Research Article

# Fair or Foul? A Qualitative Study of Fairness Cream TVCs in the Indo-Pak-Bangladesh Region Between 2011 and 2020

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**The study qualitatively analyzed 21 television commercials (TVCs) for fairness creams from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, featuring 17 brands. Fair & Lovely was common across all three countries, while other brands varied regionally. Pakistani TVCs showcased high-budget productions, Indian TVCs highlighted reputable regional brands, and Bangladeshi TVCs blended locally produced brands with the reputed regional brands. Female primary characters dominated over the male primary characters (15 out of 21 TVCs), with happiness (11 TVCs) and confidence (10 TVCs) commonly linked to fair skin. Skin tone consciousness (9 TVCs) and superiority due to fair skin (8 TVCs) were prominent attitudes. Male-focused TVCs (5) used humor, while female-centric ones lacked humor. Color dynamics played a significant role, with black often associated with men (4 of 5 male TVCs) and pink with women (7 of 15 female TVCs). A strong correlation emerged between product packaging colors and dominant TVC visuals. In 11 TVCs, characters had fair skin from the outset, while 8 used color grading and wardrobe changes to emphasize before-and-after transformations. These commercials reinforce associations of fair skin with beauty, success, and social validation, perpetuating gendered and cultural stereotypes.**

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Being born and grown up in a South Asian country named *Bangladesh*, it never stopped amazing me how South Asians, despite having a brown complexion in general, are obsessed with fair complexion. Certain South Asian celebrities are overhyped only because of their skin color[1]. Fair skin is highly desirable in the South Asian region, which encompasses Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri

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Lanka, and the Maldives[2]. This preference for fair skin is also reflected in South Asian movies, where heroes and heroines are usually fair-skinned, and the villain is most of the time dark-skinned[3]. Despite having potential skin concerns[4], people in South Asia continue to use products that make their skin fairer[5]. For South Asians, being white and being beautiful are synonymous[6]. However, the scope of the study would be too broad if I included the whole South Asian region as the backdrop of my research. I will keep this study limited to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. First, India is one of the world's largest markets for fairness products[5]. 60% of the global sales of skin care products come from India[7]. Second, the top five countries globally where the terms "Skin Whitening" are most popular are Pakistan, whereas Sri Lanka and India (two other South Asian countries) occupy the $4^{th}$ and $5^{th}$ places respectively[8]. Third, many Bangladeshi people in Bangladesh and the diaspora find dark skin unattractive and discriminate against dark-skinned people, especially girls and women. They find fair skin attractive and desirable[1].

The reason this study has chosen TVCs among various other media is that TVCs are a very powerful communication tool. They deliver messages in a short time; hence, the TVC makers try to make the most of that time to attract the audience's attention by applying efficient strategies such as adding powerful stories, eye-catching glamour and glitter, beautiful jingles, humor, and sex-appeal wherever applicable. The bottom line is, TVCs are designed to grab the audience's attention. The issue with the fairness cream TVCs is that many of them over-glorify the issue of fairness and the positive feeling that comes along with having fair skin[9]. They show fairness as a prerequisite for success both in professional and personal life[3]. The fairness cream TVCs guarantee whitening, and their names and associations with reputed celebrities give the message as if along with fairness comes an improvement in one's life in the form of youthfulness, success, confidence, and attractiveness[5]. Some fairness cream TVCs even go to the extent of showing a dark tone as a matter of shame and social rejection. The biggest fairness cream brand in the South Asian region is *Fair & Lovely* (now known as *Glow & Lovely*), which is not only in that region but the first and biggest selling fairness cream product globally[10]. The name of this brand itself is demeaning in the sense that the opposite of 'fair' and 'lovely' means 'dark' and 'horrible'[7]. Subtly, such a name suggests that if one does not have fair skin, then she or he is not good-looking.

The purpose of this study is to understand how fairness cream TVCs reinforce and perpetuate certain beauty standards and colorism. Besides, it will explore what kind of roles gender plays in these TVCs, depicting men and women differently. There will also be a discussion putting light on the socio-cultural

context of these regions that paves the way for this kind of TVCs. At first, this study will look at the existing literature reviews around the obsession with fairness creams among the common people in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Then this study will analyze the collected TVCs to see how the TVCs of the fairness creams in these countries promote fair skin as the ideal beauty standard and influence people's perception of beauty and reinforce them; and how the TVCs depict men and women differently, how they associate certain feelings with fairness, and the attitudes the primary characters portray. With the help of Cultivation Theory and Reinforcement Theory, it will discuss the methods that have been used to conduct this study; provide a discussion of the findings; and end the paper by sharing the limitations of this study.

