

The Worldwide Epidemic of Skin Bleaching: Prevalence, Predictors and Associated Problems

By Irene López, PhD, Avril Ho and Analise Gonzalez, OPA Poster Session Undergraduate Non-Empirical Winners

Abstract

Practiced all over the world, skin bleaching is a worldwide, multi-billion dollar phenomenon, which is associated with a host of medical problems. In this report, we summarize the current literature on skin bleaching, including its prevalence, predictors, and the problems associated with this practice. We then conclude with considerations for future research.

Prevalence and Practice of Skin Bleaching

Skin bleaching, defined as the practice of lightening one's skin, is a universal phenomenon that occurs throughout the world. Although estimates vary depending on the sampling frame and recruitment method used, it appears to be most prevalent in Western and Central Africa, as well as in Asia (Ly et al., 2007). Skin bleaching involves the use of various mass produced and/or homemade products, used either in isolation or in conjunction with one another. Bleaching products may include specialized creams, soaps, lotions, serums, pills, capsules, and gels, or even everyday household toiletries that are infused with skin lightening ingredients. Although less common, sheep placenta masks, laser surgery and injections may also be used. Depending on the context, other substances or foods may be used to augment the bleaching effect, such as Vitamin C, yogurt or papaya. In more extreme cases, toothpastes, peroxides, hair dye chemicals or straighteners, camphor balls, sand, cement, battery fluid, and even actual bleach may be used. Different products may be used concurrently or sequentially, and instructions for making these homemade combinations can easily be found on the Internet.

The process of skin bleaching also varies greatly. For example, for some bleaching may begin with a total body bath, upon which supplemental treatments are typically given once or twice daily, or only specific parts of the body may be bleached. Overall, research indicates that while virtually every part of the body can be bleached, the neck and face are by far the most common areas, followed by arms, underarms and legs.

Problems Associated with Bleaching

Many skin bleaching products typically bleach through the use of three main ingredients: hydroquinone, mercury and corticosteroids, which deactivate enzymes that produce melanin. These ingredients are known to have a number of health risks and problems. The net effect is an array of skin disturbances and disorders, ranging from skin burns, uneven and patchy skin, thinning and wrinkling of skin and contagious fungal infections. Additionally, bleaching may lead to the loss of skin elasticity and impaired wound healing.

Yet, despite these well-documented risks, users are often unaware of their effects. This lack of knowledge may be

because skin bleaching companies often fail to list or mislabel their ingredients, fail to list the percentage of chemicals in their compounds and do not list warnings of adverse effects or contraindications. However, even with appropriate labeling, bleaching may still continue in less developed countries, due to, among other reasons, high rates of illiteracy. Finally, some users continue to use, or increase their use of products, because hyperpigmentation can sometimes occur upon their discontinuation. Additionally, some users hold the belief that in order to avoid or eradicate these effects they must either continue or increase their bleaching.

Predictors of Skin Bleaching

While these beliefs may explain the maintenance of skin bleaching, reasons given for the initiation of bleaching include a host of sociodemographic, interpersonal and social factors, as well as actual or perceived medical concerns, and more macro level forces, such as Westernization/acclulturation and the media (See figure 1).

Sociodemographic Factors: Women constitute three-quarters of the skin bleaching market, although it is increasing among men, especially in Ghana, Zambia, India, and the UK. With regards to age, while the average age of onset is typically in early adulthood, the range of onset varies.

Additionally, skin bleaching occurs throughout various levels of social class, although it has been studied in predominately poorer and less developed countries. However, in some countries, such as in India, skin bleaching products are specifically targeted towards the middle class and users do acknowledge that part of the perceived benefit of bleaching is the ascribed social status that comes with having lighter skin.

Interpersonal and Social Factors: Apart from these demographic indicators, the most obvious reason for skin bleaching is the desire for lighter skin, and this has been documented both among those who are light and dark skin (Ajose, 2005). Often there is the perception that lighter skin is more beautiful, healthier, softer and pleasing (Asia Market Intelligence; cited in Schwartz, 2002). For example, in a study among various Asian subgroups, Malaysian men were the most likely to want their partners to have a pale complexion (74%), followed by men in Hong Kong (68%) and Taiwan (55%). Furthermore, lighter skin was valued because it made the user feel more attractive and because they found this more attractive in others.

Because of this desire for lighter skin, many non-bleachers claim that users lighten their skin because users hate themselves and/or their racial group. However, participants themselves rarely cite this as a reason. Instead, overwhelmingly participants mention that they bleach because of the pressure or influence of others. For example, in a study in South Africa, users indicate that they were first introduced to bleaching by friends or family, followed by people in the medical professions, such as chemists or pharmacists. Contact with others therefore normalizes this experience. Finally, while white skin may be idealized among many Asians, this desire for whiteness may not always reflect a yearning to be white per se, but instead a culturally specific ideal of beauty as exemplified by the white face of the Japanese Geisha which predates Western imperialism (Aishikari, 1005). Thus, for some bleaching may not be a way to erase one's "Asianness" but a way to heighten it.

