A Semiotic Analysis of Fairness Cream Advertisements and Its Impact on the Perception of Indian Women on Beauty Standards

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements serve as pivotal cultural tools that shape consumer perceptions, influence purchasing behavior and construct social meanings. In the context of beauty and cosmetics, their persuasive force is particularly directed toward women, often reinforcing the long-standing association between fair skin and desirability. This study examines the semiotic strategies employed in fairness cream advertisements to demonstrate how they commodify the female body and reproduce normative beauty standards among Indian women. Drawing on multimodal semiotic theories from Structuralist Model of Signification of Saussure, Barthes (1972) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) the analysis explores how signs, symbols, color schemes, narrative structures and ideological mythologies collectively sustain the notion that fairness signifies beauty, confidence, success and social approval. The study focuses on both lexical and visual semiotics, analyzing linguistic choices, metaphors, presuppositions and transformation narratives that implicitly encode colorist ideologies. Complemented by feminist theory and postcolonial perspectives, the analysis further interrogates the gendered pressures, patriarchal expectations and colonial residues embedded within fairness discourse. Findings reveal that fairness cream advertisements systematically normalize colorism by idealizing lighter skin tones while marginalizing darker complexions. These representational patterns shape self-perceptions of women, contributing to internalized bias, diminished self-esteem, and aspirational conformity to Eurocentric beauty norms. The study highlights the urgent need for inclusive media practices that challenge discriminatory beauty narratives and support diverse representations. By examining the intersections of semiotics, gender and postcolonial identity, this research contributes to broader discussions on beauty, power and inequality in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Semiotics, colorism, beauty, Indian women, advertising

INTRODUCTION

Advertisements play a central role in shaping cultural ideologies, consumer desires and social expectations. In contemporary capitalist societies, they function not merely as marketing tools but as ideological instruments that naturalize values and worldviews. As Yelle (2021) argues, advertising constructs cultural myths that align with dominant social and economic interests, presenting these narratives as universal truths rather than commercially motivated constructs. Through persuasive linguistic and visual strategies, advertisements embed themselves into the everyday consciousness of consumers, shaping their aspirations, anxieties and self-perceptions. This influence is particularly evident in the beauty and cosmetic industry, which has grown exponentially due to globalization, digital marketing and the increasing visibility of beauty cultures across social media platforms.

Cosmetics hold a longstanding cultural significance especially among young girls and women who are often exposed to beauty practices from an early age. Saha (2019) notes that adolescent curiosity with beauty products evolves into adult engagement with cosmetics as tools for enhancing attractiveness, negotiating femininity and cultivating self-confidence. The modern cosmetic industry capitalizes on these cultural practices by producing a wide range of products tailored to diverse socio-economic groups and disseminating them through highly stylized advertisements in malls, city billboards, women magazines and digital spaces. These advertisements construct and reinforce idealized beauty norms, persuading consumers that cosmetic enhancement is both desirable and necessary.

One of the most persistent and problematic beauty ideals in the Indian society is the cultural valorization of fair skin. Historically rooted in caste hierarchies, colonial legacies and socio-economic stratification, the preference for lighter skin has led to widespread discrimination against darker-skinned individuals particularly women (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). This deeply embedded colorism fuels the demand for fairness creams which have become some of the highest-selling cosmetic products in South Asia. Studies indicate that a significant proportion of Indian women regularly use multiple skin-lightening products in pursuit of a lighter complexion (Jha, 2016). The beauty market capitalizes on these insecurities by promoting fairness as a marker of attractiveness, modernity, success and social mobility.

The consequences of colorism extend beyond aesthetic preference. Darker-skinned Indian women often experience lowered self-esteem, stigmatization and exclusion in various social spheres. Correa (2011) highlights that in the traditional Indian marriage market, fair-skinned brides continue to receive preferential treatment, reinforcing discriminatory perceptions that equate fairness with desirability. Such deeply ingrained norms are continually reproduced through fairness cream advertisements, which depict lighter skin as a prerequisite for employment, social approval, romantic success and upward mobility. Beauty related advertisements not only promote fairness creams but also construct a broader framework of beauty discrimination. They frequently portray narrow body types as ideal, marginalize natural physical features and celebrate youthfulness as the ultimate form of beauty. Iqbal (2014) argues that this systematic exclusion contributes to body shaming, ageism and emotional distress among women who do not conform to these constructed ideals. In this context, fairness cream advertisements represent one of the most visible and harmful forms of aesthetic regulation, particularly because they intersect with race, gender and class.

This study focuses specifically on fairness cream advertisements and the semiotic strategies they employ to construct and normalize colorist beauty ideals. These advertisements often rely on transformation narratives, visually depicting a shift from "dark to fair" as symbolic of personal improvement, success and happiness. To critically examine the layers of meaning embedded in these narratives, this research employs a multimodal semiotic approach informed by Peirce's triadic model of signification. This framework enables an in-depth analysis of linguistic choices, visual symbols and ideological myths embedded within fairness advertisements. By dissecting the semiotic components of these advertisements, the study aims to reveal how fairness creams are marketed not merely as cosmetic products but as aspirational tools for attaining social acceptance and upward mobility. In doing so, it seeks to highlight the broader implications of such advertising practices on the self-perception and identity formation among Indian women. Ultimately, this research advocates for media representations that embrace diverse skin tones and challenge discriminatory beauty norms, contributing to a more inclusive discourse on beauty and identity in the Indian context.

Background of Study

The significance of conducting a semiotic analysis of beauty standards portrayed in fairness cream advertisements and their influence on the perceptions of Indian women lies in its potential to offer profound insights into the cultural and social ramifications of these advertisements. This analytical approach allows for a deeper exploration of the various signs, symbols and messages embedded within these advertisements. It delves into how visual imagery, language and cultural symbols are strategically employed to construct and reinforce specific beauty standards.

