Obsessions with Fair Skin: Color Discourses in Indian Advertising

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Abstract

In India, the idea of beauty is often associated with fairness. Fairness creams abound in the market, and advertisements glorify fair skin. An analysis of television advertisements of fairness products shows how they connect fairness with achieving other personal goals, such as marriage, success, empowerment, job opportunities, and confidence. Focus-group interviews with Indian women reveal that most agree that an obsession with fairness and its projected attributes continues to prevail despite an awareness that beauty is a more personal and complex concept. Many believe the connection between beauty and fair skin arises from age-old historical beliefs that are now perpetuated in advertisements for fairness creams. Though these women do not personally rate fairness as a predominant indicator of beauty, they are aware of the culturally determined advantages of being fair and have themselves made efforts to look fair.

The economic liberalization that has occurred in India since the 1990s has resulted in an increase in multinational products in Indian markets and a change in consumer culture. Economic reform processes and political changes also consolidated middle-class identity and power. The rising middle class is now driving the economic forces of post-liberalized India, encouraging multinational corporations to produce more lifestyle products specially suited for that market.

Women in India have also seen their power and roles change. Researchers have documented women's increasing educational levels, urban mobility, use of technology, economic independence and political participation. India has more working women than any other country in the world. This includes female workers at all levels of skill—from the surgeon and the airline pilot to bus conductors and menial laborers. Accomplished women can be found heading multinational corporations and holding leadership roles in both the public and private sector. Indeed, India has the world's largest number of professionally qualified women, with more female doctors, surgeons, scientists, and professors than the United States. These women are now being targeted for a variety of products, ranging from cosmetics to cars, insurance, travel and hotel services, and many others.

Despite the achievements of its women, India has evolved as one of the major consumer markets for a product that would seem rather retrograde: skin-whitening creams. These "fairness creams" are based on niacinamide, which is known to control dispersion of melanin in the skin. It is a patented and proprietary formulation, which has a chemical that lightens the color of the skin through a process patented by Hindustan Lever in 1971. The product was first test-marketed as Fair & Lovely in the southern states of India in 1975; by 1990 it was available throughout the country. Intensive and aggressive advertising promised results within six weeks of using the product. Fair and Lovely "made a killing" in the first few years after its introduction and subsequently became the largest selling skincare cream in India.
Soap. Many competitive entrants followed. These included Fairiever by CavinKare Pvt Ltd, Fair Glow by Godrej Consumer Products, Ponds Dream Fairness cream from Ponds, Emami's Naturally Fair Fairness cream, and many more. International brands followed this trend as they added the whitening effect if they wanted to sell their face creams in the Indian market. These include Avon's VIP Fairness, Oriflame's Natural Northern Lights and Revlon's Touch & Glow. More expensive, similar creams and soaps include Lancôme's Blanc Expert Neurowhite Ultimate Whitening products, Yve St. Laurent's Blanc Absolute Serum, L'Oreal's White Perfect, Elizabeth Arden's Visible Whitening Pure Intensive, and Estee Lauder's White Light.

Despite the increase in competitors, Hindustan Lever Ltd (HLL) has monopolized the Indian market. According to Bhushan, Hindustan Lever's Fair & Lovely brand continues to be the leader in the category, with a volume share of 82 percent of the fairness creams and lotions category in July 2003 against 75 percent the previous year, as per the AC Nielsen retail audit, with an estimated turnover of $60 million. The product is more popular in South India, with the largest market (36 percent), followed by north and west (equally contributing 23 percent each), and 18 percent in the East. The spending on fairness creams advertising in India increased by 56 percent in 2004, with Hindustan Lever Limited (HLL) Company leading in market share (Financial Times 2006).

