Being Beyond Brown: Colourism and Embracing Skin Colour among Young Adult Malaysian Indians

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ABSTRACT

Colourism is a form of discrimination based on skin tone in which lighter-skinned individuals are favoured over darker-skinned individuals. This phenomenon that is perpetuated by the global beauty industry and the media have shown to cause damaging mental and emotional effects that can last for generations. Past studies have highlighted the effects and perpetuation of colourism but not the process of how one would have to overcome these challenges and embrace their own skin colour; hence, the current study aims to unlock the knowledge on this missing key component. The objective of this research was to study the experience of embracing one's skin colour after facing colourism among Malaysian Indian young adults. A basic interpretive qualitative research design was adopted to explore the process of how seven female Malaysian Indian young adults, in the age range of 22 to 32 embrace their skin colour following their experience with colourism. Through purposive sampling, selected participants were interviewed online using semi-structured questions. Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis (2006) were employed to analyse the data collected. The findings of this study revealed the emergence of eight themes, 'Status quo', 'Initial exposure', 'Support system', 'Actively seeking to validate examples', 'Seeking like-minded others', 'Transformation', 'Advocate for change' and 'Generational empowerment' all of which have formed a framework on the process of embracing one's skin colour. Consequently, the result of the participants' experience in this study, created a path to empower and shed light on how one may embrace their skin colour following their experience with colourism.

Keywords: Colourism; Embracing skin colour; Process; Young adults; Malaysian; Indians

INTRODUCTION

Colourism is a global issue which has resulted in the spread of skin bleaching and self-hatred among diverse ethnic groups (Howard, 2011; Quiros & Dawson, 2013). It is defined as the dislike and unfair treatment of members of a particular racial group who have a darker skin colour than others (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Numerous studies have found that darker-skinned individuals encounter more discrimination than lighter-skinned individuals (Keith et al., 2017; Frisby, 2006). Individuals with fair skin are regarded as more competent, smart, worthy and beautiful whereas individuals with darker skin are judged as ignorant, lazy and filthy in many countries (Hunter, 2007). Once colourism has become ingrained in the human psyche, it can cause a great deal of physical, emotional and psychological damage (Stamp, 2018) such as low self-esteem (Howard, 2011).

Colourism is prevalent in Malaysia across all major races. In the Malay culture, there is an inherent belief that dark skin is a curse while fair skin is a blessing which transpired from Malay folklore like *Dayang Senandung,* a story of a princess who was cursed with black skin at birth and turned fair-skinned when the curse lifted (Yohan, 2020). These beliefs are still deeply rooted in the Malay community today and are shown through the obsession with skin whitening products which are heavily promoted and produced by the very same race (Azizah, 2018; Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, n.d.). Similarly, the Chinese community tend to regard individuals with darker or tanned skin as unhealthy or unfavourable as they are deemed to represent a life of poverty (Hill, 2018). This phenomenon is no different among Malaysian Indians where the nuances of colourism are apparent since their

early childhood and is experienced to varying degrees depending on how fair or dark one is as deemed by different communities (Thiagarajan, 2021). Nevertheless, this study aims to focus on those who have traditionally faced and experienced colourism, namely the young adults in the Malaysian Indian community on how one overcomes the adversities of colourism and begins a journey towards embracing one's own skin colour.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

It is important to note that since there are few published studies on colourism among Malaysian Indians, the literature review is based mainly on colourism experiences of Indians in India. Almost all members of the Indian community in Malaysia originated directly from the Indian subcontinent (Malaysia Central, 2013) and both Malaysia and India were under British colonial rule before obtaining their independence. Navigating into the history of colourism among Indians, two factors may be considered to have caused this emergence. The first is through British colonisation. Evidence of skin colour prejudice became clearer when the British Empire kept light-skinned Indians as allies, granting them special perks and access to government employment, while continuously disparaging darker-skinned Indians, who were labelled as 'Black Indians' and were barred from educational institutions and restaurants. In British colonialism, the concept that fair-skinned people were the ruling class and darker-skinned people were the subjects was deeply engrained in society (Mishra, 2019). Amidst such practises and subtle brainwashing, Indians began to idealise fair-toned skin as the pinnacle of all that is powerful and beautiful. However, it would be unfair to lay all the blame for colourism in Indian culture today on their former colonial masters.

