

# Colorism and Love for *Fair* Skin

## Exploring Digitization's Effect on India's Arranged Marriage Matrimonial Advertisements

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### Abstract

Previous studies have found the presence of colorism, especially a bias toward fair-skinned women in India's newspaper matrimonial advertisements where fair-complexioned women are considered more beautiful than those with a darker skin complexion. Most matrimonial advertisements in newspapers are posted by family elders such as parents of prospective brides. This study explored if the rise of online matrimonial portals has empowered marginalized members of families such as prospective brides by giving them greater access to, and control over, posting matrimonial ads, and whether who posts these ads has made a difference to how women are projected in the online ads. Textual analysis of 150 online matrimonial ads indicated that younger women such as would-be brides posted more ads in online media, compared to older family members. Further, irrespective of who posted the ads, there was less overt focus on physical attributes of women such as fairness of skin, but colorism was present in more subtle forms. Finally, the online ads posted by both prospective brides, and their parents, were unable to entirely break free from shackles of socially constructed patriarchal norms where women's physical attributes such as fair skin are considered critical qualities. Findings were consistent with the tenets of Critical Race Theory that colorism is an ingrained feature of social systems and is constantly negotiated based on a group's own social interests.

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## Introduction

Arranged marriages—where family elders seek and select a spouse for their son or daughter—are perhaps the most popular form of marriage in India (IANS, 2013; Pande, 2015). Some studies have found 75% Indian men and women between 18 and 35 prefer arranged marriages to choosing their own partners (e.g., Rodrigues, 2015)—a process often referred to in India as *love marriage*. Despite the number of such love marriages (marriages that are self-arranged) growing in India over the past decade (Allendorf & Ghimire, 2013; Allendorf & Pandian, 2016), many more marriages are arranged entirely by parents, at best with some input from the bride or groom (Banerji, Martin, & Desai, 2013; Stopnitzky, 2017).

Arranged marriages are not an Indian phenomenon though. They are common in many parts of the world beyond South Asia. Even in societies where parental control over marriages are crumbling such as China (e.g., Xiaohe & Whyte, 1990), arranged marriages continue to be a powerful institution. Each year several hundred thousand women enter into *transnational* arranged marriages and immigrate to other nations (Constable, 2010) such as the U.S., and U.K. Arranged marriages are still popular, if not dominant, in countries as diverse as Denmark (Schmidt, 2011), Nepal (Allendorf & Ghimire, 2013), Germany (Hense & Schorch, 2013), and Saudi Arabia (Al-Dawood, Abokhodair, & Yarosh, 2017).

The Indian and South Asian diaspora, however, dominate this market. This includes the large South Asian diaspora worldwide. According to a 2016 survey by the UN Department of Economic & Social Affairs, 16 million Indians live outside the countries they were born in—constituting the single largest bloc of all global migrants (Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016). Countries such

as South Africa, Malaysia, USA, U.K., Singapore, and Fiji, for instance, have a large Indian diaspora. Arranged marriages continue to be popular among this population (e.g. Pande, 2016; Bonfanti, 2015).

## **Literature Review**

Arranged marriages are a complex phenomenon. Despite their popularity, and seemingly high survival rate (Applbaum, 1995; Lee, 2013; Buch, 2015) compared to self-arranged or love marriages, they are fraught with challenges. Incidents of marital violence, lack of marital satisfaction, infidelity, and mental health problems are common in such marriages (Qureshi, Charsley, & Shaw, 2014). Human rights activists also argue that many so-called arranged marriages are actually child marriages (Ouattara, Sen, & Thomson, 1998) that result in serious health consequences (Kamal & Hassan, 2015), or dowry-related violence. Supporters of arranged marriages, on the other hand, argue that some Western cultures do not understand arranged marriages since this is a practice alien to their culture, or a practice long forgotten (Burke, 2012). They claim that arranged marriages succeed because people in these communities believe marriage is not just a union between two people but a way of belonging in society, being part of a larger cultural group (Das, 2017).

