

## COLOURISM AS A CATALYST FOR THE SKIN WHITENING INDUSTRY IN THAILAND

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### ABSTRACT

*Colorism is a historical and cultural phenomenon with global dimensions. This phenomenon is credited, in part, for the growth and financial success of the skin-lightening industry throughout the world. In Thailand, dark skin is often associated with lower-income classes, including farm labor. As a pioneering effort, this study sought to empirically identify colorism in a way that would minimize social desirability bias. Three groups in an MBA program at an international university in Bangkok - Thais with Chinese ancestry, non-Chinese Thais, and non-Thai foreigners – were asked to identify socio-economic status (“rich” or “poor”) by examining photographs of male and female Thais with dark, medium, and light skin tones. An analysis was conducted using the demographic variables of ethnicity, gender, and age. The study found significant differences wherein Thai-Chinese associated light skin tone with wealth and dark skin tone with poverty. Non-Chinese Thais followed in this assessment, but foreigners did not. Regarding marriage, both Thai-Chinese and non-Chinese Thais chose photographs of individuals with light skin to marry, but they were significantly different than the foreigners where skin tone was not a factor. There was no significant difference regarding gender. However, age was significant in that the younger group in the study (ages 20 to 27) identified dark skin tones as indicating poverty more than the older group in the study (ages 28 to 48).*

## INTRODUCTION

Colorism has been defined as a process of discrimination in which light-skinned people of color are privileged over their dark skin counterparts (Hunter, 2007) and as a product of racism (Mallick, 2021). It is a phenomenon relating to actual skin tone but is not necessarily tied to biology or a specific racial identity (Hirschman, 2004; Hunter, 2007) but, rather, to those sharing similar ethnic traits but who are treated differently based on skin tone (Jones, 2001).

The preponderance of the literature about colorism has focused on the United States regarding ethnic minorities (Monk 2014, 2021; Norwood, 2014; Reece, 2018, 2021; Russell et al., 1992), including Asian Americans (Jones, 2013; Rondinella & Spickard, 2007). The consensus from Western scholars is that colorism is derived from a foundation consisting of white privilege institutional racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Charles, 2003; Gram, 2007) and Eurocentric influences tied to slavery and colonization (Glenn, 2008; Hall, 2013; Hunter, 2013, Murray & Price, 2011; Reece, 2018, 2020). Therefore, racism can be seen as having given birth to colorism (Dixon & Telles, 2017).

The impact of globalization has meant that beauty has come to mean white, i.e., emphasized by western-looking white faces (Hunter, 2005; Jha & Adelman, 2009; Li et al., 2008) and that whiteness is associated with cleanliness (Jones, 2011; Leong, 2006), purity (Wagatsuma, 1967), healthiness, youthfulness (Matts et al., 2007), popularity (Thompson & Keith, 2001), modernity, success (Aizura, 2009), and being cosmopolitan (Saraswati, 2010). As a result, market forecasting of the worldwide skin whitening industry indicates estimated sales of USD 8.8 billion in 2022 and up to USD 11.8 billion by 2026 (Global Industry Analysts, Inc., 2022).

However, Dixon and Telles (2017) point out that the framing of colorism in the United States cannot be extended globally because of differences in the respective cultures of nations including linguistic disparities regarding color and race. Long before the historical phenomenon of European colonization, nations such as Japan, Korea, and China, historically idealized white skin (Hesse-Swain, 2006; Leong, 2006). In Japan, from the Nara period (701 to 793 AD) to the Meiji period (1868 – 1912), court ladies and Japanese men and women belonging to the higher classes wore white facial powder, often made of white lead (Wagatsuma, 1967). An old Japanese proverb indicated that “white skin makes up for seven defects” (*iron no Shiroi wa Michigan kakusu*) (Wagatsuma, 1967, p. 407) and medicines were sold that promised “to turn...skin as white as snow found on the peaks of high mountains” (Wagatsuma, 1967, p. 411). The literature of ancient China described beautiful women as having white skin described as “white jade” (Leong, 2006, p. 167) “snow” and “ice” and proclaimed that “a white complexion can hide several flaws” (Zhang 2012, p. 440). Farm laborers were labeled as “black-headed people” (Dikotter 1992, p. 10). In addition, a common Chinese saying of that time indicated that “One whiteness can cover three kinds of ugliness” (Leong 2006, p. 167).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Colorism in Thailand*

