

Representation of Race and Culture: Understanding the Characteristics of Pan Asian Talents in Malaysian Television Commercials

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Abstract

In the recent years, advertisers are increasingly using Pan Asian talents rather than local talents that are considered “pure race” such as Malay, Chinese, and Indian. This is part of a globalized effort in creating a more homogenized market in order for one advertisement to cater to all race and culture. However, globalization may not be the right advertising strategy for Malaysia that consists of diversified society, race and culture. Thus, to understand the representation of race and culture in Malaysian television commercials, this study intends to unravel the justification of advertising practitioners in selecting Pan Asians as talents in the development of television commercials. In-depth interviews were conducted on advertising practitioners in Malaysia. This study dissects on how Pan Asian talents are characterized among advertising practitioners and the reasons that these talents were favoured in television commercials, in relations to the current contemporary society as well as product and brand image. Consequently, the findings of this study have led to further research on talent representations in Malaysian advertisements and provide greater insights for foreign advertising practitioners to understand the trends of television commercials in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Pan Asian talents, Race Representation, Advertising, Malaysia*

Pemaparan Ras dan Budaya: Memahami Ciri-ciri Pemilihan Bakat Pan Asia dalam Iklan Televisyen di Malaysia

Abstrak

Sejak kebelakangan ini, semakin ramai pengiklan mengutamakan bakat Pan Asia daripada bakat tempatan yang dianggap “bangsa murni” seperti Melayu, Cina, dan India. Hal ini merupakan sebahagian daripada usaha global dalam mewujudkan pasaran yang homogen agar sebuah iklan dapat disesuaikan untuk semua bangsa dan budaya. Namun, pendekatan dalam kerangka globalisasi bukanlah strategi pengiklanan yang sesuai untuk konteks di Malaysia yang mempunyai kepelbagaian masyarakat, bangsa dan budaya. Oleh itu, untuk memahami pemaparan bangsa dan budaya dalam iklan televisyen Malaysia, kajian ini bertujuan untuk memahami justifikasi pengiklan dalam memilih bakat berketurunan Pan Asia dalam penghasilan sesebuah iklan televisyen. Temu bual mendalam telah dijalankan terhadap para pengiklan di Malaysia. Kajian ini membincangkan bagaimana bakat Pan Asia dicirikan dalam kalangan pengiklan dan mengenal pasti sebab-sebab bakat ini dipilih untuk terlibat dalam iklan televisyen, terutamanya berkaitan masyarakat kontemporari serta imej produk dan jenama. Dapatan kajian ini telah membuka ruang kepada penyelidikan dan perbincangan yang lebih mendalam mengenai pemaparan bakat dalam iklan di Malaysia dan akan memberikan perspektif yang meluas bagi pengamal iklan asing untuk memahami trend iklan televisyen tempatan.

Kata Kunci: *Bakat Pan Asia, Pemaparan bangsa, Periklanan, Malaysia*

Introduction

Most people wonder whether the advertising industry is going to sink or swim due to the economics of the changing marketplace. However, shifting into the digital era does not sink the industry, but whoever is able to adapt to the revolution will survive this competitive sea. Since the emergence of new media, the exponential growth of technology has led to the conveying of information across the world. This revolution has

brought media to a global village (McLuhan, 1964) where we can see the consequences of how globalization and technology contribute to the extending of culture and lifestyle as well as how message and idea is carried across the medium in shaping and influencing the society. Martin (2014) saw this phenomenon as though consumers drank from a common well of popular culture. Media itself is a cultural institution and with this shared world, globalized advertising has become a trend with the intense rise of cross border consumers that brings about the global culture. Global culture does not indicate a converged or centralized society where it is entirely homogenous. But it has become more diversified and complex instead as the notion of cultural imperialism is shifting to the market-oriented media model that is accompanied by rapid growth of multicultural population. Therefore, the process of running advertising campaigns is becoming more challenging, especially pertaining to the representation of race and culture in this multicultural landscape – internationally, regionally or locally.