Fairness in India is often said to transcend all other aspects of beauty. 78 percent of women would like to be two shades lighter, as it makes them more attractive and confident. Jordon, analyzing the market for skin care products in the Indian market, described fair color as a cultural virtue, while Turnato, analyzing the Indian market trends described being fair as "real beauty, if you are white." In India, fairness products are not only being targeted at women but over the last few years, grooming and fairness products have been extended to men, as two leading manufacturers in India have recently introduced fairness cream for men.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the commercials that have created this enormous phenomenon and to find out how contemporary Indian women viewed them. As such, the research had two steps, an analysis of the existing television advertising and a series of focus groups.

The Advertisements

For the advertising analysis, I recorded more than 30 television commercials from the national channel Doordarshan and two cable channels, Star Plus and Zee TV. Most of the fairness cream advertisements are repeated across the channels. Though the products in these ads were primarily for fairness creams, two were for fairness soaps and one for skin lotion and talcum powder. I then analyzed these advertisements to develop a scheme of reference points. I identified themes, examined the roles of women in the ads, looked at the physical settings for the product's use, and noted the results shown in the ad due to the use of the product.

Overall, I found that the ads promised lighter skin, but also additional physical benefits, such as prevention of skin dryness, clearer skin (fewer blemishes), "natural" beauty, sunscreen protection, more radiant skin, and an "unbelievable glow to the skin." Almost all the creams affirmed that users would achieve "fairness" in four to six weeks. Nearly all the ads also promised social benefits. A majority featured courtship, engagement, or wedding scenes, but some promised jobs, family approval, and other positive outcomes.

What follows is an explication of a selection of representative ads. The commercials are predominantly in Hindi, so I have provided summations of the action within them, along with selected direct translations of important dialogues and voiceovers.

This first Fair & Lovely commercial represents the most typical narrative in the sample. A
girl's father receives a call stating that the eligible groom's family will be visiting them next month for the engagement and to plan for the wedding. The girl overhears the conversation and states, "Let them come," indicating her confidence because she uses *Fair & Lovely*. The voiceover in the ad explains that the cream has milk protein and sunscreen, and brings out the inner beauty of the women. The cream efficacy is demonstrated with multiple images of the actress' face getting lighter over time. After the product demo, we see a party, at which the bride and groom are to be introduced, a common custom in India, where eligible men and his family are invited to see and meet the prospective bride and her family. The fiancé, when he sees his prospective bride, is totally mesmerized by the girl's looks. When they come together by accident, he tells her, without even having had a conversation with her, "Lets get married...today itself," and picks her up in his arms while the parents smile happily in the background.

In another spot, the economy of the product adds a value to this basic narrative. The implication is that anyone can afford *Fair & Lovely*. A worried father tells his calm wife that an eligible man is coming to see their daughter. He also adds that the boy has rejected three girls "by just looking at their faces." The mother raises her palm, showing five fingers. But her husband cannot "read" the significance of the gesture. The five fingers are raised to signify the low cost of the cream (Rupees 5 or about US 20 cents) that will make their daughter beautiful and glowing. In the product break, the spot explains that the cream works by creating a barrier from the sun and brings a fair glow to the skin. Later, during the traditional wedding, the groom is amazed to see her. He tells her, "Your face is glowing. What is the secret behind this glow? Is it love or something else?" The girl has a "sly" smile on her face and "shushes" the groom by holding up her hand in the same way the mother did. The father is still wondering how this was all achieved and is still wondering about the significance of "the five fingers" as his daughter is getting married. In the background, the voiceover emphasizes the low cost of *Fair & Lovely*. The ad is intended to address those who want only to sample/use the product as well as those who may be unable to afford the standard size. In India, as well as throughout the poorer parts of Asia, small volume sample sizes or "sachets" of many toiletries and household products have been made available so that even the very poor may purchase them in the vast rural markets in India.
Notice that in both these ads, the father is the contact person for the impending marriage, as is traditional in Indian society, where arranged marriages are still prevalent. Because the parents are often pictured to be "brokering" the daughter's future in fairness commercials, the promise offered by the cream often implies parental approval, as well as romantic success.

