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A Contrastive Study of Colorism on L'Oréal's Thailand and USA YouTube Channels

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Abstract

The promotion of lighter skin tones—a form of colorism—has a long and worrisome history. However, little is known about the discourse of colorism outside of Western contexts, especially in languages other than English and in online settings. Therefore, in this study, we applied keyword, collocation, and concordance analysis, alongside inductive content analysis to examine 440 thumbnails (images) and their accompanying video titles (2,230 Thai words, 2,001 English words) on L'Oréal's Thailand and USA YouTube channels. This mixed-method approach allowed us to explore the skincare discourse of each channel and determine to what extent, if any, colorism was present in each dataset. The results from the Thailand dataset showed that white-skinned influencers typically presented the aesthetic benefits of products, where lighter skin was promoted. Results from the USA dataset showed authoritative presenters with a wide diversity in skin tones, who highlighted the functional benefits of products. Based on our findings, we raise awareness of how colorism can be perpetuated in different languages/contexts in subtle ways. Moreover, our results contribute to a growing body of research on multinational companies' complicity in sustaining colorism, and highlight the need for further studies on cross-cultural marketing and colorism in non-Western, non-English-speaking contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Race is typically inferred from broad phenotypic traits, including facial features, hair texture, and skin tone (Risch et al., 2002). Thus, while race and skin color are often treated as synonymous in some discourses—for example, equating "Black" with "African American"—such associations are reductionist, context-specific, and discursively constructed (Winegard et al., 2020). In practice, racial identification involves a wider range of visual and cultural markers beyond skin tone alone (Bowen & Hopper, 2023). Moreover, in many Asian societies, racial heterogeneity is relatively low, making race a less salient category for everyday social distinctions. In such settings, colorism—the preferential treatment of lighter-skinned individuals over darker-skinned individuals within the same racial or ethnic group—plays a far more central role in shaping social hierarchies. In other words, when colorism is present, lighter skin

tones become a form of symbolic capital which affords increased social mobility, job opportunities, income, educational access, and other benefits (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Hall, 2023; Vijaya, 2019). In some contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, colorism is even seen as a marker of beauty, purity, and privilege (Ashikari, 2005; Hunter, 2011; Jablonski, 2021), while darker skin tones have become associated with negative outcomes, traits, and processes of othering. In such contexts, darker-skinned individuals may experience more microaggressions, disrespect, and condescension (Keith et al., 2017).

Historically, the association between lighter skin tones and increased symbolic capital has been taken advantage of by the beauty industry, wherein cosmetic companies have, as Dyer (1997) puts it, "a history of whitening the face" (p. 49). However, despite valuable insights into how the cosmetic industry influences people's intentions to lighten skin tones (e.g., Chia et al., 2015; Ka, 2007), to the researchers' best knowledge, few studies have investigated the influence of social media on the perpetuation of colorism (cf. Childs, 2022; Webb & Robinson, 2017), and even fewer have done so in an Eastern context or in a language other than English (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Furthermore, if we also consider the ever-expanding reach of the global skin whitening market (Global Industry Analysts, 2022), the powerful influence of multinational cosmetic companies in perpetuating colorism (Van Hout & Wazaify, 2021), and the uphill battle of local, grassroots movements in combating colorism (Vijaya, 2019), there is a clear need for more nuanced understandings of how discourses related to skin color, particularly in non-English speaking contexts, are realized in and through (online) discourses (Graumann, 2010).

Accordingly, our study investigates choices in language and imagery attached to skincare posts on L'Oréal's Thailand (Thai) and USA (English) YouTube channels. More specifically, we explore written text and thumbnail images for the potential presence of discourse that promotes the lightening or darkening of skin tones on two of L'Oréal's YouTube video feeds. By investigating the similarities and differences across the two feeds through keyword analysis, collocation and concordance analysis, and inductive content analysis, we answer recent calls "for a new urgency in mobilizing against skin whitening practices" (Vijaya, 2019, p. 234), and for more empirically driven studies into non-Western settings, especially internet-based ones (Davis, 2018) and ones controlled by multinational companies (Van Hout & Wazaify, 2021). We use the following research questions to guide our exploration:

1. To what extent, if any, does the discourse of L'Oréal Paris's Thailand and USA YouTube channels differ regarding skincare?
2. To what extent, if any, is colorism present in the discourse of L'Oréal Paris's Thailand and USA YouTube channels?

COLORISM IN SOCIETY, MEDIA, AND ADVERTISING

The sociohistorical origins of colorism

Race is typically defined in terms of group membership, where members are said to share certain physical characteristics such as facial morphology, skin complexion, and hair structure

(Richmond et al., 2018). However, individual phenotypic traits vary within racial groups, thus individuals can also be positioned along clines (Winegard et al., 2020). When individuals are positioned along a cline based on skin tone, colorism—also known as skin color bias, skin tone bias, or pigmentocracy—may emerge. Thus, colorism can be defined as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (Walker, 1983, p. 291). However, in different parts of the world, such prejudices have distinct sociohistorical bases, and these affect how colorism is viewed and treated in each respective region.

In the United States, for example, systematic devaluation, otherization, enslavement, and mistreatment of darker skinned Africans by white settlers gave rise to racism, and later colorism within African American populations (Hall, 2023). Colorism in Latin America, whilst not as clearly delineated as in America, has a similar history (Canache et al., 2014; Dixon & Telles, 2017). In the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Europe, colorism is historically attributed to Arabs involved in the Atlantic slave trade (Al-Azmeh, 1992). In the East, meanwhile, preferences for lighter skin tones "are not imitation[s] of Western norms but reflect economic and political development, Asian modernity, and transnational relations within the region." (Yip et al., 2019, p. 73). For instance, long before Europeans colonized other parts of the world, the concept of "whiteness" was especially prevalent in Japan, where it symbolized beauty, purity, and privilege (Ashikari, 2005). In other Asian countries, notably China (Ka, 2007) and Thailand (Slutskiy & Hamilton, 2017), lighter skin tones symbolized a higher social status, as people of lower classes often worked outside, and the resultant exposure to sun for prolonged periods led to a darkening of skin tones over generations (Hall, 2023; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). The ideal of whiteness in countries such as Cambodia, India, Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam was further reinforced through colonizers, who actively promoted white supremacy (Hall, 2023; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007).

