Marketing Of Skin Fairness Creams And Consumer Vulnerability
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A B S T R A C T

This paper's purpose was to unpack women perceptions regarding skin fairness creams advertising practices and the way those perceptions caused them vulnerability (i.e. harm). Primary data were collected from female consumers of skin fairness creams through semi-structure interviews in Pakistan. The study findings suggest that skin fairness creams advertising practices are a source of disempowering women in a non-white culture as beauty standards portrayed in skin fairness creams advertisements are considered unrealistic and unachievable by women. The participants perceive that fairness creams sellers make exaggerated claims about the efficacy of their products, strengthen negativity in the society and are a source of hurting their self-respect. The negative perceptions about fairness creams marketing practices caused them harm of various sorts. Based on the study findings, we offer viable policy implications for empowering women and enhancing their self-esteem. Finally, study limitations and future research avenues are elucidated.

INTRODUCTION

The South Asian countries make up a lucrative market for skin fairness creams. These creams are mostly consumed by young women because white face skin is commonly associated to beauty (Philips, 2004; Shankar & Subish, 2007) and dark face skin is considered undesirable in the South Asian countries. There are several reasons for this obsession with fair skin in the South Asian countries. In the Indian subcontinent, fair skin colour was associated to upper social classes and dark skin colour was linked to lower social classes (Verma, 2010; Shankar & Subish, 2007). Likewise, a huge part of South Asia was ruled by the British (Shankar & Subish, 2007). It is believed that the British rule also played a critical role in establishing superiority and admiration of fair skin in South Asian countries (Verma, 2010; Shankar & Subish, 2007) where many individuals have a tan or dark complexion. Moreover, mainstream media programs and films further brace superiority of fair skin in the South Asian countries. For instance,

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movie heroines and beauty contest winners' have a fair skin, but the true skin colour of South Asian inhabitants is usually not admired as beautiful (Shankar & Subish, 2007).

The cultural perception of beauty in the South Asian countries oblige many women to become fair colored. They commonly utilize skin fairness creams to improve their skin colour, which are being sold by several local and multinational companies. The fairness creams sellers typically claim that consumption of their respective brand will transform consumers' skin colour from dark to white within a few days. The TV commercials of skin fairness creams commonly associate beauty, professional success and finding of an ideal life partner with fair skin complexion. However, it is almost impossible to transform dark or tan skin colour to white by using skin fairness creams (Sinha, 2000). The young women having dark skin in the South Asian countries could encounter harm owing to the culturally defined beauty standards as they can't transform their skin colour through fairness creams consumption. Therefore, it is questionable, whether it is moral on the part of skin fairness creams sellers to satisfy to those negative cultural demands (Verma, 2010). Companies producing skin fairness creams take benefit of poor advertising regulations and make false claims about the efficacy of their products (Verma, 2010; Shroff, Diedrichs, & Craddock, 2018). Moreover, skin fairness creams use ingredients, which could cause skin harm to their consumers (Peltzer et al. 2016; Shroff et al. 2018; Karnani, 2007). Young women may already encounter harm owing to their personal dark skin colour in the South Asian countries. However, their vulnerability could be further exacerbated by the marketing of skin fairness creams. Consumer experience of vulnerability is often associated to consumer harm, which they could encounter as a result of product consumption or due to the consumption of advertising messages (Baker et al. 2005). Skin fairness creams are an important element of young women consumption lives in the South Asian countries, but a little research is conducted on fairness creams and their issues (Verma, 2010). Skin fairness creams could cause skin problems to consumers (Islam et al. 2006; Frimpong, 2018) and could also perpetuate cultural prejudice against those who have dark complexion (Adbi et al. 2016; Glenn, 2008). This implies that fairness creams have a potential to harm women in various ways. However, according to best our knowledge previous researchers have not approached skin fairness creams marketing from the perspective of consumer harm (i.e. vulnerability). This research explores women perceptions regarding skin fairness creams advertising and how those perceptions cause them harm.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Skin Fairness Creams Consumption and Marketing

White complexion is considered a symbol of beauty and higher social status in many non-white cultures e.g. South Asia. Women having white complexion are perceived to have better chances of finding an ideal life partner (Hamilton et al. 2009; Ashikari 2005), and have better career and earning prospects (Ashikari, 2005). The meanings of whiteness could vary in different cultures, but three major countries

of South Asia (i.e. Bangladesh, India and Pakistan) place almost similar importance to white skin. White complexion ladies are commonly treated favorably in the South Asian countries, which suggests that dark complexion women could encounter discrimination owing to their skin color (Arif, 2004; Karnani, 2007). In South Asian cultures white skin is linked with purity, auspiciousness and honesty and dark complexion is commonly linked to evil, badness and annoyance (Arif, 2004). To attain the culturally admired beauty standards, the South Asian women commonly utilize skin fairness creams (Kaw, 1993).

