



Research Paper

The Myth of Gender Identity: A Critical Insight of TV Commercials of Fairness Cream in Bangladesh

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Abstract: The paper examines the conceptual ideas of false singularity of beauty, confidence and success of women and lays out the reasons behind and beyond commercialization of the particular product. The study performs a visual analysis of television commercials featuring female models in roles such as cricket commentators, film actors, and daughters seeking familial professional approval, to theorize how the commercials represent the images, identity, existence of women in Bangladesh with the approach of semiotics in the form of inter sign relation of metaphor-metonymy in accordance with Roland Barthes' theory of myth and Horkheimer's Culture Industry as mass deception. The findings reveal that the whitening creams commercials strive to communicate an ideology representing a mixture of ideas between the Bangladeshi social values and the western concept of femininity in the form of standardization of female identity. Through these advertisements the concept of fairness is in a threat that women's activities might be confined to skin color and fair beauty. Ultimately women's identity is stereotyped through these representations of culture industry. This is an opportunity to write a new conclusion reflecting on how capitalized consumer complexities have affected in creating myths in women's psyche through the creative industries and our understanding of art, culture, and economy and in creating needs and expanding the commercial market of Fairness creams.

Keywords: Myth, Standardization, Stereotyping, Mass Deception, Fetish, Representation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A myth is a widely held belief, often communicated through media like film, advertising, and news, that conveys a cultural or political meaning by framing it as a natural or commonsense truth. It's not a false story in the traditional sense, but rather a way of interpreting reality that shapes societal norms, values, and power structures. A key theorist in this field is Roland Barthes, who defined myth as a "type of speech" or a semiotic system that takes existing signs and reconfigures them to convey an ideological message. Myth can be identified in any medium, from a written text to a film or advertisement. It becomes a system of communication. In media myths are a mode of signification, meaning they are a system for conveying messages through signs, symbols, and images. Myths are used today to legitimize things like consumerism, gender roles, and political ideologies (Barthes, 1957).

A central function of myth is to "naturalize" or make ideologies seem inevitable and timeless. For example, the "myth of the American Dream" presents upward mobility as a natural outcome of hard work, hiding other factors like systemic inequality, explains (Fiveable). Myths serve a purpose by teaching us how to understand the world. This makes them instructive and a way for a society to transmit its values. For example, an ad for a cleaning product showing a perfect, happy family using the product to clean a spotless house is a myth that naturalizes the idea that a product can create a certain lifestyle and that this lifestyle is the ideal.

The advertisement media has experienced a long and hilarious journey to become the creative industry of modern society. Its primary objective is to create the tension between culture and economics which lies at the heart of this terminology. This is now not simply a question of art and the market; Rather, it has pinned the false and illusive myth of modernity, obsession, and objectified stake holder of capitalized consumer society. Thus,

the culture industry's metalanguage has created a dimension of neo capitalism that digitalizes consumers' needs. Through advertising, capitalism is fueled by the principle of unlimited accumulation at the expense of all other values.

The fairness cream industry is also thriving in Bangladesh, a nation shaped by a complex blend of social, religious, and cultural stigmas and stereotypes. For decades, Unilever has taken advantage of the widespread preference for fair skin with its product Fair & Lovely (currently known as Glow & Lovely), which has become the dominant brand in the country's skin-whitening market. In Bangladesh, fairness cream advertisements often portray lighter skin as desirable and associated with success, contributing to social pressure on individuals, especially women, to conform to unrealistic beauty ideals. Furthermore, some fairness creams contain harmful ingredients like mercury, which can lead to serious health complications. This article is going to dissect the theoretical analysis of this culture industry that how the perpetuation of harmful beauty standards set the female psyche. Advertisements for fairness creams frequently associate lighter skin with beauty, success, and social approval, while darker skin is often depicted negatively. This creates a societal pressure for individuals to conform to these unrealistic beauty standards, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, especially among women.