In the context of Thailand—a country with one of the highest consumption rates of skin whitening products and treatments in the world (Cuny & Opaswongkarn, 2017; Peltzer et al., 2016)—Thai women have historically used skin whitening products and treatments to appear more "hi-so", enhance their self-confidence, maintain their man's loyalty, and obtain better career opportunities (Cuny & Opaswongkarn, 2017). Many of these beliefs stemmed from the transnational movements of wealthier urban elites from China, who had much lighter skin tones than the Indigenous Thais. Moreover, darker skin tones became associated with being "unhygienic" and less "intelligent" (Bettache, 2020, p. 1132). Yet even in the present day, many individuals—including those born in the United States (Krishen et al., 2014)—continue to desire a lighter skin tone in the belief that it affords them increased opportunities and social standing, regardless of their geographical location (Assawavichairoj & Taghian, 2017; Chia et al., 2015).

Skin tone and perceived beauty standards

One of the results of colorism is that a light skin tone is now an established beauty standard in many parts of the world (Chia et al., 2015; Hussein, 2010; Krishen et al., 2014; Morris, 2014). However, in some Western contexts, a desire for darker or tanned skin among Caucasians has emerged. This trend is said to be indicative of a higher socio-economic status that is realized through increased leisure time, travel, and attention to one's aesthetics (Bettache, 2020).

Conversely, some darker-skinned African Americans show a desire for a lighter skin tone in the belief that they would be more confident, beautiful (Maxwell et al., 2014), and attractive to the opposite sex (Choma & Prusaczyk, 2018). Indeed, Rudder (2014) and Watson et al. (2010) note how American males show a preference for lighter-skinned females in print media and an online dating site, respectively.

In Asia, as Yip et al. (2019) argue, the preference for whiter skin is based on economic and political developments, and this preference is mirrored by a regional skincare industry that generates billions of dollars. Skin whitening, in combination with cosmetic surgery to avoid distinct Asian facial features (i.e., a growing trend for pointy noses, double eyelids, and almond-shaped eyes) has even led to a new beauty standard. Known as the *Pan-Asian ideal,* this emerging trend "acts to homogenize racial difference within the region and reinforces superiority of Northeast Asia over Southeast Asia" (Yip et al., 2019, p. 74).

Nevertheless, despite this recent drive to index a globalised, cosmopolitan look, lighter skin is still the alpha and omega of status and beauty in many Asian countries. Indeed, in Thailand, lighter skin is not merely a personal choice but is influenced by historical, economic, and media portrayals that valorize whiteness (Phakdeephasook, 2009), For instance, Rongmuang et al. (2011) found that young women in Thailand often internalize whiteness as a major component of beauty ideals, leading to a collective perception that darker skin is unattractive and associated with lower socio-economic status. This is echoed by Franco and Roach (2023), who empirically demonstrate that colorism significantly impacts the skin whitening industry in Thailand, revealing a societal bias that favors lighter skin tones across different demographic groups, and Peltzer et al. (2016), who surveyed 718 Thai students, and found that an 89.1% of female and 69.5% of male respondents reported using skin-lightening (or bleaching) products in the previous 12 months.

Given such findings, it is perhaps no surprise that Thailand's consumption of skin-whitening products was among the highest in the world in 2022 (Global Industry Analysts, 2022); the psychological ramifications of this are profound. Cuny and Opaswongkarn (2017), for example, explored the motivations behind the desire for white skin among young Thai women, revealing that both conscious and non-conscious factors drive this preference, which is often reinforced by advertising and peer influences. Similarly, Käng (2021) discussed how beauty is perceived as a form of social capital in Thailand, where women feel pressured to conform to these ideals to achieve social acceptance and personal satisfaction. This pressure is compounded by globalization and the influx of Western beauty standards, which further complicate local beauty narratives in the region (Jennings et al., 2006).

Moreover, the impact of these beauty ideals extends beyond individual self-esteem; it can lead to disordered eating behaviors and mental health issues among young women. Research by Poompruek et al. (2014), for example, highlights how societal expectations regarding beauty can contribute to body dissatisfaction and unhealthy behaviors, particularly among marginalized groups such as *kathoeis* (transgender women). Assawavichairoj and Taghian (2017), on the other hand, note that Thai women often navigate the tension between self-expression and societal expectations through appearance management practices.

Overall, research surrounding colorism in Thailand reveals a complex interplay between cultural ideals, psychological impacts, and social dynamics. This body of work has highlighted the pervasive influence of skin color on social beliefs and personal identities among Thai women, particularly in urban settings like Bangkok. The idealization of lighter skin tones also has significant psychological and social implications for those with darker skin tones.

Skin tone and media portrayals

Cosmetic companies have long understood socio-culturally driven desires for a lighter skin tone and have consistently taken advantage of them for profit (Lewis et al., 2011). Chia et al. (2015), for example, found that women in Singapore developed favorable attitudes towards lighter skin tones and had the intention to lighten their skin after exposure to skin-whitening advertisements. Likewise, Ka (2007) revealed that Chinese women's intentions to purchase skin-whitening products were associated with skin-whitening advertisements that created the "ideology of whiteness as beauty" (p. 150). Xie and Zhang (2013), meanwhile, found that Chinese and American Vogue Magazines consistently presented models that aligned with readers' preferences for lighter-skinned individuals. Other research has repeatedly shown that in Asian versions of magazines, Caucasian models tend to have a light skin tone (Bissell & Chung, 2009; Morris, 2014), while in Western magazines, Caucasian models are more likely to have a tanned or darker skin tone (Lewis et al., 2011; Mbure & Aubrey, 2017; Morris, 2014).

