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9B21M001

UNILEVER’S FAIR & LOVELY IN INDIA: FAIRNESS MATTERS[[1]](#endnote-1)

Tulsi Jayakumar and Jagdish Rattanani wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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On July 2, 2020, Unilever plc’s Indian subsidiary, Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL), renamed one of its largest-selling brands in India from Fair & Lovely (F&L) to Glow & Lovely.[[2]](#endnote-2) Unilever was a global fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) company, with a portfolio of 400 brands sold across more than 190 countries.[[3]](#endnote-3) The skin cream F&L, which promised its users fairer skin, was sold in countries where a majority of the people were dark- or brown-skinned.[[4]](#endnote-4) India’s skin-lightening cream market was estimated at US$450–US$535 million.[[5]](#endnote-5) It was the biggest market for F&L, where the brand was a leader with a 70 per cent share.[[6]](#endnote-6) The company, however, faced criticism for its positioning and advertising of F&L in India, which was seen as reinforcing the pre-existing bias for fair skin in India.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Unilever plc had aggressively taken on the role of a leader in driving sustainable growth since 2010, with its Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP), which it called “our blueprint for sustainable growth.”[[8]](#endnote-8) In 2014, it added to its sustainability agenda the commitment to fostering gender equality and women’s empowerment under its broader goal of Enhancing Livelihoods and a specific approach it called “unstereotyping.” The approach involved ridding its value chain of stereotypes and social norms, which caused gender gaps “with life-shaping consequences for men and women,” to make the world a fairer, happier, and more prosperous place to live for everybody.[[9]](#endnote-9) In 2020, the company renamed F&L and termed it as the “next step in the evolution of its skin care portfolio to a more inclusive vision of Positive beauty,”[[10]](#endnote-10) even as analysts viewed the move with skepticism, fearing resistance from consumers.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Was the decision to rename the popular fair skin brand the right strategic move, in line with its publicly stated move toward “unstereotyping”? What more, if anything, should be done with the brand?

UNILEVER plc

Unilever plc, a company whose history dated back to 1871, sold its brands in more than 190 countries.[[12]](#endnote-12) Seven out of 10 households on the planet used its brands, which meant that over 2.5 billion people every day used its products. According to the company, 12 of its brands reported annual financial revenue of over €1 billion,[[13]](#endnote-13) including its well-known brands Lipton, Knorr, Hellmann’s, Dove, Rexona, and Vaseline.[[14]](#endnote-14) The company claimed to use “insight and innovation [to] make sure that [its] brands performed for consumers.” The company operated through three main divisions: Beauty & Personal Care, Foods & Refreshment, and Home Care. In 2019, the Beauty & Personal Care division generated revenue of €21.9 billion as the highest contributor, accounting for 42 per cent of overall revenue and 52 per cent of overall operating profit. The Foods & Refreshment division contributed 37 per cent of the company’s overall revenue and 32 per cent of its profit. The Home Care division contributed 21 per cent revenue and 16 per cent profit[[15]](#endnote-15) (see Exhibit 1). With 155,000 employees, and with annual sales of €52 billion in 2019, Unilever plc was a significant global force in the FMCG category.[[16]](#endnote-16)

UNILEVER’S PURPOSE

Along with his brother, William Hesketh Lever co-founded Lever Brothers in 1885 with a clearly stated purpose:

To help popularise cleanliness and hygiene in Victorian England and reduce work for women, to foster health and contribute to personal attractiveness, that life may be more enjoyable and rewarding for the people who use our products.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The idea of sustainability was present in the company’s origins, as expressed by the co-founder in 1900:

The truest and highest form of enlightened self-interest requires that we pay the fullest regard to the interest and welfare of those around us, whose wellbeing we must bind up with our own and with whom we must share our prosperity.[[18]](#endnote-18)