The prime target market of skin fairness creams are 18-35 years old women (Shevde, 2008). The fairness creams sellers commonly portray a worried individual who is rejected by the society owing to her dark complexion. The ads commonly portray that fairness creams consumption facilitate women in achieving diverse life goals (Gundala & Chavali, 2005). The sellers of skin fairness creams explicitly convey that the main cause of being unsuccessful in non-white cultures is having a dark complexion (Arthur & Quester, 2003). Their ads set trends in the society, which can be considered unethical. Their ads commonly emphasize that fair skin is a way to survive in a society and mostly develop a stereotype image of women. So, manufacturers of fairness creams spread frightening messages which could further deepen discrimination of women owing to their skin colour in non-white cultures (Gundala & Chavali, 2005). Threatening message appeals have a potential to cause fear and anxiety to their target market, which could motivate them to start finding ways to overcome these gaps (LaTour & Zahra, 1989).

The Asian women commonly utilize skin fairness creams to attain the culturally admired beauty standards (Kaw, 1993). They are influenced by the attractive TV ads, which show that it is easier for women to acquire culturally desired beauty standards through consumption of fairness creams. Therefore, fairness cream ads have been blamed for manipulating purchase intention of their customers and not delivering according to the claims made in ads (Gundala & Chavali, 2005). Skin fairness creams

consumers commonly report poor product performance. Fairness creams consumption do not make their consumers fair skinned, but they are at a risk of developing skin problems. According to dermatologists lightening creams are not effective without the use of bleaching agents which include harmful chemicals (Islam et al. 2006). Dermatologists have never found that skin fairness creams consumption could change people complexion (Sinha, 2000). Many fairness creams use energetic type of ingredients, which are dangerous for human skin. These ingredients include hydroquinone, mercury and bleaching agents i.e. hydrogen peroxide (Shroff et al. 2018). Skin fairness creams contain chemicals, such as steroids, mercury or hydroquinone which can cause skin irritation and redness to human skin (Shroff et al. 2018). Skin bleaching agents enhance consumer vulnerability to infections e.g. Fungus and bacteria (Peltzer et al. 2016). Some African countries have already banned fairness product imports which include mercury and hydroquinone (Frimpong, 2018). However, Asian countries (e.g. China and India) are lacking regulations to prevent imports of skin fairness creams that contain harmful chemicals.

A wide range of products are considered detrimental to consumers' wellbeing. Proponents of free market stress that consumer choice clearly increases their wellbeing. However, consumer rights advocates underscore that marketing of some products could be harmful for society e.g. skin fairness creams (Adbi et al. 2016; Verma, 2010). Skin fairness creams sellers typically position themselves as empowering women by offering them more choice. However, these products have a potential to perpetuate women disempowerment by strengthening cultural prejudice (Adbi et al. 2016; Glenn, 2008). Fairness creams manufacturers are criticized for reinforcing superiority of white complexion is non-white cultures (Mishra, 2015; Verma, 2010), which is unachievable for many inhabitants of the South Asian countries (Verma, 2010).

The widespread consumption and promotion of skin fairness creams are recognized as an issue to public health and social justice in non-white cultures. The skin fairness creams could harm human skin and potentially strengthen cultural and social unfairness for those having dark skin color (Craddock, 2016). The advertising of fairness creams particularly play a vital role in strengthening negativity in non-white cultures. Although, there is a market for skin fairness creams in non-white cultures, but fairness creams sellers play with the insecurities of people (Shroff et al. 2018). The advertising practices of skin fairness cream manufacturers could be considered unethical owing to satisfying negative cultural demands (Verma, 2010). There is a lack of research investigating issues linked to skin fairness creams consumption and promotion. This research explores how fairness creams consumers perceive sellers

advertising practices and how those perceptions cause them harm. The subsequent section discusses consumer vulnerability literature that is commonly used to understand consumer harm that they could encounter in their consumption lives.

Consumer Vulnerability

Consumer vulnerability connotes consumer harm that they undergo in various consumption settings. It can be of personal, social, economic and physical nature (Smith & Cooper-Martin 1997, p. 4). In recent years research in the domain of consumer vulnerability has gained considerable attention from consumer researchers (e.g. Baker et al. 2005). A clear definition of consumer vulnerability is lacking, but consumer vulnerability definitions could be categorized into two main themes. The first classification of definitions is that consumers encounter harm (i.e. vulnerability) only owing to their personal characteristics (e.g. Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997; Ringold, 1995). Ringold (1995) delineate consumer vulnerability as *"diminished capacity to understand the role of advertising, product effects, or both"* (p. 584). The second categorization of definitions explains consumer vulnerability as a state of helplessness that arises from

the consumption of products and advertisements. The real vulnerability arises from the interaction of internal (i.e. individual states and characteristics), and external circumstance in a setting where consumption goals may be hampered and the experience affects individual and social perceptions of self (Baker et al. 2005, p. 134).

