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EDITED BY SRIRUPA CHATTERJEE
AND SHWETA RAO GARG



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Gender, Body Image, and the Aspirational Middle-Class Imaginary of Indian Advertising

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Introduction

This chapter analyzes Indian discourses on body image and identity in contemporary Indian advertising from 2010 to 2020 through a focus on three types of commercials: skin-care product ads, matrimonial ads, and jewelry ads. Each of these genres, we argue, proffers a prescriptive and heteronormative idea about female body image such that this idealized image is intimately tied to prevailing hierarchies of power in neoliberal and globalized India. Engaging millennial and postmillennial feminist and queer theories, we ask these questions: How do contemporary advertisements represent the ideal female body? How do they address and emblemize a neoliberal rhetoric about women's empowerment and heteronormativity? What modes of resistance and critique, individual and collective, challenge this rhetoric about normative body image?

Several scholars have analyzed the relation between body image and women's ideas of self-worth in contemporary India. As Meenakshi Menon and Preeti Pant observe, "In urban Indian women, there has been an increasing concern with one's physical appearance and body dissatisfaction (Goswami et al. 2012) that may be attributed to the influence of the media (Kapadia 2009)."¹ In dialogue with contemporary feminist scholarship on media representations, this chapter analyzes colorism and body shaming embedded in skin-care product, jewelry, and matrimonial advertising in Hindi and English, as well as feminist activism that challenges these body and skin color norms.

Through a discursive analysis that attends to the audioscapes and visualsapes of particular commercials, as they appear across television and YouTube, we track how contemporary commercials mobilize new ideas of women's empowerment and gender equality to sell old products like skin-lightening creams and gold jewelry. Further, we demonstrate that these commercials often reproduce heteronormative conventions of intimacy that, in South Asia, are also linked to racism, caste, and class discrimination. Finally, we identify modes of feminist activism that challenge these body norms propagated across media and point to new strategies and arenas for creating change. Through Indian commercials in contemporary Hindi and English media, we examine how mass media functions as a space for the reinforcement as well as renegotiation of body normativity in the context of India's aspirational middle-class imaginary. In sum, we map the appearance of colorism, heteronormativity, and patriarchal joint family values to unveil the interplay of capital, female empowerment, and heteronormative intimacies in media discourses about modern Indian women's embodiment.

Colorism and the Politics of Women's Empowerment in Skin-Care Advertising

In her anthropological study titled *Living Color*, Nina Jablonski demonstrates that the skin color differences now central to the modern definition of sociocultural identity emerge from the work of Immanuel Kant, "one of the most influential racists of all time."² She reveals that Kant insisted, in his influential philosophical writings, that "skin color denote[s] qualities of personality and morality."³ His misguided insistence that skin color (or differences in skin pigmentation) was tied to hierarchical differences of nature and character eventually became one of the foundational myths for the systematic and stereotypical ideas about racial differences that persist even today in societies across the world. One of the most visible ways that this colorism, or the privileging of less-pigmented skin, appears in India's consumer culture is through commercials that market cosmetics and beauty products.

Much feminist scholarship has shown that Indian media, while drawing upon Western beauty ideals, propagates thinness as a body norm. Itisha Nagar and Rukshana Virk demonstrate that an increase in exposure to the thin ideal in media images leads to internalization and body dissatisfaction, which in turn lowers women's self-esteem.⁴ Relatedly, Indian discourses about women's beauty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have valorized less-pigmented skin. In periodicals like *Sound*, *Filmindia*, and *Star & Style* from the 1930s and 1940s, British companies regularly advertised women's face

creams, like Afghan Snow, that claimed to increase the skin's fairness, light, and glow. This has changed little since India gained independence in 1947: markets for skin-lightening creams have only multiplied. The skin-lightening cream named Fair & Lovely, first launched by Hindustan Lever in 1975, quickly became the preeminent fairness cream in India. After economic liberalization in the 1990s opened up Indian consumer markets to multinational companies, a plethora of companies invented fairness creams, including multinationals like L'Oreal, Garnier, and Revlon. The development of newer creams like Fair and Handsome, targeting male consumers, also suggests that skin color norms that privilege less-pigmented skin have intensified under globalization. Researchers estimate that the fairness industry in India "currently represents 50% of India's entire skincare market, with estimates of its worth varying between \$US 450–535 million."⁵ Across the Asia-Pacific region, this market is estimated to be approximately \$13 billion. As Sonali Johnson argues, "India's historical preoccupation with fair skin is in fact racism and sexism expressed through various cultural and historical mediums and reinforced by the contemporary beauty industry."⁶

