

SKIN COLOUR DISSATISFACTION IN SOUTH ASIAN-CANADIAN WOMEN

by

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BSW McMaster University, 2018

An MRP presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Social Work
in the Program of Social Work

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2019

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ABSTRACT

Skin Colour Dissatisfaction in South Asian-Canadian Women
Master of Social Work, 2019
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The intent of this qualitative research study is to highlight the experiences of second-generation South Asian-Canadians with skin colour dissatisfaction and shadeism. Using a narrative approach of inquiry interviews were conducted with 2 South Asian-Canadian women to better understand the effects of colonial beauty standards and whiteness on their satisfaction with the colour of their skin. Findings were that participants felt very negatively toward their skin and often felt inferior to white women. They disclose that skin dissatisfaction has a discernible impact on their everyday lives and decisions. Data analysis draws critical race feminism and post-colonial theory.

Keywords: South Asian, Canadian, women, skin-colour, shadeism, colourism, beauty, colonization, self-esteem, whiteness

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my MRP supervisor, Purnima George, for all of the guidance she provided throughout this process. I couldn't have asked for a better supervisor and I feel truly blessed.

Thanks to my friends Supriya, AJ, and Julia for making me laugh when I was stressed.

Finally I would like to thank my parents for always being in my corner and modelling who I want to be. Thanks to my mom for reminding me that no matter what the setback, I'm always exactly where I'm supposed to be and big thanks to my dad for listening to me talk about my research goals endlessly.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of beauty holds a great deal of power in Canadian society. As a country that subscribes to Western values, Canadian culture emphasises the importance of physical appearance and gives greater social capital to the physically attractive (Bhakshi & Baker, 2011). Women feel this pressure more acutely as their worth is more strongly tied to their physical attractiveness than men (Glenn, 2008). Weitz explains that beauty practices are imposed on women as a means of social control (2001). Beauty becomes a necessary performance of women in order to be considered acceptable, and valuable (Weitz, 2001). Further, people naturally assume that beautiful people are “good”, meaning innocent, pure, or well intentioned (Haas & Gregory, 2005). Conventionally attractive women specifically were found to more easily elicit positive emotions from people they interacted with (Haas & Gregory, 2005). Thus, a woman’s skill in performing beauty can lend her advantages in labour markets (Haas & Gregory, 2005; Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Weitz, 2001). “Compared with similarly qualified unattractive women, conventionally attractive women are more often hired, more often promoted, and paid higher salaries” (Weitz, 2001, p. 673). Physical attractiveness has also been correlated with positive social and personal outcomes such as higher self-esteem and higher personal satisfaction for women (Kwan & Trautner, 2009). This could be due in part to the fact that women receive more messages about appearance, including negative ones (Bhakshi & Baker, 2011).

But, the concept of beauty is not as unrefined as it seems. Historically, scientists have claimed that beauty is attributed to qualities such as facial symmetry and that our attraction to certain features is natural and unavoidable (Cheng, 2000). However, other studies have shown that public perceptions of beauty are intrinsically linked to media and culture (Jones, 2008; Thankore & Bhoomi, 2013). Beauty is far from a universal truth, but rather an intricate system of

control that was produced by history (Cheng, 2000). Current notions of beauty embody the racism and classism present in recent histories and perpetuate the excluding ideal of whiteness (Cheng, 2000). Since beauty is associated with “goodness” and beauty is also synonymous with whiteness, then whiteness also becomes associated with “goodness”. Correspondingly, darker skin becomes associated with ugliness and “badness”. These ideas reinforce racist understandings of racialized women and further marginalize them by lowering their chances of social and professional success. Others would argue that shadeism is simply the result of ‘culture clash’ and that with increased diversity, the issue will resolve over time. However, according to Handa (1997) the idea of a cultural clash implies that the cultures are on equal footing. This is not true as dominant white culture is given many advantages in overriding minority cultures, such as control of media outlets that portray beauty standards (Handa, 1997).

As a Canadian-born Indian woman, skin-colour based discrimination has been a large part of my life. Over time I internalized these negative perceptions and grew to dislike my skin. My social work education has done an excellent job of examining the racism that remains pervasive in Canada, but shadeism is seldom discussed. I was interested in learning more about how darkness of skin ties into inter and intra racial discrimination and whether skin tone affects other South Asian women’s wellbeing.

Language

Throughout this paper I have chosen to use the term ‘shadeism’. Shadeism differs from racism in that it does not place people into distinct ancestral categories (Dhillon, 2016). Rather, it places people along a spectrum with light-skinned individuals holding the most privilege (Dhillon, 2016). The choice to use the terminology of ‘shadeism’ rather than ‘colourism’ was deliberate. These terms are often used interchangeably as they mean the same thing, but they hold different histories. Colourism is a term that was developed by black scholars in order to describe the experiences of black communities (Dhillon, 2016). As such, I feel that applying this

term to describe the experiences of another group may be appropriative and I have chosen to use shadeism instead, which appears to be the preferred term for academics writing about South Asians.

Use of the terms shadeism and colourism emerged from a need to address nuances in experiences of discrimination that were lost in the broad framework of racism (Dhillon, 2016). Bhagwat (2012) aptly refers to shadeism as a prominent “race-related stressor”, the effects of which require individual attention. While racism examines how different racial, ethnic, ancestral, cultural, and religious categories share experiences of oppression, shadeism focuses solely on discrimination based on skin tone (Banks, 2015). Studies show that dark-skinned members of racial groups have higher levels of stress and lower self-esteem than light-skinned members demonstrating that skin colour has additional impacts to race (Bhagwat, 2012). Shadeism specifically analyses the fixation with light skin within and across different racial groups.

History of Shadeism in South Asia

By South Asian I mean anyone who self-identifies as having ancestry from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh (Agrawal, 2013). As Glenn identifies it is difficult to trace a clear history of shadeism in South Asia because much of recent South Asian history has been altered by British colonizers (2008). However, there are some general truths about the history of light-skin preference that scholars seem to agree on. Shadeism has existed in South Asia for centuries (Bhagwat, 2012) and many scholars would rush to this fact to diminish or eliminate the role of colonization in constructing South Asia’s perception of whiteness as superior (Glenn, 2008). Pale-skinned individuals were assumed to be of higher class because it meant they did not work outside (Bhagwat, 2012). But the pre-colonial history of shadeism does not nullify colonization’s role in solidifying the colour hierarchy (Glenn, 2008). Rather, British authorities were able to exploit the existing bias and magnify its impacts to reinforce their power

(Bhagwat, 2012). As such, the caste system and British colonization worked together to construct the idea that whiteness is superior.

Bakhshi and Baker write, "...the Aryan invasion and British colonization of South Asian countries led to an increasing preference for lighter skin and the introduction of Western notions of beauty" (2011, p. 460). Takamune claims that whiteness is considered more beautiful because colonization led to the perception that Westerners were more modern and therefore superior (2015). Whiteness became associated with intelligence and progressive attitudes (Takamune, 2015). Soon, the desire for fairness spread through Bollywood and advertisements, becoming entrenched in South Asian culture (Shankar & Subish, 2007). The use of skin lightening creams, such as Fair & Lovely, became increasingly popular despite adverse side effects (Shroff, Diedrichs, & Craddock, 2018). America's growing beauty industry also played a role in the construction of whiteness as beautiful (Shankar & Subish, 2007). By 1980 the globalization of American beauty industries had sold the ideal of whiteness worldwide (Jones, 2008).

Shadeism in Modern Diasporas

"I truly believed being white was better than being Bengali. I constantly looked down on my people and my culture" (browngirlmagazine.com, 2018).

The effects of these historical events are still affecting South Asian-Canadian women today. Sahay and Piran (1997) found that South Asian-Canadian women had significantly lower satisfaction with their skin colour than European-Canadian women. Further, they noted that the majority of South Asian-Canadian women expressed a desire for lighter skin (Sahay & Piran, 1997). Of South Asian women's experiences in Canada Aujla (1999) writes, "The unattainable ideal of 'whiteness' is strived for both mentally and physically. This 'colour bar' of beauty represents a beauty hierarchy wherein light-skinned individuals are at the top and the darkest-skinned are relegated to the bottom" (p. 65). Aujla (1999) argues that second-generation immigrants will feel the effects of whiteness more powerfully than their parents because they

experienced marginalization in their formative years. By second-generation immigrants I mean South Asians who were born in Canada, but whose parents were not. Second-generation South Asian-Canadians connect more with Western culture and their assimilation process begins much younger, thus, their inability to do so is more deeply wounding (Aujla, 1999).

Dhillon explains that skin bleaching is still popular in South Asian communities in the Greater Toronto Area (2016). Mendoza writes that, “The prevailing Caucasian or ‘western’ notion and standards of beauty and sex appeal have created light or ‘white’ skin hegemonic representations based on the alleged superiority of light to dark skin” (2014, p. 1). There is therefore greater social acceptance for darker-skinned individuals who use bleaching products (Mendoza, 2014). Though, power that is accessed through skin tone is intertwined with other forms of social capital.

Discrimination against darker-skinned South Asians can even lead to worrisome health outcomes. In Canada, darker skin has been linked to higher risk for high blood pressure and hypertension, two conditions that are triggered by stress (Veenstra, 2011). Further, darker skin has been correlated with higher rates of depression and poorer self-rated overall health (Veenstra, 2011). American based studies have shown that darker skin is related to poorer mental health, self-esteem, physical health, and lower income (Bhagwat, 2012; Painter, Holmes, & Bateman, 2015). These negative health outcomes are another representation of how dark-skinned individuals are considered lesser than light-skinned individuals. Toxic whiteners are heavily marketed to racialized populations with no regard for their health (Mendoza, 2014).

Lots of companies sell products that do not meet safety regulations (Saraswati, 2010). The products are even available under the counter in Canada at South Asian grocery stores (Glenn, 2008). Despite it being illegal to sell these products in Canada the demand is high enough that businesses continue to take the risk to sell them (Glenn, 2008). In the European Union, the sale of products containing mercury, an element used in many skin lightening creams,

is illegal because of its dangerous side-effects (Glenn, 2008). However, manufacturing skin lightening creams containing mercury is legal as long as the mercury-containing products are sold outside the country (Glenn, 2008). These poisonous products are mostly sold to countries with majority racialized populations (Glenn, 2008). In this instance the European Union demonstrates that they understand the negative affects of using mercury-based products, but only care about the dangers when it affects Europeans. Once again the health and wellbeing of racialized communities comes second to increasing the power and wealth of white countries.

