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Profiting from Insecurity: A Critical Analysis of Advertising's Role in Shaping Inferiority Complexes

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Abstract
Advertising in contemporary Tamil media operates not merely as product persuasion but as cultural production that shapes ideals, anxieties and consumption. This article examines how 2024 and 2025 Tamil advertisements for prominent beauty and personal care brands Santoor, Dove, White Tone, Ponds, Close Up, Pears and Fair and Lovely contributed to the formation and reinforcement of inferiority complexes among young women. Drawing on Alfred Adler's theory of inferiority and objectification theory, the study interprets advertisements as texts that naturalized narrow beauty norms and converted self doubt into profitable behavior. The empirical material comes from qualitative data collected from 100 female college students aged 18 to 25 in Trichy and Coimbatore using focus group discussions and semi structured interviews. The analysis shows that repeated exposure to regionally resonant narratives increased self surveillance, heightened comparative self evaluation and anxiety, and prompted consumption aimed at compensating perceived deficiencies. The article situates these findings within contemporary research on media effects and colorism and argues for targeted media literacy and regulatory interventions tailored to regional contexts. Implications for advertising ethics and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Inferiority Complex, Objectification Theory, Tamil Advertisements, Fairness Ads, Body Image, Consumer Psychology, Media Literacy

Introduction

Advertising shapes more than desire; it actively participates in constructing social reality. In Tamil Nadu, a region where cultural traditions and modern consumer practices interact closely, beauty advertising delivers messages that reach deep into everyday life, into family conversations, wedding expectations and imagined futures. Advertisements for personal care and beauty products do not simply promise incremental aesthetic improvements; they often present a transformed social life, implying that

attractiveness confers better relationships, employment prospects and social standing. When advertisers repeatedly frame fairer, younger or fresher appearances as routes to acceptance and success, they do more than sell creams or toothpaste; they map a moral economy of worth. This study interrogates how recent Tamil language advertisements specifically those by Santoor, Dove, White Tone, Ponds, Close Up, Pears and Fair and Lovely participated in this mapping, producing psychosocial effects that can be understood through the lenses of inferiority and objectification.

Literature Review

A converging body of research demonstrates that media images cultivate and maintain idealized standards of beauty and that such standards often become internalized benchmarks. The meta analysis conducted by Grabe and colleagues documented reliable associations between media exposure and body dissatisfaction across both experimental and correlational studies, finding that the nature and repetition of exposure mattered for psychological outcomes (Grabe et al., 2008). Subsequent work on sexualizing media similarly found that repeated exposure to sexualized or narrowly idealized images correlated with higher self objectification, body shame and related maladaptive behaviors (Karsay, Knoll, & Matthes, 2018). Objectification theory remains a central interpretive lens for understanding how media images convert social scrutiny into private monitoring and anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

In South Asia, fairness product advertising has been both ubiquitous and controversial. Content analyses and recent reviews have shown that fairness commercials commonly constructed narratives that equated lighter skin with social mobility, desirability and moral worth. A multi country review of fairness commercials from South Asia found that the majority of ads targeted female consumers and repeatedly emphasized a moralized linkage between fairness and social advantage (Razi et al., 2024; Akram, 2025). Corporate responses since 2020 have included rebranding and rhetorical shifts, for example, major producers stated intentions to remove terms such as fair from packaging. Such moves have been critiqued as insufficient to counteract entrenched colorist ideals (Unilever, 2020; Time, 2020).

Regional advertising adapts global marketing strategies to local cultural scripts. Dove's Real Beauty campaign is widely studied for its ambiguous position. It fore grounded inclusive messaging yet continued to operate within market logics that aimed to increase brand loyalty and sales (Georgeson, 2018). Researchers have argued that campaigns that signal inclusivity may still imply a need for correction or improvement, thereby perpetuating self surveillance even where diversity is acknowledged. Taken together, this literature points to two central processes. First, the normalization of narrow ideals through repetitive imagery and narrative. Second, the channeling of resulting insecurities into consumption.

