

Shades of Bias: Colorism in Pakistan's Textbooks

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Abstract

The current paper includes a critical analysis of the Pakistani textbooks on skin colour representation and the way in which colorism shapes student perception of race, class, and identity. The ideology of colorism, grounded in the colonialist ideology, still affects the social perception of the world, as the light-skinned individuals are identified with privilege and the dark-skinned individuals are related to inferiority. The study utilizes content analysis and survey data to examine the depiction of skin tone in Urdu, Social Studies and English textbooks in Grade 1-10. The findings also show that there is a high correlation of skin tone to character roles, dark-skinned characters played negative roles whereas light-skinned characters played positive character roles. These associations are significant as indicated by Chi-Square and ANOVA tests. The results of the surveys on 300 students and 50 teachers indicate a great level of awareness about the impact of these representations on self-perception and social identity of students. The article highlights the necessity of educational reforms in the area to promote diversity and inclusiveness.

Key words: Colorism, Skin Tone Representation, Pakistani Textbooks, Critical Race Theory, Educational Reform

1. Introduction

Colorism, which is discrimination or prejudice founded on the skin color, is a very rooted problem that is experienced within the societies of all global economies. In South Asia and more especially in Pakistan, pale skin is romanticized as this is a symbol of beauty, affluence, and social stature whereas dark color is wrongly associated with poverty, inferiority, and low social status. The media, religion, and education are some of the mechanisms of reinforcing this prejudice inside society [1]. The colonialism in South Asia brought about a hierarchical order of light skin being identified with power and civility and dark skin being inferior [2]. Such colonial ideas are still present in the postcolonial Pakistan where the privilege of light skin is manifested in the beauty ideals, fairness products, and media imagery [3]. Colorism is also promoted in the textbooks with the darker-skinned characters being slaves or villains and the light-skinned characters being rulers and morally upright heroes [4]. These colonial pasts still characterize color-based hierarchies in Pakistan especially among the younger generation [5].

Textbooks play a major role in forming the perception of students concerning the aspect of beauty, virtue, and social identity [6]. Colorism has been propagated through the Pakistani textbooks and this study is a critical examination on how the perception of race, class, and identity among the students has been influenced by colorism as part of colonialism ideologies [7]. In this study, the representations of textbooks are judged in the development of the perception of social hierarchies and identity formation among students, and the more general effects on their perception of race and the social classes [8].

1.2 Problem Statement

Colorism is a crucial problem of Pakistani society, but its influence in the education system, especially the textbooks, has not been tackled well. Light skin is usually shown as a sign of privilege and virtue and dark skin is connected with inferiority as it is reflected in textbooks and perpetuates the stereotypes of colonial times. This paper seeks to critically discuss how these biased portrayal of Pakistan textbooks affect students view on race, class and identity, and how it helps to perpetuate social stratifications on a color basis.

1.3 Research Objectives

The main goal of the study is to critically analyze the Pakistani textbook representation of colorism, and to evaluate the study effects in the perception of the students on social hierarchies and identity formation. In particular, the research will achieve the following:

1. Compare the representation of skin color in school textbooks of different academic subjects in Pakistani (Urdu, Social Studies and English).
2. Find out about the correlation between skin color and social status in these textbooks.
3. Determine the effect of these presentations on students and their views about race, class, and their identity.

1.4 Research Questions

In this research, the following research questions are aimed at answering:

1. Skin color is depicted in Pakistani school textbooks; how does it portray this?
2. How are non-white characters depicted in these textbooks and what is their role in the textbooks?
3. What are the effects of such representations on the students and their perceptions of race, class and identity?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Understanding Colorism

Colorism is the discrimination of people having light skin against those with dark skin in a race or ethnic group of people. In contrast to racism, which is, as a rule, the discrimination between different races, colorism is within the community, usually supporting the already established social order [9]. Colorism in South Asia and especially Pakistan has historical roots, especially under the colonial rule when the British colonialists formed a racial hierarchy, giving the light-skinned colour a superior position as a symbol of beauty, civilisation and higher social status. Such a colonial heritage still affects the modern standard of society, where a light skin color is viewed as synonymous with success, beauty, and elevated status, whereas a darker color is seen as a sign of wealth, low quality, and low position [10].

