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## Unfair Promotion of Whitening Creams: Is Beauty No More Skin Deep?

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Fairness industry is a multi-billion business endorsing the notion that being 'fair' is beautiful and being 'dusky' is always risky. This article explores how the advertising of fairness cream belittles the existence of women in India. Focusing on the promotion of whitening brands as a case study, the authors bring out the contradictions and unverifiable assertions in the marketing philosophy of beauty, the social obsession, the aspirations of young men and women, the Bollywood glamour, and the darker side of fairness. It is appalling to see the reckless promotional campaigns even when the tons of whitening tubes cannot change what is genetically determined by the amount of melanin in the skin. Such advertising campaigns of whitening creams and their strategies rob not only the consumers of their self-esteem but also infuse a false sense of inferiority and guilt. The article seeks to understand the marketing campaigns of whitening creams and suggests that their advertising appeals can be altered to salvage the image of Indian women whose survival is not just confined to the skin tone. It further urges the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI)<sup>1</sup> to have stringent guidelines to check the representation of stereotypical assumptions of women and their social status in advertisements.

Keywords: Gender, fairness, advertising, society, celebrity endorsements, brands

Since time immemorial, people have been obsessed with fair complexion. Right from nursery rhymes (*chubby cheeks, rosy lips, curly hair, very fair*) to the devotional songs where Lord Krishna as a young kid complaining his mother for not being fair ('*Yashomatimaiyya se bole Nandlala, Radhakungori, main kyunkala*' – why he is dark, but his lady love Radha is fair!), our preference towards fair skin is well evident in our literature, social mores, and professional practices. In Indian society, we live in a myth that fair skin is an instant ticket to live gloriously and excel in every field we choose while being dark is dubbed as someone who is bound to fail and live in perpetual ignominy. Here comes a brilliant marketing opportunity with a staggering consumer base that is ready to roll out the red carpet for a magic potion '*the fairness cream*' – the savior of pride and honor! An author and mythologist, Devdutt Pattanaik shares that we have an inexplicable affinity to the white hue and a similar aversion to the dark...There's this notion about dark-skinned people belonging to the labor class because they'd work on the fields under the sun. White skin, on the other hand, symbolized power (Bhatti, 2014). "Indian society is variegated in its color profiles, and this yen and craving for fairness exists everywhere, almost like a disease," says Harish Bijoor, brand strategy specialist and CEO, Harish Bijoor Consults (Joshi, 2010). Our obsession with fairness is well exploited by the market. The Indian market was flourished

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with brands<sup>2</sup>post-liberalization, which started by marketing the fulfillment of dreams and desires, empowerment, that the use of cream can help you get anything in life. But the real question which comes in this case stud—Do we need the fairness cream today when India and young Indians are aspiring to conquer the world in every walks of life? Is this resurgent India still insecure of its roots and feels inferior about its skin color? Is the beauty no more skin-deep?

## The Genesis of Being Fair

In India, the fascination with fair skin has its roots in ancient folklore and cultural beliefs. There's one school of thought that traces this back to our caste system called the *Varnashrama Dharma*, where the word *Varna* in Sanskrit implies color. Another set believes that since Sanskrit words are not literal and have varied meanings, this may not hold water (Joshi, 2010). The masters of British India had also been responsible for this mania for fairness as people in power were the whites and the people with dark skin at their receiving end.

*Indian market is seen as the most promising business for beauty products especially fairness solution.* Royal Indian women, fascinated by white skin, used to apply pearl extracts on their skin for enhanced fairness. In 1919, India got its first commercial fairness cream in *Afghan Snow*, manufactured by ES Patanwala, a perfumer/entrepreneur who came to Mumbai from a small principality (Jhalra Patan) in Rajasthan (Bhatti, 2014). But the 'the real genie in the bottle' came when the first ever Fairness cream '*Fair & Lovely*' (FAL) was launched by Hindustan Unilever Limited in 1975. As a pioneering brand, the advertising<sup>3</sup>campaigns of FAL has served the aspirations of millions of women by placing them on the top of the world. *Fair & Lovely* brand promised that it would fetch them stars, get them married suitably and find the careers of their choice. *Fair & Lovely* was the sole player in this segment before Cavin Kare's *Fairever* came in picture in 1999 with an Ayurveda product that was countered by *Fair & Lovely* with launching its Ayurvedic fairness range. This competition intensified further.