Beauty product advertising propagates skin color norms integral to ideas of body image and body normativity. At least 50 percent of the beauty product industry in India revolves around skin-lightening products, which range from face creams to soaps and products for genitalia. The privileging of less-pigmented skin as being part of an idealized body image for women is most evident in commercials that market cosmetics and skin products for skin-lightening. This colorism, we suggest, is racialized, as well as marked by other axes of power relations in South Asia like caste, class, and sexuality, among others. We map how colorism is integrated into, and reinforced by, body normativity in Indian commercials because, as Radhika Parameswaran and Kavitha Cardoza note, "these commercially sponsored texts execute the pedagogic task of reminding India's expanding female consumer markets to imagine that it is their bodies' excess production of melanin, not historical and institutional structures of power, that retards their social mobility . . . (Reddy, 2006, p. 124)."⁷ How is this reflected in the narrative arc and visual representations of earlier commercials in comparison with later commercials? In many ads from the mid-twentieth and late twentieth century, the narrative arc is structured around a before-and-after transformation, producing a discourse around these products that instigates anxiety about one's skin. This discourse promises to empower the female consumer psychically and materially. The transformed, less-pigmented consumer, usually female, is also transformed psychically and socioeconomically: she becomes more confident in the job interview and the arranged marriage interview and successfully acquires both capital and love. In response to public outcry over the racism

embedded in these commercials' discourse, companies have recently shifted to a strategy that posits that using skin-lightening creams is a feminist act of self-empowerment.

As problematic as this shift sounds, many contemporary commercials for skin-lightening products often suggest that using their merchandise protects the consumer's skin from the sun, thus inviting the female consumer to choose self-care and unrestricted mobility. For example, in a 2009 commercial for Neutrogena's Fine Fairness Cream, the Hindi film actor Deepika Padukone asserts, "Skin experts say that one hour in the sun can set your fairness back by eight weeks. Does this mean we shouldn't step out into the sun?"⁸ The camera then follows her as she boldly steps out onto the balcony of her posh, modern home. Padukone turns to the viewer and triumphantly declares, "Of course not." A voiceover then introduces us to the Fine Fairness Cream, which, we are told, includes, among its ingredients, "Healthy White complex," which, the voiceover promises, will lighten skin tone "from the inside." It also includes "150% sunscreen protection," we are informed. The commercial opens with a series of wide shots of Padukone's slim body, and it concludes with a series of successive close-up shots of her face, ostensibly lightened. We address this commercial because of its regressive representation of less-pigmented skin as desirable, complete with pseudoscientific racialized language about its ingredients ("Healthy White complex"), which is representative of how multinational and national cosmetic companies now market face creams in India. In 2014, after considerable public debate and outcry over the regressive and demeaning representations in such ads, the advertising industry watchdog, Advertising Standards of India (ASCI), issued new guidelines that tackled the before-and-after narrative structure that was a staple in these ads. According to these guidelines, companies need to ensure that their ads "do not depict people with dark skin as somehow inferior to those who are fairer."⁹ ASCI mandates that ads should not associate less-pigmented skin with any socioeconomic, psychological, or professional disadvantage or with a particular caste, class, or religious background. The guidelines state, "These ads should not reinforce negative social stereotyping on the basis of skin colour. Specifically, advertising should not directly or implicitly show people with darker skin, in a way which is widely seen as, unattractive, unhappy, depressed, or concerned."¹⁰

If this mandate forces the abandonment of explicitly racist and demeaning representations that negate most Indian skin tones, it nonetheless leaves untouched the related issue of body image and normative conceptions of ideal skin in many, if not all, ads. Indeed, capital morphs in the pursuit of profit, and these beauty products have adapted to the market by renaming their creams, using synonyms that largely leave unchanged the privileging of less-pigmented skin and thinness in these commercials. For example, a

