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Abstract

This research paper will examine skin lightening practices around the world focusing on places like Asia, Africa, the Caribbeans and the United States. This paper will be looking at reasons that people bleach their skin. Last but not least this paper will examine how the media industry has played a major role in why people around the world want to bleach their skin.

Keywords

Skin Lightening, Bleaching, and Whitening Phenomenon

Disciplines

Africana Studies | Women's Studies

Comments

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Tamiyah Miller

Skin Lightening, Bleaching, Whiting Phenomenon

Skin lightening cream is a cosmetic treatment to reduce the prominence of skin and even out the color of the skin. You can buy bleaching creams over the counter and by prescription. Also, you can bleach with bleaching soap, or pills and lotions.

(Pierre, 2008, p. 15) There's a difference between using lightening products to correct skin condition such as acne scarring and uneven skin tone, and products that lighten skin by several shades. Some people apply skin lightener to their entire body to change their complexion, but this can be very risky. The active ingredient in some skin lighteners is mercury, so bleaching can lead to mercury poisoning. Skin lightening cream contains an active ingredient or a combination of ingredients that reduces the amount of melanin in the skin where it is applied. The most widely used ingredients in skin lighteners is hydroquinone.

Hydroquinone is a crystalline compound made by the reduction of benzoquinone. Some side effects to taking Hydroquinone are it is very bad for the skin and can cause irritation, change in color of skin to blue-black, extreme itching and blisters or sores. Other skin lighters use drugs such as steroid and retinoic acid, which comes from vitamin A, as active ingredients. Some skin lighters use natural ingredients such as kojic acid, a compound that comes from a fungus and arbutin, a compound found in various plants. (Pierre, 2008, p. 9)

The standard of beauty around the world contributes to why people go through extreme measures to get a lighter skin complexion. Being closer to white is being more right, while being of darker skin has a negative connotation and people want to get

away from that negative side by whitening their skin. This research paper will examine skin lightening practices around the world focusing on places like Asia, Africa, the Caribbeans and the United States. This paper will be looking at reasons that people bleach their skin. Last but not least this paper will examine how the media industry has played a major role in why people around the world want to bleach their skin.

Skin Lightening Cream Around the World

Asia

The larger parts of South Asia were governed by the British for about two Centuries. The 'white' race was the ruler and the 'dark' or 'black' natives were the ruled. (Shankar and Subish, 2007, p. 101) The result of the colonial legacy in South Asia that would be one major contributor to why people wanted lighter skin is that white is considered to be what is acceptable and beautiful. In South Asia, lighter pale skin is considered marketable and shows that a person or a family had aristocratic lineage. Darker skinned is associated with labour and field work in the sun. Fair skin is considered as a gate way of purity and innocence in Asia. (Shankar and Subish, 2007, p. 103)

In Asia, the use the term 'faired' skin means someone's skin that is in the middle of dark and white. They do not necessarily want to be a white person, but want the fairer skin as a white person has. Recently, the huge preference for lighter skin has been from the mass exploitation by manufacturers of the fairness creams. The lightening creams are everywhere in Asia. Being closer to white makes a person more sustainable for jobs. It makes them more appealing to look at and allows them to be more sociable.

One of the biggest industries of fairness cream in South Asia is Fair & Lovely. In the article, Indian Women Criticize 'Fair and Lovely' Ideal, Leistikow states "general secretary of the women's association, calls one of the ads "discriminatory on the basis of the color of the skin," and "an affront to a woman's dignity ," because it shows fairer women having greater job success based on their sexuality." (2003, p.1)

In Asia, they just launched a product called "Clean & Dry" that was intended to whiten a woman's intimate parts. The advertisement, which naturally caused an uproar, suggested that a woman would have a more fulfilling personal life if she chose to lighten more than just her face. (Leistikow, 2003, p.2)The stigma of having fairer skin has made people go through extreme measures to please society's beauty standards.China has an old saying, "One whiteness can cover three kinds of ugliness'. Being fair-skinned or, as often used interchangeably in the chinese language, being 'white' or, as often used interchangeably in the Chinese language, being 'white' skinned is effectively the symbol of elegance and nobility, and 'white jade' is often used as a metaphor to describe such fairness." (Leong, 2006,p.167) The positive connotation that fairer skin has and the negative connotation that darker skin has makes societies in Asia create unfair social structures that people feel like they have to live by.

West Africa

West Africa was formerly colonized by the Dutch and then the English. The reasons for the upsurge of this phenomenon of skin bleaching in Africa is the following: memories of historical overtones of colonization, slavery, discrimination, and better job opportunities, executive positions and chances in beauty uphold the

supremacy of the white skin. Ghana and Nigeria are the largest countries in West Africa to use skin lightening cream to bleach their skin in different types of ways.

