

# CASE 2-2 Cultural Norms, Fair & Lovely, and Advertising

Fair & Lovely, a branded product of Hindustan Lever Ltd. (HLL), is touted as a cosmetic that lightens skin color. On its website ([hll.com.in](http://hll.com.in)), the company calls its product “the miracle worker,” “proven to deliver one to three shades of change.” While tanning is the rage in Western countries, skin lightening treatments are popular in Asia.

According to industry sources, the top-selling skin lightening cream in India is Fair & Lovely from Hindustan Lever Ltd. (HLL), followed by CavinKare’s Fairever brand. HLL’s Fair & Lovely brand dominated the market with a 90 percent share until CavinKare Ltd. (CKL) launched Fairever. In just two years, the Fairever brand gained an impressive 15 percent market share. HLL’s share of market for the Fair & Lovely line generates about \$60 million annually. The product sells for about 23 rupees (\$0.29) for a 25-gram tube of cream.

The rapid growth of CavinKare’s Fairever ([www.cavinkare.com](http://www.cavinkare.com)) brand prompted HLL to increase its advertising effort and to launch a series of ads depicting a “fairer girl gets the boy theme.” One advertisement featured a financially strapped father lamenting his fate, saying, “If only I had a son,” while his dark-skinned daughter looks on, helpless and demoralized because she can’t bear the financial responsibility of her family. Fast-forward and plain Jane has been transformed into a gorgeous light-skinned woman through the use of a “fairness cream,” Fair & Lovely. Now clad in a miniskirt, the woman is a successful flight attendant and can take her father to dine at a five-star hotel. She’s happy and so is her father.

In another ad, two attractive young women are sitting in a bedroom; one has a boyfriend and, consequently, is happy. The darker-skinned woman, lacking a boyfriend, is not happy. Her friend’s advice—Use a bar of soap to wash away the dark skin that’s keeping men from flocking to her.

HLL’s series of ads provoked CavinKare Ltd. to counter with an ad that takes a dig at HLL’s Fair & Lovely ad. CavinKare’s ad has a father–daughter duo as the protagonists, with the father shown encouraging the daughter to be an achiever irrespective of her complexion. CavinKare maintained that the objective of its new commercial is not to take a dig at Fair & Lovely but to “reinforce Fairever’s positioning.”

Skin color is a powerful theme in India, and much of Asia, where a lighter color represents a higher status. While Americans and Europeans flock to tanning salons, many across Asia seek ways to have “fair” complexions. Culturally, fair skin is associated with positive values that relate to class and beauty. One Indian lady commented that when she was growing up, her mother forbade her to go outdoors. She was not trying to keep her daughter out of trouble but was trying to keep her skin from getting dark.

Brahmins, the priestly caste at the top of the social hierarchy, are considered fair because they traditionally stayed inside, poring over books. The undercaste at the bottom of the ladder are regarded as the darkest people because they customarily worked in the searing sun. Ancient Hindu scriptures and modern poetry eulogize women endowed with skin made of white marble.

Skin color is closely identified with caste and is laden with symbolism. Pursue any of the “grooms” and “brides wanted” ads

in newspapers or on the Web that are used by families to arrange suitable alliances, and you will see that most potential grooms and their families are looking for “fair” brides; some even are progressive enough to invite responses from women belonging to a different caste. These ads, hundreds of which appear in India’s daily newspapers, reflect attempts to solicit individuals with the appropriate religion, caste, regional ancestry, professional and educational qualifications, and, frequently, skin color. Even in the growing numbers of ads that announce “caste no bar,” the adjective “fair” regularly precedes professional qualifications. In everyday conversation, the ultimate compliment on someone’s looks is to say someone is *gora* (fair). “I have no problem with people wanting to be lighter,” said a Delhi beauty parlor owner, Saroj Nath. “It doesn’t make you racist, any more than trying to make yourself look younger makes you ageist.”

Bollywood (India’s Hollywood) glorifies conventions on beauty by always casting a fair-skinned actress in the role of heroine, surrounded by the darkest extras. Women want to use whiteners because it is “aspirational, like losing weight.”