Today, with the expansion of media channels, new media has shown the expansion of cultural institution due to the growing of contemporary culture or cultural shift. Race and cultural identity are represented in this cultural institution. This phenomenon is common in the Asian countries, where there is an interconnection of culture and racial groups. In the Malaysian context, the representation of race and culture in advertisement should not be taken lightly as it plays an integral role for the advertisements to become relevant and congruent with the target consumers. According to Belch and Belch (2019), advertising is any paid form of non-personal communication about an organization, product or service by an identified sponsor that helps to promote and position brands or products into the consumers' minds to persuade them and change their purchasing behavior (O'Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2018). Thus, creating advertisements that are relevant to the target consumer will further help it to be effective in persuading the consumers. Past research has also shown that advertising is more effective when the content or message is congruent to the cultural values and ethnicity of the targeted consumers (Gauthier et al., 2020; Haryadi Arief, 2019).

In conceptualizing an advertisement, advertisers are always faced with a dilemma regarding whether to globalize or localize their advertising strategy. The transnational and digital technology today has made advertisements to become more globalized. When globalized advertising takes place, advertisers must consider a form of standardization to cater for multiple markets, whether regionally or globally. According to Frith (2003, p. 41), globalized advertising strategy has become a trend among advertisers, where “multinational advertisers run a single advertising campaign that is translated into different languages”. Moreover, foreign culture is also injected into the extent where homogeneity takes place, leading towards cultural globalization (Frith, 2003). This unplanned and unexpected development in the content industry has the potential to generate inappropriate information and spread material regarded as pleasurable consumption that impacts the value, social norms and lifestyle of the consumers (Samsudin & Latiffah, 2010).

In specific, cultural globalization helps to offer global culture with a homogenous market where consumers are segregated into two cultural channels such as local and global. As a result, other than utilizing the local talents consisting of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Bumiputra, the Malaysian advertising industry prefers to utilize Pan Asian talents in one single advertising campaign as a form of standardization to accommodate multiple markets (Locke, 2014). According to Frith, Shaw and Cheng (2005), Pan Asian is characterized as mixed race of an indeterminate racial type. For example, a Pan Asian person is usually partly Caucasian with some Asian features such as Malay, Indian and Chinese. In other words, Pan Asian can be noted as a person who has mixed genes of Western (Caucasian) and Asian.

Transnational movement, settlement and migration has probably brought this Pan Asian phenomenon and influence the representation of race and culture by the media industry. As Malaysia was once under the British colonization, migration and globalization, these situations has led to inter-race marriage and the cause of Pan Asian existence in Malaysia. Despite of how Pan Asian is defined as, what matters more is how the Pan Asian race are perceived by advertisers and how they are being represented through advertising content. The labelling of talents

affects the perceptions towards social class that is judged merely on an individual's race. However, it must be understood that a homogenous world does not mean everyone share the same race and culture.

Literature Review

Race and Cultural Representation in Malaysian Media

Advertising offers an opportunity to investigate how race and identity is constructed across culture despite race is known as a sensitive subject to be represented. The treatment of representing Malay, Chinese and Indian in television commercials such as creating separate advertisements might be perceived as outdated and set a drawback to the audience. Hence, using Pan Asian talents can be another form of representation into projecting a colorful and globalized Malaysia. In the past, the focus has been on ethnic marketing where advertisements were segmented for different race such as Malays, Chinese and Indians (Hassan & Jaamat, 2000; Muhammad Mohsin & Ernest, 2012). But the challenge today is to appeal to the Malaysians as a whole and each of the race in the nation.

At the same time, the usage of Pan Asian talents by the media has faced several struggles from the government. In June 2007, the Malaysian Local Broadcasting Act has enforced a legislation to ban Pan Asian models from the broadcasting industry including advertisements in Malaysia under the auspices of the Department of Information and the Department of Cultures, Arts and Heritage (Daphne, 2010; Baradan, 2007). According to Hassan and Jaamat (2000), the ban of multicultural Asian faces allowed only 20% of foreign footages because they do not represent the Malaysian demographics and created a beauty standard that is unfeasible (Frith, 2003). Nevertheless, despite the ban and reaction, Pan Asian talents are still widely utilized in the Malaysian TV commercials.

