

MARKETING

Brands are trying to cancel the idea of "whitening." Will this work?

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Facing accusations of racism and stereotyping, some beauty companies have decided to eliminate words like "whitening" and "fairness" from their product packaging and advertising entirely. Image credit: Fenty Beauty

By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

With the Black Lives Matter movement gaining momentum in recent months, scrutiny on racial equality has quickly spread to the beauty industry.

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Apart from inclusivity in product ranges (i.e. available foundation shades), the spotlight has also been focused on marketing strategies and messages used by brands particularly for whitening product lines.

Many global beauty and personal care conglomerates have since clarified their positions and use of certain terminologies in the marketing of their products.

Unilever indicated it would remove the words "fair", "whitening" and "lightening" from all product packaging and communication as it "suggests a singular ideal of beauty." Its popular Fair & Lovely whitening cream, which accounts for \$500 million in annual revenue for the company, will be renamed Glow & Lovely in the coming months.

Johnson & Johnson also announced that it would stop selling its Neutrogena Fine Fairness and Clean & Clear Clean Fairness lines, which retail in Asia and the Middle East.

The skin whitening market is one of the fastest-growing beauty categories, with global demand projected to reach **\$31.2 billion by 2024, up from \$17.9 billion in 2017.**

According to the World Health Organization, routine skin whitener usage is at about 40 per cent in countries such as China, Malaysia, Philippines and South Korea. Is this naming adjustment and recall on whitening products the right choice?

Is it entirely a race issue?

In many advertisements for whitening products, a fair-skinned protagonist is often pictured enjoying attention from the opposite sex, career accomplishments or general success in life.

In a **classic (now-removed) ad for the aforementioned Fair & Lovely cream in India**, a retired man's young and dark-skinned daughter decides to take on the role of a son and provide for her father amidst his constant griping about their financial situation. She makes use of the cream, achieves a fairer complexion, and lands a coveted job as a flight attendant.

Following the release of new set of guidelines by the Advertising Standards Council of India in 2014 that banned ads depicting those with darker skin as being inferior this ad was eventually taken off air.



Fair & Lovely is a highly popular product in India. Image credit: Reuters

When beauty brands make these slip-ups in the West, they are often called out for racism such as **Dove in 2017, when it ran an ad showing a black woman removing her top to reveal a white woman underneath**. But what is important for brands to understand is that in societies such as India, these issues are less related to racism but instead stem from a deeply-rooted form of colorism in society.

India's caste system, which is among the world's oldest-surviving forms of social stratification, is one of the contributors to this. The system divides Hindus into four categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras.

While **studies have shown that there is no clear, proven relation between caste and skin color, Hindus of lower castes are often in jobs that require manual labor**, leading to their relatively tanner skin tones. With this assumption in mind, members of society start to associate skin tone with socio-economic status and, hence, success in life.

This is not unlike the situation in China one of the world's largest markets for whitening products.

Johnson & Johnson's decision to pull its Clean & Clear Clean Fairness and Neutrogena Fine Fairness lines in Asia was met with mixed reactions, with some netizens expressing **support, and others deeming it a "disgrace" as women should have the freedom to decide if they wanted fair skin or not**.

It should be noted that China is a largely homogenous society, with more than 90 per cent of its population historically being Han Chinese.

The notion of fairness being desirable in Chinese culture originated from the social division of labour and economic disparities from as early as the Han Dynasty.

Back then, there was the beauty practice of "Fu Fen" applying foundation where aristocrats, both men and women, applied rice powder or lead powder to whiten their skin.

Peasants, on the other hand, were constantly toiling under the sun and ended up with darker skin shades. Skin color in China gradually became a way to distinguish between societal classes. Till today, tanned skin is still largely viewed as undesirable, with connotations of a lower socio-economic status.

Therefore, simply removing all whitening-related terminology as a response to accusations of racism may not necessarily solve the issue globally.

This move will play out differently in different cultural contexts, and is unlikely to eliminate any stereotypes about skin colors in these Asian societies.

The absence of whitening products may also push some consumers to try more aggressive and harmful whitening methods, for instance, skin bleaching, in the absence of established products.

Product positioning and targeted communication

As brands become more politically correct in their communication, the relation between being "fair" and having "a

better life" has gradually disappeared from mainstream advertising.

However, this does not mean that consumer demand for whitening or related products has decreased, but rather, has become more segmented.

As such, brands should tailor their product lines and marketing strategies to specific consumer backgrounds and differentiated needs.

According to the [2020 Baidu Skincare Industry Report](#), whitening still accounts for 33 per cent of consumer skincare demand in the Chinese market.

Search for product efficacy ("antioxidant" and "antiglycation") and whitening ingredients ("niacinamide" and "glabridin") has increased significantly.

For contemporary consumers, whitening requires more than a one-size-fits-all solution, and more segmented skincare needs and criteria will emerge as consumers become more aware.

Some brands have begun to differentiate their whitening product strategy.

Procter & Gamble's premium beauty brand, SK-II, launched its GenOptics Spot Essence Serum in parallel with its signature product GenOptics Aura Essence Serum.

Although these two products are both under its whitening product line and are packaged similarly, they target two different whitening concerns: "brightening" and "spot treatment."

Instead of focusing on the entire idea of fairness and whitening, this narrowed approach helps to stimulate existing customers and target new audiences to purchase products which better suit their skincare needs and avoids the contentious racist associations.

"Whitening" as a term is not only considered problematic, but also excessively-used.

Monotonous emphasis on "whitening" is not enough to win market share within an increasingly competitive industry with sophisticated consumers.

Inclusivity is the new sustainability

It is worth noting that the self-tanning market, which is on the opposite end of the aesthetics spectrum compared to the whitening market, has also been growing in recent years.

According to [a report released by Technavio](#), the global self-tanning market is estimated to grow by \$191 million between 2019 and 2023. Major beauty groups such as Estée Lauder and L'Oréal, have all launched self-tanning products or brands.

While the main markets for self-tanning are still Europe and the United States, East Asian countries that continue to exhibit strong demand for whitening products have started to embrace different kinds of beauty.

South Korean singer Hwasa and Japanese model Mitsuki Kimura are just some examples of popular celebrities who have broken the mould of fairness and beauty in East Asia.

The celebrity effect will eventually see this more inclusive notion of beauty trickling down to the masses, with regular consumers gradually becoming more accepting of different definitions of beauty, furthering the development of niche markets.



South Korean singer Hwasa is an example of a popular celebrity who has broken the mold of fairness and beauty in East Asia. Image credit: Rainbowbridge World

Unfortunately, as far as the Chinese market is concerned, not only have niche self-tanning brands not chosen to make their entrance due to the existing limited market capacity, but legacy brands such as Clarins and Dove have also not introduced their self-tanning lines in the Chinese market.

Today, brands who advocate diversity should acknowledge the need to offer options to consumers. It is not about completely removing the idea of "whitening," but giving consumers the choice of whether they would like to chase a fairer or more tanned complexion.

In the burgeoning global beauty industry, educating and empowering consumers is a far more sustainable strategy than obliterating choices.

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