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Unfair Standards: Media Influence on the Fairness Paradigm in India

Sahana Heiderscheidt

UNFAIR STANDARDS

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Sahana Heiderscheidt

Dr. Azim Khan

Asma Ansari, Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action

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Abstract:

This paper aims to study the fairness paradigm in India and how the media influences women's perceptions of beauty. It aims to answer a main question: How does the media influence the cultural obsession with fairness and ultimately perpetuate a market for dysmorphic beauty ideals among women in India? The paper is structured to discuss three topics: How has fairness as a beauty ideal evolved? How does advertising and the film industry portray women? How do they influence young girls' perceptions of beauty and self? While most studies have focused on college-educated, middle class women, this study focuses on women from two conservative and low income communities in Mumbai. Information from secondary literature and media is combined with data from four focus group interviews. The study revealed certain gaps in young women's understanding of *why* fair skin is considered beautiful in Indian society. It also illuminated the influence of advertisements and celebrities on fairness cream use and perceptions of beauty standards in India. This paper reveals the normalization of fairness creams among this population of women as well as their community's attitudes towards female beauty.

Introduction:

There is a cultural preoccupation with fair skin in India. Depictions of fair skinned people dominate religion, film, TV, advertising and social media. Skin whitening products are endorsed by major celebrities and they flood the shelves of every chemist and cosmetic store. Use of these products is damaging to one's physical health because it may cause increased chances for infections, skin cancer and kidney failure (Peltzer, Pengpid, & James, 2016). They can also lead to emotional harm by promising unrealistic results. Though these products are harmful to one's skin and self image, they are also large "money-makers" for corporations. These companies push skin bleaching products onto consumers despite negative physical and mental health effects. In India, skin-lightening products account for half of the $318 million skin care market (Peltzer, Pengpid, & James, 2016). They are a force to be reckoned with. Most companies will argue they are not creating the obsession with fair skin, but merely capitalizing on an opportunity to provide what people already want. So, why is fair skin such a big deal?

Background:

One theory of this permeating beauty standard is western influence through colonialism continued through globalization. This theory expresses the view that women of color aim to emulate "western whiteness" in order to compete in a western dominated beauty market. Indian actress and model, Aishwarya Rai, won the title of *Miss World* in 1994 and she was deemed the "most beautiful woman in the world" by Oprah Winfrey (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). Though she represented India, she has very European looking features including fair skin, large green eyes, thin nose and full pink lips.

Others argue that a preference for a fair complexion was present in India far before Western interference. Some theories point towards fairness as an emulation of purity, cosmopolitan status and wealth rather than western-ness specifically. Many blame India's ancient social hierarchy: the caste system. Caste is determined by birth and is a social inequity created by society. It is a social stratification system ranked on the basis of class, power, and social status. It carries a certain social honor as well as many stereotypes. Those of upper caste traditionally had the professions that did not require working in the sun, thus supposedly preserving a lighter complexion than those of lower caste who spent long hours in the sun doing manual labor. The association with fairness and upper caste is especially important for marriage. The preference for fairer brides in matrimonial advertisements, as well as the depiction of many religious figures as white and pure, may create a strong pressure for women to maintain fairer complexions to portray superiority and be "successful" in marriage, family, and spiritual life.

Regardless of the paradigm origin, use of fairness products is normalized in Indian society today. No one bats an eye when an advertisement promoting women's worth tied to the fairness of her complexion is posted for the world to see. Perhaps it is a problem that many are more comfortable ignoring than addressing. Underneath India's fair beauty ideal, there is discrimination and oppression.

Objectives:

The main objective of this study is to determine how the media influences young women in:

- Their perceptions of beauty

- Their use of fairness products

- Their self esteem

Some of the questions considered were: Why is fair beautiful? How was one's idea of a beautiful person created and how has it evolved? How do companies advertise skin lightening products to consumers? How is beauty represented in film and on TV? What population do Bollywood movies represent? How can skin color be a barrier or advantage in one's personal or professional life? Has one felt pressured to or engaged in skin lightening practices? How does the prevalence of fair-centric beauty in the media affect self esteem? Are standards of beauty changing?

Methodology:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted among four focus groups of women, ages 18 to 30, over two weeks. These women live in low income, Muslim minority communities at Jogeshwari and Bandra, Mumbai. All interviewees have completed the 10th standard grade. The interviewer met the interviewees at women's centers in their communities for the interviews. The women are at the centers to participate in a beautician course sponsored by Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA). They meet everyday for the 3 month course in order to become certified beauticians. The goal of this program is to secure economic independence for these women by allowing them to seek full time employment or open their own parlors. In addition to teaching beautician skills, the program also aims to teach these women life skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and empowerment.

Two focus groups of four and five women were conducted at Jogeshwari. Two focus groups of four and 10 women were conducted at Bandra. Some of the interviewees spoke English, but one translator was involved in facilitating communication between the interviewer and interviewees when necessary. The interviews were conducted in Hindi and translated back to the interviewer in English when needed. The interviewer informed the interviewees about the

purpose of the interview and ensured confidentiality before each session. The interviewer took

verbal consent from the interviewees to be interviewed as well as recorded on a mobile device.

No individuals belonging to a vulnerable population were interviewed. The interviewer

determined, with the assistance of the translator, that all women interviewed were over 18 years

old. A series of the same questions were asked to each group along with circumstantial follow up

questions. Each interview lasted about 40 minutes.

Each focus group sat for one initial interview and one follow up interview for a total of

two interviews per focus group. The interviewer visited each center a total of three times. This

was done in order to facilitate more trust and therefore a more open interview. Upon the initial

meeting, most women were very shy and hesitant to answer the questions. Furthermore, after the

first meeting, the interview questions had to be revised. The initial questions were made for a

college educated and middle class population. The questions had to be revised for this new

population.

The main findings of these focus group interviews were that these women used market

fairness products such as *Fair and Lovely*, *Pond's White Beauty, My Fair* as well as many more.

Most women purchased the products due to advertisements or family and friends'

recommendations. It was clear that most of the women had never questioned the use of fairness

creams, as it seemed to be a norm in society. These interviews served to start a conversation

about what is considered beautiful and why. The women were encouraged to think about what

society thought was beautiful and compare it to what they personally thought was beautiful.

