

Colouring the Narrative:

How to Use Storytelling to Create Social Change in Skin Shade Ideals in Malaysia

An e-course from the Strategic Training Initiative
for the Prevention of Eating Disorders

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SYNOPSIS

In this teaching case, “Colouring the Narrative: How to Use Storytelling to Create Social Change in Skin Shade Ideals in Malaysia,” six main characters are fighting against one common issue - colourism. In their different walks of life, one unifying message from society that stands out for all genders, but is particularly felt by girls and women, is that the lighter their skin, the better their prospects: More likely they will be taken to be affluent, powerful, educated, socially elevated, and just plain “beautiful” or desirable. And what if their skin shade is not already considered light enough by society’s colourist ideals? They are encouraged by ads, family, friends, and even strangers to seek out the “help” of creams, soaps, and a seemingly endless array of other consumer products sold with promises to lighten their dark skin.

The phenomenon of “colourism” is now fairly well understood but far less so is the problem of skin lightening products and the health risks that consumers assume with these products and their dangerous chemical contents. Having personally been impacted by the issue, our teaching case protagonists Jasmine, Layla, Munirah, Meng, Iskandar, and Hari are intent on fighting these practices amidst the media’s predatory messaging. In Layla’s case, the secondary school teacher is struck with grief as her young students fall prey to the deceptive marketing for use of dangerous skin-lightening products. She then meets Jasmine, her friend and a determined master's degree student in sociology who brings up the issue by sharing her NGO's competition to encourage youth to take the first step to make social change in their communities through a design-thinking workshop. Munirah, a creative director for an advertising agency, also wrestles with the conceptualization of an anti-colourist marketing campaign for a moisturizer.

In Layla's school is Hari, an illustrator and CGI animator, who shares how storytelling would challenge predominant social narratives with his students. Their lives intersect as Layla and Hari's students enter the competition hosted by Jasmine's NGO, using storytelling methods to serve a larger public health strategy to create societal change to address colourism. Through these narratives, this teaching case examines the impacts of colourism on the physical and mental health of Malaysian adolescents and explores social change strategies to challenge skin shade ideals underlying colourism and skin-lightening cosmetic campaigns on societal and community levels.

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Cast of Characters

Chapter 1 – School, Manish’s household

Cikgu Layla – Public secondary school teacher, early thirties

Meng, Iskandar, Dayang, Sue, Manish – Sixteen year old students

Paati – Manish’s grandmother, early sixties

Chapter 2 - Mamak

Jasmine – A social work master’s student, earlier thirties

Farhana - Of the same friend group as Layla, early thirties

Wen Yi – Of the same friend group as Layla, early thirties

Chapter 3 – Iskandar’s household

Munirah – Creative manager at an advertising agency, heavily pregnant, late thirties

Qaedi – Munirah’s husband, early forties

Harith – Thirteen years old, Iskandar’s brother

Chapter 4 – Manish’s household, school

Ms Ling – English teacher in public secondary school, early thirties

Hari – Illustrator and CGI animator

Also appeared or mentioned in smaller, non-recurring roles: a number of curious students

Chapter 5 – Hotel conference room

Unnamed finance manager at a consulting firm – Mid-fifties

Unnamed general partner at a venture capitalist firm – Late twenties

Unnamed actress who is looking to disburse some of her income – Ambiguous in age

Chapter 1

“It wasn’t because of his skin color,” Dayang tearfully gulped, “I just didn’t like Manish like *that!*”

Looking at her four Form 4 students – Dayang sobbing, her friend Sue patting her on the back while glaring daggers at Meng, who had his arms folded defiantly, and Iskandar awkwardly standing to the side – Layla wondered what she should say or do next.

Monday had started out bright and early, with Layla entering her homeroom class to take daily attendance. The first thing Layla noticed was that Manish was absent – this was the third day with no valid reason. Layla had made her usual announcements and then left the sleepy sixteen year old students for the first-period teacher.

During recess, Layla entered the staffroom with a roll of mahjong paper and a box of markers perched precariously on top of an armful of homework books: with her view partially obscured, she had nearly bumped into the four of them crowding her little table at the corner.

