International Journal of Research (IJR)
e-ISSN: 2348-6848
p-ISSN: 2348-795X
Vol. 9 Issue 03
March 2022

Neither 'Fair' nor 'Lovely': Commercial Exploitation of Colour Bias

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Abstract:

The media is powerful enough to form notions, change opinions, bring in transformation or reinforce the status quo in different areas of our lives. Advertising, very crucial to media's projection of people, is a major factor in deciding what we buy or we do not. However advertising does not just influence the buying behaviour, it also offers great insights into the socio-cultural and economic life of communities than a whole shelf of conventional histories. Advertising is undoubtedly unmatched as a window on the contemporary society. A closer examination reveals the ideology underlying these advertisements. While some advertisements are progressive, a majority of them reinforce stereotypes of gender, class, race and sexuality.

This paper explores the fairness cream advertisements like Fair and Lovely, Fairever Mantra, Fair and Handsome etc. These advertisements exploit the preference for a lighter skin tone, long embedded within the Indian psyche. Initial advertisers resorted to stereotypical representations of women as consumers of skin bleaching products. With the launch of Fair & Handsome, exclusively for men, there was a revolution that breaks taboos, and permits men to openly acknowledge their interest in personal care. At the same time, this also opens up a potentially huge consumer market for the advertised brand. This paper examines whiteness as a normative construct. Simultaneously it also examines the shifting societal dynamics. The paper concludes that these advertisements reveal a growing consciousness of an orientation in the education of girls and women that perpetuates sexism and within-culture racism.

Keywords: Beauty standards, whiteness, personal care products, advertisements, stereotypes, intra-cultural racism

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of us all?"

Countless women in the world since the days of 'Snow White & the Seven Dwarfs' have posed this question to their 'not-so-fair' reflections. Fair skin is considered an asset, identical with beauty. In India, the words for fair and beautiful are synonymous (Franklin; Hall,R). "Fairness" or having fair skin is considered an important element in constructing female beauty in Indian culture. This predilection for fair skin is evident all across the Indian

e-ISSN: 2348-6848
p-ISSN: 2348-795X
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society. Matrimonial advertisements are full of captions that read "Fair and Handsome man looking for fair and good-looking bride…" In the glamour industry, fair skin is considered a great advantage and most actors and models are predominantly fair skinned. There is a vast difference in the way a fair-skinned foreigner is treated compared to a dark-skinned foreigner. Even among the non-white races, the 'fair is beautiful' mindset is widely prevalent in society cutting across class and gender. Heather Kroes points out that "throughout the world there is a general notion that the whiter an individual is the better they are and the more pleasing they are to the eye (*sic*)." However as Kroes observes:

> But what is beautiful? Who defines it? … The truth is one cannot ascertain an unconditional definition of beauty. It simply does not exist and it would be haphazard to even attempt to define the abstract concept of physical attractiveness. The old adage, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," is as close as we shall ever come.

Contemporary meanings of fairness are influenced by Western ideologies as well as traditional Indian values and beliefs. Some would argue that our fixation with the fair skin is intrinsic to our society. The beauty ideal of white skin in Asia predates colonialism and the introduction of Western notions of beauty (Wagatsuma). Some historians trace the preference to the Vedic associations with purity some thousands of years ago. Prof. Shalini Bharat, a socio-psychologist with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, believes this complex is a result of the country's history: "India's rulers have always been fair, be it the Aryans in the early centuries or Europeans in later years. Fairness is equated with superiority, power and influence, therefore the preference for lighter skin" (quoted in Chadha). Contemporary meanings of white skin combine Western mass-mediated ideologies and traditional Asian cultural values (Li *et al*). For some others "white" skin has a colonial connotation of power and superiority. The popularity of Caucasian and Eurasian models reflects the postcolonial structure of commoditization and consumerism and is still influenced by a colonial past (Goon and Craven). Consequently, dark skin is associated with being poor, living in a village, coming from a 'lower' caste or tribe. Old miniature paintings depict people of various complexions, but the darker skins are that of attendants and servers, while the royalty and privileged class are fair. Poems in different regional languages, across the ages, celebrate the 'marble-like' body and the 'moon-face'. And some others think it maybe the vestige of the British colonial legacy. All the above factors and many more complex ones may account for such a belief. However, in present times, the marketing and publicity divisions of the

e-ISSN: 2348-6848
p-ISSN: 2348-795X
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companies selling fairness creams are fuelling this obsession. It is an established fact that good marketing and sales strategies can sell snow to an Eskimo. And when done effectively, marketing is like mass propaganda.

