

Pigmentocracy and Power: An Interpretive Study on Skin Tone Bias and Its Health Impacts among Young Women in South India

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Abstract: *This study investigates how colourism a form of discrimination based on skin tone affects the physical, psychological, and social well-being of young women in India. Drawing on qualitative data from ten postgraduate students at Gandhigram Rural Institute, the research employs a phenomenological framework to explore how familial, peer, and media influences shape perceptions and experiences of skin colour. Findings reveal that colourism contributes to diminished self-esteem, social isolation, unhealthy beauty practices, and intergenerational transmission of biases. The study underscores the urgent need for socio-cultural interventions and inclusive beauty norms to counteract the long-standing impact of colourism.*

Keywords: Colourism, health outcomes, body image, young women, socialization, India, phenomenology

1. Introduction

Colourism, a term popularized by author Alice Walker in 1982, refers to the prejudicial or preferential treatment of individuals within the same racial or ethnic group based on their skin tone. Unlike racism, which operates across racial boundaries, colourism functions internally—within communities, families, and cultural groups—often privileging lighter skin tones over darker ones (Walker, 1982). In India, colourism has evolved into a deeply embedded social phenomenon, shaped by centuries of colonial rule, caste hierarchies, and media representations. While India is home to a vast diversity of skin tones due to its complex geography and ethnic composition, lighter skin continues to be idealized and associated with beauty, modernity, affluence, and success.

The sociocultural impact of this bias is particularly pronounced among women, who are subjected to gendered beauty norms that equate fairness with desirability, virtue, and social mobility. Fairness creams, skin-whitening advertisements, and matrimonial classifieds reinforce the notion that lighter skin is not only more attractive but also more valuable. From childhood, many girls are exposed to subtle and overt messages that dark skin is a disadvantage. These messages are often transmitted through family, educational institutions, peer groups, and increasingly, digital platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

Despite growing awareness, there is a paucity of academic research exploring how colourism shapes health outcomes in the Indian context. Most existing literature either focuses on media studies or anthropological descriptions of skin tone hierarchies, while fewer studies examine the psychological and physical consequences of colour-based discrimination. This gap is particularly evident in research on young Indian women, who face intersectional vulnerabilities linked to gender, appearance, and socioeconomic pressures.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how colourism influences the physical, psychological, and social health of young women in South India. Through a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in phenomenology, the research captures the lived experiences of postgraduate female students from Gandhigram Rural Institute. By focusing on their narratives, the study investigates how familial upbringing, media exposure, and peer interactions contribute to internalized colourism, low self-esteem, unhealthy body image, and risky cosmetic practices.

In doing so, this research aims not only to document the hidden costs of colourism but also to highlight the cultural mechanisms that sustain it, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how beauty hierarchies function in contemporary Indian society.

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of colourism—defined as the discrimination or preferential treatment based on skin tone within racial or ethnic groups—has garnered increasing academic attention over the past two decades. In the Indian context, colourism is deeply interwoven with the historical legacy of colonialism, caste stratification, and patriarchal beauty standards. While the term was first introduced in the American context by Alice Walker (1982), scholars have since highlighted how colour-based hierarchies function distinctly in South Asian societies, including India.

In Indian society, lighter skin has long been associated with higher caste, urbanity, and social prestige, while darker skin is linked with rurality, manual labour, and lower caste status. These associations are perpetuated not only through cultural narratives but also through tangible socio-economic practices—such as preference for fair-skinned brides in arranged marriages, which continues to be a widespread and socially sanctioned norm (Nagar, 2018). Colourism in India is not limited to personal prejudices but is institutionalized

through media portrayals, commercial advertising, and the booming fairness products industry.

Research has shown that colourism can have a profound psychological impact, particularly on women. A systematic review conducted by the Bahria Journal of Professional Psychology (2019) demonstrated that individuals with darker skin often experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social exclusion. These findings are supported by Maqsood (2018), who found that women who perceive themselves as darker-skinned often internalize societal messages that equate fairness with competence and beauty, leading to chronic psychological distress.

In the Indian context, media and marketing industries play a crucial role in reinforcing colourism. Itisha (2018) noted how fairness-based advertising campaigns on television and in print media normalize and reward lighter skin, while marginalizing darker tones. This lack of representation contributes to the internalization of unattainable beauty standards among young women. The use of fairness creams and aesthetic modifications to lighten skin has become a normalized practice, creating a feedback loop of unrealistic ideals and harmful practices (Maqsood, 2018).

Cultural transmission is another critical factor in perpetuating colourism. Families and communities often pass down beliefs that lighter skin is more desirable. These are reinforced through intergenerational practices, home remedies, and social conditioning that begins in early childhood (Nagar, 2018). The intersection of colourism with gender, caste, and class adds layers of complexity. Dalit women, for example, face compounded discrimination due to both caste-based marginalization and negative perceptions of darker skin (Chatterjee & Rastogi, 2018).