“Okay, Cikgu¹ is here, faster Dayang, say what you want to say,” Meng insisted.

“She doesn’t want to say anything, okay,” Sue shot back, annoyed, “don’t force her to.”

“Last T-t-tuesday,” Dayang started nonetheless, “During break, Manish gave me a flower, and said he l-l-liked me.”

“But she don’t like him back,” Sue clarified promptly.

“Ya, so I said that, very nicely some more,” Dayang sniffed. “Then h-h-he said –“

“Accused,” Sue interjected.

“– that I don’t like him, confirm because of his skin color right, then c-c-called me racist!”

¹ Cikgu (Malay): Literal translation ‘teacher’

“Because of her la²,” Meng said angrily, “Manish don’t want to come to school.”

“We don’t think she’s racist,” Iskandar pacified, “just that maybe, Manish tak nak datang³ on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, because you know, kena⁴ reject.”

Over the weekend, Meng and Iskandar had not heard anything from Manish even though they had called, texted, swung by his house on their bicycles, and shouted his name loudly into the hot, sweaty afternoon.

Layla listened to all this curiously and thanked them all for looking out for their friends. That afternoon, Layla made an impulsive decision to detour from her usual route back home to try her luck at Manish’s home. She had already left a few messages for Manish’s mother that went straight to voicemail.

Manish and his family lived in a tenth-floor unit in an apartment complex near the morning market. A frail female voice greeted Layla’s tentative knocks: “Hello, who is it?”

Layla quickly introduced herself to who she thought might have been Manish’s grandmother. Streaks of white shot across her graying hair. “Come in, come in. Manish thambi⁵ is taking a nap.”

The place was small for a family of six: two parents, one grandmother, three children. A well-kept shrine to the elephant god Ganesha stood at the far end, next to the TV. Incense wafted through the air: it took Layla back to her university days when her friend Hari would invite the whole gang over to eat vadai and watch movies.

Manish’s parents were not home, so Paati⁶ tottered about making Layla tea. “How is he doing?” Layla asked, leaning against the kitchen countertop. She noticed the spice jars wedged tightly against one another: turmeric, sandalwood, ginger, cumin.

² La or lah 啦 (Cantonese): Sentence-final particle used to either convey firmness or gentleness, depending on the intention of the speaker

³ Tak nak datang (Malay): Literal translation ‘did not want to come (to school)’

⁴ Kena (Malay): Rough translation ‘have something happen to’ or ‘got’

⁵ Thambi (Tamil): Literal translation ‘little brother’; used as a term of affection.

⁶ Paati (Tamil): Literal translation ‘maternal grandmother’

“Teacher, don’t get me started on Manish thambi,” Paati launched, in an all-too-familiar way that family often did. “I have told him since he was a small boy, but he never listened. Now look at him – he wants to buy this cream, he wants to buy that cream. All these creams are useless.”

It began to dawn on Layla that Manish may have stayed home not only due to the embarrassment of being rejected by a girl, but because of something else.

“When he was small, I made him scrub his elbows, knees, hands, wherever that was dark so that he looks clean and nice. My thambi must look presentable when he goes outside. But what to do? He never listens to me, always running around in the hot sun ... this boy I tell you ...”

Layla weakly accepted the proffered steaming mug of tea; Paati went about fetching sugar biscuits from tin containers. They both turned around to find Manish standing outside his bedroom door with feet nailed to the floor in shock, awoken in horror to find his teacher in his home.

“The rascal thinks he is sooo clever,” Paati remarked sarcastically, “went all the way to the sundry shop by himself to buy cream. He used it only once and look, look at him!”

Layla saw Manish’s frightened, blotchy face – small, obvious patches of red-white unevenly across smooth, brown skin – and understood immediately. Manish was not unwell, but with the consent of his parents, he had chosen instead to stay home from school until the discoloration on his face, neck and arms had faded to an unnoticeable degree.

“Take your time to heal,” Layla said kindly, “and reach out to your friends to catch up on classes.”