Internal and external factors can cause consumer experience of vulnerability (Baker et al. 2005, Hill & Stamey, 1990). Internal factors of consumer vulnerability are associated to consumers own characteristics. Many South Asians have a tan or dark complexion (Mishra, 2015), which is their personal trait. Individual having dark complexion could encounter discrimination owing to their skin colour in various socio-economic domains (Arif, 2004; Karnani, 2007). Undoubtedly, the cultural conventions disadvantage dark skin individuals (e.g. Arif, 2004), but marketing of skin fairness creams reinforce those negative cultural myths in non-white cultures (Shroff et al. 2018). This suggests that individuals' personal tan skin colour is not an actual source of vulnerability for them, but the external factors, such as cultural perceptions about beauty standards (e.g. Shankar & Subish, 2007) cause them

vulnerability (Baker et al. 2005). The skin fairness creams advertising is also an external factor which is blamed to reinforce the negativity in various non-white cultures (e.g. Gundala & Chavali 2005).

Baker et al. (2005) underscores that individuals are not merely vulnerable owing to their personal characteristics (Baker et al. 2005, p.130), but vulnerability can also stem from the environment in which people live (Baker et al. 2005). The skin fairness creams advertisements commonly show that dark skin colour girls are neglected and avoided in various socio-economic spheres (Gundala & Chavali, 2005). Fairness creams ads could strengthen the unachievable cultural beauty standards in non-white cultures and their viewers may feel vulnerable after watching such advertisements. Thus, external factors (e.g. fairness creams ads) could play a vital role in rendering the non-white young women vulnerable (Baker et al. 2005 p.130). Consumers' experience of vulnerability is contextual. In the event of unfair marketing practices consumers potentially encounter vulnerability (Baker et al. 2005). Researchers can understand actual vulnerability of consumers by listening and observing their experiences as consumers (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997), which can facilitate market researchers to suggest strategies that could mitigate consumers experience of vulnerability and facilitate their control in various consumption settings (Baker et al. 2005).

The South Asian countries cultures usually place a strong demand on women to become fair skinned, which could cause powerlessness to women of dark complexion as these demands cannot be fulfilled through the consumption of fairness creams (Sinha, 2000). The cultural conventions regarding fair skin

liking could disempower women (Adbi et al. 2016; Glenn, 2008), but marketing communications have a potential to transform society's myths and perceptions regarding skin colour preferences. Unfortunately, skin fairness creams ads strengthen societal negativity as they commonly portray dark skin as a symbol of inferiority and disapproval within non-white societies (e.g. Arif, 2004; Karan, 20008). The women dark skin is often portrayed as inferior in fairness creams advertisements, which could instigate a sense of powerlessness to them. It is not the women skin colour in the south Asian countries that could cause them powerlessness, but the external factors (e.g. culture and fairness cream advertising) instigate vulnerability to them. This paper explores how fairness creams advertisements are perceived by tan or dark skinned women and how those perceptions cause them vulnerability in their everyday lives.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative interview approach was considered appropriate in this study because the research topic was not adequately explored by previous researchers (Belk et al. 2012). The data were collected through semi-structured interviews from thirty female consumers of skin fairness creams, who were the residents of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. Their ages ranged from 19 to 40 years. The participants were residents of Rawalpindi and Islamabad and they worked in various professions, except six participants who were full time students. Eighteen participants were married and twelve were single and their education ranged from Matric to Masters level. The informants were recruited by using a purposeful sampling method, which involves interviewing individuals who can share deep information about the research topic (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The fairness creams consumers were selected as participants who were knowledgeable about the fairness creams products and their marketing practices. We completed twenty four interviews at participants' homes. Six participants were the university students and their interviews were completed in university premises (e.g. hostels). All the interviews were completed by a female researcher (i.e. first author), which facilitated our informants to comfortably express their views with the researcher. Table 01 includes the study participants' profile.

