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## To Be Fair: Colorism and Online Dating Among Young South Asians

Kajal S. Patel

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

TO BE FAIR: COLORISM AND ONLINE DATING AMONG YOUNG SOUTH ASIANS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

KAJAL S PATEL

DIRECTOR: MARILYN KROGH, PH.D.

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## ABSTRACT

Online dating is rooted in first impressions through images. Because of this, users of these apps tend to alter their profile pictures to fit a certain criteria that they believe will attract more matches. For people of color, this benchmark is based upon fair skin and European facial features. This has led me to ask, how is colorism reinforced in online dating apps for Indian Americans, and more specifically though, how are the users of these apps portraying themselves in their own profiles as it relates to colorism?

Due to various factors Indians with darker skin tend to feel pressure from friends, family, and the media to lighten their skin to fit the standard of beauty that is based upon European features. Technology grants certain affordances through lighting, camera angles, and editing techniques, in which users are able to enhance their features to fit the standard of beauty. If the lighting is not to their favor, then multiple levels of photo editing will take place to cover up blemishes, dark spots, or lightening their skin altogether.

My study highlights how Indian Americans navigate societal pressures of beauty as it relates to colorism in online dating apps. There is a gendered component because women are held to higher levels of criticism from society in terms of beauty. Thus, they go through greater lengths through skincare, makeup, photo-taking, and editing to ensure they fit into the beauty standard. This study found that while the women were pickier than men in how they presented themselves in their online dating profiles, for 3/5<sup>th</sup> of the participants, they did not place value on skin color when looking for a partner in online dating apps.

## INTRODUCTION

Two years later, I still remember 2019 as it was yesterday. There are an abundance of reasons why 2019 was a tough year for me, but the largest contributor was coming out of a long-term relationship. This led me to experience low self-esteem and discouragement. After months of feeling low, in 2020, I become open to the idea of dating. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, my only option was online dating.

My experience with online dating apps was subpar at best. I quickly realized that many of the messages I received from men made me feel uncomfortable. Many of their comments were targeted towards my skin tone and my body. Some of these comments referenced how “exotic” or “spicy” I looked. While the men who used these words often believed it was complementary, they failed to understand it was fetishizing and rooted in racism. While my friends had found their significant others through online dating, I frequently asked myself why I was attracting this type of attention. After pondering on this question for some time, the only conclusion I could come up with was that it was rooted in my skin tone. I have darker skin in comparison to most of my friends, even those who identify the same as me racially and ethnically. While I cannot be sure that is the case, it raises a larger question about how skin color impacts online dating.

Online dating is rooted in first impressions through images. Due to this, people alter their pictures to fit a certain criterion that they believe will attract more matches. Often times for people of color, this criterion is based upon fair skin and European like facial features. Therefore, it leads to the sociological question, how is colorism reinforced through online dating apps? In

this thesis project, I will focus upon how colorism is reinforced through self-presentation, specifically, the ways in which users of online dating apps portray themselves in their profiles through their images. While numerous studies exist on online dating preferences and colorism as two separate entities, there seems to be a scarcity of research that analyzes how skin color influences online dating. People of color constantly face levels of prejudice due to their physical appearances. We are constantly reminded how dark or light our skin tone is, or how “exotic” our features are. These words are frustrating and disheartening. This intersection of the color complex and the technology of online dating apps allows us to understand how skin color impacts interactions within the online world.

Furthermore, literature shows that racial groups experience colorism in varying ways. There are subtle nuances in the ways different racial groups experience colorism that is dependent on history, culture, religion, geographical locale, and other factors. As a South Asian Indian American woman, I have chosen to focus my analysis on the impact of the colorism and the experiences of online dating among the Indian American population. Much of the literature on colorism in the United States has a focus on the impact it has on Black Americans. Although South Asians also identify as people of color, the experiences of colorism between both groups can be expected to differ due to cultural factors. Thus, by focusing on Indian Americans specifically, this project will contribute to the understanding of how this particular subgroup navigates and experiences colorism and how the experiences differ between Indian American men and women.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Colorism, Casteism, and Region**

Colorism has existed for centuries all over the world, even when there was not a word to define it. In India, through external influences, there was a superiority based upon white skin. India's common people were ruled by "whiter skinned masters: first by Mughals then by other European rulers like the Portuguese and the British for over three hundred and fifty years" (Mishra 2015: 732). British ruled over India for almost 100 years. During that time, the British who had fair skin and different facial features than Indians claimed themselves to be superior and far more intelligent than the "black coloured" Indians (Mishra 2015:731). The British segregated the "Black Indians," and barred them from restaurants and educational institutions (Mishra 2015:731). This external influence by the British in India created a race-based superiority that correlated to colorism. Colorism is defined as the "process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts (Hunter 2007:237). Colorism was prevalent in India at that time because the British preferred Indians with lighter skin over their darker skinned counterparts. Lighter skinned Indians were kept as allies and given extra advantages in relation to education and occupation compared to those with darker skin (Mishra 2015:731). Preferences of skin color can be traced back to ancient India, but it is also prevalent in today's society, especially when it comes to love, dating, and marriage.

Colorist ideals in India can also be traced to the classification of people based upon caste. One of the earliest forms of classifications was cited in the text, Rig Veda, specifically in the

*Purushukta*, “which explains how the four orders in society originated through self-sacrifice of Purusha, the primeval being, who destroyed himself so that an appropriate social order could emerge” (Mishra 2015:727). The four orders were the: Brahmins who originated from the head of Purusha, Kshatriya from the arms, Vaishya from the thighs, and Shudras from the feet. While many believed that this classification dictated a hierarchy with Brahmins at the top and Shudras at the bottom, it was meant to be a metaphorical classification. The metaphor exemplifies all four classes emerging from the same body and occupying different, but equally important, functions within society. However, because texts such as the Rig Veda were passed down verbally, the interpretations differed. This led to those with a higher status receiving noble occupations while the “polluting and unclean” occupations were given to those part of a lower status (Mishra 2015:728). Thus, ancient India was not a homogenous society, and the unequal treatment of people was, and still is, often based upon caste and skin color.

Skin color and casteism often intersect. It is often assumed that those part of the high Brahmin caste tend to be fairer, whereas Shudras and Dalits (“untouchables” who are excluded from the four-fold varna system) tend to be darker skinned. However, this is an erroneous view because individuals can have varying skin tones in every caste. Although oftentimes one’s work and labor practices dictate the color of their skin, there is some level of truth that academics have noted that the lower caste Shudras and Dalits are at times darker skinned due to the occupations involving physical labor (Mishra 2015: 736). India’s hot climate and the high levels of sun exposure leaves those with manual labor jobs and those experiencing poverty with darker skin than those with indoor office jobs. Furthermore, with Shudras and Dalits expected to do the manual labor jobs due to their caste, there is a direct correlation with casteism and skin color.

The correlation between casteism and colorism goes beyond occupations, as it also directly affects love, dating, and marriage. In India, women with darker skin face limited marital options regardless of their caste (Johnson and Dhillon-Jamerson 2019:122). In the same vein, Mishra writes “an upper caste woman or man is more socially acceptable than the lower caste counterpart; however, within the same caste, men and women with lighter skin are almost preferred to those with darker skin” (2015:735). Arranged marriages are still prominent in India, thus, when families look for potential matches for their children, they look for potential partners in the same or higher caste as themselves. If the partner is of a higher caste, then skin color is often times ignored (Mishra 2015:736). However, when a person is both dark skinned and part of a lower caste, they are often associated with impurity and immorality (Johnson and Dhillon-Jamerson 2019:124). If one does have dark skin, they should have other attainments such as a high paying job, higher degree of education, or a higher caste to compensate for their dark skin. Not surprisingly though, men are not held to the same standard as women when it comes to skin tone. An Indian man’s worth is determined by his accomplishments, such as having a high paying job or wealth. Furthermore, according to Johnson and Dhillon-Jamerson, “Men who seek to marry women with light skin often possess competitive qualities related to caste and/or class status and can therefore afford to exchange their value for the symbolic currency of a light-skinned wife” (2019:125). Regardless of gender, there is a level of prejudice against dark skin. Thus, even regardless of caste at times, light skin is preferred because one’s social status and hierarchy in India seems to be governed by skin tone.

While skin tone varies by caste, it also varies by region which can impact one’s social status. Skin tone and facial features for Indians are based upon the geographical location they belong to. Those part of the Northernmost region tend to be fair skinned, while Indians from

the Northeast region are commonly known to having a yellow skin tone and facial features more akin to Southeast Asians (Mishra 2015:726). Indians hailing from Southern India tend to have a darker skin tone, compared to their Northern counterparts. However, within each group, the upper caste tends to have lighter skin (Chattopadhyay 2019:99). Due to the lack of employment opportunities in rural areas in India, some people migrate to larger cities, leaving those part of a lower status behind (Mishra 2015:737). While this situation is rooted in economics and not in racism or colorism, it still causes those who are considered inferior to face discrimination. Those who are left in rural areas tend to do farm or manual labor in the sun, creating a darker skin complexion. This darker skin complexion then impacts their social status, and thus impacting their marriageability.

### **India's Light Skin Ideal**

The color complex is an intra-racial phenomenon in which privileges are granted to those with lighter skin tones. Lorna Roth, in her work, *Making Skin Visible through Liberatory Design* highlights how discrimination against darker skin tones gives more power, beauty, and privilege to those with fairer skin (Roth 2019:275). This favoring of light skin leads to the color complex, in which light skin is the “dominant cultural criterion of beauty” (Roth 2019:290). Colorism is a deeply rooted problematic practice that has continued among Indians who were born and raised in the United States, often learned through the generation that was raised in India. At the same time, it must be noted that while the origin of colorism practices in India is contested, however, it is not limited to one particular religion, community, or culture. As noted, the origins of colorism can be traced to the Hindu religion in relation to casteism, as well as external influences such as the British rule. Regardless of the origins, it is a practice that is still utilized today by many Indians, even in the United States. For many who are part of the Indian community, light skin

and Eurocentric traits designate a high social class, wealth, and for women it signifies beauty and femininity (Khanna 2020:37). Therefore, there are certain pressures for people to conform to those ideals. The pressures come from family, friends, peers, and various media sources (Khanna 2020:37). Growing up, my mother would pressure me to use a turmeric yogurt paste on a daily basis in order to lighten my skin. She would often ramble off the multitude of health benefits associated with it, but I quickly realized that the only benefit she had in mind was to attain a brighter and fairer skin tone. When this realization occurred, I refused to use it. This led to arguments between my mom and I because unlike her, and many others from her generation, I was proud and happy with my natural skin tone which leaned towards a couple shades darker than hers.

While the pressures to conform to the light skin ideal often originate among family and peers, the media is also a large contributor. Nikki Khanna and the other contributors to the text *Whiter* highlight how the media often presents light skin as the beauty standard for Asian women. Advertisements across Indian media further solidify this standard of beauty by showcasing skin lightening products that target insecurities that society has created for those with darker skin. Men and women with a darker skin tone are constantly told that they are unattractive or lacking, which allows skin lightening advertisements to feed off those insecurities. The advertisements often portray an individual with dark skin who is unhappy with their life. They are not able to get promoted in their careers or find a partner, however, through the use of the cream they get everything they had hoped for since they now have lighter skin (Khanna 2020:3). If advertisements are not using the “ugly duckling” to a “beautiful swan” notion, they use successful Bollywood actors and actresses. Regardless of the type of advertisement, the message is clear: *“Those with light skin are beautiful and will marry and be*

*successful; if you have dark skin, too bad for you”* (Khanna 2020:4). Beauty and attractiveness are often used as social capital, and for many communities, it takes the form of fair skin.

