

Asian Females in an Advertising Context: Exploring Skin Tone Tension

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Acknowledgement: We would like to acknowledge the support of Dr. Kathryn LaTour, Kelly Bennett, and Lin Zhang for their help in the completion of this research.

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Abstract

While the explosive literature on the portrayal of women in advertising has established a multitude of salient issues (e.g. sexual objectification), the skin tone of Asian models in ads and associated cultural underpinnings has not yet been examined. However, given the obsession in various Asian countries with skin whitening for women, it has the potential to be salient in Asian cultures in the United States. The current exploratory study examines the possibility of “skin tone tension” occurring in a diverse Asian sample in the U.S. and compares Caucasian to Asian reactions to a model’s skin tone in a print ad. The results reflect cultural frameworks and provide a preliminary evidentiary starting point for further examination of this issue in various Asian cultures within the U.S. Towards that end, extant theory is discussed and a new research agenda to extend such is proposed.

Key Words: Skin tone tension, Asians, Caucasians, Female role portrayal in advertising

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Introduction

Very few issues are as explosive as the portrayal of women in advertising (Ford and LaTour 1993; Kilbourne 2000). Underlying such is the manifestation of feminist consciousness (Ford and LaTour 1996). The growth of such thinking provides a lens for viewing advertising phenomena as a means for the dehumanization of women, reduction of a human female to a sum of body parts, setting of unrealistic beauty standards, promotion of anorexia and bulimia, and supporting of violence towards women (Ford, LaTour and Middleton 1999).

Our exploratory study of Asian skin tone in ads builds on the robust literatures focusing on female role portrayals in advertising (c.f. Ford, LaTour and Middleton 1999; Reichert et al. 2007), extensions of such to cross cultural contexts (Ford, LaTour and Clarke 2004; Ford, LaTour and Honeycutt 1997) and cultural focused works on skin tone of women, primarily in Asian cultures (c.f. Ashikari 2005; Baumann 2008; Li et al. 2008). In Asian cultures, despite the diversity therein, the lightness of skin tone of women is bordering on obsession (Li et al. 2008). Given centuries of highly male dominated (patriarchal) deep rooted cultural values formation (Ford, LaTour and Honeycutt 1997) lighter skin for Asian women (across various cultures within Asia) is thought of as more sexually desirable and healthy (Li et al. 2008), more beautiful (Baumann 2008), and more socially desirable (Glenn 2008). According to Glenn (2008), the passion for skin lightener products is common in various cultures and the desire for such in the Asian cultures is particularly acute, given the higher status connotations of whiter skin for women (Ashikari 2005).

The purpose of our study is to explore the pervasiveness of the skin tone issue among a diverse sample of Asian students in the U.S. to see whether it transcends Asian cultures overseas. In effect, we want to determine whether this phenomenon has merit for further analysis in this country. Based on these preliminary results, a research agenda is proposed to extend existing theory which would include further exploration of this issue amongst various subsets of Asian Americans (e.g. Filipino Americans, Chinese Americans, Vietnamese Americans, etc.). In our current study we examine three factors (Caucasian sample vis-à-vis Asian sample, male respondents vis-à-vis female respondents, and a dark skin tone ad vis-à-vis a light skin tone ad). A three way interaction grounded in culture based theory is posited and found lending additional insight for a cross cultural extension in future research.

Background

Introducing Skin Tone Tension: Derived from the Consumer Motivation Model

Given the pervasiveness of skin tone issues for marketing in Asian ethnic populations, we introduce and define the gap between a person's desired skin color and their self-perceived actual skin color as their *skin tone tension*. The basis for the theory behind skin tone tension comes from the consumer motivation model (Solomon 2004), derived from the concept of a tension system which develops when there is a gap between an actual state and an ideal state (Lewin 1951). Consumer behavior theorists apply this concept through the consumer motivation model, arguing that this tension system leads to a drive state which then leads to subsequent behavior. For example, consumers may make a purchase of something to reduce this tension (if regarding a change to the self), which might be a lotion which claims to lighten skin tone. This gap, though, would normally develop from external indicators, such as societal and cultural norms, traditions,

and advertisements. In a positivist definition of the self, the concept of self-image consists of a view of what a person is and wishes to become as a combination of self-identifiable traits or states, and can be measured with traditional marketing scales (Sirgy 1982). Making the self a combination of several key characteristics, Mittal (2006) suggests that a self-defined “I” consists of values and character, body image, success and accomplishments, subjective personality traits, social roles, and possessions. The self-defined order of these six elements (i.e. the distance from the core of an individual), and the amount of each one, makes every individual self-identity extremely unique. All of these definitions center on the idea that a self-concept is self-defined and self-motivated and likewise, any goal-directed behaviors to change one’s self-concept or self-view, must come from within an individual and develop as a drive state.

