

Stereotypes in Advertisements: A Cultural Stigma

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Abstract

Advertisements are an integral part of our lives. Be it television, radio, social media, or even markets and streets, ads with catchy phrases and appealing doodles surround us. These advertisements, most of the time, use social stereotypes to tap into the insecurities of the people and thereby sell their products and services. This article seeks to analyze such stereotype-driven media through household brands like Fair and Handsome, Fair and Lovely (now called Glow and Lovely), and their respective television commercials. The article will analyze the propagation of colorism and the enforcement of gender roles in multiple advertisements. Critical engagement and scrutiny of the media would reflect upon the usage of specific colors, setting, etc. to spread the cultural stigmas.

Keywords: Analyzing media; Colorism; Conventional beauty standards; Gender bias; Stereotyping in advertisement.

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Indians are and always have been brown. It is our ethnicity. But the fact that there is such rampant racism in a country where almost all people are of the same race comes as a shock. The history of this obsession of ours with fair skin is layered and highly complex. Some say that it was the British and their 'fairness' that made it an issue while some say that it is more deeply entrenched in the Indian society with the caste system and the history of the upper castes being fairer than the relatively darker lower castes.

Wherever it may root from, capitalism has done a splendid job to monetize on people's insecurities and how. Taking into consideration the advert of Fair and Handsome cream, the entire premise of this commercial

featuring Shah Rukh Khan seems flawed. The very fact that the product promotes fair skin as a beauty essential is stereotypical and hence questionable. But that's not all, the advertisement uses several nuanced ways of enforcing gender norms, and racism that further heighten the cultural stigmas prevalent in the society. A visual representation of the product is in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Product



The advertisement particularly targets men who have a dusky complexion. It enforces the stereotype that fair skin is desirable while dark skin is unattractive. Further, it also conspicuously encourages the predetermined notions of watertight gender roles. The choice of music in the advertisement strongly intensifies the idea of the division between masculinity and femininity.

The advertisement begins with a hunky guy with wheatish skin flexing his muscles and dancing to the tune of "Mai Hoon Don", a Bollywood song that boasts of male superiority. The ad is set in a gym's locker room. The reason behind the selection of the gym seems to serve the notion that gym is an area dominated by men. This first set of the ad has been shot at wide-angle presenting the actor as a confident personality who is proud of his physique. Yet another minute aspect to be noted is the color of the

towel placed around his neck. The color chosen is blue and this seems to have been deliberate as it is a very common notion that blue color is boyish while pink is associated with females.

This becomes much more substantial later in the advertisement as in the second part of the ad, the music changes to "Pari Hoon Mai", indicating the feminine aspect of the cream that the actor is applying. The ad also shows the actor suddenly using gestures that are conventionally known to be 'feminine'. The contrast, from the stereotypical hunk flexing his muscles to his acting feminine in the socially constructed sense of the word, seems profane and extremely problematic.

Further Shahrukh Khan comes into the scene and says, 'These pink fairness creams do not work for a man's rough and tough skin.' Here the pink color has been very conveniently associated with femininity. This adds to the cultural stigma of the watertight division of gender roles thereby plaguing the minds of the masses into believing such abysmal stereotypes.

The product claims to provide a fair tone to the person who applies it and to substantiate it the actor is shown walking out of the gym with fair skin. As a result, all the girls nearby stop to look at him as if impressed by him. This is problematic on multiple levels. First, the sudden change in the color of the actor's skin by the application of the cream is scientifically impossible. The actor was naturally fair and with the application of make-up had been shown as dusky earlier. This simply shows the lack of logos in the rhetoric of the media and of the product at large. Moreover, the presentation that the opposite gender will be attracted only if one has fair skin intensifies the colorism that our society already faces. It plays with the insecurities of dark-skinned males and engulfs them in a toxic stereotype.

For propagating such false claims, the company, Emami Limited was penalized and was ordered to pay a penalty of Rupees Fifteen Lakhs. The complainant, Mr. Nikhil Jain, stated in his complaint that the company "had played with his emotions with its false claims" (Iqbal, M.) The Consumer Forum Bench in its judgment stated that the company had taken no steps "to justify the advertisements which hold out a promise of the skin getting fairer by the use of product." This goes to show how the advertisements tend to affect the psychological state of Indians and further stigmatize the mindsets against dark skin color.

Susan Runkle, in her dissertation, writes about her experience at the Miss

India pageant with the participants and dermatologist Jamuna Pai. She stated that in order to brighten their skin color, “every single one of the young was taking some sort of medication” (Runkle). Dr. Pai, according to Runkle said that such obsession of Indians with fairness has been ingrained over the years. Such sad state of the country is seen as an opportunity by fairness cream companies that play on the insecurities of people.

In regards to this, this article will focus on another product with a similar objective and a similar name has gained immense popularity and surprisingly garnered sales too. It is estimated that the business of fairness creams would soar as high as Rs. 5000 crores by 2023 as the percent at which the market is growing for these creams for women is 18 while for men it is between 6 to 8. (Coondoo, A & Sarkar, R.) In this paper, we will talk about the Fair and Lovely commercial. The visual representation of the product is in Fig 2. The Fair and Lovely Commercial that is being scrutinized through this paper starts off with an old, jobless father sustained by his daughter’s salary, grumping over trivialities while his daughter toils away. Despite that, the ungrateful and insensitive father boldly repeats the rancor conventional notion that sons are better, in the words, “Kaash humein ek beta hota’.