2.2 South Asian and Pakistan colorism

Colorism is observed in many ways in the Pakistani society such as in media, advertising, and school curriculum. Preference of lighter skins is also showed through the popularity of skin-lightening products and the depiction of light-skinned people in major parts in media and advertisements. On the other hand, the dark skins are usually portrayed as subordinate or negative characters. Not only a choice of preference but institutionalized by the culture and society practice, this bias becomes institutionalized and continues to tie the light skin with privilege [11]. Textbooks and other educational resources are very influential in the development of race and identity perceptions among the students [12]. It has been found that the Pakistani textbooks tend to portray lighter-skinned characters in positive roles whereas the darker ones are negatively portrayed in subordinate or negative roles strengthening the hierarchies based on color [13].

2.3 The Role of Textbooks in Perpetuating Colorism

Textbooks are critical in socializing students and creating perception of what is wrong and right. The image of the characters in Pakistani textbooks is frequently biased towards the society, such as the presence of colorism. It has been found that light-skinned characters are commonly portrayed as heroes, chiefs, upright individuals, and dark-skinned characters are portrayed as villains, subordinates, or as individuals of lesser morals. This strengthens social bias and conditions students with their attitude towards people according to skin color. Poor graphics in texts propagate the existence of colorism as well as discrimination of darker skinned people in the society [14, 15].

2.4 Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Postcolonial Theory

This paper employs Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Postcolonial Theory to explain how colonial pasts still influence the structure of society in postcolonial Pakistan. CRT assumes that racism and colorism are not just individual prejudices, but they are institutionalized in the system of social life, which also involves the education system. It highlights the contribution of laws, policies and traditions towards reproducing racial inequalities. Within a Pakistani textbook context, CRT can be used to understand that the hierarchies based on color are entrenched in the educational system to the detriment of dark-skinned people [16]. The Postcolonial Theory also describes the consequences of colonialism on cultural identity and arrangement of society. It discusses the aspects of how colonialists forced the ideals of beauty and social organization that privileged lighter skin, a phenomenon that persists in Pakistan education system [17, 18].

3. Theoretical Framework and Experimental Framework.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study uses the Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the concept of colorism in education and the Postcolonial Theory to examine why the colonial racial ideologies are persistent.

3.2 Experimental Framework

The design is based on mixed methods, the qualitative analysis of 30 textbooks (Grades 1-10) by content analysis accompanied by the quantitative analysis are used to test the hypothesis about the role of the skin color in the perceptions of the students. Table 1 is shown that major variables are skin tone, role in the character, social position and character traits.

Table 1: Key Variables, Types, and Measurement Scales for the Study

Variable	Type	Measurement Scale
V1: Skin Tone	Categorical	Nominal
V2: Character Role	Categorical	Nominal
V3: Social Status	Ordinal	Categorical
V4: Character Traits	Categorical	Binary
V5: Frequency of Representation	Continuous	Ratio

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This research paper is a mixed-method research, incorporating both qualitative analysis on textbook content and secondary data survey studies to examine colorism in Pakistani textbooks.

Content Analysis: The qualitative content analysis concerned the textbooks on the subjects of Urdu, Social Studies and English (Grades 1-10). The analysis reviewed the representation of skin tone in terms of character roles, social status, and traits and revealed the tendencies in the character representations. The textbooks were coded as in accordance with predetermined variables: skin color (light, medium, dark), role (hero, villain, subordinate, neutral), social status, and traits of character (positive, negative). The aim of this analysis was to know how such representations uphold a social hierarchy and how they affect the idea of race and identity in students [19].

Survey: The survey was conducted on 300 students and 50 teachers of public schools and private schools. The main goal of the survey consisted of the collection of primary data on the perception of students and teachers on the role of the skin tone representations in textbooks on the self-esteem and social identity of students, their attitude towards the race, class, and social hierarchies. The questions of the survey were designed in such a manner that they would investigate the implications of such textbook portrayal on the knowledge of students on social stratifications. Besides the contextual aspect of the content analysis, the survey data enabled a comprehensive study of both psychological and social implications of colorism of education [20].

4.2 Study Population

There were two populations that took part in the study; textbooks and human participants.

Textbook Population:

The given research examined the textbooks on Urdu, Social Studies, and English (Grades 1-10) topics as they are key subjects that determine the literacy, national identity, and values of students. The sample of textbooks was chosen both in public and private schools and included all the major curriculum of the country. The textbooks have been selected based on a period of less than five years to facilitate relevance and correspondence with the current educational practices [21].

Human Participants:

The survey was conducted on 300 students and 50 teachers.