Post liberalization, several cosmetic companies have added fairness brands to their existing basket. These brands have become mature and business savvy over the years and decided to play safer to avoid any controversy or conflict from the dermatologists, women's groups and government agencies. Their main appeal remains to keep people fair, but they camouflaged the word 'fairness' with other smart terms such as skin brightening, skin lightening, skin whitening, pink glow, glowing skin, sparkling glow, or white radiance. In the next few years, several Indian brands including Godrej Group's *Fair Glow*, Elder Pharmaceuticals' *Fair One* and Emami Group's *Gold Turmeric* and *Naturally Fair* appeared in the space. Many international brands like L'Oréal, *Garnier*, and *Olay* witnessed that 'fairness cream' is a huge consumer market. They experimented with their range of products by introducing new fairness creams with special all-skin treatment. As the market grows for fairness brands, they started associating with soap operas and beauty pageants and subsequently tried to garner more space, publicity, and acceptance in public media. These combined marketing forces made Indian women believe that it is the fairness that would make them Miss India, Bollywood damsels, and wannabe models. 'The craze for better future' offered by fairness industry has gone to explore a new set of the audience: the young India male.

Although the market has been promoting the fairness dreams to the female audience for generations, now the Indian male has become the icing on the cake. The new Indian male is more conscious about healthy personality and good hygiene and doesn't hesitate

to apply fairness creams. Male, therefore, has become the target audience. Research indicates that this new male audience is driven by western lifestyle, Bollywood stars, and Indian cricketers. It was the first time in India that an exclusive male fairness cream '*Fair & Handsome*' was launched by Emami in 2005. Seeing the tremendous success of the brand, other big companies like HUL, L'Oréal and Procter & Gamble (P&G) have also joined the bandwagon of marketing the male fairness. It has expanded as one of the most lucrative industries with over 35 major brands to woo the male and female with their organic, herbal and personal grooming appeal. According to the India Fairness Cream and Bleach Market Overview, 2018-2023 "the women's fairness cream category is anticipated to achieve market revenues of more than five thousand crore rupees by the year 2023...Men's fairness cream market is anticipated to grow with a CAGR (compound annual growth rate) of 6-8% during the forecast period of 2018-2023." Report further suggests that easy access of media and entertainment, pressure of society to look well-groomed all the time, inferiority from colleagues at workplace, desire to try new products launched in the country, escalating number of young population, etc. are some of the factors which drove the market of women's fairness cream in last few years and still there's no looking back (Market Overview, 2018).

### **The Business of Beguiling Communication**

In the postmodern era, it is obvious that the consumer does not make consumption choices solely from products' utilities, that is, what they do, but also from their symbolic meanings, that is, what they communicate. The functions of the symbolic meanings of brands operate in two directions, outward in constructing the social world: *Social-Symbolism*, and inward towards constructing self-identity: *Self Symbolism*. The social-symbolic meanings of brands can be used to communicate to other people the kind of person we wish to be seen as (Elliott & Percy, 2007). The fairness cream category is not different, and advertisers work on the consumer psyche powerfully and constitute a consumer world that is carving for these symbolic identities.

It is difficult to resist the way advertising reinforces gender stereotypes and exploits insecurities about appearance and behavior. We see the social organizations and feminist groups criticize stereotypical ads in public debate and call for tough guidelines to ban inappropriate advertising messages. It is seen with the most advertising campaigns for fairness products in India where they have tried to create a cultural climate in which men or women with fair complexion is viewed as acceptable and appropriate. Women resort to fairness products to align themselves with social expectations to acquire "symbolic capital"<sup>4</sup> (Bourdieu, 1991).

Advertisers' appeals refer to a variety of ways that deliver a certain benefit, stimulation, identification, or reason to explain what consumers think about and why they buy products (Kotler, 1991). Today's media along with powerful advertising appeals change consumers' attitude by using broadcast messages to trigger consumers' inner momentum psychologically; consumers are likely to echo and recognize the advertising messages, and further change their attitude towards the advertised product (Schiffman, 2007; Kanuk, 2007). Advertising appeals are very stimulating and intriguing in promoting such products through beautiful faces and colorful media images to establish an emotive bond that their creams not only clean their complexion but also make them beautiful and confident!