Representation of Race and Brand Image

According to Franzen and Bouwman (2001), brands are important for consumers to decipher the emotional and functional values in their minds efficiently. The brand image of the organization or product are then engraved into the consumers' minds, leading to purchase intentions and actual purchasing (Franzen & Bouwman, 2001). Specifically, brand image

is the perceptions about a brand that is held in the consumer's memory for further brand associations (Keller, 1993; Martinez & Chernatony, 2004). On another note, according to Biel (1992), brand image has three dimensions which are corporate, social and product image. Particularly, corporate image is the consumer's perception on the producer of the product or service (Biel, 1992). Social image is the acceptance of the society towards the brand and what the brand stands for (Biel, 1992). Lastly, product image is the perception that is associated with the product or service (Biel, 1992). From there, relationships are then formed between the perceived personalities of the brand with consumers' personality and lifestyle. Hence, brand image is the association or congruency between the brand and its consumers that helps consumers to identify the brand uniqueness and compare it to the competitors (Biel, 1992).

Particularly, brand associations are categorized as two kinds of attributes, including hard (tangible and functional attributes) and soft (emotional attributes) (Keller, 1993). These attributes help in forming a strong affection and congruency between the consumer and the brand, influencing their purchase decision and brand loyalty. Brand associations explores on the desired positioning, personality attributes, benefits and attitude that are formed due to the brand image (Keller, 1993). Thus, for a brand to ensure that their products or services are relevant to the consumers, brands are forming race associations to build their image by employing certain talents that possess the same race and culture in their commercials.

Racial identity is seen as a form of commercialization that commodifies human's feeling and emotions. This can also be seen in political strategies where race cards are utilized in elections and ideologies towards citizens. According to Obama (2008) as cited by Ana (2015), race and emotions are materialist explanation for how emotions can strongly establish ethnic and racial identities in a multicultural and capitalist society. Similar to this notion, the marketing strategies for a brand is the same as any political game. According to King (2015), consumer capitalism today has moved beyond race by embracing principles of color-blindness and beyond multiculturalism. Talents in advertising are used as a representation of a brand image in creating a story that could touch consumer's emotions

and to ensure that their image and identity resonate with their consumers.

Race Representation in Malaysian Advertising

Colonization of Western in developing countries has made its market more complicated in terms of racial attitudes because Western has institutionalized and dominated the global racial hierarchy (Gao, Xu & Joe, 2013). The history of colonization in developing countries by the Western colonization has normalized the idea of Western “superiority” and non-Western “inferiority” to portray western or non-western (Gao, Xu & Joe, 2013). Malaysia is also undergoing the same situation as it was a British colonial country, consisting of multiple race and culture, where Pan Asians are used in the advertisements and commercials.

However, globalizing advertising by using Pan Asian talents can lead to disregarding localization, propelling a biased landscape towards local talents. Moreover, talents with Pan Asian look seems to garner greater demands for higher fees. Talent fees for Pan Asian talents have higher numbers for their contract duration, media usage, roles, shooting hours and more as they are perceived of higher class or known as “A-listed”. Similarly, in Singapore and Taiwan, Cheng et al. (2005) implied female Caucasian models are more frequently exposed in magazines than Chinese models in the countries, 65% (Singapore) and 47% (Taiwan). The overused of Caucasian models are due to the hegemony towards “whiteness” and cultural imperialism. This inequality and social status by how race representation are solely based on appearance should be relooked into, as it can create race discrimination and inequality.

Gabriel (2015) illustrates race in the Gramscian sense, that race is a key ‘site of struggle’ over meaning, where it is always a contestation arena because the meaning of race is unfixed, and hegemony is known as the primary factor of social change. The meaning of race is always contested, reinterpreted, and negotiated according to context and people’s desire. This happens in the advertising industry where clients hold hegemonic power including the selection of talents and how they interpret them (Gabriel, 2015). Clients and advertising agencies, being a non-state hegemonic actor, interpret race of talents merely based on looks and appearance rather than their identity (Gabriel, 2015). Due to this, it has

a great potential to create a misperception and false idea of social class and race subordination rather than promoting a multicultural nation where all forms of race are equal. This also complicates the construction of race and cultural identity in the contemporary society especially in Malaysia.

