

Exploration of Young Adult's Perception of Skin Colour and Mental Health Deterioration: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore the perception regarding skin colour and decline in mental health due to an increased obsession with fair complexion among young adults, specifically in Pakistan.

Study Design: Exploratory study.

Place and Duration of Study: Public and Private Universities of Islamabad/Rawalpindi Pakistan, from Jun to Aug 2022.

Methodology: Three independent focus group discussions were carried out with young adults (aged 18-35). Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed by keeping in mind the ethical consideration. Moreover, two interviews, one with the dermatologist and the other with the beautician, were also conducted to gain more information. The data was gathered and transcribed and then, themes emerged by using Thematic Analysis. Inter-rater reliability of themes was computed by four independent raters which were found to be substantial for focus groups and each interview.

Results: The results reveal major themes that emerged from the present study, which influenced young adults' perception regarding skin colour and damaged their mental health. New dimensions were revealed in which both males and females were studied, which had not previously been explored in Pakistan.

Conclusion: This study identifies those factors contributing to the deteriorating mental health of a person related to skin colour and mental health professionals. The Young adults of Pakistan are dissatisfied and preoccupied with the notion of perfect skin colour, which leads them to opt for different unhealthy means to beautify themselves and damaging their mental health.

Keywords: Mental health, Perception, Skin colour, Skin-lightening products, Young adults.

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INTRODUCTION

Skin colour obsession has become a new trend for keeping up with the world. There were times when songs were made to glorify dark complexion. Then, black was a beauty, nowadays light skin tone is in fashion and is the personification of beauty and it looks very appealing to others.¹⁻³ One way to measure beauty in Asian countries like Pakistan, is by scaling complexion. People's obsession with fair skin makes them more concerned about their skin colour which automatically led them to practice different kinds of skin-lightening products. People in Pakistani society and nearby countries felt proud if they found a fair bride for their son. The attraction toward the opposite sex increases if the other person is fair.⁴

Research showed that Pakistani people believed that advertisements for fairness creams change the perception of women and indulged them in using

these creams to get a fair complexion.^{5,6} The most affected population is dark-skinned people who are influenced by media skin complexion advertisements in which they glorify the preference for a fair complexion in every field of life either personal or professional.⁷ A fair-complexion woman enjoys every facility while a dark female has to face a lot of difficulties, low self-esteem, and hardships in all fields of life.⁸ Skin-lightening products portray a woman as unsuccessful and undesirable until they are suggested to use a lightening agent, which helps them in their deprivation.⁹

Regardless of its historical and cultural importance, a limited number of studies are available that have established links between psychological well-being and skin tone. Individuals with darker complexion became sensitive towards their feelings and started feeling inferior.¹⁰ So, this study aimed to explore the perception of Pakistani young adults about skin colour and mental health deterioration. What do they think about their skin colour and the trending obsession with fair complexion?

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METHODOLOGY

The exploratory study was conducted at the Public and Private Universities of Islamabad/Rawalpindi Pakistan, from June to August 2022. The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethical Committee of the University (Ref: FURC/IRB/043).

Inclusion Criteria: Participants of either gender, who were currently enrolled in Islamabad and Rawalpindi universities and aged 18-35 years were included.

Exclusion Criteria: Students who were already suffering from physical or mental health conditions were excluded.

To collect the qualitative data, using purposive sampling, 30 study participants from different public and private universities in Islamabad/Rawalpindi were selected for the present study. The sample consisted of both males (n=14) and females (n=16) in the age range of 18-35 years. Interviews were also conducted with dermatologists and beauty salons. A dermatologist (n=1) from a well-known hospital was interviewed. A beautician (n=1) was also interviewed to get relevant information about the study and treatments young adults were using to improve the skin colour of their customers.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews were conducted to explore the perception. A demographic sheet was filled out by the participants before each focus group. A Focus group guide was prepared based on literature and opinions of subject matter experts. All the relevant information was searched, and a focus group guide and interview guide were developed based on already existing literature and experts in the field, which included psychologists (n=1) and researchers (n=2). Participants were requested independently to participate in this focus group and share their valuable experiences and points of view based on their proper consent. The participants granted the permission for audio-recording the focus group. They, were assured about the confidentiality of the information they would provide and that it would only be used for research purposes. The specific set of questions was developed so that the targeted information was elicited, participants could easily understand and provide more in-depth information. Each focus group took almost 50-60 minutes to complete the discussion. After completing each focus group, gathered audio recordings were transcribed. For interviews, doctors and beauticians were contacted independently to share their valuable

career experiences. Permission was granted for audio-recording the interview. Each interview took 30-40 minutes to complete. After the completion of each interview, the gathered data was separately transcribed.