Despite these alarming trends, academic work on colourism in India remains limited, especially in qualitative research that centers women's lived experiences. This study attempts to address that gap by exploring how colourism influences the health and social well-being of young women in South India, grounding their narratives within broader socio-cultural and institutional frameworks.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, rooted in the interpretive paradigm, to explore how colourism influences the physical, psychological, and social health outcomes of young women. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, capturing the subjective and nuanced ways in which colourism is perceived and internalized. In particular, a phenomenological framework was employed to investigate the personal experiences of participants and how they construct meaning around skin tone discrimination within their socio-cultural environment.

Phenomenology, as developed by Edmund Husserl and later expanded by scholars such as Moustakas, is concerned with the essence of lived experience. It emphasizes understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their realities. This framework was particularly suitable for the present

study, as it enabled the researcher to center the voices of young women who experience or resist colourism in their everyday lives. The goal was not to generalize findings but to uncover shared patterns and meanings related to colour-based discrimination and its consequences on health and well-being.

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who were best positioned to provide rich and relevant insights. A total of ten female postgraduate students, aged 22 to 25, were selected from the Gandhigram Rural Institute in Tamil Nadu. All participants identified as Tamil and came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Criteria for selection included being in the second year of their postgraduate program and having some awareness of or experience with colourism, either personally or through their social environment.

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was held in a private study room at a local library to ensure comfort and confidentiality. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. The interview guide included open-ended questions exploring themes such as family influence, peer interactions, media exposure, body image, and mental health in relation to skin tone.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, where recurring patterns and categories were identified and coded. The researcher engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging personal biases and maintaining a reflective journal to bracket preconceived notions.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through the anonymization of names and identifying details. The study also recognized the participants as co-researchers, acknowledging the collaborative nature of meaning-making in qualitative inquiry.

4. Findings

The data analysis revealed several significant themes that illustrate the multi-dimensional impact of colourism on the lives of young women. The themes highlight how colourism is experienced, internalized, and contested within familial, social, and digital domains, with direct consequences for psychological, physical, and social health. The five major themes that emerged were: (1) familial and intergenerational transmission of colourist values, (2) influence of media and digital culture, (3) psychological impact and identity negotiation, (4) peer interactions and social learning, and (5) resistance and redefinition of beauty norms.

4.1 Familial and Intergenerational Transmission of Colourist Values

Participants overwhelmingly emphasized the role of family, particularly mothers, in shaping their understanding of skin tone and beauty. Colourism was often introduced at an early age through casual remarks, comparisons among siblings, or

traditional beauty practices. Many mothers were perceived to have internalized societal beauty ideals themselves and passed them on to their daughters under the guise of care or concern.

“My mom used to tell me to stay indoors in the afternoon because I might get darker. She made me try all these home remedies—turmeric, curd, lemon—just to make my skin glow.”

In some families, comments about complexion were tied to marriage prospects, with lighter skin associated with increased desirability and social value. Even within the family structure, preferential treatment based on skin tone was occasionally reported. One participant shared how her lighter - skinned sibling was often praised more and perceived as more attractive.

These messages had a lasting effect on participants' self - perception, reinforcing the idea that darker skin is inferior or undesirable. While some participants mentioned their fathers or other relatives opposing these beliefs, the mother's influence remained dominant in shaping everyday beauty practices.

4.2 Influence of Media and Digital Culture

Participants widely acknowledged the influence of social media, television, and advertisements in reinforcing colourist beauty standards. Celebrities, beauty influencers, and fairness product commercials were repeatedly cited as sources that normalized lighter skin as ideal.

“It wasn't one ad. It was death by a thousand ads—Instagram, YouTube, even filters. Everyone wants to look fair. It's everywhere.”

Several respondents mentioned being introduced to skin - lightening practices through these platforms. Social media, in particular, emerged as a powerful force in shaping beauty perceptions. Many shared how digital filters on apps like Instagram subtly encouraged lighter, clearer skin tones, and some expressed discomfort when their natural skin tone did not match the “ideal” seen online.

Others noted the paradox of being part of a culture that predominantly consists of darker - skinned individuals but promotes a visual culture dominated by fair - skinned models and celebrities. This dissonance caused many to question their worth and physical appearance.

4.3 Psychological Impact and Identity Negotiation

Colourism had a profound psychological impact on the participants. Several described experiencing low self - esteem, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction. The internalization of fair - skinned beauty standards often led to emotional struggles, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood when appearance becomes closely tied to identity.

“Sometimes I feel like no matter what I achieve, people still look at how I look first. I've been told so many times- ‘you'd be prettier if you were fair’—it stays in your mind.”