In today's media animated world, print and electronic media are the dream tools of any marketing professional. The media is powerful enough to form notions, change opinions, bring in transformation or reinforce the status quo in different areas of our public or private lives. From the debates, deliberations, surveys and studies carried out on the media potential, there is consensus that media in general and television in particular is capable of revisioning ideological formations and recreating history and culture.

The invasion of advertising in both print and electronic media has been much discussed and debated. There are few things that have more impact on our lives today than advertising. Advertising is a major cultural institution that mirrors and shapes our lives. Advertising has 'taught' us many things, and is a major factor in deciding what we buy or we do not. Advertising has been defined as 'any human communication intended to persuade or influence buyers in their purchase decisions' (Cheng, 74). However advertising does not just influence the buying behaviour, it also offers great insights into the socio-cultural and economic life of the people. Advertising is undoubtedly unmatched as a window on the contemporary society. And advertising is very crucial to media's projection of people. Also, the constant bombardment of advertising images of gender, types of persons, social classes and other groups influences our social learning process (Roy). As Goldman points out advertising is a major social and economic institution that seeks to maintain cultural hegemony by providing us socially constructed ways of seeing and making sense of our world. A close examination of the advertisements reveals several complex ideologies intersecting and interacting. While some of these advertisements may be progressive, a majority of them reinforce stereotypes of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

My essay examines two aspects of the fairness cream commercials aired on Indian television: the stereotypes these commercials rely upon to promote their product; and the mode in which these commercials reinforce stereotypes thereby legitimising the prevalent ideologies, and aid in maintaining the socio-cultural hierarchies and justify a system largely in favour of the socio-culturally privileged, the economically advantaged and the politically powerful.

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p-ISSN: 2348-795X
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The fairness cream advertisements and television commercials in India exploit the preference for a lighter skin tone, ingrained within the Indian psyche. The concept of beauty is delineated by the widespread notion of white superiority upheld by advertisements.

The elite, the flourishing and the beautiful — all share a common thing, fair skin. Or, that is the message spread advertisements and television commercials. Timmons says "the modern Indian woman is independent, in charge, and does not have to live with her dark skin…. Often they (the ads) are peddled with a "power" message about taking charge or getting ahead." The advertisements for these products often play on the insecurities and inability of people to achieve and prosper in life, such as pursuing a career, job prospects and marriage options down to low self-esteem and confidence predominantly as a result of dark skin. Most advertisements for the creams tend to portray that dark skin will hold a person back, whereas fair skin will mean social acceptance and even success in the chosen profession, as well as among the opposite sex. With the disintegration of conventional racial boundaries in many parts of the world, the pervasive and increasing consumption of skin-lightening products testifies to the greater than ever significance of colourism—social hierarchy based on gradations of skin tone within and between ethnic groups.

The use of skin lighteners is growing fast among girls and women in both urban and rural sectors. Although global in scope, the skin-lightening market is highly segmented by nation, culture, race, and class. The role of transnational pharmaceutical and cosmetic corporations in fueling the desire for lighter skin through print, Internet, and television advertisements that associate light skin with modernity, social mobility, and youth is unparalleled. As Kroes points out:

> The pursuit of fairer skin is not solely a quest of upward social mobility however. The desire for paleness also stems from the widely held notion that black males are more sexually attracted to women with lighter skin. Whiteness equalled femininity. The media sends rather direct messages that confirm and maintain the link between fair skin and the feminine ideal.

Bourdieu (1986) observed that at a theoretical level, whiteness is a source of "symbolic cultural capital." So light skin operates as a form of symbolic capital, one that is especially significant for women because of the link between skin colour and attractiveness and desirability. It is also associated with upper class images, luxury, prestige and success in Asian cultures (Rhada). Simultaneously light skin is commoditised and the deluge of fairness

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p-ISSN: 2348-795X
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advertisements that increase the propensity for consumption leads to the feeling that possessing a certain commodity is essential to show that one belongs to the higher echelons of society.

Until recently the advertisers resorted to stereotypical representations of women as consumers of skin bleaching products. With the launch of *Fair & Handsome* exclusively for men, a few years ago, we witnessed a revolution that breaks taboos, and permits men to publicly acknowledge their interest in personal care. At the same time, this also opens up a potentially huge consumer market for the advertised brand. My essay examines the ramifications of whiteness as a normative beauty construct as propagated by the skin lightening cream commercials.

