

## **COMPLEXION OBSESSION – A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE DISCOURSE OF SKIN COLOUR IN FAIRNESS PRODUCTS ADVERTISING.**

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### **Abstract**

Indians and the realm of homosapiens for ages have obsessed over fairness as a measure of beauty. Fairness is a predominant indicator of beauty. Fairness creams are aplenty in the market. Analysis of print advertisements of fairness creams / products clearly points to the fact that achieving fairness is equivalent or occasionally more important along with goals like marriage, professional success, financial empowerment, improved job opportunities and even personal success like improve confidence levels. Women in general are a testimony to this fact - directly or indirectly. Although the highly established truth that is all pervading states that beauty is a very personal and complex concept, the connection between beauty and fair skin continues to play a key role in major assessments in personal life. Most print advertisements adopt the method of "claims" to manipulate this principle. The following study analyses print advertisements of popular fairness creams in India on the basis of these "claims".

**Keywords: Fairness products, advertising, illusion, claims, males and females.**

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## **Background to the study**

Though 'beauty is only skin deep' is a popular maxim and an extensively understood one, our obsession with beauty products especially fairness creams is never ending. The branding and marketing wing of popular fast moving consumer goods producing multinationals encash this aspect and continue reaping profits each fiscal year. FMCG is the fourth largest sector in the Indian economy of which personal care products account for nearly fifty percent. The recent Nielsen report (April 2018) states that nearly sixty percent of this revenue is from the rural market. Growing awareness, easier access and changing lifestyles are the key growth factors for the consumer market. The focus on agriculture, MSME's, education, healthcare, infrastructure and employment under the Union Budget for the year 2018-2019 is expected to directly impact the FMCG sector. These initiatives are expected to increase the disposable income in the hands of the common people, especially in the rural areas which will be beneficial to the ever growing FMCG sector.

Advertisements act as an intermediary between the seller and the consumer. The message in the advertisement ensures that the product is sold/ bought. Since there is myriad number of products and an even larger number of products, novelty in selling these products is a prerequisite. This invariably inspires rivalry, generates demand and boosts the development of new products. The fact that consumers revel in prominence given to them and that the product itself may not carry due credit may add importance to its advertisement.

Mark Tungate quotes Jean-Marie Dru, President and CEO of TWBA in his history of advertising as follows: "Most people enjoy good advertising. Nobody likes a bad product but a well-made product will always find an appreciative audience. Furthermore, a lot of advertising agencies have a great deal of respect for its customers. It is, after all, our job to understand customers. In fact advertising has far more respect for its customers than many other industries."

Advertising, therefore, has a huge responsibility of conveying a message, convincing the consumer and increasing profits for the firm.

**Fairness in India.**

Fairness creams and other beauty products were brought into India by foreign invaders. Indian royalty took a fancy to it and used to apply pearl extracts fascinated by the white skin of the invaders. This was done to enhance fairness which was much sought after especially in a geography where fairness was unachievable. The first commercial fairness cream, manufactured by ES Patanwala, a perfumer/entrepreneur came to India in 1919 from a small principality (JhalraPatan) in Rajasthan. Since the cream reminded the king of the snow from his homeland, it was named after King Zahir of Afghanistan and called *Afghan Snow*.

Fair & Lovely, a product from the Hindustan Unilever house was the one of the first creams to be advertised commercially in India paving the way for a rock solid foundation upon which future brands attempted to hoist them. Unlike the bleaching creams of that time, Fair & Lovely was soft on the skin and usurped the fairness bleaching market. This fairness cream spearheaded the booming beauty products sector and reached the status of a luxury item. The impact of this one campaign was so powerful that the target population, especially women in the age range of 18 to 35, started believing that the product will ascertain the possibility of them getting a man of their dreams.

Post this various other brands decided to take the plunge into the emerging market of fairness and beauty products. Emami Naturally Fair Herbal Fairness Cream in the early 90's, CavinKare's Fairever in 1998 and Godrej's Fairglow in 1999 were few rivals. The USP of each of these creams was different from one another. Emami concentrated on pearl extracts, Fairglow highlighted its protein punch whereas *Fairever* encashed two indigenously popular fairness causing unique ingredients – saffron and milk. *Fairever* went on to become the biggest challenger to *Fair & Lovely*.

