

**Can We Be *Made* Beautiful?**  
What Does Indian Advertising Say?

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### **Abstract**

Advertising is a medium of communication that has a direct and indirect influence on our perceptions about the world around us. Existing literature indicates that advertisements in India are socially deficient in the portrayal of women by presenting them unrealistically or as objects that are easily influenced. The aim of this study is to provide a qualitative evaluation of the representation of women in skincare and beauty advertisements in India. The study addresses the gap in current research by exploring the contemporary presentation of ‘female beauty standards’ in advertisements released between 2011 and 2021. A qualitative research approach of visual critical discourse analysis has been chosen to analyse 100 skincare and beauty advertisements belonging to 10 different brands that are a part of 7 of the leading skincare and beauty players in the Indian market. Three major themes have been identified to describe female beauty standards as they are prominent in the advertisements. The first theme is colourism that focuses on the analysis of skin colour and the preference for white and fair skin over dark among women. The second is physical attractiveness that focuses on the preference of slim body image, colour, texture and length of hair, and western and Indian clothing styles among women. The third is gender roles and objectification that focuses on viewing women from the traditional perspective of caregivers, homemakers and devoted wives, contemporary perspective of professional and independent women, and as objects and subjects of sexual desire. The critical exploration in the present study of the portrayal of female beauty standards in advertising has found that degrees of beauty ideals of colourism, physical attractiveness, and gender roles and objectification can be seen in implicit and explicit ways, despite changing times and with only a few exceptions of diversity.

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KEYWORDS: Beauty ideals, Colourism, Physical attractiveness, Gender roles,  
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## 1. Introduction

“The quest for beauty has deep psychological roots in human beings and is as indispensable to them as any other quest” (Kumar, 2002, p. 261). Beauty has been one of three “human values”, the others being truth and goodness, characterising Indian culture through historical periods (Kumar, 2002). There is evidence that dates back to the Indus Valley Civilisation (about 3300 to 1300 BCE) that both men and women used cosmetics and skincare as part of their daily routine (Datta & Paramesh, 2010). The practice of self-care has seeped into modern lifestyles in India. Recent studies stated in the Statista research of 2022 rank India as fourth globally in generating the highest revenue in the beauty and personal care sector in 2021 (Statista Research Department, 2022). In 2020, the skincare and beauty products market had touched a value of INR 129.76 billion or approximately 1.55 billion EUR, and the market is expected to reach a value of INR 191.09 billion or approximately 2.28 billion EUR by 2025 (Research and Markets, 2021).

A conducive environment for commerce was created by the economic liberalisation policies of the 1990s, which provided the space for commercialisation of the traditional cultural inclination towards beauty. According to Singh (2017), many foreign brands stepped foot into the Indian arena after the policy of economic liberalisation. From 1994 to 2000, Indian contestants won at the prestigious international Miss Universe and Miss World pageants (Singh, 2017), putting Indian beauty in the limelight. Concurrently, the Indian market for beauty products grew. A decade after the liberalisation policies, an analysis conducted by ASSOCHAM of the period 2005 to 2015 showed a significantly increased consumption pattern of cosmetics among young individuals due to a growing awareness of looks and the desire to appear beautiful (Singh, 2017). Since then to 2021, the skincare and cosmetics industry has boomed with inflow of capital combined with growing technical capacities. The Financial Express (2021) report estimates that India’s traditional knowledge and the manufacturing capabilities built over the years are likely to make India a global destination in the skincare and cosmetics sector.

The influence of the economic reforms of 1991 was felt on the Indian media and the entertainment industry. One of these influences could be seen by way of “representations of beautiful bodies” that began circulating in media images (Munshi, 2004, p. 163). With such exposure in and accessibility to media, advertising by the skincare and beauty industry seems to be profoundly influencing concepts and standards of beauty in India. The depiction of female beauty in Indian visual media has followed the trends in western visual media

(Munshi, 2004). Western visual media studies show that the rise of consumer culture has affected and altered conceptions of femininity. A significant difference was a transition from depicting women in their roles as wives and mothers to a greater emphasis on beauty, sexuality, and attractiveness clichés (Munshi, 2004). Globalisation has affected the homogenisation of the beauty ideal and the alteration of individual standards of beauty around the globe (Majidi, 2020). The notion of “ideal beauty” popularised by multinational corporations of colonial countries is the root of homogenisation of beauty (Jones, 2011, as cited in Majidi, 2020). Therefore, Majidi (2020) indicates that beauty ideals of today are moulded by liberalisation, globalisation, and shadows of the past (including colonisation).

Historically, there have been certain standards of beauty. Majidi (2020) describes the traditional beauty ideal in India as seen in ancient sculptures and carvings. The scholar points out that the parameters of beauty were linked to body shape and proportions, the shape of the eyes, the hair, and the complexion. As the standard evolved over the years, skin tone became the most significant aspect of appearance (Majidi, 2020). The binary opposition of fair and dark was perpetuated in British India until 1947 (Shevde, 2008), when India threw off the colonial yoke. The liberalisation of the Indian economy at the end of the 20th century provided an open playground for the beauty industry to take advantage of historical biases (Shroff et al., 2018).

Scholars, including Shroff et al. (2018), point out that 50% of India’s entire skincare market is skin brightening products. Various Asian cultures view complexion that is light and fair as more beautiful and desirable. Such complexion is believed to be socially advantageous for marriage and professional opportunities (Shroff et al., 2018). This is especially important in Asian nations such as India where fair skin has been recognised over years as a cultural symbol of class, wealth, and social standing. It is suggested that the advertising sector, in particular, plays a substantial role in perpetuating and profiting on stereotypes of caste, age, race, and attractiveness (Shroff et al., 2018). According to Shankar et al. (2007, as cited in Shroff et al., 2018), sale of products for skin fairness is analogous to “disease mongering” (para 5), not exactly generating a demand that does not exist but exploiting people’s worries about their looks and profiting handsomely from them.

Contemporary beauty ideals in India, according to Gelles (2011), also include body figure, hair and other facial features, and clothing. Gelles (2011) writes that the present ideal of thin forms is a contrast to the traditional representations of curvaceous hourglass shapes and a hint of fat. The colour, length, and texture of hair matter. The most favoured hair

qualities are the natural Indian hair colour of black, long or medium in length and straight, wavy and curly in texture (Gelles, 2011). Preferred clothing styles are the modest traditional wear, covering the chest, shoulders and legs, and not figure-hugging. However, there are some changes that permit sleeveless and sheer wear as well as westernised clothes (Gelles, 2011).

In addition to skin colour and other physical features, advertising skincare and beauty products in India portrays gender roles and sexual objectification. Nath and Saha (2021) highlight gender roles and female objectification to emphasise stereotypical ideal womanhood. According to the scholars, traditionally, women have been represented in advertising as docile, afraid, and shy. Commercials frequently present women as objects of interest to be adored by men for their benefit, especially in health and beauty product advertising (Nath & Saha, 2021). Some advertisements portray women as competent, knowledgeable, and confident in their ability to please others in a way to lure men or make a positive impact in general. The impact is felt on women, many of whom link their self-esteem to their own attractiveness and ability to meet standards (Nath & Saha, 2021).

Advertising is one of the key mediums that affect our everyday lives both knowingly or unknowingly and is accountable for moulding societies in a much deeper context (Chatley, 2018). The media establishes what looks appealing, and the prism of advertising dictates that appearance offers a more pleasant existence. Individuals who fit the ideal are naturally treated differently to those who do not (Rajendrah et al., 2017).

Thus, this research aims to explore the question: How are female beauty standards represented in skincare and beauty advertisements targeted at young women in India?

Since the notion of female beauty standards is a very broad spectrum, the above research question is further broken down into three categories that will analyse beauty standards using three main concepts briefly addressed above and further defined in the Theoretical Framework. The three sub-questions that will lead this research aim to explore the following:

*SQ1:* How is colourism as a female beauty standard represented in skincare and beauty advertisements targeted at young women in India?

*SQ2:* How is physical attractiveness as a female beauty standard represented in skincare and beauty advertisements targeted at young women in India?

*SQ3*: How is gender roles and objectification as a female beauty standard represented in skincare and beauty advertisements targeted at young women in India?

### **1.1. Scientific and Societal Relevance**

The existing literature indicates that advertisements in India are not fulfilling their social responsibility. They are projecting women either unrealistically or as objects, easily influenced (Chatley, 2018). Studies so far have discussed the portrayal of women across a mix and a range of products from the most basic to the most luxurious, and beauty products are only one part of this range. Within beauty products, there has been greater concentration of studies on advertisements of skin fairness products (Shroff et al., 2018).

This research, therefore, will include but not be limited to skin fairness, covering skincare, cosmetics, and hair care, thereby providing a more complete study on skincare and beauty products than what has been done earlier. Furthermore, the research will be made contemporary by covering the most recent decade of 2011 to 2021. By examining these advertisements, an attempt will be made to understand whether and if at all these advertisements represent female beauty standards through colourism, physical attractiveness and gender roles and objectification. In recent years, the world has seen protests against such bias and false ideals and for the need to include diversity and better representation of women across advertisements. Analysing skincare and beauty advertisements in India in the decade 2011 to 2021 will provide a stage to study alteration, development, or static preservation of such communication, which makes it an untapped and important topic for exploration. The aim of this research is to provide an evaluation that can enable businesses to alter their perspective and make it more consonant with social responsibility and reality. Amendments in the advertising communication can also have a positive impact on self-image and self-esteem of women, empowering them to be true to themselves.

### **1.2. Chapter Outline**

The current thesis includes four chapters which are Theoretical Framework, Methodology, Results and Discussion, and Conclusion.

The thesis begins with a detailed description of current literature on the topic of ‘female beauty standards’. The chapter of Theoretical Framework defines concepts of colourism, physical attractiveness and gender roles and objectification which are linked to the topic. Following the Theoretical Framework, the Methodology explains the chosen

sampling method of visual critical discourse analysis. The chapter outlines the methodological decisions made and describes the steps taken during the analysis. Further, it discusses the sampling approach as well as the dataset used for the analysis and the operationalisation of the concepts used in the research design. The next chapter of Results and Discussion presents the findings of the research and discusses them by connecting them to existing literature. Lastly, a Conclusion answers the research question. This chapter incorporates a summary of the main findings. Additionally, it outlines the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The section explores literature on topics related to the concept of ‘female beauty standards’ in advertising. First, the concept of colourism is explained and connected to the advertisements’ definitions of beauty. Second, the concept of physical attractiveness and any change in the definition of beauty over time is examined. Finally, the concept of gender roles, including sexual objectification, as a parameter of beauty is studied.

### **2.1. Colourism**

Colourism in advertising is the presence of “interracial and intraracial racism based on skin tone” (Mitchell, 2019, p. 1367). Discrimination by skin colour or colourism, like weight standards in contemporary beauty and fashion conventions, is an issue of gender that has disproportionately harmed women more than men (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). According to Hochschild and Weaver (2007), “Colour preference is a cousin of racial prejudice, and like prejudice, it is closely linked with the urge to obtain and keep power over others” (p. 646). Recent research based in the United States traces colourism to the “institutionalised racism of slavery and segregation and internalised racism within the black community” (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009, p. 224). In comparison, there exists little work in India that can illustrate explicitly the history of discrimination based on skin colour. Hall (1993, as cited in Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009) compiles an inventory describing the glorification of fair complexion in many Asian countries and Indian communities and finds that such glorification has been “all but ignored in the scholarly literature” (p. 224), especially for Indian women. However, biases based on skin colour can be traced back to the British imperial legacy (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009).

Historically, India has had a social hierarchy of the caste system (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). Initially, the system was based on occupation but with associations of colour with the premier caste comprising the learned and fair-skinned Brahmins, followed by the warriors Kshatriyas who were affiliated with the colour red because of their fury shown on the battlefield. The next were the farmers and traders called Vaishyas who exemplified the colour yellow, and the dark-skinned menial workers or Shudras were the lowest in the hierarchy. Furthermore, other castes like Dalits or untouchables were considered to be too “impure” to be included in this caste hierarchy (Shevde, 2008, para. 14). It is believed that when the Caucasian Aryans arrived in India around 1500 BCE, colour-based divisions in Indian society were propagated (Shevde, 2008). The hypothesis is

that colour became a distinguishing factor when fair-skinned foreigners defeated indigenous darker-skinned Dravidians. It suited the Aryans to suppress local Dravidians using colour, hence the Varnas (Sanskrit for colour). According to Shevde (2008), over time, for such socio-political reasons and the universal symbolism of colour, fair and white became associated with superiority and purity while dark skin was associated with inferiority and impurity (Shevde, 2008).

This binary opposition of fair and dark was perpetuated in British India until 1947. Skin colour discrimination in postcolonial India may be linked back to the long-lasting imprint of British imperialism, the institutional residue of stereotypes and prejudices that has survived in the country even after the end of the colonial empire. Postcolonial criticism has highlighted the prejudiced portrayal of the “dark native” as “primitive, exotic, passive, unruly and incapable of self-determination” (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009, p. 225) by European colonialism. In a manner similar to the ideological ramifications of enslavement in the black community, British colonial racist segregation laws and barring of Indian nationals from inclusion within systems of power may have led to the occurrence of colourism in India (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009).

Additionally, the liberalisation of the Indian economy at the end of the twentieth century provided an open playing ground for marketers to take advantage of the historical caste, community and colour bias (Shroff et al., 2018), which did not leave even the popular film industry untouched (Rehman, 2019). In folklore, now converted into comic books and television serials, evil forces are portrayed as dark and divinity as light (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). In Hindu mythology, including the epics Ramayana and Mahabharat for instance, legends of fair-skinned beneficent gods, like some forms of Ram and Shiva, battling darker-skinned villains and demons are portrayed, equivalent to the Aryan against Dravidian struggle. Religious legends, like Lord Shiva mocking his bride, Goddess Parvati, for having dark complexion, have persisted in religious literature. One may contend that these mythic texts were not intended to encourage racism based on colour, but they did generate preconceptions in the minds of their readers and followers (Shevde, 2008, para. 15). Till today, the popular faces on television are largely fair-skinned and in matrimony, fair-skinned brides are sought after (Paul, 2016).

In the era of liberalisation of the 1990s, Indian women won numerous worldwide beauty pageants between 1990 and 2006. These contests were won by women with skin tones ranging from delicate ivory to natural ivory. Models in Indian publications were also

featured with little make-up and a typical picture of smooth ivory skin tone (Rehman, 2019). However, the complexions of most of these Indian women were fair. These celebrities then tended to advocate that changing skin tone to obtain the “ideal image of beauty is the most convenient approach for women to acquire the success, luxury, and prestige associated with white skin” (Rehman, 2019, p. 34).

Sims and Hirudayaraj (2015) note that while “fair-skinned” individuals are seen as “more beautiful, worthy, intelligent, and competent, darker-skinned people are seen as dirty, lazy, and ignorant” (p. 39). According to the scholars, as there is little regulation in India to prohibit colourism’s insidiousness, social stratification based on skin colour “not only leads to the development of skin tone-based hierarchies, but also produces social hierarchical castes and class systems” (p. 39). In fact, acquiring the ideal skin tone is a priority even during the foetal period when Indian mothers-to-be are advised to eat white foods like yoghurt, rice, cashews, and almond milkshakes in order to have a child with a light skin colour (Paul, 2016). What is even more dangerous is that colour-based preconceptions are accentuated by gender, which intensifies the bias. According to Rehman (2019) “being female and dark-skinned are two major sins” (p. 33) leading to the financial burden of more dowry, stigma, and often female infanticide. Colourism affects women disproportionately as colourism is a traditional phenomenon in India that is reinforced by cultural principles and ideals, social structures (family, educational systems, marriage), and the media. Darker-skinned women are victims of greater discrimination at the workplace and in society. Hunter (2005, as cited in Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2015) add that:

light skin tone is interpreted as beauty, and beauty operates as social capital for women. Women, who possess this form of capital, are able to convert it to economic capital, educational capital, or another form of social capital (p. 41).<sup>1</sup>

The studies cited by Sims and Hirudayaraj (2015) indicate that dark-skinned women in India have reduced possibilities to feature as models in magazine advertising and commercials, as actors in films, and as presenters in media organisations. To mitigate this problem, marketers promote strategies for women to lighten their complexion, allowing them to enter particular sectors (see section 1.3.).