Beauty and attractiveness are key in one’s online dating profile. Thus, my study will show how Indian Americans navigate Indian beauty ideals passed down from family and friends in their dating life. Beauty ideals rooted in colorism have been a focus within studies pertaining to arranged marriages in India. However, there is a gap in literature on how Indian Americans experience colorism in online dating. The current literature shows how colorism intersects with notions of beauty, self-presentation, and attractiveness, particularly in relation to love, kinship and relationships. In exploring the way in which colorism intersects with dating and love in particular, the online dating world is an ideal site to explore through the interactions between individuals, but also in how people present themselves in their own profiles. In this modern world, online dating has become a favored way for people to meet and interact with each other. Online dating has become an increasingly popular way among the Indian American population to enter new relationships, thus making it an important site to understand how colorism within this population might be operating in these new spaces.

### **Colorism in the United States**

Racial discrimination is a prevalent problem in the United States for people of color such as African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. People of color are actively denied access to resources and fair competition for jobs and schooling (Hunter 2007:237). However, while racism is routinely discussed and identified, the issue of colorism is often overlooked in the United States. Hunter defines colorism as the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people over their dark-skinned counterparts (2007:237). The privileges granted to people of color with light skin, range from schooling, jobs, and lifestyle. In the United States, colorism

tends to affect all people of color, and can be traced back to the European colonial project, plantation life for enslaved African Americans, and early class hierarchies in Asia (Hunter 2007:238).

A color hierarchy had developed in the United States during slavery, that is still common today. For example, White slave owners at times gave lighter-skinned African slaves additional privileges, such as working in the house as opposed to the fields, the opportunity to learn to read, and for the lucky few, the rare chance of manumission (Hunter 2007: 238). Often, in the antebellum South, lighter skinned slaves, who generally were the children of Black female slaves raped by their White owners, were given more desirable jobs (such as being a house slave), the ability to learn a trade, or even received some schooling (Dixon and Telles 2017: 333). Furthermore, during slavery, an elite Black population was established composed of lighter-skinned men and women which provided social, economic, and educational advantages not granted to their dark-skinned counterparts (Monk 2021:78). This is because light skin was often correlated to intelligence, attractiveness, and general superiority compared to their dark-skinned counterparts (Dixon and Telles 2017: 333). Even today, certain privileges related to economic, educational, and social advantages are granted to those with light skin compared to those with dark skin.

In relation to economic advantages, studies have found that lighter-skinned African Americans earn more money than their dark-skinned counterparts. Hunter outlines how darker-skinned African Americans earn less money, on average, than lighter-skinned African Americans (Hunter 2012:248). The Latino population is more interesting to study because there are Latinos who identify as White, Black, Indian, and others (Hunter 2007:240). Thus, when discussing economics pertaining to this group, research has found that Latinos who identified as White

earned about \$5000 more per year compared to Latinos who identified as Black, and about \$2500 more than Latinos who identified as ‘some other race’ (Hunter 2007:241). Therefore, a clear color hierarchy can be seen in terms of economics with the Latino group with White Latinos as the top, ‘others’ in the middle, and Black Latinos as the bottom. For minority groups in the labor market, dark skin is consistently penalized.

Social attainments in the United States for people of color are also dependent upon skin color. Skin tone is an important characteristic to consider when defining beauty, with light skin being considered beautiful in comparison to dark skin. For women, beauty is a status symbol that can lead to advances in employment, education, and even in the marriage market (Hunter 2007: 247). Hunter writes that light skinned African American women are more likely to marry higher status spouses, thus spouses with higher levels of education, higher incomes, or higher levels of occupational prestige in comparison to their darker-skinned counterparts (2007:247). Other studies also show that Black women with dark skin are consistently passed over for marriage by middle to higher class Black men (Monk 2021:82). Studies have even shown that in neighborhoods with a shortage of marriageable Black men, the darker women were particularly disadvantaged because the shortage allowed the men to be more selective in their hopes of obtaining a lighter spouse with higher social status (Dixon and Telles 2017:228). In terms of beauty in the United States, it is found that “filmmakers, novelists, advertisers, modeling agencies, matchmaking websites – all demonstrate how much the power of a fair complexion, along with straight hair and Eurocentric facial features, appeals to Americans” (Hochschild 2007:2). Thus, light skin is viewed as being more favorable or beautiful in comparison to dark skin.

In the discussion of skin tone stratification in the United States, the concept of



immigration must also be considered. It is important to note that, while much evidence shows that most immigrants integrate well into U.S. society, skin tone discrimination and the stratification that results from this, is a major barrier to their integration (Monk 2021:84). Monk further writes how studies have shown that darker-skinned immigrants have significantly worse labor market outcomes and lower amounts of wealth than lighter-skinned immigrants (2021:84). While immigrants may experience disadvantages due to the color of their skin, they may also be key players in perpetuating colorism. Monk outlines how some immigrants may bring their skin tone biases with them to the United States (2021:85). This is especially common within South Asian families, as noted previously, in the way in which skin color ideal are passed down by generations, even when families immigrate to the United States. Therefore, skin color continues to shape the lives of people of color in the United States from a historical standpoint that has been passed into modern times.

### **Gender and Colorism**

The Hancock and Toma study highlighted an important concept shaping self-presentation in online dating profiles that must be considered: gender. When it comes to the phenomenon of colorism, gender is crucial to consider due to the differences in men's and women's experiences relating to their skin tone. Although societal benefits are given to those with lighter skin tones, women of color are made more aware of the benefits attributed to fair skin. Adbi et al. (2021) discuss women's disempowerment in comparison to men in regard to colorism in India. Women face greater societal pressures in relation to beauty and physical attractiveness compared to men who are not held to the same gendered appearance norms (Adbi et al., 2021:179). Therefore, advertisements are often created targeting women more so than men. Furthermore, familial pressures are placed upon women to attain fair skin in order to find a suitable husband. There is a

connection between beauty and marriageability for women in India, in which beauty connotes fair skin (Banks 2015:671). Families of the potential groom often look for a fair skinned bride and is often considered just as important as educational attainments (Mishra 2015:739).

These societal pressures placed upon men, but especially women, often result in participating in extreme measures to conform to the standard of beauty. A popular intervention taken by people of color in order to lighten their skin are skin lightening products such as Fair & Lovely. Fair & Lovely is a popular skin lightening cream that is a household name in India which commands 60% of the industry revenues in India alone within a skin-lightening industry that is expected to reach \$31 billion by 2024 (Adbi et al., 2021:180). When taking gender into consideration, only 16.7% of men have reported using skin lightening products in a sample of university students in 26 countries compared to 30.0% of women (Peltzer et al., 2016:55). Thus, while colorism affects all people of color, studies on the consumption of skin-lightening cosmetics indicate that women are far more affected by it.

The beauty ideal rooted in fair skin further perpetuates a standard that people, especially women, feel coerced to achieve. These ideals are often governed by media, especially in India where light skinned models are glorified. Bollywood movies promote fairness with the most famous lead actors and actresses, such as Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and Shahid Kapoor, donning fair skin and promoting skin lightening products such as Fair & Lovely. Other advertisements for traditional Indian clothing such as Saris or traditional jewelry often show extremely fair skinned models or foreign White models (Mishra 2015:733). Therefore, fair skin is depicted as the standard of beauty in media that men and women feel forced to conform to (Mishra 2015:734).

Mishra conducted a survey study with 100 Indian students, including both men and women to investigate colorism and social acceptance. When Mishra asked the participants to

describe what pretty meant to them, 71% of the sample included the words ‘fair’ or ‘light’ in their description (2015:742). When the 71% was broken down by gender, Mishra found that 77.77% of the men believe that being pretty equates to having light skin compared to the 63.04% of women who think the same (2015:742). Gender differences are crucial to consider within the broader discussion of colorism but also self-presentation and the role that technology plays.

Self-presentation in online dating is dependent upon one’s gender. The societal pressures, especially within the Indian culture, that are associated with colorism differ for men and women. Thus, it is important to study the ways in which Indian American men and women create their dating profiles. While colorism affects both, it is crucial to study how the ways in which men and women navigate colorism in online dating differ from each other, but also the ways in which their experiences are similar.

### **Online Dating Apps**

Online dating apps such as Hinge, Dil Mil, and Tinder provide its users a convenient way of browsing and interacting with others. With a simple application download onto their smartphone, users have access to thousands of others using the same app in their area. Apps such as Tinder and Dil Mil use a swipe feature which allows users to move through matches quickly and efficiently, while only looking at a couple of photographs and a short biography (Hanson 2020:79). These apps show one profile at a time that fits the users’ criteria including proximity, age, gender, and at times race, ethnicity, and religion depending on the app. Users have the opportunity to swipe right if they are interested and wait for the other person to also swipe right indicating a match, or they can choose to swipe left if they are not interested. Therefore, online dating apps offer certain affordances that dating websites, meeting people in person, and other forms of meeting people do not. Those five affordances include: mobility, proximity, immediacy,

authenticity, and visual dominance (Chan 2017:247). Smartphones allow users to log onto their apps anytime and anywhere in order to find matches in their geographical vicinity. Online dating apps allow their users to learn about potential matches through a broad range of facts and photographs. Through algorithms embedded within the technology, compatible matches are conveniently attained. Furthermore, many apps require registering with a Facebook or other social media accounts to authenticate the profile. These affordances make online dating convenient and efficient for people who are looking for a long-term relationship or a casual sexual one.

Users of online dating apps seek various types of relationships, allowing an interplay between agency of the users and the affordances allowed by the technology of the dating apps. Some people go in hoping to look for a long-term romantic partner; whereas others are simply looking for a casual relationship driven by sexual desire (Chan 2017:247). Chan defines a romantic relationship as “a relationship that is serious, meaningful, and long-term oriented” and a casual sexual relationship as “a purely sexual encounter that is not intended to be a serious, meaningful, and long-term relationship” (2017:247). An app such as Tinder is known to be utilized for those who are looking for a more casual relationship, while apps such as Hinge are more for those looking for a romantic partner. When considering gender, heterosexual men and women report different desires. For example, men tend to seek more casual hookups and women are more likely to seek long term relationships (Hanson 2020:79). Regardless of gender, each person is looking for success on the apps whether that be through finding a long-term partner or a casual sexual hookup.