As a tactical move to incredulous antagonism, *Fair & Lovely*, deflected its dream man track to woman empowerment and focused on the emerging urban educated Indian woman as a confident young lady landing the perfect job.

Those brands that were yet to catch up in the recent times have at least one product and occasionally multiple variants addressing the need for a niche. Garnier and Lakme have taken positions subsequent to *Fair & Lovely*. Creams for whitening the rather intimate part of the female anatomy is an indication that marketers are not even close to being 'done' exploiting this category.

Celebrity endorsements add fuel to the already raging fire of perfection in beauty. Representatives from the movie industries both down south and in Mumbai have laughed all the way to the bank, both on a personal level and professionally. The marketers made plenty more by making these celebrities endorse their notion that fairness creams made them look the way they do and not make-up artists, cosmetic surgeons or hereditary factors. From LeelaChutnis to PadminiKolhapuri to JuhiChawla to the present day divas like AishwaryaRai and DeepikaPadukone, they have all been there, sold that.

The projection of female actors in daily soaps and serials and even in reality shows in the mid-2000's, slowed down the pace of these shows with the sole intention of selling beauty products to the extent that the narrative would be stalled for several minutes on end just to promote these products.

In the mid-2000's in order to accommodate advertiser funded programming in the already congested time slot allotted for a particular show or serial, the narratives had to be stalled for several minutes.

Turning attention to the other gender, Emami launched *Fair & Handsome* in 2005. A survey revealed that nearly 30 percent of men were using women's fairness creams and that a cream catering to the specific gender was an urgent requirement. Though the others followed Emami continues to be the leader in the men's fairness cream market. Celebrity endorsement played a pivotal role in the success of this beauty product.

## **Literature review**

The language presented in the advertisement significantly affects the recall and recognition of a product as outlined by Rajagopal (2010). Further, the emotional content of the advertisement strongly predicts the buying decision and it can be reflected in recall rate among consumers.

The language of persuasion behind advertising was studied by Kenechukwu, Asemah, and Edegoh (2013). For a successful advertising campaign, the language of persuasion is embodied by boosting patronage of the idea or a theme. The main objective of advertising message is to create persuasion and to make the people believe the message. The heart of language advertising relies on the ability to sway the consumers to buy the product or to force them to have such patronage. It also involves the design of good language to direct the consumers in making the right choice. Hence it requires the skill of literacy. The texts, sentences, and words are attributes of language which have the power to change the meaning and mood of advertising messages.

The effect of different types of claims and their pragmatic inferences was investigated by Harris et al (1993). Research related to cognition has shown that most frequently people tend to grasp pragmatic inferences which go beyond what is implied directly in the text, for example, the statement Sparkle fights cavities indicates that it prevents cavities. The impact of directly asserted claims is concerned with different types of implied claims such as deleted comparatives, implying casualty, deleted comparatives, statistical abuses, hedge words and negative questions. All these types of claims determine the truth value of the claim and the likelihood of purchasing. An empirical assessment on the diffusion of advertising messages was presented by Zhang and Peng (2014). The study found that the diffusion of advertising messages is highly hampered by affectivity, typicality and the completeness of the information. The practical implications of the study reported that the less use of typical and emotional words within advertising messages will increase the active number of fans towards a product. The success of advertising messages and their diffusion heavily depends on the strength of persuasiveness. The linguistic factors of advertising messages leverage the purchasing intention of consumers by enhancing persuasive strength. The characteristics of advertising messages include length, affectivity, interactivity, relevance, accessibility, and completeness of information which substantially impact the information diffusion process.

The advertisements published in Indian print media were analyzed by Flergin (2014). Generally, the advertising claims differ in the degree of confidence signaled by the language used. Certain phrases and words are frequently applied as indicators of the probability of the claim to be true. Many contemporary and sophisticated visual and printed media accentuated the role of language used in the advertisements. In both visual and printed media advertisements the persuasive potential of a language was well experienced. In the perspectives of linguists, there are different levels of human communication like meaning, form, and discourse or substance, phonology and syntax since all are playing a decisive role in persuading the readers or viewers.

