(Anti-)Colorist Diversity Marketing in East Asian Consumer Segments

SHORT ABSTRACT

Colorism research suggests a general bias where lighter skinned spokespeople are perceived as superior. However, target market research suggests ingroup effects whereby darker skinned consumers would prefer darker skinned spokespeople. Two studies show evidence that colorism persists regardless of consumer skin tone, but self-relevance matters.

The goal of this research is to explore the role of colorism in marketing campaigns focused on East Asian consumers, and identify techniques for successfully including anti-colorism in marketing. A review of the literature shows that colorism is very understudied in marketing research. Specifically, a literature search for the word "colorism" (or the alternative "colourism") revealed a total of five publications in the field of business. This research adopts a behavioral approach to this topic that is grounded in social-cognitive psychology, which fuses theories of social interaction (social psychology) with theories of learning and information processing (cognitive psychology). This approach will allow us to understand how social information is interpreted in the context of brands' use of models, endorsers, or spokespeople who vary in skin tone. We explore the East Asian context to answer calls for research in emerging markets (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2013; Narasimhan et al., 2015; Sheth, 2011) and because of documented colorism effects in this marketplace, including film (Hermosilla et al., 2018) and ads (Olivotti, 2016).

Colorism, or a biased preference for lighter skin colors over darker skin colors (Cowart & Lehnert, 2018; Mitchell, 2020), suggests that marketers would be best served by including lighter skinned spokespeople in their branding efforts (e.g., advertisements, packaging, websites, etc.), regardless of the target consumers' skin color. However, this hypothesis contradicts extant research on target marketing, which suggests that consumers generally prefer spokespeople that match themselves (i.e., ingroup bias). This theory suggest a matching principle, where darker skinned spokespeople may be more effective when targeting darker skinned consumers. Importantly, research also suggests colorism harms well-being (Craddock et al., 2018), where consumers may become overly focused on lightening their skin (through various consumption behaviors), and both lighter and darker skinned individuals may become more prone to harmful

biases against darker skinned individuals, with associated effects on self-esteem. Thus, a pro-colorism proscription is not only at odds with target marketing, but also problematic for society.

Adopting an identity-consumption perspective, we predict that colorism bias will be observed when the advertisement context has relatively low alignment with the consumer's personal goals or aspirations. In this situation, the cognitive congruence or "fit" of the advertisement with consumers' pre-existing colorist beliefs should drive preference. When alignment with consumer's personal goals or aspirations (i.e., self-relevance) is relatively high, we expect ingroup bias will be observed, driven by the degree to which the brand fits with consumers' identity. Thus, whether colorism bias or ingroup bias is observed may depend on the self-relevance of the brand. The ultimate objective of this work is to provide implications for theory and practice on marketing campaigns that can achieve business objectives while improving social equity through anti-colorist egalitarianism.

STUDIES

We explored the proposed relationships in two studies. The first pilot study recruited 287 East Asian participants from Prolific.co to pre-test stimuli and explore perceptions of skin tone and status. The design was 2 x 2 between-subjects (Status: low vs. high x Spokesperson Skin Tone: lighter vs. darker). We also included two replicate factors: one for occupational field (STEM vs. Business) and another for the use of different spokespeople (3 lighter skinned and 3 darker skinned). The high status spokesperson was a Chief Officer and the lower status was a graduate student. Thus, there were 24 different advertising stimuli to fit a 2 x 2 x 2 x 3 experimental design

including the replicate factors. Each ad was a testimonial for a fictitious brand and product (the Fulton brand Projector). We included measures of spokesperson skin tone, status.

Results revealed significant skin tone manipulation ($p < .05$) and status manipulation (prestige, social status, and power; $p < .05$). Additional exploratory analyses provided interesting insight into potential presence of colorism. Specifically, the difference in skin tone perceptions between the lighter skinned and darker skinned spokespeople was marginally significantly larger in the high status condition ($p = .055$), suggesting that viewing higher status spokespeople may have increased attention to skin tone. Additionally, darker skinned spokespeople received significantly less of a boost in ratings of prestige from the status manipulation ($p = .026$), suggesting that darker skinned spokespeople in higher status positions may not be congruent with pre-existing beliefs. Both of these outcomes provide some support for the presence of colorism.