Where did these ideas originate and how have they evolved? The following sections of the paper

will analyze how fairness as a beauty ideal has evolved, how advertising and the film industry

portray women and the influence they have on young girls' perceptions of beauty and self.

History of Colorism and Hierarchy in India:

It seems that a certain hierarchy according to shade has been present in India for a very long time. There are several theories that attempt to identify the origin of colorism in India, but none have been absolutely proven.

Early invaders and the caste system:

One theory points to the northern Aryans conquering the native Dravidians within the Indian subcontinent around 1500 BCE (Nadeem, 2014, pg. 226). The Aryans were of lighter complexion than the Dravidians. Some historians believe Aryans created the caste system based on *varna* or color. The lighter skinned people, supposedly of Aryan descent, made up the higher castes whereas the darker skinned people, typically of Dravidian descent, made up the lower castes. This was a way to separate the two populations and oppress the darker skinned Dravidians. However, this theory has often been cited by lighter skinned Indians to prove a racial superiority.

Presently, there is little to no evidence that supports caste is directly correlated with skin color. Due to India's immense diversity, a North Indian who is technically descended from a lower caste can be a lighter shade than a South Indian who is descended from the highest caste. Despite caste and skin color having no real correlation, people still commonly believe the higher castes are lighter skinned and the lower castes are darker. When the women at Jogeshwari and Bandra were asked if skin color was related to caste, the answers varied from absolutely yes to definitely not. However, a consensus was reached in three out of four groups that Shia Muslims were the fairest sect of Islam. Answers included, "Shia women are very fair. Out of others, Shia is the fairest" (Bandra, PM Focus Group, 05/15/19). The interviewees cited Shia as being the

fairest sect of the Muslim community despite being the minority in India. One interviewee answered "It is not really caste based but [the] community people have to say that because in minority communities – minority means Muslim – I have also experienced this. My friend, she is in a Muslim community too, and she says 'In [the] Muslim community, women are very cute and very fair but you are not fair'. We can't think like that, but in our friend circle [and] our community circle, people behave like that. [They say] 'you are not in the minority community', because [the minority communities] are really different" (Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 04/15/19). This interviewee communicated her frustration when her friend rejected her identity because it did not fit the stereotype of her community. This answer reveals the tendency of people to relate certain groups with a particular skin color or fairness. Maybe it is to justify the hierarchies, or maybe it involves the human need to label and categorize. Regardless if it is backed by solid evidence or not, certain people believe that skin color and caste sub-groups are related. This way of thinking serves to reinforce hierarchies based on looks and deem certain physical qualities as better or worse.

Caste is not the only thing thought to be related to skin color. Historically, and sometimes presently, people associate moral and behavioral qualities with skin color. This is particularly relevant in religion (Shroff, Diedrichs & Craddock, 2018). For the Hindu community, it is believed by some that one is re-born into a caste based on how that person led his/her previous life. If the person was good, then he/she would be born into a higher caste. If he/she was bad, he/she would be born into a lower caste. In depictions of Hindu religious figures "heroes like Ram and Shiva were all fair complexioned good characters, while a demon like Ravana was dark-skinned. Tales about Lord Shiva mocking his wife, Goddess Parvati on the basis of her skin tone is quite popular [and] Kali, a dark-skinned goddess is raw, cruel, ugly, and destructive"

(Rehman, 2019, pg. 33). Lighter skin tones are associated with purity, goodness, calm, and beauty. Darker skin tones are depicted as polluted, evil, chaotic, and ugly. Furthermore, because marriage is very important for maintaining the family honor and continuing the family line, fair brides are often considered a more suitable match (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). The imposition of skin color and morality on the reigning social hierarchy in India for thousands of years may very well have brought about the cultural obsession with fairness. However, more modern entities have taken this system ideal and reinforced it.

The British ruled India for almost 200 years. They ravaged the resources and ruined the governing structure. The British Empire made the social hierarchy of caste stronger to justify their rule and to paint the white person as superior to the brown person to ease their governance. They achieved this through polarizing groups. They rewarded lighter skinned Indians and those of higher castes with better jobs and more rights, thus deeming them more intelligent, attractive, and deserving. They penalized and oppressed darker skinned Indians, giving them less legal rights and undesirable jobs. They deemed darker skin tones as weak and simple minded. This made the caste lines more rigid and lighter skinned Indians tried to separate themselves from the darker skinned Indians. These groups became even more polarized towards the end of British rule when different groups were emerging as candidates for the new governing party (Nadeem, 2014). The British may have left the land, but the effects of colonization remain even until today.

Globalization and capitalistic influence:

India is an emerging global influence and the potential for a large consumer population is causing companies to turn their sights towards the 1.4 billion potential customers. Presently, huge capitalist corporations such as Unilever and L'Oreal Group, are profiting off a deeply rooted societal preference for fair skin. They are marketing fair skin as a means to gain cultural capital, success, and happiness (Shroff, Diedrichs, & Craddock, 2018). In a time where a middle class is burgeoning, companies are jumping at the opportunity to capitalize on the new found purchasing power. Furthermore, western companies continue to profit from harming people in Africa and South Asia. Many fairness products are produced in America and Europe and then sold in Asia and Africa because there are fewer regulations (Rehman, 2019). Therefore, products that are deemed to dangerous to sell in the West may be imported to the East.

International and domestic companies alike are taking advantage of and perpetuating the "whitewash" solution. Presently, young women are constantly bombarded by TV, films and social media, and these platforms serve to define their schemas for beauty, success, and happiness. However, by marketing white skin as the standard beauty ideal and solution to all one's problems, the media serves to negatively affect the self esteem of young women. This pushes consumers to use potentially harmful products to bleach their skin in order to feel accepted in society as a woman. These corporations exploit female insecurities about skin color and beauty to reinforce fair skin as "better". Yet, brown and black women cannot deny their racial origins. They will always be seen as their race or ethnicity, yet they are encouraged to do everything they can to deny their identities. In the following sections, the cultural influence will be explored as well as the media influence.