TABLE 01 PARTICIPANTS DETAILS

S#	Alias	Age	Profession	Monthly Income	Marital Status	Education	Residence
1	Fatima	30	Dengue Surveillance	10,000	Married	Intermediate	Rawalpindi
2	Ayesha	24	House Wife	20,000	Married	Graduated	Rawalpindi
3	Khatija	28	Teacher	7,000	Single	Bachelors	Rawalpindi
4	Zainab	23	Marketing	25,000	Single	Bachelors	Rawalpindi
5	Zohra	28	Marketing	25,000	Married	Bachelors	Rawalpindi
6	Aleena	32	Teacher	8,000	Married	Intermediate	Rawalpindi
7	Marwa	40	Teacher	6,000	Married	Graduated	Rawalpindi
8	Beenish	40	House Wife	30,000	Married	Metric	Rawalpindi
9	Momna	34	Marketing	25,000	Single	Graduated	Rawalpindi
10	Safa	40	Teacher	39,000	Married	Bachelors	Islamabad
11	Kanwal	22	Dengue Surveillance	15,000	Married	Metric	Islamabad

12	Hadiqa	21	House Wife	30,000	Married	Intermediate	Islamabad
13	Halla	22	House Wife	27,000	Married	Metric	Islamabad
14	Rabia	23	Student	28,000	Married	Metric	Islamabad
15	Alia	27	Homeo doctor	32,000	Single	Graduated	Islamabad
16	Nida	21	Student	60,000	Single	Bachelors	Islamabad
17	Mehwish	24	Financial Analyst	30,000	Single	Masters	Islamabad
18	Sana	20	Student	70,000	Single	Graduated	Islamabad
19	Zara	24	Student	50,000	Single	Masters	Islamabad
20	Aleena	22	Student	60,000	Single	Masters	Rawalpindi
21	Sara	23	House Wife	30,000	Married	Masters	Rawalpindi
22	Hina	23	Student	40,000	Single	Masters	Rawalpindi
23	Farah	25	House Wife	25,000	Married	Bachelors	Rawalpindi
24	Nadia	26	Marketing	30,000	Married	Metric	Islamabad
25	Saba	22	Sales Assistant	20,000	Single	Intermediate	Rawalpindi
26	Nargis	21	Teacher	45,000	Married	Masters	Rawalpindi
27	Riffat	20	Receptionist	17,000	Married	Metric	Islamabad
28	Anum	27	Teacher	12,000	Married	Bachelors	Rawalpindi
29	Sidra	33	Teacher	22,000	Single	Masters	Rawalpindi
30	Farhat	20	House Wife	34,000	Married	Metric	Rawalpindi

We distributed an information sheet in Urdu language to all the participants for informing them regarding the purpose of current research. All participants volunteered to participate in the study and signed a consent form before the interview. The interviews were conducted in the national language of Pakistan i.e. Urdu, which enabled our participants to comfortably share their views about the study topic. However, for the purpose of reporting data into the research paper, the verbatim were translated into English language. An interview guideline was utilized for carrying out interviews, which included main topics or questions around which discussion was made. Apart from the demographic questions, discussion was made on topics, such as the participants perceptions regarding skin fairness creams TV advertisements, informativeness of advertisements, claims made during advertisements regarding product efficacy, roles shown in TV commercials, effects of skin fairness creams advertising practices on values, culture and people behaviour, and participants feelings after watching TV advertisements. The order and wording of main questions, and sub-questions arising from interview discussions were kept flexible according to the participant's characteristics, responses and situation. There are various products that are used for skin lightening e.g. lotions, face washes and skin whitening or skin fairness creams (Shroff et al. 2018), but this study only focused on skin fairness creams. We attempted to obtain

detailed views of participants regarding their perceptions of fairness creams advertising, therefore we asked open ended questions. We used pseudonyms to report data which also helped to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of our participants. All the participants permitted us to audio record their interviews, which resulted into almost 10 hours of audio recordings. The transcribed interviews resulted into over 250 handwritten pages of A4 size.

We applied thematic analysis method for data analysis, which facilitated us to identify, examine and report recurring patterns within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun & Clarke (2006) suggested a step by step approach to conduct thematic analysis, which we followed in data analysis. First, data were tanscribed by carefully listening the audio recorded interviews several times, which helped us to correct some minor errors in transcripted interviews and to deeply understand the data (Myers, 2013; Braun, Clarke, 2006). Since qualitative data analysis process is iterative in nature. Therefore, both authors read the transcribed interviews many times, which also increased our familiarity with the dataset (DeCuir-Gunby et al. 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, after developing a good understanding of dataset, we proceeded to carry out data coding and in this phase a list of initial codes were generated in the data, which is regarded as an important steps in interview data interpretation and analysis (DeCuir-Gunby et al. 2011). Third, after completing the data coding on interview transcripts, a list of codes were also written on separate papers, which was followed by an analysis at a broader level. This facilitated us to understand the potential of combining different codes to various themes. This research attempted to explore skin fairness consumers' perceptions regarding the skin fair creams advertisements and this issue was not examined earlier. Therefore, we applied a 'bottom-up-approach' (Myers, 2013) in which a data driven coding was done for data analysis (Myers, 2013; DeCuir-Gunby et al. 2011). This process resulted into a generation of initial themes and subthemes. Fourth, we reviewed the initially generated themes. We ensured that themes have a sufficient support from the data. Therefore, we revisited the dataset for ensuring that no important information is missing and themes have an adequate support from the transcribed data. Both the authors also separately analyzed the data and agreed on sub-themes and themes. Finally, we elucidate that what each theme means and decided what part of the data was linked to each theme. Themes were named in a manner so that they have a relevance to the research question. We conducted a thorough analysis and supplied evidence from the dataset (i.e. verbatim) which explained each theme. Collectively, the themes and sub-themes emerging as a result of data analysis facilitated us to answer our study questions (see. Braun & Clarke, 2006).

