



DOES DARK COMPLEXION MATTER? A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED ONLINE ADVERTISEMENTS FROM WATSONS AND GUARDIAN IN 2017

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: This study attempt to analyse the frame of online advertisements from Watsons and Guardian. Both companies utilized the similar storyline in advertising its products during the Hari Raya period, however, advertisement from Watsons had given rise to controversy and racial issue has been raised.

Methodology: This study employed quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis to ensure a more reliable finding in research.

Main Findings: The finding reveals that advertisement from Watsons often framed women in a negative light by 1) Defining beauty as being fair skinned, 2) Interpreting women's quality of relationship correlates with the fairness of their skin, 3) Framing and judging dark skinned women as negative and unable to pursue their dream love life, and 4) providing skin whitening remedies to solve their problems. This contrasts with Guardian's advertisement which was framed more neutral.

Applications of this study: This study stressed the significance of business ethics and corporate responsibility. It is not uncommon when an advertiser exaggerates some characteristics of the advertisements in order to attract people's attention. However, exaggerated advertisements might contain some misleading information which may influence the credibility and truthfulness of the then and future advertisements and hence could further affect the company negatively as consumers had lost confidence in the company.

Novelty/Originality of this study: Most framing studies focused on types of frames, information/news sources and slants of frame, this study provides an in-depth analysis on the four framing functions suggested by Entman, which is less explored in the field.

Keywords: *Business Ethnic, Dark Skin, Framing, Online advertisement*

INTRODUCTION

As businesses are facing intense competition from their rivals, it has become a necessity that businesses employ the use of modern tools to engage with their consumers in order to sell and promote their good and services. The way businesses advertise their goods and services has also changed since they incorporated media 2.0. According to the explanation of [Parekh \(2012\)](#), media 2.0 "enables businesses today to establish two-way communication between themselves and their customers via interactive platforms such as emails, chatrooms, messengers, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter and etc."

The availability of these interactive platforms has also encouraged the evolution of video Advertising. Based on the explanation by [Behal and Sania \(2014\)](#), Online advertisements come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. From the classic digital ad formats like IAB banners to modern video overlay ads, lots of advertisement formats are used by today's digital marketers to earn our attention and business. Online advertising has also helped business now reach a wider and larger target audience without having to spend a lot of money. As more and more consumers are engaged with at least one type of media platform, it allows businesses to venture into newer markets simultaneously making their advertising more consistent.

Online advertisements can provide a business lot of advantages if they are well planned and executed, however, there have been instances of where online advertising by certain businesses have actually backfired and caused a great deal of embarrassment and damaged the image of the business in eyes of the public. In this study, we are looking into the online advertising undertaken by two of Malaysians prominent healthcare companies Guardian and Watsons, whereby one company gained positive publicity for their online advertisement but at the same, the other companies' advertisement was perceived to be discriminatory towards females and people of dark complexion.

Both healthcare companies, Guardian and Watsons, have been operating in Malaysia over some period of time now. Both companies had come up with advertisements based on a fairy tale storyline but the message sent out was totally different. The Watsons's advertisement, raked up controversy as the advertisement depicted a king who sees his potential bride for the first time and becomes extremely unhappy as the women bore dark skin complexion. The Message implied that true beauty of a women lies in their white skin complexion. This advertisement bore an indirect message that it discriminated women with dark skin complexion.



The Guardian's advertisement, on the other hand, was also based on the same fairy tale where a King meets his potential bride, however in this advertisement, upon seeing his future bride as a person of dark complexion, the King said the colour of one's skin does matter to me; the true beauty lies in the heart.

From this advertisement, we can observe that despite being a well-established business organization, the advertising and marketing team of Watsons had committed serious gender discrimination in their advertising. It is also clear the organizations advertising and marketing team did not give its due considerations towards ethical factors of advertising which has resulted in the organization gaining bad publicity. This study will closely examine and provide in-depth explanation of the advertisements undertaken by both organizations.

OVERVIEW OF GUARDIAN AND WATSONS

Watsons was established in the year 1841. Watsons is an international chain of health and beauty products retailers. The group focuses in Asia and European markets. Which includes mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia Indonesia, Turkey, and Ukraine. The group is headquartered in Hong Kong, making it the top-selling health and beauty care product retailer in Hong Kong. Apart from this, it is also the best pharmacy chain in Asia. The Group operates a total of 137000 stores currently across 24 markets in Asia and Europe. Watsons brand is wholly owned by the A. S. Watsons Group which is controlled by Hong Kong Billionaire and Philanthropist Mr. Li Ka Shing (Watsons's formal website).