In contrast, another Fair & Lovely commercial promises preference in job hiring. The ad again opens with a father, but this time he looks considerably more downscale. Dressed in an undershirt and sitting in a modest home, he asks for a cup of coffee. His wife tells him there is no milk and curses him for depending on his daughter's income. A brief cut shows the daughter riding home on a crowded bus, seemingly exhausted after a hard day's work. Aloud, the father wishes he had a son (Indian culture prefers sons over daughters as a means of providing for the material care of parents in their old age. Since ancient times, sons have stayed near parents, while daughters were married away, and the male children have also customarily been better positioned to secure employment and incomes that would make parental care possible.) The daughter overhears the conversation and becomes upset. When the mother asks her if she wants coffee, she tells her to give it to the father and runs to her room crying because she cannot provide enough for her parents. She looks at other jobs in the paper and circles a job for an airhostess. She looks at her dark image in the mirror just as the Fair & Lovely commercial appears on her television. She decides to try the cream. In the following scene, she is transformed from the "incapable" daughter to a smart, young, fair woman, who incidentally now appears in western attire. At her interview for an airline hostess's job, the potential employers are impressed with her looks, and she is given the job. Delighted, she takes her parents to an upscale hotel. The father asks, "Dear, can I have a coffee?" And he gets not only the coffee, but milk, too. Other similar advertisements show women landing media jobs as television reporters or as models. Of course most of them have the approval and encouragement of the parents, sisters or friends.
Notice that even though the situation is employment, rather than marriage, a fair complexion is presumed to have a positive effect on the outcome. This suggests how strongly fairness may be preferred, even in upwardly mobile, modern India. It may also be noticed also, however, that parental approval is still playing a major role—in either case, the comfort of the parents is as much at stake as the romantic future of the heroine. The pressure to be fair seems, in some ways, even more dramatic in this spot than in the wedding scenarios, as responsibility for the material hardship of the parents (not even being able to afford milk for coffee) is placed squarely on the daughter's dark complexion.

Other commercials for Fair & Lovely, as well as for its competitors, return us to the themes of immediate male infatuation and parental approval. Some, however, introduce other themes. The next few commercials are selected to exemplify the range of executions.

In the Ponds' Real Glow skin cream, for instance, the intended audience is younger—this spot is aimed at teenage girls. Not only does this spot expand the audience, it illustrates a general expansion in claims that has occurred as the pressure to differentiate has increased. Other companies and fairness products, in order to compete in the market with Fair & Lovely, have begun to address concerns other than fairness, such as differences in skin type. At what appears to be a slumber party full of teenage girls, one of the girls pretends to be an emcee, announcing into her hairbrush, "It's just not enough to be fair these days." All other girls nod their heads in agreement. She continues, "Along with fairness, we all need to have a soft fresh glowing skin. We need dream fairness." The scene cuts to a more authoritative-looking spokesperson for Ponds, who reiterates that "Girls not only need fairness but also a glowing soft skin," so they have come up with Ponds Dream Fairness cream. And, unlike Fair & Lovely, these creams are made for different skin types. The demo includes the requisite multiple-image lightening process for the young actress who appears in the ad's narrative. In the last scene, the girls enter an auditorium, and the young girl with the glowing skin tells the Master of Ceremonies, "For the time being...I want your job," which indicates a new level of self-confidence. Thus, we again see the new roles and confidence of Indian women, as exemplified in the next generation, but there is still the concern with fairness.
The Ponds Fair and Young cream is targeted at slightly older and married women, promising, in addition to fairness, that it will remove wrinkles around the eyes and promote younger-looking skin. The fact that this woman is successfully married and has a child promises that such a woman can still generate desire in a man, provided that her skin is fair.

