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Belief that only fair is beautiful and its impact on teenage girls

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Abstract---Background: Young minds are being driven towards wanting fair skin by the quest of only ‘fair is beautiful’. Adolescent girls who are going through this vulnerable phase of puberty are highly prone to fall prey to this mindset they are being exposed to everyday and may develop body image issues, lack of self-esteem and low confidence. Material and methods: This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 500 adolescent girls in 10 senior secondary schools of a rural block of district Rohtak, Haryana from April 2019- Jan 2020. Results: Out of the 500 participants, 138 (27.7%) were not satisfied with their skin color and among them, nearly half (44.6%) were using fairness cream. Among the study subjects who had body image issues, 65% were dissatisfied with their skin color and this association was also found to highly significant. (p=0.000). Association between socio-economic status, age group and skin color satisfaction were also found to be significant. Conclusion: Fairness cream market and social media perpetuates the ideology that being fair will secure you jobs, get you appreciated by the opposite gender and in general make you happy. There is a need to create more awareness and acceptance of the natural diversity of skin color in India via various media platforms and education programs to protect young girls from this ideology that only fair is lovely.

Keywords---adolescent girls, fairness cream, colorism, skin color satisfaction.

Introduction

White or fair complexion is perceived to be more appealing and covetable in most countries and cultures worldwide due to its alleged social advantage for marital and career prospects. In several Asian countries, this is especially relevant because for centuries skin fairness has been presumed to be a cultural indicator of class, wealth, and social prestige. Media whether print or social media along with matrimonial ads ought to take the onus of bolstering this mindset. In India, majority of people have brown skin and matrimonial ads still include the archaic “seeking-a-fair-girl/boy” lines. Not only this belief that fair skin makes one beautiful is misconstrued but also it needs to be considered that there are side-effects of these fairness products also. Products of skin fairness were valued 450 million USD in India. Women constitutes 80% of the total sales of fairness cream in India. ^{1,2}

Young minds are being driven towards wanting fair skin by this quest of ‘fair is beautiful’. Adolescent girls who are going through this vulnerable phase of puberty are highly prone to fall prey to this mindset they are being exposed to everyday and may develop body image issues, lack of self-esteem and low confidence. Long term dissatisfaction with their skin tone can lead to significant distress and affect their mental health. Unfortunately, there is lack of data and research material regarding this issue, thus present study was planned. This study was undertaken to estimate the prevalence of skin color dissatisfaction and use of fairness cream among adolescent girls. And also to find the association between skin color dissatisfaction and other variables.

Methodology

This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 500 adolescent girls in 10 senior secondary schools of a rural block of district Rohtak, Haryana from April 2019- Jan 2020.

Sample size

Market research by IRS showed that lowest prevalence of the fairness cream among adolescents was 13%.³ Taking prevalence to be 13% and absolute error to be 3% , the sample size was thus calculated by using formula: $4pq/L^2$ where p was prevalence, $q = 100 - p$ and L is absolute error = 3%

Sample size from above calculation came out to be 503. So, for the purpose of present study 500 subjects were selected.

Study Population

13-19 years old adolescent girls, studying in class VIII to class XII from both government and private senior secondary schools in the block comprised the study population. Students who gave assent to participate in the study were included and those who were not available in the respective school on the days of visits were not enrolled in the study.

Data collection

In the block Lakhanmajra, there were 21 government and private senior secondary schools according to the data provided by Block Education Officer (BEO). 1 exclusive boys school was excluded in the study. First 10 schools were selected randomly from the 20 schools, 5 government and 5 private, followed by 10 students from each class, thus a total of 50 students were interviewed from each school. To select students from each class simple random sampling technique was used. Selected students were interviewed in a separate classroom using pre-designed pre-tested semi-structured interview schedule by the investigator herself and confidentiality was ensured.

Consent

Prior to the study, permission was taken from the DEO and principal of each school after explaining the purpose of the study and written informed consent was taken from parents of the students.

Data compilation and analysis

The data was collected and entered in the MS EXCEL spread sheet, was coded appropriately and later cleansed for any possible typing error and then the data was subjected to appropriate statistical tests using SPSS 20 (Statistical package for social sciences) software as per study objectives. To show the simple distribution of subjects in terms of socio- demographic profile descriptive statistics in terms of percentages was used and inferential statistics like Chi square was used for qualitative data to compare complexion satisfaction with different variables.

Results

The mean age of the study subjects was 14.73 ± 1.736 . 50.6% of the study subjects were in the age group of 15-17 years, followed by 13-14 years (37.2%) and 18-19 years (12.2%). Most of the study subjects' fathers and mothers were educated up to secondary level (30.4% & 33%). Nearly half of the study subjects' fathers were farmers (47.2%), followed by government employee (16.6%) and majority of the study subjects' mothers were housewives (93.6%). 25.4% study subjects belonged to the middle class and 23.6% to the upper middle class. Upper class constituted the least of the cases (7.0%). Half of study subjects (50.6%) belonged to nuclear family, followed by 33.6% who belonged to three-generation family (Table 1).

