



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514

VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 9 | JUNE - 2019



A STUDY OF SKIN COLOR REPRESENTATION IN FAIRNESS CREAM ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT:

Fairness creams, in India, have been accused of spreading and promoting racism and “colorism” along with their products in their advertisements. Several blogs and research papers have addressed this issue in the recent past. Some campaigns have been launched against such beauty products like NDTV has decided not to air any fairness cream advertisements, ‘Black is Beautiful’ campaign, etc. Due to the rapid advancement of social media and electronic media, people have become more sensitive to and aware of social justice and equality in the twenty-first century. The present study is an attempt to find out whether there is any effect of these campaigns on the television commercials (hereafter TVC) of fairness cream or not. If there is any change, the study tries to find out the extent to which these advertisements are affected by these campaigns. The study also tries to look into the new strategies devised by the brands to promote such products. The study follows the case study research design to address the research problem. The study takes into account Fair and Lovely fairness cream as a case (since it occupied 80% of the fairness cream market in India in 2012 and still it has a strong grip in the market). The study analyses the select television advertisements of Fair and Lovely fairness cream that came after 2003. The study uses convenience sampling method to select the advertisements.



KEYWORDS: Representation, Racism, Colorism, Advertisement.

INTRODUCTION

The desire to look beautiful, for most of us, have almost always been part of our life since the outset of human civilization. Due to the rapid development of the cosmetic industry in the recent past the desire has changed into craving. One of the determinants behind the socio-psychological change in the perception of beauty has been the advertisements of beauty products. These

advertisements have been fueling our desires for immaculate beauty. The cosmetic industry with the help of different types of media changed and reshaped the concept of beauty. Cosmetic industry has grown many times in the second half of the twentieth century. Some key factors responsible for the growth of the industry are increase in per capita income globally, rise in electronic media and the internet, strategic planning by the cosmetic company to promote their products, etc.

Advertisement is the only major communicative tool between the consumer and the companies. Some advertisements of beauty products are accused of promoting implicitly or explicitly stereotype, racism, colorism, lookism, favoritism, etc. One of the controversial beauty products along with its advertisement is fairness cream. Fairness creams, in South Asian countries, have been accused of spreading and promoting racism and “colorism” along with their

products in their advertisements. Several blogs and research papers have addressed this issue in the recent past. Some campaigns have been launched against such beauty products like, NDTV has decided not to air any fairness cream advertisement, 'Black is Beautiful' campaign, etc. Due to the rapid advancement of social and electronic media, people have become more sensitive to and aware of social justice and equality in the twenty-first century. It seems academically viable to look into how such brands have addressed the socio-psychological change and accommodated themselves and their advertisements to the change. The present study is an attempt to find out whether there is any effect of these campaigns on the advertisements of fairness cream or not. If there is any change, the study tries to find out the extent to which these advertisements are affected by these campaigns. The study also tries to look into the new strategies devised by the brands to promote such products.

The controversy

If we look at Fair and Lovely as a multinational brand (marketed by Unilever in many countries in Asia and Africa and Hindustan Liver Limited in India) from its business perspective it has performed remarkably well so far in India and other Asian and African countries. The controversy is not about the brand's business and growth. The accusation against the brand is that it has compromised on ethical issues, whether the product is safe to use or not and its efficacy. Browne suggests that some chemicals like, hydroquinone, mercury salts, etc. are used in common fairness cream (2004). Such chemicals have negative side effects. However, there is no claim that Fair and Lovely contains such harmful components and to the best of my knowledge there is no safety issue has been reported about Fair and Lovely. Rusmadi et al concludes that 'despite knowing and being aware of the danger of skin lightening products, it does not stop them from using it as they believe that having a lighter skin tone is for their own self-satisfaction' (2015). Rusmadi et al suggests that craving for fairness has become so much important that they are ready compromised with safety.

The next controversy about the product is its effectiveness. On the basis of some discussions about the efficacy of Fair and Lovely, it can be said that it is almost impossible to change one's skin color by using any ointment or cream (Islam et al, 2006, Sinha, 2000). The most controversial aspect of Fair and Lovely fairness cream has been its advertisements. Some its advertisements are called highly racist. For example, Brinda Karat, a well-known Indian politician and former General Secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Congress (AIDWC), called the *Air Hostess advertisement* of Fair and Lovely 'demeaning to women and it should be off the air'. She calls the advertisement 'discriminatory on the basis of the color of skin,' and 'an affront to a woman's dignity' (quoted in Leistikow, 2003). The AIDWC campaign against the *Air Hostess Advertisement* created a political pressure on the central government and consequently two advertisements of Fair and Lovely including the *Air Hostess Advertisement* were banned by the government. The then Information and Broadcasting Minister, Ravi Shankar Prasad justified the ban and said, 'Fair & Lovely cannot be supported because the advertisement is demeaning to women and the women's movement,' (quoted in Doctor and Narayanswamy, 2003). Despite this controversy and ban of the two advertisements the brand has kept on suggesting to its potential customer and its users that people with dark complexion is inferior to the fair ones. Furthermore, in this regard Karnani adds that these advertisements 'contain the message of a depressed woman with few prospects that gains a brighter future by either attaining a boyfriend/husband or a job after becoming markedly fairer' (2007).