2018 ad for Garnier's skin-lightening cream calls it "Garnier Light Complete Serum Cream."¹¹ In the audioscape of the ad, we are promised that the product will "brighten" skin, remove "dark spots" caused by the sun, and make one's skin "spotless and bright." The female actors in the ad, with the lead played by Hindi film actor Alia Bhatt, only reinforce hegemonic body image norms: they are conventionally thin with less-pigmented skin. These new commercials now abandon the before-and-after narrative logic of earlier commercials (especially of the Fair & Lovely brand), which suggested that those who use these products will get a desirable job or get married to that eligible bachelor. Instead, they reframe the use of these products as a sign of female independence, self-care, and self-protection that enables women's mobility beyond the home.¹²

In this context, it is important to note how feminist voices and activists have challenged and resisted ideals of desirable skin tone and body norms. Given this complex commercial mobilization of middle-class feminist rhetoric of empowerment toward problematic body image norms, resistance to colorist body images has come from several quarters. From successful protests organized by the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) to media campaigns like Kavitha Immanuel's *Dark Is Beautiful* in 2009, feminist resistance has illuminated the sociocultural and economic violence engendered by these commercials. In 2002, AIDWA campaigned against corporate giant Hindustan Lever's offensive fairness ad campaign—this was debated in the Indian Parliament, and the ad was eventually withdrawn due to state pressure, which became a successful moment of women's organized resistance. Likewise, in 2009, Kavitha Immanuel, founder of Women of Worth (WOW), launched the *Dark Is Beautiful* campaign to combat the lived experience of colorism in India. Further, in 2013, celebrity actor and film director Nandita Das joined this campaign to disrupt the racialized rhetoric about less-pigmented skin and to disseminate messages on body positivity. WOW's advocacy actions included organizing workshops, as well as developing print and TV ad campaigns that sought to create a public conversation about colorism and its dehumanizing effects. In Das's powerful PSA video about this issue, she asked Indians to "stay dark, stay beautiful." In 2019, Das renamed this campaign *India's Got Color*, and she has gone on record to argue that "while we must combat the various forms of discrimination based on caste, religion, gender and sexual preference, the least we can do is to end the bias based on skin colour."¹³ As part of this campaign, Das created a two-minute music-based ad campaign in Hindi that identifies how racism based on skin color permeates social life in India and then goes on to challenge it. Through this counterdiscourse, the actor hopes to inspire Indian youth to "change the public discourse around this issue" and enact "a more holistic celebration of diversity"; as she asserts, "after all, we are more than 1.3 billion people and have

that many shades of skin tones.”¹⁴ This ad’s message thus challenges the capitalist exploitation of colorism evident in Indian media: it instigates a public conversation about skin color norms that disrupts the privileging of less-pigmented skin while celebrating skin color diversity.

Further, Parameswaran and Cardoza identify several media sites where one can discern a critique of colorism and Indian women’s social experiences, from several Hindi and English-language films made in India and the diaspora to television series like *Saat Phere* and debates in India’s popular women’s magazine *Femina*.¹⁵ If some celebrities have been brand ambassadors for skin-lightening products (Priyanka Chopra, for example, was for Garnier’s cream), other Bollywood celebrities, like Taapsee Pannu and Abhay Deol, have criticized the racism and harm such endorsements bring.

Corporate India has responded to this growing shift in public perception and public critique of racialized skin and body norms in two ways: first, linguistically, corporations have shifted their tone to avoid words like “fair” and “whitening,” and second, visually, they have erased from the narrative the eligible male potential partner (often lurking in the background)—instead, they position the use of these beauty products as instances of feminist individualism and as acts of self-empowerment, self-care, and self-assertion in a patriarchal society. Hindustan Unilever in 2020, for example, rebranded its flagship Fair & Lovely cream to what is now called Glow & Lovely. Has this shift to a new linguistic economy countered the privileging of less-pigmented skin? We argue otherwise. Indeed, its tacky name change plays into how synonyms like “bright” and “glow” have replaced words like “light,” “fair,” “lightening,” and “whitening.” This, however, does nothing to negate colorism and racism. The new visual ad for the face cream named Glow attempts to co-opt the language of feminist self-empowerment in multiple ways. First, it appears to celebrate body diversity, insofar as it includes multiple female models of different ages, body types, and skin tones with different levels of pigmentation, instead of the conventionally thin, less-pigmented model. The repetition of the refrain “Don’t stop my glow” is positioned as a message of feminist self-assertion to Indian society. Yet, ultimately, the commercial’s fetishization of the thin central female figure, “Dee,” as the assertive self-empowered DJ who uses this product to *glow* reiterates the undesirable body image tropes of earlier ads.¹⁶

