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## ETHICAL NORMS IN FAIRNESS CREAM ADVERTISEMENT

by

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**Abstract:** *This Paper aims at probing into the ethics and meanings of advertisements of a very popular product of recent times, fairness creams. The purpose is three fold: one, to read the encoded messages of these ads; two, to see how far these ads adhere to the norms regarding ethics of advertising set in India; and finally, to argue that market and ethics are two most contradictory ideas. Further, both ethical norms set by a state apparatus and widely circulating advertisements reflect the socio-economic structure of the society concerned and hence the state apparatus and media are hardly ever at loggerheads with each other. The authors of the paper believe that any cream or other product that promises to transform the physical appearances of consumers, demeans people; promising lighter skin tone is racist and further, showing lighter skin tone as a precondition of success and confidence is not only falsity but is also a clear attempt at boosting most people's feeling of inadequacy. Therefore, by permitting these ads to remain in circulation the state is contradicting the norms set by it.*

**Keywords:** *advertisement, fairness cream, ethics, racist, encoded messages, popular fear, beliefs, government intervention, mass media.*

“Advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors moulding and reflecting our life today. They are ubiquitous, an inevitable part of everyone’s lives.”(Williamson,1978, pg 11). Even if we try to avoid reading newspaper or watching television, every now and then we are forced to consume advertisements in one form or other, as the advertising industry is no longer confined within the four-walls of print and electronic media. It is expanding its horizon and has incorporated the outdoor spaces like billboards, and hoardings to suit the tenacity of the advertising messages. Whether we are at home or travelling outside there is a constant bombardment of advertisement which we cannot choose to avoid. The advertisement and its visual attributes are so interesting and appealing at the same time that almost none can resist or afford to lose sight of these.

In the light of this thesis, the paper intends to probe into the purpose and ethics of advertisements of Fairness creams, much in vogue currently.

While reading an advertisement we are mostly guided by three inseparable and important elements: the sign, signifier and the signified. These work together to impact viewers/ consumers of the media.

“A sign is quite simply a thing- whether object, word, or picture-which has a particular meaning to a person or group of people. It is neither the thing nor the meaning alone, but the two together. The sign consists of the Signifier, the material object, and the Signified, which is its meaning. These are only divided for analytical purposes: in practice a sign is always thing-plus-meaning. Signifier and signified are materially inseparable, since they are bound together in the *sign*, which is their totality” (Williamson, 1978,pg 17-18).

While the pictures of the products in ad texts are the primary signifier (of the real product, the signified), they seemingly arrest the attention of the consumers they actually see beyond the primary signifier; and at the second level, the pictorial and the literary texts as components of the whole text seem to signify not the real product but a lifestyle. Knowingly or otherwise consumers are most attracted by the second order that is signified. In a more complex way, the signified is a further signifier of a desired/coveted mode of existence (unreal but not impossible). The third order signified is what arrests the attention of consumers and of which they are not conscious in most of the cases. It may seem that it is their consciousness that would render the ads in an ineffective state.

However, advertising texts create meanings through encoded messages; while the surface meaning denotes the encoded message which is created through the connotations of the ‘denoted’. Nevertheless, decoding the encoded messages or making the desired sense of the connotation is context dependent and as Stuart Hall would have us believe that all encoded messages are not decoded in the way desired by the creators of the message.

Denotation being the descriptive and literal meaning created by the literary and/or pictorial texts or parts of the whole advertising texts refers to the “first order” of signification generated by the signifier and the signified—the initial, common-sense and obvious meaning of the sign (Fiske, 1990, p. 85). Connotation, on the other hand, being the “second order” of signification, involves meanings that are generated by connecting signifiers to wider cultural

concerns. <sup>1</sup>. So while analysing an advertisement one has to keep in mind the entire structure that gives 'meaning' to the advertisement.

Though commodities owe much to advertisements for their demand and it is these ads that actually create a desire/demand for a lifestyle, a life pattern of which, apparently the advertised product is the cornerstone. It may seem that the advertising industry with its mystic touch tries to construct a name and image for a product which in due course of time finds its way into people's list of choices and preferences. Advertisements have immense power to embed a brand-name or a class of goods in the minds of consumers, for which there is an eventual feeling towards an impending need. Advertisement media is so interwoven with our lives that we almost tend to overlook its manipulative aspect. While keeping this in mind one ought not to lose sight of the fact circuit comprising encoding and decoding which may not always be complete; completion would depend on the receivers of the encoded messages, receivers who move through many discourses other than the common hegemonic mass media (Hall).

