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## HOW COMPARATIVE MINDSET INFLUENCE THE CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOUR IN BUYING SKIN WHITENING FACE CARE PRODUCTS: SRI LANKAN CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

*Consumer purchasing decisions always involve two modes of cognition: a decision-only mindset (e.g., considering whether to buy) and a comparative mindset (e.g., comparing and deciding among available options) (Lee & Ariely, 2006; Xu & Wyer, 2007). This paper discusses how the comparative mindset influences consumer buying behaviour in buying skin whitening face care products in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, these are in high demand, and consumer buying behaviour has not been monitored from the consumers' comparative mindset. This study analysed a comparative mindset by taking ten current users and non-users of skin whitening face care products in Sri Lanka. Respondents were selected through the convenience sampling method and were interviewed using an in-depth interview method. Thereby, results revealed a strong and positive influence of the comparative mindset on the purchase and non-purchase of skin whitening face care products among users and non-users, respectively.*

**Key Words:** Comparative mindset, Skin Whitening, Face Care, Consumer Buying Behavior

## 1. Introduction

Whiter skin is being aggressively marketed across Asia, with vast selections of skin-whitening creams on supermarket and pharmacy shelves. Based on product, the face cream segment generated the highest revenue in 2016 and is also expected to grow at the highest CAGR of 4.7% (Technavio, 2016). Skin brightening cream occupied around one-third of the global face cream market in 2016 (Doshi, 2018). Since a trendy demand is becoming lighter skin among Sri Lankan females, even the marketers have taken one step ahead in grabbing the audience's attention using fairly skinned celebrities. When a local TV channel is tuned on, an ordinary consumer is bombarded with thousands of TV commercials. She gets to see stars with fair and glowing skin promote various fairness face care products daily. Consumers make stereotypes of what she sees. For instance, females believe that the celebrity used in a suitable face care product needs to be fair in complexion. The success of the fairness product depends on the first impression it makes through its advertisement. Because that is the point where the customer first gets to see the product and even think she should buy it. That is the main reason why none of the whitening face care brands has used celebrities with dark or tan in complexion because the whole purpose is to do a mind twist with whoever interacts with the commercial. When a female party gets to see a TV commercial with a celebrity in fair and glowing skin, a signal goes into the consumer's mind automatically to get a complexion like hers if she uses this advertised product on TV.

Particular consumers believe that they become tan unless they use face cream on their face when they go out in the sun. So that, they tend to stick to the same brand for ages and ages, thinking that only that product gives an excellent remedy of efficacy. (Daniel, 2013) Sometimes it might not be the case; only their mindset has been made accordingly. Moreover, according to previous research, most consumers use skin bleaching to attract friends because they believe becoming fair will secure them an essential place among their peer groups. Similarly, it was found that females want to look like their friends when they get to see their friends have changed in appearance (Lewis, Robkin, Gaska, & Njoki, 2011). Hence, there is a higher tendency towards purchasing skin whitening face care products based on friends' recommendations (Malangu & Ogunbanjo, 2006).

Depending on the customer's mindset, they are likely to engage in various activities when shopping. Consumers with a comparative mindset may assess and compare different possibilities, resulting in a combined evaluation (Kim & Im, 2018). A comparative mindset can influence the value perception of a product because the attractiveness can change depending on other options (Hsee, 1996). However, there is no study conducted to find how comparative mindset influence consumer buying behaviour in buying skin whitening face care products: Sri Lankan context. This study has been focused on exploring consumers' comparative mindset.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Face Care Market in Sri Lanka**

In terms of personal care, Sri Lanka is still at a very primitive stage where face care penetration is people applying face wash at least once a year. The face care penetration is only 40 per cent (Sharmila Bandara, 2017). Face care products include face cream, face wash, toner, face mask, cleansing gel, face scrub, lotions, serums, exfoliators, cleansers, and moisturisers used to keep the facial skin clean (Rusmadi, SyedIsmail, & Praveena, 2015).

### **2.2. Skin Whitening Products**

The use of skin fairness products, sometimes discussed as “skin whitening products,” “skin bleaching products,” “depigmenting agents,” “Fairness products” in Africa, Europe, North America, and Asia, with the occurrence of usage extending from 27 to 77% among community samples according to certain studies (Dadzie & Petit, 2009). It comprises whitening and skin-lightening creams, face washes, cleansers, face masks, toners, and lotions for skin fairness products. This industry is one of the rapidly growing segments of the global beauty industry, predominantly in Asia and Africa. It is predicted that it will be worth an estimated \$US 31.2 billion by 2024 (Global Industry Analysts, Inc., 2017). Even though it was marketed to women in the past, the companies have recently prolonged their offerings to include products designed and sold specifically for men. Commercials and packaging claim that products will make consumers’ skin fairer and more even-toned, not only that product names and the use of renowned models and actors in advertisements denote that they will enhance consumers’ cultural capital through improvements in attractiveness, youthfulness, confidence, and success (Karan, 2008), (Eric P.H., Min, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008).

