“YEARNING FOR WHITENESS”: CONCEPTUALIZING THE REASONING BEHIND THOSE WHO BLEACH AND HOW THEY ARE PERCEIVED BY THEIR “BEHOLDERS”.

*LILLIAN PHILLIPS-KUMAGA, CHARLOTTE O. KWAKYE-NUAKO
Methodist University College Ghana
GHANA

Email: *lphillips-kumaga@mucg.edu.gh

ABSTRACT

Skin Bleaching or skin whitening, sometimes euphemistically referred to as skin toning, is pervasive all over the world. Interestingly, skin bleaching is even common in areas like South Asia, whose citizens will be perceived by Ghanaians as being “fair”. Among university students, skin bleaching appears to be on the rise. There have been many common sense reasons that have been expressed to explain why people bleach. Some researchers assert that bleaching “is a lack of self-confidence and self-worth”. In effect, people who bleach hate themselves. Others have also suggested that Ghanaian men are accomplices in promoting the “lighter-is-better stereotype” because of the perception that Ghanaian men like fair women. This paper attempts to conceptualize the reasons behind why people bleach, with emphasis on colorism, physical attractiveness, racial capital and the role of the media. Additionally, the paper discusses whether the “beholder” of the bleached, value and prefer the bleached person based on those reasons that inform bleaching. The implications for education and public health are discussed.

Keywords: Skin Bleaching, Skin Whitening, Colourism, Racial Capital, Perception, Ghana

1. Introduction

The perceived benefits of having a light coloured skin are pervasive around the world especially in countries formerly colonized by Europe or have a strong US presence (Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2005; Mire, 2001). Throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America, skin bleaching is a fairly common practice by people to acquire lighter skin and the supposed associated social and economic benefits (Perry, 2006). Skin bleaching occurs in all racial and ethnic groups regardless of age, level of education or social class (Blay, 2007). The interest in this topic lies in the fact that the discourse surrounding it in the media and the campaigns by some Ghanaian celebrities like Ama K. Abebrese, Hammamat Montia, Paulina Oduro and Nana Ama MacBrown to curb the rise of skin bleaching in the country, and encourage people to accept their natural skin tone (Spy News Agency, 2015). This paper will look at the concept of whiteness and some theories that possibly explain bleaching. The main focus of this paper however will be to look at the perceptions that people have about those who use skin lightening products. It will finally look at the direction in which policy on skin bleaching should go if governments and stakeholders really want to tackle this social problem. We first discuss the concept of skin bleaching.

Skin bleaching, is the use of homemade concoctions, cosmetic products and other dermatological products to remove the melanin from the skin over time. This removal of melanin is also called skin lightening, skin whitening or skin toning (Charles, 2010). Since ancient times women in parts of the Mediterranean, Asia and Europe have used skin lightening products (Dlova, Hamed, Tsoka-Gwegweni, Grobler, & Hift, 2014).
Historically, skin bleaching can be traced to the Elizabethan era of powder and paint (Blay, 2011). In recent years the practice of skin bleaching or skin whitening has assumed alarming proportions among women from all over the world and especially among women of African descent (Pierre, 2008; Blay, 2007). For instance, data available from South Africa suggests that one in every three black South African woman, admits to using skin-lightening products (Dlova et al., 2014). In Nigeria, the practice is a serious phenomenon practiced by both men and women (Olumide et al., 2008). In a study of four hundred and fifty Nigerians who confessed the use of bleaching creams, the majority of them were women and they socio-demographic characteristics cut across class, marital status, educational level and religion (Olumide et al., 2008). In Ghana the story is no different; dermatologists estimate that over 30% of the population, mainly women, use bleaching creams regularly (Delle, 2001; Mckinley, 2001).