Even after being left to their own devices post-independence, many Indians continued to face colourism. This discrimination bled into the caste system, which is the second factor for the emergence of colourism amongst Indians where people perceived lower castes (e.g., Dalits) as darker and inferior and higher castes (e.g., Brahmins) as fairer and superior (Hochschild, 2006; Mishra, 2019; Varghese, 2017). Several academicians have noted that lower caste Indians generally had the darkest complexion (Mishra, 2019) due to performing manual labour which oftentimes involves working under the sun, causing their complexion to be darker as compared to upper caste Indians. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that both dark-skinned Brahmins (those considered the higher caste Indians) and light-skinned Dalits (the lower caste) exist too. In spite of that, a higher-caste Indian with a darker skin tone may be more acceptable in society than a lower-caste Indian with a darker skin tone (Mishra, 2019). As a result of these enduring ideals, Indians' social status is still influenced by their skin colour today.

Colourism amongst Indians

There are two particular drivers that can help to explain the perpetuation of present-day colourism amongst Indians: a) media, and b) marketing politics and skin-whitening products.

Media

Colourism has been prevalent in the media ever since it became a dominant form of communication and entertainment. This is particularly noticeable in Indian cinemas whereby darker-complexioned actors are disproportionately cast as criminals or unsavoury characters, whereas fairer-skinned actors are typically the movie's heroes (Chodia, 2019; Mishra, 2019). While these portrayals may seem harmless at first glance, the ideas audiences take away from such portrayals can contribute to harmful perceptions towards dark-skinned individuals and insidiously perpetuate stereotyping and discrimination. On popular social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram, filters lighten the skin automatically, indirectly endorsing lighter skin colour (Craddock et al., 2018). There are photo editing applications that allow users to lighten their complexion in their own images as well. According to Varghese (2017), young Indian women often use lightening filters in pictures of themselves as they perceive that it would make their photos more 'likeable' and 'attractive'.

Marketing Politics and Skin Whitening Products

In marketing politics, preference is commonly given to either fair-skinned Indians or white-skinned foreign individuals over darker-skinned Indian models (Mishra, 2019). The marketing fixation with fair-skinned models has immensely encouraged the general public to want to look like these lighter-skinned models, and as a result, to use whatever means possible to 'become beautiful' by utilising fair products (Chodia, 2019; Mishra, 2019). For instance, a typical Indian advertisement for a fairness cream opens with a depiction of an insecure dark-skinned female or male who is unable to secure success in life until somebody recommends applying a skin-whitening cream (Sylvia, 2014). The commercial then shows him or her transition through a tremendous shift in which not only do they become several shades lighter but with a whole dramatic change in demeanour too. They are then portrayed as successful, self-assured and confident because of their 'whiteness'.

The implicit message in these advertisements is that dark skin is at the foundation of their troubles and that skin lightening is the 'key' to their life's success. This is seen as an issue as society tends to define beauty according

to standards and ideologies that were created by dictatorial market forces such as industrialists and media moguls (Mishra, 2019) that encourages colourism. With the marketing industry preferring to render fair-skinned men and women as role models or symbols of masculinity, beauty and achievement, the 'fair is better than dark' concept is reinforced.

Although previous literature provides an understanding of colourism to some extent, the focus tends to be mainly on populations such as Indians from India. Unfortunately, studies in relation to colourism among Malaysian Indians and how one embraces their skin colour are practically non-existent. This has prompted the current research to target the aforementioned population and topic of research.

METHOD
Research Design and Strategy
This study utilised a basic interpretive qualitative research design to investigate the distinct perspectives of participants as well as how their experiences with colourism led to the process of embracing their skin colour. This research design permits the researchers to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of colourism and allows participants to reflect on the significance they assigned to their experiences - how they constructed their world and how they interpreted their experiences (Cavazos, 2017) as they encountered challenges posed by acts of colourism.

Participants
Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit participants along with the utilisation of a criterion sampling strategy, whereby participants were required to fulfil a set of predetermined criteria. The inclusion criteria were: (a) Malaysian Indians, (b) young adults in the age range of 18-40, (c) have experienced colourism, (d) clearly have embraced their skin colour, and (e) fluent in the English language. Of the 31 respondents who signed up for the study, 7 eligible participants were recruited following the screening procedure and their ages ranged from 22 to 32 years.

