Research Paper

Assessing Stereotypes Related to Skin Tone

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ABSTRACT

Skin tone and related discrimination is a pressing issue in India. The resultant stereotyping is deep-rooted in the country and has historical causes across various cultures. This has directly led to the formation of labels and standards for men and women alike and has negatively impacted the self-esteem of numerous people. With a distorted self-concept, many resorts to rigorous beauty regimes. The current research attempts to explore the differences in perception of men between fair and dark skin tone women on various characteristics. The sample included 126 males in the age range of 18-20 years and a self-designed questionnaire consisting of 10 characteristics was developed with a rating scale of 1-10. Data were analyzed using SPSS and t for dependent samples was used to compare the perception of men towards dark and fair skin tone women on the 10 characteristics. Results indicated that there were no significant differences between dark and fair skin tone women as rated by the subjects, favoring the fair skin tone women on the mentioned characteristics.

Keywords: Discrimination, culture, Stereotyping, self-concept, and skin tone.

Stereotypes about groups are the beliefs and expectations that we have concerning what members of those groups are like. They include traits, physical appearance, activity preferences, and behaviors (Deaux & LaFrance, 1998). Stereotypes generally have a negative valence and can be viewed as incorrect and derogatory generalizations of group traits, reflective of the stereotyper's underlying prejudices (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Stanford, 1950) or other internal motivations. Hilton and Hippel (1996) stress that stereotypes are "mental representations of real differences between groups, allowing easier and more efficient processing of information". Stereotypes are false or misleading generalizations about groups that move far and wide and usually become resistant to counterevidence. Consequences of stereotyping are 1. A negative consequence of

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stereotyping is stereotype threat where people are aware of the negative perception about their group and experience anxiety that might confirm the stereotype. 2. Self-fulfilling prophecy – another consequence in which minority group members experience an apprehension that they may behave in a manner that actually confirms existing stereotypes (Steele, 1997). This apprehension, in turn, affects their ability to perform well and thus leads them to conform negative stereotypes about their group. 3. Reduced psychological well-being i.e. being attached with a label leads to emotional and mental distress. 4. Reverse Discrimination – is discrimination against members of a dominant or majority group, in favor of members of a minority or historically disadvantaged group. Internalization is a crucial process in maintaining social systems because it leads people to regulate their own behavior in accordance with accepted forms rather than having to be monitored and corrected by external authorities. People often stereotype other men and women on the basis of their skin tone i.e. form quick perceptions about their attributes merely on the basis of their skin color. People use physical features to gain access to a rich source of heuristic information about others based on stereotypes (Ashmore and Del-Boca, 1979). People's physical features often indicate the categories to which they may belong, causing people to associate character traits with that person. These associations can become salient so quickly and automatically that people remain unaware of the process (Klatzky, Martin, and Kane 1982). Skin color plays a huge role as an indicator of class and beauty within some Asian and Asian American communities. Lighter-skinned Asian women are viewed as more attractive than their darker-skinned counterparts. In 2013 Nina Davuluri, an Asian Indian from New York became the first South Asian American Miss America. Her selection prompted racist messages on Twitter mixing up Indian, Indian-American, Arab, Muslim, and everything in between. One Asian Indian American commentator sarcastically wrote, "That gorgeous chocolate may play as exotic in the West, but in India, we prefer our beauty queens strictly vanilla—preferably accessorized with blue contact lenses." Thus, it was not simply Davuluri's win as Miss America that was deemed significant, it was her skin tone as well. A commentator added that Davuluri would have never won the Miss Indian America USA title because she is "too dark." Still, others added that in India someone with her skin tone would never be a contestant in a beauty contest, much less be the winner. Such perceptions are unsurprising in South-Asian communities. The origin of colorism practices in India and other parts of South Asia is not limited to one particular faith, tradition or ethnicity. The popularity of skin lightening products for women in India reflects the connection between concepts of beauty and marriageability for women. This preference for marriageable Asian Indian women with light skin tones seems to mirror the historical marriage patterns of women in the black American community. Skin tone also influenced economic outcomes, perceived attractiveness, access to integrated schools or work groups and perceived discrimination. Linking parenting quality to skin tone, Landor, Simons, Simons, Brody, Bryant, Gibbons, Granberg and Melby (2013) found that lighter skin daughters received higher quality parenting compared to those with darker skin tone. Ina study done by Purdue, Young, Balam, and Vazin (2015) found that dark-skinned participants, as compared to medium or light skinned participants, rated others as more attractive. However, no relationship was seen between participant's own self-reported skin tone and attractiveness. In a more recent study