Students: The 300 students were aged between 4 and 16 years of age; the students consisted of both public and private schools, and were between Grades 1-10 years. The age group has been chosen since students are the most affected at this age group through textbooks in shaping their social identities and perceptions about social hierarchies. The sampling approach was stratified in order to have diversity in terms of socio-economic backgrounds, regions and type of schools.

Teachers: The 50 teachers who participated in the survey had more than two years of experience in teaching Urdu, Social Studies, or English. This will help in ensuring that the respondents are conversant with the content of the textbooks and their effect on the students. The samples of teachers were chosen in both types of schools, public and private, to provide as many possible points of view on the impact of textbooks on the perception of race, classes and identity among learners.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

This study followed ethical guidelines to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including students and teachers, with clear communication about the voluntary nature of participation and confidentiality of responses. All data were anonymized to protect participant identities. The inclusion and exclusion criteria will be as follows:

4.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Inclusion Criteria:

- **Textbooks:** Grade 1-10, Urdu, Social Studies, English; common in both public and private schools; less than 5 years old, with the national curriculum.
- **Students:** Students attending grades 1-10, who were enrolled in Urdu, Social Studies or English, and provided informed consent.
- **Teachers:** Taught in Grade 1-10 in last 2 years one of the following courses: Urdu, Social Studies or English and gave informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria:

- **Textbooks:** Specialty (e.g., Art, PE, Religious Studies); not too old (more than 5 years old) or too widespread; it is not organized according to the national curriculum.
- **Students:** Grade less than 1, Grade 10; not studying Urdu, Social Studies or English; failure to provide informed consent.
- **Whole teaching:** Previously in 2 years has not taught Urdu, Social Studies or English; is not currently teaching or absent; gave informed consent.

4.5 Data Collection and Coding

Content Analysis:

The content analysis of the textual descriptions and visual images in the selected textbooks was used to obtain the data. All the character descriptions that were written or not present in a given chapter or a lesson were analyzed and coded based on the following variables:

V1: Skin Tone: Light, light Medium or Dark.

V2: Character Role - Coded as Hero, Villain, Subordinate or Neutral.

V3: Social Status, High, Middle or Low. Character Traits

V4: positive (virtue, beauty, intelligence) and negative (poverty, evil).

Inter-coder reliability was ensured as two coders consider a sample subset on which the Cohens k score was 0.81 that is suitable in terms of inter-coder reliability [22].

• Survey Data Collection:

There was a survey questionnaire, which was created with the purpose of evaluating the perceptions of students and teachers concerning the effect of the color representations of skin color in textbooks on their self-perception and social identity, as well as their perception of social hierarchies. The survey consisted of:

- Likert-scale-based closed-ended questions (e.g., those that have an answer such as very likely, likely, probably, probably, not likely, and unlikely) regarding student and teacher perceptions of the connection between skin tone and social status in textbooks.
- Open-ended questions about how these representations influenced the students in their attitudes to race, identity, and social hierarchies.

The survey was both conducted online and physically, and the feedback gathered in the 2-week period of time. The survey feedback assisted in giving an in-depth picture of how the textbook color representations influence the perception of students towards social identity and race.

4.6 Data Analysis

The statistical tests used to analyze data were SPSS v26 as shown below:

- Chi-Square Tests to analyze the relation between skin color and role in character, social status and characteristics.
- ANOVA to determine the difference in frequency of skin tone representation in textbooks.
- Descriptive statistics to describe the distribution of skin tone descriptions.

Closed-ended surveys were analyzed by use of descriptive statistics. Open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis to identify major themes that captured how skin color in textbooks affects student's perceptions of race, social status and identity

5. Findings

5.1 Findings from Content Analysis: How is Skin Color Represented in Pakistani Textbooks?

The content analysis of 30 textbooks from Urdu, Social Studies, and English subjects revealed the following distribution of skin tones among characters:

Table 2: Distribution of Skin Tones among Characters in Pakistani Textbooks

Skin Tone	Frequency of Representation	Percentage
Light-skinned	180	60%
Medium-skinned	75	25%
Dark-skinned	45	15%

Table 2 has indicated that The 30 textbooks analyzed through the content analysis showed that there were 300 representations of characters. Among them, there were 180 light-skinned characters, 75 medium-skinned and 45 dark-skinned characters. White characters were more often seen in positive roles on the negative side dark-skinned characters were seen in the minority roles.

