
How Disempowerment Drives Demand for Risky Skin-Lightening Products



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Empowering darker-skinned women in emerging markets acts as a buffer against a toxic combination of sexism, colourism and economic disadvantage.

Recent years have seen evolving awareness of systemic inequities including racism, sexism and pro-Western chauvinism. The concept of **intersectionality** invites scholars and thinkers to take a more nuanced approach centred on how these biases interact, rather than viewing them in isolation or as additive challenges. Thinking along intersectional lines provides opportunity to focus immediate attention – and target intervention – on those most at risk. It also equips us to examine how the actions of various stakeholders may reduce or exacerbate these interwoven risks.

Consider the worldwide phenomenon of **colourism**, or systemic bias in favour of lighter-shaded skin over darker. Even in non-white majority countries, research has consistently found fairness of complexion to be

correlated with better life outcomes. In emerging Asian and African economies, the natural aspiration to enhance one's circumstances has led to rapid growth in the market for skin-lightening products, which is projected to reach US\$31 billion by 2024. Though both men and women partake, the vast majority of habitual skin-lightening consumers are female. In one study of [university students across Asia, Africa and the Americas](#), 30 percent of women participants reported using the products, as compared to 17 percent of men.

Our [research \(paper forthcoming in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*\) \[1\]](#) uses experimental evidence from India to explore how the combination of colourism, gender bias and economic disadvantage affects demand for risky skin-lightening products. What we found challenges the notion that [such products can be empowering](#) to oppressed women seeking to improve their station in life. Instead, we show how a sense of internalised *disempowerment* activates women's desire to lighten their skin and, even more worryingly, places their health at risk.

Objectification

We hypothesised that women are the primary audience for whitening products, despite the cross-gender impact of colourism. This is because of [self-objectification](#), a byproduct of sexism that causes women across lines of race and ranges of skin tones to be more sensitive to their appearance due to its implications for their social status. When women receive reminders of their disempowerment on top of their chronic objectification, they might clutch at the nearest remedy – in this case, skin-lightening agents (which ubiquitous advertisements assure them will make them look far more beautiful and hence transform their lives for the better).

The greater their concerns regarding social standing, the more likely they are to bypass over-the-counter products such as Unilever's [Glow & Lovely](#) (which are medically benign, essentially similar to sunscreen) in favour of riskier “pharmaceutical” products that have been linked to a host of adverse long-term health effects. The latter category of products are aimed at suppressing melanin production, and many varieties have been found to contain chemicals banned in some markets, including hydroquinone, corticosteroids and/or mercury. Officially, they are available only with a doctor's prescription. Nonetheless, they are widely accessible without medical oversight in India through neighbourhood chemists and online

marketplaces.

We conducted two experiments with a total of nearly 1,000 participants based in India. First, following random assignment to conditions, participants wrote about either a past experience of having power over someone else, or a time in their lives when they felt subject to the power of another. They then evaluated over-the-counter and pharmaceutical skin-lightening products for desirability and riskiness. Both with and without inclusion of control variables such as frequency of skin-whitening product use and financial independence in statistical models, we found causal evidence that for women, a psychological state of disempowerment led to a higher preference for the pharmaceutical products, compared to high-power women and men regardless of experimental condition. Moreover, as their riskiness ratings demonstrate, women's product preferences were with full awareness of the dangers of pharmaceutical products.

The potential blind spots of “win-win” thinking

Our findings might seem to suggest that disempowerment is unrelated to women's use of over-the-counter skin-lightening products. However, we underscore that not finding experimental effects of disempowerment for over-the-counter lightening products does not mean there is no relationship. For example, it is possible that products such as Glow & Lovely are already so established in India that interest in them is not susceptible to experimental nudges. Also, it is possible that large-scale marketing campaigns for the milder creams seeded demand for the stronger and riskier products by legitimising the idea of skin-whitening for cosmetic purposes and inadvertently reinforcing colourism.

Therefore, we should not exempt from scrutiny the makers of mass-market skin-lightening products. Many companies celebrate their efforts to self-regulate – such as Unilever's recent decision to merely change the name of its famous cream from Fair & Lovely to Glow & Lovely (in the hope that the change in positioning would reduce allegations of its racist undertones) – and the beneficial impact of their CSR initiatives. Yet our findings demonstrate that the intersectional ways in which biases are internalised and compound one another may be too subtle and nuanced for firms to predict, let alone manage.

In developing economies such as India, where women are on average already relatively disempowered compared to the most progressive

European nations, it is especially important that societal and policy interventions complement corporate self-regulation on such issues. These may include the creation of intermediaries to protect the rights of more vulnerable segments of society, customer education by civic society organisations, and transparency mandates to reduce information asymmetries between companies and consumers.

For businesses seeking only “win-win” solutions that deliver both profits and social impact, our paper provides further proof that **ethical dilemmas and trade-offs are more prevalent** than many leaders are willing to acknowledge. Strategies for “doing well by doing good” often have inherent blind spots that allow social ills to flourish. Critics argue that values ought to always trump (monetary) value: Some things should be a matter of principle rather than needing justification through a “business case”. Yet expecting for-profit businesses to do all this on their own may be too idealistic an expectation. **Intersectional complexities** would be best handled through multi-stakeholder collaborations that extend beyond business to also include governments, academics, NGOs and **social enterprises**. Importantly, business leaders would benefit from the insights philosophy and ethics have to offer on such matters, especially regarding why not all market transactions represent genuine value creation for society, and how we ought to do better at recognising – as **Michael Sandel** puts it – the moral limits of markets.

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[1] Co-authored with Arzi Adbi (NUS Business School), Chirantan Chatterjee (IIM Ahmedabad & Hoover Institution, Stanford University) and Clarissa Cortland (UCL School of Management).

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