## Why This Obsession in the Indo-Pak-BD Region

There are noticeable similarities between the cultures of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The reason is that until 1947, these three countries were parts of a single entity, and it was under the regime of the British colonial government[11]. On 14$^{th}$ and 15$^{th}$ August of 1947, India and Pakistan were born respectively, as a dissolution of the British raj[12]. Until 1971, Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan, and it was known as East Pakistan. East Pakistan achieved independence in 1971 and emerged as independent Bangladesh. Because of sharing the same root, this trilateral region[11] has startling similarities culture-wise.

There is a high probability that this obsession with fair skin came from imperialism. The Indian sub-continent has been ruled by different imperialist regimes, such as the Central Asian Aryans between 1500 and 200 BC, the Mughals in the 15$^{th}$ century, and the Europeans from the 15$^{th}$ till the middle of the 20$^{th}$ century[7]. All these imperialist rulers were fair-skinned. That could be the strongest reason behind fair skin being associated with class, wealth, power, and social status[5]. Dark skin is associated with the poor, working class, or the laborer class[3], who work outside, and also has a connection with unethical activities[5]. Another explanation behind the strong connection between skin tone and wealth comes from the fact that centuries ago, when the economy was agrarian, landlords used to make poor people work in the harvest fields, which exposed that poor working class to sunlight and gave them darker skin[13]. With time, the indigenous population had to sacrifice their own cultural norms to be accepted by the colonial rulers[13]. This instilled the belief in them that bright skin accompanied by European features signifies economic power and true beauty[13].

The above-mentioned factors have been coupled with the fact that beauty pageant contestants or movie actors and actresses are commonly seen as light-skinned people, which makes people believe that beauty is synonymous with fair skin[3]. Another reason behind the South Asian obsession with fair skin lies with religion. In Hinduism, fair skin is associated with the *Brahmins*; whereas dark skin belongs to the people from the lower caste of society, such as *Sudras*; in Buddhism, Gautam Buddha's portraits and statues are also white; in most religions, white is the color of chastity, purity, and femininity[14]. Even in the fairy tale of *Snow White*, we see the dwarfs and the evil queen asking the mirror – "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?"[15]. Even the regional fairy tales are also not free of this fantasy about white skin. Countless Bangladeshi or Indian Bengali fairy tales, or folk songs, describe a princess or the beloved woman with terms such as *Kancha shona'r moto rong* (the skin tone of hers is like raw gold) or *Dudhe alta rong* (the skin tone of hers is as if a drop of red has been mixed with milk). In the wedding programs in Bangladesh, brides are almost unrecognizable on their wedding days because of the thick layer of white-based foundation cream[1][14].

Matrimonial columns and websites also list women's skin color as a primary criterion for her desirability as a potential life partner, which only deepens the obsession with fair skin for this population[3][13][16].

Advertisements work as a bridge between customers and sellers. There are uncountable products in the market, whereas the capital to produce those products might be limited. Several studies have shown that fairness creams do not work the way they promise[16]. They have no role in making the skin tone fair; in fact, they have many side effects on the skin and health[10][4][17][5]. Still, customers keep buying them; otherwise, how is it possible that South Asia offers such an alluring business ground for fairness cream products? It is understandable that in such a neck-to-neck competitive market of the modern era, customers will only be hooked if the advertisement of the product is unique. Despite having the same quality, some products in the market sell better than others; the due credit might not fully belong to the product quality but to how it has been marketed and advertised[15]. Advertisements must play a responsible role here. Sadly, instead of doing that, the fairness cream products make unrealistic promises of making skin white within a couple of weeks, which is practically impossible. Skin complexion is an amalgamation of climate, genetics, distribution of melanin, and ethnicity[3]; fairness cream cannot change that.

By believing in those false promises the advertisements provide, we are succumbing to the colorism set by imperialist culture and making the media's (such as TVCs) manipulation technique more powerful.

Audiences, especially women, fall prey to an inferiority complex for having dark skin due to the cultural perception of beauty[17][16] Fairness cream delivers the message that skin fairness is the primary criterion to be successful, especially for women, which is a mockery of dark-skinned people[7], and to the concept of women empowerment as well. Additionally, these TVCs use "fear" techniques to market their products[18]. Fear techniques demonstrate what would happen if the customers do not use the advertised product[18].

The exaggerated results shown by the fairness creams' TVCs and the over-glorification of fair skin can have a negative impact on self-esteem, particularly for women[17]. Fairness cream TVCs mostly target women as their potential customers[5][17]; women reported that the way the TVCs show the desirability of fair skin makes them feel pressured to use them, and dark skin gives them low self-esteem and anxiety[19]. Societal expectations based on looks are much higher for women than men[20], and TVCs of fairness cream show that getting fairness increases the cultural capital[5]. Cultural capital is the social and cultural assets, such as education, manner of speech and attire, intellect, and physical appearance, that can facilitate an individual's social mobility within a stratified society[21].