Thailand is the largest market in ASEAN for cosmetics with a market value of over USD 4 billion (Kasikornbank 2017) and with about half that amount spent on skin-lightening products. Peltzer et al. (2015) surveyed 718 Thai undergraduate students and found that 83.8% had used skin-lightening products which included 89.1% of females and 69.5% of males. Another study surveyed 800 undergraduate Thai students on the use of skin whitening products and found that 69.4% had used such products. Among the users, 73.3% were

male and 69% were female (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2017). Phutongnak et al. (2020) studied 1,143 female higher education students and found that almost 85% of female (higher education) students had used skin-whitening products.

The advertising of these products has been controversial. One Thai advertisement for skin whitening supplemental pills featured a female Thai celebrity who attributed her professional success to having a pale complexion with the product using taglines like “white makes you a winner” “just being white, you will win,” “eternally white, I am confident,” and “get to know the miracle of white skin” (Hodal, 2013; Sherwill, 2016; The Straits Times 2016, January 8). Dunkin Donuts in Thailand had to make a public apology for creating a print advertisement featuring a Thai woman in blackface that was perceived by many as a bizarre and racist ad (Chomchuen, 2013; Pesce, 2016; Tharoor, 2016).

An important factor in the use of skin whitening products is the influence of the Thai-Chinese (preferred by them over Chinese-Thai) community in Thailand who make up about 14% of the national population (World Population Review, 2022) – the largest Chinese population in Southeast Asia. As part of the overall overseas entrepreneurial Chinese network (Gambe, 2000; Gomez & Hsin-Huang, 2001; Hodder, 1996; Koning & Verver, 2013; Rae & Witzel, 2008), the Thai-Chinese now control 80% to 90% of the overall market capitalization in the country with ownership or majority control of approximately 80% of the companies listed in the Thai stock exchange (Haley et al., 2007; Ramsay, 2000; Seagrave, 2010; Weidenbaum & Hughes, 1996). According to Yeung (2007, p. 356), “the sheer prowess and diversity of the economic activities controlled or coordinated by the Thai Chinese have enabled some of them to become the very foundations of the economies” in which they primarily own or control.

This economic influence is compounded by the fact that about 67% of the nation's wealth is held by 1% of the population (Wechsler, 2020). At the top are about 150 wealthy Thai-Chinese families with the Chearavanont, Chirathivat, Yoovidhya, Sirivadhanabhakdi, Srivaddhanaprabha, and Bhirombhakdi clans having a combined net worth of about USD 93.5 billion or around 2.83 trillion baht (Wechsler 2020).

Thai-Chinese are aesthetically distinguishable from non-Thai-Chinese by their pale skin. Most high-profile actors (movies and very popular soap operas) singers, and models in Thailand are Thai-Chinese and are utilized in print and television advertisements as well as on street billboards and mass transit advertisements (e.g., in the MRT and BTS systems in metropolitan Bangkok). Most television stations and major advertising and modeling agencies are owned or controlled by Thai Chinese who are prominent as marketing and advertising executives for firms like L'Oréal and Unilever that sell skin whitening products. Jory (1999) found that only 26 out of the top 100 advertising-spending companies in Thailand were solely foreign-owned with another 17 jointly owned with Thais. Advertising expenditures by foreign-owned businesses in Thailand amounted to only 17% of the total spent on advertising for the top 100 companies in the country. Therefore, the ideal of aesthetic beauty in Thailand, which emphasizes white skin, has been established by an immigrant, ethnic minority whose skin tone is in fundamental contrast to 86% of the population, particularly the 20 million in the agricultural province of Isan, north of Bangkok, where the population has dark skin and where many are farm workers who labor under the sun.

Feigenblatt (2010) found that Thailand's standard for ideal aesthetics has been established in greater Bangkok (Central Region) where the preponderance of the country's Thai-Chinese reside. Preference for Sino-aesthetics has been compounded by the

"Korean Wave" (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Hong & Jin, 2021) including Korean Pop bands, and Korean soap operas (dubbed into Thais as part of Korea's transnational production strategy) as well as Japanese anime and manga, and, more recently, the commercializing of metrosexual (sometimes androgynous) Korean, Japanese, and mainland or Singapore Chinese male pop stars and male models (Purnell, 2013). The Thai expression "*khaaw-suay-muay-X*" (white-pretty-Chinese-looking-seXy) evolved to incorporate Japanese and Korean aesthetics with "big 'innocent' eyes" that are often made oversized with big, colored contact lenses (Saiyasombut, 2012).