As Layla walked back down to her car, she thought of monthly spa-days in her childhood: her cousins would bring back free skin-whitening cream samples they had picked up at the shopping mall, Layla would put on soothing music and get the nail polish ready, and then they would sit around with towels wrapped around heads all afternoon, gossiping about the celebrity men they were going to marry once they became fairer.

That had seemed like harmless fun at the time, but this was most certainly not.

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Chapter 2

Jasmine looked up from her laptop to the large clock on the wall. Malaysian ‘rubber time’⁷ was getting to be a bit too much, she decided, if her high-school friends, now all in their thirties, were always going to be half an hour late for gatherings.

Jasmine had decided to opt out of the morning hike in favor of making some progress with her readings. A Master’s student in Sociology, Jasmine’s thesis centered on biracial identity development in relation to societal invalidation; as a bicultural product of Malaysia herself, she had always been interested in how differently people treated her when they thought she belonged, or did not belong, to their community.

Spotting Farhana enter the mamak⁸ and nearly trip another customer with her hiking stick, Jasmine stifled a grin and beckoned them over enthusiastically.

“We’re so sorry,” Layla said apologetically, “we got lost and had to backtrack 15 minutes to find our way out ...”

“Eh, Wen Yi not with you?” Jasmine exclaimed by way of greeting, standing up to hug her friends.

“She’s such a puteri lilin,⁹” Farhana scoffed, “even though we told her that the forest foliage would mostly shade us from the sun.”

“Oi,” a familiar voice protested. “I’m right here, you know. Also, I had other things to do. Drop fiancé off, coming out from KLIA very jam leh¹⁰.”

The women turned around to find their friend smiling at them. After ordering, they caught up each other’s lives: Jasmine was applying for a grant to fund her research, Wen Yi (and her fiancé) had

⁷ ‘Rubber time’ is an expression used to describe the stretching of time beyond acceptable punctuality

⁸ Mamak stalls are food establishments run by Indian Muslims, serving food unique to the region

⁹ Puteri lilin (Malay): Literal translation ‘candle princess’; used to describe someone who cannot not stand being in the sun for too long or she (typically) would melt from the heat

¹⁰ Leh 咧 (Cantonese) is a sentence-final particle, which indicates nuance. In this case, Wen Yi is conveying apologies by way of excuse as to her delayed arrival

finally decided on a wedding date and venue, Farhana was in line for a promotion, and Layla shared her concerns about her (unnamed) students' behavior.

Jasmine nodded in sympathy at Layla's story. "It was really confusing as a kid," she said slowly, "when people tried to guess what race I was based on the color of my skin. I wasn't sure why it mattered, but they always seemed to feel accomplished if they got it right."

"Wanting to be fairer because that's the beauty standard," Wen Yi ruminated, her mouth full of eggs, "I can relate. You all call me puteri lilin as a joke, but it is a very real thing in my culture ... when I was a teenager, my mother would say 一白遮三丑¹¹ which translates to, uh, one white covers three ugly. Seemed like having fair skin could make up for other less desirable physical or personal qualities."

Jasmine was happy to be able to share something from her readings with her friends. "Darker skin had historically been associated with manual toil under the sun," she explained, "Compared to peasant farmers and construction workers, the wealthy and rich did not have to work in such conditions and so could have the 'luxury' of fairer skin."

"I mean, I don't think I would melt la," Wen Yi laughed, "but going out in the sun meant getting darker no matter how much sunscreen I apply. It would take forever for me to go back to my original skin color, so that meant no outdoor sports with high exposure to the sun, like basketball and volleyball."

"Is that why you won't come hiking with us?" Farhana asked. "I always thought you didn't like sweating because it's so humid here ..."

"Is that why you always have an umbrella with you?" Layla asked, tearing her roti canai apart with her hands. "Even though it hasn't rained at all lately ..."

Farhana sipped her coffee thoughtfully. "Hey, Wen Yi," she asked, "all joking aside, do you feel like you missed out on things because of what you were or were not allowed to do?"