From the urban affluent to the rural poor, most girls across India reach out for anything which will make them 'fair'. The result is the rise and rise of lightening creams that promise to deliver a lighter complexion in a matter of weeks. The innumerable skin lighteners available in the market is testimony to the 'fairness' frenzy. A number of new fairness-out-of-a-tube brands keep appearing in the national market. In recent times there has been a locust-like invasion of premium international brands. From the grand old 'Fair & Lovely', and 'Pears Naturals Fairness' from Hindustan Lever Ltd (HLL), to Emami's 'Naturally Fair, Gold Turmeric', Avon's 'PT-White Fairness cream', Revlon's 'Touch & Glow', CavinKare's 'Fairever', Godrej Group's 'Fairglow', Elder Group's 'FairOne' - the list is unending.

Skin-lightening products are by far the most popular products in India's fast-growing skin care market. According to industry experts, the emerging skin-lightening products industry in India is a multi-million dollar one, and is growing at a fast rate. "Half of the skin care market in India is fairness creams," said Didier Villanueva, country manager for L'Oréal India, and 60 to 65 percent of Indian women use these products daily. (Timmons)

A marketing study found sales for skin whitening creams have jumped more than 100 percent in rural India and sales for male grooming products are increasing 20 percent annually. Hindustan Unilever, one of the largest consumer products companies in India, noted in recent annual reports that "skin lightening continues to be a major area of emphasis" for its skin care division. And Emami Ltd., the company which produces "Fair and Handsome," sent CNN an email saying: "Fair and Handsome is a market leader with almost 70 percent market share in India and doing extremely well in Gulf countries and the Middle East as well." Skin-lightening products account for almost 40 percent of the Indian cosmetics industry. 'Fair & Lovely', the original launched in 1978, is the bestselling product for

Hindustan Unilever, the Indian subsidiary of Unilever PLC, based in London. The growing awareness among men to look good and results of marketing research by the industry suggesting that 75 percent men were using 'fairness' creams made for women prompted companies to manufacture separate 'fairness' products to cater to the needs of both genders. The industry had used light-skinned models and even celebrities to endorse their fairness products, leading to a boost in the demand for skin-lightening products among the target audience.

The marketing of 'fairness' products had always been a controversial issue. Professional dermatologists have been cynical about the efficacy and concerned about the harmful effects of these creams. But critics have been more concerned with the socio-psychological effects of these products. It is interesting to examine some of these advertisements promoting the 'fairness creams. Perfect examples are the commercials run by India's largest producer of skin lightening products, 'Fair and Lovely'. 'Fair and Lovely', one of Hindustan Lever's "power brands," is marketed in over 38 countries. Its frequently-telecast advertisements typically show a crestfallen woman with bleak chances in life, gaining a brighter future by attaining a boyfriend or a job after becoming noticeably 'fairer' (emphasized by several silhouettes of her face lined up from dark to light).

One of the commercials featured a young girl watching cricket games from the field pretending and dreaming of being a cricket announcer. Time passes and she is now shown as a young woman still obsessed with this fantasy. Her mother slips her a tube of 'Fair and Lovely' and she magically becomes many shades lighter, which is demonstrated by images of her face in a literal spectrum from the darkest to the lightest. With her newfound beauty she has the confidence to submit her demo–tape to a broadcasting agency which is so impressed with her that they sign her as an announcer immediately. The first half of the commercial, before the use of the fairness cream is shot in black and white and the second half is done in colour. Her new light skin is associated with beauty, success and fortune. An additional message that could be derived from this specific commercial is the notion that only women who are fair and physically beautiful can have the courage to follow their dreams. Ironically, the Fair and Lovely website heralds this commercial as a step forward in promoting the rights and possibilities for Indian women. The website also states that 'Fair and Lovely' advertisements "showcase stories where the woman challenges the unhealthy societal realities of status quo and discrimination and finds that she is empowered to carve out her own

e-ISSN: 2348-6848
p-ISSN: 2348-795X
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future." Another advertisement that became (in)famous as the air hostess advertisement shows a woman, whose father had lamented not having a son to support the family, landing a well-paying job as an airline attendant after using the product.

