

The Meanings of Fair Skin in Eight *Unilever*'s Skin-whitening Advertisements in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Human skin color ranges from the darkest to the lightest. However, the culture and the power of media, especially advertisements, convince all women to embrace fair skin as the idealized self. This study aims to find how fair skin is represented in the selected eight *Unilever*'s skin-whitening advertisements and how this representation reflects consumerism. In conducting this study, I used the theory of representation and consumerism to find the symbolic meanings of consumerism. The finding showed that there were two meanings that are represented by the skin-whitening advertisements, such as youthfulness and success. In conclusion, those eight skin-whitening products were sold not just as products, but also as their symbolic meanings that lead women to youthfulness and success.

Keywords: fair skin, skin-whitening advertisements, meanings, youthfulness, success, consumerism

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the beauty industry in Indonesia has expanded rapidly. As a result, the number of advertisements for beauty products has been increasing. According to data from the Ministry of Industry in 2018, the development of Indonesia's beauty industry expanded four times faster than the national economy in 2017. This indicates that beauty advertisements have successfully increased the capacity of the consumers' consumptive culture to follow the beauty standards by using the advertised products. The advertisement can portray how we think and act. This is related to the consumerism culture in terms of how advertisers can persuade women to buy skin-whitening products because those products must be purchased. The advertisements for skin-whitening products depict women with fair skin who use those products to gain more benefits.

One of the beauty standards is having fair skin. Skin-whitening products are one of the beauty products that are definitely associated with fair skin. Whitening products attract women to whiten their skin actively. Whitening products must be consumed by women in order for them to feel beautiful. Moreover, according to Statista (2020), there was a survey about the preferred skincare product functions among Indonesian women, stating that in September 2019 skin-whitening products became the most demanded across the generations. In addition, more than 80 percent of respondents considered bright and glowing skin as their beauty's definition.

In fact, seeing as Indonesia is a tropical country, Indonesian women naturally have brownish skin color. Meanwhile, the skin-whitening products in Indonesia create advertisements by trying to construct women to change their natural skin color into fair skin. Unilever is one of the companies that is identified as one of the market leaders in Indonesia. The company has a number of brands that sell a variety of skin-whitening products. They manufacture a variety of skin-whitening products with various functions to whiten skin. For example, *Citra* is well-known for their body lotion, *Ponds* for their face wash, *Vaseline* for their UV lotion, and *Rexona* for their deodorants. This implies that the company desires to persuade women that it is critical that they whiten their skin on all parts of their bodies.

In this study, I chose to observe eight skin-whitening advertisements at YouTube between 2017-2019. There are two reasons why I would like to focus on this topic. First, the data are

gathered from four Unilever (one of the largest leading companies in Indonesia), which together contained skin-whitening features with different functions. Second, all of the advertisements gathered have the same target market, which is young women in their twenties. The advertisements selected for this study were *Citra Sakura Fair UV – Febby Rastanty 30sec (2017)*, *Citra Natural White UV 30s (2017)*, *Pond’s White Beauty Facial Foam – Goals Ready Face Ready (2017)*, *Pond’s White Facial Foam – Bersihkan Wajahmu “Hijab Fight” (2019)*, *Vaseline Healthy White Fresh and Fair – Pengalaman (2019)*, *Vaseline Healthy White Lotion – Konser (2019)*, *Rexona Advanced Whitening – Kereta (2017)*, and *Rexona Advanced Whitening + Anti Noda ft. Gisella Anastasia (2018)*.

In conducting the study, this study will investigate how fair skin is represented and how this representation in the eight advertisements on whitening products reflects consumerism. For the theoretical framework to investigate this study, I used the theories of representation and consumerism. First, representation is conveyed through signs, and those signs represent certain meanings to be conveyed to and by us (Hall, 2002, p.15). Those signs such as images, languages, sounds, attitudes, clothes, and expressions are part of the material world in our life. Through those signs, we can represent thoughts, feelings, and actions. Therefore, through representation, meaning is produced and constructed without directly saying it. Meanings are constructed very firmly so that the meaning looks as if there are natural and cannot be changed. It becomes a process of signification, the practice of making something meaningful. All in all, Hall was concerned that no representations are real, they are the only version of the real. This theory will work best in revealing how the eight advertisements in this study construct the way fair skin is represented as youthful and successful. By observing the signs from the advertisements, we can understand the meaning.

