

The Fair and Lovely Phenomenon:
A case study into a country's obsession with fairness and the media that
pursues it

Melanie Marian Crasta

Phone: (968) 9435 41 56

E-mail: melanie@bayancollege.net

October 2018

Updated October 2020

The Fair and Lovely Phenomenon:

A case study into a country's obsession with fairness and the media that pursues it

Abstract:

This study aims to focus on the media that propagates the fairness ideal followed by many women, and even men, around the globe. Media personnel have a social responsibility to avoid promoting unrealistic beauty standards; however, a sizeable amount of advertising agencies continue to support a company that feeds this very flame. This paper attempts to investigate the company's ideals and the ethical connotations that its policies entail. I conclude that media has had an adverse effect on body image; however, change can be brought about by socially responsible media. The methodology adopted in this study will be mixed (Qualitative and Quantitative).

Keywords: Social Responsibility, Advertising, Marketing, Campaigns, Public Relations, Colour.

Introduction

Beauty standards around the world have been a large topic of debate and the introduction of a certain 'skin whitening cream' lead to an awkward acceptance that the westernized standard of beauty should be one that must be pursued. Fairness being equated to the epitome of beauty (The Daily Records, 2017), prolongs this orthodox notion. Moreover, advertisements portraying various women and men achieving great feats simply by changing the colour of their skin, further submits to a cultural norm that fair is, in fact, lovely.

Review of Literature:

The idea of fair being lovely is a topic that has been widely covered. Especially with the new age of Social Justice Warriors or SJWs; this topic, in particular, has been brought under a new light. It is collectively agreed that the most recognizable practitioners of fairness routines have been Indian women who believe, “A fair skin is like education, regarded as a social and economic step up” (Luce and Merchant, 2003). Further, in his case study, Aneel Karknani (2007) exhibited how Fair and Lovely's popular commercials typically showed women being depressed over the darker complexion of their skin resulting in hardly any prospects of a brighter future professionally or personally. They only achieved success, “after becoming markedly fairer, which is emphasized in the advertisements with a silhouette of her face lined up dark to light.” Another example of such advertising as stated by Shareen Pathak (2014) portrayed both a combination of sexism and fair-skin bias where “A retired father with money problems laments that he didn't have a son to bail him out. His dark-skinned daughter decides she'll “be a son” and uses a Fair & Lovely cream to land a coveted job as a flight attendant.” This kind of advertising became a norm and even reached within the proximity of men. Suneera Tandon (2017) in her article for quartz India very clearly reflected her frustrations on India's obsession with turning everyone white, “For generations, companies have been selling fair skin to young Indian women. However, over the last few years, men have become a favoured target audience.” In Ancient China and

Japan, men of pale skin were revered as handsome; they were even required to cover their face with a shield lest the sun's rays “lessen their handsome looks” (Lasco, 2016). Moreover, the colour of one's skin determined social class, the dark-skinned were attributed to the class of a labourer who worked in the hot sun (Jablonski, 2012). This kind of situation also found itself most notably in America where blacks and browns (mexican-latinas) alike, faced certain atrocities or ambivalence based on the colour of their skin (Adams, 1996). This is further highlighted in a book by Marita Golden (2005) who highlights her own story walking within the confines of her colour and how it was treated by those who interacted with her. However, there finally seems to be a decline in colour/fairness-based marketing as cited in Rajiv Singh's (2013) article in the Economic Times where people seem to finally be getting over their obsession with the 'fairness' bug.

Objective of Study

1. To review Unilever policies and their dissemination of the 'Fair and Lovely' marketing, especially in the Indian context.
2. To analyze the ethical implications of such advertising and their impact on society.
3. To study the effects of corporate benefit versus societal well-being.
4. To recognize the role of the media as a distributor of ethical and socially responsible content.

Research Methodology

This paper incorporated a mixed methodology focusing on the possible psychology behind why a majority of society may condone the propagation of fairness ads in the media. The methodology was carried out in the form of a questionnaire that targeted males and females between the ages of 15-45. As in the literature review, considerations have been taken from journals, books, and advertisements to further highlight the problem that fairness ads may create on the psyche and perception of one's own race.