After merging to become Unilever plc, the company saw its purpose as a legacy that had been handed down from the founders and their core values, although not specifically conscious of sustainability.[[19]](#endnote-19) In the 1990s, Unilever set up a sustainable agriculture program “in light of growing environmental pressures and consumer concerns about the food chain.” This program was followed by other initiatives to preserve water resources and source fish from sustainable stocks.[[20]](#endnote-20) Antony Burgmans, the company’s chairman and head of the Birds Eye brand (with the popular Captain Birdseye mascot), commented on the perception of Unilever plc at the time: “People were worried the oceans were being depleted. I was afraid we would get the blame. After all, we were the ones selling all those fish.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

Two-thirds of the company’s raw materials for various brands originated in the agricultural sector, which had implications for the cost structure.[[22]](#endnote-22) The move toward sustainable agriculture was strengthened in the first decade of the millennium, especially in the sourcing of essential raw materials such as palm oil, which led Unilever plc to initiate its sustainable-sourcing program.[[23]](#endnote-23) Palm oil was used in a wide range of Unilever’s food, home, and personal care products, and was a more cost-effective and more land use–efficient resource than other vegetable oils. However, the practice affected 8 per cent of the global palm oil production. Despite ecological ramifications that included deforestation, climate change, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, and water pollution, as well as the societal implications of human rights abuses, Unilever included the sustainable sourcing of palm oil in its sustainability agenda.[[24]](#endnote-24) The company was a founding member of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil in 2004, a globally recognized certification standard to drive the sustainable production of palm oil.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Communicating its Sustainable Agriculture Initiative to consumers was intended to strengthen customers’ confidence in the food supply chain and help the business, Jan Kees Vis, the company’s environmental manager, stated in a 2001 report that “consumers vote with their purses and are not slow to express their preferences. Their support is crucial to our profitability.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

**THE UNILEVER SUSTAINABLE LIVING PLAN**

In 2010, under the leadership of new chief executive officer Paul Polman, Unilever plc announced that the USLP sought to “decouple” growth from the environmental footprint, while also making a positive social impact.[[27]](#endnote-27) The company was positioning itself as an early adopter of sustainability in a large corporate setting, and claimed that “our vision is a new way of doing business—one that delivers growth by serving society and the planet.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Through the USLP, the company saw sustainability challenges as “presenting opportunities for business growth.”[[29]](#endnote-29) When Polman announced the USLP, he spoke about the link between sustainability and profit:

Growth at any cost is not viable. We have to develop new ways of doing business which will increase the positive social benefits arising from Unilever’s activities while at the same time reducing our environmental impacts. We want to be a sustainable business in every sense of the word. We do not believe there is a conflict between sustainability and profitable growth.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Accordingly, from 2012 to 2019, the company featured the heading “Making Sustainable Living Commonplace” on all its annual report covers.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The USLP was seen as driving business in four ways. First, it enhanced growth. As the company’s internal research found, sustainable brands were the preferred choice of more than half of its consumers. Second, it lowered costs. Sustainability helped reduce waste, improve efficiencies, lower expenses, and improve margins, while reducing exposure to volatile resource prices. Third, it mitigated risks associated with climate change and the long-term sourcing of raw materials, thus helping to future-proof the business. Fourth, it fostered trust. A sustainable business model was believed to contribute to stronger trust relationships with multiple stakeholders, including employees.[[32]](#endnote-32)

In an effort to make Unilever plc the world’s most sustainable business,[[33]](#endnote-33) the USLP sought to grow the business while achieving three key goals by 2020: to help more than 1 billion people take action to improve their health and well-being, to cut in half the environmental footprint of making and using products, and to enhance the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people in the supply chain. These three goals comprised nine commitments and clear measurable targets for achieving social, environmental, and economic performance across the value chain.[[34]](#endnote-34)

One of the USLP’s nine commitments fell under the third goal of enhancing the livelihoods of people in the supply chain—to enhance opportunities for women.[[35]](#endnote-35) In 2014, gender equality and women’s empowerment was made a specific part of the USLP under this commitment to identify the company as a leader:[[36]](#endnote-36)

We want our business to be a leading force in closing the gender gap, and to challenge and change the harmful norms and stereotypes that are a barrier to women’s economic empowerment—and the adverse norms and stereotypes of masculinity that confine men too.[[37]](#endnote-37)

