

A STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF MEDIA LITERACY PROGRAM ON COLOUR DISCRIMINATION AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN IN CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

Social norms paired with media messages in India have successfully fuelled colour discrimination in minds of people. Advertisements especially for fairness creams, have successfully constructed an ideology that decries and belittles dark skinned people to be unsuccessful, unpopular and unpleasant. Keeping in mind that children often fail to differentiate between the real world and the fantasy world of media, this study analyses the impact of media on the skin colour perceptions of young school going children. Media literacy is seen as an efficient alternative in solving issues related to content of programs. The study started with an extensive qualitative study on understanding the perceptions of young school going children on the dark skinned people. It also helped in understanding the impact of media on developing their ideology of skin colour stereotyping. Based on the results of the qualitative research a media literacy program was conducted in five schools and its impact documented. The result of this study reveals that there is a strong perception among the children that only fair skin people are beautiful and that being fair is a sign of being rich. Post the media literacy program which provided the children an analysis of the portrayal of dark skinned people in media through a video, skit and few activities, the children understood the reality and though a majority said that the programme has given them a confidence and they would not discriminate or feel discriminated, a few stood by the fact that fair is beautiful and they will want to become fair whatever it takes.

Keyword: *Skin colour discrimination, media literacy, dark skin, children*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of beauty has evolved over ages. The definition of beauty is constantly changing in the society due to socio-cultural factors and in today's age, mass media plays an important role in defining the concept of beauty to its audience. Mass media especially television and cinema have promoted the concept of lighter skin as an asset and stereotyping of typecasting people with dark skin as unsuccessful and unattractive people. The psychological impact of these

representations is tremendous especially among young children and youth. The demand for fair skin among both the gender has led to the exponential growth of fairness cream industry in India.

According to the advertisers, the only hope for dark skinned people is to change their skin colour by using whitening cosmetics. Change of skin colour is seen as the only redemption from the misery as fair skin is perceived as a sign for prosperity, beauty and success. Even films and television too share this same ideology that being fair is beautiful and hence there is always a preference of fair skinned actors and presenters over dark skin talents. These repetitive images and messages on Indian media cultivate a strong bias based on skin colour. Though constitutionally, it is a violation to discriminate a person based on colour, the media has rampant messages on the inferiority nature of the dark skin colour. These messages have successfully manufactured an artificial demand to become fair and more and more children are the falling victims to these pursuits.

In today's digital world, children are hooked onto media twenty four hours. The mainstream media assault the young audiences with messages which are often inappropriate for them. Most of these messages delivered are crafted from an ideology which has a capitalistic bias and often promote a new culture, essentially that of a dominant class. Media is a very powerful tool for those who want both to control society and to sell ideas and products to its members. Literature has proved that both children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new styles of conduct from media.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To study the impact of media on the perception of beauty among school children and its impact on their psychology.
- To create awareness among school children on the Skin Colour Discrimination through a media literacy program.
- To enable children to critically analyse media messages and decipher the bias and misinformation in it.

2.1 METHODOLOGY

- Focus Group Discussion
- Media Literacy Program on Skin Colour Discrimination

3. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Focus group discussion was conducted among school children to gauge their perception of beauty, their media consumption patterns, and to find out whether they have faced skin colour discrimination. The following schools were selected for the study. Standard VIII students participated in the study and the findings are as follows.

Table: 1: Name of the schools and number of participants

Schools	No. of students participated in Focus Group Discussion
St. Francis Xavier Middle school, Alwarpet , chennai-18	45
Government Higher Secondary school,Nandanam, Chennai-25	35
Government Higher Secondary school,Selaiyur,Tambaram, Chennai-73	40
Cantonment High school, Pallavaram Chennai	40
Anna Gem Science Park, Kotturpuram, Chennai	66
Total	226

3.1 CONCEPT OF BEAUTY & FAIR SKIN TONE

Majority of students from 8th standards have used words like ‘chubby’, ‘fair complexion’ and ‘white skin’ to define **beauty**. Almost all believe that fair skin colour is a necessary quality for being beautiful and that fair colour is superior. They’ve also consider physical appearance, style and attitude in contributing the overall beauty factor. When asked who among them considered themselves handsome/beautiful, very few raised hands. All the children except eights said that they were not confident about their looks and felt bad about their complexion which they claim is predominately dark. Almost all the children said that they want a fairer version of their existing skin colour. Most children related fair colour with rich people and there was a strong association of dark skinned people with poor and poverty.