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes have been taken originally from the source.

Paul (2016) suggests that a swarm of television, print, and social media advertisements featuring major Bollywood celebrities boosts the purchase of skincare products that promote skin lightening and brightening. According to Paul (2016), “these preposterous fairness narratives are barely credible and are often scoffed at in the public sphere” (p. 137); however, the products keep selling, indicating that many buyers are willing to forego their scepticism long enough to purchase them. According to Parameswaran in an article written by Rosemary Pennington (2009, as cited in Paul, 2016, p. 139):

India’s role on the world stage is changing... It’s becoming a bigger player in the global economy, is moving from Third World to First World. And, so, these ads are telling people that they need to become modern, that, in order to become part of ‘New India’, they need to buy these products. This becomes an issue of social mobility, the idea that if you have lighter skin you are more beautiful, you will be more successful, you will be able to change your place in society more easily.

For several years, marketing communication has fostered racism by promoting white supremacy using colourism. Rehman (2019) affirms some of the factors that have contributed to India’s propensity for colourism. These factors are gender roles and expectations; associations with wealth, prosperity, and higher caste; better marriage prospects and job opportunities; links with morality and knowledge, and chastity, purity, and righteousness. Such overt forms of oppression modify and impact an individual’s societal recognition and acceptance merely on the basis of their skin tone. Others who are socially acceptable proclaim their superiority over those with darker skin tones (Russell et al., 1992, as cited in Mitchell, 2020). However, in the present era, this kind of colourism manifests itself in a sophisticated and veiled manner as “colorblindness” (Mitchell, 2020, p. 1368), which seems to call into doubt the prevalence of true racism. Furthermore, “cosmetic colorblindness” (Mitchell, 2020, p. 1370), a dimension of colour blindness that bypasses structural racism, may be demonstrated in modern colourism-related marketing operations.

Sheth (2020) sheds light on how historical insecurities within Indian women comparing themselves unfavourably to the western world are perpetuated by advertisers in their search for profits, that is, advertisers exploit prejudice and low self-esteem. Mishra (2015, as cited in Sheth, 2020) accuses the media of presenting Western ideals of beauty as a post-colonial remnant when discussing how skin tone is internalised in the Indian psyche. Globalisation has a pathos, according to Fanon (1952, as cited in Sheth, 2020). Among the wealthy strata of the darker nations, an inferiority mentality arises. With reference to cultural

imperialism, Hamelink (1983, as cited in Sheth, 2020) offers an insight for this cultural autonomy in global communication. He contends that autonomy results in “sameness” with white countries. It contributes to the sameness of complexion in this case. Sheth (2020) identifies “dominant hegemonies” (p. 12) against which advertisers persuade women to be discontent about themselves and use the advertised products to make themselves attractive.

Thus, colourism is significantly more complicated than mere racism since it entails discrimination based on physiognomy, independent of claimed racial identity (Utley & Darity, 2016, as cited in Sheth, 2020). Colourism is practised by people of the same race since physical differences occur among racial groups. As a result, skin tone can be utilised to discriminate against persons outside or inside one’s racial-ethnic group. For years, marketing tactics have propagated such forms of colourism and proclaimed fair skin as beautiful and dark skin as ugly. According to Anand (2021), in India, many advertisements are known to offend, deceive, and popularise dangerous stereotypes in society.

Many skincare and beauty product advertisements in India utilise the same strategy of condemning young women for not doing enough to lighten dark skin. Due to her dark skin, each woman in these advertisements is depicted doubting her own value and social standing. Only after using the advertised product and miraculously changing her skin colour does she feel secure and socially accepted. As a result of such typical communication, these advertisements legitimatise the society’s existing biases, particularly those linked to idealised female beauty (Anand, 2021). Nadeem analyses (2014):

The wish to lighten one’s skin is a way of fleeing the contingency of life, forged as it is in a crucible of status insecurity, economic uncertainty, and western hegemony. It is the flight from something pitied (darkness) and the chasing of something prized (fairness). Global processes intensify these aspirations, eliciting both curiosity about other ways of being and anxiety about one’s place in the world (p. 225).

This is due to the fact that the desire for fairness is inevitably an urge for difference: a willingness to be counted among the advantaged and erudite rather than the common and conventional (Nadeem, 2014). Colourism in such advertisements may be overt or subtle, self-evident or needing deciphering. Therefore, to see how skincare and beauty advertisements targeted at young Indian women represent beauty through skin colour and its traditional associations, it is necessary to see the extent of colourism in the message.

## **2.2. Physical Attractiveness**

Physical attractiveness in India may be perceived strongly in terms of skin colour but other factors also contribute to an ideal of beauty. Individuals have been seen to enhance their physical attractiveness by modifying weight, muscle tone, hair, skin, nails and clothes (Ickes, 2009). The myriad of features that characterise a person's appeal are dominated by physical attractiveness. Physical attractiveness is inherited and altered by all individuals, and it is determined by a complex interdependence of physical and non-physical elements. Disguised and noticeable values guide thoughts and behaviours, which if uncontrolled, have substantial repercussions, with higher physical attractiveness being predominantly favourable and lower being largely harmful (Patzner, 2006).

Historically, the cultural preference was for fuller figures (Majidi, 2020). Between the fourth and first centuries BCE, traditional ideals of beauty artistically represented women through figurines with "large breasts, wide hips, tapering legs" (Bracey, 2007, as cited in Majidi, 2020, para. 3). Some women even had "elaborately plaited hair", "thin waists" and were regarded as "stiff" (para. 3). However, half a century later, pictures of women were distorted into the "S-shaped curve" which followed a particular pose of "tribangha" or the three bends, bent at the hips, waist, and breasts, to provide an 'S' like shape (Das & Sharma, 2016, p. 117). The women appeared as if the:

eyes were placed two-thirds of the way up the face, the bottom of the breast were placed one heads height below the chin, the whole figure stood seven heads high... and the use of a fairly round face. (Bracey, 2007, as cited in Majidi, 2020, para. 3)

According to Majidi (2020), since these representations were not inherent attributes of Indian women, they were seen as glorified standards of beauty rather than natural, especially because they signified "fertility or mother goddess" (Das & Sharma, 2016, p. 117). Meanwhile, sculptural depictions of women from these times were reinforced by ancient texts. For instance, an idealised depiction of women was influenced by Parvati, the Hindu goddess of fertility, love, harmony, marriage and children, who is described as "the magnificent personification of [...] the notion of beauty" (Dehejia, 2006, as cited in Majidi, 2020, para. 3). Parvati is a "slender-bodied maiden of comely hips and moon-like face"; "comely hips" presumably means obvious ones, and the "moon-like face" states that the face is glowing, pale or both (para. 3). Furthermore, she was described as "Her eyes as lotus petals, her lower lip like the Bimba, her eyebrows as the bows of Kama, and her nose like the beak of a parrot" (para. 3). In addition to this, there are epithets in philosophical texts like 'Shringarashata of Bhartihari' that describes ideal beauty through certain physical

features like - “the coral beauty of her lower lip”; “those twin globes, her breasts”; “rising high in the pride of youth”; “her navels hollow, and diminutive waist; “her hair by nature’s own hand curled” (para. 4); “a face to rival the moon”; “eyes that make a mockery of lotuses”; “thick tresses that shame the black bee”; “breasts like elephant’s swelling temples”; “a voice enchanting and soft” (para. 6).

According to Singh (2006), the classic image of an attractive and voluptuous woman as an hourglass shape provides a standard and a definition that contradict the notion that beauty is transient, capricious, and subjective. The term “hourglass” illustrates the form of women while the colloquial way to characterise a woman through the numbers 36-24-36 seamlessly conjure the picture of a young and beautiful woman in the modern period. However, describing a woman’s body size does not summon up images of a beautiful woman (Singh, 2006). One explanation of the appeal of such a figure has been based on “biological information about various factors regulating women’s reproductive potential and fertility” (p. 359) which makes it a “reliable cue for her mate value” (p. 360).

In recent times, beauty standards pertaining to physical attractiveness have deviated dramatically, and that too, towards a more westernised standard (Majidi, 2020). There has been a shift from the curvy hourglass figures to more “slim and trim” ones (Gelles, 2008, as cited in Majidi, 2020, para. 10). In the contemporary post-feminist media world, the normative body standards are “aestically slim” (Jackson & Vares, 2015, p. 348).

In terms of hair, another important attribute of physical beauty, Gelles (2008, as cited in Majidi, 2020) states three major characteristics that influence the look of the hair i.e., “colour, length, and texture” (para. 10). As many Indian women have black hair, there is a high desire for black curly and wavy hair; however, coloured hair can also be seen getting advertised (Das & Sharma, 2016). Meanwhile, the demand for long or at least medium hair length has been steady throughout time (Majidi, 2020). With reference to clothing, while traditional Indian attire consisted of a ‘sari’ or ‘shalwar-kameez’ and a ‘dupatta’, contemporary apparel has evolved to a degree, and women frequently wear western-style clothing. According to Majidi (2020), the way women wear clothes reflects their “social status, class, and education level” (para. 10).

According to Toby et al. (2020), Asian beauty standards emphasise features like wide eyes or a tiny nasal bridge, indicating that the present Asian beauty standard for women is converging with Eurocentric values. Early twenty-first century advertisements

also highlight women with “smooth complexions, shining black hair, and slim bodies” (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009, p. 228). The weight, height, and facial beauty of a person constitute physical attractiveness, which is the first thing people relate to (Bardia et al., 2011 as cited in Agam, 2017).

This can be understood better by Patzer’s (2006) ‘circular four-stage process of physical attractiveness’. In this process, physical attractiveness prompts information from which individuals deduce extensive information or misinformation. This knowledge and its inference drive biases, beliefs, dispositions, and actions, resulting in widespread and significant effects that favour people with more physical attractiveness. Advertising today bolsters such attitudes that only high physical attractiveness is valuable. This leads to a “new dimension of appearance” (Patzer, 2006, p. 44) where advertisements often digitise unwanted features to enhance wanted features, for example, “soften smile line, trim chin, soften line under earlobe, add hair, add forehead, soften next muscles” (p. 45). Hence, physical appearance becomes such an evident characteristic that its market driven counterparts in daily life appear acceptable (Patzer, 2006).

Furthermore, a physically attractive endorser enhances credibility and attractive people find easier success in changing attitudes (Ohanian, 1991, as cited in Agam, 2017). Although physical attractiveness is significant in both genders, beauty is widely considered as the most significant feminine quality (Agam, 2017). In this period of pop culture, potential buyers tend to focus primarily on female looks, which encompasses the attractiveness and physical attributes of the celebrity endorser, and not the product. An excellent celebrity endorsement appears to work on product representation since “attractive people sell more products” (Brumbaugh, 1993, as cited in Agam, 2017, p. 25). According to Kahle and Homer (1985, as cited in Khalid & Yasmeen, 2019), celebrity attractiveness can change attitudes of consumers in a positive way by building purchase intentions. Baker and Churchill (1977, as cited in Khalid & Yasmeen, 2019), find attractive endorsers may help in positive evaluation of a product but are not very effective in developing strong purchase intentions.

Since physical appearance is important to convince and communicate, advertisers use attractive models, idealising them through their association with the product. Advertisers thus set standards that consumers want to measure up to (Das & Sharma, 2016). Models with “skimpy clothes, fair skin, and bare midriffs who assume influential paradigmatic roles in society” (p. 114) are responsible for an idealised notion of female beauty in India. Studies

conducted by Stice and Shaw (1994, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016) and many more scholars show that women who are exposed to advertisements try to imitate the models as their role models by making use of the advertised product. This “self-modelling” process has led to depression, stress, low confidence, and body dissatisfaction (Mitchison et al., 2016 as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016), which has been identified as a precondition to eating disorders. By urging women to regulate their weight by diets, they make women prone to the thinness mindset (Heinberg, 1996, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016). Frisby (2004, as cited in Rekha V. & Maran, 2012) investigates the effect of exposure to advertisements featuring skinny, physically beautiful models on self-evaluations of people with varied degrees of personal body esteem. Women with low body esteem reported reduced self-satisfaction with body esteem when exposed to pictures of models who were physically attractive. The current study therefore shows that exposure to idealised pictures has a detrimental impact on a woman’s self-esteem.

Most research hence shows how in today’s times, the “ideal woman” is typically shown as tall, white, and slim, with a “tubular” figure and coloured hair. Moreover, airbrushing, digital modifications, and cosmetic surgery all contribute to the false character of media advertisements (Thompson et al., 1999, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016) and may contribute to spreading misinformation about where true beauty lies. It is clear that physical attractiveness is defined in advertisements. Therefore, to see how skincare and beauty advertisements targeted at young Indian women represent beauty, it is necessary to examine this definition of physical attractiveness in the message.

### **2.3. Gender Roles and Objectification**

Gender roles and physical attractiveness are interconnected (see section 1.2.). Gilbert (1993, as cited in Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013) defined gender as having three theoretical structures: “gender as difference”, “gender as structure”, and “gender as process” (p. 59). Gender as difference expands our knowledge of social behaviour. Gender as structure refers to how views toward men and women are established within social systems. This is seen in the workplace when it is assumed that women will care for children, as evidenced by the supremacy of one gender over the other in different professions. Gender as process refers to a series of relationships between men and women that are based on gender stereotypes. Women are viewed as nurturers, providing emotional support, while males give financial support (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013).

In India, the traditional role of a woman has been as a homemaker and a devoted wife and mother, and the physical attractiveness of a woman was seen in such contexts of social ideals. The sole aim of the woman's body was to win male approval and attention (Das & Sharma, 2016). Traditional ideas on feminine attractiveness differ across countries and eras. India has always been a stringent patriarchal society (Hofstede, 1980, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016), with gender norms intimately tied to religious and cultural traditions. Years of male supremacy and female subordination in India have sculpted the image of women (Adhikari, 2014, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016).

As mentioned by Chowdhury and Patnaik (2013), within an Indian patriarchal household, males are assigned dominant and controlling social duties, while females are assigned supporting functions. Thus:

By birth, males are caretakers of resources, performing the functions of earners, on the other hand, females are family caretakers performing the functions of child nurturing, caring of the aged and running the household (p. 61).

Gender roles are clearly defined in Indian homes and impact the socialisation from birth. Children start to recognise from a young age gender-based distinction in their relationships with others, in the allocation of resources, such as nourishment, medical services, and schooling, within the family, and in access to membership of the family. All children are raised with the understanding that the son has a distinct significance (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013). Additionally, the understanding that a girl's life in her native family is just transitory shapes her personality and relationships with everyone (Dube, 1988, as cited in Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013). Marriage is considered as the ideal of a girl's life since it requires her to dissolve her bond with her birth family and start a new household that may be hostile and unpleasant.