In contrasts, Guardian is Malaysia largest health, beauty and personal care store which was established in the year 1967. The group is currently owned by Guardian Health and Beauty Sdn. Bhd. which is a subsidiary of a dairy Farm International Group. The group has stores across Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. The company was listed in the Malaysian book of records as the country largest pharmaceutical group (Guardian formal website)

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

RO1: To contrast the slants of online advertisements from Watsons and Guardian.

RO2: To analyse the frames of online advertisements from Watsons and Guardian through problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years whitening products have been viewed as a phonological perspective due to the racial portrayal in advertisement ([Allen, 2001](#); [Charles, 2011](#); [Dorman, 2011](#); [Glenn, 2008](#); [Hall, 2006](#); [Hope, 2011](#); [Hunter, 2011](#); [Leonardo, 2004](#); [Lewis, Robkin, Gaska, & Njoki, 2011](#); [Lindsey, 2011](#); [Murray & Price, 2011](#)). This is mainly due to intuitive thinking among consumers of having a fair skin tone due to "white supremacy" effect. Advertisers have constantly gratified women of having fair, flawless facial appearance as the most desired need of a female. Throughout the years' scholars have also differed "white supremacy" as the only contributing factor for whitening products usage among women ([Bhattacharya, 2012](#); [Charles, 2011](#); [Jones, 2011](#); [Saraswati, 2010](#)). Other factors such as to increase self-esteem and confidence have also been cited by scholars as the leading factors which encourage females to gratify themselves via cosmetics and other products ([Ogilvie & Ryan, 2011](#); [Hamed, Tayyem, Nimer, & Alkhatib, 2010](#)).

The constant comparison between lighter skin tones towards darker skin tones has always been a selling technique among advertisers worldwide. These rather controversial techniques have managed to create several controversial advertisements mainly within the Asian region. For example, in 2016 Thailand Skincare company Seoul Secret had to retract an advertisement which used two women characters one a fair skin and another blackface. The advertisements also had a provocative slogan which also contributed to the backlash "white makes you win". And in 2017, Watsons Personal Care store, the largest health care, and beauty care store in Asia; was involved in backlash due to their controversial "Legenda Cun Raya" campaign which portrayed a blackface lady as unattractive. Nevertheless, the portrayal of women as blackface has shown negative consequences in both examples. Gender discrimination mainly among female is common in developing countries ([Sultana, 2012](#)).

LIGHT-SKIN SUPREMACY

Status and supremacy have been commonly associated among the white or light skin individual's mainly Western countries. This can be traced back to the colonialism era where the western cultures would discriminate the darker skin community Frost 1990. In fact, the slave trade which was rampant in the 18 century was conducted in the name of God ([Dixon & Telles, 2017](#)). In the 18-century dark skin tone people were made slaves by the western countries that brought them from Africa. The dark skin tone slaves were deprived in every manner possible including women and children. The persistent discrimination has to lead the society to daunt further.

In a qualitative experiment conducted by [Clark & Clark \(1947\)](#) found that the children of African American would prefer playing with dolls that were light in colour (white dolls). This is evident enough to show that at such a tender age; children have such preferences and have been pre-informed that lighter skin people are beautiful. To quote [Hill Collins \(1991, p.69\)](#) in her study of Black Feminist Thought that African American women were often depicted as "stereotypical mummies, a

matriarch, welfare recipients and hot mammas". This provides a general picture of the US black women's oppression and discrimination.

The devastating effects of the European colonization have had a lasting impact until the 21st century. Where even modern-day society still discriminates dark skin tone individual mainly females. Advertisers are seen to constantly portray women that are light skin being given opportunities to excel, being loved and liked by others.