Dating apps also consider other gendered differences. The study conducted by Hanson found that concerns differed between men and women. Men on dating apps were more

concerned if the women they matched with were as attractive in person as they were in their profiles, leading to some men using other apps such as Snapchat to verify who the person they connected with is and how they look (Hanson 2020:85). Snapchat allows its users to send pictures and videos in real time. Women, on the other hand, were more concerned with personal safety, this is because women encounter unwanted sexual images and messages ranging from sexual puns to directly targeting their bodies (Hanson 2020:86). This leads to concerns of personal safety when women meet their matches in person. Women of color are often held accountable to follow White standards of beauty and femininity, which leads them to experiencing fetishization which further objectifies them (Hanson 2021:4). Women of color are coerced to navigate online dating through an intersectional lens. First, as women they are the targets of unwanted sexual encounters and as women of color they are further fetishized and objectified. The ways in which women of color are objectified can often differ by their race and/or ethnicity. For many Indian women, we are often labeled as being “exotic” or “spicy” by men due to the color of our skin.

### **Affordances of Technology**

Various forms of technology, such as the media, showcase colorist ideals. However, the technology of photo-processing techniques is crucial to consider because the capturing and presenting of images is key in online dating. According to Roth, colorist ideals began with the history of photo-processing techniques. Roth highlights how in the mid 1900s photographers had issues with reproducing images of darker skinned models, because darker skinned “appeared to be muddy-looking, ashen, or so close to “black” that only the whites of the subjects’ eyes and their white teeth appeared with any detail” (Roth 2019:277). Therefore, models with light skin tones and a Westernized “sexy” look were used (Roth 2019:278). Over time, models with lighter

skin tones and European features become the norm in the United States and globally. The standard of fair skin became the norm for the studio technicians, as well as the general public, who only viewed models and actors with light skin on their screens and magazines. The light skin standard created a psychological message about the dominant value of white skin color (Roth 2019:282).

The Kodak film technology only improved in order to properly capture two of their biggest professional accounts – chocolate and furniture – in the mid 1960s and 1970s (Roth 2019:285). Thus, capitalism was the driving force to bring about change, not people of color. Although the technologies had improved in capturing darker skin tones, the beauty standard in light skin remained. Even internationally, the ideal beauty norm included light skin, thus, while one can be “ethnic,” or not white, they should still have lighter skin (Roth 2019:288). Such as how Indians are expected to have fair skin in order to be considered attractive, even though they are not White.

The camera is a crucial component in capturing an aesthetically pleasing image, the technology of editing is also key for people to look physically attractive. Physical appearance is presented in online dating profiles through photographs which are selected and posted by the user. Through lighting, camera angles, and editing techniques, users are able to enhance their features in order to represent their most attractive self (Hancock and Toma 2009:338). Online dating users take advantage of these technological affordances to manipulate their features in order to enhance or improve their self-presentation in their profile. Society places pressures on people to look a certain way to be deemed physically attractive. For people of color, these pressures are rooted in ideals of fair skin and white European like features, which leads to users

to engage in technological manipulations to increase their perceived level of attractiveness (Hancock and Toma 2009:371).

According to Hancock and Toma (2009) there are two categories of self-presentation discrepancies in online dating profiles. The first concerns physical characteristics of the individual which includes makeup, clothing, hair, and poses (Hancock and Toma 2009:372). The second involves the photographic process in which camera resolution, light exposure, zooming, and photoshop are considered (Hancock and Toma 2009:372). By taking both categories into consideration, Hancock and Toma performed their study to assess the accuracy of the participants' (both men and women) online dating profile pictures through participants' self-report and ratings by independent judges. The study found that while participants rated their photographs to be accurate, however, according to the judges, male photographs were more accurate than female ones (Hancock and Toma 2009:376). Technological affordances, such as lighting, camera resolution, and photoshop allow individuals to be selective in their self-presentation in their online dating profiles.

My study will consider the work of Hancock and Toma to determine how Indian Americans use the affordances granted by technology to create their profiles. My study will investigate how they use specific lighting, camera processes, and editing techniques to ensure that the image captured is acceptable for themselves and an Indian diaspora that is obsessed with fair skin.

## DATA AND METHODS

The goal of this project is to determine how colorism is experienced through online dating apps, in particular, how users present themselves in their dating profiles through photography, photo processing, and editing techniques. To gather data to answer this question, I utilized qualitative research methods, specifically in-depth responsive interviews as well as photographic images from the participants' profiles. The photographs allowed me and the participants to discuss how they navigate self-presentation in their profiles with the affordances that technologies of capturing and editing images allows. I chose to utilize responsive interviews because they are "built around main questions, follow-up questions, and probes that together elicit the rich data" that is necessary for the research question (Rubin and Rubin 2012:116). The interviews began with questions regarding the participants' experiences with colorism, online dating, and how they presented themselves in their online dating apps. Follow up questions were used in order to seek detailed information on the themes, concepts, or events that the participant introduced, while also using probes to keep the conversation on topic (Rubin and Rubin 2012:116). In-depth interviews allowed for the participants to elicit as much detail as possible regarding their experiences, thoughts, and feelings of how the concept of colorism had impacted their online dating experience.

In order to determine the gendered differences in analyzing how colorism was reinforced, I interviewed both men and women. The men and women identified as Indian Americans, such that they were born and raised in the United States but of Indian descent, or they immigrated



from India as a child and have spent a majority of their life in the United States. I focused upon experiences of young adults between the ages of 20-25. Ten Indian American men and women were interviewed, with the goal of having an equal number of men and women represented. The participants identified as coming from various parts of India and a variety of skin tones were represented. The participants were recruited from a variety of avenues. Also, each of the interview participants expressed interest in finding a South Asian partner. First, I interviewed participants from my own friend group who identified as Indian American and had used online dating applications. Secondly, I utilized snowball sampling in order to gain access to others who fit the criteria of this study. Each of the interviews took place over Zoom due to ease of access. The table below highlights the participants and their characteristics including sex, age, relationship to me, region of India they are from, and their skin tone as judged by me.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Relationship	Region of India	Skin Tone
Sam	Male	23	Friend	Gujarati	Medium
Arian	Male	21	Acquaintance	Punjabi	Medium
Raj	Male	21	Referral	Gujarati	Light
Kaleb	Male	22	Friend	South Indian	Tan
Rahul	Male	23	Acquaintance	Gujarati	Medium
Elise	Female	24	Friend	Gujarati	Light
Mila	Female	23	Acquaintance	South Indian	Rich
Lina	Female	25	Referral	Punjabi	Light
Catherine	Female	24	Friend	South Indian	Tan
Laina	Female	24	Acquaintance	Marathi	Tan

Skin tone was dictated by my own judgement based on the following categories: fair, light, medium, tan, or rich.

In order to protect each participant, a pseudonym was given to them. Each interview, with the consent of each participant, was recorded through Zoom and saved on my password protected laptop. The interviews took place in 2022 between January and June. At the conclusion of each interview, I transcribed them by hand, opting out of using a transcription software. The

transcriptions were stored on my password protected laptop. Next, the transcriptions were coded onto a Word document. I hand coded each of the interview transcriptions, opting out of using a software program. The codes included certain topics that came up in multiple interviews and others that are predetermined such as: light skin and beauty, editing process, lighting, and colorism shaped by family. Following the completion of the project, all materials including the recording and transcriptions will be permanently deleted. It should also be noted that I passed the CITI ethics training online in September 2019, as well as the IRB training in human subjects research required by the graduate school in September 2021.

## HYPOTHESIS

The purpose of this study is to analyze how colorism is reinforced through online dating apps. Based on previous research, my main hypothesis is there will be several differences in Indian American women's and men's self-presentations in their online dating profiles. My work will built upon the research conducted by Adbi et al. to discuss gendered differences as it relates to colorism experienced in online dating. Adbi et al. discuss women's disempowerment in regard to colorism experienced in India. They find that Indian women face greater societal pressures in relation to beauty which is different than the experiences of men who are not held to the same gendered appearance norms.

Based off the study conducted by Adbi et al., the overarching hypothesis is that both Indian American men and women will face colorism throughout their experiences in online dating, however, women will experience it at a much more higher rate than men through the ways they present themselves and through their interactions with other site members. This is because women face greater societal pressures to look a certain way to fit the European based Indian beauty standard. Thus, in relation to self-presentation, I hypothesize that women will be more concerned with their skin tone and image in comparison to men overall. Specifically, women will take the necessary skin care and makeup steps to ensure that their skin looks fair and flawless. Furthermore, women will spend more time taking their pictures with proper lighting and will have an in-depth editing process to "fix" parts of their body that they do not deem beautiful, with a particular focus on their skin. Thus, I hypothesize that there will be several differences in

assessing how Indian American men and women self-present in their online dating profiles in relation to colorism, with women being affected at a higher rate than. Finally, colorism will be reinforced more so for women in the ways men interact with them through the apps, such as the messages they receive targeting their physical characteristics and sexualizing them. However, the interactions will differ if the participants are interacting with South Asians versus non-South Asians. I hypothesize that when interacting with women, non-South Asian men will be colorist with certain key words or phrases they use such as “spicy” or “you’re pretty for a brown girl.” However, I believe that South Asian men in general will hold more colorist views in their interactions compared to South Asian women in the apps. Thus, the color complex in online dating will be dependent upon many different factors.

## ANALYSIS

This study was created based upon on my own personal experiences as an Indian American woman on online dating apps. Through my time on dating apps such as Hinge, I found myself catering my profile based upon my own upbringing in an Indian immigrant household. Being in an environment in which fair skin was considered superior, I found myself going through an intensive skincare and makeup routine to ensure my skin looked fair, bright and smooth. As I took pictures for my dating profile, I paid special attention to lighting, and my editing process for pictures involved a number of adjustments. All this effort was made to fit the Indian beauty standard based upon European features. Yet, I still faced colorist and racialized interactions on the dating apps. I knew my experience could not be unique, and thus this study was created.

### **Understandings of Colorism**

One of the first questions I asked the participants was, “what does colorism mean to you?” When I began this study, I thought this would be a concept that everyone would be familiar with. However, the responses I received varied from person to person. Raj understood colorism as “being expected to look a certain way when you're South Asian...I would consider colorism as always protecting your skin, not you know getting too dark and like just lighter features.” Colorism is the discrimination against those with darker skin, typically among people within the same racial or ethnic group. Thus, Raj’s definition shows how his own upbringing and Personal experiences have shaped how he defines colorism, with him pointing out that one must “look a certain way when you’re South Asian,” which coincides with light skin.

A couple of the participants related colorism with racism. For example, when I asked Arian the same question, he dove into a story of how his coworkers and bosses would have certain expectations due to him being Indian. He explained that they expected him to have certifications in programming when he was applying for a finance position, in which he believes was due to his race or skin color. Sam also had a bit of confusion between colorism and racism. Sam dove into his response stating, “colorism is when people have an underlying assumption that I'm an exotic person with different tastes and different languages and have all these crazy stories about freaking Aladdin and everything in my everyday life.” Colorism and racism are different. However, they both tell the importance of skin color. Skin color matters in everyday experiences because people respond to each other based upon how they physically represent themselves. This can often lead to racialized and colorist interactions, such as assuming that every brown individual knows computer programming or that they resemble Aladdin.

A couple of the participants truly understood what colorism means and how it has impacted themselves, but also those around them. Just like the other participants, I asked Lina “what does colorism mean to you,” and she explained her understanding.

Colorism is making judgements about people's skin tone, their character, their social status, and making judgements about their values, about them as a person and where they come from. And I think that it's something that's absolutely horrible. I think that south Asians use colorism towards one another as well.

