

UNDERSTANDING COLOURISM IN MALAYSIA THROUGH DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF SKIN COLOUR ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Colourism refers to any act of discrimination that is portrayed on the basis of skin colour or the act of attributing negativity upon dark skin. This article explores the extent to which colourism prevails in Malaysia by studying the discourse of skin colour on social media. The data is gathered from Twitter (now known as X), a social media platform that allows users to interact with short messages called “tweets”. The tweets are sourced from the Malaysian Twitter diaspora via the keyword “kulit gelap”—a phrase in Malay language which translates to dark skin. The analysis is conducted in alignment with the viewpoint of discourse-historical approach, where a qualitative analysis is employed to examine the linguistic devices and discursive strategies utilised to construct the notion of dark skin. The results indicate that dark skin is often portrayed in a negative light, suggesting that colourism is pervasive in language use. Through the analysis, several discursive strategies are identified, such as nomination of dark skin as a problem and stereotypical predication of dark skin.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, discourse-historical approach, discursive construction, colourism, social media

INTRODUCTION

The main ethnic division in Malaysia is conventionally categorised into Malay, Chinese and Indian (Hirchsman 1987) with a variety of other ethnicities, such as the Kadazandusun from Sabah and Iban from Sarawak (Department of Information Malaysia 2016). The Malays are described to be tawny-coloured, which is orange-brown or yellowish-brown (Blumenbach 1795 cited in Okihiro 2012), meanwhile the Chinese are known to have fairer skin. Tan and Stephen (2019) discovered that Malaysian Chinese favour yellower skin tone. The Malaysian Indians are from India—a country populated by darker-skinned people especially in the south (Barnett and Hutton 2016). They are generalised to have a darker complexion. These backgrounds—although not necessarily—are some of the many factors that result in the diversity of skin tones among Malaysians.

In the past, mass media and the beauty industry had shaped the world into thinking that ideal beauty is the Eurocentric beauty, where an “ideal beautiful person” should have fair skin, straight hair and round eyes (Uzogara and Jackson 2016). This one-way communication that occurred through print media, such as magazines and newspapers, and electronic media, such as television and film, had constructed the image of an ideal physical appearance. Light-skinned Caucasian models are portrayed, especially in cosmetic advertisements, to manoeuvre the desire of non-white women to achieve lighter skin (Mills, Shannon and Hogue 2017; Hussein 2010).

Today, the internet had changed the way of communication. With the internet, comes social media, a user-generated content utilising internet-based publishing technologies distinct from traditional print and broadcast media (Terry 2009). It is used for social interaction, for information seeking, and for expressing opinions (Whiting and Williams 2013). As opposed to one-way communication manifested through traditional media, social media had administered a space for people to interact. It has given power to the people. In 2011, the government of Saudi Arabia which had previously banned women from driving had faced resistance when the people in the country were campaigning through a social media movement called “Women2Drive” (Aljarallah 2017). With social media, the voice of the people is now heard. They are able to speak out on issues that people without authorities would not previously have the chance to execute. Social media encompasses the idea of allowing many users with internet access to share, collaborate and update web content (Lange-Faria and Elliot 2012),—and this is what makes social media powerful.

In a prior observation, the author noticed that “skin colour” is an emerging topic of discourse on social media. People share their thoughts and experience around the subject of skin colour, and their sharing are exhibiting interesting reflections of their authentic thoughts. The following tweet sample is reviewed:

Aku kulit gelap. Bg surat confession dkt crush. Crush reply “muka mem bontot kual, ada hati nak suka aku”. Aku naik bus kwn sapa aku “hai botol kicap”. Disappointed my self-esteem hilang, forever. Apa salah aku kulit gelap?

[I have dark skin. When I gave a confession letter to my crush, he/she replied, “your face is like the pan’s bottom, you don’t deserve to have feelings for me”. When I got on the bus, my friend greeted me with “hi, soy sauce bottle”. Disappointed. My self-esteem is gone forever. Is it wrong to be dark?] (Twitter, 19th February 2019, 3:57 PM)

The tweet sample is shared by a social media user, sharing their experience of being rejected by a person that they had a romantic interest in due to their dark skin. Here, several linguistic items are identified in the construction of dark skin, such as in the phrase *bontot kual* (the bottom of a frying pan) and *botol kicap* (soy sauce bottle). This results in their disappointment, which prompted them to question their own skin. This tweet sample shows how a particular skin colour is favoured more than the other, which is evidently a product of colourism.

