

Colorism in advertisements in Kenyan print newspapers: A study of the nation newspaper

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Received: 24 July, 2023 | **Accepted:** 22 September, 2023 | **Published:** 12 October, 2023

Abstract: Colorism is discriminatory, as it excludes dark skin tones and elevates light skin tones. Studies have established the negative effects of colorism on different groups of people. Owing to the power of advertisements to influence and shape opinions, beliefs and perceptions, this study's purpose was to determine colorism in advertisements in Kenyan print newspapers. The research methodology encompassed the use of a case study design. The Nation print newspaper was studied because it is the most widely read newspaper in Kenya. Data was collected through the content analysis of all advertisements from January to April 2023. The study found out that light skin was the most preferred skin tone for males and females in the advertisements. However, more females than males in the advertisements were light-skinned, whereas more males than females were dark-skinned. This study concludes that colorism exists in advertisements in Kenyan print newspapers. The study recommends equal representations of color tones to mirror the composition of the Kenyan population.

Keywords: Advertisement, Colorism, Discriminatory, Print newspapers, Skin tones

1. Introduction

Colorism, a concept initially identified in 1982 by Alice Walker, refers to the prejudicial or preferential treatment of individuals within the same racial or ethnic group solely based on their skin color (Inganji & Sharro, 2020). This discriminatory practice is rooted in the belief that individuals with darker skin tones face biases. As elucidated by Walker (1983) and Jones-Williams (2021), colorism manifests as a form of discrimination against those with darker complexions. Nittle (2018) further characterizes colorism as a demonstrable bias favoring lighter skin tones, leading to explicit discrimination based on skin color. Consequently, colorism contributes to the widening disparity between White and non-White races, perpetuating the privilege accorded to individuals with lighter skin. Hunter (2007) highlights the existence of two systems of discrimination: one based on race and the other on colorism. The latter focuses on the gradation of skin tone, wherein varying shades of darkness or lightness lead to varying degrees of discrimination experienced by individuals of the same racial background. In essence, while all individuals of black heritage encounter discrimination, the intensity, frequency, and consequences of such discrimination differ significantly depending on their specific skin tone.

Colorism's historical foundations can be traced back to various aspects of European colonialism, plantation life for enslaved African Americans, and early class hierarchies in Asia (Jordan, 1968; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Colorism was so entrenched that mechanisms for determining one's skin tone were put in place. Whites administered complexion tests as a way of barring light-skinned Blacks from gaining entry into white companies and establishments (Kerr, 2006). Nail test and the paper bag test were among the most common forms of complexion test. Nail test was attributed to the belief that nails of a person with Negro blood would have a purplish semi-circle on the nail bed. Paper bag test was one of the most widespread method of test complexion. It was a test carried out by various Black organizations in order to establish if a person's skin was light enough

to engage in certain activities. A person was made to put their hand into a brown paper bag. If the person's skin tone was the same tone as or lighter than the bag, the person would be allowed entrance/admission into the activity or group (Kerr, 2006). In contemporary times, colorism in the USA is largely perpetuated by a system of white racism, where the maintenance of white supremacy in aesthetic, ideological, and material aspects relies on the association of dark skin with savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority, while white skin is associated with civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority. This contrasting definition of skin color serves as the foundation for colorism.

The Eurocentric beauty ideals have been ingrained in African communities for decades, stemming from the colonial era. These ideals uphold lighter or brown skin tones as more attractive and straight hair as desirable (Kinuthia, Susanti & Kokonya, 2023). Colonialism further propagated the notions of white superiority and black inferiority through the dominance of European powers in third-world countries. Skin color became a significant factor in perpetuating racism and color-based social stratification in these colonized nations (Robinson, 2011). Herring, Keith and Horton (2004) explain how colonizers systematically implemented a social hierarchy based on skin color, allocating different workloads according to this distinction. For example, during Kenya's colonization, schools were segregated for Europeans, Indians, Arabs, and Africans, with Europeans holding prestigious positions in government and offices, Indians in the construction sector, Arabs in business and trade, and Africans relegated to manual labor like cooking or farm work. This caste-like system reinforced the belief in the superiority of certain groups based on their skin complexion, exacerbating divisions between them (Graham, 1999). Sixty years after the independence of Kenya, it is important to establish whether discrimination on the basis of skin color tones still persists. A study of colorism in advertisements in Kenya has the potential to answer the question since advertisements are a reflection of the values of the society. The objective of this research is to establish whether colorism exists in advertisements in Kenyan print newspapers.