“According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 77 percent of women and men in Nigeria use skin-lightening products, the world’s highest percentage” (Adow, 2013. p.1) The phenomenon started in Nigeria in the 1960’s and has grown popular among men and women, due to a globalized image of fair-skinned beauty , a perception of material and sociocultural gains attached to fair skin, and probably a colonial mentality. In Nigeria fair skinned people still bleach to keep their skin pure. Lightening creams are not effectively regulated in Nigeria where even roadside vendors sell tubes and plastic bags of powders and ointments from cardboard boxes stacked along sidewalks in market districts. Many of the tubes are labeled as to their actual ingredients.(Adow, 2013. p.2) The people of Nigeria get their creams anywhere so they can live up to society’s beauty standard even if it is on the side of the road. In West Africa, when bleaching of skin began to get a negative connotation to it by society, people began to use the term ‘toning’ of the skin as not so much a severe term as bleaching of the skin could be.

According to the 2005 Ghana Health Service report, approximately 30% of Ghanaian women and 5% of Ghanaian men were actively bleaching. The same statistic indicates that currently, 50% to 60% of adult Ghanaian women are currently or have at one time or the other actively used bleaching agents. (Konlan 2016). Ghana people bleach because the notion of having too dark skin is bad, seeing the act as not ‘fashionable’ and ‘trendy’, gaining social acceptance and superiority which are

sometimes instigated by peer influence, the need to get some societal acceptance among peers and the attraction of potential suitors, amongst other various reasons.

According to the BBC News, women in Ghana have been warned against a growing trend for taking pills during pregnancy to lighten the skin of their unborn babies while they are still in the womb. Medical experts say these illegal drugs can cause birth defects, including damage to limbs and internal organs. Many women do this in Ghana because of the ideals that you are most beautiful when fairer toned is very damaging. These mothers believe that they will give their children a better life if they are lighter skinned as society will be willing to accept them, completely disregarding the irreversible and permanent damage that their children may encounter as a consequence of their actions. However, the multi-billion dollar skin bleaching industry is about to get slightly less lucrative. In Ghana, the government has announced a strict crackdown on the sort of potentially dangerous lightening products that are startlingly popular across the entire African continent.(Drury and Booty, 2018)

Caribbeans

Skin bleaching is a widespread controversy in the Caribbeans. In Jamaica, it is heavily used. In a study Christopher Charles authored of the *Caribbean Journal of Psychology*, the top three reasons he gives for bleaching skin in Jamaica were wanting a lighter or brighter complexion, getting rid of facial imperfections, and looking beautiful. Charles points out that many people who bleach their skin are rewarded for it. People tell them that they are 'beautiful'. People "validate them," he says. There are social benefits to having light skin, even if manufactured. It is deeply rooted in a history of

slavery and colonialism; it is about following standards that are dictated by Eurocentrism; it is a response to hundreds of years of colonial indoctrination that has been passed down through socialization since independence. The idea of beauty is often associated with “browning” or “light skin” in Jamaica.(Charles,2011,375-390) In Jamaica, skin lightening or bleaching is commonly problematized as the superficial manifestation of low self-esteem and/or ideal of whiteness purportedly working in concert to negate a black African identity in a Eurocentric region. In addition, the practice is usually associated with lower-working class or inner-city phenomena. (Hope,2009,p.101) The payoff is significant enough that even those who do not have a lot of disposable income will spend significant amounts on their bleaching habit: “Bleaching creams and gels can cost anywhere from a dollar or two for a small tube to around \$7 for a bottle. Despite the minimum wage in Jamaica equaling less than \$50 per week, some women report spending \$20 to \$30 on creams every couple of weeks—and believe it to be a worthwhile investment”.(Charles,2011,p.380)

James Marlon’s photographic project’s intention is to understand both the practice and the means by which a person would attempt to ascertain some kind of beauty where many saw none. Some proclaimed it was merely a fad; others felt it elevated their confidence. This concept may have been born from a flawed perception of beauty, through global advertising. They are entitled to their portrayal of what beauty is to them. (James,2013,p. 243-254) The race distinctions that governed plantation society gave way to a residual colour hierarchy, where lighter skin(coded as ‘brown’ in Jamaica) is perceived to be better over darker skin. Consequently, notions of social

status and personhood in post-colonial and contemporary Jamaica remained intertwined with notions of colour.