### **India's Fascination for Fair-Skinned Women**

In the case of India and South Asia, arranged marriages are further complicated by another factor—a fascination for fair-skinned women (Johnson, 2002; Karan, 2008; Shankar & Subish, 2016), where fair skin is equated with beauty (Ismail,

Loya, & Hussain, 2015), and accorded a superior position in society compared to darker-skinned women (Mishra, 2015). Some scholars attribute such colorism to India's colonial legacy (Nadeem, 2014; Eric, Li, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008). Others argue that idealizing whiteness (Gupta, 1976) and demonizing the dark-skinned may have been prevalent even in ancient India (e.g., Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). The modern Indian, however, does not live in ancient times nor are they colonized. Yet, many recent studies examining marriage practices and female body image in India have found an overwhelming presence of colorism in the arranged marriage matchmaking process (e.g. Jha & Adelman, 2009; Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009; Karan, 2008). A 2013 survey of 1,000 Indian men and women conducted by a leading matrimonial website found that a majority of women and men believed fair-skinned women made better partners. Most men mentioned they would prefer to go on a date or marry a woman who was fairer than them (IANS, 2013).

### **Changing Dynamics of Matrimonial Ads: Print Vs Online Platforms**

The framing of women's bodies as ideal brides in matrimonial advertisements is especially interesting in this respect. In a pre-digital era, matrimonial advertisements appeared only in Sunday editions of newspapers. This often meant that power over the content of such ads would lie in the hands of family elders such as parents, since it involved face-to-face financial transactions (with the newspaper's sales office) and physically submitting the matrimonial ad to those offices. Traditional print media, by their very nature, are exclusionary. They continue to encourage age-old practices such as pre-templated matrimonial ads with clearly defined parameters to be filled out by parents

who are expected to provide the age, height, skin complexion, and body type of a woman/would-be-bride (Ramasubramanian & Jain, 2009; Hamamoto, 2013; Mishra, 2015). It is common to come across a newspaper matrimonial advertisement that describes the prospective bride as very fair, pretty, tall, slim, and adjusting, ignoring entirely—or pushing to the periphery—her academic, and professional qualifications. Online media, by comparison, are arguably more democratic (Mellet, Beauvisage, Beuscart, & Trespeuch, 2014; Firmstone & Coleman 2015), offering opportunities to all members of society to voice their aspirations and concerns. Historically marginalized in most nations, women have used online media to call for political upheavals (Radsch & Khamis, 2013), launch campaigns against sexual harassment (Skalli, 2013), or make their grievances heard (Mpofu, 2015) across continents. In India's booming arranged marriage industry too, the advent of online marriage portals such as simplymarry.com, shaadi.com, and bharatmatrimony.com have arguably led to a gradual decrease in parental control over matrimonial ad content (Sinha & D'Souza, 2017; Yasmin, 2013) since in many households, older members such as parents or grandparents are not comfortable using digital technology. This has potentially allowed younger members within the family structure to post their own matrimonial ads without parental control. Chat, video, and other interactive features of online portals too have encouraged brides and grooms to be more engaged in the decision making process (Agarwal, 2015) and choose their own life partners.

Have these innovations ushered in more sustainable changes in so far as control over who posts matrimonial ads, how women are depicted in the ads and, the presence of colorism in matrimonial ads, is concerned?

Access to technology that *should* usher in social change, does

not always guarantee that desired changes *will* take place. Affected groups should be willing to challenge and change status quo. If online platforms have actually shifted power dynamics within families (Salkowitz, 2010; Shukla, 2016), is this change reflected in the content of matrimonial advertisements, especially in terms of how women's bodies are depicted in such ads?

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine: (a) who posted matrimonial ads on online matrimonial/arranged marriage platforms; (b) how were women depicted in these online matrimonial ads; and (c) how important was skin complexion of a woman when would-be-brides or their siblings posted these ads? To answer these research questions, textual analysis of 150 online matrimonial advertisements was conducted. The findings were situated in the context of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to understand how, and under what conditions, colorism operates during an arranged marriage process.

## Theoretical Framework

Unlike some social science theories that merely explain a phenomenon (Crossman, 2017), critical theories critique and attempt to change existing structures. Critical Race Theory (CRT) posits that "the majority of racism remains hidden beneath a veneer of normality" (Gilborn, 2015, p. 278) and that perceived group memberships can make some groups vulnerable to various forms of bias. For example, women of different ethnicities and cultures may experience racial or ethnicity-related biases differently. Women in India have long been subjected to colorism, especially in matrimonial advertisements—most often based on their ethnicity, caste, and skin complexion.