UNDERSTANDING COLOURISM

First coined by Alice Walker in 1983, colourism is defined as the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of colour over their dark-skinned counterparts (Hunter 2007). Colourism is also acknowledged as the tendency to associate light skin with positive virtues and dark skin with negativity. In other words, colourism refers to any act of discrimination that is portrayed on the basis of skin colour or the act of attributing negativity upon dark skin. This discrimination is commonly identified as a black or Latino problem, but it is also common among people of colour (Hunter 2007), which means the multicultural people in Malaysia are not excluded.

Many scholars have acknowledged the distinction between racism and colourism, yet they are discovered to be deeply interconnected. According to Rand (2017), racism is defined as a belief that “each race has distinct and intrinsic attributes” or “that one race or ethnic group is superior or inferior to another” or “prejudice or discrimination based upon race or ethnicity”, meanwhile colourism is a form of

prejudice and discrimination solely based on skin colour (Craddock, Dlova and Diedrichs 2018). The interconnection between racism and colourism is the racist ideas that derived from white supremacy have been subconsciously internalised within the people (Mbatha 2017).

Colourism has shown to cause complex life outcome among people of colour. A study claimed that women are experiencing limitations when it comes to jobs and careers (Sims and Hirudayaraj 2016), and it is even affecting an individual's ability to acquire wealth and assets (Painter, Holmes and Bateman 2016). The severity of colourism had also triggered dangerous and unhealthy use of skin lightening products among both men and women (Mukherjee 2019; Shroff, Diedrichs and Craddock 2018; Wong et al. 2017).

It is important to note that colourism is rooted in white supremacy (Tate 2015). The concept of whiteness or fairness is often associated with the Western standard of beauty. Whiteness is defined as a set of characteristics and experiences that are attached to the white race and white skin (Cole 2019). Whiteness is also a part of the social construction of race, racism, and white skin privilege (Guess 2006). Therefore, in understanding colourism, it is necessary to take into account the preference for whiteness, especially in the absence of rejection for dark skin.

This study attempts to gain a deeper understanding of colourism that may or may not still be prevailing by investigating the people's discourse about skin colour on social media. The study is focused on the power of social media to gain insight on people's thoughts and opinion about skin colour by examining their discourse. To achieve this, a discourse analysis approach is adapted.

DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL APPROACH (DHA)

DHA focuses on the systematic analysis of context and its dialectical relationship to meaning-making. It involves the integration of a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive events are embedded (Wodak 2015). In this study, DHA is primarily integrated into the data analysis, where the data is diagnosed and interpreted as a discourse from the DHA viewpoint, where nomination, predication and intensification are three of the key discursive strategies.

Nomination, Predication and Intensification Strategies

Nomination strategy refers to the different ways in which entities are referred to in the course of the text; specifically, to answer the question of “how are persons/ objects...named and referred to linguistically?” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Drawing on the questions for the current research, the persons (or also acknowledged as social actors in a DHA study) being studied are classified as people with dark skin. In the case of objects, dark skin is the object being studied when it is being referred to independently without affiliating it to a person. Reisigl and Wodak (2001) indicated several ways that a nomination can occur, including reference by tropes, biological, naturalising and depersonalising metaphors and metonymies. Synecdoche, deictic and phoric expressions, and collectives that establish membership and create insiders and outsiders, discourse objects, processes and actions are also some of the tools for nomination strategy (Wodak 2001).

Predication strategy refers to the way entities are described whether positively or negatively, explicitly or implicitly (Wodak 2001). Questions to approach predication strategy are to reveal the characteristics or qualities attributed to social actors, objects, and phenomena. While nomination strategy brings the social groups into being, the strategy of predication linguistically provides these groups or actors with characteristics and traits (Wodak 2001). Predications are linguistically more or less evaluative; deprecatorily or appreciatively (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Predication is a process of assigning qualities to persons, animals, action and social phenomena. This particular strategy is mainly realised by specific forms of reference, attributes, predicates, collocations, comparisons, similes, metaphors, synecdoches, metonymies, hyperboles and allusion.