Lina understood colorism as making judgements based upon skin tone, thus understanding that some people are afforded privileges based upon skin color alone. When I asked Elise the same question, she was passionate in her response and how she understood the difference between racism and colorism based upon her lived in experiences.

I know colorism has a formal definition but the way that I've always thought about it is like people are discriminated against to an extra degree in a certain sense because they have a darker skin tone than other people. And it feeds out of racism I guess, but it's definitely an issue on its own, in the sense that, you can't be racist against your own race. I mean you could, there's fine lines between prejudice and all of that stuff; but you can be colorist against your own race. You probably went through this, I went through this, a lot of people we know probably have. When we were growing up moms and grandmas would always be like don't be out in the sun too long because you don't want to get too dark. And even if those people in our lives never outwardly said being dark is a bad thing, they would say things like that which obviously reinforced the idea that dark equals bad. And it bleeds into the ideals that we see and that people have. For example, in like rishtas (marriage proposal) being set up, fair skin is something to brag about, having fair skin is something you want to show off like oh my daughter has fair skin so marry her or she's very beautiful and she has fair skin which makes her beautiful.

For Elise her understanding of colorism came from her own experiences growing up, especially how her family and the Indian peers she was surrounded by reinforced colorist ideals. Thus, between Lina and Elise's responses, one can see that assumptions are often made about people simply based upon their skin color, which reinforces colorist ideals within the Indian community.

### **Family Influence**

Colorist ideals for many begin at home through the influences of those closest to them, their family. All participants, regardless of their gender, spoke about how their family members influence how they perceived beauty. Much of the Indian beauty standards are based upon European features, including fair skin. All the participants come from immigrant households, with their parents being born and raised in India. Thus, those Indian colorist ideals were passed down to their children as they were growing up. One of the methods of skin lighting and brightening practiced by Indians is a turmeric paste which includes turmeric powder, apple cider vinegar, honey and either milk or yogurt. This is a practice I grew up with as my mom would have me apply it once a week. Although it has great skin benefits, the main purpose was to make

one's skin brighter and lighter. All the participants spoke about how this was also a part of their childhood. While some of them fought it, others were forced into applying it. Sam spoke about how his mother was strict about limited outdoor time as she was afraid how dark he would get and would find ways to remedy it. When asked if that entailed the turmeric paste, he said, "hell yes." Although he was not fond of it, he would continue to use it when he was younger to appease his mother. When he visits home now as an adult, she still encourages him to use it.

Sam had spoken about limited outdoor time in fear of getting darker; this was not a unique experience. Rather, other participants spoke of similar stories growing up and some experience even today as adults. One of the participants, Catherine, shared her story of going on vacation a few months ago and her family's reaction to her getting tan.

I went to Utah this past year came back looking like, in the words of my sister, like a burnt chicken nugget. And my mom was absolutely horrified. Up until November I believe, she was constantly saying how I still haven't lost my tan and how she shouldn't have said let me go to Utah and hike the mountains.

Catherine mentioned how her mom's remarks did not come from a place of hatred for her, rather it did not sit right with her that her daughter was tanner than normal. Sam speaks a similar tale about his mother in which he outright said, "I know that she views lighter skin, or fair as she calls it, as more attractive." This sentiment is shared by many immigrant parents due to Indian colorist ideal which leads to their children experiencing limiting outdoor time, the application of turmeric paste, and for some skin lightening creams.

Limited outdoor time was not something that I had grown up with, however, it is something that many of the participants had talked about during the interviews. Arian spoke about how much he loved to play basketball and tennis outside, especially when he was younger. However, his mom was never a fan of him spending too much time outdoors, which he speaks in



more detail about.

My mom used to yell at me about playing outside too much since I would get dark, yeah I used to play basketball and a little tennis so I would get tan and have pretty bad tan lines too so you can distinctly tell how my shoulders were a lot lighter compared to the rest of my body and my mom did not like that.

Growing up, Arian was constantly told how fair skin was “good” by his parents. This is because both his parents had a lighter skin tone and that coupled with the Indian colorist ideal, fair skin was deemed attractive while dark skin was not, thus, they did not want their son getting tan.

Sam also spoke about his love for the outdoors and that was true especially when he was younger. Similarly, to Arian, his mom was not a fan of the amount of time he spent outside, purely due to how tan he would get. Sam went into detail describing his experience

I live outside, I was pretty much born outdoors, and my mom is always like calling me *kalio* (black) because like she thinks I'm going to get darker. And she's like you don't wanna get more tan so here's some sunscreen. She would always tell me you don't wanna get more tan. Which is where I think my aversion to sunscreen comes from because I was forced to put it on when I spent so much time outside...because I think she does view, I mean, like I know that she views lighter skin or fair as she calls it as more attractive.

Light skin is viewed as more attractive in the Indian beauty standard and it is often passed down to even the children who grew up in the States due to their Indian heritage. Thus, the children of Indian immigrants are often given limitations on the time spent outside, or they are told to use turmeric paste, and at times even skin lightening creams.

The skin lightening industry in India is a billion-dollar business. The popularity of creams such as Fair & Lovely and Fairever has transferred over to the United States. Although such creams are hard to come by here, through ties in India, many of these products are brought over to the States by parents and grandparents for their children and grandchildren to use. This is something that Catherine is very familiar with.

You know, my grandma got me my first ever Fairever. I love my grandma but there is a very huge mindset in which fair skin is seen as being superior. In her mind she's fair, my grandpas also fair, they gave birth to my mom who's like decently fair skinned I guess, and married my dad who is also light skin. And you know from them living in India, in a place where there is constant sun outside, you are going to get darker. And the number one way to combat that is with Fairever and Fair & Lovely.

Colorist ideals in a family is a streamline process in which immigrant parents are surrounded by a certain beauty standard in India which they pass down to their children in the United States.

Although the beauty standards differ between the two countries, it is hard for the children of immigrants to balance them which often leads them to using turmeric pastes or skin lightening creams.

Family influence goes beyond just the application of products in order to gain lighter skin. Lina spoke about how her family reinforced colorist ideals in the way they would view and discuss others with darker skin tones.

Growing up, I heard from my family that someone from a darker skin tone may not come from the best family. Again, totally not okay or proper judgement and it's something that my sister and I have argued with our family members, and it's more of our extended family members that make these remarks. And they won't publicly ever say it or show it but behind closed doors they will judgements on other people.

These comments she heard growing up, and even today, have influenced in how she sees herself but also how she views others.

Colorist ideals within Indian families in the United States are first taught by parents and grandparents. They are the ones who force their children and grandchildren to be mindful of the time they spend outside or have them use turmeric pastes in order to lighten their skin. Through family, children of immigrants are often taught that light skin is superior, that in order to be considered beautiful or handsome, one should possess fair skin. Family is the first contributing

factor of colorist ideals; however, media sources also play a significant role.

### **Media Influence**

Within this generation, one of the greatest influences is media. During each of the interviews, the participants were asked what they found attractive and where their understanding of attractiveness stemmed from. All the participants, aside from Lina, had mentioned Bollywood. Bollywood is India's film industry that is centered in Mumbai, India. It is also the world's largest film industry. The promotion of colorism within Bollywood film industry is extremely prevalent.

Bollywood movies are notorious for casting fair skinned actors and actresses. The most successful stars are extremely fair skinned, such as Alia Bhatt, Deepika Padukone, Hrithik Roshan, and Shah Rukh Khan. Even when the role calls for a darker skinned individual, it is given to an actor with fair skin due to India's colorist beauty ideal. Many actors and actresses serve as ambassadors for skin lightening creams, such as Deepika Padukone.

Media, and more specially Bollywood, is important to discuss because it influences beauty standards for the Indian and Indian American community. Most of the participants had grown up and continue to consume Bollywood movies, which is how many realized what features they found attractive for themselves, but also for others. Bollywood reinforces the Indian colorist ideals, which aids in transferring those ideals over into the Western world. One of the interviewees spoke of how Bollywood influenced the types of women he found attractive.

I used to watch Bollywood movies like since I was like a little kid. So like I would just see, really I mean it's bad to say, but like you know like a lot of the Bollywood actresses that I find attractive are like super light skinned. Plus, they have high cheek bones, strong jawlines, stuff like that. So, a lot of these characteristics are what I find attractive and even in non South Asian women too. So, I think it's a trap, like it's the part where they are South Asian but they still have these Western features as well, so that's super attractive.

One of the key features that every interviewee spoke about when they discussed Bollywood was

fair or light skin. Skin tone, coupled with other European features such as strong cheek bones and jawlines inform what Indian Americans find attractive, especially when they are looking for a partner. When I asked Catherine what features she finds attractive she immediately discussed Indian actors. Catherine's family hails from South India in which Tollywood (Telugu cinema) is the main form of media, coupled with Bollywood. In relation she spoke how Tollywood influenced what she looks for in a future partner.

I think my biggest factor of what or definition of what an attractive south Asian male comes from, really comes from the idea that stipulated in our minds at a young age. For me specifically that's like you know Tollywood media and everything. One specific response that's always in my head is a really famous actor named Mahesh Babu. He rose to fame specifically in South Asia because of his looks. And the biggest thing about his looks is that yes he's tall and he's lanky but, it's the fact that he's fair. His nickname in our media is literally like milk boy because he's so fair that his skin is compared to like milk. So I think while you're growing up especially for me, like my mom was always saying to me like oh you know I hope that you find someone like me because she's fair but you have to find someone that's good looking and that's fair. So I was always kind of going along that path so growing up it was like oh who do I find attractive South Asian wise people, it was those who are tall people, who are fair people, who have like fluffy heads of hair people, who you know fit a very,very Eurocentric beauty standard even though we are South Asians.

Bollywood and Tollywood perpetuate a standard of beauty that is based upon European features. Media plays a crucial role in how one interprets attractiveness. The fact that all interviewees had discussed Bollywood in relation to what they find attractive speaks volumes of how fair skin is considered the norm when it comes to beauty. In relation, Arian said, "even in Bollywood movies everyone is fair skinned too, there's not a lot of dark skin; so I feel like as I was raised it was put in my mind, not that fair skin is superior, but that's what you should look for." Light skin is treated as a norm, thus, when it comes to dating and love, people tend to go to extreme lengths to fit that criterion.

Many of the Bollywood actors and actresses endorse skin lightening products, which they

sell to the media consumers. Many of the interviewees discussed how media, in terms of commercials, influence how they view beauty for themselves. Many commercials in India feature skin lightening products such as Fair & Lovely and Fairever. They often feature famous Bollywood actors and actresses to sell how fair skin can lead to success in one's career, but more importantly, in their love life. Many of the commercials feature circumstances in which a darker skinned woman is not able to find a partner, however, once she uses the cream and her skin transforms, she is able to find the love of her life. These commercials target Indian men and women's greatest insecurity, dark skin. Laina spoke about her experiences seeing the targeted commercials.

I feel like here (the United States) the commercials are not that big of a deal, but like when you're in India, there's so many commercials for fair skin creams. Like all the actresses are using it and stuff like that. There's influence through that because you're like oh I can be pretty like her and stuff like that if I also use the cream.