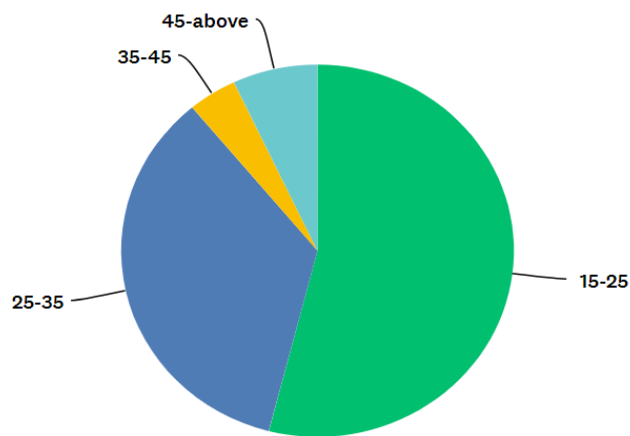
Result and Discussion

1. Age, Nationalities and Products Used

Of the 100 respondents targeted, a majority (54%) were between the ages of 15-25. 35% belonged to 25-35-year-old and the remaining 11% belonged to ages 35 and above (See Fig. 1). Nationalities focused on were Indians (90%) where the fair and lovely phenomenon seems to be most prominent; however, other nationalities were approached to see if the problem extended to these as well (See Fig. 2). Out of these, 54% of the respondents have used a fairness cream at, at least one point in their lives. Products used varied among respondents; however, it can be agreed that Fair and Lovely has always been a leading brand in fairness (See Fig. 3) while other varied overall.

Age

Answered: 100 Skipped: 0

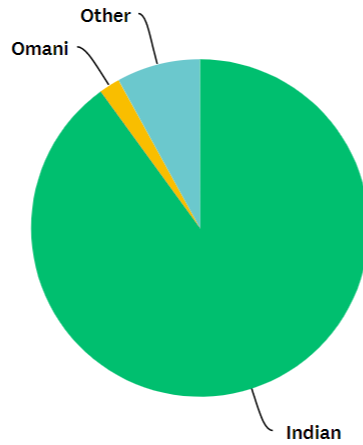


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
15-25	54.00%	54
25-35	35.00%	35
35-45	4.00%	4
45-above	7.00%	7
TOTAL		100

Fig. 1

Nationality

Answered: 100 Skipped: 0

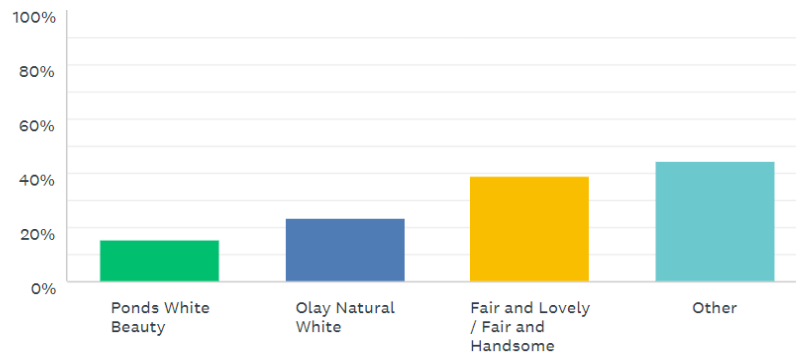


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Indian	90.00%	90
▼ Chinese	0.00%	0
▼ Omani	2.00%	2
▼ Other	8.00%	8
TOTAL		100

Fig. 2

Have you used any of these products?

Answered: 90 Skipped: 10



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Ponds White Beauty	15.56%	14
▼ Olay Natural White	23.33%	21
▼ Fair and Lovely / Fair and Handsome	38.89%	35
▼ Other	44.44%	40
Total Respondents: 90		

Fig. 3

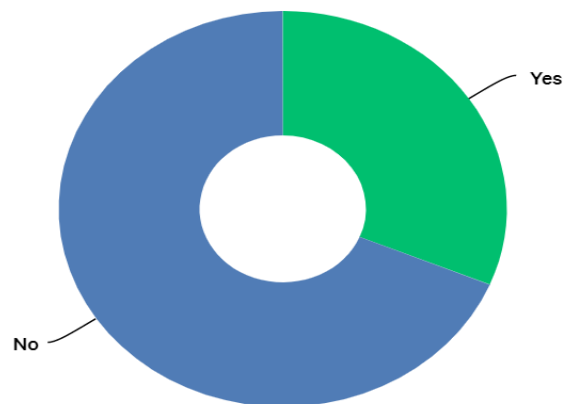
2. Fairness Pressure and Reasoning

Focusing on the methodology, many of the respondents did not feel pressured into caring for their fairness (See Fig. 4); nonetheless, the problem seemed to surface within one's own perceptions and external ideologies. Predominantly, fairness was equated to the possibility of finding a life partner or proposal in marriage. Respondents stated that potential suitors almost always had 'fairness' as a criterion for their perfect bride or groom. This, when broached further, seemed to exist from societal acceptance that fair was equal to beautiful. Moreover, these ideologies seem to be further fueled by media and its wide endorsement of fairness brands (Gupta, 2015).