The advertisements in Malaysia are mostly inclined towards reflecting the race and lifestyle of Malaysians. For example, this advertising approach can be seen in the late Yasmin Ahmad's advertisements. In her advertisements, the Malay, Chinese and Indians culture blend in and live together as a whole, respecting each other while upholding their own culture and traditions. One example of her advertisement was in 2007, that promotes classless, racial unity titled *Tan Hong Ming in Love*. This treatment of representing Malay, Chinese and Indian in television commercials might seem obsolete and dull to audience, but it also promotes the notion of going beyond multiculturalism that is cosmopolitanism that encourages humanism. This might be a possibility of why client and advertisers avoid representing Malay, Chinese and Indian in their television commercials, naturalizing the talents with Pan Asian look.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

In 2014, Martinez conceptualized the Critical Race Theory (CRT) that brings together issues of race, power and racism to situate the liberal notion of color blindness and argues that when we disregard racial differences, it perpetuates and retain the status quo with its extensively institutionalized injustice towards racial minorities. The theory provides perspectives to important conversations on dominant ideology and its impacts towards the society, institutions, and humankind (Martinez, 2014). This paper adopts the four themes outlined in CRT. In the first theme, the notion of racism is seen as a deep-rooted feature, accustomed and natural to a person that is almost unrecognizable (Delgadi, Richard & Stefancic, 2000; Martinez 2014) and grouped together in the social order and has become invisible to people in culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The notion of "racism" is defined as an act of violence or discrimination towards individuals of color (Bonilla-Selva, 2006; Martinez, 2014). The second theme of CRT resides in its commitment to the centrality of experiential knowledge through narrative (Martinez, 2014). This explains

how people have experiential knowledge having to live under racism and developed a coping mechanism. By interviewing, stories related to practice, structures, and systems of racism, mainly in the selection of talents in advertising are shared by advertisers to provide a critical reflection.

The third theme of CRT explores social construction that holds race as products of coaxial thoughts and relations (Martinez, 2014). Race is the categories of the invention by the society, manipulates or retires when convenient. In specific, this theme is to challenge the dominant asserts of race neutrality, fairness in opportunity, color blindness and merit. This phase questions the dominant ideology where advertisers or practitioners act as the dominant in this research. The notion of racialized ideological acts as a camouflage for the power, privilege, and self-interest of dominant groups (Martinez, 2014). The dominants will only encourage racial advances when such advance provides self-interests and benefits. Lastly, CRT looks at how dominants contribute in differential racialization. It values the interdisciplinary approach, where the informants not only act as dominant but also the non-dominant that provides counter-story (Martinez, 2014).

Precisely, CRT looks at the means of reconstructing racial hierarchies to benefit the cultural production and advertising is seen as a part of an enterprise that racialize at its core and inception (Martinez, 2014). The representation of race and identity includes issue of racism. Malaysia fits into the features of the themes mentioned, as a multiracial country that was under the British colonization. Media production specifically advertising is seen as a part of capitalism, an enterprise that racialize at its core and inception. The representation of race and identity includes the issue of “racism”.

Selection of talents by advertiser in a multiracial market in Malaysia has remained unquestioned, situated with the ongoing inequitable by the norm and hegemony. It appears normal to consumers and advertisers (dominants) as people are associated to brand's image by upholding social norms. Thus, this issue is crucial to look into because the desire of advertising in enhancing and upholding the stereotypes and perceptions

of people that has the potential to inject unconscious discrimination. Therefore, by integrating CRT into this research, it explores in the Malaysian context rather than the Western society in order to challenge the mainstream notion and express the viewpoints on the subject matter. Moreover, the CRT could be improved by exploring how advertising serves as a cultural apparatus and to what extent it helps to reconstruct and reinterpret the cultural and identity representation in the Malaysian context.

Multiculturalism

Diversity is usually accompanied by equity for groups and individuals to reach mutual accommodation in a diverse concurrent society in respect to religion, ethnicity, culture, race, sexual orientation and gender (Berry, 2016). In specific, the ethno cultural diversity consists of three distinctive meaning. First, most societies around the world are now diverse. Second, multiculturalism is an ideology where individuals and groups uphold views and belief about their acceptance or rejection of this diversity (Berry, 2016). Third, it is the articulation of programs and public policies created by the state with respect to accepting diversity (Berry, 2016). The scholar also connoted cultural diversity has associations with intercultural relations where high diversity society has greater preference of integration as evidenced by young people's joint orientation to heritage, culture, and national society.

Berry (2016) implied most countries including Asia and Africa accommodate among the most diverse nations. Similar notion was stated by Hall (2000) as cited by Buron (2002), claiming that multiculturalism has become progressively crucial in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, New Zealand, Malaysia, Australia, Sri Lanka, and South Africa. In Malaysia, the country is culturally diverse due to its history and origins that is nestled among Southeast Asian countries. Thus, there is a possibility Malaysians are interested in preserving one's rooted culture while in daily interaction with other groups. For instance, the emergence of Pan Asians is the consequence of interethnic and inter-race relations. .