Intensification, on the other hand, is described together with mitigation as a method of modifying the illocutionary force; thus, the epistemic or deontic status of utterances (Wodak 2015). With such objectives (to modify utterances), several devices may be used to realise the objectives, including the use of hyperboles, indirect speech act, and verbs of saying/feeling/thinking. Intensification may also be identified through the use of intensifiers, such as presented in Beltrama (2018)’s study on the pragmatic intensification in the English language through the use of intensifier totally. In other words, intensification is similar to the act of sharpening one’s utterances.

Contextually, the border between nomination and predication are blurry as they may overlap with one another. The strategies of predication cannot be neatly separated from the nomination strategies (Wodak and Richardson 2013); therefore, in this study, these two strategies are simultaneously analysed to investigate how

this topic is linguistically realised through the linguistic processes and mechanisms in accordance to the data. This study is precisely concerned with how skin colour is constructed through language. Within the structure and understanding about the strategies of nomination, predication, and intensification in discourse, this study proceeds to analyse the texts from Twitter, a social media platform.

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

The data comprises of selected corpus of tweets within the subject of skin colour written in the Malay language. They are collected from Twitter, a social media site that allows users to post character-constrained messages (Zappavigna 2011). In this study, social media users who post on Twitter are referred to as tweet authors. Through web scraping, tweets are collected from 25 June 2019 to 25 July 2019 by applying the phrase *kulit gelap* as the search keyword. A maximum sample of tweets was initially collected (1,140 tweets), consisting of more than 25,000 words. The particular date is chosen on the grounds that skin colour was an emerging topic among social media users at that time, as a result of current trending topics and news. This includes the news about how a Malaysian pageant participant was harshly criticised due to her dark skin (Hassan 2018) and an incident involving a local businessman calling an audience on a TV show ugly for having dark skin (Mokhtazar 2018). The emergence of this topic, hence, prompted the data collection for this research. To organise the data, spam tweets, repeated tweets, and tweets that contained the search keyword but carry meaningless data are eliminated. The final number of tweets acquired for the study is 350 tweets. Several prominent tweets from each theme are chosen as the example and a detailed interpretation and analysis is presented in the next section.

The analysis follows a two-dimensional method. The first dimension is to identify the types of discursive strategy embedded in a tweet. This step is conducted by drawing upon the methodological approaches of DHA within the scope of discourse analysis, which is primarily concerned with identifying the themes of a given discourse by focusing on linguistic and discursive strategies. This step will provide an overview of the dominant discursive topics in the data. The tweets are then categorised into its most prominent discursive category (nomination, predication, or intensification). The second dimension of analysis is to qualitatively analyse and interpret the discourse so as to reveal the extent to which skin colour is discussed. This step is essential to examine how the discourse practice on Twitter contributes to the construction (or deconstruction) of colourism. The researcher's interpretation is supported and linked with previous reports and studies within the context of skin colour and colourism.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings discovered that the discourse on dark skin is often constructed negatively. The discussion in this section is organised into five identifiable types of discursive strategies:

Nomination of Dark Skin as a Problem and Skin Bleaching as the Solution

The discourse on dark skin often comes together with a perceived solution, which revealed the nomination of dark skin as a problem. When talking about dark skin, tweet authors tend to convey their intention to solve the problem especially through skin bleaching, which is a practice of using products or undergoing procedures to acquire lighter skin.

Makin gelap kulit aku ni **kena pakai sunblock**
[I am getting darker; I need to use sunscreen]

Makin lama makin gelap kulit aku, aku tak kira **aku nak makan collagen**
[My skin is getting darker. I don't care, I want to consume collagen]

Kulit mkin gelap bila nk beli ni k***** ni **utk cerahkan kulit blik**
[My skin is getting darker, its time I buy K***** to restore my light skin]

Tweet samples above show the tweet authors' concern about their skin condition that is signified to have become darker. This results in the consumption of sunblock, collagen and other products that are believed to be the solution.