The company claimed that gender equality and women’s empowerment would be transformational, benefiting individuals and their families and entire societies—as well as the business, since women constituted more than 70 per cent of its consumer base and 50 per cent of its employees. The company’s website noted that “we believe a world where women are economically empowered will be a fairer, happier and more prosperous place to live for everybody—and that our business will flourish in it.” This commitment also meant viewing all programs at the design and implementation stages through a gender lens to see how they might hold women back, and how these barriers could be overcome.[[38]](#endnote-38)

In its 2017 report *Opportunities for Women*, Unilever plc highlighted the impact of social norms and stereotypes (which it referred to as “unconscious bias”) on the careers and personal lives of women. For example, women were expected to conform to traditionally male ideals of beauty. The company outlined how its approach across the value chain would work at a systemic level to challenge outdated gender norms and stereotypes. Its approach, which the company referred to as “unstereotyping,” was expected to be the key factor in making equal opportunity the new norm.[[39]](#endnote-39) The company linked ethics to sustainability, stating that “doing business ethically—and with integrity—is central to the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan.”[[40]](#endnote-40)

In May 2020, when the USLP celebrated its 10th year, the company’s chief executive officer, Alan Jope, stressed the importance of making sustainable living common place for the world’s 8 billion people, even as the USLP was drawing to a close after 10 years:[[41]](#endnote-41)

In fact, as the world is changing increasingly quickly, our employees, our consumers, our customers, our suppliers, our partners expect more from us. We know that we can continue to lead the charge, but we need to be better, bolder, and faster.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Previously, in 2019, Jope had stated, “I intend to build on Unilever’s century old commitment to responsible business. It is not about putting purpose ahead of profits. It is purpose that drives better profits.”[[43]](#endnote-43)

In the decade that the USLP had been in existence, India had become even more important for global brands. According to the Consumer Reach Points program, which analyzed consumer decisions using penetration and consumer choice as metrics, India contributed to the growth of 13 of the top 25 global brands.[[44]](#endnote-44) Unilever plc had 12 global brands with more than €1 billion in annual revenue, and other brands such as Fair & Lovely were popular local or regional brands.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Sustainability

In 1987, the United Nations’ *Our Common Future* report defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”[[46]](#endnote-46) Other definitions viewed sustainability in terms of not only intertemporal and intergenerational equity but also interpersonal equity. Yet others spoke of a triple bottom line that comprised people, the planet, and profits.[[47]](#endnote-47) The focus on sustainability led businesses to improve the way they engaged with ecological and societal issues.[[48]](#endnote-48) Corporate sustainability thus became a term that described the “various strategies and initiatives that firms used to engage with nature and society.”[[49]](#endnote-49)

Benn, Dunphy, and Griffiths assessed the progress of companies that pursued a clear agenda of sustainability through what they called a “phase model of sustainability,” in which organizations evolved into sustainable organizations through six phases organized over three waves. The six phases coincided with corporate views on sustainability as follows: (1) rejection and (2) non-responsiveness (in the first phase); (3) compliance, (4) efficiency, and (5) strategic pro-activity (in the second phase); and (6) the sustaining corporation (in the third phase).[[50]](#endnote-50)

The six phases were also mapped across a continuum of value destroyers and value limiters (in the first wave), value conservers and value creators (in the second wave), finally leading to a sustainable business (in the third wave). However, the continuum itself was not always smooth; organizations could progress and regress according to changing circumstances. Some organizations could even undergo transformative change toward more advanced phases of sustainability.[[51]](#endnote-51)

THE MARKET FOR FAIR skin products IN INDIA

The first known commercial fair skin cream in India was called Afghan Snow. The product was launched in 1919 by Ebrahim Sultanali Patanwala, a perfumer and entrepreneur. Associations between fair and beautiful were soon established, leading to the company sponsoring the first Miss India pageant in 1952. The practice of celebrity associations had already started by this time, including a sponsorship of the Indian model and film star Persis Khambatta, whose movie credits included the 1979 film *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, among others.[[52]](#endnote-52)

