

Colourism in Advertising: How Skin care Product Advertisements Impact Women in India

JAYATHUNGA T.W.M.P.S.^{1*}

¹Denstu Communications, Sri Lanka.

malindijayathunga@gmail.com

Abstract — Skin-lightening products are arguably the best example of the powerful impact of advertising on people's psycho-social behaviour. South Asians are notorious when it comes to their obsession with lighter skin tones. In India, the biggest market for skin-lightening skincare products, this phenomenon is fuelled by centuries of historical, political, social, religious, and geographical segregation as well as the influence of Western media (Mishra, 2015). By considering the negative impact of fairness cream use and the promotion of skin-lightening products, The Indian Ministry of Health and Welfare banned the negative portrayal of dark skin in advertising (Raj et al., 2022). However, these regulations apply only to the textual or verbal messaging in advertising. Overcoming those regulations is a simple matter of replacing 'Fair' or 'Whitening' with words like; 'Glow', 'Brightening', and 'Lightening'. These regulations do not challenge the underlying discriminatory narrative of skin-lightening advertisements, due to a lack of in-depth understanding of how various aspects of advertising impact its viewers. This paper aims to bridge this knowledge gap by studying how different aspects of advertisements can impact psycho-social behaviour. The research design is a qualitative systematic literature review with a deductive approach that uses both empirical and theoretical data. Literature from credible databases such as; Google Scholar, Springer Link, ScienceDirect, and Wiley Online Library, published within the last 10 years, were considered for the systematic review to protect the findings' credibility and relevance. PRISMA model of inclusion and exclusion was used as a screening process to narrow down the final literature materials. Indian society views lighter skin as an indicator of success (Verma and Ray, 2023). This practice pre-dates India's history of colonisation when the arrival of Nomadic Aryans with lighter skin met their opponents - the darker-skinned Dravidans (Bajwa, von Maur, and Stephan, 2023). Skin tone would have been an easy indicator of tribe or caste and later social hierarchy. Centuries later and after several colonial invasions, Indian society associates lighter skin with wealth and privilege. Yet, according to Pathak and Nichter (2018), Indian women have little knowledge and experience with skincare products due to the negative social stigma surrounding self-adornment. Therefore aspirations for lighter skin stem from various social and personal measures (See Fig. 1) which are then used in creating compelling advertisements. Research shows that TV and digital advertisements are the

main influencers for the use of skin-lightening products among Indian women (Mangal et al., 2021).

For Indian women, fair skin means they get better opportunities in their careers and in marriage. Most of the early 2000s fairness advertisements from India narrated a similar story. A young girl failed to secure a dream job, only to pass the interview after using the advertised skin-lightening product. Another girl was rejected by her lover only to have him come running after she had used the skin-lightening product. More recent advertisements show lighter skin as a catalyst for female empowerment (Arumugam et al., 2022). See Fig. 2. However, most of these advertisements portray the product as a need by accepting, amplifying, and advocating society's stigmas and prejudices surrounding skin tone.

The degradation or the humiliation of the character with the darker skin in most of these advertisements is how the brand uses its power and strength to influence a new narrative in society, where the product becomes a need. In his 2014 study, S. Nadeem explains how advertisements have set a benchmark for beauty and assigned light-skin exclusionary powers which leads to 'Social Mimicry' a state of false consciousness and a desire based on power relationships. He also points out how all these advertisements hint at a lack of individual sovereignty. The skin-lightening product always has validation from friends or family (See Fig.3). This is a driving state created by social measures. Meanwhile, Krishen, LaTour, and Alishah (2024) use the Consumer Motivational Model to elaborate on how advertisements create 'skin-tone tension' among Asian women by creating a need-oriented drive state to move from the actual self to the ideal self. 'If the model in the advertisement enjoys freedom and joy, I can too. I just have to lighten my skin!'. However, while Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive theory suggests that the consumer is an active decision-maker in the buying process, a more advertising-centric model created by Justine Combs, called Social Framework for Advertising, believes that society and media are an active influence in the consumer's passive decision-making (Combs, 2016).

An advertisement's effectiveness can be measured in two ways: financial and cognitive, where financial effectiveness is measured using the product's elasticity of demand (Shapiro, Hitsch, and Tuchman, 2021). Cognitive effectiveness calls on measuring the change in brand perception and perceived value of the product within its target audience. Such a cognitive change is supported in an advertisement by three factors; advertising media, messaging, and time of schedule (De-Miguel-Guzmán et al., 2020).

