GENRES OF SKIN WHITENING

This section reviews past studies on marketing genres about skin whitening in Asia. In East Asia, the literature covers China (including Hong Kong), Taiwan, Japan and Korea (Johansson, 1998; Lee, 2014; Leong, 2006; Li, Min, & Belk, 2008; Mak, 2007; Xie & Zhang, 2013). In South Asia, the literature mainly comes from India (Chand & Chaudhary, 2012; Hussein, 2010; Karan, 2008; Li et al., 2008; Venkataswamy, 2013) and one from Bangladesh (Rosul, 2011). As for South East Asia, it involves Indonesia (Afriani, 2012; Purba, 2017; Saraswati, 2010; Trisnawati, 2012), Malaysia (Chendirasagaram, 2012), and Thailand (Slutskiy & Hamilton, 2017).

Research on the discursive construction of skin whitening mainly addresses two themes: culture and gender. Studies under the first theme often criticise the 'whitening' construction of beauty among Asian women (Afriani, 2012; Chendirasagaram, 2012; Hussein, 2010; Karan, 2008; Lee, 2014; Leong, 2006; Li et al., 2008; Mak, 2007; Saraswati, 2010; Slutskiy & Hamilton, 2017; Trisnawati, 2012; Xie & Zhang, 2013) and both sexes (Rosul, 2011). Most South Asian studies look at how skin whitening is promoted. The most mentioned strategy is associating fair skin with success (Rosul, 2011), specifically in job employment/opportunities, marriage as well as self-empowerment and confidence (Hussein, 2010; Karan, 2008). East Asian studies cover a wider range from racial identity (Leong, 2006) and cultural/historical background of beauty (Mak, 2007; Xie & Zhang, 2013) to marketing strategies (Lee, 2014). As for South East Asia, most studies look at how whiteness is promoted to women through symbolisation like 'purity' (Trisnawati, 2012), 'beautiful' (Afriani, 2012; Chendirasagaram, 2012), 'success' (Slutskiy & Hamilton, 2017), and 'cosmopolitan whiteness' (Saraswati, 2010). These symbols that focus on female beauty may overlap with the second theme (see below), especially with feminine notions such as 'purity' and 'beautiful'.

The second theme, discursive construction of gender in marketing genres about skin whitening, is relatively less studied for both Asian women (Johansson, 1998; Purba, 2017) and men (Chand & Chaudhary, 2012; Venkataswamy, 2013). The studies can be further categorised into two foci: critical approach and inquisitive approach. The critical approach condemns and problematises the construction of harmful femininity in the discourse on skin whitening. Johansson's (1998) study on skin-whitening advertisements for Chinese women from 1985 to 1995 reveals the portrayal of 'a chaste, disciplined and anxious femininity fearful of nature' (p. 1).

Our interest is, however, the inquisitive approach that investigates the communicative/persuasive strategy to promote skin-whitening products, targeted at men and women respectively. Purba's (2017) study discovered that the most persuasive strategies in skin-whitening commercials for Indonesian women are Ethos (the appeal to the brand's credibility), followed by Pathos (the appeal to emotion) and the least, Logos (the appeal to logical reasoning), based on Aristotle's theory of persuasion. Discourse analyses on men's skin whitening, however, are more concerned about how it is different from women's. Chand and Chaudhary (2012) reveal that the gender stereotype (strong masculine image) is still intact, although the brand's logo and slogan depict femininity since the male brand is a segmentation from the original female brand. This is the same with our subject, LME, which originates from LP. However, Venkataswamy (2013, p. 137) claims that men's skin-whitening advertisements 'transcend gender' as they use the same strategies with women's, e.g. 'the theme stressing on confidence and self-esteem; the emotional route exploiting colour

prejudices and also in the usage of vocabulary, text and images'. Nevertheless, Chand and Chaudhary (2012) merely analysed one printed advertisement, whereas Venkataswamy (2013) interpreted different advertisements with support from similar findings in India. Nonetheless, both studies only focus on India.

To sum up, our study addresses three gaps. First, Malaysian discourse analyses on skin whitening are limited. Second, most skin-whitening studies analyse advertisements, but not product packaging. Different genres have different communicating and marketing strategies, and ultimately, different gendering strategies. Third, skin-whitening research on the discursive construction of gender (the second theme) is still limited, especially about male skin whitening.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The research framework is an amalgamation of semiotic concepts, i.e. Barthes' Order of Signification and the paradigmatic dimension (Saussure, 1916/1983; Jakobson, 1962/1971), based on Chandler's (2007) *Semiotics: The Basics*.