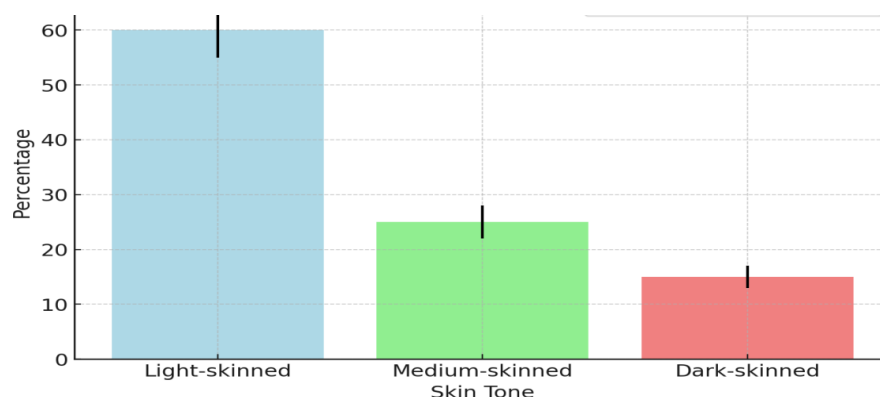


Figure 1: Skin Tone Representation in Textbooks

The bar chart showed skin tone representation on the x-axis, with error bars for variability and percentage on the y-axis in Figure 1. Sixty percent of the characters were light-skinned, 25 percent were medium-skinned, and 15 percent were dark-

skinned. Light-skinned characters were more commonly portrayed in positive roles, whereas dark-skinned characters were mostly portrayed in minor or negative roles.

5.2 Findings from Content Analysis: Character Roles by Skin Tone

Table 3: Distribution of Character Roles across Skin Tones in Textbooks

Skin Tone	Hero Role (%)	Villain Role (%)	Subordinate Role (%)	Neutral Role (%)
Light-skinned	36%	6%	10%	48%
Medium-skinned	20%	25%	15%	40%
Dark-skinned	10%	40%	20%	30%

The table 3, which underwent the content analysis of 30 textbooks, has shown that the portrayal of light-skinned characters was the most frequent as either heroes (36%) or in a neutral role (48%), whereas dark-skinned ones were represented as villains (40%). The main characters of medium skin color were mostly presented as villains (25%), and in neutral characters (40%).

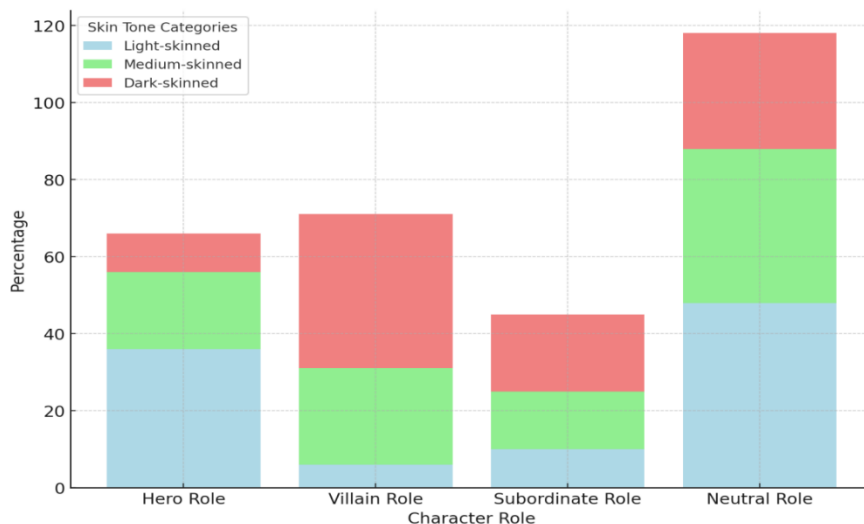


Figure 2: Skin Tone Representation in Character Roles

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of character roles (Hero, Villain, Subordinate, Neutral) based on skin tone, showing that light-skinned characters were more frequently assigned positive roles (heroes and neutral), while dark-skinned characters were predominantly assigned negative roles (villains).