In recent years we witnessed a widespread furor over a Protein World (protein drink) advertisement featuring a bikini-clad woman asking: "*Are you beach body ready?*" The advertising campaign got backfired as it claimed that one couldn't wear bikinis on the beach ...if she is not slim and fit with the right weight. It's an advertising campaign for

protein powder, and it implies that you need to starve yourself to be allowed to go to the beach. Nearly 400 complaints were made, with many saying the advert shamed women who did not conform to a supposed “ideal” and could exacerbate body image issues. Around 70,000 signed a petition calling for the campaign to be removed (The Week, 2017). Such messages implicate that you are lesser as a woman unless you fit that standard of body. Campaigns for fairness creams are similarly designed with the same flavor and tone in India as well. It's the representation of that aesthetic shown in the advertisements as the only acceptable female form is the cause of humiliation!

Every product comes with basic utility. We may use Paracetamol for moderate pain, and it sounds credible. So is the selling of detergent that suggests the cleaning of clothes. But the marketers feel that the same straightforward and sustainable claims are uneasy and improbable to market the fairness products.

The communication strategies among the fairness brands in the cosmetic industry are not very reasonable and relevant. Most brands share a common bottom line—to improve the dark complexion through ‘the before-after’ or ‘cause-effect’ advertising technique. The initial advertising campaigns of *Fair & Lovely*, the pioneering fairness cream were not responsible and respectable to the women as they claimed that fair skin is the only way to be successful as air-hostess, model, and cricket commentator. It kept on harping with poor advertising strategies where the girl is ‘rejected and accepted’ based on her fairness. Of course, later FAL sets up FAL Foundation with women empowerment initiatives to address its corporate image and stereotypical advertising. Mostly the advertising strategies of fairness brands remain indifferent as many social organizations and women groups protest against them for not portraying a ‘real woman.’ Serious accusations have been leveled against their brand strategies, but the business continues to flourish as Bollywood stars have thrown their weight to the promotion of these campaigns.

### **Unfairness Galore in Celebrity Endorsements<sup>5</sup>**

It is projected that there is a natural connection between stardom and fairness. Bollywood and its penchant for fairness are vibrantly noticed in most fairness treatments. Bollywood celebrities are often seen as the brand ambassadors of fairness creams for which they are hugely paid. Companies hire celebrities for their mass appeal, glamour, and dependability. Young audiences easily get along with these stars and feel satisfied and confident as products are endorsed by their choicest celebrities. They not only buy the products but also get carried away by the fantasy world created by these stars. With fairness advertising, mostly celebrities do not suffer the moral dilemma of promoting color discrimination and low self-esteem. With their specialized niche, they enhance the brand values of such products and provide a lot of media hype and draw attention from the general public. But it is truly regressive and demeaning to endorse the color of skin that is inherent and genetic.

All most all fairness advertisements strongly bank on the fan following of the celebrities and influence the young audience through ‘problem-solution’ technique. A problem is shown in the form of dull and dark skin individual who fails in life due to the poor complexion, and then solution comes as a friend celebrity with fair complexion highlights the secret of his or her success due to the particular fairness brand. The ‘big idea’ of selling the brands more or less remains the same as underlining the message that fairness cream can make you fair, attractive, and eligible for a better career and suitable wedding partner. Actors and actresses like Shahrukh Khan, Shahid Kapoor, John Abraham, Yami Gautam, Priyanka Chopra are the birds of the same feather - all endorsing the fairness

products for both men and women respectively. It is easy to believe and follow when popular celebrities add their charisma and glamour to the billion-dollar fairness industry. Superstars make super claims about the fairness brands that only make racist stereotypes stronger among the Indian consumer base. Here are some of the hyper testimonials from the Bollywood stars:

*Get Radiant Fairness That Lasts Even In The Sun.* (Neutrogena-Deepika Padukone)

*Get Up to 2 Tones Fairer In Just 7Days. Measure & See.* (Garnier Light-John Abraham)