Unfortunately, it has also been commonplace for Asian advertisements to portray the presence of dark skin as unwanted, distasteful, or even psychologically damaging (Glenn, 2008; Hussein, 2010; Rondilla, 2009). In a now infamous case in Thailand, for instance, Seoul Secret advertised the benefits of their skin whitening product by presenting darker skin as "ugly or unsuccessful" (Slutskiy & Hamilton, 2017, p. 65). Such a bifurcation of skin tones in advertising is problematic because it enables and perpetuates an "us" versus "them" divide, as well as ignoring the wide spectrum of skin tones within and across countries. In the West, this divide is based on racial comparisons between Whites and People of Color (Davies, 2018; Hall, 2023), whereas in the East, this divide is mainly premised on differences between people of North Asia (Japan, South Korea, and China) and Southeast/South Asia (e.g., Cambodians, Indonesians, Thais, Indians, etc.) (Bettache, 2020; Glenn, 2009). In Thailand specifically, this divide is further complicated by regional and class-based hierarchies, where lighter-skinned individuals from Bangkok are often valorized more than equally light-skinned individuals from rural or southern regions (Bettache, 2020; Franco & Roach, 2023). Overall, however, despite the valuable findings from these studies and others, there are number of limitations regarding research into colorism and media, especially social media on a global scale.

First, studies on self-identification primarily focus on how the internet and social media help reconstruct and represent the identities of People of Color, specifically through internet homepages and Twitter posts (e.g., Olayinka et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2018; Stokes, 2007; Webb & Robinson, 2017). Published research into other popular platforms, such as YouTube or Instagram, seems to be lacking (cf. Childs, 2022; Webb & Robinson, 2017). Second, studies on the presence of skin tone in the media, especially advertisements, have mostly explored people's perceptions toward darker skin tones, and such studies are primarily done in Western

contexts (see Davis, 2018; Dixon & Telles, 2017; Hall, 2023). Third, studies on colorism and advertising have mostly focused on people's attitudes toward skin tone represented in print and broadcast media (Chia et al., 2015; Ka, 2007; Krishen et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2010; Xie & Zhang, 2013). Finally, to the best of our knowledge, no study has explored the discourse of skincare in the Thai language, despite Thai people being avid consumers of skin whitening products. Overall, there is a dearth of research regarding advertising and skin tone on social media, even though online discourse is (a) a powerful means of perpetuating discriminatory discourse (Graumann, 2010), and (b) a "part of our collective cognitive infrastructure" (Owens, 2015, p. 122). Accordingly, the present seeks to explore discourse that could potentially relate to colorism in the video titles and thumbnails of L'Oréal's Thailand and USA YouTube channels.

METHOD

Research context

Our research site was the YouTube channel feeds of L'Oréal Thailand and USA. We focused on L'Oréal because the company tops the list of global beauty brands (Interbrand, 2022) and, in 2021, its sales totaled $31.95 billion US, beating out its nearest rival (Unilever) by $9.78 billion US (L'Oréal, 2021). Moreover, L'Oréal's skin-related products, especially skincare and protection, accounted for 41.8% of their revenue in 2021 (L'Oréal, 2021)—highlighting the importance of these product lines in a skin-lightening market that is predicted to hit $12.6 billion US by 2027 (Global Industry Analysts, 2022). We chose these two channels because Thailand and the USA are two of L'Oréal's biggest grossing markets for skincare products.

We chose thumbnails and titles from YouTube videos because they serve as the primary point of engagement for viewers, encapsulating the key visual and textual elements used to attract attention and communicate central messages. Cosmetic companies also carefully craft thumbnails and titles to summarize the most important aspects of their products, which often involve aesthetic or functional benefits. Given that our study aims to explore visual and linguistic discourses related to colorism, this concentrated form of communication provides valuable insights into how L'Oréal markets its skincare products across different cultural contexts. Furthermore, YouTube is a dominant platform for video advertising, making it an ideal source for examining cross-cultural marketing strategies. Analyzing full video content or using data from other platforms would significantly broaden the scope of the study and detract from the focused examination of the representations in these critical components of digital advertising.

Data collection and preparation

The total number of videos on L'Oréal's USA and Thailand YouTube channels in December of 2022 was 513 and 499, respectively. Using the search terms, "skin" and "ผิว" [= *skin*], we purposively sampled the top 220 results that came back on each channel. This resulted in a sample of 440 thumbnails and 440 video titles (2,001 English words for the USA sample; 2,591 words for the Thailand sample [2,230 of which were written in Thai script]).

We copied and pasted each video thumbnail (jpeg image) and title (plain text) into an MS Excel spreadsheet. Accompanying images and titles were placed on the same row so that we could cross-reference their contents. We manually checked each title for completeness and inconsistencies in spelling (e.g., L'Oréal was written as L'Oreal and L Oreal in English, thus we changed all instances to L'Oréal). Thai titles were translated into English by the first researcher, who is a native Thai speaker. Translations were checked for accuracy during the intercoder procedure (outlined below).

Data coding and analysis

To explore skincare discourse in video titles, we used a three-step process. First, we used keyword analysis to identify the most frequent themes in the titles and used a log-likelihood (LL) statistic (Pojanapunya & Watson Todd, 2018) to generate a keyword list in AntConc (Anthony, 2019). Second, we used collocation and concordance analyses to explore the most common usage of the keywords. Third, using inductive content analysis as a shared method, we manually coded the titles for the presence of words related to (a) skin color change or maintenance, (b) promotion of lighter or darker skin tones, and (c) implicit and explicit evaluations of skin tone, as illustrated in Figure 1.