Such colorism can operate between similar racial and ethnic

groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) as an ingrained feature of social systems (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Hordge-Freeman, 2010) that is constantly negotiated based on a group's own social interests (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, De Ruse, Few, & Blume, 2005). Caste-based colorism, in fact, is quite unique to South Asia, especially India. As a 2004 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report noted, casteism in India had evolved over centuries, and that "caste sustained communitarian identities of innumerable groups ethnically, culturally and socially distinct from each other and at the same time, held these communities together in a vast network of local hierarchies...The graded structure of exclusion was never a permanently fixed arrangement, and a fairly frequent upward and downward movement of communities took place within and across local hierarchies" (Sheth, 2004, p. 3). Critical Race Theorists too argue that colorism is not always limited to the black and white binary, and racism can exist between people who identify as different shades of brown (Burke, 2008; Hall, 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

This is evident in the findings of some previous studies that have concluded frequent mention of women as fair or very fair in newspaper matrimonial ads, denoted a sense of privilege among those who considered themselves or their daughters fairer than others (Mishra, 2015; Ladson-Billings, & Tate, 1995). While the presence of intercultural racial bias has been found in several global studies (e.g., Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Jones, 2013; Burton et al., 2010), fewer studies have used Critical Race Theory to examine colorism in India's arranged marriage market (Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016; Nadeem, 2014), more specifically, to explore if online platforms have empowered marginalized family members such as brides-to-be to challenge the objectification of women.



Research examining colorism in India started when several multinational skin-lightening brands gained popularity in India, and scholars began examining the effects these ads had on social norms and values (Osuri, 2008; Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). Similarly, skin tone bias in matrimonial advertisements became a subject of discussion as greater access to internet in India resulted in the rise of online matrimonial websites, and discussion centered on the presence of colorism in a country of brown-skinned people (Berggren & Nilsson, 2013). With India's Internet user population now the second-highest in the world (Thakur, 2016), thanks especially to more young Indians going digital, many parents are ceding control to their children, allowing them to craft their own matrimonial ads (Harris, 2015). Young Indians are "carving out independence from parents and matrimonial websites have started redesigning themselves for the more progressive user" (Tandon, 2017, p. 2). Yet, few studies have explored this shifting power structure within households and its possible effects on online matrimonial ads. To understand the effects of online matrimonial platforms on Indian families, and on the nature of matrimonial ads, the following research questions were posed:

- RQ1: How frequently was fairness of skin mentioned in descriptive texts of these advertisements?
- RQ2: Which members of the family posted online matrimonial advertisements?
- RQ3: Did colorism have any presence in these advertisements, and if so, in what form?
- RQ4: Did the content of the advertisement differ based on who posted the ads?

## Method

*Sample:* A discourse analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2014) was conducted to examine the presence of colorism and overall depiction of women in India's online matrimonial advertisements. To put these online advertisements in perspective, a sample of newspaper advertisements was also analyzed to establish possible differences between print and online advertisements. In qualitative studies, randomization of sample is not a necessary criterion. In fact, most qualitative studies use a purposeful or judgement sample where "the researcher actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question" (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). One of the best purposeful sampling options for this study was to choose a broad range of subjects, also known as the maximum variation sample (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In this case, the analyzed sample represented members of different linguistic and cultural groups, as well as different castes and communities from across India. The print sample was chosen from the matrimonial pages of Hindustan Times—India's second-largest English language newspaper. The online samples were chosen from Shaadi.com and BharatMatrimony.com—two of India's most popular online matrimonial sites. Shaadi.com (*shaadi* means wedding in Hindi and Urdu) is one of India's three biggest online matrimonial portals. Founded in 1997, its core market is India, but it operates globally, with offices in Canada, the UAE, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. (Sethi, 2008). Bharat Matrimony, also founded in 1997, claims to be the largest matrimony website in India with over 130 offices in the country. It also has offices in Sri Lanka, UAE, Malaysia, and the U.S. to cater to expatriate Indians (Kaur, 2002; Babu, 2013). Hindustan Times is India's second-highest selling English newspaper with a daily circulation of over 1.6

million copies (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2016).