Not choosing the delivery of messaging in a responsible way has other implications for society as well. For example, Kamran[22] showed that in Pakistan, the fairness cream TVCs portray women generally as somebody dreaming of finding a rich husband or getting married, or in traditional roles of housewives. These TVCs portray Pakistani women in such a way as if they cannot be the breadwinners, when in some cases they are.

Men's fairness cream TVCs depict them as dark-skinned college students or young gentleman being overlooked by female peers[3]. Upon utilizing the product, their skin brightens, attracting girls to them like moths are drawn to a flame[3]. When audiences, such as children, see such advertisements, they subconsciously develop the idea that fair skin is superior and grow low self-esteem in the absence of it[23].

One *Fair & Lovely*'s TVC from India, which is popularly known as *the air hostess ad*, was broadcast on four reputed TV networks together[7]. This TVC showed a woman nailing a glamourous job interview because of her fairness or sexuality, undermining a woman's capability to prove herself based on her talent, intellect, or skill[7]. Another notorious depiction of the importance of fairness is in a Pakistani TVC for the popular brand *Stillman's Skin Bleach Cream*, where three ladies are being plainly avoided by their male colleagues, classmates, or fiancés only because of having dark skin. Next, all those same men are falling

off their chairs or getting shocked to see their transformation with their jaws dropped when those ladies come back with fair skin using *Stillman's Skin Bleach Cream*. Such TVCs only establish and perpetuate the superiority around fair skin or demean people having dark skin.

## Theoretical View

Fairness cream TVCs promote a certain behavior pattern or body image as the desirable one, and then sell products that can help attain that behavior pattern or desirable body image[24]. This is how, first, the TVCs establish a hierarchy of values that show fair skin as a desired thing[24], and then keep reinforcing and perpetuating the desirability by repeating the same activity. These series of behavior patterns portrayed by the fairness cream TVCs in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh between the timeline of 2011 to 2020 led me to apply two theories to this study- Cultivation Theory and Reinforcement Theory.

### *Cultivation Theory*

According to Cultivation Theory[25], people's perception, belief, and attitude towards social reality are shaped by the way television leaves a long-term effect on them. One of the arguments of this theory states that even though the audience's choices are varied and unrestricted, television does not cater to those varied choices. It presents the audience with certain kinds of content repeatedly. Though this argument has been questioned on the ground of showing television as a platform providing a limited set of choices, where the audiences have a non-selective role[26]. This argument might have been true in the initial days of this theory, but not today, when choices are many[26]. Due to the advent of the internet, OTT platforms, and numerous TV channels on cable TV, the choices of the audiences have diversified. TV programs are now targeting the segmented audiences too[26]. But focusing on the TVCs of fairness cream in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh for the timeline of 2011-2020, this argument of television's providing a limited choice still rings true. The fact that the South Asian region, until now, is a very lucrative market for skin lightening products[2][17] paves these TVCs for continuing to idolize fair skin as a benchmark of beauty. These TVCs continue showing fairness as a factor enhancing cultural capital along with success, fame, attraction, confidence, and shaping the audience's perception accordingly. Taking from the core idea of Cultivation Theory, repeated and prolonged exposure to such content strengthens the misperception about beauty among the audiences.

## *Reinforcement Theory*

The second theory which will be applied is Reinforcement Theory[27], which says mass media can make only limited change. What the media does is to reinforce the already existing perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of people. The only time media can bring about a change is when it introduces a new idea or concept[27]. Other than that, the media's role is limited to reinforcing only[27]. Because of the colorism that the media, such as TVCs, portray, the adolescents, especially the girls, become more susceptible to unrealistic beauty standards and start using skin-lightening products[28] that claim to halt the natural process of melanin production to give artificially enhanced fairness[3]. Such practices ultimately internalize certain appearance standards that privilege lighter skin and lead to comparing oneself to the other having a brighter complexion[28] and growing low self-esteem. These beliefs and attitudes are time and again produced and reproduced by the fairness cream TVCs with their portrayal of positive feelings and attitudes associated with fairness.

For example, Jensen[1] showed in her study how the children in Bangladesh get used to hearing comments about their skin tone from their childhood. Even when a child is born in Bangladesh, people make comments about their skin color instead of their health; mothers forbid their kids not to go play under the sun because their skin will be tanned. All these aspects are coupled with the fact that when TVCs portray somebody being rejected in a job interview, or not getting the confidence to accept or reject a marriage proposal, or being avoided by his or her romantic interest only for having dark skin; it reinforces and perpetuates colorism promoted by the fairness cream TVCs.

Considering all the above factors, this study proposes the following questions:

- RQ1: How do fairness cream TVCs demonstrate positive feelings in their depictions of fair skin?
- RQ2: How do the primary characters in the TVCs show their attitudes towards fairness in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh?
- RQ3: How do the TVCs of fairness creams develop and promote ideal standards of beauty in society in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh?
- RQ4: How do TVCs of fairness creams depict the male and female consumer base differently?
- RQ5: How do TVCs of fairness creams depict before and after-fairness situations differently?