There appears to be very limited support for the influence of Western media in Thailand, in contrast, for example, with the Philippines, (a large purchaser of skin whitening products) and a large consumer of Western entertainment products, perhaps the result of over three centuries of occupation, first by Spain and then by the United States (Mendoza, 2014). Therefore, Chaipraditkul (2013) indicates that European cultural domination may not be the primary cause of the Thai conception of beauty. Thailand, like Japan, was never formally colonized by any European state. As an example of the limited influence of the West, Cuny and Opaswongkarn (2017) studied 92 Thai female users of skin whitening products who stated that usage was not to look like Western women but to look Asian with light skin that was seen as highly effective to seduce men (74%), be better able to attract men (86%), and to have a happy love life (98%).

Colorism in Thailand appears to be less tied to the emulation of the Eurocentric ideal of beauty (i.e., whiteness) than to the identification of socio-economic status. Thais with lighter skin are perceived to come from higher social strata and those with dark skin are perceived to be poor, uneducated, and from rural areas. *Tee* refers to Thais with lighter complexions and relates to being educated and having money while *Isan* refers to darker complexions (Hodal, 2012). Derogatory

commentary on skin tone has been internally generated by Thais. These include phrases used such as *dam men e-ga* (black like a crow) and *tua dam* (having a black body) (Fuller, 2006; Hodal, 2013).

Culturally, Thailand is a high collectivism society that operates under a pyramidal, hierarchical structure ("*kreng jai*") where those in authority (or an alpha personality in a particular group dynamics) are granted acceptance without argument from lower-status individuals and where the dictates or standards established from above are not challenged or publicly contradicted. (Chayakonvikom et al., 2016). From Thai-Chinese dominated Bangkok, the national aesthetics of beauty (whiteness) appear to be communicated downward from financial elites who control the institutions of advertising, marketing, and mass entertainment, recently utilizing contemporary imagery of popular Korean stars, in particular, who have pale skin tones similar to the Thai-Chinese. Rongmuang et al. (2011) studied 200 Thai young women in four regions of Thailand - North, Northeast, Central (greater Bangkok), and South - and found that the women in all four of the regions considered "bright face skin" and "white-pink (body) skin" to be the most important physical characteristics of appearance (Rongmuang et al., 2011, p. 115). Therefore, the national quest for white skin has created a plethora of lightening products which include creams, soaps, pills, and injections as well as more exotic and controversial lightening products such as chlorine soap, salmon sperm, snail slime, vaginal whitening wash, and pink nipple lotion (Bangkok Post, 2015, November 11; Daniel, 2012; Fuller, 2006; Hodal, 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

The population of MBA students in an international, English-curriculum program at a university in Bangkok was examined over the course of one semester. Utilizing Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for tabulating sample sizes, an inferential sample size of 214 was

calculated. The MBA program consisted of Thais of Chinese ancestry (Thai-Chinese), Thais with no Chinese ancestry, and foreign students who consisted mainly of English native speakers (specifically, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States) or those who grew up in bilingual educational programs where English was a second language (i.e., mainly Europeans). The research instrument was selectively administered to maintain the general breakdown by ethnicity, gender, and age of the overall student population: Thai Chinese – 33 students (16% of the total), non-Chinese Thai – 97 students (45%), and foreign students – 84 students (39%). Overall gender consisted of 101 males (47%) and 113 females (53%), and two age groups consisted of 123 students between the ages of 20 to 27 (57%) and 91 students between the ages of 28 to 48 (43%).

The research instrument (anonymous and self-administered) was operationalized with a survey form (showing rows of faces) and guided with verbalized instructions. Regarding the instrument, no Cronbach's alpha calculation was required. Given the nature of the analysis, the study did not use a multi-item scale to measure any construct (Hair et al., 2010; Nunnally & Berstein, 1994; Sekaran 2000). The instrument (asking for demographic information) and guiding script were translated from English to Thai and then translated back to assure accuracy and that there was no loss of understanding because of the translation process (Behling & Law, 2000; Domyei & Taguchi, 2009).