DATA COLLECTION
An online form comprising a brief demographic questionnaire and the criteria of the study was circulated online via social media platforms. Since there are no available questionnaires to explore the process of embracing one's own skin colour, this study adapted questions 7a, 7b and question 8 from the Color of My Skin instrument developed by Alarcón et al. (2000) in order to ascertain if an individual truly embraced their skin colour and to avoid any 'fake good' answers (see Appendix A- questions 5 and 6). Question no. 5 asked candidates if they liked having their skin colour and to explain why or why not, while question no. 6 depicted a series of smiley faces showcasing emotion with a corresponding Very sad (score of 1) to Very happy (score of 5) to assess how respondent's felt about the colour of their skin. Only respondents with positive statements on liking their skin colour and selecting 'Very happy' were selected for the study.

A follow-up call was then made to selected participants to explain the objective and nature of the study and interview sessions were scheduled. Each interview session was conducted through a video call for 40-60 minutes on Microsoft TEAMS to ensure a comfortable and private setting for each participant. Audio recordings of the interview sessions were made for transcription purposes. Tokens of appreciation were then provided to participants upon completion of each interview session.

DATA ANALYSIS
This study applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis to provide an insightful and rich account of the phenomena being investigated. The lead researcher thoroughly immersed herself in the data after transcribing the audio recordings into text to fully comprehend what it comprised. The coding phase entailed highlighting relevant or potentially intriguing areas of the text and then creating codes that described its content. To correspond to the different codes, the phrases were highlighted in different colours. The highlighted phrases were then collated into groups identified by the codes which allowed the lead researcher to obtain a condensed overview of recurring meanings and points throughout the collated data. Subsequently, the lead researcher identified patterns among codes, generated themes and discarded codes that were irrelevant and vague. All the themes were then reviewed thoroughly by the data set compared with the co-researcher. The researchers then searched for missing data, identified adjustments that could be done to improve themes and ensure that themes accurately represented the data. After a list of final themes was created, each theme was defined and named. The last phase of this approach included determining the themes that contributed significantly to the understanding of

the phenomena being investigated and met the research objective of identifying the process of embracing one's skin colour that is depicted as a framework.

A member check was conducted at the end of the study whereby the completed results were shared with the participants to critically analyse the findings and to comment on them; with the goal of providing findings that are authentic, original, and reliable. All the participants affirmed that the results accurately reflected their views, feelings, and experiences, thereby increasing the credibility of the findings.

Ethical Considerations
The following measures were implemented to protect participants' rights and safety while ensuring that the study followed ethical guidelines: (a) Participants were notified that their participation in the study was voluntary; (b) participants had the option of declining to answer any questions during the interview; (c) identities of participants remained anonymous by using pseudonyms.