Although many of the respondents agree that the reasons were never valid (See Fig. 5); however, it did not dissuade them from trying fairness creams altogether for the reasons above specified.

Have you ever been pressured into caring for the 'fairness' of your skin?

Answered: 96 Skipped: 4

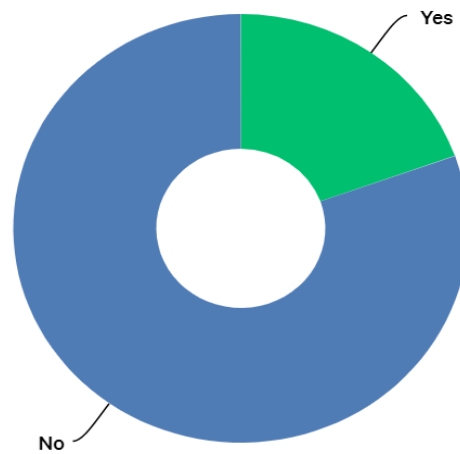


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Yes	31.25%	30
▼ No	68.75%	66
TOTAL		96

Fig. 4

Were these reasons valid?

Answered: 82 Skipped: 18



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Yes	19.51%	16
▼ No	80.49%	66
TOTAL		82

Fig. 5**3. Present Care and its impact on Self Image**

Presently, respondents still show a sense of care for their complexion; however, the reasoning seems to now vary leaning more towards just overall self-care and better-looking skin. This tilt towards a more positive image could be attributed to recent media promoting more self-acceptance and general maturity of the average respondent. Social Campaigns made by the Women of Worth (2009) such as the 'Dark is beautiful' campaigns, propagate ideas of colour acceptance and natural beauty. They exist specifically to 'challenge the belief that the value and beauty of people, is determined by the fairness of their skin.'

Dark is Beautiful even began a petition lobbying the Advertising Council of India to legislate against adverts that discriminate against dark skin (Hoskins, 2014). This kind of non-violent warfare seems to be making a difference as advertisements showing people with darker skin as being inferior are being banned by the Advertising Standards Council of India (Pathak, 2014).

Nonetheless, many respondents still shed light upon the injustices they felt growing up when it came to skin colour. One respondent specifically spoke of how she was reprimanded for playing in the sun for fear of getting tanned and ruining her natural complexion. Yet another was given a hard time for being dark as her relatives stated that being dark would drastically decrease the number of potential suitors as she looked 'ugly'. These and many other similar stories hang over young men and women all over the world, especially of South Asian descent, leading to the ruination of many a self-esteem at a young age.

4. Unilever and the Fair and Lovely Product (Policies and Ethical Connotations)

Unilever's mission stems from 'transforming the lives of women who desire fairer or even-toned skin.' This gave birth to a variety of ads that showed depictions of women feeling better after using their brand of fairness cream and getting the job they deserved. To this day, their website continues to show ads that involve the above-mentioned set-up. Nonetheless, the campaign now seems to steer more toward women empowerment and boosting self-confidence to achieve what women were initially denied (Hindustan Unilever, 2018). However, despite these efforts to change brand image, it continues to receive criticism on its reason of continuance in the first place.

To answer this possibility, it is seen that fairness creams continue to boom in sales. The fairness cream industry in India alone boasts an estimated \$432 million a year and showed growth of at least 18% annually in as recent as 2010 (Pathak, 2014). This, along with their 'changed' mindset may seem to still bring in the money and seal the customer base for the product. Their brand tries to appeal to 'young and bright customers' and, this marketing strategy seems to be working as the growth of the fairness brand doubled in 2015 (Unilever Annual Report, 2016).