These ads can normalize color-based discrimination, where individuals are judged and treated differently based on their skin tone. The health risk is a concern. Many fairness creams contain harmful ingredients like mercury, which is a toxic substance that can cause kidney damage, neurological problems, and birth defects in pregnant women. Other potentially harmful ingredients include hydroquinone and steroids, which can cause skin irritation, thinning of the skin, and other side effects. The use of these creams, especially without proper medical guidance, can lead to a range of skin problems, including irritation, dryness, and increased sensitivity to sunlight.

By observing TVC in the Bangladeshi advertisement media industry we are willing to analyze how the images viewed represent a particular identity within the society. In Fair and Lovely commercials there exists a representation of today's Bangladeshi social values and ideas, the images of today's women's identity. Sultana & Siddiqui finds that ads often portray dark-skinned women as undesirable and link fairness to success (e.g., getting married, confident life, career). This creates an inferiority complex among darker-skinned individuals. (Sultana & Siddiqui, 2019). The identity is conveyed throughout the commercials by using a careful selection of color scheme, background set, and audio line placement. The ads show the change of social values and ideas from a conventional one to a more liberal, modern and westernized one. This ideology changes the vision of women from being efficient human resources to being more careful of skin color. These ads show the very modernity of being identical in the deception of their commercialization of products.

The deception lies in the visuals that threaten human values and questions the very vulnerability of womanness of being unfair. The commercials draw a line between gender and class. The meta-language of the play is the vital motivation for young girls of Bangladesh for transforming fair skinned and beauty conscious and thus become the victims of consumerism of culture industry. Products selling turns into the light of girls' luck. The meta-narratives of the ads influence the girls as well as the whole global process of feminine identity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers worked on the advertisements of fairness cream and beauty products. The paper analyzes how the commodification of consumer complexities has shaped myths within the Bangladeshi female psyche through the creative industries, influencing our perceptions of art, culture, and the economy, while also generating demand and expanding the commercial market for products like "Fair and Lovely."

In 2008 Natasha Shevde advocated in her article that skin whitening cream is situated in the context of Indian culture, is fetishized through media, and is distributed to consumers.

Sultana and Siddiqui (2019) paper claims that the ads do not only create false ideas but also create discrimination among people in Pakistan. They even showed that according to Indian "Fairness Cream a Blea Market Overview 2015-2016" more than half of the revenues, skin care products in the market are generated by skin whitening products. In Pakistan the situation is similar to ours in Bangladesh.

A 2024 study by Razi, R. analyzed 152 south Asian fairness cream commercials on Youtube and found that 84% targeted females, while 78% used celebrity endorsements and fewer than half mentioned specific ingredients. The study concluded that these commercials reinforce societal bias, linking fair skin to success, confidence and happiness, and suggested dermatologists should prioritize overall skin health in their discussion with patients.

These commercials reinforce associations of fair skin with beauty, success, and social validation, perpetuating gendered and cultural stereotypes. - Himika Akram(2025)

The alignment of these citations and this very particular paper is obvious. The commercials create a powerful societal myth in Bangladesh by leveraging and reinforcing existing cultural beliefs that associate light skin with beauty, success, and higher social status. A review of literature highlights how advertisements and

societal perceptions work together to perpetuate colorism and create an internalized sense of inferiority among those with darker skin.

The difference that this paper is trying to create is a consciousness in the mass. The more women come to realize the havoc media creates in society by cultural hegemony in Bangladesh the more deception by the culture industry will be cornered. It is vital to create an awareness to protect women from being deceived by the fake and racist paradigm of capitalist society.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative interpretative approach, using visual analysis as the main method of data collection and analysis. Visual analysis is a method of examining and interpreting ads in order to elicit meaning, understand context, and identify patterns and themes (McKee 2003).

The analysis uses a purposive sampling technique, selecting four Bangladeshi advertisements of the particular product of fairness cream that are relevant and representative of the research problem and purpose. The ads are selected for their contextual richness, thematic relevance, and visual- narrative qualities.