3.2 SCIENCE BEHIND SKIN COLOUR & PIGMENTATION

More than 80% of the children who participated in the discussion believe that colour of the skin is determined hereditarily; they also equally believed that cosmetics can alter skin colour & tone. Many cited actors and actresses undergoing the skin colour alteration procedures and claim that money can alter their skin tone. About thirty percentage of children said they are fully aware of melanin and its

role in protecting the body from sun in a tropical country like India. Even though, all the children said they learnt the structure of the skin in their lessons, very few were able to explain the structure of the skin in detail.

3.3 SKIN COLOUR DISCRIMINATION HOME

Skin colour discrimination according to the children starts from their homes. Nearly 70% of the children reported that frequent comparisons have been made among siblings, close family members, relations and friends. Instances where the sister is fair and the brother is not and vice versa has developed a certain social stigma- mostly regarding marital status as one girl commented that “boys can be dark or fair, but a girl has to be fair to get married.”

3.4 SCHOOL: The children informed that that though there are no direct discrimination in schools based on skin colour by management, there is a bias which usually creep in during cultural events or during interschool competitions wherein fair skin students are given prominent roles. Physical attractiveness is associated with skin colour in all these performances and some children accepted that even though they want to participate in these competitions they lack confidence because they possess a dark complexion and fear that they might be singled out and teased.

3.5 PEERS: Among friends, there have been numerous occasions wherein an individual is made fun of his/her complexion using poor and unruly adjectives. Slang words like “Kaka”, “Karuvayan”, “Karuchatti”, “Karuvachi”, “Karupuazhagi”, are used by children to tease their friends who have extremely dark skin tone. The result – a tremendous decrease in confidence level and a possible surge in deeply controlled violence. Many children learn these terms from television especially from comic scenes from movies and it helps them tease themselves and others on the basis of their skin tone.

3.6 PROFESSION & CAREER

When asked about their future ambitions and immediate desires, basic professions like doctor, engineer and scientist were the answers. None of the children were confident about taking up show biz or other professions which involves looks. A follow-up question regarding their interest in show business was asked and many asserted that to be an actor/actress, one has to possess a fair complexion and look beautiful. They asserted that none of them possess the requisite beauty or complexion they do not have any aspirations for show biz.

3.7 MARRIAGE & FAMILY LIFE

The perception that only a fair complexion woman can get married is strong among the group. More than 70% the boys who participated in the discussion said they would choose go for a fair skinned their life partner. They wanted a girl who is fairer than themselves and said that even if they do not mind the skin colour of their future partners their parents will look for a fair girl as partners. Girls felt

that fair complexion is a requisite to get married to well settled rich boys. Girls said this concept is embedded in them right from childhood as comments from friends and relatives revolve around skin colour of girl children in their families. Though girls said they do not have a preference of a fair skinned boy as life partner, they all agree that it is acceptable for a boy to be dark.

3.8 GENDER BIAS

The children asserted that it is vital for girls to possess fair skin to look beautiful but it's not the same for boys. The children both boys and girls cited examples from films wherein heroes are dark and are widely accepted by the audience like Rajnikanth, Vijay, Vishal etc., Hence majority of the girls believe that the same is the belief of the society. About 20% of the boys countered this belief and said that both boys and girls should possess fair skin to be rated as beautiful. Girls who possess dark skin said that they often get beauty tips from older women for making their skin fair. Usually, the topics starts in wedding halls or in family get-togethers where the mothers and daughters are taught extensively by older women on the importance of making their skin lighter than it is now.

3.9 FAIRNESS AIDS & COSMETICS

Majority of the girls who participated in the discussion informed that they use fairness creams like "fair & lovely" to either improve their complexion or to reduce pimples in their skin. They learn about skin products mainly from television and from peers. The mothers also play an important role in buying these fairness creams and other cosmetics for their girl children. Though some girls said their mothers insist on herbal products usage, majority of the girls prefer factory made branded cosmetics as they feel it is stylish, easier to use and the effect is immediate. Boys though claimed they are aware of these products, a majority of them said that they do not use cosmetics.