In the first scene, a couple appears to be lying on a bed. The husband is staring at the wife, entranced and enthralled. The scene, with its soft background music, implies that a man is so impressed with his wife's young soft looks that he cannot take his eyes off her. In a voiceover, he says, "I don't know what to say...It's just like that feeling in the song...He wants to touch and kiss her...even in the car." We now see the couple in the car, with their young son in the back seat. The husband, apparently unable to control himself, reaches across the front seat to kiss his wife. She is surprised, but expresses friendly annoyance because their young son is present, making it an awkward moment to express and show such passion. In the third scene, they are dressed to go out. The man again touches his wife's face, in a bit more of a pinch, followed by a stroke. At first, she seems genuinely irritated, but then looks into her husband's eyes with adoration.
The need to be fair transcends age, and the quest for fairness continues even after marriage. A commercial for *Nivea Visage Fairness Cream* shows a slightly older woman who shyly declares that her husband is totally enamored with her glowing white skin (thanks to *Nivea Visage*) and he can’t stop calling her to tell her that. In the voice over, we hear of usefulness of the cream in bringing out the radiance on her face. The model fondly states that her husband had called four times since that morning; when the phone rings, presuming that it is her husband, she lovingly says “Hello sweetheart” only to be embarrassed that its her father and not the husband who is calling.

An *Emami* commercial presents a dream sequence—and a dreamlike transformation of skin (and, consequently, a similar dreamlike transformation of life). A girl in a bed looks at a pearl and wishes her face and skin was as fair as a pearl. The lady in the pearl says there is a “fair miracle from the seas, the *Emami Fair Pearls Cream* is made from real pearls and herbs….For the first time in India, the cream that uses pearls and reduces darkness, gives clear and young-looking skin in just four weeks.” Again, we see the multiple-image transformation. In the last scene, the woman is glowing and being admired by a man, this time through an aquarium. The invocation of the power of natural materials (“real pearls and herbs”) in a quite unnatural setting may not be intended to be ironic, but clearly is, given that these creams, in fact, use chemicals to change the very nature of one’s skin.
Many have remarked that the Indian desire for fairness may hark back to colonial influences, though the evidence suggests that the value placed on fair skin has a much longer history. Even so, this commercial for Lakme Fair Perfect cream implies a link between the desire for light skin and emulation of European women. The scene begins with a conversation between two men on a flight to Paris. One of them says, "Paris is a beautiful place." Seeing a young lady walk in, he adds, "The French women are also very pretty." The man admires the woman and states, "What a face—beautiful skin." The voiceover describes how the Lakme Fair Perfect cream has milk proteins, honey, and cucumber to make the skin look "perfect." The young woman echoes this judgment: her lighter skin is now "perfect." One of the men comments, "We heard that French women fall for Indian men." The woman turns and replies in Hindi, "Well, I have not heard of that." The men, who had thought their words had not been understood because they had assumed the woman was French, now realize their mistake and sheepishly hide their faces.
Another aspiration tactic is to use celebrities, especially ones with light coloring. In the last two decades, Indian women have won many international titles of Ms. World, Ms. Universe and Ms. Asia Pacific. Most beauty queens also turn to modeling or become Bollywood actresses. Advertisements tend to use these beauty queens and actresses to endorse beauty products.  

In one of the *Fair & Lovely* commercials, Aishwarya Rai, the former Miss World and famous Bollywood actress is shown returning from her honeymoon. Her family, especially her sister, is in awe of her fair complexion at the airport. The sister asks her, "What is the reason for such a glow ...is it marriage or something else?" In the next scene, Aishwarya Rai attributes her clear fair skin to the use of *Fair & Lovely* and advises her sister to also use the cream. The sister happily states, "I will also make a beautiful bride." In another commercial, former Ms. Asia Pacific Diya Mirza, who is fair, is endorsing the *Emami Naturally Fair* fairness cream. An expert beautician emphasizes Emami's natural ingredients free from other chemical fairness creams. The final scene shows a makeover of the beauty queen and actress from a dull dry blemished skin to a fair glowing skin. As she steps out, a man cannot take his eyes off her and crashes into a pole.