## Method

The current study aims to identify the dominant themes in TVCs of fairness creams in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh between 2011 and 2020 and applies the content analysis method as a research approach. I used a purposive sampling strategy based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria during the fall of 2024. A total of 21 TVCs were analyzed, 7 from each country. Purposive sampling strategies are different from the other kinds of sampling because the strategies ensure that certain types of cases of those that could possibly be included form the final sample in the research study[29]. Many researchers endorse the idea that they can attain a representative sample by the application of sound judgment, which would be time and cost-saving[30]. A codebook was developed to gather data to answer the research questions posed.

The use of content analyses can be either qualitative or quantitative[31][32] for message analysis. Even though the initial form of content analysis exclusively depended on text form, where the main goal was to identify the construct or concept from the text, trying to find out the latent meaning in the text and giving the texts an organized structure[31], multimodal content analysis, which is becoming more and more popular in qualitative studies because of its potential to expand the quality of qualitative content analysis[33], also takes image, video segments, and web-based contents[34] for coding. The main goal of the current study is to qualitatively determine the themes such as the gender of the primary character, positive feelings in each TVC, visuals and aesthetics, and gender differences in the 21 fairness cream TVCs from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Therefore, content analysis is a suitable strategy for achieving this goal.

There were multiple inclusion and exclusion criteria to collect the TVCs, such as that the TVCs must be released within the time frame of 2011-2020; they need to be in either Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, or English because of my expertise in these languages; and they need to be available on YouTube. I collected TVCs of only fairness creams, not the other fairness products such as serums, soaps, facewashes, and so on. Also, this study did not take any dubbed TVC into the list. For example, *Fair & Lovely* is the largest fairness cream brand in South Asia[10] and many of the advertisements are usually shot casting Indian superstars, shot in India and in the Hindi language, and then they are dubbed in Urdu or Bengali and released for the Pakistani or Bangladeshi audiences, respectively. I did not count those advertisements in my codebook. The advertisements for which the release year was not possible to verify were also excluded from the sample list.

## *Sampling Strategy*

Since the time frame for this study is 2011-2020, and this study is being conducted in 2024, these TV commercials are not being circulated on the national TV channels of the respective countries anymore. Also, since this study is analyzing TVCs from three countries, YouTube was the most convenient source to collect the TVCs.

Multiple factors led me to choose the time frame of ten years instead of limiting it to five years between 2011-2015 or 2016-2020. Within 10 years, technological evolution, consumer taste, consumer demands, and the narrative of the TVCs have the potential to change significantly. One example could be that in the first half of the decade, the focus of the fairness cream TVCs was heavily dominated by the idea of getting fair. In the last 2-3 years of the decade, the narratives were still about fairness but in a much softer tone, such as using the fairness cream for the purpose of protecting the skin from the sunlight and evening out the skin tone; or the narrative of directly shaming the dark skin is lessened[19]. Analyzing a decade facilitates a comprehensive study that shorter durations may not provide. For example, Indian television advertisements from 2011 to 2015 focused on showcasing creative storytelling, delivering socially responsible messages, and content diversity. Until then, television was still the primary and most popular platform for delivering entertainment, information, and advertisements[35]. Whereas the latter half of the timeframe of this study, 2016-2020, witnessed the uprise and popularity of digital transformation, digital analytics, and user-generated content[35], comparatively more progressive portrayals of the stories in the selected advertisements. Also, it is understandable that in the latter half of the timeframe, marketers and consumers had increased access to and use of digital platforms such as YouTube, Dailymotion, or social networking sites than in the first half, and the usage has only increased with each passing year. Selecting a decade resulted in a more diverse sample. To ensure accuracy and ease of access to commercial advertisements via digital platforms such as YouTube, the coding sheet included the YouTube link for each advertisement.

## *Video Characteristics*

Apart from the variables such as *primary character, gender differences, positive outcome, attitudes, visual and aesthetic aspects* as the units of analysis of this study, additional sample characteristics were coded, which include *serial number of videos, brand name, country of origin, channel/uploader's name, channel/uploader type* (product's official YouTube channel, or ad-making agency who made that advertisement, or an individual), *year of release*, etc. TVCs were uploaded from both organizational and individual YouTube

account holders. To ensure the accuracy of the TVCs' release year, if the advertisement was uploaded from the product's own official channel, or the advertising agency who produced those TVCs, then the upload year will be considered as the release year. Apart from that, sometimes individuals upload the raw version of the TVC, which shows information such as the release year (including date and month), duration, lead model's names, etc., in the beginning of the TVCs. A valid assumption is that they are the individuals from the marketing division of that brand, or somebody related to the ad-making agency who has access to that TVC's raw copy. Since those are the raw copies of the TVCs, in that case, further probing is not necessary about the timeline since it is shown in the beginning in the advertisement itself. Also, there are advertisements where the release year is mentioned in the caption by the uploader, even though he/she is a random individual. In that case, the timeline will not require any extra verification. It is understood that the uploader has nothing to gain by uploading a TVC mentioning a wrong year in the title. If none of the above-mentioned methods are applicable, then those advertisements will be filtered out. For *primary character*, my analysis will identify the main character in these TVCs by observing the longest screen presence as well as whom the story revolves around.