The article uses a combination of theoretical and analytical frameworks, such as narrative and visual pleasure theory of Laura Mulvey, feminist criticism, postcolonial criticism and close observation, to guide the information collection and analysis. Contextual analysis examines how the ads are interconnected with their contents, through various forms of references, illusions, casting, artistic creation, commercialization of the product and influence. Feminist criticism is a framework that analyses how the advertisements represent construct gender roles, relations, and identities as well as challenge or reinforce patriarchal structures ideologies. Finally, close observation of narrative of the visuals is a technique that involves paying attention to details of commercialization of mise-en-scene, dialogues, artistic value, form of TVCs and creation of the whole culture industry and value for the society and visual media critics.

IV. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The concept of Culture Industry was proposed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt school in 1944. Culture Industry refers to the standardization and false-singularity of cultural items, and how these cultural items are regulated (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). It says that customers, as people, have become standardized because corporations produce standard products which fit our needs and demands. So, corporations produce our needs and desires. Advertisements are a powerful means of social communication (Das & Sharma 2016). They are an important tool used by marketers to promote their goods, services or ideas to their prospective customers (Das & Sharma 2016). Advertising plays a crucial role in our everyday life. Kotler and Keller have defined advertising as any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor (2008). Their main objective is to raise sales by rendering a favorable impression on consumers about their goods and services. To do this, they must quickly capture their attention through persuasion, whether it be while driving on a highway, flipping through a magazine or newspaper, switching TV channels, or opening a new tab on a computer. Advertising effectively grabs the public's attention through the use of television commercials, billboards, magazines, etc. It is the advertisement that attracts the consumer to buy a product and ascribe the connotation of "coolness" to it. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that "the culture industry has taken over reality as the prism through which people experience reality, thus completely shaping and conditioning their experience of life" (2002). The fairness industry is a multi-billion business endorsing the notion that being 'fair' is beautiful and being 'dusky' is always risky (Chauhan & Tiwari 2019). For example, Fair and Lovely's television advertising has stuck to propagating the hegemonic ideologies in their narratives over the last many years. The discourse constructed by their advertisements not only objectifies the women but also looks down upon the women who do not have a fair skin tone. In *The Odyssey*, one of the classics of Western literature, Homer expounds upon Nausicaa's beauty by describing her as "white-armed" in the same sentence as he claims "she outshone [all the other maidens], though all are lovely" (*The Odyssey* 1996). Women now believe that if they do not conform to this, if they are not so called standard beautiful, they would not be successful and would remain useless as well. This paper is going to concentrate on looking at the portrayal of women in "Fair and Lovely" advertisements and how these advertisements are propagating a myth of women's beauty standard, i.e., fair skin which becomes imperative to attain anything in life.

Fair & Lovely, the largest selling skin whitening cream in the world, was launched in the India market in 1975 (Karnani 2007). The brand's name itself has served as a visual cue to its Unique Selling Proposition (USP), which is that it caters to ladies with pale skin. In the beginning, Fair & Lovely was specifically designed to meet the needs of the middle-class customer. The growing middle class had become increasingly fashion conscious and was enjoying higher levels of disposable income. Although Fair & Lovely was first introduced into the Indian market, its reach has now proliferated to more than 38 countries around the world. In Bangladesh, for example, after introducing the product in the 90s, soon it became a huge success in this

untapped market. In fact, it is the advertisement industry that grows our needs. For that Adorno and Horkheimer say that-

The 'needs' are calculated.

"The effrontery of the rhetorical question, 'what do people want?', lies in the fact that it is addressed ... to those very people who are deliberately to be deprived of this individuality. ... Now any person signifies only those attributes by which he can replace everybody else: he is interchangeable, a copy. As an individual, he is completely expendable and utterly insignificant" (145-146).

The truth is that customers are buying this product because it is frequently publicized through the media only to illustrate this materialized commodity of "cool" that everyone must have. Consumers are truthfully as much of a commodity as the product itself. Adorno and Horkheimer criticize the 'Culture Industry' for promoting a society that is drowning in a society of mass culture and industrialization, instead of encouraging freedom and individuality (Horkheimer& Adorno 1976). The Culture Industry in short can be represented as the "Enlightenment" or knowledge as mass trickery or fraud. In other words, we may be compelled to wonder if we live in a world of mass deception in which we are simply kept in the dark.