Participants frequently reported comparing themselves to lighter - skinned peers or celebrities and feeling inadequate. Some engaged in obsessive skincare routines or avoided the sun to prevent tanning. Others discussed wearing excessive makeup or using photo editing tools to feel acceptable in social situations.

The internal conflict was evident: many intellectually rejected the fairness ideal but admitted to emotionally struggling with its persistence. There was also fear about being judged in matrimonial settings or job interviews based on their skin tone, reinforcing the idea that fair skin opens doors and dark skin limits opportunities.

4.4 Peer Interactions and Social Learning

Peer groups played a dual role in reinforcing and resisting colourist ideals. Some participants described peers who perpetuated colourism through teasing, comparisons, or backhanded compliments. Remarks such as “you'd look better if you were lighter” or “you're pretty for a dark girl” were common experiences that furthered feelings of exclusion or inferiority.

“I remember in school, people would joke about my skin tone—even friends. They'd say things like ‘Don't stand too long in the sun, you'll turn into charcoal.’ It wasn't funny.”

On the other hand, many participants also found solidarity and support among friends who helped them embrace their appearance. These supportive friendships acted as counterweights to societal and familial messages, promoting confidence and self - acceptance.

Moreover, the peer environment was also a space where participants shared and discussed fairness products, learned about the latest trends in skincare, and exchanged beauty routines—sometimes reinforcing harmful practices unintentionally. This emphasized the social embeddedness of colourist values and the complex role peers play in both challenging and sustaining them.

4.5 Resistance and Redefinition of Beauty Norms

Despite the widespread influence of colourism, a significant number of participants also exhibited critical awareness and resistance to dominant beauty ideals. Some had consciously stopped using fairness creams or had made peace with their natural skin tone. Education, feminist perspectives, and exposure to alternative representations of beauty played a role in this transformation.

“I used to feel bad about being dark. But now I realize beauty has nothing to do with skin. I see it differently now—confidence is beauty.”

Many expressed a desire to see more diverse representations of skin tone in Indian media and emphasized the need for societal change. They advocated for inclusive beauty campaigns, greater awareness in schools, and open conversations in families. Some participants had even spoken

out against fairness product promotions among friends or relatives.

Interestingly, resistance was often a gradual process, beginning with emotional struggle and evolving into critical reflection. The change often occurred through mentorship, exposure to diverse narratives, or personal milestones that shifted the participants' priorities.

4.6 Cross - Cutting Concerns: Class, Region, and Skin Tone

Several participants highlighted that skin lightening practices and attitudes are influenced by class and region. Wealthier individuals were more likely to afford safer, branded skincare products, while economically disadvantaged individuals resorted to harmful or unregulated alternatives. Similarly, participants noted that being from South India often added another layer of bias, as the region is stereotypically associated with darker skin tones.

Some participants felt that urban settings offered slightly more acceptance of diversity, while rural areas maintained more rigid beauty expectations. However, even in progressive spaces like universities, colourism remained a largely unaddressed issue.

5. Analysis and Discussion

This section offers a critical discussion of the findings from the interpretive study on colourism among postgraduate young women in Tamil Nadu, India, particularly focusing on their health outcomes. The results are analyzed using phenomenological and intersectional perspectives and are contextualized within existing national and international literature. Key themes that emerged—family and peer influence, media and digital culture, psychological health, physical health, and resistance—are examined to highlight the multidimensional impact of colourism on young women.

5.1 Internalization of Colourist Norms through Family and Culture

The study found that familial socialization plays a pivotal role in perpetuating colourist ideals. Participants shared how mothers and older female relatives often encouraged them to stay indoors to avoid tanning or suggested traditional fairness remedies. This intergenerational transmission reflects deep-rooted cultural associations between fairness and femininity, purity, and marriageability—values deeply embedded in Indian patriarchal society.

This phenomenon aligns with Nagar's (2018) study on skin-tone bias in Indian matrimonial advertisements, which revealed that women with lighter skin are overwhelmingly preferred as potential brides, regardless of other achievements or attributes. The emphasis on skin tone over competence perpetuates a regressive beauty ideal that undermines female agency.

Furthermore, the emotional effects of familial comparisons between siblings—often favoring lighter-skinned members—reinforce internalized inferiority among darker-

skinned girls from a young age. This aligns with the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999), which posits that parental and peer influences are major contributors to the internalization of appearance ideals and consequent body dissatisfaction.

5.2 Psychological Implications: Self - Esteem, Anxiety, and Social Withdrawal

Colourism was found to have a significant negative impact on the psychological well-being of participants. Many expressed feelings of low self-esteem, social anxiety, and a constant sense of inadequacy. Some reported avoiding social events due to embarrassment about their complexion or using filters and makeup to appear lighter in photos. This is in line with global research showing a correlation between skin tone dissatisfaction and psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and identity confusion.