Barthes' Order of Signification derives from the belief that signs presented in a text are due to motivated and intended choice. In fact, the act of signifying itself is intentional to project an intended image via socially constructed language, in order to fulfil the author's specific purpose. Connotation, the symbolic meaning(s) of a sign, is the primary concern for Barthes.

Barthes' Order of Signification uncovers layers of meaning underlying a sign from the first order of signification (denotation: literal meaning) to the second (connotation: symbolic or social meaning). The higher the order of signification, the deeper the structure of the symbol (i.e. social practices) is revealed. The highest order of signification is *mythologies* that refer to social beliefs. These social beliefs derive from social practices that are repeated over a long period in broad societies. Thus, myth is a socially constructed knowledge that is universally believed to be the truth. The most popular example of a myth is the gender myth, masculinity and femininity.

Sign structure can be analysed in two dimensions, i.e. the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, which refer to 'meaningful contrasts and permitted/forbidden combinations' respectively (Culler 1975, p. 14, cited in Chandler, 2007, pp. 83-84). We employed the paradigmatic approach in this study.

A paradigm is a set of connected signs classified within defining categories, in which members of the category (paradigm set) are 'structurally replaceable with another' and 'the choice of one excludes the choice of another' (Chandler, 2007, p. 85). Within the paradigm of colour, there are red, blue, black, and many other colours. The paradigmatic approach interprets the meaning of a sign by questioning the choice of the sign over other workable alternatives within the same paradigm that are not chosen for the text. For instance, we interpret the meaning and purpose of having the colour orange in a text by questioning why other colours such as black and blue were not chosen. As William James (n.d.) states, 'the absence of an item is a determinant of our representations quite as positive as its presence can ever be' (cited in Chandler, 2007, p. 88). In other words, the absent-yet-replaceable alternatives, also known as 'opposition *in absentia*' (Chandler, 2007, p. 87), provide meaning for the existing signs.

DATA DESCRIPTION

Although LME *White Activ* is the focus, LP *White Perfect* is also included for comparative analysis due to the emphasis on 'opposition *in absentia*' in the paradigmatic approach. As the 'tangible' opposition, LP, eases the interpretation of the signs in LME. Comparing LME with LP also helps to detect LP and LME's gendering efforts.

A total of twelve (12) product packaging from two sets of products: LME *White Activ* series and LP *White Perfect* series were analysed. The types of products chosen were cleanser, toner, and moisturiser, representing the three basic steps in a skincare regime.

The products' manufacturing years were within 2012–2013, when male skin whitening was rather new in Malaysia (see *Male Enlightenment*, published in *The Star* on March 7, 2013) and thus, was still subject to much controversy concerning gender practice. Until today, male skin whitening remains a phenomenon in Malaysia. According to the latest Euromonitor's data in 2017, male skin whitening is the key highlight in the Malaysian grooming industry (Euromonitor International, 2018).

Since the products came from different ranges (LME *White Activ* and LP *White Perfect*), different types (cleanser, toner and moisturiser), and even varieties within the same range and type (e.g. different types of cleanser), the analysed product packaging were coded to avoid confusion. For example, 1) 'A' for LP *White Perfect* and 'B' for LME *White Activ*; 2) 'C' for cleanser, 'T' for toner and 'M' for moisturiser; and 3) '1, 2, 3...' to indicate the varieties of product within the same range and type. The two sets of product packaging from LP and LME are displayed in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively.



Figure 1. The collection of LP *White Perfect*

[LP *White Perfect* products from left to right: Purifies & Brightens Milky Foam (AC); Whitening & Moisturizing Toner (AT); Fairness Control Moisturizing Watery Cream (day) (AM1); Fairness Control Moisturizing Cream (day) (AM2); and Fairness Revealing Soothing Cream (night) (AM3).]



Figure 2. The collection of LME *White Activ*

[LME *White Activ* products from left to right: Brightening Foam (BC1); Bright + Oil Control White Foam (BC2); Anti-Spots + Oil Control Charcoal Foam (BC3); Total Skin Renewer Volcano Red Foam (BC4); Bright + Oil Control Powered Water (BT); Bright + Oil Control Moisturiser (BM1); and Power 4 Whitening Moisturiser (BM2).]