After the ban of two of its advertisements, the brand tried to defend and counter the criticism. The brand defended itself by saying that skin color is a part of personal grooming in India and other Asian countries and a well groomed person has advantages in his/her life. The Malaysian counterpart of the brand suggested that 'our TV commercial was never intended to suggest any correlation between skin color and beauty' (quoted in Prystay, 2002). The creator of the banned *Air Hostess Advertisement* also came to defend the advertisement and argued that 'the ad is meant to be a slap in the face of people who still discriminate against a girl child, and we had to start with the negative image to deliver the positive message' (Islam et al, 2006). His argument seems logical but a message of empowerment cannot be accepted at the cost of discrimination and humiliation.

Fair and Lovely fairness cream along with other fairness cream witnessed severe criticism on social media. Bollywood actor Abhay Deol in a series of posts on Facebook slammed the celebrities who endorse and has endorsed fairness creams. It became a big debate on social media. Ram Subramanian, an ad filmmaker and activist, harshly criticized Fair and Lovely for creating racial discrimination and exploiting insecurities of people in a video that went viral on social media. There are several campaigns one can see on social media that question such advertisements and their products. Many parodies that mock and criticize such TVCs are available on social media. It would be academically interesting to look into some recent advertisements of Fair and Lovely in relation to these controversies and campaigns.

METHODOLOGY

The study follows the case study research design to address the research problem. The study takes into account Fair and Lovely fairness cream as a case (since it occupied 80% of the fairness cream market in India in 2012 and still it has a strong grip in the market). The study analyses the five select television advertisements of Fair and Lovely that came after 2003. The year 2003 is remarkable since two TVCs were banned by the government. The study uses convenience sampling method to select the advertisements. As the study looks into the TVCs of Fair and Lovely, a short description each TVC has been given below:

1. The first select TVC is about two female colleagues who are in their office. The first (in the order of appearance in the TVC) one measures her fairness with the help of a "fairness measure scale" and she wants to know whether the fairness cream has worked or not. She finds a satisfactory change in her skin color; she has become fairer. In order to share her happiness and to know the result of Fair and lovely she goes to her colleague. She compares her fairness to her colleague's and becomes sad when she finds that her colleague is fairer than her. She wants to know how she has become fairer than her as they started using the cream from the same day. She is told by her colleague that she applies the cream, unlike her, daily not occasionally. Finally she suggests her that if she wants double fairness liker her she will have to use the fairness cream daily.
2. The second select TVC is of Fair and Lovely fairness cream for men. A young stuntman finishes his bike stunt and the moment he tries to remove his helmet that director says, "Ok, cut, now call the hero". He feels dishearten when the director praises the hero's look and not his heroic stunt. He thinks that he cannot be fair like the hero because he rides a bike. Suddenly he gets a message in his phone from the heroine of the film suggesting him to use Fair and Lovely Menz Active. In the next section, he again performs a bike stunts but the moment he removes his helmet the director is mesmerized with his fair look and not only shoots the entire scene but makes him the hero of the film. Finally not only he gets success but wins the heart of the heroine as well.
3. The third select TVC begins when a father tries to convince his daughter to accept a marriage proposal from a well settled boy but the daughter suggests his father that she first of all wants to be financially independent by getting a job. The conservative father keeps on suggesting her that the boy has a good job, own house, a perfect match for her, etc. In the next part of the commercial she discusses the issue with a friend of hers. She suggests her to use Fair and Lovely. After the use of the cream she gains confidence and tells her father that she will marry to the boy after three years once she gets a good job, own house, etc. She thinks only then she would be a perfect match for the boy.
4. In the fourth TVC Viral Kohali, a famous Indian cricketer, says our face has to persuade many things and people in our life. He says being a cricketer his face has to persuade the sunlight, heat and dust. His face sometimes has to persuade the empires, the bowlers, his fans and media persons, and girls. He finally says that he is able to persuade all people because he uses Fair and Lovely Multi Expert.
5. The fifth and the last select commercial for the present study tries to highlight the best aspects and parts of popular TVCs of Fair and Lovely that came before 2012. Simultaneously, it talks about the broader vision and mission of the brand. The commercial says with the help of written words is as follows, "A brand with a vision. A vision to make dreams come true. Empowering women since 1975. Transforming their lives. Rescripting their destiny. A brand consumer swear by. A brand that is determined to outdo itself. 2012 are you ready."