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider Pakistani advertising, further attention is warranted for an ad that Hindustan Lever created for Glow & Lovely’s Pakistani market. This ad, “Mitti Ke Sau Rung” (A Hundred Shades of Earth), articulates a more complex relationship to the South Asian female body in ways that reject colorism.¹⁷ It opens with this line: “Glow and Lovely celebrates the diverse and glowing faces of Pakistan.” The entire commercial features a fast-paced montage of video clips in which different

women are filmed in action as they work in different professions, from sports to music, construction, entertainment, and the arts. The lyrics and the refrain of the background score assert a message of body diversity that centers anticolorism: “There are a hundred shades of earth; one is mine; another is yours.” The cinematography notably includes several montages of low-angle shots of the different models, as they look straight at the camera with powerful expressions of confidence, strength, and defiance. By featuring each model in several action shots—playing soccer, supervising a construction site, playing the *tabla*, jogging in the streets, fighting in the boxing ring, and so on—the visualscape articulates along with the soundscape of the song, which exhorts the female viewer that “hardships will come, but you will fight them,” and “in each color, you are complete, in each color you have a distinct existence.” While none of the models featured reflect diversity in terms of age or weight, this commercial most explicitly (when compared to its counterparts in India) positions its skin-care product as affirming skin color diversity. Ads like this exemplify the capitalist appropriation of discourses of feminist empowerment through their individualist representation of aspirational middle-class female subjectivity in South Asia.

Adorning the Ideal Body in Tanishq’s Wedding Jewelry Commercials

Contemporary Indian advertising has played no small part in proliferating colorism, ableism, and fatphobia arising from thin-ideal messaging. Madhusmita Das and Sangeeta Sharma note that by constantly “associating fairness and beauty with increased marriage eligibility, career achievement, and other positive outcomes,” Indian television ads have caused “women and adolescent girls” to become “increasingly concerned about their appearance.”¹⁸ Their study reveals that women who are greatly affected by such negative messaging are “at greater risk to develop extreme preoccupation with weight and appearance, and are also more likely to display disordered eating patterns and/or clinical eating disorders.”¹⁹ In this section, we examine how wedding jewelry ads for the Indian brand Tanishq contribute to these harmful discourses and how feminist activism can challenge the normative and prescriptive ideals propagated by such jewelry commercials.

In the last two decades, Indian jewelry commercials have moved away from an explicit focus on familial wealth and prosperity toward the portrayal of the “new” Indian woman. Meenakshi Thapan defines this new Indian woman as “an ambivalent entity shaped by the social and public domain which simultaneously portrays her as glamorous, independent, conscious of her embodiment and of the many forms of adornment and self-presentation avail-

able to her, and yet enshrined in the world of tradition through her adherence to family and national values.”²⁰ The ideal new Indian woman is also the ideal customer because she shows her connection to both tradition and modernity through consumption. Recent jewelry ads have appropriated this narrative by making the claim that the modern Indian woman can proudly proclaim her independence and individuality through her choice of jewelry. In these new ads, the bride is no longer shy, silent, and inconsolable at the thought of leaving her parents. Rather, she is someone with a distinct personality that she draws attention to through her choice of jewelry. Even as these ads attempt to tell individualized stories marked by ostensibly progressive values and ideals, they cannot seem to escape the limitations imposed by conventional beauty standards. Much like the magazine spreads Thapan analyzes in her work, these ads have absolutely no space for “the ageing, disabled, obese or out-of-shape body, which deviates from the perfect embodied state.”²¹ The casting of actresses whose bodies meet normative ideals is crucial to conserving, maintaining, and reproducing practices and norms that punish unconventional and unruly bodies.