V. "FAIR AND LOVELY" ADVERTISEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF JUDITH BUTLER'S THEORY

Butler argues that sex and gender both are culturally constructed. 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.' (*Gender Trouble* 25). In other words, gender is a performance; It's what you do at particular times, rather than a universal who you are. Butler argues that we all put on a gender performance, whether traditional or not and so it is not a question of whether to do a gender performance, but what form that performance will take.

This gender trouble has obvious media implications, since the mass media are the primary means for alternative images to be disseminated. The media is therefore the site upon which this 'semiotic war' (a war of symbols, of how things are represented) would take place. It is the media that define the standard of beauty now. For example- women should possess a slim body and beautiful white skin and men should have tall dark skin and of course a work-out body. "Fair and Lovely" as a part of the media always broadcasts the message that a woman cannot be complete without white skin. Thus, they create pseudo-consciousness among the women for the white and glowing skin. They define the standard of beauty. The ad producers do this for their business purpose. They show to the common people that their products are not a luxury, rather it is the need for the women.

Subconsciously, we may not realize that each time we buy this trendy product, we are merely buying the new trendy "thing" to add to our very own material product of a self. The truth is that we are buying this product because it is frequently publicized through the media only to illustrate this materialized commodity of "cool" that everyone must have. We are truthfully as much of a commodity as the product itself. Regardless, we have a situation where the consumers are being victimized by the producers in that they know what we like and give us what we want; therefore, we no longer have genuine experiences. (Horkheimer& Adorno 2002).

VI. THEMES OF FAIR AND LOVELY

Unilever announced in 2020 that it would drop the word "Fair" from Fair & Lovely, renaming it "Glow & Lovely". Despite this, critics argue the rebranding was superficial, as underlying messages remained unchanged. The move was part of a broader industry response to criticisms tied to colorism.



In all advertisements of “Fair and Lovely”, it has been espoused to be the cure for dark skin. The theme remains the same in all its advertisements. We want to show three advertisements for example.

In one such advertisement, a girl is depicted feeling dejected after being tormented by her father because she was not born male, followed by his dismissal of her limited job prospects as a woman due to her dark complexion. Subsequently, she uses the Fair & Lovely cream and impresses the interviewers with her newfound beauty, thereby securing the job and winning the approval of her father.

Another popular ad on television of this brand tells the success story of a young middle class girl who has a flair for cricket commentary. At home, she practices her craft using a phony microphone that is later replaced by a 'Fair and Lovely' tube by her mother. The next part is the girls’ instant selection as a television cricket commentator where her radiant skin tone becomes the center of attention for co-commentators and the television audience.

In another advertisement, a girl is rejected for a film for not having a brighter skin despite being talented. After using Fair and Lovely, she achieved huge success as an actor. Some ads depict the benefits of having lighter skin in the professional beauty industry, as in another spot where the dusky woman aspires to be a model but does not qualify for the role till she discovers the benefits of Fair & Lovely moisturizer.

All the advertisements of this brand show that the notable qualifications like intelligence, education, hard work, dedication etc. are not sufficient enough to achieve success. The only key to success is fair skin. So, if one wants to be successful, she must use this cream as it removes darkness and opens the magic door to success within 4-5 weeks. The concern should be given only on the skin if any woman wants to be successful and satisfied as well in her life. Skin color is the only way to feel good. The inherent implication is that if one has fair skin, she is somewhat superior to others around her as if darkness were an illness which one must cure.



VII. MYTH AS A SEMIOLOGICAL SYSTEM

According to Roland Barthes myth is a semiological system that makes meaning within the tertiary level of a tridimensional system (Barthes 1957). TVC of Fair and Lovely is the SIGN that signifies that fair skin is the source of success, social status and identity of women. Thus we can see the significance in this chart that shows the total process of advertisement of fair and lovely is actually mass deception of consumerism of fairness cream.