<center>**FINDINGS**</center>

The participants perceive that advertising campaigns of various skin fairness creams are untrustworthy and fairness creams consumption do not improve their complexion. They consider that skin fairness creams are a major source of further exacerbating their powerlessness that they experience due to their tan or dark skin colour. The skin fairness creams TV commercials were commonly perceived negatively by the participants and those perceptions often source vulnerability to them. Three main themes were emerged as a result of data analysis (a) Exaggerated Claims (b) Strengthening negativity in the society (c) Source of hurting self-respect.

1. Exaggerated Claims

The participants perceive that fairness creams communications make exaggerated claims about their products. They expressed that skin fairness creams have a poor efficacy and their use caused them skin problems. The participants also expressed that fairness creams sellers show unrealistic roles and achievements in their advertisements, which are almost impossible to achieve for consumers in the Pakistani cultural milieu.

The participants expressed that fairness creams lack efficacy. They had a negative perception regarding fairness creams performance that they claim in their TV commercials. They believe that fairness creams deceive them through beautiful model girls having white colour, which lure them to buy and consume fairness creams. They reported that the claims made by fairness creams sellers were untrue as fairness creams consumption did not improve their complexion. A few participants stated that continuous cream consumption only gives some glow to their face. The participants reported to encounter psychological harm after fairness creams consumption (i.e. anxiety) as skin fairness creams actual performance remained well below of consumers expected performance. A participant shares her views regarding how skin fairness creams consumption resulted into her disappointment and financial harm.

> *They [Fairness cream] are showing very beautiful white colour [model] girls to sell their products...I was thinking that cream use will make me white, but they were lying on TV [advertisement]...I used many brands but there was no change in my skin colour...I wasted a lot of money on skin fairness creams (Mehwish, 24).*

A number of informants experienced skin problems after a continuous use of skin fairness creams. The participants believe that fairness creams take advantage of consumers' stumpy knowledge, which makes it easier for them to sell their products in the Pakistani market. The participants reported to spent significant amount of money each month for buying such creams. Some participants reported that consumption of fairness creams caused them skin related issues, such as, growing pimples after consumption, skin inflammation, stiffness, itchiness and skin reaction. They perceive that their lack of knowledge about fairness creams led them to purchase the product, but that caused them both financial and physical harm (i.e. skin problem). A number of participants visited doctors to cure their skin problem, which also cost them significant money. The participants commonly expressed that fairness creams sellers do not communicate the side effects of their respective products. The following interview quote explains powerlessness of one of our participants as she encountered skin issues after consuming a fairness cream.

> *I used to apply fairness cream regularly in the night time...I noticed some skin problems, means some itchiness and stiffness on my face skin as I used the cream...Doctor told me to stop using fairness creams this may be harmful for your skin (Nargis, 21).*

The participants expressed their apprehension regarding unrealistic roles and achievements shown in the TV commercials of fairness creams. They perceived that fairness creams advertisements develop expectations that are unachievable in Pakistan due to various socio-cultural reasons. They expressed that roles shown in fairness creams TV commercials such as, a poor girl married a very rich boy; a girl got a very good job; and a girl was admired by her peers due to her fair skin are unethical. The study participants criticized fairness creams advertisement on grounds that they overlook the Pakistani culture in their attempt to market their respective products. A number of study informant expressed that social status is a vital aspect of matrimonial considerations, but skin fairness creams commercials show that a very rich boy married a very poor girl because her complexion was changed from black to white. Similarly, our participants commonly expressed that obtaining a good job also depends on one's qualifications, skills and experience. They perceive that women having tan and dark complexion are being humiliated owing to deceptive and unethical advertisements of skin fairness creams. Some participants perceive that false expectations, roles and achievements shown by fairness advertisements are a source of anxiety and stress for them. They express that fairness creams are deepening discrimination of women on the basis of skin colour. They feel that watching deceptive TV ads made

them tense. They feel that they are inferior due to their tan or dark skin colour. The participants commonly expressed their anxiety with the exaggerated roles that are shown in the TV advertisements. The following interview excerpt explain how the roles shown in fairness creams ads cause anxiety and ensuing vulnerability to a female participants.