Even the gods supposedly lament their dark complexion—Krishna sings plaintively, “Radha kyoon gori, main kyoon kala? (Why is Radha so fair when I’m dark?).” A skin deficient in melanin (the pigment that determines the skin’s brown color) is an ancient predilection. More than 3,500 years ago, Charaka, the famous sage, wrote about herbs that could help make the skin fair.

Indian dermatologists maintain that fairness products cannot truly work as they reach only the upper layers of the skin and so do not affect melanin production. Nevertheless, for some, Fair & Lovely is a “miracle worker.” A user gushes that “The last time I went to my parents’ home, I got compliments on my fair skin from everyone.” For others, there is only disappointment. One 26-year-old working woman has been a regular user for the past eight years but to no avail. “I should have turned into Snow White by now but my skin is still the same wheatish color.” As an owner of a public relations firm commented, “My maid has been using Fair and Lovely for years and I still can’t see her in the dark. . . . But she goes on using it. Hope springs eternal, I suppose.”

The number of Indians who think lighter skin is more beautiful may be shrinking. Sumit Isralni, a 22-year-old hair designer in his father’s salon, thinks things have changed in the last two years, at least in India’s most cosmopolitan cities, Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. Women now “prefer their own complexion, their natural way” Isralni says; he prefers a more “Indian beauty” himself: “I won’t judge my wife on how fair her complexion is.” Sunita Gupta, a beautician in the same salon, is more critical. “It’s just foolishness!” she exclaimed. The premise of the ads that women could not become airline attendants if they are dark-skinned was wrong, she said. “Nowadays people like black beauty.” It is a truism that women, especially in the tropics, desire to be a shade fairer, no matter what their skin color. Yet, unlike the approach used in India, advertisements elsewhere usually show how to use the product and how it works.

Commenting on the cultural bias toward fair skin, one critic states, “There are attractive people who go through life feeling inferior to their fairer sisters. And all because of charming grandmothers and aunts who do not hesitate to make unflattering comparisons. *Kalee Kalooti* is an oft-heard comment about women who happen to have darker skin. They get humiliated and mortified over the color of their skin, a fact over which they have no control. Are societal values responsible? Or advertising campaigns? Advertising moguls claim they only reflect prevailing attitudes in India. This is possibly true but what about ethics in advertising? Is it correct to make advertisements that openly denigrate a majority of Indian people—the dark-skinned populace? The advertising is blatant in their strategy. Mock anyone who is not the right color and shoot down their self-image.”

A dermatologist comments, “Fairness obtained with the help of creams is short-lived. The main reason being, most of these creams contain a certain amount of bleaching agent, which whitens facial hair, and not the skin, which leads people to believe that the cream worked.” Furthermore, “In India the popularity of a product depends totally on the success of its advertising.”

HLL launched its television ad campaign to promote Fair & Lovely but withdrew it after four months amid severe criticism for its portrayal of women. Activists argued that one of the messages the company sends through its “air hostess” ads demonstrating the preference for a son who would be able to take on the financial responsibility for his parents is especially harmful in a country such as India where gender discrimination is rampant. Another offense is perpetuating a culture of discrimination in a society where “fair” is synonymous with “beautiful.” AIDWA (All India Women’s Democratic Association) lodged a complaint at the time with HLL about their offensive ads, but Hindustan Lever failed to respond.

The women’s association then appealed to the National Human Rights Commission alleging that the ad demeaned women. AIDWA objected to three things: (1) the ads were racist, (2) they were promoting son preference, and (3) they were insulting to working women. “The way they portrayed the young woman who, after using Fair & Lovely, became attractive and therefore lands a job suggested that the main qualification for a woman to get a job is the way she looks.” The Human Rights Commission passed AIDWA’s complaints on to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which said the campaign violated the Cable and Television Network Act of 1995—provisions in the act state that no advertisement shall be permitted which “derides any race, caste, color, creed and nationality” and that “Women must not be portrayed in a manner that emphasized passive, submissive qualities and encourages them to play a subordinate secondary role in the family and society.” The government issued notices of the complaints to HLL. After a year-long campaign led by the AIDWA, Hindustan Lever Limited discontinued two of its television advertisements for Fair & Lovely fairness cold cream.