To analyze data qualitatively, the recorded data was transcribed, and the Thematic Analysis,¹¹ method was carried out in which themes emerged using the Inductive approach. The themes were reviewed and analyzed by independent researchers, as the process is described in Table-I.

Table-I: Overview of Steps Involved in the Analysis Process

Steps	Description
Organization of recorded data	Organization of recorded data and copies of all records help to get back to the original record when needed.
Transcription and Condensation of data	Transcription of data and re-read to become familiar with the material helps to get an overall picture of the information.
Coding & Classification	An analysis is based on the coding of participants' verbatim
Analysis	Analysis of transcribed data depends on inter-rater reliability

To access the inter-rater reliability of the themes generated from the focus group discussions and each interview, Cohen's Kappa was calculated by 4 trained independent raters for FGDs and two interviews, it was found 0.78 which was considered to be substantial agreement.

RESULTS

The present study explored the perception of young adults in Pakistan regarding skin colour using Thematic Analysis. The combined themes that emerged from focus group discussions and interviews are displayed in Table-II. The results showed different themes that emerged from FGDs and interviews, which showed that most people are obsessed with fair complexion and are dissatisfied with their skin colour upon idealizing it. People start worrying about their skin colour at an early age which afterwards turns into skin-lightening practices. The themes appeared that ethnic identification and discrimination in various fields are based on skin colour. Being darker was even more stressful when judgmental comments were passed, which often shattered one's self-confidence, affected their mental peace, made them worthless, and lowered their self-esteem. As the results in Table-II showed that skin colour plays a part in enhancing a person's overall appearance and media is the source of glorifying the fair complexion and obsession which led

Exploration of Young Adult's Perception of Skin

Table-II: Themes Emerged from Focus Group Discussion and Interviews

Themes	Subthemes	Quotations
Skin colour satisfaction	Overall satisfaction level of people and urge for fair complexion	People are somehow satisfied with their skin colour but the desire to have a fair complexion is still there
Skin colour concerns	Consciousness related to skin colour	Mostly teenagers (14-15) especially females become conscious about their skin colour but are concerned more after 18 and are more likely to visit beauty salons
Ethnicity identification	Identification	People identify and recognize each other's ethnicity based on skin colour
Differential treatment in life situations	Family and friends' behavior	People are compared by their own family and make friends on skin colour bases
	Better job opportunity	People prefer skin colour over intellectual qualifications in jobs
	Societal status and Class difference	People have different social standards and class differences on skin colour
Judgmental behavior and Emotional Distress	Judgmental comment passing leads to the disturbed emotional state	People judge each other, and passed pejorative comments on one's skin colour which damaged a person's emotional state, shattered one's confidence, and feeling of worthless
Physical attractiveness in spousal selection	Physical appearance as a source of attraction	Skin colour affects one's physical appearance as a fair complexion is considered a symbol of attraction
	Spouse preferences	A fair bride is preferred over a darker one while ignoring her personality traits.
Media's glorifying role in obsession for fair complexion	Beauty advertisement increases the urge for a fair complexion	The media portrays fair skin in their ads in a glamorous way to attract people
	Usage of skin-lightening agents	Obsession leads them to opt for excessive practices of whitening agents for the white complexion.

people to use certain harmful lightening agents that affect their skin.

DISCUSSION

In this study, the focus group discussions, and interviews suggested new dimensions related to the overall factors contributing to perception regarding skin colour among young adults of Pakistan for both males and females. The results revealed that skin colour is essential to people's daily lives. The emerging theme of skin colour satisfaction showed the dissatisfaction level of people that if they ever get a chance to change their skin colour, they will go for it. These findings were also reported by Bond and Cash,¹² as women are satisfied with their skin colour, but it becomes dissatisfaction when they idealize it.