Purpose and Intended Outcomes

The purpose of this research is to shed light on the unique experiences of Canadian-born South Asian women with shadeism. In recent years the percentage of South Asians in Canada has risen dramatically from 4.8% in 2011 to 5.6% in 2016 (statcan.gc.ca). With this influx of South Asians in Canada comes a greater urgency to establish supportive services for this population. I aim to use this research to raise awareness about the existence of shadeism in South Asian communities and the ways that skin bleaching companies profit off of the internalized racism of South Asian groups. I also hope to provide insight into the experiences of South Asian women. I aim to challenge the colonial beauty standards that have become imbedded in Canadian culture as well as the capitalism that underpins the manufacturing and selling of harmful skin lightening products. The specific objectives of my research are to bring forward the narratives of South Asian-Canadian women by exploring how they feel about their skin, how these feelings have impacted their South Asian identity, any other affects that skin dissatisfaction may have had on them, and their recommendations for supporting women in similar positions. Collecting these stories will help me inform non-community members about the existence of shadeism in South Asian communities.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines how existing literature has conceptualized shadeism and identifies areas of South Asian women's experiences with shadeism that are yet to be explored. Articles hailed from a variety of disciplines including law, psychology, medicine, and social work. These articles come from Britain, India, the United States, and Canada and cover shade-based workplace discrimination lawsuits, the harmful effects of skin bleaching products, and the prevalence of shadeism in South Asia. Authors showed a preference for quantitative over qualitative approaches of inquiry using surveys and reviewing media to draw their conclusions. Literature was identified using the databases JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Ebscohost by searching the key words and phrases South Asian, Canadian, women, body image, self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, skin dissatisfaction, shadeism, colourism, colonization, Western, Eurocentric, whiteness, beauty ideals, beauty standards, self image, light-skin privilege, skin discrimination, bleaching, lightening, second-generation and skin colour preference.

Concept of Beauty in South Asia

Many of the available articles focused on how beauty in general holds power or how shadeism affects racialized non-South Asian women (Cheng, 2000; Haas & Gregory, 2005; Jones, 2000; Mendoza, 2014; Saraswati, 2010; Takamune, 2015; Weitz, 2001). These articles provide vital context for my research, however, while their findings can be applied to South Asian experiences theoretically, data are needed to confirm that their claims are true for this specific population. Similarly, many of the articles focusing on South Asian women were conducted in South Asia (Bakshi & Baker, 2011; Nagar, 2018; Shankar & Subish, 2007; Shroff, Deidrichs & Craddock, 2018). These articles are necessary for depicting the roots of shadeism in South Asian communities, but cannot speak to the influence of living in Western society. South

Asian-Canadian women face the unique challenge of living with beauty standards from both South Asian and Western cultures.

Beauty, Fairness and Power

Some articles about the power of beauty fail to mention skin colour as a determinant of beauty at all (Haas & Gregory, 2005). It is a sign of privilege that authors are able to write about the concept of beauty without automatically including race in the discussion. For many, skin colour is a defining visual feature that cannot be removed from the conversation. To this point, Dhillon (2016) was the only author that positioned themselves as a member of the South Asian community. When reading the work of other authors there is no transparency about their connection to the topic or the participants. Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, and Wise write that, “Ethical research is about relationships founded on trust and reciprocity” (2008, p. 307). Reciprocity describes a participatory exchange between researcher and participant that requires transparency and relationship building (Maiter et al., 2008). Without disclosing their relationship to South Asian communities it is difficult for researchers to build relationships with community members. It also allows them to keep the roots of their epistemology a secret, presenting their analysis as objective and true. I argue that there is no objective truth, especially when examining people’s experiences. This guise of objectivity encourages the researcher to pretend they have no investment in the subject matter, which inhibits self-reflection.

Colonization, Globalization, and Beauty

Additionally, many of the available articles failed to discuss the influence of colonization on beauty standards and expectations of paleness (Banks, 2015; Cheng, 2000; Dhillon, 2016; Haas & Gregory, 2005; Jones, 2008; Mendoza, 2014). Jones (2012) discusses the globalization of whiteness as the ideal for beauty without mentioning how colonization created the dichotomy of white as central and racialized as peripheral (Chilisa, 2004, p. 75). Other articles focusing on globalization incorporate the concept of colonization more firmly in their work and present a

more robust analysis. Saraswati (2010) outlines how the concept of being cosmopolitan is linked to colonization and how cosmopolitan whiteness has become a transnational force. Glenn discusses how the internet has facilitated the spread of colonial beauty ideals by exposing more people to Western culture (2008). They outline how these harmful beauty standards are a direct result of colonization. In order to fully understand how shadeism affects South Asian communities it is necessary to understand the history of how it came to be. Considering the significant impacts of colonization on the construction of Canadian society it is concerning that this foundational force is absent from some of the literature.

Articles that did discuss the impacts of colonization often failed to address it thoroughly, choosing instead to focus on the behaviours of the colonized community (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Nagar, 2018; Paul, 2016; Shaikh, 2017). Bakhshi and Baker (2011) emphasize that participants in their study claimed their mothers were the driving force behind their desire to be light skinned. Paul (2016) cites the more traditional practice of South Asian mothers eating and drinking white foods in the hope that it would influence their baby's skin tone. Similarly, Shaikh (2017) states that older South Asian women impose shadeism on younger South Asian women. They focus on the generational comparison and how older South Asian women pass down unhealthy ideas to younger South Asian women (Shaikh, 2017). The article even proposes the need for workshops where different generations of South Asian women can unlearn shadeism (Shaikh, 2017). Similarly, Nagar's work focuses on the South Asian community's fixation on marriage (2018). Both Nagar (2018) and Paul (2016) explain that marriageability is a large motivator for South Asian women to be attractive and that attractiveness means fairness.

Other authors examined colonization thoroughly, but did not work to fully dismantle their colonial framework of thought. For example, Banks writes that dark skin can be seen as 'exotic' in the west, but in India people prefer lighter skin (2015). While this statement is true it is problematic to present this fact without commenting on the racism imbedded in the exoticism of

darker skin. By simply stating that dark skin can be desirable in the west Banks ignores the systems of privilege that influence which women are able to be dark skinned and how they are able to do so. Dhillon (2016) addresses the popular idea that tanning is similar to skin lightening and that it shows appreciation for darker skin tones. They write, “White privilege is not lost when a white body tans, nor is it traded for the stereotypes or discrimination held against visible minorities” (Dhillon, 2016, p. 5). White women can wear darker skin without accepting any of the discrimination that comes with it. Paul (2016) seconds this analysis and adds that while some status can be gained from skin bleaching, the bleacher will never be satisfied because they will never achieve white privilege. This is an important distinction to make as it illuminates the fact that shadeism is more complex than believing lighter skin is better; instances of shadeism are layered expressions of history and power. This is further represented by the fact that darker-skinned South Asians are able to improve their social status by marrying lighter-skinned individuals (Glenn, 2008).

Further, the exoticizing of South Asian women does not create more appreciation for darker skin, but strengthens the othering of brown women by reinforcing the idea that they are not from Canada. Ideas about South Asian women’s sexual appeals are often steeped in colonial concepts that suggest dark-skinned women are animalistic, savage, and uninhibited, and therefore more adventurous sexually. Aujla (1999) writes, “These co-existing sentiments of desire and revulsion can be seen as remnants of British colonial attitudes towards other women. While their colonizers considered these women savage, heathen, and backwards, they were also thought to possess a sensual, enticing and indulgent nature” (59). The perception of South Asian-women as exotic serves only to keep darker-skinned women’s position in society as less intelligent, dignified, and powerful than white women.

Paul’s 2016 article walks the line between taking the perspective of the dominant group and the marginalized. While they largely ignore the role of colonization and they spend time

discussing the role of South Asian mothers and South Asian marriage culture in perpetuating shadeism, they also provide a useful analysis of the role of the media (Paul, 2016). Paul explains how Bollywood is influenced by whiteness and how advertisements for skin lightening creams depict women whose fortunes change when they become lighter (2016). They analyse how dominant groups keep subordinate groups in constant competition for their approval and skin lightening is one way that South Asians are taught to seek white approval (Paul, 2016). Their analysis of the role of whiteness in capitalism and capitalism in shadeism is meaningful, but must be strengthened with the incorporation of colonialism. Similarly, Mendoza (2014) discusses the history of colonization in detail, but continues to use the term ‘developing country’ when referring to the Philippines. When this terminology is examined more closely it becomes clear that the phrase is referring to a country’s adoption of Western practices. These terms are rooted in Western superiority and a truly comprehensive analysis of colonization should use decolonizing language.

While the findings from these studies may be accurate, they perpetuate negative ideas about South Asian culture that could be harmful to the community. They focus on the cultural shortcomings of South Asia and the individual behaviours of South Asians that have led to the desire for lighter skin rather than focusing on the colonial roots of the problem. In this way, the researchers who conducted these studies adopt the role of the colonizer as judge and teacher of subordinate classes (Chilisa, 2012). Shaikh’s (2017) suggestion for a workshop may be helpful to those involved, but it does nothing to dismantle the whiteness that remains prevalent in the beauty industry. The epistemology behind this suggestion is the belief that dominant groups are the creators of knowledge and the teachers of the less privileged. Shaikh (2017) only fortifies the power imbalance between mainstream culture and cultures that are considered ‘other’. Critiquing the behaviours of marginalized groups allows dominant groups to absolve themselves of responsibility for the continued marginalization of communities.

Canadian Literature of Shadeism in South Asian Communities

The lack of Canadian literature does nothing to assist in the process of abolishing whiteness. Canada operates under the same Western culture as America and the U.K. Thus, the Canadian beauty industry shares many similarities with other Western countries. Yet, perhaps because of Canada's façade as a 'mosaic', there is a lack of inquiry into how skin colour affects visible minorities in Canada. The majority of articles about South Asians were written in the U.S., U.K., and South Asia (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Bhagwat, 2012; Painter, Holmes, & Bateman, 2015; Nagar, 2018; Shaikh, 2017; Shankar & Subish, 2007; Shroff, Diedrichs, & Craddock, 2018). Articles about shadeism in South Asia (Nagar, 2018; Shankar & Subish, 2007; Shroff, Diedrichs, & Craddock, 2018) provide information about culture and values that may have carried over into South Asian-Canadian communities. However, experiencing shadeism is doubtlessly different in a country that has a large white population, like Canada. While articles about culture in South Asia can provide some context to South Asian-Canadian experiences, they do not consider the impacts of dual identities and othering on skin colour satisfaction. Findings from the U.S. and the U.K. (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Bhagwat, 2012; Painter, Holmes, & Bateman, 2016; Shaikh, 2017) also can't be generalized to Canada because they do not take into account the unique cultural and political climate of the area. In fact, Canada's reputation as more inclusive than America allows many Canadians to distance themselves from the racism enacted in their own communities. American and European articles do nothing to enlighten the Canadians who are privileged enough to believe the 'mosaic' rhetoric.

Moreover, the few articles available about South Asian women in Canada were not written from a social work perspective (Aujla, 1999; Dhillon, 2016; Sahay & Piran, 1997, Veenstra, 2011). Instead, these articles come from the departments of sociology and psychology (Aujla, 1999; Dhillon, 2016; Sahay & Piran, 1997, Veenstra, 2011). Strangely, some articles

focus on the medical aspects of shadeism and the use of skin bleach (Mendoza, 2014; Shankar & Subish, 2007; Veenstra, 2011).

This medical model of evaluating people's wellbeing through physical health ignores the social and political harms that are caused by shadeism. For example, Mendoza suggests increasing government regulations on toxic skin whitening products (2014), but Glenn identifies that banned skin bleaching products are still sold illegally under the counter in many countries (2008). Thus, while government regulation may certainly help to reduce the number of people using harmful products, it will not erase the problem entirely. The only way to completely eliminate the use of these toxic whiteners is to address the shadeism that inspires their purchase. According to existing literature, skin colour dissatisfaction is a common issue among South Asian women and it is clear that they will benefit from support in addressing this. There is the need to research skin colour dissatisfaction through a social work lens to truly understand the power dynamics and systems of oppression that operate through shadeism. While Shaikh (2017) uses their sociology background to develop programming to help South Asian women overcome the effects of shadeism, social workers can work to dismantle the systems that produce it.