RESULTS
Eight themes emerged from this study as shown in Figure 1. They were: 1) Colourism from family and strangers 2) Initial exposure 3) Support system 4) Actively seeking validating examples 5) Seeking like-minded others 6) Transformation 7) Advocating for change, and 8) Generational empowerment.
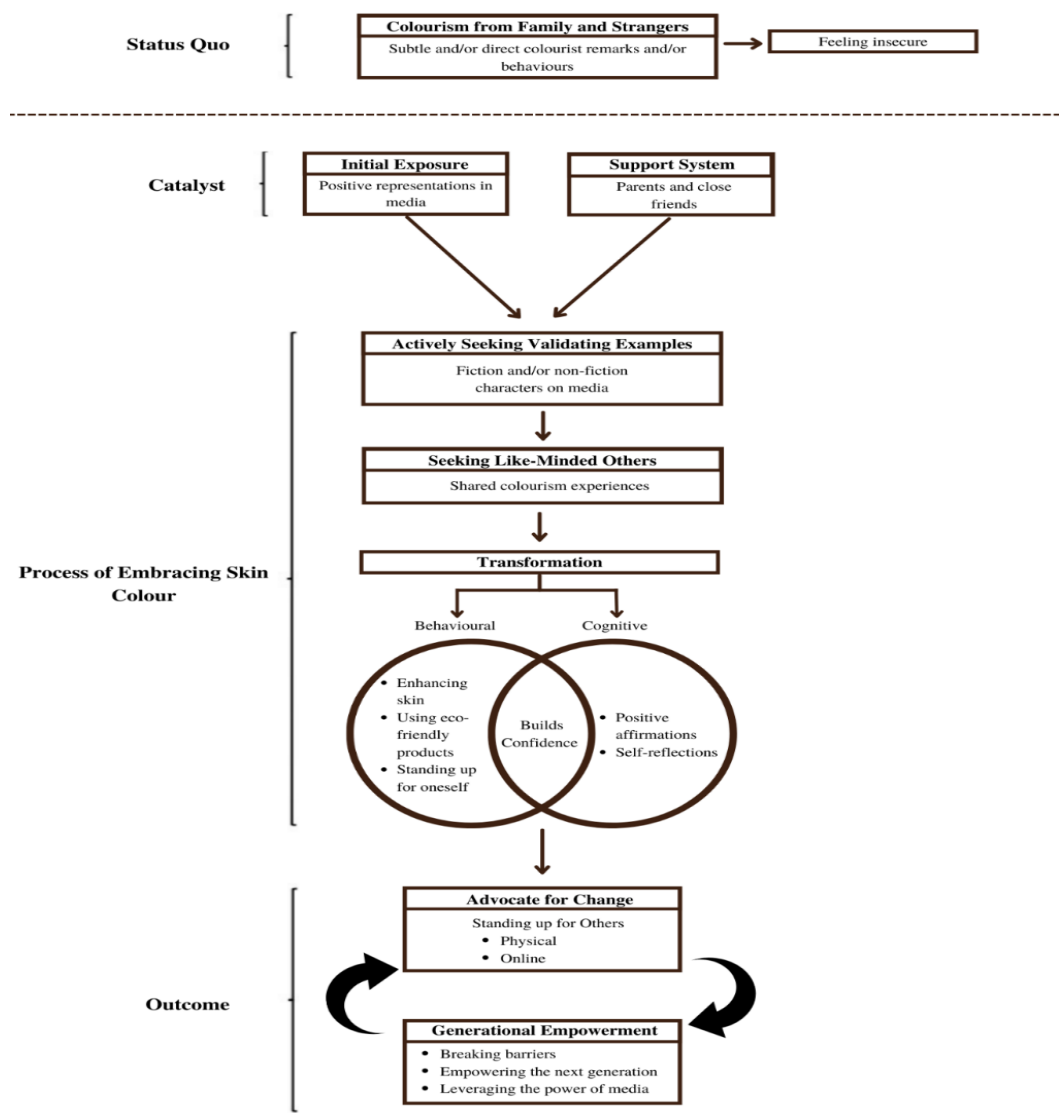

Figure 1: The process of embracing skin colour following one's experience with colourism.

Theme 1: Colourism from family and strangers
Participants revealed experiencing subtle and/or direct colourist remarks and/or behaviours from family members. An example of a colourist remark from an extended family member can be seen in Riya's story:

> *"So, once I went to a festival open house and they didn't realise my mom was beside them, so they made a stereotypical comment regarding my skin tone."*

Colourist behaviour from another family member was shared by Vita as follows:

> *"Someone even gifted me a skin whitening product once… that was the worst part, and I was like 'Oh this is my birthday gift?' and then he was like 'Yeah'."*

Other participants revealed being on the receiving end from members of the Indian community themselves. Tena shared her experience of facing colourism from her Tamil dance teacher:

> *"She would say things like 'No, don't take darker shade of costumes for you. It wouldn't look good on you'… In dance class fair skinned girls were given more opportunities than dark skin girls. We're not given opportunities based on our talents or skill."*

Nala was the only one among the seven participants who shared facing colourism from members of other races during her adolescence, and it was no less an unpleasant experience:

> *"A lot of my sports were mostly with Chinese people, … they would never touch us because they believe if they ever touched us, the colour of our skin will be transferred to them… The coaches could have done something, but they just laugh and never acknowledged it."*

As a result of these colourist remarks and behaviours, most of the participants reported feeling 'insecure' about themselves. Vita recounted her experience as follows:

> *"I always tried like random products for my skin because I wanted to make them stop talking about my skin colour, so I tried so many things that ruined my skin, and my self-confidence… I became even more insecure. I avoided going out."*

It is worth noting that Theme 1 does not represent part of the process of embracing one's skin colour. Instead, it demonstrates the status quo reality of colourism that is embedded in society that participants experienced from both family members as well as 'strangers'.