METHOD

We first identified the semiotic features within LP that convey skin whitening and fair skin as a beauty ideal. This is followed by a comparison between LP and LME, where the contrastive semiotic features were interpreted. Employing Barthes' Order of Signification, we broke down each semiotic features into three layers of meaning—denotation, connotation and myth (the gender myth of masculinity and femininity). The purpose is to uncover LME's gendering effort in negotiating skin whitening and fair skin among men.

DATA ANALYSIS

Based on LP's packaging, we discovered that the notion of skin whitening is conveyed through the representation of fair skin, as well as skin-whitening series, agents, functionality, and rationale. A comparative analysis between LP and LME was conducted based on these aspects, as discussed below.

Packaging Colour: Representing Fair Skin with Black-White, Light-Dark, and Bright-Dull

The notion of fair skin is represented non-verbally through the packaging colour on the basis that consumers' choice of colour signals their desired self-image (Aslam, 2006). In our case, this refers to their desired skin colour.

The products in LP *White Perfect* series mainly come in white and light/pastel colours. This appeals to the feminine desire for fairer and lighter skin. Due to their strong association with femininity, LME manipulates the choice of colours based on three colour continuums: 1)

black and white; 2) light and dark; and 3) bright and dull. This challenges the *whiteness*, *lightness*, and *brightness* of LP that connote the pursuit of fair skin through *skin whitening*, *skin lightening*, and *skin brightening*, respectively.

The notion of skin whitening is represented by the black-white continuum, as black and white have long been associated with dark and fair skin, respectively. LME products that best represent this dark-fair tension are the first two cleansers, BC1 and BC2 (see Figure 2). Both cleansers begin with grey at the top with the most coverage, followed by black and white. This negotiates between black and white, which connotes the negotiation between dark and fair skin as well as between dark men and fair women ideals.

Another skin-whitening notion is skin lightening, which is associated with the light-dark continuum. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2002, pp. 355-356), colour lightness can be gauged through two perspectives: 1) *value* — 'the scale from maximally light [white] to maximally dark [black]'; and 2) *saturation* — 'the scale from the most intensely saturated [dark] or 'pure' manifestations of a colour to its softest, most 'pale' or 'pastel' [light]'. Colour saturation best represents fair skin, as supported by the common expressions of fair skin that associate with *paleness*, e.g. 'pale-skinned' (Leong, 2006, p. 168), 'paler skin' (McLoughlin, 2013, p. 15), 'pale complexion', and 'several shades lighter' (Foo, 2010, p. 25).

LP shows paleness through white and pastel colours, which are light colours due to low saturation. In contrast, LME employs another version of the light-dark continuum based on colour value. It counters the notion of paleness with dark colours that are made of high saturation. These dark colours, however, are considered light based on colour value. As shown in Figure 3, one of LME products uses light blue, light grey, and light green, which appear dark due to high saturation but light due to high value. Presenting such colours together with white and black that make the highest and the lowest colour values, respectively, LME presents the complete scale of colour value.



Figure 3. The choice of colours based on value in LME *White Activ*.

Lastly, LME presents the notion of skin brightening through the bright-dull continuum. As discussed in the paragraph above, LME employs a different light-dark continuum focusing on colour value, which looks at how close the colour is to white and black. Being 'the total reflection of all colours' (Labrecque & Milne, 2012, p. 714), white also projects maximum brightness. Thus, the closer a colour is to white (i.e. higher colour value), the brighter it is. Besides colour value, LME projects brightness through other factors, e.g. hue, warm colours like red and orange, and a brighter version of grey, i.e. silver.

Product Series: Juxtaposing 'White' and 'Activ'

The product series gives information about the product's function(s). Both LP *White Perfect* and LME *White Activ* carry the same word 'white' that suggests a skin-whitening function. However, unlike LP's 'White' and 'Perfect' that complement well to suggest feminine beauty ideal, LME's 'White' and 'Activ' present a gender mismatch between the feminine beauty ideal and masculine trait. The possible intention behind LME's 'Activ' is to challenge the passivity of skin whitening in two aspects: 1) fair skin as a result of passively staying indoors and 2) beauty as a passive object of contemplation.

Skin-Whitening Agents: Empowering Men's Skin and Product

The naming of key ingredients/skin-whitening agents (presented on the front packaging) also negotiates gender. While LP's whitening agent is named 'Tourmaline Gemstone' (AC), LME named its agents as 'Pro Exfoliatine' (BC1), 'Active Defense System' (all, except BM2), 'Melanin Block' and 'Vitamin C' (BM2). The naming is deliberate since the names are not identified in the ingredient list. We summarise LME's naming strategies in Table 1.