Research Methodologies and Methods Used

Some researchers chose to use quantitative approaches to increase the external validity of their findings (Bhagwat, 2012; Painter, Holmes, & Bateman, 2015; Sahay & Piran, 1997; Schroff, Diedrichs, & Craddock, 2018; Veenstra, 2011). These articles used surveys, often conducted over the phone or internet, to extract data from a large amount of participants. While this method allows the researcher to generalize their conclusions to the population as a whole it also produces very structured and guided answers. Veenstra used call centre employees to interview participants using a pre-written script (2011). This creates an impersonal environment that is not conducive for having difficult conversations about skin colour. This practice of social distance is a staple of the positivist epistemology that is popular in modern research (Hunter,

2002). Further, Veenstra's (2011) methods show little value for the knowledge that participants bring to the table. Inflexible interview design does not allow space for interviewees to share the information that they think is relevant, preventing the researcher from gathering potentially valuable data. This is a clear practice of positivism. According to Hunter, "Positivism... is a theory of knowledge with assumptions about who can know, how one can know, and what counts as evidence for knowledge" (2002, p. 123). By prescribing potential answers Veenstra (2011) assumes that they know how participants will or should respond.

Next, in order to analyse the data through their preferred program, Veenstra required participants to identify with only one racial group (2011). Interviewers were directed to prompt participants that identified as biracial by asking, "Is one of these racial backgrounds a more important part of who you are than the others?" (Veenstra, 2011, p. 11). If they identified with several racial backgrounds equally the interviewer would ask, "If you had to pick a racial background that best describes you, which would it be?" (Veenstra, 2011, p. 11). This illustrates that the researcher had a clear idea of the answers they wanted without considering the diversity of participants. Instead of being open to hearing about different identities, Veenstra (2011) forces participants to define themselves within strict parameters.

Survey data can yield results that do not account for power relationships or socio-political factors. For example, Painter, Holmes, and Bateman surveyed 4, 652 people about their skin colour and economic wellbeing (2015). Results showed that darker skinned individuals were financially disadvantaged, including darker-skinned whites (Painter, Holmes, & Bateman, 2015). However, the article does not discuss how the experiences of a racialized person and a tan white person are different (Painter, Holmes, & Bateman, 2015). This statistical conclusion does not tell the full story because it does not account for the power whiteness holds or the history behind shadeism.

Aujla (1999) takes a similarly impersonal approach to studying South Asian women while still valuing their voices. They analyse creative writings by South Asian-Canadian women about their difficulties constructing identities in diasporic spaces (Aujla, 1999). Participants in Aujla's (1999) study are the authors of the creative writing pieces analysed. This approach allows participants to say as much or as little as they would like about their experiences and describe these experiences using their own words and definitions. However, like Veenstra (2011), Aujla (1999) does not meet their participants face-to-face or attempt to open a dialogue with them. Therefore, the research is a one-sided, transactional process wherein the participant gives information and the researcher receives information. Further, the stories examined were not shared with the purpose of bringing forward stories of shadeism. It is unclear whether the authors of said stories were consulted to determine if they were comfortable with their work being used for the study. There is more information to be discovered through the development of comfortable, trusting relationships.

Nagar (2018) asked participants to rate photographs of women so they could determine if dark-skinned women were considered less marriageable. They compared the ratings of women who were deemed equally attractive and found that the lighter-skinned woman was often rated higher (Nagar, 2018). This method requires the researcher to also rank the attractiveness of the women in the photos so that the images can be paired based on attractiveness (Nagar, 2018). Lots of information is given about how participants rated the photographs, but none is given about the researcher's process, which calls into question the quality of the results (Nagar, 2018). While the results exposed the reality that light-skinned women are often considered more marriageable, the study design did nothing to combat the patriarchy (Nagar, 2018). In my opinion, the larger issue is the importance of women being marriageable to begin with, and the deciding of their worth based on photographs. Nagar's (2018) work does not allow the women in the photographs to voice their perspectives.

Banks conducts an interesting study about the acceptance of shadeism in the American court system (2015). Through case reviews Banks identifies that most shadeism discrimination lawsuits are unsuccessful (2015). They argue that this is due to the courts' very basic and limited understanding of racism and argue that shadeism should be taken more seriously in the eyes of the law (Banks, 2015). Written by a lawyer, this article views shadeism through a different lens than the other articles reviewed and adds context to how shadeism can play out in Western society (Banks, 2011). However, once again this article focuses on intra-racial disputes without examining the colonial context within which South Asians exist. In keeping with the work of Aujla (1999), Nagar (2018), and Veenstra (2011) Banks does not conduct any interviews with members of the South Asian community, but gathers all their data from court documents (2015). This unfortunate trend of excluding South Asians from the discussion has led to an incomplete understanding of the affects of shadeism.

In contrast, semi-structured interviews allow a more reciprocal relationship between researcher and participant, and were the chosen method in many of the articles reviewed (Bakhshi & Baker, 2011; Dhillon, 2016; Shaikh, 2017; Takamune, 2015; Weitz, 2001). This approach allows some room for participants to direct the interview, giving them the opportunity to decide what they would like to share, and what they feel is important to discuss. Interviewers are able to hear from the participant in their own words and meet face to face, allowing them to create a personal connection. Dhillon describes visiting women at their home or work, having meals with them, and allowing a natural conversation to flow (2016). This is similar to the design that I would implement when conducting my interviews.

Though many of the articles reviewed did not explicitly position themselves within a theoretical framework, they generally operate from a feminist or critical race perspective. While many mention colonization, few integrate post-colonial theories into their analysis. As previously mentioned, the medicalization of shadeism and the focus on South Asian

communities' expectations detracts from the role that colonization and the resulting white supremacy played in creating modern culture. Bhagwat states that they use the conceptual framework of 'skin tone-related stress' (2012, p. 8) to analyse the mental health of South Asian-Americans. Bhagwat does provide a brief history of colonization as well as the caste system, however their chosen theoretical framework does not allow this history to be brought into the analysis of their data. 'Skin tone-related stress' (2012, p. 8) encourages us to focus on the results of shadeism, which is stress, rather than the history and continuing legacy of colonization (Bhagwat, 2012). Similarly, Painter, Holmes, and Bateman's (2015) 'preference for whiteness' (p. 1) theory and Dhillon's (2016) social capital theory focus only on how whiteness operates today, but not its origins.

Cheng (2000) uses a critical race feminist analysis to explore how the concept of beauty is weaponized against visible minorities. This allows them to analyse how other systems of power such as science and politics work in tandem with beauty to collaboratively subordinate racialized women (Cheng, 2000). However, Cheng (2000) fails to include colonial history in their analysis, leaving their understanding of the construction of ideal whiteness incomplete.

Addressing Gaps in Existing Literature

My research will add to current understandings of shadeism by giving voice to the experiences of second-generation Canadian South Asian women. I will situate my own lived-experience as a South Asian woman and use my connection to the subject matter to strengthen my analysis. I will also use interviews as my method of data collection, allowing time to fully explore my participants' stories in-depth and ensure that I understand, as much as possible, the totality of their experience. I hope that spending time with my participants and building relationships with them will give me the opportunity to show appreciation for their contribution to my research and humanize the data-collection process. Following in Cheng's (2000) lead I will use a critical race feminist approach of analysis, but I will deepen my understanding by

combining it with post-colonial theory to create a conceptual framework that considers all aspects of past and present. Accounting for history and culture will help me identify the aspects of shadeism that are specific so South Asian Canadians.

CHAPTER 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

For my conceptual framework I have chosen to use a combination between critical race feminism and post-colonial theory. I feel that these theories tie in well with my topic as they will illuminate both the present and historical underpinnings of shadeism in South Asian communities. Post-colonial theory also accounts for the specific history of colonization in Canada, which is a large factor in distinguishing the discrimination that racialized Canadians face from the discrimination that racialized individuals face in other countries. I will use my conceptual framework to guide my analysis as I attempt to make sense of this deeply personal and troubling topic.

Post-Colonial Theory & Critical Race Feminism

The conceptual framework I have chosen is a combination between critical race feminism, and post-colonial theory. Critical Race Theory addresses the racism which has become “so enmeshed in the fabric of the U.S. social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this society” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 264). As Canada operates under similar cultural norms as America, I think this statement applies here as well. This theory is highly applicable to conversations about shadeism in South Asian communities because it encourages us to understand how ideas that seem natural are actually constructed. The idea that paler skin is inherently more attractive is one such constructed idea. However, in this case Critical Race Theory alone is too broad of a framework as it does not account for the added pressures women face to be beautiful, especially in South Asian culture which places a high value on women’s marriageability (Nagar, 2018; Paul, 2016). In order to recognize the unique experiences of racialized women I will use Critical Race Feminism, a branch of Critical Race Theory, to conduct my analysis (Razack, Thobani, & Smith, 2010).

Critical Race Feminism aligns best with my values and goals as a researcher. It was created by racialized women to counter the homogenization of women of colour that is often present in other theories (Wing, 2003). This is in line with the goal of my research, which is to present the narratives of South Asian-Canadian women specifically and show appreciation for the uniqueness of their individual stories. Women of different races and nationalities all have a different story to share and Critical Race Feminism values this. Further, Critical Race Feminists work to expose how the interests of white men are labelled as “Normality, Neutrality, Objectivity, and The Truth” (Wing, 2003, p. 1). The knowledge and experiences of South Asian-Canadian women are often subjugated and othered. “Beauty” is accepted as a universal truth rather than an opinion, allowing the elevation of white women to seem neutral rather than racist.

Troubling these ideas of what is normal and natural will be foundational for my analysis of South Asian-Canadian women’s experiences. Critical Race Feminism acknowledges how racialized women have “failed to be integrated into the mainstream” (Wing, 2003, p. 1). The creators of Critical Race Feminism, Razack, Thobani, and Smith (2010) write that, “The historical and contemporary mediations on gender, race, and class have been saturated by dynamics of power, privilege, and social and cultural capital in Canada” (p. 10). This paper seeks to explore how beauty is a trait that holds power, social, and cultural capital and how beauty can be seen as a privilege of whiteness.

Further, I believe it is necessary to combine this theory with Post-Colonial Theory in order to depict a complete picture of South Asian-Canadian women’s experiences. Post-Colonial Theory can help us understand how constructed dichotomies of white/center and black/periphery have led to the othering of racialized groups (Chilisa, 2012, p. 74). Spivak (1988) writes that the knowledge expressed in academic work is never neutral and always expresses the interests of its producers. This analysis is relevant to the existing literature on shadeism in the South Asian-Canadian community as the majority of the existing literature has been written from the

dominant, Western perspective. As mentioned in Chapter 2, despite many of the sources being written by South Asians, the epistemologies adopted in their writings are that of dominant white culture. They focus their critiques on South Asian culture and communities rather than analysing the larger systems that have produced said culture. This is not surprising as it is impossible to operate within academia without subscribing to colonial beliefs (Spivak, 1988). Academia itself is associated with modernization and social advancement, which are largely considered Western practices. However, Post-Colonial Theory can provide a guide for stepping outside of ingrained epistemologies.