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN BEAUTY PRODUCTS

According to [Wilson \(2008\)](#), the older civilization of Egypt was known for using dairy products as a method to rejuvenate one's skin. According to [Kotler \(2016\)](#), the core principle of an individual desire is only determined by culture. This is primarily because culture is mirrored in one's daily life. It is well established that the reaction towards a new product differs by cultural perspective ([Mahajan and Muller, 1994](#); [Maitland and Bauer, 2001](#); [Takada and Jain, 1991](#); [Van Everdingen and Waarts, 2003](#)). Each culture will have a different set of perspective which is also mediated by gender within a culture. Within South East, Asia nations using skin whitening products are only seen as a female task. And the female is responsible for beautifying. Hence, this leads to discrimination and advertisers frequently uses cultural perspective in making sure the advertisement is taken seriously. Along-the-line, advertisers will be seen as diminishing gender, race, religion and culture.

Throughout time the main function of advertisement which is to inform customers has never changed ([Fatwa, 2016](#)). The different advertising appeal is integrated with an advertisement to generate better exposure. However, [Fox \(1996\)](#) assert that a woman has often been portrayed as a symbol of sexual appeal. But, for the case of Watsons's advertisement, women have been ridiculed and given a racial pun. Watson's web video portrayed women of darker skin tone as an outcast within Malaysian society. The advertisement without fail; has emphasized on lighter skin tone as the desired skin tone by social norms. The climax of the seen has intended to glorify how beauty is view by society and men thinking of fairer skin tone as benchmarks of beautiful. Nevertheless, the colonial effect on South East Asia countries may have impacted the understanding of fair skin tones as lovely and prevailing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An overview of framing theory

Previous studies have much relied on the framing theory to explain how media constructs social reality. Different from agenda-setting theory, framing aims to examine what and how people will discuss or talk about certain issues. Generally, it was used to examine the way people interpret issues in the media and thus framing is largely related to the angle of the issues/events that are created by media practitioners which could have the power to influence the way people think about the issue. For more specific, framing aims to "isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events" ([Hout and Macgilchrist, 2012, p.173](#)).

Nevertheless, there are no single definitions of framing. Tons of literature reviews have provided multiple definitions for framing. [Gitlin \(1980, p.248\)](#) defines framing as "device that facilitates how journalists organize enormous amounts of information and package them effectively for their audiences". [Mishra \(2011, p.24\)](#) stated that "mass media set the frames of references that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events". Furthermore, [Chyi and McCombs \(2004\)](#) pointed out that, an event can be framed in various ways, providing different perspectives with different attributes of a story. Different frames could have different meanings and impacts. In discussing types of frame, [Semetko and Valenburg \(2000\)](#) have identified five common types of media frames namely conflict frame, human interest frame, morality frame, economic consequences frame and attribution of responsibility frame to be suitable in analysing issues related to conflict, economic, human impact, morality, and responsibility.

Moreover, slant is another frame used by many researchers in studying media contents. [Entman \(2010, p. 392\)](#) stated that the emphasis on one side perspective "give attention and weight to the evaluative attributes" that favoured certain people's interpretation which could be bias. Hence, the success or failure of a certain event is dependent on the slant. Slants of frame are assured of success in controlling public opinion. Slants can either be supportive, critical or neutral. This study will attempt to compare and contrast the slants of online advertisements from Watsons and Guardian.

ROI: To contrast the slants of online advertisements from Watsons and Guardian.

Apart from this, framing is also an effective way to comprehend and understand the media roles during any event or crisis as it organizes ideas or storyline that provides meanings in telling the audience what is the problem and cause of the issue, and sometimes media do provide judgments on certain issue as well as provide remedies or the solution of issue. This is enhanced by [Entman \(1993, p.52\)](#) that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation". This study aims to examine the four types of framing functions suggested by [Entman \(1993\)](#) to compare the commercial advertisements from Watsons and Guardian in 2017.

RO2: To analyse the frames of online advertisements from Watsons and Guardian through problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative content analysis was conducted to compare the slants that employed by both controversial advertisements, Hikayat Guadian-pura 2017 and Watsons Legenda Cun 2017. In the content analysis, a coding scheme was applied to obtain the quantitate aspects of data. The text was coded sentence by sentence or scene by scene. Supportive, critical or neutral slant was examined through the appeared video images and keywords in the video subtitles. To ensure the reliability of this study, two postgraduate graduates were trained as the second and third coder.