Wedding jewelry ads that clearly value a specific skin color and body type over others send the message that the promise of heteronormative reproductive futurity (through marriage) is accessible only to those who fit conventional standards of beauty. Mallika Das, in her analysis of the portrayal of gender roles in Indian television ads, has also written about the concept of the modern “New Indian Woman” trapped in the limbo between modernity and tradition.²² By using this trope of the new Indian woman, especially in the context of bridal jewelry, brands like Tanishq have appropriated the language of empowerment and diversity while continuing to showcase models and actresses who fit normative ideas of beauty. Launched in 2017, the ad campaign for Tanishq’s Rivaah collection focuses on brides from different Indian states. During the launch, the company claimed that their wedding-centered collection aimed to “cater to 13 bridal communities across India and celebrate their culture.”²³ The collection has grown since the initial launch, and the Tanishq website has a separate page dedicated to each “Rivaah Bride.”²⁴ The page titled “The Bengali Bride,” for example, has pictures and descriptions of traditional Bengali jewelry, such as the *paati haar* and *shaakha pola*.²⁵ The campaign claims to support and celebrate India’s cultural diversity. The website describes their ideal bride with these words: “As varied as the communities she hails from, the Indian bride looks absolutely resplendent in her wedding finery.”²⁶

While each bride is supposed to be “as varied as the communities she hails from,” what is perhaps most striking about the print campaign is the absolute lack of variation in the models’ body types. Each category has a different model, but the uniformity of their physical features reveals that while the

jewelry itself may vary, the idealized body image does not. Further, their tokenistic inclusion of Muslim brides, delinked from any regional variations, only serves to highlight the overwhelmingly Hindu framework of the wedding collection. Unsurprisingly, the Rivaah ads, both print and for television, feature young, able-bodied, conventionally attractive models with less-pigmented skin as brides.²⁷ This collection, while explicitly claiming to celebrate cultural variations and diversity in India, ends up reproducing and propagating body normativity. Here, the dangerously depoliticized and idealized category of the new Indian woman allows them to do so.

Rivaah's ad campaign became the subject of a petition begun by Muna Beatty, an Indian anticolorism advocate. Beatty addressed the petition to Tanishq, criticizing the lack of models with more pigmented skin in the Rivaah campaign. A part of Beatty's #ColourMeRight campaign, the petition begins by acknowledging the impact made by an earlier Tanishq wedding ad that had featured a bride with more pigmented skin.²⁸ The 2013 ad begins with the bride (the actress Priyanka Bose) putting on her Tanishq jewelry. A girl, who calls her Mama, walks in, and they share a brief emotional moment together before the ceremony begins. After the wedding, the child asks the groom if she can finally call him Daddy. Created by Lowe Lintas India and shot by filmmaker Gauri Shinde, this ad received a lot of attention when it first came out. In an interview that year, Deepika Tewari, who was then vice president of marketing for Titan's (Tanishq's parent company) jewelry division, when asked about this particular ad, proudly claimed, "Tanishq has always represented progressive thinking and we have only mirrored reality. Marriage is a big decision and our latest wedding collection is for every new-age bride who is confident and believes in herself."²⁹ Arun Iyer, the national creative director of Lowe Lintas, said that they took pains to cast the actors, as "it had to look like a marriage of equals, not something that was done out of pity."³⁰ The ad has over 1,950,000 views on YouTube, and viewers' comments are overwhelmingly positive.

Beatty, who uploaded the petition with the username Dark Brown Woman, writes appreciatively about the Priyanka Bose ad and criticizes the ads for Tanishq's Rivaah wedding collection. Beatty's primary focus in her petition is colorism. It is interesting to note how Beatty uses recognizable tropes about womanhood—tropes that Tanishq uses for advertising—to argue for better representation. She establishes herself as a woman who knows her own mind, as well as a mother who is worried about her daughter's future. Beatty also goes on to write about her own self-esteem issues and how such biased advertising might affect her daughter: "My daughter has the same complexion as me. I wonder at times how it will be for her."³¹ She ends her petition by asking Tanishq to "publicly commit to representing Indian women of all skin tones in all future ad campaigns" and reasserting the importance of swift

action.³² Beatty's petition received more than a thousand signatures in a short period of time and garnered a positive response from Tewari, who released a statement claiming to be committed to diversity: "Tanishq has always stood for diversity and we have consistently made efforts to ensure inclusivity is a cornerstone in all our advertisement work. . . . We will continue to create commercials that reflect the truly diverse nature of the country."³³ Beatty's success with Tanishq led her to start another petition on Change.org, this time demanding that Lakme, an Indian cosmetics brand, feature models with more pigmented skin in their ads. After Tanishq released its statement, Beatty exhorted the petition's signatories to continue to support such feminist activism. In her follow-up, titled "The Colour of Victory," Beatty writes how such an outcome has led her to hope that such a change "in our time [augurs] a better tomorrow for our children."³⁴ Thus, feminist activists have engendered change by holding corporations that claim to be committed to inclusivity and diversity accountable; their activism signals the urgent need to change normative visual narratives that perpetuate harmful ethnoracial and gendered stereotypes.