Seeing those commercials when Laina visited India made her insecure in her own skin. She felt that maybe if she was lighter then she could also be considered "pretty." That is a sentiment that is shared by both men and women. The relationship between light skin and beauty is not just for women, men experience it too. Kaleb, whose family comes from South India, spoke about his experience as a South Indian. According to Kaleb, he is lighter than others from South India, but he still feels pressure from media sources to be lighter. He speaks about the difference in commercials from when he visits South and North India. He says, "when I'm back home in South India there would be more targeted ads saying oh here is a fair and lovely product for people to use to make them more fair; but, when I got to North India I don't see that many targeted ads." This is because people from South India tend to be darker in skin tone in comparison to those from Northern parts of India. Thus, there tends to be more targeted skin

lightening ads in South India.

Due to the pressures of media, whether it be Bollywood, Tollywood, or commercials, each of the participants felt the need to find ways to become fairer at some point in their life or they found people with fair skin to be attractive. This was taught by their parents, but then reinforced by the many forms of media that they consumed. These influences were simply inescapable for them, and the same can be for other Indian Americans. These influences continue to play a role in their love life, especially as they navigate online dating.

### **The Power of Skincare and Makeup**

Through the influences of family and various media sources, people feel the pressure to fit into a particular beauty standard. The pressures that many of the participants faced from family and the media made them feel as if they had to fit into the India beauty standard that is based upon European features, the most prominent attribute being fair skin. The participants dove deep into their own skincare and beauty routines, however, there seemed to be a distinct difference between the women and men that I interviewed. Each of the women ensured that they had a set routine with their skincare, makeup, or both. However, none of the men experimented with makeup, and most did not have a set skincare routine that they followed. This difference shows that the pressures that women face to look a certain way exceeds the pressures that men face, which coincides with the current literature.

A large portion of each of the interviews focused on self-presentation, and one aspect was skin. Getting skin tone right for many Indians is a big deal, and for many, 'right' means making their skin tone look lighter, even, and brighter. People experiment getting their own skin tone 'right' in a variety of ways including skincare, makeup, and clothing. When I asked each of the women how they navigated getting their own skin tone right in pictures, they dove deep into

their skincare and makeup routines. Catherine explained the lengths she has gone through to achieve perfect skin, which for her meant having it be even, acne free, and brighter. She explained her frustrations of never having products work for her when they seemed to for all those closest to her.

I have a lot of, and I still have a lot of problems with my skin. I think out of all my physical features that's the one where I like struggle with in pictures the most. You know it's simply because I just had like a lot of acne, and I still do, but it's more so less active now you know. It's probably because I'm just at home, you know being at college and being constantly stressed and getting no sleep I was really damaging my skin...I think I've gone through more products than anyone I know anyone in my friend group or in any of my friend groups. You know my roommate for four years has this St. Ives apricot scrub. That's the only thing she uses and the fact that it's like, first of all, just one face wash and she's never had pimples. Second, it's St. Ives, which just they say it's terrible for you, but somehow, she has never broke out you know. And I would be so jealous because every year I had the newest trends, the newest! And I would ask friends for recommendations, so I'd be like okay one said African black soap okay let's get that. You know trying every product on the market spending so much money to get perfect skin.

Catherine's story sadly is not unique. When one is constantly exposed to various media sources in which celebrities look perfect, or social media in which editing techniques and filters are liberally used to mask imperfections, it is hard not to feel as if you are not good enough or not perfect enough. Catherine spoke further as to why she wanted perfect skin such as how she would see the most popular girls at school were always White and how Bollywood movies always had the fairest actresses. These influences played a crucial role in how she created her skincare and makeup routine to mimic these standards.

Other women expressed similar sentiments in this study. They outlined all the different products that they have used, including Indian remedies such as turmeric pastes. Sadly, some even expressed their desire to use skin lightening creams in order to fit the standards of beauty that

they had been exposed to by their families and media. When Laina and I were discussing beauty, there was a moment in which she started talking about fair skin. She remembered a time in which she wanted to get Fair & Lovely because that is what she saw the celebrities using and even her own grandmother used it. At that time in her life, just a few years ago, she expressed feeling “ugly in her own skin” because she was not as light as her family members or the celebrities she saw in her favorite movies. Laina expressed between family and the media, “it was always instilled in my head that I should be lighter.” These pressures are greater at a more impressionable age, but it is still difficult to break away from as girls become adults. Therefore, many have created intensive skincare routines.

The discussion I had with the men in this study regarding skincare was brief. Many expressed in other parts of the interview how their parents limited the time they spent outside or made them use turmeric pastes, however, as they had gotten older the same sentiments did not transfer in their own daily lives. When discussing skincare, all the men but one had a very simple to no skincare routine. Many simply used a cleanser, some even the same one as they used on the rest of their body, and a lotion. Rahul expressed exactly that stating that “I don’t have a skincare routine, maybe I should though...like I use lotion, but it’s the same lotion that I use on my body and my face, like it’s just lotion.” Rahul and other men in the study expressed that they did not pay much attention to their skin. They felt comfortable as they were and did not feel the need to go through extra steps. The only exception within the men was Raj. Raj was very passionate about the way he looks. When we discussed why, he stated that in his family, “your look and your presence is like a big factor,” so he was expected to look perfect. He walked me through his skincare routine which included the Cerave cleanser twice a day, sunscreen every morning, moisturizer, and Chapstick. He also mentioned that he exfoliated his skin twice a week to ensure



that his skin looked “perfect.” For Raj, perfect included fair skin with no acne because his family placed beauty in fair skin, along with other strong facial features.

Family and media influences play a crucial role for how people view themselves and beauty. However, it is at a greater and more intense level for women in comparison to men. Women constantly face pressures as they are younger and even when they are adults to look a certain way to be deemed beautiful. Therefore, they go through extreme lengths to fit beauty standards, which also includes intense makeup routines.

Makeup is an art form that many are passionate about in order to express themselves. However, for many of the women that I interviewed, it was seemed as if it was necessity for them. When discussing makeup routines, Catherine expressed that she would always wear a lighter foundation shade. She stated, “I don't know if that means anything for foundation but I'm a 107 and I used to wear like a 106, why I don't know.” When I probed and truly asked her why she felt better using a lighter shade of foundation, she answered honestly.

One because I thought I looked better, okay, I thought I looked better as a lighter shade. You know you put it on and it's the power of makeup. In like a minute you're like Oh my God I'm suddenly lighter you know, so I thought that. And then also because of acne. Acne was definitely like part of it, but in the moment, you don't really know that it's a lighter shade and you think it looks normal, you think it looks good.

By using a lighter foundation shade, Catherine was able to conceal her acne, but also was able to fit in with what her family and media deemed beautiful. Her skin looked lighter, brighter, and more even. She made her skin even brighter by using highlight. She suddenly went into a giggle when describing the highlighter she used two years ago.

Goodness I had such a bright highlight. I love that highlighter and I think that highlighter is great, but I should have done like three dots, whereas like this entire section (pointing to her nose and cheeks) was highlight. My nose, my cheeks was all highlight and even on the sides. So much highlight! Why? Because it was a

white highlight, it was shiny, it kind of distracted people from my skin, or you know my acne and acne scars. It also made me brighter.

For Catherine and the other women, makeup was a necessary step before they took pictures for their dating profiles. Each of their dating profile pictures included them wearing makeup. This is because they were able to hide any imperfections, make their skin look more even, and even lighter and brighter. Laina expressed exactly that during her interview. When I asked about her makeup routine and if she has makeup on for every dating profile picture she said yes and dived in deeper.

I always have on makeup, like it even if it's like the lesser makeup ones like there's still like concealer and like a small layer of foundation. I think that just makes me more like comfortable. Yeah, like avoiding like dark spots and like dark circles and stuff like that. Um you know like I wouldn't put like a no makeup picture on my profile, I gotta have some makeup yeah.

For Laina and the other women, makeup is a tool necessary for them to feel confident in their own skin, and especially when they take pictures for their dating profiles. They feel pressures from family and media to fit a certain beauty standard and those influences contribute to how they present themselves in their dating profiles.

Makeup gives the power of being able to cover up any imperfections, such as dark spots and dark circles as Laina mentioned. However, skincare and makeup are just the first steps when it comes to looking flawless for dating profiles. For many, the real art of covering up imperfections takes place in how a photograph is taken, and then how it is edited.

### **Self-Presentation Through Photography: “It’s so Psychopathic”**

Technology grants certain affordances through lighting, camera angles, and editing techniques, in which users are able to enhance their features to fit the standard of beauty. People on dating apps tend to cater their profiles in order to fit a certain criterion of beauty in order gain

more matches. For Indian Americans, that criterion is often based upon fair skin and European facial features. For many, the first steps to achieve this standard of beauty takes place within their skincare and makeup routines, however, that is just the beginning. There are levels of technological manipulation that takes place when taking a photograph for dating profiles through certain lighting and camera angles. Further manipulation takes place during one's editing process. Each of the participants of this study were asked about their photo taking process for their dating profiles and how they edit those photos in order to understand how they present themselves in their dating profiles. Each of their responses were based upon their experiences and influences from those around them.

The ways in which the men and women navigated self-presentation on dating apps completely differed. They all spoke about the influences they faced from family and the media to fit a standard of beauty based upon European features, yet women had more intense photography taking and editing routines compared to the men. The men did not go through extreme lengths or have their set processes of taking and editing pictures in the manner that many of the women described in this study. They were not as particular as the women were when getting their picture taken. For example, when discussing photography for dating profiles, Arian mentioned that he was not "too crazy about pictures," and he explained a bit more.

But like when taking a picture, I don't have a specific angle, I just take pictures with the guys and whichever ones that we all look good in I use. To be honest, the person who's taking the picture will tell me where to move and I move. I don't really care about angles or anything like that. I have friends who are picky, but I don't care as long as it's decent.

This sentiment was shared by all the men in the study. Raj, in relation to camera angles, mentioned, "whoever is taking the picture can do whatever they want." Another participant Kaleb went explained in a little more detail his experience taking pictures.

For me it's like I don't have like a certain lighting or anything that I prefer. Or I don't have like this certain angle, I don't have like a good side or if I do I don't know what it is...I'll experiment different angles, different lighting, whatever. Like whether it's adding artificial lighting or just keeping it as a natural light. Whatever is already there I'll use. And then like after looking at all those pictures I'll decide if this picture is good or if that picture is good, but I don't have a process where I'm like because this picture is good from now on I'm only using this lighting or this angle every time.

Kaleb has found that for him just using whichever lighting is already there, natural or artificial is the best way to go. He has never been particular about lighting or angles and tends to just follow directions from whoever is taking his pictures. The same could be said about all the other men as well.

For many people of color, lighting and angles in photography are extremely crucial. It is through certain lightening that people of color's skin are able to stand out. For example, in both natural and artificial lighting, it must be pointed towards the person to ensure that they do not blend into the background or look the skin does not look grey or ashen. Furthermore, certain lighting will conceal any imperfections on the face, especially during golden hour natural light. It will make the skin seem more even, bright, glowy. With artificial light one's skin can even look lighter. Through certain angles, one can look taller, slimmer, or ensure that the lighting is hitting their body and face in which it will show off a more even skin tone. The men in this study did not consider these factors when they took their pictures for their dating profiles. Although they had large influences from family and the media to look a certain way, they did not apply it for themselves when it to taking pictures for their dating profiles. However, the women in this study told a different story.