Research Objectives

This research pursued four interrelated objectives. The first objective was to analyze how contemporary Tamil advertisements constructed and circulated ideals of beauty, particularly those emphasizing fairness, flawlessness, youthfulness and social desirability, and how these constructions invited comparison. The second objective was to interpret the psychological mechanisms through which advertising converted latent insecurity into concrete consumer behavior, drawing on Adler's theory of inferiority and on objectification theory. The third objective was to document the self reported experiences, attitudes and behaviors of female college students in Trichy and Coimbatore in response to

these advertisements. The fourth objective was to propose contextually grounded interventions, pedagogical, regulatory and ethical, that might mitigate the harmful effects uncovered by the study.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Two theoretical lines were brought into dialogue. Adler's concept of the inferiority complex located feelings of deficiency as motivational forces that could push individuals toward compensation via achievement, conformity or consumer strategies that claimed to remedy perceived deficits (Adler, 1931). In the commercial sphere, products frequently assumed the role of compensatory instruments; they were rhetorically framed as solutions to shortcomings, whether real or socially constructed. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) complemented Adler's perspective by articulating the intrapsychic effects of being treated as an object. According to this framework, women socialized under an observer's gaze learned to monitor their appearance, an internalized surveillance that produced shame, anxiety and bodily dissatisfaction. When advertising repeatedly staged the normative viewer as the arbiter of worth, it intensified both inferiority sensations and self objectification. Together these frameworks helped explain how advertisements could be experienced as threatening to identity and as invitations to remedial consumption.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative design aimed at understanding meanings, experiences and practices rather than producing statistical generalizations beyond the sample. The empirical material derived from focus group discussions and semi structured interviews conducted in 2024 and 2025 with 100 female college students aged 18 to 25 drawn from institutions in Trichy and Coimbatore. Participants were recruited purposively to represent a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and media consumption patterns. Ethical procedures included informed consent, anonymization of transcripts and availability of debriefing support for participants who reported distress during discussions.

Advertisements were purposively sampled to reflect prominent Tamil campaigns broadcast or circulated online in 2024 and 2025. The sample included TVCs and digital clips from Santoor, Dove, White Tone, Ponds, Close Up, Pears and Fair and Lovely. Advertisements were viewed together during sessions and served as prompts for discussion. Five focus groups were conducted in each city with 8 to 10 participants per group. These sessions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. In addition, 20 participants were selected for in depth semi structured interviews to elicit deeper narratives about lived experience, purchase histories and perceptions of social consequence.

Audio recordings were transcribed and translated when necessary. The research team used thematic analysis, coding transcripts inductively and deductively with NVivo to identify recurring themes such as self comparison, anxiety, product usage, and perceptions of brand intent. Where percentages are reported, for example, the proportion of participants reporting increased anxiety after exposure to certain ads, they derive from the coded dataset of 100 participants and are reported as descriptive figures contextualized by qualitative excerpts.

Findings

The participants' accounts converged on the sense that Tamil beauty advertising created and sustained a tight evaluative frame for self worth. Many respondents described encountering repeated narratives in which fairer, younger or clearer skin and an idealized smile were portrayed as gateways to social

success. A majority of participants, seventy two out of one hundred, reported that exposure to fairness oriented advertisements, particularly those from White Tone and the historically branded Fair and Lovely, heightened anxiety about their own complexion and prompted comparative thinking. Participants narrated moments of comparing their reflection with the faces displayed in advertisements and with the imagined approval those faces would secure in social settings.

Participants described Dove's messaging as complicated. A subset reported that Dove's Real Beauty themes felt reassuring because they featured diverse women. However, many also said that such campaigns simultaneously implied that real beauty needed affirmation and product support. In the interviews, fifty eight participants acknowledged that even seemingly inclusive advertising suggested an intervening product was required to achieve acceptability. This ambivalence reflects academic critiques that inclusive campaigns may still function within market logics that reposition insecurity as solvable through consumption (Georgeson, 2018).

