

Beautiful and Beautiful Enough: A Survey based Research Into the 21st Century Understanding and Use of Cosmetics

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Abstract--- *The use of cosmetics has been in place since time immemorial, and the existing archaeological evidences prove the prevalence of cosmetic products in practices such as bathing in scented oil in order to protect and smoothen one's body or chewing herbs to be devoid of bad breath, in ancient civilizations. However, through the ages, the understanding of the application of cosmetic products especially facial cosmetics has drastically taken a reversive wind. It started gaining political, and classist meanings through the rise of a totalitarian and capitalist rule around the world. With a striking rise in the readership of women's magazines, media took up the responsibility of propagating the patriarchal frame work of a perfect body. The invention of moving pictures also offered people an idea to base themselves on and compare. But through the ages, these understandings of the use of cosmetics have been deconstructed by people, especially women to revoke it as a platform for expression and creativity. Nevertheless, the business mind set, and the consumerist mentality in people have brought a sheer change in the marketing and promotion of cosmetic products unlike the wave of this nouveau thought. This paper titled, 'Beautiful and Beautiful Enough: A Survey Based Research into the 21st Century Understanding and Use of Cosmetics, is based upon the responses that we received from fifty people of diverse geographical areas, and cultures, and examines this change in the thought and practice of using cosmetics. It also discusses the marketing practices of the beauty industry, exploitation, psychosocial development and trauma experienced behind the propagation of a 'better other'.*

Keywords--- *Cosmetics, Fair skin, Representation, Exploitation, Cosmetology, Adi Positivity, Augmentation, Environment, Pandemic, Beauty Influencer, Gaze.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Although the term 'cosmetic', was first penned by Sir Francis Bacon in the second book of his work *The Advancement of Learning* to define 'the art of decoration', the utilization and necessity of cosmetics and enhancers began as early as the 10,000 BC when ancient civilizations like the Egyptian, bathed and applied scented oils and perfumes to protect their skin from the desert Sun, and to soften it. From archaeological evidences, it can be asserted that this practice of "cleansing" in civilizations came about as a result of the prominence given to appearance and hygiene. In fact, cosmetic body art is considered to be one of the earliest forms of rituals practiced in human culture, notes Ian Watts (pp 62-92). Based on primeval artefacts, paintings, and historic interpretations, it is transparent that men and women painted their bodies, and that the act of doing so 'went beyond a desire simply for decoration or adornment' (Stewart, 2). That is to say, the use of cosmetics was not entirely for the purpose of embellishment, but

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that it carried a number of socio-political factors. While red ochre, kohl, beeswax, olive oil, rose water etc., were used to treat scars, the eyes, and the body in general, roots of Frankincense, and other herbs were used to improve one's breath, for bad breath and unpleasant body odour were considered to be worthy of shame in ancient days, "Smell" was incomprehensibly fundamental in Egyptian society and perfumery began as a secret art in Egypt that was perfected by 2500 BC", remarks Chaudari S.K and Jain N.K in their study, 'The History Of Cosmetics' (165).

However, the practice followed by the Chinese, that of dipping fingers in beeswax, albumin, gelatine and gum-arabic to stain their nails, brings to the forefront a classist segregation, for only the Royals were allowed to paint their fingernails with bright colours like silver, gold, red and black. The rest of the people were either denied the freedom to practice the art or were demanded to use a duller tone. Although the elite society of Europe practiced making-up, it was frowned upon nevertheless as it was the act of Prostitutes. The use of cosmetics went on to be considered sinful and immoral during the middle ages by the Churchists of the era, condemning doctors, chemists, and diarists who advised women on how to achieve a better appearance; and until the 20th century with a high risk in employment and demand in the agricultural sector had peasant women of ordinary classes working in the fields under a scorching Sun, while the elite women enjoyed a time of leisure and luxury by staying indoors, causing their skin to appear pale and fair, unlike the women in the fields. As it was common for people especially women to follow the footsteps of the elite women for social acceptance and better prospects, the trend of the 'fair skin' came about. There are accounts of people who have died from the exposure to products containing lead and arsenic that were used to achieve a lighter skin tone. The Italian women, on the other hand tinged their lips red in order to claim that they were aristocratic.