The study takes into account only the television advertisements of Fair and Lovely which use either Hindi or/and English.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study does not discuss the legal and commercial aspects of the fairness creams. It does not discuss the extent to which the advertisements were/are commercially successful or not successful.

Analysis and interpretation of the data

The first obvious change in the TVCs of Fair and Lovely after the ban of two of its advertisements in 2003 is, unlike the two banned commercials, they do not explicitly propagate the idea that the skin colors other than fair are inferior. However, if we look at some of the select TVCs of Fair and Lovely that came after 2003, they do suggest, in one way or the other that fair skin color is superior to the dark one. For example, in the second select advertisement it has been clearly depicted that the stuntman has the heroic quality but he does not have the stereotype look (more precisely the skin color). It has been suggested that his dusky skin color is an obstacle in his career. However, the commercial has a good message for the society that the hero does not have the heroic quality but we have accepted him as a hero because he has the stereotype look and body. It tries to communicate the situational irony of our society. However, it seems difficult to accept that this positive message is intentional. The Ultimate objective of the commercial is to convince the audience that success can be achieved with talent supported by a good look with fair skin and the implied meaning is success cannot be achieved with dark skin.

The first select TVC of Fair and Lovely clearly shows the strong desire to achieve fairness. It implicitly and cleverly depicts how people feel insecure and inferior because of their dusky and dark complexion. However, this commercial's main objective is to address the existing customer and persuade them to use more Fair and Lovely to have better result. It may address to those dissatisfied customers who have not got the desired and promised result. This advertisement can also be seen as a strategy to retain the existing customers who are somewhat aware of and influenced by the campaign against and criticism of the brand.

If we take into account the third TVC, it carries a message of women empowerment. It seems that the brand tries to counter the criticism of and campaigns against its TVCs and its products. It tries to counter the criticism that compelled the government to ban two of its commercials. The advertisement is based on a very common strategy of commercials. It tries to express solidarity with female at large. However, like other TVCs it also propagates that fairness and a glowing face are not only a key to professional success but also gives you confidence. The implied meaning is if one does not have fair skin and a glowing face, he/she will have difficulty in getting success because of lack of confidence. The fourth TVC clearly tells the viewers that Virat Kohali is a successful cricketer because he has a glowing face with fair skin which is the result of using Fair and Lovely. It also suggests that his success is more a result of applying the cream on his face than his cricketing skills. Over all the TVC suggests that if one wants to be successful in any sport, he/she should have a glowing face with fair skin.

The biggest strategic change after the 2003 controversy was the establishment of Fair and Lovely Foundation by the brand. Cleverly the brand tried to shift the attention of the existing and potential customers towards its social responsibility. It can also be seen as a defensive mechanism against the criticism of its commercial and the products itself. A conscious effort was made to change the entire narrative about the brand. However, the brand denies that the Fair and Lovely Foundation had been established to deal with the accusations and criticism of its products and its TVCs. The fifth last select TVC astutely tries to deny all allegations and criticism against the brand. At the deeper level the purpose of this advertisement is to save and maintain the brand's image and at the same time it tries to convince the potential customers and the existing customers that the brand does not spread discrimination on the basis of skin color rather it has been working for empowering women since its

inception in India. One of the purposes of the fifth TVC is to touch the emotional chord of female at large and tries to convince them that the brand is against the subjugation of women and patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the analysis of the select TVCs of Fair and Lovely, it can be concluded that a controversy and debate that started in 2003 and still going on has influenced the TVCs of Fair and Lovely. The company, so far, has tried to avoid the controversies by making TVCs which contain, according to the company's perspective, no controversial contents. The analysis also suggests that the new strategy of the brand is to focus only on positive aspects of fairness. In other words, its TVCs explicitly do not propagate any negative aspects of people with dark and dusky skin color. Despite such allegations and controversies, the company, in order to promote and sell its products tries to maintain the obsession for fairness in Indian society with the help of its TVCs. However, the aggression and openness that was available earlier in its TVCs is missing. The brand tries to avoid using the words like "fair" "fairness", "dark", etc. in its TVCs and uses some suggestive words, like, "glowing", "radiant", etc. In order to promote its product the brand suggests through its TVCs that fairness is a key to success and happiness in life. The brand is trying to establish an ideal beauty standard which can never be achieved. There is no doubt that such fairness creams and their promotion is offensive and it spreads discrimination among people. The only long term solution to such problems is to provide better education and awareness to people at large.

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