2. Literature review

Advertising serves not only as a means to promote products but also as a tool to shape consumers' beliefs and values, influencing their decision-making processes (Rauf & Ullah, 2019). However, this relationship between businesses and consumers, built on trust, can be compromised when advertisements are accused of deception, promoting offensive content, and perpetuating harmful stereotypes in society (Audi, 2004). The mass media, being a significant platform for the (re)production and dissemination of various stereotypes, plays a crucial role in influencing how individuals, including children, perceive and interact with each other (Durin & Vasquez, 2013). Such media-driven (re)production of social imaginaries can have detrimental effects on individuals belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged groups, leading them to underestimate their abilities and reinforcing their marginalized status (Vázquez & Curtain, 2018). Moreover, the (re)production of discriminatory and racist stereotypes in the media contributes to the ideological dimension of structural racism and exclusion, which in turn manifests in concrete actions of inclusion and exclusion (Iturriaga, 2016). Advertisements, designed to increase product consumption, become arenas for constructing desire and normalizing exclusion through the legitimization of stereotypes.

One notable aspect of colorism in advertising is its impact on individuals' perceptions of beauty, where preference is often given to lighter skin tones, leading to insecurities among those with darker skin tones (Gerdeman, 2017). The prevalence of colorism globally extends to prejudice, favoring lighter complexions over darker ones (Hamilton & Slutskiy, 2017). This preference for fairer skin, even within ethnic and racial groups, has led to the widespread use of skin-lightening products among women of African, Asian, and Latin descent (Arzi et al., 2021).

The media, including advertisements, play a crucial role in shaping societal norms and beauty ideals (Aubrey, 2006; Thompson & Stice, 2001). As a reflection of societal values and beliefs, advertisements hold

significant power in influencing identity development, self-perception, attitudes, and prejudices toward different groups of people (Saunders, 2008). The study was pinned on social representation theory by Serge Moscovici which specifies a number of communicative mechanisms explaining how ideas are communicated and transformed into what is perceived of as common sense. This touches the very heart of mediated communication – how the media naturalizes social thinking and generates collective cognition strives to make sense of the processes of collective meaning making resulting to common cognitions which create social bonds integrating societies, organisations and groups (Brako. & Oduro-Appiah 2022). Advertising is a form of social representation. Social representation is a system of values, ideas and practices to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it. Social representations appear as a “network” of ideas, metaphors and images, more or less loosely tied together (Moscovici 1973). Given the influential nature of mass media and advertising, it becomes crucial to investigate the representation of color in Kenyan print newspapers and examine whether colorism exists within these advertisements.

3. Research methodology

The study employed a case study design to establish colorism in advertisements in Kenyan print newspapers. Case study design was employed due to its ability to enable in depth examination of a specific case thereby enabling generalizability. Nation newspaper was purposively sampled for the study since it is the most widely read print newspaper in Kenya (Media Council of Kenya, 2022). There are six daily newspapers in Kenya, namely the Daily Nation, Standard, Star, People Daily, Business Daily and Taifa Leo. The People Daily is a ‘free’ news publication. Taifa Leo is a Kiswahili language publication while the rest are English language newspapers, with *Nation* having dominant readership (KMAR, 2021). A census of the advertisement of the newspapers for the months of January to April 2023 were studied. Only advertisements that had photos of human beings were studied. Advertisements that had images of products were excluded. Total of 197 people-104 males and 93 females - who were advertising different products and services were studied.

The choice of the period was informed by the fact that each quarter of the year is representative of the patterns of advertisement throughout the year. To ascertain whether colorism exists in advertisements in Kenyan print newspaper, the skin color of the persons advertising products and services was studied. The researcher adapted the distinctions of color of black people (Wilder, 2009). The author categorises the skin tones as light-consisting of bright, light bright, high yellow, medium which consist of tan, cocoa, mocha and chocolate and black which comprises of dark and tar baby. For purposes of the study, the researcher adapted three major categories of black skin tone: light, chocolate and dark. The content of the advertisements was analyzed quantitatively. Content analysis involved textual labeling, with coding variables. Data was analysed in frequencies and percentages. Data was presented in pie charts.