O’Brien and Sanchez (1976) discuss consumer motivation in terms of an actual self, expected self and ideal self. The *actual self* is defined as a perceived self concept, which includes both private and introspective thoughts as well as reflexive ones, or those developed through social interaction (Rogers 1951). The *ideal self*, or a future self of sorts, is motivated by goal directed behavior and consists of a self-defined level of perfection which the individual wishes to achieve (Landon 1974). A middle-ground construct, called the *expected self*, exists between the actual and ideal selves, and is a more realistically defined future self concept, which, in some sense, is shorter term (O’Brien and Sanchez 1976). Building further on these ideas, Vanier and Sciglimpaglia (1981) suggest that in addition to actual and ideal self-images, consumers also develop a *user image* as “... the impression one holds of the user or consumer of a brand, product, or distribution outlet,” (p. 480). The components of a self-defined “I” can vary, depending on which view of the self is being utilized.

From a decision making perspective, Sheth (1975) argues that there are five different motivational dimensions of utility; they are functional motives, aesthetic-emotional motives, social motives, situational motives, and curiosity motives. Skin lightening products may fall into the aesthetic-emotional motives, as they would normally be purchased for the purpose of deriving positive self-emotive feelings from the act of becoming closer to the ideal self. We thus define *skin tone tension* as the need-oriented drive state that develops when consumers are motivated to move from their self-perceived actual skin tone to their self-defined ideal skin tone.

The desire to have white skin is echoed in an old Chinese saying, “one white covers three uglinesses” (Bray 2002). Just typing in “Asian whiteness” in Google on December 30, 2009 reveals the article called, “Why white skin is all the rage in Asia,” published Nov. 25, 2009 (Martin 2009). The topic is not remiss in the academic literature either, where scores of articles from various disciplines discuss not only the idea of whiteness and the craving for it, but also the market dominance of skin lightening products throughout Asia. In both China (Dikotter 1992) and Japan (Siddle 1997), there are clear inferences between skin color and social class, wherein dark skin is associated with working as a laborer. The preference for lighter skin, especially for females, is prevalent in India (Jha and Adelman 2009), Mainland China (Leong 2006), Japan (Ashikari 2005), and the Philippines (Glenn 2008), among others. Indian scriptures, for example the Vedas, which date back to the 1500-1000 B.C., portray the evil characters as black-skinned and the good ones as light-skinned, an idea which carried into the caste system, still somewhat prevalent in India today. The need for white skin in Asia is more targeted towards women; in particular those who wish to find a job, get married, earn an attractive salary, or have a good place in society, and thus is a key ingredient to marketability for females (Ashikari 2003; Datta 2008).

In a recent dermatology study (funded by P&G), an in-depth color assessment of 407 females (*Note*: males were not part of the study) showed that unexposed skin color was relatively constant across the entire country, whereas exposed skin color differed (Wei et al. 2007). The sponsors of such a study, no doubt, are looking to uncover ways to target the female population for skin whitener products. For Asian women, across various Asian cultures, skin lightening products have become a large and rapidly expanding market (Ashikari 2005; Glenn 2008; Li et al. 2008) and we thus argue that skin tone tension is an underlying factor which is driving this market, and is in need of assessment in the Asian population within the United States. In concert with the acute nature of the passion for whiteness for women in Asian culture, the following first exploratory hypothesis is posited:

H₁: A two way interaction (gender by ethnicity) will be found for *skin tone tension* with it most manifest for desired lightness by Asian females.

The Asian Male Desire for a Light Asian Female: Based on Gender Theory

Female role portrayal, also known as gender identity, has been studied in an advertising context for decades (for a review, see Palan 2001; Milner and Collins 2000). Early literature regarding the portrayal of women in advertisements concerns the issue of whether gender-based roles portrayed in advertisements reflect contemporary feminine ideals. Defined as the female role orientation (FRO) scale, Sin and Yau (2004) identify multiple dimensions of female roles, expanding the simplistic dichotomous working/non-working or high/low autonomy definitions given in previous literature. These scholars identify family orientation, submissiveness, social and economic independence, and societal orientation as the four dimensions of FRO. Even though mainland China and Hong Kong are found to have self perceived differences in these four dimensions, the authors mention that political ideologies may be at the foundation of that difference, as opposed to female role definitions. Further, the study finds that women who are

high in social and economic independence are believed to be low in family orientation and submissiveness. Such research underscores the dangers of the female role dichotomies in Asian societies, those of submissive/aggressive, independent/dependent, and family oriented/work oriented.