The research instrument showed rows of faces on paper which were replicated in color on a projector screen. Fourteen rows of three faces on each row (seven rows consisting of all male faces and seven rows consisting of all female faces) were displayed with the rows alternating based on gender. Each row consisted of one face each representing a light skin tone, a medium, and a dark. The different tones were scrambled from row to row. The determination of the clear distinction of each

tone was achieved through pre-testing, using students that were not later incorporated into the inferential sampling. All the faces were Thais, excluding celebrities, prominent public figures, and anyone belonging to the university community. The faces were purchased from stock photos or were commissioned to assure diversity in skin tone. The photographs were cropped so that only the faces were visible, thus minimizing clothing or background that could influence selection.

To assure accuracy, the instruction was delivered in English by a native speaker and in Thai by a native speaker, even though all the students were participating in an English-only graduate program curriculum. The students were not informed of the nature of the study to minimize potential social desirability bias. Instead, they were told to view the screen, and for each line of three faces, mark on the face on their sheet an "R" for "Rich" and a "P" for "Poor," thus leaving one face unmarked. Then they were told to mark an "M" for "Marry" for one of the three on each row that they would consider marrying. On rows that had faces of the same gender as the student subject, they were asked to mark "M" for who they would want as a brother-in-law or sister-in-law bearing children who would be the nephews and/or nieces of the student subject. The results were analyzed by addressing the demographic variable of ethnicity, gender, and age.

*Hypotheses (Note: All hypotheses are stated as null.)*

- H<sub>1a</sub>** There will be no difference among the three groups regarding the perception of being "Rich" status based on skin tone.
- H<sub>1b</sub>** There will be no difference among the three groups regarding the perception of being "Poor" status based on skin tone.
- H<sub>1c</sub>** There will be no difference among the three groups regarding the choice of marriage based on skin tone.

- H<sub>2a</sub>** There will be no difference among Chinese Thais regarding their perception of skin tone and economic status based on gender.
- H<sub>2b</sub>** There will be no difference among non-Chinese Thais regarding the perception of skin tone and economic status based on gender.
- H<sub>2c</sub>** There will be no difference among non-Thais regarding the perception of skin tone and economic status based on gender.
- H<sub>3a</sub>** There will be no difference among Chinese Thais regarding the perception of skin tone and economic status based on age.
- H<sub>3b</sub>** There will be no difference among non-Chinese Thais regarding the perception of skin tone and economic status based

on age.

- H<sub>3c</sub>** There will be no difference among non-Thais regarding the perception of skin tone and economic status based on age.

### FINDINGS

The first grouping of hypotheses suggested that there would be no differences in the evaluation of skin pigment for those designated “Rich” (H1a), “Poor” (H1b), and “Marry” (H1c) across the three groups tested: Thais of Chinese Parents, Thais of Thai parents, and foreign (non-Thai) students. Descriptive statistics for the ratings by groupings are presented below in Table 1 as well as for Gender and Age groupings.

**Table 1** Mean ratings of pictures by skin tone for rich, poor and marriage\*

Group	N	Statistic	Rich	Poor	Marry
Thai Chinese	33	Mean	1.07	2.79	1.13
		SD	.157	.216	.147
Thai	97	Mean	1.21	2.58	1.24
		SD	.173	.164	.238
Foreigners	84	Mean	1.67	2.39	1.94
		SD	.307	.246	.471
Total	214	Mean	1.37	2.54	1.50
		SD	.340	.249	.471
Male	101	Mean	1.44	2.50	1.59
		SD	.374	.247	.500
Female	113	Mean	1.32	2.56	1.43
		SD	.304	.248	.441
Gender Total	214	Mean	1.37	2.54	1.50
		SD	.340	.249	.495
Age 20-27	123	Mean	1.36	2.56	1.48
		SD	.335	.257	.479
Age 28-48	91	Mean	1.39	2.50	1.52
		SD	.347	.224	.517
Age Total	214	Mean	1.37	2.54	1.50
		SD	.340	.249	.495
Overall Total	214	Mean	1.37	2.54	1.50
		SD	.340	.249	.495