Theme 2: Initial Exposure
The catalyst stage to 'embracing one's skin colour' comprised two themes, with Initial Exposure as the overall second theme. Initial Exposure describes the media content where participants first gained the awareness of the existence of other dark-skinned individuals who were of Indian descent but who were portrayed in a positive light. Tena for instance, mentioned:

> *"When I was a teenager, I was first exposed to Facebook or Instagram. So, I've seen people being dark skin, but they projected themselves as confident. At that point of time, I asked myself, 'if they can be that confident, what about me?'."*

Theme 3: Support System
The third theme which serves as the other catalyst is the Support System. Here, a solid support system consisting of parents and close friends was found to play a vital role in allowing participants to take that next step of change. Vita for instance, demonstrated the support of her parents as follows:

> *"My parents really helped me… Whenever anyone comes and talks to me like that, they defended me. They say that 'Nothing's wrong with her skin colour', 'She's happy with her skin colour', 'I don't see anything wrong', 'I don't need her to use random products', this and that. So yeah, my parents were really, really helpful."*

As for close friends, Riya mentioned:

> *"If and when I feel low, I definitely talk to my close friends and get some reassurance from them."*

It should be pointed out that the support received in this theme is demonstrated as one-way support from family and friends to the participants.

Theme 4: Actively Seeking Validating Examples
Upon receiving exposure or support, participants began their process of embracing their skin colour in an active manner by seeking validating examples, through non-fictional characters such as Nandini Balakrishnan as was expressed by Pini:

> *"With Nandini from 'Says … yeah so, she's fabulous, amazing. She is the first person that I've seen who really embraces her true beauty, and it's that kind of perception that really changes you and it just inspires you to embrace your appearance and don't care about what other people say or think about you."*

Kani described her experience in seeking out non-fictional characters,

> *"One thing that I did was trying to look at other people who are like me, who are brown like me or even darker. Then I try to look at them and see their progress. What do they have to say? What they experience and everything. So, when I see other people it almost kind of help me find notes on how to change myself."*

or through fictional characters as in Riya's case:

> *"I watch movies where the protagonist like you know, embraces herself. It makes you feel represented… It's a kind of motivation. It just teaches me and makes me feel better about myself."*

By doing so, participants began increasing their own self-awareness by reflecting on themselves through the experiences of others.

Theme 5: Seeking Like-Minded Others
Once participants actively sought for something deeper within themselves, they started seeking out like-minded people who shared a common experience, which acted as their second support system. It is important to note that this type of support system differs from theme three as it involves the mutual sharing of colourism experiences which benefits both parties as described by Tena:

> *"It's a support system for each other because we face the same type of discrimination. We will get together, share with each other and then, we try to think of how we could stop this and what we can do and what type of responses we can give back to them."*

Finding an inner circle reinforces participants to move forward on their journey of embracing their own skin colour as Devi revealed:

> *"I think naturally connecting with those who have similar experience would be easier. Just because you have that mutual ground… But I must say that I do derive some kind of comfort in knowing that there are others who face similar things. So, you know you are not alone. There's a sense of solidarity and you can also have conversations about how different people experience… So, you can kind of can discuss and try to figure it out together. So that's nice."*

Theme 6: Transformation
The transformation stage is where participants truly began to undergo behavioural and cognitive transformations. These changes happen concurrently with each other. Behavioural changes include how one approaches skin care or in Kani's words:

> *"The products that I used are not solely based on whitening or anything that would*
> *make myself fairer, but on enhancing that glow in my skin and just taking care of it,*
> *you know. So, I ventured into sustainable and vegan products. I've slowly started exploring*
> *because my main focus is not becoming white."*

The use of 'sustainable' skin care products portrays a holistic change in the mindset of embracing what is natural in terms of their skin tone to the types of products used to enhance it, as described by Devi:

> *"I try as much as I can to see how the things that I use affect the environment or myself. Basically,*
> *What works for your body, really listening to your body and see how different things react to your body.*
> *In fact, I abstain from using any products that talks about bleaching. Yeah, so any advertisements*
> *that talks about how you can have X number of lighter skin – Sorry not going to use you."*

Other participants also mentioned exploring using a wider variety of colours in their daily life that are expressed through their clothing, hair, and make-up. Tena explained:
> *"I also started to wear all glaring colours because it is just a matter of whether you want*
> *to wear it or not. So, I realised other people don't get to tell me what colour is suitable for*
> *my skin type. I started purchasing more colours that I want."*

Participants also started standing up for themselves like Riya:

> *"As I grew older it became more empowering in the sense, like I was a bit more vocal about me*
> *being happy with my colour. If they made a joke about it, I definitely wouldn't laugh, and I would*
> *give them the face and tell them off. I think I'm at that point where enough is enough."*

