

Bride and Prejudice: Does the Skin-Colour Matter in Arranged Indian Marriages?

Dr. Itisha Nagar, Deepanky Gupta, Kamna Sarin, Nandita Sharma, Punyapriyaa, Shikha Soni, Snigdhaa, Sonali Kadian, Sukanya Chakraborty and Tenzin Wangmo
Kamala Nehru College, DU

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE

Underlying the growing popularity of skin-lightening or “fairness” creams and cosmetics in India is one of the most baseless biases experienced and practiced by Indians. The bias can be summarized as ‘*fair is lovely and dark is ugly*’. Yet, the over-riding importance of fairness especially in context of marriage has been largely unaddressed. This study examined the influence of skin-colour on preference for potential marriage partner.

METHOD

A 2 X 2 (gender X skin colour) between group experimental design was used. Mothers (N=108) of individuals of marriageable age group (24-30 years) were presented with an option of 5 resumes containing education and work information. All the resumes were judged to be highly competent. The participants were shown resume of either males or females depending on whether they had a son or a daughter. Once a resume was chosen, picture of highly attractive fair girl/boy was shown or highly attractive dark girl/boy was shown. The light-skinned and dark-skinned picture was of the same person, except their skin tones were manipulated with the use of computer software. Participants were then asked to rate how strongly would they recommend the girl/boy as potential bride/groom for their children.

RESULTS

As expected fair-skinned highly attractive people received higher ratings than dark-skinned highly attractive people. However, contrary to our expectations, ratings received for dark-skinned woman were not significantly greater than the ratings received for dark-skinned man.

CONCLUSION

The study found that skin-colour plays a very important role in increasing or decreasing the marriage prospects of an individual in our society. Even a highly competent and attractive individual is likely to suffer on account of dark skin in context of matrimony.

INTRODUCTION:

I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

A typical advertisement for a fairness cream begins with the problems of a dark skinned woman. We learn that a major source of distress for her and her family is her persistent inability to find a suitable groom. With sad facial expressions and poor body posture, she is portrayed as an under-confident and insecure person, until someone suggests the use of a

fairness cream. The advertisement then shows us her radical transformation; not only does she become several shades lighter, her entire personality undergoes a drastic change. She emerges as a successful woman, confident and self-assured because of her ‘whiteness’. The advertisement ends with her clinching a desirable marriage proposal; the camera zooms in on her fair and happy face. The implied message is ‘fair is lovely and dark is ugly.’ The fairness cosmetic industry generates approximately 675 crore Rs. each year and is growing at a rate of 25% (Picton, 2013). Underlying the growing popularity of skin-lightening or “fairness

” creams and cosmetics in India is one of the most baseless biases practiced and experienced by us. An industry that began selling fairness creams exclusively for women, now has a lot to offer for men as well. Today in the market, there are fairness creams, face washes, and makeup available for both genders. *Fair & Lovely* has found its counterpart in *Fair & Handsome*. These skin-lightening cosmetics in most cases promise to protect against the harmful and darkening UV rays of the sun, reduce the melanin secretion, thus revealing more “beautiful” skin that is several shades lighter than the original skin colour. Most advertisements carry an implicit message that darkness is the root of all women’s (and now men’s) problems in life, and skin lightening is the key to success in all spheres of life. Additionally, one can now find means to lighten each and every part of their body. The latest addition to the list is whitening creams for one’s private areas.