According to Lundén (2009) the web has emerged with the newsrooms and a drastic change has taken place in the previous years and it is expected to be continued in the future. The web is not at all a problem for the traditional print media. It is the audiences and the publishers themselves. If the number of audiences becomes less the publishers come forward to stop the publications. Advertising on the web has gradually increased. The reason is that the cost of advertising is cheaper when compared to printed advertisements.

Pongiannan and Chinnasamy (2014), in their analytical assessment, evaluated the media that depicts the quality of FMCG advertisements. Many of the respondents of the study revealed that print media highly depicts the quality of FMCG advertisements.

## **Methodology**

Let us now examine the print advertisements and the different claims made by these giants in the beauty products/fairness creams sector.

### **Problem:**

Do Men and women differ in their perception of the 'claims' made by an advertisement?

### **Aim:**

The aim of the study is to explore the two genders with respect to their perception of 'claims' made by print advertisements of fairness creams.

**Objectives:**

1. To study the perception of 'claims' of men and women.
2. Compare men and women living in the city of Bengaluru.

**Hypotheses:**

1. There is no significant difference in the perception of 'claims' between men and women.

**Research design:**

The present study is exploratory in nature.

**Variables:**

Independent variable: gender

Dependent variable: perception of claims

**Procedure**

An online search for most recent print advertisements for fairness products came up with the following list.

1. Unilever'sLux soap,
2. KSDL's Mysore Sandal Soap,
3. Unilever'sFair & Lovely fairness cream,
4. CavinKare'sFairever
5. Godrej'sFairglow,
6. Vaseline's Sport Whitening Cream ,
7. Garnier'sPowerLight.
8. Hindustan Unilever's Pond's White Beauty,
9. ITC'sFiama Di Wills
10. Olay's white radiance.

To achieve the above objective data was collected by conducting a survey through a structured questionnaire adopting simple random sampling technique. A total of 200 respondents (111 males and 89 females) were given the print advertisements of the above mentioned brands/products for examination and were later provided the questionnaire. The age of the

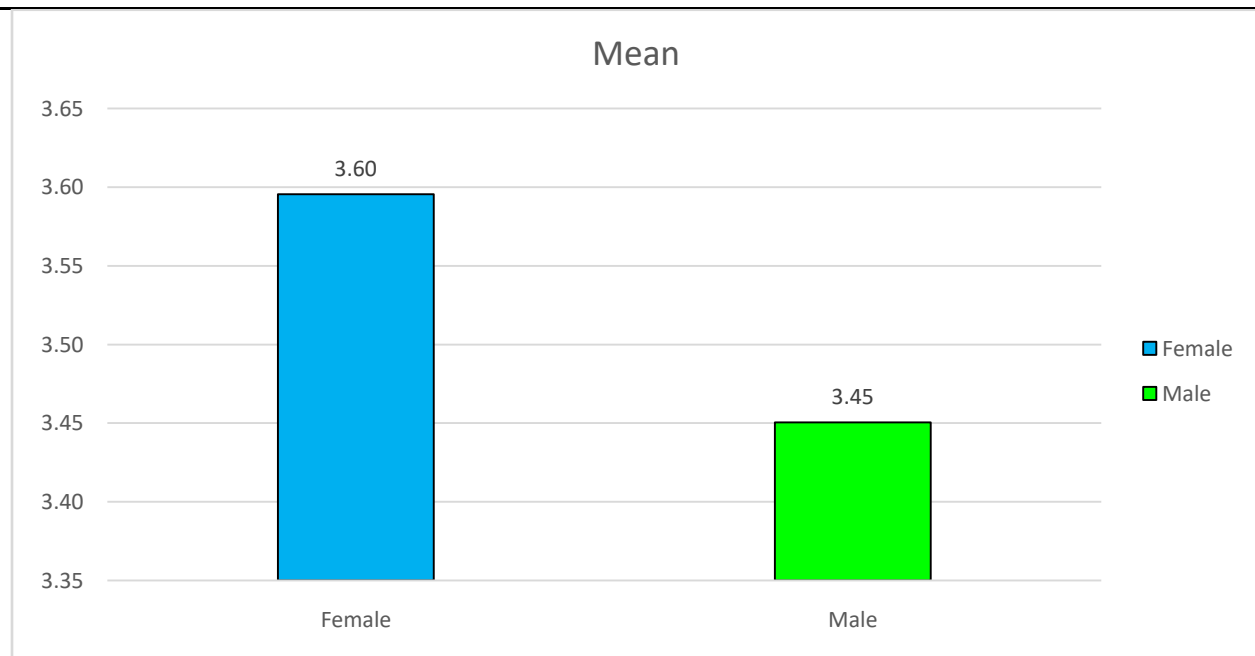
respondents ranges between twenty and forty years. Data has been collected from respondents residing in and around the city of Bengaluru. Questions included the emotional impact such advertisements had on the consumer. The sample was chosen based on the criteria of employment and a minimum educational qualification of having obtained a graduation degree. The data has been collected following the five-point Likert's scale which demonstrates the intensity of choices used in the print advertisements among the consumers. The intensity of choices has been scaled from five to one where five stands for 'strongly agree' and one stands for 'strongly disagree'.

