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## Racial Discrimination in Western Beauty Product Advertisements

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### Abstract

This research analyzes the issue of racial discrimination towards black people that occurs in the advertisement. Discrimination occurs in western beauty product advertisements like skincare, bodycare, and haircare. This research aims to reveal and explain how racial discrimination exists in western beauty product advertisements. The researchers use qualitative descriptive and audio-visual methods to conduct this research. The data in this research derive from some western beauty product advertisements. The research aims to give a perception of racial discrimination through the analysis by linking some advertisements with racial discrimination theory and semiotics theory. Based on the discussion, the researchers conclude that racial discrimination in advertisements, especially beauty product advertisements that should have gone for many years, is still present six years later in a subtle way. The advertisers utilize racial stereotypes to promote their products. Many people still think Whites are better than Blacks. This promotes degrading behavior like black-and-white stereotypes and advertisements that promote white supremacy to grab viewers' attention.

**Keywords:** global advertisement, racial discrimination, western beauty products.

### 1. Introduction

An act of discrimination is when someone mistreats another because they belong to a more robust social group (Altman, 2020). Discrimination is the act of mistreating someone because of their gender, color, or religion (Lang, Kahn, 2020). Discrimination has existed since ancient times because it is human instinctive wild nature. Discrimination can happen in many areas. The most common type of discrimination encountered is race discrimination against a person or community. Race discrimination or racism happened a lot since decades ago when the black race was considered inferior and enslaved by the white race. Racism is a different prejudice against each individual due to their race based on the context of beliefs about the superiority and inferiority inherent in other racial groups or who are considered superior, which are emphasized by heredity and history (Chaudhary, Berhe, 2020). Even today, the habit of racism against the black race that occurred decades ago continues.

This racial discrimination has many bad effects on many people. Due to the fast development of the world and technology, racial discrimination can occur anywhere, such as in everyday life, politics, media, or advertising, even through the internet. Because of its easy and fast distribution, it has greatly influenced society. Many cases are about people from the white race being exempt from unfair treatment like discrimination experienced by people of color in America. Blacks are being mistreated because of the color of their skin. Many anarchic behaviors bring black people down and make them always alert and even afraid to leave the house, while whites typically are not

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and are considered superior in all aspects (Jackson, 2019). In these cases, white supremacy is the view that white people and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors are superior to People of Color (Jones, Okun, 2018). This white supremacy causes many people or people of color to feel anxious and inferior.

Women's advertising was no longer relevant to women's beauty products. There are many of them showing racial discrimination and inadequate treatment of women. The globalization of beauty and appearance ideals is gaining popularity in both Western and non-Western nations due to the permeation of Western beauty goods into societies and cultures around the world (Coward, 1984). As a result, there are some standards for beauty or lovely skin, such as the golden ratio (Atalay, 2006; Green, 1995). Beautiful white skin has texture, no visible pores, and no blemishes. People keep arguing about whether beauty is in the eye of the beholder or if there is one standard for all (Riji, 2006). According to one school of thought, everyone has a different definition of what is beautiful (Laeng et al., 2013), so the standard will vary depending on who the beholder is. In the United States, it is commonly thought that attractive people have characteristics such as fair skin, blue eyes, and long, straight, blond hair (Awad et al., 2015).

In this research, the researchers use the racial discrimination theory by Theodorson & Theodorson. Discrimination is the unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on characteristics typically categorical or distinctive, such as race, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic class (Fulthoni et al., 2009). Then, in revealing the existence of racism, the researchers use the semiotics theory by Roland Barthes. Semiotics is the study of anything that "stands for" another thing and something typically referred to as "signs" in daily conversation. From a semiotic perspective, signs can be things, actions, sounds, words, and pictures. Modern semioticians investigate signs in isolation and as part of semiotic "sign systems" (such as a medium or genre). They explore how reality is represented and how meanings are created. (Chandler, 2002). In the theory of semiotics by Barthes, he made a map of how signs work. That map continues Saussure's thinking by examining the interaction between the text and its readers' cultural and personal experiences. The interaction of the text's norms with those its readers have come to expect and experience.

In exploring the study on racial discrimination, especially in an advertisement, it is essential to see how other scholars did such a thing. They examine Nike brand posters or advertisements using Charles Sander Pierce's concept of visual semiotics. The researchers discovered that the poster uses a simple font and color to explain the relationship between Nike and the two athletes depicted in the video to educate the audience on the importance of supporting the anti-racism movement and to develop sensitivity to the social issues of racism that exist in our lives (Rafi, Jasifi, 2020).