Cognitive transformation on the other hand included practicing self-affirmations and self-reflections which allowed participants to maintain a positive sense of identity. Nala does so by:
> *"I go to the mirror. I just look and tell positive things to myself or words of affirmation."*

and Devi through self-reflection:
> *"I just say that I love this sun-kissed skin and I'm comfortable with it. It just feels very different.*
> *Being able to validate oneself, I think, is very important and you create that shell of not being hurt*
> *If I'm not comfortable, I'm going to step out and ask myself, 'ok, what's going on right now?'*
> *A lot of self-reflection."*

As a result of these two transformations, participants reported building their confidence too as illustrated by Pini:

> *"I became more confident compared to the old me. The old me was always insecure. I was like*
> *'Oh my God, I shouldn't do this, I shouldn't wear that, what would people think?' this and that.*
> *But what I'm doing now is I am more confident."*

Theme 7: Advocate for Change
The outcome of the participants' transformation of embracing their own skin colour is standing up for others who have experienced colourism. Participants believed that it was a way to encourage and inspire others to embrace themselves. Kani for example utilized social media to support others like herself:

> *"The other girls that I know via social media also experience it. Most of the time when*
> *a fellow 'Brown friend' that I know, post something, I make it my job to share it, comment*
> *it, like it. I help to boost their content so we all just do it. She didn't ask me, and we didn't*
> *talk about it, but I feel like I kind of am obligated."*

Other participants like Pini would stand up to one's own family members to educate them on their actions:

> *"My niece is very fair. So, my mom will tell, 'Thank God she's fair' and I'll be like, 'You know what?*
> *That's not appropriate because that's not a nice thing to say. I know you maybe meant it well, but*
> *it's not. It's not a right thing to say. You should not like put a seed right in the mind of a small*
> *child that you know fair is good and darker skin is bad and it's just not a proper way to raise*
> *a child even'."*

Advocating for change can even be done to complete strangers as demonstrated by Tena:

> *"The moment someone else in front of me say any derogatory comments on dark skin about others, that's the end of it. So, I'll just jump in there. I'll just pass my message across that this is not a nice thing to say… I'll be there preaching about this because I don't want the other person who is not confident enough, to end up accepting that they're not good enough. That's the last thing that I would want to happen… I create that safe type of environment for people around me. They feel safe around me because they know with me those hateful people can't pass these types of remarks."*

Theme 8: Generational Empowerment
Participants felt compelled to empower the next generation too. It became their aim to sustain this change not only for themselves but for others as well to minimise the impact of colourism. As expressed by Kani:

> *"It's like up to us in our generation to actually make that progress even more."*

Thus, participants would get actively involved in encouraging the younger generation like Vita:

> *"I always told my younger cousins, especially girls to defend themselves and don't let anyone tell you that you're not good enough just because you're dark skin. If they come and tell you, just say that you love your skin and you're fine with how you look."*

The participants also believed that media 'plays a huge role' in tackling the issue of colourism. Pini stated:

> *"Media is really an excellent outlet. Everybody is exposed to some kind of media at this very moment. Older generations as well. So, it's just such a powerful method where you can voice out the things that should have been voiced out, shape people's mind and just think in another different direction."*

Generational empowerment describes the goal of the current and next generation to utilise the media as a platform to continue their activities of educating and advocating for change. As a result, this would once again initiate the process for someone else to begin their journey of embracing their own skin colour and continuing to change the narrative that fair skin is desired while darker skin is not.

DISCUSSION
The findings of this study indicate that the issue of colourism is much wider in scope in everyday life and not just limited mainly to the media and marketing politics as stated in extant literature. A sad truth about the status quo is that colourism frequently occurs close to home; from the ones we call family. Participants revealed that family members were the main group of individuals that were quick to pass a colourist remark or behaviour. What these family members failed to comprehend was the effect their words and actions had in shaping how their own flesh and blood perceived themselves as well as others in terms of skin colour (Wilder & Cain, 2010). This transmission of colourism was found to greatly impact how an individual of a particular skin colour was treated by other family members whereby those of fairer skin colour received preferential treatment over individuals with darker skin, who tended to experience lowered self-esteem.