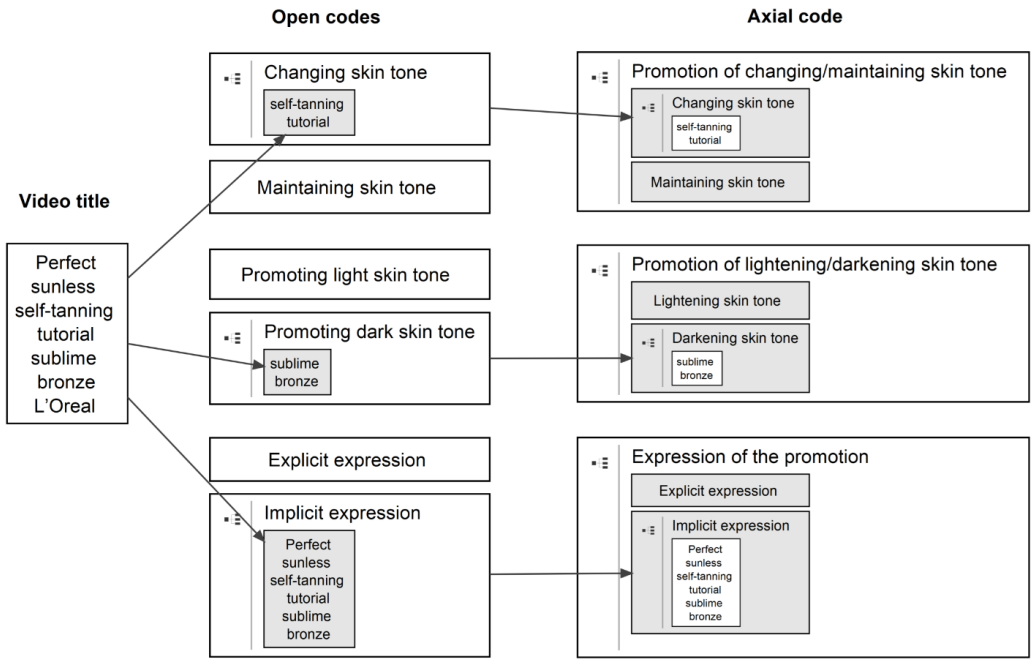


Figure 1 Coding of "Perfect Sunless Self-Tanning Tutorial Sublime Bronze L'Oréal"

Inductive content analysis is a qualitative research method where patterns, themes, or categories emerge from the data, rather than being imposed a priori by the researcher. It allows for a more flexible exploration of data, particularly when the goal is to identify new or unexpected patterns, as is the case in our study of the implicit and explicit messaging in skincare advertisements across different cultures. Moreover, this method is especially useful

when dealing with complex, context-sensitive topics like colorism, where preconceived categories may not fully capture the nuances of the discourse.

We also used inductive content analysis to explore skincare discourse in the video thumbnails. This resulted in several sub-themes (open codes) and six main themes (axial codes) that were relatable to our research questions. This process is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows a typical thumbnail from the Thailand sample (we have edited the original to avoid copyright issues. The original showed trademarked names and a different model).

Open code	Axial code
1. Wrinkle reduction	Product benefit
2. Female	Presenter's sex
3. Light, pale white skin	Presenter's skin tone
4. Show the result	How to attract viewer
5. Rivatalift cream	Skin-related product

Figure 2 Coding of a Video Thumbnail Using Inductive Content Analysis
(Image of woman from Pixnio.com [Anon, 2023, CC0 1.0 Universal])

To ensure validity in our coding of both text and images, we randomly selected 20% of the data for independent coding by a third researcher, who is a Thai speaker and is trained in multimodal discourse analysis. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa. Results showed an almost perfect agreement in both USA, $\kappa = 0.942$ ($p < .001$), 95% CI (0.907, 0.976) and Thailand datasets, $\kappa = 0.977$ ($p < .001$), 95% CI (0.939, 1.016).

Following the coding of the data, we made frequency counts for within and between channel comparisons. This allowed us to identify the most frequent words, collocations, and themes, as well as explore any resultant patterns in the discourse through a qualitative lens.

RESULTS

Discourse of skincare in YouTube video titles: USA versus Thailand

To explore skincare discourse in video titles, we used keyword, collocation, concordance, and content analyses.

Keyword analysis

For the keyword analysis, we identified 30 keywords (LL ≥ 15.13, p < 0.0001) across the 440 titles. Excluding L'Oréal, the top ten keywords were "tutorial" (LL = 55.8), "UV" (29.56), "pure" (26.71), "color" (25.70), "men" (24.47), "essence" (22.43), "matte" (21.68), "Revitalift" (20.82), "age" (20.42), and "sunscreen" (20.39). Table 1 shows the top ten most frequent words in each dataset.

Table 1

Frequency and frequency dispersion of the top ten words in each corpus

USA video titles			Thailand video titles		
Word	*f*	Disp.	Word	*f*	Disp.
1. makeup	37	2.50	1. รีไวทัลลิฟท์ (Revitalift)	53	2.12
2. serum	36	2.65	2. เซรั่ม (serum)	41	2.54
3. tutorial	30	2.64	3. ใหม่ (new)	36	2.50
4. pure,	25	2.95,	4. เมคอัพ (makeup)	34	2.58
color	25	4.23	5. ริ้วรอย (wrinkles)	26	2.80
5. acid	20	3.47	6. กันแดด (sunscreen)	22	3.09
6. age	19	4.00	โปร (pro)	22	3.34
7. perfect	18	3.80	7. เอสเซนส์ (essence)	20	3.58
8. hyaluronic	16	4.12	8. เรตินอล (retinol)	19	3.52
9. riche	14	3.85	9. ยูวี (UV)	18	3.57
10. retinol	13	4.13	10. คริสตัล (crystal)	17	4.33

As shown in Table 1, only three words appeared in the top ten of both datasets: "makeup", "serum", and "retinol". To further tease apart any differences between the keywords in each channel, we followed Brezina's (2018) keyword analysis procedure; this enabled us to identify positive and negative keywords. To clarify, if a word is used more often in a corpus of interest than in a reference corpus, it is a positive keyword (+); if a word is used less in the corpus of interest than in the reference corpus, it is a negative keyword (-). The top ten positive/negative keywords for each channel's video titles are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Positive and negative keywords in video titles