by Utley and Darity (2016), it was found out that skin shade is described far more often in advertisements placed by prospective brides or their families than prospective grooms or their families, and, whenever complexion is mentioned, the possession of lighter skin shades. It is thus evident that skin color affects the perception of people and their attributes like beauty, intelligence, competence, warmth etc. The present study has been undertaken to assess stereotyping related to skin tones to gain a fresh perspective on the current scenario of this age-old issue. The study will allow the researchers to look at the stereotype towards female skin tone biases from the perspective of opposite gender and understand how men relate general personality characteristics of women and whether these are affected by the amount of melanin. An experimental design will allow for a "fairer" and different approach towards this study and present further ways to extend the research.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 126 males. The individuals selected were from the age bracket of 19-21 years of age and were mostly college students.

Tools used

Two self-designed questionnaires consisting of 10 personality characteristics were developed. Each administration consisted of a buffer image and an image of a woman. The first administration consisted of the image of a dark skin tone woman and the buffer image. While the second one showed a fair-skin tone woman and a buffer image. The buffer images were used so that the subjects do not recognize that the same image was shown again in the second administration (form II) with dark skin color. The rating was given from 1-10 with 1 meaning least occurrence of characteristic and 5 meaning maximum occurrence.

Procedure

An experimental design was used for the present research. Image of a dark skin Indian girl was used for the purpose of the research. The same image was edited to a lighter version of skin color. Hence, two different images were obtained of the same person with varying skin tones. Two separate questionnaires were constructed with these two images, enlisting ten personality traits, namely, Affectionate, Intelligence, Friendly, Assertive, Attractive, Ambitious, Helpful, and Confident. A 10-point Likert scale was used for rating both the images. The administrations were done in two sessions, during the first session the participant was shown the fair skin girl image and a buffer image of an old man and was asked to rate them on the aforementioned traits. The same participants were located again after three days for the second session. Similarly, in the second questionnaire a darker version of the same image was shown accompanied by a buffer image of a dark skin Indian girl. The time gap between both the administrations was for three days. The buffer images were used so that the subjects do not identify that the same image was used in both the forms. When the administrations were successfully completed, the participants were thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

Paired samples test was used to compare the ratings obtained with fair and dark skin images on different traits. To fulfill its assumptions, the ordinal data obtained from the rating of the respondents was converted into continuous data. It was done by introducing two dimensions i.e. positive traits and negative traits. Positive traits dimension comprised of the ratings on traits like Affectionate, Intelligence, Friendly, Assertive, Attractive, Ambitious, Helpful, and Confident. Similarly, negative traits comprised of ratings on traits like Arrogant and Materialistic. To understand the shape of the distribution, skewness was calculated. Table 1 details the Skewness for the dark and fair skin girl on both the traits.

Table 1, Skewness for the dark and fair skin image on both the traits (N= 126)

Dimensions	Skin Tone	Skewness	Std. error of skewness	Z
Positive traits	Dark Skin	-.196	.216	-1.10
	Fair Skin	-.332	.216	-0.65
	Dark Skin	.230	.216	0.94
Negative traits	Fair Skin	.264	.216	0.82

From table 1, it is evident that the Skewness values are within the range of ±2, which are generally considered acceptable (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006). All the Z values obtained are lower than z = ±1.96 (α0.05 non-directional) this means that the data is not skewed and therefore parametric statistics can be used.

Table 2, Mean, standard deviation, t-value and p-values for the ratings on both the images on the traits (N= 126)

Variable	Fair Skin		Dark Skin		t	p
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Positive Traits	26.14	5.87	26.79	5.36	1.141	-.347
Negative Traits	5.43	1.81	5.34	1.78	.256	.729

Table 2 shows the mean scores, standard deviations, t-values and p-values for the combined ratings on dark and fair skin image on positive and negative traits. The t-value obtained for ratings on positive traits for dark skin and fair skin images is 1.141 at p-value .256. This is not significant, indicating no differences in the rating of fair skin image on positive traits. Similarly, t value obtained to compare the ratings on dark skin and fair skin image on negative traits is -.347 at p-value .729. This again is not significant, suggesting no difference in the ratings for the dark and fair skin images on negative traits.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the research was to identify the stereotypes related to skin tone. For the study, male subjects were asked to rate females on various traits while looking at their photographs. The females in the photographs had varying skin tones. The results of the study signify that there are no differences in the ratings of dark and fair skin tone images on various traits.