In terms of sexual objectification, Sen's 1984 study highlighted that the exploitation of the female body for the aim of selling goods was not as common in India. Sexual objectification began as a more visceral and intimate phenomenon; objectification was not merely about the capitalist endeavour to make profits but stemmed deeply from within society, a society with a landlord-peasant culture. The scholar adds that historically, production in this culture was commercialised on the basis of patriarchy, with family labour supplemented by non-family labour. Women were segregated and their sexuality was protected in order to secure the paternity of their offspring, who were the successors. Within

the patriarchal structure the sexuality of daughters and daughters-in-law was not proportional. While daughters-in-law had to be sexually regulated in order to reproduce future generations, daughters were sexually controlled in order to secure the reproduction of another household upon marriage (Sen, 1984). Even in the labour sector, Sen (1984) claimed that limits to mobility resulting from sexuality control had a critical role in determining women's "secondary position" (p. 140) which impacted their ability to earn an income. Its purpose was to "crowd" (p. 140) women, limit their career opportunities, and force them to accept lesser pay and worse working conditions.

With globalisation, international exposure, a growing economy, and transformation in the educational and employment sectors, women are moving out of homes and traditional roles. Women are becoming empowered, career-oriented, and financially independent, and the appearance now of women has to be more professional and international (Das & Sharma, 2016). The contemporary Indian woman knows how to "dare" and to "dream" (Chaudhuri, 2001, p. 382). Formerly, freedom, choice, and expression of independent selfhood were related to greater questions of social justice in the common country (the poor and marginalised). Notably, the emergence of liberalisation has coincided with a concentrated manifestation of individualism and unrestricted selfhood principles (Chaudhuri, 2001). Women in modern society have gradually begun to see their real promise and are dominating in many professions, whether it is politics, sports, entertainment, literature, or technology (Baluja, 2016).

To see the world through advertisements may not often result in immediate modifications in how men and women appear in daily life, but it does impact how people believe men and women may and ought to appear. Such images serve the societal function of persuading observers that "this is how men and women are, want to be, or should be" (Klassen et al., 1993, as cited in Thompson, 2000, p. 178). Advertising may signal changes in society to the degree that it acts as a reflection of society (Cunningham, 1992; Kuhn, 1985; Williamson, 1978, as cited in Thompson, 2000).

Advertisers have portrayed women in both traditional and contemporary aspects and have even created needs and wants according to changing expectations. Young girls remain targets of beauty products that claim to help them find suitable husbands or a job (Das & Sharma, 2016). In the name of improved looks, attractiveness, grandeur, and authority, fake demands are generated and actual human norms and wants are replaceable with commercial commodities (Rathee, 2010, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016). This way, advertisers use

women's vulnerabilities to develop these cravings, causing even more ambiguity and tension. As most products fail to deliver the expected results, customers are constantly on the lookout for upgraded items to fill a hole created by the advertising industry in the first place (Wallowit, 2007, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016).

Furthermore, according to Vargas-Bianchi and Mensa (2020), advertising practices showcase a woman's body as distinguished and separated from her as a person; women are seen as sexual objects to satisfy sexual desires. Perez (2000, as cited in Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020) points out how advertising places women in an acute dilemma: they are both objects and subjects. As objects, they are tools to inspire desire and as subjects, they are at the receiving end of that same persuasion as consumers. The opinion is again divided on the degree of effectiveness of objectifying women. As maintained by According to Fullerton and Kendrick (2000, as cited in Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020):

Women are more likely than men to be portrayed in a sexist manner in advertising, showing them to be helpful in a domestic setting, dependents, without authority and as properties of men (p. 78).

Marketing communications have and will continue to be a conduit for these traditional female representations and behaviours, and the most disrespectful to women is that of sexual object, in which women are regarded as sexual goods utilised to advertise a product (Drake, 2017, as cited in Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020). Several studies showcase that "women as a sexual object has little effect and do not aid the recall of the ad nor the brand name" (Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020, p. 79). Further, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009, as cited in Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020) state that objectification occurs when female representation is concentrated merely in her sexuality. Mastin et al. (2004, as cited in Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020) discover that advertising reinforces conventional gender stereotypes, such as domestic duties or work responsibilities traditionally given to women, and present women as sex objects. Sa'nchez-Aranda (2003, as cited in Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020) examines the feminine image in advertising and discovers that the objectification of women has been mainstream and accepted by many in Western nations. The feminine images discussed may even appear to cause women to experience feelings of discontent and worry. Hence, to see how skincare and beauty advertisements targeted at young Indian women also represent beauty through perpetuation of gender roles and objectification, these parameters of beauty have to be examined.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

Therefore, in studying selected advertisements of skincare and beauty products targeted at young Indian women, this research scrutinises them within the interconnected framework of colourism that addresses aspects of skin colour and its traditional associations; physical attractiveness that addresses features of physical beauty; and gender roles and objectification that addresses the femininity and sexualisation of women. This will indicate if the advertising propagates or perpetuates beauty ideals drawn from these. It is to be noted that though skin colour is a part of physical features and attractiveness, it is being seen as a theoretical concept by itself because of its pervasiveness in the Indian context.

### **3. Research Design**

The section delineates the research design which has been applied to answer the research question. First, the method chosen for the analysis and the methodology and its implementation are described. Second, the sampling criteria and sampling method is explored. Finally, the key concepts that have been highlighted in the research question and sub-questions are operationalised.

#### **3.1. Method**

This section justifies the method that has been applied in this research. It begins with explaining the choice of visual critical discourse analysis as a method and then presenting a description of the methodological decisions that have been made before conducting the analysis. This section ends by summarising how the method was implemented.

##### **3.1.1. Visual Critical Discourse Analysis**

The research adopts a qualitative approach that ensures a rich and detailed analysis of sources. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not define variables, develop hypotheses, carry out experiments, or duplicate findings. Instead, it poses research questions, seeks meaning, finds meaningful methods to discuss experiences within a certain historical, cultural, economic, and/or political landscape, and considers the research process in relation to important social practices (Brennen, 2017). Therefore, “context is a central part of the interpretive process” (Brennen, 2017, p. 22) as it allows one to “understand the myriad meanings that people make” (Brennen, 2017, p. 22) in qualitative research. As this research aims to explore female beauty standards represented in beauty and skincare advertisements in the Indian context, the research is identified as qualitative. Hence, a qualitative approach is used to investigate the ideas discussed by the research question and sub-questions due to their qualitative character.

The method considered as most appropriate to answer the research question is visual critical discourse analysis as this method concentrates on implicit and explicit meanings of cultural objects that affect communication of power relations in society (Hall et al., 2013). According to Jardine (2004), discourse analysis allows the researcher to deeply construe inferences and premises, find narratives that the advertisement may indicate and evaluate how the advertisement communicates and engages with its viewers. So far, the study of discourse has been primarily linguistic in nature, focusing on speech and writing. As a result,

discourse analysis has been considered as unresponsive to visual representations; nonetheless, this does not exclude visual pictures from being considered in terms of discourse. It can hence be said that advertising pictures are a discursive form capable of nuanced subtleties in communication, similar to language (Jardine, 2004).

Albers (2007) describes visual critical discourse analysis as an approach that is “concerned with a theory and method of studying the structures and conventions within visual texts, and identifying how certain social activities and social identities get played out in their production” (p. 83). Thus, one reason for the choice of this method is its suitability for this research because of its ability to show how a visual is perceived: the perception goes beyond simple direct communication of the message into subliminal symbolism (Hall et al., 2013). For instance, the visual critical discourse analysis of an advertisement promoting a skincare or beauty product might reveal the direct persuasion using a beauty standard such as lustrous hair, one of the features of physical attractiveness. In this setting of the advertisement, the symbolism might also become clear, such as the traditional ideal of femininity. The method can help clarify, through interpretation, latent meanings derived from culturally and collectively remembered qualities. This contextualisation can make it possible to understand how an average consumer interprets visuals (Machin & Mayr, 2015).

Another reason is that this method can add validity to the study by identifying thematic interconnections running through similar and dissimilar visuals. It can then become possible to compare discourses with diverse contexts and backgrounds (Machin & Mayr, 2015). Different skincare or beauty product advertisements can be studied to see if the same element or beauty standard directly or indirectly conveys the idea of femininity either through visuals or advertising text.

Mullet (2018) explains that there are certain methodological decisions that need to be made before conducting the analysis. While Mullet (2018) presents an analysis of general critical discourse, such decisions have been applied to the current research of visual critical discourse. Most importantly, the researcher must identify and select discourses that “construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities” (Mullet, 2018, p. 116). The proposed research has thus used a larger discourse of female beauty standards and broken it down into three categorical themes of colourism, physical attractiveness, gender roles and objectification. Furthermore, after the selection of data sources, the background of the visual imagery must be explored by the researcher and overarching themes must be identified

(Mullet, 2018). The current research has thus identified major themes which have been analysed and presented through meaningful descriptions and representations.

Additionally, the researcher must establish a way of analysing internal and external relations within the images and whether these are to be inductive or deductive in nature (Mullet, 2018). The proposed research has incorporated an approach that focuses on theory. Thus, the analysis of the data is largely deductive in nature with the help of the theory defined in the Theoretical Framework. This is done to ensure that the limitation of flexibility in this method is controlled. The current research also attempts to not only describe but interpret each theme more explicitly and latently in order to bring forth its relation to broader societal context.

### **3.1.2. Implementation of Visual Critical Discourse Analysis**

According to Machin and Mayr (2015), there was a lack of toolkit for analysis of visuals in the late twentieth century. The scholars thus came up with tools to implement visual critical discourse analysis for qualitative research. These were - denotations and connotations. Machin and Mayr (2015) describe denotation as who or what is actually and literally depicted in a visual, and connotation as the symbolic dimension of ideas and values in the visual that are subject to interpretation and context. For instance, the advertisements may have shown particular events, people, places and things and in this way, they are known to 'denote'. This denotation or depiction may be used to 'connote' ideas and concepts.

Drawing from this, this research employs a framework to assess denotations and connotations of the visual as a whole, products, objects, settings, and other salient features including colours, tones, positioning, size, focus and overlapping of elements as well as cultural symbols of each advertisement. Hence, the defined tools guide the researcher to implement visual critical discourse analysis. First, the researcher has to become familiar with the data. This is done by viewing and reviewing the advertisements and noting down initial ideas and concepts that may appear. Second, concrete features and characteristics are identified within the data after familiarisation that is relevant to the research question. The features, in the form of denotations and connotations, that highlight idealistic female beauty standards are considered as relevant to the research question. Third, the denotations and connotations are coded into open, axial and selective codes (see Appendix A). While open coding looks at the overall data and phenomena of the advertisements, axial coding refines and categorises the data. Following this, selective coding integrates these categories into

meaningful expressions (Williams & Moser, 2019). Fourth, these codes are critically evaluated to arrive at the themes or the concepts of the Theoretical Framework each advertisement supports, if at all. Fifth, after re-evaluating each advertisement individually, the themes are refined and it is ensured that each theme captivates the true character of the data. This is further enhanced by the construction of a defining thematic chart that defines each theme and its relationship with the data (see Figure 3.).

Finally, having arrived at an understanding of the overt and the covert persuasion for all chosen advertisements of each brand, the researcher summarises this understanding theme-wise. The researcher evaluates the persuasive message of each brand by the standards of colourism, physical attractiveness, and gender roles and objectification, aware that some portions of the persuasion may not subscribe to the themes within the Theoretical Framework while others do. This is presented in an academic manner in the Results and Discussion chapter. It is to be noted that even though this research is qualitative in nature, some of the evaluation of the persuasive message is expressed quantitatively with the help of numbers that indicate the scope of the concepts or themes. Therefore, the researcher is able to arrive at an answer to the research question of the standards of beauty promoted by advertising in the skincare and beauty market in India.

### **3.2. Materials, Sampling and Operationalisation**

This section includes an account of the dataset and sampling method that are utilised to recognise the advertisements employed in the analysis. Additionally, the concept of ‘female beauty standards’ that is identified and broken down in the research question and sub-questions, and used in the analysis, is operationalised.

#### **3.2.1. Dataset and Sampling Method**

In terms of the sample, the methodological decision is to visually analyse 100 different static advertisements from 10 different skincare and beauty brands in India. The advertisements are for creams, lotions, cosmetics, and hair products pitching the products as capable of creating or accentuating beauty. The visual imagery as well as visual texts that are presented in the advertisements are analysed in an in-depth manner. Furthermore, the intention behind this choice is that ideal beauty standards in the form of colourism, physical attractiveness and gender roles and objectification are often showcased implicitly, possibly because of how ingrained such standards are in Indian society as discussed in the Theoretical Framework. Thereupon, the researcher is able to comprehensively confirm that only the

advertisements that are aligned with the operationalisation of the key concepts are incorporated in the analysis (see section 3.2.2.). However, the advertisements have not been selected only to reflect the key theoretical concepts but according to other parameters that are described below.

The advertisements for analysis have been selected using the sampling method of purposive sampling which is based on the theory of non-probability. Sarstedt et al. (2018) define this as a method where “selecting elements is based on the researcher’s judgements or expertise” (p. 654). In the research, therefore, the researcher has chosen only those advertisements that seemed appropriate for the purpose of analysis. These judgements have been made based on the researcher’s awareness of the phenomena under the study and the audience (Emmel, 2013).

The data has been selected based on the following criteria to aim for variety in terms of the brands, the products advertised, the target audience and the time frame of advertisements. First, the brands have been chosen from among those belonging to parent companies perceived as leading skincare and beauty players in India. In a report by Business Wire (2021), Hindustan Unilever Limited, L’Oréal India Pvt. Ltd., Dabur India Limited, Lotus Herbals Pvt. Ltd., Emami Limited, Nivea India Pvt. Ltd., and Procter & Gamble are identified as some of the leading players that have brands in the Indian market. Thus, the advertisements have been sampled from brands that fall under these major companies (see Figure 1.). Second, the selection of the brands has been from among those that have a similar target audience of young women. This is assessed based on the study conducted by Chouhan et al. (2020) that segregates the leading skincare and beauty products market in India on the basis of age group i.e., into Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z. The millennial segment is expected to garner the highest revenue in this industry by 2027. Third, the advertisements have been selected from among those released in the period 2011 to 2021. This is because this is the most recent decade, and the researcher aims to provide contemporary relevance to the research question. It is noticed that every brand has at least one key advertising campaign in the period 2011 to 2021. This way, the researcher has ensured to consequently sample between 6 to 12 advertisements from each year of this decade. A period of a decade also enables the researcher to track change, evolution, or static perpetuation of the persuasion leading to the latest point of time.

Moreover, the advertisements have been purposefully sampled from brands’ websites and Facebook pages, and by conducting a Google search using keywords of the brand name

and different beauty products in India. For instance, keywords like ‘Lotus Herbals Face Cream’, ‘Garnier Shampoo’ or ‘L’Oréal Foundation for Women’ have been used. Other social media channels, like Instagram, of these brands have also been surveyed but advertisements have been selected from these only if they are different to those on the website and Facebook page. Almost all brands have advertisements on their Facebook pages and Instagram channels from as early as 2014. Advertisements from before 2014 have been taken through Google search which specifies the year of their release. Advertisements on popular eCommerce platforms in India (Amazon India and Flipkart) have been considered if they have been inserted there by the brands themselves. This is verified by the eCommerce platforms as they specifically indicate the seller selling a product on their product pages. The eCommerce platforms include advertisements from the recent years of 2020 and 2021 only as these get updated at least twice a year based on the discounts, sales and offers that take place on these platforms. It should be noted that not all advertisements included in the analysis have been taken from only one of the above sources. The researcher has deeply studied all these sources for each brand and sampled advertisements from every source to ensure that the brands have relevant advertisements throughout the period 2011 to 2021.