By dissecting these advertisements through a semiotic lens, researchers can uncover the nuanced meanings conveyed through various elements within the advertisements. This includes the connotations attached to specific colors, symbols, gestures and depictions of beauty. Understanding these underlying messages helps elucidate how these advertisements contribute to shaping and perpetuating certain beauty ideals within Indian society.

Moreover, this study focuses on examining the impact of fairness cream advertisements on the perceptions of Indian women serves as a window into the broader implications of media representation on individual and societal notions of beauty. It allows for a comprehensive analysis of how these advertisements influence not only individual perceptions of beauty but also how they contribute to the formation and reinforcement of societal beauty norms. Thus, by shedding light on these mechanisms, this study aims to highlight the limitations and potential harm of these narrow and often discriminatory beauty standards perpetuated by such advertisements.

Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to a more informed discourse on beauty ideals, encouraging a shift towards more inclusive and diverse representations that celebrate the natural diversity and individuality of Indian women.

Problem Statement

The cosmetic industry and the media collaborate to propagate the unethical idea on beauty standards by glorifying the white ideal beauty through favorite cosmetic brands of women that represent various aspects such as class, social standing, lifestyle and aesthetics. Such advertisements create misconceptions about beauty, leading women to believe that being beautiful means being "*white*" or "*fair*". Despite efforts toward promoting inclusivity and diversity, the pervasive influence of fairness cream advertisements continues to reinforce narrow and discriminatory beauty standards, particularly concerning skin color. Moreover, criticism has been directed at fairness cream advertisements for promoting colorism, perpetuating the notion that fair skin holds superiority over darker tones. This perpetuation of discrimination based on skin color reinforces biased societal hierarchies, eliciting discontent among numerous Indian women who challenge these prejudiced notions.

Amidst this discourse, a faction of Indian women actively advocates for embracing diversity within beauty standards. They emphasize the importance of celebrating and accepting different skin tones and unique features. This group encourages a shift toward recognizing and promoting natural beauty and self-acceptance, advocating against adhering to narrow and discriminatory beauty ideals.

Furthermore, a significant number of Indian women have taken a stand against the pervasive influence of fairness cream advertisements. They confront societal norms and call for a more inclusive representation of beauty, promoting the idea that beauty encompasses diverse forms and should not solely revolve around external appearances. These varied perspectives illustrate an evolving understanding among Indian women regarding the damaging impact of *"unrealistic"* beauty standards. This collective understanding drives a growing demand to challenge and redefine these standards, advocating for a more inclusive portrayal of beauty that celebrates individuality and diversity regardless of skin color or physical appearance.

Thus, this study aims to critically analyze the impact of fairness cream advertisements on societal perceptions of beauty and the subsequent implications on the self-esteem of the women and the prevalence of colorism within the Indian society. By understanding the semiotic constructions employed in these advertisements, this research seeks to shed light on the cultural and social implications of perpetuating such biased beauty standards, thereby advocating for a more inclusive and diverse representation of beauty in advertising and media.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a comprehensive semiotic analysis of fairness cream advertisements with a specific focus on understanding the beauty standards they endorse and their influence on the perception of Indian women regarding skin color. Grounded on the Structuralist Model of Signification of Saussure, Barthes (1972) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) this research aims to dissect the underlying semiotic elements employed in these advertisements, including visual and textual cues, symbols and messaging to reveal how they contribute to the perpetuation of biased beauty ideals of fair skin. Through this analysis, the research also endeavors to advocate for a more inclusive and diverse representation of beauty, emphasizing the importance of embracing and celebrating diverse skin tones among the Indian women globally.

Research Questions

Considering the research objectives outlined previously, the following research questions have been formulated to guide the study towards achieving a comprehensive understanding of the impact of fairness cream advertisements on the perceptions of Indian women on beauty standards:

1. How do fairness cream advertisements construct symbolic meanings about femininity, beauty and skin color?

2. What semiotic strategies reinforce colorism and gendered expectations?

3. How do these advertisements influence the perception of Indian women regarding beauty standards?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The promotion of fairness cream advertisements in the Indian media has sparked significant scholarly interest and public discourse, primarily due to its influence on shaping societal beauty standards and the perception of skin color. Several researchers have examined the underlying semiotic strategies employed by these advertisements to propagate specific beauty ideals and their subsequent impacts on the perception of Indian women.

Gupta and Verma (2017) highlighted how fairness cream advertisements construct a symbolic association between fair skin and notions of beauty, success and social acceptance. They emphasized the use of visual cues such as fair-skinned models and language emphasizing transformation and societal acceptance to reinforce the idea that fair skin is the epitome of beauty and attractiveness.

Similarly, Patel and Singh (2019) underscored the role of visual elements in elucidating how advertisements influence the perception of Indian women, leading to internalized beliefs that equate fair skin with self-worth and societal acceptance. Their research emphasized the psychological impact of these advertisements on the self-esteem and self-perception of women, contributing to the perpetuation of colorism and discriminatory beauty standards.

Building on these studies, Khan et al. (2020) explored the broader socio-cultural implications of fairness cream advertisements in reinforcing colorist attitudes and discriminatory practices within the Indian society, focusing on the relationship between the perpetuation of biased beauty standards and its impact on social hierarchies; emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and diverse representation of beauty to combat the pervasive effects of colorism.

Similarly, Raj and Kumar (2020) investigated the cultural implications of fairness cream advertisements, examining its role in shaping societal perceptions of beauty and reinforcing hierarchies based on skin color. Their study underscored the need to challenge the prevailing beauty standards propagated by these advertisements and advocated for a more inclusive representation of beauty that celebrates diversity and rejects the notion of fair skin as the sole standard of attractiveness and success.