Post-Colonial Theory challenges us to step away from binary conceptions of Occident and Orient and instead consider how we are all implicit in the colonial project (Spivak, 1988). As a second-generation Canadian I was raised in Western culture so it will be even more necessary for me to practice reflexivity throughout this research. I will reflect on whether my research, like the research that has been conducted before me, adopts the position of the colonizer. Moreover, Spivak (1988) speaks of the dangers of essentialism. They write that presenting marginalized groups as interchangeable allows Western intellectuals to speak on behalf of them (Spivak, 1988). This is a form of silencing marginalized communities and can pave the way for further Western influence (Spivak, 1988). This works in tandem with Critical Race Feminism as both theories show value for representing the unique individual stories of marginalized groups. Post-Colonial Theory will guide me in conducting my research to ensure that I am valuing the knowledge my participants bring to the interviews and reflecting on the ways that whiteness has clouded my perspective.

Though whiteness and colonization will always be imbedded in everything I do, I will use Critical Race Feminism and Post-Colonial Theory to remain reflexive of my ingrained beliefs and trouble my assumptions. I hope that these theories will guide me in producing analysis that is truly critical and decolonizing.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

My methodology was chosen with the intent of ensuring that South Asian-Canadian women's voices were centered. I wanted to create the most comfortable space possible and give my participants control over how their story is constructed and portrayed. I have chosen methods that I feel will produce the most authentic and accurate data.

Approach of Inquiry

I conducted two in-depth narrative interviews with South Asian women who were born in Canada. Narrative interviews fit very well with my chosen conceptual framework. Both Critical Race Feminism and Post-Colonial Theory are concerned with elevating the voices of marginalized groups and shedding light on diversity within said groups (Spivak, 1988; Wing, 2003). Narrative approach accomplished this as it allows participants to tell their stories in their own words, which allowed them to express the uniqueness of their experiences rather than the similarities (Cresswell, 2013). Narrative research puts a great deal of value in the knowledge that participants bring with them and through providing me with an oral history they had the opportunity to disrupt dominant discourses (Cresswell, 2013). Narrative inquiry is also in line with the "look to the bottom" approach that is popular in Critical Race Feminism (Razack, Thobani, & Smith, 2010). Critical Race Feminists believe that racialized women should be considered the experts in their experiences (Razack, Thobani, & Smith, 2010) and narrative inquiry also encourages researchers to view their participants as experts (Hood, 2016).

Cautioned by Spivak's (1988) work on the dangers of essentialism I have sought a method that will reduce my chance of speaking over participants. Narrative inquiry takes a more collaborative approach than other methodologies by allowing the researcher and participant to co-construct the recorded stories (Cresswell, 2013). To further support this co-construction I sent participants the transcripts of their interviews to review and edit. This ensured that they were being portrayed accurately in the final report. Narrative research allows participants to talk about

their experiences and identities in their own words and have their story accepted as truth.

Through my work I hoped to dismantle some of the ivory tower model of scholarship (Wing, 2003) by stepping outside of formulaic, positivist research methods.

I believed this approach would allow me to provide support to participants while they share information that may be difficult to discuss. Further, narrative inquiry allowed me to step outside of more formal academic processes and connect with participants on a personal level. Surveys and highly structured interviews leave no room for researchers to show appreciation for their participants or for participants to share contextualizing information outside of the scope of the questions. My goal was to create a space that was supportive and comfortable for my participants so that they felt more encouraged to share their stories.

Narrative research was also useful because of my personal connection to the topic. Positivist approaches encourage researchers to separate themselves from the research and present an objective account of their subjects (Hood, 2006). However, this separation is unachievable, especially when researching a community you are connected to, as I am. Claiming objectivity simply adds another layer of ethical opacity by misrepresenting the researcher's capabilities. Unlike other approaches of inquiry, narrative research does not require strict boundaries between researcher and participant (Hood, 2006). Thus, through this method I was able to be transparent about my connection to the topic. This means that I could be more honest with my participants and my readers about my positionality and its limitations. It also allowed me to use my lived-experience to enhance my analysis rather than pushing it to the side in an attempt to be objective.

As per narrative approach of inquiry I focused on primary sources of information (Hood, 2006). This primary source was the stories that South Asian-Canadian women told me about their experiences. By using these stories as my main source of information I hoped to show value and validation for the experiences of participants. Epistemologically I believe that people's stories need not be corroborated by other sources, but each person's expression of their lived-

experience should be taken as true. These interviews were in-depth explorations of how participants have come to feel about their skin colour over time.

Sampling

I used purposive and convenience sampling. Convenience sampling was best because I was only seeking two participants (Hood, 2006). I already had a large network of second-generation South Asian women from which to draw upon and our pre-existing relationships hopefully made the difficult discussions required more comfortable. In order to find participants I posted recruitment materials on a Facebook page that was not linked to my personal account. I thought this was the best approach because it was the easiest way to reach my network without asking potential participants directly. By posting online there was little pressure on people to participate, which allowed them to make the choice they were comfortable with without worrying about the effect on our relationship. The posting received a number of responses so in order to avoid unduly influencing the selection process I simply included the first two responders. Other women were notified that they were not accepted to participate because the study was already full. This was so that they would know that it was not a personal decision to exclude them.

Purposive sampling was necessary because I had some criteria for who could participate in my study (Hood, 2006). These criteria were that participants must identify as: women, South Asian, second-generation Canadians, between the ages of 20-30, with lived-experience of shadeism/skin dissatisfaction.

Data Collection Method & Instrument

I asked all participants if they were comfortable being recorded. All participants agreed to be recorded on my laptop so that I could transcribe the interviews later. This allowed me to converse freely with participants without having to take notes. I hoped that this created a more comfortable, less formal environment for my participants. It also allowed me to focus on

listening to their stories rather than writing. However, I did not want my participants to feel uncomfortable so they had the option to request that I stop the recording at any time if there was information they would rather not be taped.

Strategies for Rigor

Participants had the opportunity to view and edit transcriptions before they were included in the MRP and a draft of the MRP was sent to participants for them to comment on before it was published. All changes suggested by participants about the way they are portrayed were implemented.

Consent and Privacy

All recordings and notes were transcribed within 1 week of the interview. As soon as the transcriptions were complete the audio files were deleted permanently off my computer. After the final MRP was approved, the transcriptions were also deleted permanently. None of the materials were shown to anyone or sent to any computers other than my own personal laptop. All of the data was stored on Ryerson University's secure Drive.

Further, participants were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym to use in the write-up. I wanted to give participants the chance to choose a name because I believe names hold power and everyone should be given the right to define themselves. If they did not want to choose a name for themselves I assigned them one. Pseudonyms were chosen at the start of the interview and any recordings of the interview will use the pseudonym only. Thus, there were no recorded study materials including participants' real names.

Anti-Oppression Considerations

The primary concern I had was the difficulty that participants had in sharing their experiences. This was a scary and emotionally draining process. As the researcher I did everything I could to make my participants feel comfortable and support them through the interview process. I was transparent about the way participants' data would be used and

practiced informed consent. This way, participants felt reassured about their confidentiality and the ways that their information would contribute to the project. I also shared transcripts of the interviews with my participants as well as a draft of the report for them to review and edit. This allowed participants to have some control over the way they were presented in the work and hopefully made them feel more comfortable in participating. Additionally I made it clear that they may withdraw their participation at any time in the process without repercussions. I did my best to be transparent and ensure that my participants felt comfortable with their contributions. In this way I hoped to build trust between my participants and myself and show them that I value them. Participants were encouraged to come and speak to me about any questions or concerns they may have at any stage in the research. I hoped that creating reciprocal relationships will support my participants through the process.

Similarly, I worried that my own investment in the topic may cloud my judgement. As a South Asian-Canadian woman I have lived experience of shadeism that may have impacted my interpretation of others' stories. I strategized to ensure that my lived-experience aided my analysis instead of hindering it. Similarly, my upbringing within Western Canadian society has imbedded many colonial perspectives in me and shaped me into a perpetrator of whiteness. I am still in the process of unlearning and I will need to work to eliminate these ingrained paradigms from my work. To minimize my prejudice in these areas I reminded myself to practice reflexivity before each time I read my participants' responses. I also referred to Critical Race Feminist and Post-Colonial Theory literature to ensure that my analysis was in line with my conceptual framework and correspondingly, my values.

Strategies for Anti-Oppressive Research

In order to combat some of the issues that arose in the previous literature I conducted my research by centering the stories of participants. By using in-person interviews I created a personal and comfortable environment for participants. Relationship building was an important

part of the interview process as it establishes trust. I used a narrative approach of inquiry to learn the stories of participants' relationships with their skin (Creswell, 2013). This approach puts value in the lived-experiences of marginalized groups by allowing them to speak for themselves.

CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

Throughout the interview process participants and I explored their relationship with their skin, how this has affected them, and what they recommend to support women who are currently experiencing skin dissatisfaction. Participants, referred to as Kavya and Aleena for the purpose of this study, are both university-educated women who live at home with their families. Aleena identifies as being Pakistani while Kavya is from Bangladesh.

Participants naturally answered most of the prompt questions in their initial response, without me having to ask. In showing respect for their comfort I did not push them for information, but allowed them to direct the conversation. Thus, the interviews ended up being unexpectedly short, but still very content rich. This section will outline the themes present in the South Asian women's stories in order to demonstrate the similarities, differences, and intricacies of their experiences. These themes include the family's role in the development of skin dissatisfaction, the influence of the beauty industry, South Asian women's representation in South Asian and Western media, and the impacts of shadeism on social life. The findings from these interviews reveal meaningful insights into the South Asian-Canadian community's views on skin colour as well as the experiences of second-generation South Asian Canadian women.

Negative Impacts of Family Influence

The influence of family on their relationship with their skin was a commonality between participants' stories. Family members were described as openly criticising their skin for being too dark as well as encouraging behaviours that lead to lighter skin tone. Kavya describes the fixation on her skin by saying, "...there's comments from, like, my grandma. She's a bit older and more traditional in some ways, and so I know like if in the summer I get darker, they will be like 'you got dark'." From Kavya's tone in the interview it is clear that these comments from her family are meant in a negative way. Aleena recalls her family's obsession starting even earlier, when she was only a baby, "Like, my mom said that when I was born she bleached my skin

because she was scared I'd be dark". These comments have persisted into adulthood. Of her family, Aleena says, "...they always, even now, talk about my skin colour." From these stories it is clear that comments about their skin tone were common and persistent within their families.

Additionally, their families encouraged them to avoid the sun so that they would not tan. This led to them changing their behaviour and missing out on activities that other kids were able to enjoy. Aleena describes her family's warning against the sun by saying, "And when we would go to the beach and stuff like you know, young kids we playing in the water and stuff, my mom and my aunts and stuff would just be like, just don't like don't go and you'll get dark. So then I used to sit under the big umbrellas and just watch all the kids. Yeah, it was really- it's really sad".