Each of the women spoke of their intricate photo taking processes. Mila walked me through how she goes about taking pictures for her online dating profile. She stressed the

importance of lighting,

I always stand in a place where there is a lot of light on my face, and I use certain angles because I know I look better with more light on my face. I know that I am more self-conscious with how light or dark I look, so I always make sure I'm angled correctly. Light and more exposure means brighter skin and less flaws. When your tone is lighter, you don't notice all the imperfections.

By imperfections, Mila meant certain acne scars, her uneven skin tone, and dark spots.

Therefore, whenever she takes a picture, especially for her dating profile, she ensures that she has natural light and that it is pointed directly at her. In discussing beauty and photography, Mila emphasized that she goes through great lengths to ensure that her skin is light and bright.

When asked why, she spoke how her family believes that the only way one can be considered beautiful is by having a light skin tone. Thus, she believes that the by attaining light skin, she will have an easier time finding a significant through online dating apps.

Each of the women spoke a similar tale in discussing photography for their online dating profiles. Catherine walked me through her thought process when taking a picture.

I don't know if it's more of a photography standpoint rather than oh I just want to look good you know. I think with lighting it's just like okay now there's no light there so there's no point in even taking picture or facing that way, so then I turn around and face the other way towards the sun. I don't think I'm that rigid when it comes to angles as I said because I truly don't know which side I prefer. But when it comes to taking pictures, like I need I need my hair to be a certain way. Yeah like no matter what, even if my hair is looking fine in the middle part, some irrational part of me will go to mess it up right before pictures because in my head I'm like no I'm taking a picture I need to make my hair look like fluffy you know. Or making sure my skin looks luminous so making sure the sun hits me right, so that's something I do when it comes to pictures. What else? I don't think there's too many other like nitpicks other than like you know just a regular ones that you take to get take a good picture, make sure you have good posture, facing a certain light, make sure you're oh the angle is right so you don't look short and make sure the angle is like either eye contact level or lower so you look taller so stuff like that.

Although Catherine mentions that she does not have many "nitpicks," she still has a set routine

to ensure that each of the pictures she takes makes her look brighter, taller, luminous, and just overall perfect. Catherine herself described her thought process for choosing pictures as “methodical” and went as far as to say that “it’s so psychopathic” because she does keep all these little aspects in mind because she wants to look a certain way which can be achieved through lighting and certain camera angles. Although Catherine’s photo taking process was vast, the other women in this study also had their own processes.

When Elise walked me through her photo taking process, she compared it to when she was younger. She described how different her process was back then compared to now.

“Actually, I feel like I remember when I was younger, when taking selfies, I would overexpose myself on purpose to make it lighter. I don’t know why I did that... I do remember doing stuff like that and playing with exposure in weird ways. Thankfully that’s not something I do anymore.”

While her photo taking process has changed between then and now, she explains how she has gotten very particular when it comes to taking pictures, especially those that she knows will be on her dating profile.

I definitely am very particular when it comes to taking photos. In terms of lighting, I like the subject to be in good light. For me that means that the photo is not backlit and no part of it is overexposed, both the subject and the background. And in terms of posing, I definitely do it with my body in mind, try to flatter myself in terms of angles and in terms of lighting and so yeah lightening is the most important part of taking photos.

Lighting was the most important component of taking photographs for Elise. It is through proper lighting that she was able to show off herself in the best form.

Laina had the simplest routine when taking a picture out of the women in this study. Her only criteria was that she preferred her left side, that almost all her pictures in her dating profile showed off her left side. When asked why, she simply stated that the left side was the one she preferred over head on or the right side. When discussing lighting, she stated that she preferred

light to be directly in front of her. She went on to further describe lighting.

I mean like for example, my lighting right now is like bad lighting because it's like on top of my face and there's just like shadows on my face and I think that's unflattering. But like if the lighting is like on my face there's no shadows, I feel like I have a more even skin tone, and it looks brighter when the light is on my face.

Although Laina had the simplest photo taking process, she was still specific about the lighting and angles that she preferred.

Throughout the interviews with the men and women, it was clear to see how different they were when it came to their photo taking processes. None of the men were particular about lighting or angles, they usually left it up to the person taking it. They simply cared if the picture turned out good or decent in order for them to be able to use it on their dating profiles.

Meanwhile, each of the women had either set sides that they preferred, each spoke about the importance of lighting in pictures, and discussed how certain angles showed off their best features. Lighting was the most important aspect for each of the women because they wanted to ensure that their skin looked bright, even, and luminous. With good lighting, one's imperfections of dark spots, dark circles, uneven skin tones, and acne scars can be concealed, which is something that each of the women mentioned. However, further manipulation of pictures takes place during the editing process.

### **Technological Manipulation Through Editing**

The beauty of technology is that it grants certain affordances through editing to allow people to enhance their features to fit a certain standard of beauty. Technological manipulation is something that many people partake in, especially when it comes to choosing pictures on online dating profiles. Online dating profiles often only contain condensed information and a few photographs. The photographs chosen play a significant role in how each person is perceived and

how matches are established. Thus, users of the apps tend to choose the most polished, refined pictures of themselves. In order to create polished and refined pictures, there are layers of editing that often take place. Studies have shown that technological manipulation takes place for photos in online dating apps. The current literature highlights that women partake in greater levels of technological manipulation than men in their online dating profiles, hence, they edit their pictures at a greater degree. This study also highlights this phenomenon.

For many people, women in particular, the camera itself is not enough to capture the perfect image. This is because they feel the need to look perfect, and for the interviewees in this study that means having fair skin and fitting a standard of beauty that is based upon European features. Therefore, for some, editing is a crucial step to ensure that the images on their dating profile are perfect. When I asked Mila about her editing routine, she questioned if she herself was a colorist because when editing her own pictures, she pays special attention to her skin tone. Her editing is twofold, the first is focused on lightening her skin tone and the second on smoothing her skin. She delves further into her techniques.

I start by lightening my color, not just to lighten my color but to make my skin look brighter. So, exposure is all the way up as well as brightness. And I make my pictures warmer rather than cooler, because cooler makes your skin look darker. And second, I edit out my acne scars. I smooth the shit out of my face, so my scars or hyperpigmentation don't show because it darkens my skin.

For Mila, having lighter and brighter skin is correlated with attractiveness and beauty due to the influences that she was exposed to from her family and various sources. She believes that the lighter her skin, the more matches she will receive increasing her chances of finding a partner.

Having one's skin look brighter or glowy was a sentiment shared by many of the women interviewed. Elise walked me through her extensive editing routine in which she paid special attention to the colors within the photographs.



When editing photos, I have messed with my skin tone in terms of warmth. Like I'm my skin tone looks dull in a photo I'll warm it up. But usually that's a function of the environment like in terms of lighting. If the photo is by the lake, then I'll warm it up so it's not as cool toned. But it definitely makes my skin look glowier and I'm not mad about it. There are subtle ways like that, that I definitely use to mess with my skin tone and it might not necessary mean to make my skin look lighter or darker but it does help to make my skin glow in a certain way... I first go to exposure, if any part of it feels too light I lower the exposure but if it's too dark then I up it a little bit. Then I look at contrast, so you know adjust it either way if it's looking weird. I usually add some highlight to it, to just get a little bit of differentiation between myself and the things around myself. And then I will mess with the warmth of the photo, usually I warm the photos up a little bit, and that gives the skin a little bit of a glow. And then I sometimes will mess with the orange tones in the photo. In the app I use you can mess with the saturation and lightness and tonal quality of different color tones in the photos, so I will go to the orange tone and that's the one that will reflect in my skin tone, and I will change that a little bit depending on if it looks weird. Like if I warmed the photo up, and it looks nice and glowy, but it looks yellow, then I will go into that orange highlight and I will change the tonal quality to be more towards red so it will even out my skin tone.

Elise paid special attention to the warmth of each photograph, and when one warms up the photo it tends to alter how the skin is viewed. Thus, while Elise did not go in with the intension of altering her skin tone in particular, it still had the effect of making her skin look glowy and bright.

Elise and Mila were not the only women in this study with an extensive editing routine, the other women also walked me through their editing routines for the images that they used in their online dating profiles. Catherine had her own set process and explained the power that many editing apps have and how she has been able to use those apps to completely manipulate her pictures.

So my whole thing, like my whole process never came before taking the picture, it was figuring out how I could manipulate it after the fact. I would turn my brightness up, my contrast was through the roof, it probably looked like I had jaundice multiple times. You know with this with these apps I could completely change myself. There's a feature that is very scary on apps where you can literally change your skin tone. You can pick a darker, or you can pick a lighter skin tone,

and there have been times where I've done both. There's been many times where it's like it's a dark picture and simply to like make sure like I'm visible, I do a lighter one. And then I've done one where I've taken pictures outside, and for some reason with the glare or something, I look pale, so I make myself look tanner. But that is just a feature that is that gives you way too much power you know, way too much power.

Technological manipulation is very common on social media apps, but the same can be said for online dating profiles. Various editing apps such as Facetune, Lightroom, and the preinstalled phone editing features give power to users to manipulate their images. For Catherine, she goes through this routine to ensure to ensure that her best features are shown off, and that her pictures look perfect in order to gain more matches.

Catherine spoke about how there are certain aspects of apps that give way too much power to users. For Lina, that was something that she was looking for. Lina goes the extra mile to pay for an app that allows her to make edits to her photographs. She walked me through her process of editing photos.

I love the Facetune app, I actually pay subscription for that. So when I have a picture, I first zoom into my face I first do things to make my eyes look bigger, or I guess not bigger but darker to make them stand out a little bit and I'll smooth my skin on my face and make my teeth slightly whiter. And then I kinda move towards my body and I kind of do somethings to make me look skinner, like if I have cellulite on my skin I remove that or I'll move the picture around to have a slimming effect. So yeah I definitely do that. Sometimes I'll use a filter to make my skin look better or one that's flattering to the picture, so I'll use an Instagram filter for that as well.

Lina was happy to pay for her the editing app because it allowed her to look perfect in her dating profile. She mentioned how she paid special attention to specific features such as her eyes, teeth, body, and skin. With skin, she used both the Facetune app, as well as a filter on Instagram.

The other women also admitted to editing their pictures. Out of all the women interviewed, Laina had the simplest editing routine. She admitted to using filters and some

editing techniques. She described how her favorite filters changed her photo and the steps she took after the fact to further manipulate the image. She states that the preinstalled Instagram filter she used makes her face look “brighter.” She goes on to further explain her routine by stating, “I remove any pimples, I brighten my under eyes, and I just feel like that I like the filters where they overall make me look better.” When I asked what “better” meant, she hesitated before answering.

I don't know how to describe it I just feel like that I like it where I look almost washed out if that makes sense. Yeah, like I don't like when the picture looks too yellow. Oh, and I whiten my teeth slightly. Okay I found a recent picture that I used on an app; I blurred the background to focus on my face. And the biggest thing is just like my skin, like I changed the pigmentation to make it more even. I don't change like the shape or anything, or like make my eyes like bigger or whatever, I just like changing small things and make sure things look smooth and even.