Colorism, or skin color stratification, is a process that privileges light-skinned people over dark in areas such as income, education, housing, and the marriage market (Hunter, 2007). In context of race, researchers have found that light-skinned people earn more money, complete more years of schooling, live in better neighborhoods, and marry higher-status people than darker-skinned people of the same race or ethnicity (Murguia & Telles 1996; Rondilla & Spickard 2007). Although, studies examining colourism have restricted their research to African American individuals, there is growing evidence for an overwhelming preference for fair skin over dark skin especially in context of arranged marriages in India. Often implicitly and at times explicitly, individuals are judged on the basis of colour of their skin, with a preference for light skinned people. “Looking for a slim, homely, and ‘fair’ girl for our son” is a common feature in matrimonial advertisements across newspapers and websites. While tall, ‘dark’, and handsome have been popular traits in a man, a survey in 2012 by the matrimonial website *jeevansathi.com*, found that the bias exists across genders. It reported that 71% women prefer fair men when it comes to marriage (Rodrigues, 2015). The findings are not surprising since fair skin has been commonly associated with beauty (Badrudroja, 2005; Jha & Adelman, 2009),

physical attractiveness (Frisby, 2006), as well as health and fertility (Swami, Furnham & Joshi, 2008).

While dark skin is perceived to be disadvantageous for both men and women, studies have reported that Black women seem to suffer from “double jeopardy” (Beal, 1970). In workplace settings, dark-skinned women receive more rejections than equally qualified dark-skinned men (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). In support, Jha and Adleman (2009) analyzed profiles and preferences of brides and grooms and coded success story wedding photos posted on four Indian matrimonial websites. They found an overwhelming bias among males for skin-colour fairer than themselves. Males were also more likely than females to state a preference for skin color in their prospective brides, and to use qualitative words like beautiful and lovely to describe their preferred match. With respect to the success story wedding photos, most photos had fairer brides than grooms whereas dark women were almost non-existent in these success stories. A qualitative study by Bakshi and Baker (2011) conducted on British Indian men and women found that internalization of Indian body ideals (including fair skin and slimness) were linked to finding a suitable life partner for women, and this pressure was largely perceived to be influenced by maternal encouragement and the media. This is not surprising, as physical attractiveness has long been considered the benchmark for evaluating the worth of a woman across cultures.

Preference for fair-skinned partner for sons/daughters is an expectation that is often explicitly and implicitly communicated by many parents. However, this over-riding importance of fairness especially in context of marriage has been largely unaddressed. Thus, the primary purpose of the study was to examine the presence of, if any, preference of fair skin over dark skin colour in context of matrimony. It was hypothesized that: (1) photograph of dark skinned individual will receive lower ratings than equally attractive and qualified fair skinned individual and, (2) photograph of dark skinned woman will receive lower ratings than dark skinned men.

METHOD:

Participants

Urban mothers (N=108) of individuals of marriageable age group (24-30 years) from New Delhi and NCR were selected for the present study. The demographic details of the participants have been provided in Table 1.

Procedure

A 2 X 2 (gender X skin colour) between group experimental design was used. The participants were presented with an option of 8 resumes containing education and work information. The participants were shown resume of either males or females depending on whether they had a son or a daughter. Once a resume was chosen, picture of highly attractive fair girl/boy was shown or highly attractive dark girl/boy was shown. The light-skinned and dark-skinned picture was of the same person, except their skin tones were manipulated with the use of computer software. Participants were asked: (1) to rate the competency of the resume selected by them on a rating scale of 1 to 7 (highly incompetent to highly competent) and (2) to rate how strongly they would recommend the girl/boy as potential bride/groom for their children on a rating scale of 1 to 7 (strongly NOT recommend to strongly recommend).

Informed consent was taken from the participants and confidentiality was ensured to all. At the end of the study, all participants were debriefed regarding the true nature of the study.

A pilot study was conducted previously for the résumés and pictures used in the study proper. First, for the pictures, 12 passport size pictures each of males and females judged to be physically attractive and having fair skin colour were selected. Ten mothers of children of marriageable age were asked to rate the perceived attractiveness and the perceived skin colour of the pictures of opposite sex using a 7-point Likert-type rating scales ranging from very unattractive (1) to very attractive (7) and very dark to (1) to very fair (7) respectively. Top rated picture for attractiveness and skin colour (fair) was selected for both the genders. The male and female photographs were then turned dark with the help of computer software and were rated by the same sample for the skin colour. The photographs

were then rated to ensure they were significantly perceived as dark. This pre-rating was done to ensure that the pictures selected were perceived as highly attractive and the skin colour was judged to be highly fair/dark.