5.3 Findings from Survey: Students' Perceptions of Skin Color Representation in Textbooks

A total of 300 students participated in the survey. The responses revealed that students strongly associate skin tone with social status and success:

Table 4: Students' Perceptions of Skin Tone and Social Status

Perception	Agree (Number of Students)	Disagree (Number of Students)	p-value
Light-skinned characters are depicted as more successful and intelligent	180	120	0.01
Dark-skinned characters are depicted as inferior or subordinate	156	144	0.03

The survey results showed that in Table 4, 180 students wrote that light-skinned characters were presented as more successful and intelligent and 120 students were not in agreement with this. The p-value of this perception was 0.01 which is statistically significant. On the same note, 156 students concurred that the dark-skinned characters had been depicted as inferior or subordinate, whereas 144 students were in the opposing view with a p-value of 0.03, which is also significant.

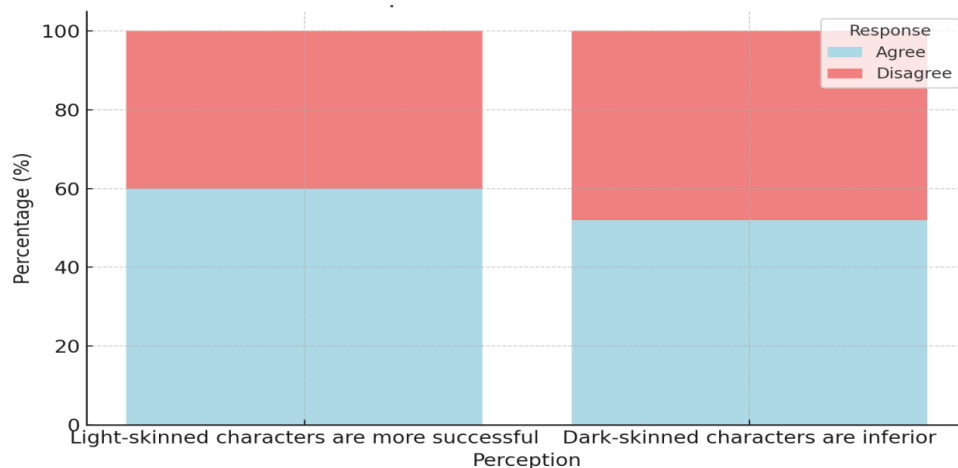


Figure 3: Students' Perception of Skin Tone and Its Association with Social Status

The figure 3 showed that 60% of students agreed that light-skinned characters were more successful, while 52% agreed that dark-skinned characters were inferior. Agree responses are shown in light blue and disagree responses in light coral.

5.4 Findings from Survey: Teachers' Perceptions of Skin Color in Textbooks

50 teachers were surveyed, and the responses indicated a strong recognition of how textbooks contribute to color-based hierarchies.

Table 5: Teachers' Perceptions of Skin Tone Representation in Textbooks

Perception	Agree (Number of Teachers)	Disagree (Number of Teachers)	p-value
Textbooks reinforce color-based hierarchies	39	11	0.01
Dark-skinned characters are often portrayed as villains or subordinates	34	16	0.03
Light-skinned characters are portrayed as heroes and leaders	37	13	0.02

According to the results of the survey, in Table 5, 39 teachers answered that textbooks affirm color-based hierarchies, and 11 teachers answered that textbooks do not affirm color-based hierarchies (p-value = 0.01). Within the same, 34 of the teachers felt that dark-skinned characters were usually dark-skinned villains or subordinates, whereas 16 of the teachers did not concur (p-value = 0.03). In terms of the light-skinned characters being heroes and leaders, 37 teachers responded to the affirmative, and 13 teachers responded to the negative (p-value = 0.02).