Various reasons have been given for the use of these products. Some of these are to look more attractive; to go with existing fashion trend; to treat skin blemishes like acne or melasma; to cleanse or “tone” the face and body; or to satisfy the taste of a spouse (Dlova et al., 2014). Although the men also use the products for the above reasons, some of them claimed they use the creams because their wives use them; some male marketers of female cosmetics and toiletries claimed they use the products to advertise their wares. The habit of bleaching the skin is most rampant among commercial sex workers who camouflage their occupation in the clinic data as “fashion designer” because of the reproach and stigma attached to prostitution. It is noteworthy that even some people who are naturally fair in complexion, still use the bleaching creams to “maintain” the light skin color and prevent tanning or dark spots from sunlight (Dlova et al., 2014). In trying to give reasons why people bleach, many scholars have postulated reasons to explain why Africans especially bleach and their perceptions about those who do so. According to Akosa (2008), bleaching fundamentally is a lack of self-confidence and self –worth. According to him “the African, after several years of post-colonialism, cannot exorcise the indignation and wants to be white. Our music, language and folklore are replete with lyrics that extol the virtue of being white. “Me bron1” (my white [woman/man]) a term of endearment in Akan, is made unconsciously but demean our blackness, our “Africaness” and our “Ghanaianess”. A Psychology professor from Uganda also agrees with Akosa’s assertion as he says “ such a person lacks self-esteem, has low self-efficacy and a perception that she or he looks ugly….it is common among women who are not educated” (Kisule, 2008, in Hunter, 2011). However as stated earlier, skin bleaching occurs in all racial and ethnic groups regardless of age, level of education or social class (Blay, 2007; Olumide et al., 2008).

There are however, problems associated with skin lightening or whitening, such as the ingredients in the creams, soaps and lotions used; the main ingredients contained in these concoctions and cosmetic products are hydroquinone, mercury, steroids and kojic acid (Kwakye-Nuako, 2016; Make’, Ly, Aymard & Dangou, 2003). These chemicals work to stop the production of melanin, which give the skin its dark complexion and protects the skin from the harmful effects of the sun’s UV rays. The complications of these products are very serious and are sometimes fatal. Some of these complications are exogenous ochronosis- discolorations of the skin with a bluish tinge- impaired wound healing and wound dehiscence, the fish odor syndrome, nephropathy, steroid addiction syndrome, predisposition to infections, a broad spectrum of cutaneous and endocrinologic complications of corticosteroids, including suppression of hypothalamic-pituitary-

---

1 ‘Obroni’ literally ’one from beyond the horizon’, is an Akan term used for any foreigner especially a white person.
adrenal axis (Olumide et al., 2008) and sometimes skin cancer. In spite of these risks, many people still “yearn for whiteness” (Glenn, 2008).

Though the problem of skin bleaching can be said to be multifaceted with complex historical, cultural, social and political factors, the majority of scholars who examine the phenomenon of skin bleaching, seem to agree that colonialism and enslavement act as catalysts of the propensity for skin bleaching. (Blay 2007; Blay, 2009; Charles, 2003, De Souza, 2008). Glenn (2008) also adds that today, apart from the history of colonialism and white supremacy, mass media and communication technologies, reinforce the message that “white is right”.

One of the objectives of this paper is to look at the role of colourism as an offshoot of colonialism and the role of the media in perpetuating the “white is right” stereotype.

2. Theories

Colourism

The idea of whitening the skin did not begin with people of African descent but has gradually gained currency among them (Blay, 2011; Charles, 2011). Bleaching among the Europeans begun in the Elizabethan era to help accentuate whiteness and persists in attempts at using anti-aging creams and dispelling freckles.

According to Blay (2011), whiteness is not a biological but a social concept that differentiates between racial whiteness and ideological whiteness. Racial whiteness is whiteness associated with skin colour whereas ideological whiteness is the ‘exclusive value assigned that involves a series of immunities, privileges, rights, and assumptions… [which] value is not inherent, natural or biologically determined but rather reflects artificial belief as created by social, economic and political beliefs’ (Ross, 1995; Blay, 2011, p. 7). This idea of white supremacy in turn influences and informs colorism as persons of colour strive to attain to the ideals and social status of being white.