In the introduction to her book, the *Painted Faces: A Colourful History of Cosmetics*, Stewart propounds how during the war periods, women were asked to dress and "look good" in order to augment morale. The cosmetic industry shifted its focus from caring to looking, often offering out manuals and advises to women through newspapers, ladies' magazines and advertisements, on how to enhance one's looks, and where to find the enhancers. Stewart goes forth to wrap the timeline of cosmetics thus:

"In the second half of the Twentieth century, women followed the lead of the rich and famous in respect of appearance as feverish celebrity culture took hold. In the twenty-first century, some of the old ideas of the health benefits of cosmetics as well as modern ethical concerns about cosmetics testing on animals or recyclable packaging have come to the fore." (5)

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

From several studies accepted in Cosmetology, Marketing, Sociology, and Psychosocial behaviour of humans, it is understandable that there is a shift, which is transformational, in how one sees one, and others around. The necessity to look a certain way is, to a great extent, structured a different way, or partially destructed to include other parameters, but cannot experience a complete demolition, for the structural basis of how one takes/ makes an impression of/ on others remains the same- on the appearance. There still exists the need to contour the face to lift one's cheek bones, or pay an amount of Rs. 400- Rs. 700 to get rid of one's arm hair, to stay "clean". Many photographers, body enthusiasts, and activists have come forth with body positivity movements to change this

destructive perspective on acceptance, like Hayley Macmillen who interviewed women who adored their arm hair for *Allure*, Velvet d'Amour's photography shoot of the activist Harnaam Kaur- the first female to have a full beard, for *Volup2*, or the *Adipositivity Project* calendar that inculcates photographs of bodies by Substantia Jones. Equipose of this reaction is the skin positivity movement, where people took an optimistic step to accept and disclose the so called "imperfections" on their skin, one major leap being the 'Pimples are in' trend.

While such campaigns, movements, and collective thought and conscience have raised a bar as tall as the standards that they oppose, a wholesome acceptance of the skin beneath the foundation is still considered "dirt" for most in the society. Our question as to why and how, led us to the aspect of 'confidence' in women. Out of the fifty responses we received from our survey, a majority took to citing this aspect as the reason for the flourishing of numerous cosmetic, especially facial cosmetic products. While many people, from the ages of 17, and over 30, who took part in the survey agree that they do not stand by or live along the existing standards of the society, they take note and remark on how such a transition can affect certain practices that are considered normal to mankind, for example, a man preferring to have his hair cut than letting it grow naturally. This is where the outlook on 'choice' comes into play. Most partakers suggested that the use of cosmetics, to enhance features, or to look in expressive ways depends upon one's choices. Whether this rebellion against the norms or the consideration of individual choices is inclined to the existing societal standards, is placed under thorough scrutiny to examine and study the changing conscious of mankind. This paradigm nevertheless is situated upon several factors such as age, the niche within which one has grown up in, cultural conscience, and the history behind cosmetics which we have already traced above.

III. USE OF COSMETICS: A SURVEY BASED STUDY

1. Understanding Cosmetics

The term 'cosmetic' garnered its present day meaning through a number of filtrations from words such as '*cosmetae*' who were Greek slaves who bathed the Royals, and from the French word, '*cosmetique*'. While the Oxford English Dictionary describes the word cosmetic, as a 'preparation applied to the body especially the face, to improve its appearance', the term contains within itself a number of products such as skin lotions, sanitizers, make-up, bath and body solutions, and perfumes, that are generally manufactured using certain chemicals to alter the appearance, texture, or fragrance of the body. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), in the United States of America defines cosmetics as "intended to be applied to the human body for cleansing, beautifying, promoting attractiveness, or altering the appearance without affecting the body's structure or functions".

However, this definition of cosmetics has been subject to the scrutiny of time. There has always been a paranoid obsession towards perfection in man, and this presumption of his, drives him to think of everything having a 'better' side to it. But those time old, rotten ideologies, that are to a greater extend built within a patriarchal, objectifying framework, have been deconstructed to form and conceive newer meanings. Out of the fifty people from the ages of 12 to 30 and above years who took part in our survey, forty-one came forth with varied understandings of the term, cosmetics. While a Psychologist, and an Editor defines it as 'mechanisms, products, and machines used for body image', a Student calls this image, 'constructed'. Another student maintains the stand that while cosmetics provide

