

Exploring the Indian consumer perception and purchase intention for skin tone inclusive brands

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate consumer perceptions and purchase intentions regarding skin-tone-inclusive beauty and cosmetic brands, with a particular emphasis on the Indian market. This study aimed to explore the impact of skin-tone preferences on advertisement selection among individuals in the sample. Participants viewed six advertisements, and responses were gathered using a structured survey questionnaire. This study examines how an inclusive brand image, particularly regarding skin tone, influences Indian consumers of beauty and cosmetic products. The findings show that for gender-specific products, purchase intentions are higher when advertisements feature fair-skinned models compared to darker-skinned models. However, for gender-neutral products advertised by both male and female models, purchase intentions remain the same regardless of skin tone. These insights can help marketers develop more effective advertising strategies for the Indian beauty and cosmetics market.

Introduction

The beauty and cosmetic industry has been witnessing change, both in industry growth and evolution of consumers. This industry with an estimated revenue of \$US 677.19 billion in 2025 (Statista, 2024) is one of the fastest growing industries. With the evolution of consumers, now more consumers are looking at brands that represent everyone, including underrepresented consumers. Seeing someone who looks like you in an advertisement or finding a product that matches your skin tone can have a big emotional impact. The beauty and cosmetic brands are now breaking beauty stereotypes and creating an inclusive brand image through inclusive campaigns for a diverse consumer base (Rodriguez-vila et al., 2024).

Inclusive marketing, also termed as diversity in marketing, is multifaceted. The inclusive or diversity areas are age, beauty which includes physical characteristics such as skin, body size, appearance, gender identity and gender stereotypes, disability, LGBTQIA+, and race and

ethnicity. Inclusivity also includes religion, language, physical and mental ability, cultural identity, and socio-economic status (Campbell et al., 2023).

Research shows that consumers are more likely to support brands that truly represent them (Rodriguez-vila et al., 2024). However, many brands are not successful in inclusiveness. Further, there is not enough research on how inclusive branding affects the perception of customers about the brand in different cultures. This paper examines how inclusive branding in beauty and cosmetics affects consumers' perception of the brand for Indian consumers. The study focuses on the inclusivity dimension of skin tone and the consumer's perception of the brand engaging in inclusiveness.

Literature Review

The literature review covers different inclusive diversities in beauty and cosmetic products. Campbell et al. (2023) explores how diversity is shown in advertising and how that impacts people by reviewing 337 studies. They found diversity is often one-dimensional, and therefore a framework was developed that explains how and why diverse representation matters. Furthermore, there are research studies that focussed on inclusive branding in beauty and cosmetics. The study by D'Angelo et.al (2024) explored how consumers felt about beauty skin tone products when the brand had products of inclusive skin tone line extensions (versus underrepresented skin tones). The study followed a mixed-methodology using laboratory, field study, and secondary data. The results showed that the consumers were less favourable to the brands when they felt underrepresented. The results showed that when companies adopted inclusivity, that hesitation fades and consumer reactions became more positive and trusting.

The literature on inclusive advertisement in the cosmetics industry investigates consumers' perception of brand inclusivity for eco-friendly and organic beauty products. Cervellon & Carey (2011) focussed on consumer behavior, mainly on consumer awareness and understanding, with regard to eco-friendly beauty products. They explored how people understood the use of "green" fashion and beauty products. This was conducted using focus groups that were composed of both male and female in addition to in-depth interviews. The results showed that most consumers are confused about eco-labels and often don't fully understand what makes a product sustainable. Many rely on personal feelings rather than facts when choosing green items. The paper by Hassan et al. (2025) explores why inclusive marketing sometimes backfires. The results show that when brands try too hard to appear diverse, some people feel alienated or disconnected—especially if the efforts seem inauthentic or forced over time.

There are very limited studies that explore the cross cultural aspect of inclusiveness in beauty and cosmetics. Baek et.al (2022) researched on how consumers responded to inclusive

advertisements (as opposed to non-inclusive) for cosmetic products. The skin color was the inclusive dimension of this research and empirical studies were conducted on East Asian consumers such as China and South Korea. The findings demonstrated that brand inclusiveness influences favourable attitudes and behavioural intentions. Wiklund (2022) addressed perceptions of inclusive marketing and attitudes towards inclusive advertisements among Swedish consumers. The findings indicate that Swedish female customers like inclusive marketing and believe it is becoming more widespread.

Based on the literature review and analysis, there are limited studies that look at diversity across different cross cultural samples (Eisend et. al., 2022). Most of the skin tone inclusivity is studied on western consumers. Such a dominant western perspective raises the question as to whether existing knowledge is transferable to other cultural contexts. Therefore, we have addressed this gap by exploring the consumer perception and purchase intention for skin tone inclusive brands in beauty and cosmetic products specific to Indian consumers.