The Unilever brand now further dabbles in philanthropy toward women through their 'Fair and Lovely Foundation' that seeks to provide scholarships to women who deserve it (Hindustan Unilever, 2018) and; moreover, accompany the previously sexist brand image to that of Women

Empowerment. These and other efforts seem to be working in the brand's favour and they continue to have record sales through the years.

The brand was recently re-branded from Fair and Lovely to 'Glow and Lovely' preaching a more, "inclusive vision of beauty" (Glow and Lovely, 2020). However, critics still question the re-branding tagging it as saving face and surface-level shifting, rather than real activism as they still promote 'fair' models on their branding and packaging. Critics have now demanded Unilever to prove their 'Woke Mentality' and rebrand with a darker model on the packaging (McEvoy, 2020).

Nevertheless, many bleaching and fairness creams still remain on the market and the question still remains, do creams with bleaching agents need to exist at all; and does media have to endorse it?

Conclusion

A Socially Responsible Media

It cannot be denied that media has come a long way from the previously, quite sexist, and demeaning nature of ad campaigns, to its present setting of gender empowerment and self-acceptance. Fueled by movements such as feminism and racial studies, media has pivoted towards campaigns that seek to empower rather than oppress. However, the faults of the past cannot be overshadowed by the success of the present. It must be taken with a grain of salt and accepted for what it symbolized, a past that *can* be changed.

References:

1. Adams, M., V., 1996. "*The multicultural imagination: race, color, and the unconscious.*"
Routledge, London; New York.
2. Glow and Lovely (2020). "Fair and Lovely is now Glow and Lovely". Unilever. Retrieved from:
<https://www.unilever.com/brands/personal-care/glow-and-lovely.html>
3. Golden, M., 2005. "*Don't play in the sun: one woman's journey through the color*"

- complex* (1st Anchor Books ed). Anchor, New York.
4. Gupta, M., 2015. "Know the Complete Truth About Your Fairness Cream" *Times of India*, 17 September 2015.
 5. Hindustan Unilever, 2018. "Our Story" *Fair and Lovely – Fairness Expert*. Retrieved from: <https://www.fairandlovely.in/our-story>
 6. Hoskins, T., 2014. "Skin Whitening Creams reveals the Dark side of beauty" *Dawn*, 12 February 2014.
 7. Jablonski, Nina G & Ebooks Corporation (2012). *Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color* (1st ed). University of California Press, Berkeley
 8. Karnani, A., 2007. "Doing Well by Doing Good Case Study: 'Fair & Lovely' Whitening Cream" *Michigan Ross School of Business SMJ 07-6615 rev*
 9. Lasco, G, 2016. "Tall, pale and handsome: why more Asian men are using skin-whitening products" *The Conversation*, 24 November 2016. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/tall-pale-and-handsome-why-more-asian-men-are-using-skin-whitening-products-67580>
 10. Luce E, Merchant K. 2003. "India orders ban on advert saying fairer equals better for women." *Financial Times*, 20 March 2003.
 11. McEvoy, J., 2020. "Critics Slam Unilever Rebrand of 'Fair and Lovely' Skin Lightener as 'Glow and Lovely'. *Forbes* Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2020/07/02/critics-slam-unilever-rebrand-of-fair--lovely-skin-lightener-as-glow--lovely/#114edd534b7a>
 12. Pathak, S., 2014. "The crazy skin-lightening ads that have been banned in India" *Digiday*, 22 August 2014.
 13. Singh, R., 2013. "Fairness creams' segment slows down: Has the nation overcome its dark skin complex?" *The Economic Times*, 18 August 2013.

14. Tandon, S., 2017, “Beauty Companies are Obsessed with Turning Indian Men White” *Quartz India*, 24 April 2017. Retrieved from:

<https://qz.com/india/962246/fair-and-handsome-beauty-companies-are-obsessed-with-turning-indian-men-white/>

15. The Daily Record (2017, November 28) *Top 10 Best Fairness Creams Brands in the World*.

Retrieved from:

<http://www.thedailyrecords.com/2018-2019-2020-2021/world-famous-top-10-list/highest-selling-brands-products-companies-reviews/best-fairness-creams-brands-world-glowing-night/6827/>

16. Women of Worth, 2009. “About the Campaign” *Dark is Beautiful*. Retrieved from:

<http://darkisbeautiful.in/>

17. Unilever Annual Report, 2016. Retrieved from:

https://www.hul.co.in/Images/annual-report-2015-16_tcm1255-482421_en.pdf