5.3 Physical Health and Harmful Beauty Practices

The physical health consequences of colourism were evident through the widespread use of skin-lightening creams and treatments. Many participants admitted to experimenting with topical steroids and unregulated cosmetics to lighten their skin, leading to side effects such as skin irritation, rashes, thinning, and long-term dermatological damage. The economic angle is crucial here—students from higher-income backgrounds had access to relatively safer branded products, whereas those with fewer resources resorted to harmful local alternatives.

This class-based disparity underscores the intersection of colourism with economic status. The health inequalities tied to perceived ingroup colourism can rival or exceed those associated with general racism or discrimination. Within Indian contexts, this also reflects neoliberal consumerism where beauty becomes a commodity accessed unequally based on income.

5.4 Social Media as a Reinforcer and Disruptor

Digital culture and social media were found to play paradoxical roles—both intensifying and subverting colourist narratives. Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube often showcase curated images that valorize light skin through filters, branding, and influencer marketing. Many participants internalized these ideals and reported negative self-comparisons.

However, some participants noted that digital spaces also provided avenues for resistance. Through hashtags like #DarkIsBeautiful and influencers who celebrate melanin-rich skin, participants encountered counter-narratives that validated their natural skin tone. This reflects the underrepresentation of darker skin tones in Indian beauty brands' digital marketing campaigns, but also noted emergent challenges to such norms.

Nonetheless, the psychological toll of social media was widely acknowledged. It perpetuated beauty hierarchies and influenced self-worth, especially among impressionable young users. These findings resonate with global studies on

Instagram's impact on social comparison and colourism - related anxiety.

5.5 Peer Networks: Enforcers and Allies

Peers emerged as both conduits of colourist stereotypes and sources of support. While some participants reported being teased or subtly demeaned by peers, others found solace in friendships that encouraged self - acceptance. This dual role of peer influence highlights the fluidity of social learning environments, where both reinforcement and resistance to discriminatory ideals coexist.

In several cases, participants learned about skin - lightening products from peers, indicating how colourism becomes a shared cultural script among young women. Yet, some also discussed collective decisions to stop using such products or openly discuss insecurities, reflecting peer - led unlearning processes.

5.6 Marriage and Social Status: Gendered Consequences

The gendered dimensions of colourism were sharply evident in the narratives related to marriage. Participants were often told by family or community members that lighter skin increases one's "value" in the marriage market. These accounts confirm findings by Nagar (2018) who shows that in India, fair skin is a prerequisite for matrimonial desirability—an intersection of patriarchy and colourism.

One participant recounted being rejected in a matchmaking process due to her dark skin despite her educational achievements. Such instances point to the ways colourism operates as a social currency, especially for women, whose bodies are culturally constructed as sites of family honour and reproductive worth.

5.7 Resilience and Emerging Counter - Narratives

Despite the challenges, participants expressed increasing awareness and rejection of internalized colourism. Many described journeys toward self - acceptance, supported by feminist discourse, exposure to empowering media, or personal achievements that shifted focus away from appearance. This critical consciousness was often hard - won but transformative.

This suggests that resistance is not only possible but emerging among younger generations. Participants spoke of confronting relatives about their comments or actively choosing not to edit their photos. Such actions reflect "micro - resistances," small but powerful acts that challenge dominant aesthetics.

These acts of resistance are critical in fostering collective awareness and building communities of affirmation. Although these resistances may not dismantle colourism at a structural level, they create alternative spaces where identity, value, and worth are decoupled from skin tone.

5.8 Intersectionality: Caste, Class, Region, and Gender

Colourism does not function in isolation but intersects with other social categories like caste, class, and region. Participants from marginalized castes or rural areas faced compounded exclusion. One respondent noted that as a Tamil woman from a lower socioeconomic background, her dark skin was interpreted as a marker of both caste and regional inferiority.

This intersectionality affirms broader feminist critiques that colourism cannot be understood solely as a beauty bias but as a systemic practice rooted in histories of casteism and colonialism. The darker skin in South Asia is often a proxy for subaltern status and must be addressed within frameworks of social justice and cultural rehabilitation.

6. Conclusion: Towards a Transformative Understanding of Colourism

This analysis reveals that colourism, while operating through everyday remarks and beauty routines, is underpinned by powerful ideologies that regulate women's bodies and identities. Its consequences are far - reaching, influencing not only mental and physical health but also relationships, opportunities, and self - perception. However, the study also demonstrates that colourism is not an uncontested terrain— young women are actively challenging its hold through reflection, solidarity, and cultural resistance.

The findings affirm the need for culturally specific therapeutic tools, inclusive media representation, school - based interventions, and policy - level restrictions on fairness advertisements. Addressing colourism requires a holistic approach that combines personal healing with structural change. Only then can we move towards a society where beauty is truly inclusive and human dignity is not conditioned by complexion.

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