‘confidence’ for people in general, with no discrimination in gender or sex, it is done so at the cost of one’s own comfort. She goes further to analyse the consumerist ideology behind the working of the cosmetic industries that feed on the identity crisis that people face once tied up with artificiality. A Vendor Support Associate notes that the beauty industry is evolving into a more inclusive space that encourages self-expression. A Human Resource personnel understands that taking the aid of facial cosmetics comes as a result of low-self esteem and difficulty in accepting one’s own body, which leaves the thread open for an Assistant Professor to note her observation that ‘cosmetics and body correctors are constant reminders of one’s naturalness labelled as imperfections’. On the other hand, a well-known Hair and Makeup Artist (HMUA) we invited to participate in the survey offered us a very distinctive outlook on the usage of facial cosmetics, taking a stern stance that they are ‘a useful tool for adult play and to express creativity’. Another respondent brings forth the concept of ‘conditioning’ in the necessity and use of facial cosmetics. The scholar believes that the well-fabricated ‘ideal beauty standards’ are in fact perpetuated through literature, art and films, and capitalized by beauty industries.

2. *The Ideal Beauty Standards and the Beauty Industry:*

To our query into the use of cosmetic products especially facial cosmetics, of the respondents led us to the following graphical representation:

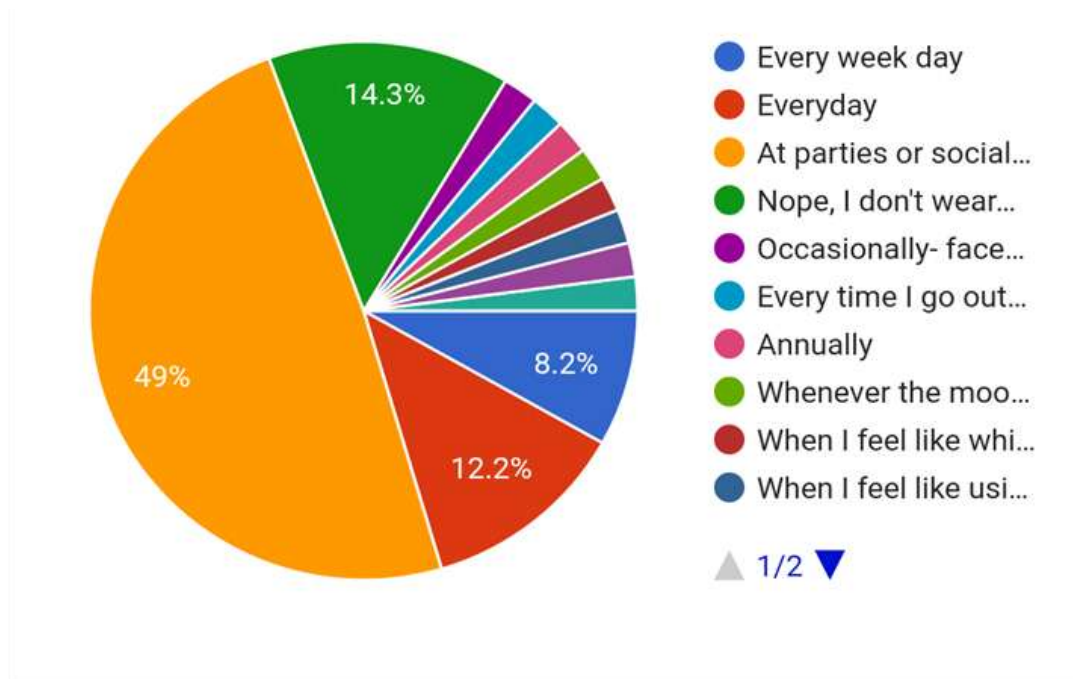


Fig.1: A Pie Chart Representing the Percentage of Respondents Who Wear Make-up and How Often

From the above pie chart, a stark 49% of the respondents wear make-up to social events, and gathering, while 12.2% wears them every day for official purposes, and a minimal of 8.2% of people feel the need to make-up every time they go out. A total of 14.3% stands for the inessentiality of make-up and cosmetics. Most individual answers that were put in cited ‘depends upon my mood’. To those 14.3% of people who negated the use of cosmetics described reasons that are graphically represented in the following pie chart:

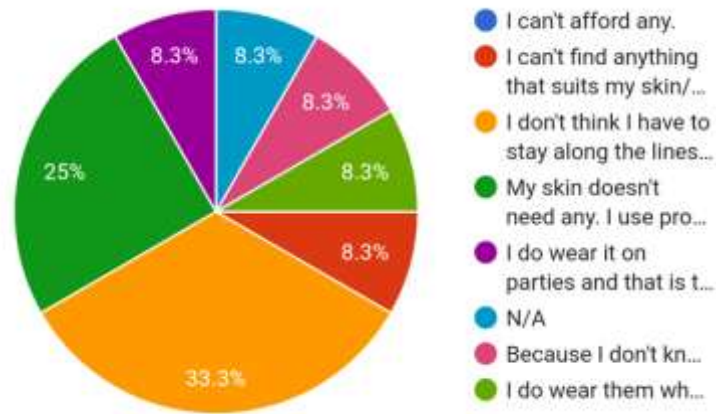


Fig. 2: Pie Chart Representing the Responses of the 14.3% of Respondents Who Negated the Use of Cosmetics

Although a repeated 8.3% can be attributed to various reasons like the exorbitant price of the cosmetics, the impatience and ignorance that goes into wearing make-up, and that people cannot find things that suit themselves in the market, a sheer 33.3% of the participants opted not to stay along the lines of societal beauty standards, while a 25% of respondents are confident that their skins do not need another layer of superficiality above it.

A prime reason behind the application of make-up is in fact the invention of the camera, and later the moving camera, observes Alyona Yarushina, a YouTube vlogger who demonstrates the various techniques used by in the film industry to highlight the facial features of women and men in moving pictures. This third-eye feature in the history of make-up and films indeed corresponds with Laura Mulvey's concept of gaze, although, here the gaze is universal, as people especially women have an 'idea', a 'mirror' to base or to reflect themselves on respectively. In their study on the effect of cosmetics on women by Marsha L. Richins and Peter H. Bloch, the reality of women who felt unattractive purchasing 'adornments'- anything that can buy them social benefits, and increase attractiveness, was revealed as 'compensatory tools'. This idea of cosmetics as compensatory tools was precisely inquired about among our participants producing the following pie chart:

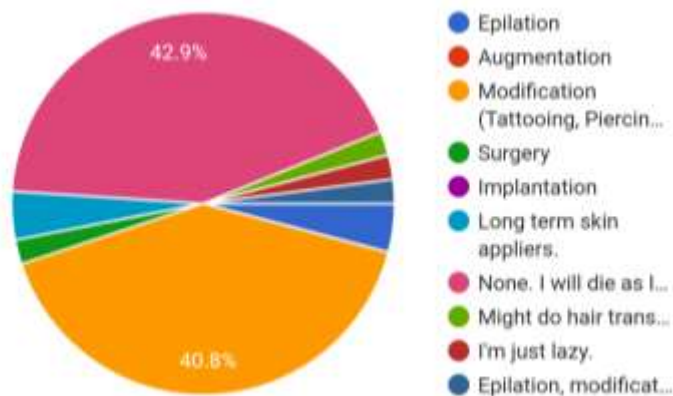


Fig. 3: Pie Chart Showing the Techniques that the Respondents Would Like to Subject Themselves To

Although a number of participants have called for body modifications like tattooing, piercing, epilation, surgery and the like, a 42.9% of the respondents stand by their own will to die as they came into the world, nullifying Richins' and Bloch's 1992 observation, thus implying the wave of transformational thought in the acceptance of one's body, i.e., products, and techniques do not stand as 'compensatory tools' to satisfy the fabricated idea of unattractiveness. But as long as the idea of a 'beauty queen/king', the perfect body, the 'perfect everything' exists, the idea of something inferior will also be valid. This validity is the field upon which a number of cosmetic manufacturing companies, and businesses are based.

The world's infamous and largest cosmetic companies such as L'Oréal, Procter & Gamble, Unilever, Shiseido, Estée Lauder, and many others that constitute the global cosmetics market, is said to render around 429.8 Dollars by 2022, remarks the Allied Market Research. As of 2018, geographically the Asia- Pacific region was the industry leader, accounting for approximately 40 percent of the global market, observes M. Shahbandeh for the website *Statista*. In her 2009 publication on the *History of Cosmetics*, Chaudari S.K, notes how the Indian beauty market was "worth more than US\$ 950 million (approx.) and is rising at 20% a year, twice as fast as the US and Europe markets." (166). As per the Goldstein Research reports, the Indian Cosmetic Industry is compelled by the "high personal disposal income of people, rising awareness towards body aesthetics". Since the past few years, the Indian culture's necessity to retrieve its traditional and spiritually inclined lifestyle has led its people to adopt a more holistic alternative over harmful chemical formulations-based cosmetics, which have led to the growth of the herbal segment at 15% annually. Although this is accurate if taken into consideration the content that goes behind its advertising and promotion, our responds produced the following pie chart, in fact raising questions like, 'is it not a lifelong process?', 'it won't produce instant result, would it?' etc., but nevertheless, there is an clear cut openness to holistic, chemical free use of cosmetics.