¹¹ Yī bái zhē sān chǒu 一白遮三丑 (Chinese proverb): If a woman has a good skin (clean, smooth, and white), she must be beautiful even if she has not other good physical or personality traits

Wen Yi's eyes grew large. "I've never thought of it that way," she admitted.

As they neared the end of their meal and bid each other goodbye, Jasmine pulled Layla aside. Pulling out a brochure from her laptop bag, Jasmine said, "I've been meaning to ask you – I volunteer at an education NGO, this might be of interest to you."

The education NGO wanted to encourage youth to play active roles in making social change in their communities, Jasmine elaborated. To do that, they had designed a two-part program, the first being a series of design-thinking workshops where students would apply the methodology to identify issues and solutions, and the second, a Shark Tank-type competition where students could pitch their solution to a panel of funders for sponsorship.

"The end goal," Jasmine said, "is to come up with a sustainable solution that students can realistically enact within their communities. Does this sound like something you would be interested in bringing to your students?"

"I can think of some students who might be keen!" Layla nodded appreciatively. "I'll see what I can do."

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Chapter 3

It had been a long day, and Munirah was only half-paying attention to the dinner conversation at the table. Iskandar, her oldest and normally a calm boy, was unusually excited as he described the latest developments of some school project Cikgu Layla had introduced to them a few weeks back.

"So, what is design-thinking? Okay. Design-thinking. It is a problem-solving approach, where you understand a problem through speaking to people before thinking of a solution. There are five main stages: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test ..."

One thing occupying Munirah's mind: the unplanned blessing. Under the table, Munirah's hand crept to touch her barely-showing belly. She would have to share the news with Qaedi sooner rather than later.

“For Empathize and Define, Cikgu Layla took us through something called a fishbone analysis where we thought about the possible root causes to our problem. Then we went around surveying all the classes in Form 4 and 5 to confirm our hypothesis, and tallied up the data, and guess what?” Blue bits of nasi kerabu flew out of Iskandar’s mouth. “More than fifty percent, *fifty percent*, of the students have used skin-whitening products before!”

“All the classes, fifty percent, banyak tu¹²,” Harith, her younger son, marveled. He was in Form 1 and still getting used to being in secondary school. “Bang¹³, what’s a skin-whitening product?”

Skin-whitening products ... Munirah’s thoughts unconsciously drifted to her difficult work day. As a creative director at an advertising agency, her latest project was to conceptualize a marketing campaign for a new product that was due to hit markets next year. The client, a well-known beauty brand, had wanted to brand the moisturizer as a ‘brightening’ product.

All day, Munirah’s team had gone back and forth on whether this use of wording was appropriate, and if not, how to convey it politely to the client. No one had wanted a repeat of the 2017 blackface ad scandal, which had seen great backlash when a famous health and beauty chain store advertised a washing foam via a video of a woman ‘cursed’ with black skin shamed by a king who fell in love with her beautiful voice, only to accept her after she had ‘washed her face’ and became pale.

Munirah looked at her sons and wondered how they might navigate what beauty meant for them. But maybe she need not have worried: the bits and pieces of Iskandar’s narrative that she did catch gave her a glimmer of hope. Something about encouraging positive feelings of bodies, especially skin tones ... an awareness campaign ...

“Sayang,” Qaedi’s voice broke her reverie, “tak makan ke?”¹⁴

¹² Banyak tu (Malay): Short for ‘banyak itu’; literal translation ‘that’s a lot’

¹³ Bang (Malay): Short for ‘abang’; literal translation ‘big brother’

¹⁴ Sayang, tak makan ke? (Malay): Literal translation ‘Sweetheart, are you not eating?’ ‘Ke’ is a sentence-final particle used at the end of the question, with nuance depending on the intention of the speaker.