*Unbeatable Fairness Up to 5 Hours In The Sun.* (Fair & Lovely SPF15- Yami Gautam)

*Transform Your Face On Facebook With Vaseline Men.* (Vaseline Men-Shahid Kapoor)

Despite their testimonials, there is a huge contradiction visible when celebrities fail to connect between the brand being endorsed and the brand used by them in reality. Their endorsements strongly influence the thinking process of the impressionable minds and create a strong association and positive image of the brand. But the celebrities hardly use the products in real life that they advertise on screen. What is paradoxical here is that many western global brands spread racism through fairness promotion, but these companies cannot dare to disseminate similar ideas in their countries of origin.

Film star King Khan Shahrukh was the first male star to endorse men's fairness cream *Fair and Handsome*. In one of the ads, Khan delivers the punch line "*Har koi Shah Rukhnahi ban sakta, par handsome to koi bhi hosakte hai* (everyone cannot become Shahrukh, but everyone can become handsome)." The message is quite clear – be fair, be handsome and be successful. Former Miss World Aishwarya Rai famously went on Tyra Banks Show, calling fairness creams racist and proclaiming that she would never endorse such products. However, the actress was the former face of L'Oréal's *White Perfect* range of creams. Another Bollywood damsel Priyanka Chopra admitted in an interview with The Guardian that she regretted her decision of endorsing a fairness cream (*Garnier Light Fairness Moisturizer*). Chopra had also revealed there was a point in life when she wished she had lighter skin. She went on to say that being the darkest in her family, she was called *kaali* (black), and that played on her psyche (Vinayak, 2017).

On the other hand, Kangana Ranaut, another Bollywood diva was very bold and honest in refusing any endorsement of a fairness product. She felt ashamed about any such kind of products and actors who endorse the same. "It's very sad, and I find it extremely humiliating because we're a country of beautiful people. Women should not be subjected to this discrimination. They're just stripped of their confidence and self-worth by such creams" (Pacheco, 2015). Abhay Deol was another star from the same Bollywood fraternity who took the courage to come openly in the media and dared to oppose the fairness brands and actors who are promoting them. Abhay Deol's Facebook posts valiantly named and shamed all the Bollywood stars who have endorsed fairness products (Bali, 2017). Still, there is a ray of hope when some noted celebrities from the film fraternity such as Kangana Ranaut, Ranbir Kapoor, Kalki Koechlin, Swara Bhaskar, and Randeep Hooda did not become the face of fairness products and refused to budge before the heavy cheques offered by the fairness firms.

## Socio-Cultural Obsession

To some extent, media reflects society and its preferences. The pursuit of beauty is inherent among women throughout centuries and cultures but it is awkwardly showcased in Indian matchmaking. The matrimonial ads are funny and creative, but they show the mindsets, attitudes, and values of the society where we live in. Advertising has portrayed that being

fair as a girl is an added advantage to find a suitable match but strangely bridegrooms are also projecting it as marital value. The future of fairness cream industry cannot be bleak when every engineer working in MNC showcases himself as fair and also demands an equally fair life partner:

Aryavysya Ayilyam fair 33/174 BE MS MNC Chn 15LPA, seeks suitable grad girl

Iyer, Kausiga Thiruvonam 29/165 BE(ECE) MNC, Well Placed, Seeks fair good looking Iyer girl

Christian 26/175, Born Again, fair, good looking, software, Tamil, Chennai. Now in the USA. Seeking fair, good looking, working girl

R.C. Naidu, Nair BE 30/162cm Actor, Fair seeks R.C. fair looking girl

Affluent South Delhi Based Highly Educated Christian Parents of Beautiful Fair Harvard MBA Girl27/158 Highly Accomplished Seek Groom post graduate US IVY League from decent well-educated family girl visiting India August (The Hindu, 2016)