Second, the purpose of the eight advertisements in this study is to sell. Therefore, this study also used the theory of consumerism. All people are trapped or programmed to consume. This system teaches people to change from what they are now to the new self (the ideal images) (Storey, 2014, p. 81). In this study, especially to change their skin now to the new skin color which is fair skin. In fact, in the process, people actually consume the symbolic meanings behind the advertisements. Those symbolic meanings are related to consumer value. There are eight obvious types of consumption value, such as efficiency (input/output, convenience), excellence (quality), status (success, impression management), esteem (reputation, materialism, possessions), play (fun), aesthetics (beauty), ethics (virtue, justice, morality) and spirituality (faith, ecstasy, rapture, sacredness, magic) (Holbrook, 1999). By analyzing how the identity meanings in the eight advertisements represent idealized images of beauty, this theory will be used to identify what types of consumption values occur in those advertisements. This will provide the answer to how those messages are attempting to influence consumers’ interest in whitening products, triggering them to change from the way they are to the way they want to be.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following parts of this chapter discuss my analysis of the findings. The fair skin in the eight skin-whitening advertisements is represented as youthful and successful. The first meaning, youthful, can be seen from the youthful appearance and physical fitness of the models. Whereas the second meaning, successful, can be seen from the models’ successful careers, popularity, and lifestyles. Those meanings that are produced or represented will be analyzed using the texts, images, and expressions found in the eight advertisements. These will prove how the meanings of fair skin are present in the eight advertisements.

Fair Skin as a Sign of Youthfulness

The advertisements encourage all women, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality, to invest in skin-whitening products in order to achieve smooth, radiant, and youthful-looking skin that is free of signs of aging. Increased pigmentation is figured to be one of the early warning

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signs of an unhealthy premature aging process (Dayan, 2008). The eight advertisements use models with youthful appearance and physical fitness and associate the two factors with fair skin.

Youthful Appearance

There are several signs in the advertisements that represent youthful appearance. The first sign is the age of the models. All models in these eight advertisements are in their twenties. When using the advertised products, the skin of all the models is shown to have no fine lines, wrinkles, age spots, or dullness. This implies that the fair skin and smooth complexions of these young models are presented as more attractive. According to Lewis (2011), "women under the age of 30 and with lighter skin tones are perceived as more attractive". Thus, women will remain youthful if they take care of their skin to become spotless, bright, and smooth.



Figure 1 Youthful Appearance (1)



Figure 2 Youthful Appearance (2)



Figure 3 Youthful Appearance (3)



Figure 4 Youthful Appearance (4)



Figure 5 Youthful Appearance (5)

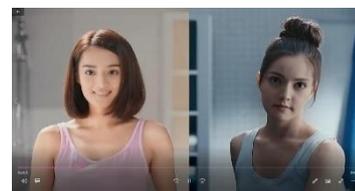


Figure 6 Youthful Appearance (6)



Figure 7 Youthful Appearance (7)



Figure 8 Youthful Appearance (8)

The second sign is revealing clothes that are worn by the models in the advertisements. According to Caitlin S. Cohn's study, *Qualitative Study of Young Women's Views of Dress Choices*, young women wear revealing clothing because they want attention and believe that showing parts of their bodies is the way to be considered attractive (Cohn, 2012). Moreover, Figure 10 also shows the model exposing her shoulder area to apply the whitening lotion advertised. This implies that she wants to take care of the skin of her whole body to maintain her youthful appearance to be more attractive.



Figure 9 Revealing Clothes (1)



Figure 10 Revealing Clothes (2)

Third, several binary oppositions used contrasting signs between the models in the whitening deodorant advertisements. The aim is to deliver the contrasts of having and not having fair skin. The advertisement takes sides with the model on the left who is considered to have fair skin and use the deodorant advertised.



Figure 11 Binary Opposition (1)

The first contrast is the dress that they wear. The model on the left wears a sleeveless dress. This makes her stand out and noticeable. Supported by research by Caitlin S. Cohn, *A Qualitative Study of Young Women's Views of Dress Choices*, revealing one's body has the potential to make one be noticed (Cohn, 2012). Next, the second contrast is their armpits' appearance. The model's armpit on the left is hairless and it is as fair as the rest of her skin tone. That is more appealing to notice and the way she grabs the bus handle without hesitation shows how she is confident to show her armpit. Meanwhile, the model on the right shows the opposite way. She does not feel comfortable with her armpit as she only raises half of her hand. This reason is supported by Lisa Miller, the author of *The Cut*, research conducted by Breanne Fahs in 2013, *Perilous Patches and Pistaches: Imagined Versus Lived Experiences of Women's Body Hair Growth*, demonstrates how women are expected to have clean armpits. They are considered dirty, gross, and disgusting if they do not shave. Then, the third contrast is the lighting. The model on the left has high-key lighting which makes it clearer, high quality, and more pleasing to the eye. This also reveals how the model's fair skin is associated with bright colors. According to Gabriel (2017) in his article, *Understanding the Basics of High-key vs Low-key Lighting*, "high key lighting is used to produce images that encourage optimism, youthfulness, and pleasurable." The right side, on the other hand, has low-key lighting that emphasizes an unappealing atmosphere because it looks duller.