Table 1. Four naming strategies of skin-whitening agents in LME *White Activ*.

Strategies	Description	Examples
1. Scientising	Inventing (and blending) scientific-related terms	'Pro Exfoliatine' 'Melanin Block' (Melanin is the scientific name of dark pigments) 'Active Defense System' (reflects expressions of biological elements like 'digestive system')
2. Instrumentalising	Naming the function of the ingredient/agent.	'Pro Exfoliatine', defined as a 'powerful peeling agent', is assumed to mean its exfoliating function. 'Melanin Block' blocks dark pigments (melanin) 'Active Defense System' protects skin from sun damage 'Vitamin C' is famously known for its skin-whitening function
3. Empowering	Using words that give a sense of strength to consumers (skin)	'defense' in 'Active Defense System' 'Melanin Block' (instead of the typical 'sunblock'): signifying a block against internal harm (dark pigment/melanin) 'Vitamin C': known for boosting the immune system
4. Trademarking	Registering (with 'TM' sign) and/or symbolising names of whitening agents.	'adS TM ' -- 'Active Defense System' 'Melanin Block TM '

Through the naming of skin-whitening agents, LME's products are portrayed as technologically-advanced products that are effective in skin whitening. While Strategy 2 (instrumentalising) stresses product functionality, Strategy 1 (scientising) and Strategy 4 (trademarking) portray LME as products of advanced technology. In contrast, LP reduces the scientific sense by adding 'Gemstone' after its ingredient, 'Tourmaline'. The word 'Gemstone' projects the product as a luxury, which aligns with the concept of fair skin as a physical marker of social status and wealth (Krishen et al., 2014; Leong, 2006; Pan, 2013; Xie & Zhang, 2013) as well as the notion of luxury that is associated with feminine beauty practice (Cheong & Kaur, 2015; McIntyre, 2011).

LME advocates Tungate's (2008, p. 37) 'branding toolkit' for the male grooming industry, which advises scientific language use and emphasis on functionality. Although Lee (2014) revealed that advertisers use scientific themes to promote skin-whitening products to women, it seems that LME welcomes this theme but not LP for deliberate gender differentiation. Nevertheless, why would LME use Strategy 1 (scientising) when it can easily imply science through the ingredients' scientific names? This suggests possible constraints in using the ingredients' scientific names. First, scientific names may be unfamiliar to some. Using pseudo-scientific terms like 'Pro Exfoliatine', consumers can guess the functions of the ingredient, e.g. exfoliating skin. Second, scientific terms may raise concerns about harmful skin-whitening/bleaching agents.

LME's Strategy 3 (empowering) suggests that skin-whitening agents strengthen the skin rather than whitening/lightening it. It uses expressions that imply the boost of skin's immune system. It replaces feminine beauty notions behind fair skin with healthy skin, which redefine skin-whitening outcome and purpose. This is supported by the notion of bright and healthy skin found in LME's product functionality (see the next section).

Product Functionality: Skin Brightening, Non-Whitening, and Problem-Solving

Another concern is how male skin-whitening products project their functions, which we assume must be about skin whitening but appears to be less so in LME's case. The functions are described on both the front and back packaging, and even within the product names, e.g. LME's 'Brightening Foam'.

In contrast to LP's explicit emphasis on skin whitening, e.g. 'fairness control/revealing' (AM1-AM3), LME prefers the notion of skin brightening using words like 'brighten' and 'dull'. To further downplay skin whitening, LME de-emphasises terms related to skin whitening or skin brightening as mere elaboration, rather than key functions that are displayed on the front packaging. Also, LME focuses on non-whitening functions. Words like 'exfoliatine' (exfoliating) (BC1), 'purifying' (BC2) and 'magnetic' (BC3, elaborated as 'captures dirt & oil') are used among LME's cleansers to refer to their cleansing functions. Lastly, LME emphasises skin problems and problem-solving, using terms like 'anti-shine/dullness/spots' and 'acne-reducing'.

All in all, LME focuses on skin brightening, non-whitening, and problem-solving to downplay the notion of skin whitening that is traditionally perceived as feminine.

Skin-Whitening Rationale: Overcoming Skin Problems

The rationale for skin whitening is presented at the top of the back packaging. For example, in LP's cleanser (AC):

To begin your daily whitening routine with a perfectly cleansed skin, L'Oréal Paris presents: WHITE PERFECT Transparent Rosy Whitening Milky Foam

and in LME's cleanser (BC1):

Warning! Sun rays, even though invisible, are aggressive to your skin: their effects are more serious than you think. As a result, skin darkens, it looks dull, uneven. And dark spots can appear. TAKE ACTION!