Clearly though, in concert with the female role portrayal literature, the desirability of whiteness of females in patriarchal Asian cultures is associated with women as “performers for men” and objects of men’s desire as opposed to autonomous entities with heightened feminist consciousness and values (Ford, LaTour and Middleton 1999; Li et al. 2008). Generally speaking, Asian cultures’ feminist movements tend to be less robust in those patriarchal societies (Ford, LaTour and Clarke 2004). Jha and Adelman (2009) studied matrimonial websites and found that Asian males had an overwhelming bias for females lighter skinned than them and were more likely to state their preferences for the skin tone of their future brides. A content analysis of Japanese advertisements shows that women are still portrayed more often in home settings, as users rather than authorities of products, as younger than men, and as more concerned with their looks than men (Ford et. al 1998).

Even though advertisements in both China and the U.S. were found to portray more women in non-occupational roles and more men in occupational roles in a Cheng (1997) study, the Chinese advertising reinforced more of the sexism stereotypes than its U.S.-based counterpart. Years later, these trends continue in Asian advertisements, as shown by a recent study regarding Taiwanese advertisements, in which Lin (2008) finds that foreign women’s magazines portray women significantly more often in trendy beauty depictions than do their domestic magazine counterparts. The author suggests that Taiwanese men expect that women not be portrayed as independent and physically active, a result of the fact that “...in the conservative masculine-

oriented society of Taiwan, for a long time women were a form of property, dominated by men,” (p. 417). To further attest to the importance of furthering our understanding of skin tone tension and its ongoing negative gender implications, the Asian population is expected to increase from 4.6% to 7.8% of the U.S. population between 2010 and 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The strength of cultural association for Asians immersed in our own culture remains an open empirical question, yet an important one given the growth of the Asian populations in the United States and the tendency of skin tone to transcend diverse Asian cultures.

In feminist discourse, the interpretation of culturally imbedded skin lightener Asian advertisements shows that “...in skin-care ads, associations with marriage and domesticity are frequent and the female representations are clearly constructed for the male gaze” (Johansson 1998, p. 74). Mak (2007) integrates the Chinese proverb, “fair skin can hide facial flaws”ⁱ with skin whitener advertisements and uses a PIA (personal impact assessment) in a qualitative research setting. She finds first of all that 15 out of 25 males were believers of this proverb, and further that both believers and non-believers of the proverb associated beauty with the lighter females. Through a study of more than 2000 advertising images, Baumann (2008) provides a meaning-based explanation for why men prefer lighter females, arguing that they associate whiteness in females with innocence, purity, modesty, virginity, vulnerability and goodness. Sexual asymmetry in the preference of light skin color is extremely prevalent, as Van den Berghe and Frost (1986) show in their study, with the finding that it is preferred in 44 cultures for males regarding their mate choice but only 17 for females, with regards to their mate choice. Aoki (2002) cites both the sexual and natural selection hypotheses as an explanation for the preference for lighter skinned females by males, noting that in most societies, males prefer lighter-than-average females, whereas this is not the case with females’ preferences. In addition to this male

preference for lightness in females, we note that for males, the importance of female physical attractiveness is disproportionately larger than the reverse (Plakoyiannaki et al. 2008). The combination of the male desire for lighter skin in his female with his emphasis on her physical attractiveness and the sexual selection hypothesis, definitely gives meaning and further understanding of the tension that females experience with regards to their skin tone and the desire they have to lighten their skin in Asian societies. Given the focus in Asian society on the desirability in Asian men's "eyes" of the whiteness of Asian females, we posit the following exploratory hypothesis:

H₂: There will be a three way interaction effect between the *Ad type* (Light skin tone vs. Dark skin tone), *Ethnicity* (Caucasian vs. Asian) and *Gender* (Male vs. Female), with Asian males expressing the strongest ad appeal for the Light skin tone advertisement.

Study

Overview and Stimulus Development

Although skin tone has been the subject of much interdisciplinary cross-cultural research, existing research does not discuss theoretical underpinnings for skin tone tensions. In our experiment, Ad-type is manipulated in an ad for a fictitious vitamin named *Vitastart*. The image of a woman on a beach for both of the ads was identical, except that the tone was lighter for the light skin tone and darker for the dark-skin tone advertisement. The beach scene was chosen as an appropriate background based on existing research on advertising which indicates that skin tone is more noticeable when women are scantily clad (Baumann 2008). The copy on the ad was also virtually identical except for a few chosen words. The light skin tone ad used the words "lighter and fairer" to describe how the vitamin would make a person's skin, whereas the dark skin tone ad used the words "darker and more tanned" to indicate how a person's skin would

become. Other than these few words, the copy, the heading, and the image were identical between the two ads. The goal of varying the image and the copy was to make them consistent with each other in the ad and make skin tone salient as subjects viewed the ads. .