	Thailand corpus versus USA corpus		USA corpus versus Thailand corpus	
	Positive keywords	Negative keywords	Positive keywords	Negative keywords
1.	UV	night	tutorial	help
2.	men	application	pure	oily
3.	matte	apply	color	bible
4.	essence	daughter	age	pink)
5.	sunscreen	dermatologists	bronze	upgraded
6.	Revitalift	fight	real	bright
7.	skin	inspirations	artist	young
8.	new	renewal	review	day
9.	expert	top	sublime	control
10.	crystal	full	riche	formula

As shown in Table 2, there are several key differences between the two channels. First, the Thailand channel has a positive affiliation for products tied to sunscreen, UV protection, and skin hydration (i.e., Revitalift, essence, and new). The USA channel, on the other hand, has a positive affiliation for self-tanning products (bronze + sublime) and reviews/tutorials focusing on makeup (color + real + artist). The negative keywords, meanwhile, primarily show a difference between the application of products (negative presence on the Thailand channel) and the aesthetic benefits of products (negative presence on USA channel).

Collocation and concordance analyses

For the collocation and concordance analyses, we removed any duplicate keywords, leaving 21 unique words. We then explored collocations for these words using LancsBox.

In the Thailand video titles, proper nouns or nouns functioning as classifiers were very frequent. "L'Oréal", for example, strongly collocated with "Paris" (MI 4.14, *f* = 55) and makeup (MI 3.83, *f* = 23) to convey the L'Oréal Paris makeup product line, or it collocated with "UV" (MI = 3.80, *f* = 21) and "perfect" (MI = 3.77, *f* = 22) to convey the "L'Oréal UV Perfect" product. Keywords with similar functions included "Revitalift" (*f* = 53), "essence" (*f* = 20), and "men" (*f* = 14).

Regarding the USA video titles, "L'Oréal" was once again used as a classifier for product names or lines. However, in the USA sample, "gloss" (MI = 6.10, *f* = 6) and "color" (MI = 4.40, *f* = 7) emerged as two previously unseen collocates, where they were used to convey the "Le Color Gloss by L'Oréal Paris" product. Other keywords that were absent in the Thailand corpus, included "tutorial" (*f* = 30), which typically related to makeup tutorials (MI = 4.96, *f* = 38), and "pure" (*f* = 25), which helped promote skin texture through the reduction of wrinkles and fine lines. Another descriptive collocate that was unique to the USA sample was "bronze" (f = 10), which usually collocated with "sublime" (MI = 8.28, *f* = 9) to form the self-tanning product, "Sublime Bronze L'Oréal".

In terms of differences between the use of other keywords, given the focus of our research questions, it seemed apt to explore the keyword "skin" and its collocations. On the Thailand channel, skin and its collocations typically conveyed the benefits of skincare in terms of aesthetics ("look/looks" collocated with skin 32 times). This explicit focus on aesthetic benefits was further evidenced in collocates such as "plump" (*f* = 11; after being hydrated), "clear" (*f* = 11; after being moisturised), "bright" (*f* = 9; after being lightened), or "young" (*f* = 9). Conversely, in the USA sample, collocates of skin made little mention of aesthetic benefits. Instead, they were mainly used as pre- and post-modifiers in product names.

Overall, the concordance and collocational analyses of keywords resulted in several overarching themes. The top three emergent themes in the Thailand video titles were *UV protection* (UV *f* = 31; LL = 31.51), men's skincare (men *f* = 24; LL = 24.40), and *matte makeup products* (matte *f* = 29; LL = 22.55). In the USA video titles, there was a noticeable shift to makeup products such as lip-gloss (a product named *colour riche* was mentioned 24 times) and eyeshadow (*f* = 8; LL = 14.72), which were almost exclusively shown in makeup tutorial videos.

The emergent themes in the USA video titles primarily concerned *tutorials in general* (*f* = 30; LL = 55.21), a focus on "pure" ingredients (*f* = 25; LL = 26.81), and products that explicitly contained or referred to the word color/colour (*f* = 39). A fourth theme of *self-tanning* also emerged (collectively mentioned 18 times), which referred to products that can create a tanned skin tone without the need for UV light.

Content analyses

Using inductive content analysis, we coded video titles for open (sub-theme) and axial codes (major themes) related to our second research question (i.e., the presence of colorism or lack thereof). These results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Frequency counts and percentages of coded themes in video titles

	USA sample		Thailand sample		Difference
Axial codes (Themes)	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f* (%)
Changing skin tone	17	7.73	18	8.18	1
Maintaining skin tone	0	0	5	2.27	5
Promoting lighter skin tones	4	1.82	23	10.45	19
Promoting darker skin tones	15	6.82	3	1.36	12
Explicit expressions	18	8.18	28	12.73	10
Implicit expressions	1	0.45	6	2.73	5

Regarding the themes of "changing skin tone" and "maintaining skin tone", there was little difference between the USA and Thailand samples. However, there was an 8.63% difference between the two in terms of "promoting lighter skin tones" (Thailand = 23; USA = 4) and a 5.46% difference in "promoting darker skin tones" (Thailand = 3; USA = 15).

To tease apart any interactions between themes, we employed cross-tabulation analysis using NVivo. Results showed that in the USA video titles, promoting a change to a darker skin tone was more frequent than promoting a lighter skin tone (15:2). The Thailand video titles, meanwhile, displayed the opposite: They only promoted changes that resulted in lighter skin tones (18:0).

Discourse of skincare in YouTube video thumbnails: USA versus Thailand

To explore the discourse of video thumbnails, we once again used inductive content analysis to identify sub-themes (open codes) and main themes (axial codes), followed by cross-tabulation analysis.

Inductive content analyses

Regarding the presence of wording in the video thumbnails, some words were noticeably more frequent in the Thailand channel thumbnails than the USA channel. Table 4 shows the largest differences for each of the three main themes.