Often, Stereotypes related to race and gender are evaluative in nature and are over-generalized and therefore wrong. But, a person endorsing the stereotype may indeed believe that this is the case. Consequently, people negatively evaluative the stereotyped group and become biased. In the present research, no differences are found in the perception of dark and fair skin on various traits. This desensitization could have occurred at two levels, first, the stereotype might have stopped perpetuating or the stereotyped group might not confirm the stereotype with their behavior. The perpetuation of a stereotype is reduced when people refuse to base their judgments on it. When people don't practice it, it soon fades away. Probable reasons associated with the desensitization from stereotypes can be many. Perception of stereotype-inconsistent information could be one reason; generally, stereotypes often rely on unproven information and enlarge the differences between the groups. Since this research was carried out on a sample of college students currently pursuing their under-graduation, the very population which has been instrumental in sensitizing the community towards skin type stereotypes, the present results may have been generated. Moreover, students get a substantial amount of exposure with different types of people around them. Research has shown that exposure to diversity-valuing information reduces the stereotypes (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, and Crosby, 2008). The students also belong to the capital of the nation and are thus recipients of better exposure to people, mindsets, community, and thoughts. Through this improved contact, a cognitive dissonance between their prejudice and observation may have increased, ultimately breaking the stereotype (Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008). This is because the cognitive dissonances instigate one to change their attitudes regarding a particular group.

At another level, the stereotyped group might also disconfirm the stereotype. Nowadays, the stereotyped group is substantiated at many levels – social media campaigns are launched regarding the skin tone bias, advertisements are more sensitive, beauty products and fashion products include people from all complexions, and magazines and movies give place to women of color. These empowerments might protect the stereotyped group from stereotype threat. For example, Murphy, Steele, and Gross (2007) found that increasing the visibility and representation of the stereotyped group actually strengthened that group. Stereotype threat might abstain one from being what one is capable of becoming, therefore the stereotype perpetuate. But in the case where the threat is reduced, the stereotype fails to perpetuate. The group altogether feels represented and is, therefore, less susceptible to falling due to prejudices, has improved the sense of self-esteem, and finds a voice in the community. For example, Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master (2006) showed that positive value-affirmations about the target group are a successful intervention for empowering the stereotyped group.

However, in this study, the raters were asked to rate the images on various traits. If the stereotypes are implicit in nature, they would not be elicited by a rating scale. Further, is it also evident to the researchers that skin type related stereotype still exist in the society? Although the people are moving towards a more unbiased opinion, a fair' amount still believes in white supremacy or white is beautiful. Currently, both kinds of media-highlighting dark skin tone and the one favoring the lighter shade, exist in the society. People

also show covert discrimination due to the issue being in limelight but the cognitive aspect is still to see a shift. It is important to tap out on these cognitions and to use intervention methods to bring a substantial change in every segment of the society. The shift in perceptions, as highlighted by the study clearly exists, but needs to work with greater strength and pace.

The research could be extended by asking female subjects to rate their female counterparts. This would allow the researchers to understand the perception of the stereotyped group towards the stereotype itself. The research could also be designed to include an intervention-based plan.

IMPLICATIONS IN PRACTICE

The present research has far-reaching implications. Since the study has been done in Indian settings, where skin tone affects a plethora of constructs, understanding the current scenario will be of great use. In the media and advertising industry, the current research sheds light on the changing mindsets of the people. This is both a cause and consequence of the shift in the type of advertisements made today and the information showed. The media is more sensitive and results which show that stereotype related to skin tone does not exist significantly anymore, push the media in the same direction. Further, cosmetics and beauty industry cannot perpetuate the message "fair is better" anymore since the attitudes of people have certainly changed. Their campaigns need to be more inclusive towards all skin tones to maintain popularity in the market. Another important implication is the marriage area, closely linked to the skin tone issue in India. The current study adds value to the latest scenario where men and women look past skin tones and focus on the other characteristics to mark their potential spouses' marriageability option. In addition, the research can be put to use to improve the self-esteem of women who otherwise feel at loss due to their skin tones. It will boost their confidence, show acceptance on part of the general public, especially the opposite gender, and help curb the stereotype from further perpetuation.

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