\*Where 1 = Lightest 2 = Medium 3 = Darkest

Before examining differences in the means for the three groups by MANOVA, it was necessary to test the homogeneity of variance assumption across the groups. This was done using Levene’s homogeneity of variance test (see Table 2). As indicated in the table, the test showed significant differences in the homogeneity of the variables across groups (Rich  $p < .001$ , Poor  $p < .001$ , Marry  $p < .001$ ). Although the Levene’s  $F$  test suggested that the variance associated with the dependent variables was not homogenous, an examination of the standard deviations, provided in Table 1, indicated that none of

the standard deviations were more than four times the size of the smallest standard deviation, suggesting that the MANOVA would be robust. While the Box’s  $M$  test was found to be significant at  $p < .001$ , this test tends to be extremely sensitive to violations of multivariate normality. However, since (as can be seen in Table 1) the larger samples tended to have larger variances, the MANOVA test was robust for type 1 errors (Zaiontz n.d.). As a further precaution, Pillai’s Trace was used to examine differences since it tends to be more robust to depart from assumptions than other similar tests (NCSS 2016; Zaiontz n.d.).

**Table 2** Levene’s Test of Homogeneity of Variances

Variable	Levene Statistic	Df1	Df2	p
Rich	5.962	11	202	.000
Poor	3.287	11	202	.000
Marry	7.462	11	202	.000

To test the first grouping of hypotheses proposed for this study, a MANOVA was first run to determine if there were any differences across the respondent groups (ethnic background, gender, and age group) on the three variables of interest: Rich, Poor, and Marry. The findings are presented below in Table 3.

**Table 3** Significant Multivariate Effects

Variable	Pillai’s Trace	F	df	Error df	p	$\eta^2$
Ethnic	.649	32.219	6	402	.000**	.371
Gender	.036	2.489	3	200	.062	.036
Age	.054	3.828	3	200	.011*	.054

\*  $< .05$ , \*\*  $< .001$

Hypothesis 1 stated that there would be no significant differences in skin tone ratings of Rich, Poor, and Marry across the three ethnic groupings of H1a, Thais of Chinese Parents, H1b, Thais and H1c, foreigners. Multivariate analysis indicated that there were significant differences indicated across these three ethnic groupings (Pillai’s Trace = .649,  $F(6,402) = 32.219$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .325$ ). ANOVAs were conducted for each of the dependent variables. Significant differences were found between ethnic groups on Rich,  $F(2,202) = 93.364$ ,  $p < .001$ , Poor,  $F(2,202) = 35.143$ ,  $p < .001$  and Marry,  $F(2,202) = 96.443$ ,  $p < .001$ . Since sample sizes for the three groups were unequal, a Welch test was employed to further protect against any possible associated Type-1 error (Mendes & Akkartal, 2010).

**Table 4** ANOVA for Ethnic Groups

Dependent Variable	df	Error df	F	Welch	p	Means		
						Chinese	Thai	Foreign
Rich	2	202	93.364	102.827	.000**	1.072	1.213	1.674
Poor	2	202	35.143	39.036	.000**	2.791	2.575	2.390
Married	2	202	96.443	100.883	.000**	1.132	1.236	1.937

\*\* < .001

Because there were three groups, a Tukey post hoc test was then performed to see where significant differences existed between the ethnic groups. Post hoc comparisons indicated that the mean scores for the three groups were significantly different with Chinese Thai ( $M = 1.07, SD = .16$ ) rating pictures with a lighter skin tone as "Rich" more than Thais of Thai parents ( $M = 1.21, SD = .17$ ) and the group of foreign students ( $M = 1.67, SD = .31$ ). Hypothesis 1a was rejected.

Post hoc tests indicated significant differences in skin tone mean ratings for "Poor" with Chinese Thai ( $M = 2.79, SD = .22$ ) designating Poor for persons with the darkest skin tone, Thais ( $M = 2.58, SD = .16$ ) designating a mid-range skin tone as Poor and foreigners selecting the lightest skin tone as Poor ( $M = 2.39, SD = .25$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 1b which suggested no significant differences in skin tone ratings for "Poor" by ethnic group was rejected.

The third ethnic hypothesis, H1c, suggested that there would be no significant differences in skin tone ratings for those designated as someone to consider marrying. Again, a Tukey post hoc test did reveal

differences, but this time the differences were only significant between the foreigner group and the two Thai groups (Thai of Chinese parents and Thais of Thai parents). Thais of Chinese parents ( $M = 1.13, SD = .15$ ) and non-Chinese Thais ( $M = 1.24, SD = .24$ ) both selected light skin tone photos as persons to consider marrying but were not significantly different from one another. However, both were significantly different from ratings of skin tone by foreigners ( $M = 1.94, SD = .47$ ) with foreigners choosing to designate Marry for darker skin tones with both groups of Thais selecting lighter skin tones. Therefore, Hypothesis 1c was rejected.