Table 4

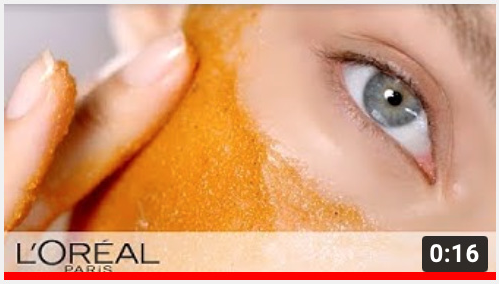
Largest differences between USA and Thailand thumbnails

	USA sample		Thailand sample		Difference
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*
Skin-related products					
Serum	13	1.79	25	2.90	12
Sunscreen	-	-	22	2.55	22
Cream with sunscreen	-	-	12	1.39	12
Cream	1	0.14	10	1.16	9
Lipstick	-	-	8	0.93	8
Foundation	1	0.14	7	0.81	6
Essence	-	-	7	0.81	7
Face cleansing	-	-	7	0.81	7
Highlighter	4	0.55	-	-	4
Scrub	4	0.55	-	-	4
Mascara	3	0.41	-	-	3
Product ingredients					
Retinol	1	0.14	17	1.97	16
Hyaluronic Acid	7	0.96	13	1.51	6
Sugar	3	0.41	-	-	3
Product benefit(s)					
Sun protection	-	-	21	2.43	21
Wrinkle reduction	6	0.83	23	2.67	17
Covering	-	-	6	0.70	6
Brightening	-	-	4	0.46	4

As shown in Table 4, the largest differences related to sunscreen products, the technical names of ingredients, and an explicit focus on product benefits on the Thailand channel.

Concerning images of people shown in thumbnails, both channels showed a clear preference for female presenters—male presenters appeared just 15 times overall. However, the USA thumbnails contained more female presenters than the Thailand thumbnails (*f* = 201 and 162, respectively), which reflected a difference in focus regarding "How to attract viewers". Specifically, in the USA thumbnails, there was an increased presence of "apply product on skin" (USA = 34, Thailand = 3) and "show makeup tutorial" (36:8). In other words, there was a marked preference for showing the product being applied to the skin of the person in the image. Conversely, the Thailand thumbnails more frequently engaged in "show the product" (Thailand = 147, USA = 47) or "show message related to skin tone" (Thailand = 29, USA = 9), which meant that any person shown in a thumbnail did not need to be shown using the product. This key difference between the channels use of thumbnails to attract viewers is shown in Figure 3.

"Apply product to skin" (USA)

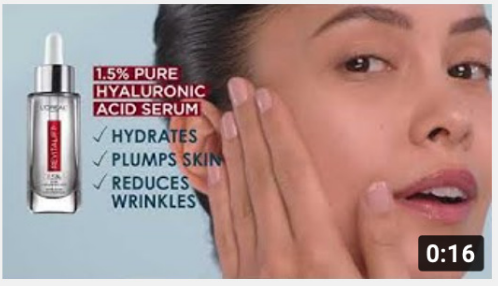


"Show the product" (Thailand)

Figure 3 Key difference between channel's thumbnails regarding "How to attract viewers"

Another difference related to the "presenter's skin tone", most USA presenters had a "medium white to olive" skin tone (*f* = 77), followed by "white, fair" (46), "light brown" (35), "olive" (30), and "dark brown" (20). In contrast, most Thailand presenters had "light, pale white" skin tone (*f* = 101), followed by "medium white to olive" (41) and "white, fair" (35), while darker skin tones were practically non-existent ("dark brown" + "light brown" = 3). This key difference between the presenters' skin tones in each channel's thumbnails is shown in Figure 4.

"Medium white to olive" skin tone (USA)



"Light, pale white" skin tone (Thailand)

Figure 4 Key difference between channel's thumbnails regarding "presenter's skin tone"

Cross-tabulation analysis

As per the analysis of video titles, we used cross-tabulation analysis to explore any potential overlaps between the resultant themes. Two noticeable differences emerged. First, under the theme of *skin-related product*, female presenters in the Thailand thumbnails appeared alongside "serum" (16), "cream with sunscreen" (*f* = 12), "sunscreen" (11), "foundation" (11), and "cream" (6). Interestingly, Thailand presenters, who appeared alongside these words, generally had a "light, pale white" skin tone (*f* = 34). Second, regarding *how to attract viewers*, in the USA thumbnails, images of people were most frequently used to "show make-up tutorial" (36), "apply product on skin" (31), "show the product" (30), and "show the result" (21). Thailand presenters, on the other hand, were far more likely to "show the product" (98), which was often combined with "show the result" (39), and "show message related to skin tone" (24).

DISCUSSION

Skincare discourses: Similarities and differences

Regarding our first research question, which explored the differences between the skincare discourses of L'Oréal's USA and Thailand YouTube channels, results showed several similarities in terms of product lines. First, both channels predominantly focused on products that hydrated dry skin or smoothed out rough skin—these products fought both ageing and the ravages of the environment. Second, both channels heavily relied on pseudoscientific jargon to emphasize the unique and innovative ingredients in L'Oréal's skincare products. Such words included trademarked lexis (e.g., Crystal Micro Essence and Revitalift) and the names of chemicals and vitamins (e.g., Hyaluronic acid and retinol). Both these findings are somewhat unsurprising as it is a well-known tactic for advertisers to (a) create a problem (i.e., the negative effects of ageing and external forces on the skin) and (b) provide a solution through aggrandizing the scientific and innovative ingredients in their products (Jan et al., 2019; Long, 2024).