The same pilot sample (mothers) as the one used for the selection of photographs, also independently rated the competency levels of 8 resumes for males and females (regarding perceived educational standards, work experience, and overall competency) of the applicant, based on the résumé. Apart from these, 3 HR professionals also rated the resumes for their competency. Pilot study results found that the resumes received high ratings for competency by mothers and HR professions. This was done to ensure that the resumes used in the primary study were perceived as highly competent.

Statistical Analysis

First, preliminary information regarding, age, education, and SES were compared for the participants in the fair and dark conditions to make sure that there were no significant differences across the two conditions. Second, descriptive statistics were obtained noting means and standard deviations for the dependent variable. Finally, a 2 (gender) X 2 (skin colour) between group ANOVA was computed to assess the likelihood for recommendation of the girl/boy as potential bride/groom for their children.

RESULT:

Demographic characteristics of the participants have been provided in Table 1. As can be seen, the participants two treatment conditions (fair and dark) were matched on the following self-reported variables: 1) age, 2) education, and 3) SES. An effort was made to minimize the influence of these variables. As can be seen in Table 1, independent *t* test revealed no significant difference in the participants of the groups on the variables age, education, and SES.

Competency ratings for resume selected by participants have been presented in Table 2. As can be seen, the resumes received high ratings for competency from the participants in all conditions.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants Exposed to Fair and Dark Conditions

	Fair		Dark		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	(N=55)		(N=53)			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Age (in years)	50.0	8.26	51.	6.18	0.8	.37
	4		28		9	8
Educational	1.73	0.71	1.5	0.69	0.6	.55
Qualifications			8		2	0
SES	2.51	0.66	2.4	0.61	1.0	.29
			3		6	2

Note. Coding for Educational qualifications: 1= graduation, 2= post-graduation, 3=higher studies; SES= 1=lower middle, 2= middle, 3= upper middle, 4= upper class

Table 2

Competency Ratings for Resume Selected by participants

Gender	Skin Colour	N	Mean	SD
Male	Fair	29	5.79	1.916
	Dark	28	5.79	1.771
Female	Fair	26	6.38	0.571
	Dark	25	6.36	.0810

Note. Gender of the photograph shown

Figure 1. Recommendation ratings for males and females based on their skin Colour

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for ANOVA analysis for the dependent variable recommendation ratings. It was expected that fair skin photographs would receive significantly higher ratings for recommendation (i.e., recommendation for suitability as life partners for their sons/daughters) than would darker skin photographs (Hypothesis 1). Consistent with our hypothesis, the ANOVA results (Table 4) for recommendation

of skin colour with a large effect size $F(1, 104) = 32.21, p = .000, \eta^2 = .236$. There was no gender effect, i.e. there was no significant difference in the ratings given to the male photograph and female photograph. It was also expected that, the photograph of dark skinned woman would receive lower ratings than the photograph of man with dark colored skin (Hypothesis 2). Contrary to our hypothesis, skin colour by time was not significant, $F(1, 108) = 0.019, p = .890, \eta^2 = .00$ implying that the pattern of ratings did not differ according to whether the participants were males or females. That is, dark photograph of the highly attractive and competent woman did not receive significantly lower ratings than the photograph of a highly attractive and competent dark man.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for ANOVA Analysis for the Dependent Variable Recommendation Ratings

Gender	Skin Colour	N	M	SD
Male	Fair	29	5.48	1.05
	Dark	28	4.11	1.57
	Fair	26	5.88	1.71
	Dark	25	4.44	1.60
Female	Fair	29	5.48	1.05
	Dark	28	4.11	1.57
	Fair	26	5.88	1.71
	Dark	25	4.44	1.60