As the market for the creams grew, so did scrutiny of the products, what they actually did or did not achieve, and the ingredients that comprised each product. Various reports questioned the claim that a cream could change a person’s skin colour.[[53]](#endnote-53) In 2019, the World Health Organization issued a report on the use of harmful mercury as an ingredient in some skin-lightening products. The report highlighted the skin-lightening industry as one of the fastest-growing beauty industries in the world, estimated to be worth $31.2 billion by 2024*.* In India, skin-lightening products with and without mercury represented 50 per cent of the skin care market, estimated at $450 million–$535 million.[[54]](#endnote-54) An Indian industry report estimated that the market was expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 9 per cent between 2018 and 2023, reaching $660.41 million by 2023.[[55]](#endnote-55) In March 2020, the market research company Nielsen Retail Measurement Services estimated fair skin creams including face moisturizers, hand and body lotions, face cleansers, and skin bleaches at $766.08 million, for a growth rate of 4.4 per cent over the previous year.[[56]](#endnote-56)

However, these estimates considered only the country’s organized market. Numerous smaller companies took advantage of the thriving established market to sell their imitation products. In 2000, the unbranded market was estimated at one-third the size of the branded, organized market, with high growth potential.[[57]](#endnote-57) India’s organized fair skin cream market included major Indian corporations and multinational companies. Unilever plc’s Indian subsidiary, HUL, was competing against local operations of major global competitors including Procter & Gamble Company, Johnson & Johnson, L’Oréal S.A., and NIVEA, in addition to local FMCG companies including Dabur, Emami Group, ITC Limited, Lotus Herbals, Biotique, Vini Cosmetics, and The Himalaya Drug Company.[[58]](#endnote-58) The Indian market showed a clear preference for fair skin, as noted in the March 2018 industry report *India Fairness Cream & Bleach Market Overview, 2018–2023*:

There’s always been a crazy obsession in Indian women for fair-toned skin. Dusky ladies are often subject to racial discrimination in their own country. There are many matrimonial sites in India, which differentiate the skin colour into fair, dusky and dark.[[59]](#endnote-59)

On the demand side of this growing market, there were five key drivers: a growing emphasis on appearance, rising disposable incomes, sun protection and other climatic factors, influence and brand endorsements from the media and the Indian movie industry (commonly known as Bollywood—the Bombay version of Hollywood), and societal pressure to look well-groomed and fair-skinned. On the supply side of the growing fair skin market, there were three key drivers: a large number of national and international brands entering the market, growing e-commerce sales, and a strong distribution network.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Fair skin creams were part of the FMCG sector, the fourth-largest market segment in the Indian economy. The market for FMCG goods in India was one of the fastest-growing in the world, although per capita FMCG consumption in India was still very low, which implied substantial scope for the industry to continue growing.[[61]](#endnote-61) The Indian FMCG market comprised three main segments: food and beverages at 19 per cent, health care at 31 per cent, and household and personal care at 50 per cent. The household and personal care segment included oral care, hair care, skin care, cosmetics and deodorants, perfumes, feminine hygiene and paper products, fabric wash, and household cleaners. In 2018, the urban FMCG market accounted for 55 per cent of revenue, while rural areas accounted for 45 per cent.[[62]](#endnote-62)

HINDUSTAN UNILEVER LimiTeD

Unilever plc held a 67.2 per cent share in its Indian subsidiary, HUL, which was India’s largest FMCG company.[[63]](#endnote-63) HUL was Unilever plc’s largest market in terms of volume. It was currently second to the US market in terms of revenue, but was estimated to surpass the US market by 2027.[[64]](#endnote-64)

In 2020, the company had 44 brands across 14 categories. The skin-care category included five major brands: Dove, Pond’s, Vaseline, Lakmé, and Fair & Lovely. In HUL’s fiscal year (FY) 2019–20, the beauty and personal care segment contributed 45 per cent of the company’s revenue, at $5.055 billion,[[65]](#endnote-65) and 56 per cent of earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortization, at $1.268 billion.[[66]](#endnote-66) The company had 21,000 employees, 1,150 supplier partners, 31 factories, 15 offices, and various logistics warehouses spread across the country. Its products were available in approximately 8 million outlets across India and used by 90 per cent of Indian households “to feel good, look good and get more out of life.”[[67]](#endnote-67)