Cultural diversity brings both benefits and challenges at the institutional and organizational settings as it leads to greater conflict and competitive advantages (Berry, 2016). This can be justified by looking at advertising, how it accommodates and manages race and cultural representation. Intercultural ideologies were introduced to promote intergroup harmony, covering color blindness, neglecting cultural differences, and regarded to be unimportant in association to the basic humanity. This is where cultural differences are acknowledged and celebrated as a national resource. Lastly, the ideology also explained assimilation that aims to reduce or eliminate cultural differences (Berry, 2016).

Burton (2002) discussed several types of multicultural orientations and among the types of multiculturalism that could relate to this framework is the commercial multiculturalism. Commercial multiculturalism presumes if diversity of individuals from varied communities is determined in the marketplace, problems and issues of cultural difference could be resolved. It can further promote diversified cultural marketing strategies that cater the needs of varied cultural groups without affecting the nature of society. The elements of critical multicultural marketing theory also explore themes like demystifying multicultural categorization, questioning the fallacy of homogenous identity and interrogating the concept of whiteness. These elements serve as a notion to this paper questioning what form of multicultural marketing fits in Malaysia, whether different marketing approach is needed for different cultural groups, how race and culture is interpreted and viewed, the purpose it serves, and relations of whiteness concept in consumer's perception and brand image. However, Boykiv (2016) also mentioned the challenge to a multicultural marketing are some clients fail to visualize in a multicultural angle and the importance of diversity in marketing in their product offerings.

By looking at CRT and multicultural marketing, this adoption serves as a guideline in exploring representation of Pan Asian talents by advertising practitioners. These theories work hand in hand to discover any form of racism because a multicultural market requires diversity and equitable participation. This helps to facilitate a deeper understanding on how multicultural marketing works by putting race as a center of analysis. In order to explore the usage of Pan Asian in relation to brands, it is

important to always relate on how advertising works, which is reflecting on the society and by letting consumers see their own stories in advertising. Henceforth, this study seeks to understand whether Pan Asian talents is representing a global culture or a “naturalized” race in a multiracial society. Lastly, this study also aims to explore how the use of Pan Asian talents in TV commercials contribute to building a brand image.

Methodology

This study utilized the qualitative approach to gain the underlying knowledge and reasons towards a certain phenomenon that is usually grounded in human experiences (Sandelowski, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017). A total of 10 interviews (n=10) were conducted with advertising practitioners who hold various positions such as agency producer, creative director, art director, and account servicing (See Table 1). The informants were chosen because they have met this study’s sampling criteria, which include (1) at least five years of working experience in advertising industry, (2) involved in the television commercials production, and (3) handled at least five different accounts or clients. These informants also came from different creative and advertising agencies, working with different range of product range including airlines, fashion, smartphones, telecommunication, services (i.e., banks and insurance), Fast-moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and more. Most informants were from Klang Valley. Although 10 informants are not the minimum sampling number in qualitative research (Latham, 2019), but the data has met saturation and no new major concepts have emerged among the informants.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of informants

Demographic Characteristics	
Gender	
Male	3 informants (11, 16, 17)
Female	7 informants (12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 110)
Ethnicity	
Malay	1 informant (11)
Chinese	7 informants (12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 110)
Indian	2 informants (16, 18)
Position	
Creative Director	3 informants (11, 16, 19)
Art Director	1 informant (17)
Agency Producer	2 informants (13, 110)
Senior Account Executive	4 informants (12, 14, 15, 18)
TOTAL	10

An interview protocol was developed to maintain consistency and reliability of the findings. The data collected were analyzed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that focus on identifying and reporting themes (patterns of shared meaning) that are common from extensive interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). In specific, thematic analysis helps to find “recurrent and distinctive features of participants’ accounts, characterizing particular perceptions and/or experiences” to achieve the research objective (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2019, p. 200).

Findings and Discussions

Investigating how Pan Asian talents is characterized by advertising practitioners has led the research in understanding the reasons to Pan Asian talents are more preferred in television commercials as well as how Pan Asian represents the image of brands. The implications of CRT and multicultural marketing framework has served to identify how race is being represented in relations to a brand’s image in a multicultural market. Particularly, by placing race in the center of the analysis. A discussion of these implications to support and contribute in the literature and current marketing strategy follows.