A. Rybová (Rybová, 2019) focused on using beauty as an intersectional framework to consider beauty's imbrication in gender structural power relations critically. She believes that black girls and women are frequently regarded as less beautiful, feminine, and attractive in American society because of their distinctive hair, skin, and facial features. Furthermore, gendered colorism has become very serious because it places additional pressure on women to be beautiful. White feminine bodies are considered modern, progressive, and light skin tone, allowing women to access better social positions.

S. Shankar (Shankar, 2020) investigates how diversity is portrayed in ads and how white supremacy promotes those advertisements using the semiotic transformation theory to examine how advertising reproduces and spreads white supremacy. The researchers found that in the ontology of racial diversity, race unites rather than divides. Promotions should support this for the heterogeneous mainstream US population to become the idealized harmony.

Racial discrimination against women is depicted in daily life, politics, and media through advertisements, such as beauty products. The study's cases involved western beauty products that are advertised worldwide. This research aims to understand the racial discrimination in western beauty product advertisements, find out about the discrimination behind these advertisements, and find out what the people behind the advertisement mean. Thus, to understand and reveal the racial discrimination in the advertisements, the researchers use the racial discrimination theory by Theodorson & Theodorson and Roland Barthes' semiotics theory which develops the thoughts of Ferdinand De Saussure about *signifier* and *signified*. In addition, this paper is intended for people who want to learn or have a deeper understanding of racial discrimination in advertisements. The researchers hope this study can help people better comprehend racial discrimination,

specifically how it manifests in western beauty product advertisements. The primary goal of this research is to clarify how racial discrimination occurs in western beauty product advertisements.

## 2. Materials and methods

This study focuses on revealing racial discrimination using the materials of some western beauty products and global advertisements that exist through media worldwide. They are Dove advertisement, Nivea advertisement, L'Oreal advertisement, Wycon Cosmetics advertisement, and TRESemmé advertisement. This research method is a descriptive qualitative method with the visual method by exploring and investigating the beauty product advertisements mentioned above. Data for this research came from some western beauty product global advertisements, which were gathered through a technique of data collection named audiovisual material or documentation because the researchers use the advertisements in the form of pictures and texts as the object of collecting or getting the data (Cresswell, 2012). To analyze, explore and understand more deeply, the researchers used the racial discrimination theory and semiotics theory as the tool that will reveal the existence of racial discrimination in beauty product advertisements.

## 3. Discussion

Racial discrimination is divided into two types; direct racial discrimination and indirect racial discrimination. When one person treats another person less favorably because of their race, this is known as direct racial discrimination. In contrast, indirect racial discrimination occurs when a rule, law, or other act is administered equally to all races but disadvantages one race (Painter, Holmes, 2017). Racial discrimination in this beauty product advertisement is included in indirect racial discrimination. This research will analyze the racial discrimination in the beauty product advertisements, such as Nivea advertisements, L'Oreal advertisements, Wycon Cosmetics advertisements, TRESemmé advertisements, by using Barthes' theory of Semiotics that is known as the order of signification, which includes primary sense or denotation (actual meaning) and secondary signification or connotation (double meanings from cultural and personal experiences). This connotation then developed into a myth that reveals and justifies the dominant values of something that prevailed in a certain period (Sobur, 2016).

### *Nivea Campaign Advertisement*

On 31st March 2017, Nivea released an ad campaign on Facebook for one of their deodorant products. The advertisement above's denotative meaning is that a woman in a clean white dress sits on a bright yellow blanket facing a pale white window that emits a bright light to her body. The ad also includes the phrase "*White is Purity*" which is placed at the bottom of the ad. Moreover, the caption for the ad campaign written by the Nivea Brand's team is "*Keep it clean, keep bright. Don't let anything ruin it.*"

The connotative meaning of this ad is that by using all-white, clean, and bright properties, as well as writing the phrase "*White is Purity*," the ad demonstrates the existence of color racism by labeling health and beauty in a white, clean, and bright label. It also indicates that black is a color that detracts from the beauty tagged with white.

From those denotation and connotation meanings above, it raises a myth where the ad producer uses white people with clean, bright white and yellow clothing also setting in the advertisement, displaying a racist attitude toward the black race. Here, we can see the existence of white supremacy, which is intended to discriminate against the black race. "White supremacy" refers to the racial characteristics of an international power structure, including white racial superiority and its associated behaviors. It is a standard operating system that consistently disadvantages people of color and tends to favor white people through deeply embedded patterns and practices. Whites' investment in the psychological and material advantages of being White motivates them individually and collectively to portray people of color as unfavorable while simultaneously portraying themselves as positive (Allen, Liou, 2018; Beliso-de Jesus, Pierre, 2020; Embrick, Moore, 2020).