Mishra and Khan (2020) explored the psychological and detrimental effects of fairness cream advertisements on the self-esteem and perception of beauty standards among Indian women, emphasizing the need to challenge the narrow and biased beauty standards propagated by the media.

Singh and Chatterjee (2021) emphasized the interplay between the signifiers used in the advertisements and their impact on the interpretation of beauty standards, leading to the internalization of biased ideals and fostering feelings of inadequacy among women who do not conform to these standards.

Crasta (2020) has highlighted that the perceptions of Indian women on beauty standards and fairness cream advertisements reveal a multifaceted comprehension of the harmful consequences associated with *"unrealistic"* beauty ideals. Numerous women express concerns regarding the negative impact of these standards on their self-esteem and body image articulating a sense of pressure to conform to specific beauty norms that foster feelings of inadequacy and insecurity.

Colorism in general remains a pervasive phenomenon in South Asia, reinforced through institutions, marriage markets, family upbringing and media practices. According to (Shankar & Subramanian, 2021) beauty and fairness are largely equated with caste privilege, purity, class status and urban modernity. Advertisements further amplify these associations by constructing lighter skin as aspirational and darker skin as a deficit requiring intervention.

On the other hand, postcolonial feminist theorists too have highlighted how beauty standards intersect with gendered power relations. Women in South Asia are often evaluated based on physical appearance within

patriarchal structures where attractiveness is linked to worthiness, marriageability and social value (Mohanty, 2003). Fairness advertisements further exploit these anxieties by targeting the aspirations of women for autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing gendered stereotypes.

Semiotics has undoubtedly played a role in decoding signs in media discourses. According to Barthes (1972) denotation refers to literal meaning while connotation refers to cultural and ideological associations. Fairness cream advertisements use signifiers such as before-and-after images, light beams, glowing skin and upward arrows to connote transformation, success and empowerment. The mythologizing process naturalizes fairness as beauty and beauty as power.

There are also existing studies that indicate repeated exposure to narrow beauty ideals lead to diminished self-esteem, appearance dissatisfaction and internalized colorism (Skinner, 2019). Women increasingly associate personal worth with conformity to media constructs. This article thus builds on these insights by unpacking how semiotic messages within fairness advertisements implicitly shape these perceptions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach employing a content analysis method to conduct an extensive semiotic evaluation of fairness cream advertisements. The focus is on understanding their influence on the perceptions of Indian women regarding beauty standards and skin tone.

Analytical Framework

This study adopts a multimodal semiotic analytical framework grounded in Barthes (1972) which distinguishes between **denotation** or the literal representation in an advertisement (such as the image of a smiling woman with visibly lighter skin) and **connotation** referring to the culturally encoded meanings that such imagery evokes (for instance, associating fairness with beauty, desirability, professional success or social mobility). Building on this semiotic foundation, the analysis further examines the narrative structures that frame fairness creams as transformative solutions (visual metaphors) that symbolize purity, improvement and modernity and the color symbolism used to contrast "darkness" with "lightness" as moral, aesthetic or aspirational categories. Attention is also given to **gendered scripts,** particularly how advertisements construct normative expectations of femininity, attractiveness and social value as well as to **linguistic framing** including lexical choices, presuppositions and metaphorical expressions that reinforce colorist ideologies. Together, these analytical components enable a comprehensive interpretation of how fairness cream advertisements construct meaning, normalize discriminatory beauty hierarchies and influence the perception of Indian women on beauty standards.

Selection and Justification of Dataset

Data includes print ads, television commercials and digital campaigns from major brands with the intention to capture the diversity in advertising strategies, audience targeting and evolving trends in portraying beauty ideals. By systematically examining ten samples, this analysis seeks to unveil patterns, associations and cultural representations embedded within fairness cream advertisements, thus, shedding light on their potential impact on the perceptions and norms related to beauty and skin color among the Indian audience.

Table 1: Cosmetic Advertisements

No.	Brands	Year	Source
1.	Fair & Lovely	2018	Instagram
2.	Dabur Uveda Fairness Cream	2009	Instagram
3.	Stillman's Beauty: Forever Lasting Fairness Cream Ad	2014	Instagram
4.	9SKIN Fairness Serum	2023	Instagram

5.	THE SECRET Fairness Cream Ad by Haappy Herbs by Shrutika	2023	Instagram
6.	LEVER Ayush Natural Fairness Saffron Face Cream	2022	Instagram
7.	Himalaya Natural Glow Kesar Face Cream	2022	Instagram
8.	Shahnaz Fairness Dream Cream	1998	Instagram
9.	LOREAL Paris White Perfect Cream	2000	Instagram
10.	DELUXE White Radiance: Whitening Cream	2000	Instagram

The parameters that will be considered in decoding the samples above will focus on identifying and decoding the verbal and visual semiotic elements such as color, imagery, language and signs, presence of a story or a plot, lighting and attire used in these advertisements to construct beauty standards and promote specific perceptions of skin color. The samples have been meticulously collected based on the following criteria:

Advertisement Samples: a set of diverse fairness cream advertisements were selected from print ads, television commercials and digital campaigns from major brands that represent various styles and linguistic variations mostly preferred by Indian women to ensure a comprehensive analysis. A well-rounded representation of the advertising landscape, capturing nuances in messaging, visuals and audience were applied to justify the validity of the dataset.

Cultural Variation: Within the diverse cultural landscape of South Asia, the selected data specifically concentrates on Indian women. This focus is attributed to the observation that Indian women compared to their counterparts from other cultural backgrounds, exhibit a notable preference for fairness creams. As a rich source of global cultural insights, the chosen media sites provide platforms for users to share content reflecting their lifestyles, preferences and cultural influences worldwide. Thus, the analysis entails an examination of user-generated content, encompassing posts, comments and engagement metrics. Various factors such as geographic location, hashtags, language in captions and the cultural context of the content offer valuable insights into the worldwide variations in beauty standards.