All the sampled advertisements were in English and all the ads were from brides or their families, seeking grooms. This suited the study's specific purpose: to understand who posted these ads, the presence of colorism—overt or covert—in these ads and the changes, if any, that online platforms had brought about in terms of how women were depicted in matrimonial ads, specifically in terms of colorism. Qualitative studies aim to gain in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon in a cultural context, and do not aim for generalizability. Hence, it was not necessary to have a very large sample size. To keep it manageable, the first 25 'grooms wanted' advertisements appearing on two consecutive Sunday matrimonial pages of Hindustan Times (hereafter, HT)—thus making a total of 50—were selected for comparative analysis (newspaper matrimonial ads appear only on Sundays). Similarly, the first 25 'grooms wanted' ads appearing on the web page of Shaadi.com and Bharatmatrimony.com during the same time period (three consecutive Sundays—August 27, September 3, and September 10, 2017) were selected. The ads were all in English and chosen from English language matrimonial sites and newspapers to ensure that print and online ads did not represent radically different socio-economic groups (James, 2004). While e-copies of the HT matrimonial pages were downloaded for the print ads, the authors had to register as members on Shaadi.com and Bharatmatrimony.com to access the online advertisements. The registrations were cancelled immediately upon completion of the study.

## Procedure

Each advertisement was separately printed out and the text read

line by line to identify emerging patterns and themes (Kohlbacher, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Multiple readings of the text were conducted to examine the identity of the advertiser, the frequency of colorism in the ads, and emergent themes. If an advertisement mentioned a woman's skin complexion by using words or phrases such as fair, very fair, gori (the Hindi term for fair), clear-skinned, wheatish, dark, or similar, it was categorized as presence of colorism. Ads that did not mention skin complexion but mentioned other physical attributes such as height, body type, or weight, were coded as women as objects. Ads that mentioned some academic, professional or other attributes of a woman, were coded as balanced, while ads that did not mention any such attribute were coded as not balanced. While print advertisements contained text in the form of a few descriptive sentences, online ads had a two-fold portrayal—they had descriptive sentences, as well as a template format where advertisers had the choice to either mention physical attributes or keep the options blank. For online ads, both sets of texts were analyzed.

## Findings

RQ1 and RQ2 examined who posted the ads, and how often fair skin or skin complexion were mentioned in the ads, to understand how online 'grooms wanted' ads were different from print ads. Number counting was important to understand if indeed online ads provided comparatively greater access to younger Indians to post their own (or their siblings') matrimonial ads or whether older adults still controlled this, and whether a change in who posted the ads also made a difference to what was posted in these ads.

## How Often was Skin Complexion Mentioned

To understand how traditional matrimonial advertisements are written, the 50 advertisements appearing in HT were analyzed. As many as 42 of the 50 (84%) advertisements mentioned the woman's skin complexion as fair, very fair or gori. Ads that did not highlight fair-skin as an attribute, did not mention the skin tone of the would-be bride at all—choosing instead to focus on other physical attributes such as their body type (e.g. slim, athletic) or height. In 40 out of 50 ads (80%), at least one of these three attributes of a woman were mentioned in the first sentence of the post: slim, fair, or beautiful.

If for some reason a prospective bride was perceived as not possessing these attributes, then her other qualities such as homely, charming, respects elders etc. were mentioned in the opening sentence. In one instance, when the would-be-bride was a doctor, the ad said: "Smart, fair, tall, beautiful, doctor girl, looking for a suitable groom". Another ad that did mention the woman's qualifications upfront, stated: "LSE-educated, v. pretty, slim, fair and homely," as the first five attributes (LSE refers to London School of Economics). Almost without exception, professional qualifications of the prospective brides (e.g. graduate, MBA, lecturer, bank manager) were either not mentioned (32 out of 50 did not mention) in the ads, or if mentioned, appeared right at the end. These were consistent with findings of earlier studies and reconfirmed that even today printed newspaper matrimonial advertisements are almost entirely controlled by parents of the bride and the advertisements remain just as sexist and skin-tone conscious as they were before, portraying women as objects of desire and using fairness of skin as a positive quality that makes one superior in some way to a woman with darker skin.