In terms of differences, the two channels clearly diverged when it came to advertising strategies and the purposes of skincare. Specifically, Thai consumers were projected as caring more about skincare benefits (aesthetics; claims of value) and being influenced by popular actors/models (appeals to celebrity). American consumers, on the other hand, were projected as wanting to know how to use skincare products (empiricism; claim of fact) and putting trust in authorities such as dermatologists (appeals to science). Such a shaping of discourse to suit a different consumer base is a tried-and-tested tactic for cosmetic and pharmaceutical companies (see Krishen et al., 2014). Known as *transcreation* in the advertising profession (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2014), it relies heavily on interdiscursive practices to (re)contextualize core information as companies cross national and cultural boundaries. For example, transcreation was evident in terms of product benefits on each channel: Thai consumers were projected as caring more about "hydrated", "bright", or "protected" skin, which could be achieved by applying "Hyaluronic acid" and "Retinol" based "creams" or "serums". In contrast, the benefits promoted on the USA channel for comparable products primarily concerned skin texture. In this consumer market, the avoidance of wrinkles, rough skin, and large pores were seen by L'Oréal as the ultimate goal. Such findings are echoed by Ruanguttamanun (2023), who argues that while both cultures may prefer similar advertising appeals, the ranking and emphasis differ, reflecting the unique cultural priorities of each market.

A second major difference involved the interactions between the people in the thumbnails and the products. Individuals in the USA thumbnails frequently engaged with the viewer by showing them the application of products, where the images typically realized a narrative like function (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). The resulting intimacy/proximity, coupled with the representation of a person doing something with the product, arguably helped L'Oréal to generate a kind of pseudo-livestreaming on the USA thumbnail feed that emulated the practices of real-world influencers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Such a tactic may also help transform the relationship between the viewer and the product into a more sensory and personal one (Gibson, 2020). Conversely, on the Thailand channel, predominantly white-skinned individuals were shown next to or holding the product, realizing a static, conceptual structure

(Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). This static, or relational juxtaposition with or next to the product strongly suggested that the individuals shown in the thumbnails were able to maintain such a pale skin tone due to the use of the product in the frame.

Overall, regarding the study's first research question, the discourses of L'Oréal Paris's USA and Thailand YouTube channels showed several noticeable differences. First, Thai consumers of L'Oréal products were projected as caring more about product benefits, and the producers of L'Oréal's Thailand YouTube channel seem to believe that celebrities can better influence these consumers. Conversely, American consumers were projected as being more functional, and they can be best persuaded by authoritative/expert voices. Nevertheless, there were similarities across the two channels in terms of a focus on the texture of skin and, perhaps unsurprisingly, a penchant for video titles consisting of noun phrases that mainly conveyed product names. As Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014) note, such overlaps in discourse are to be expected when a company transverses national boundaries because they have a core brand identity and range of products to maintain. In other words, through the process of transcreation, which is similar to interdiscursivity, companies like L'Oréal can (re)contextualize principal visual and linguistic information for new audiences/consumers.

Skincare discourses: The presence of colorism

Regarding our second research question, which set out to explore the potential presence of colorism in each channel, one of the more noticeable differences in this regard could be seen in the content of the video thumbnails; notably the distribution of skin tones in the people shown in thumbnail images. In the USA thumbnails there was far more diversity in skin tones, which included medium white to olive, white, fair, olive, light brown, and dark brown skin tones in relatively even numbers. In contrast, 76.84% of the people shown in the Thailand thumbnails possessed skin tones that were on the lighter side of the spectrum (light, pale white + white, fair = 136), which equated with a notable absence of darker skinned presenters (light brown + dark brown = 3).

In terms of skin-related products, the most frequently presented content on both channels related to anti-aging skincare and matte makeup. However, Thai consumers were also projected as caring about UV protection (f = 18), where lighter skin was the goal, and American consumers (or at least some of the American population) were projected as being interested in self-tanners (f = 18), where a more bronzed or glowing skin tone was the goal. On the surface, such findings seem to reflect the different climates in each region; however, on the Thailand channel, UV radiation (or exposure to sunlight) was to be avoided at all costs, and it was rare to see the words "UV", "sun", or "protection" without the word "white", "bright", or "cream" being in the frame/title—there are, of course, certain connotations attached to these words: brighter skin reflects more light and is, thus, often associated with lighter skin tones (see Peiss, 2011), and cream is strongly associated with white or off-white colors. Conversely, on the USA channel, the avoidance of UV light (and the melanin released by it) was more implicit: Self-tanners do not need sunlight to work.

As Vijaya (2019) notes, "the casting of melanin as a kind of abnormality that needs to be contained only serves to accentuate the normalization of whiteness and ingrains darkness as

a deviation from the norm" (p. 235). On the Thailand channel, the complete avoidance of UV light, in combination with images showing predominantly light-skinned individuals, no doubt conveys a message for Thai consumer that dark skin can easily be avoided, and this is problematic for several reasons. First, according to Peltzer et al. (2016), most individuals in Southeast Asia possess a naturally dark intermediate or olive skin tone (18–23 on the human skin tone scale, or type IV on the Fitzpatrick scale). Consequently, for such individuals, a light skin tone can only be achieved through active lightening (or bleaching). Second, given that an estimated 63% of the Thai population live in rural areas (CERD, 2011), and many of these individuals no doubt work outside, perhaps the thumbnails should have been more representative of the demographics of Thailand. Furthermore, it is worth noting that within Thailand, lighter skin is often associated not only with class but also with urban origin, especially Bangkok, whereas darker-skinned individuals from rural or southern regions may face additional stigma—further reinforcing the intersection of colorism with regional and socioeconomic hierarchies (see Bettache, 2020; Franco & Roach, 2023). Third, the primary goal of UV protection should be to avoid skin cancer or premature ageing of the skin. Yet, there was little mention of these harmful effects on either channel.

Turning to the USA sample, while tanning (or the application of a cream that led to the appearance of tanning) was seen as a healthy activity, the products did not explicitly promote a darker skin tone per se, but the acquisition of a healthy "glow" or "bronze" effect. However, the kind of tanning espoused here was not obtainable from natural sunlight, but from the application of a cream that temporarily altered one's skin tone. In essence, while tanned skin has become indicative of travel to warmer climates or increased vacation time among individuals of Caucasian ancestry—both of which index a higher socioeconomic status (Bettache, 2020)—companies like L'Oréal effectively communicate that such aesthetic signifiers of affluence can be replicated through product use, circumventing the need for actual travel or financial investment.