Shortly after pulling its ads off the air, HLL launched its Fair & Lovely Foundation, vowing to “encourage economic empowerment of women across India” by providing resources in education and business to millions of women “who, though immensely talented and capable, need a guiding hand to help them take the leap forward,” presumably into a fairer future.

HLL sponsored career fairs in over 20 cities across the country offering counseling in as many as 110 careers. It supported 100 rural scholarships for women students passing their 10th grade, a professional course for aspiring beauticians, and a three-month

Home Healthcare Nursing Assistant course catering to young women between the ages of 18 and 30 years. According to HLL, the Fair & Lovely Academy for Home Care Nursing Assistants offers a unique training opportunity for young women who possess no entry-level skills and therefore are not employable in the new economy job market. The Fair & Lovely Foundation plans to serve as a catalyst for the economic empowerment for women across India. The Fair & Lovely Foundation will showcase the achievements of these women not only to honor them but also to set an example for other women to follow.

AIDWA’s campaign against ads that convey the message, “if she is not fair in color, she won’t get married or won’t get promoted,” also has resulted in some adjustment to fairness cream ads. In revised versions of the fairness cream ads, the “get fair to attract a groom” theme is being reworked with “enhance your self-confidence” so that a potential groom himself begs for attention. It is an attempt at typifying the modern Indian woman, who has more than just marriage on her mind. Advertising focus is now on the message that lighter skin enables women to obtain jobs conventionally held by men. She is career-oriented, has high aspirations, and, at the same time, wants to look good. AIDWA concedes that the current crop of television ads for fairness creams are “not as demeaning” as ones in the past. However, it remains against the product; as the president of AIDWA stated, “It is downright racist to denigrate dark skin.”

Although AIDWA’s campaign against fairness creams seems to have had a modest impact on changing the advertising message, it has not slowed the demand for fairness creams. Sales of Fair & Lovely, for example, have been growing 15 to 20 percent year over year, and the \$318 million market for skin care has grown by 42.7 percent in the last three years. Says Euromonitor International, a research firm: “Half of the skin care market in India is fairness creams and 60 to 65 percent of Indian women use these products daily.”

Recently, several Indian companies were extending their marketing of fairness creams beyond urban and rural markets. CavinKare’s launch of Fairever, a fairness cream in a small sachet pack priced at Rs 5, aimed at rural markets where some 320 million Indians reside. Most marketers have found rural markets impossible to penetrate profitably due to low income levels and inadequate distribution systems, among other problems. However, HLL is approaching the market through Project Shakti, a rural initiative that targets small villages with populations of 2,000 people or less. It empowers underprivileged rural women by providing income-generating opportunities to sell small, lower priced packets of its brands in villages. Special packaging for the rural market was designed to provide single-use sachet packets at 50 paise for a sachet of shampoo to Rs 5 for a fairness cream (for a week’s usage). The aim is to have 100,000 “Shakti Ammas,” as they are called, spread across 500,000 villages in India by year end. CavinKare is growing at 25 percent in rural areas compared with 15 percent in urban centers.

In addition to expanding market effort into rural markets, an unexpected market arose when a research study revealed Indian men were applying girlie fairness potions in droves—but on the sly. It was estimated that 40 percent of boyfriends/husbands of girlfriends/wives were applying white magic solutions that came in little tubes. Indian companies spotted a business opportunity, and Fair & Handsome, Menz Active, Fair One Man, and a male bleach called Saka were introduced to the male market. The sector expanded dramatically when Shah Rukh Khan, a highly acclaimed Bollywood actor likened to an Indian Tom Cruise, decided to endorse Fair & Handsome. Euromonitor International forecasts that

in the next five years, spending on men's grooming products will rise 24 percent to 14.5 billion rupees, or US\$320 million.

A recent product review in [www.mouthshut.com](http://www.mouthshut.com), praises Fair & Lovely fairness cream: "[Fair & Lovely] contains fairness vitamins which penetrate deep down our skin to give us radiant fairness." "I don't know if it can change the skin color from dark to fair, but my personal experience is that it works very well, if you have a naturally fair color and want to preserve it without much headache." "I think Riya Sen has the best skin right now in Bollywood. It appears to be really soft and tender. So, to have a soft and fair skin like her I recommend Fair & Lovely Fairness Lotion or Cream." Yet "skin color isn't a proof of greatness. Those with wheatish or dark skin are by no way inferior to those who have fair skin."