Participants, Procedure, and Dependent Measure. Two hundred and seventy-six subjects (145 female, 129 male, 2 did not report gender; mean age = 24.28 years) who were undergraduate students from a university in the western part of the United States participated in this study. The data was collected on a larger sample and the Asians/Caucasians (described below) were then used for analysis. The total number of subjects in the full sample is 276 (12 did not report ethnicity, 6 African American, 104 Caucasian, 132 Asian, 15 Hispanic/Latin American, 3 Mexican Indian/Bulgarian/Italian, 2 Native American, 2 Pacific Islander). Respondents rated the ads in terms of a 9 point semantic differential *Ad Appeal* construct (10 items: unhip/hip, dull-boring/exciting, not entertaining/entertaining, not unique/unique, not fun/fun, not creative/creative, not attractive/attractive, unappealing/appealing, unimpressive/impressive, not eye-catching/eye-catching ($\alpha = .93$)) (Homer, 2006).

Subjects first viewed the ad (timed) and then completed the survey questionnaire. All treatment conditions were administered randomly to participants. Multiple sessions were conducted in order to collect the data. Following the data collections, the following analyses and testing uses two key ethnicities to test hypotheses, Caucasians and Asians.

Manipulation check

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to ensure that Ad type operated as intended. Two semantic differential items (*modeldarkness*, not dark skin/dark skin and *modellightness*, not fair skin/fair skin) were used to assess the skin tone of the models and ensure that they were rated as

significantly different for both the Caucasian and Asian ethnicities. Analysis revealed that there was a significant difference for *modeldarkness* for Caucasians ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.81$ for light skin tone ad vs. $M = 7.22$, $SD = 1.69$ for dark skin tone ad; $t(102) = -12.78$, $p = 0$) as well as Asians ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 2.14$ for light skin tone ad vs. $M = 6.19$, $SD = 2.23$ for dark skin tone ad; $t(130) = -8.20$, $p = 0$). Analysis also revealed that there was a significant difference for *modellightness* for Caucasians ($M = 6.85$, $SD = 1.53$ for light skin tone ad vs. $M = 3.84$, $SD = 2.54$ for dark skin tone ad; $t(102) = 7.38$, $p = 0$) as well as Asians ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 1.79$ for light skin tone ad vs. $M = 5.29$, $SD = 2.22$ for dark skin tone ad; $t(130) = 3.07$, $p = 0$).

Sample check

Since our sample consists of U.S.-based Asians and Caucasians, we used 17-item modified ethnic self-identity scale presented by Quinn and Devasagayam (2005) ($\alpha = .93$). This scale measures the degree to which ethnic diaspora in the U.S. identify with their original ethnicity. An independent samples t-test with ethnicity as the factor (Caucasian vs. Asian) and ethnic self-identity as the dependent variable shows that Asians have significantly higher ethnic self-identity than Caucasians ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.36$ for Asians vs. $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.47$ for Caucasians; $t(232) = -5.41$, $p = 0$). Further, we confirmed that there was no significant difference for ethnic self-identity across genders, $t(231) = -.66$, $p = ns$).

Designs. For the test of H_1 , a 2 x 2 between subjects design (gender by ethnicity) was performed to assess skin tone tension. For the test of H_2 , a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design was used to test the impact of *Ad_type* (Light skin tone vs. Dark skin tone), *Ethnicity* (Caucasian vs. Asian) and *Gender* (Male vs. Female) on ad appeal. In order to run analysis for these two ethnicities, the analysis was run for a total of 236 subjects (126 female, 109 male, 1 did not report gender; mean age = 23.74 years; 104 Caucasian, 132 Asian).

Results

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the effects of Ad Type on ad appeal for the different ethnicities of Caucasians and Asians.

Test of Hypotheses. To test H₁, two different single-item 9 point semantic differential measures were used with the question “According to you, what is your current skin tone?” (*self-tone*: light/dark; *self-tan*: not tanned/tanned). We also utilize an additional item in combination with *self-tone*. This item is also a single-item 9 point semantic differential measure, with the question “Given the choice, what skin tone would you like to have?” (*want-tone*: light/dark). *Lightdarktension* is calculated by subtracting *want-tone* from *self-tone*. *Lightdarktension* was tested as the dependent variable. There was a significant interaction effect for *Ethnicity* x *Gender* ($F(1,230) = 3.87, p = .05$), as depicted in Figure 1. The Asian males had the smallest desire to be lighter skinned ($M = .44$), versus the Asian females who had the highest desire to be lighter skinned ($M = .89$). For the Caucasians, the females had a greater desire to be darker ($M = -1.80$) than did the males ($M = -1.37$). Therefore, the H₁ hypothesis was supported. Planned comparisons reveal that there was a significant overall effect of ethnicity, ($F(1,230) = 99.67, p = 0$).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