1. Signifier (image, sound, letter)	2. Signified (concept/idea)
3. Sign/ Language	
I. SIGNIFIER (fairness cream)	II. SIGNIFIED (concept of beauty)
III. SIGN/ MYTH (fair beauty is source of women’s confidence, creates dignified identity, helps to build up desired career)	

Fairness creams create myths through media in Bangladesh by consistently associating fair skin with beauty, success, and happiness, using advertising to reinforce negative stereotypes and promote a false narrative of desirability. Media campaigns connect skin color to social outcomes like marriage prospects, career success, and confidence, while also portraying darker skin as a source of rejection, which is reinforced by social norms and existing colorism.

Advertising strategies and their impact is more like underneath the meaning of these advertisements. Creating a hierarchy of beauty turns to the cover message of these commercials. Fairness cream ads establish a

system where fair skin is positioned as superior and desirable, while darker skin is presented as a flaw or obstacle.

Another interpretation of these advertisements is linking fairness to success. Advertisements often portray characters with fair skin achieving success in areas like careers and relationships, and even those who are initially rejected for being dark-skinned find love and acceptance after using the product. The media consistently portrays dark-skinned individuals as lacking confidence and facing rejection, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating the harmful and negative stereotype that skin color determines a person's social and personal success.

In another way, the advertising campaigns amplify existing societal biases; norms and colorism where fair skin is associated with higher social status and darker skin is linked to the working class. By highlighting insecurities about complexion, cosmetic companies capitalize on existing colorism to sell their products, creating a cycle of fear and self-doubt which is completely exploiting insecurities in the viewers. Promoting "before and after" scenarios is once again a meta-message of this semiological myth making system. Commercials frequently feature a dramatic transformation from a "before" state of rejection or low self-esteem due to dark skin to an "after" state of happiness and success, which is directly linked to using the product.

VIII. STEREOTYPING AS A RESULT OF THE ADVERTISEMENT

'Fair and Lovely'- the name of this brand itself promotes stereotyping. The fair itself is beautiful. If one has fair skin, then she would be considered as lovely. The ads for this brand propagate the idea that Women should be fair if they want to be successful. They show that women who are not fair are like a burden for their family for not having white skin. By showing these ads, they divert their concentration of women only upon beauty rather than on education or profession. Striegel-Moore and Smolak (2000) note that beauty is the core feature of femininity as portrayed by the media. It seems that fair skin is the only ticket to success and all other qualifications and qualities are irrelevant (Munshi 2001).

A groundbreaking study by Razi et al. (2024) analyzed 152 fairness cream commercials on YouTube from subcontinental South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka). Key findings include:

- 84.2% of commercials targeted female consumers.
- 77.6% featured celebrities.
- Only 47.4% mentioned specific ingredients.
- A mere 6 commercials acknowledged potential harms.

The core message of this finding of Razi et al. (2024) is that advertisements target woman, lack transparency, rarely mention harm

Natasha Shevde explains that the collective mantra generated by these ad campaigns is simple: If you buy this fairness product, you will make your family proud, you will look beautiful, and you will secure a wonderful husband—all of which are considered to be vital determinants of a woman's happiness in the highly patriarchal and male-dominated society. Oddly, the current brand proposition for the cream—"Fair and Lovely: The Power of Beauty" implies a more modern message about choice and economic empowerment (2008).

Fair & Lovely perpetuates the particular pressure on women to look beautiful, as the country's obsession with skin fairness is typically found to be gender-lopsided and targeted more towards women. Needless to say, Fair & Lovely has created a bone of contention between supporters and active users of the product and feminist groups, both of which adopt a very different approach to the issue of using fairness creams. While the former have no qualms in leveraging the product as a way to springboard out of social or economic constraints, the latter considers the very concept of make-up and grooming practices, such as skin-whitening, as pretentious lies.

Fair & Lovely has often been accused of fostering the commoditization of female attractiveness by highlighting the importance of a woman's physical appeal in a predominantly male-dominated society. Nowhere has this phenomenon of commoditization been more evident than in arranged marriage. By taking advantage of misconceptions about the potential disadvantages of having dark skin (which include a lack of career options, poor prospects for marriage, and low social acceptance) and fairness has undoubtedly become a fetish due to the lack of people with fair complexion and the promotion of skin-lightening cosmetics.