But it is the advertisements that help to create a niche and image of a product in audience's mind which in return guide them to choose from different sets of products. In a way we can claim that it is the advertisements that mould and shape our choices and desire. Ads however do not only stuff products into our shopping baskets but also steer our ambitions, create desires, and most importantly define our ideals—they shape our lifestyles stealthily.

"It is not the ad that evokes feeling, it simply invokes the idea of a feeling; it uses feeling as a sign which points to the product. But then emotion is also promised when you buy the product. So the feeling and the product become interchangeable as signifier/signified" (Williamson, 1978, pg 31).

Advertisements have an immense power of communication that coaxes consumers to participate in the drama and does not permit them to feel like a passive receiver of the media message.

"Product as a generator can generate a feeling or emotion. A product may go from representing an abstract or feeling, to generating or being that feeling; it may become not only 'sign' but the actual referent of that sign. If a product creates the feeling, it has become more than a sign; it enters the space of the referent and becomes active in reality. Feelings become bound up with products. This means, on one level, that the product 'produces' or buys the feeling. But the more subtle level on which the advertisement works is that of 'alreadyness', which is where 'totemism' becomes a part of ideology; you don't simply buy the product in order to become a part of the group it represents; you must feel that you already, naturally belong to that group and therefore you will buy it. This is how advertisements maintain their hold on you in the gap between seeing them and buying products. You don't choose in the shop, but in response to the advertisement, by 'recognizing' yourself as the kind of person who will use a specific brand. You must have already chosen when you buy otherwise the ads have failed in their purpose." (Williamson, 1978, pg 36-48).

When we buy a product we do not only buy the product but we also buy the feeling associated and advertised with the product. Since products have use value while commodities have use and exchange value the purpose of market is to increase the exchange value and entrap as many heads as possible. To inculcate the notion, “I consume hence I exist” is the prime motto of a consumer economy; and for the purpose commodities are loaded with symbolic value, which ads propagate. This being the general theory, contemporary ads would emphasise on the symbolic value much more than they would during the pre-globalisation period. Not only that, but also the market would be flooded with commodities devoid of use value, on which ads would confer supposed use value and create apparent needs to entrap consumers.

Ethics and meanings of Fairness creams ads ought to be read in this context.

### **Growing Demand of Fairness**

We are here to analyse the meanings created by the advertisements and the ethics of advertisements of fairness creams because they are aggressively targeting and are often successful in trapping both the sexes. It seems that, they are trying to justify their existence by screaming *‘fair skin is the much needed yet so far neglected new thing’*. Sometime big brands have come up with the new term “skin lighting” to promote fair skin complexion in more subtle and seemingly racialism-free manner.

India, being a tropical country and hence naturally a land of brown skinned people has since long been suffering from an obsession for fair skin. This obsession though is predominant among the urban middle and upper class but has an undoubtedly trickling down effect. There is an unsaid notion that beauty is equivalent to fair skin tone. Although this very mythical set of beliefs has been criticised and challenged by several critical intellectual minds but still the market for producing fair skin type as the one and only yardstick to measure beauty is growing day by day. And along with that the market has not forgone the opportunity to thrive on people’s folly. The ads succeed in drawing attention chiefly because Indians have a darker skin tone—desire thrives in the space between the ‘real’ and the aspired impossible, the self and the other. Earlier, fairness cream ads targeted only the women, for matrimonial columns demanded fair brides. But now men too are drawn into the vicious cycle, as the now supposed special fairness creams for ‘men only’; these ads usually show that men too have secret desire to be fair skinned, a desire that they cannot express but the advertiser know. Though we know that a large number of women do crave for a lighter skin tone, but we are not so sure about our men; however, that is quite beside the point because ads can turn their messages into common sense, and once that is done people fall into what psychologists call the loop effect (Karl E Scheibe), and absurdities seem real and the normative becomes normal. Increasingly, these fairness products with advertised celebrity endorsements are normalising the already existing notion that equates beauty with lighter skin tone; and more, ads are associating success with beauty as they define it. In popular belief marriage of girls depended on skin tone but now, according to the ads success in career along with public attention for both men and women depend on fair complexion. The ads do not thus feed on popular feeling of

inadequacy but also diverts people's attention from the real causes of their failures, which are more often socio-economic than personal. They do not only sell products but also sell a lifestyle comprising (mis)conception.