For a long time, skin-lightening creams had been aimed almost exclusively at women. Emami first launched a fairness cream nationally for men. Surveys carried out by cosmetics companies suggested growing numbers of Indian men were using the creams. Called 'Fair and Handsome', the advertisement for the product gives the message: be fair or remain in dark oblivion among the opposite sex. Set in true Bollywood song-and dance fashion, the 40 second video shows a young Indian man struggling with the ladies. He is criticised by a fairer skinned, more popular man who suggests he try a skin-lightening cream to appear more attractive. After four weeks of applying the product, the young man returns with a lighter complexion and brimming with confidence. This endears him more to the ladies who take to the 'new' man much better, calling him handsome. Shahrukh Khan the popular Bollywood actor proclaims in the ad "Mard ho ke Ladkiyon waali Fairness cream kyon?"(Being a man, why do you use a fairness cream meant for women?) This particular ad exploits both the gender and the colour biases. Hindustan Lever too advertised a skin lightening product for men too, making it difficult for critics to accuse the company of exploiting only women's insecurities

Advertisements that attribute success in marriage, career prospects, or family approval to the application of 'fairness' creams drew flak from various sections of society, and were considered demeaning to women and accused of promoting complexion prejudices. Shankar et al., think that the fairness cream manufacturers promote "racial distortion of body image." Shankar and Dubey further observe that "promoting a particular body image or behavior pattern as the preferred one and then selling medicines or products to help people attain the particular ideal may be regarded as disease mongering."

The air hostess commercial was discontinued after a year-long campaign led by the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). In another instance the Association had complained against an ad which showed a woman, whose father had lamented not having a son to support the family, landing a well-paying job as an airline attendant after using the product. The Women's Association appealed to the National Human Rights Commission stating that many of HLL ads degrade women. They objected to three things. First - the ads

e-ISSN: 2348-6848
p-ISSN: 2348-795X
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were racist, second – they were promoting the preference of sons, and third – they were insulting to working women. The Women's Association pointed out the way they portrayed the young woman who, after using 'Fair & Lovely', becomes attractive and therefore lands a job suggested that the main qualification for a woman to get a job is the way she looks (Graham and Cateora). In a memo to India's National Human Rights Commission, Brinda Karat, general secretary of the women's association, calls one of the ads "discriminatory on the basis of the color of skin," and "an affront to a woman's dignity," because it shows fairer women having greater job success based on their sexuality (Leistikow). However, the arduous battle brought about only a pyrrhic victory as there has been no significant change in the marketing of 'Fair & Lovely'.

The Women's Association was not the only organization which criticised Hindustan Lever for promoting fairness as desirable for professional and personal success. Way back in 1988, the magazine Gentleman carried an article "Hindustan Lever's Ad Campaign: Fair and Lovely?" challenging HLL's claim as a socially responsible company. The magazine wrote:

We are disappointed that a mature company like Hindustan Lever has not been able to promote products like 'Fair and Lovely' without recourse to the kind of irresponsible and …demeaning advertising that the 'Fair and Lovely' campaign reflects.

> …The criticism was, and is, focused on the social irresponsibility of a company (any company, but especially a large and supposedly socially aware one as Hindustan Lever) to propagate a desire for an attribute that has prejudicial connotations. (11)

The magazine further pointed out that "an advertisement campaign like the 'Fair and Lovely' one can do grave social and psychological damage to those women who are dark-skinned." (12)

For the past many years 'Fair and Lovely' brand has drawn particular scrutiny because of its market dominance, its ads and the parent company's image. It is interesting to note that the parent company of Hindustan Lever, which holds 51.55% of the equity of the producers of 'Fair and Lovely' which is Unilever also makes Dove products, whose "Real Beauty" campaign encourages women in the United States and Europe to embrace the way they look, and implores women to love themselves and celebrate their natural beauty. Interestingly, Unilever is usually not so irresponsible in its advertising elsewhere in the

e-ISSN: 2348-6848
p-ISSN: 2348-795X
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world. For its brand *Dove* the advertising campaign is especially aimed at parents and children. It tries to explain that the beauty they see on hoardings is not necessarily real. It exhorts the public to understand in a series of dramatic freeze-frames how Photoshop is essentially what creates unblemished beauty. It may be considered very responsible advertising. Unfortunately, Unilever would not allow the same for Indian women as there is a huge profit to be made by selling them skin lightening creams.