It is seen in this advertisement that there are two fundamental implications of the conceptual association of white with the idea of purity: to establish supremacy on both a physical and an abstract ethical level. The first is the physical level, showing White unsullied by filth or projected impurity. And the second one is abstract ethical, where White is offered to be morally pure and therefore inherently right. In other words, NIVEA's dichotomy is consciously proposed not only to

divide and separate black from white but also to define white itself as having purity, then labeling black as unclean and a direct threat to the purity of whiteness.

The active distinction between white and black is also manifested in the nonexistence of darkness in the ad, unless white clothes, bright yellow sheets, white windows, pale white walls, white sky, light, and so on. This shows racism in one physical characteristic, one of which is black and white skin color that distinguishes one race from another. These differences can attract people to the problem of oppression and injustice. This makes racism mean one group because a racial group is destined to be superior to others (David et al., 2019).

#### *Nivea's New Natural Fairness Moisturizer Advertisement*

Omowunmi Akinnifesi, 2005 Miss Nigeria and fashion entrepreneur, appears in an advertisement for Nivea's new Natural Fairness moisturizer, marketed to women in Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and Senegal, with the tagline "*For visibly fairer skin*," which was posted in October 2017.

The denotative meaning of the ad is a woman with dark skin posing and holding her shoulder, which seems to radiate brighter skin with the words "visibly lightens." Furthermore, the advertisement also contains the phrase "*for visibly fairer skin*." Nivea no longer disguises itself behind polite terms like 'dull skin' or 'clear skin,' instead emphasizing 'fair' skin as the solution for gaining confidence. Not only that, but they seem to be saying that being fair rather than dark is 'healthy for your skin.' The connotative meaning of the ad image above is the advertisement for Nivea's new Natural Fairness moisturizer for all moisturizer products, which shows that the product can provide a brightening effect on the skin. At the same time, the producer uses a female advertising model with black skin, indicating racial discrimination against the black woman model.

In the advertisement, the producer uses a black female model posing holding her shoulders which seems to radiate brighter skin with the words "visibly lightens". The discrimination against black models is seen in the product article 'for visibly fairer skin,' which creates a prejudice that white skin is better than black. These advertisements only provoke the old belief that being white is somehow better and the stigma of fair skin is cleaner and more beautiful. This concept of ideal beauty is communicated to us through depictions of a range of characteristics, including skin tone, hair texture, body shape, and even fashion (Sugiharti, 2018). Based on the advertisement, it can be concluded that stereotypes that appear in advertising due to cultural influences may have a detrimental effect on the stereotypes that are influenced (Memani, Akinro, 2019). That stereotype is supported by the appearance of a black female model with words that imply racism in one frame.

#### *Wycon Cosmetics Advertisement*

Wycon Cosmetics, an Italian brand that seems to be a cheerful, colorful firm selling makeup, nail polish, and beauty accessories, released the deepest shade in Wycon Cosmetics' new gel nail polishes, named "*Thick as a Nigga*" on January 5th, 2018.

The denotation in the ad image is a gel nail polish that is black in color, like charcoal. In addition, the advertisement contained the words *Thick as a Nigga*. The connotation of the advertisement is a gel nail polish issued by a beauty brand, Wycon Cosmetics, which shows that the black color of gel nail polish is as black as the black race. Such actions can lead to racism against the black race.

The connotation and denotation meanings above contribute to the myth that black gel nail polish is associated with the black race. Based on the advertisement above, the black race is always considered inferior to the white race. This is because the advertisement associates black people with black gel nail polish. This is an example of racism against black people. Many studies have found that skin color predicts perceived discrimination. According to such studies, black people with darker skin are subjected to more excellent discrimination than those with lighter skin. Skin color hierarchies continue to affect Black women. According to research, having more delicate skin in terms of beauty gives women advantages in terms of education, income, and even marital status (Fattore et al., 2020).

#### *L'Oreal Advertisement*

On 17th April 2018, a black woman named Clarene Mitchell wrote a tweet on her personal Twitter account which contained her frustration with an advertisement for L'Oreal mask products that she saw in a drugstore one day earlier, precisely on 16th April 2018. In the ad, their mask product covers the black woman's face but not the two white women's.

The denotation in this advertisement is that the advertisement producer uses three models with three different skin colors in the advertisement flyer for a mask product from L’Oreal. Each has a different skin color; fair, medium, and black.

The connotation of L’Oreal face mask advertisement uses three models with three different skin colors: fair, medium, and black. The ads cover the face of the black woman with a mask on but not the two white women, so this is what causes many people to be disappointed and speculate that the producer of this ad is doing racism to the advertising model by covering the faces of black women which is considered to reduce the aesthetics of the advertisement. The marker from this ad flyer is an advertisement from the beauty brand L’Oreal for face mask products which shows that good and healthy skin is white or bright skin.