Here are a few facts from Hindustan Lever Ltd.'s homepage:

Lever Limited is India's largest Packaged Mass Consumption Goods Company. We are leaders in Home and Personal Care Products and Food and Beverages including such products as Ponds and Pepsodent. We seek to meet everyday needs of people everywhere—to anticipate the aspirations of our consumers and customers and to respond creatively and competitively with branded products and services which raise the quality of life. It is this purpose which inspires us to build brands. Over the past 70 years, we have introduced about 110 brands.

Fair & Lovely has been specially designed and proven to deliver one to three shades of change in most people. Also its sunscreen system is specially optimized for Indian skin. Indian skin, unlike Caucasian skin, tends to "tan" rather than "burn" and, hence, requires a different combination of UVA and UVB sunscreens.

You may want to visit HLL's homepage ([www.hll.com.in](http://www.hll.com.in)) for additional information about the company.

## QUESTIONS

1. Is it ethical to sell a product that is, at best, only mildly effective? Discuss.
2. Is it ethical to exploit cultural norms and values to promote a product? Discuss.

3. Is the advertising of Fair & Lovely demeaning to women, or is it promoting the fairness cream in a way not too dissimilar from how most cosmetics are promoted?
4. Will HLL's Fair & Lovely Foundation be enough to counter charges made by AIDWA? Discuss.
5. In light of AIDWA's charges, how would you suggest Fair & Lovely promote its product? Discuss. Would your response be different if Fairever continued to use "fairness" as a theme of its promotion? Discuss.
6. Propose a promotion/marketing program that will counter all the arguments and charges against Fair & Lovely and be an effective program.
7. Now that a male market for fairness cream exists, is the strength of AIDWA's argument weakened?
8. Comment on using "Shakti Ammas" to introduce "fairness cream for the masses" in light of AIDWA's charges.
9. Listen to "In India, Skin-Whitening Creams Reflect Old Biases," *NPR*, November 12, 2009. Consider this information in your analyses.

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Sources: Nicole Leistikow, "Indian Women Criticize 'Fair and Lovely' Ideal," *Women's eNews*, April 28, 2003; Arundhati Parmar, "Objections to Indian Ad Not Taken Lightly," *Marketing News*, June 9, 2003, p. 4; "Fair & Lovely Launches Foundation to Promote Economic Empowerment of Women," press release, Fair & Lovely Foundation, [www.hll.com.in](http://www.hll.com.in) (search for foundation), March 11, 2003; Rina Chandran, "All for Self-Control," *Business Line* (The Hindu), April 24, 2003; Khozem Merchant and Edward Luce, "Not So Fair and Lovely," *Financial Times*, March 19, 2003; "Fair & Lovely Redefines Fairness with Multivitamin Total Fairness Cream," press release, Hindustan Lever Ltd., May 3, 2005; "CavinKare Launches Small Sachet Packs," *Business India*, December 7, 2006; "Analysis of Skin Care Advertising on TV During January–August 2006," *Indiantelevision.com* Media, Advertising, Marketing Watch, October 17, 2006; "Women Power Gets Full Play in CavinKare's Brand Strategy," *The Economic Times* (New Delhi, India), December 8, 2006; Heather Timmons, "Telling India's Modern Women They Have Power, Even Over Their Skin Tone," *The New York Times*, May 30, 2007; "The Year We Almost Lost Tall (or Short or Medium-Height), Dark and Handsome," *The Hindustan Times*, December 29, 2007; "India's Hue and Cry Over Paler Skin," *The Sunday Telegraph* (London), July 1, 2007; "Fair and Lovely?" *University Wire*, June 4, 2007; "The Race to Keep up with Modern India," *Media*, June 29, 2007; Aneel Karnani, "Doing Well by Doing Good—Case Study: 'Fair & Lovely' Whitening Cream," *Strategic Management Journal* 28, no. 13 (2007), pp. 1351–57; "In India, Skin-Whitening Creams Reflect Old Biases," *NPR*, November 12, 2009.