In 2010, HUL adopted its parent company’s sustainability approach to support the USLP.[[68]](#endnote-68) The company also promoted its own high standards of ethical conduct and policies of “doing well by doing good.” HUL values were defined in its Code of Business Principles for interaction with multiple stakeholders, including employees, suppliers, distributors, and retailers.[[69]](#endnote-69) Considering itself a company led by consumer insights, it stated in its *Annual Report 2019–20* that “We track changing consumer sentiment through our People Data Centre, combining social listening with traditional consumer research.”[[70]](#endnote-70)

FAIR & LOVELY

Origin

F&L was launched in March 1975 by HUL at a time when the Indian beauty-care segment comprised few products.[[71]](#endnote-71) The product itself owed its origin to a serendipitous idea conceived by the company’s controller of the toilet preparations division (later renamed the personal products unit) in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. That division was mainly responsible for products such as shaving cream and talcum powder. Noticing advertisements for “fair brides,” the controller wondered whether a fair-skin product might be successful and approached the company’s research and development department.[[72]](#endnote-72) At first, the idea was greeted with skepticism, but soon research showed a gap in the market for a product that promised fairer skin, and a face cream was launched that claimed to make the user’s skin fairer within six weeks.[[73]](#endnote-73) A former brand manager recalled the unique product’s development process and promotion: “The product was developed scientifically, and the results were brilliant. For a national roll-out, massive door-to-door selling was mounted for which promotion agencies were hired in many cities.”[[74]](#endnote-74)

The Product’s Journey

The company was able to extend the brand’s appeal across all social classes, in both urban and rural India, to become the largest-selling skin-care brand. By 1999, F&L held 90 per cent of the market share of skin-lightening creams in India. Not until 1999 did the product face competition, when a new entrant called Fairever was launched by the Indian company CavinKare. In response, HUL attempted to retain its market share by launching a new advertising campaign suggesting that girls with fairer skin were more likely to marry the right man.[[75]](#endnote-75)

The controversial advertising campaign ran between December 2001 and March 2003 and portrayed lighter skin as a prerequisite for success, in a manner that was seen as extremely derogatory for women. In one television commercial, a father was seen bemoaning the fact that he did not have a son to improve his financial status, as his dark-skinned daughter looked on helplessly. The daughter then uses F&L to change her skin complexion, becomes a flight attendant, and is shown celebrating her achievement by taking her father out to dinner. Another commercial showed a light-skinned girl advising a dark-skinned girl to use a skin-lightesning cream to retain her boyfriend, as the light-skinned girl had already done.[[76]](#endnote-76) CavinKare, countered HUL’s campaign by portraying career-oriented women who wanted to look good and “enhance [their] self-confidence.”[[77]](#endnote-77) The CavinKare product was advertised as containing saffron and milk, and therefore being more natural than F&L.[[78]](#endnote-78)

The HUL advertising campaign was criticized by various groups across the country. In March 2002, the All India Democratic Women’s Association issued a complaint both with HUL and with the National Human Rights Commission. The complainants saw the advertisements as being racist, depicting gender bias (a preference for sons over daughters), and being insulting to working women. The complaint was forwarded to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which notified television networks to stop airing the commercials. In its decision, the ministry cited a violation of the *Cable and Television Network Act* of 1995, which ensured that advertising did not promote discrimination on the basis of gender, race, creed, colour, caste, or nationality. HUL had to stop airing its commercials, which were pulled in March 2003.[[79]](#endnote-79)

Facing declining markets, HUL decided to rework its corporate strategy. In 2000, it reduced its portfolio of 110 brands and focus on 35 power brands. Previously, the company’s range included non-FMCG products, such as animal feed, specialty chemicals, and thermometers. Many of the products were “undifferentiated and lacking scale.” The new power brands had consumer appeal and covered all price segments. F&L was one of the company’s 35 power brands, which was planned to be expanded.[[80]](#endnote-80)