4. FINDINGS OF THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The focus group discussion reveals that media portrayal has a definitive impact on the perception of beauty among school children. Advertising and cinema play a major role in defining the standards of beauty among school children. Majority of the children believe that possession of fair skin is one of the chief attributes to look beautiful or attractive. The children especially the ones who possess dark skin colour at some point of time felt discriminated and for many it starts from their homes. All the children agreed that they do not mind going extra mile for becoming fairer than what they are now. There is a strong gender bias in this ideology as the children felt that the need to become fair is more for girls than boys. All the children believed that fair people are the most successful in life and that many attribute fair skin to hereditary factors. Majority of the children do not have the knowledge of the structure of the skin and many believe that cosmetics and surgical procedures can change skin colour of a person.

5.MEDIA LITERACY PROGRAM

A media literacy program will enable children to access, analyze and evaluate media messages. Media literacy program will enable a better understanding of the complex messages on skin colourism one receives from television, radio, Internet, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards, video games, music, and all other forms of media.

The Media Literacy program was conducted in the five schools and the impact of the program was documented through a focus group discussion. The children were attentive throughout the session and actively participated in all the activities given to them. The program started with a quiz which involved testing their scientific knowledge on the reasons for skin colour in humans. After the quiz, a small presentation was conducted to inform the students the structure of skin and reasons why skin colour varies from person to person.

After the quiz, a street play was performed for the students which highlighted the society discrimination of people based on the skin colour. The play was scripted by the students of the department of media sciences based on the experiences shared by the school children during the focus group discussion. Since the play was entirely scripted with the experiences of the children, the children were able to identify themselves in the situations portrayed.

After the play, a power point presentation explaining the media construction of skin colour and its commercial motives were explained to the children. An advertisement for a fairness cream was deconstructed and presented to the children to help them understand the persuasion techniques involved by advertisers. Lastly, a video on the skin colour discrimination in Tamil cinema was presented.

After media literacy program 80% of the children informed that there is a change in their attitude towards their preference for fair skin colour. Majority of the children agreed that this bias has been fuelled extensively by advertising and media industry. The children learnt to dissect advertisements and interpret the ideologies presented in the videos. Through this media literacy program children developed a competency to handle media content and apply critical thinking skills not only to skin colour discrimination but also to a wide range of issues. Media literacy has enabled the children to become active participant in consuming media content. Though 80% of the children informed that the media literacy helped them in changing their perceptions on skin colour, 20% of the children predominately boys disagreed with the presenters and said that they

still believe fair skin colour can earn them success and that possession of fair skin colour is prerequisite for good looks.

6. CONCLUSION

This project on imparting media literacy for school children on skin colour discrimination in media started with an extensive study on the perception of beauty among school children and its impact on their psychology. The study revealed the presence of skin colour discrimination in the society. Children with dark skinned felt less confident as they believed their skin colour will undermine their talent and they will be unsuccessful in their lives. Majority of the children lacked confidence and they all attributed their perceptions of skin colour on media. Majority of the children get their information and knowledge from media such as television and cinema.

Though constitutionally, it is a violation to discriminate a person based on colour, the media has rampant messages on the inferiority nature of the dark skin colour. Though there are enough laws and regulation in the country to restrict such content in media, enforcement of the laws becomes an issues and the legal course of action usually is time consuming. Media literacy is seen as an efficient alternative in solving issues related to content of programs.

Based on the results of the qualitative research a media literacy program was designed which included a video, a street play, a presentation and few participatory activities. The media literacy program was conducted in five schools and its impact documented. The result of this study reveals that there is a strong perception among the children that only fair skin people are beautiful and that being fair is a sign of being rich. Post the media literacy program which provided the children an analysis of the portrayal of dark skinned people in media through a video, skit and few activities, the children understood the reality and though a majority said that the programme has given them a confidence and they would not discriminate or feel discriminated, a few stood by the fact that fair is beautiful and they will want to become fair whatever it takes.

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