### **2.3. Consumer Psychology**

Consumer Psychology is defined as using distinctively psychological concepts and methods to understand the dynamic forces underlying, influencing and determining consumer behaviour (Jacoby, November 2003). The distinct feature that separates human beings from other species is the cognitive abilities that humans possess. Cognitive skills refer to the ability of thinking, reasoning and problem-solving. People make decisions, overcome challenges and problems they face through series of efforts involving thinking and reasoning. The power of thought will assist an individual in proving a meaningful existence in society (Toplak, 2013).

#### **2.3.1. Comparative Mindset**

Person perception most often encompasses some act of comparison, linking an individual target to some point of reference. Recently, Corcoran, Hundhammer, and Mussweiler found that the impact of stereotypes may connect with the perceiver’s underlying comparison mindset (Ames, Mor, & Toma, 2012). Consumers with a comparative mindset may assess and compare different possibilities, resulting in a combined evaluation. Consumers with a decision-only mindset, on the other hand, may analyse only one alternative at a time and concentrate on deciding if the option is appealing or not, which is a separate evaluation. In a joint review, the relative

attractiveness of alternatives can influence the target evaluation, but not in an independent study (Tversky & Shafir, 1992). If people have to weigh personal predictions or possible risks, they usually tend to disclose a comparative optimism. They rate their chances more positively than others and believe that their aptitudes are above average. The motivation to self-assess and self-improve should pertain when people are deliberating; hence it encourages lateral or upward social comparisons in a study which was carried out previously; when tracking the participants' mindsets and social comparison, it was found that they had to compare themselves to an average person concerning various manageable and non-manageable risks. It was shown that participants were inclined to engage in downward social comparison as they believed that they were less vulnerable to health risks and adverse events than the average person (Puca & Slavova, 2007).

#### **2.4. Social Interactions**

If customers/patients can buy whatever clothes they like independently, why can they not buy any lighting products? Respect for sovereignty means that they have the freedom to decide what they can spend their money on. Society must respect their choices and actions in allowing people the space to exercise their independence (Veatch, 2018). However, it was found that there are social influences of the shared effects of many individual persons' selections (Prof. Darryl Macer, 2007). Thus each person is not able to exercise his rights to pursue his image of perfection, including whiteness, fair skin or even tanned skin. Because people are not autonomous when it comes to technologies which may have a risk of harm to others indirectly (through social norms of whiteness) and even actual physical harm from side effects of some chemicals (Chaipraditkul, 2013). In the Basics of Bioethics (Veatch, 2018), it was identified that there are two types of rights: positive rights and negative rights. Autonomy is related to the negative rights that give ways to act without disturbance. Even if the rights are dependent upon recognition of autonomy, people usually cannot pursue any likelihood of carrying out some action in practice. Under these circumstances, the concept of whiteness revolves around any persons who consider themselves to require treatment psychologically. Even though beauty and white skin might not be life-threatening, it affects how people act through how they see their lives and themselves, so they might also look into any factors connected to their actions (Chaipraditkul, 2013).

A comparative study between nine skin bleachers and nine non-skin bleachers on self-esteem levels by (Charles, 2003) found that one participant among nine skin bleachers specified that she bleached because her friends were also doing it that peer pressure can be a motivating factor. A study by (Robinson, 2011) Robinson verifies this finding because it was also found that the impact of others can be pretty influential. Correspondingly, (Lewis, Robkin, Gaska, & Njoki, 2011) found that some respondents stated that their friends and colleagues claimed that they should also have a lighter complexion. For instance, a 51-year-old independent food preparer reported, "I use skin bleaching to attract my friends", whereas a 22-year-old student stated, "... I saw my friend had changed, so I wanted to look like her." (Lewis, Robkin, Gaska, & Njoki, 2011). In South Africa, (Malangu & Ogunbanjo, 2006) found that peer pressure was expressively associated with topical steroid misapplication. For example, the study found that 35.5% of respondents misused topical steroid products, 47.5% were initially

recommended mainly through friends. These findings suggest that most people engage in the practice because they are being pressurised and also bleach their skin because they see other people using these products, hence, desire to obtain the same privileges of having a lighter skin tone, which includes, but is not limited to, admiration, social class and beauty (Peltzer, Pengpid, & James, 2016). For this reason, the present study aims to determine if the need to fit in or the need for fame amongst peers is a good enough reason for this practice.