*Video 9.*
Fair & Lovely spot with Aishwarya Rai.
Click to view video
Top selling products like *Fair & Lovely* and *Emami* are not only diversifying into other product ranges, but are being upgraded for greater involvement among the audiences while promising a variety of other results. An advertisement for the *New Advanced Formula Fair & Lovely* begins with a young woman who is amazed at the transformation of her skin in just six weeks, "something that never happened before." A voice-over states that *New Advanced Formula Fair & Lovely*, with added vitamins and double sunscreen, gives you protection and also brings out the glow in you. The young girl again repeats that her skin has never "glowed so much in just six weeks," as we see the visible changes in the transition from the first to the sixth week.

Most fairness ads, as stated earlier, revolve around personal relationships, and approval as well as admiration from men. Wade showed a positive relationship between skin color and sexual attraction and self esteem among African Americans. A teaser advertisement in a restaurant shows a man who, although sitting with his girlfriend, has a roving eye for other young pretty girls passing by. The girlfriend, who is not seen in the picture, shows annoyance by hitting his hand. But five to 10 days later, he cannot take his eyes off his girlfriend (even though she reminds him when the other girl is passing by) as he notices that she is looking prettier (fairer) by the day and glowing by the end of 15 days. The voice-over states that it is the compelling effect of Shahnaz Hussain's (a noted beautician) "*Fair One*": in just 15 days she has the undivided attention of her boyfriend.
In terms of settings, these advertisements generally featured a family or young women in their late teens or early twenties, on the threshold of getting a job or about to be married. Even if they were married, they had to continue using the fairness creams if they wanted to be loved and admired by their husbands. To add scientific credibility to the concepts, some of the products were endorsed by beauticians. Ads that showed career women also featured the parents, who also approved of the use of such fairness creams for their daughter's success. Others stressed the need to for increasing self-esteem by advising women to take care of their personal grooming, albeit with the use of fairness creams.

How do these themes affect the women in India? The focus groups interviews revealed interesting data.

The Response

Focus groups were conducted in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, a southern Indian state. Fairness cream advertising and usage are often focused on southern Indians, as southern Indians have darker skin tones than northern Indians. The residents of southern India are believed to be the historical descendants of the Dravidians, who were darker than the ancestors in the north, the Aryans.

Two of my graduate students helped me conduct these focus groups. We are all familiar with the Hyderabad area. I also used interviews with staff from marriage bureaus to review the types of matrimonial advertisements in newspapers. This study was conducted before the launch of the fairness creams for men.

The respondents were 35 young women living in urban areas. Two groups were comprised of eight students each from junior and undergraduate colleges. The other two groups were comprised of 19 older working and non-working women. More than half were aged 17-23 years. This age group was chosen because they are the prime market for fairness products. They are also in the age range of young girls who are getting into new careers or getting set for marriage. The older women were employees in local companies, college teachers, or housewives. Most held undergraduate or graduate degrees. A majority of the respondents were from the middle class, which includes the 200-300 million Indians that are the target for most of the consumer goods advertisements.¹⁶

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The interviews were intended to examine six major areas of interest: general opinions on fairness, problems associated with having dark skin, fairness as it relates to marriage prospects and careers, fairness as it relates to self-confidence and social status, recall of specific advertising for fairness creams, and belief in and use of the products. All interviews were recorded but not videotaped. The women were treated to a lunch as a mark of appreciation for participation.

General opinions about fairness

Most of the women emphasized that Indian society gives too much importance to fairness. For instance, one respondent said, "They have made it [fairness] a craze, and it's in our mind that we must be fair to get a good husband or get a good career." One woman blamed advertising for this "craze": "It's all this madness of cosmetics and advertisements that push you into believing and using the products...sometimes we women behave like fools in our quest to look good." Another said, "It's all a media hype to sell all those fairness creams like Fair & Lovely. It is high time women protested against these products that are creating unreal expectations among us Indian girls." Expanding the blame, yet another added, "To add fuel to fire, television serials are also making dark skin a big issue and telling us the problems of dark girls; next they will tell us to commit suicide if we are dark."