Shaadi.com is an online platform. Previous studies have shown that online platforms provide more access and power to younger members of society to have their say. Online advertisements had a fundamental difference from print ads: applicants had the option of uploading multiple photographs of themselves with their post. While 47 of the ads scanned for this paper did post at least two or more photos, three did not. Further, the site had a specific place on the profile page where each candidate was asked to mention her body type, weight, height, skin complexion, eating and drinking habits and other information. On Shaadi.com, mentioning of the skin tone of a woman was mandatory in the basic profile.

Therefore, in all 50 ads, irrespective of who posted them, the advertisers mentioned skin complexion of the women in the space provided for specific physical attributes. Almost all of them (except one) mentioned at least one other physical attribute. However, there was a difference: fair or very fair were not the only complexion type mentioned. Many ads reported the would-be bride's skin complexion as wheatish (indicating that a person's skin tone is like wheat—a commonly used term in India) or dark-skinned. Another big difference was the almost complete lack of any mention of a woman's skin complexion or body type in the main text of the ads, unlike in print ads. Instead, almost all ads prominently mentioned the candidate's academic and/or professional skills in the main text. As many as 36 of the 50 (72%) posts mentioned a candidate/applicant's academic qualifications (e.g. MA, PhD, CA, MBA) and/or work-status (e.g. teacher, doctor, engineer) in the first two sentences. Among the others, 12 mentioned it later during the post. Only two ads did not mention any academic or professional qualification of the prospective bride.

On Bharatmatrimony.com similarly, 47 out of the 50 ads

carried at least one image of the prospective bride. Only three did not. Unlike on Shaadi.com though, it was not mandatory to mention the skin complexion of a prospective bride or groom on Bharatmatrimony.com. It was an option on the dropdown menu, but clients could choose not to answer that question. Yet 49 of the 50 advertisements mentioned the woman's skin complexion in the section allotted to optional physical attributes. In the main text, much like Shaadi.com, not a single advertiser mentioned the prospective bride's physical attributes such as body type or skin complexion.

Instead, 39 advertisers mentioned the prospective bride's skills, qualifications, and/or requirements in the first two lines. Eight others mentioned it somewhere in the main text. Only three did not mention specific academic qualifications or specific skills.

### Who Posted the Ads

Except in two instances, all print ads (48/50) were posted by family elders. They all referred to the prospective bride as "our daughter", "our niece", "my granddaughter", or in similar language—making it clear that the advertisers were family elders/parents. Two ads were written in a manner where it was not possible to distinguish the identity of the advertiser. Again, this was consistent with findings of previous studies.

On online platforms, many more younger adults posted the ads, including prospective brides or their siblings. The Shaadi.com portal had a drop-down option where a member needed to declare who was posting the ad, with the options being Self/Sibling/Parent/Friend. This was visible to anyone viewing these ads, thus making it easy to find out who posted the ad. While 23 of the 50 (46%) ads were posted by parents/guardians, 27/50, (54%) were posted by self or siblings.

On Bharatmatrimony.com, the numbers were quite similar. Out of the 50 ads, 24 were posted by parents, while 26 were posted by self or siblings. On this website too, each advertisement mentioned who posted the ads (e.g. posted by parents), though many ads made it obvious in the main text (e.g. our daughter is...). While these numbers did not suggest a complete reversal of power or a total shift in who controls matrimonial ads, it indicated that compared to print media such as newspaper ads, women—especially prospective brides—had a lot more opportunity to post their own matrimonial ads on online platforms.

### Presence of Colorism in Texts

RQ3 sought to examine the presence of colorism in the online advertisements, to understand if who posted the ad made a difference to how the ads were framed.

*Print media:* Again, to understand how different traditional print newspaper ads were, the 50 print ads were analyzed. Colorism was overt in almost all the ads, with fair skin complexion and body type of the prospective bride inevitably appearing within the first 10 words. Non-physical attributes such as their academic qualifications, job status, salaries etc., were sometimes mentioned but always after physical attributes had been highlighted first.

Interestingly, in most advertisements, the caste of the woman was also highlighted, even though a majority of posts specifically stated that caste was not a criterion they were looking for in a groom (e.g. caste no bar). These examples from five ads helped us contextualize the findings:

1. "SM4 AGRWL Girl V.B'ful, Fair, 26, 5.3", working in top



MNC, reputed family. Caste no bar" (SM4 means 'suitable match for'; Agarwal refers to the woman's caste).

