

Ethical Issues in the Marketing of Skin Lightening Products

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Abstract

Skin lightening products are used medically for the treatment of a range of skin disorders, however a major market has developed in their use for cosmetic purposes, particularly in countries where darker skin tones are prevalent. Many major multinational brands are active in the sector and high percentages of women reportedly use the products daily. In this paper we analyse a number of serious product safety issues relating to this sector, such as the use of mercury and other toxic substances in some products. We discuss a wide range of ethical issues relating to the marketing of products in the sector and the need for more consistent and effective regulation of the sector overall.

Keywords: marketing ethics, advertising ethics, product safety, cosmetics, skin-lighteners, stereotypes, discrimination.

Track: Brand and Brand Management

Introduction / Background

*“Is **wanting** to be fair about personal freedom? Or is it about gross racism? Is the fairness industry really unfair and ugly? ...What is it about fairness that makes it this national aspiration’ (Barkha Dutt (2008), host of the talk show **We the People**, on the popularity of ‘skin lightening’ or ‘fairness’ creams in India”. (Cited in Nadeem, 2014, p. 1).*

Skin lightening products are used medically for the treatment of a range of skin disorders, however a major market has developed in their use for cosmetic purposes, particularly in countries where darker skin tones are prevalent (Gillbro & Olsson, 2011). There are over 240 brands in India alone, with many major multinational brands represented such as Dove, Vaseline, Olay, L’Oreal, Estee Lauder, Shiseido and Garnier (Goldschneider, 2012; Shrestha, 2013). Over 60% of Indian women reportedly use the products daily (Goldstein, 2012). We discuss a number of serious product safety issues relating to this sector, together with a wide range of ethical issues relating to the marketing of products in the sector and the need for more consistent and effective regulation of the sector across national boundaries.

Product safety issues

Before considering the marketing of these products, there is a significant problem with product safety. Many products currently marketed in this sector have not been subject to safety and efficacy studies and the product category appears poorly controlled (Draelos, 2007); while some claim to contain natural ingredients such as Vitamin B3, mercury has been found in skin lightening creams available in Mexico and other developing countries (Peregrino, Moreno, Miranda, Rubio, & Leal, 2011). In 2011, 11 of 12 skin whitening products, most manufactured in China, that were tested in the Philippines were found to contain mercury levels well in excess of the regulatory limit (Ecowaste Coalition, 2013).

Other potentially dangerous ingredients include hydroquinone, classified as carcinogenic (cancer causing) and mutagenic (causing genetic mutations) and now banned in Europe, and

corticosteroids which can cause a number of skin abnormalities and even diabetes (Cristaudo et al., 2013). It is surprising, given the severe health consequences that can arise as a result of prolonged use of these types of products that there is little consistent regulation of the sector. This is primarily due to classification of the category as cosmetic rather than pharmaceutical: a lack of regulation means there is no consistent requirement for ingredient labelling. Many product labels do not list all ingredients; further, there is evidence in some developing countries of misbranding (Olumide et al., 2008).

A major inconsistency is evident in regard to products containing mercury. It is illegal to sell products containing mercury within the EU, but manufacture is permitted if the product is then exported to countries outside the EU. There is evidence of skin lightening products containing mercury being exported to African countries then being smuggled back into the EU for sale within immigrant African communities (Glenn, 2008). Consequences of long term use of products containing mercury can be severe: kidney, lung and brain damage may occur (World Health Organisation, 2011). Long term use of hydroquinone results in a disfiguring condition (ochronosis) involving grey and blue-black skin discolouration. As well as health issues, skin colour dissatisfaction and erosion of self-esteem may occur (Glenn, 2008).

Drivers of Demand: Entrenched Cultural Issues

Light skin colour is “valued almost ubiquitously” globally (Watson, Thornton, & Engelland, 2010, p. 185). This bias has its origins in racism, although the historical origins differ. The era of slavery in the USA saw the establishment of “a colour-caste system that placed dark-skinned persons at the bottom, light skinned persons in the middle and Caucasians at the top” (Watson, et al., 2010, p. 186). In South Africa, a similar ‘negative inheritance’ of European colonisation is evident, but there are indications that conceptions of female beauty in the pre-colonial era already favoured light skin tones. Latin America saw similar colour-caste systems as a consequence of Spanish colonisation and slavery and South East Asia saw the influence of two waves of colonisation, first from Spain, then from the USA (Glenn, 2008).

In East Asia, i.e. Japan, China and Korea, light or white skin for women was historically idealised, and was linked to wealth and desirability (Leong, 2006). Similarly, in India, privileging of light skin predates European colonial society, with paler skin associated with position and wealth, enabling sun exposure to be avoided (Glenn, 2008). Regions in which skin lightening products are promoted include: the USA (African American and Hispanic groups), Southern and Western Africa, Hong Kong, India, China, Thailand and the Philippines (Watson, et al., 2010). The demand for these products is thus based on deeply entrenched cultural beliefs that people with paler skin are of higher social status or, in India, of a higher caste, than those with darker skin, making the former more attractive and leading to better paying jobs or better marriages; Bollywood actors are among the high profile promoters of the products in India (Shevde, 2008), for example Shahid Kapoor, who is the spokesperson for the Unilever’s Vaseline Men skin whitening series (see figure 1).

Marketing Strategies

The marketing strategies of some products have been criticised. For example, as part of a wider marketing campaign involving traditional marketing techniques such as television and newspaper advertising and product placement, the Unilever-owned brand Vaseline produced a Facebook app (see Figure 1) which allowed users to download a profile picture, drag a line across their face and digitally transform their image to a much lighter tone (Goldschneider, 2012). In Thailand, a promotion by the Unilever product range Citra appeared to offer

university scholarships to students with fairer skin: public criticism lead to the promotion being terminated (Hodal, 2013).