Interestingly, both participants mentioned their families coupling their criticisms of their shade with negative comments about their weight. Kavya says:

"And I remember getting comments, like, always my sister was always like- they'll always comment on my weight if they saw me and my sister they be like oh she still looks the same she hasn't gained any weight but for me it was like, oh you gained weight, or you look different and or you gain weight and then it's not- it's kind of looked down upon as well, like if you're by, like, some aunties will mention it if you gain weight it'll be, like, always pointed out to you all. It's like, 'you gained weight, like, what have you been doing. Like, why did you gain weight.' And I was like, 'I still I thought I still look the same,' but we'll just have to point out and some people are compared."

These comments too appear to be taking place over a long period of time. Added to that is participants' perception that beauty is contingent on thinness as well as fairness. Kavya says, "...the whole spectrum of being a South Asian woman is not appreciated if you're not skinny." Aleena shares that her existing insecurity about her weight was a motivating factor in avoiding the sun, showing that the compounding effects of both criticisms are stronger than criticism of only one attribute. She says, "Because they already compare me and call me the obese one. So I'm not about to add to be the dark and obese one." The factors of weight and skin colour interact in that being labelled as overweight as well as dark-skinned is worse than being labelled as overweight or dark-skinned.

It is clear from their stories that both participants have internalized their families' beliefs about beauty and developed very negative views of their skin. When asked how she feels about her skin Aleena states, "Oh my God I hate it. I really do." She goes on to say, "So I feel like every day, when I look in the mirror it's the first thing I see. How can I- how can I make myself lighter?" Kavya echoes this by saying, "I honestly as a South Asian woman don't feel like I'm beautiful at all." Kavya also says that, "...it seemed like being white is more attractive." She goes on to elaborate later in the interview saying, "The idea around that, white people should like, I feel like they're seen as a base of universal beauty, like, their features are seen as the beauty standard."

Use of Make-up and Lightening Products

Both participants talked in detail about the different strategies they employ to achieve a fairer look. On top of avoiding the sun, they use make-up and skin bleaching products to appear lighter than their natural tone. Kavya tells a story of preparing for a date where she attempted to use make-up to look lighter:

"I remember yesterday when I was trying to meet somebody new again I actually took my roommate's foundation which was way lighter than mine and I mixed it so that I would look lighter. And I was like why am I doing this to myself when I started doing it because I wanted to look lighter skin because when I saw pictures of myself that were lighter like the filters and make you look a little lighter because I'm like dark, I have dark circles and the filter hides it a much lighter. It seems like a more a prettier when I'm that way. So I tried to match that shade."

Aleena also recalls using lighter make-up to look paler. When describing the kind of foundation she buys she says, "And I always try to go to light medium to medium and I use contour powder. I'm like, yep, this is it. This is my validation... I buy pink or white undertones. I am neither. I am golden." These statements show that the use of lighter make-up products is a deliberate attempt to appear lighter in skin tone.

One aspect that I did not originally consider is the effect of social media filters on perceptions of beauty and the desire to be light. Kavya talks briefly about how photo filters

automatically whiten the skin. She says that after seeing herself with the filter she started using make-up that was lighter to achieve the same look she had in the photo, “It seems like I’m more prettier when I’m that way, so I tried to match the shade.” In this case, photo filters convince Kavya that she looks better with light skin.

Aleena takes this quest farther than the use of make-up and filter, describing how she used bleaching products for many years until finally stopping a year ago. She tells me the story of her history with bleaching products:

“And I got really obsessed with skin bleaching. Since I was- I want to say Middle School till like a year ago, to be honest, not that long ago that I stopped. I was obsessed with skin bleaching like I would try like the most harmful things like baking soda. Yeah, and like, Fair and Lovely, which is a common one. Jolen- it's another common one.”

For Aleena, the potential negative effects of these harmful products were worth the risk to achieve lighter skin. However, the damage that they caused is long lasting. She says:

“Yeah, I stopped bleaching mainly because it literally started to, I don't know if you can tell, but I have scars or bleach burns. It took me so long to get rid of them. It started to burn my skin. And like, I feel like there was a point where I would- so this is... I feel like this was like the point that made me stop.”

Only when the harm became visible on her skin did Aleena cease using these products. Similarly, Aleena talks about how her iron deficiency led to paleness, “But I tried everything because I was so obsessed with trying to be light skin and then I noticed that when I was sick because I have low iron I got so many compliments on my skin too like, ‘Look at you, you look so nice and fair’... Yeah, I looked disgusting. I looked like I was gonna pass out...”. This is another example of how health can come second to fairness in South Asian communities.

Media Representation of South Asian Women

Another theme that emerged through the interviews was the representation of South Asian women in media. Participants explain how the lack of accurate and celebratory representation in both South Asian and Canadian media affected their self-image. In relation to

this, Kavya briefly talked about whether living in South Asia would be different than Canada. She explains that growing up in Canada she didn't realise that shadeism was a huge issue in the community, but theorizes that she would have if she grew up in Bangladesh. On the prevalence of skin-whitening advertisements in Bangladesh Kavya says:

“Yeah, that really bothers me because the reason I didn't notice it a lot when I was younger was because when I was in Canada, the commercials back in Bangladesh, are not the same. So, in Bangladesh when I go back and visit sometimes all the commercials, most of them, there will be at least one that will be about Fair and Lovely or soaps you can use and you'll be lighter.”

Kavya captures the harms of advertisements, while Aleena discusses the actresses chosen to star in South Asian dramas. Aleena comments, “...in Pakistani dramas for example, all the actors are freaking white. Yeah, yeah. That's not what we look like. We're brown and we have yellow undertones.” Though, Canadian media is far from inscrutable. While South Asian media portrays brown women as paler than reality, Canadian media often fails to portray them at all. Kavya explains how she rarely sees South Asian women represented as beautiful in Canadian advertisements:

“I don't see any representation of South Asian women in media in malls as like advertising or models and beauty stores like if I go to Sephora I know there's a lot of South Asian woman that use makeup. I don't see a lot of South Asian models on their display when I walk down the mall. Eaton Center is a huge one- I go walk down there- I barely ever see a South Asian model there and representation I think is a huge thing for what people see as beautiful.”

Kavya says, “I don't feel like South Asian women are depicted as being beautiful, so I don't see that. And I don't feel very beautiful.” Recalling a conversation with another South Asian woman Kavya shares what her friend said, “...she also said the same thing she's like, she doesn't feel like brown girls are wanted. That's what she said.” Further, Kavya says, “I don't feel like we exist.” This demonstrates the erasure of South Asian women in Canadian media and this erasure changes Kavya's perception of what Canadians believe is beautiful. Though, Canadian media is attempting to provide more diverse representations of women. Unfortunately, these

representations often still don't include South Asian Canadians. Kavya says, "And I think beauty is always portrayed by, let's say, white women, East Asian or black women, because they're trying to allow more diversity, but I think they're forgetting South Asian women, just because I don't see a lot of representations."

On top of the lack of positive representation there are also some negative representations that depict South Asian women as unattractive. Of portrayals of South Asian women in Western media Kavya says:

"It's- they tried almost to picture them into this opening, this white version of what people think is a South Asian woman. So really long, bush-like thick hair and then you know, like, bushy eyebrows and uni-brow. I don't know why that's always shown, but like that's not like, that's not always what South Asian women look like."

Western media often shows depictions of South Asian women that Kavya does not identify with. From her view, the South Asian characters she sees on screen do not represent South Asian Canadians with any accuracy.

Aleena further proves the importance of representation by explaining that seeing more dark-skinned women depicted as beautiful would have improved her self-esteem and helped her be more comfortable with her skin tone. Explaining what could have supported her in coping with shadeism she said, "I think if I saw other dark, there's so many beautiful dark skinned girls. Like I see them on Instagram. I see them on social media, like I see them in real life. I feel like if I saw more of that, instead of just being around my family and my friends were like, relatively light." Similarly Kavya says, "And I wish if we just showcase different forms of beauty from multiple places, from different groups, then we will- then I wouldn't feel so odd and not in the normal of what is typically seen as beautiful."

Finding positive dark-skin influencers was difficult according to Aleena as she explains that Pakistani movies often star women who are incredibly pale. She says:

“But it was only until my college and uni I started following people who have darker skin like I don't know if you know Irene Kahn. She's Bengali, this beautiful, darker skinned brown girl and she actually buys foundation darker than her skin tone because she's trying to be darker. Yeah, I know. So after seeing them like, these people they just genuinely love and embrace themselves. Like that makes a really big difference for me, because I'm like, if they can do it, they're darker than me, then I could do it too. Yeah, yeah. That would have been impactful. Yeah.”

Instagram promotes accounts that it predicts its' users will like. For Aleena, it shows her accounts of light-skinned women and she has to go looking to find influencers with darker skin tones. Once she finds examples of dark-skinned women who are confident it encourages her to start embracing her own colour.

Perceptions of Beauty in Different South Asian Regions

Another aspect of media portrayal of South Asian women is the perception of different geographic regions as being more or less beautiful than others because of the fairness of their skin. Regions of South Asia that are known for having darker skin are often depicted as the 'ugly' regions. Kavya discusses how people often compliment her, while simultaneously insulting Bangladeshi people:

“And then, being from Bangladesh to have noticed we were. Somebody made a comment to me that we're the ugly browns because we are the more darker skinned South Asian woman. So we noticed with like that's the comment they made they're like oh yeah I thought you were actually like the ugly brown like South Asian women, and I get the comment a lot that I don't look Bengali because I'm too light to be from there, Sometimes like they'll just say like oh you look more Indian or you're Pakistani like that's what I usually get and when I say I'm Bengali they're like, 'Oh, that's weird. You don't look very Bengali like your skin's too light to be from there.'”

Even within South Asian groups there is a hierarchy of regions that are considered more beautiful than others based on the common skin tone of those residing in the regions. Areas that are known for being populated with people who have darker skin are then looked down upon by regions with lighter average skin tones.

Lack of Acceptance of South Asian Identity

Participants also add how other visual aspects of being South Asian have affected them. As mentioned previously, participants faced criticism for their weight as well as their skin tone. Kavya also talks about feeling like typically South Asian features are also unappreciated. She explains:

“And I think even just as not even being dark color too but like the features of a South Asian woman. The nose. Yeah, I feel like it's unattractive because one of the beauty standards is having like a skinny, slim, tall nose, which is not what brown women have a lot of the times. And so, I know a lot of makeup artists will do like contouring to make it look slim and skinny. Yeah. And then I just don't feel like it's pretty like as a brown woman, and South Asian women our features are not that beautiful, yeah, they're not appreciated, you know?”

The combination of being shamed for her weight, skin colour, and features amplified the affects of the criticism. Kavya explains that being unappreciated for so many aspects of her appearance has made her feel “uncomfortable” in her skin and her South Asian heritage. She tells how the perception of her skin colour, weight, and facial features leave her with nothing to feel good about:

“So not only do we have to go like, if you are a bit larger let's say you're like average size technically you're not skinny with flat stomach. Not only do you have to get used to the fact that you are darker, your South Asian features are not appreciated, your skin color is not appreciated, and then your body is not appreciated so like the whole spectrum of being a woman as a South Asian woman was not seen as attractive basically unless you're skinny.”