Product directed anxiety often translated into purchasing behavior. Sixty five participants indicated they had purchased a product after perceiving a flaw highlighted implicitly or explicitly in an advertisement. Reasons ranged from wanting to remove blemishes to seeking a brighter complexion or a fresher appearance for social occasions. Eighty participants reported altering their buying habits over time as they consumed more advertising. Changes included experimenting with multiple brands, shifting to fairness oriented products, or increasing monthly expenditure on personal care items. These consumption patterns accord with studies that show advertising can shape purchasing through normative framing and repeated exposure (Grabe et al., 2008).

Regional features of Tamil advertising, local cultural references, festival scenes and familial settings, made narratives feel familiar and therefore more persuasive. Several participants commented that when ads used Tamil festivals, colloquial language or domestic rituals, the implied promise of transformation felt not only attainable but culturally validated. This localization thus amplified the psychological reach of the messages, converting globalized beauty ideals into intimate, culturally mediated expectations. Participants also elaborated on social consequences. Some described being teased by relatives about complexion during family events, others recounted peers encouraging fairness products as part of self care for job interviews or dating. Finally, 80% of participants expressed a desire for change. They articulated the need for more realistic representations in advertising, stricter regulation of misleading claims, and educational programs that would help young women contextualize persuasive messages. These calls align with broader public debates about fairness advertising and the steps some companies have taken to rebrand, which observers have often criticized as insufficient in the absence of deeper structural change (Unilever, 2020; Time, 2020).

Discussion

The findings support a view of advertising as an active agent in the production of social norms and psychological dispositions. Through the twin mechanisms of comparative depiction and normative narrative, advertisements cultivated standards that invited monitoring and remediation. Adler's concept of inferiority helped explain why imagery that cast a person as relatively deficient provoked compensatory behavior. Products were framed as instruments to close perceived gaps between current self and socially rewarded ideals. Objectification theory clarified how external visual standards became internal measurement devices, producing ongoing self evaluation and anxiety. The study's data suggest

that even campaigns that rhetorically embraced diversity could in practice sustain market logics that problematized the body and positioned products as solutions.

The regional adaptation of global marketing techniques is significant. By incorporating local scripts, Tamil advertisements increased their persuasive power among young women for whom familial and cultural approval remained salient. The pattern is consistent with recent reviews of fairness advertising in South Asia that documented how culturally resonant storytelling intensified the reach of colorist and beauty hierarchies (Akram, 2025; Razi et al., 2024). Corporate rebranding announcements such as those by companies that pledged to remove the word fair from packaging are important symbolic gestures, but they do not, on their own, appear to dismantle the larger cultural processes that sustain colorism and beauty hierarchies (Unilever, 2020; Time, 2020). Policy and pedagogical implications emerge from this reading. Regulators should consider standards for truthful advertising that pay attention not only to factual claims about product efficacy but also to the social effects of repeated normative portrayal. Media literacy programs that teach young people to read advertising as rhetorical and economic practice may reduce automatic internalization. Industry responsibility must include commitments to sustained representational change rather than episodic rebranding.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Tamil beauty and personal care advertisements of 2024 and 2025 played an active role in shaping inferiority complexes among young women in Trichy and Coimbatore. By constructing narrow ideals of fairness, youth and flawlessness and by localizing these ideals within culturally familiar narratives, advertisements encouraged comparative self evaluation, heightened anxiety and channeled consumption as compensatory behavior. Theoretical frameworks of inferiority and objectification help explain how external standards became internalized and how products functioned rhetorically as remedies. Pragmatically, the findings point to the need for combined approaches including regulatory vigilance, advertiser accountability and media literacy interventions to mitigate harm.

Limitations of the study include the qualitative design and purposive sampling, which prioritized depth over broad generalizability. Future research could adopt mixed methods and longitudinal designs to measure the durability of advertising effects and to examine male experiences and cross regional comparisons. Research that evaluates the outcomes of media literacy interventions in the Indian context would also be valuable. Ultimately, addressing the commercial production of insecurity requires both scholars and practitioners to engage with the cultural and institutional roots of preference, prejudice and imagined worth.

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