Fairness as a Cultural Beauty Ideal:

Undoubtedly, fairness is a highly valued trait for Indians, but it is especially tied to a women's worth in society. Dark skin for women is "one of [their] biggest disadvantages; almost a curse" (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). In a caste-segregated and patriarchal society, women are faced with double hardship. It may be possible for women to have high power careers and wealth, yet if she is not also able to be a reliable mother, wife and daughter, she is seen as a failure. While men are evaluated on things such as wealth and career accomplishments, a women's worth is largely dependent on her appearance, ability to marry, and fulfill a domestic role. The importance of appearance was apparent when interviewing the women of Jogeshwari and Bandra. All of the interviewees took precautions to protect their skin from the sun and "keep from getting dark" (Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 04/15/19). Most wore extra scarves to wrap around their face when traveling outside, in addition to their hijabs. Many precautions are taken to avoid the unfavorable dark skin women fear.

Attitudes towards women:

It is important to first understand the place women hold in society and how that effects their view of themselves. In the first Jogeshwari focus group, the girls played a game. A social worker from YUVA asked them if they thought girls were weak or strong. She told them to stand on different sides of the room depending on their answer. Half of the girls agreed that girls are strong. Half of the girls disagreed, the reasons being that manual labor is "bad for the skin and the health" and "working in open spaces under the sun makes you dark" (Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 04/15/19). These girls answered the question based on what they think women *should* be rather than what they are *capable of*. The threat of becoming dark seemed to outweigh their

desire to be strong. They also interpreted this strength as physical rather than emotional/mental.

Another question posed to the girls was if "eve-teasing" or more plainly, sexual harassment, was

acceptable behavior. Three out of the five girls said eve-teasing was acceptable and not related

to fairness. This answer demonstrates how normal the objectification of women may be in this

community. If unwanted and unprovoked sexual advances and comments are considered

ordinary behaviors, then women may feel heir appearance defines them in this community.

Today there are more opportunities for women in India than previously, but it is

concentrated among those of liberal views and higher socioeconomic status. This wealth brings

about more privilege, social capital, ability to get an education, or a career. Among conservative

and lower income families, women have less options in terms of education and they are often

pressured to marry and fall into a domestic role. This can rob them of opportunities to learn

about important topics such as feminism, gender roles, and the hierarchies that surround them.

Without education surrounding these topics, it is easy to be influenced by common messages in

their surroundings. The pressure to be fair may seem customary and unquestionable. Even

though fairness is desirable, fair women can also be limited. Often times a woman who is fair is

pressured to marry sooner in order to protect her from male attention or to maintain the honor of

the family. It seems that women cannot be free either way. Women are pressured to be beautiful

to gain the attention of men, yet if they are too beautiful, they are protected and hidden.

Fairness and marriage:

The color of a woman's skin may determine her economic "worth". A woman's dowry is

in part determined by her looks and therefore her complexion. Fair women are considered more

desirable and therefore may have lower dowries while darker women may have higher dowries

and be considered a burden on the family. The perceived burden females pose on families is also what contributes to the high rate of female infanticide every year in India (Rehman, 2019). One interviewee said when looking to get married, "the preference is given to the fairer girl from men's side and they choose the fairer girl who looks beautiful. So then there are feelings of lowness and looking for more beauty. So ultimately women go for these beautifying products and then they use these products" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/27/19). In a collectivist culture, a woman's appearance is not only tied to her own success and happiness, but also her family's. By linking a woman's looks to her family's honor and economic prosperity, it may create immense pressure to alter her appearance to reflect a "suitable girl". However, regardless of education, upbringing or values, often times males will "settle only for white girls" (Rehman, 2019, pg. 37). This custom sends a message to darker skinned girls, telling them they are not suitable for marriage because of their appearance.

When the interviewees were asked what made a women successful, they answered "good face and good behavior" (Bandra, PM Focus Group, 04/15/19). One explanation included, "a dark face isn't good. A white face is good. A fair girl will get married first" (Bandra, PM Focus Group, 04/15/19). This suggests that the idea of success for a woman is marriage and the woman needs to be beautiful and behave well to achieve that. When asked what they meant by "good behavior", interviewee responses included, "how to talk", "attitude", "manners", "way of talking", "respecting elders", "she should not have attitude and she should be simple" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/18/19). In an Indian context, a "simple" girl means a girl who blends in and draws little attention to herself. It also means someone who will respect cultural values about women. These answers suggest that a successful woman is one who is subdued, respectful and obedient.

It seems as though success is linked to marriage, which is linked to beauty, which is linked to fairness. Perhaps this is because marriage is a typical way for a female to gain social capital in these communities. An unmarried woman may be considered a failure or shameful. Appearance is especially important for a young woman around marriage age. The interviewees reported that, "it depends on age. Marriage time, when we are getting married, then our behavior and face type matters" and "a fair girl is preferred. When we get married, we find a fair girl" (Bandra, PM Focus Group, 04/15/19). When women become old enough to get married, there is great pressure on them to physically transform their appearance in order to pass inspection. Their behaviors and appearances are scrutinized. They are put on display for the single men and their families at every community event, especially weddings. When it is time for young men to find a bride, advertisements in local newspapers often ask for "fair" women outright. Other requirements for a suitable girl, requires them to be slim, tall, thin nose, full lips, big eyes and so much more. These are features that one cannot naturally change.

Fairness and self-worth:

In India, words for "fair" and "beautiful" are used interchangeably (Rehman, 2019). From a very young age, women are taught that a fair complexion is a healthy and desirable complexion. They are teased and called "kaali kaali" if they are darker skinned. However, through the interviews, it seemed very common for people to be teased about their skin color. The interviewees even laughed about it when asked about it. It is considered normal to desire fair or white skin, and to be teased about darker complexions. However, some had a more serious answer. One interviewee said she felt "very, very, very hurt" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/27/19), when her friends and family called her "kaali". Another interviewee said, "Myself, I am a dark girl. It's really the taunting, the 'Oh, you are dark. Such a dark girl. How will you ever

get married?' My family says 'Oh, she's dark but leave her be', but society taunts me"

(Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 05/06/19). The self esteem of young girls who suffer from this

teasing can be lowered significantly. One interviewee said, "I am not confident. I am dark"

(Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/27/19). She then said that she uses fairness creams because they

make her feel more confident and she plans to use them her entire life. She also claims she is

scared to stop using them because she worries she will turn darker than before. This is an

unhealthy relationship to have with beauty products, yet this may reflect the situations of many

young girls. This skin-shaming attitude leads to a negative self view for darker skinned women.