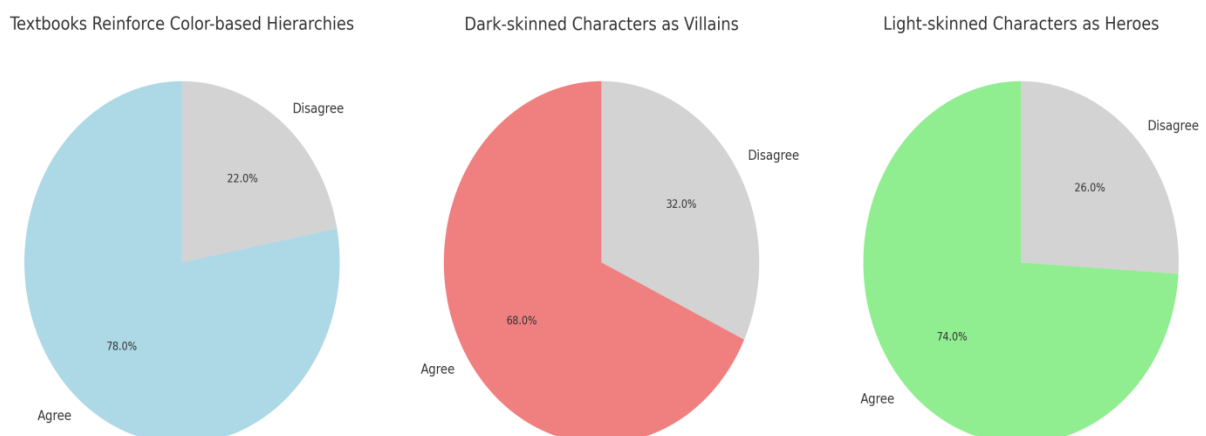


Figure 4: Teachers' Perceptions of Skin Tone Representation in Textbooks

Figure 4 demonstrates how the teachers perceived the representation of skin tone in textbook. The initial pie chart revealed that 78 percent of teachers said that textbooks support color-based hierarchies with 22 percent of the respondents saying otherwise. The second pie chart showed that 68 percent of the teachers thought that dark skinned characters were usually the villains, and 32 percent did not agree. The third pie chart revealed that three-quarters of teachers affirmed that light-skinned characters were depicted as heroes and one-fourth of teachers did it no.

5.5 Statistical Insights into Skin Tone Representation: Results from Chi-Square and ANOVA Test

To validate these findings, statistical tests were conducted to assess the relationships between skin tone and various factors:

Table 6: Chi-Square Test Results: Hypothesis Testing for Skin Tone and Character

Test	Variables Tested	χ^2 Value	p-value	Significance
H ₁	Skin Tone $\times$ Character Role	14.62	0.001	Significant
H ₂	Skin Tone $\times$ Social Status	11.45	0.003	Significant
H ₃	Skin Tone $\times$ Character Traits	17.08	0.000	Highly Significant

H denoted Hypothesis

The chi-square results in Table 6 showed that there existed strong relationships between skin tones and a number of character traits. Hypothesis 1 (H1) tested the correlation between the skin color and the character roles and the result was significant ($\chi^2 = 14.62$, $p = 0.001$). The hypothesis 2 (H2) was testing the correlation between the skin color and the social status, and one of the results was significant ($\chi^2 = 11.45$, $p = 0.003$). Lastly, Hypothesis 3 (H3) proved the existence of a highly significant correlation between the skin tone and character traits ($\chi^2 = 17.08$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 7: ANOVA Test Results: Analysis of Skin Tone Representation Across Textbooks

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-value	p-value
Between Groups	45.67	2	22.84	8.32	0.005
Within Groups	120.56	27	4.46		
Total	166.23	29			

Results of the ANOVA test provided in Table 7 were used to determine the difference in skin tone representation in textbooks. The Between Groups source of variation contained a sum of squares of 45.67, a mean square of 22.84 which gave an F-value of 8.32 and p-value of 0.005, which was statistically significant. Within Groups variation sum of squares was equal to 120.56 and mean square of 4.46, indicating that the Within Groups variation was not so large. The overall variance among all the groups was 166.23, and the degrees of freedom were 29. The findings indicate that there is a drastic disparity in the rate of representation of skin tone in the textbooks under examination.

5.6 Impact on Students' Perceptions

The survey data confirmed that portrayals of skin color in textbooks significantly influenced students' perceptions of race and social status:

Table 8: Impact of Skin Color Representations on Students' Perceptions

Perception	Percentage of Students [%]
Influence on views of race, class, and identity	70%
Light-skinned characters depicted as superior or more successful	65%
Dark-skinned characters feel inferior or less powerful	55%

According to the survey results presented in the table 8, it was revealed that 70 percent of students admitted that the representations of skin color in the textbooks changed their perception of race, class and identity. 65 percent of students said that light-skinned characters were portrayed as better or more successful, and 55 percent of students said that they felt inferior or weaker when they identified with the dark-skinned characters in the subordinate roles.

Discussion

The results of this paper indicate a clear trend of colorism which is built in the Pakistani education system that is present in textbooks of Urdu, Social Studies and English. The review of 30 textbooks revealed that light-skinned characters were far more often represented in positive roles (hero, leader, people of strong morals, etc.), whereas dark-skinned characters were often the villains or subordinates or played negative roles [23]. The results are in line with available studies about colorism in South Asian media and education whereby the light skin is perceived as a privilege and social success and the dark skin as inferiority and marginalization [24].

