



LINDA YEW

# “You don’t look Singaporean.”

When we picture a typical Singaporean, what do we see in our minds? Are some people left out from our mental image of “local” because of how they look? These questions led CHEW WEI SHAN to explore what looking Singaporean means to ethnic minorities here.

**T**oday, Nivya, Dewi, and Phyu share their thoughts and stories with me.

**Shan:** “Where are you from?” is a question that some Singaporeans hear a lot. And, when they say, “I’m from Singapore”, they are often met with disbelief. “But, you don’t look Singaporean!” is often the reply. What are your thoughts about “looking Singaporean”? How do we form our ideas about who looks Singaporean and who doesn’t?

**Nivya:** What we see around us plays a big part. The other day, I saw an Indian girl on an Instagram ad for a moisturiser and I just felt so happy, I bought it right away! *(Laughs)* I suddenly felt so... seen.

**Shan:** Gosh. I’ve never really noticed the race of models in ads. I probably take for granted that I see myself and my race represented on TV and social media all the time.

**Nivya:** I guess so. That isn’t your fault, though. It is natural to only notice when you feel something is missing.

## WHAT'S UP

**Nivya (cont'd):** Growing up, I was surrounded by media that showed me that beautiful, famous, or even “normal” Singaporeans only looked a certain way. Hardly any of them looked like me. As a kid, it often made me feel like there was something weird or unacceptable about my appearance.

**Dewi:** I feel the same way! What is seen as the “norm” can really make a child feel lousy, even if they're too young to understand it. Recently, my five-year-old son asked me if he could apply sunscreen on his face before going to school.

He said, “I want my skin to be lighter. I want to look normal.” He is only in kindergarten, and already feels “abnormal” because of his dark skin.

**Shan:** That's heartbreaking to hear, especially from such a young child.

**Dewi:** Yeah. It really pained me, as a mother. I want my son to have a sense of **self-worth**, but it may be harder for him if he feels like he doesn't belong, or if his peers treat him as less than equal. I want my son to grow up to be friendly and kind. And, I know it is harder to learn kindness in an environment where you're made to feel different.

**Phyu:** Ever since I can remember, I have always dreamed of being an actor. But, I am a dark-skinned Burmese boy. In my primary school and secondary school drama clubs, I was selected for minor roles only. Some of my other dark-skinned schoolmates faced the same issue, no matter how talented they were. Often, these minority characters were used for comic relief and not meant to be taken seriously.

I definitely struggled with my own sense of

self-worth in school.

Of course, I cannot speak for everybody. Maybe, in other schools and other clubs, there was more fairness and **equal opportunity**. But, this was my own experience growing up, and it was quite depressing.

Because of this, even from a tender young age, I started to worry about the limits of my dreams. Could I hang on to my dream of being an actor? Would I ever be granted the same opportunities as my fairer peers?

**Nivya:** Oh, I totally agree. I worry about that all the time as an aspiring fashion model. Do you remember when Miss Mohanaprabha was crowned Miss Universe Singapore last year? I was so delighted. “Finally!” I thought. “An Indian woman representing Singapore beauty!”

However, not everybody felt that way. “No offence,” some netizens said, “but she just doesn't look Singaporean.”

Even if no harm was intended, it was deeply offensive. These comments not only must have hurt Miss Mohanaprabha's feelings, but they upset me and many other Indian Singaporeans like me. Why should we be considered any less Singaporean than a Chinese Singaporean? Are we less deserving?

When I get featured in magazines or interviews, I'm often introduced as a “model of Indian descent”. But, when my Chinese friends get featured, they are simply called “Singaporean”, “local”, or “homegrown models”. Why is there this double standard? I am “homegrown” too! I am local. I am Singaporean.

The writer is a Chinese Singaporean who has never been treated differently in her country because of the colour of her skin. So, she decided to interview people who had experienced everyday racism to learn from them. Based on their stories, she wrote up this series of articles for you to read. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

**Shan:** I see your point. My own grandparents immigrated here from China. By that logic, I should always be referred to as a “writer of Chinese descent”. Instead, I get to be called a “Singaporean writer”.

**Phyu:** Most Singaporeans’ parents or grandparents are immigrants, after all. Only some of my Malay friends have ancestors who are truly native to this land. Who gets to be called truly local? That is a big question.

**VOCAB BUILDER**

**self-worth** (say “self werth”; noun) = sense of one’s own value as a human being.

**equal opportunity** (say “ee-kwel o-por-tiu-ni-tee”; noun) = when all individuals are offered the same chances as everybody else to study, work, play and thrive in life.

## The Singaporean look

**H**ow does the media shape what we think of as “beautiful”, “normal” or “local”? These are questions we must ask ourselves more often.

From commercials on television to posters at the bus stop, it is more common to see a Chinese or Caucasian face used to represent the everyday Singaporean. Advertisements favour fair-skinned models. Beauty companies even sell lotions and cleansers that whiten skin.

Even if the advertisements and posters are not meant to be racist or exclusive, they can affect how we think about ourselves and others.

Once we become more aware of these inequalities, we can start to make things right. My conversations helped me to see more clearly the stereotypes about what Singaporeans look like. Have your own conversations with your friends to discover more about such stereotypes.

Even children can make a difference. For instance, your artwork can show more variations of what Singaporeans look like. And, when you vote for class representatives, be careful not to let physical looks affect your choices.

Let’s work on erasing any one image that



### WHAT IS EVERYDAY RACISM?

Racism means to treat some people worse than others, just because they are of a different race or skin colour, come from a different place, or have a different culture. Everyday racism is a form of racism where people say or do hurtful things without intending to be unkind. Everyday racism is also called “casual racism”, although there is nothing casual about it for the person at the receiving end.

claims to be the Singaporean look. After all, as long as we have citizenship, shouldn’t we all be considered to “look Singaporean”?

**This series is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Singapore. You can find more articles about casual racism at <http://more.whatsup.sg>.**