**Brands which produced the analysed advertisements**

S. No.	Major Player or Parent Company	Brand	About the Brand	No. of Advertisements Analysed
1	Hindustan Unilever Limited	Fair & Lovely	Fair & Lovely, currently known as Glow & Lovely, started off as an Indian skin-lightening cosmetic product of Hindustan Unilever.	10
2	Hindustan Unilever Limited	Lakmé	Lakmé is an Indian cosmetic brand owned by Hindustan Unilever.	10
3	Hindustan Unilever Limited	Pond's	Pond's is an American beauty brand that was acquired by Hindustan Unilever and launched in India to add to its skincare portfolio.	10
4	L'Oréal India Pvt. Ltd.	Garnier	Garnier is a mass cosmetics brand of the French cosmetics company L'Oréal, which has an Indian presence.	10
5	L'Oréal India Pvt. Ltd.	L'Oréal	L'Oréal Paris has cosmetic products under its own name in India.	10
6	Lotus Herbals Pvt.	Lotus Herbals	Lotus Herbals, founded in 1993, is an Indian beauty brand selling natural skincare, haircare, and make-up products.	10
7	Nivea India Pvt. Ltd.	Nivea	Nivea is a German skin and body care beauty brand that was launched in India in 2006.	10
8	Procter & Gamble	Olay	Olay is an American skincare brand owned by Procter & Gamble's Indian subsidiary.	10
9	Emami Limited	Boroplus	Boroplus is an Indian Ayurvedic beauty brand that was launched in India in 1984 and is owned by Emami Limited, a major Indian skincare player.	10
10	Dabur India Limited	Fem	Fem is an Indian skincare range of bleaching and hair removal products under the House of Dabur, a major skincare player in India.	10

Figure 1. The major skincare and beauty product players in India along with the chosen brands and the number of advertisements analysed per brand.

### 3.2.2. Operationalisation

The research question addresses the notions of ‘female beauty standards’. The researcher further systemised this broader theme into sub-themes of colourism, physical

attractiveness, gender roles and objectification, and operationalised the same in the following way:

- a) Colourism: This theme is operationalised based on Talé A. Mitchell's (2020) explanation of colourism and colour-blindness of black women prevalent in marketing communication. The researcher uses the scholar's exposition and applies it in a different context to operationalise the concept for the purpose of this research.

According to Mitchell (2020), colour-blindness is the notion that racism has ceased to exist and, as a result, must not be tackled as everyone is equal despite the fact that racism is pervasive and systematic. This "new racism" as labelled by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003, as cited in Mitchell, 2020, p. 1368) helps the White elite to maintain their place, allowing them to subjugate others based on social status.

Another degree of colour-blindness, according to Mitchell (2020) has been identified as "cosmetic colorblindness" (p. 1370), which is a race discourse that does not address the institutionalisation of racism. It means to explicitly incorporate race as a method of avoiding a debate of racism, and to highlight the participation of Black individuals as a manner of demonstrating that they have satisfied the diversity standards (Ernst, 2010, as cited in Mitchell, 2020, p. 1370). This way, cosmetic colour-blindness may be applied to explain colourism-related marketing activities.

For instance, Dove's 2011 campaign shows three women (from left to right - Black, Latina and White) standing in front of a background that has three different skin tones. The advertisement shows the black woman as 'before' and the white woman as 'after'. The skin tone behind the black woman is dull while that behind the white woman is bright. Dove stated that "all three women are intended to demonstrate the 'after' product benefit? (Astor, 2017; Chan, 2017; Quackenbush, 2017, as cited in Mitchell, 2020, p. 1371). Thus, their cosmetic colourblind response diminishes any allegations of racism, as if racism is inconceivable since racism does not exist. Once again, the answer blames Black individuals for using the "race card" (Mitchell, 2020, p. 1371) or being too delicate.

Similarly, for the proposed research, the researcher uses cosmetic colour-blindness as an appropriate medium of analysis because of the proven relationship between colourism and colour-blindness. The analysis of the advertisements is thus done from a visual lens of brands having fair-skinned women advertise beauty and

skincare products and/or brands using persuasive texts that promote such colourism. Additionally, advertisements are also looked at from a perspective of highlighting the status of fair-skinned women as more successful and beautiful and dark-skinned women (if shown in the advertisements) as unworthy.

- b) Physical attractiveness: As discussed in the Theoretical Framework, higher physical attractiveness is favourable and lower physical attractiveness is harmful (Patzner, 2006). The analysis involves understanding women's physical appearance in the advertisements. This delves into their body image and size, hair, clothes and other facial features. In the proposed research, each of these characteristics is operationalised into different categories.

First and most importantly, the body types of women are analysed based on Stunkard's Figure Rating Scale (1983) which consists of nine schematic outlines ranging from extremely skinny to extremely fat which can be seen in Figure 2. According to research, there is a substantial correlation between the figure allocated to the women and the women's BMI (Cardinal et al., 1995). However, a possible drawback of this scale could be its limited number of figures that are not representative of the true range of body shapes in women. This scale thus struggles to encompass all conceivable body types and may be unable to accurately describe body size of women that do not fall in this range. Nevertheless, as the scale has been effectively adopted in the past, the researcher considers it as a measure of analysis of the body types represented in the advertisements.

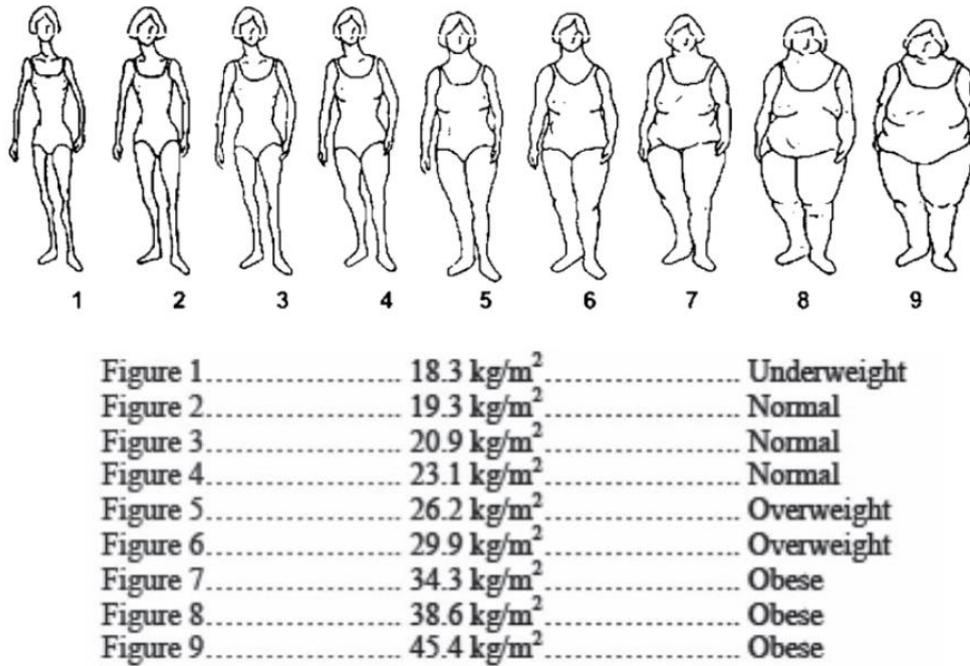


Figure 2. Stunkard's Figure Rating Scale and established conversion to BMI.

Retrieved from Yardimci, H., Hakl, G., Çakıroğlu, F. P., & Özçelik, A. Ö. (2016).

Second, hair is analysed based on colour, texture and length. In terms of colour, the hair of women in the advertisements is divided into either black, brown or coloured as research mentions in the Theoretical Framework shows that many Indian women have naturally black hair. In terms of texture, analysis is done based on wavy, curly and straight hair. Additionally, length is divided into long, mid-long and short. Women are described as having long hair if the length crosses their shoulders. Mid-long hair length means that women have hair between their chin and their shoulders, and short hair means that women have hair length that is shorter than the chin-level. The length of the hair can only be analysed if it is left open in the advertisements. Finally, in terms of clothes, the attire is divided into traditional and modern. While traditional clothes include typical Indian clothing like sari, salwar-kameez, blouse, skirt and dupatta, modern clothes include a more western-styled approach of dresses, jeans, t-shirts, shirt, skirt and shorts.

Additionally, as determined in the Theoretical Framework, Asian beauty standards emphasise facial features like wide eyes or a tiny nasal bridge to be converging with eurocentric ideals. While such features are also looked at during the

analysis, these are not considered the main focus under this theme by the researcher. Therefore, for the proposed research, the analysis of the advertisements has been done from the visual lens of the 'idealistic' standards of female body images, hair, clothes and other facial features that have either remained stagnant or evolved over the the chosen time period of this research, and that have been discussed in detail in the Theoretical Framework.

- c) Gender roles and objectification: It is argued in the Theoretical Framework that India has been a rigid patriarchal society such that a woman's traditional duty has been that of nurturing, caring and running the household, and a woman's physical attractiveness has been seen in such settings of social norms. For the proposed research, the theme of gender roles is thus categorised on the basis of viewing women within the private setting and classifying them as a homemaker, devoted wife and mother. Moreover, sexual objectification, stemming from the segregation of women based on gender roles, is operationalised based on Vargas-Bianchi and Mensa's (2020) understanding of the dual role of women in advertising. Thus, for this research, women are analysed from the perspective of objects and subjects. As objects, they are seen from a point of view of inculcating desire and as subjects, they are seen from a point of view as consumers or receivers of that desirable persuasion.

For this research, it is noted that women have been portrayed in advertising in their traditional and contemporary roles in order to keep up with the evolving expectations. Women have been seen moving out of their homes, becoming independent and entering the public sphere as discussed in the Theoretical Framework. Therefore, the analysis of the advertisements has been done from the visual lens of understanding whether the advertised skincare and beauty products claim to help the female audience find a good home or husband in terms of traditional gender roles or help them succeed professionally in terms of contemporary gender roles of women. Finally, the advertisements are seen as a channel of such female representations, with the most derogatory being viewing women as sexual commodities to advertise a product.

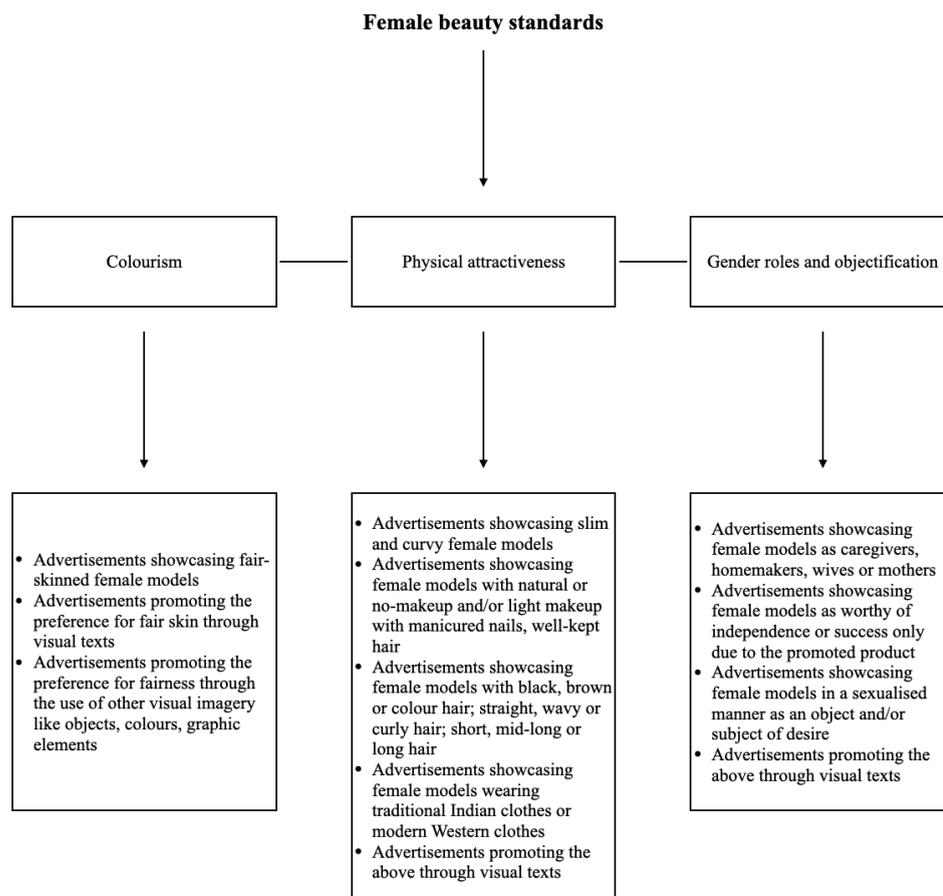


Figure 3. Thematic chart that defined each theme and its relationship with the data for the purpose of operationalisation.

### 3.3. Conclusion, Reliability and Validity

This chapter outlines the entire research design involved in order to answer the research question. First, the choice of using visual critical discourse analysis as a qualitative method of data analysis is addressed. Methodological decisions taken for this analysis are also discussed. Second, the chosen dataset is described followed by the choice of purposive sampling of 100 advertisements of skincare and beauty products in order to understand female beauty standards in terms of colourism, physical attractiveness and gender roles and objectification is explained. Third, these categorical themes are then operationalised.

It is important to understand that the method of visual critical discourse analysis is also accompanied with some limitations that are linked to its key characteristic of flexibility. Due to flexibility, there is not only a lack of fixed techniques to follow but also a lack of fixed meanings, leaving room for interpretations and negotiations (Mogashoa, 2014). Hence, in order to ensure reliability and validity, the current research addresses such limitations by

augmenting a methodological frame that allows the researcher to interpret the data in an in-depth and efficient manner. According to Jaipal-Jamani (2014), individuals draw conclusions about the world based on formal and informal social conventions learned from interactions with phenomena and individuals from various social groups, which are reinforced through repetition and stored as habits. Therefore, reliability and validity of interpretations that are made from the analysis are enhanced when the researcher uses a common set of beliefs, rules, and frames of reference to interpret the visuals that are studied. This is ensured by formulating each reviewed denotation and connotation into open, axial and selective codes that are revisited and compared so that they can be properly applied to the key theoretical concepts of this research.

## **4. Results and Findings**

An analysis of the selected advertisements reveals findings that can be divided into four main categories: 'Fairness', 'Aesthetic features', 'Femininity and feminine gender roles' and 'sexual objectification'. The four findings are discussed in the following sections by presenting the results and expanding on them in accordance with prevailing theories. In order to interpret the results, examples from the dataset are provided.

It is to be noted that a fifth finding has also been identified. However, it is not directly related to the research question or purpose of this research. The fifth finding is 'Brand strategies'. Thus, this specific finding is only briefly touched upon as it uncovers the marketing tactics or strategies the chosen brands have used to promote female ideals of beauty or support the main themes of this research.

### **4.1. Fairness**

Fairness in the advertisements is represented in ways that reflect how fair or bright skin colour is considered an ideal, how happiness and success are related to having fair skin and how the broader spectrum of skin tones is ignored or overlooked in the analysed advertisements.

#### **4.1.1. Fairness and Brightness as Ideals**

A vast majority of the advertisements showcase a female model with a fair and bright skin in the overall advertisement and/or on the product package. This suggests how advertisements are upholding preferences for white, fair or bright skin by highlighting how skincare and beauty products yield such effects on the skin (see Figure 4). Moreover, the inclination towards fairness in the advertisements is represented by the use of certain words, phrases or verbal cues that identify being fair as an ideal. This can be seen in almost half of the advertisements. For instance, advertisements use words like 'fairness', 'glow', 'brightness', 'lightening', 'whitening', 'spotless', 'anti-mark', 'colour transform', 'even-toned', 'white beauty', 'flawless', 'anti-darkening', 'dullness reducer' amongst other such words (see Figure 5). The analysis also reveals that the majority of the advertisements display the colour white as a colour of any visual element in the advertisement and/or the text and/or background (see Figure 5). Waggener (2020) discusses that the colour white, when used as a marketing and branding tool, can highlight brightness and cleanliness, and in

this case, the use of the colour white can suggest the brightness a product or brand brings to one's skin.



Figure 4. Fairness is represented by showcasing a female model with a fair and bright skin in the overall advertisement and/or on the product package.