Many acknowledged multiple sources for the phenomenon. Beginning when they are young, mothers, grandmothers, and friends all look at and admire fair women, according to these respondents. The fair person catches immediate attention. "It's the Indian mindset, along with the advertising and the screen heroines who are all fair." Ancient cosmetic practices were invoked: "During marriages also, girls are asked to wash their faces with yogurt and turmeric to look fair on the big day." Therefore, the traditional cosmetic practices to look fair are extended with the application of fairness creams because "women are conditioned from childhood to adulthood to look fair."

Some of them condemned the obsession with fairness and said such things as, "Inner beauty is more important than external looks," yet others had positive attitudes about being fair and have made efforts to take care of their skins: "It's good to be fair; everyone wants to look nice, and fair people do look beautiful." One of the younger respondents declared, "I would like to be fair, and honestly everyone tries all means to look fair and look like beauty queens."

Some respondents did not think that fairness alone constituted beauty. One of the respondents added, "A beautiful woman is someone who is smart, self-confident, and dresses well." In general, responses indicated that the women realized that looks matter in this world and a woman should strive to be attractive with "expressive eyes and a pleasant smile on her face," but not necessarily fair-skinned. "The best qualified and progressive Indian women are not fair," said another. One respondent said "It's also difficult to change the mindset [that fair is beautiful] as women are glued to the television soaps, and the more they see the fair women and fairness product ads, the more they are convinced of the need to be fair. Further to add to the drama, they also see problems of the dark girls as shown in the serial Saath Phere: Saloni Ka Safar. Others demurred: "Why should we run after fair women [as models] when we have had capable women like Indira Gandhi as our former prime minister and Kiran Bedi as the best policewoman in the country?"

The problem of being dark

Being dark was seen as the source of many social problems, from the family to school to marriage. "Dark girls suffer from a kind of inferiority complex," claimed a younger girl. According to one of them, "They [dark girls] have to make more efforts to look good and presentable, unlike the fair girls."

Being dark, according to the respondents, sometimes resulted in social segregation and name-calling: "People call you kali [blacky], and this reduces your self-esteem." Another social problem cited by the respondents was the diminished ability to make friends:
“Everyone wants to be friends with the fair and pretty girls, and the dark girls are left out of the crowd, even if they are clever, intelligent, and good at studies or work.” Another respondent observed that the obsession with fairness was not limited to just Indian society: “Around the world, dark people are looked down upon… Even a man like Michael Jackson, the famous rich musician, went through so many surgeries to look fair, so one can't really blame many of us women.”

Even at home and in childhood, dark skin was a problem for women. Some of the older respondents, including a mother, stated that mothers prevented their daughters from playing in the sun for fear of them becoming dark.

There were mixed reactions to the question of whether fair women, in contrast, received preferential treatment. Many were of the opinion that fair girls were to some extent favored by teachers for parts in school plays, got more attention from others, and, especially, got more attention from men. Some of the responses included: “Of course teachers liked and favored my fair classmate more than the others”; “Fair girls get selected to play the heroine roles, while the dark ones are given secondary and negative roles”; and “The same is true of many Indian movies also.” Dark girls are snubbed and called names by friends: “A fair girl attracts attention even if a dark girl has better features”; and “Fair girls are always proud of their looks and others are envious of them.”

**Fairness as it relates to marriage prospects and careers**

The foremost problem associated with being dark-skinned, as voiced by all respondents, was the problem of getting married. Ultimately, family pressure, in particular, was focused on marital prospects. Two of the married women also opined, “As much as we like to put values over looks, it's not reality. I have known some really good and educated dark girls finding it extremely difficult to get a husband, let alone a good one.” One woman from the older age group stated that “being the fairer one, I got more marriage proposals than my darker sister.” Therefore, “it was necessary to try all means, and definitely the fairness creams, to look fairer.” Another respondent gave an example of how her fair neighbor got married to a dark man working in the U.S.: “It's the woman who has to be fair; the man can be as black as coal —what double standards in this society.”