Fair and Normal: Skin Color, Able-bodiedness, and Capital in India's Digital Matrimonial Advertisements

We now turn to contemporary matrimonial advertisements in Indian digital media to explore how these ads reproduce or challenge conventional, patriarchal, and caste-ist ideas about colorism and body image for prospective brides and grooms. South Asian feminist scholars such as Rochona Majumdar, Sonora Jha, Jyotsna Vaid, and Neha Mishra have mapped how colonial and patriarchal ideological discourses have been recast in modern arranged marriages. Showing how market-related forces have influenced Indian marriages, these scholars underscore how the modern nuclear family reproduces patriarchal values. In what follows, we contend that modern Indian wedding advertisements center on and celebrate the joint family, reinforcing patriarchal body norms for women through a rhetoric of female empowerment.

Rochona Majumdar analyzes how the idea of the arranged marriage was reconstituted and rearranged in colonial India.³⁵ She argues that there remains "an unresolved tension at the heart of modernity" with the growth of Western education and the ideal of the bourgeois couple on the one hand and the normative construction of the joint family on the other.³⁶ The centrality of the couple is always subordinated to the ideal of the joint family founded on patriarchal values, such that the family, rather than the couple, is central in an arranged marriage; to explain this, Majumdar claims that "behind the celebration of the couple form was a commitment and concern about the lon-

gevity of the family.”³⁷ Majumdar establishes the modernity of the Indian arranged marriage by demonstrating how a primarily urban, print-based arranged marriage market emerged in colonial Bengal; this marriage market reconceptualized marriage practices in response to changes in colonial laws, education, and power relations, while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal ideas about gender and family. Relatedly, Sonora Jha notes how the marriage market in postcolonial India has been influenced by beauty and “fairness” ideals and skin tone has become “a visual agent” in placing individuals in “a local social hierarchy.”³⁸ Jha traces the rise of the modern “super-bride,” who emerged as the epitome of physical perfection in the 1990s. As Jha notes, with the advent of the Internet, patriarchal notions of colorism and sexism got reproduced by matrimonial websites; although online matchmaking enables an electronic interaction that bypasses face-to-face communication, it does not bypass skin color bias.³⁹ We argue that disguised under the garb of modernity, virtual matchmaking reinforces the hegemony of colorism.

This becomes evident across several online Indian matrimonial sites such as Shaadi.com, Bharatmatrimony.com, and Jeevansathi.com, which have been steadily growing in popularity. Since the ASCI released guidelines targeting tropes of fairness in advertising in 2014, matrimonial websites have removed the “complexion” and “body type” categories on their pages. In this context, we turn to two digital texts—a matrimonial video by Mainduck (2012)⁴⁰ on YouTube and a matrimonial advertisement on the website iMilap.com (2020)—to underscore how bias against more pigmented skin supersedes body image prejudice in the online matchmaking world. The matrimonial video was published before the ASCI guidelines, while the iMilap matrimonial profile was posted six years after the guidelines were issued. Although they are eight years apart, in both examples, colorism and body image bias are central to their vision of heteronormative intimacy.

Indian matrimonial websites require all prospective brides and grooms to submit a “biodata” to facilitate the search. The Indian marriage biodata is a document that details the age, date of birth, religion, education, caste, profession, salary, hobbies, and expectations of the alliance seeker, along with the names and professions of the candidate’s parents. Since the biodata necessarily fails to capture the personality of the seeker, online matrimonial profiles can often include accompanying short YouTube videos created by prospective brides and grooms. One matrimonial video, called “Sahi Rishta Matrimonial: Naik # 7892” and posted through the YouTube channel Mainduck, ridicules the gendered expectations underlying Indian matchmaking and critiques middle-class sexism.⁴¹ The matrimonial ad is produced by a company that makes comedic shows online. While sometimes funny and somewhat exaggerated, it reflects actual matrimonial videos that are produced today.⁴² In “Sahi Rishta Matrimonial: Naik # 7892,” the mother of the pro-