Gender is important since we are going to see if TVCs portray men and women differently. Each TVC will be accompanied by the *short description* of the same. The story of each advertisement will be described in English. Or, if the advertisement is predominantly a monologue, then it will be translated into English.

For the code of *positive outcome*, the codebook will identify the key positive result of getting fair skin, such as *confidence, success*, *fame*, *happiness, attraction, or getting compliments*. *Confidence* is depicted as self-assurance or faith in one's own potential. In fairness cream TVCs, confidence comes after achieving fair skin, which is shown in body language, eye contact, and assertive speech. Confidence is also portrayed when the primary character is shown affirming their potentials or capabilities, or praising their own beauty because they have fair skin. *Success* in these TVCs is portrayed as the achievement of a goal, such as overcoming rejection, impressing the interviewer in any job or academic interview, or doing well in a competitive environment. Fairness cream is shown to be a major criterion for success in the face of a challenging situation. *Fame* in fairness cream TVCs is portrayed either by showing the model as a celebrity who is popular for their fair skin or an aspiring individual who dreams of being a superstar and earning fame. *Happiness* is shown as a state of emotional wellbeing or satisfaction, which is usually expressed by the vivacious smile or the bubbliness of the primary character, or their enthusiasm portrayed by a jingle, full of dance, and glamour. By *attraction*, the fairness cream TVCs show their primary characters getting romantic attention from the opposite gender, or their romantic interest.

Finally, *getting compliments* is that situation when people approach the primary models to know what the secret behind their fair skin is, because they also want to get such a complexion. Each TVC might contain multiple positive feelings.

The codebook will also contain the attitudes portrayed by the primary characters about the use of the fairness cream. TVCs will be coded by 7 categories of attitudes such as *inferiority for having dark skin, superiority for having fair skin, color shaming, skin consciousness, peer-comparison,* and *social validation*. *Inferiority for having dark skin* is projected on screen by showing a lack of confidence, a lack of smile, sadness, or a little sense of adequacy for having dark skin by the primary character. Such attitude portrayals in the TVCs validate the idea that fair skin is a barrier to one's progress or emotional wellbeing. *Superiority for having fair skin* is portrayed by the primary characters in the form of pride or dominance for having fair skin. Primary characters projecting such attitudes on skin cements the perception that fair skin is something to be desired and equates to excellence. *Color shaming* happens when the primary character is being ridiculed or insulted by someone for having dark skin. This is usually expressed through negative reactions, comments, or discriminatory behavior in the fairness cream TVCs. *Skin consciousness* is usually depicted in those TVCs where the primary character is shown to have fair skin from the beginning. The primary character is shown to be regularly using that fairness cream because she or he is already aware of the useful elements that the cream contains and pursues the audience, or the other characters in the TVC, to use that brand. In the case of *peer-comparison,* the primary character is usually seen being compared by their peers with their own skin tone and asking the primary character what their beauty regime is to have such fair skin. It could also be the opposite. The primary characters are also seen in some TVCs comparing themselves with a celebrity or a friend who has fair skin and approaching them to ask about how to gain such a complexion. Then, after being informed, they also start using that product and get the fair skin within a couple of weeks. Finally, in the case of *social validation*, the primary characters are shown to have achieved acceptance, approval, and admiration from others. For example, a male primary character who has transformed his dark skin into fair skin; post that, ladies want to flirt with him because they find him attractive now. Each TVC might depict multiple attitudes.

Finally, the codebook will also have the analysis of *visual and aesthetic techniques* to see, depending on the gender of the primary character, if there is any difference between the use of colors. It is common to associate certain colors with males and certain colors with females; for example, red and pink are popularly believed to be women's colors, whereas black, blue, and green are associated with males[36].

It will also be analyzed if there is any difference between the color grading of the scenes before and after they gained fairness. Before getting the fairness, how the tone of the screen is set to express the gloominess that comes with the primary character's dark skin, and after the models get the fairness using the fairness cream, is there any change in the color grading? How, in terms of visual and aesthetic elements, do the TVCs express the transition on screen?