For the H₂ test, ad appeal was tested as the dependent variable. There was a significant interaction effect for *Ad Type* x *Ethnicity* x *Gender* ($F(1,224) = 3.93, p = .05$). For the Asian males, as hypothesized in H₂, the light skin tone ad generated significantly higher ad appeal ($M = 5.18$) than the dark skin tone ad ($M = 4.33, F(1, 224) = 5.34, p = .02$). The difference in ad appeal for the Asian Females ($M = 4.76$ for light skin tone ad vs. $M = 4.36$ for dark skin tone ad; $F(1, 224) = .21, ns$), Caucasian Males ($M = 4.41$ for light skin tone ad vs. $M = 4.64$ for dark skin

tone ad; $F(1, 224) = .54, ns$), and Caucasian Females ($M = 4.75$ for light skin tone ad vs. $M = 4.01$ for dark skin tone ad; $F(1, 224) = .06, ns$), as predicted, was not significant.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Discussion

The objective of this research was not to draw in depth conclusions about the skin whitening issue in the context of Asian American populations, nor to posit complete hypotheses for every experimental cell. However, we did provide exploratory evidence that this explosive phenomenon merits further in depth theory, expanding research in this country. In terms of H_1 , skin tone-tension analysis among respondents (Figure 1) shows that there is a significant difference in skin tone tension when comparing Asian with Caucasian ethnicities. While both Asian males and females indicate a tendency toward lighter skin tone as their ideal state, both Caucasian males and females show tendency toward a darker skin tone. As discussed previously, there are many underlying reasons for skin tone tension differences between Asians and Caucasians, such as cultural values, social norms, history, and advertisements. We will discuss the Figure 1 differences between Asians as a broad category and Caucasians as a broad category in the next section. However, we need to make note of the focal differences at this point. Our focus is on the skin lightening and whitening industry, which is not to say that tanning of skin as a phenomenon is trivial. Our contention is that these two drive states, darkening for Caucasians versus lightening for Asians, are the product of two very different underlying mechanisms. We discuss the underpinnings of the Asian male desire for a light-skinned female as the key issue at question in our research.

Although advertising companies mainly use country or ethnicity-based characteristics for creating their ads, those ads also tend to, in turn, cycle back to change the society they are marketed to. We would briefly like to discuss some differences between the ads for skin whitening products shown in Asian countries with those broadcasted in western countries. One particular Asian commercial advertises their skin whitening product by showing episodes of a dramatic story of an Asian female who lost her beloved boyfriend to another lighter skinned Asian femaleⁱⁱ. She is later able to get him back after using the company's advertised skin whitening product. In another commercial, dark skinned Asian females are not noticeable by males until they start using skin whitening productsⁱⁱⁱ. Other media even shows young girls who are rejected by boys because they have dark skin tone in their underarms or on unexposed parts of their body^{iv}. Most of these ads focus on increasing skin tone tension for Asian females by degrading them in an effort to make their products look more important and effective. Many of these commercials use terms such as "white", "perfect white", "white power", "change" and "transform" to market their products. They also highlight what a big difference a skin whitening product can create in the life of an otherwise dark female. In contrast to this, skin whitening ads in western countries tend to depict a very different story. They mainly show middle aged women who are using these products to look younger and healthier. They advertise skin whitening products as a tool for women to keep their power^v.

Whereas there is not a statistically significant difference between the male and female skin tone tension within each ethnicity, it is still interesting to note that the female gender has more skin tone tension compared to the males within the same ethnicity. This can be attributed to the fact that physical and facial attractiveness have been shown to be extremely indicative of a female's success in her social and marital life. This finding is echoed by those of Leong (2006),

Datta (2008), and Glenn (2008). These scholars conduct meta-analytic research which suggests that having a light skin tone for Asian females is associated with being more feminine and appearing younger, finding better jobs, being chosen as a mate from a higher social class, and ultimately living a happier life. As Datta (2008) finds in her research of advertisements, television commercials for skin whitening products exacerbate (the caste system) the already existing belief that light and dark skin tone for Asian females can create two extremely different scenarios, i.e. of being happy and successful versus poor and a loser, respectively. In terms of H₂, analyzing ad appeal among respondents (Figure 2) shows that Asian males have a considerably higher ad appeal for the light skin advertisement. One possible reason is that Asian males have a more traditionally dominant role in choosing their mate, whereas the male's role in mate seeking is comparatively less significant among Caucasians. In the more westernized societies, females have a larger role in increasing their household income. Given this along with societal differences, westernized females have a stronger claim toward having equal rights and consequently having more control over their mate, in comparison to Asian females.

Also, due to the high context culture of Asians compared to the individualistic culture of Caucasians, skin whitening products are categorized as stature related products with high-involvement for Asian females which are mostly evaluated by their ideal self, while skin whitening products have a more functional role for Caucasian females which are mostly evaluated by their actual self (Quester 2000). This difference gives a further understanding of the closer skin tone tension difference between Caucasian males and females versus that of Asian males and females. Thus we can also see why Asian males show higher ad appeal toward the lighter skin advertisement.