However, merely studying the quantitative nature of text without deeper investigation in its logical and context is not enough. As emphasized by [Yin and Mike \(2008, p.21\)](#), the quantitative analysis can help us to understand the nature of text, but the use of qualitative analysis can further help to explore the deeper meanings behind the text which might relate to other texts and this can help in exploring the significance of the text in the context of cultural and historical content. Therefore, in this study, textual analysis was used to provide deeper meanings behind the commercial advertisement text with reference to the four framing functions recommended by [Entman \(1993\)](#) - problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RO1: To contrast the slants of online advertisements from Watsons and Guardian

Table 1: Advertisement * Slant Cross tabulation

			Slant			Total
			Supportive	Critical	Neutral	
Advertisement	Watsons	Count	4	26	4	34
		Expected Count	9.5	20.4	4.1	34.0
		% within Advertisement	11.8%	76.5%	11.8%	100.0%
		% within Slant	28.6%	86.7%	66.7%	68.0%
		% of Total	8.0%	52.0%	8.0%	68.0%
	Guardian	Count	10	4	2	16
		Expected Count	4.5	9.6	1.9	16.0
		% within Advertisement	62.5%	25.0%	12.5%	100.0%
		% within Slant	71.4%	13.3%	33.3%	32.0%
		% of Total	20.0%	8.0%	4.0%	32.0%
Total	Count	14	30	6	50	
	Expected Count	14.0	30.0	6.0	50.0	
	% within Advertisement	28.0%	60.0%	12.0%	100.0%	
	% within Slant	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	28.0%	60.0%	12.0%	100.0%	

To answer the first research question, there are a total of 50 sentences/scenes that projected the women in a supportive/critical/neutral way. In the advertisement, Watsons utilized a more critical frame in portraying women (76.5%), only two sentences/scenes in the video highlighting on the inner beauty of women which is the beautiful voice and beautiful heart. In contrast, Guardians provided a more supportive frame (62.5%) in portraying women, particularly highlighting on the women’s inner beauty which is the beautiful heart as well as showing positive facial expressions when the men character found out that the dream women was ugly.

Table 2: Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.811 ^a	2	.001
Likelihood Ratio	14.737	2	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.120	1	.008
N of Valid Cases	50		

a. 3 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.92.

A Chi-square test had been run to understand the relationship between two or more categorical variables, and it showed in table 2.0 that 3 cells (50.0%) have expected countless 5². This means that the result has violated the assumption as all of our expected cell sizes are less than 5 (in our case greater than 1.92).

The value of 0.001 is smaller than the alpha value of 0.05, therefore it can be concluded that the result is significant. In other words, it means that the slant employed in Watsons and Guardian advertisements are significantly different from each other.

Reading the text

RQ2: To analyse the frames of online advertisements from Watsons and Guardian through problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation.

The findings reveal that Watsons's advertisement often framed women in a negative light as compared to Guardian advertisement through the way it defined beauty, interpret women's relationship with beauty, provide negative images or judgments on women in the journey of pursuing the dream of love as well as provide remedies or recommend products to improve the condition of women.

Problem Definition – Defining Beauty as Being Fair Skinned

In the video advertisements, both Watsons and Guardians advertisements were with the same fairy tales theme; however, the way they define beauty is different. In defining a "women beauty", Watsons often utilized keywords such as "fair skin" and "beautiful physical looking". This is obvious when the king Saudagar Kaya Al-Kazam was shocked as he found out that the dream lady was dark. The video also sensationalized the scene as he expected the lady to have a beautiful looking with fair and light skin.

"Oh, my gosssh!
Where are the lights?
She is actually dark?
Habb Habb!!

In comparison, Guardian is able to provide a more neutral definition with keywords such as "beautiful heart" and "skin colour is not a problem". This is proven in a scene where the king, Sang Putera Negeri Guardian-Pura realised that the dream lady has darker skin, he did not mind with her dark and ugly face and at the end, he married the lady.

Jangan Wayang Pasa Kulit
Yang Penting hati.
Kulit tiada masalah bagi beta.