### *Ethical Considerations and Self-reflexivity*

This study will not conduct information from or about any human being. The data are one hundred percent non-human, openly available for public consumption on public domains such as YouTube. It does not require any private interaction such as interacting with the commentators, taking screenshots of the users and their comments, or analyzing comments. Because of the same reason, it does not involve documents such as informed consent, interview questionnaires, or the formalities to acquire IRB approval. Since it is a content analysis-based study conducted on the video-sharing platform YouTube, the data gathering process does not involve discomfort, risk, or harm to anybody. No personally identifiable information is collected. Where channels put a disclaimer that "The contents of this channel are prohibited from using/copying without the uploader's consent" has been strictly avoided. Data has been secretly stored and will be deleted once the study is complete, to avoid misuse and unauthorized access.

As the primary researcher of this study, who was born and raised in Bangladesh, where fair skin is synonymous with beauty, people's obsession with fair skin is something I have experienced numerous times in my life. This personal experience provides me with an insider perspective to understand the widespread impact of fairness cream commercials on self-esteem. Nonetheless, it requires being careful with overseeing personal biases. While I have a good understanding of the cultural and linguistic subtleties of Bangladesh, I must be cautious not to overgeneralize those same insights for India and Pakistan, despite noticeable similarities in the cultures of these three countries. I am aware of the responsibility not to stigmatize people using fairness creams, but rather to challenge and critique the oppressive beauty standard and contribute to the wider discussion about the transformation of social norms in the Indo-Pak-BD region. Also, I will be careful about misrepresenting any country and tarnishing their image with my personal bias.

## Findings

For this study, 21 TVCs have been analyzed from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, 7 from each country in either Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, or English language. Among the 21 TVCs, 17 brands have been identified, among which *Fair & Lovely* has been commonly found in all three countries. The rest of the brands were *Fair and Handsome* (India, Bangladesh); *Imami Fair & Handsome*, Garnier Light (India); *Layla Beauty Cream, Fairever Next, Faiza Beauty Cream, Facefresh Fairness Cream, Stillman's Bleach Cream, Golden Pearl* (Pakistan); *Fair & Lovely Max Fairness for Men, Shirley Beauty Cream; Botanic Aroma Fairness Cream; Botanic Aroma Fairness Cream for Men, and Shibany's Aroma Fairness Cream* (Bangladesh). For Pakistan, apart from *Fair and Lovely*, their local brands also seem to be quite trending among the masses, and the TVCs appear to be made with a relatively high budget, which is obvious from the costumes and stylings of the models, location, set design, and videography.

When it comes to the uploader, seven TVCs were uploaded by the ad-making agency or the ad-makers themselves, six TVCs were uploaded by individual uploaders, and the rest eight were uploaded by the official YouTube channel of the products.

Fifteen TVCs portray females as the primary characters, among which six TVCs belong to Pakistan, five TVCs belong to India, and four TVCs belong to Bangladesh. One TVC from Bangladesh portrayed both male and female as the primary characters, where both were given equal camera presence, and that TVC did not have any story. It only showed two popular models who are happy and celebrating their happiness (apparently, they are happy using the product) singing and dancing at the beach, wearing colorful clothes and make-up. Five TVCs portrayed males as the primary characters, among which two belong to Bangladesh, two belong to India, and one belongs to Pakistan. Here it can be specially mentioned that the Pakistani TVC where a male was the primary character did not show him using a fairness cream, but the story revolves around him as a potential groom, who was looking for a fair bride. He got cheated and fainted to see the bride for the first time in person at the end of the wedding program because the bride was too dark in comparison to the photo she sent before the wedding, and he chose the bride only looking at her photo, without seeing her in person. So technically, for the Pakistani TVCs, all the users of the fairness creams were females.

When it comes to positive feelings, the most dominant positive feeling found was *happiness*, which was found in eleven TVCs, where females were the primary characters in nine, male and female in one, and male in one. The second most dominant positive feeling is *confidence*. Ten TVCs incorporated confidence

among other positive feelings, where the primary characters were females in seven of them and males in three of them. *Confidence* is followed by *attraction, getting compliments*, and *fame*, each of which was depicted in 4 TVCs. Both for *attraction* and *fame*, the male-female ratio as the primary characters was 2:2. *Getting compliments* only featured females as the primary characters. Three TVCs portrayed success as the positive feeling, with one portraying a female and 2 portraying males as the primary characters.

Regarding the attitudes the models portrayed on screen towards fairness, the most dominant attitude was *skin tone consciousness*. Out of nine TVCs, eight contained females as the primary characters that showed *skin tone consciousness*, and one contained both male and female as the primary characters. This is followed by depicting *superiority for having fair skin* in eight TVCs (two males and 5 females), four TVCs showed *peer comparison* (three females, one male); four portrayed *social validation* (one female, three males); three TVCs showed *color shaming* (one female, two males); and lastly, three depicted feelings of *inferiority for having dark skin* (two females, one male). Country-wise, Pakistan dominantly showed *superiority for having fair skin* (four out of seven TVCs), whereas Bangladesh and India focused on *skin tone consciousness* (four out of seven TVCs each).