Finally, it is interesting to note from Figure 2 that all respondents showed equal or more ad appeal toward the light skin ad in comparison to the dark skinned one. This brings to mind some possible explanations. First, they might all believe that the Asian identity matches more with light skin tone and that Asian females are more beautiful and appealing when they have lighter skin tone. A second possible explanation is that all respondents believe that having a lighter skin tone makes the model look more beautiful. However, since the Caucasians indicate skin tone tension in the opposite direction than Asians, this idea might not be appropriate.

Conclusion and Future Research

As advertising research extends to a global context, robust cultural issues challenge advertising researchers to elucidate the psychological underpinnings of such. This research introduces *skin tone tension* into the greater context of research on female role portrayals. Our results substantiate in the context of advertising what has mushroomed into a highly controversial cultural issue - fixation on the lightness of women's skin in Asian cultures.

As with the introduction of any new concept, the initial research provides a starting point for what is hoped to be a new tributary in the stream of research on female role portrayals. Given all of the popular press and the results of this study, there is a mandate for literary and empirical extension and exploration of this cultural phenomenon.

The dangers of preoccupation with a lighter skin ideal in the Asian marketplace are immense. As previously discussed, this obsession promotes a patriarchal, male-dominated society where female role orientations are not consistent with the changing role females play in modern Asian society (Sin and Yau 2004). As an indicator that this problem exists more in Asian societies than in Western societies, Koernig and Granitz (2006) find that e-commerce advertisements show

progress with regards to female inclusion, negation of stereotypes, and portrayal of women in non-sexist themes.

However, while some progress is being made in Asian societies on women's issues, it is abundantly clear that the skin whitening craze has very deep cultural roots, the nature of such reflects the deep seated patriarchal dominance. Indeed this can carry over to Asian communities within western societies. Clearly these male dominated societies and their value systems merit even deeper exploration given the growth opportunities for marketing to those of Asian ethnicity. Future research needs to further extend the Female Role Portrayal literature into this context to dig even further into the psychological and cultural underpinnings of the way women are perceived across ethnic lines and around the world. The controversy is upon us, now is the time for further exploration and extension of theory to this arena. As the Female Role Portrayal literature hit its peak in the 1990's, extension to this ethnic and cultural context has room for appreciable work building on the present research.

For example, could the raising of feminist consciousness in Asian societies (and within Asian communities in our own society) mitigate this objectification and dehumanization of women due to skin tone whitening? If so, what would be necessary to bring those changes about? Ford, LaTour and Middleton, (1999) found mere exposure to a documentary facilitated lasting change among U.S. college students. How much persuasion would be necessary to change the views of Asians or, for that matter, Asian Americans? Given the nature and entrenchment of this phenomenon, one can suspect that it will be more difficult to bring about change. Also, assuming consciousness can be raised for Asians, how strong would the linkages be between dimensions of a raised feminist consciousness (such as female autonomy) and downstream

effects on perceptions of corporate sponsors of skin whitening products and potential intent to boycott (see Ford, LaTour and Honeycutt, 1997).

Given the limitations of the sample used in this study, future research will need to explore differences between various Asian cultures on these issues. It stands to reason that the fledgling feminist movements in Asian cultures may develop at different rates with different degrees of potency in terms of feminist capabilities to bring businesses in line with their thinking. Certainly, in the United States, one does not want to offend feminists with female role portrayals that are perceived as objectifying nor dehumanizing given the negative publicity and damage to brand image that may well ensue. Future research should investigate other aspects which became apparent in the course of our study. For example, the skin tone tension which Caucasian women experience in the opposite direction, i.e. the desire for a tanned body (see Figure 1). Although the phenomenon has ties in terms of measurement, the underlying causes may be completely different. However, we recognize that skin lightening and skin tanning are equally dangerous for the health and longevity of individuals, and thus we encourage future research to further the understanding of this issue. Baumann (2008) discusses tanning in terms of a meaning-based explanation and delineates between lightening and tanning by arguing that lightening has moralistic reasoning whereas tanning is tied more to a pursuit of beauty by females. Still, further research can elucidate theoretical reasons for both tanning and lightening ideals and discuss differences and similarities between them.

In addition, as has been the case in western societies reacting to the feminist movement, those in business as well as academe should anticipate a backlash effect as feminist issues such as this grow in Asian cultures. Advertising executives in particular have the dilemma of dealing with multiple constituencies when using female models. More specifically, the cosmetic product

industry is challenged to market to diverse segments with varying degrees of feminist consciousness (Ford and LaTour, 1996). The key will be further partnering between advertising practitioners and academe to elucidate the cultural issues surrounding the growth of feminist consciousness in various contexts. Bringing theory into the context of application has never been more warranted than it is for the current issue at hand with skin whitening products. Still future research can identify downstream variables which other academics have found to be of interest in the Asian American culture, such as perceived source credibility (La Ferle and Choi 2005; Morimoto and La Ferle 2008) and how they are affected when advertisements show lighter versus darker skin tone on their models.