The follow up study recruited 300 East Asian participants from Prolific.co. Participants were randomly assigned to see one of two advertisements: Colorism vs. Anti-Colorism. Each ad was a set of two testimonials for the same fictitious brand and product (the Fulton brand Projector). In the Colorism condition, there was one testimonial from a lighter skinned Chief Science Officer (i.e., higher status) and a second testimonial from a darker skinned graduate student in STEM (i.e., lower status). The Anti-colorism condition reversed this: darker skinned spokesperson was the chief officer and lighter skinned spokesperson was the graduate student. We retained the occupational field replicate factor (STEM vs. Business) and the spokesperson replicate factor (2 lighter skinned and 2 darker skinned). After viewing the testimonials participants were asked to rate interest in seeking more information about the product. To operationalize personal relevance, we also measured participants' occupational identity and interest (STEM and Business) as a second

factor. Finally, we measured participant skin tone using a sliding scale with 5 thumbs-up emojis of different skin tones as scale points. The expectation is that we might observe colorism when relevance is low, but not high, depending on skin tone. Thus, the model was 2 (Colorism vs. Anti-Colorism) X 2 (Self-Relevance) X 2 (Participant Skin Tone) with the first factor manipulated between-subjects and the latter two factors measured.

Results of an ANCOVA controlling for replicate factors showed a significant main effect of colorism such that colorist condition lead to about 6% greater interest in learning more about the product than the anti-colorist condition ($F(1, 297) = 4.46$, $p = .036$). Thus, there is evidence of colorism bias.

Exploratory analyses reveal several interesting findings about when more or less colorism bias is observed. First, subset analysis reveals a significant ~8% colorism bias in the STEM condition ($F(1, 157) = 4.717$, $p = .031$) but not in the Business condition ($p = .48$), although the interaction between the occupational field replicate factor and colorism condition was not significant ($p = .16$). Keeping in mind that we used all male spokespeople, a ~9% colorism bias was present for male participants ($F(1, 167) = 5.791$, $p = .017$) but not female participants ($p = .71$), but the interaction between colorism condition and gender was not significant ($p = .22$). There was a significant interaction showing that colorism bias significantly varied by country ($F(1, 243) = 3.264$, $p = .04$): United States (n = 119): < 1% bias, Canada (n = 38): 22% bias, United Kingdom (n = 93): 8% bias. Colorism bias did not vary by age ($p > .7$) or education ($p > .9$).

For hypothesis testing, separate regressions examining the different 2-way interactions reveal that the colorism bias was not affected by participant skin tone ($p = .57$), or self-relevance as measured by occupational identity ($p = .45$) and occupational interest ($p = .71$). Critical to our

hypotheses, the regression for the 3-way interaction between colorist condition, participant skin tone, and self-relevance was also not significant (both $p > .4$). Thus, our hypothesized 3-factor model was not supported.

A set of ancillary analyses provides a different angle to test our model. Our original theorizing suggests that under higher self-relevance, colorism bias might reverse specifically because of identity-driven ingroup effects occurring for darker skinned participants (i.e., a 3-way interaction). It is possible that reversal may not occur if the sample does not contain enough darker skinned participants. If we do not account for participant skin tone, then our model suggests a stronger colorism bias under lower self-relevance that will simply attenuate (but not reverse) under higher self-relevance. Thus, another form of analysis that preserves greater statistical power is the 2-way interaction between colorism condition and self-relevance (without the need to analyze the 3-way interaction with participant skin tone).

Given the stronger colorism bias observed in STEM, we analyzed the two-way interaction with separate analyses for the STEM and Business conditions. We found a marginally significant 2-way interaction in the STEM condition ($t(1, 155) = -1.73$, $p = .086$[1]) that was consistent with our predictions: a ~16% colorism bias that appeared at low self-relevance (-1SD on occupational interest) attenuated to a ~2% bias under high self-relevance (+1SD). Johnson-Neyman analysis showed that colorism bias was significant at $p < .05$ for the 40% of participants scoring below 4.25 on occupational interest, and nonsignificant for the other 60%. However, we saw a significant interaction with a different pattern for the Business condition ($t(1, 136 = 2.53$, $p = .013$): under low self-relevance there was actually an ~8% anti-colorism preference, which flipped to a ~11% colorism bias under high self-relevance.