This can contribute to a feeling of hopelessness and lack of control over one's fate (Peltzer,

Pengid & James, 2016). If a young woman grows up being ashamed of her skin color and

believes she is less worthy because of it, she may suffer from severe self esteem issues her entire

life. This can lead to risky behaviors such as sexual promiscuity and lowered physical activity

(Peltzer, Pengpid, & James, 2016). Her physical health has the potential to be negatively

impacted by her emotional health. In the next section, the influence of advertising on one's

likelihood to buy fairness products, one's perception of beauty and even one's self esteem is

examined.

Commodification of Fairness in Advertising

The fairness ideal in India has made quite a market for exploiting women's insecurities

and profiting from them. Selling outer transformation as a mode for inner transformation, these

corporations advertise their products as the solution to the Indian woman's problem. They sell

success in love and marriage, making one's parents proud, confidence, male attention, as well as

success in one's career all through a tube of skin-bleaching cream. Most of the interviewees

currently used skin lightening creams daily, almost all of them used it for special occasions such
as weddings, and all of them had used a fairness cream at least once in their lives.

Fair & Lovely is the iconic skin whitening cream released by Hindustan Unilever Limited
in the 1970s. Since its release, it has managed to maintain control over 2/3 of the fairness cream
market, expand into all economic consumer classes, and launch Fair & Handsome targeting
young men (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). Fair & Lovely was the first product most
interviewees listed when asked which products they currently used. In fact, most of them used it
everyday despite their knowledge of side effects. The women said, "Some skins are very
sensitive but we still use the products. When we stop or forget to use the product, we look double
black. So we use the product more" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/1819). When asked why they
used the cream in the first place, their response was always the same, "to be beautiful". However,
when asked why fair is beautiful, they were perplexed. Somehow, every group interviewed
agreed that fair was beautiful but when asked why, the responses were lacking. They ranged from
"because it just is" to "I don't know" to complete silence.

Clearly, there is a disconnect between the concept that fair is beautiful and the
understanding of where that comes from. When asked who or what is telling them fair is
beautiful, the majority responded that advertisements were telling them fair is more beautiful. It
is easy to see why. Drive down any of Mumbai's major roads or walk through the marketplaces,
and one sees advertisements of fair skinned, western-dressed models promoting all sorts of
products. Many times there are even pictures of Caucasian models promoting products in store
windows.

The interviewees also reported that their decision to buy a product was almost always
because they had seen one in an advertisement. Advertisements invade almost every media

platform these days. No longer are they just billboards, radio and TV commercials. Now advertisements appear on all forms of social media, as well as video and music streaming platforms. These advertisements often target young, single women and connect the use of the product to success in life.

Themes:

One prevalent theme in advertisements for fairness products is success in love. There is an iconic *Pond's White Beauty* cream featuring Saif Ali Khan and Priyanka Chopra. The commercial was aired in five parts and it chronicled a love story between Khan and Chopra. Khan and Chopra parted ways in an airport and three years later, Khan was with a fairer Caucasian looking girl. Chopra used *Pond's White Beauty* cream that gave her a "pinkish white glow" and eventually won Khan back because of her new and improved complexion. This is one example of an advertisement that tells women if their skin is whiter, they will gain male attention and love. This message is very problematic. Firstly, the new girlfriend looks Caucasian and leaves the some-what dusky but still relatively fair looking, Chopra, feeling self conscious. This communicates that Caucasian features are more desirable to men than Indian ones. Chopra feels the need to transform herself into a whiter version in order to win Khan back because he desires a fair girl. This advertisement connects a woman's romantic worth to her fair skin color which is a very damaging message to women with darker complexions. The airport setting also serves to "westernize" Chopra and portray her as a "modern" woman.

Other themes portrayed in fairness crème advertisements include success in one's career and family prosperity. A famous advertisement for *Fair & Lovely* suggests that bleaching one's skin will bring happiness and prosperity to one's family. The advertisement shows a wife offering her husband coffee. He asks for tea, but she informs him they do not have any milk

because they cannot afford it. The father laments about not having a son. His daughter over hears

him and runs to her room in tears. Then she sees an advertisement in the paper for an air hostess

job, but fears she will not receive the job because of her lack of confidence and dark skin color.

Suddenly, an advertisement for *Fair & Lovely* appears. She uses the cream and lightens her skin

significantly. As she strolls confidently into the airport, dressed in a fancy stewardess outfit, she

receives lustful looks from men and ultimately secures the job. Then she takes her family out to

lunch at a fancy hotel and they all laugh when her father asks for milk in his tea. This

commercial equates a woman's potential to get a job with her looks. It also implies that women

need to bleach their skin in order to redeem themselves for being dark skinned on top of being a

woman. Unsurprisingly, this commercial received a lot of criticism as it was derogatory towards

women and eventually it was pulled from airing. However, *Fair & Lovely* continues to produce

advertisements with similar themes.

Another commercial for *Skin White Soap* shows a mother asking her already very fair

daughter if she is ready for a special occasion. She asks her what she is doing to prepare her skin

and the daughter replies that she is using *Skin White Soap*. Then the advertisement shows her

lathering it on in a luxurious shower and stresses that it is all natural with goat's milk. A song

about beautiful white skin starts playing in the background. Then the woman walks down a

beautiful marble staircase in an exquisite sari, and to her mother's delight she is glowing white.

She breaks into a dance complete with back up dancers, looking exactly like a scene from a

Bollywood film. A man gives her an approving nod. Everyone is smiling. Everyone is white.

Everyone is happy. This sends a message that already fair women should strive to be fairer in

order to gain approval and harmony in one's family. The advertisement also portrays a very

wealthy family which connects wealth to fair skin. The nod from the random man also

communicates that women should strive for fairness in order to gain approval and attention from men.