Do the myopic and stereotypical portrayals of women that the media propagates create society's view of what a woman should be like, or do they consolidate prevailing notions? The media propagates anything that sells. Like many other things, media too is driven by market-economy. Advertisements are tied to the market reality of consumerist capitalist ideology. Advertising is a cyclical process: it takes ideas from society and reinforces them. It has the power not only to influence but shape and establish ideas. Its potency makes its impact far-reaching. There is some evidence that internalising these oppressive stereotypes may lead to psychological symptoms, including depression and anxiety (Jones and Shorter –Gooden; Neil-Barnett and Crowther). Recurring acts of oppression can influence the psychological and behavioural patterns of the individuals and affect the growth of the self-concept. The processing of oppression influences two concepts of identity: public and private regard (Sellers et al.). The internalisation of oppression can lead individuals to adopt personas that match the stereotypes, based on their feelings of private and public regard It is a matter of great concern how these advertisements impact a young girl or a boy with brown skin which is the normal skin tone for this region, when these advertisements denigrate anyone with a less than 'fair' complexion. We are familiar with those advertisements where they give away free shade-cards to gauge the improvement in the skin tone, which is not simply the change of the skin colour being measured. It is the rise of one's self-esteem and social status. Advertisements aim to produce a hierarchy of values based on the notion that "fairness" is an object of desire (Goon and Craven).These advertisements specifically lure women into using skin bleaching products by promoting colour hierarchies that privilege light skin. The literal colour spectrum of faces from the darkest to the lightest in the 'Fair and Lovely' advertisements highlights this concept. These advertisements exploit the insecurities of young girls and women by mocking the model, who is made tan with make-up and then is magically 'white' and all is well with the world. It is a matter of grave concern that these commercials affect the consumer's subjectivity, sense of

e-ISSN: 2348-6848
p-ISSN: 2348-795X
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self-worth and consciousness. As many feminist media critics have argued, women's self-consciousness is created through the complex interaction between women and media.

These advertisements create stereotypes that consumers may find hard living up to. Worse is perpetuating negative associations with anything that does not fit into those stereotypes. These advertisements perpetrate violence by projecting stereotypes of whiteness as beauty. As pointed out by Stuart Hall, "stereotyping is a key element in the exercise of symbolic violence (259) and "in maintenance of social and symbolic order" (258). Stereotyping as a signifying practice is central to the representation of 'difference'. Stereotyping reduces, essentialises, naturalises and fixes 'difference'. Another feature of stereotyping is its practice of 'closure' and exclusion. It symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong. The third point is that stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power (258). And power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group. One of the aspects of this power, according to Dyer is 'ethnocentrism'—'the application of the norms of one's own culture to that of others' (Brown, 183). We could also recall Derrida's argument that between binary oppositions like Us/Them, 'we are not dealing with...peaceful coexistence... but rather with a violent hierarchy (41).' Hall points out that stereotyping is what Foucault called a 'power/knowledge' kind of game (259). It categorises people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as 'other'. Hall further points out that stereotyping is also an aspect of the struggle for hegemony (259).

Advertising to a large extent reinforces the stereotypes, thereby legitimating the system itself. A mass medium is not just a 'vessel' which carries ideas from one place to another, but is 'itself a subjective, interpretative, ideological form' (Martin-Barbero, 102). As the famous media theorist Marshall McLuhan put it: 'the medium is the message'. James Lull says, "Commercial advertising not only asserts, references, and reinforces preferred ideologies, it often suggests that products and services exist to help create a better world, despite strong evidence to the contrary in many cases" (21). The effective spread of dominant ideologies depends according to Lull, "on the strategic use of image systems, of which there are two basic types: ideational and meditational. Ideational image systems refer to how ideas take form. Meditational image systems refer to how ideas circulate in society" (17). Mass media plays a very influential role in consciousness formation. Two important factors in consciousness formation are direction and repetition. By directing people's attention to certain ideas, and repeating key information, the potential for creating a desired

awareness is developed. That is how, Lull points out, ideology and consciousness are connected. Ideology mainly refers to representation of ideas; consciousness is the impression those ideas leave on individuals and groups (30).

The fairness cream commercials stereotype dusky women as socially less desired for marriage, sexually unattractive to the opposite sex, psychologically weak and lacking in confidence, and professionally, lacking in career prospects. Interestingly, the men's fairness creams ads portray dark men desiring fair skin only to attract female attention. Most of the skin lightening products advertisements and commercials in India reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate fairness as the normative beauty construct. Presenting the 'dark' as the 'other' is exclusive and unhealthy in a country which is a convergence of diversities in many possible ways, and which is inhabited by people of diverse colours. The bias for light skin is incongruous in the Indian context, where a majority of the population is not fair-complexioned. By glorifying fair complexion, the fairness cream commercials promote a sexist orientation in the education of girls and boys and propagate intra-culture racism.

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