As can be seen in our research as well as extant research, the skin whitening obsession is not going away anytime soon. Yet, in a deeper sense it is indicative of the complexities of Asian culture and the fact that advertising researchers are just beginning to scratch the surface in fully understanding this important and growing cultural context.

As an initial extension of this exploratory research, we propose that there is adequate evidence to warrant several in-depth studies focusing on various subcategories of Asian Americans. We believe that the exploratory results of our research set a precedent for more future advertising research in an experimental context. We therefore propose several ways in which future research can expand on our findings. These include:

- *Implicit measures of skin tone attitudes*
 - Given the track record of success of Z.M.E.T. types of works (c.f. Braun-LaTour, LaTour and Zinkhan, 2007 and Zaltman, 2003), metaphorical based depth interviews should be able to extract deep seeded emotional/cultural underpinnings of the skin whitening obsession in a level of depth that experiments nor surveys could begin to touch. As Zaltman (2003) has

validated both in academe and in practitioner applications, we are creatures of emotion more so than we are consciously aware. Therefore, as most obsessions go, they have deep psychological roots which should be explored.

- *Ethnographic research on skin tone*
 - Exploration of the concept of skin tone tension in an ethnographic setting could definitely lead to insights, especially given the cultural embeddedness of this phenomenon and the fact that our research shows that these ideas carry on even when members of this culture live abroad. In the interpretivist research tradition, scholars refer to a narrative view of the self, wherein consumers see themselves as immersed in a story which helps them identify who they are and who they wish to become (Thompson 1997).

- *Female role portrayal with respect to skin tone*
 - Yet another key area which warrants future research centers on the portrayal of females in advertising media, specifically as it pertains to skin tone. Previous research shows that female role portrayals often promote negative stereotypes, some of which might give rise to negative self image for females and increase skin tone tension. An example of a critique to female role stereotypes in advertising, conducted in a longitudinal study (Belkaoui and Belkaoui 1976), indicates that in the 1960's and 1970's, advertisements mainly portrayed females in decorative and traditional roles, and hence was not inclusive of the evolution of women into the workplace. Content analytic research of both print and television advertisements in the 1980's and 1990's shows that advertisements continued to show females as subordinate to men, although this marginally decreased while images of them as sexual objects increased (Sin and Yau 2004). With regard to female role portrayals in British society, Plakoyiannaki and Zotos (2009) recently find that images of women in decorative and sexist roles still dominate print advertisements, especially when the media they are placed in is targeted to males.

- *Meta-analytic advertising research regarding skin tone*

Meta-analytic studies of advertising phenomena abound with respect to many target populations or demographics, such as gender and age. We suggest that future research can study the advertising in all media forms across multiple countries, in an effort to further understand the roots of skin tone tension. Such information can provide a deeper understanding of the issues involved both from a business perspective as well as from the consumer perspective. Failure to do so would simply set this future literature stream into a series of relatively atheoretical studies that may not do justice to the apparent deep rooted cultural and emotional complexities at hand.

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<http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/files/nation/summary/np2008-t4.xls>. Retrieved 2010-10-24.
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Figure1