Figure 5. Fairness is represented by use of words that indicate fairness as an ideal. This is further supported by the use of the colour white as a colour of any visual element in the advertisement and/or the text and/or background.

Furthermore, there are only a few instances, as in the case of Fem and Lotus Herbals, that directly address skin problems like those of ‘melanin production’ or ‘pigmentation’ rather than explicitly or implicitly promise fairness. Fairness in the advertisements has also been represented differently. For instance, the 2019 Lotus Herbals cream advertisement promotes the idea of fairness not of the face but of the elbows and knees and has a specific product line catering to such needs. This thus highlights how a woman should be fair and bright not only when one sees her face but also when one sees her other body parts. The 2012 Olay cream advertisement suggests an age recommendation of as early as 25 years to start using products that provide a spotless glow to the skin. This reinforces how any mark on a woman’s face at such a young age is looked down upon and should be diminished at all costs (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Lotus Herbals advertisement for brighter knees and elbows and Olay advertisement for spotless skin at 25.

The analysis also reveals that the representation of fairness in most of the advertisements has not altered in substance despite claims or efforts to the contrary. For example, Glow & Lovely, formerly known as Fair & Lovely, has recently been reprimanded for its marketing methods that have incited colourism. Following the growth in popularity of body positivity and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, Fair & Lovely drew severe judgement for pushing bogus standards of beauty (Sharma, 2020). Consequently, it was decided to rename the brand by substituting the term ‘fair’ with ‘glow’.

Nonetheless, there have been several arguments about if the move has resulted in a genuine shift in how the Indian market approaches beauty standards (Sharma, 2020). For instance, by replacing the word ‘fair’ with ‘glow’, the brand is still promoting the same ideals of fairness but just in a subliminal manner. The rebranded advertisements continue to showcase the same female models with fair or bright skin. Instead of using words like ‘fairness’, words like ‘brightness’ have been used which inculcate the same idea that the product or brand brings brightness to one’s skin (see Figure 7).

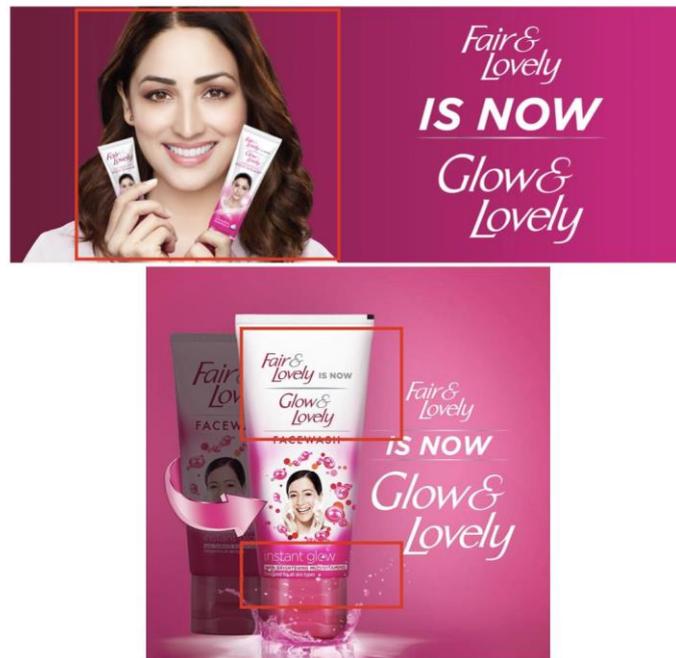


Figure 7. Advertisements of Fair & Lovely after rebranding to Glow & Lovely (Sharma, 2020).

#### 4.1.2. Fairness for Happiness and Success

Furthermore, fairness in some advertisements is represented by indicating skin transformation in the advertisement with the help of images of two skin tones of a woman, one dull and expressionless and the other fair and happy, which suggest that happiness and success in one’s life comes with fairness (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. Fairness is represented by indicating skin transformation with the help of images of two skin tones of a woman.

#### 4.1.3. Ignoring the Broader Spectrum of Skin Colours

There is also an inclination of brands towards fairness and brightness by ignoring the broader spectrum of skin tones in a few of the advertisements through the use of objects and symbols in the advertisement like a scale with limited number of skin colours and as a measure of fairer skin, and other objects like white-coloured light bulbs, sparks, glitter and pearls (see Figure 9). This can establish set parameters and definitions of skin tones acceptable for consideration, excluding right at the outset a diverse range that falls outside these definitions.



Figure 9. Fairness is represented by ignoring the broader spectrum of skin tones in a few of the advertisements through the use of objects like a scale with a limited number of skin colours or tones, and other objects like light bulbs, sparks and pearls.

While most advertisements do not have female models with a wheatish or dusky skin tone, two advertisements show diversity in terms of skin colour. For instance, in the 2021 Lakmé advertisement for foundation, there are 3 women with different tones of skin colour ranging from fair to dusky to dark. The brand claims that the product is suited for the variety of Indian skin tones (see Figure 10). Furthermore, it states that the product is based on the Fitzpatrick Scale created by Thomas B. Fitzpatrick in 1975 (Sachdeva, 2009). The scale is based on a person's skin colour and reactions to sun damage in terms of the extent of burning and tanning. Fitzpatrick skin type, while subjective, has been shown to have preventive and surgical significance. It has been most widely employed to assess sun susceptibility in population-based and case-control studies on the causes of skin cancer, UV radiation exposure, tanning, and preventive activities (Sachdeva, 2009). The 2020 L'Oréal for hair colour similarly shows 2 women with different skin tones (see Figure 10). Thus, even though fewer in number, these instances highlight how diversity has become a crucial issue in the recent years of social and political uproar, and how brands are acknowledging and respecting such diversity.

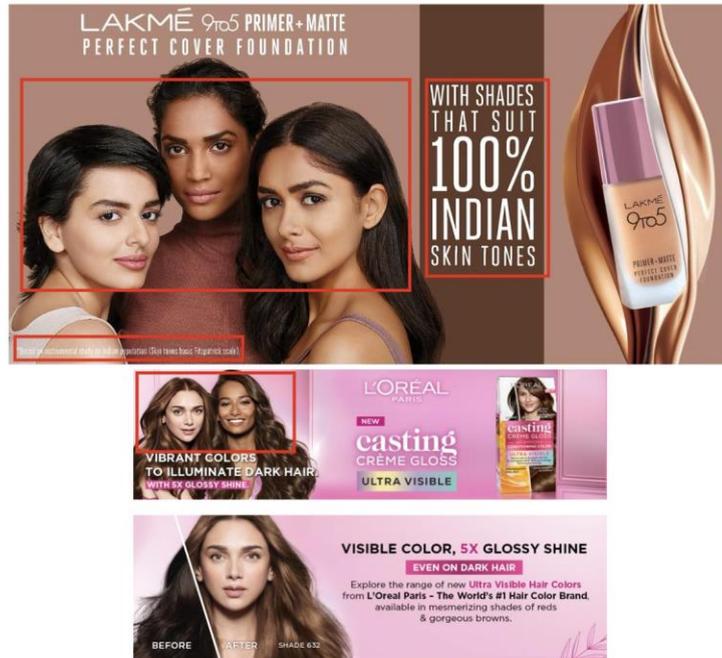


Figure 10. Lakmé and L'Oréal advertisements acknowledging diversity of skin colour.

#### 4.1.4. Projection of Fairness Expertise

Other than the above-mentioned verbal cues that promote fairness as an ideal, the advertisements use other words and phrases that can be considered “eye-catching” and that can possibly make the audience believe that the expertise and effectiveness of the brand can bring such results to the skin. For instance, Fair & Lovely advertisements use words like ‘expert range’, ‘treatment’, ‘unbeatable’, ‘solution’ and ‘multivitamins’; Lakmé advertisements use a word like ‘expert’; Pond’s advertisements use claims like ‘micro cleansing technology removes layers of dead skin cells’; Garnier advertisements use phrases and words like ‘miracle’, ‘spot-less, brighter skin in 1 week’ and ‘get upto 2 tones fairer in just 7 days’; L’Oréal advertisements use words like ‘superior to laser treatment’; Lotus Herbals advertisements use phrases like ‘India’s 1st whitening and brightening gel creme’, ‘salon-like glow at home’ and ‘upto 2X skin whitening and brightening power’; Fem advertisements use a hashtag like ‘#Darkdaysareover’. These words are interestingly used not only to directly uphold the idea of fairness but also to describe the brand and the product as an entity or object that can lead to such desired results in the skin tone that no one can or should achieve ordinarily.

#### 4.1.5. Decoding Fairness in the Advertisements

Therefore, in the analysed advertisements, fairness is represented by highlighting how fair or bright skin colour is considered an ideal by the showcasing of fair female models, use of certain words and phrases and display of the colour white. The advertisements also project happiness and success are related to having fair skin by portraying skin transformation from dull to bright. The broader spectrum of skin tones is ignored or overlooked.

According to Rehman (2019), models in Indian publications may be featured with little make-up and a smooth ivory skin tone, but the complexions of most of these Indian women are fair. This is in congruence with Mitchel's (2020) concept of "cosmetic colorblindness" (p. 1370) that intends to incorporate individuals of colour to meet the diversity standard. It becomes evident that 90% (N=90) of the advertisements do not meet this standard. Diversity in terms of skin colour is only visible in 2% (N=2) of the advertisements, like those of Lakmé and L'Oréal, as mentioned before. The rest 8% (N=8) of the advertisements showcase women with wheatish or dusky skin tone.

Celebrities tend to advocate that changing skin tone to obtain the "ideal image of beauty is the most convenient approach for women to acquire the success, luxury, and prestige associated with white skin" (Rehman, 2019, p. 34). Sims and Hirudayaraj (2015) note that while "fair-skinned" individuals are seen as "more beautiful, worthy, intelligent, and competent, darker-skinned people are seen as dirty, lazy, and ignorant" (p. 39). The studies cited by Sims and Hirudayaraj (2015) indicate that dark-skinned women in India have reduced possibilities to feature as models in magazine advertising and commercials. To mitigate this problem, marketers promote strategies for women to lighten their complexion, allowing them to enter particular sectors. Fairness can be seen in the advertisements with the help of having fair-skinned female models advertise beauty and skincare products using persuasive texts that promote such colourism in 46% (N=46) of the advertisements and highlighting the status of fair-skinned women as more successful and beautiful and dark-skinned women (if shown in the advertisements) as unworthy in 14% (N=14) of the advertisements.

Many skincare and beauty product advertisements in India utilise the strategy of condemning young women for not doing enough to lighten dark skin. Due to her dark skin, each woman in these advertisements is depicted doubting her own value and social standing. Only after using the advertised product and miraculously changing her skin colour does she feel secure and socially accepted. As a result of such typical communication, these

advertisements legitimatise the society's existing biases, particularly those linked to idealised female beauty (Anand, 2021).

## 4.2. Aesthetic Features

Aesthetic features are represented in the analysed advertisements in ways that highlight what natural beauty is and how it is considered an ideal, how happiness is related to having such natural beauty, how slimness is considered a body image standard and how important modernity is.

### 4.2.1. Natural Beauty as an Ideal

A high majority of the advertisements showcase female models with a no-makeup or light makeup and gazing look, manicured nails, hairless skin and well-done hair. Additionally, these images of the models are enlarged and in focus. This suggests how advertisements are upholding preferences for natural and effortless beauty by highlighting how skincare and beauty products yield such effects on the skin (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. Aesthetic features are represented by showing female models with a no-makeup or light makeup and gazing look, manicured nails, hairless skin and well-done hair.

In the process of promoting natural beauty as an ideal, the 2013 Garnier cream advertisement has taken a very intriguing approach. For instance, the advertisement showcases the female model cuddling a spotted black and white Dalmatian puppy. This is

further supported by words like ‘1 2 3 spot free’ and ‘His spots I love, but my spots - they just had to go’ which can indicate that while other creatures can be naturally full of spots, women should have naturally spotless, clear skin (see Figure 12).



Figure 12. Advertisement of Garnier for spot-free skin by comparing it to a spotted animal.

The notion of natural aesthetic beauty is further made apparent by the length, colour and texture of the hair. Out of the 100 advertisements, less than half of the advertisements show the female models with open hair of which most have long and lustrous hair that falls below the shoulders (see Figure 13) and which many studies reveal as attractive (Jarrett, 2020). Only a few have short hair that falls above the shoulders.

Additionally, 7% (N=7) of the advertisements are for hair care. These advertisements not only display female models with long and lustrous hair but also indicate the beauty of having such hair through verbal cues. For instance, Garnier’s 2017 advertisement for hair colour showcases 3 women with long, smooth and shiny hair which is in shades of brown. The products are surrounded by rich and smooth oily and milky graphic waves and the products have an image of avocados, olives and almonds. Phrases like ‘open up to beautiful browns’ further highlight the products. Thus, this can indicate the desire and necessity to colour one’s hair to shades of brown which can be considered as adding natural beauty. Furthermore, the use of natural elements like the graphic waves and avocados, olives and almonds can suggest that the product transforms one’s hair naturally to appear as long and smooth, even though hair colour products are known to have chemicals. Similarly, Garnier’s

2018 hair cream advertisement suggests the same idea using phrases like ‘long lasting shine, smooth and soft hair’. Even L’Oréal’s advertisements for hair products use female models with long and lustrous brown hair. While one 2017 advertisement indicates the use of natural clay to naturally transform one’s hair by making it appear fresh and smooth for ‘72 hours’, another advertisement indicates the use of oils that make the hair ‘3X shinier, 3X softer’ (see Figure 13) However, the 2020 L’Oréal advertisement for hair colour takes a different approach by not directly suggesting that only brown hair is desirable and beautiful. The advertisement indicates that if one wants to colour one’s hair, the colour will be visible even on the blackest of hairs and will provide ‘5X glossy shine’ (see Figure 14).

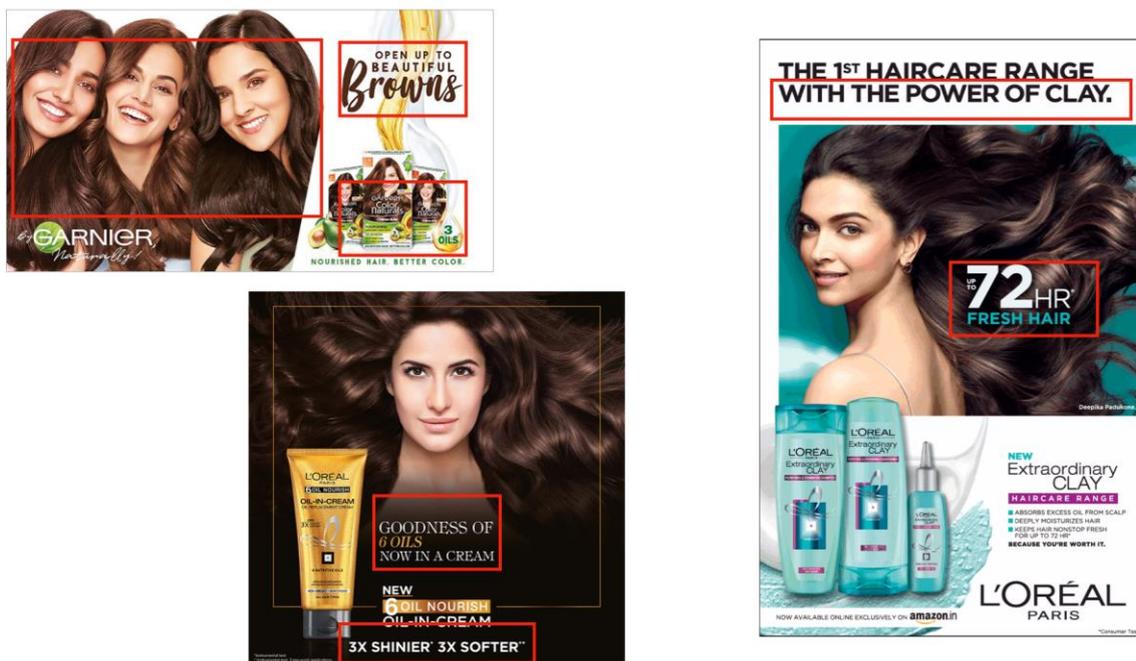


Figure 13. Garnier and L’Oréal advertisements for long and lustrous hair as an ideal of natural beauty.