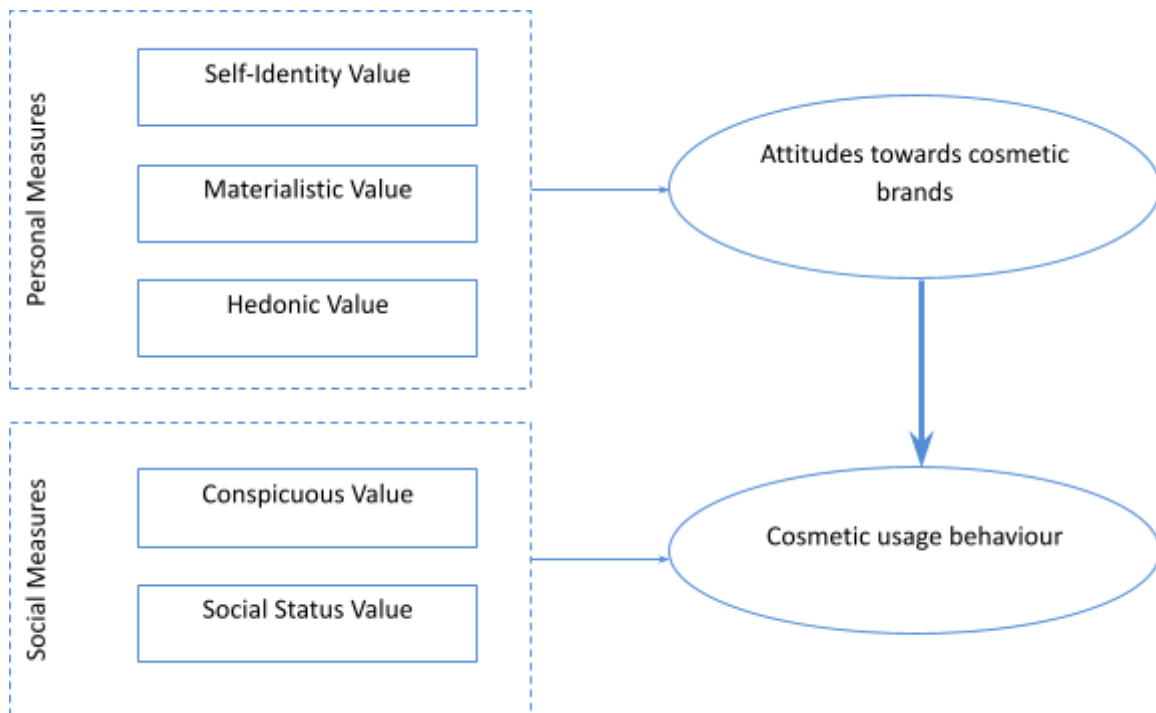
According to Zhao et al. (2022), an advertisement's quality and frequency are the two main factors that manipulate consumers. While ad frequency helps build credibility, the definition of ad quality was found to be vague. This study defined the quality of an ad as the ability of its content to convince the viewer using personal and social measures. Ad content can also be analysed in two parts; verbal and visual. Verbal strategies like; the use of positive adjectives, and the use of possessive and plural pronouns (eg; 'us' and 'you') play a major role in advertisements in validating the viewer's relationship with social forces. Advertising agencies also use various visual strategies such as; celebrity endorsements, depiction of scientific evidence as well and visualising the transition of the skin tones. Therefore, the research concludes that regulations on the textual content of an advertisement alone are not enough to counter the discriminatory impact of skin care advertisements.

The findings of this research call for more holistic and adequate regulations for advertisements promoting skin-lightening products. This research further highlights the need for advertisers to be bold in using their creativity to challenge long-held prejudices of society, rather than re-iterating them. This can create more authentic consumer engagement with skincare brands, especially as the world embraces changing sentiments about our sense of self.

Keywords: Advertising, skin-lightening products, psycho-social impact, advertising regulations

Figure 1

Personal and social measures influencing cosmetic usage behaviour.



Note. These measures are used in advertisements to build convincing narratives to influence consumers.

Figure 2

Storyline of the Glow and Lovely - 'Umpire' Commercial portraying lighter skin as a catalyst for female empowerment.



Note. Figures are sourced from the official YouTube page of Glow and Lovely India.

Figure 3

Vaseline Light Hydrate Advertisement



Note. Source: Vaseline India's official YouTube page

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