Colourism in the East and South Asian Beauty Markets*

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The cosmetic industry has been instrumental in perpetuating and exacerbating colorism across Asia. This study employs data from The Pudding to analyze the relationship between foundation shades offered by popular makeup brands and the range of skin tones in Japan and India. Based on the findings, there is a noticeable similarity in the distribution of lightness among foundation shades in both Indian and Japanese cosmetics. The findings reveal that while certain Japanese beauty brands offer foundation shades that are suitable for East Asian skin tones, the range of available colors is biased towards lighter skin tones. Conversely, foundation shades available in India are considerably brighter than the natural skin tone of South Asians. The results demonstrate the influence of colorism and the pursuit of proximity to whiteness.

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*Code and data supporting this analysis is available at:

1 Introduction

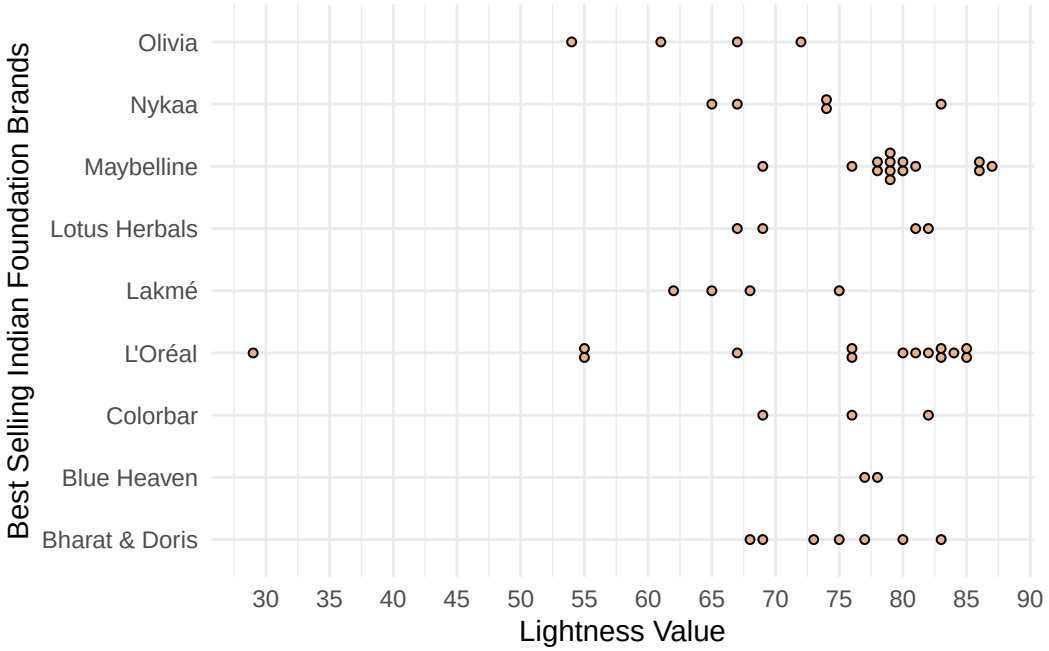
The issue of colourism has been a persistent and pervasive concern in Asian societies, with the cosmetic industry identified as one of the contributing factors. As the popularity of makeup brands continues to grow, this industry has perpetuated and exacerbated colourism, particularly in Japan and India, which are two of the largest beauty markets in Asia.

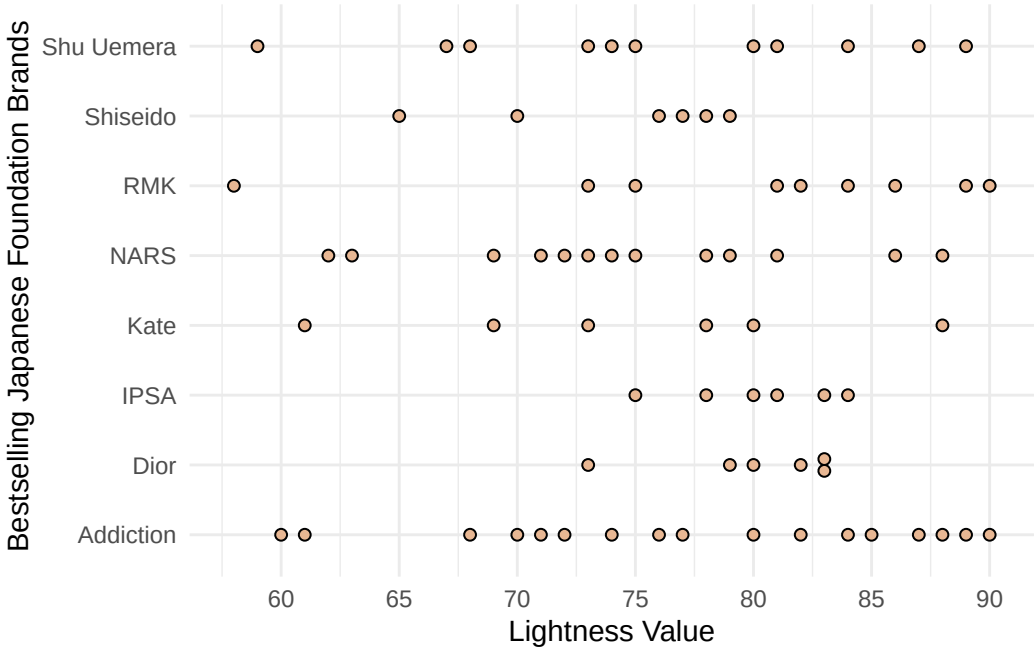
To gain a better understanding of this issue, the present study utilizes data from The Pudding to examine the distribution of foundation shades offered by popular makeup brands and their suitability for different skin tones. This study's significance lies in its contribution to the broader discourse on how the cosmetic industry perpetuates colourism in Asian societies and the need for greater accountability and awareness to address this problem. Furthermore, the study's findings have substantial implications for broader social issues, such as racial discrimination and inequality, which must be addressed to promote greater social justice and equality.