For example, examining Instagram posts related to beauty products or routines may reveal trends specific to certain regions or cultural communities. The use of location tags, language diversity in captions and engagement patterns can help discern how beauty standards are expressed and perceived across different cultural contexts within a country. It allows researchers to explore how individuals from various cultural backgrounds engage with and contribute to the discourse on beauty within the digital realm.

Temporal Variation: The inclusion of advertisements from distinct time periods aims to scrutinize potential shifts or trends in messaging and representation within the beauty industry. This choice is substantiated by recognizing the dynamic and evolving nature of beauty ideals and advertising strategies over the years. The selected time periods for the present data collection span from 1998 to 2023, encompassing diverse decades strategically captures different epochs within the late 20th century and the 21st century. This deliberate selection enables a nuanced analysis of how societal perceptions of beauty, cultural norms and advertising approaches have transformed over nearly two and a half decades.

The late 20th century, represented by the years 1998 and 2000, reflects a period when traditional beauty standards and conventional advertising methods were predominant. As the timeline progresses into the early 21st century (2009 and 2014) there is a shift in societal attitudes towards beauty and a surge in digital media influence. The subsequent years 2018, 2022 and 2023 represent contemporary times marked by heightened awareness of diverse beauty standards and the pervasive impact of digital platforms. As such, the inclusion of this specific timeline in the data collection process enables a nuanced exploration of the temporal evolution in beauty advertisements, providing insights into the dynamic interplay between cultural shifts and advertising strategies over the past two and a half decades.

Data Collection Procedures

Documentation and Archiving: selected advertisements were gathered and documented systematically to ensure proper archiving with detailed information such as brand, date of airing/publication, target audience and content description.

The data analysis will involve a systematic semiotic examination of ten (10) samples of fairness cream advertisements from various media platforms from the year 1998 to 2023. This systematic examination involves a detailed analysis of visual and textual elements present in these advertisements to uncover underlying meanings, symbols and messages conveyed to the audience.

Each selected advertisement will undergo a comprehensive evaluation, focusing on verbal and visual imagery, linguistic cues, cultural signs, narratives and any other semiotic elements used to convey messages related to beauty standards. The systematic nature of this analysis ensures a thorough exploration of how these advertisements construct and reinforce societal perceptions of beauty among Indian women.

Ethical Considerations

It is to be noted that ethical clearance is not deemed necessary for this study due to the reason that this study did not involve any human participants as it solely involves the analysis of publicly available materials such as advertisements or media content without directly involving human subjects in interviews, surveys or experiments. Hence, this study did not involve any secondary data analysis as well. This study also did not delve into sensitive or potentially harmful topics and does not pose any risk of harm, coercion, or discomfort to participants.

Data Analysis

Drawing from Barthes (1972), fairness cream advertisements often employ various verbal, visual and semiotic elements to construct and reinforce beauty standards that associate fair skin with attractiveness, success and even inclusiveness to a certain extent. The denotative level presents seemingly simple images such as smiling women, glowing complexions and "before–after" comparisons while the connotative level embeds deeper ideological meanings linking fairness with confidence, desirability and upward mobility. Visual cues such as lighting effects, color contrasts, transformation arcs and aspirational settings work alongside linguistic choices. Terms like "brightening," "whitening," "radiance" or "advanced formula" to position fairness as a superior aesthetic ideal. These semiotic resources collectively naturalize colorist ideologies by portraying darker skin as a problem requiring correction and fair skin as a gateway to acceptance within society. Through such layered meaning-making, advertisements subtly shape consumer perceptions and normalize discriminatory beauty hierarchies.

Advertisement 1
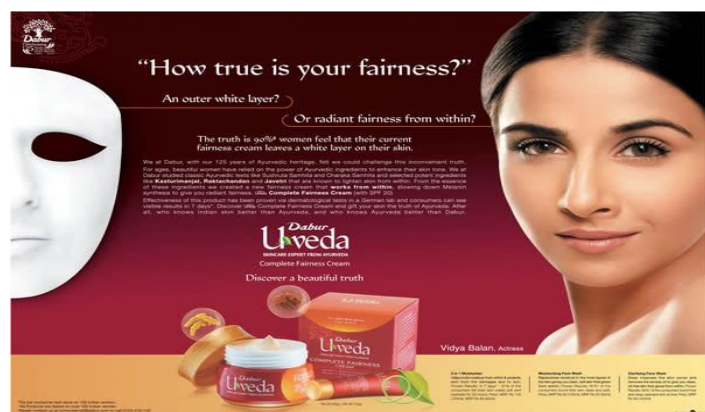
Fair & Lovely Promotional Campaign Ad (2018)

Source: Instagram

Fair & Lovely, a skincare brand introduced by Hindustan Unilever Ltd in 1975, swiftly gained popularity in India and beyond, significantly influencing beauty standards. Promoted to lighten complexion and reduce dark spots, the brand's advertisements depicted fair skin as synonymous with beauty and success. However, it faced widespread criticism for perpetuating colorism and unrealistic beauty ideals, negatively impacting self-esteem,

especially among women not fitting these standards. In response to evolving societal views, Hindustan Unilever rebranded Fair & Lovely as "Glow & Lovely" in 2020 aiming for a more inclusive representation of beauty, distancing itself from the earlier focus on fairness. This shift signified a move towards diverse standards in the Indian beauty industry. The significant influence of the brand paved the way for similar beauty concepts emphasizing white skin in various advertisements, reflecting a shift in beauty ideals and the importance of understanding their symbolic representation.