Translation:

It's never about the skin color
More concern is being kind-hearted
Colour of skin is not a problem to the majesty

Causal Interpretation – Interpreting Women's Quality of Relationship Correlates with the Fairness of their Skin

In interpreting women relationship, there is a scene in the Watsons advertisement where the king had finally found out his dream lady but with dark skin, he dislikes and trying to avoid her and finally the lady leaves. Later, the king found out that the lady was pretended to be dark, rather she is flawless or perfect with fair and light skin, the king shown suspicious looking at her and attempted to confirm with the lady. It implies that women must be "beautiful" in terms of having fair skin to get into a good relationship; and when women are abandoned, it is due to having dark skin that equal to ugly looking.

Will you marry me?
Is your feet dark too?
Did you wash it too?

On the other hand, Guardians emphasized more on the inner beauty compared to physical beauty. Women relationship is got nothing to do with physical beauty. The beautiful heart is far more important than having a beautiful looking but bad-hearted. The king got no second thought and determined to marry the lady even though Bawang Merah was not beautiful.

Ku Bermimpi.
Ku bermimpikan jadi Sang Puteri,
Disayangi, dicintai Sang Raja Sejati.
Sang Putera dan Bawang Merah pun diijabkabulkan.

Translation:

I dreamed.
I dreamed to be Princess,
Being loved by the King.
Wishes of The Prince and Bawang Merah came true.

Moral Evaluation – Framing and Judging Dark Skinned Women as Negative and Unable to Pursue their Dream Love Life

In Watsons's advertisement, to win the king's heart, women often appeared in a negative image, particularly during the singing audition. For instance, the exaggerate performances by Puteri Hang Po Po, Laila Majmuk, Puteri Gunung Rendang,

Nong Nak and Puteri Mayang Mengurai. Furthermore, Watsons's video also attempted to highlight the dark women face by enlarging the face to be appeared as darker than usual in the video. Nevertheless, Guardian is able to provide a more neutral image of women in chasing for her Mr. Right.



Figure 1: Watsons Advertisement Video Scene: Women Skin's Stereotype Portrayal

Treatment Recommendation – Providing Skin Whitening Remedies to Solve their Problems

As expected that the aim of the advertisements was to promote the products, both advertisements recommended Watsons/Guardian products to solve the problem of not having a beautiful looking or to whitening skin. Guardian highlighted a few products in the advertisement.

Kalau macam tu, mari kita ke Guardian, Settle!

Sah.

Ada apa-apa dengan sunblock?

Yang ini ada SPF 20.

Translation:

Let's settle the problem at Guardian.

Any product about sunblock?

This product has SPF 20.

As compared to Guardian, Watsons did not provide detail regarding any specific product but promoted Watsons in general. However, the message that had delivered earlier in the video has, directly and indirectly, signalled that skin colour is problematic, thus when the advertisement come to the end by promoting Watsons products in general, it gives a sense that the products could treat the dark skin to become beautiful.

Must be beautiful this Raya!

Only at Watsons, you'll be beautiful.

CONCLUSION

In overall, Watsons's advertisement tends to promote its product by framing women in a negative way with the emphasis that a beautiful physical which is having fair skin is very important as it might determine a women relationship as well as whether the women will be loved. In contrast, Guardian is able to provide a positive portrayal by highlighting that inner beauty is more important than the physical beauty or skin colour, while using Guardian's product will enhance a women physical beauty.

It is not uncommon when advertiser exaggerates some characteristics of the advertisement to attract people's attention. However, the exaggerated advertisement might contain some misleading information which may influence the credibility and truthfulness of the then and future advertisements and hence could further affect the company negatively as consumer lost the confidence of the company.

Even though there is an improvement of racial imbalance due to the increase of women in leadership in business, however, many companies still struggle with a traditional thought of genders imbalance. The problem of gender imbalance in business suggests a lacking of corporate responsibility. As mentioned in [Ferrell, Fraedrich, and Ferrell \(2011, p.5\)](#) that business ethics and responsibility is most important.

Largely in response to this crisis, business decisions and activities have come under greater scrutiny by many different constituents, including consumers, employees, investors, government regulators, and special interest groups. Additionally, new legislation and regulations designed to encourage higher ethical standards in business have been put in place.

Nevertheless, business action will always be judged based on "morally defensible" ([Wozniak, 2011, P.304](#)). More concern is that every business action could relate to society's evaluation which could further impact a corporate reputation and image.



LIMITATION OF STUDY

The number of the units of analysis in this study is insufficient as this study only analysed two videos. More commercial advertisements should be included in order to provide a more solid analysis and findings.

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