spective groom (an art-of-living or spiritual/self-help teacher living in the United States) directs the search for her son's spouse and shares her criteria for the ideal daughter-in-law: "a tall, pretty, clear-minded, and dynamic girl who honors all relationships" is what she wants. Following this, the mother asserts, "but most important, girl should be fair." The mother underscores that "wheatish" and "dark-skinned" brides are "not very much preferred." She adds that there is "no country bar or caste bar," but "Hindu parentage is preferred." In contrast, the viewer knows very little about her expatriate son except that he is an Art of Living teacher and awaiting his green card. The mother claims that he is "handsome," "athletic," and "caring," with "no health issues." There is no mention of the son's skin color, body type, or interests; instead, the text's focus on the mother's colorist demands exemplifies dominant sexist and racist discourses that privilege less-pigmented skin. It also represents, as Majumdar has argued, the hetero-patriarchal reconstitution of the institution of marriage today such that the joint family continues to reign supreme.

History tells us that India's deep-rooted bias against more-pigmented skin, though predating the arrival of British colonizers, was reaffirmed by the racialized hierarchies of colonialism that privileged less pigmented skin. Engaging an intersectional lens with this phenomenon, we suggest that feminist scholarship can expand our understanding of how colorism in India is imbricated with caste and class. Neha Mishra notes that conventional Indian matrimonial searches often expect that the married couple will share both caste and religion and privilege less-pigmented women over more pigmented women.⁴³ Skin color can be overlooked only if the bride's family is wealthier than the groom's family. Jyotsna Vaid illuminates how "fairness" functions as a "bargaining chip" in Indian marriage negotiations such that less-pigmented skin is often used to compensate for status inconsistencies in cross-caste marriage, inadequate dowry, lack of education, or unemployment.⁴⁴ Vaid contends that Indian matrimonial ads promote "ascribed characteristics," such as family status, caste, region, and language, over "achieved characteristics," such as educational accomplishment, occupation, and personality traits.⁴⁵ In the case of the Naiks, the mother's assertion on "no country bar or caste bar" is tied to the intersections of both class and caste privilege—this privilege determines access to emigration. It also implies that less-pigmented skin is the bargaining chip to negotiate the inconsistencies in caste and citizenship/residency. Contemporary Indian matrimonial advertisements are thus replete with neoliberal jargon that strives toward but fails to disguise the deep-rooted and dispossessing biases defining the nation's culture.

Body image norms and colorism intersect in specific ways in matrimonial advertising for differently abled subjects in India. iMilap is a matrimonial website that describes itself as a platform for people who are *divyang*,⁴⁶

deaf, or physically challenged. It illuminates how people with disabilities are also often prejudiced against more pigmented skin such that many prioritize less pigmented skin over able-bodiedness when considering potential partners. iMilap allows members to categorize their complexion as “unspecified,” “fair,” “brown,” “dark,” or “very dark.” It also classifies disability as follows: blindness, deafness, deafness and muteness, muteness, mental illness, physically challenged, polio, and accidental mental injury. Since self-identifying information in both categories is optional, some candidates describe their complexion as “fair” and “brown” but eschew noting anything in the disability section. Most profiles that mention disability are those of men. Further, it is noteworthy that the profiles of most women with disabilities are created by a parent or relative, implying that women with disabilities need to be protected and assisted by family members to make decisions on their behalf, while men with disabilities are independently capable of managing their online presence.

This speaks to how the marginalization of women of color who have disabilities is intertwined with colorism. Often, more pigmented women with disabilities list themselves as “fair” on this platform.⁴⁷ Ranjita Dawn argues that women with disabilities have consistently been denied traditional roles and access to heteronormative structures of intimacy like marriage. Either they are assumed to be incapable of fulfilling family responsibilities, or they are seen as asexual.⁴⁸ That the emancipatory possibilities of the digital media discussed above are complex and limited should be amply evident in how biases about religion, caste, skin color, and class status, among others, permeate the social organization of intimacy in this medium. One matrimonial profile posted in 2020 by a Kashmiri Hindu man with a disability states that he is looking for a “fair, beautiful, and loving professional woman” with a master’s degree. He details that he has a slightly raised right foot but that he is entirely independent and mobile. He confirms that he is open to marrying a woman with a disability.⁴⁹ Such ads demonstrate that even while attempting to disrupt the privileging of able-bodiedness, their heteronormative rhetoric reproduces other conventional colorist biases about lesser-pigmented skin. They also suggestively evince how capital (professional earning capacities) and education come into play as markers of value in evaluating life partners.