It was not only older women who had this experience, however; despite the strides made by Indian women, fairness was a concern even among the girls between 17-19 years old, who showed an understanding of the “requirements” of being marriage eligible. “Fair girls are seen as less of a burden to parents to get them married, even if they are not educated or are not working.”

Even still, the respondents reiterated that the prejudice was not just in the marital arenas, but had spread to job preferences as well. One of the undergraduate students stated that dark girls tend to suffer from a social stigma and inferiority complex: “Fair girls are preferred not only for marriages, but also in jobs too, especially for receptionists and airhostesses … as if these places are reserved for fair girls.”

**Fairness, respect, status, and confidence**

Respondents disagreed among themselves as to whether being fair raises a woman's level of respect or confidence. Though the literature review suggested that fairness was associated with status and respect, a majority of women in all the four focus groups did not agree: “Fairness may call for attention, as people get attracted by looking at a fair person, but this does not mean we also respect them,” said one respondent. “[because] people may admire the beauty of the fair women, but this may not translate into respect or superior status.” Yet three women emphatically said: “It may not be obvious, but a fair daughter and fair daughter-in-law get preferential treatment and more respect in the family”; “it's the dark women who are snubbed and not treated well, while the beautiful (fair) ones get better treated—it happens at work … we know it as teachers”; “we may be reluctant to admit it, but its this 'mad' mindset of people who respect and bow before the 'fair skinned.'”
The respondents were asked to reflect on whether being fair had given them confidence and an edge over others. This question brought smiles across the four groups. A majority of them were not agreeable to this statement: "As we are of wheatish [a common term used in India for a light shade of brown] complexion, we are okay and do not suffer these complexes in a big way as the really dark people." Some said that it was their education, inner strength, their values, and their jobs that give them the confidence. One woman admitted that if she were fair, better looking, and had a good figure, it would also give her more confidence to face the world. In addition, the women stated that styles of clothes, colors, and fashions look good on fair people—a "fact" highlighted by the film stars, models, and celebrities. A few blamed the advertisements: "It's the advertisements of the fairness products that talk about fairness and confidence; it's not true of real life." Some of their other comments included: "It's so ridiculous to compare confidence with fairness; dumb fair women also lack confidence if they do not have the right values and expertise in anything."

**Opinions about the advertising of fairness products**

As we saw in the analysis of the television commercials above, the fairness campaigns glorify fairness and associate it with marriage, careers, romance, love, and so on. Most of the women had seen the advertisements: "One cannot miss them as they are on every TV channel"; "These are particularly aired during the prime-time women serials which compel us to watch them." A majority of the respondents blamed advertising for glorifying fairness and compelling women to use these products: "It's just getting worse, not better"; "Advertising is making us do many more things we don't want to do, and well, since these are cosmetics for looking fair and beautiful, which woman would like to ignore these beautifying products"; "The six-week change is so impossible, but sounds good if one can change"; "One can now get imported fairness creams."

The proposition that advertising was influencing women to use fairness creams was much debated. A majority of women also condemned the advertising. One said: "Advertising is also a culprit, constantly telling us we won't get married or everyone will treat us badly if we are not fair." Another response: "While many of the educated women could take this kind of advertising with a 'grain of salt,' it was not true of many young women across the country, who are getting influenced by these advertisements, which promise a world of benefits for being fair"; "fairness products are selling like hotcakes; with so much advertising, it's quite obvious that it is the advertisements that were attracting the persons to become fair." Finally, a majority agreed that advertising was supporting and reinforcing the fairness ideals, and young women were being lured by the advertisements to become fair.