1. Characteristics of Pan Asian talents in Malaysian television commercials

There were several components of characteristics that were discovered. In particular, advertising practitioners classified Pan Asian talents by physical appearances and values. For physical appearances, the following subthemes were found: ambiguity, Western versus Oriental, mixed-look and beauty standard. Additionally, for values, this study found the subtheme, aspirational.

Ambiguity

Findings summarized the characteristics of Pan Asian talents as someone whose appearance is ambiguous to the point that their race is unidentifiable. In the Malaysian context, these talents do not offer any specific representation of race such as Malay, Chinese, Indian or others. Moreover, due to their ambiguous appearance and unidentified outlook, they are also known as having a neutral and generic face.

Informant 6 mentioned,

“[...] the impression of Pan Asian would normally be someone who looks a bit exotic, which is very hard to pinned down [...] this particular look is so generic and fit anywhere [...] there are some talents that look completely Irish but then we used then in ads for Gawai because they can pass on as Kadazan. So, in the sense it is hard to pin down” (I6)

Western versus Oriental

Similar to the statement made by Frith et al. (2005), results found that Pan Asian talent has a distinct but indeterminate Asian look with some Caucasian-looking features but with a more apparent look from the Asian heritage. Additionally, having a neutral and generic appearance and the nature of an Asian oriental feature, Pan Asian can represent the Southeast Asian market with the exceptions of Taiwanese, Japanese, Indian and Korean market. Specifically, practitioners identified these markets as special markets. Informant 9 implied,

“Yes, especially if we were to market to Southeast Asian countries? We try our best to use Pan Asian because at the end of the day, something that has already produced here needs to be used in the regions which is why Pan Asian talent is the best because it answers to the market [...] there are certain situations we cannot do that. For example, India we cannot do that. Taiwan we can't because it is very specific. (I9)

Mixed Look

Mixed races were classified as an indeterminate racial type that are partly Caucasian with some Asian features (Frith et al., 2005). Pan Asian is known as a person with a mixed look and is not necessarily mixed biologically. A person can be identified as a Pan Asian, but the individual's race could not be determined by looking at the appearance per se. Informant 6 explained,

“Some markets prefer a Pan Asian talent that is a bit more Japanese looking, some prefer that look of Portuguese [...] because they realized some of their target audience is also Malay but urban then they go for a Pan Asian talent that could look like Malay mixed. [...] They are quite particular about even with Pan

Asian what kind of Pan Asian. More Caucasian, more oriental or more Portuguese” (16)

Beauty Standard

The uniqueness of Pan Asian proposes a certain extent of beauty standard. For beauty standard, informants characterized Pan Asian talent as how people perceived Westerners as good looking. Practitioners view them as someone with unrealistic beauty, where they are prettier, more handsome and better-looking. This is similar to Rhodes et al. (2005), as the study noted the most attractive face was a mixed-race characteristic. According to informant 1,

“[...] like their commonly held belief or what beauty is to them. [...] it is nicer to look at, more presentable and ease of the eyes”. (11)

The same notion was stated by Informant 2,
“So, I think using Pan Asian faces is meeting some sort of unrealistic beauty standard.” (12)

Aspirational

The second theme of CRT is the “social construction” that holds race as products of coaxial thought and relation. This sub-theme captures how race is constructed by exploring informants’ opinions and perceptions towards the representation of Pan Asian in terms of value by judging on their looks and appearances. Due to the social construct, Pan Asian are deemed as someone who is wealthy, upper class, successful and aspirational. Hence, Pan Asian talent is likely to be preferred especially for brands that pursue the same images. Informant 10 indicated,

“I don’t know how or why but somehow people has this mentality or perception that upper class means Pan Asian look.” (110)

On the other hand, informant 6 asserted,

“[...] She needs to look successful yet contemporary all these things right. So those are not included in the brief somehow the culture of advertising kind of insinuate that it should be there. So, when it comes to creative, we are kind of wrapped up around that [...] so “pan asian”. I think one key reason is aspirational.” (16)

2. Factors to Selection of Pan Asians versus Local Talents

Findings also showed that there are several factors to why practitioners choose Pan Asian talents and among the subthemes found are market, budget and audience preference.