A few underlying contexts are identified from these tweet samples: the authors do not favour the change on their skin tone; the authors prefer a lighter skin tone; and the need to consume skincare products, such as sunscreen, is a measure that should be taken in attempt to gain lighter skin, despite the actual purpose of a sunscreen that is to protect the skin's health in terms of exposure to ultraviolet radiation (Forestier 2008). The concern was only brought up after realising that one's skin is darker, which not only depicts a false conception of sunscreen, but also conveys the message of needing to fix the problem with dark skin. Here, the idea of dark skin being regarded as a problem and the use of such products as a solution to the alleged problem is implicitly conveyed.

Masalah kulit gelap? rasa malu? nak saya bantu?
[Having dark skin problem? Feeling ashamed? Want me to help?]

The above tweet sample is nominating dark skin as a problem that an individual would be ashamed to have. Although the tweet is expressed diminutively instead of being a more objective statement (e.g., dark skin is ugly), the presupposition is made clear. The following phrase in the same tweet that says, “want me to help?” is suggesting that this particular tweet author has the solution to the problem. This tweet author is presumably a seller of skin bleaching products who is promoting his or her business, given the availability of social media that enables sellers to perform online marketing.

What stands out from the data is the explicit promotion of skin bleaching believed to be dispersed by the individual who profits from such promotion.

Diamond Extract. Membersihkan dan memutihkan kulit muka. Mengurangkan jerawat dan mengecilkan liang. Mengurangkan noda dan bintik hitam dan gelap di muka. Mengatasi masalah kulit dan pigmentasi yang membosankan. [Diamond Extract. Cleaning and whitening the face. Reducing pimples and pores. Reducing flaws and black, dark spots on the face. Fighting skin problems and boring pigmentation.]

Jiran membawang... Uish hai... Makan apalah dia tu kan.. Dulu kulit gelap.., sekarang pergh!!! Gebu gebas, flawless gitu. [The neighbours are talking, what did she consume? She used to have dark skin, look at her now! Her skin looks supple and flawless.]

Lagi cantik, lagi jahat! lagi abg sayang. Siapa kat sini ada masalah jerawat, jeragat, parut, resdung, kulit gelap, kulit allergik, kutil, ketuat, tatoo, bulu, whiteheads. [More beautiful, more dangerous, more love from your husband! Anyone here having problems with acne, freckles, scars, sinusitis, dark skin, allergic skin, warts, tattoo, hair, whiteheads.]

These tweet samples exhibit direct promotion for skin bleaching by emphasising on the positive results, such as “cleaning and whitening the face”; implying how an ideal, clean face is allegedly white. The marketing strategy is operated through copy writing, which involves a presumption on the society; such as the “neighbours are talking” (about the positive change in one’s skin colour). The notion of beauty and flawlessness is envisioned to only be achieved by getting rid of dark skin. Linguistic device, such as allusion, is implied, i.e., “she used to have dark skin, look at her now! Her skin looks fine and flawless”. This reinforcement on the notion of “light is right” is integrated with local sentiments, such as friendly neighbourhood (e.g., the neighbours are talking) and household intimacy (e.g., more love from your husband).

Nomination of Dark Skin as the Cause for Low Self Esteem

Self-esteem is defined as a favourable or unfavourable attitude as well as the perceptions of worth and importance towards the self (Rosenberg 1965; Shoemaker 1980). A person with high self-esteem thinks he or she is a person of worth, and coherently, low self-esteem indicates contempt, rejection, or dissatisfaction with the self (Rosenberg 1965). In the findings, dark skin is nominated as the cause for low self-esteem through several linguistic devices, such as nouns denoting negative traits and verbs of feelings.

I've been asked about the two G's lately.
G1: La, kau buat ape, asl Gelap? G2: La, kau dah Gemok eh. **Hais, makin rendah self-esteem aku.** Buat penat jelah hari hari aku jaga kulit.
[I have been asked about the two G's lately.
G1: Why are you dark? What have you done? G2: Have you gained weight?
My self-esteem just dropped. All those skincare routines for nothing.]