In 2001, HUL launched an F&L beauty soap, an under-eye cream, and a sachet with a reusable cap; however, none of these products was successful and all were discontinued. In 2002, the brand entered the herbal and natural products category, with Ayurvedic Fair & Lovely Cream, followed by an anti-marks variant. In 2003, the brand tried to target high-end consumers by offering premium skin care products under the umbrella brand Fair & Lovely Perfect Radiance.[[81]](#endnote-81) In 2004, HUL launched the Fair & Lovely Oil-Control Fairness Gel.[[82]](#endnote-82) The advertising campaign followed a similar theme as the company’s earlier advertisements, claiming that women could have six times fairer skin—and thus, be happier.[[83]](#endnote-83) In 2006, HUL launched a men’s variant, Fair & Lovely Menz, in response to the success of Emami Group’s new product Fair and Handsome, which was targeted at men. Initial advertisements for HUL’s Menz product range again followed a similar theme: fairer skin would ensure success.[[84]](#endnote-84) In 2005, F&L emerged as one of the company’s six mega brands, with sales exceeding ₹5 billion.[[85]](#endnote-85)

The brand was also relaunched several times. Around 2012, the company changed the colour of the cream from white to pink, along with a change in packaging. In FY 2013–14, F&L was relaunched as “the Best Ever Fair & Lovely . . . a product that was tailor-made to deliver superior skin lightening results in India.” The relaunch resulted in an increase in the brand’s growth trajectory. HUL then launched a sun protection factor, or SPF, 15 vanishing cream under the F&L brand.[[86]](#endnote-86) In 2013, the Indian film star Yami Gautam was chosen as an F&L brand ambassador. During the same period, another Indian film star and activist, Nandita Das, launched a campaign against fair-skin products called Stay Unfair, Stay Beautiful. Gautam faced ridicule and criticism on social media for her F&L brand endorsement, while Das’s campaign was widely acclaimed.[[87]](#endnote-87)

Controversy over F&L advertising campaigns persisted. In 2014, India’s self-regulatory agency for advertising, the Advertising Standards Council of India, acted on industry and public feedback by issuing a set of guidelines to regulate advertising of skin-lightening and fair-skin products in India.[[88]](#endnote-88) In 2016, the issue of women being depicted in a demeaning nature in advertising was raised in India’s Upper House of Parliament, the Rajya Sabha. Members discussed the psychological impact on women by specific products, such as F&L and Pond’s face creams.[[89]](#endnote-89) In FY 2015–16, HUL estimated that the F&L brand could bring over ₹20 billion in revenue and introduced a new F&L blemish balm (or BB) cream and a face wash targeted at male consumers.[[90]](#endnote-90) By 2020, the F&L brand had been holding its leading position among HUL brands for decades as a high-revenue earner.

Over the years, HUL’s the parent company, Unilever plc, had been promoting the brand in other ways. In 2003, the company set up the Fair & Lovely Foundation to offer scholarships to help financially challenged young women pursue an education.[[91]](#endnote-91) By 2018, the foundation had helped more than 20,000 women.[[92]](#endnote-92) The brand had also benefited by being recognized among India’s Most Trusted Brands.[[93]](#endnote-93) In 2020, the market research firm The Nielsen Company valued the Fair & Lovely brand at more than $290.58 million and estimated that seven out of 10 women used F&L each year in approximately 200 million households.[[94]](#endnote-94) In July 2020, the company officially changed the brand’s name. At that time, the brand comprised a range of variants, including Advanced Multi-Vitamin Cream, Ayurvedic Care Cream, BB Cream, Sun Protect, Winter Glow, and Anti Marks Cream.[[95]](#endnote-95)

**Name Matters**

In early 2019, HUL adjusted its communication about the F&L brand to distance itself from claims such as “benefits of fairness, whitening and skin lightening,” and moved instead toward claims of “glow, even tone, skin clarity and radiance,” which were seen as holistic measures of healthy skin. HUL also removed words such as “fair and fairness,” “white and whitening,” and “light and lightening” from the brand’s packaging to avoid the promise of fair-skin transformation. The packaging also eliminated images of faces depicting skin shade transformation, as well as a skin shade guide.[[96]](#endnote-96) The company indicated in its *Annual Report 2019–20* its intention to move toward using the new term “glow”:

In 2019, Fair & Lovely combined the new facial glow trends along with enhanced technology to arrive at a “High Definition (HD) Glow” product line meeting consumer needs. We also launched Fair & Lovely soap during the year and the initial response has been good.[[97]](#endnote-97)

In 2018, HUL was denied the trademark Glow & Lovely by India’s Controller General of Patents, Design & Trademarks. HUL’s chairman and managing director acknowledged the complex brand renaming process: “You don’t change the proposition of the brand overnight. This is not something which we have done now. The proposition was changed last year.”[[98]](#endnote-98) Meanwhile, in response to a global movement against colourism, global competitors were rethinking their own strategies and “erasing, repositioning or updating products” within their fair-skin segment.[[99]](#endnote-99) In June 2020, Johnson & Johnson announced its exit from the skin-whitening cream market,[[100]](#endnote-100) although it intended to continue selling its Clean & Clear products until stocks were exhausted.[[101]](#endnote-101) L’Oréal S.A. announced that it would stop using words such as “white,” “fair,” and “light” on all its skin-care products.[[102]](#endnote-102)

On June 17, 2020, HUL again applied for the trademark Glow & Lovely to be used on a range of categories, including soaps, cleaning preparations, and essential oils.[[103]](#endnote-103) On July 2, 2020, the company officially announced the renaming of the brand Fair & Lovely to Glow & Lovely.[[104]](#endnote-104)

In the past, the company had faced resistance from consumers when it had tried to change the colour of the cream and the packaging design. Analysts were now skeptical of a name change.[[105]](#endnote-105) Was the company right in its assessment of current consumer sentiment? Would the name change strategy be successful for one of its largest-selling brands in the personal care segment? Would it cause the company to regress on its business goals? Was distancing from fair-skin products consistent with the parent company’s larger sustainability goals of social fairness?

EXHIBIT 1: UNILEVER PLC FINANCIALS, 2018 and 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Beauty & Personal Care** | | **Foods & Refreshments** | | **Home Care** | | **Overall Group** | |
| **2019** | **2018** | **2019** | **2018** | **2019** | **2018** | **2019** | **2018** |
| Revenue (€ million) | 21,868 | 20,624 | 19,287 | 20,227 | 10,825 | 10,131 | 51,980 | 50,982 |
| Underlying sales growth (%) | 2.6 | 3.4 | 1.5 | 2.2 | 6.1 | 4.7 | 2.9 | 3.2 |
| Underlying volume growth (%) | 1.7 | 2.5 | –0.2 | 1.3 | 2.9 | 2.3 | 1.2 | 1.9 |
| Underlying price growth (%) | 0.9 | 0.9 | 1.7 | 0.9 | 3.1 | 2.4 | 1.6 | 1.2 |
| Operating profit (€ million) | 4,520 | 4,165 | 2,811 | 7,287 | 1,377 | 1,187 | 8,708 | 12,639 |
| Underlying operating profit (€ million) | 4,960 | 4,543 | 3,382 | 3,576 | 1,605 | 1,344 | 9,947 | 9,463 |
| Operating margin (%) | 20.7 | 20.2 | 14.6 | 36.0 | 12.7 | 11.7 | 16.8 | 24.8 |
| Underlying operating margin (%) | 22.7 | 22.0 | 17.5 | 17.7 | 14.8 | 13.3 | 19.1 | 18.6 |
| Return on assets (%) | 124.0 | 117.0 | 61.0 | 58.0 | 99.0 | 86.0 | 89.0 | 92.0 |

Source: Unilever plc, *Purpose-Led, Future-Fit: Unilever Annual Report and Accounts 2019*, 24, accessed July 10, 2020, www.unilever.com/Images/unilever-annual-report-and-accounts-2019\_tcm244-547893\_en.pdf.

Endnotes

1. This case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspectives presented in this case are not necessarily those of Unilever plc, its subsidiary Hindustan Unilever Limited, or any of its employees. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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