Another advertisement also clearly makes a contrast from both models' clothes. The model on the left is the most stand out object compared to the model on the right. The pink dress that she wears, based on research done by Kate Smith (2005), a color expert, says that "pink stands for youth, innocence, attention, and playfulness". On the other hand, the grey clothes that are worn by the model on the right are linked to old age, depression, and lack of direction (Kanchier, 2012).

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Figure 12 Binary Opposition (2)

The next sign is the selfies activity which is done by these fair-skinned models. It is believed that taking a selfie can help people stand out and prove they are a part of something (Steele, 2018). Their amusing gestures and cheerful expressions indicate that having young and fair skin makes them happy and makes them love themselves. As a result, they take selfies with joy and confidence. Tajuddin, Hassan, and Ahmad (2013) agree that people taking selfies can boost their confidence.



Figure 13 Selfies (1)

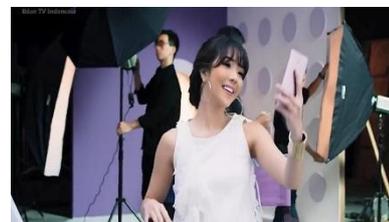


Figure 14 Selfies (2)



Figure 15 Selfies (3)



Figure 16 Selfies (4)

Physical Fitness

The youthfulness of the models who have fair skin is also produced by their physical fitness. The advertisements want to create perceptions and try to connect how the models who have fair skin are physically more fit. This makes them become the winner that shows their youthful aspect.

The first sign shows how the fair-skinned models easily reach the top of the mountain without any injuries. They do not look exhausted at all. Their expressions and their energetic movements make those models look youthful.



Figure 17 Mountain Climbing

The next sign shows the fair-skinned model is perceived to be the winner compared to the darker-skinned one who does not use the lotion advertised. The one who has fair skin wears a blue blouse, and the other one wears a green blouse. Figure 18 shows how the blue one is leading the way. This means that she has a faster speed, and this gives a sign that the one who has fair skin has more stamina and more fit. Moreover, Figure 19 shows how the green one slips on the sand and she gets the mark of dirty sands on her skin. Judging from her expression also, she looks uncomfortable with the dirt and she looks irritated. It is different from the blue one who always puts on a smile and this makes her physically more fit.



Figure 18 Sand Boarding (1)



Figure 19 Sand Boarding (2)

The next sign also shows how having fair skin is related to being a winner. These models are doing a marathon run. Figure 20 shows how the fair-skinned model in the middle position has more energy compared to other models. The others look tired by their hand gestures and their expressions. Then, Figure 21 shows how the fair-skinned model shows how excited her expression is, and she has better running skills since she can be the winner at the end of the race. In addition, the hashtag #FITGOALS gives a strong meaning that to be fit is a target that needs to be achieved. Thus, this advertisement suggests that women must have fair skin to get fit.



Figure 20 Marathon Run (1)



Figure 21 Marathon Run (2)

The last sign in this advertisement also creates the fair-skinned model in the middle position. This let her become the spotlight as the leader. In addition, her posture looks firmer, balanced, and muscular compared to the others that look weaker as if they do not have the maximum strength as the model in the middle.



Figure 22 Aerobic

Fair Skin as a Sign of Success

This part shows another ideal meaning that the advertisements try to construct by having fair skin. The advertisement gives the perception that when you have fair skin, then you will get the successful life. The fair-skinned models are able to get successful in careers, popularity, and lifestyles easily.

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The first sign comes from this fair-skinned model who successfully achieves her career and becomes popular. Gisela, the fair-skinned model, has two successful jobs that make it easy to earn money. Having fair skin is depicted as the factor that makes her comfortable and confident. This is proven by Figure 23 that shows how she has no hesitation when posing and Figure 24 shows how the audience enjoys her performance (which can be seen from their hand gestures). This lets her get more popular as she becomes the center of attention.



Figure 23 Success Careers and Popularity (1)



Figure 24 Success Careers and Popularity (2)

The next signs come from how these fair-skinned models successfully reach certain lifestyles and popularity. Figure 25 shows the hashtag #FANGOALS that gives a strong meaning that fangirling is needed to be achieved for those women who love their fans, and Figure 26 also has a hashtag #TRAVELGOALS that gives a strong meaning that traveling is needed to be achieved to have no stressful life. Moreover, both figures also show how those fair-skinned models are having fun together with their friends while fangirling and traveling. Therefore, these advertisements suggest that women need to have fair skin in order to achieve those lifestyles and easy to have best friends.