Although Laina's routine was the simplest out of the women, she still had her set process. She found ways in which she liked to manipulate her dating profile pictures to make herself feel beautiful. For Laina, beauty meant an even skin tone, being a little washed out, and looking bright. Her standards were created from a young age through what she was taught by her grandmother and her favorite actresses in Bollywood movies.

I hypothesized that men and women would differ in how they presented themselves in their online dating profiles. Previous literature states that women would manipulate their pictures in higher degrees in comparison to men. My study showed the same results. The men in this study used little to no technological manipulation when it came to editing their pictures for their dating profiles. The reasons varied, some stated that they had no interest in editing their pictures, others had no knowledge, and one wanted to ensure that they stayed true to themselves in their dating profile.

A common response that I heard from the men in this study when it came to editing their dating profile pictures was that they had no interest in doing so. When I asked Sam whether he ever edited his dating profile pictures he laughed and stated, “I don’t edit at all.” When I asked him why, he said, “I just haven’t learned how to edit, and I’m not really interested in learning either.” Rahul expressed a similar sentiment in his interview. When asked about editing he stated, “I do not edit pictures with me in it, like I don’t even touch up, I don’t edit them at all.” When I asked him why, Rahul told me, “I don’t care enough to, but I also feel like it wouldn’t be authentic to myself, I don’t want to catfish anyone, and I’m not trying to boost any expectations or lower them in any way.” Therefore, for Rahul not editing his pictures is twofold. He did not care enough to learn how to, but he also wanted to be authentic in his dating profile.

Although Sam and Rahul did not use editing techniques, others such as Arian and Raj did. However, their editing techniques differed completely from all the women in this study. When I asked Arian to walk me through his editing process he simply stated, “I don’t really edit, but when I do, I just click the editing tool on the picture and change either the brightness or the exposure level just to make everything more vibrant.” He was quick to point out, “but, I don’t know how to use Photoshop or anything like that.” Arian mentioned that he did not care enough to learn how to use Photoshop because he felt confident in himself already, further, dating apps were more of a game to him rather than a serious means to find love. He simply wanted to meet women or to enjoy swiping left and right and having conversations with whomever he found attractive. Raj told a similar tale as Arian. When asked about editing, Arian stated, “uh yeah, I don’t really know how filters work so like I think I just swipe through and see what I like.” He did go on to state that there are times that he uses a highlight tool that is preinstalled on the Instagram app to make the image look brighter, however, that was rare for him. Raj also felt

confident in the way that he looks, thus, he does not use much editing to enhance his features.

Both men and women in this study stated that they felt influenced by family and the media to look a certain way. However, the women used technological affordances at greater lengths than men to manipulate their images to fit the Indian standard of beauty that is based upon features such as fair skin. Women face greater pressures than men to look a certain way, especially as they get older in order to find a future partner. The current literature states Indian women are often told that only beautiful, fair skinned women will find successful husbands. The same sentiment is passed onto Indian women in the United States. Thus, women feel greater pressure to manipulate their images to look more lighter, brighter, and luminous in their online dating profiles in order to gain more traction on their profile and more matches.

### **Attraction on Dating Apps**

Much of the literature on how colorism is practiced and experienced on online dating apps focuses on the interactions between people on the apps. Thus, a portion of the interviews for this study also dissected the interactions that each of the participants had in their online dating profiles. In order to analyze the interactions, there must be a discussion on what the men and women of this study find attractive in a partner. On many online dating apps, conversations can only pursue if both parties “like” each other or swipe right on each other. Thus, there must be a discussion on what makes each participant of this study swipe right.

All the participants were in search of a South Asian partner, thus, for many what they found attractive in a potential partner stemmed from media sources such as Bollywood and Tollywood (Telegu Cinema). These influences had a large impact in the ways they saw beauty. For example, Catherine found that Tollywood influenced what she looked for in a partner.

I think my biggest factor of what or definition of what an attractive south Asian male comes from really comes from the idea that stipulated in our minds at a young age. For me specifically, that's like you know Tollywood media and everything. And one specific response that's always in my head is a really famous actor named Mahesh Babu.

When asked what it was about Mahesh Babu that made him stand out, she said his looks. She mentioned his fair skin, high height, and his “fluffy head of hair.” However, she pointed out that her meaning of attraction has changed over the years.

I think attraction to me has really changed and I'm kind of impressed by myself you know and how it's changed. Growing up, I was a really, really, really, really into Caucasian men, and then a light skinned brown boys. You know the light skin brown boys that are seen as frat boys... you know the fat boys who were like light skin, clean shaven, one ear pierced, spiky hair, snap back on you know. Then, that changed into a beard lined up, both ears pierced, still snapback, sunglasses, and somewhere along the way that's changed into darker skinned boys.

Her attraction to light skinned men began through media influences, but then she started to embrace her South Indian roots and started falling for darker skinned Indian men. She realized that the older she got, features such as fair skin started to mean less to her. She started to break away from her family's and the media's traditional mindset of finding fair skin superior or attractive. She started to focus more on personality and ensuring that the men that she matched with were good people.

When I asked Lina what she looks for in a partner, she went on to describe physical traits.

I look for a lot of physical things, I look for someone who's taller than me... an attractive man would be someone who is 5'10'' or higher and someone who has facial hair. Also, if being honest as well, a man who is not super, super dark in complexion. I mean having a darker South Asian man can be attractive, but something that I look for, I guess I want someone closer to my skin tone if that makes sense.

Lina discussed how she and her family are very fair, thus, she wanted someone who also was the same skin tone. This may come result from how her extended family would make negative

assumptions of people with darker skin tones behind closed doors as she discussed previously. Thus, while Catherine's previous desire for a partner with fair skin came from media, Lina's desire stemmed from her family.

Aside from physical traits, personality was a large focus for many of the interviewees. When I asked Laina what she found attractive in a partner, she instantly mentioned personality. However, she stated that when going through online dating profiles, the first thing she noticed were pictures. She only went through the rest of someone's profile if she finds them attractive. For Laina attractive meant being fairly tall and having a beard. She was not too picky in what she was looking for when it came to physical characteristics. Although, she was particular about the profile pictures that the men did choose.

I mean they should be like aware enough to know what kind of pictures they choose. Like sometimes people pose like just like on one side or like it's like weirdly zoomed in or like blurry and stuff like that. And I'm like if you can't even like pick a nice picture, that's like something that kind of puts me off.

Laina was particular about the quality of pictures chosen, but not necessarily what the men looked like. She never mentioned skin tone which differs from some of the other participants in this study.

The responses from the men in this study were surprising. From the previous literature, it has been found that men hold more colorist ideals than women. Men tend to look for more fair women, especially in the Indian community. However, the responses from men in this study showed that only a few men held those same colorist view. Raj's understanding of attraction in based upon Bollywood movies, stated, "I mean it's bad to say but like you know like a lot of the Bollywood actresses that like I find attractive are like super light skinned like high cheek bones strong jawline like stuff like that." He went on the mention skin again in what he found attractive

by discussing he found women with “good skin” attractive. When I asked what “good skin” meant he stated, “okay so I guess yeah no blemishes I guess, oh my god I sound like a terrible person, holy cow, but yeah I guess no blemishes, like even skin tone, and symmetrical face yeah.” Skin was not the only feature he focused on, he also mentioned he looked for a woman in good physical shape, good teeth, and someone shorter than him. Raj was very particular in what he looked for in a partner, and for him it stemmed from his family’s value of looks and what he learned from Bollywood. Through those means, Raj reinforced colorist ideals in what he looked for in a partner, because if they did not meet all these criteria points, he would not swipe right on them.

Some of the other men were not as particular as Raj. For example, when I asked what Kaleb found attractive and where his definition of attractiveness stemmed from, he explained that he considered many aspects.

So, I would say my definition of attractiveness, you can’t just say your definition stems from yourself when media, family and friends exist. Like whether you want to call them confounding factors or conflicting factors, that are all around you. So, like it’s those factors have an undeniable influence on you no matter how much you want to believe it’s your own thing you created out of your own volition. But at the end of the day, there’s some degree of impact that they have. So, for me, I would say that my definition is a mixture of all those, but for me it’s not just a physical thing, but it can also be used as an aspect of someone’s personality, or the way they dress.

Kaleb found attraction in how one “carries themselves” rather in particular physical features. As long as they seemed personable, were at the same level of intelligence, and dressed well, he did not pay close attention to specific physical features. The only physical features he mentioned were height since he prefers women short than him; he mentioned nice eyes but was not particular about the color; and he specified nice smile, but he also said it did not have to be a perfect smile. Thus, for Kaleb, attraction was not purely based upon particular a beauty standard.



Attraction differs from person to person. In this study, all the participants outlined what they found attractive, although some were more particular than others. All the participants mentioned the importance of personality, they all looked for someone who was compatible to them. However, their responses differed to what they were looking for. Catherine and Lina were the only women who paid attention to skin tone, while Arian and Raj were the only men who discussed skin tone. This was surprising in two ways. The first because Catherine and Lina were from two different parts of India and two different skin tones, the same can be said about the men. Thus, those who paid attention to skin tone ranged from different parts of India and also possessed varying skin tones, therefore, they all four had no shared background other than they all grew up in the United States. The second reason why the findings were surprising was because based upon previous literature, I hypothesized that all the men in this study would be particular about skin tone. Although this differed from my hypothesis, it was welcomed difference because although each of the men were exposed to colorist ideals, it did not impact them all in what they looked for in a future partner. The same could be said about the women. Although they all paid close attention to how they present themselves in their own dating profile, they were not at particular in what they looked for in a partner when it related to physical characteristics. Those that did mention skin tone were not adamant about how they only found people with fair skin to be attractive, thus the norms of attractiveness may be changing even with the influences that are present. However, the women did face colorist and racist interactions during their time on online dating apps, thus reinforcing the colorist ideals of the Indian community and the racist ideals of the American nation.

### **Interactions**

This research project began because the color of my skin and my identity as an Indian

American women led to men referring to me as “exotic” and “spicy” when they messaged me on online dating apps. When I asked about messages that the participants in this study received, their answers varied. Mila expressed how she felt fetishized by certain men, “whenever it’s someone White, they’ll always say that I’m exotic, or sexy, or comment on my culture, and it just makes me question why they would even think that’s okay.” Mila considered messages such as those to be “red flags.” Catherine’s experience differed from Mila’s. Catherine stated, “I’ve been very privileged very, very, very, super, super, super privileged and I completely acknowledge that I’ve never gotten like an explicit message, or any slurs probably because I don’t swipe and I’m barely on the app.” Even though Catherine had not received any explicit messages or slurs, she did describe some of the colorist and racialized messages she has received from men on the apps.

So, whenever it was like someone, when it's like a creepy old White guy, exotic has definitely been used and so has traditional. They say traditional and I never understood what traditional meant. But I think the underlying message is oh she’s a traditional Indian you know. So, I've gotten that. There have been a few instances where I've gotten messages from brown guys where it's like oh I thought you were Gujarati or I thought you were North Indian, because in their perspective they're thinking of South Indian people are dark people you know, like darker skinned. And I find that terrible because it's like yeah, I am fully South Indian, I may not be look as dark as you know what you expect, but that's terrible that you just assume.