Research design and method

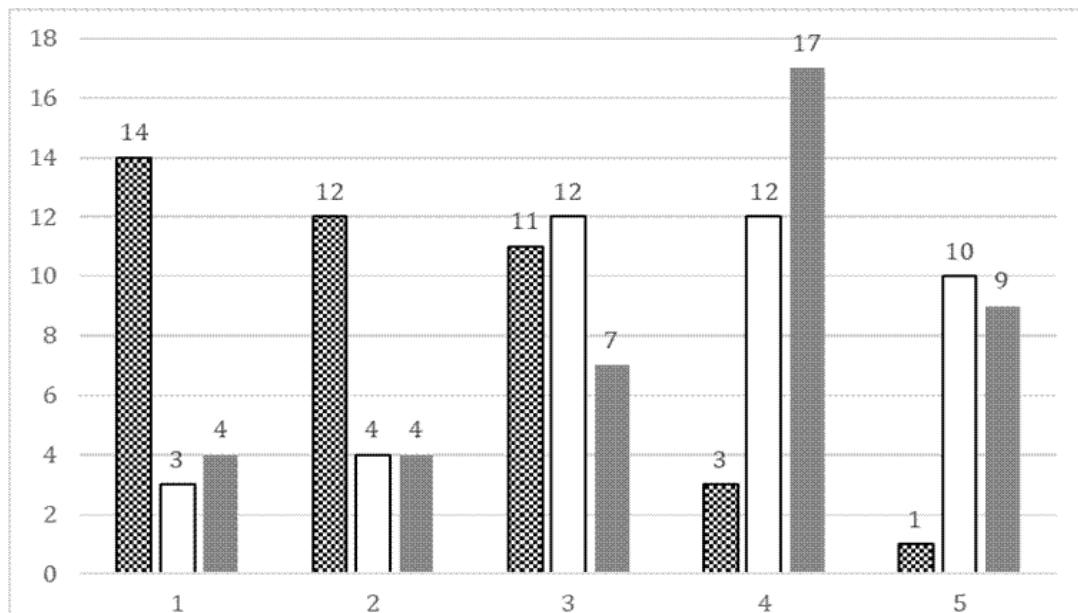
The aim of this study is to understand the consumer perception and purchase intention for skin tone inclusive brands in beauty and cosmetic products. In this study, we examined Indian consumers. The total sample for the study was 41 individuals. The data collection was done through a survey questionnaire. Out of 41 individuals, 33 were female and 8 were male. The average age group of the individuals were mostly below 18. Hence, the sample represented mostly school going children. Table 1 shows the main themes covered in the survey questionnaire.

Table 1: Themes covered in the survey questionnaire

Themes	Variables
Demographics of the respondents	Age, Gender, Education level
Social media usage	Popular channels such as Television, Youtube, Social media channels to consume advertisements
Consumer perception and Purchase intention	Consumer perception towards inclusive advertisements in beauty and cosmetic products

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the number of people watching advertisements on television, social media, and Youtube. The scale ranges from 1 (Least) to 5 (Highest). It is clearly seen that most individuals in the sample have watched advertisements on social media and Youtube rather than the television. This is attributed to the age group which is way below 18.

Figure 1: Number of individuals watching advertisements on different channels



Results and Analysis

The aim of the study was to examine the preferences of skin tone on the choice of product advertisements for individuals in the sample. The individuals in the sample were shown a set of six advertisements (refer Annexure for the details mentioned in the questionnaire). Through this study we tested the research question which is hypothesized as follows:

Research Question: Does inclusive advertisement in cosmetic and beauty products have any effect on the purchase intention of consumers.

Null Hypothesis – H0: There is no significant difference in the purchase intention between the two advertisements for the same product.

Alternate Hypothesis – H1: There is a significant difference in the purchase intention between the two advertisements for the same product.

Advertisement 1 and 2: Beauty Cream with female model



Advertisement 1: women’s BB cream



Advertisement 2: women’s BB cream

Advertisement 1 and 2 was an advertisement of a women’s BB cream that was being advertised by a female model. In Advertisement 1, the model had a darker skin tone, while in Advertisement 2, the model had a fairer skin tone. The results of the choice between Advertisement 1 and 2 is represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Purchase intention responses for Advertisement 1 and 2

Response	Advertisement 1 (Darker skin tone)	Advertisement 2 (fairer skin tone)
Yes	3	7
No	38	34
Total	41	41

Out of 41 individuals, only 3 (7.3%) had responded in favor of purchasing the product as shown in Advertisement 1, while only 7 (17.07%) had responded in favor of purchasing the product as shown in Advertisement 2. Overall, when asked to compare between Advertisement 1 and 2, only 11 out of 41 (26.83%) individuals responded in favor of Advertisement 1, and 30 responded in favor of Advertisement 2 (73.17%). A one sample t-test was used to understand the consumer perception and purchase intention for inclusive and non-inclusive advertised products. The results showed that there is a significant difference in the consumers’ purchase intention between the two advertised products ($M=0.70$, $SD=0.46$), $t(40)=9.86$, $p=0.025$. Thus, from the above results, we get our first proposition

Proposition 1: When the product advertised is *feminine*, and is advertised by a *female*, the preference for purchase intention is *higher when the skin tone is fairer*, compared to a darker skin tone.