Kalau aku pakai colour nude macamni nampak macam aku nak mampos dah. Pucat lesu oii. **Aku kulit gelap sedihhh.**
[If I were to wear a nude colour like this, I would look as if I'm dying.
Very pale. I'm dark, sad.]

Aku insecure tgh2 mlm nih, Dh la duduk lama ngat kt turki tgh summer. Kulit jdi makin gelap. Kulit kering. Rambut barai. Tgk org turkey sume hensem, rambut lawa + straight. Aku rasa mcm manusia yg hodoh kt sini.
[It's midnight and I'm feeling insecure. I have been staying in Turkey for so long in the summer. Skin is getting darker and drier. My hair is a mess. Turkish people are so good looking with beautiful and straight hair. I feel like an ugly human here.]

In tweet sample (8), the author quoted a previous conversation that includes the detail about their weight gain and darkened skin, which had decreased their self-esteem. Tweet authors are identified to have projected their lack of self-esteem through insecurities and worries, including through verbs of feelings, such as sad and insecure. They are also shown to be affected by the viewpoints of others when it is subjected to the darkening of their skin. From people in general to friends and acquaintances (e.g., teacher), there are clear examples of how the words of others play an important role in affecting one's self-consciousness as identified in the following tweet samples.

Mmg insecure bila ada org dah strt tegur ttg kulit muka makin gelap.
[I get insecure when people start asking about my skin getting darker.]

Kulit aku dah la gelap bila sunburn bertambah gelap. Semua tegur asal gelap sangat, malas nak jawab. [My skin is already dark as it is, and now its sunburnt so it became darker. Everyone has been asking why I'm so dark. I don't feel like answering.]

My teacher once cakap "N***, hitam nya ek kau ni" dekat aku and I was really malu and benci kulit aku sendiri. [My teacher once said "N***, you're really dark". I was ashamed, and I hate my own skin.]

In tweet sample (13), the author is disclosing the information about her teacher who once projected negative comments upon her skin, which consequently caused her to feel "ashamed" and drove her to continue to "hate" her skin. This tweet author and her teacher are similar in terms of their socially shared knowledge and ideologies (Van Dijk 2014); therefore, resulting in the negative idea of the conversation, where the teacher's conscious or unconscious intention of insulting N is reflected in N's negative thinking upon her skin due to the shared ideology of "dark skin is not beautiful".

Predication of Attractiveness Based on Skin Colour and Gender

The study finds that dark-skinned men are often predicated as attractive while their women counterpart are predicated to be less attractive. Tweet authors are found to have shared their preference for a romantic partner through several linguistic devices including slang, argumentative statements and rhetorical questions.

Lelaki yg kulit gelap ni sumpah bae.
[Dark-skinned men are really 'bae' material]

Sorry, lelaki kulit gelap lagi handsome daripada lelaki kulit putih. Fight me!
[Sorry, dark-skinned men are more handsome than light-skinned men. Fight me!]

Jangan lawan cakap aku bila aku cakap laki kulit gelap ni handsome!
[Don't fight me when I say dark-skinned men are handsome!]

Aku tahu kenapa tapi aku lagi attract dengan lelaki kulit gelap than yang putih.
[I don't know why but I'm more attracted to dark-skinned men compared to light.]

Tweet sample (17) shows the use of adjectives, such as handsome and *bae* (internet slang for baby, which also carries the meaning of addressing one's partner affectionately) to describe the attractiveness of dark-skinned men. Tweet authors are also being argumentative when conveying their opinions (i.e., fight me, don't fight me). However, when discussing their interest towards dark men, several tweet authors tend to make degrading comparisons with lighter-skinned men. Clear comparisons are made by stating that "dark men are better looking than light men". This finding is found to be aligned with previous studies, where women have been found to be more interested in dark-skinned men due to the association of dark men with "strength, power, safety and protection" (Pinkney 2014), which puts into context that the notion of light-skinned men as the opposites: weak, powerless, and unsafe. The findings in the current study further supports the predication of attractiveness to dark-skinned men, where they seem to have machismo.

Lelaki kulit gelap ni dia ada macho tersendiri, serious.
[Dark-skinned men have their own kind of machismo, seriously.]