> *I don't think very rich people would marry a poor girl in Pakistan...they are [fairness creams] showing these attractive things in the ads for selling their creams...After watching these advertisements, I sometimes get worried about my future (Fatima, 30).*

2. Strengthening negativity in the society

The participants perceived that skin fairness creams advertisements further fortify white skin obsession in a non-white culture, negatively influencing teens as they are exposed to advertisements, and are playing a role in enhancing materialism in the society. These perceptions led our participants to encounter various form of harm.

According to the study participants skin fairness creams advertisements show white face skin as a main beauty standard, intelligence and a source of achievements in a non-white culture. They perceive that these advertisements are further strengthening an already existing negativity in the society i.e. fair skin obsession. Some participants explained that their parents and siblings often suggest them to use various fairness creams to improve their complexion, which is a deep-rooted cultural problem. However, participants expressed that fairness creams sellers fortify this negativity as they regularly remind people about the superiority of white skin colour in Pakistan. They expressed that fairness creams strengthen the notion of unacceptability of dark complexion, which caused them anxiety. A number of participants feel that society do not accept them in their natural complexion and skin fairness creams advertisements are further reinforcing the white skin liking in our culture. They reported that after watching fairness creams ads they feel nervous about their looks, which sourced a sense of inferiority to them. The following interview passage explains the aforementioned problems.

> *My mother says me to become white. I get an idea, I mean that If I am not acceptable in tan colour...TV advertisements are very wrong...I mean they show all positivity with white colour girls...Isn't it possible that a girl of tan complexion is intelligent?...I mean they always show that only white colour girl can achieve everything in her life...They are spoiling our society by showing these things (Hina, 23).*

The participants expressed that men and their parents demand a white bride and women education, character and other abilities are often ignored in matrimonial considerations. They perceived that fairness creams ads are enhancing such negativity that even a tan and black colour man demands a white bride, which is unfair to women. The dark colour girls experience difficulties in finding a right partner that matches to their educational and social status. The participants believe that the roles shown in the skin fairness creams advertisements are further enhancing demand of fair complexion in the matrimonial considerations. They commonly expressed that apart from other cultural factors, fairness creams ads are also enhancing such trends within the society, which makes the women more powerless. The participants perceive negatively regarding the fairness creams advertisements as they are a source of enhancing societal demand for a fair skin brides, which caused a sense of powerlessness and harm to some study participants. The following interview quote explains the aforementioned problem:

> *Many people visited us for matrimonial consideration, but then they rejected me as I don't have a good skin colour…I think society needs to be changed… But, the media and fairness creams advertisements are also raising this negativity in our society (Sidra, 33).*

Many participants believe that fairness creams advertisements are negatively influencing teens as they are exposed to these advertisements in their daily lives. They believe that teenage girls become more worried about their beauty and start consuming fairness creams. A number of participants reported that their teenaged younger sisters and cousins either ask them for fairness cream or demand some money to buy a cream for themselves. A few participants also reported that younger sisters use their fairness creams without permission, which sometimes cause a little dispute with them. The participants perceive that skin fairness creams advertisement motivate teenage girls to consume their products. Some participants reported to deny providing fairness creams to their teenaged younger sisters. They believed that it is too early for teenage girls to worry about their complexion. However, denial of such requests caused social detriment to some of our participants, which is manifested in shape of damaged relationships with their younger sisters. Some participants reported to provide fairness cream to their younger sisters to avoid damaged relations. The following interview excerpt explains the aforementioned problem.

> *She is only 13 years old...she is always asking fairness cream from me...I think she is very young to use it [fairness cream]...her age is to play and enjoy life. She should not be worried about*

beauty...I say her No when she demands cream from me...she is too young...But then I give her cream because she is very dear to me and I don't want to annoy her (Alia, 27).

Our study informants also believe that fairness creams TV ads are a source of enhancing materialism in the society. They perceived that ads showing luxury things, such as, expensive cars, dresses, dowry items, and marriage places are enhancing expectations of various people in matrimonial considerations. The participants expressed that widespread illiteracy prevent people to think in a logical manner and they start expecting what they watch in ads. Some participants believe that women may also start expecting luxury things from their future or actual husbands as they are exposed to fantasized advertising of fairness creams, which could negatively affect their relationship. Some participants expressed that in case that a girl is of tan or black colour then some greedy people could ask for more dowry. Participants perceived that materialism within a society is a negative thing and TV ads can play a vital role in bringing about a positive change within the society. They expressed that roles shown in the fairness creams ads are maintaining status quo by showing roles that enhance materialism. Some participants expressed a sense of powerlessness and wished that fairness creams TV ads could enhance positivity within the society. One of the study participants expresses her powerlessness in the following manner.

I have a dark skin colour and no one is willing to marry me...A couple of people demanded dowry from my parents, which they could not afford... media and TV advertisements promote materialism and dowry culture...some fairness cream sellers show such things (Momna, 34).