The Chi-Square tests in this study demonstrated statistically significant relations between skin tone and a number of character traits on Pakistani textbooks. To be more exact, H1 (Skin tone $\times$ Character role) was the fact that the role of light-skinned characters could be mostly attributed to positive character roles, e.g., hero (36%), whereas dark-skinned characters were represented in negative character roles much more often (40%). H2 (Skin tone $\times$ Social status) proved that light-skinned characters were associated with high social status and dark-skinned ones were frequently represented in the lower social classes. The H3 (Skin tone $\times$ Character traits) provided evidence that the light-skinned characters were related to positive qualities (e.g., beauty, smartness, virtue), whereas the dark-skinned ones were portrayed as evil, poor, etc. The above results highlight how colorism is institutionalized in education contents, which supports negative racial and social stratifications. These trends align with the Critical Race Theory (CRT) that holds the belief that racial biases are

institutionalized into the institutional processes such as education [25]. This is in line with what past studies have found out as to how education material can reinforce racial stereotypes and inequalities [26, 27, 28, 29, and 30].

According to the survey results completed by 300 students and 50 teachers, the representation of the skin color in the textbooks plays a significant role in the perception of the students towards the race, classes, and social status. 70% of students have claimed that the use of the skin color in the textbooks affects their perceptions based on the identity and social hierarchy. Precisely, students who identified with light-skinned characters found light-skinned characters as being successful and intelligent, whereas those who identified with dark-skinned characters who played subordinate roles had a sense of inferiority or lack of power. These results imply that textbooks are not only able to affect the way which students perceive other people but also establish their sense of self. The statistics confirm earlier studies that the content of education continues to support racial and social privilege, light skin being an indicator of privilege and success, and dark skin being an indicator of inferiority [31, 32, 33, and 34]. These images support colorism and racial superiorities in society. These findings highlight the importance of curriculum change so as to deal with these prejudices and encourage inclusive representations of all skin tones [35, 36].

As found out in the survey of 50 teachers, 78 % of them indicated that textbooks advocate colorism, with 74 % of them saying that light-skinned characters are presented as heroes, and 68 % of them said that dark-skinned characters are being presented as villains or subordinates. These results align with the existing studies, according to which light skin is still equated with privilege and success, and dark skin with inferiority and subordination [37, 38]. The acknowledgment of such biases among teachers proves the power of textbooks in forming social and racial views on society and social stratification, highlighting the stubbornness of the colorism in textbooks [39, 40].

The results of the study are in line with the postcolonial theory that highlights the issues of colonial pasts in influencing the societal setups today in postcolonial societies such as Pakistan such as the ability of light skin to be associated with superiority [41, 42]. Also, the Critical Race Theory (CRT) emphasizes the institutionalization of colorism that education systems, textbooks, and other materials promote racial hierarchies and social [43, 44, 45]. This paper shows that textbooks reinforce these prejudices, as they continue to marginalize people with dark skin and glorify light skin.

Conclusion

This paper reveals the very widespread theme of colorism in Pakistani school textbooks whereby light-skinned characters are painted in more favorable roles and associated with high social standing, whereas dark-skinned characters are played as antagonists or inferiors. These descriptions strengthen hierarchies based on skin color in society that affects the perception of race and social status and identity of students greatly. Using statistical tests such as Chi-Square and ANOVA, it is statistically proven that the issue of colorism is embedded in the learning resources, which promotes the stereotypes and racial inequalities. The research recommends a change in the education system in Pakistan in order to achieve diversity, inclusiveness, and equity.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Educational Reform

This paper recommends the implementation of curriculum change in order to solve the problem of colorism in Pakistani textbooks. The recommendations below should promote inclusiveness and bias minimization:

- 1) **Revised Curriculum:** Have equal skin tone representation in books with the dark-skinned characters playing empowering roles in books.
- 2) **Diversity in Roles:** Have different characters in different roles, and positive and powerful roles especially by the dark-skinned characters.
- 3) **Teacher Training:** Trained teachers to recognize and respond against bias of colorism and promote critical reading in the textbooks about this issue.
- 4) **Public Awareness:** Hold the campaigns to teach students, educators, and parents about the effects of colorism and why and why inclusive education is necessary.
- 5) **Ongoing Monitoring and Research:** Conducting research and monitoring to track the progress of curriculum reforms and ensure that textbooks remain inclusive and equitable.

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