Advertisement 2

Dabur Uveda Fairness Cream Ad (2009)

Source: Female Magazine

Dabur Uveda Fairness Cream is a skincare product designed to address uneven skin tone, dullness and pigmentation issues. Created by Dabur, a trusted name in the realm of natural healthcare and personal care products, the fairness cream is formulated with a blend of natural ingredients known for their skin-brightening properties. This cream aims to provide a radiant and even complexion by working on various aspects of the skin. It may contain herbal extracts, vitamins and other skin-nourishing components that are believed to help reduce dark spots, improve skin texture and enhance natural glow of the skin.

The product is typically advertised as a suitable product for all skin types and may focus on delivering visible results by targeting specific skin concerns. Dabur Uveda Fairness Cream might also emphasize the use of natural or herbal ingredients, appealing to individuals seeking skincare solutions that are perceived as gentle and beneficial for the skin. Often promoted through persuasive marketing campaigns, endorsements and testimonials, this fairness cream aims to address the desires of individuals looking to achieve a brighter and more even skin tone. It may claim to offer a visible transformation, leading to enhanced confidence and a more radiant appearance. Dabur Uveda Fairness Cream is among the products in the market targeting skin brightening and addressing uneven skin tone, appealing to those seeking to achieve a more luminous complexion. By verbally and visually projecting the cream to achieve an even skin tone, it subtly implies a pathway to overall wellness. Yet, it remains entangled with prevalent societal beauty norms.

Advertisement 3

Stillman's Beauty: Forever Lasting Fairness Cream Ad (2014)

Source: Facebook

As of January 2022, Stillman's Beauty: Forever Lasting Fairness Cream while not widely recognized in mainstream global media, held a prominent place among South Indian housewives as an affordable skincare option. The advertised benefits encompassed claims of long-lasting fairness, reducing dark spots, improving skin texture and enhancing overall radiance with regular use. Despite its straightforward visuals and mediocre claims, Stillman's Beauty: Forever Lasting Fairness Cream became a popular choice due to its affordability and widespread availability at local stores.

Advertisement 4

9SKIN Fairness Serum Ad (2023)

Source: Instagram

Renowned Indian actress Nayanthara identified a market gap for affordable skincare products infused with exotic ingredients, leading to the creation of 9Skin. Setting itself apart, the brand prides itself on meticulously crafted formulas that combine the goodness of natural elements with cutting-edge nanotechnology. Claiming to utilize unique and multi-beneficial ingredients such as Sea Buckthorn and *buah merah* (red fruit) ingredients that are untapped by Indian skincare brands, 9Skin stood out. Notably, the product is advertised as suitable for all skin types and genders. In a promotional interview, the actor further highlighted that the product is "more than just skincare," framing it instead as an expression of self-care and self-love. As a widely admired public figure, her endorsement lends considerable credibility to the brand, reinforcing perceptions of reliability, desirability and quality. Her association with the product is likely to influence consumer aspiration, particularly among women who idealize her beauty and success, thereby strengthening the persuasive appeal of the advertisement.

Advertisement 5

THE SECRET Fairness Cream Ad by Haappy Herbs by Shrutika (2023)

Source: Instagram

This *SECRET* Fairness Cream is marketed as a naturally curated formula that promises visibly fairer skin within a remarkably short period specifically, within just nine days, attributing its effectiveness to the presence of glutathione as its primary active ingredient. Such claims position the product as a rapid solution for attaining socially *"desired"* beauty standards, thereby increasing its appeal among consumers seeking quick transformations aligned with prevailing colorist ideals- which obviously seems misleading. Through strategic use of visuals, endorsements and language, this ad perpetuates the prevailing misconception of beauty standards among Indian women, further reinforcing their beliefs on beauty standards. Sharma and Gupta (2015) have explored the effects of semiotics in Indian television ads on consumer behavior. It delves into how signs, symbols and cultural representations within these advertisements influence consumer attitudes, preferences and decision-making.

Advertisement 6

LEVER Ayush Natural Fairness Saffron Face Cream Ad (2022)

Source: Online Female Magazine

The LEVER Ayush Natural Fairness Saffron Face Cream focuses on utilizing saffron as a key natural ingredient renowned for its skin benefits. Known for its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, saffron is associated with brightening the skin tone, providing a radiant glow and addressing issues like uneven skin tone or dark spots. Apart from saffron, the cream also claims to contain other botanical extracts or essential oils emphasizing its natural ingredients.

Among Indian communities, saffron and kumkumadi are regarded as premium, culturally valued herbs known for their medicinal and cosmetic properties. Their rarity and cost typically signal exclusivity. By claiming to incorporate these ingredients while offering the product at a significantly lower price point, the advertisement risks creating a misleading impression of authenticity and efficacy. This strategy may particularly influence women who feel pressured to achieve socially constructed "desired" beauty standards, thereby exploiting cultural symbolism and economic vulnerability in the pursuit of profit.

ADVERTISEMENT 7

Himalaya Natural Glow Kesar Face Cream Ad- 2022

Source: Actual Product Brochure

Himalaya Natural Glow Kesar Face Cream is a face cream that lightens, reduces dark spots, enhances glow, removes dullness, moisturizes the skin. Its unique formulation provides five visible effects: Brightening and smoothing skin tone, reducing blemishes and dark spots, reducing dark circles, nourishing and moisturizing without making the skin oily. The unique Phyto-Vitamin Complex in Natural Glow Saffron Cream consists of a complex of alfalfa, saffron, vitamin B3 and vitamin E. Vitamin B3 is an effective skin brightener, while vitamin E protects the skin from oxidative damage.