Handsome jugak wei kulit gelap...nmpak macho kan.
[Dark skin is indeed handsome, they look macho, right?]

This finding—although seemingly positive on the surface—arguably reflects a substandard upon dark skin. In other words, the positivity seems to be one-sided, where there is a firm endorsement for dark-skinned men but not women. There are not as many direct tweets in the data that are found to be describing attraction towards female. To the best of the data analysis, only two tweets appear to be describing the attractiveness of dark-skinned women, as follows:

Ak tahu knp, tapi aku rasa perempuan yg kulit gelap ni hot af do.
[I don't know why, but I think dark-skinned women are really hot.]

Susah nk cari makwe kulit gelap ni.
[It's difficult to find a dark-skinned girl.]

In tweet samples above, the first author is expressing direct attraction towards dark-skinned females through the use of the slang adjective "hot", a casual expression for sexy. Meanwhile, the second author is expressing his/her opinion regarding the difficulties to find a dark-skinned girl. Deductively, it is understood that the tweet author implies that most girls are fair; therefore, it is "difficult" to find a dark-skinned girl. The difficulties in finding dark-skinned women as a potential girlfriend would presumably have strong historical connection with the female attractiveness being associated with light skin, inducing in the practice of skin

bleaching among women; hence, resulting in the preponderance of light-skinned women in society. However, this hypothesis is yet to be proven.

Nonetheless, it is established that the male sex tends to have preferences for lighter or fairer women (Cain 2006). A psychological study by Coard, Breland and Raskin (2001) discovered that men believe that the opposite gender found darker skin to be most attractive. It is widely acknowledged that among people of colour, fair-skinned females are regarded as attractive and desirable by dark-skinned males as they believed that marrying a fairer female will help them increase their social status (Wade 1996). Previous scholars have also explained that darker skin affects more females than males as females are mostly judged based on their physical appearances as opposed to men (Browne and Misra 2003; Keith et al. 2010).

Predication of Dark Skin as a Certain Race Through Stereotyping

Racial stereotype is defined as a highly simplified classification of any racial group made by the dominant group in a society or culture (Samsioe 2010). Racial stereotypes predicated to dark skin is reflected through generalisation of races that are both local and foreign to Malaysia. An example of stereotyping a local race through the use of racial noun is identified in the data.

Nak bagi tahu. Yang aku India. sebab kulit gelap sangat. Even India pon ade yang putih daripada aku.
[I would like to inform that I am Indian, because my skin is too dark.
Even some Indians are fairer than me.]

Tweet excerpt above suggests that the author might not be an Indian; however, the author is associating his or her skin tone to that of an Indian ethnicity because it is stereotypical for Indians to have dark skin. In the second sentence of the tweet, the author contrastingly states that “even some Indians are fairer than me”, indicating the extreme darkness of his or her skin tone, which are two paradoxical statements; first, being too dark is associated with being Indian; and second, the author decides that the darkness of his/her skin is beyond that of Indians, implying that the Indian race itself is referentially judged based on the darkness of skin. This may be explained through the rhetorically hypothesised concept of “the darker the skin, the more Indian you become”.

This tweet sample is contextually representing the concept of internalised racism, where individuals in a race is expected to possess a certain degree of skin colour in order to be categorised into a certain ethnicity. However, the projection of this tweet is ironic because instead of receiving such internalised racism by other

people, the author itself is conveying such predication, suggesting that the cognate belief might be shared in the community that occupied the author's surrounding.

Kau ingat semua yg kulit gelap ni India. Eh, sial la!
[You think everyone who is dark is Indian? Curse you!]

The tweet sample above shows that the author disagrees with people who often stereotyped dark-skinned people as Indian. Although the author may positively suggest that skin colour racial stereotypes are irrelevant, the underlying negative notion of this tweet is detected through the act of cursing, indicating that he/she is agitated to be stereotyped as an Indian. Such misconception projected by other people upon this tweet author had caused him or her to feel distressed, as asserted by Veenstra (2011a), "when cues provided by others do not confirm internally held identities, people experience stress". In this case, the author does not perceive him /herself as an Indian; therefore, explaining the frustration expressed through cursing.