Note. Gender of the photograph shown

Table 4

Time x Group Factorial Analysis for Perceived Competence of Resumes

Source	df	F	p	η^2
Gender	1	2.1	.14	.02
	9	2	1	

Skin Colour	1	32.	.00	.23
	21	0**	6	
		*		
Gender X Skin Colour	1	.01	.89	.00
	9	0	0	

Note. *** $p < 0.001$

DISCUSSION:

This study sought to shed light on the area of skin-colour bias in context of arranged Indian marriages. Results of the study indicate that there appears to be a skin-colour preference with regard to making decisions about the suitability of an individual as a potential partner. Given that the study was manipulated in such a way that the influence of the

two other important variables, namely, attractiveness and competency were controlled in a manner to minimize their influence; the significant mean differences in ratings can only be attributed to the skin-colour variation. Individuals perceived as highly competent but dark-skinned are likely to be rated lower than their highly competent light-skinned counterparts. The findings of the study establish the presence of colourism in context of matrimony. Sadly, these findings are not terribly shocking, but are in fact in line with our expectations.

Although there is plenty of work on colourism in the United States, there is very little work to explain the historical origins of skin-colour discrimination in India. Parmeshwaran and Carodoza (2009) in their article titled 'Melanin on the Margins' discuss some possible reasons for this bias. They explain that colour of the skin is related to social hierarchy in India, since fair skin is often considered to be a mark of high class/caste. First, preference for light over dark skin can be traced to lasting impact of British imperialism. The racist construction of 'dark native' as barbaric and savage seems to have become a part of our unconscious and is often projected as strong dislike for the 'dark other'. Going further back in time, fair skin is considered to be a link to the Aryan ancestry, the superior, strong, and more civilized tribe from central Asia that invaded India around 1500 BC. Finally, the caste system also called *varna* (literally means colour), also accounts for the perceived superiority of fair skin over dark. Owing to the association of fairer skin with upper caste and darker skin with lower castes, skin colour came to signify the social position of an individual in our society.

Turning to our second hypothesis, even though we found that fair skin was preferred over dark skin, we did not find evidence for 'double jeopardy' i.e. dark-skinned woman was not found to be in a more disadvantaged position than dark-skinned man. This is a surprising finding since studies have found that women are judged more harshly for darker colour of skin than are men (Jha & Adleman, 2009; Thomas & Harrison, 2009; Bakshi & Baker, 2011). One of the possible reasons for this could be that we presented participants with resumes of highly qualified women. The participants believed that the woman's photograph that they were viewing was a highly competent lawyer/doctor/engineer. Further, the photograph selected received highest ratings for attractiveness in our pilot study. So it is possible that dark skinned women are able to overcome the 'skin-colour disadvantage' if they are perceived as highly attractive and competent. In support, Thompson and Keith (2001) found that the relationship between skin tone and self-esteem was moderated by socioeconomic status and body image. More specifically, dark skinned women from lower incomes who were judged to be unattractive displayed lowest level of self-esteem whereas the impact for skin-colour was weaker for women from higher social class. Financial success along with an otherwise attractive appearance thus appears to reduce the affect of skin-colour bias for women.

Overall, the findings of the study have implications for socio/psychological well-being of individuals. Experience of rejection or discrimination on the basis of colour of the skin is likely to lead to poor body image, self-esteem, and dissatisfaction with self and others. Okazawa-Ray Robinson and Ward (1995) found a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and liking of own skin tone, greater liking for skin-tone was associated with higher score on self-esteem measure for African American adolescents. That is, dark skinned individuals may suffer from low self-esteem since they have to cope up with a number of negative messages from the larger society, especially the perception that 'fair is lovely and dark is ugly'. Studies that have focused on women have replicated the findings and suggest dark skin-colour is related to greater negative ratings of overall appearance and facial satisfaction (Bond & Cash, 1992) as well as symptoms of depression and poor self-esteem among African American adolescents (Williams and Thompson, 2006).