White supremacy can be traced from the Europeanization of Christianity, through the duality of the Manichean worldview to the whitening of Christ, the main focus of Christianity and consequently the damnation of all things black (Akbar, 1996; Blay, 2011; Dyer, 1997). The Persian philosopher, Manes conceptualized the world into two: good and evil and these were made to connote to white and black with ‘white’ symbolizing good and pure and ‘black’ symbolizing evil and darkness. Although the Church at the time disbanded this pagan theory as a heresy, it influenced conceptions about the black race and influenced European worldview evidenced in their depictions of fairy tales where good people were described in fairer terms that bad people (snow white as being fair and white; and the witch as being ugly). Words like white wash, white magic, white lie; were contrasted with words like blackmail, black magic etc. Thus, this duality gave the impression that being black was bad and being white was good.

The further Europeanization of the Christ, a person of Jewish descent who was depicted as having blond hair and blue eyes made Him more of a Nordic character than a Jew. Coupled with this was the tracing of the black race to Ham who was cursed by his father Noah to be a drawer of water and a hewer of wood and whose duty would be to serve his brothers (Genesis9:24-25). Thus, white supremacy and the subjugation of the black race though slavery were justified (Akbar, 1996; Blay, 2011; Dyer, 1997). In view of this assumed supremacy, whites have assigned to themselves the moral right to exact brute force when white interests are threatened but do not accept that other non-white groups have an equal right to defend and exact the same rights for themselves (Blay, 2011). This
clearly explains white hegemony in the African context but not so clearly in the Muslim context. The Prophet Muhammed, the focus of Islam has not been Europeanized and in fact, images of him are not allowed, and yet there is bleaching in Senegal which is a predominantly Muslim community. A possible explanation may be the aspect of colonialism where they had the French as their colonial masters and so had evidence of white privilege.

According to Charles (2011) whiteness is a commodity that is greatly cherished and protected. The gate keepers of whiteness do not allow just anyone to enter. Thus it is interesting to know why people continually bleach their skins to attain whiteness. For in attaining to whiteness through bleaching, one school of thought is that the bleachers endorse the historical supremacy of whiteness. Various reasons have been given and these will be discussed.

**Racial capital**
Racial capital occurs when people derive social and economic value from racial identity (Leong, 2012). In this case racial capital is drawn from the body and is related to skin tone. The light/white skin is transformed to social capital through social networks, symbolic capital through esteem or status or economic capital through high-paying jobs or promotion (Bourdieu, 1984; Hunter, 2015). Blay (2009) found that women in Ghana who used skin bleaching products were trying to attain beauty, that is light skin and this conception of beauty was used to gain social capital. Light skin becomes a sort of currency through which individuals gain access to commodities that they want. Hughes & Hertel, (1990) found that skin tone had significant relationships with education, occupational prestige, personal income and family income, even when gender, age and parental socio-economic status are controlled. For each resource indicator, light Africans were higher. Keith & Herring, (1991) found gender differences, showing that for women, skin tone plays an important role in determining education, occupation and family income. This theoretical approach was helpful for looking at skin tone bias at the societal level of African Americans. This study seeks to bring the discussion closer home to Ghana to see how the society perceives those who are light skinned and those who have actually bleached.

**Theory of physical attractiveness**
The physical attractiveness stereotype is the assumption that physically attractive people possess other socially desirable traits as well. Generally, this stereotype concludes that what is beautiful is also good (Myers, Abell, Kolstad & Sani, 2010). Physical attractiveness influences first impressions; and first impressions are fast becoming relevant in our fast growing urban and mobile world and as contacts with people are more fleeting (Myers et al., 2010, p.355). Our ideas about what is beautiful are culturally and historically determined, however. Nelson & Morrison (2005) generalized that for cultures with scarce resources and for poor and hungry people, plumpness seems attractive; whereas for cultures and individuals with abundant resources, beauty is associated with being slim.

Evolutionary psychologists have also tried to evaluate physical attractiveness in terms of ability to reproduce. Thus, men prefer younger females because of their fertility whereas females prefer men with social status and power for security reasons (Myers et al, 2010). Li, et al. (2002), have however found that although men require some physical attractiveness and women require status and wealth, they both also expect some level of kindness and intelligence.
Thus, physical attractiveness, as defined by the culture of the individual, creates an immediate first impression that opens doors and creates a foot in the door for the individual until a more in-depth assessment of the person is made over time. Other factors such as the media, the global North and other social experiences such as colonialism, also shape ideas about what is beautiful especially in Africa and for persons who experienced colonialism (Charles, 2011). For instance, Charles reports that in Jamaica the history of skin bleaching can be traced back to the colonial era where skin colour was the basis for a hierarchical structuring of the society and thus an incentive for bleaching to ensure social status.