United States

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, skin bleaching products and procedures became increasingly popular in African American communities across the United States. Many African American newspapers and magazines carried numerous advertisements for skin lightening products and procedures in their consumer sections. Although skin bleaching/lightening had a long history in African American communities in the U.S., the formalization of a racially-specific consumer marketplace that began during the Progressive eras created opportunities for manufacturers and sellers to target new, potential customers. The rhetoric existent in these advertisements proclaimed lightness as preferential and aesthetically desirable. Advertisers marketed their skin bleaching products and processes to African American communities throughout the United States. African American women in urban centers became central to advertising discourses. African American men participated in various arenas of beauty culture; however, beauty culture existed as a feminized space. Through purchasing a skin bleach cream or a bar of complexion soap, New black women in the U.S. embraced their fledgling status as consumer citizens and contributed to broader discussions about the interplay of race, class, color, gender, aesthetics, urbanity and modernity.(Lindsey 2011,97)

In America, these variations in complexions produced an unspoken hierarchy: Black people with lighter complexions ended up being granted some of the rights of the

master class. By early 19th century, the “mulatto hypothesis” (Hall,2018,p.2) emerged, arguing that the “white blood”(Hall,2018,p.2) of light-skinned slaves made them smarter, more civilized and better looking. It is probably no coincidence that light-skinned blacks emerged as leaders in the black community: “To white power brokers, they were less threatening. Harvard’s first black graduate was the fair-skinned W.E.B. Du Bois. Some of the most prominent black politicians – from former New Orleans Mayor Ernest Morial, to former President Barack Obama – have lighter skin.” (Hall,2018,p.2) Ronalds Hall a professor of social work at Michigan State University states “after studying skin color for years, I coined the term ‘bleaching syndrome’ to describe this Phenomenon.”(Hall, 2018,p.4) In the United States, some people see bleaching of the skin as a syndrome. The bleaching syndrome has three parts. The first is psychological: This involves self-rejection of dark skin and other native characteristics. Second, it is sociological, in that it influences group behavior. The final aspect is physiological. The physiological is not limited to just bleaching the skin. It can also mean altering hair texture and eye color to mimic the dominant group.(Hall,1995,172-184) Other African Americans do not see skin bleaching as a syndrome; they see it as a practice to get rid of dark marks especially on their faces.

The study, *The Psychological Effect of Skin on African American Esteem* states skin color distinction is “a well-kept secret” in black communities. “The hue of one’s skin,” the authors states “tends to have a psychological effect on the self-esteem of African-Americans.” (Davis,Daniels, Lee See,2008,70-75) Yet they also noted that existing research on the relationship between skin color and self-esteem did not even

exist. Fear of being perceived as a race traitor continues to make the topic taboo in the United States – in a way which exceeds that in places like India or Japan.

(Davis,Daniels, Lee See,2008,70-75) To obtain a fairer complexion, many apply bleaching creams. Some of the most popular skin lightening creams in the United States are Olay, Natural White, Ambi Fade Cream and Clean & Clear Fairness Cream.

Media

The media is heavily influential to the practices of skin bleaching. Through television commercials, print and digital advertisements, magazines, billboards, and the internet, the ideal skin complexion represented in the media is fair-skin tones. This idea that fair skin is better is common among other cultures in the world and is spreading to developed as well as developing nations worldwide, where it is heavily advertised. In other countries as people are driving, there are massive billboards advertising skin lightening cream. The standard of beauty is to be closer to white skin complexion. Many people in power are of white skin complexion. To gain success a person has to live up to society's standards of beauty; in fact many famous people practice skin bleaching.

Examples of many celebrities today include rapper Nicki Minaj, dancehall performer Vybz kartel, Mshoza, an African singer, Former Chicago Cubs slugger Sammy Sosa, and Nigerian pop star Dencia, just to name a few; all have bleached their skin for several years now. Many of these people have their own product line of skin bleaching creams, locations and more. Fans and consumers look up to their favorite celebrities and if they see that this person is promoting or practicing skin bleaching to

achieve a level of beauty, people are going to do it as well to achieve the same level or beauty.

For example, Blac Chyna and her partner Dencia, African pop singer, just recently launched her 'X Blac Chyna Diamond Illuminating and Lightening Cream' in Nigeria. This product is from the cosmetics company Whitenicious, founded by Dencia, that is a skin care line that has been controversial since its launch in 2014. The new cream comes in a crystal-adorned jar and sells for \$250 for 100 grams, about 3.5 ounces. (Muzenda, 2018,p.2-12) The media and the people in the media promote the standards of beauty. People look at some sort of media everyday and if people see these variety of products help people be successful and beautiful people are going to buy and use these products.

In conclusion, all around the world people practice skin bleaching or whitening to live by society's beauty standards. The societal beauty standards are to be closer to white and if you are closer to white you are right. In some communities and cultures people grow up taking part in this phenomena. It is about about making one's life better. Women and men that take part in this phenomena are very common in their answer to be beautiful or handsome and to gain a certain level of success within their society. Women take part in this phenomena more because women are criticized more about how beautiful they are. In many cultures beauty can go a long way; it allows you to find a good husband; it allows you to do more prestigious things. Men recently began to take part in the phenomena because men want to please society more as well. The skin bleaching phenomenon is growing rapidly. Everyone wants to take part in this trend.

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