4. Finding and discussions on colorism in advertisements in Kenyan print newspapers

The study established that out of the of the 93 females that advertised different products and services in the print newspaper, 71% percent were light skinned, 11% were dark skinned, 12% were chocolate skinned, 3 % were white while 3 % were Caucasian. Out of the 104 males 40 % were light skinned, 33% were dark skinned, 25% were chocolate

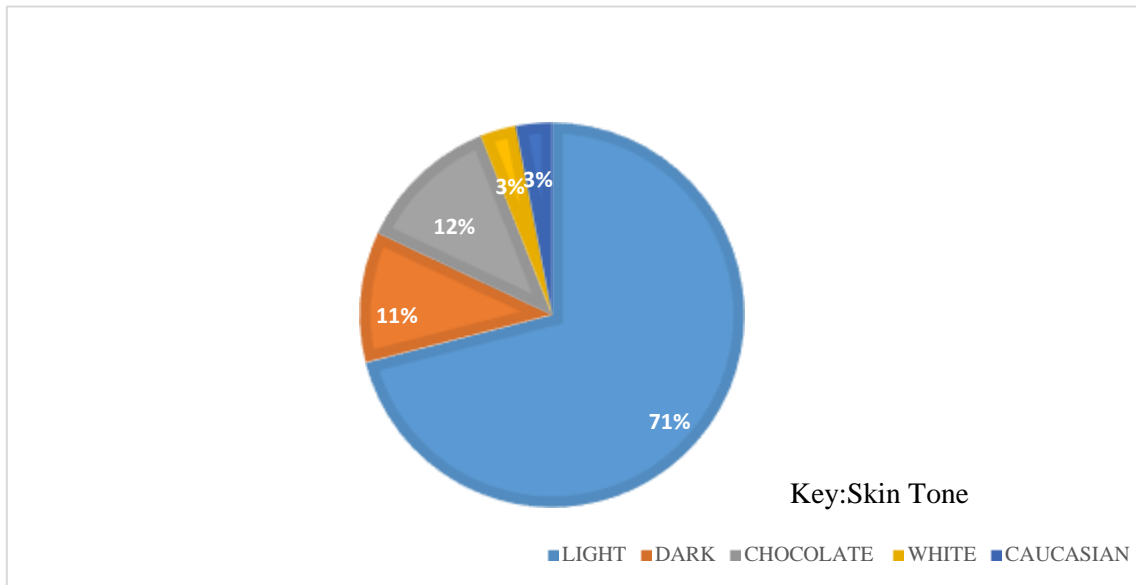


Figure 1: Skin tone of females in advertisements

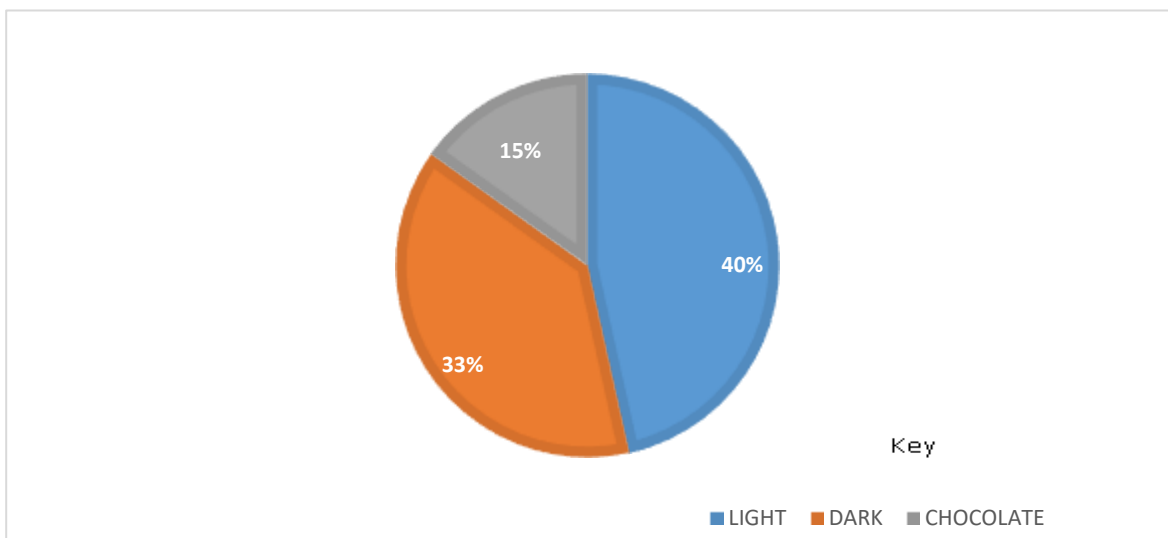


Figure 2: Skin tones of males in advertisements

The study's results provide evidence of the existence of colorism in Kenyan print newspapers. These findings are consistent with previous research by Hamilton and Slutskiy (2017), which revealed that colorism, a general preference for lighter complexions over darker ones, is prevalent across various cultures and often extends to prejudice. The study observed that in advertisements, light skin tone was predominantly favored for both male and female models. However, there was a higher proportion of light-skinned females compared to males, while the opposite was true for dark-skinned individuals. This aligns with Gerdeman's (2017) findings, indicating that advertising agencies often favor fair-skinned models for specific roles.

Additionally, Hunter's (2007) research highlights how colorism privileges light-skinned individuals in various aspects, including income, education, housing, and the market. The overrepresentation of light-skinned individuals in Kenyan advertisements may reinforce the notion that light skin tone is the ideal standard of beauty. Notably, colorism appears to have a more profound impact on women, as discussed by Norwood (2015) and Iturriaga (2016), emphasizing the imposition of certain physical aspects in advertisements that define societal standards of attractiveness. The preference for light-skinned individuals in advertisements raises concerns about discrimination, given the diversity of people with different skin tones in Kenya. Equal representation of various skin tones in advertising is essential to avoid promoting low self-esteem among

individuals with different complexions, which can lead to harmful practices like skin bleaching. Although this study did not investigate the direct influence of colorism on consumers, research by Arzi et al. (2021) indicates that colorism drives millions of women from African, Asian, and Latin backgrounds to use products containing chemical ingredients to lighten their skin color.