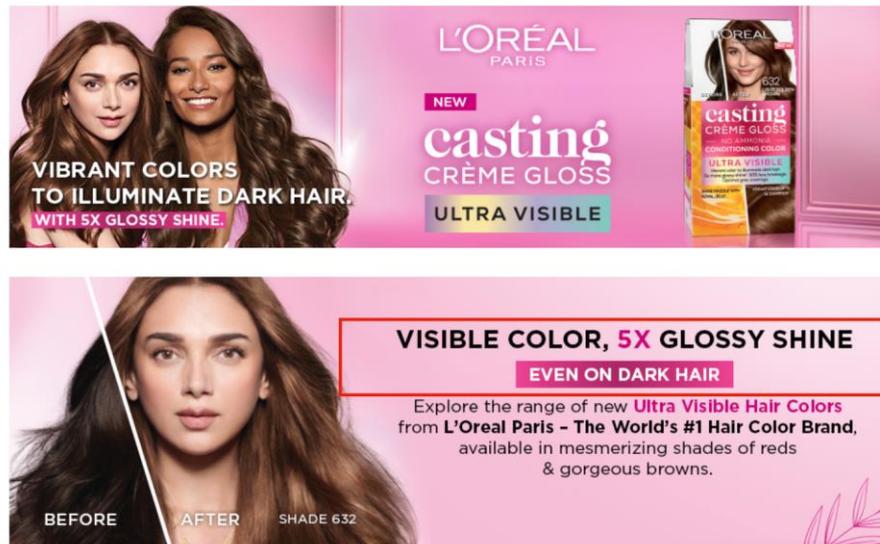


Figure 14. L'Oréal advertisements for black to lighter hair colour.

In the representation of aesthetic features to further promote natural beauty as an ideal, many brands in numerous advertisements use specific verbal cues to identify what is ideal and what is not. For instance, Pond's uses phrases like 'for boosted wrinkle reduction and youthful radiance' and 'beautiful soft skin'; L'Oréal advertisements use phrases like 'my skin looks perfect' and 'because you're worth it'; Lotus Herbals advertisements use phrases like 'get photo ready in 2 minutes' and 'anti-ageing transformation'; Nivea advertisements use phrases like 'moisture just once, look just-moisturised all day' and 'get skin that feels soft and fresh instantly'. These words are used not only to directly uphold the idea of natural beauty but also symbolise that having wrinkles, dullness or pimples should not be considered natural and must be taken care of to become beautiful and worthy of seeing. These also describe the brand and the product as an entity or object that can lead to such desired results in one's appearance that no one can or should achieve ordinarily.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that only two advertisements connected aesthetic features to the healthy effects of the product. For instance, Boroplus and its product line of 'anti-pollution face wash' directly address the problems caused due to pollution and indicate that with the use of such products, harmful impacts of pollution can be reduced for a healthy and natural appearance. This is further highlighted by showing the female models tearing apart an image of cars and buildings polluting a city and using words like 'pulls out impurities caused due to pollution' (see Figure 15). The analysis also reveals that aesthetic features can be represented without showing a human face. For instance, the 2019 hair

removal advertisement of Fem shows no face but clean, clear and hairless legs with manicured nails which can similarly highlight the inclination toward spotless, clean, clear, natural and healthy appearances without even showing a human face with emotions (see Figure 16).

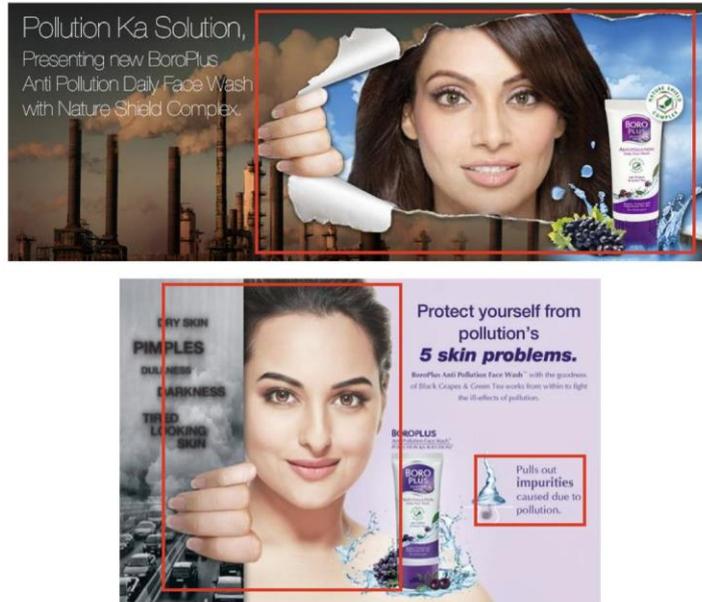


Figure 15. Boroplus advertisements for anti-pollution.



Figure 16. Fem advertisements for hair removal.

#### 4.2.2. Natural Beauty for Happiness

Aesthetic features are also represented with the imagery of a smile. More than half of the advertisements show the female model with a slight or a wide smile (see Figure 17) which can indicate a relationship between natural beauty and the happiness it offers, as many scholars like Trivedi and Tiechert (2019) state that smiling can be considered attractively appealing.



Figure 17. Aesthetic features are represented through smiling.

#### 4.2.3. Slimness as a Body Image Standard

All of the advertisements have female models with slim faces and bodies and sharp angular jaws which can indicate having slim body image as a standard of beauty. Out of these, only a few of the advertisements show full body images of the female models which further supports the preference for slimness as standard (see Figure 18).

#### 4.2.4. Importance of Modernity

Aesthetic features are also represented through attire. There is an inclination towards modernity by presenting female models in modern and western attire, i.e. jeans, T-shirts, dresses, shirts, shorts, and skirts, and accessories such as heels and sunglasses. Of the advertisements in which women are not bare or are wearing Indian traditional attire, most of the advertisements showcase female models wearing modern attire (see Figure 18).



Figure 18. Aesthetic features are represented by highlighting slimness as a body image ideal and showing an inclination toward modern attire.

#### 4.2.5. Decoding Aesthetic Features in the Advertisements

Therefore, in the analysed advertisements, aesthetic features are represented by what natural beauty is and how it is considered an ideal with the portrayal of female models with a light or no-makeup look, manicured nails, hairless skin, well-done hair, along with the use of certain words and phrases that indicate what is beautiful and what is not. The advertisements also project happiness is related to natural beauty with the female models smiling, and slimness is considered a body image standard. Finally, there is emphasis on modernity by way of western attire worn by the female models.

Features that constitute physical beauty are inherited and altered by all individuals, with higher physical attractiveness being predominantly favourable and lower being largely harmful (Patzer, 2006). In recent times, beauty standards have deviated dramatically, and that too, towards a more westernised standard (Majidi, 2020). There has been a shift from the curvy hourglass figures to more “slim and trim” ones (Gelles, 2008, as cited in Majidi, 2020, para. 10). In the contemporary post-feminist media world, the normative body standards are “aestically slim” (Jackson & Vares, 2015, p. 348). As analysed, it becomes evident that all advertisements show female models with slim and angular faces; however, only 17% (N=17) of the advertisements show full body images of female models that are also slim.

In terms of hair, Gelles (2008, as cited in Majidi, 2020) states three major characteristics that influence the look of the hair i.e., “colour, length, and texture” (para. 10). As many Indian women have black hair, there is a high desire for black curly and wavy hair; however, coloured hair can also be seen getting advertised (Das & Sharma, 2016). Meanwhile, the demand for long or at least medium hair length has been steady throughout time (Majidi, 2020). The analysis reveals that all female models in the advertisements fit the colour type of black and/or brown hair. However, in certain instances of Garnier and L’Oréal as discussed before, brown hair is highly preferred. In terms of texture, almost all female models in the advertisements have either straight or wavy hair. Only 5% (N=5) of the advertisements have female models with curly hair. In terms of length, 40% (N=40) of the advertisements have female models with long and lustrous hair that falls below the shoulders, 5% (N=5) of the advertisements have female models with short hair that falls above the shoulders while the rest of the advertisements have female models with hair tied at the back.

Majidi (2020) describes that while the traditional Indian attire consists of a ‘sari’ or ‘shalwar-kameez’ and a ‘dupatta’, contemporary apparel has evolved to a degree, and women frequently wear western-style clothing. According to Majidi (2020), the way women wear clothes reflects their “social status, class, and education level” (para. 10). In the analysis, 74% (N=74) of the advertisements show female models wearing western attire and only 3% (N=3) of the advertisements show female models wearing Indian attire.

Since physical appearance is important to convince and communicate, advertisers use attractive models, idealising them through their association with the product. Advertisers thus set standards that consumers want to measure up to (Das & Sharma, 2016). Models with “skimpy clothes, fair skin, and bare midriffs who assume influential paradigmatic roles in society” (p. 114) are responsible for an idealised notion of female beauty in India.

### **4.3. Femininity and Feminine Gender Roles**

In the analysed advertisements, femininity and feminine gender roles are represented through aspects of femininity, confidence and independence. The advertisements represent femininity as qualities of youthfulness and innocence, fertility and health, beauty and fashion, and softness and gentleness. These also identify the role of a woman as a caregiver, mother and married woman, as an individual inferior in the hands of a man, and as a

homemaker in the private sphere. Finally, the Indian tradition of a woman along with her idolisation as an Indian goddess is highlighted.

#### 4.3.1. Feminine Qualities

Nearly half the advertisements show female models with open hair of which most have long and lustrous hair that falls below the shoulders (see Figure 19) and few have short hair that falls above the shoulders. Long and lustrous hair, as Jarrett (2020) discusses, can indicate a sense of femininity as it is linked to her fecundity. Furthermore, the analysis also reveals that the advertisements use or showcase different colours as a colour of any visual element in the advertisement and/or the text and/or background which can indicate feminine qualities (see Figure 20). For example, most of the advertisements display the colour pink. According to Ferreira (2019), the colour pink can indicate youthfulness and innocence when used in tactical marketing. Therefore, the colour can reflect the youthfulness and innocence that the brand or product offers to one. Some of the advertisements also display the colour green which can indicate the fertility and health that the brand or product offers to one (Ferreira, 2019). A few of the advertisements display the colour nude which can indicate the beauty and fashion of using such a product (Color Psychology, 2022).



Figure 19. Femininity is represented through long and lustrous hair.



Figure 20. Feminine qualities are represented through pink, green and nude colours (Ferreira, 2019; Color Psychology, 2022).

Furthermore, the feminine quality of youthfulness is tacitly conveyed in the 2021 Fem bleach advertisement that showcases an elderly woman with salt and pepper hair with fully covered clothing and a young woman with her black hair tied in a towel and wearing scanty clothing (see Figure 21). Even though this advertisement suggests that the bleaching product can be used by women of all ages, it makes the notion of age very apparent by showing how a young and an older woman should look in terms of hair and clothing, further drawing a comparison with the second finding of aesthetic features. The feminine qualities of softness and gentleness are made apparent in two novel ways. Advertisements like those of Pond's, Fem and Boroplus highlight these qualities. For instance, Pond's shows the female model holding her dress with one hand, Fem shows the female model resting her chin on her hand while sitting and Boroplus shows the female model poking her dimples with two fingers on both sides (see Figure 22). Some of the advertisements illustrate images or graphic elements of flowers like rose, jasmine, orchids, and saffron further highlighting such feminine qualities (see Figure 23). For instance, jasmine indicates a sense of purity, love and femininity (Stanton, 2021), orchids indicate a sense of grace and beauty (Endersby, 2016; Welke, 2021), and saffron indicates innocence and joy (Dewan, 2015; Gaumond, n.d.).



Figure 21. Feminine quality of youthfulness is represented in the Fem advertisement.



Figure 22. Feminine qualities of softness and gentleness are represented through gestures and expressions.



Figure 23. Feminine qualities are represented through flowers.

#### 4.3.2. Sense of Confidence and Independence

In contrast to the above findings that represent the notion of femininity, a small number of advertisements show female models with short hair (see Figure 24) which can indicate a sense of confidence and independence as it is “unlike” a woman to go against the norm of maintaining long hair (Montell, 2021). This independence and confidence can also be seen in the 2015 Fem hair removal advertisement, the only advertisement of those analysed that has a female model in tennis attire with a racket mid-air which highlights the sporty rather than shy nature of a woman (see Figure 24).

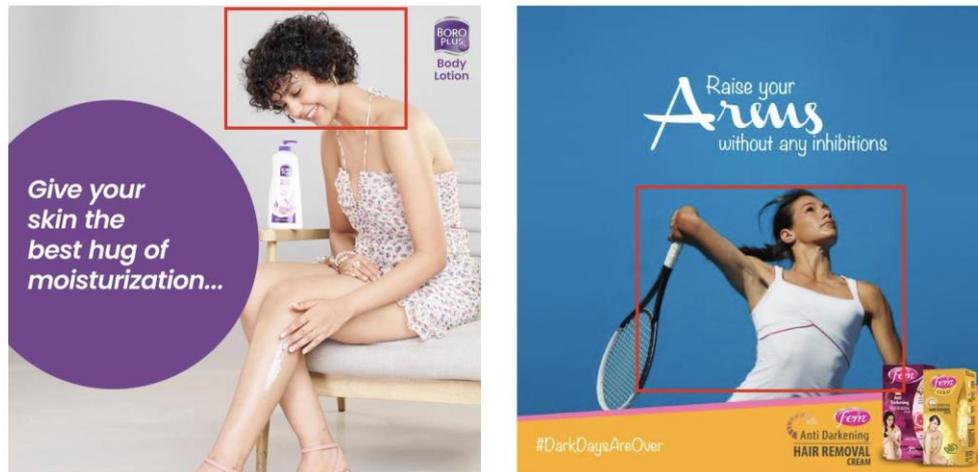


Figure 24. Boroplus and Fem advertisements highlighting the “unlike” feminine qualities of confidence and independence.

#### 4.3.3. Gender Roles: Mother, Wife, Subordinate, Homemaker

Moreover, feminine gender roles are explicitly made evident in three advertisements. The 2015 Nivea cream advertisement shows a woman holding and kissing a younger boy who appears to be her son. The woman can be seen wearing a wedding ring and the boy can be seen holding a cricket bat. Such imagery not only clearly defines the gender role of the boy as a masculine individual who is into sports even at a young age but also defines the role of the woman as a mother or caregiver and a wife (see Figure 25). The 2017 Nivea cream advertisement has a woman resting her head on the shoulders of a man and happily smiling in comfort. Such imagery can indicate the inferior role of the woman and how she feels safe and comfortable only in the arms of a man (see Figure 25). The 2020 Fem bleach advertisement shows a woman smiling in what appears to be her kitchen. Such imagery can indicate the woman’s role as a homemaker situated in a private sphere (see Figure 25).



Figure 25. Highlighting feminine gender roles.

#### 4.3.4. Indian Tradition of a Woman

Some of the advertisements display female models wearing Indian attire like saree, blouse, skirt, and dupatta. Such instances can indicate the emphasis placed on Indian tradition for a woman and how the product or brand further advances the beauty of the woman in traditional settings. However, the number of advertisements showing women in traditional attire is small; with modernisation, attire is increasingly westernised, also creating a sense of sexual allure. In some instances, traditional wear is also given an alluring look with female models wearing a backless blouse or a sheer dupatta that shows the stomach (see Figure 26).