Although ambiguous, it is possible that the author expressed his/her frustration due to negative sentiments that are commonly associated with the Indian race, especially the notion of low-classness for dark-skinned Indians (low castes) based on the skin colour bias and religious discrimination in India (Hall 2012). In other words, this tweet author may not be equally frustrated if he/she were to be misidentified as a Caucasian due to the positive construction of whiteness that often correlates with beauty and power (Hall 2012; Rodrigo-Caldeira 2016). Although the Indian caste system is no longer legitimate in India as well as being non-existent in Malaysia, the remnants of the system prevailed throughout the media and political representation (Mehta 2019), and the discovery in this study suggests that the predication about dark skin and Indian is often negative.

Kulit dia gelap, panggil dia anak negro.
[He/she is dark, call them Negro child.]

Siapa la nak kahwin dengan orang kulit gelap, muka bergerutu macam orang tak pernah mandi (...) kalau aku diberi choice antara Syrian, dan Rohingya, aku memang la pilih Syrian.
[Who would ever want to marry dark skin, spotty faced people who look like they never showered (...). If I were given the choice, I would surely choose Syrian over Rohingya.]

Referring to the tweet sample above, the word Negro is deemed as a cause for insult or name calling. The word Negro itself indicates degradation. This is seemingly related to the historical context, where representations made upon dark-skinned

African Americans in our country is often negative (Abdul Latif and Kumar 2017). Shankar and Subish (2007) asserted that a large part of South Asia was once ruled by the British, who are people with white skin, and this may be one of the factors towards the belief that white is beautiful. However, this stereotypical notion does not only apply to light skinned people from the Western or European diaspora. Tweet sample (25) appropriately supports this inference, where explicitly criticises and expresses abhorrence of refugees from Rohingya on the basis that dark skin is disgusting.

Intensification of Discourse

The discourse of dark skin is discovered to be intensified through linguistic devices, such as hyperbole. Hyperbole is a figurative statement, where the traditional term was taken originally from classical rhetoric; thus, it is associated with formal and persuasive speech, stylistics, and literature (Claridge 2010).

Baru minggu ke-2 kulit dh gelap, lagi 5 minggu nak habis LI jadi
biawak hangus rasanya.
[It's just the second week and my skin has darkened, in 5 weeks
after my LI is done maybe I'll turn into a burnt monitor lizards.]

The author of this tweet chose to represent his or her thought on dark skin through the phrase *biawak hangus*, which translates to burnt monitor lizard. In the Malay language, the connotation on monitor lizards is commonly negative. There are several proverbs in this language that explains how a *biawak* carries a negative context such as *biawak kudung masuk kampung* that translates to a bad lot known by many, *lidah biawak* (an untrustworthy person), and *mendukung biawak hidup* (doing a troublesome work). Given the negative connotation of the lexical *biawak*—combined with the state of being blackened due to burning (*hangus*)—it is presumed that the tweet author is using the strategy of hyperbole to emphasise on the unpleasant consequence of having a dark skin, which is as unpleasant as burnt monitor lizards.

Kulit dahla gelap. Burn pulak lama nak mampus hmmm hari-hari
la org panggil si hitam.
[My skin is dark and now it's going to be sunburnt for a really
long time, people will call me "black" every day.]

Tweet sample above describes an aspect of colourism experienced by the tweet author, where he/she has dark skin due to sunburn. Because of that, he/she is concerned with how people will call him or her *hitam* (black) every day (*hari-hari*). The intensification on the amount of time for the name calling to last is identified

here. This is similar to the tweet sample presented in the introduction part of this article, where words associated with the colour black often become a derogatory nickname for people with dark skin. This tweet sample does not only show how colourism is experienced, but also the severity of it through the intensified length of time.

PREVALENCE OF COLOURISM

The findings and analysis section had discussed the construction of skin colour on social media in an attempt to reveal the prevalence of colourism. Through Twitter, many had shared their life experience, and some shared their thoughts on dark skin. There are tweets that reflect the experience of colourism, where tweet authors see themselves as being excluded from, or even unaccepted by other people. Through the analysis, several discursive strategies are identified: nomination of dark skin as a problem and skin bleaching as the solution; nomination of dark skin as the cause for low self-esteem; predication of dark skin as a certain race through stereotyping; predication of beauty based on skin tone and gender; and intensification. Based on the data, the findings imply that colourism is indeed prevailing.