Munirah looked down to her plate to find that she had only taken a few bites. “Simpan je, nantilah makan,” Munirah smiled at her husband. “Had a late lunch, don’t feel too hungry for now. Iz, tolong ambulkan fruits out of the fridge?”¹⁵

Munirah watched her son fetch the knife and chopping board, recalling a time when her firstborn was no larger than a mango in her womb. The pregnancy had been mostly smooth but her family’s constant fussing had tested her patience very much so. One unpleasant memory: Kak Long¹⁶ snatching a plate of ayam kicap manis¹⁷ out of her hand, screaming ‘Jangan makan kicap banyak, nanti anak jadi gelap!’.¹⁸ Her oldest sister was alluding to the old-wives tale that eating dark-colored foods would affect the unborn baby’s skin color and unpleasantly ‘darken’ their temperament.

Munirah shuddered, recalling how a well-meaning friend had visited her, only to spend two whole hours sharing about her own anxieties about giving birth. Her friend had not been able to face her relatives and wider social community, terrified that her baby girl’s less-than-ideal skin shade would not live up to their expectations. “But look,” her friend had said, gesturing to the curly-haired children who accompanied her, “they grew up so beautifully, I worried for nothing!”

Already feeling more nauseous than usual that day, Munirah had rushed to the washroom right after her friend left: till present time, Munirah could never quite pinpoint whether it had been an effect of pregnancy, or the seed of doubt and worry having been planted. Qaedi had been a pillar of strength and support through it all, reassuring Munirah that no matter how their children physically turned out, they would not be loved any less.

With Iskandar and Harith having hopped off upstairs for their evening bath, Munirah turned resolutely to her husband. Qaedi had his back turned to her as he soaked the dishes. “Do you know,” he offhandedly mentioned, “some of the husbands at the mosque said, their wives aren’t too happy with this project that Cikgu Layla has the kids doing? ‘*Sure, they may be a bit young to start using skin-whitening products,*” he mimicked quoting a friend, “‘*but better late than never, right?*”

¹⁵ Simpan je, nantilah makan ... tolong ambulkan ...? (Malay): Literal translation ‘Keep it for now, I will eat later ... please, could you help take [the fruits from the fridge]?’

¹⁶ Kak Long (Malay): Term of kinship to refer to the oldest sister in the family.

¹⁷ Ayam kicap manis is a Malay-style chicken dish cooked in sweet and spicy soy-sauce based gravy.

¹⁸ (Malay proverb): Don’t eat too much food with soy sauce, or your baby will have dark skin (physical)/ dark habits (personality)!

“Oh, ye ke?”¹⁹

“You don’t sound too interested,” Qaedi faced her, drying soapy hands on a rag, “and you seemed distracted during dinner.” His tone was one of concern. “What’s up?”

“Sayang,” Munirah took a deep breath, hand resting gently on her stomach again, “I have something to tell you too.”

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Chapter 4

It was one of those rare afternoons when no one was home: his parents were out at work, and Paati presumably at mamak chit-chatting with her friends. Manish was still wearing his school uniform, sprawled on the sofa with his legs in the air. From his view, the TV was upside down.

Lazily flicking through channels, Manish would have loved the freedom to do anything and everything a young boy with an empty afternoon could think of doing – except that the week’s events kept haunting him, slyly popping up in his thoughts when it had no business to.

Only his first week back, and he was on the receiving end of pitying looks from his friends. Whispers ran through the corridors quicker than he would have liked, spreading its ugliness to other classes.

An advertisement for a brightening skin product had started to play on the TV. Manish switched the TV off and groaned. Nothing was interesting enough to distract him from his thoughts.

When Meng and Iskandar approached him and shared about this design-thinking project that they were involved in, *and would Manish like to be a part of it too?* Manish was offended, almost: put his bad experience on stage for all to see? *No, thank you!*

He thought back to English class that day. Ms Ling, a petite woman with a very soft voice, had enlisted the help of a big burly man to deliver the day’s lesson. Hari was an illustrator and CGI animator who had declared that his personal goal in life was to spread the power of storytelling.

¹⁹ Ye ke? (Malay): Literal translation ‘Yes?’

As part of his introduction, Hari had shared that he had been quite nervous to speak to them today. As a child, Hari used to be teased for being dark-skinned and plump: he had been told to pakai bedak²⁰ during class photo day or they would not be able to see him. Even worse, he was then told that his size made him so large that all of him could not be included in the photo anyway!