3. Source of hurting self-respect

Our study participants perceive that skin fairness creams TV commercials are one of the major sources of hurting their self-respect in various life spheres. They expressed that after watching fairness advertisement feelings of inferiority and social disapproval emerge. The participants also perceived that fairness creams ads made them perceive that their natural complexion is socially unacceptable. Some participants expressed that sometimes their family and friends jokes are aimed at their skin colour and they suggest them to use a fairness creams for improving skin colour, which negatively affect their confidence and self-image.

A number of participants reported that they have experienced sarcastic remarks on their skin colour from their classmates, cousins, colleagues and siblings. They perceive that fairness creams ads are a major source of teaching our society about the product consumption of skin fairness for improving complexion.

Nevertheless, such negative remarks from a social network members and suggestion to use a fairness cream affected our participants' self-respect negatively. The following interview quote explains how one of our participants experienced anxiety and social harm after receiving sarcastic remarks regarding her skin tone from her friend.

> *My close friends often call me Kalo [black girl]. I don't say them anything, but I feel humiliated when they say me Kalo in front of others...Sometimes I think that it is a crime to have a dark skin colour...Sometimes they tell me about a cream that will improve my complexion (Aleena,22).*

Some participants also reported that their teenaged younger brothers often pass sarcastic comments on them regarding their skin colour, which cause them anxiety about their personal skin colour and make them feel powerless. The participants believed that their exposure to fairness creams advertisements make them knowledgeable regarding fair skin preference in the Pakistani culture, which motivates them to pass comments on others complexion. One of the participants explains her views in the following way.

> *My younger brother often taunt my skin colour. He suggest me to use a fairness cream in a sarcastic manner...I think he learns this all from ads...I know that he is joking but sometimes, I become worried about my tan skin colour...Sometimes, I ignore him or I shout at him or cry or complain to my father about his bad behaviour (Zara, 24).*

Many participants believe that skin fairness creams advertisement roles are also a major source of hurting their self-respect. The participants believed that fairness creams ads portray successful fair complexion women, which cause humiliation to tan and dark skin colour women. They expressed that such advertisements are negatively affecting society's approach towards women as people ignore their education and other personality traits and focus only on their complexion in various life domains. Many participants expressed their discomfort when others in the society suggest them to utilize a fairness cream for improving their skin tone. One of the study participants explains the aforementioned issue in the following manner:

> *A girl having dark complexion in our society faces unwelcoming attitude from others...Their [people] face expressions tells the story...Sometimes they would recommend you a skin*

whitening cream. Isn't is embarrassing for an educated women...I really feel bad when I face

this. I am good the way Allah (God) has created me (Beenish, 40).

To conclude, skin fairness creams marketing activities are perceived negatively by the participants and those perceptions are connected to their experience of vulnerability i.e. financial, psychological, social and physical harm.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on consumer vulnerability and fairness creams literature, this research illustrates how women perceive skin fairness creams advertisements and how those perceptions cause them various kind of harm. Although, the cultural conventions regarding fair skin preferences in Pakistan play a vital role in disempowering women owing to their tan or dark skin colour in various life spheres. The women perceive that fairness creams advertisements make exaggerated claims, reinforce negativity in the society and hurt their self-respect in different ways and those perceptions cause them harm of various sorts. The research contributes to consumer vulnerability literature by illustrating how advertising of skin fairness creams becomes a source of consumer vulnerability.

The first theme explaining perceived wrongness of fairness creams advertising was exaggerated claims about the product efficacy. The fairness creams also caused skin problems to participants and the roles and achievement shown by fairness creams advertisers are seen as unrealistic by consumers. It is a common practice of many firms to overstate their product performance claims to sell their products (Rhodes & Wilson, 2015). However, such marketing practices could cause financial, social, psychological and physical harm to their consumers (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997). Fairness creams lack of efficacy cause financial and psychological harm (i.e. anxiety) to their consumers. Consumer waste money on skin fairness creams and their consumption goals remain unachievable and such situations cause consumer vulnerability (Baker et al. 2005). Skin fairness creams have a potential to cause physical harms to their consumers as they could get skin problems after consuming such creams. Their visit to doctors also cost them money, which could also be considered as their financial harm. The consumer perceive that fairness creams advertisements show unrealistic roles and achievements for selling their respective brand. The consumer believe that linking career, marriage and social acceptance prospects with white skin in a Pakistani culture are unethical, which cause them psychological harm in shape of anxiety and stress. Fairness creams ads trigger a sense of inferiority among tan or dark

complexion women as advertisements portray them as inferior to those having white complexion. Such ads potentially deepen women discrimination in various life spheres owing to their complexion.