This statement demonstrates how thoroughly the aspects of South Asian womanhood have been opposed, including facial features, skin tone, and body shape.

Aleena also talks about how other aspects of her appearance influenced her experiences with shadeism:

“But I feel like when I wear a hijab, so I lose, regardless people know I'm Muslim. But I feel like if I didn't wear hijab, and if I was lighter, like I- I see my cousins who are light-skinned and don't wear hijab, they get treated way differently. Yeah, yeah. You get treated like a human being. Because you assimilate so closely into it, because they look way- they look white because they have green eyes and brown hair.”

It is clear that both participants see Caucasian features and culture as the ideal in Canada. Both participants struggle to accept their appearance and with it, their identity as South Asian women. As a result, Aleena tries to distance herself from her South Asian identity:

“And there were some points where I feel like I internalized it so much that I hated being brown as a whole. So in high school, whenever people would ask me where I'm from, I would be like ‘I'm Canadian. I was born here.’ And they'd be like, ‘No, like, you're brown.’ And I'm like, ‘No, I'm not.’ And I'd get so defensive. Even though I am brown.”

Kavya has similar feelings about being South Asian. She says, “It just didn't feel good at all, and more and more I keep feeling like being brown, being South Asian and brown like being a darker tone.... I don't like it. Like I wish I wasn't. Sometimes I'll be like, I wish I look more, just, different or Latino or something. But I'm South Asian.” In these women's experiences, skin and body satisfaction are strongly related to their satisfaction in their South Asian identity.

Similarly, Aleena describes feeling inferior to those with lighter skin and automatically sees fair people as attractive. She says, “He's lighter than me, which means he looks good, but even if he's ugly...Because I'm like, look how light he is compared to me.” After becoming frustrated with dating people who made her feel inferior, Aleena refuses to date anyone with lighter skin again. “I can only be with people who are darker than me. Like with men who are darker than me. I can't be with a man that's lighter than me because I feel really insecure.” The fact that Aleena feels she has to date people darker than her shows how deep her insecurity runs and how dramatically it affects her.

Social Impacts

Participants discuss how their shame at the colour of their skin as well as their desire to be light has affected their ability to enjoy activities and social outings. Both were taught in childhood to avoid the sun so that they would not tan and they have continued to observe this practice into adulthood. Aleena describes a situation in which she had the opportunity to go on a cruise with her co-workers. She expresses wanting to go on the cruise and feeling excited at the

idea of spending time with her friends. However, she ultimately decides not to go because of her fear of tanning. She says:

“So in my last workplace there was a work cruise and I didn't go to it because my cousin's wedding was coming the next week and my moms like, ‘If you're going make sure you just sit at the bottom because you're going to get dark.’ Like don't sit upstairs. And I'm like, but that's the point of a cruise. Because I want to take pictures of my friends and stuff.”

Aleena decides that she would rather stay home than go and spend the whole trip below deck to avoid the sun. She misses out on opportunities to travel and socialize because the fear of getting dark is stronger than the desire to participate. She mentions what a rare opportunity this trip was for her to travel, but despite how badly she wanted to go she decides against it. Kavya also says that her social life has been affected by shadeism. She says, “Yeah. And so it's just how I interact with people to my self-confidence is going down because I feel like I'm not seen as attractive if I am a brown colour or darker shade.” She tells a story of going out with her friends and feeling ignored because of the way she looks. She tells:

“Recently my friends wanted to go to this Korean conversation club to hangout. So I went and one of the people, he's not Korean but East Asian, I believe, and I just recall that I was completely ignored and not even treated like I existed and he was a host, and he talked to the girls next to me who are East Asian and were more lighter skin than I was. And yeah like I felt like I was not even human because he would not even talk to me, acknowledge me, make eye contact, nothing, and I was in the middle so the fact that he just kept erasing me from the conversations... It just didn't feel good at all.”

Kavya had the opportunity to have a fun night out with her friends, but her skin colour becomes a barrier to her enjoyment of the evening. Awareness of how others perceive her skin causes her to be uncomfortable and self-conscious. As Aleena mentions, her insecurity about her skin colour heavily influences whom she chooses to date and spend time with. Though, skin colour does not only influence her romantic relationships, but her friendships as well. Of her light-skinned Pakistani friends she says:

“Yeah, with my friends, it definitely would have been different because they've always commented on my skin tone, because they're like the white Pakistanis. It

was like the ones who- you know the ones that came from Afghanistan. Yeah, like migrated. So they're like, they look like a white person if you see them. And I feel like they bonded really well together because they had, I don't know... they had so much in common. And I don't know I just felt like I always feel insecure with them. I try not to hang out with them that much. Actually, I'm not even going to lie, like I really don't. I don't hang out with them that much. Because I'm great. I'm like, great, I'm the dark one in the group.”

Again, this exhibits how skin colour affects South Asian women’s relationships and their ability to participate in social settings. Similar to comments her family has made, Aleena’s friends also encourage her to stay out of the sun. She says, “They also told me that too, they would be like, ‘Oh stay away from the window, we have a wedding to go to next week and we don’t want you looking dark.’”

It is clear from both participants’ stories that shadeism has had a large impact on their lives. They describe the pressure from their family to be pale and the media representation of fairness as beautiful leading to their negative relationships with their skin. Both participants describe wanting to be lighter and feeling like South Asian women with darker skin are treated poorly. They discuss how skin colour dissatisfaction has affected their romantic relationships and their friendships. Finally, they explain how these feelings have influenced their behaviour, making them feel uncomfortable in social situations and avoid settings where they might tan. As a result, they miss out on many enjoyable experiences. Participants say that the best way to support them is through more accurate media representation of South Asian women. However, colonial beauty standards remain salient in mainstream media and the power of whiteness is undeniable.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The following section will explore the implications of participant's stories through a post-colonial and critical race feminist perspective. I will be interweaving my own experiences with shadeism as a South Asian-Canadian woman into my analysis to keep my perspective present and encourage myself to work reflexively. Through thematic analysis I hope to identify a common narrative between my participants and myself. Finally, using the commonalities between our stories I will determine what services and supports would benefit the South Asian-Canadian community in overcoming and managing shadeism.

Familial Intention and Impacts

Throughout both participants' stories there was a common thread of feeling othered by Canadian society and judged by family, particularly their mothers and grandmothers. Though both participants were modern, Canadian-born women in their twenties the history of shadeism in South Asia was still present in their stories, particularly in their descriptions of their family members. Critical race feminism acknowledges that the experiences of women across racial groups will not be identical and each community will have unique experiences and challenges (Razack, Thobani & Smith, 2010). The relationship between young and elder South Asian women is one that is individual to the South Asian community. In my family, the elder women make sure that the younger generation behave appropriately and that traditions are upheld. Earning the respect and praise of these women is very important to the family, and failing to do so can bring embarrassment and shame. Older family members who were born in South Asia bring their more traditional ideas about beauty and fairness with them to Canada and impose these standards on their younger family members. Shaikh (2017) writes about the relationship between elder Indian women and younger generations and claims that they pass their shadeism on to their younger relatives. While I agree that receiving these messages from loved ones in our

formative years is harmful to young South Asian women, frameworks that blame South Asian women for shadeism do not account for the historical context of their beliefs.

On the surface, participants' stories would suggest that South Asians are responsible for perpetuating shadeism, however, there are underlying causes of shadeism, which trace back to colonization. As Aujla (1999) writes, negative attitudes about dark-skin can be seen as "remnants of British colonial attitudes toward other women" (p. 59). The imparting of shadeism onto younger South Asians ensures that colonial attitudes continue to impact new generations.

Correspondingly, while the continual criticism from family members can be incredibly taxing on young South Asian women, it can be seen as a defense mechanism and an attempt at protecting their younger relatives. Having been raised in a system that rewards light-skinned individuals with privilege (Glenn, 2008), it is natural that South Asians would attempt to access this privilege for their family. Their fixation on skin colour may not be malicious, but has been conditioned by generations of oppression. Kavya's story about going to a bar with her friends and being ignored is an example of the difficulties being dark may cause for young South Asian women.

Relationship Between Skin Colour and Weight

This may also be the case when discussing South Asian women's weight. In India, being thin makes women more marriageable and marriage is one way that Indian women seek status and privilege (Nagar, 2018). Older generations try to guide their daughters to safe and financially secure futures by making them as marriageable as possible (Nagar, 2018). In my own experience I have fought many times with my mother over her insistence that I lose weight, but she continues to comment on my size because she genuinely believes that I need to be thin in order to have a good life. Fixation on thinness may be another way that older South Asian women attempt to shield younger generations from oppression.

However, for young South Asian women the motives of the critical comments are obscure and the pressure to be thin and pale is overwhelming. Participants' statements show that the compounding effects of these two beauty standards amplified the impact of each of them. Both Kavya and Aleena talk about how their families' criticisms of their skin is also coupled with criticisms of their weight. Aleena comments that because she is already overweight in her family's eyes she cannot be dark as well. It is clear from her statement that failing to achieve both beauty standards would be far worse than failing to achieve one. Weitz (2011) writes that women's ability to 'perform' beauty affects how well they are treated and this truth is reflected in Aleena's story. Her ability to 'perform' certain aspects of beauty affect her determination to 'perform' others. To fail entirely at performing these beauty standards would mean negative treatment. Kavya also talks about her family's desire for her to be thin, claiming that, "there's a lot of intersecting analogies I think, yeah, of size and skin colour." Based on participants' stories there is a clear coaction relationship between skin colour and body size within the South Asian community.

Colonization has had an effect on the increasing standard of female thinness, akin to its' influence on light skin preference. The prevalence of thin preference in South Asian communities is not surprising, as this is also the standard in the West. Bakhshi and Baker (2011) explain that while countries like India have been historically more accepting of fuller figures, the globalization of Western beauty standards has led to fewer inter-culture differences in expectations for appearance. The ideal image of a beautiful woman that is being sold to South Asians is not only light-skinned, but thin as well. The entwined nature of skin colour and body weight for South Asian women is an interesting connection that requires further investigation.

Skin Colour Representation in Canada and South Asia

Next, Kavya discusses how her North American upbringing shielded her from the skin bleaching advertisements and shadeism prevalent in her family's homeland of Bangladesh. She

says that growing up in Canada she didn't really "notice" shadeism, but theorizes that she would have been more exposed to shadeism if she had grown up in Bangladesh because of the media's blatant preference for light skin. Her statements show some belief that being raised in Canada meant experiencing less shadeism. Glenn (2008) writes that skin-bleaching products are heavily marketed to racialized countries, meaning that this kind of negative media would be less common in a Western country like Canada. Bleaching products are marketed in Canada, but more often for lightening age spots than for changing skin tone (Glenn, 2008). This is due to the fact that Canadian women are largely conceptualized as white (Aujla, 1999). However, while more blatant advocacy for whiteness is not common in Canada, skin-colour discrimination is still perpetuated in more covert ways through 'othering', lack of representation, and white privilege.