## **2.5. Consumer Behavior**

It would comprise the buyers or customers of products and the people who use them. It contracts with the buying decision itself and far beyond. Consumer behaviour covers from 'How do we know what we want?' 'What do we do with something we no longer want?' In between these two stages, consumer behaviour deals with many other concerns (Priest, Carter, & Statt, 2013).

- How do we get information about products?
- How do we assess alternative products?
- Why do different people choose or use other products?
- How do we decide on a value for money?
- How much risk do we take with what products?
- Who influences our buying decisions and our use of the product?
- How are brand loyalties formed and changed?

The typical consumer behaviour definition might be the following: The mental, emotional and physical activities that people engage in when selecting, purchasing, using and disposing of products and services to satisfy needs and desires (Priest, Carter, & Statt, 2013).

## **3. Methodology**

This study takes the qualitative approach mainly because consumer psychology is empirically tested. Qualitative research is defined as a research strategy to gain a deep understanding of the phenomena. In specific, qualitative research provides insights into the problems and attempts to offer ideas. Thus it lays the foundation for further quantitative study (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

All the primary data required for the study had been collected through in-depth interviews with fairness product users and non-users. In-depth interviews were conducted using a predetermined interview guide where the participants were not allowed to see the pre-set areas of the questions. At specific points, arranged questions were not asked as the respondents answered the questions and other questions. Sometimes the researcher had to ask probing and additional questions related to the study to gather valuable and meaningful insights. The interview guide contained more open-ended questions and a few closed-ended questions, allowing the participant the freedom to answer the questions asked.







The researcher has chosen convenience sampling, a form of non-probability selection, as the data collection method for this study. According to Bryman and Bell 2007, a

convenience sample is a type of non-probability sample selected because it is simply available for the researcher at hand quickly.

The researcher has conducted ten in-depth interviews among females who fall under 18-25 for this study. Out of the ten respondents, five were current fairness creams users, whereas the other five were current non-users of fairness creams. Since there were no researches conducted aiming the psychology of buying skin whitening face care products among females in the Sri Lankan context to understand the scope of the study few pilot studies were carried out. In-depth interviews were conducted in places that were more convenient for the respondents, along with an interview guide. Transcriptions were prepared with the recordings of the in-depth interviews after finishing the in-depth interviews. Unnecessary data for the study was removed when preparing transcriptions.

#### 4. Results/Analysis and Discussion

Data analysis was done using a three-step system which included Review, Analysis and Summarize of each method. Initially, the taped content was transcribed and sent to the respective respondent to verify the transcribed content. Then it was coded and analysed using the Force-field analysis method. When analysing the data gathered from the current users of skin whitening face care products, the indicator of Opinions and Suggestions (OS) can be identified as the strongest supportive influence representing the independent variable of comparative mindset implying that majority of current users shows a tendency of considering what others say when buying skin whitening face care products. Usually, this sort of psyche is created when people get to compare themselves with others. That is the main reason why people compel to believe what others say, making someone the benchmark.







Variable	Drivers	Resisters
Comparative Mindset	Opinions & Suggestions (25) 	Opinions & Suggestions (7) 
	Be important among others (16) 	Be important among others (2) 
	Self-improvement (13) 	Self-improvement (1) 

**Figure 1. Overall Force Field Analysis: Current Users of Skin Whitening Face Care Products**

*Source: Author Developed*

When analysing the current non-users of skin whitening face care products, the researcher was able to identify indicators of Opinions and Suggestions (OS), which represent the independent variable of comparative mindset has the most substantial resistive influence. Here the ones who do not use any fairness face care products have negative beliefs on being fair. Opinions and Suggestions of using fairness face care products were treated as negative comments by the non- users. In turn, they advise those who are using the fairness products not to use them by telling the adverse effects.

It was found that most of the non-users are influenced by the awareness programs about anti-fairness products telecast on media.

Variable	Drivers	Resisters
Comparative Mindset	Opinions & Suggestions (8) 	Opinions & Suggestions (17) 
	Be important among others (13) 	Be important among others (15) 
	Self-improvement (0) 	Self-improvement (6) 

**Figure 2. Overall Force Field Analysis: Current Non- Users of Skin Whitening Face Care Products**

*Source: Author Developed*

#### 4.1. Discussion and Findings

##### *Current Users of Fairness Face Care Products*

When current users were questioned on what products they were using, the majority's answer was fairness cream. Yet, some stated that they used a face mask to remove sunburns after getting exposed to the sun for long hours. Similarly, some mentioned that they use a fairness night cream since they could not use it in the daytime due to pimples. Most of them stated that they need to have clear, blemish-free skin. Even though the respondents preferred to become fair, they wanted to have natural fairness with a glow rather than having artificial fairness. Almost all the respondents desired to have golden fairness. Other works of literature mentioned that most females use fairness cream either as a solution for acne or for fair complexion (Alghamdi et al., 2020).