By presenting a long list of transformative outcomes, the advertisement constructs an unrealistic expectation of efficacy, particularly when supported by scientific-sounding terminology such as "Phyto-Vitamin Complex." While ingredients like saffron, vitamin B3 and vitamin E do have cosmetic properties, their effects are often modest and dependent on concentration, formulation and consistent use. Promotional language, however, implies rapid, comprehensive transformation which may encourage consumers, especially those influenced by colorist beauty pressures to overestimate the capabilities of the product and equate naturally occurring skin variations with deficiencies requiring correction.

Advertisement 8

Shahnaz Fairness Dream Cream Ad- 1998

Source: Product Facebook Page

The cream is promoted as an "advanced dream" formula enriched with saffron, honey, apricot oil, rose, cucumber and lemon distillate—ingredients that are culturally associated with natural purity and nourishment. However, the advertisement overextends the cosmetic potential of these herbs by claiming that they can *protect the skin from darkening* and make it *noticeably fairer, soft, young and beautiful*. Such assertions risk misleading consumers by implying that natural ingredients alone can deliver dramatic skin-lightening and anti-aging effects despite limited scientific evidence supporting such outcomes. The language used reinforces colorist beauty ideals and exploits insecurities of women, suggesting that youthfulness and fairness are attainable through a simple cream. This creates inflated expectations and reduces complex socio-cultural pressures about appearance to a purchasable "solution."

Advertisement 9

LOREAL Paris White Perfect Cream Ad- 2000

Source: Instagram

This L'Oréal Paris White Perfect Cream advertisement reinforces entrenched colorist beauty standards by positioning fairness as a scientifically attainable ideal, leveraging terms such as *"Melanin-Vanish"* and *"Tourmaline gemstone"* to create an illusion of dermatological legitimacy. By claiming to "reduce dark spots," "inhibit melanin production," and "visibly brighten skin tone," the brand exploits consumers' insecurities while masking colorism under the guise of skincare science. As a globally renowned brand, L'Oréal's reliance on such narratives is especially problematic because it amplifies the message that lighter skin is superior, desirable and achievable through routine cosmetic consumption. Furthermore, the use of a Bollywood celebrity—a figure synonymous with beauty, glamour and aspirational femininity intensifies the persuasive power of the ad. Celebrity endorsement operates as an implicit guarantee of credibility and desirability, persuading Indian women that fairness is both a marker of success and an attainable trait. Through this strategy, the advertisement not only sells a product but also reproduces harmful beauty hierarchies that privilege fair skin and marginalize darker tones.

Advertisement 10

DELUXE White Radiance: Whitening Cream Ad- 2000

Source: Instagram

This fairness cream gained immense popularity among Malaysian Indian women for its skin brightening effects. Despite being banned by the Ministry of Health Malaysia due to the alleged presence of hazardous ingredients like mercury posing serious health risks, this fairness cream maintains popularity among Malaysian Indian women. The allure persists because of its noticeable skin color changes despite the health concerns. Smith (2020) indicates that, "consumer behavior in the skincare industry emphasizes that visible effects often outweigh perceived risks, influencing continued usage even after regulatory actions".

In semiotics, the advertisement leveraging a famous actress to endorse a fairness serum embodies the integration of multiple modes of communication to convey meaning. The use of visuals, endorsements and language aims to connect the product with the actresses' image, suggesting that using the said skincare products can lead to achieving desirable skin qualities akin to their favorite celebrities. This approach reflects the essence of Kress (2010) which examines how diverse modes, encompassing visual, linguistic and other elements, collectively contribute to creating meaning in communication. It emphasizes the intricate interplay between different modes and their cumulative effect in shaping messages and interpretations within various social and cultural settings.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The semiotic examination of fairness cream advertisements reveals a consistent set of visual, linguistic and narrative strategies that collectively normalize colorist ideologies and shape the perception of Indian women on identity, beauty and social value. The findings are organized around several dominant semiotic patterns identified across the dataset.

The "Dark-to-Fair" Transformation Narrative

Across all advertisements, the most recurring representational structure is the transformation arc that visually contrasts the *"before"* and *"after"* states of the female subject.

Denotatively, this is presented through split-screen compositions, sequential frames or contrasting imagery depicting the model with darker skin prior to using the product and with noticeably lighter skin afterward.

Connotatively, these images encode a symbolic relationship between skin tone and social worth. The *"before"* version is consistently associated with undesirable traits such as sadness, self-doubt, social exclusion or failure, whereas the *"after"* version signifies confidence, success and admiration. In semiotic terms, dark skin becomes the *signifier* of inadequacy while fair skin becomes the *signifier* of improvement and desirability. This narrative transformation functions as the central ideological mechanism of fairness advertising. By framing fairness as the solution to personal and social problems, the advertisements construct a logic in which beauty, acceptance and socio-economic mobility are contingent upon altering one's skin tone. Thus, fairness is not merely cosmetic; it is positioned as a gateway to empowerment.

Visual Metaphors of Light, Purity and Superiority

Fairness advertisements rely heavily on multimodal metaphors that draw on cultural associations between lightness and virtue. These metaphors operate on both overt and subtle levels:

- **Beams of light** are commonly used to wash over the skin of models during the "after" segment, signifying purification, cleansing and transformation.

- **Pearls, flowers, silk and dew drops** are included to evoke delicacy, purity and refinement qualities implicitly linked to lighter skin.

- **Upward arrows, glowing halos and radiating backgrounds** reinforce the narrative that fairness equates to progress, ascension and elevated social status.

Through these metaphors, these advertisements construct an ideological hierarchy in which "lightness" is depicted as synonymous with improvement, purity and modernity. Such symbolism aligns with long-standing Eurocentric beauty norms and reinforces the colonial residue embedded in South Asian aesthetics.