Figure 2

Visual Representation of the Product



Listening to this, the daughter in order to prove her father wrong toughens her resolve and sets out to find a job. But according to the advertisement, the job she finds is of an air hostess which makes her think that she is still not pretty enough for the job just because of her dusky complexion. This clearly demonstrates society’s checklist and standards of beauty. We are shown that the girl scoffs and feels ashamed of her own skin color and

this is when Fair and Lovely Cream comes to the rescue. With the application of the cream not only does her skin magically become fair but she also qualifies for the job and acquires new confidence. Since, she is fair and has a fine job, now the father too undergoes a change and stops with his rants, instead looking at her daughter with a newfound sense of respect.

The entire foundation of the advert is a big red flag. Not to mention the obviously flawed narrative that fair is lovely, the commercial goes further to insinuate that if one has a fair skin they'll get any job they desire irrespective of their qualifications and talent. This bizarre representation makes the advertisement exceedingly annoying as it lacks any kind of credibility. While the production of such fairness creams is an issue in itself, the larger conundrum here is the endorsement of the idea that dark skin color is undesired and definitely not beautiful. This, in tandem with the belief that being fair will get you success and fame, is utterly illogical and has zero logic in its rhetoric.

This advertisement has tried to fight the conventional belief that boys are better than girls by putting the ungrateful father in his place but at the same time, the method used to fight it is unfair and not at all lovely. It manages to depict that the father became content and respectful of his daughter only when she became fair and earned good enough to afford a cup of coffee in a lavish restaurant. Prior to that, all her efforts and hard work were not even acknowledged by her father. This advert does nothing but endorses and promotes such ridiculous stereotypes.

It uses the persuading form of rhetoric called pathos to make the audience feel emotional at the misery of the dark damsel. And this is specifically where the issue lies, the association of dark skin with misery, low confidence, ugliness, and so on and so forth. These adverts tend to milk the prevalent stigma and the despise that persists for dark skin to further their interests and sell their products.

There have been petitions against the company and the product, one of them from Chandana Hiran, who called them out for propagating colorism and racism. Post the backlash, Unilever dropped the word 'Fair' from its product and used 'Glow' instead. But does this solve the problem? Isn't glow yet another name for fair? More importantly, has the essence and spirit of the advertisement changed? Hardly. Claiming for an "HD Glow", the cream still stands as a symbol of continued colorism in the country. As Karuna Sharma writes, it's like the company is selling its old wine in a new bottle. If that wasn't enough the word fair has been used over and

over again in the new advert. So, the problem and the stigma continues.

The portrayal of the idea that fair skin brings confidence, love, and fame in one's life is a tragic reminder of the fact that society still hasn't progressed enough to realize the profanity of such advertisements. Why is only fair, handsome, and pretty? Why is skin tone the determinable aspect of beauty or personality? The obsession with fairness that India has is supplemented by these advertisements creating an unnecessary stigma. "In several Asian countries and cultures, white or fair skin is perceived to be more attractive and desirable due to its social advantages for marital and career prospects." (Shroff H, et al.) People feel insecure about their skin color only because of these socially constructed norms that these companies take advantage of and further promote only. But the fact remains that even after the usage of such creams, the natural skin tone remains the same which then further adds to the trauma of the consumers. The shocking irony is that Shah Rukh Khan promotes a fairness cream despite being known for his charming dusky complexion. By accepting to endorse such an ad Shah Rukh Khan acquiesces to the propagation of social stigma against dark color. This goes to show how little celebrities care about ethics and morality. Advertisements play a huge part in influencing society and their opinions. According to a survey conducted by Raghav Gundala there were 55% of respondents who believed that advertisements impact and influence the purchase decision in cases of fairness creams.

Yet another demented and outdated stereotype that still holds value in Indian society is the association of various homely chores with one gender. This gender-related stereotype, while seems to be trivial, is a lot more deplorable as this kind of labeling impacts the mindsets. It goes on to divide and define chores and responsibilities that are specific to each gender. From cleaning supplies to makeup products, from kids products to family necessities, women dominate the advertisement world which intensifies the belief that specifically, women are supposed to take care of the household and cater to family needs. A report by UNICEF and Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media states that women in Indian advertisements are "highly stereotyped".

The same report also stated that the role of the parent is three times more likely to be given to a female as compared to a male and on the other hand, in instances of making important decisions males have dominance over females. Such systematic division of roles on the basis of gender and the unashamed representation of the same through advertisements tends to further promote internalized sexism in the minds of the Indians. This not

only negatively impacts the women, but also the men who wish to pursue passions and professions that are allegedly female-oriented. Be it jewelry or makeup, it is almost always the women who dominate the scene, and the man is limited to buying the items for his female counterpart. In today's time and age these notions should change, such water-tight division of gender roles has today changed in reality and this change must reflect on screen as well. The corporate giants and big companies in tandem with the advertisement industry must reflect on these issues and present fresh and renewed ideas to the society.

These advertisements serve as a mouthpiece for spreading racism, colorism, as well as the prevalent gender stereotypes that trigger people's insecurities making them even more unpleasant to watch. The commercials try to put males and females in different boxes, be it through the choice of color, music, or even certain gestures. They make the masses question their choices as well as serve a false solace in the form of their products. These advertisements are a paradigm of everything that is no more acceptable with stereotype-driven media.

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