Furthermore, having talked in favour of becoming fair, they disagreed upon using skin whitening products containing bleaching because they were well aware of the adverse effect of them. Not only that, they publically commented about imported fairness brands coming from countries like China and Pakistan. These respondents firmly refused the use of these brands, and some had used them earlier without knowing precisely about those brands. As a result, some of them had faced allergic conditions and gone through even medical treatment as well. Besides that, some respondents declared that they use a fairness cream to solve their acne problems as the fragrance of acne creams available in the market is not appealing. The researcher concluded that most of the respondents showed a positive attitude towards natural products due to chemical misconceptions and increased awareness about superior benefits associated with natural remedies. Alghamdi et al. (2020), found that nearly two thirds of females in their study were aware about the side effects of fairness creams available in the market. The majority of the respondents were compelled to buy fairness brands that their family, friends, and beauticians recommended mainly because they too wanted to improve their complexion like the ones who suggested them. In addition to that, they wanted to look attractive among others. Almost all the current users spend a considerable amount of money buying the fairness cream and are willing to pay even more if the product is promising. The users would like to recommend their product to others when it is delivering the

product efficacy. Almost all the users have been using the product continuously upon its efficacy. Some were in a psyche that if the product were purely natural, the price would be high since natural ingredients are scarce. Yet there are willing to pay more upon its effectiveness.

#### *Current Non-Users of Fairness Face Care Products*

The main reason why these respondents were not using fairness face care products are due to the phobia they have with the adverse side effects of usage, especially after seeing what had happened to their friends who were using it, some had become victims of using fairness products and stopped using them, desire to protect the natural skin without changing.

Most of the respondents were aware of the chemical misconceptions. They had got know about these from TV awareness programs and through social influence, especially after seeing the victims of fairness product users. In contrast, Sindhushree (2018) has found that majority of respondents purchase fairness products through persuasive fairness advertisements. The other key finding is that none of the answerers wanted to become deliberately dark like foreigners using tanning creams to get the skin tone dark. These respondents did not want to get into extra trouble by applying necessary things to their faces. Thus, they believe natural skin is good. Besides that, some mentioned that there was not a habit of continuous using something over a long time. Hence, keeping the same colour constantly made it easy for them to apply nothing to their face.

Most of the respondents used a day cream to protect their skin from getting damage. Sometimes, their decision to not apply any fairness face cream depends on the negative support given by the family. That is, sometimes their family or loved ones insisted they not to get artificial fairness. They firmly believed that all the fairness brands available in the market are full of chemicals and unnatural whiteness. They always prefer to go through medically prescribed cosmetic products. Most of the time, they tend to seek support from medical practitioners or dermatologists as they are not recommending any harmful or fairness products to their patients.

It was found that these interviewees go through a thorough product search in buying any cosmetic product and always try to go with a renowned brand after checking whether it has been made by complying with set standards and ingredients. Almost all the respondents discouraged the ones who were using fairness products, stating the after-effects of the usage. Fairness product recommendations were null as they did not want to put someone's life into trouble. They always acted as advisers for the ones who use fairness products, thinking that fairness will make them look attractive and appealing in society. There is also a trend that the researcher found most answerers preferred to move into naturals.

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

Unlike in the past, now it has been found that most consumers look for fairness products that give them natural fairness rather than instant whiteness through this study. Similarly, both users and non-users have certain chemical misconceptions, and they specifically check for bleaching in the purchase. Moreover, there is a trend that consumers are moving into naturals with their evolving lifestyles. A current cosmetic



organisation can consider these critical findings in making decisions on its existing product portfolio.

Developing Call to Actions (CTAs) in a way that brings out that the product gives them the natural golden fairness with a glow. Crafting communication campaigns and awareness programs stating that the company offerings do not contain bleaching or any other harmful whitening agent. Introducing variant extensions or new products in a way representing the natural segment.

However the most significant limitation we came across in conducting these ten in-depth interviews was that the interviewees hesitated in disclosing specific details; therefore, we had to face difficulties in conducting the research in-depth. This limitation limits the effectiveness and the efficiency of the obtained results up to a certain extent. At some points, these constraints became a barrier in deriving a highly accurate conclusion. Further, time was a significant constraint as we had to limit the scope of the research.

Beyond these limitations, we believe scholars and researchers will explore more about consumer psychology under the variables identified in this study in buying skin whitening face care products among females above 30 years, and since male grooming is also evolving same variables of consumer psychology can be studied in identifying what makes males fair in the current context.

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