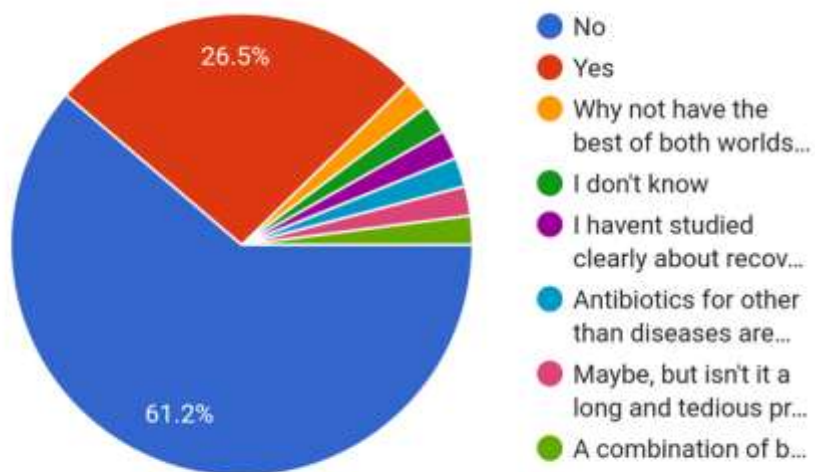


Fig.4: Representing a 61.2% of Respondents Objecting a Holistic Approach over a Formulation-based Approach

3. *Media Representation and Role of Beauty Influencers:*

Whilst the media's aggressive methods to naturalize the unnatural, from displaying the act of waxing pre-waxed arms, or citing body odour, or a darker complexion as the reason to lose a job, to encouraging people to 'reinvent' themselves using products such as lip liners, lipsticks, skin creams etc., or asserting that '#itskaytobeyou' (m. it's okay to be you), to leading campaigns like '#mybeautymysay' - there is a noticeable shift in getting products marketed and promoted to the consumer's hand, i.e., while advertisers of the past, used people's weaknesses as means to propagate a thought, or an ideology through the promotion of their client's product, the newer advertisers and media take heed of the strengths in people that are considered inferior, or that are 'said' to be considered inferior. That is to say, we think in terms of what they create. It is they who shield, and build the barrier and frame a dualistic 'better' mentality in people.

Another aspect of this marketing practice is the role played by the beauty influencers of the world. The rise of social media and networking platforms like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok etc., have paved the path for what we now call 'influencer marketing'. Beauty Influencers, Beauty Vloggers/ Instagrammers or Beauty Gurus as they are referred to, are those people who collaborate with cosmetic companies or individually review new cosmetic products in the market, and offer their subscribers or followers with the necessary judgement about an item. There are a number of ways in which this kind of marketing takes place such as paid partnership/ambassadorship, product collaboration, product giveaways. The followers partake in the consumerist play as a passive observer or an active give away participant about to experience a new cosmetic product. According to an online portal called IZEA that features marketing techniques, a day after the Beauty Influencer Arielle Charnas, posted a Snapchat story featuring the gel mask, more than 500 masks were sold, worth more than \$17,000. Erica Brandt, an online PR and digital marketing specialist explains in a blog post by Influence:

"Forming a partnership is beneficial to both parties because influencers are often able to learn and share exclusive information about a brand while brands are able to showcase their product in front of the influencer's large social media and YouTube audiences. Two of the most popular ways influencers and brands can work together are by using social media and video content to optimize their partnership."

Once a vlogger, or a blogger mentions a brand's product in their review videos, the brand encourages them to tie up with them to increase the exposure of the product in the market. Here is where the PR list takes command. Elyssa Sugar, a former YouTuber and Instagrammer reveals how influencers are considered top-grade if they are part of an exclusive PR list, which is prepared by the brands with the aid of digital marketing experts. These influencers will have the privilege to receive anything and everything a brand's collection then has to offer. For brands and marketing experts to notice one's work, a Blogger, Instagrammer or Vlogger must have at least a minimum of 5000 followers to start with, with a high engagement rate, undoing 'fake' or 'invalid' or 'bot' followers. Not all influencers are paid by the brands, of course, some of them are provided with the content they need with a certain commission accessible when the followers use the influencers code or link to buy a product- the type of marketing technique known as Affiliate Marketing. When asked if they or a person they knew were influenced by Beauty

Gurus and Reviewers online, a solid 50% suggested ‘maybe’, indicating that the online influencer marketing is indeed a success.