Ultimately, we believe that both sets of findings regarding sunscreen and self-tanning can be linked to consumers' desires to index socioeconomic positions (see Wu et al., 2022), thus both exhibit colorism but in slightly different ways. Fundamentally, skin exposed to sun releases more melanin, which leads to darker skin tones. Over thousands of years, populations exposed to consistently elevated levels of UV exposure develop naturally darker skin tones. In Bangkok, Thailand, which averages 189.83 hours of sunlight per month and has a UV index of around 6.58 (World Weather Online, 2024), darker skin tones have been traditionally linked to indigenous Thai people who have, historically, worked outside (i.e., a lower socioeconomic class); in America, darker skin tones are associated with people of color rather than an indigenous population who have traditionally worked outside, yet "tanned" skin is associated with an expensive economic activity (vacationing to sunnier climates). Consequently, the issue of class and economic capital seems to be a driving force in both USA and Thailand channels when companies like L'Oréal market their sun-related products.

Overall, colorism was more explicit (and frequent) on the Thailand channel, which reflects the deep historical roots of colorism in Thai culture, wherein a darker skin tone is seen as a marker of lower socioeconomic status and white skin is to be desired (Cuny & Opaswongkarn, 2017).

On the other hand, the producers of L'Oréal's USA YouTube channel are careful to avoid notions of whiter skin being more desirable than darker skin; indeed, they focus on how to use skincare products rather the benefits of using skincare products. While some may rightly claim that America has much wider diversity in its population in terms of racial backgrounds, and that Thailand has less diversity in skin phenotypes than America, there is still a wide spectrum of skin tones in Thailand—many of which are seemingly ignored on L'Oréal's Thailand YouTube channel. Ultimately, regardless of the demographics of each country, the fact that colorism is present on either channel is cause for concern.

CONCLUSION

By exploring the discourse of skincare and the potential presence of colorism on two of L'Oréal's YouTube channels, we hope to have contributed to the topic of discriminatory discourse online, as well as to the fields of discourse analysis and the language of advertising. Moreover, by exploring the discourse of skincare across two different contexts, we are the first study to empirically explore the choices that one large cosmetic company makes when presenting comparable products to two different audiences/cultures on YouTube. In this light, our findings have highlighted how one of the biggest multinational companies projects the (assumed) needs of two different consumer markets through variations in language choices and accompanying images.

In terms of empirical findings, both channels projected their consumer base as wanting products that moisturised and hydrated skin and did so primarily with trademarked product names and pseudoscientific jargon. However, on L'Oréal's Thailand channel, a third prominent product, and a discourse associated with it emerged. This discourse focused on skin whitening/lightening and avoiding/eliminating dark skin, mirroring the fact that Thailand has one the highest consumption rates of skin whitening products and treatments in the world (Cuny & Opaswongkarn, 2017; Peltzer et al., 2016). More importantly, though, as Vijaya (2019) argues, by introducing supposedly benign products that contain melanin blockers, and moving away from explicit discourses and products centered on chemically lightening the skin, "poorer consumers and those seeking more tangible results will be pushed toward the harsher bleaching products" (p. 238). Contrastingly, for L'Oréal's USA channel, the third most prominent product centred on self-tanning. We argued that this finding reflects a growing trend in Western societies, where a desire for darker skin tones among Caucasians indexes increased health, vitality, and social standing (Bettache, 2020; Mbure & Aubrey, 2017).

Our second key finding further highlighted how advertising reflects culturally specific demands (see Krishen et al., 2014). Namely, how Thai consumers were projected by L'Oréal as caring more about a product's aesthetic benefits, wherein such benefits were typically espoused by popular actors/models. American consumers, on the other hand, were mostly projected as caring more about a product's application and use, wherein the functionality of products was put forth by experts. In other words, these differences seemingly reflected a drive for aestheticism (Thailand channel) and a drive for functionality (USA channel).

Third, results showed that colorism was more explicit on the Thailand channel, yet it was realized organically by a conflation of presenters' skin tone, the type of skin-related product being promoted, and the use of descriptors when touting the product's benefit(s). Moreover, in terms of the presenters' skin tones, light brown and dark brown tones were almost non-existent in the Thailand channel's thumbnails; this is despite the population of Thailand being made up of 62 ethnic groups, most of which live in the countryside (CERD, 2011). This kind of symbolic annihilation (or rendering of groups as invisible) clearly signifies to Thai society who is important and who is not. Contrastingly, in the USA sample, skin tones were more diverse and seemingly signified a marketing approach based on diversity that is increasingly found in American advertising (Shankar, 2020). Nevertheless, the marked inclusion of self-tanners in the USA thumbnails highlighted that any natural changes to the skin were to be avoided, thus creating demand for a product among lighter-skinned individuals—lightening and tanning, thus, both feed into the hands of cosmetic companies looking to create a product that goes against natural circumstances.

Despite the above contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research sample represented one company and just two of its YouTube channels. Future studies will no doubt want to expand to include more companies, cultures/languages, and social media outlets. Moreover, the data was examined without reference to the attitudes and beliefs of each channel's subscribers/viewers or its creators, and, as argued in the literature review, identifying the presence of colorism on social media is just the first step in assessing social media's impact on colorism. For example, peoples' attitudes and perceptions to how their own skin tone and others are represented through the comment sections on online channels would arguably help us gain more in-depth understandings of the hidden discourses surrounding colorism (an ethnographically oriented mixed-method study would be useful in this respect).

Overall, we hope to have raised awareness of how deep-rooted historical beliefs about skin tones can be perpetuated in implicit and explicit ways in one form of online discourse. Moreover, we hope to have stimulated further interest in understanding how (and why) multinational companies are complicit in the maintenance/expansion of colorism across cultures/languages. Ultimately, based on our examination of one of the largest cosmetic companies on the world, there seems to be evidence that the industry might well be walking a fine line between product-market fit and perpetuating colorism. Consequently, developing a deeper understanding of how these two mechanisms are realized through marketing discourse is of utmost importance, especially if localized or national campaigns against colorism are to be successful.

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