Females are the most concerned gender about their skin colour, and they became conscious about their complexion in their early teens. Recent research reported similar findings, showing that adolescents and young adults were dissatisfied with their skin colour, leading them to use skin-lightening products. The doctors also explained that mostly 18 years and above females came to us with their skin colour issues. A study from India by Utley *et al.* in 2016 suggested that dark-skinned men and women both suffered from

discrimination but studies showed that dark-skinned women suffered a lot and have many disadvantages related to their skin colour.^{13, 14} Another study conducted in India in 2021 showed that 40% of males and females think that fair colour has an advantage, especially in job selection.¹⁵ The current study findings showed that our society has different and strict criteria, especially for females regarding skin colour, which is why females are more concerned and inclined toward beauty treatments. Most people identify one another by their skin colour and referring them to a particular ethnic group. In our culture, people stereotyped that if a person is fair, then, he/she must have belonged to a Pathan or a Kashmiri family and if he/she is darker then he/she might be from a Punjabi family.⁹

Differential treatment in life situation theme revealed that most females suffer more in daily life situations for their skin colour. Previous research supported the idea that having a light skin colour is considered a symbol of high status. A light-skinned person prefers a light-skinned peer.¹⁶ For employment purposes, women are evaluated in terms of their complexion and physical appearance rather than their education and skills.¹⁷ One recent ethnographic study conducted in Pakistani culture in 2020 showed that a fair complexion and appealing look always received

more favour, and fair colour enhances incredible chances, especially for matrimony.¹⁸

People judge and pass comments on others for their skin colour, which emotionally distresses a person with a dark complexion. These findings were reported by Keith *et al.* who found that women have to face hardships, be mistreated, and be called insulting names just because of their skin colour.¹⁹ During a selection of a spouse, people prefer physical attractiveness which means a fair-complexion bride is in demand. People ignore the other personality trait of a girl and instead focus on her physical appearance. These findings were supported by recent research in which Ryabov *et al.*²⁰ reported that physical attractiveness is associated with light skin colour and is often high for black female adults. In the marriage context, women faced more discrimination than men and it was found that males have a right to partner selection in terms of skin colour preferences.¹³ Lastly, the media is contributing to enhancing the concept of a fair complexion as the most desirable and attractive skin colour. The results showed that the commercialization of beauty products advertisements attracts young souls and makes them feel guilty about their complexion. These ads portray that a fair complexion is a key to success and a solution to any problem. Previous literature showed that media promotional campaigns are actively playing their role in enhancing the fondness for fairness creams by showing different advertisements on TV, print media, and billboards. Dark-skinned people were the most effective ones influenced by these ads.^{6,21} It is playing its role in manipulating people's minds and making them think how much a complexion matters. TV commercials, dramas, films, and other sources are promoting a fair complexion as a sign of prosperity, opportunities, beauty, and fame in our culture.⁹ Recent research in 2016 reported that fairness creams for men have also been launched in India, Nepal, and other South Asian countries, and men are using them excessively all over the world. Beauty salons are offering different skin treatments and they count on bleaching agents which make the skin colour white.⁶ These findings were supported by studies in Pakistan which showed that 50% of the population is using fairness creams along with Tropical Corticosteroids (TCs) as these fairness creams contain steroids which speed up the process of lightening skin tone and lead to early aging, acne scars, and an enormous amount of facial hair growth. The current study highlighted how much our young population is concerned about skin

complexion and how we made the skin complexion a benchmark of one's ability. Their skin colour obsessions make them vulnerable to different psychological problem. This is need of hour to focus on acceptance of individual potentials and abilities rather than complexion.

CONCLUSION

The overall results revealed that the young adults of Pakistan showed concern and dissatisfaction with their skin colour. They suffered from different mental health issues leading to many unhealthy ways of life. It was also illustrated that there is a lot of societal contribution in shaping the minds of young adults like society has made fair complexion a symbol of goodness and purity, beauty and status. People were obsessed and preoccupied with fair complexion and considered it as the reason behind all the success and facilities of a person. People made fair complexion a standard for beauty. A fair complexion is considered a dominant factor in our culture, which is ruining our everyday mental peace.

Conflict of Interest: None.

Authors' Contribution

Following authors have made substantial contributions to the manuscript as under:

SM & HKT: Data acquisition, data analysis, data interpretation, critical review, approval of the final version to be published.

SK & FP: Study design, data interpretation, drafting the manuscript, critical review, approval of the final version to be published.

Authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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Exploration of Young Adult's Perception of Skin

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