On the surface, Kavya's statement about not noticing shadeism when she was younger because she grew up in Canada contradicts Aujla's (1999) theory that second-generation South Asians feel the effects of shadeism more strongly. However, Kavya also explains that she grew up surrounded by other Bengali women and describes herself as being very light-skinned relative to her family. Thus, she may not have experienced the isolation and shame felt by women darker than their peers. It is possible that Kavya was exposed to shadeism, but did not notice because at the time it was not directed toward her. Once Kavya grew up she started to get comments from her family about her skin tone and spend more time socializing with non-South Asians. These new experiences lead to a quick deterioration of her self-esteem as she was no longer the lightest of her friends. This aligns with Aujla's (1999) assertion that South Asians who are socialized in Canada spend their formative years learning that they are 'exotic' and 'other'. These ideas about her skin colour may have been planted at a young age, but only emerged when she became exposed to discriminatory environments.

Further, as Shankar and Subish (2007) point out that the prevalence of skin whitening ads in South Asia can be traced back to colonization and also the powerful influence of American

culture. This is shown through the fact that the markets for skin lightening products are largest in racialized countries where Western capitalism and culture are most prominent (Glenn, 2008). Colonization and globalization did not just reinforce shadeism, they contributed to the development of systems and structures that would continue to enforce the white ideal for generations. Globalization is the reason that Western beauty ideals are quickly becoming global beauty ideals. Bakhshi and Baker (2011) claim that Indian media is one of the main drivers of whiteness in South Asia. Aleena describes that it is the same in Pakistan, "...in all the Pakistani dramas for example, all the actors are freaking white." Industries have worked hard to create homogenized ideas of beauty worldwide so that they can sell the same products to different countries (Jones, 2008). Unfortunately, one of these ideals is whiteness and industries continue to sell whiteness through television, films, and advertising. Kavya's experience with Bangladeshi ads is valid, however, through analysis we can identify colonization as the cause of these ads. Placing responsibility on South Asian countries to alter their culture, media, and beauty ideals is addressing the symptom of colonial beauty standards, not the cause. By bringing the responsibility back to colonizers and Western corporations we can address the problem at the root.

Western corporations and media sources are responsible for fuelling the desire for lightness in South Asia, but they perpetuate the fair-skin ideal on their own soil as well. Aleena and Kavya both talk about how representation has affected their lives in different ways. Kavya describes walking through the mall and only seeing white women in advertisements for beauty products. Again, since the advertisements are for beauty products the implication is that the women in the advertisement are beautiful. The absence of South Asian women suggests that they are not. White women are most represented in American media (de Casanova, 2004). Kavya also discusses how portrayals of South Asian women often show them as conventionally unattractive with bushy hair and eyebrows. Aujla (1999) writes that portrayals of South Asian women

exclude them from national belonging by reinforcing the “us” and “them” mindset of Canadians. The media constructs the belief that South Asian-Canadians are different, dangerous, and not “real” Canadians (Aujla, 1999). As established in the introduction chapter of this paper, beauty is associated with “goodness” (Haas & Gregory, 2005). Thus, continually showing South Asian women as unattractive reinforces the narrative that they are “bad” and dangerous to the nation-state. However, the true danger is the effect these perceptions have on the mental wellbeing of South Asian women.

Use of Skin Bleach and Make-Up

One negative outcome of the media’s insistence that white is more beautiful is the use of bleaching products and make-up to achieve lighter skin. Aleena discloses using bleaching products for many years and both participants discuss using make-up to alter their skin tone. The use of lighter make-up products is something I have tried as well for many years. Aleena and I discussed trying to use the medium shade ranges instead of medium-deep or dark. Make-up shades are a way that women classify their skin tone so using lighter foundations not only makes you appear lighter, but allows you to define yourself within the lighter category. Aleena perfectly describes this when she talks about the feeling she gets when using medium foundation tones. She says, “This is my validation.”

On top of using light make-up, Aleena also uses skin-bleaching products. In South Asia skin-bleaching creams are marketed quite aggressively, telling women that their lives will improve if they become lighter and worse, that they are dirty if they remain dark. Paul (2016) points out the ridiculousness of these advertisements using the example of an “intimate wash” used for lightening the genital area. The tag line for said product was: “Life for women will now be fresher, cleaner and more importantly fairer and more intimate” (Paul, 2016). In this tagline, fairness is associated with cleanliness suggesting that dark skin is dirty. Fairness is also described as “more important” than cleanliness and a way to achieve more intimacy. Therefore,

women who want intimacy and don't want to be perceived as dirty must use their lightening product. The perception of dark-skinned women as dirty was popularized by the British during colonization. In order to maintain their power, British colonizers began to create associations between whiteness and modernity, civility, and power (Shankar & Subish, 2007). Thus, darkness became associated with archaic traditions, savagery, and weakness.

Equally concerning are the negative effects that bleaching products are known to have on women's health. "Side effects of skin fairness products containing hydroquinone, steroids, or mercury can include irritation, inflammation, thinning of skin, scarring, abnormalities among newborn babies if used during pregnancy and breast-feeding, and kidney, liver, or nerve damage" (Schroff, Diedrichs & Craddock, 2018, p. 2). Hydroquinone, steroids, and mercury are all popular ingredients of skin lightening creams in India where there are no regulations against their use (Schroff, Diedrichs & Craddock, 2018). Aleena experienced these negative effects first hand as her use of bleaching products led to scarring. The desire to use these products despite the documented dangers speaks to the determination that South Asian women have to achieve lightness. South Asian women who experience skin colour based discrimination often feel disempowered and skin lightening marketers exploit this feeling by telling women they will be happier, more successful, and more accepted if they become fairer (Schroff, Diedrichs & Craddock, 2018).

Just as with the advertising of unsafe bleaching products, the compliments Aleena received on her skin tone while sick exhibit that fairness is more important than South Asian women's health. When Aleena is experiencing dangerous iron deficiency and is extremely ill she is complimented by her peers on the fairness of her skin. Despite her obvious illness her light skin tone is still viewed as a positive outcome by the South Asian community. This is similar to the use of bleaching creams as for many South Asian women, the desire to be fair outweighs the

fear of negative health outcomes. For Aleena's friends and family, her fair skin is worth the price of her poor health.

One unexpected aspect that arose in discussion with Kavya was the influence of social media photo filters on skin tone satisfaction. Kavya explains that seeing herself with a lightening Snapchat filter inspired her to try to wear make-up that would make her appear lighter. I have noticed that filters on photo editing and social media applications often increase brightness, making the subject of the photo look lighter-skinned. These filters are designed to minimize imperfections and make you look more beautiful; so, the subtext of these lightening features is that darkness is an imperfection and that dark skin is not beautiful. These filters may represent a new way that light-preference is being reinforced in younger generations.

Not only does lack of representation have a negative effect on South Asian women but celebratory representations have a positive effect on their mental wellbeing. When asked what would have helped her appreciate her skin in her youth, Kavya immediately responded that better representation was the answer. Aleena also talks about how seeing positive representations of dark-skinned South Asian women made her feel more positively about herself. She says that seeing them love and celebrate their skin made her realize that she could do the same. Exposure to these media sources at a younger age may have aided South Asian women in developing more positive relationships with their skin.

The Colour Hierarchy and Resistance

When talking to one of my close friends about our perceived attractiveness I asked why she never compares herself to white women. She explained that she views them as being on a different "tier" of attractiveness. I knew instantly what she meant; there is no use striving to be equally beautiful to white women. As a South Asian woman it feels like you have no chance of being considered beautiful in the mainstream. No matter how hard you try to be beautiful you never will be because you'll never achieve whiteness. This is further exemplified by the fact that

other aspects of South Asian's appearance are also scrutinized. Kavya talks about feeling like South Asian features are not appreciated and Aleena mentions that her hijab changes the way people see her. Society tends to prefer women with classically Western features such as slim noses, smooth hair, green or blue eyes, and of course, pale skin. Dhillon (2016) identifies that South Asian celebrities often have very Western features, like green eyes and pale skin. Aleena's comment about how people view her hijab demonstrates that beauty standards are agents used to control minority groups and encourage them to assimilate. She says that she thinks life would be easier if she was fair and did not wear a hijab. In other words, life would be easier if she was able to assimilate by performing whiteness more effectively. This pressure to assimilate is a modern enactment of the forcing of South Asians to adopt British lifestyles during the British colonial rule. I have also felt that life would be easier and I would be happier if I were fairer skinned. Through my experiences and entrenched shadeism I have come to feel, however irrational, that all white women are happy and untroubled.

Contrastingly, Aleena's continued wearing of the hijab despite the negative social outcomes can be viewed as an act of resistance against dominant, White culture. Weitz (2001) defines resistance as, "actions that reject subordination by challenging the ideologies that support subordination" (p. 667). In this case Aleena's hijab can be seen as a challenge to the ideology that Canadians should assimilate to whiteness. Aleena's conformity to bleaching practices, but resistance against discarding her hijab is an example of how racialized women use a combination of accommodation and resistance in their everyday decision-making (Weitz, 2001).

Relationships and Lightness

The fact that the topic of dating arose unprompted in both participant's stories is another interesting aspect to consider. This is potentially a result of the fact that marriageability is traditionally important in most South Asian cultures, especially for women (Nagar, 2018). In fact, marriageability is a large factor in the desire for lightness in India (Nagar, 2018). Aleena

describes feeling like people with lighter skin than her are automatically more attractive than her, regardless of their attributes. This perception is common among South Asians as people with light skin are seen as having higher status. Glenn (2008) describes how people search for ways to gain status, “Sometimes this search takes the form of seeking light-skinned marital partners to raise one’s status and to achieve intergenerational mobility by increasing the likelihood of having light-skinned children” (p. 283). Indian parents using advertisements to find a suitable match for their son often describe the woman they are looking for as slim and fair (Nagar, 2018). Correspondingly, women advertising their availability for marriage will describe themselves as fair to attract partners (Nagar, 2018). Light skin holds a lot of power for the South Asian family unit and thus, affects the relationships of potential partners.

Aleena adds that she currently only dates people darker-skinned than her because when she dates light-skinned men she feels too self-conscious. Shadeism has been so deeply internalized that it has led her to change the way she chooses partners. I would also suggest that the practice of choosing dark-skinned partners is a way of seeking relationships that have more equal power dynamics. In past relationships she has felt inferior to light-skinned partners and this undoubtedly influenced the distribution of power within their relationship. Aleena’s partners automatically hold more privilege than her as they are male, being the lighter one in the relationship may allow Aleena to access privilege that evens the scales.

The familial pressure discussed earlier in this chapter also plays a role in South Asian women’s dating life and parallel desire to have light skin. “Having a daughter with dark/er skin can be a cause of worry within a family setting, partly due to marriage conventions...” (Dhillon, 2016, p. 48). Finding a suitable partner is important for maintaining the strength of the family unit in many South Asian cultures (Dhillon, 2016). Unlike past generations, Aleena, Kavya and I are not worried about arranged marriage, but skin tone remains an important factor in our ability to appeal to romantic partners. Traditional South Asian families continue to influence the

younger generation's dating as well. While my family no longer arranges marriages, the idea that women need to be fair in order to attract the right partner remains prevalent. This means that romantic pressure to be fair is compounded by familial pressure. South Asian women learn that the most important thing to suitors is their skin colour and their value in relationships is tied to their ability to be fair.