Another advertisement for *Clean and Dry Intimate Wash* shows a sad woman, dressed in bland khaki pants and a white polo, serving her husband coffee while he reads the newspaper and ignores her. She glances at him and then glances down looking very upset while dreary music plays in the background. Then the advertisement flashes to her in the shower with the intimate wash that claims to make her intimate area whiter, cleaner and drier. The words "freshness" and "fairness" flash on the screen. Suddenly the music picks up and the wife, now wearing a tank top and shorts, demands the husband's attention and playfully steals his keys and puts them in her pants. The husband then picks her up bridal style and spins her around. This advertisement suggests a woman should be ashamed of her naturally darker intimate area. It also equates "clean and dry" with fairness which suggests darker tones are dirty and wet. It clearly suggests women should bleach their intimate areas in order to receive attention and approval from men. This advertisement exploits women's insecurity about their genitals and connects an Indian women's sexuality to satisfying men's supposed desire for white women.

All of these advertisements serve to champion fair skin and criticize darker skin. In addition to presenting certain scenarios that are "solved" by fairness product use, advertisements also use celebrity endorsement as a trustworthy voice of reason. They use respected and revered celebrities to endorse their products to create the illusion that their products are the "best" because a certain celebrity says so.

Celebrity endorsement:

Another subtler advertisement is for *Garnier's Fairness Serum Cream*. The advertisement features Alia Bhatt, a Bollywood starlet, singing and dancing while promoting a

fairness cream that "brightens" the skin tone. She consoles two women who want to go shopping, but their imperfect complexions keep them from doing so. The advertisement describes a darker skin tone on the women as "dull". The advertisement also features an animation of a Caucasian woman, complete with orange hair, whose skin is whitened to reveal a happier expression. The advertisement suggests a woman should be not go into public without a flawless and fair complexion. It also uses Bhatt as the all knowing voice promoting the product. The women in the advertisement trust Bhatt because she has a fair and flawless complexion.

In another advertisement for *Garnier's Light Complete White Speed Serum Cream*, Bhatt's friends lament in the gym locker room about how they are not ready for "the premiere" because of their dark skin. Bhatt whips out the fairness cream and they are magically transformed "3 tones lighter". Firstly, these women getting ready for a "premiere" hints at a wealthy and cosmopolitan lifestyle. The locker room setting also promotes a "modern" image of a woman who works out to maintain her figure. This cream is not only promoting fair skin, but it is also connecting it with a thin body and cosmopolitan lifestyle. Interviewees said healthy skin is "pimple free, glowing skin, normal skin – not oily or dry, no dark circles, no black spots or white spots"(Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 04/15/19). They essentially equate healthy skin with flawless skin like advertised in the commercials. This view of flawless skin being healthy skin just perpetuates the use of fairness products.

Celebrity endorsement in skin whitening advertisements is quite common. Celebrities such as Alia Bhatt, Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Deepika Padukone, and Priyanka Chopra have all made appearances in fairness cream commercials. When a respected celebrity endorses these products it influences young people considerably. When asked about this subject, the interviewees reported, "the make up is good and glowing. They look really good" (Bandra, PM

Focus Group, 04/15/19), and "It makes you feel like its going to be good for your skin because they are advertising them. They make me feel like I should use them" (Jogeshwari, PM Focus Group, 04/16/19). Another interviewee said "because they are attached to celebrities is why we purchase them" (Jogeshwari, PM Focus Group, 04/22/19). Celebrity endorsement is very powerful to consumers. These are actors and actresses they love and trust.

The interviewees also reported that they wanted to look like the people in the advertisements because they felt less than them. One interviewee said, "You get a feeling of being like them in the advertisements. The feeling is like we are not beautiful like the actresses in the advertisements but we could be" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/27/19). They said fairness creams made them feel more confident and they worried about becoming darker if they stopped using them. When they forgot to use their products, some women reported being stressed that they would get dark circles and their skin would look dull and dark accompanied with a feeling of lowness.

Fairness as a lifestyle:

Fairness is not only advertised as ideal in fairness product advertisements, but other products capitalize on society's fairness fetish as well. Fair models, actresses, and actors are used to sell everything from shampoo to air conditioner units and luxury cars. Things that have nothing to do with a person's complexion are being promoted by the fairest people (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). This is done to associate beauty, wealth, happiness and success with fairness. It also serves to create a power dynamic with purchasing, as if to communicate that by purchasing this product the consumer is separating him or herself from the masses. It uses fairness to create a sense of superiority with the product even if it has nothing to do with bleaching one's skin. The "'whiteness, whitened bodies, and hybrid foreign bodies,' with

their seductive promises of consumer empowerment in an India that [is] opening up to the global

economy, convey[s] the 'infinite possibilities of transformation and mobility to the socially

ascending post- colonial viewer'" (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009, pg. 229). The middle class

is a large target for corporations to sell an upper class lifestyle to, through their purchasing

power.

Yet, corporations are now infiltrating lower income communities with smaller unit

packages that are more affordable (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). Interviewees reported that

the fairness creams they used were expensive and often caused them stress because of the price,

yet they continued to buy them. This pressure for a woman to be fair in low income communities

is yet another problem piled on to the problems these women face. On top of taking care of the

household, securing clean water, keeping housing and managing waste disposal, women are now

also pressured to maintain a fair complexion through it all.

Fairness in Bollywood

Bollywood is India's largest entertainment industry and it is considered a celebration of

India's culture, yet it hardly represents the real people of India. Most films represent the

cosmopolitan life of middle and upper class people. There are also unspoken requirements to be

successful in Bollywood. One must be fair and of high caste and socioeconomic status. The

majority of Bollywood heroines are very light skinned or pressured to undergo skin treatments to

portray an "upper caste aesthetic" (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009 pg. 231). Bollywood claims

to be casteless yet the aesthetic includes last names associated with upper castes. Any mention of

lower castes usually revolves around an upper caste girl falling in love with a lower caste boy,

who is still handsome and fair. The families disapprove of the match but in the end "true love"

wins. There is rarely an instance of a lower caste girl falling for an upper caste man. If there ever

is, the girl is usually beautiful and relatively fair.