The difference between males and females was that, out of 5 TVCs where the males were the primary characters, four of them contained humor, whereas TVCs with females in the primary character did not have any humor. Also, for the males, apart from one TVC from Pakistan, all 4 showed them in black shirts after they got fairness. This is interesting because for females, there were multiple colors, with pink being the most dominant one (seven out of fifteen TVCs), followed by a golden-red combination (two TVCs), green (one TVC), yellow (one TVC), purple (one TVC), and no dominant colors (four TVCs). It is quite possible there is a correlation between the product's dominant color on the package and the color of the dress the models are wearing. For example, *Fair & Lovely* sachet and tube have pink as the dominant color with a combination of white, and the models endorsing this product usually are seen in outfits with a pink and white combination. Perhaps this is the reason the only male-based ad from Pakistan did not have any dominant color, because as mentioned earlier, even though the primary character is a male, he was not the user of the fairness product; it was his bride who was using it.

Additionally, all *Fair & Handsome*'s male models were in black shirts because black is the dominant color in the packaging of Fair and Handsome. The only exception was *Botanic Aroma Fairness Cream for Men*, because the packaging was pink, but the male model wore black in the end scene, perhaps to follow the trend only. Apart from that, there are 4 more TVCs that did not have any dominant color; one belongs to Pakistan (female primary character), and the rest three belong to Bangladesh.

When it comes to expressing the before and after-fairness situation, out of twenty-one TVCs, eleven TVCs showed the model fair from the beginning, where they were just talking to others about the benefits of using the product. In those TVCs, there was no change in color grading. In eight TVCs, where the models go from dark to bright or fair, the difference in color grading was visible. The difference was created mostly by making the models wear dull-colored clothes such as grey, greyish purple, white, or olive to make them look dark before they used the fairness creams, whereas after getting fairness, they are shown wearing pink, red, golden, black, green, yellow, deep purple, and maroon to enhance their skin tone; putting on white-based make-up, or just by adding more brightness or vibrance to the screen.

## Discussion and Future Area of Research

The thing that really surprised me was that the fairness obsession is quite a phenomenon in South Asian countries, especially in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. But there were surprisingly few scholarly articles that wrote about this phenomenon in the context of Bangladesh. There were countless numbers of articles found in the context of India; enough on the context of Pakistan; and only two written on the context of Bangladesh. This was quite shocking for me because, growing up in Bangladesh, my personal experiences and observations due to having brown skin and because of lots of cultural similarities between these three countries, I expected I would find enough articles in Bangladesh's context too. I found a couple of articles about women's portrayal in media in general, but not something as specific as fairness cream TVCs. Even though there were ample TVCs featuring prominent Bangladeshi celebrities or Indian TVCs dubbed in the Bengali language still being telecasted on a regular basis. India has only 3-4 fairness cream brands, but the number of TVCs is significantly higher than that of the other two countries, which feature some very famous Bollywood celebrities as well. In terms of the number of brand names, Pakistan exceeded both Bangladesh and India, and it has at least a dozen brands with emerging brands as well, such as *Sia* and *Ajooba*. Casting big-name celebrities as the primary characters, brand ambassadors, or marketing new brands and advertising them on a large scale in print media, electronic media, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube, keeps cultivating the belief that fair skin is something highly desirable and that the lack of fair skin is something to implore. The fairness cream companies have gone so overboard with the idea of fairness that they have even started selling creams that whiten the private parts of women's bodies, which clearly indicates they are not going to stop any time soon[15].

Though men and women, both genders feel the urge to look attractive, the pressure is always more on women[20][16]. Exposure to global media, pop culture, and peer pressure creates a distorted perception among young adults about their appearances[37]. Fairness cream TVCs between 2011 to 2020 in the Indo-Pak-BD region commonly portrayed narratives such as somebody getting rejected in a job interview, or being looked down upon by her/his colleagues or relatives for having dark skin, or opportunities being easier to get when one has light skin, leading individuals to engage in risky behavior to meet the impossible beauty goals set by the media[37]. At the same time, these TVCs internalize the attractiveness ideal among the audience, especially women[20]. This confirms the main idea set by Cultivation Theory, which, in the context of this study, shows that repeated exposure to media content depicts certain appearance traits as normative, desirable, and achievable[38]. These contents also associate personal values with the obtainment of these traits, which makes them even more desired by the audience[20].