Framing Dark Skin as a Socio-Professional Obstacle

In addition to idealizing fairness, the advertisements strategically represent dark skin as a barrier to personal, social and professional success. The "before" images consistently depict the female subject as:

- isolated, dejected or visibly insecure.

- overlooked by potential employers.

- dismissed or ignored in romantic encounters.

- lacking social desirability or family approval.

These portrayals rely on symbolic associations that conflate darker skin with failure, incompetence, and unworthiness. The implication is that darker-skinned women inherently face limitations that can only be overcome by altering their complexion. Such framing constitutes a form of semiotic discrimination that situates dark skin as a categorical disadvantage, thereby naturalizing colorism within everyday social relations.

Linguistic Reinforcement of Colorist Ideologies

The verbal components of the advertisements further reinforce the visual messages. Lexical choices include verbs and adjectives such as *lighten*, *brighten*, *whiten*, *even out*, *correct*, *repair*, *fix*, *revive*, *renew* and *enhance*. These terms perform two key ideological functions:

i. **They presuppose that darker skin is a flaw or deficiency**- something that requires correction, improvement or elimination.

ii. **They construct fairness as a form of social capital** promising enhanced confidence, respect or desirability.

Recent shifts in terminology for example, from *fairness* to *glow*, *radiance*, *tone enhancement* or *brightening* are largely cosmetic rather than conceptual. Although they appear more inclusive, their connotative meanings remain bound to the same colorist ideology; *glow* remains shorthand for *lighter*, *brighter* and *closer to fair*. Thus, the linguistic framing complements the visual semiotics in naturalizing fairness as the normative ideal.

Gendered Expectations and Social Pressures

Another notable pattern is the gendered nature of fairness discourse. Advertisements overwhelmingly target women and embed messages that link fair skin to:

- **romantic desirability** often implying that lighter-skinned women are more appealing to men.

- **marriage market value** echoing cultural expectations surrounding the "fair bride" ideology.

- **Professional competitiveness** portrays fairness as a factor that enhances employability or workplace respect.

- **family pride and social acceptance** suggesting women carry the burden of representing familial honor through physical appearance.

These gendered discourses situate women as the primary bearers of beauty norms, reinforcing patriarchal expectations that women must modify their bodies to secure social validation. The advertisements exploit these pressures by positioning fairness creams not simply as beauty products but as tools for meeting gendered societal demands.

Postcolonial Identity and Aspirational Modernity

A particularly prominent theme is the postcolonial construction of identity embedded within fairness narratives. Fairness is not merely depicted as an aesthetic preference but becomes an emblem of:

- **urban sophistication**

- **Westernized modernity**

- **Middle and upper-class aspirations**

- **global professionalism**

Models in the "after" images are frequently shown in Western attire, corporate settings or urban environments, connoting the alignment between fair skin and upward socio-economic status. This reflects a postcolonial beauty hierarchy where lighter complexions are historically associated with European colonists and upper-caste elites; symbolically equated with success and modern progress. Thus, the desire for lighter skin is presented not only as personal enhancement but as participation in a globalized, aspirational identity as well.

Together, these semiotic patterns reveal how fairness cream advertisements operate as powerful ideological texts. They simultaneously stigmatize dark skin and valorize fairness, constructing a beauty hierarchy that shapes the self-perception, aspirations and social expectations of Indian women. By presenting fairness as a prerequisite for recognition, confidence and opportunity, these media texts perpetuate deeply ingrained colorist ideologies that align with patriarchal and postcolonial structures of power.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that fairness-cream advertisements contribute significantly to the normalization of colorism by repeatedly constructing fair skin as the preferred and superior aesthetic standard. Through visual and verbal semiotic strategies, these ads reinforce a hegemonic beauty ideology in which darker skin is implicitly framed as undesirable or socially limiting. This aligns with recent research showing that fairness-cream commercials across South Asia consistently portray fair skin as the aesthetic ideal and exert influence on consumer behavior (Razi et al., 2024).

Although some brands have attempted to soften their marketing language substituting explicit terms like "fairness" or "whitening" with more ambiguous ones like "glow," "brightening," or "tone enhancement" such superficial changes do not dismantle the underlying colorist ideology. As Jayathunga (2024) argues despite rebranding, the semiotic core of these advertisements remains intact: "lightness", radiance and brightness continue to stand in for privilege, acceptance and desirability. Thus, semantic adjustments fail to challenge the structural hierarchy that equates lighter skin with social capital.

Beyond aesthetic preference, the influence of fairness advertising appears to extend into concrete social and economic consequences. Empirical studies show that darker-skinned individuals, particularly women often face bias in employment and social opportunities, suggesting that colorism is not merely a social attitude but can manifest structurally in everyday life (Jha,2016). Additionally, research on the psychological effects of skin-lightening product use among South Asians documents increased levels of body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem and internalized color bias (Banala et al., 2023). These findings mirror the concerns raised in this study: repeated exposure to fairness-oriented beauty ideals can foster insecurity, self-doubt and a perceived need to conform for social validation. The role of new media in sustaining and expanding colorist beauty discourse deserves special attention. Recent social media beauty analyses reveal that platforms like TikTok and Instagram continue to propagate fairness ideals, often through user-generated content and beauty influencers' promotions (Case, 2020).

RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study carry important implications for the beauty and advertising industry. Brands must move decisively away from fairness-centered transformation narratives that position lighter skin as inherently more desirable. Instead, advertisers should actively incorporate models representing a wide range of skin tones, portraying beauty as plural and contextually diverse. Equally crucial is the need to avoid linguistic cues such as "correct," "fix," or "improve" that implicitly frame darker skin as a deficiency. A shift toward inclusive visual and verbal representation would help dismantle long-standing colorist ideologies perpetuated through commercial media.