Portrayal of women:

There is a higher standard of fairness that women are held to in Bollywood films. Even in

the love songs, females are often referred to as *gori* which essentially means white. The majority

of Bollywood films focus on a heterosexual love story which paints the woman as fair, pure,

innocent and desirable. The love song sequences may often show a very fair girl dressed in light

colors, laughing and evading the darker skinned male who tries to pursue her and sings about her

beauty. Songs such as *Chittiyan Kalaiyan* meaning "white wrists" and *Gori Gori* meaning "white

white" are examples of songs that blatantly refer to women by their fair features. The main line

in the song *Gori Gori Gori Gori* says, "gori gori gori gori gori gori, kabhi kabhi kahin kahin

chori chori" which roughly translates to "fair lady, sometime, somewhere secretively [we will

meet]". The woman receives attention from the man for her fair skin.

It is also very common to see white women as back up dancers, particularly surrounding

men. In the film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, Amitabh Bachchan is seen dancing with a group of

young Caucasian girls and his wife gets upset. He then sings to her to gain her forgiveness.

Unfortunately, this incident was not only upsetting because Bachchan was dancing with younger

girls. The fact that they were white girls symbolizes a whole new concept that white women are

superior to Indian women. In fact, in many films white women back up dancers are seen as

desirable and sexy. Shah Rukh Khan, a Bollywood super star "has reportedly stipulated that

dancers in his extravagant musical scenes must be 'white-skinned college girls who smell good'"

(Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009, pg. 230). The blatant objectification of white women and

white bodies equates whiteness with desirability. The main actresses mimic the whiteness with

fair skin, thin noses, long legs, slim figures, highlighted hair and western dress while still passing

for Indian and therefore serving as acceptable love interests. Yet "frustrated dark-skinned female

dancers or 'extras,' members of the Cine Dancers Association, are increasingly facing

unemployment because directors, film stars, and choreographers perceive slim and light-skinned

dancers as indispensable" (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009, pg. 231). Real Indian women are

being replaced by white foreigners in their own film industry. This only serves to perpetuate

audiences to desire fair skin.

Illusion of representation:

While the film industry is being pushed to be more inclusive, often times the women are

left out of that inclusivity. In the recent film *Gully Boy* starring Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt, a

boy from Dharavi, Mumbai pursues a rap career despite facing issues related to his social status.

This movie is a significant step in addressing the divide between the wealthy and poor in

Mumbai. However, there is still an aesthetic that is unrealistic. Singh's character is supposed to

be from the lower class. He has a darker complexion but his physique looks as if he must have a

personal trainer or membership to an expensive fitness club. This is an unrealistic standard for a

man of his income. Furthermore, while this is supposed to be a commentary on the division

between the wealthy and poor populations in Mumbai, one cannot help but notice the place of

women in this film. Both of Singh's love interests in the film are extremely fair and from

wealthier families. One of the actresses is not even ethnically Indian. She is French. The

character has gone to music school in America and promises to help Singh's character with his

career. The woman is Caucasian, but speaking a little Hindi designates her as "Indian". Singh

faces a choice to remain loyal to his long term Muslim girlfriend or to choose this white ex-

patriot who lives the glamourous lifestyle of wealthy Indians in Mumbai. Singh initially gives in

to the latter but ultimately chooses his long term girlfriend, played by Alia Bhatt. However, she is still an extremely fair girl. Furthermore, even though Bhatt's character is part of the Muslim community and normally wears a hijab, she chooses to remove it when she is with Singh which shows her "modernity" and highlights her fair beauty.

This film focuses on a man's ascent from his low income and low caste background. He pursues a glamorous career in rap while also pursuing fair skinned women. This film had potential to caste a darker skinned woman that would have been more realistic, yet they chose to follow the mainstream and choose only fair actresses. The only relatively darker skinned woman in the entire film is Singh's mother who his father abuses. Singh's father remarries a younger and fairer woman and his mother is tossed aside. While this may be the shocking reality of what its like to be a darker skinned woman in that community, the potential to make a powerful social commentary on fairness is unfulfilled.

Other attempts to be inclusive in entertainment include *Slum Dog Millionaire*. However, this movie portrays dark skinned Indians associated with filth, crime, and despair whereas white skinned people are portrayed as good hearted, wealthy, and happy. Another show called *Saath Phere* was about a woman who experienced discrimination and trouble with love because of her dark skin. However, some viewers thought she tried too hard to attempt to deny her dark skin instead of accepting it. Others felt the story line of her trying to find love and struggling with her darkness suggested she was trying to gain the approval of men rather than learning to love her dark skin. (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009).

Influence on women:

Many interviewees said they believed Bollywood actresses were fairer than the average person. When asked if they believed celebrities used skin whitening creams such as *Fair & Lovely*, they said "No they don't use them. They use plastic surgery" (Bandra, PM Focus Group, 04/15/19). This could be referring to the largely European features that models and celebrities possess. They do not look like typical Indian women. When asked what one needs to be successful in Bollywood, the interviewees said "personality has to be good. First is acting, then is personality, then face. Make up has to be the best" and "First, we have to maintain our figure" (Bandra, PM Focus Group, 04/15/19). Others said, "Good makeup and good skin" (Jogeshwari, PM Focus Group, 04/16/19). Actresses in their films are often portrayed as fun-loving, feisty and confident. Yet, in more conservative communities in India, women are encouraged to be soft spoken, obedient and respectful. The actresses often portray a lifestyle that is not realistic for a lot of Indian women. In addition to promoting a fair and western-like appearance, Bollywood also portrays a western attitude as ideal. The definition of a good personality is interesting. Interviewers often reported that traits such as humor and confidence were desirable personality traits associated with celebrities. The cultural divide between Bollywood and these conservative, low income communities is that Bollywood portrays the glamourous, "western" lifestyle that often comes with freedoms that a lot of women in these communities do not possess. For example, it is still highly frowned upon for women to drink alcohol in India, yet the characters in hit films enjoy alcohol while dancing provocatively in dance clubs with men. The interviewees live in a very different context than these stars yet they still aspire to be like them. Perhaps this is because they are repeatedly exposed to these images with positive reinforcement because these actresses rarely experience negative consequences for their "risqué" behavior.