Market

Representing race is always an issue where ethnic marketing is employed by separating advertisements for Malay, Chinese and Indian. And this has undeniably shaped the mindset of consumers as there is this mentality if a brand portrays a Chinese talent, the brand is catered only for the Chinese consumers. Because of that, practitioners believed that using Pan Asian talents is one of the safest approaches to elevate brand image and imposed that the brand is not racist by representing everyone. Informant 5 indicated,

“So, I think for TVCs the reason why they want Pan Asian is because they want to tell people that this product is not directly related to any race but it is for all. [...] so they are the representative of everyone. [...] They have the mass face. The faces of the masses.” (I5).

Similarly, Informant 10 said,

“They know they can’t go wrong using a Pan Asian. It will work whether in or out Malaysia. So, it is a safer route for them.” (I10).

Budget

Focusing on the Malaysian market itself, many brands could not afford producing multiple advertisements due to their budget restrictions. Practitioners assumed representing Pan Asian is one of the best ways to produce an advertisement that can represent all races without causing any backlash or racial issues, yet, cost saving. They perceived that hiring a Pan Asian talent is cheaper than multiple local talents, although the price for Pan Asian talents is higher than local talents.

In certain circumstances, Pan Asian talents could garner well-earned pay if the TV commercial is aired regionally or globally. However, if a Pan Asian talent was in high demand and they could demand for higher pay, they are viewed as big-budget talents while local talents are considered

lower-budget talents. This situation is considered as a form of racial and class subordination when one's pay is estimated by face value, demand and social status.

Although using Pan Asian talents is cost effective and a safer approach to brands, practitioners still think that using local talents especially in localized product is much more effective for a brand. In recent years, agencies are applying more localized strategies where Pan Asian talents will only be preferred when the TV commercial must share asset with other neighboring countries and is not airing only in Malaysia. Thus, agencies are being less dependent on Pan Asian talents in their campaigns. In fact, they are breaking the chain by injecting more local talents or even lesser emphasis on talent's face value.

Audience Preference

Looking at the audience preferences, practitioners assume audience are still stuck in the ideologies that is socially constructed and influenced by the Western media on the representation of whiteness. The mentality where fairer skin is better looking and of higher social class, the assumption that made people become more comfortable with Pan Asian talents. Race is also ranked such as whites or supremacy, the yellow (Latinos and Asians) are in the middle and the blacks at the bottom (Gao, Xu & Joe, 2013). Thus, consumers have a certain expectation on beauty standard and aspirational values that defines what the brands are selling and a fantasy visual of lifestyles they aspire to achieve.

3. Reasons of Pan Asian representation in building brand image

This section delineates on how Pan Asian talents represent the brand image. The results show the representation of Pan Asian in TV commercials could portray the brand image based on international credentials, social class and lifestyle, symbol of diversity versus racism and diversity.

International Credentials

Due to the reason that Pan Asian talents establish good-looking, non-local appearance and higher social status, the image of Pan Asian represents what all brands aspired to be. It also helps in levelling up the

international image of the brand. Similarly, Informant 6 indicated,

“Brand aspires to be that. Part of the aspiration is to appeal to a global market. To look global, too feel like it is an international brand you know so it is a local fashion brand and they want to look like (brand name), then they will say yeah “pan asian”, because it elevates the image of the brand. [...] it looks international.” (I6).

Social Class and Lifestyle

Pan Asian talent could also build the image of lifestyle that consumers has fantasized to own. Specifically, it represents an image of higher social class. Informant 10 mentioned,

“I think one is it make the brand look more [...] high class a bit [...] like it gives a brand a certain classiness you know like a status, a social status that is not a cheap brand [...] They want to sell that kind of lifestyle like yea you can own this thing, you can be a part of this brand.” (I10).

Symbol of Diversity versus Racism

This subtheme explained that Pan Asian represents diversity as informants believed these group of talents can please all market and represent everyone. It is the image where a brand fits a diverse market. According to Informant 1,

“brand fit [...] in many occasions when you know where the conclusion is, find something that cuts across everybody, that can please all the markets, everybody, find the lowest common denominator of what they hold as pretty and handsome, in that case more often or not then you start to rely on that Pan Asian look.” (I1).