Age	Frequency (%)
13-14	186 (37.2)
15-17	253 (50.6)
18-19	61(12.2)

Type of family	
Nuclear	253 (50.6)
Joint	79 (15.8)
Three- Generation	168 (33.6)
Number of family members	
6 or less than 6	207 (40.9)
7-10	261 (51.6)
More than 10	32 (6.3)
Category of socio-economic status	
Upper class	35 (7.0)
Upper Middle	118 (23.6)
Middle Class	127 (25.4)
Lower Middle	117 (23.4)
Lower Class	103 (20.6)

<p>Table 2 Distribution of study subjects according to adolescent girls' satisfaction with their skin color</p>	
Skin color satisfaction (N=500)	Frequency (%)
Present	362 (72.4)
Absent	138 (27.6)
Total	500 (100)
Use of fairness cream (N=138)	
Yes	62(44.6)
No	76(55.4)
Total	138(100)

<p>Table 3 Association of skin color satisfaction with socio-demographic determinants</p>			
Variable	Skin color satisfaction		p-value
	Yes	No	
Age categories			0.001*
Early adolescence	131 (70.4%)	55 (29.6%)	
Mid adolescence	175 (69.2%)	78 (30.8%)	
Late adolescence	56 (91.8%)	5 (8.2%)	
Body image issue			
Present	35 (35.0%)	65 (65%)	0.000*
Absent	327 (81.8%)	73 (18.3%)	
Type of family			0.065
Nuclear	172 (68%)	81 (32%)	
Joint	63 (79.7%)	16 (20.3%)	
Three-generation	127 (75.6%)	41 (24.4%)	
Socio economic status			0.000*
Upper class	17 (48.6%)	18 (51.4%)	
Upper Middle	97 (82.2%)	21 (17.8%)	

Middle Class	78 (61.4%)	49 (38.6%)	
Lower Middle	81 (69.2%)	36 (30.8%)	
Lower Class	89 (86.4%)	14 (13.6%)	

*significant

Out of the 500 participants, 138 (27.7%) were not satisfied with their skin color and among them, nearly half (44.6%) were using fairness cream. (Table 2). Table 3 displays the association of skin color satisfaction with socio demographic determinants. 30.8% and 29.6% girls belonging to mid-adolescence and early adolescence age group were not satisfied with their skin color respectively. This association was found to be highly significant. ($p=0.001$). Among the study subjects who had body image issues, 65% were dissatisfied with their skin color and this association was also found to highly significant. ($p=0.000$). Association between socio-economic status and skin color satisfaction was also found to be highly significant. ($P=0.000$). There was no significant association between type of family, parents' education, parents' occupation with study subjects' skin color satisfaction.

Discussion

Adolescence is one of the most rapid and formative phases of life, and the specific physical, social, emotional and sexual development that takes place during this time requires special attention. Adolescent girls are a vulnerable group and not just young adults or old children. They have specific and distinctive health issues related to their sensitive age which need to be addressed, for its impact will be not only on them and their adult life but also on the future generations. That's why the present research has been focused on this subject. In our study it was also found that 27.6% of the adolescent girls were not satisfied with their skin color and among them, nearly half of the adolescent girls (44.6%) who were dissatisfied with their skin color use fairness cream. Higher prevalence of fairness cream was reported by other studies among African population^{3,4,5} The reason for this may be because these studies also included all skin lightning procedures including fairness creams.

Association between body image issues and skin color satisfaction was found to be highly significant ($p=0.000$). Among all adolescent girls, who did not like their appearance when they look in the mirror (20.2%) and thus had body image issues, 65% were dissatisfied with their skin color. Thus, it might be a major factor responsible for body image issue. Association between socio-economic status and skin color satisfaction was also found to be highly significant. As socio-economic status increases skin color satisfaction decreases. 51.4% of the girls belonging to upper class were not satisfied with their skin color. The reason may be that adolescent girls who belonged to upper and middle class had more access to social media than lower class. Many recent social media filters promote colorism and racism such as Instagram filter 'blackface'. It is racially offensive and inappropriate because these filters and trends on social media convey that fair skinned people are happier and more successful.⁶ As age increases, skin color dissatisfaction decreases and this association was found to be highly significant. This conveys that younger girls are more prone to fall prey to this mindset as compared to older age group. Fairness products' marketers does not target 12 -15

year olds as of now but market research (2008) disclosed that 13% users of fairness cream were 12-14 year olds.⁷

To clarify variations in perceptions of skin color across India, further research among urban communities and various geographical regions is needed

Although there have been no published studies regarding skin color dissatisfaction and use of fairness products among adolescent girls in India, these findings indicate that skin color dissatisfaction is a vexatious trend and the reason may be that societal expectations are much higher with regard to women's appearance.

There are several potential areas of intervention from the point of view of public health practice

Primary among these is the design of programs to reduce stigma and prejudice associated with skin color and its connection with people's judgment of appearance, beauty, attractiveness, and social status.^{8,9}

Conclusion

Fairness cream market and social media perpetuates the ideology that being fair will secure you jobs, get you appreciated by the opposite gender and in general make you happy. There is a need to create more awareness and acceptance of the natural diversity of skin color in India via various media platforms and education programs to protect young girls'self-worth from this ideology that only fair is lovely.

Limitations of the study

The study is restricted to only arural block of Haryana. Hence the findings may not be representative of the whole State.

Conflicts of interest: There are no conflicts of interest.

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