LP rationalises the use of its products for beautification by using positive descriptions, e.g. 'transparent rosy whitening' and 'perfectly cleansed skin'. In contrast, LME evokes the need for skin whitening and grooming for problem-solving as it uses negative descriptions that stress on harmful factors on the skin (e.g. 'sun rays', 'stress', and 'pollution') and consequences (e.g. 'dark spots', 'dull'/'uneven' skin, 'excess sebum', and 'impurities'). LME further stresses the urgency of solving problems using imperatives and exclamations, e.g. 'Warning!' and 'Take action!'. The mentioning of environmental harms implies outdoor activities that signal activeness, which connotes typical masculinity and the passivity behind fair skin that is usually attained by staying indoors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To negotiate male skin whitening, LME presents another version of skin whitening through the representation of skin colour as well as skin-whitening series, agents, functionality, and rationale. LME manipulates the notions associated with skin whitening that are represented in LP, i.e. skin whitening and skin lightening, passivity, a physical marker of social status and wealth, and for beautification/beauty purpose.

LME avoids the notion of skin fairness by appropriating its packaging colour across three continuums: black-white, light-dark, and bright-dull continuums. The black-white continuum negotiates between the feminine fair skin and the masculine dark skin. The light-dark continuum uses dark, saturated colours to avoid the notion of paleness in fair skin. The bright-dull continuum promotes male skin whitening as 'skin brightening'. Skin whitening is to achieve the feminine ideal of fair beauty, whereas 'skin brightening' is another alternative to 'skin whitening' which some use to differentiate men's skin whitening from women's (see Cheong, 2013)". To project 'skin brightening', LME risks its masculine image using bright, colourful packaging, which according to Moss (2009), is typically used to indicate femininity in marketing. To further downplay the notion of skin whitening, LME stresses non-whitening functions (e.g. cleansing function) in various contexts, other than packaging colours.

Second, LME's 'activeness' challenges the passivity behind skin whitening, which comes from: 1) fair skin as a result of passively staying indoors, and 2) beauty as a passive object of contemplation (Cheong & Kaur, 2015).

Third, while LP reinforces the cultural concept of fair skin as a physical marker of social status and wealth by adding 'gemstone' in the name of its whitening agent, LME suggests fair skin as a physical indication of strength and health through the naming of its whitening agents that suggests boosting skin's immune system, e.g. 'Active Defense System' and 'Vitamin C'. This further counters health concerns about the chemical harms of skin whitening.

Finally, LME rationalises skin whitening as solving skin problems. Unlike LP that focuses on beautification/beauty purpose, LME presents a sense of need, which aligns with the stress of utilitarian/need in the literature about metrosexuality (McIntyre, 2011; McNeill & Douglas, 2011).

In summary, LME replaces the common notions behind skin whitening, i.e. skin whitening/lightening with skin brightening and non-whitening; passivity with activeness; social status/wealth with stronger and healthier skin; and beautification with problem-solving.

Different Version of Skin Tone, Complexion, and Whiteness

LME redefines 'fair skin' by projecting another version of skin tone, complexion, and whiteness.

First, we witness two types of colour tones (lightness/darkness) attributed by colour saturation and value (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). LP mainly uses colours with low saturation that present the image of paleness while LME focuses on colours with high colour value (i.e. closer to white) that produces bright colours. However, colour brightness is not formed through colour value alone, but a combination of factors (e.g. hue). Thus, LME's bright colours are less associated with colour tone, which slightly diverts the notion of fair skin to the less tone-related 'bright skin'.

Second, the comparison between LP and LME projects two versions of 'complexion'. According to Oxford Dictionaries.com (retrieved on October 29, 2015), 'complexion' is defined as '(t)he natural colour, texture, and appearance of a person's skin, especially of the face'. LP's 'complexion' focuses on the *tone* (also, shades). Besides the use of low-saturated colours (see the paragraph above), LP uses terms such as 'light' and 'transparent' to refer to colour saturation; and 'rosy' to connote the shades of pink. In contrast, LME's 'complexion' focuses on *non-tone-related complexions*, e.g. bright (using bright colours and words related to 'brightening'); clean (e.g. 'captures dirt & oil'; 'fights pimples & blackheads'); and smooth (e.g. 'tightens pores').