Personality and Attractiveness

Based on the results, there are several positive impacts of utilizing Pan Asian talents towards a brand's image including attractiveness, trustworthiness, and sense of goodness. However, when participants were also sharing stories on their experience in talent selection, racial prejudice and how skin color of a person matters. Skin color in terms of

white is more pleasant and has good values. Findings found people with fairer skin are more preferred and perceived as more attractive despite the race of the person. Similarly, Informant 6 mentioned,

"I have never seen an ad like a facial ad that use a dark skin person [...] So I don't know maybe there is some sensitivity involved in that or whether they just reluctant to use that because they think the perception of beauty is fairer is better, I'd like to see that change" (I6).

To a certain extent, the demand for Pan Asian in television commercials still remains because it is effective especially when a brand has to share asset with other countries and could not afford to produce different television commercials for each race. In contrast, advertising practitioners also realized Pan Asian talent is not the best alternative for the local market as Malaysia has diverse racial groups. Berry (2006) emphasized multiculturalism should involve the presence of diversity and must be accompanied by equitable participation by all cultural groups in the society. The image of beauty standard, high social status, premium lifestyle and international credentials of a Pan Asian talent might be less convincing to the Malaysian consumers. It lacks effectiveness because it does not represent diversity in the sense that Malaysians has none of the Pan Asian talent characteristics. Consequently, consumers might not resonate to the advertisement.

Representation of race can be done in many other forms in terms of culture, language, and message content. Aside from using multiple talents or Pan Asian talents to represent all races, key opinion leader is now an upcoming trend. If the campaign execution only allows one talent to represent the brand, agency should consider using local influencer, celebrity or key opinion leader who are relatable to all racial group. Face value is indeed a form of racial discrimination especially when it comes to skin color. Using key opinion leader helps to reduce racism or social class discrimination because they are selected based on popularity and exposure among the targeted audience. Therefore, selection of talents should be done in a more liberal way and lesser emphasis on skin color and one's race or ethnicity for a better society.

Moreover, the concept of whiteness and social construct leads to the discrimination on skin color. This justified the feature of CRT stressing on the dimension of material determinism whereby racism advances interest of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically), and sustain “social construction” that holds race and races as products of coaxial thought and relation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Despite the change that agencies are trying to achieve in recent years, brands are still not receptive on dark skin appearances. Brands still prefer fairer skin especially in beauty and fashion products. Many brands believed consumers prefer products that could make their skin fairer. However, this is probably not the case anymore as the fantasies of using product that promises fairer skin, and other forms of unrealistic beauty standard stereotype is no longer convincing. In fact, consumers today are aiming for something more natural and realistic as well as more relevant to the nature of their skin color.

Throughout the interview, racism and racial discrimination is identified through critical reflection within the participants. There are times in their job especially in the selection of talents where advertising practitioners felt that being racist is a common nature in advertising. Most of the time, they noticed that it is unethical to comment and judge in a certain way. However, these advertising practitioners failed to stand up and voice their opinions as they fear in losing accounts, thus, preferring to follow what has been socially constructed and the ideologies that they believed their client and consumers has been comfortable with. Unfortunately, it is most likely for brands to face backlashed or controversies by consumers when brands went against the norm as it takes time to change mindsets. However, going for a safer approach will not sustain a brand in the long run.

Thus, this study suggests accepting to more alternatives in selecting talents and embracing talents from different race and culture. Therefore, constant and consistent integration in identifying the experiential knowledge in race and cultural representation is crucial to reinforce the connection between brand and consumers. The changing Malaysian has led to an increase in representation of race and cultural awareness who are exposed to Western notions of democracy and movement where race

and cultural awareness who are exposed to Western notions of democracy and movement where race is still undergoing contestation and renegotiation (Lee, 2015). Malaysians today are broader minded, rational and progressive, therefore, brands should also open up to any kind of talents as long as they are able to bring up the character and carry the brand message across.

Limitations and Recommendations

As every brand have different image that they want to achieve, more research on consumer culture could help brands in building their image that is resonant with the current contemporary society and it should be done from time to time especially in the Malaysian context. Although the findings of this research provided a rich verbal data that answers practitioners' justification on the selection of Pan Asian talents a larger study could further investigate on which product range uses Pan Asian talent in their television commercial. Consumer research focusing on consumers' perception on brands based on race and characteristics of talents in relation to buying behaviors could also further strengthen the literature. Other than Pan Asian, future research can also look at the kind of aspirational qualities or characteristics that consumers look for in a brand and who should represent these brands. For example, key opinion leader or key influencer is one aspect to explore as it is the current trend in advertising.

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