2. "Daughter, 26, v. beautiful, v. fair, slim. We are looking for an IAS or doctor from a Delhi-based business family. Caste no bar" (IAS stands for Indian Administrative Services, a highly sought-after credential).
3. "Well settled, qualified match required for Tall, Slim, Fair, MDS, with own clinic in West Delhi..." (MDS refers to a medical doctor).
4. "SM4 Fair, average, nvr married Dhobi girl, 1978/5.2", pursue MSW, Caste no bar except Muslim..." (Dhobi refers to the woman's caste; MSW refers to master's in social work).
5. "SM4 Arora, 35/5.5", fair, beautiful, slim, innocent. Divorce, i'less, MBA-UK, working exec, Delhi-based" (i'less means issue-less or has no children; Arora refers to caste/ethnicity).

In all the instances, while the bride's physical attributes were highlighted, the advertisers specified they wanted well-settled, highly qualified grooms; no mention was made about desired physical attributes of the men. Depiction of women as objects of desire, as pretty, fair, capable of household work, therefore, was common in the ads. Colorism, including casteism, was overt, obvious, and unsubtle.

*Online media:* The online media ads on Shaadi.com and Bharatmatrimony.com were different in many ways. Firstly, unlike print ads, the advertisers were not charged per letter or word (as in print ads). Instead, advertisers needed to register and become members of the matrimonial website. Basic memberships were free, though premium memberships cost money. Prospective members were vetted at the outset by mobile number

verification, after which a unique identity number was emailed to the member. There was no charge till this stage; however, there were certain optional paid upgrades offered. Therefore, individuals posting matrimonial ads presumably had more physical space, the use of more words to describe themselves, than in print. The bigger difference, however, was in the descriptive section of the ads. Since many of the advertisements were posted by prospective brides themselves, the framing and language differed significantly from print ads. One candidate wrote, for instance:

I am extremely ambitious. Education for me is the most important asset and I am looking for the same in my companion. My thoughts are very liberal, and I come from an extremely forward thinking and close-knit family.

Here, the prospective bride clearly stated she was ambitious and career-oriented. She made it evident that she was liberal-minded and forward-thinking—usually a code to indicate that grooms who want a woman to stay at home and cook, should look elsewhere for a bride. A second candidate wrote:

I am a fun-loving person who likes to have balance in all aspect of life, doesn't let work affect personal life and vice versa. I love to travel and dance. I like to socialize a lot but after a long day I also enjoy sipping a cup of tea by myself or watching movies/series. In my free time, I like to gym, hike, cook, or hang out with my friends.

Here, the woman set her own terms instead of stating physical attributes. Interestingly, when parents posted on online platforms, they too avoided the language of print ads, choosing to follow the frame younger members used. So, physical attributes were not present in any of the descriptive texts. Some subtle differences, however, did exist. Parents, for instance, tended to highlight their daughter's hobbies, lifestyle, and

character over and above their professional skills. For instance, one parent wrote:

Passionate about painting and crafts. Likes watching Indian movies and listening to Indian music. She will be studying for Post-Graduation while continuing to work. Strongly believes in family values with respect for elders. Appreciates Indian cultures / customs.

Here, while physical attributes were missing, academic qualifications seemed secondary to her values, hobbies, and likes. However, by stating that she intends to study "...while continuing to work", the post clearly indicated that the desires and career aspirations of the woman was of great importance. Another parent/guardian wrote:

My daughter has completed her Bachelors. She is a self-made person and is hardworking when it comes to her career. We would want a match who is respectful of elders and loving towards the family. My daughter adopted two small pets (female dogs) whom she would like to keep even after marriage. So, the boy has to accept her with her two lovable babies.

Once again, while attributes such as body type, height, skin complexion were missing from the descriptive text, the text privileged perceived feminine qualities such as a caring nature. However, the education level (bachelor's degree) and hardworking, career-oriented nature of the woman were clearly indicated in the text too.

### **Identity of Advertiser and Effect on Content:**

Findings showed that most (95 out of 100) of the profiles mentioned at least some educational qualifications of the candidates, their work-status and likes and dislikes, in the descriptive part of the profile. When parents posted the ads, they

were more likely to highlight the personal characteristics of their daughter, including hobbies, caring nature, or even domestic skills, compared to when prospective brides or their siblings posted the ads.