The second theme, Initial Exposure, alongside the third theme, the Support System serves as the catalyst for the process of embracing one's own skin colour. It was found that having either one or both components essentially led to the commencement of this process. Although extant literature highlighted the media as a source of the perpetuation of colourism issues, our findings show that the media could also be leveraged to counterbalance the negative effects. Platforms like Instagram and Netflix encourage para-social interaction. According to Horton and Wohl (1956), para-social interaction is defined as the illusion of real, in-person friendships with artistes made possible by listening to music or in this case watching television shows or viewing pictures or videos of influencers, content creators or celebrities. This interaction offers individuals who have low self-esteem an opportunity to be closer to their ideal selves and reduce their self-discrepancies (Donovan, 2008). Thus, participants who experienced initial exposure by viewing content creators, influencers or even celebrities embracing their skin colour or voicing out about colourism, felt connected to them. This feeling of connectedness allows participants to relate to and come to a realisation that even dark skin can be beautiful. In addition, participants revealed that the support of their parents and close friends allowed them to take the next step to begin

the process of embracing skin colour with greater ease as their support lowers daily hassles (e.g., when faced with colourist remarks) and the psychological distress that follows.

It was clear that participants began the process of embracing their skin colour by actively seeking out validating examples. This created a greater self-awareness of how to deal with their personal experience with colourism; wherein by doing so can aid in alleviating their psychological distress and facilitate a path of self-development (Sutton, 2016). This self-awareness was obtained from fictional and non-fictional characters in media which influenced how participants viewed themselves. Some of the examples provided by respondents did include darker skin representations as main characters in shows like "Bridgerton" and "Never have I ever" on Netflix and content creators such as Nandini Balakrishnan who is vocal on social issues such as colourism and who defies dark skin stereotypes. These types of representations are able to break down barriers and are a source of inspiration by being powerful role models.

As part of the experience in embracing their own skin colour, the participants did also seek like-minded individuals for peer support. Here, peer support refers to support from individuals who have had similar health issues or life events and who are well-positioned to understand one another in ways family and friends (from theme three) as well as professionals may not (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000). The benefits of having a peer support group further reinforce the participants to want to make the change to embrace their skin colour because it helps them in recognising that there are other individuals with similar experiences. Thus, connecting with peers helps them figure out how to respond to experiences of discrimination and address situations in ways one may never have thought of. This study revealed two forms of social support. The first type of support (theme three) involves one-way support from family and friends with the participants at the receiving end, while the second type of support (theme five) served as a two-way support with both participants and their peers benefiting from the shared experiences.

The sixth theme, Transformation, is when research participants finally began implementing both cognitive and behavioural transformation within themselves. Cognitive transformation in the form of self-affirmations and self-reflection was practised. Self-affirmations are a class of interventions that requires the act of affirming one's self-worth (Steele, 1988; Cohen & Sherman, 2014). It frequently involves individuals reflecting on their core values which may provide them with a broader view of the self through self-reflection. Self-affirmations also have been shown to be beneficial in a variety of threatening situations by a substantial body of research whereby affirmations can make individuals more receptive to changing their behaviour, increase their well-being and decrease stress (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Some of the ways participants were open to behavioural changes were by focusing on enhancing their skin via skincare routines rather than whitening their skin. One study found that when carrying out skincare, the condition of participants' skin improved and contributed to feelings of self-esteem, happiness and empowerment (Zhang et al., 2020). Another behaviour change was the ability to communicate assertively and handle criticism by standing up for themselves when faced with colourist remarks and behaviours from others.

The result of these two transformations was crucial in participants' building confidence in themselves. This is because confidence arises when there is a belief in one's own experience, ability and skills, resulting in feelings of well-being as well as acceptance of one's body and mind (Budin, 2017). This was exhibited by the participants when their transformations involved embracing themselves rather than changing themselves to be what they are not. Acquiring self-confidence also aids one to be able to handle criticism, communicate assertively, contain a positive view of oneself, acknowledge one's own strengths and weaknesses, have a sense of control in life and accept and trust oneself (Eldeleklioğlu, 2004 as cited in Çutuk et al., 2020).

The journey of transformation experienced by participants inspired them to tackle the issue of colourism in their environment and to also to try and uplift upcoming generations. Having faced the challenges due to being 'victims' of colourism, they felt the need to stand up for others by being an upstander. An upstander is defined as a person who speaks or acts in support of an individual or cause, particularly someone who intervenes on behalf of a person being attacked or bullied (Facing History, 2021) or in this case, discriminated against for their skin colour. Based on a study conducted by Chapin and Brayack (2015), the factors that explain upstander behaviour are experience and empathy. In this situation, participants' experience with colourism clarifies the reason for taking up the role of an upstander. Being a support for others comes in two forms: physical and virtual. Many positive aspects that are similar to those of offline peer support groups have been found in studies of online peer support groups. This includes recovery processes (Smith-Merry et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2016), empowerment (Barak et al., 2008), coping with day-to-day challenges and stigma reduction (Smith-Merry et al., 2019) and social connectedness (Highton-Willliamson et al., 2014; Naslund et al., 2016; Smith-Merry et al., 2019).