All this made socializing very difficult, so at the tender age of seventeen, Hari had firmly decided that he would retreat into the realm of art where he did not need to have to interact unnecessarily with others.

“But you’re here talking to us – voluntarily!” Someone in the front row had piped up cheekily.

Hari had laughed. “Yes – and let me tell you why! I found my initial assumptions to be completely wrong: I had to interact with my bosses to know if I was doing good work or not, I had to interact with my colleagues to exchange ideas, I had to interact with clients to sign contracts and process payments. I was stuck! So, I told myself a story: that if I kept on thinking that I would not be able to speak to people in fear of their responses, I most likely wouldn’t. But if I told myself to at least try, who knows what I might have been able to achieve?”

Sitting in the third row, Manish remembered that he had initially scoffed at the idea. All of it had seemed very wishy-washy. Nothing was going to just *change* if people just kept talking to themselves. Where was the action? When was Hari going to get to the part where he became a cool artist and show them his animations?

But what Hari said next sparked Manish’s interest: Hari spoke of how stories could also inspire change at a community level. “Go no further than on social media, you will find stories of how ordinary Malaysians came together and supported those who were heavily affected by the monsoon floods, whether it is providing shelter or financial support. Stories like these inspire us to do better and always lend a helping hand to our fellow countrymen and women.”

“Think of the opposite, the other end of the spectrum. As a community, when we hear a negative story, like a rumor or bad joke, we could be more careful and distance ourselves from the source. This

²⁰ Pakai bedak (Malay): Rough translation ‘to put on (usually white talcum) powder’; used in an effort to ‘lighten’ up skin color

makes a lot of sense if the story is in fact true – but it can be quite dangerous if the story is not. Who can share an example?”

The class fell silent for a while, until a girl at the back row said thoughtfully, “I guess it is what you said about pakai bedak just now – if we tend to associate having darker skin with undesirability, then as a community we may fall into the trap of thinking of dark-skinned people as unwanted. Whereas skin color is just something you are born with, it is a biological response of how much melanin you have ... so it isn’t really fair to think or act that way ...”

Manish had looked over to the back to see who had spoken up. Dayang was trying very hard not to meet his eyes.

For the rest of the lesson, Hari had introduced them to the basics of storytelling and had them imagine themselves, or someone in their community, as a hero who had overcome a great challenge. “Stories have power,” Hari had winked at them, “so when you are feeling down and recall these stories, you may feel motivated to get back up again. These stories can act as an anchor to inspire us, to do things differently, to make change.”

Pulled out from his reverie, Manish sat up from the sofa. Too quickly, blood rushed to his brain and made him dizzy. So that was what Meng, Iskandar and the rest were trying to do! *Where* was the action? *Here* was the action!

Manish stumbled over to the TV and picked up the house phone next to it. Dialing Meng’s number and holding his breath, Manish rehearsed what he would say in his head. His friend would probably poke fun at him for declining their offer to participate so sternly just earlier that day, and Manish had enough of being teased.

However, when Meng’s voice came through, it made Manish smile. It was nothing but kind: “Sure, bro, why not! Tomorrow after school, we have decided to meet to discuss the Ideate stage and come up with solutions – I can send you the data collection report and analysis for you to catch up on – Teacher Layla will be more than happy to have you on board – do you think you can make it?”

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Chapter 5

Waiting in line to register her students for the shark-tank style competition, Layla reminisced how it all came to be. After the school bus had deposited the team at the conference hall where Pitch Day was to be held, she had left them all to their own devices while she went to check on a few logistics items.

On the bus on the way here, Layla had checked in with Manish. Manish shared how his friends' support had helped, and how going back to school had not been as hard as he had expected. He still had unbearable phantom itches sometimes, and the great urge to look at a mirror and scratch, but as Hari had said, there was no use beating himself up over the past. Layla made a mental note to thank Ms Ling for her brilliant ideas; Manish made a mental note to tell them how grateful he was for their friendship.

The students were supposed to be practicing their presentation, but only Sue was hunched over the laptop. Layla saw Meng nudge Iskandar. "Wah²¹," she faintly heard him marvel. One of the participating teams from another school had brought a diorama. Iskandar looked down at the small tube he had in his hands; it was barely larger than his pencil box.