Second, women perceived that fairness creams TV advertisements strengthen negativity in the society. Fair colour women are given a preferential treatment in Pakistan and tan complexion women could encounter discrimination (Arif, 2004; Karnani, 2007), which can be considered a negative value. Therefore, it is immoral on the part of skin fairness creams sellers to satisfy to those negative cultural demands (Verma, 2010). The beauty products marketing communications could negatively affect societal perceptions of women and their beauty (Sandlin & Maudlin, 2012). Consumers commonly view fairness creams advertisements as strengthening negativity within the society and negatively influencing teen's behavior as they are exposed to these advertisements. Likewise, fairness creams consumers perceive that roles shown in advertisement enhance materialism in the society. These perceptions caused powerlessness to fairness creams consumers. The fairness creams ads caused them psychological harm (e.g. anxiety and nervousness and feeling of inferiority) and social harm e.g. damaged relations with younger sisters as they use their creams. Lastly, Skin fairness creams hurt self-esteem of women as they show unachievable beauty image. The consumers perceive that fairness creams advertisers teach our society regarding unachievable beauty standards as social network members often passed sarcastic comments on them, which lower their self-esteem. Likewise, ads showing roles that white colour girls are successful in a variety of life spheres became a source of hurting self-esteem of young women having tan colour.

The Pakistani culture places a strong demand on young women to become white skinned, which might source vulnerability to girls having a tan skin colour. Their vulnerability is further exacerbated by advertising practices of fairness creams. The fairness creams position their products on unachievable beauty standards as they portray that Pakistani women's natural skin colour falls short of ideal beauty standards. Their ads are a source of women disempowerment in Pakistan. The fairness creams sellers make exaggerated claims in their ads, strengthen negativity in the society and by hurt self-esteem of women. The women in non-white cultures ought to be emancipated from the unachievable beauty standards as these serve as an impediment to non-white women progress in various life domains. Therefore, such fairness creams products and their marketing activities need to be regularized. We

suggest following policy implications for empowering women in non-white cultures (i.e. Pakistan) and for mitigating their harm that they encounter owing to the marketing practices of skin fairness creams.

PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Beauty products advertising are often blamed of making a vast majority of women appear inferior (Sandlin & Maudlin, 2012). Beauty standards differ culture to culture, but fairness creams advertisements play a role to widen prejudice towards tan or dark skin women, which is the original skin colour of most of the inhabitants of South Asian countries (e.g. Pakistan). This is also an issue of social justice (Craddock, 2016) as those having white skin color are promoted as achievers and others are portrayed as losers, which may not always be true. Nevertheless, such advertisements are a source of disempowerment of women as they deepen discrimination on the basis of skin color (Adbi et al. 2016; Glenn, 2008). Therefore, relevant authorities in Pakistan should review fairness creams advertisements and censor the contents which potentially assist to maintain, enhance or fortify cultural prejudice towards tan or dark complexion. This could help to mitigate the vulnerability of women which they encounter owing to a tan skin color and unethical fairness creams advertisements. Second, fairness creams sellers commonly praise white skin colour, but the actual skin colour of the Pakistani women is never commended. There is no doubt that the obsession with white skin color is entrenched in the Pakistani society. This study findings suggest that women encounter powerlessness and harm (e.g. sense of inferiority) when they realize that their actual face image falls short of the ideal beauty standards. Therefore, women rights activists and NGO's can launch campaigns that dispel the negative connotations attached to tan and dark complexion in various non-white cultures. These campaigns could praise the inherent skin colour of women, which could help to mitigate women experiences of vulnerability that they often undergo owing to their complexion. Third, fairness creams exaggerate claims regarding the efficacy of their products which cause harm to consumers. The regulators should scrutinize whether performance claims made by fairness creams sellers are attainable or not. Companies making exaggerated claims regarding their respective fairness creams should be fined by the regulators. Moreover, fairness creams sellers must be urged by the regulator to provide a full information of their respective brands to their target market. Lastly, fairness creams cause skin damage to consumers as they contain chemicals that are harmful for human skin. Therefore, all the fairness creams brands must be

tested in the laboratories by the local regulatory body and creams containing harmful substance should be banned to protect consumers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH GUIDELINES

This research was conducted to ascertain the consumer perception regarding fairness creams and this study did not focus on a particular brand or brands. Future studies may be conducted to explore how multinational and national brands of fairness creams are perceived by consumers in Pakistan and elsewhere. This research findings may also be applicable in other South Asian countries, but similar kind of study may be conducted in a South Asian or Asian country, which may yield different results owing to cultural differences. Lastly, this research only investigated women perception regarding fairness creams, but in contemporary age fairness creams are also being consumed by men. A future research could investigate how men perceive about skin fairness creams marketing activities in Pakistan and elsewhere.

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