Figure 25 Lifestyle and Popularity (1)



Figure 26 Lifestyle and Popularity (2)

The next sign shows how having fair skin successfully makes the models admired by a man and having friendship goals. Figure 27 shows how the fair-skinned model can attract the man to do a ballet with her. According to Roger Dobson (2011), a Health News writer for the Independent, there are many researchers who show that men prefer women with light complexions. Then, Figure 28 shows the hashtag #SQUADGOALS. Connecting to the advertisement, it means that a fair-skinned women squad is the ideal one. The ideal is presented as the exclusive group that supports, laughs, and helps each other. All in all, those advertisements show how having fair skin brings many advantages in their lives.



Figure 27 Popularity (1)



Figure 28 Popularity (2)

In fact, having fair skin, youthfulness, and success come from different things that have no connection. However, in the eight advertisements, the youthful appearance, physical fitness, and success that are represented in those skin-whitening advertisements have become the signs that are intentionally linked to create meanings (youthfulness and success). Those advertisements seem to give women a solution of how to make themselves look youthful and successful by consuming those products. Those advertisements give women hope that they can look more attractive by showing the values and benefits of being youthful and successful when they have fair skin. Holbrook says that the symbolic meaning is connected to the consumption value. From Holbrook's theory about symbolic meanings of consumer values that have already been discussed in the theoretical framework, it has been found that youthfulness contains aesthetic, playful, efficiency values, and success contains status and esteem values.

First, youthfulness can give women a more attractive appearance. The advertisements' aesthetic value can be seen in the fair-skinned women, as it emphasizes idealized criteria such as young faces, clear skin, vibrant colors of clothing and lighting, and ideal bodies. Next, youthfulness can make women look enthusiastic. It is related to playful values. It has been revealed by how the models with fair skin enjoy taking selfies and participating in sports activities. They appear to be active, passionate, and full of life. Their excited expressions prove this. Then, youthfulness also can make women feel comfortable. This gives a sign that it is related to efficiency values. The comfort can be seen from the way those models who have fair skin are not afraid of being the center of attention.

Second, success can make women have status. The status value can be seen from the models who have fair skin in the advertisements, as to how having fair skin can successfully make them have a higher reputation. In the advertisements, the models who have fair skin can enhance their appearance and be able to impress their audience. First, the model who gets two careers can impress her photoshoot's photographer and her singing audience. Second, there is also the model in the yoga class who can catch the man's heart with her fair skin. Moreover, there are also some women who have fair skin who create a squad as having fair skin successfully brings them prestige. The next value is esteem. The esteem value can be seen from the models who have fair skin in the advertisements, as to how having fair skin can successfully make them have more freedom. In the advertisements, the models who have fair skin are able to express themselves as they are comfortable and have certain lifestyles, such as attending a concert and traveling. This means that they are successfully confident enough to show themselves into the world without feeling isolated.

CONCLUSION

The eight *Unilever's* skin-whitening products have been marketed as a part of fighting against aging and failures. From the aesthetic appearance, physical fitness, to careers, lifestyles, and popular success, the advertisements try to present an image of youthfulness and success as the ideal meaning of women who have fair skin. Also, the symbolic meanings of consumer values, it has been found that youthfulness contains aesthetic, playful, efficiency values, and success contains status and esteem values. Those values are convinced to be the factors that might influence women's point of view or the psychological thinking that leads them to consume those skin-whitening products advertised.

In 2003, Ahmad Jansiz, an Assistant Professor of Political Science in the University of Guilan said that "as a result, the ideology of consumption is formed using certain methods that are transferred through images inside the media. This ideology is like one of the dictatorial ideologies that limit consumers the freedom to choose". Therefore, women are being dictated to consume skin-whitening products as if those products can bring those meanings. This means that women are "forced" to choose to have fair skin as if it can really make them achieve youthfulness

and success. In this study, it is youthfulness and success. Hence, until today's era, women still have been facing the demand that having fair skin is better than any other skin color

In conclusion, the eight *Unilever* skin-whitening advertisements depict how those products are sold not only as products, but also sold as their symbolic meanings (being youthful and successful). These advertisements provide women with identity instructions by presenting cultural ideas of beauty, success, and happiness. Women will believe that if they do not have fair skin, they will be unable to achieve their ideal self.

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