*Few usual elements depicted in "fairness" or "skin lighting" adverts which remain more or less the same are as follows:*

- The boy or girl in these adverts are unsuccessful in their personal or professional lives owing to their dark skin tone
- Generally in these ads the boy or the girl is shown depressed because of their skin colour as if fair skin tone is the only normally desired skin colour and the departure from the normalcy is the normal cause of their complex and depression.
- Then appears the advertised fairness cream as the panacea of all problems to deliver the boy/girl from failure, loneliness, and depression.<sup>2</sup>

It is undoubtedly unethical to portray a constructed notion as common sense, to pose the normative as normal; here however, we would examine ethics of these ads as per the prescribed norms set by the ASCI (Advertising Standards Council of India).

### **Ethics in Fairness Cream Advertisements**

The aspect of ethics has always been severely compromised when it comes to fairness products advertisements. To secure market and increase sale the advertisers have been boldly promoting racism and thriving on people's already existing sense of inadequacy and thus affirming them.

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) prescribes ethical norms of advertising in India. ASCI seeks to ensure that advertisements conform to its Code for Self-Regulation, which requires advertisements to be legal, decent, honest and truthful and not hazardous or harmful while observing fairness in competition.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The purpose of the Code*

The purpose of the Code is to control the content of advertisements, which might be offensive; its purpose is not to hamper the sale of products.

This Code for Self-Regulation, with the following as basic guidelines, with a view to achieve the acceptance of fair advertising practices in the best interest of the ultimate consumer:

- I. To ensure the truthfulness and honesty of representations and claims made by advertisements, and to safeguard against misleading advertisements.
- II. To ensure that advertisements are not offensive to generally accepted standards of public decency.

III. To safeguard against the indiscriminate use of advertising for the promotion of products, which are regarded as hazardous to society or to individuals to a degree or of a type and which is unacceptable to society at large.

IV. To ensure that advertisements observe fairness in competition so that the consumer's need to be informed of choices in the marketplace and the canons of generally accepted competitive behaviour in business is both served.

With the growing demand for skin lighting or fairness improvement products the Chairman and the Board of Governors of ASCI on August 14<sup>th</sup> 2014 passed guidelines for the advertisements of these products.

### *Guidelines of Advertising for Skin Lightening or Fairness Improvement Products*

#### **Preamble**

While all fairness products are licensed for manufacture and sale by the relevant state Food & Drug Administration (FDA) under the Drugs & Cosmetics Act, there is a strong concern in certain sections of society that advertising of fairness products tends to communicate and perpetuate the notion that dark skin is inferior and undesirable. ASCI Code's Chapter III 1(b) already states that advertisements should not deride race, caste, colour, creed or nationality. Yet given how widespread the advertising for fairness and skin lightening products is and the concerns of different stakeholders in society, ASCI, therefore, felt a need to frame specific guidelines for this product category.

#### **Guidelines**

The following guidelines are to be used when creating and assessing advertisements in this category.

1) Advertising should not communicate any discrimination as a result of skin colour. These advertisements should not reinforce negative social stereotyping on the basis of skin colour. Specifically, advertising should not directly or implicitly show people with darker skin, in a way which is widely seen as, unattractive, unhappy, depressed or concerned. These advertisements should not portray people with darker skin, in a way which is widely seen as, at a disadvantage of any kind, or inferior, or unsuccessful in any aspect of life, particularly in relation to being attractive to the opposite sex, matrimony, job placement, promotions and other prospects.

2) In the pre-usage depiction of product, special care should be taken to ensure that the expression of the model/s in the real and graphical representation should not be negative in a way which is widely seen as unattractive, unhappy, depressed or concerned.

3) Advertising should not associate darker or lighter colour skin with any particular socio-economic strata, caste, community, religion, profession or ethnicity.

4) Advertising should not perpetuate gender based discrimination because of skin colour.<sup>4</sup>

## Analysis of Fairness Cream ads in Indian Television

In contradiction to the Code, television ads of Fairness creams do not only promise lighter skin tone but also associate skin tone with success, to scare dark skinned people, who are the majority of the Indian population. Through subtle or not so subtle use of fear technique the ads do not only create false notions but also take the risk of causing mental injury to a sizable portion of our population. Now, the need for fairness has found its way into deodorant industry that emphasises the need for fairer under arms. However ridiculous these advertisements might seem, but while consuming the glossy happy advertised world, where success is just a few steps away, a world brought to light by the most advanced techniques, one is hardly able to note the absurd yet harmful messages that these ads disseminate, unless of course one is armed to ward off these encoded messages by other discourses.