Conclusion

Our analysis in the present study is not exhaustive, but we hope that it instigates further dialogue about how race is central to colorist body image norms propagated in modern India for the Indian female subject and how caste, class, able-bodiedness, and heteronormativity structure these hegemonic norms. A truly effective feminist critique of colorism, then, must be intersectional:

it must uncover how colorism is imbricated with caste, class, regional, sexual, gender, and religious differences and stereotypes; it must also confront these imbrications across and through media forms that purport to offer new emancipatory visions of empowerment. Such an intersectional feminist critique can deconstruct the harmful relation between body normativity and capitalist consumer culture in the ecosystem of India's media cultures. Our admittedly eclectic archive of commercials that target, frame, and invent the ideal female body and the ideal Indian female subject exemplifies how capital, technology, and gender oppression are intertwined in new ways today. Our task, then, is to continue to grow feminist voices and feminist activism, which, as we have demonstrated, can mobilize media forms as well as policy changes to challenge colorism and body normativity in contemporary India.

NOTES

1. Menon and Pant, "Are Contingencies of Self-Worth," 129.
2. Jablonski, *Living Color*, 127.
3. Jablonski, 127.
4. Nagar and Virk, "The Struggle."
5. Shroff, Diedrichs, and Craddock, "Skin Color, Cultural Capital."
6. Johnson, "The Pot Calling the Kettle," 215.
7. Parameswaran and Cardoza, "Melanin on the Margins."
8. Medi Tree India, "Deepika Padukone."
9. *Economic Times*, "ASCI Releases Guidelines."
10. *NBC News*, "New Ad Guidelines."
11. Garnier India, "Garnier Light."
12. See Bharpilania, "Sorry 'Indian Matchmaking.'"
13. Basu, "India's Got Colour."
14. *Hindustan Times*, "Nandita Das."
15. Parameswaran and Cardoza, "Melanin on the Margins."
16. Glow and Lovely India, "GLOW KO NA ROKO."
17. Glow and Lovely, "Glow & Lovely."
18. Das and Sharma, "Fetishizing Women," 120.
19. Das and Sharma, 123.
20. Thapan, "Embodiment and Identity," 415–416.
21. Thapan, 441.
22. Das, "Gender Role Portrayals," 209.
23. ETRetail.com, "Tanishq Launches New Sub Brand."
24. Tanishq, "Rivaah Brides."
25. Tanishq, "The Bengali Bride."
26. Tanishq (@TanishqJewelry), "As varied as the communities she hails from, the Indian bride looks absolutely resplendent in her wedding finery. #RivaahBridesByTanishq," Twitter, February 17, 2017, 1:17 P.M. Available at <https://twitter.com/tanishqjewelry/status/832667734219427843>.
27. Tanishq Jewellery, "Tanishq—Rivaah."
28. Tanishq Jewellery, "Tanishq Wedding Film."
29. Twishy, "Tanishq's Progressive Thinking."

30. Shah, "New Tanishq Ads."
31. Beatty, "Tanishq—We Can Do Better!."
32. Beatty.
33. *Business Standard*, "Tanishq Commercials."
34. Beatty, "Petition Update."
35. Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity*, 2.
36. Majumdar, 13.
37. Majumdar, 241.
38. Jha, "Looking for Love," 68.
39. Jha, 71.
40. Mainduck, "Sahi Rishta."
41. Mainduck.
42. The Society for Anthropology in Community Colleges, "Annotated List."
43. Mishra, "India and Colorism."
44. Vaid, "Fair Enough?" 152.
45. Vaid, 153.
46. *Divyang*, meaning "divine body," was introduced as a new term by the Bharatiya Janata Party Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, in 2015, as a positive substitute for *viklang*, or "disabled." However, this term became controversial as people with disabilities and disability activists claimed that the term deified their impediments and overlooked their reality. See Karmakar, "'Divyangajan' Is a Controversial Word."
47. Their more pigmented skin was obvious in the profile pictures.
48. Dawn, "Our Lives, Our Identity."
49. iMilap.com.

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