Although beauty and its meaning and values are and never were neutral (Collins 2018), the preoccupation of light skin as the ideal human skin exists. The construction of beauty had often perpetuated slimness and the lightness of skin as the ideals (Hussein 2010; Stephens, Hill and Hanson 1994). While it is arguable that a slim physique may be achieved through a healthy lifestyle (in regard to obesity and other possible health issues), dark skin, on the other hand, is not a fairly equivalent health issue. The commotion of dark skin being homogenised into what is ideal and what is not ideal is dispensable as no skin colour is inherently ideal or not ideal. Feeling insecure and worried about one's skin complexion is a part of looking at one's body image negatively, where it is inferred that as body dissatisfaction increases, self-esteem decreases (Mucherah and Frazier 2013; Ra and Jee 2013).

The effect of colourism on these individuals are causing them to resort to skin bleaching. Hall (2012) mentioned that non-white people especially women have risked their health in attempting to achieve the white ideals (Hall 2012), and this study supports Hall's statement. Taking the example from tweet samples in the findings section, a woman's worth in the community is said to be defined through the approval of neighbours or spouses on the basis of skin colour. This is an alarming dispersion of ideology since skin bleaching had been proven harmful

towards human health and safety (Craddock, Dlova and Diedrichs 2018; Davids et al. 2016).

It is found that physical appearance is an immense concern in which it sometimes may or may not project negative effects on one's emotion. Long-standing inferiority of dark skin had caused dark-skinned individuals to perceive themselves as less worthy, and it is projected through their tweets. Hence, this study is convinced that skin bleaching practice will prevail if the idea of fairness as the ideal skin is not reversed. One might argue that it is an individual's right to bleach their skin, but skin bleaching actually carries a serious public health risk (Street et al. 2014).

The availability of social media today enables skin bleaching businesses to take advantage. Through linguistic devices, sellers are dispersing ideologies parallel to society's concern. Such capacity is also known as the social capital, where the people understand and share the same values, and in this case, the value is to achieve light skin so that one could appear "better" in society. As remarked by Bourdieu et al. (1986), the "conceptualisation of social capital is based on the recognition that capital is not only economic and that social exchanges are not purely self-interested and need to encompass capital and profit in all their forms".

The findings also suggest an apparent normative validity, as such where the norm had always been for people to view dark skin as inferior. The repercussion caused by the expectation of others upon the affected individuals are similar to Veenstra (2011b)'s findings in his study about the identity of American Indians, that "when cues provided by others do not confirm internally-held identities, people experience stress and, accordingly, will either attempt to correct the perceptions or succumb to them, with negative implications for self-esteem".

CONCLUSION

Many are still preoccupied with the idea that light skin equates beauty. Such a conception had been held long before the advent of social media. Advertisements promoting whitening products have long projected negativity about dark skin without considering sensibility, ethics and sensitivity. The traditional media, such as magazines and television, have explicitly promoted whiteness to the Malaysian female community, especially through advertisements. Although such representations were previously conveyed by giant companies such as Neutrogena, Loreal and Fair and Lovely, the recent availability of social media have provided space for the emergence of small businesses, and they appear to be preserving the same idea. However, this study also discovered a small number of counter-

discourses, in which some Twitter users acknowledge the beauty of dark skin. They are advocating people into appreciating their skin colour in attempts to demystify the current ideology.

Ideologies are manifested through language, and the relationship between colourism and language is intensely substantial. Dark skin individuals in this country may not experience colourism in the exact equivalent ways such as in the Western world. However, the repercussion is prevalent upon their social life and mental health as a form of a long-term suffering, a result of society's ignorance. Substantial advances and changes in the way people use language to convey their ideologies are crucial steps that should be taken into developing a society that is not discriminatory. Subsequently, social media requires an immense responsibility from its users in all aspects, including the discourse they deposited on its platforms.

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