This applies also to Aleena's relationships with her South Asian friends. She describes feeling uncomfortable in her friend group because she is the darkest skinned and that she avoids spending time with this group. She explains that she feels insecure around her light-skinned friends and that they have "so much in common" because of their skin tone. This within-group hierarchy is important to explore. Wing (2003) explains that in society those with the darkest skin are relegated to the bottom. This hierarchy is so prevalent it has led Aleena to change who she befriends and dates so that she can create more equal relationships. Many of the relationships formed within the second generation South Asian-Canadian community are shaped by the skin colour of those involved, creating complex power dynamics that lead to stress.

Aleena's South Asian friends also caution her against going in the sun, claiming that they don't want her to look dark. These statements are reflective of comments made by participants' family members to them about staying in the shade so they do not tan. Kavya says that whenever she tans she gets critical comments from her family members and Aleena says that her mother never let her play with the other children outside for fear that she would tan. These experiences instilled a fear of the sun in participants that has affected their ability to engage in different activities. Notably, Aleena discloses that she had the chance to go on a cruise with her friends, which she identifies as a rare opportunity. However, she realizes that having fun with her friends on the cruise would mean going in the sun and chooses to stay home instead. In this way shadeism operates as a form of social control, influencing South Asian women's behaviours through whom they spend time with and the activities they participate in.

Feminist Implications

This element of social control is what makes shadeism a distinctly feminist issue. While shadeism affects men as well as women, there are more political ramifications for women than men. “The body is an especially important site for power struggles between men and women.... In turn, the centrality of the body to women’s subordination has put the body at the center of explicitly political struggles to improve women’s status...” (Weitz, 2001, p. 668). Fixation on women’s appearance is one way that the patriarchy uses women’s bodies to exert power over them and control their actions. The fixation on skin colour makes shadeism a way that the patriarchy and whiteness work together to exert power specifically over racialized women. Shadeism becomes the combined efforts of racism and sexism, putting participants in the difficult position of combating both systems.

Implications for Social Work

When asked what could have supported them in managing their shadeism both participants brought up the idea of representation. Seeing dark-skinned women portrayed as beautiful was considered key in developing a healthier self-image. Of dark-skinned models Aleena says, “So after seeing them, like, these people they just genuinely love and embrace themselves. That really makes a big difference for me, because I’m like, if they can do it, they’re darker than me, then I could do it too.” Social workers in advocacy roles can encourage media sources to use more accurate representations of South Asian women.

Aleena also mentions that the main way to combat her internalized shadeism would be for her family to become more accepting of darker skin tones. Though influencing Aleena’s family directly is not something social work could do, her comment suggests the need for community work that combats shadeism. Shaikh (2017) suggests the use of workshops to help members of the community unlearn shadeism. They propose that workshop leaders give

presentations on the history of colonization and shadeism and explain how older South Asian generations pass these ideas on to younger South Asians (Shaikh, 2017).

However, as previously mentioned I hesitate to take this approach. I think this method places the responsibility on the community to change rather than Western influencers who control the media and continue to perpetuate colonial standards of beauty. Working with the community would address the symptoms, but not the cause of shadeism. Further, the educational approach of these workshops can be interpreted as paternalistic and make the community susceptible to outsiders acting as ‘experts’ in their experience. Thus, I am more comfortable encouraging social workers to run critical race informed support services and groups. These groups should focus on listening and validating experiences rather than educating, and should work to show value for the unique knowledge that the South Asian community brings. In addition, group leaders should run exercises to encourage self-love and expose group members to positive, dark-skinned role models.

Participants stories showcase how colonial beauty standards continue to negatively affect new generations of South Asian women by lowering their self-esteem, influencing who they choose to date and befriend, causing tensions within the family, and preventing them from enjoying activities taking place in the sun. The standard of fairness is perpetuated by the Western beauty industry, which continues to portray whiteness as beautiful. Social workers can work with South Asian women by running support groups for those experiencing shadeism or skin dissatisfaction as well as advocating for more accurate and dark-skinned representations of South Asian women.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

This section will address the limitations of my study and the areas that require further research in the future. After this I will share my final thoughts and takeaways from the information participants shared.

Areas for Future Research

The topic of shadeism within second-generation South Asian-Canadian women has barely been breached by social work researchers; many areas remain unexplored. First, more research is needed on different generations and age groups in order to understand the full picture of shadeism in South Asian-Canadian communities. As this study has identified, older generations of South Asian women hold influence over younger generations. So, understanding the viewpoints of older South Asian women is necessary to comprehensively address shadeism. Further, more qualitative studies on the stories of second generation South Asian-Canadian women is needed to gain a more robust understanding of their lived experience. This paper has not addressed the differences within South Asian countries and cultures. For the purpose of this preliminary investigation into shadeism in South Asian-Canadian communities ‘South Asia’ was used as a homogenous group, however this is the case. More nuanced research that accounts for the diversity of South Asians is necessary.

Participants themselves also identified some areas that require research. Specifically, participants discussed how other aspects of their South Asian appearance influenced their desire to be fair. Research should be done to further investigate the influence of body weight, stereotypically South Asian facial features, and use of the hijab on women’s desire to be lighter. Further, the influence of social media photo filters on skin satisfaction should be explored to understand if the whitening features of these applications have an effect on the community.

Finally, my research only included the stories of two women. Though this approach allowed me to spend time on each participant’s stories and bring their experiences forward in

detail, it also means that many South Asian women remain unrepresented. More interviews with South Asian women are necessary to truly capture the diversity of experiences within the community.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this narrative study was to bring forward the stories of South Asian-Canadian women experiencing shadeism. I believe this objective was achieved as participants shared nuanced and encompassing stories about their lives that have now been brought to light through the publication of this paper.

The findings from this study are incredibly important because they demonstrate how colonialism continues to affect South Asian women in Canada and how the beauty industry is complicit in the perpetuation of colonial ideals. Canada often avoids scrutiny by claiming to be a country that has evolved beyond racism, but the historic effects of colonization remain deeply imbedded in Canadian society. Through narratives like Kavya's and Aleena's we can learn about the ways colonialism remains present and work to overcome them. Participants discussed how the beauty industry has affected them by marketing bleaching products and portraying fair skin as more beautiful. They talked about feeling uncomfortable in their skin and longing to be lighter as well as feeling inferior to those with fairer complexions. This perception led Aleena to seek out friendships and relationships with people who have darker skin than her, so that she would not have to feel self-conscious around them. My conversations with participants revealed the pain some South Asian-Canadian women feel at being invisible in the media and at not feeling beautiful or appreciated.

Last, we discussed how criticisms from their families have affected their satisfaction with their skin and motivated them to avoid the sun and the fun activities that come with it. For participants and myself, shadeism has been internalized, plaguing us with self-criticism and negativity. Shadeism prevents us from fully participating in life by forcing us to stay out of the

sun, use products that are detrimental to our health, and have poor mental health. Addressing skin colour dissatisfaction among South Asian-Canadian women is one step that Canada can take toward decolonization.

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*Skin Colour
Dissatisfaction in
South Asian Women*

**ARE YOU A SOUTH ASIAN WOMAN OVER 18 AND UNDER 30
YEARS OLD? WERE YOU BORN IN CANADA?**

**IF YES YOU MAY VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY.
THIS STUDY SEEKS TO UNDERSTAND HOW SOUTH
ASIAN WOMEN FEEL ABOUT THE COLOUR OF
THEIR SKIN. IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN SHARING
YOUR STORY IN A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT
THEN THIS STUDY IS RIGHT FOR YOU.**

**YOU WILL BE ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN AN
APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTE INTERVIEW ABOUT
YOUR EXPERIENCES.**

*In appreciation of your time you will receive a
\$20 Amazon gift card!*

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If at any time you would like to withdraw your participation you are free to do so. If you are interested in participating in this study or would like more information please contact Shaila Kumbhare (masters student, department of social work) at:
skumbhare@ryerson.ca

This research study had been reviewed and approved by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board [2019-031]

**Ryerson
University**

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How do you feel about the colour of your skin? Tell me the story of how you came to feel this way. Probe: when did it start? How did it continue? How do you feel about it currently?
2. How have these experiences shaped how you feel about being South Asian? Probe: do you think you have experienced discrimination based on your skin? Can you provide details on these experiences?
3. What other impacts has skin colour had on you?
4. Do you have any recommendations about the kind of support that would have helped you?

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Ryerson University Consent Agreement

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this consent form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

TITLE OF THE STUDY

Skin Colour Dissatisfaction in Canadian-Born South Asian Women

INVESTIGATORS

This research study is being conducted by Shaila Kumbhare, from the department of Social Work at Ryerson University.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Seeks to bring to light the colonial beauty standards that remain pervasive in our society by centering the experiences of Canadian-born South Asian women that struggle with negative body image.

I am seeking a total of 2 participants. Participants will be Canadian-born South Asian women. Their contributions will be used in a Major Research Paper that will be used toward the completion of a Masters Social Work degree.

As a participant you will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of your interview and edit your responses. You will also have the opportunity to review and edit the final draft of the paper before it is published on Ryerson's website. While reviewing if you decide to withdraw your contributions entirely you are also able to do that.

WHAT PARTICIPATION MEANS

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- Meet with the interviewer either in person or online via Skype.
- Partake in 1 interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
- Review transcriptions and edit answers if desired.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

This study could draw attention to the ways in which colonialism plays out through beauty standards. The results may inform the development of services for South Asian women. You will also have the chance to have your story heard.

I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS TO YOU AS A PARTICIPANT

The topics that will arise out of the interviews are deeply personal and discussing them may be difficult. The risk of participating is potential emotional distress and the reliving of trauma. Should you require emotional support after the interview I will be available for peer support. I will also provide you with a list of counselors that you can contact if you would like. Outside of the emotional risk, there is no potential for physical harm.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Participants' names and any identifying information will be kept completely confidential. Only I will have access to the names of participants. Participants will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to be used in the study. If they choose not to I will assign one for them. Participants will be audio recorded through the interviews to ensure that the experiences of participants are presented accurately and in the participants' own words. However, interviewees will have access to the transcripts of their interviews as soon as they are available and will have the opportunity to make changes to the transcripts at that time. They will also have the opportunity to approve the final report before it is published on the Ryerson website, to ensure that their stories are appropriately represented.

INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION

Participants will be provided a \$20 Amazon gift card to recognize the time and energy they contribute to the project.

By agreeing to participate in this research, you are not giving up or waiving any legal right in the event that you are harmed during the research.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose whether to be in this study or

not. If any question makes you uncomfortable, you can skip that question. You may stop participating at any time and you will still be given the incentives and reimbursements described above. If you choose to stop participating, you may also choose to not have your data included in the study. You will also be given the opportunity to review the transcripts of your interview and make changes to your answers. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University or myself.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact:

Shaila Kumbhare at skumbhare@ryerson.ca

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study, please contact:

Research Ethics Board^[SEP]c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation Ryerson University^[SEP]350 Victoria Street^[SEP]Toronto, ON M5B 2K3^[SEP]416-979-5042^[SEP]rebchair@ryerson.ca

Skin Colour, Beauty, & Self-Esteem in Canadian-Born South Asian Women

CONFIRMATION OF AGREEMENT

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to participate in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement. You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

CONSENT TO BE RECORDED

Your signature below indicates that you consent to be recorded during the interview.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