The eighth theme, Generational Empowerment is where participants mentioned encouraging the current and future generations to embrace their skin colour and empower them to be part of the change. This theme demonstrates employing bystander intervention which is a form of social support that empowers individuals to intervene against antisocial behaviour (Chapin & Stern, 2019) like colourism. Content creators such as Nandini Balakrishnan are a product and example of generational empowerment. Individuals like her use social media to be a voice for others and their influence encourages others to act pro-socially too.

It was apparent from the participant's description that media should be leveraged to spread awareness in modern society due to its inherent ability to reach a large number of audiences. For instance, as reported in January 2022, 89 % of Malaysians use social media (Digital Business, 2022). Further research needs to be undertaken on the topic of social media and colourism. Social media serves as a space to offer-counter narratives, disseminate positive messages as well as challenge and confront dominant ideologies (Nakagawa & Arzublaga, 2014). An exemplar of how social media was used to tackle colourism was through the hashtag #Unfairandlovely which is an online social movement that promotes a platform for Indians to share the impact colourism has on darker-skinned individuals and on embracing their skin colour (Barnes, 2016). This movement evolved into a global social media campaign and became a talking point for everyone to share their solidarity and experiences. This type of movement is an example of how participants can utilise the media to initiate the process for others to embrace their own skin colour.

Limitations
The lead researcher was unable to obtain the experience of colourism and embracing skin colour from a male perspective. With the majority of participants being in their early 20s, the results of this study may also not reflect the process of embracing skin colour among young adults in their 30s and beyond, and it would be interesting to explore how different age groups might respond. In addition, the researchers encountered a fair-skinned participant who revealed that he was treated differently because he was 'too fair' to be an Indian. This changed the researchers' perspective towards the definition of colourism where it should not necessarily be limited to the discrimination of darker-skinned individuals but discrimination of any shades of skin colour. Regardless of the colour of one's skin, one may face discrimination if their skin colour did not fit the 'norm' colour of their specific race (e.g., too fair to be an African, too dark to be a Chinese). Unfortunately, the participant pulled out before the interview session and the researcher could not further explore this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION
This study provided an opportunity for participants to openly share their thoughts and experiences with colourism. Some of the participants expressed that being part of the study had widened their horizons and allowed them to view the importance of this matter. The findings of this study can contribute to the existing pool of literature on colourism and serve as an effective guide or framework to acknowledge the process involved in embracing one's own skin colour. It is hoped that the results of this study as reported in this paper can help to empower those who are still struggling to love and accept (embrace) their skin colour.

Additionally, this study can inspire future research on colourism that can explore other dimensions and contexts of this phenomenon, such as its intersection with gender, class, ethnicity and culture, as well as its impact on mental health, well-being and social justice. Finally, this study can raise awareness and spark dialogue among various stakeholders, such as educators, policymakers, media practitioners and the general public, on the need to challenge and dismantle the harmful effects of colourism in society.

DECLARATION STATEMENT
The lead author of the study attests that this paper is an accurate, transparent and honest account of the study that is reported; significant elements of this study have not been omitted; and that any deviations from how the study was intended to be conducted have been explained.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare no self-interest in the study conducted.

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Appendix A:

Recruitment Form Questions
1. Age
2. Gender and Pronouns
3. Nationality
4. Have you experienced colourism before?
☐ Yes
☐ No
5. Do you like having your skin colour?
   * If yes, why do you like having this skin colour? Briefly explain
   * If no, why do you not like having this skin colour? Briefly explain
6. Which face on this card shows how you feel about the colour of your skin?

VERY SAD   A LITTLE SAD   NEITHER SAD NOR HAPPY   A LITTLE HAPPY   VERY HAPPY
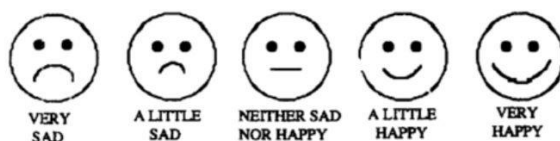
7. Contact number
8. Email address