The next grouping of hypotheses (H2a, H2b, and H2c) suggested that there would be no differences regarding designations of "Rich" (H2a), "Poor" (H2b), and "Marry" (H2c) based on skin tone by gender. Multivariate analysis indicated that there were no significant differences indicated across the two gender groupings (Pillai's Trace = .036,  $F(3,200) = 2.489, p = .062, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .036$ ). The descriptive statistics for the ratings of "Rich," "Poor," and "Marry" are presented below in Table 5. Therefore, Hypotheses H2a, H2b, and H2c are not rejected.

**Table 5** Means and Standard Deviations for Gender Groups on Rich, Poor, and Married

Dependent Variable	Means / SD	
	Male	Female
Rich	1.437 / .374	1.322 / .304
Poor	2.499 / .247	2.564 / .248
Married	1.589 / .548	1.428 / .495



A final set of hypotheses (H3a, H3b, and H3c) examined whether there would be no differences in designations of “Rich” (H3a), “Poor” (H3b), and “Marry” (H3c) for different in skin tone based upon the age grouping of the respondents. To make this assessment, respondents were divided into two roughly equal groups based on age, with those ranging in age from 20-27 designated as “Young” and those from 27 to 48 designated as “Old.” A multivariate analysis was conducted which indicated that there were significant differences indicated across the two age groupings on these variables (Pillai’s Trace = .054,  $F(3,200) = 3.828, p = .011$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .054$ ).

A set of ANOVAs was then conducted to examine where differences existed relative to age groupings and the dependent variables. Hypothesis 3a suggested no significant differences in the selection of skin tone by age as to the designation of “Rich.” As can be seen in Table 6, “Young” respondents ( $M = 1.36, SD = .33$ ) did not exhibit a statistically significant

difference in the designation of “Rich” by skin tone as compared with the “Old” group ( $M = 1.39, SD = .35, F(1,202) = .403, p = .526$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3a was not rejected.

Hypothesis 3b suggested that there would be no differences by age group in designations of “Poor” for the selection of skin tone depicted. There was a statistically significant difference in the designation of “Poor” by skin tone between the “Young” group ( $M = 2.56, SD = .26$ ) as compared to the “Old” group ( $M = 2.50, SD = .52$ ) with the young group designating “Poor” to photos depicting darker shades of skin tones,  $F(2,202) = 9.728, p = .002$ . Therefore, Hypothesis 3b was rejected.

The final age hypothesis suggested differences in the designation of “Marry” by age group based on differences in skin tone. In this case, “Young” respondents exhibited no significant differences ( $M = 1.48, SD = .48$ ) from the “Old” group ( $M = 1.52, SD = .52, F(2,202) = .003, p = .957$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3c was not rejected.

**Table 6 ANOVA for Age Groups**

Dependent Variable	df	Error df	F	p	Means	
					Young	Old
Rich	1	202	.403	.526	1.355	1.394
Poor	1	202	9.728	.002**	2.563	2.501
Married	1	202	.003	.957	1.480	1.521

\*\* < .001

The findings of this study are summarized in Table 7. As indicated in this table, there were mixed results for the hypotheses proposed. Significant differences were found for skin tone mean evaluations for designations of Rich, Poor, and Marry across all ethnic groups with Rich being the lightest skin tone, Poor being the darkest skin tone, and Marry between these two in terms of skin tone. Designations across the skin tones regarding gender showed no significant differences. For the two age groups, Young and Old, there were differences in the assessment of Poor with that designation going to photographs with darker skin tones.