"It's not a competition," Manish reminded everyone loudly, "there is no winner or loser, as Hari says, it is a learning journey."

"Hari this, Hari that," Iskandar lightly teased him, "Hari is your superhero now la, is it?"

Manish smiled sheepishly. "Joking la bro," his friend thumped him on the back.

Layla smiled at the friendship – it reminded her of her own. Earlier that week, Jasmine had invited her for a hike on the very same Saturday, but Layla had to turn it down as she would be chaperoning her students for Pitch Day. Much to both ladies' surprise, Wen Yi tentatively said she would be up for it, but could they start small please? When teased about being sunburnt, Wen Yi sheepishly smiled and said that it was time for her to try new things, and that if her fiancé did not like it, well, it was for a conversation between them.

²¹ Wah (Malay): Literal translation 'wow'

Upon reaching the registration counter, Layla greeted the support staff and took down the details of which rooms her students were to be presenting in, and against which other teams and/or schools. She also managed to find out more about the judges-funders who sat in their room: a finance manager at a consulting firm, a general partner at a venture capitalist firm, and an actress who was looking to disburse some of her income.

As Layla walked back to her students, she heard: "... and we're asking for RM 10, 000 to fund our physical and virtual campaign on raising awareness of having a positive body image, focusing on physical appearances," Sue was muttering, "... and here is the breakdown of our budget ... eh Dayang, where is the budget slide?" which made Layla smile even more.

"Time to go," Layla shepherded her students, "and give a wonderful pitch!"

They were the last of the four teams to present. Meng started it off by distributing empty pieces of white paper with only a gingerbread man outline. Manish did the same for the audience, largely made up of teachers and students from other schools, and a few curious hotel guests who had walked in and stayed.

"Please draw on your own clothes, hairstyles, accessories that show your hobbies or what you do for a living. When you are done, write down the answer to this question: 'When we think of a good person, what are some qualities we can think of?'" Meng gave some time for the bemused room to scribble down their thoughts.

Walking around, Meng observed: "When we compare drawings, each one is unique but many of the good qualities listed actually overlap. I'm seeing a lot of adjectives: kind-hearted, helpful, family-oriented, strong leadership skills et cetera. Nowhere does it say: a good person is thin, or has fair skin, or long hair - all these physical characteristics are not that important. So why is it that we think we have to 'look' a specific way to be considered 'good'?"

"This is Aku Cerah, a well-known brand of beauty product,²²" Iskandar introduced, waving a pink-and-white tube. "In my school, products like these are very popular, even though they cause

²² Aku Cerah (Malay): Literal translation 'I am Bright'; here used as a placeholder brand name for skin-whitening products in general

physical and mental harm to ourselves. More than 50% believe that skin-whitening products would improve their self-esteem and lead to happier lives.”

Using a clicker to move through PowerPoint slides, Dayang and Sue took the room through the process they had completed on students’ perceptions of a positive body image. It was a long one, from generating surveys to test their hypothesis on the problem statement to validating possible solutions to identify the best possible one.

“What we have decided based on our research,” Sue announced, “is to use the inherent power of stories, whether through social media like Twitter, or oral tradition, or through text and drawings, to change behavior. We want to focus on ...”

Cheering for them in her heart, Layla beamed with pride. If they were nervous, she could not tell. Their presentation and proposed solution were a microcosm of what students could achieve when challenged to value dignity in diversity, not only for themselves but also for others. Even if they did not receive the target funding they requested, Layla knew that something important had been accomplished that day.

Design-thinking was just a way of defining and solving an issue, Layla reflected, but really, what they were doing was redefining the stories about themselves, stories that they wanted to tell the world. Who were they? What were their passions? What was important to them: what would they be champions of?

Layla looked over at her students, taking turns to speak to the panel of engaged judge-funders. An incredible warm glow overcame her: they had grown so much in the span of a few months, and would go on to grow more. Who knew what exciting stories lay ahead?

The End