IX. IMPACT OF ADVERTISEMENT ON VIEWERS

The advertisements raise awareness of the objectification of women, as someone is always analyzing a woman's appearance. Hence, the concept of 'male gaze' emerges as a strong sub-text here (Jaggi 2015). Each storyline also repeatedly blames having dark skin for professional rejection. The dark woman is further marginalized within the larger framework of women as the marginalized gender, even though it simultaneously produces a highly racist discourse. The very existence of the friend/advisor/mentor who becomes the change agent in the protagonist's life is significant discourse on the propagation of dominant ideology (Jaggi 2015). The

protagonist finds success with the assistance of this change agent, be it a job or a relationship, and this is all presented in a very moralistic way. This kind of initiative appropriates physical characteristics—read: dark skin—as the main means of representing women.

X. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study finally comes to an insightful finding of mechanisms of myth creation.

1. Colonial Mentality and Societal Preference: The preference for fair skin is rooted in a historical "colonial mentality," which associates lightness with the former ruling class and progress. This historical context provides a fertile ground for the fairness myth to thrive, linking skin tone to social hierarchy.
2. Advertising and Media Portrayal: Advertisements are a primary tool for reinforcing these myths. TV commercials (TVCs) often depict dark-skinned individuals as lacking confidence, being overlooked in job interviews, or unable to find a partner. Upon using the product, their skin brightens, and they instantly achieve success, happiness, and social acceptance. This narrative suggests that fairness is the primary criterion for success, trivializing an individual's actual skills, talent, or intellect.
3. Psychological Impact and Insecurity: The constant barrage of these messages, combined with societal comments from childhood, leads many, especially women, to develop low self-esteem and an inferiority complex about their natural skin tone. The ads often use "fear techniques," showing the negative consequences of not using the product, thereby pressuring consumers to seek an artificial standard of beauty.
4. Perpetuation of Stereotypes: The media's portrayal of women, often in traditional roles dreaming of finding a rich husband or getting married, reinforces unequal gender and power relations in society. The myth, therefore, intertwines beauty standards with gender roles and social mobility, creating a powerful, self-perpetuating cycle.
5. The Role of Reinforcement Theory: According to the Reinforcement Theory, mass media primarily reinforces already existing perceptions and beliefs. In the Bangladeshi context, media portrayals of fair-skinned superiority simply amplify and normalize an existing cultural bias, making the myth deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness.
6. Challenging the Myth: While the dominant narrative is strong, counter-narratives are emerging. A notable example is the 2014 "fairness is not beauty, freshness is" campaign by Meril Splash Beauty Soap, which directly challenged the fairness ideal, indicating a slow shift in consciousness and a potential for change toward embracing diverse skin tones.

XI. CONCLUSION

Through advertisement, the cultural industry is profiting from false myths. As a devastating result of it, it spreads the problem like stereotyping, dominance and gender trouble. The social impact of these advertisements is shocking inwardly. These can encourage discrimination and even violence against individuals with darker skin tones. They can negatively impact social progress by hindering women's education, professional achievements, and overall well-being. Some individuals may face pressure from their families or partners to use fairness creams, further reinforcing these harmful beauty standards.

It fixes the standardization for the men and women, and we as a whole become victimized by their unique strategy. Rather, this brand is getting huge success day by day, and it seems that they will continue to thrive no matter whether they spread stereotyping and dominance or not. The contents, visuals and narratives of TVC of Fair and Lovely set a standard of so-called values, social desire, and show off feminine identity which is alarming and threatening.

Several organizations and individuals in Bangladesh have been advocating for the banning of fairness cream advertisements and promoting body positivity. There is a growing awareness of the negative impacts of these advertisements and the importance of challenging color-based discrimination. Some countries have already banned or restricted the sale and advertising of fairness creams containing harmful ingredients. There is a need for stricter regulations and public awareness campaigns to address the harmful effects of fairness cream advertisements in Bangladesh.

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