On the other hand, the essence of Klapper[27]'s Reinforcement Theory is that media does not have the power to change much. Rather, people look for, absorb, and recreate information that supports their already existing attitudes and beliefs. Brown[39] argues that when media shows sexual content, not only does it lead to increased interest in sexuality, but it also enhances interest in sexual content in media. Similarly, it can be stated that increased exposure to the fairness cream TVCs strengthens the repetition of the narratives shared by them. Mady et al.[20] and Verma[16] showed how, by taking advantage of the customers' naivety, products' marketing and narratives lead to incessant skin fairness routines, ultimately making the consumers a part of the cycle of production-marketing-consumption. Another aspect of Reinforcement Theory shows that the only time media changes opinion is when people are inclined to change[40]. For example, the media does not have much power to change political and religious beliefs, but it has considerable influence on fashion and pop music[40]. This is reflected in the incident where *Fair & Lovely and Fair & Handsome*, two gigantic brands of Hindustan Unilever Limited, and *Emami Fair & Handsome*, another big name for men's fairness cream in South Asia, have deleted the word "fair" from their respective brands. Since 2020, all three brands are known as *Glow & Lovely, Glow & Handsome, and Emami Glow & Handsome*[41] to save their business from the constant backlash they have received in the recent past for promoting colorism through their brand names. During coding, I found that Indian fairness cream brands are gradually shifting their focus from promoting fairness directly. It is still being done but in a much subtler way. Instead of showing why a fair face is needed or desired, the TVCs are focusing more on other skin issues. Now the fairness brands are focusing more on making the face and body tone even, protecting the skin from the sunlight, removing melasma or dark spots from

the face, making the skin glow, helping in doing a quick make-up, and such, as a part of their evolving market strategies and consumer perspective[19]. Though analysts are comparing it to the proverb "old wine in a new bottle"[42]. It is a "partially" positive change because they are still visibly showing the models as unusually fair after using the product, thereby reinforcing the desirability of fair skin.

In light of the findings, whether among these three countries, Bangladesh has the least obsession with fair skin, or Pakistan has the most obsession with fair skin, can be a potential area of research. For the TVCs coded for Bangladesh, apart from *Fair & Lovely*, the rest are for very niche, less known brands, and are made with noticeably low effort in terms of visual and aesthetic appeal. I had to put quite an effort into searching for originally Bangladeshi TVCs for fairness cream brands and scholarly articles on this subject, written in Bangladesh's context. Even the TVCs for *Fair & Lovely* that I found were mostly dominated by Indian TVCs dubbed in the Bengali language, which were not considered for this study. On the other hand, Pakistan has a noticeably large number of fairness cream brands, even outnumbering India. TVCs are produced with visibly high effort, such as story-based TVCs, good production quality in terms of resolution, cinematography, color grading, and lens quality; carefully chosen outfits and stylings for the models on the level of global celebrities. Ultimately, does it imply that the fairness obsession is the least in Bangladesh and the highest in Pakistan? This could be a potential area to explore for future research.

## Limitations and Conclusion

The biggest limitation of this study is the number of TVCs. More TVCs could have given better results and more diversity. Especially India, as the birthplace of Bollywood, where there are 22 different state languages and 398 dialects, and a 1.4 billion population, is the hub of cultural richness and diversity. Apart from Hindi, languages such as Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada each have their own media industry, including films, drama series, TVCs, music, TV channels, etc. Including samples from those parts of India could have added a different viewpoint or could have reinforced the finding with higher strength. Another limitation is the crisis of scholarly articles in the context of Bangladesh. Also, for Pakistan, there were very few TVCs featuring male models in the fairness cream TVCs. To be honest, I found only 1 and had to remove it from my sample because the timeline could not be verified. Now, does Pakistan have almost 0 TVCs on men's fairness, or are they just not uploaded on YouTube by anybody? It was not possible for me to verify. Finally, intercoder evaluation could have made the coding more reliable. Due to the lack of that, the sample size may not be fully free of my own bias. Since this is a qualitative

analysis, in many cases, it might be affected by the popular saying- “people just see what they want to see.”

To conclude, every country’s media sector needs to have a clear guideline for the TVCs to stop the promotion of colorism. Colorism not only promotes low self-esteem, but it also leads to stereotyping and repressiveness in society, especially for women. Products that make unrealistic promises and fail to deliver the result should be called out. Consumers should be more aware before making their purchasing decisions, such as studying reviews of the product or learning about the ingredients and their side effects, if any. Overall, the recent changes that have been visible in India and Bangladesh, such as the decrease in the fairness cream TVCs, or the effort to be more inclusive or shift the focus to just make the skin better, or at least removing the racist term “fair” from their brands, should be continued. Even though they are still showing fair models, big change cannot come overnight. Baby steps are still much better than nothing. Who knows, maybe after 10-15 years, these whitening cream, fairness cream, or bleach cream brands will be diminished altogether, and society will be embracing the beauty of the diversity of skin tones!

## Statements and Declarations

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### *Conflicts of Interest*

I have reviewed the relevant policies and considered all potential factors. I can confirm that I have no conflicts of interest related to this matter. If circumstances change or any potential conflicts of interest arise in the future, I will promptly disclose them in accordance with the required procedures.

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