For policymakers, the results highlight the need for stronger regulatory measures governing discriminatory beauty claims. Existing guidelines in many South Asian contexts remain insufficient to address the subtle and coded forms of colorism embedded in advertising discourse. Regulatory bodies should enforce clearer standards regarding the portrayal of skin tone, prohibit claims that equate fairness with success or desirability and encourage the promotion of inclusive beauty narratives. Public awareness campaigns that explicitly address the social harms of colorism could further counteract decades of biased media representations and foster healthier beauty perceptions among consumers.

Future research should extend the current analysis by examining how audiences particularly young women interpret and internalize fairness-oriented messages. Understanding audience reception would shed light on the psychological, social and behavioral impacts of exposure to colorist advertising. Comparative studies across other South Asian contexts could also reveal how regional cultural norms influence the semiotics of skin tone in media. In addition, the growing influence of AI-generated influencers, augmented-reality filters and algorithmic beauty standards presents an emerging area of inquiry. Investigating how these digital technologies reinforce or challenge color hierarchies would offer valuable insights into contemporary, tech-mediated beauty culture.

CONCLUSION

Advertising remains one of the most powerful cultural forces shaping societal perceptions, identities and aspirations. Within contemporary consumer culture, its persuasive power extends beyond mere product promotion, actively constructing and reinforcing social norms, including those related to gender, beauty and bodily value. This study has demonstrated that fairness cream advertisements reproduce a deeply entrenched colorist ideology that privileges lighter skin tones as symbols of beauty, success and modernity. Through the lens of semiotics, it becomes evident that these advertisements are not neutral aesthetic representations but ideological texts that encode and circulate dominant cultural myths.

Across the corpus examined, fairness cream advertisements consistently rely on a narrow and exclusionary standard of beauty anchored in the valorization of fair skin. Whether through visual metaphors of brightness, upward mobility and transformation or linguistic framing that presents darker skin as a deficit requiring "correction," these advertisements perpetuate a hegemonic beauty discourse that aligns with long-standing social hierarchies in South Asian contexts. Such portrayals reinforce colorism as an internal system of discrimination privileging lighter skin over darker shades which is deeply rooted in South Asian histories of caste, colonialism and globalized beauty capitalism (Glenn, 2008). By repeatedly coding fairness as synonymous with desirability, confidence and success, these advertisements sustain a symbolic violence that disproportionately affects women.

The psychological and social implications of these beauty messages are significant. Research consistently links exposure to idealized advertising imagery with increased body dissatisfaction, reduced self-esteem and heightened appearance anxiety among women (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Craft & Cone, 2014). Although much of the empirical literature has focused on weight, body shape or youthfulness, parallel mechanisms operate in fairness cream advertising. Fairness is framed as both a problem and a solution: dark skin is problematized through negative depictions like sadness, rejection, social exclusion while fair skin is presented as the key to acceptance, opportunity and romantic desirability. This echoes Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) which argues that women internalize unrealistic beauty ideals, leading to chronic appearance monitoring and self-objectification. In fairness advertising, the "thin ideal" is replaced by a "fairness ideal" that functions, similarly, generating pressure for women to modify their natural appearance to meet manufactured standards of worth.

This study also reveals how the semiotic mechanisms embedded in fairness advertisements operate at two levels of meaning, following Barthes (1972). At the denotative level, viewers encounter images of women using creams, smiling or undergoing visible "improvements." At the connotative level, these same images communicate culturally coded messages: fair skin symbolizes professionalism, marriageability, sophistication and moral purity while darker skin is framed as a barrier to social success. The advertisements' reliance on "before and after" narratives, visual motifs of radiance and celebrity endorsements amplify these connotations, making the underlying ideology appear natural, inevitable and aspirational.

Gendered expectations further intensify the impact of these messages. The overwhelming majority of fairness cream advertisements explicitly or implicitly target women, constructing femininity as contingent on meeting externally imposed aesthetic standards. These ads exploit patriarchal insecurities such as marital prospects, family honor and professional acceptability, subtly reinforcing the notion that the social value of women is tied to their physical appearance. Iqbal (2014) suggests such portrayals reproduce a gendered hierarchy in which women must labour emotionally and financially to maintain marketable beauty, while men remain largely exempt from such scrutiny.

Moreover, fairness advertising cannot be divorced from larger sociohistorical narratives. The valorization of light skin reflects colonial legacies that elevated European features, as well as local caste-based hierarchies associated with purity, class and labour (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). By positioning fairness creams as tools for personal transformation and upward mobility, advertisements capitalize on these historical inequalities, presenting light skin as both an attainable goal and an indicator of social capital. This interplay between postcolonial identity, aspirational modernity and globalized commercial beauty culture contributes to the pervasive normalization of colorism in India.

The findings of this study underscore the ethical responsibility of media producers and policymakers. Recognizing the harm inflicted by discriminatory beauty advertising, several countries have begun regulating skin-lightening promotions, yet enforcement often remains inconsistent. As recent scholarship suggests, inclusive advertising practices featuring diverse skin tones, avoiding harmful linguistic framing and rejecting transformation narratives can play a meaningful role in challenging colorist norms (Crasta, 2020). Policy interventions, coupled with media literacy programmes are essential for equipping consumers to critically interpret beauty messages and resist internalizing harmful ideals.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a growing body of scholarship calling for more equitable and inclusive representations of beauty. By examining the semiotic mechanisms of fairness cream advertisements, the study highlights how these texts shape perceptions of self, identity and value among Indian women. The conclusion is clear: beauty advertising must move beyond narrow, exclusionary ideals and instead embrace a more diverse and authentic portrayal of human bodies. Only then can media play a transformative role in dismantling the psychological, social and cultural harms perpetuated by colorist beauty norms.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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