In a country where the majority belongs to the dark-skinned people, advertising gives them nonstop brainwashing messages through media that to be darker means loser and fairer means winner. Generations were made to believe that dark complexions are inferior to fair ones. People have become more curious and supportive of such fairness products that spell the magic of white skin. The same sentiment percolates through the matrimonial ads in which fairness is 'the most important' pre-requisite for a suitable match as prospective bride and bridegroom. The message is clear: fair skin represents beauty and success, and as a result, Indians are keen consumers of products that promise to lighten skin. Matrimonial sections of print or online media reinforce what fairness brands talk every day in their advertisements. India today is a huge paradox of discrimination and prejudices towards the obsession of fair skin. It reflects the social discrimination and colonial hangover based on skin type. The survival of fairness industry becomes easy when the urban and educated citizens are making a 'fair skin' statement about their choice of partners. Advertisers cast their messages brilliantly and accentuate the sentiment further that fairness cream is an integral accessory of their everyday existence. With the promise that cosmetics present an ideal image, women believe that cosmetics will transform them and lift their self-confidence to a higher level (Bloch & Richins, 1992).

### **The Real Truth about Being 'Fair'**

It is fairly difficult to break the myth that empowers an individual by their skin color. Like Maggi (noodles) that offers instant gratification to hunger in 2 minutes, fairness ads spell the power of instant whiteness not only to dusky girls but even the guys who are equally tempted to re-incarnate themselves. A fairness tube that is bound to show results within 7-days is challenging the evolutionary process of humankind. Cosmetic dermatologists believe that skin complexion is an evolutionary trait that resulted from natural selection and ultraviolet exposure over thousands of years. People with dark complexion have more melanin than those who are light-skinned. The fairness cream advertisements hardly speak up about the biochemical effects of the products. If they promise to transform the user's skin by reducing the melanin, it is nothing short of a miracle. Reduced number of melanin is linked to skin cancer and melanoma. The advertisements don't come with a disclaimer over rampant use of fairness creams. Just like smoking and drinking, the ads must carry the statutory warnings on prolonged use of the creams (Meenal & Ishani, 2018).

It is beyond comprehension that the multi-million dollar industry expands its business with the surprising premise of turning the people's complexion fair, lovely and handsome. Does anyone check the validity and veracity of these claims? The glossiest print ads and mesmerizing TV commercials often hide what the ingredients these fairness cream contain? It is shocking to know these creams do silent damage to the users and unfortunately, this unsafe steroid and risky-chemical containing creams are licensed by the government labs and departments. Skin and beauty experts suggest that our skin color is determined by our race and genetic lineage which in turn decides the amount and structure of melanin. Fairness creams can only work to a certain extent. As per dermatology studies, achieving fairness up to 20% is possible, but not more than that. The fairness creams only block sun rays and prevent the secretion of melanin. Thus help in reducing tan and restoring natural skin (Gupta, 2015). Such claims cannot hold any legal ground, and they are ruthlessly playing with the sentiments of the audience by promising them the false hope of turning into fairer, better and superior lot.

## Conclusion

The success of fairness brands to a large extent also exposes how immature and insecure are we as a society. We think that our fair skin color opens up the avenues for better marriages, careers, promotions and even for the next generation. The booming business of fairness cream is also corollary to the fact that we continue to promote a white-skin obsessed society, on the one side we have the English-speaking urban population that creates a racist world by placing the matrimonial ads on the basis of skin color, caste, and creed in English dailies, while on the other side, rest of India also looks desperate where every next door girl trying to change her fortune by changing her complexion. How fairness brands promote their business may not be healthy, but society's attitudinal values are responsible for giving them a space to create a false and stereotypical aspiration among the consumers. We wear a strange perception of beauty and prejudices on our sleeve, and our insecurities about being dark are greatly reflected in fairness commercials.

The intense desire is further fuelled by the advertisers by creating a pseudo-realistic world where name and fame are possible only when one has bestowed enough fairness. While discussing the concept of consumption, Veblen (1979) still stands true that it was a basic fact of human society that people need to display their social status, and that the consumption of goods could be used to maintain a position of social prestige. To demonstrate a separation between the upper and lower classes, it was necessary to accord most status to the consumption of goods that had little or no functional value, a conspicuous waste of time and money. Symbolic brands become status symbols.