Figure 26. Femininity is represented through Indian traditions of women with the help of traditional attire.

#### 4.3.5. Idolisation of a Woman

Finally, in the 2014 Fem bleach advertisement where the female model has been idolised as an Indian deity with the use of the phrase ‘become the starface of Durga Puja’ (see Figure 27). Goddess Durga is known for her two incarnations of a warrior and a mother. Even though she executes at the command of the gods, she is left to care for her children alone. Thus, despite her fierce nature, she continues to fulfil her patriarchal duties. This indicates a paradox that is inherent in Indian society - while the woman leaves the household to work and earn, the home and children remain the responsibility of the woman (Patel, 2019).



Figure 27. Femininity is represented through idolisation of women as a goddess.

#### 4.3.6. Decoding Femininity and Feminine Gender Roles

Therefore, in the analysed advertisements, femininity and feminine gender roles encapsulate aspects of femininity, confidence and independence through the length of the hair of the female models. The advertisements also highlight femininity as qualities of youthfulness and innocence, fertility and health, beauty and fashion with the help of prominent colours of pink, green and nude visible in the advertisements. Additionally, the feminine qualities of softness and gentleness through the gestures of female models as well as through the use of natural elements like flowers are described. Finally, the advertisements represent the gender roles of women as, mothers, wives, homemakers, inferior to men, as well as their Indian tradition and notion of idolisation. However, most advertisements do not have identifiable indicators of the qualities of femininity unlike indicators that are evident in most cases of fairness and aesthetic features. Overt indicators of femininity and gender roles are visible only through colours, length of hair, gestures and elements like flowers.

In India, the traditional role of a woman has been as a homemaker and a devoted wife and mother, and the physical attractiveness of a woman is seen in such contexts of social ideals. The sole aim of the woman's body was to win male approval and attention (Das & Sharma, 2016). India has always been a stringent patriarchal society (Hofstede, 1980, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016), with gender norms intimately tied to religious and

cultural traditions. Years of male supremacy and female subordination in India have sculpted the image of women (Adhikari, 2014, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016).

In terms of the non-contemporary notion of gender roles, 3% (N=3) of the advertisements project women as caregivers, mothers, homemakers, and inferior to men as mentioned above. Furthermore, another 3% (N=3) of advertisements show women in their Indian traditional nature through Indian attire. Out of this, one advertisement further equates the state of a woman to that of an Indian goddess.

With globalisation, international exposure, a growing economy, and transformation in the educational and employment sectors, women are moving out of homes and traditional roles. Women are becoming empowered, career-oriented, and financially independent, and the appearance now of women has to be more professional and international (Das & Sharma, 2016). In terms of the contemporary notion of gender roles, 5% (N=5) of the advertisements symbolise the independence and confidence of a woman with the help of female models with short hair. This contemporary independent nature can also be seen in the advertisement that showcases the sporty nature of a female tennis player.

Advertisers have portrayed women in both traditional and contemporary aspects and have even created needs and wants according to changing expectations. Young girls remain targets of beauty products that claim to help them find suitable husbands or a job (Das & Sharma, 2016). This way, advertisers use women's vulnerabilities to develop these cravings, causing even more ambiguity and tension. As most products fail to deliver the expected results, customers are constantly on the lookout for upgraded items to fill a hole created by the advertising industry in the first place (Wallowit, 2007, as cited in Das & Sharma, 2016).

#### **4.4. Sexual Objectification**

Sexual objectification in the analysed advertisements is represented by displaying enticement and feminine sexuality as a form of passion and energy. It takes into account a sense of eroticism and sexual allure, desire and sexual appeal, and enjoyment and devourment. Finally, it captures a connection between human value to that of the product being advertised.

##### **4.4.1. Sense of Enticement, Passion and Energy**

A majority of the advertisements show the female model in the advertisement and/or have an image of a female model on the product package with a direct gaze which can

indicate an internal state of enticement (To & Patrick, 2021). Additionally, some of the advertisements have female models with heavy and dark makeup. According to Tagai et al. (2016), this can accentuate their appeal to others and create favourable impressions (see Figure 28). The analysis also reveals that the advertisements display different colours as a colour of any visual element in the advertisement and/or the text and/or background which can indicate sexual qualities (see Figure 28). For example, a few of the advertisements use the colour red and the colour maroon which can indicate passion and energy (Ferreira, 2019).



Figure 28. Sexual objectification is represented through the enticement of the direct gaze (To & Patrick, 2021) and heavy makeup (Tagai et al., 2016). Additionally, it is reflected in the colour red which symbolises passion and energy (Ferreira, 2019).

#### 4.4.2. Eroticism and Sexual Allure

A high number of the advertisements have female models wearing scanty attire which reveals their back, shoulders, legs and other skin, and a few of the advertisements have the female models with bare shoulders without wearing any attire (see Figure 29). This promotes a feeling of eroticism and sexual allure (Beasley & Danesi, 2002).



Figure 29. Sexual objectification is represented through bare shoulders and scanty attire (Beasley & Danesi, 2002).

Sexual objectification is further represented in some of the advertisements that display female models with expressions such as a pout or an open mouth with wide eyes open, eating some food, or with a smouldering expression (see Figure 30). This can symbolise eroticism and sexual allure (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This can further be highlighted by the advertisements that showcase the female models touching and feeling their necks, shoulders and legs (see Figure 30). Even the use of words or phrases like ‘playtime for your pout’, ‘many shades of diva’ (in the case of Lakmé) and ‘bright, bold and beautiful’ (in the case of Lotus Herbals) along with such visuals bring out the eroticism (see Figure 30). Katcher (2018) talks of the powerful desire that comes with fur. In the 2019 Lakmé lipstick advertisement and the 2018 Boroplus cream advertisement, a natural setting of fur is used. Such instances encapsulate an animal-like desire that gives rise to eroticism (see Figure 31).

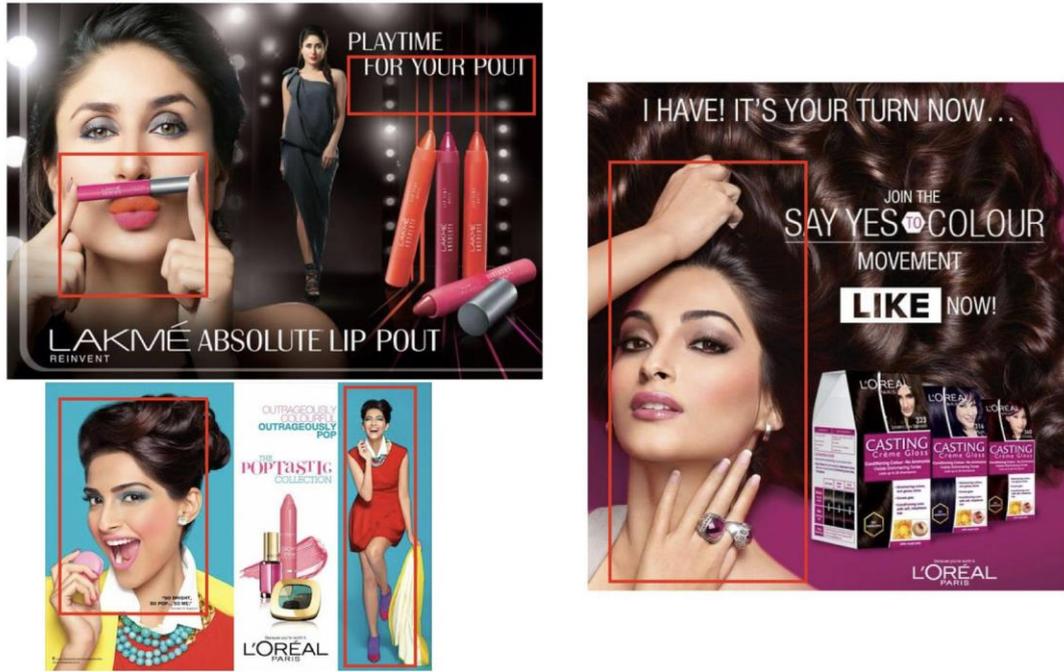


Figure 30. Sexual objectification is represented through expressions (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.) and feeling of parts of the body that indicate eroticism and sexual allure .



Figure 31. Representation of desire through display of fur (Katcher, 2018).

#### 4.4.3. Equating Human Value to Product Value

Moreover, there are two interesting ways objectification is shown. In the 2012 Pond's face wash advertisement, there is an image or symbol of a 'face value' metre that

innovatively indicates how an individual's value is directly related to the use of the product. Hence, this objectification of one's value to a product suggests that with the use of the product, the value of one's face increases (see Figure 32). 2 out of the 10 Boroplus use imagery like the female model holding a bitten chocolate and equating it to the product being advertised. This can indicate that she is an object to enjoy and devour. Additionally, phrases like 'irresistible tenderness of smooth chocolate now in your skin' can further support this notion (see Figure 32).



Figure 32. Objectification is represented by equating one's value to the product.

#### 4.4.4. Desire and Sexual Appeal

Finally, a small number of the advertisements represent desire and sexual appeal in the most precise manner. Nivea's 2011, 2013 and 2017 advertisements employ the imagery of a man holding the woman or touching her. The man's close proximity and gaze can indicate that the woman belongs to the man. The use of words, phrases or verbal cues like 'for visibly smooth and touchably soft skin' uphold the idea that only skin that is clear and soft is to be desired and felt. Furthermore, all three advertisements display the hairless, satin-smooth body of the female model and hairy body of the male model along with more skin of the female and barely any of the male which also support the notion of sexual appeal of each gender (see Figure 33).



Figure 33. Desire and sexual appeal seen in the Nivea advertisements.

#### 4.4.5. Decoding Sexual Objectification

Therefore, in the analysed advertisements, sexual objectification unfolds a sense of eroticism through the direct gaze and heavy makeup of the female models. It considers feminine sexuality as a form of passion and energy through the use of the colours red and maroon. It also takes into account eroticism and sexual allure that can be seen through the scanty attire, or lack of attire, and expressions of the female models, certain words and phrases mentioned above and the use of natural elements like fur. Enjoyment and devourment are made evident by showcasing a bitten chocolate, and desire and sexual appeal are revealed by the male proximity and gaze. Finally, a connection between human value and product value is made apparent.

According to Vargas-Bianchi and Mensa (2020), advertising practices showcase a woman's body as distinguished and separated from her as a person; women are seen as sexual objects to satisfy sexual desires. Perez (2000, as cited in Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020) points out how advertising places women in an acute dilemma: they are both objects and subjects. As objects, they are tools to inspire desire and as subjects, they are at the receiving end of that same persuasion as consumers. The opinion is again divided on the degree of effectiveness of objectifying women. Hence, in terms of objects of inculcating desire, 3% (N=3) of the advertisements highlight desire and sexual appeal. Furthermore, another 98% (N=98) of advertisements endorse a sense of eroticism and sexual allure. In

terms of subjects or receivers of this desire, the same 98% (N=98) of advertisements create a sexual aura around the women placed near the products.

Marketing communications have and will continue to be a conduit for these traditional female representations and behaviours, and the most disrespectful to women is that of sexual object, in which women are regarded as sexual goods utilised to advertise a product (Drake, 2017, as cited in Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020). Several studies showcase that “women as a sexual object has little effect and do not aid the recall of the ad nor the brand name” (Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020, p. 79). Further, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009, as cited in Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020) state that objectification occurs when female representation is concentrated merely in her sexuality.

#### **4.5. Brand Strategies**

Brand strategies highlight instances of brand quality, product effectiveness, connection to the target audience, promotion of stability, trust, power, affluence, knowledge, and diversity for different skin issues.

All of the advertisements promote brand quality and effectiveness by using visual symbols or images like DNA strand, protection layer, skin cells etc. to create trust in the natural and scientific foundation of the brand and its products (see Figure 34). Additionally, a few of the advertisements use cultural symbols like ‘ayurveda’ to possibly engage with the target audience of Indian women who crave such natural benefits (see Figure 34). The analysis also reveals that the advertisements use different colours as a colour of any visual element in the advertisement and/or the text and/or background which can indicate brand value. The most commonly used colours are grey, blue, silver, black, purple and gold. Some of the advertisements use the colour grey which can either indicate negativity (Ferreira, 2019) that the brand is avoiding or balance (Ferreira, 2019) that the brand is bringing . Almost half of the advertisements use the colour blue which can indicate stability, knowledge and trust that the brand and product brings to one (Ferreira, 2019). A few of the advertisements use the colour silver which can indicate affluence and power of the brand (Olesen, 2022). The colour black is also used which, when used in branding, can indicate the mystery and power of the brand (Ferreira, 2019). Many of the advertisements use the colour purple which can indicate the luxury of the brand (Ferreira, 2019). A few more of the advertisements use the colour gold which can indicate devotion of the brand or product to the consumer (Holland, 2005). There are also diamonds in the advertisement and/or product

image (see Figure 35), which can indicate perfection and purity as well as status (Cho, 2022). Finally, a finding that stands out is that of the 2019 Nivea advertisement for face wash which showcases creams for different skin types, i.e. sensitive, dry, normal, oily and normal, thus addressing diverse skin problems faced by individuals (see Figure 36).



Figure 35. Branding strategies are represented by highlighting brand quality, product effectiveness, connection to the target audience through certain elements and symbols.



Figure 36. Branding strategies are represented through diamonds that indicate perfection and status (Cho, 2022).



Figure 36. Branding strategies addressing diverse skin problems.

Therefore, in the analysed advertisements, brand strategies encompasses tactics the chosen brands use in order to promote the before-mentioned female standards of beauty. Since this finding does not apply to any of the key themes of this research, this has not been used for the purpose of this analysis to answer the research question and has hence only been briefly mentioned.

#### 4.6. Conclusion

This chapter outlines, thus, the variety of results that were evident after the analysis of the advertisements. The results have been broken down into categories which are discussed in detail with the help of literature and examples from the dataset. These main categories are 'fairness', 'aesthetic features', 'femininity and feminine gender roles' and 'sexual objectification'. Finally, the results and findings will now be viewed from the lens of the defined themes and concepts of this research, the details of which will be concluded in the next and last chapter.

## **5. Conclusion**

The section concludes the research and summarises the implications of the results. Furthermore, it delineates the shortcomings of the research and provides suggestions for future research.

### **5.1. Implications of the Results**

The present study has explored how ‘female beauty standards’ are represented in skincare and beauty advertisements targeted at young Indian women from the period 2011 to 2021. These female beauty standards were studied from the perspective of three concepts: colourism, physical attractiveness, and gender roles and objectification in order to understand the broader spectrum of such standards and arrive at an appropriate answer for the research question. The study revealed four main results.

First, advertisements upheld fairness and brightness as an ideal and suggested that happiness and success are related to having fair skin. The broader spectrum of skin tones was largely ignored and there was a projection of expertise by the brand in terms of offering fairness to one’s skin. This notion of fairness can be understood by exploring colourism (Mitchell, 2020) in Indian advertising between 2011 and 2021 of skincare and beauty products for young Indian women. Discrimination by skin colour or colourism is an issue of gender that has disproportionately harmed women more than men (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). In the present era, colourism manifests itself in a veiled manner as “colorblindness” (Mitchell, 2020, p. 1368), which seems to call into doubt the prevalence of true racism. Furthermore, “cosmetic colorblindness” (Mitchell, 2020, p. 1370), a dimension of colour blindness that bypasses structural racism, may be demonstrated in modern colourism-related marketing operations. This research thus explored colourism because of its proven relationship with such colour-blindness that intends to incorporate individuals of colour to meet the diversity standard.