When asked if a dark skinned actress could be successful, the interviewees said "Yes, if their makeup is good. Like Kajol" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/27/19). Kajol has a *slightly* darker complexion compared to the extremely fair women in the industry, but she does not have a *noticeably* darker complexion. The interviewees also said they believe Kajol uses skin lighteners. Presumably, all "darker" skinned actresses use skin lighteners to appear more fair. When asked about their favorite actresses, many gave answers such as Deepika Padukone, Shraddha Kapoor, Gauri Khan, Katrina Kaif etc. The actresses were all relatively fair, if not extremely fair. They also cited good style, good makeup, being pretty, being cute, good dancing and good acting as some of the reasons why they liked these women. A few interviewees said they specifically liked them because they were "fair and beautiful" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/27/19). One focus group agreed that "they are more fair because they are more beautiful than us" (Jogeshwari, PM Focus Group, 04/16/19). These girls see these celebrities as better than them largely due to their appearances and fairness.

When asked if these beloved actresses would be as famous if they had dark skin, the interviewees said, "Dirty? No. Fairness is first, then talent. Because of the beauty. We go for beauty and see the appearance of the person and then talent comes later." (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/27/19). The previous response connected being "dark" to being "dirty" which reinforces the idea that dark skinned people are seen as polluted. Others described the entertainment industry as being, "very selective" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/27/19), and therefore dark actresses would be unacceptable. The consensus was that dark skinned actresses have more obstacles in the film industry. The fairest actresses represent an unattainable standard of beauty and they reinforce the fairness ideal "because they are fair, everyone wants to be fair" (Jogeshwari, PM Focus Group, 04/22/19), according to the interviewees. They also reported that

they would like to look like women in films, "because they look very beautiful, because we want to be like that" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/27/19).

It is clear that these women see Bollywood actresses to embody beautiful women. They want to look like them, they buy the products endorsed by them, and they look up to them. Yet, they also agree that the films portray very different stories from their real lives. When asked if they could relate to the stories in Bollywood films, the interviewees said, "No. It's very different. Representing something very different" (Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 04/22/19). Perhaps these films represent something these girls want. However, it discounts their real experiences and may serve to make them feel unseen. Some interviewees said "*Gully Boy* is a real story" (Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 04/22/19). *Gully Boy* was a huge success because it made the lower income and minority Muslim population of Mumbai Indians feel seen. They could relate to a Muslim boy from Dharavi who lacked support from his family and dealt with discrimination because of caste and socioeconomic status. It seems that the interviewees separated Bollywood from their real lives for the most part. They acknowledged that most films were not portraying their lived realities. However, that did not stop the interviewees from *wishing* they were more fair in order to be more "beautiful".

Conclusion:

New directions:

As a final question to each focus group, the interviewer asked if they saw changes in the standard of "fair" beauty. The majority of the girls said "No". One interviewee said, "Fair is still the best. Fair is beautiful and the best. Fair families are better in society" (Bandra, AM Focus Group, 04/18/19). Another reported, "It's still the same. Fair: good. Dark: bad. It's unequal"

(Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 04/22/19). Other interviewees disagreed. One interviewee said, "Yes, it is changing. Style of dress and standards of living change, but it also depends. My friend wears jeans with her family but I don't. Because of personality development, it changes too. And people change their life standard because society develops, and we help them make those changes. He or she will upgrade the standard. So they will try these different things" (Jogeshwari, AM Group, 04/15/19). This response suggests that it is different depending on different contexts that largely have to do with standards of living. Changing one's view of fairness may not be as important as making sure one has clean drinking water or suitable housing. Because of the inequalities in basic human rights that many Indians still suffer from because of living conditions and socioeconomic status, questioning fair beauty standards may be over looked. It also suggests that questioning this ideal comes with conversation and growth. It is the responsibility of empowered women to empower more women. If no one ever talks about it, there will be no change.

Conversations are beginning to emerge. One interviewee said "Our generation it is not as bad. Older generations still taunt us because of dark skin. It will take time" (Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 05/06/19). However, one notable observation of the Bandra and Jogeshwari communities was they did not know where the fairness paradigm came from exactly. Their attitude towards the fairness paradigm is "that's the way of thinking" (Jogeshwari, AM Focus Group, 04/22/19). When asked why fair was considered beautiful or where this idea came from, the interviewees were puzzled. Some women reported nature to be more important than physical beauty but struggled to elaborate on the reasons why. The interviewees tended to equate their own worth with their beauty when asked other qualitative questions. When the interviewer asked them to say a quality they liked about themselves that was non-physical, they hesitated to

provide answers. However, they reported physical qualities such as hair and makeup. This suggests that these women tend to equate their worth with physical appearance. The conversations about inner beauty have started, but are clearly not finished.

Summary:

From these results, one can construct a complex understanding of fairness and beauty ideals within these communities. The perception of female beauty is that fair is beautiful and dark is unattractive. These women are surrounded by friends and family who believe this and they are also bombarded by media that reinforces the notion. Not only does a fair complexion matter to these women, but also slim bodies, flawless complexions and "good" personalities. The women who were interviewed expressed a desire to be fair *in order to be* beautiful. Some felt they were not beautiful and had lower self esteem due to dark skin. The women who expressed dissatisfaction with their skin color tended to be quieter and less outspoken. They also tended to use fairness creams daily. The women expressed that their choice of fairness creams were influenced by advertisements, celebrity endorsement, friends, family and skin doctors. Some reported being hesitant to stop use and predicted they would continue to use these products throughout their lives. From the data collected as well as information from secondary literature, it seems that advertising and the film industry serve to reinforce the idea that fairness is necessary for beauty, confidence and success.

The ever-present media perpetuating a fair beauty ideal leaves out a large portion of India's population and deems them as inferior. In a hierarchal and patriarchal society, the media uses beauty standards to ultimately damper women's self esteem and assert dominance over them. It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and in Indian society the beholders are men. Women are taught to strive for fair skin to gain acceptability in the male gaze.