### Analysis of results and discussion:

The table below gives the difference in perception of 'claims' made by the print advertisements of fairness products.

Table 1: Claims used in advertisements helps in generating awareness about the product within customer bases.

Gender	Mean	N	SD
Female	3.60	89	0.95
Male	3.45	111	1.02
Total	3.52	200	0.99





As evident from the above table, there is no significant difference in the perception of 'claims' between males and females of the sample population. The hypothesis outlined as 'no significant difference exists between the two genders when it comes to the perception of claims' thus stands verified and proven. The mean score of females is 3.60 with a standard deviation of 0.92 whereas for the males the mean score is 3.45 with a standard deviation of 1.02, which reveals that irrespective of the gender the perception of the 'claims' made in the print advertisements of fairness products is normal and acceptable both in terms of quality and quantity. This in turn affects the success of the advertisement especially in terms of influencing the target consumer which in this case are adults from an urban background. It may be of significance to note that fairness creams gain popularity and a healthy market in rural areas of the country in general. The rural population though lagging behind in means of accessibility to mass means of transportation or communication does not side-line the cosmetic part of everyday existence. It must be noted that sixty percent of revenue for the cosmetic industry is generated in the rural areas of evolving India.

The much sought 'fairness' has a deep rooted history, especially in the South Asian part of the globe. This has led to manufacturing giants exploiting this belief of beauty in fairness and utilising it as a weapon to ward of darker skin which is not considered an aesthetically appealing skin tone. White skin has a colonial connotation of power and superiority (Shankar et al, 2005). Even the fairy tales are not spared this notion of fairness where the Queen in Snow White and the seven dwarfs asks, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" Indians and the Indianness that comes with it have an obsession with this fairness right from the times of the Mahabharatha and Ramayana. The success of Fair and Lovely in India is a cursor that points to the fact that fairness creams do not need any special marketing techniques just like in the USA or elsewhere in Africa. The Advertising Council of India (ASCI) had rolled out guidelines in 2014 which prohibited cosmetic brands from communicating any discrimination on the basis of complexion through advertising. It also emphasised on the fact that no post-production visual effects must be used to enhance or exaggerate the claims made by these advertisers. The popularity of fairness creams and their claims does not derail its potential in reaching masses. ASCI hence insisted on the need to set up specific guidelines for this product category.

## Conclusion

The increased sensitivity towards complexion disparity poses a challenge to fairness products manufacturers. The obsession for a desirable change in skin colour is most individual's penchant. Though socio-cultural sensibility towards whitening products differ from market to market and even geographic locations, brands are reluctant to heed to rules. Stringent measures from authorities do not unsettle the booming cosmetics industry from their persistent 'claims'.

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