### Examples are Useful

- Fair & Lovely cream ad: the product targets women, as is evident from the name; in one of “Fair & Lovely” ad featuring Bollywood film actress Yami Gautam, we see a man convincing his daughter to get married to a well settled man as a proposal like this does not come every day. In the next scene, the girl is seen pondering over the possibility of her finding a job. However, once Yami Gautam hands her the tube of Fair& Lovely, she finds confidence to tell her father that she would marry after three years, when she too would be well settled in her career, to form a relation based on equality. Apparently, an ad promoting women’s empowerment is actually bent on disempowering the entire population irrespective of sex; the call here is to purchase success via the advertised product, a call that immediately renders all acquired qualities and skills powerless.
- Emami’s Fair & Handsome cream ad: As the name suggest, the target audience of this cream happens to be men. In one of the Emami’s “Fair & Handsome” cream advertisements we will find a boy who seems to be embarrassed for his dark complexion is hiding his face from girls. This ad, features film star Shahrukh Khan, who repeatedly warns the boy against using fairness creams meant for girl; he suggested a special fairness cream meant for men .The obvious happens after the boy uses the suggested cream—he gains confidence and girls swarm around him. The measure of success, source of confidence and meaning of beauty, in fact the entire life pattern like most other ads are decided, defined and handed to the consumers, by this ad too.

Whatever be the regulatory guidelines of the Council, in a competitive market each product of the same group of commodities has to promise something more than what its competitors offer—most of these promises are impossible to keep (detergents cannot brighten textile colors, shampoo cannot strengthen hair roots, just as creams cannot lighten skin tone and neither can lighter skin tone give confidence *naturally*), and thus, advertises by practice make

false claims. Further, by defining and promoting a lifestyle they surely scare, make feel inadequate and/or offend those who have a different life pattern.

Now if we analyse both the ads we will find that in both the ads the concept of fairness being associated with attractiveness and confidence remains well intact. But the ads has moved one step further of promoting the idea that it is no longer the women who are in constant need to be fair, but men too also fall into this trap of insecurity owing to darker complexion.

### **The biggest question “How fair are these fairness cream ads”?**

“The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 that prohibits indecent representation of women in India, through advertisements or other mass media, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner. However this act extends to the whole of India, except the State of Jammu & Kashmir.<sup>5</sup> Though law has been passed for prohibiting indecent representation of women in advertisements, advertisers find means to trick their way out of this stringent law. However, the point is that the attempt to protect women from indecent representation is by all means a sign of gender inequality especially when male body is the latest target of advertisers. Further, the ads of Fairness creams can never be brought under Act prohibiting indecent representation of women because in these ads, women are never represented, what is commonly understood as indecent in India; otherwise too the notion indecency is not a thing out there. In India, preparing a girl for marriage or to centre romantic and tender ideas around a girl’s wedding is never considered indecent; neither is associating lighter skin tone with beauty considered indecent as the notions actually reside in popular imagination and the ads thrive on these.

The moot point is not whether the creams portray women decently; the point is whether the ads make false claims or go against basic human dignity; whether the creams are liable to create health hazards and thrive/reiterate on wrong popular notions. Close examination would help one realize that the creams and their ads are unethical irrespective of what the Indian code defines as ethics and indecent in spite of the Indian Regulation for reasons already stated. It is important to note that a socio-economic system that fosters inequality and indignity of majority cannot be improved if they have ads that reflect the same tendency.



**Citation:**

<sup>1</sup>Lin, Ma. (2008). *The Representation of the Orient in Western Women Perfume Advertisements: A Semiotic Analysis*. Retrieved from <http://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/05-Ma-Lin.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Gundala, Rao. Raghava., & Chavali, Kavita. (2012). *Ethical Aspects in the Advertising of Fairness Creams*. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256039000\\_Ethical\\_Aspects\\_in\\_the\\_Advertising\\_of\\_Fairness\\_Creams](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256039000_Ethical_Aspects_in_the_Advertising_of_Fairness_Creams)

<sup>3</sup>The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ascionline.org/>

<sup>4</sup>ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://ncw.nic.in/acts/TheIndecentRepresentationofWomenProhibitionAct1986.pdf>

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