When asked to recall the fairness creams, almost all the women were able to recall many of the products. *Fair & Lovely* was the most-named product, followed by others like *Pond's Dream Fairness Cream, Fairever, Fairglow, Vicco, Nivea Visage, Emami Naturally Fair, L'Oreal* and many others. The respondents could easily recall the names of products as well as the messages highlighted in the ads. At least six brands were recalled by all the groups and were at the top of their minds. These mostly included the Indian brands, *Fair & Lovely, Fair and Lovely winter care cream, Godrej's Fair Glow, Emami Fairness cream, Ponds, and Vicco Turmeric.*

As to whether the respondents believed in the promises of the ads, the answers were mixed. Some were skeptical about the content of the product claims. A young respondent said, "We know we won't become fair, but we know that it's just a sunblock, so the idea is not to get darker than we already are." Some believed that "the fairness creams made them look fairer [in their minds]." One woman stated, "After all, we have to keep up with the times, and these creams give us an internal satisfaction about our attempt to look good." Another woman stated, "Fairness is the promise of 'good looks'; so whether we want to believe or not, we tend to buy the product like any others, that will make us look better. After all, hope is what one hopes for."
The use of fairness products

Some respondents stated they did not believe in the advertisements and did not use the fairness products. There was instant opposition from others. One of the women asked rhetorically, "Why would there be so many products in the market, advertised so much, if they did not have an effect on us?"

Indeed, at least a third to a half of them in all the groups finally admitted that they had used or were using fairness creams. "Since we use some foundation, we tend to use these creams…maybe it will make us fair," said one woman. Another said, "My mother uses them and encourages us also to use the creams everyday." It was interesting to see that though the majority of respondents did not associate beauty with fairness, the majority agreed that women made efforts to look fair. These responses surely reflect the societal norms and requirements as well as commercial forces that compel women to look fair.

Conclusions

Based on these conversations with an admittedly limited group, women in India seem to be aware of an existing Indian belief that "fair is beautiful." Marketers have exploited this phenomenon to their advantage in promoting fairness creams, lotions, and soaps. The themes of their ads echo this cultural message: fairness is associated with increased marriage eligibility, greater physical attraction to men, career achievement, and an increase in status and confidence. So, not surprisingly, the Indian markets are saturated with fairness creams.

Though we find that women understand that they are in a modern world, there is a dissonance among the educated young women, who realize that beauty can be only skin deep and have examples of many successful women who are not fair, but who, in the end, cannot dismiss or change the societal expectations of the "white culture of India," as stated by one of the respondents. The idea of beauty and fairness, as they believe, is that of social default from historical times to the present. The fairness prejudice manifests itself from early childhood where there is discrimination at home, at school, college or in offices.

Women agree to the fortune of being fair and advertising exploits this weakness. Thus, many blame the media for perpetuating these "false notions of fairness," either through product advertising or through prime time serials that project the problems of dark girls who have to be "dark virtuous women" if they are to be preferred to the "fair vamps." According to these women, the Indian media is constantly emphasizing the ugliness of being dark and the privileges of being fair.

So, it is not the case that women are blindly using these products from complete gullibility. Instead, due to their own socially-constructed desire to look fair, many woman who claim to "know better" nevertheless buy these products. Though women believe that in principle this prejudice needs to be condemned, they feel that there is no escape, in the words of one respondent, "given the commercial interests of marketers and advertisers who thrive capitalizing on this belief."

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References and Other Related Readings


Dwyer, R. 2000. All you want is money, all you need is love: sex and romance in modern India. London: Cassell Publishers.


Notes


17. Media and social practices continue to reiterate the problems of dark-skinned girls and women. An interesting television serial on Zee TV that is being telecast in over 12 countries titled 'Saath Phere—Saloni Ka Safar' (Seven rounds of the scared fire that symbolize the Hindu marriage and Saloni's (name of the woman) journey of life) encapsulates the trials and tribulations of a dark skinned girl, who despite having very good qualities (of being honest and helpful, of caring for the family, even of being good cook and talented dancer) is looked down upon by her family, relatives and also her own fair sister. In the growing years she is shunned by all and is constantly rejected by potential grooms. There is hope and peace in the household, when one good wealthy family recognizes her inner beauty and she is married to a handsome young man. Her problems are not over when an older woman of the house taunts her color and also presents her with "imported fairness creams." She has to prove her good qualities several times to be loved and recognized in the family of all the 'fair ones,' and the saga continues.


Sources

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