Advertisement 3 and 4: Pimple clearing and whitening cream with male model



Advertisement 3: Men’s Pimple clearing and whitening cream



Advertisement 4: Men’s Pimple clearing and whitening cream

Advertisement 3 and 4 represented a pimple removing and fairness cream, with a male model. While Advertisement 3 had a darker skin tone model that was showcasing the product, advertisement 4 had a lighter (fairer) skin tone model representing the product. Table 3 provides the results of the number of individuals who responded in favor of purchasing the product.

Table 3: Purchase intention responses for Advertisement 3 and 4

Responses	Advertisement 3 (Darker skin tone)	Advertisement 4 (fairer skin tone)
Yes	3	5
No	38	36
Total	41	41

As seen in Table 3, only 3 out of 41 (7.3%) individuals responded in favor of buying the product shown in Advertisement 3, and 5 out of 41 (12.19%) individuals responded in favor of buying the product shown in Advertisement 4. Overall, when asked to compare between Advertisement 3 and 4, only 4 out of 41 (9.76%) individuals responded in favor of Advertisement 3, and 37 (90.24%) responded in favor of Advertisement 4. A one sample t-test was used and the results showed that there is a significant difference in the consumers’ purchase intention between the

two advertised products ($M=0.85$, $SD=0.35$), $t(40)=15.35$, $p=0.025$. Thus, from the above results, we get our second proposition

Proposition 2: When the product advertised is targeted for *males*, and is advertised by a *male*, the preference for purchase intention is *higher when the skin tone is fairer*, compared to a darker skin tone.

Advertisement 5 and 6: Sunscreen (gender neutral product) with both male and female models



Advertisement 5: Sunscreen (gender neutral product)



Advertisement 6: Sunscreen (gender neutral product)

Advertisement 4 and 5 represented a gender-neutral product which is sunscreen. Table 4 provides a description of the results.

Table 4: Purchase intention responses for Advertisement 5 and 6

Responses	Advertisement 5 (Darker skin tone)	Advertisement 6 (fairer skin tone)
Yes	11	11
No	30	30
Total	41	41

In this case, for Advertisement 5 (the sunscreen with a fair couple as models) and Advertisement 6 (the sunscreen as a product with darker tone models), the proportion of respondents who agreed were the same (close to 25% of the respondents indicated that they would purchase the product, while 75% said that they would not), irrespective of whether the advertisement had the fairer tone couple or the darker tone couple. However, when asked the question to choose between the two advertisements, approximately 55% of the respondents chose the advertisement where the darker skin tone models were on the advertisement. This indicated the inclusivity by

the respondents while placing their preferences. A one sample t-test was used to understand the consumer perception and purchase intention between the two advertised products. The results showed that there is a significant difference in the consumers' purchase intention between the two advertised products ($M=0.37$, $SD=0.48$), $t(40)=4.91$, $p=0.025$. Based on the above results, we get our third proposition.

Proposition 3: When the product advertised is *gender neutral*, and is advertised by *both genders*, the preference for purchase intention is the **same irrespective of skin tone**. However, when the choice is between the two advertisements, the preference was for the advertisement with darker skin tone models.

Analysis based on the perception of the product

In this study, we also assessed whether each advertisement is considered negative, neutral, or positive by the respondent. According to the summary of the results shown in Table 5, the proportion of negative responses to the advertisement was significantly higher for gender specific products (either male or female), compared to gender neutral products. For gender neutral products, the perception was largely neutral or positive. Second, the proportion of negative perception was higher than positive perception for both dark and fair tone models (with the exception of fair tone – male). Based on these results, we get the following proposition:

Table 5: Results on the perception on the different advertisements

	Advertisements					
	1 (dark tone- female)	2 (fair tone- female)	3 (dark tone-male)	4 (fair tone- male)	5 (dark tone- gender neutral)	6 (fair tone- gender neutral)
Negative	12	12	19	10	1	3
Neutral	23	20	20	17	15	19
Positive	6	9	2	14	25	19
Total	41	41	41	41	41	41

Proposition 4a: The negative and neutral perception for the products were higher than the positive perception with regard to gender specific products. However, for gender neutral products, the positive perception was higher.

Proposition 4b: For gender specific products, the negative and neutral perception is higher than the positive perception, irrespective of the skin tone of the model. However, for the gender-neutral product, irrespective of skin tone, the positive perception was higher than the neutral and negative perception.

Conclusion

This study aims to understand the influence of inclusivity in skin tone in beauty and cosmetic brands for Indian consumers. The results show that when the product advertised is gender specific (either female or male specific products and advertised by female and male models respectively), the preference for purchase intention is higher when the skin tone is fairer, compared to a darker skin tone. However, when the product advertised is gender neutral, and is advertised by both genders, the preference for purchase intention is the same irrespective of skin tone. The study could help marketers to strategize the advertising appeal to Indian consumers for cosmetic and beauty products. There are some limitations to this research and the small sample size could limit the generalisability of the findings.

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