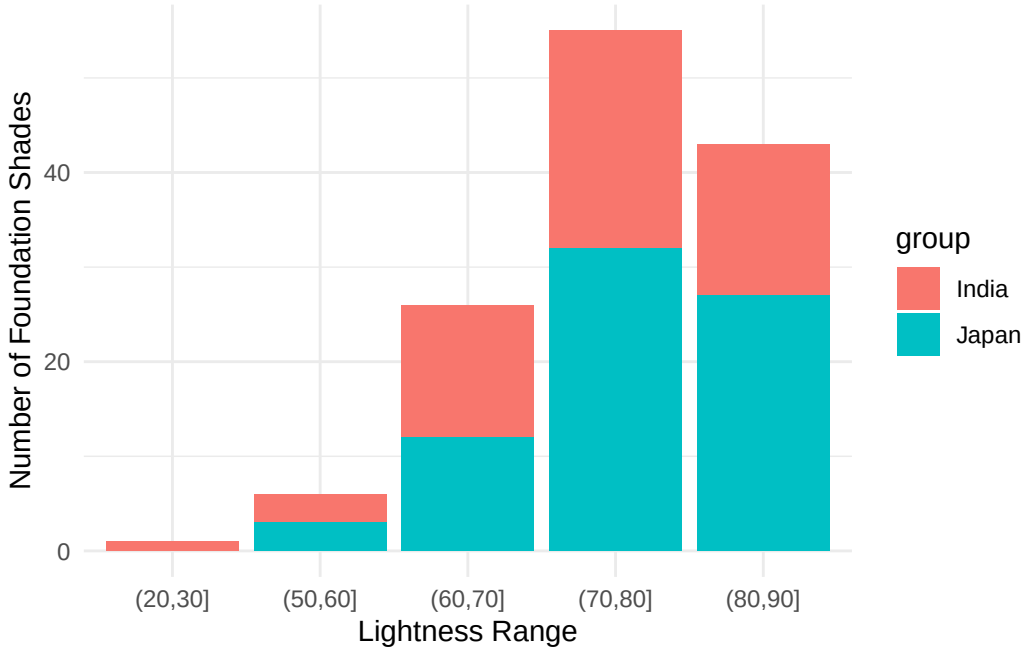
2 Data

The dataset provided the hexadecimal colour code (hex), hue (angle on the colour wheel), saturation (degree of color/chroma), and brightness (also known as value, which measures the lightness or darkness halfway point) values of the foundation shades, with lightness (the relative degree of black or white) values derived using the CIE Lab colour model. This study primarily employs lightness values (L*) to quantify the degree of lightness or darkness in foundation shades, using median lightness values instead of mean values to mitigate outliers and skewed data. The representative hex values of the median lightness values for Japan and India are e8b793 and ebb08a, respectively.

group	(20,30]	(50,60]	(60,70]	(70,80]	(80,90]	Total
India	1	3	14	23	16	57
Japan	0	3	12	32	27	74


Best Selling Indian Foundation Brands
Olivia
Nykaa
Maybelline
Lotus Herbals
Lakmé
L'Oréal
Colorbar
Blue Heaven
Bharat & Doris
30
35
40
45
50
55
60
65
70
75
80
85
90
Lightness Value


Bestselling Japanese Foundation Brands
Shu Uemera
Shiseido
RMK
NARS
Kate
IPSA
Dior
Addiction
60
65
70
75
80
85
90
Lightness Value


Number of Foundation Shades
40
20
0
(20,30]
(50,60]
(60,70]
(70,80]
(80,90]
Lightness Range
group
India
Japan

Data Acknowledgement

Resources Acknowledgment

The primary tool used to analyse data in this paper is R, an open-source statistical programming language (R Core Team 2022b). The paper also uses a number of R packages, including: dplyr (Wickham et al. 2022), foreign (R Core Team 2022a), ggplot2 (Wickham 2016), here (Müller 2020), janitor (Firke 2021), kableExtra (Zhu 2021), knitr (Xie 2023), lubridate (Grolemund and Wickham 2011), readr (Wickham, Hester, and Bryan 2022), RColorBrewer (Neuwirth 2022), scales (Wickham and Seidel 2022), and tidyverse (Wickham et al. 2019).

3 Appendix

4 References

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