Many of the participants spoke of being mistaken for which part of India their family was from. Arian is Punjabi, and yet he has been mistaken for Gujarati due to his skin tone. People from Punjab tend to vary in skin tones, from being a very light to a medium shade. Gujarati folks tend to be a medium skin tone. Arian falls in the medium category, thus, he is often mistaken as being Gujarati. This is considered a practice of colorism because conclusions are drawn of where someone’s family is from, or where they are from, simply from skin tone alone.

Catherine discussed about her experience of how non South Asians would make assumptions of her based upon her skin tone since she does not list her race or ethnicity on her dating profile. Lina spoke of similar experiences.

I think people who are not South Asian, or people who are different, it's easier for them to make judgements... with non South Asians I definitely have felt like they have made it obvious that I have a different skin tone than them. They start to make judgements about my background, about the hair, about my body, or they make comments like oh you seem Indian so you must be so smart, or you must be so good at math like those kind of things...and you know when people make these kinds of comments to me or make those judgments, it's kind of become a norm, it's kind of sad. Like you're just forced to brush off those comments which makes me angry, and it makes me really annoyed...but it's made me become conscious of how I view someone's skin tone. And I can't change someone else, but I can change myself.

Each of the women interviewed spoke of either colorist or racialized interactions. It ranged from being told that they were "exotic looking" or assuming that they were from a specific region of India purely based on their skin tone. However, none of the men aside from one reported any colorist or racist interactions. Raj described a message that he received from a White woman on a dating app, "she called me a curry muncher so I let her have it, like literally I'm not even kidding that's what she said, it was disgusting." Raj mentioned that this was the only incident in which someone had been racist towards him on a dating app. When I asked other men of the messages that they had received, they all pointed out the nice comments that they had received from women, the comments that complimented their physique or the messages they received regarding the prompts that they had uploaded about their hobbies and interests. None of the other men reported any colorist or racist messages or interactions. This is a complete difference from the experiences of the women in this study who were constantly judged based on their physical characteristics. These gendered differences further reinforce how colorist ideals are targeted

more towards women than men, which leads to women practicing various techniques to conceal their imperfections or their skin tone.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that colorism is not one dimensional, rather it operates in a multitude of ways. This project explains how colorism among Indian American is reproduced in online dating spheres, focusing specifically on the ways in which Indian Americans interact with the technological affordances of dating apps to present images of themselves to prospective others. Each of the participants were exposed to colorist ideals as they grew up through their family and media sources such as Bollywood. This led to all of them having strict practices to combat darker skin tones when they were younger, whether it be limited time outside, applying turmeric pastes, or using skin lightening products. As the participants grew older though, there were clear gendered differences in how they viewed skin color as they navigated online dating.

My hypothesis stated women would experience colorism at higher rates compared to men in how they present themselves in their dating profiles. This was proven true because each of the women had set skincare and makeup routines. They wanted to ensure that their skin looked light, bright, even, and luminous. When their skincare and makeup was not enough, they turned to technological manipulation techniques. As they took their photos, they would ensure that their angles and the lighting were adjusted to show off a slimmer and more even skin toned body. They pursued further manipulation by editing the photographs. All these techniques were enacted by the women in order to fit the prevailing beauty standards that are based upon European features. Indian women have been influenced by their family and the media to obtain fair skin in order to find a husband. Each of their families grew up in a time in which the fair

skinned woman could easily find a partner, thus, passing that notion down to their daughter in the United States. Although that is not true today, it is still difficult to let go of what one is taught for most of their life. Moreover, families are still guilty of instilling those notions onto their children and so is the media. Bollywood movies still mainly cast the fair skinned actors and actresses. Therefore, Indian women today still feel pressures to have fair skin. Which is why the women in this study have gone through extreme lengths in their skincare, makeup, photography, and editing routines to ensure that they fit the Indian beauty standard so they can have more matches as they navigate the online dating world. This explains how colorism operates in online dating for Indian women. They have been exposed to colorist ideals all of their lives which has led to them practicing certain colorist ideals through skincare, makeup, and technological manipulation to present themselves according to the Indian beauty standard for prospective others on online dating apps.

The men in this study told a different story. Each of them highlighted the same family and media influences as the women. They also told stories of having limited playtime outside and being forced to put on a turmeric paste as they grew up. However, they did not go through extreme lengths to fit the Indian beauty standard as the women in this study did. None of them, aside from one, had a set skincare routine. None of them cared for particular angles or lighting as they took photographs for their online dating profiles. Furthermore, for most, they did not have a particular editing routine. The two that did, simply adjusted the lighting or swiped through various preinstalled Instagram filters. None of them felt the need to fully enhance certain aspects of themselves in pictures. The men in this study showcase how colorism is more prominent for Indian women than it is for Indian men. Although the men had been exposed to colorist ideals growing up, it did not impact them as they became adults and started looking for partners on

online dating apps. They did not go through extensive technological manipulation the way that the women in this study did to present themselves according to the Indian beauty standard due to the fact that they did not face the same pressures as adults from family and the media the way that the women did.

These gendered differences show how beauty standards are created for women to follow. Although all the participants were exposed to colorist ideals growing up, only women in this study were pressured by family and the media to reinforce them. Which led to the women in this study to go through extensive skincare, makeup, and technological manipulation to abide the Indian beauty standard based upon European features. When it comes to dating and marriage in the Indian culture, women are still discriminated against due the color of their skin. That is seen in the interactions that the women had during their time on online dating apps. I hypothesized that colorism would be reinforced in the interactions that women had with men on the apps through the messages that they would receive targeting their physical characteristics. This was proven true in how each of the women outlined some form of a colorist or racist interactions. It ranged from being called “exotic,” and “traditional,” or they were assumed to be from a specific region of India due to the color of their skin. All the men, but one, reported to never have been discriminated against due the color of their skin. Thus, we see that even today skin color plays a role in online dating, and it is more common for women than men. This leads to women going through extreme lengths to fit the Indian standard of beauty. They hope to combat certain comments, but also to find a partner because women are told by their families and the media that being fair is beautiful and that is the quickest way to get married.

Throughout this study it is highlighted that online dating is rooted in first impressions through images, which leads to South Asians to alter their pictures to fit the Indian standard of

beauty that is based upon fair skin and European facial features. Colorism is reinforced in the Indian American population through how they present themselves in their dating profiles, through the technological manipulation that takes place in creating their dating profiles.

Although women are more likely to use technological manipulation, it must be noted that this is not because they want to. Rather, the standards that are set in place that define beauty have pressured them to do so.

Women faced greater pressures from family and the media in this study to look a certain way, which led to intense skin care and makeup routines as well as photography and editing processes. My study built upon the work conducted by Adbi et al. who also found that Indian women face greater societal pressures as it relates to beauty and physical attractiveness. Thus, they experienced disempowerment in their everyday lives simply based on how they looked. However, men were not held to the same gendered appearance norms. My study found came to a similar conclusion because the women were held to different standards in how they looked and how they were perceived based upon their physical appearance. While both men and women in this study grew up with colorist ideals, it truly only affected the women in how they presented themselves in their online dating apps through their extensive skincare and makeup routines as well as how they took and edited the photographs for their dating profiles.

While there are set ways in which people reinforce colorist ideals, there have been positive changes in which people view skin color. There has been a shift in the ways in which people place value and importance on skin color. For many of the participants in this study, they may practice colorist ideals on themselves in how they turn to skincare and makeup or the ways in which they take and edit their pictures for online dating profiles. However, for most of the participants, they do not put value on skin color in online dating. Skin color was not a criterion



that helped to determine if they would swipe right or left on an individual. Part of that mindset might can be attributed to growing up in the United States and being surrounded by several races and ethnicities, thus, a multitude of skin tones. Another part of this shift might be attributed to social media.

In terms of social media, in 2016, two South Asian women Mirusha and Yanusha Yogarajah and their photographer friend Pax Jones created the #unfairandlovely campaign, a play on the popular skin lightening cream Fair & Lovely, in which they encouraged women of color to post selfies online (mainly Instagram) to showcase that dark skin is beautiful (GirlTalkHQ 2016). The images served a symbol of solidarity for women with darker skin tones. The campaign was created and used by people who did not want to conform to the current beauty standards that emphasized Eurocentric features. The #unfairandlovely campaign gave voice to thousands of people who felt discriminated and prejudiced against due to the color of their skin, especially in societies in which a lot of value was placed on having fair skin.

More and more social media campaigns were created in an effort to fight against colorism and give voice to people with darker skin tones. This has led to various skin lightening power houses to change their advertising techniques. For example, in 2020 the Unilever company announced that the Fair & Lovely brand name would be changed to Glow & Lovely (Unilever 2020). However, “glow” is just a more digestible word for light or fair. Furthermore, the product still remains on shelves for consumers. Therefore, while positive efforts are being made to represent all skin tones and to fight colorism, there are still prominent manifestations of colorist ideals such as the existence of skin lightening products. This should not take away from the efforts made by millions to dismantle colorist ideals. Through social media, like minded individuals are able to come together and change the discourse on skin color and colorist ideals.

It is through these efforts that changes are being made in how people view skin color, such as how most the participants in this study did not consider skin color when looking for a partner in online dating apps.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. In your opinion, what does an attractive South Asian man and woman look like – Where does this ‘definition’ of attractiveness stem from? (family, friends, media, etc.)
2. Some people claim that South Asians face colorism in their everyday life. What does colorism mean to you?
3. How have your friends, family, peers, or media shaped your understanding of colorism?
4. Can you tell me about why you decided to get on dating apps and when did you first join? What are some of your favorite apps?
5. Could you walk me through what you look for when viewing others’ profiles? What aspects of others’ profiles do you find attractive?
6. Can you tell me about some of the key things you include in your dating profile? What do you try to convey?
7. Can explain to me your process of creating an online dating profile? – do you gain insight or discuss your profile with your friends or family?
8. For a lot of folks, getting skin tone right is a big deal, how do you handle that, say with clothing, makeup, skincare before your photo-taking process even begins?
9. Could you walk me through how you go about taking pictures for your dating profile? – what are some key features you look for when taking a picture?
10. Can you take me through your editing process for your pictures? – can you tell me about any filters or editing techniques that you may use? (ask if they’re okay with showing their pictures to me so we can see the before and after – stress that photos will not be used in the thesis to protect their identity)
11. After initially spending some time on different apps, did you find yourself changing your own profile based upon your experiences?

12. Can you tell me about some of the messages you receive from potential matches? - What sorts of things do people comment on?
13. How do the messages you receive differ from South Asians to non-South Asians? Do you find that colorism is more prominent within one group? – How do you navigate these comments?

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## VITA

Kajal S. Patel was born in Warner Robins, Georgia and raised in Mount Vernon, Illinois. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology at Loyola University Chicago in 2020. While at Loyola, Patel was on the board for the Hindu Student's Organization, serving as the Puja Room Coordinator, Discussions Leader, Secretary, and President during her tenure there. Now she is at Loyola University Chicago to complete her master's degree in Sociology and serves on the board of the Sociology Graduate Student Association. Patel also competed at various events where she was named the winner of the Sociology 3 Minute Thesis competition, also the winner at the Sociology Graduate Student Association Symposium, and finally won Best Social Science Paper at the Graduate Student Advisory Committee's Interdisciplinary Symposium.