Figure 1: Advertisement for Vaseline Skin Lightening app. Image sourced from: <http://jezebel.com/5585906/vaseline-crowdsources-racism-with-new-skin-whitening-app>



Stereotypical Images in Marketing: Theoretical Foundations

Gender roles and expectations are learned from childhood as part of a socialisation process (Fowler & Thomas, 2013). Stereotypical images reinforces discrimination and negative racial stereotypes, often at a subtle level: some claims it operates at a subliminal level, i.e. below the threshold of awareness (Shabbir, Hyman, Reast, & Palihawadana, 2013). Several theories are relevant here. Marketplace theory suggests individuals learn that some physical features are preferred and lead to positive responses from others (Watson, et al., 2010). Marketing activity, especially marketing communication acts as a socialisation agent, mirroring current social trends; gender stereotyping has negative consequences and to potential restriction of life opportunities (Eisend, 2010).

Reinforcement theory holds that coupling an ad with the positive reinforcement of desirable physical factors in models will result in more favourable advertisement and brand evaluations (Watson, et al., 2010). Advertising is not alone in perpetuating deeply embedded social values; wider media portrayals and popular culture convey the values and assumptions of dominant social and political groups (Sandlin & Maudlin, 2012). Social learning theory suggests that repeat exposure to the media content leads to the acceptance of media portrayals as reality (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). There is evidence of the prioritising of pale skin in beauty and fashion features targeting British Asian women (McLoughlin, 2013).

There have also been concerns raised for more than 20 years over the manipulation of skin tones to lighten ethnic models' skin tones, on the grounds that the practice reflects implicit narrowly defined theories of beauty and, more seriously, to avoid negative responses from racially intolerant customers (Watson & DeJong, 2011).

Specific Example of Marketing Strategy

We now examine the ethical issues involved in the marketing of the Unilever product range *Fair & Lovely* as there has been considerable ethical criticism of their activity (Karnani, 2007). *Fair & Lovely* was created by Unilever's HLL Indian subsidiary (Hindustan Lever Limited): the subsidiary name was changed in 2007 to HUL (Hindustan Unilever Limited). *Fair & Lovely* is the largest skin whitening cream on the market, holding more than 50% of the market in India, a market valued at over US\$200 million in 2006, with a 10 – 15% growth rate per annum. It is also marketed in other Asian countries, for example, Malaysia, and in some Arabic countries such as Egypt. While the primary target is women, male-oriented

products are also offered under the Fair & Lovely brand. A male-specific range, Fair & Handsome, was launched in 2008 by Emami (Shevde, 2008).

Figure 2: Pack shots for Fair & Lovely and Fair & Handsome Images sourced from: <http://www.unileverme.com/our-brands/detail/Fair-and-lovely/333481/> and <http://www.fairandhandsome.net/>



The central product benefit claimed for Fair & Lovely is dramatic skin whitening within six weeks. HLL claims the product fulfils a social need, given that fair skin is valued in the country, even though dark skin is less vulnerable to skin diseases. It is not marketed as a pharmaceutical product and therefore does not have to prove efficacy – which is disputed by dermatologists on the basis of the ingredients contained in many products.

Advertisements in all the countries in which Fair & Lovely is sold show product users getting better jobs, getting married or having a brighter future (and being noticeably happier) as a result of their lighter skin. The primary target market is women aged 18 – 35, with the poor being a significant segment. There are reports of girls aged 12 – 14 using the product, which is marketed in ‘affordable’ small packages. Critics have claimed that the ads are socially objectionable, racist, demeaning or even ‘repellent’. Two ads have been taken off air in India as a result of protests, but others are still running. HLL claims the ads promote choice and empowerment. Critics such as women’s movements claim they entrench disempowerment (Karnani, 2007).

Perpetuating Stereotypes

Fair & Lovely is a profitable brand, but there are many ethical issues that arise in the marketing strategies used, particularly in relation to the racist and sexist stereotypes and prejudices that exist in relation to skin colour. Additionally, a key target sector includes people who are not well educated (if at all) and who are therefore unable to understand the controversy and criticisms, or to understand that the efficacy of the product has not been verified. The use of the product by children is a further concern. HUL claims to exercise corporate social responsibility, but its actions in the marketing strategy and tactics with Fair & Lovely have led to criticisms of hypocrisy such as those discussed above. While HUL did not create the prejudices that underpin the demand for the product, critics claim the product’s marketing helps to sustain the prejudices. The company is marketing a legal product, it is not breaking any laws, and it appears to have a loyal customer base, but can it claim to be doing good while it does well out of sales of the product?

There have been calls for tighter restrictions on the sale and promotion of skin-whitening products in several countries, including proof of efficacy and safety, but to date, there has been little action. Proposals in more developed countries have included a complete ban on over-the-counter sales, and a requirement for prescription-only sales (Goldschneider, 2012).

Discussion

Two factors appear straightforward. Firstly, the sale of unsafe products such as those containing high levels of mercury should be stopped. The ethics of knowingly producing such products in the EU when they cannot be sold there is highly questionable and deserves scrutiny as to whether or not such practices are ethical. Secondly, the dangers of long term use of products containing toxic substances must be communicated to current and potential users. This will present problems in communicating to those with low literacy levels. Awareness may be achievable within the context of calls for tighter regulation of the product category noted above; changing consumer attitudes (and those of the wider society) and behaviours will be more difficult. A third factor is more problematic. What are the ethical responsibilities of global companies such as Unilever in marketing skin lightening products, given claims that they are sustaining prejudices and stereotypes? Particularly, when these companies use their considerable financial resources to reinforce the desirability of these products by using marketing techniques glamorising the use of their products in similar ways that the cigarette industry marketed their products?

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