Furthermore, little attention is drawn to the fairness paradigm and the women of the Jogeshwari and Bandra communities, and perhaps many more women, do not question it or understand where it comes from. The fairness paradigm seems to be especially oppressive in conservative communities where women are expected to marry at a very young age. Brides are often judged on their appearance and adherence to social norms above other personal qualities. The moment women begin to question why fair is beautiful, the whole system is threatened. When women recognize and truly believe their worth is not made from their appearance, they can become more empowered.

These conversations are beginning to happen in Jogeshwari and Bandra communities. The YUVA sponsored beautician course is a great step in empowering women. The women interviewed were new to the program, but after completion they will most likely have a better understanding of gender roles and social hierarchies.

Limitations:

The main limitation to this study was the language barrier. The researcher found it difficult to ask meaningful questions that translated in Hindi or were fully understood by those that spoke English. There was also a lack of access to a reliable translator which may have hindered some responses. Any responses that seemed to be influenced by the translator were omitted, however without a complete understanding of Hindi, the interviewer relied on her translator to provide a complete translation of the responses. Some questions had to be omitted from the study because they did not translate well and the interviewer felt that the interviewees did not have a clear understanding of the question. A few interviewees did speak some English and the interviewer found those interviews to be the most reliable. Some interviews had to be omitted due to lack of a translator in general.

Another struggle was gaining the interviewees trust. The interviewer had the most success when a member of YUVA was with her, however due to the busy schedule of YUVA employees and the low number of employees who spoke English, the interviewer was often alone. To try and counteract this, the interviewer visited the centers multiple times to try and build some trust with the interviewees and facilitate more responses.

Call for change:

Due to the influence the media has on women's perceptions of beauty, regulations in advertising could serve to create a more positive message for women. Perhaps ethical review boards could be formed in order to make sure the media uses its powerful influence responsibly. The media has so much potential to start social movements and initiate change. If major celebrities became role models for speaking out against the fairness ideal, they could potentially change a whole generation's view on beauty standards. Several stars have spoken out about mental illness and LGBTQ+ rights, so why should fairness be any different? Though some celebrities such as Priyanka Chopra have mentioned in interviews that they regret promoting fairness creams, there has been little public outcry from these revered celebrities. Recently, Priyanka Chopra has become an ambassador for a diversity promoting campaign called "Skinclusion" by American company called Obagi. While this is a good step in creating inclusion and diversity in American skin care, it would be a powerful step for Chopra to start something similar in her home country, India.

There should also be increased regulations for safety testing on products sold in India. Many products that would not be deemed safe in other countries are imported to India to sell. Furthermore, there should be more regulations on the claims of fairness creams. Perhaps fairness

cream advertisements should be required to mention potential risks from excessive use of their products, similar to tobacco and alcohol advertisements.

The film industry has the power to create new narratives for social change. Bollywood should incorporate more diversity into the plot lines and also among the actors and actresses. Darker skinned individuals deserve positive representation. Furthermore, exposing not only the *existence* of social stratification, but also the *harm* it causes, is necessary to promote a wide spread message of anti-colorism.

Awareness is one of the most important things needed to fight colorism. Women need to know that dark is beautiful. There is one advocacy campaign called *Dark is Beautiful* founded in 2009 and based in Chennai. This campaign is focused on bringing awareness to the problem of colorism. If celebrities, icons, and even political powers advocated for a campaign such as this, imagine how far it could reach.

Most likely, this will not happen overnight. It will take time and it will take demands from the women of India to facilitate change. The first step to creating a unified force, ready to fight this colorism, is educating women about the subject. It is important to reach all communities, socioeconomic status', castes, regions, religions, etc. Anti-colorism material should also be incorporated into youth empowerment programs.

These conversations are beginning to happen in Jogeshwari and Bandra communities. The YUVA sponsored beautician course is a great step in empowering women. The women interviewed were new to the program, but after completion they will have a better understanding of gender roles and social hierarchies. The interviewer worked with YUVA to help create a pamphlet with information, as well as discussion questions and activities, about the fairness paradigm. This will hopefully help spark conversations about beauty among women and future

beauticians. It will take time for change to come but the harder women fight for representation and validation, the faster it will come.

Recommendations for further study:

It would be interesting to explore the view points of celebrities and those in the entertainment business. It would also be interesting to study how older women view fairness and if they regret using fairness products, or how they think it contributed to their lives, etc. There are many other directions one could take this study by changing the population.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What are your hobbies?
4. Do you use any forms of sun protection?
5. What makes someone a beautiful person?
6. What do you personally think is beautiful?
7. What does society think is beautiful?
8. Do you think there is a preference for fair skin in Indian society? Why or why not?
9. Are fairness and castes related?
10. Have you ever used skin whitening creams?
11. Do you currently use skin whitening creams?
12. Which brands do you use?
13. How old were you when you started to use these products?
14. Why did you start using fairness products?
15. How did you choose your product?
16. Does using or not using these products cause you stress?
17. Are you confident about your beauty?
18. What is healthy/good skin?
19. Do fairness creams help or harm your skin?
20. Why do women use fairness creams?
21. Why is fair beautiful?
22. Have you ever been teased about your skin color?
23. How did it make you feel?
24. Who is telling you fair beautiful?
25. Have you seen a skin whitening product advertisement?
26. Can you describe this advertisement?
27. How did it make you feel about your skin?
28. Have you seen celebrities endorse fairness products? Who?

29. How does a celebrity endorsing a fairness product make you feel? Are you more or less likely to buy that product? Why?

30. Do you think celebrities use fairness products?

31. How is beauty portrayed in Bollywood?

32. What do the women in Bollywood look like?

33. Who is your favorite actress? Why?

34. Can dark skinned actresses be successful? Why or why not?

35. What is your favorite film? Why?

36. Do you see yourself represented in Bollywood films?

37. Would you like to be as fair as the women on TV and in films?

38. What does a successful women look like?

39. What do you personally think is beautiful?

40. What does society think is beautiful?

41. Are the standards of beauty in India changing?