In a study by Mahe et al (2003), they found out that some of the Senegalese women they interviewed admitted to using skin bleaching products even during pregnancy because they wanted to have clear skins during the naming ceremonies of their babies. Thus, in spite of the adverse effects of chemicals such as mercury and hydroquinone on the unborn child, the mothers continued to bleach for the sake of beautifying their skins (Lauwery, Bonnier, Evrad et al, 2007).

Physical attractiveness is thus an important motivator for bleaching and women have been found to be more concerned about their physical attractiveness. What is more, a lighter skin tone is usually associated with physical attractiveness and beauty, and consequently, other positive attributes such as intelligence (Thompson & Keith, 2001). In a study aimed at finding the relationship between skin tone and the development of self-concept and esteem, Thompson and Keith found that skin tone had a significant positive effect on self-efficacy for both men and women. They also found that changes in skin colour from dark to light had an effect or consequent increase in the self-esteem of their participants and that higher scores on physical attractiveness also positively correlated with self-esteem scores.

Charles (2011) writing about the Jamaican widespread phenomenon of skin bleaching believes that the bleaching of black skin is as a result of colorism which is an offshoot of racism. Colorism, according to Thompson & Keith (2001) is the embodiment of the preference and desire for light skin as well as straighter hair (as opposed to black curly hair) and straighter (as opposed to broader) nose and lips. Thus, simply put, colorism is the desire to look ‘white’ or Caucasian.

Thus physical attractiveness is culturally determined but the ‘culture’ of the African and persons of African descent are influenced by ideas and concepts from the global North, about beauty being found in all things whiten and Caucasian, which ideas have also been internalized by Africans. Whiteness per se does not come as just phenotypical colouration of the skin but has its attendant values of superiority such as higher social status, wealth, better education and a good job (Hugh & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991).

Other Factors:

**The Role of the Media: Marketing and the use of celebrities**

In spite of the fact that we are in a post-colonial world, sales and marketing of skin-lightening products are at an all-time high (Perry, 2006). An explanation for this phenomenon is the re-strategizing of the global beauty industry in an age of multiculturalism (Hunter, 2005). Many cosmetic companies that previously featured white women exclusively have added light-skinned black women to their advertisements as spokeswomen for their products. This creates the impression that cosmetic companies are accepting of people of colour without disrupting their message that white bodies are beautiful (Hunter, 2011). Included in this is the use of celebrities to endorse the products.
These celebrity endorsements make the public more likely to believe the efficacy of these products and also endorse the act of skin lightening itself, making skin lightening more culturally acceptable (Hunter, 2011). This point is relevant because people still see skin bleaching/whitening as shameful in some cultures and believe that those who bleach hate their racial or ethnic identity (Charles, 2003).

Perceptions:
From the theories discussed above, it is clear that many factors influence bleaching/skin whitening behaviour. The question however remains: what do the people who see these obviously unnatural lightened people think of them? Most studies have examined the reason why people bleach but few if any have focused on how these people are perceived by those who see them. Are the people who bleach reading their social cues right? Is the capital that theorists postulate are achieved through skin bleaching, real or perceived?

3. Conceptual Framework

This model shows that the history of colonialism and its subsequent legacy of privileges and rights of being light or fair-skinned, coupled with the social capital derived from being light skinned and colourism--influenced by the media and the concepts of physical attractiveness--influence the individual to decide to bleach. This relationship is however mediated by gender, as women are more likely to bleach. In this work we seek to test this concept in order to find out the following:

a. Do beholders of those who bleach perceive that the factors enumerated above influence bleaching behavior?

b. Do the beholders also believe those who bleach obtain what they set out to achieve by their actions?
4. References