The third strategy is negotiating another version of 'whiteness'. Again, we refer to LP's 'light' and LME's 'bright'. They not only present two versions of light-dark continuum (colour saturation or value), but also the colour white, which is the product of minimum colour saturation or maximum colour value (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). Second, LME presents another connotation of the colour white -- cleanliness (see Labrecque & Milne, 2012), as it emphasises non-whitening functions that are mainly about cleansing, e.g. removing oil, dirt, and impurities. Cleanliness also signals 'purity', which is the main feminine notion behind fair skin (Baumann, 2008) and skin-whitening advertisements for women (Trisnawati, 2012).

CONCLUSION

LME presents a different set of notions that form a masculine version of skin whitening and fair skin to negotiate skin whitening among men. It replaces key notions behind skin whitening, e.g. skin whitening and skin lightening with skin brightening and non-whitening; passivity of the practice (staying indoors) with activeness; as well as skin-whitening rationales for fair skin as the physical marker of social status and wealth with fair skin as a physical indicator of strength and health; and for beautification with problem-solving. Also, it projects another version of 'fair skin' by defining skin tone, complexion, and whiteness differently, in which the notions of skin tone and purity behind fair skin are replaced with skin brightness and cleanliness. All these suggest 'antifemininity', which is an important element in traditional/hegemonic masculinity (see Beaglaioich, Sarma, & Morrison, 2013; Kahn, 2009).

LME's antifemininity sets men apart from women in skin whitening by coming out with different notions and justifications. This ultimately claims a masculine space in the female domain of skin whitening, i.e. a 'safety zone' (Rinallo, 2007, p. 86) and 'men's legitimate territory' (Ourahmoune, 2009, p. 134), where men can fulfil their self-desire to look good while retaining traditional masculinity. Subsequently, this forms a new gender binary in skin whitening (see Table 2).

Table 2. Gender binary of skin whitening.

Concept	L'Oréal Paris <i>White Perfect</i> (Female)	L'Oréal Men Expert <i>White Activ</i> (Male)
Ideal Complexion	Tone-related Fair (lighter/paler tone) Others: e.g. rosy; glowing/ bright; and transparent	Not tone-related Bright Others: e.g. Clean, clear & refreshed -- No dirt and oil
Skin-whitening practice	A <i>passive</i> process that relies on the product to produce perfect fair complexion. A passive process indoor. A luxury	An <i>active</i> process where men solve skin problems. An active process overcoming outdoor elements that harm the skin. A need (to solve problems)
Skin-whitening products	Expensive and luxurious	Effective and high-tech
Skin-whitening rationale	For beautification, with embedded notions of social status and wealth.	To solve skin problems for a stronger, brighter, and healthier skin and also, look.

From an 'ambivalent' evaluation of men's skin colour during the Middle Ages (Frost, 1990, p. 671) to the lack of 'empirical work on men's beauty practices' (Barber, 2008, p. 459) and ideal *facial* image (McNeill & Firman, 2014), it is unfair to consider male skin whitening as having deviated from social norms or even, not masculine. Nonetheless, the fact that fair skin and beauty practice are both associated with traditional/hegemonic femininity, men's skin whitening inevitably challenges the traditional/hegemonic masculinity that emphasises

antifemininity. Hence, communicating about male skin whitening needs extra sensitivity and creativity.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that all marketing discourses of male skin whitening will employ antifemininity. Our findings support Chand and Chaudhary's (2012) findings that show a strong masculine image, but do not align with Venkataswamy's (2013) study that shows gender has been transcended in male skin-whitening advertisements.

Also, we believe that the gender construction in discourses about male skin whitening is not fixed, but evolves with male grooming and male skin whitening that are both gaining social acceptance. Our study shows strong gender differentiation in the packaging of LME *White Activ's* products that were manufactured between 2012–2013, when male skin whitening was emerging in Malaysia. However, a diachronic analysis can show how the discursive construction of gender evolves in product packaging or other marketing genres from the same brand in the same context, but at different times.

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Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest 'hunk' of them all? Negotiating a masculine notion of skin whitening for Malaysian men

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Huey Fen Cheong

is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster University (UK), as well as a fellow at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya (Malaysia). Her research interests are gender studies (i.e. masculinities, queer identities and male grooming/metrosexuality) and multimodal discourse analysis.

Surinderpal Kaur

is a Deputy Dean and Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University Malaya. Her research interests are critical discourse analysis, multimodality, language and gender studies, and terrorism studies.