The propagation of colourism or the preference for fairness was seen from a visual lens of brands having fair-skinned women advertise beauty and skincare products, using persuasive texts that promote such preference, and highlighting the status of fair-skinned women as more successful and beautiful. A study of the advertisements revealed showing female models with fair and bright skin and displaying visual elements in the colour white that symbolise brightness (Waggner, 2020). There were verbal cues that identified being

fair as an ideal and that promoted the expertise of the product and the brand in providing this ideal. This portrayal seemed ingrained to the extent that only one brand, Fair & Lovely, rebranded itself in response to social backlash; however, the rebranded Glow & Lovely showed no significant change in the portrayal of such beauty standards. Furthermore, fairness in advertisements was represented by indicating skin transformation with the help of images of two skin tones of a woman, one dull and expressionless and the other fair and happy, suggesting that happiness and success in one's life comes with fairness. Brands also tended to ignore broader spectrum of skin tones. While most advertisements did not have female models with a wheatish or dusky skin tone, only Lakmé and L'Oréal showed diversity in terms of skin colour.

Second, advertisements upheld aesthetic features by highlighting what natural beauty is and how it is considered an ideal, how happiness is related to having such natural beauty, how slimness is considered a body image standard and how important modernity is. This notion of aesthetic features can be understood by exploring physical attractiveness in Indian advertising between 2011 and 2021 of skincare and beauty products for young Indian women. According to Patzer (2006), higher physical attractiveness is favourable and lower physical attractiveness is harmful. Physical attractiveness was seen from a visual lens of facial cues, slim body image and size, long and lustrous hair, and traditional and modern clothes.

The facial cues displayed female models in the advertisements with little to no makeup and posing with a smile which indicated a pleasant appeal (Trivedi & Tiechert, 2019) and represented natural and clean beauty. The body types of women were examined based on Stunkard's Figure Rating Scale (1983) which can be seen in Figure 2 (see section 3.2.2.). A study of the advertisements revealed that the female models fitted the body type figures 1, 2 and 3 which were evidently leaner and slimmer. Additionally, hair was explored based on colour, texture and length. According to Majidi (2020), as many Indian women have black hair, there is a high desire for black curly and wavy hair. Meanwhile, the demand for long or at least medium hair length has been steady throughout time (Majidi, 2020). In terms of colour and texture, the hair of women in the advertisements was either black or brown and wavy. The length of the hair of women in the advertisements was rather long. Finally, in terms of clothes, the attire worn by the female models was more westernised and modern. Even some of the traditional wear was modernised by permitting more skin to be shown.

Third, advertisements upheld femininity and feminine gender roles through aspects of femininity, confidence and independence. The advertisements represented femininity as qualities of youthfulness and innocence, fertility and health, beauty and fashion, and softness and gentleness. They also identified the role of a woman as a caregiver, mother and married woman, as an individual inferior in the hands of a man, and as a homemaker in the private sphere. Finally, the Indian tradition of a woman along with her idolisation as an Indian goddess was highlighted. This notion of femininity can be understood by exploring gender roles in Indian advertising between 2011 and 2021 of skincare and beauty products for young Indian women. As mentioned by Chowdhury and Patnaik (2013), within an Indian patriarchal household, males are assigned dominant and controlling social duties, while females are assigned supporting functions. Gender roles are clearly defined in Indian homes and impact the socialisation from birth. Children start to recognise from a young age gender-based distinction in their relationships with others, in the allocation of resources, such as nourishment, medical services, and schooling, within the family, and in access to membership of the family.

The propagation of femininity was seen from a visual lens of brands showing female models with long and lustrous hair symbolising fecundity (Jarrett, 2020), and colours like pink for youthfulness and innocence, green for fertility and health (Ferreira, 2019) and nude for beauty and fashion (Color Psychology, 2022). Advertisements also had flowers as elements that represented softness, gentleness and innocence (Stanton, 2021; Welke, 2021; Endersby, 2016; Dewan, 2015; Gaumond, n.d. ) as well as gestures signifying the same qualities. A study of the advertisements also revealed that feminine gender roles displayed the female models as mothers or caregivers, wives, homemakers and looking to the man for support and comfort. This portrayal was evident despite the fact that women in modern society have gradually begun to see their real promise and are dominating in many professions, whether it is politics, sports, entertainment, literature, or technology (Baluja, 2016). Hence, Boroplus showed a woman with short hair that signified her modernity, independence and confidence (Montell, 2021). Likewise, Fem had a female model as a tennis player. Yet, in a different advertisement, Fem idolised the female gender as an Indian deity in the incarnation of a mother and warrior (Patel, 2019).

Fourth, advertisements upheld objectification by displaying enticement and feminine sexuality as a form of passion and energy. Objectification took into account eroticism and sexual allure, desire and sexual appeal, and enjoyment and devourment. Finally, it captured a

connection between human value to that of the product being advertised. This notion of objectification can be understood from a sexual and sensual perspective in Indian advertising between 2011 and 2021 of skincare and beauty products for young Indian women. Based on Vargas-Bianchi and Mensa's (2020) understanding of the dual role of women in advertising, women were viewed as objects who were seen from a point of view of inculcating desire and as subjects who were seen from a point of view as consumers or receivers of that persuasion.

A study of the advertisements revealed that there was a display of enticement through the direct gaze of the female models (To & Patrick, 2021) and heavy makeup (Tagai et al., 2016), and of passion and energy through red and maroon colours (Ferreira, 2019). Female models were shown with bare shoulders, scanty attire (Beasley & Danesi, 2002) and smouldering expressions (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), and sometimes in a setting of natural fur (Katcher, 2018), signifying eroticism and desire. There were instances of equating human value to product value by showcasing elements such as chocolates or a metre. Finally, desire and sexual appeal were shown by displaying female models in close proximity to the male models who were touching and holding them.

## **5.2. Scientific Relevance**

Studies so far have presented the portrayal of women across a mix and a range of products from the most basic to the most luxurious, and beauty products are only one part of this range. Within beauty products, these studies of advertisements have concentrated more on skin fairness products (Shroff et al., 2018). The advertisements analysed for this study, therefore, included but were not limited to products of skin fairness, covering skincare, cosmetics, and hair care. Moreover, the research was made more contemporary by covering the most recent decade of 2011 to 2021. In recent years, the world has seen protests against false ideals and for the need to include diversity of women across advertisements. Analysing skincare and beauty advertisements in India in this decade enabled the study to examine change or static preservation of such communication, making the exploration significant. The study revealed that despite social outcry and the greater empowerment of women in this decade, there has been only a token attempt to change the way beauty ideals are portrayed in Indian advertising through skincare and beauty products for women.

## **5.3. Societal Relevance**

Hence, the evaluation borne of this research may point out areas that businesses need to look into to alter their perspective in order to be more socially responsible. On examining these advertisements, it was evident that they represent female beauty standards through colourism, physical attractiveness and gender roles and objectification. Therefore, changes in the advertising communication can ensure better representation of women and inclusion of diversity as well as have a positive impact on self-image and self-esteem of women.

#### **5.4. Limitations and Recommendations**

The current research may be affected by certain limitations. The research included the study of skincare and beauty product advertisements from the decade 2011 to 2021 which began with a period during which digital means were not widely used. Mishra (2014) states that online advertising in India was still in its “embryonic stages in India” (p. 1). There was no accessible digital archive that consolidated advertisements from set time periods brand-wise. Hence, purposive sampling was conducted using Google search, social media channels and eCommerce platforms which may have their own biases in showing results. Moreover, the advertisements were sampled from online platforms that the target audience would have easy access to and advertisements outside these channels such as those in print media or television were not considered. This way of purposive sampling limited the research to only the advertisements accessible online and how these advertisements portrayed female beauty standards.

Another limitation was of reflexivity that takes into account the researcher’s social background. This background placed the researcher as one of the young Indian women the advertisements were targeted at, as a potential consumer of the products. The researcher was also a potential receiver of the advertising communication of what female beauty standards in India were. The researcher, therefore, had to be conscious of this duality of role and deliberately remain objective and dispassionate, avoiding personal value-laden responses and descriptions.

Furthermore, a limitation came up at the time of analysis of the sampled advertisements. The present research was influenced by and built on scholarly work when defining the concept of ‘female beauty standards’ and categorising it into ‘colourism’, ‘physical attractiveness’ and ‘gender roles and objectification’ which added to the reliability and validity of the research. However, at the time of analysis, it was found that these interconnecting concepts often overlapped. When advertisements brought in ‘dark spots’ on

the skin, the lines between the concepts of colourism and physical attractiveness merged as the former focused on 'fair' skin and the latter focused on 'spot-less, natural beauty'. Additionally, often advertisements displayed women wearing western clothing. However, such clothing was mostly skimpy and scanty. This imagery blurred the line between the physical attractiveness of modern fashion and sexual allure. Another instance is of long and lustrous hair of women. Even though the length of hair fell under the concept of physical attractiveness, long hair was considered a sign of femininity based on scholarly research.

To address the limitation of a restricted sample, with the availability of more time and resources, it is recommended that a visual investigation of other mediums like print media and video advertisements of the same brands and products be conducted. This would provide a broader insight. The advertisements were sampled keeping in mind that each brand had a key advertising campaign in the selected time frame. These campaigns included not only static advertisements online but also print and televised video advertisements. Analysing print and video advertisements could lead to more in-depth inferences taking into account that richer text, on-going movement, gestures, and sound could give more clues as to how female beauty standards are represented and perceived in the Indian market.

The limitation of merging of theoretical boundaries could be avoided by performing a quantitative analysis to understand the intricacies of each theoretical concept and validate the findings. Finally, as a recommendation for businesses, quantitative analysis could also be used to understand the personal opinions and views of the target audience and how these could shape businesses to amend their communication strategies and build consumer trust.

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## Appendix A

<i>Codes Related to RQ</i>			
	<b>Open Codes</b>	<b>Axial Codes</b>	<b>Selective Codes</b>
1	Showcasing fair-skinned female models	Fairness/brightness as an ideal	Fairness
2	Using words like 'fairness', 'glow', 'brightness', 'lightening', 'whitening', 'spotless', 'anti-mark', 'colour transform', 'even-toned', 'white beauty', 'flawless', 'anti-darkening', 'dullness reducer'		
3	Showcasing the colour white as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background		
4	Showcasing skin transformation of the female model from dull to bright	Relation of happiness and success to fairness	Aesthetic features
5	Using objects/symbols like a scale with limited number of skin colours or tones, light bulb, sparks, pearls etc.	Ignoring of the broader spectrum of skin colours	
6	Showcasing enlarged images of the models with a no-makeup or light makeup and gazing look with manicured nails, and well-done hair	Natural beauty as an ideal	
7	Showcasing a comparison like that of the female model to a spotted dog	Relation of happiness to natural beauty	
8	Showcasing the female model constantly smiling		
9	Showcasing female models with slim faces, sharp angular jaws, slim and curvy bodies, and clear hairless skin	Slimness as a body image standard	
10	Showcasing female models wearing modern and western attire i.e., jeans, T-shirts, dresses, shirts, shorts and skirts	Importance of modernity	Femininity and feminine gender roles
11	Showcasing the female model with long hair in the advert and/or product image	Sense of femininity	
12	Showcasing the female model with short hair in the advert and/or product image as well as showcasing the female model playing a sport	Sense of confidence and independence	
13	Showcasing the colour pink and/or mauve as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Femininity as youthfulness and innocence	
14	Showcasing imagery like the salt and pepper hair of one female model with fully covered clothing gives while the other model has black hair and is wearing scanty attire		

15	Showcasing the colour green as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Femininity as fertility and health	
16	Showcasing the colour nude as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Femininity as beauty and fashion	
17	Showcasing the female model holding her the attire like a dress, and resting her face on her hands or poking her two cheeks with her fingers	Femininity as softness and gentleness	
18	Showcasing elements such as flowers like rose, jasmine, orchids and saffron		
19	Showcasing imagery in the advert like a woman holding and kissing a younger boy who appears to be her son while wearing a wedding ring and/or the younger boy holding a cricket bat	Role as a caregiver/mother and married woman	
20	Showcasing imagery like the resting of the head of the female on the shoulders of a male in the advert	Role as inferior in the hands of a man	
21	Showcasing cultural symbols like a saree, blouse, skirt and dupatta worn by the female model in the advert	Indian tradition as an ideal	
22	Using words like 'become starface of durga puja'	Idolisation as an Indian goddess (Durga Ma)	
23	Using words like 'bleach at home like a pro' and showcasing the female model in her kitchen	Role as a homemaker in the private sphere	
24	Showcasing the female model with a direct gaze	Sense of enticement	
	Showcasing the enlarged images of the female model with heavy and dark makeup		
25	Showcasing the colour red and/or maroon as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Feminine sexuality as passion and energy	
26	Showcasing the female model wearing scanty attire with bareback, shoulders, legs and other skin		Sexual objectification
27	Showcasing the female model with bare shoulders and no attire	Sense of eroticism and sexual allure	
29	Showcasing the female model with expressions such as a pout with wide eyes, an open mouth with a shocked expression or a fierce smoulder along with touching of her skin i.e., chest, arms, neck, legs		

30	Showcasing of natural settings in the advert like fur, cushion carpet surrounding the female model		
31	Showcasing symbols and images in the advert like a meter	Connection of human value to product	
32	Showcasing imagery of a man holding the female or touching her in the advert with verbal cues like 'for visibly smooth and touchably soft skin'	Sense of desire and sexual appeal	
33	Showcasing imagery in the advert like the hairless, shiny bodies of the female model and hairy bodies of the male model along with showcasing more skin of the female and barely any of the male		
34	Showcasing imagery like a bitten chocolate by the female model in the advert and equating it to the product being showcased	Sense of enjoyment and devourment	

***Codes Unrelated to RQ***

35	Showcasing the big sized brand logo in the advert	Promotion of brand and product effectiveness	Brand strategies to promote female beauty standards
36	Showcasing symbols, icons, and images like a DNA strand, protection layer, and stopwatch, skin cells, chemical particles in the advert Words like 'advanced multivitamin', '24 hour moisturisation', 'No. 1 micellar worldwide', 'salon grade' and 'skin tones basis Fitzpatrick scale'	Scientific establishment of brand	
37	Showcasing symbols, icons and images like water splash, texture strokes, cream/milk splash, and natural elements like leaves, almonds, coconut etc., and sparkles, shine and glitter	Promotion of brand quality	
38	Showcasing a cultural symbol like that of Ayurveda in the advert and/or product image	Connection to the Indian target audience	
39	Showcasing natural settings in the advert like a sunny day, fashion show, bedroom, garden etc.	Connection to easy use of product in reality	
40	Showcasing the colour grey as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Avoidance of dullness or negativity or creation of balance and neutrality	
41	Showcasing the colour blue as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of stability and trust in the product	

42	Showcasing the colour silver as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of affluence and power of the brand
43	Showcasing the colour orange as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of creativity and enthusiasm the product brings
44	Showcasing the colour yellow as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of happiness and positivity that the product offers
45	Showcasing the colour gold as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of devotion and power of the brand
46	Showcasing the colour black as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of mystery and power of the brand
47	Showcasing the colour dark blue as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of knowledge and power of the brand
48	Showcasing the colour brown as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of comfort and security the product offers
49	Showcasing diamonds as an object and/or in the background in the advert	Sense of perfection and purity as well as status of the brand
50	Showcasing pearls as an object and/or in the background	Sense of wisdom and serenity in the brand
51	Showcasing the colour purple as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of luxury the product offers
52	Showcasing the colour beige as a colour of any object in the advert and/or the text and/or background	Sense of work ethic and simplicity of the brand
53	Showcasing a variety of products along with words like 'sensitive', 'dry', 'oily' and 'normal' skin	Promotion of diversity for different skin issues