However, both parents and younger members wrote more about education, skills, desires, and aspirations of the prospective bride, and less about either body type and skin tone, or family details such as rank and job role of parents, brothers etc. None of the online media posts mentioned skin tone or body type of a prospective bride in the descriptive texts. However, in the dropdown box under the 'Lifestyle and Appearance' section, a majority of advertisers, irrespective of who were posting the adverts, answered the skin complexion question. One interesting aspect was that while both skin tone and body type questions were filled out by most advertisers, only 10 out of the 100 advertisers filled out the "body weight" category—choosing to leave it as "not specified".

Clearly, skin complexion continued to play a critical role in the description of a would-be bride, even if the platform had changed. The difference? Online media advertisements acknowledged various skin complexions such as dark or wheatish, and body types such as average, unlike in print media ads where only those women who were perceived as fair or very fair, and slim or athletic, had their skin tone and body type highlighted. This was a common trait with both parents and younger family members. All 47 parents who posted online mentioned skin tones. However, as many as 11 mentioned the skin tone of their daughters as wheatish or dark, while the rest mentioned it as fair or very fair. Of the 53 younger persons (siblings or applicants themselves) who posted online, 52 mentioned their skin tone even though the Bharatmatrimony.com algorithm had given them the choice not to report a skin tone.

Again, 16 women said their skin tone was not fair (wheatish, dark, etc).

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

The findings supported the tenets of Critical Race Theory that colorism can operate between similar racial and ethnic groups (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2009) as an ingrained feature of social systems (Burton et al., 2010) that is constantly negotiated based on a group's own social interests (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2009). Online platforms clearly provided younger members of the family such as prospective brides or their siblings greater access to post matrimonial adverts, to use language they were more comfortable with when describing themselves. To an extent, older family members conformed to these new norms of online writing, deleting all mention of body type, physical beauty, or apparent feminine qualities from the main text. However, while overt colorism was missing in these online ads, covert colorism was present in almost all online advertisements, irrespective of who posted them, mentioning skin complexion in the physical attributes section.

The advertisers were, however, more flexible while mentioning skin complexion online, compared to print ads. On online ads, some referred to their complexion as wheatish or dark as well unlike in print ads, where only those considered fair had their skin complexion mentioned.

Nonetheless, clearly skin tone was considered important to a marriage in context of colorism within similar racial and ethnic groups. Colorism in India, especially in context of the arranged marriage market, is a complex, multi-layered issue. It is deeply entrenched in many communities across ethnic, regional, and

linguistic groups, where dark is considered inferior to fair. Colorism in the matrimonial ads, irrespective of platform, seemed socially constructed and constantly negotiated based on a group's own social interests. It was in the interests of parents and family elders that their daughters find a good match. If traditional practices and norms dictated that fairer women get better grooms, then the said elders were likely to conform to those norms, even if they did not necessarily agree with such colorism personally. On online platforms, younger members including prospective brides could be expected to be less focused on physical attributes and more on their hard earned skills, talents and accomplishments. However, while the main texts of online ads did reflect a change—with more focus on accomplishments and less on physical attributes such as fair skin—almost every online ad, irrespective of who posted it, mentioned the woman's skin tone by selecting it from the drop down menu even when it was not mandatory to select an option. This was consistent with the central argument of Critical Race Theory that whiteness or colorism is socially constructed and used as a power tool when it suits the needs of a group or helps them reach a goal.

In print media matrimonial ads, advertisers did have a choice to highlight what they wanted about their daughter. Nothing prevented them from doing so. Yet, they chose to highlight skin complexion, body type, height, and household skills such as cooking abilities of their daughters because these are an ingrained feature of the social system (Burton et al., 2010).