In the advertisement, the ad producer is seen doing direct discrimination by covering black women's faces and exposing two white women. When individuals or groups are mistreated due to their race, color, country, or ethnicity, this is known as direct discrimination (Fibbi et al., 2020). Discrimination based on skin color is also called “colorism.” It is a form of racism in which people with darker skin tones are mistreated by others (Hall, 2020). Because of colorism, beauty is associated with lighter skin tones, curled or straight hair, and other Eurocentric characteristics (Ladd et al., 2022; Stamps et al., 2022). This flyer ad seems to discriminate against black women, so many other women who have black skin feel angry and disturbed because of this advertisement. This shows a strong correlation between skin tone and the likelihood that black people would experience racial discrimination. Therefore, skin color is a marker of racial discrimination (Landrine, Konoff, 2000). This correlation can occur because the black community often experiences social discrimination because of the color of their skin.

#### *TRESemmé Advertisement*

TRESemmé published an advertisement on the drugstore Click group's CLSJ. J website on September 4, 2020. The ad has four collaged photos of four women with different hair types and styles.

The denotative meaning of the advertisement above is that there are four women of two different races and hair types. Those women were asked to pose with showing their hair, and the photographer only took a small part of their faces because they wanted the focus of the image to be only on the hair and their skin. In addition, the ad also contains an inscription of “Dry and Damaged Hair, Frizzy & Dull Hair” next to the picture of women with black and curly hair. Also, “Fine & Flat Hair, Normal Hair” is placed next to the image of women with straight blonde hair.

The connotative meaning of the ad image above is an advertisement from the beauty brand TRESemmé for all shampoo products manufactured by Unilever, which displays white women’s hair as “normal.” In contrast, the coat of African women is described as “frizzy and dull.” That kind of act raises racism toward Black women’s hair.

So, the myth constructed by those meanings above is that there is a binary opposition seen between two different races; the black race and the white race (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The Binary Opposition of Black and White Women’s Hair

The Hair of Black Women	The Hair of White Women
Ugly	Beautiful
Dry	Normal
Damaged	Healthy
Dull	Clean & Fresh
Frizzy	Flat

A binary opposition concept uses two opposite terms to define and describe the meanings that society has given specific assignments. Derrida developed this concept by arguing that one of these ideas is moreover also labeled as a positive value while the other is labeled as a negative value; to put it in another way, one of these concepts has power over the other because it is viewed as desirable while the other is undesirable (Ross et al., 2014). The existence of black-and-white racial distinction, which will always be controversial for humans, demonstrates the binary opposition to race. This also shows the continuing difference between the black and white races. White will always be superior to black (Gilbert, 2021; Neighbors et al., 2022).

The racial binary opposition depicted in the advertisement's image implies that people, particularly women with black skin, typically have unattractive, curled, damaged, and dull hair. Women of the white race, however, have hair that is normal, flat, healthy, clean, and beautiful. The stereotype that develops racism toward the black race is always seen as a behavior that excludes "racial" or "ethnic" minorities from taking advantage of the full rights, obligations, and responsibilities available to society's majority (Elias, 2021). This causes the myth of the superiority of the white race to spread through mass media, including advertising and word-of-mouth (Crilley, Gillespie, 2019).

#### 4. Results

Using the semiotics in racial discrimination theory, we have examined how racial discrimination occurs in the media, especially in advertisements. The results reveal racial discrimination in a beauty product advertisement with a striking, not-so-striking skin tone difference between white and black. The Nivea marketing campaign, for example, promotes white supremacy by identifying health and beauty as white, clean, and brilliant and black as filthy and a danger to whiteness. The second Nivea campaign, which uses black models, promotes white skin as superior. Third, Wycon Cosmetics' black gel nail polish equates the black race with black, which constitutes discrimination. The fourth L'Oreal ad covers black women's faces and exposes two white women. The last is a TRESemmé ad that says black people, especially ladies, have unsightly, curled, damaged, lifeless hair. White women have normal, flat, healthy, clean, and lovely hair. From that, it's been proven that racial discrimination in advertisements, which should have disappeared, is still there now in a subtle way from 6 years ago.

#### 5. Conclusion

Racial discrimination happens as a result of the numerous prejudices that have ingrained themselves in our culture. Advertisers frequently employ this stereotype to promote their goods, particularly in the case of beauty products. By conducting in-depth observations of several advertisements that are considered to contain racial discrimination against blacks, this study finds that white races are still regarded as superior to people of color to date. Many still think the black race is always depicted as backward and inferior. This creates the belief that one race is superior to another, making the white race believe their biological and intellectual status is unique to the other race. Therefore, degrading practices, such as comparing the stereotypes between Blacks and Whites, become a scene worth watching to gain viewers' attention, one example is advertisements, especially beauty products.

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