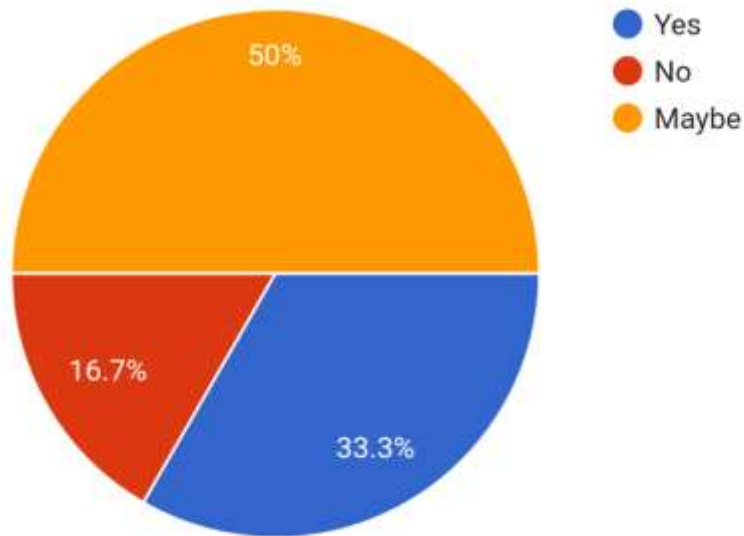


Fig. 5: Pie Chart Displaying the Percentage of Women Being Influenced by the Beauty Influencers Online

4. *Exploitation and the Known Secret of Beauty webs:*

When *Refinery29*, an American digital media and entertainment website owned by *Vice Media* posted a research video in the category called ‘Shady’ under the title, “The Dark Secret Behind Your Favourite Makeup Products”, on the Fourth of May 2019, exposing the underage labour that went into the mining of Mica in a village called Koderma in Jharkhand, India, it resulted in the same moral and ethical upheaval that was received by an article which appeared in *Reuters* that brought the issue to the forefront in 2016. However, the aftermath of the issue remains the same, except for a number of cosmetic companies like Lush, reaching out to aid the children in this crisis, and some extending to completely eliminate Mica- the substance that causes the shimmer in cosmetic products as that of lipstick, eye shadow, or contouring powder, from their products, substituting it with artificial Mica. This act of substituting is brought about in many products as a result of studies based on the use of cosmetic products, and how many/much of the ingredients that are involved in the production, are harmful for living organisms.

While it was the exploitation of animals like rats, that were used for the testing category of cosmetic products that first led a wave of protest against the industry by zoophiles leading to products being labelled ‘cruelty-free’, the attention was however persuaded by the many other practices of the cosmetic industry. Our participants, although some claimed to be well read about the cosmetic world totalled a 37.5% who were ignorant about this exploitative side of the cosmetic world:

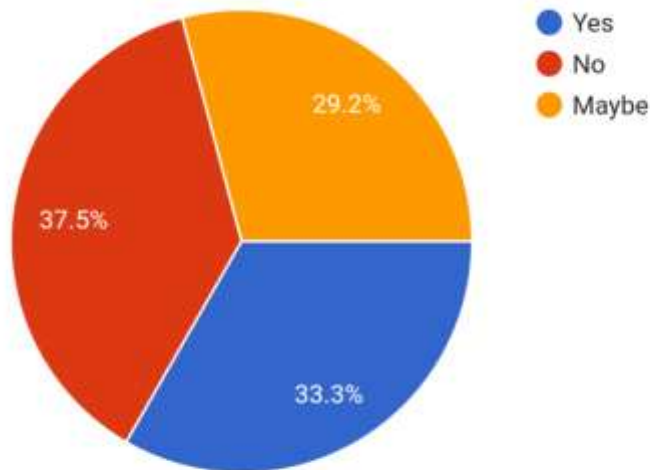


Fig. 6: Showing a Pie Chart of the Number of People Who are Aware of the Advancements and Exploitation Behind the Products they Use, or they Know of