The platform change merely made presence of colorism subtle. Online platforms also reinforced masculine hegemony while donning the mask of inclusivity and empowering the hitherto marginalized. When the authors became members of Shaadi.com and Bharatmatrimony.com to explore what the websites demanded of potential advertisers, they were asked to

fill out the *appearance & lifestyle* section on both websites. During an online chat with a member of Shaadi.com's IT support team, the authors asked the support staff if the space for skin tone could be left unanswered. The employee answered: "my apologies but as of now we do not have a provision to leave that space blank. If you want you may leave the categories of weight, and height blank". Thus, while applicants had the choice to not report their weight and height, they were forced to mention their skin complexion (e.g. fair, very fair, wheatish) and body type (e.g., athletic, slim, average). In other words, while online platforms did provide a degree of power to marginalized family members such as prospective brides to post matrimonial ads, they continued to reinforce traditional patriarchal practices where women had to be described in terms of physical beauty. Colorism is indeed still deeply ingrained in the social system. Shaadi.com is a prime example of patriarchy and dominant discourse being reinforced by ensuring skin tone of a woman was mandatory to mention. Here, the women or other family members who posted ads really had no choice. Colorism was institutionalized by the websites themselves, which acted as defenders of status quo by reinforcing a policy that divided people based on skin complexion.

This is not to say that many families, including younger members who posted ads, were unwilling to mention their skin complexions. Mentioning skin complexion was optional on Bharatmatrimony.com, yet almost all advertisers including the younger women/prospective brides chose to mention their skin complexion.

### Hidden Colorism—The Caste Factor

Another area where colorism was reinforced was through the

continued mention of castes and sub-castes of the women. In more than 75% of the ads on Bharatmatrimony.com (39/50), the advertisers mentioned their caste, even though it was not a mandatory option. In fact, many advertisers mentioned their sub-caste as well in the advertisements (e.g. caste, Yadav, sub-caste, Ahir; or caste, Vannia Kula Kshatriar, sub-caste Naicker; or caste, Thiya, sub-caste, Ezhava). Caste creates a sense of hierarchy in many Indian communities (e.g. where any Brahmins are considered high caste, Dalits low caste). Previous studies have established a clear and close link between India's caste system and skin complexion (TOI, 2016; Deshpande, 2002). Deshpande's (2002) study concluded that caste was often as important as skin tone and the two were closely tied together. The mention of castes in their profiles, even when not mandatory, therefore suggested that younger members of the family were not able to break the shackles of traditional barriers or perhaps they did not intend to.

### The Silver Linings

There were some positive changes in the online advertisements. Online platforms offered much more freedom to play around with words and were seen as spaces that allowed prospective brides and grooms to engage directly in dialogue, often bypassing parental control. Shaadi.com, for instance, had a chat function that enabled the prospective bride and groom to chat directly with each other without parents hovering about—unlike traditional arranged marriages, where the couple usually meet the first time in front of parents and elders.

Online platforms also seemed to have acted as an empowering and liberating tool for women, especially would-be brides, who could now feel confident about referring to



themselves as dark-skinned or wheatish without fear of stigma; and not slim, but of average build or overweight. Consistent with the tenets of CRT, once marginalized members are aware of how their race or color is being used to create divides, they start challenging established social practices. We argue that the women who posted their skin complexion as dark or wheatish, and their body types as average, were challenging social norms that created a color hierarchy.

While print platform ads have long created such a hierarchy, online platforms acted as a relative leveler with women of all skin tones and body types seemingly equally empowered. We argue that while they continued to reinforce many of the patriarchal stereotypes in mentioning their skin complexions, body types or castes, some younger women could have seen the mentioning of their skin and body type as not fair or slim, as a fightback against patriarchal hegemony.

The difference in the descriptive texts in print and online ads posted by parents/guardians is also significant. Academic and professional qualifications, dreams and aspirations of women were almost absent in print media ads. On online media ads, a woman's skills, abilities and aspirations, were more prominent. One reason for this change could be the perception that online ads are seen by more families who live abroad, who are perceived as liberal minded, and open to accepting working, successful women compared to some traditional Indian families. Indeed, the "growing popularity of (Indian) online matrimonial sites is seen not merely among Indians living in India but in the Indian diaspora as well" (Jha & Adelman, p. 71).

As technology pervades Indian homes, youth may gain greater access to and control over the content of matrimonial ads. Many older people are unsure about how to post ads on online sites. Even if they post the ads, their children have greater control

over the content of the ads and can also update/alter the content from time to time at no extra cost. As young Indians—including prospective brides and grooms—gain more control over content of matrimonial ads, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and stereotypes such as those found in this study, will hopefully be challenged and dismantled.

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