The study, despite being comprehensive, has certain limitations, which may be addressed in follow-up researches. First, we conducted this study on urban middle/upper-middle class mothers for whom professional competency and educational qualifications may offset the skin-colour bias. It would be interesting to replicate this study in societies where educational and professional competency of women matter considerably lesser in context of arranged marriages. Second, the study only involved mothers, which can make generalization to other populations problematic. It would be interesting to see if their children also exhibit the same bias as they do. Third, perception of one's own skin-colour can also play an important role since an individual with considerably darker skin is less likely to discriminate against those with dark skin. However, it was difficult to gather this information from the participants of the present study, as it would have revealed the purpose of the study. Future researches should also focus on investigating the possible mediating effects of varying levels of competency and attractiveness on skin-colour bias. Despite these limitations, the results of the study are insightful in revealing the role played by skin-colour in context of matrimony. 'Marginalization of the dark skin' is a phenomenon rampant in our society, but we have failed to acknowledge and address this. This study shows that the colour of skin has the potential to even overpower traits such as general competency and physical attractiveness of both men and women. Recognizing this bias is the first step towards making amends.

REFERENCES

- Badrudroja, R. (2005). Color, Beauty, and Marriage: the Ivory Skin Model. *South Asia Graduate Research Journal*, 15: 43-79.
- Bakshi, S., & Baker, A. (2011). 'I think a fair girl would have better marriage prospects than a dark one': British Indian adults' perceptions of physical appearance ideals. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 7(3), 458-486.
- Beale, F. (1970). Double jeopardy: To be black and female. *The black woman: An anthology*, 90-100.
- Bond, S., & Cash, T. F. (1992). Black beauty: Skin color and body image among African-American college women. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 22, 874 – 888.
- Rodrigues, C. (2015). *India's unfair obsession with fair skin, its impact on relationships*. Hindustan Times. Retrieved from <http://www.hindustantimes.com/sex-and-relationships/india-s-unfair-obsession-with-fair-skin-its-impact-on-relationships/story-cbkOW7ZShgbR10i5yfvIXI.html>.
- Frisby, C.M. (2006). "Shades of beauty": examining the relationship of skin color to perceptions of physical attractiveness. *Facial Plastic Surgery*, 22 (3), 175-179.
- Harrison, M. S., & Thomas, K. M. (2009). The hidden prejudice in selection: A research investigation on skin color bias. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39(1), 134-168.
- Hunter, M. (2007). The persistent problem of colorism: Skin tone, status, and inequality. *Sociology Compass*, 1(1), 237-254.
- Jha, S. & Adelman, M. (2009). Looking for Love in All the White Places: A Study of Skin Color Preferences on Indian Matrimonial and Mate-Seeking Websites. *Studies in South Asian Film and Media*, 1, 65-83.
- Li, E. P., Min, H. J., Belk, R. W., Kimura, J., & Bahl, S. (2008). Skin lightening and beauty in four Asian cultures. *Advances in consumer research*, 35, 444-449.
- Murguia, Edward and Edward Telles 1996. 'Phenotype and Schooling Among Mexican Americans.' *Sociology of Education* 69, 276–89.
- Okazawa-Rey, M., Robinson, T., & Ward, J.V. (1987). Black women and the politics of skin color and hair. *Women & Therapy*, 6 (1-2), 89-102.
- Rondilla, Joanne and Paul Spickard 2007. *Is Lighter Better?* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Picton, O. (2013). "The Complexities of Complexion: A Cultural Geography of Skin Colour and Beauty Products." *Geography*, 98(2), 85-92.
- Swami, V., Furnham, A. & Joshi, K. (2008). The influence of skin tone, hair length, and hair colour on ratings of women's physical attractiveness, health and fertility. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 49 (5), 429–437.
- Sylvia, K. (2014). *Hegemonic Whiteness: A Qualitative Study of Fairness Advertisements in India*. Texas State Undergraduate Research Journal, 2(1), 1-5.
- William, Z.A. & Thompson, M. (2006). Does it matter if you're black or white? skin color and psychological well-being among middle-school youth. Unpublished dissertation.