Advertising campaigns for the fairness brands should '*grow up*' with their creative strategies to reach a new set of the educated young Indian audience. It should refrain from representing that the color of the skin as the metric to climb up the social ladder and stop promoting the 'wannabe' white skin culture. These campaigns riding high on the popularity of celebrities continue thriving on the idea that fairness has a strong bond with being superior. It is too demeaning that we have been repeatedly conditioned to believe through powerful visual media that big and mighty are successful due to their fair complexion. Our colonized minds appreciate these fairness products based on this conditioning. Doing business and selling a fairness cream is not an offense but how they do the promotion is disparaging. We feel wretched and lost when we find a very insensitive standard of fairness and beauty in public life. And things get worst when we get trapped and aspire to achieve



perfect fairness and stop enjoying our natural complexion and body. It is a fact that a multi-million dollar fairness market cannot change skin color that is only possible by our race and genetic family. The onus is on the advertisers and brand managers to figure out a way to generate new creative ideas that don't compare or talk about fair over dark but sell it like any other product to treat it like just another product to groom oneself. Media should reflect the more diverse beauty of all gender and usher in a new era where dark skin is normal and equally beautiful. Advertising commercials can also have more positive health-centric and medically suitable claims. Unfortunately, companies would continue their fairness pitching as long as we do not appreciate our natural color. It's time to change our color prejudices and then resist them. It is always natural and comfortable to be in our skin.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) established in 1985 has adopted a Code for Self-Regulation in Advertising. It is a commitment to honest Advertising and fair competition in the marketplace. It stands for the protection of the legitimate interests of consumers and all concerned with Advertising - Advertisers, Media, Advertising Agencies and others who help in the creation or placement of advertisements. ASCI has one overarching goal: to maintain and enhance public confidence in advertising. Retrieved from <https://ascionline.org/index.php/ascicodes.html>

<sup>2</sup>We can consider a brand as the idea or image we have in mind when thinking about specific products, services and activities of a company, both in a practical (e.g. "the shoe is light-weight") and emotional way (e.g. "the shoe makes me feel powerful"). It is therefore not just the physical features that create a brand but also the feelings that consumers develop towards the company or its product. This combination of physical and emotional cues is triggered when exposed to the name, the logo, the visual identity, or even the message communicated. A product can be easily copied by other players in a market, but a brand will always be unique. "A brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (American Marketing Association). Retrieved from <https://www.thebrandingjournal.com/2015/10/what-is-branding-definition/>

<sup>3</sup>Advertising is a means of communication with the users of a product or service. Advertisements are messages paid for by those who send them and are intended to inform or influence people who receive them. A company that needs to advertise itself and its products hire an advertising agency. The company briefs the agency on the brand, its imagery, the ideas and values behind it, the target segments and so on. The agencies convert the ideas and concepts to create visuals, text, layouts, and themes to communicate with the user. After approval from the client, the ads go on air, as per the bookings are done by the agency's media buying unit. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/definition/advertising>

<sup>4</sup>Symbolic capital can be referred to as the resources available to an individual based on honor, prestige or recognition, and serves as the value that one holds within a culture. A war hero, for example, may have symbolic capital in the context of running for political office. Theorists have argued that symbolic capital accumulates primarily from the fulfillment of social obligations that are themselves embedded with potential for prestige. Much as with the accumulation of financial capital, symbolic capital is 'rational' in that it can be freely converted into leveraging advantage within social and political spheres. Unlike financial capital, symbolic capital is not boundless, and its value may be limited or magnified by the historical context in which it was accumulated. Symbolic capital must be identified within the cultural and historical frame through which it originated to fully explain its influence across cultures. Retrieved from <http://www.soc.duke.edu/~jmoody77/TheoryNotes/bourdieu.htm>

<sup>5</sup>Today most celebrities are keen on endorsing a product for which they are paid a high amount of money. Firms put loads of money in partnering their brands with qualities such as attractiveness, amiability, and dependability. But why endorse a product which one has not even used yet? For starters, customers derive a certain fulfillment for products endorsed by their favorite celebrities. Some would just prefer to buy a product or utilize a service endorsed by a celebrity. It is for these reasons that most companies today believe and trust that the endorsement of their products by a well-known celebrity will help sell their goods and services. While some critics state that they have a little positive impact on business sales, others assert that by using them, the benefits that a company can enjoy are countless. Retrieved from <https://www.marketing91.com/celebrity-endorsement/>

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