

The American makeup industry has long promoted makeup and makeup standards with the goal of producing lighter skin tones. To accomplish this, shade ranges in foundations and concealers have become lighter in recent years. Even shade names for these products reflect the goal of lighter skin tones. Even more alarming is the way in which lighter skin tones have been favored in advertising campaigns highlighting a lack of diversity in marketing makeup products.

When it comes to foundation shades, a near perfect match to skin tone is desired. With some brands, finding the correct shade is difficult due to a narrow shade range. Often, for those with darker complexions, readily available foundation options will be too ashy, or orange. Many brands have been criticized for their limited shade range. ¹In “4 Times Beauty Brands Were Dragged for Having a 'Limited' Range of Foundation,.” Brianna Moné from Insider establishes that this problem is endemic. For instance, in 2018 Tarte was criticized for offering only three shades out of the 15 which were appropriate for darker skin tones. In response, Tarte released ten more shades, but these could only be purchased online. (Moné, 2018) ² A Story Maps website article notes that, “It was only in the 1990’s that brands such as MAC, Nars and Bobbi Brown started to embrace people of colour by widening their concealer and foundation shade ranges.” (Abby Marshall, January 24, 2020). Brands like IT Cosmetics, YSL, and BeautyBlender have all been criticized for a lack of inclusivity in shade ranges. IT Cosmetics has pointed out that their foundations have a 50 SPF rating, make it difficult to create darker shades.

¹ Brianna Moné “4 Times Beauty Brands Were Dragged for Having a 'Limited' Range of Foundation,” Insider (Insider, July 30, 2018), <https://www.insider.com/beauty-brands-called-out-for-not-enough-foundation-shades-2018-7>.

² Abby Marshall, “Racism or Acceptance in the Beauty Industry?,” ArcGIS Story Maps (Esri, January 24, 2020), <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/26149688049746cf9b76f309bcc57f04>.

Additionally, the industry is lacking diversity especially in ad campaigns. ³In an article for the Guardian, Funmi Fetto, a beauty journalist, never believed that she would be in the beauty publishing industry. She did not see a career path in the industry because she is a woman of color and never saw anyone that looked like her in the beauty community. This lack of accessible role models is a very common issue amongst girls and women of color. ⁴In Marketing week, “According to a report conducted in 2016, just 22% of the models featured in ads in the UK and US were ethnic (black, Asian, Hispanic) while the rest (78%) were white.”. Brands like Jeffree Star Cosmetics, Fenty Beauty, and Covergirl use women of color and white women for their models. Another brand called Juvia’s Place, a black owned brand, features drawings of women of color on their eyeshadow palettes.

Another problem that the beauty industry faces is the use of racist/distasteful shade names and product names. Several articles have touched on this issue, many darker shades of foundation are named after food and spice items whereas the lighter shades are more dainty and feminine. ⁵One brand, Color Pop Cosmetics, came out with a product called Sculpting Stix. They were great products until you read the name of the darkest shades. Some of their darker shades were called “Yikes” and “Typo”. Another brand, Chantecaille, came out with a darker shade of foundation called “Banana” but the lighter shades got girly names such as

³ “The Beauty Industry Is Still Failing Black Women | Funmi Fetto,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, September 29, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2019/sep/29/funmi-fetto-happy-in-my-skin-beauty-industry-diversity>.

⁴ Molly Fleming, “Why Is the Beauty Industry Still Failing Women of Colour?,” Marketing Week, July 5, 2019, <https://www.marketingweek.com/beauty-industry-failing-women-colour/>.

⁵ Alexis Barron, “Some People Are Calling Out Makeup Companies For Crossing The Line Of Cheeky Names To Racial Tropes,” we are Mitú. 100% American & Latino, January 13, 2020, <https://wearemitu.com/fierce/these-10-beauty-products-have-names-so-racially-charged-youll-be-left-wondering-who-approved-them/>.

“Aura” and “Vanilla”.⁶ In 2016, MAC Cosmetics came out with a collection called “Vibe Tribe” “The packaging of the collection featured ‘tribal’ patterns and the shades had names such as “Arrowhead” and “Call of the Canyon. What’s worse, the campaign featured models wearing Native American headdresses.” The brand claims that this collection wasn’t inspired by Native Americans but rather by clothing and patterns you would wear to Coachella Music Festival.

⁷According to The Pudding article “The Naked Truth”, as of March 2021, there were 6,816 complexion products and by examining the shade ranges and names you can identify bias in the industry. 82% of foundation products name their shades using either words or phrases that may have negative connotations.

“We found 130 products on Sephora’s and Ulta’s websites that use a sequential number system to label their shades. Of those, 97% put their lighter shades, and thus the customers that use those shades, first.”

“Roughly 40% of beauty brands use a sequential numbering system to organize their foundation shades. Yet only 4 out of those 130 products ordered their shades from dark to light.”

Also this article pointed out several interesting things when it came to the names of the lighter shades. For example, the constant use of the words “nude” and “natural” with lighter skin tones leave us wondering if brands consider darker skin tones “unnatural”. The Naked Truth article explored other names that are most commonly used. From this they discovered that 278 darker

⁶ Alexis Barron, “Some People Are Calling Out Makeup Companies For Crossing The Line Of Cheeky Names To Racial Tropes,” we are Mitú. 100% American & Latino, January 13, 2020, <https://wearemitu.com/fierce/these-10-beauty-products-have-names-so-racially-charged-youll-be-left-wondering-who-approved-them/>.

⁷ The Pudding, “The Naked Truth,” The Pudding, accessed May 25, 2021, <https://pudding.cool/2021/03/foundation-names/>.

foundation shades are named after drinks such as coffee, mocha, cognac, and espresso. 1,024 shades are named after foods ⁸“But, typically, product lines don’t use a consistent naming scheme and end up naming their darker shades after foods and drinks. Alternatively, their lighter shades are named after gems, plants, or a much wider variety of miscellaneous words.” The cuter names such as peach, vanilla, and rose vanilla are associated with the lighter skin tones. For the darker skin tones, you have shades named: nutmeg, chocolate, dark chocolate, fresh cloves, chestnut and hazelnut.

Compared to the last 50 years, the beauty industry has come a long way in their product standards. There is still a very long way to go for the industry to model equality in products. Brands such as Fenty Beauty, Juvia’s Place, Pat McGrath Labs, and Beauty Bakerie, all of which are owned by people of color, have set the bar high. Other brands are struggling to catch up, some are hitting the mark while others are missing it completely. Over time, the skin tone in the United States has gradually grown darker. For the makeup industry to thrive, it must start providing more foundation shades that cater to darker complexion.

⁸ The Pudding, “The Naked Truth,” The Pudding, accessed May 25, 2021, <https://pudding.cool/2021/03/foundation-names/>.