Exploitation can take the form of wigs as well, the Refinery29 project brought forth to the lime light the underground world of human hair trafficking with fewer or no financial benefits, because the source of the hair extensions, or wigs go unsearched, or unquestioned. In fact, the use of mercury consisting cheap products, or the duplication of the original for cheaper rates misleads an unaware and uninformed community. Not only such exploitative, capitalist tendencies of the market, but a controversial facial injection nicknamed the ‘penis facial’ is gathering a lot of attention for its use of cloned baby foreskin cells to repair muscles, nerves and collagen, analyses Lexy Lesback in her video. Lesback goes forth to understand the newer techniques in the field of cosmetology by introducing her viewers to the PRP treatment that utilizes the client’s own blood mixed with Poly lactic acid, or PLLA filler to repair dark circles. The Facial Aesthetic Balancing on the other hand, calls itself to rejuvenate facial skin cells, and one’s youth by injecting a placenta product called Amniaphill.

The environment around us suffers significantly like that of the prejudices set upon one’s appearance. Respondents are concerned that the wasteful packaging that comes with the manufacturing of the products is non-biodegradable and hence a factor in the plastic crisis the world is facing today. In addition to that, they believe in creating a more sustainable option as they are aware that a lot of these products contain chemicals and toxics that are in fact washed into water sources causing pollution.

5. Psychosocial Development and Trauma Behind the Necessity to Look ‘Better’

The prominence given to skin tone in the world, especially the Asian countries affects the psychosocial development of people, especially young girls. A 17-year-old we interviewed as part of the survey felt that, being fair meant a lot more opportunities than being any other tone darker than that, shockingly in how friends and gatherings are selected too. Amidst the strong and loud, Black is Beautiful movements and the manufacturing of foundation creams for all skin tones, many find it difficult to satisfy their own self. In her research video, Lesback

examines Philippines obsession to fair skin as it is often linked with that of a social symbol. For this, people use products such as an IV Drip called a Cinderella Drip that contains Vitamin C and the unapproved Glutathione.

While the people who submitted their responses understand and agree that facial cosmetics and like are now used as a means of personal freedom, they do not deny the influence of more orthodox perspectives on their lives. A striking remark made by one of the respondents was that she used lipstick not to look beautiful, but to enhance her beauty, and another felt that the society in general needs to move towards a more inclusive idea of physical beauty that embraces all body types, skin tones, facial features etc. However, they all believe and collectively respond that a future generation that is in the making should not be thrust with the beauty standards of the past. But the prospect of it remains a mystery and uncertain for this is a business worth million and billions that we are discussing here.

IV. CONCLUSION

From our study and examination, it is foreseeable that there is a logical and rational shift in how people define and see themselves, unlike the thought of the past. Yet, there is an underlying thought within the people that makes them think of a 'better' which is productive if channelled in a positive way. But a thorough study and analysis of the effect of cosmetics and the like should be made among children in elementary and high schools to accurately prove this shift. India, of course, does not see the *Fair and Lovely* advertisements anymore, but it does see other ways in which the idea behind having a fair body is propagated. The newspapers carrying matrimonial classifieds have them, so thus many online match making profiles. The problem lies in the propagation and a business that takes this propagation as its fundamental basis. As discussed above, there is a narrow difference in perceiving oneself as beautiful and beautiful enough. In addition to this, there are communities out there behind the cities, and the fields whose ideology of the body we have no knowledge of, because they do not fall into the web of the business.

Cosmetic practices like augmentation, modification etc., have its advantages too. Our respondents list the people they think can make use of it, for instance, the physically disabled, for film actors to stay young and alter their looks according to their character, for acid and burn victims, patients who have gone through mastectomies, and the LGBTQI who take the help of cosmetics to express themselves, in fact body correctors through surgeries has made a lot of impact for the Transgender community. Therefore, it is agreeable that the shift in thought is transparent, and based on choice, but how shallow or deep it is, needs a lot more of understanding. Additionally, if the need be, industries and companies should stand for a more sustainable ethically manufactured products that do not base itself on other's insecurities. Furthermore, people with hormonal and reproductive diseases like PCOD/PCOS, Hirsutism, and Thyroid suffer tremendously in the web of such standards, and with them lies nothing to look better other than wax strips, laser beams, or shavers. A concluding note should be brought about the situation amidst the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Governments all around the world have shut down spas, salons and beauty parlours amidst the pandemic. This is in fact, a very crucial moment to analyse and examine whether the many facial/ body regimes that are done to one's body are following the precise hygiene protocols.

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