Macro Level Forces

Still, acculturation, or more specifically Westernization, has been noted as one possible reason for the increase in skin bleaching. Increasingly, this practice has not only been documented within native born populations, but also among immigrant and diasporic groups. However, it is still unclear whether bleaching is an imported cultural practice that immigrants bring with them when they migrate, or a practice initiated upon entry to a new place of residence. Nevertheless, one of the first studies to assess bleaching found that among Kenyans, bleachers had a greater likelihood of speaking English as compared to other non-bleaching Kenyans, suggesting that exposure to Western ideals was an important factor (Barr et al., 1972).

Exposure to Western ideals can evidently be seen in the sheer amount of advertising given to skin bleaching. For example, a study in Hong Kong found that 30% of advertisements on television on a Saturday night were devoted to whitening products (Leong, 2006). There has also been a proliferation of websites and videos dedicated to skin bleaching that often promise outlandish and false health claims regarding their products. In particular, these advertisements promise a transformative and personally empowering experience that can be achieved in a matter of days or weeks. Lighter-skinned models are as healthier, happier and more successful with love and careers. It is therefore not surprising that bleachers cite the media as one of the primary reasons they chose to bleach.

Medical Concerns and Perceived Health Benefits

Finally, apart from these concerns, approximately 30% of those who use skin bleaching products wish to alleviate abnormal hyper skin pigmentation, such as melasma, eczema or acne. Others, such as some users in Ghana, may bleach to "correct" the skin damage cause by other health problems, such as AIDS (Olumide et al., 2008). Yet, apart from this group, many report that they bleach in order to appear healthier, and to tone or cleanse their face and/or body, which is ironic since darker skin provides a number of protections against skin disorders.

Discussion

Skin bleaching is a worldwide epidemic. However, despite its profitability, prevalence and adverse health effects, psychological research on skin color is limited. This is unfortunate as psychology can help us understand the contextual meanings ascribed to skin color and to see how macro forces interact

with interpersonal variables to explain the feelings associated with skin color. In addition to more research, we need more sophisticated prediction models to ascertain the reasons and its association to mental health. Finally, we should also identify how skin bleaching works in conjunction with other appearance modification procedures such as ethnic cosmetic surgery, which is also becoming disturbingly high (Sturm-O'Brien, Brissett, & Brissett, 2010).

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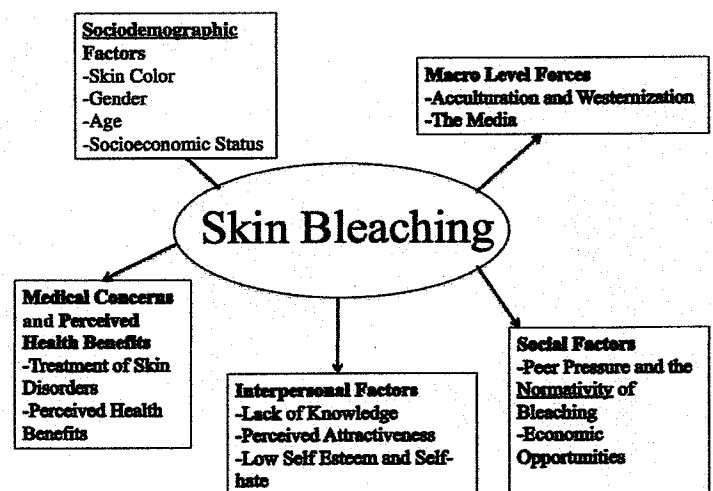


Figure 1. Reasons for Skin Bleaching. This chart demonstrates the common reasons for skin bleaching.

About the Authors

Irene López, PhD
Email: lopezi@kenyon.edu



Irene López is an assistant professor of psychology and the Harvey F. Lodish Junior Faculty Development Professor in the Natural Sciences. Dr. López is a clinical psychologist who studies psychopathology using a cross-cultural and feminist lens. In particular, she is interested in the impact of acculturation on mental health, cross-cultural psychopathology, and socioeconomic status. Other areas of interest are phenotype, racial and ethnic identity, LGBT, and women's issues in ethnic minority communities, which she seeks to understand within the tradition of liberation psychology. Dr. López has received a number of awards for her teaching and research, including a faculty fellowship by the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education and a High Flyer Excellence in Teaching Award from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Currently, she is a Task Force member of the American Psychology Association Committee on Socioeconomic Status.

Avril Ho
Email: hoaw@kenyon.edu



Avril Ho hails from Singapore and is a senior psychology major and Japanese minor at Kenyon College. Broadly speaking, she is primarily interested in multicultural psychology and psychopathology. Specifically, she is interested in autism and appearance modification issues in ethnic minority women. Her research has been presented and accepted for presentation at several conferences, including the American Psychological Association annual conference in August 2011.

Analise Gonzalez
Email: gonzaleza@kenyon.edu



Analise Gonzalez is a senior comparative global identities major at Kenyon College. She is particularly interested in ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic identity and social experiences of minorities. She has just completed research on representations of Muslim identity in United States and French news media. Broadly, her research has been presented and accepted for presentation at several conferences, including the American Psychological Association annual conference in August 2011.



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