Skin tone Lightness Tension Interaction

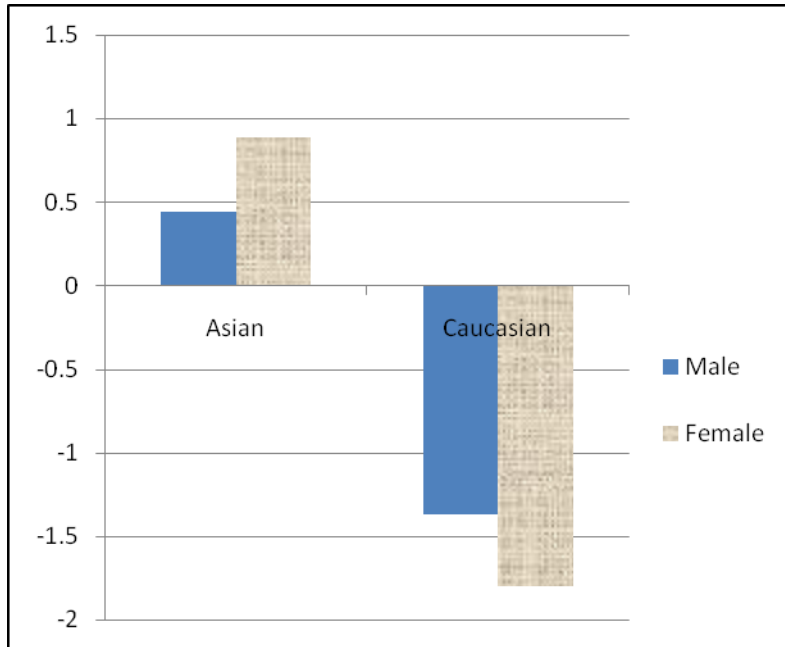
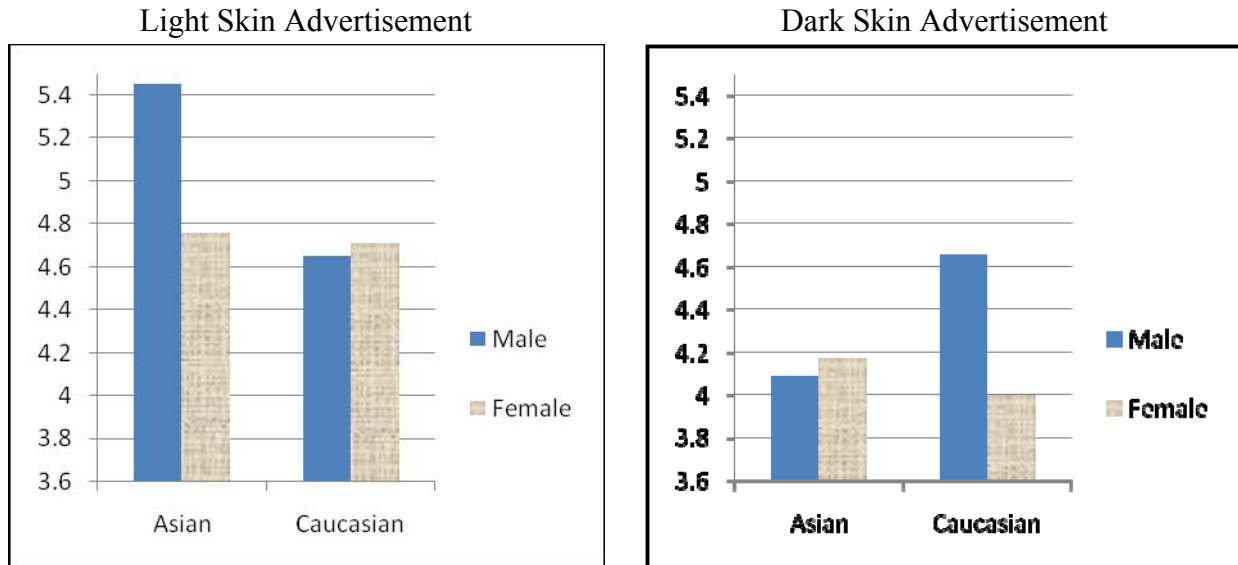


Figure 2

Ad Appeal Interaction



Appendix 1

Advertisement Manipulations



Advertisement A features a woman with light skin lying on a beach under a blue umbrella. An inset image shows a white jar of Vitastart with several green capsules. The text below the image reads: "Introducing *Vitastart*" followed by a paragraph: "Your healthy body needs the proper minerals and vitamin A. **Vitastart** acts as an antioxidant to neutralize harmful elements in your skin, helping to prevent wrinkles, resist infection and keep your skin youthful. **Vitastart** provides you with a complete body-energy formula to keep you feeling and looking your absolute best at all times. As an added bonus, it makes your healthy skin look *lighter* and *fairer* than any other vitamin on the market." At the bottom, it says "We can be found at your local drugstore www.vitastart.com" and is labeled "Ad A".

Light Skin tone Advertisement



Advertisement B features a woman with dark skin lying on a beach under a blue umbrella. An inset image shows a white jar of Vitastart with several green capsules. The text below the image reads: "Introducing *Vitastart*" followed by a paragraph: "Your healthy body needs the proper minerals and vitamin A. **Vitastart** acts as an antioxidant to neutralize harmful elements in your skin, helping to prevent wrinkles, resist infection and keep your skin youthful. **Vitastart** provides you with a complete body-energy formula to keep you feeling and looking your absolute best at all times. As an added bonus, it makes your healthy skin look *darker* and *more tanned* than any other vitamin on the market." At the bottom, it says "We can be found at your local drugstore www.vitastart.com" and is labeled "Ad B".

Dark Skin tone Advertisement

End Notes

ⁱ The common Chinese proverb, Yi Bai Zhe San Chou (fair skin can hide facial flaws) is used.

ⁱⁱ All Ponds episodes together: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXQSkE9J4N8>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BNmqGF5Xmc>

^{iv} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcC8Jw2Ugg>

^v <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUu2q7GK2kk&feature=related>