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[1] Controlling for gender and country, the interaction $p = .045$, and the J-N transition point shifted to 5.12, with 43% of participants showing a significant colorism bias. The degree of bias did not shift (16% to 2% for -/+1SD)

In short, we found the greatest support for our original theorizing in the context of STEM, for participants from non-US countries, and for male participants. We found an unexpected pattern in the context of Business. This suggests there may be context-specific effects at play that are tied to the field under study (e.g., specific norms or beliefs about skin tone and different occupations). Additional review of the literature suggests that context-specific effects such as those observed under the STEM and Business conditions may be a function of 1) stereotypes, 2) social hierarchy norms, and 3) similarity.

For example, it is possible that there are stereotypes about skin tone and occupation field (STEM = lighter skinned and Business = darker skinned) which could align with our status manipulations. Supporting this, darker user skin tone significantly predicted interest in Business field ($B = .49$; $t(1,298) = 2.96$, $p = .003$). In this case, colorist/STEM and anti-colorist/Business would both be stereotype-consistent (i.e., high cognitive congruence). Under high self-relevance, ingroup effects may be observed to different degrees depending on the proportion of darker and lighter skinned participants in the sample. Thus an insufficient number of darker skinned participants would preclude a 3-way interaction and also bias the results toward what would be observed with only lighter skinned participants. This post-hoc theorizing fits the observed pattern of results. However, further research is needed to fully understand the role of stereotypes about skin tone in specific occupations like Business.

CONCLUSION

The present research provides implications for theory and practice by resolving competing theories and identifying conditions under which organizations may experience

backfire effects from target marketing toward segments of East Asian consumers due to colorism. Importantly, this research also explicates how to successfully use evidence-based interventions within target marketing campaigns to facilitate impactful marketing with anti-colorist branding. Taken together, these results provide initial evidence for colorism in East Asian consumer segments, addressing a significant gap in the literature in the study of skin tone biases. Future studies need to identify conditions where anti-colorism will be successful so as to provide stronger implications for consumer well-being.

The present investigation contributes key implications to United States' competitiveness in the global marketplace when trying to reach Asian consumers. Overall, practitioners should consider sociocultural norms and stereotypes about the types of consumers that are associated with different positions and roles in society, and how these beliefs vary by consumer segment. Following this, practitioners may want to pursue alignment between their branding efforts and consumers' beliefs in a way that not only attracts consumers but also is beneficial for societal well-being – namely, avoiding reinforcing any harmful beliefs about social hierarchy and instead promoting helpful egalitarian beliefs.

Several specific implications provide further guidance. First, the present findings suggest the presence of colorism biases when targeting Asian male consumers outside of the United States. In this case, our results showed that marketing efforts that depict spokesmen with lighter skin in higher-status STEM positions (e.g., a testimonial from a Chief Science Officer) may generate more interest in the brand than images of darker skinned spokesmen in higher-status STEM positions. Second, the colorism bias observed in our research was diminished to the extent that STEM was self-relevant to the study participants. That is, when targeting consumers with a STEM background, both darker and lighter skinned spokesmen in higher status STEM

positions may generate similar interest in the brand. Thus, a brand hoping to attract consumers without promoting colorism biases may find success by aligning the occupational identity of the spokesperson with that of the target consumer, within STEM.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the caveat that this effect may be limited to STEM contexts. STEM includes Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math fields, which collectively cover a wide swath of the marketplace. However, when looking at context of Business, we found a different pattern of effects. Specifically, there was no significant main effect of colorism bias when the spokesmen were from a Business background (a CEO, a graduate student in Business). Moreover, we saw different brand preferences based on self-relevance: participants with less interest in Business preferred darker skinned spokespeople in higher-status positions, and participants with more interest in Business preferred lighter skinned spokespeople in higher-status positions. Further studies will be needed to determine whether this was a function of stereotypes specific to Business, the specific stimuli used in this research, or the specific sample of study participants.

In summary, both skin tone and status matter when using spokespeople in branding. We can say with confidence that practitioners would be well-served by crafting branding collateral that varies the background of the spokespeople (e.g., skin tone) and what types of roles in which they are depicted (e.g., occupations, status levels). Practitioners can then test which variations are seeing the most success with different consumer segments. This technique should yield greater alignment between brands and consumers in both B2C and B2B situations abroad.

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