5. Implication for the study

The study spotlights the prevalence of colorism in Kenya. It draws attention to the subtle discrimination against dark skin tone with a view to have it addressed by the concerned parties; advertising agencies, newspaper editors. Through the study, it is also hoped that the academia would integrate colorism into the curricula for communication and media Studies. The study could also form a basis for other scholarly research on colorism in the media. It is hoped that ethical guidelines to journalism will be revised to incorporate the promotion of inclusivity of all skin tones.

6. Recommendations of the study

The study recommends the coverage of colorism in the university communication and advertising curriculum so as to embed into the minds of advertisers that skin tone is value-neutral. In addition, the media should alter narratives about colorism and promote the belief of equality in the human race, irrespective of variations in skin tone. Government and non-governmental bodies should give awards and incentives to media organizations and advertising agencies to promote the inclusion of all skin tones in advertisements.

With regard to suggestions for further studies, this study recommends an investigation of colorism in television advertisements in Kenya and the implications of colorism in print newspapers on public behavior. Moreover, this study was unable to interrogate advertising agencies and media institutions on colorism, therefore, a different study could investigate reasons for the preference for light skin tone in advertisements.

7. Conclusion

This study established that colorism exists in advertisements in Kenyan print newspapers. Females and males with a light skin tone are the most preferred for advertisements of different products and services in Kenya. The preference for a light skin tone over the others implies that the light tone is superior to other skin tones. This also seems to entrench the belief that a light skin tone is a mark of beauty. The chocolate skin tone, which is a tone between dark and light, was the second most preferred for male and female models for advertisements. There were more males with a dark skin tone than females in the advertisements. This seems to imply that dark skin is a more acceptable skin tone for males than females.

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