**Table 7 Summary of Study Findings**

Hypothesis	SS	
H <sub>1a</sub>	Differences Across Ethnic Groups for "Rich"	Rejected
H <sub>1b</sub>	Differences Across Ethnic Groups for "Poor"	Rejected
H <sub>1c</sub>	Differences Across Ethnic Groups for "Marry"	Rejected
H <sub>2a</sub>	Differences Across Gender Groups for "Rich"	Not Rejected
H <sub>2b</sub>	Differences Across Gender Groups for "Poor"	Not Rejected
H <sub>2c</sub>	Differences Across Gender Groups for "Marry"	Not Rejected
H <sub>3a</sub>	Differences Across Age Groups for "Rich"	Not Rejected
H <sub>3b</sub>	Differences Across Age Groups for "Poor"	Rejected
H <sub>3c</sub>	Differences Across Age Groups for "Marry"	Not Rejected

### Social Desirability Bias

Social desirability bias addresses the possibility that within self-reporting, some respondents may provide information that makes themselves look positive instead of providing information that is more truthful or accurate. Two independent dimensions within social desirability bias are (1) *self-deception*, where a subject provides a positive self-assessment that may be an unconscious act of self-deception, and (2) *impression management* which is a deliberate distortion of self-presentation to form a favorable impression of the respondent for a particular audience, specifically if the questions asked dealt with self-evaluation of work performance, quality of work, and overall ability (Dodaj, 2012; Holtgraves, 2004; McCrae, 1986; Paulhus & John, 1998).

The incorporation of, especially, impression management can result in response contamination that can threaten construct validity (Jo et al., 1997; King & Bruner, 2000). However, because the subjects in this study were not informed of the nature of the inquiry before or throughout the administration of the instrument, the degree of self-deception does not appear to have played any significant role. The same is true of impression management since none of the examinations involved self-reporting as to work performance or ability. Informal discussion sessions with the respondents, after the collection of the research instruments, revealed none of the participants were aware of what they had been tested on.

### CONCLUSION

This study managed to overcome the barrier of social desirability bias to empirically verify colorism among Thais. This was a major challenge because of cultural traits within Thailand that discourage the articulation of opinion, particularly on a controversial subject. They included a strong hierarchical structure with high power distance, *kreng jai* (the avoidance of displays of emotion or asserting's one opinion), and a general tendency of Thais to avoid saying anything that may be interpreted as criticism of one's country to foreigners (Chayakonvikom et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2003; Suntaree, 1990). Therefore, it is often necessary to create a research instrument for Thais consisting of a forced Likert scale that eliminates a neutral, middle option (e.g., "not sure") which, otherwise, could consist of the bulk of the responses.

This study suggests that the colonialism hypothesis of many Western scholars which argues that the success in selling skin-lightening products is predicated on the Eurocentric promotion of idealized whiteness, reinforced through colonization and institutionalized racism (including through cultural imperialism) does not adequately explain the phenomenon of colorism in Thai society. Instead, an understanding requires the issue of socioeconomic identification between dark skin Thais from agricultural areas of the country and light skin (predominately Thai-Chinese) who dominate the concentration of

capital in the country's central city – Bangkok. This may also reflect on the migration of the rural poor to the capital wherein there is an assimilation from the cluster of core, values, and ideas of Buddhist village life to those of neo-Confucianism of the overseas entrepreneurial Chinese by way of interaction with the Thai-Chinese.

This study was limited to a student body in an international university in Bangkok which was beneficial in being able to have Thai-Chinese and foreigners as parts of the inferential sample. However, future studies could seek to explore this subject in Thai institutions with different demographic representations and different areas of the country.

Informal discussion groups were held between the researchers and the participants after the survey sheets had been collected from the groups. The participants were asked if they understood the purpose of the exercise. No participant responded correctly. This helped in avoiding the degree of social desirability bias that would have occurred if the exercise had consisted of face-to-face interviews or formal (recorded) focus groups. In the informal discussions that followed the administration of the research instrument, the researchers of this study were informed by many of the male participants that, as to the question of whom they would marry, they did not choose based on skin tone but, rather, by sexual attraction. This led some to select faces that were dark or even had the darkest skin tone. Many of the female participants indicated that they made a choice based on the most masculine of the choices provided even if the most masculine had dark or the darkest skin tone in the row of selection. Studies have indicated that there is a tie between sexual attraction and skin tone (Bhattacharya, 2012; Charles, 2011; Fokuo, 2009; Hill, 2002; Li et al., 2008; Shankar & Subish, 2007). However, most of these studies referred to African Americans and populations in the West Indies. Esara (2009) found that Thai

men in the Bangkok area did identify white skin with physical attraction and Cuny and Opaswongkarn (2017) found that Thai women believed white skin to be a major asset to sexually attract men. Future studies can more directly examine the degree to which sexual attraction and masculinity in appearance override skin tone.

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