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Skin Bleaching in the African Community

Yena Balekyani

University of Northern Iowa, balekyay@uni.edu

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“Please, Caro, Make Me Lighter’: Skin Bleaching in the African Diaspora Community”

Yena Balekyani
University of Northern Iowa
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology



Abstract

Previous research presents the phenomenon of skin bleaching in a global perspective, in terms of its roots in colonial past and how it has manifested in the 21st century. Skin bleaching is the action in which a person applies chemical substances on their skin to chemically alter their skin pigmentation. In this study I am interested in how and why this phenomenon of skin bleaching is currently occurring in the African Community in the Midwestern U.S., and how skin bleaching practices affect the US African diaspora. I conducted qualitative interviews with 6 women and men of color in the US African diaspora who have engaged in skin bleaching practices, and also conducted an online qualitative interview with 28 people.

Literature Review

Skin bleaching/lightening is a multi-billion dollar global industry. In 2014, 15% of the population brought skin bleaching product. Although not a new phenomenon, skin bleaching no longer operates within local boundaries, but has instead spread into a global phenomenon. The process of skin bleaching/lightening has impacted the discourse around black skin, and why black bodies are engaged in the process of lightening skin tones. Commonly used bleaching supplies such as soaps and creams from African and Asian countries were most likely used by darker skinned peoples in European nations and North America (Tate 2016). Skin bleaching is on the rise, especially within groups of educated women in developed countries (Hunter 2011), and Parameswaran (2015) exposed the hypocrisy of countries such as India, where fair skin is praised more than dark skin, while the majority of the country itself is darker toned. Individuals who choose to engage in the process to alter their skin tone have done so for various reasons such as to gain social mobility within a hierarchal/racialized society, to attain beauty, or to satisfy beauty standards set by the dominant group. There are many internal and external factors that leads one to choose to engage in skin bleaching, and all must be explored, in order to understand the implications of skin bleaching on black bodies.

Data and Methods

After securing permission from IRB to conduct this study, I advertised to recruit study participants using online and in-person methods, inviting individuals of the African Diaspora community who have been in/directly affected by the practice of bleaching to participate in the study.

I conducted 6 in-person interviews and 28 online questionnaires with African diaspora members who were in/directly affected by the processes of skin bleaching. The interview questions and online questionnaire used similar semi-structured questions. Once the data collection period was complete, I transcribed and coded interviews, and then also examined the online questionnaire data in a similar fashion.

Findings

Dealing with Physical Insecurities

Blacks who bleach their skin will experience higher levels of low self esteem and high insecurities about their natural skin tone, which may result in the desire to change part of their skin tones for evening purposes or changing their whole bodies.

“People who bleach, I think its more cultural or raised in a family that everybody is bleaching so you feel like you have to bleach also. or its more like, 'Oh if I'm light skinned I'm going to be more beautiful...it creates a self-esteem for you...” - Esther (all names are pseudonyms)

Influenced by External Factors

Bleaching happens because of societal pressures such as peer pressure, family influences, social media, fitting in, and deeply rooted psychological effects of self-devaluing, and feelings of inferiority as a result of colonialism that took place in many of the African countries.

“I started bleaching because of my older sister. I grew up watching her changing different creams” - Esther
“It affects me, because if a family member who is trying to change their look, it means that they are not comfortable with themselves or their esteem.”- Barua

Findings, Continued

Bleaching as a tool for Social Mobility

Individuals who engage in skin bleaching do so as a desire to move upward in their social settings and economically.

“It's more women compared to where I come from. It's mostly women who engage in skin bleaching, and mostly, younger ladies who are trying to get into relationships or something like that, so they are just trying to make themselves look better.” - Barua

“ Always seeing the white people in government and business folks being in charge of everything, and lighter skins on top, darker on the bottom, so you want to be on top too” - Satuniro

“If you don't bleach you're not considered beautiful. and when women are getting married, they often bleach their skin which is something I find ridiculous. Like my sister got married but she didn't bleach her skin and people were like, 'Do they know any better, it's their family. Are they like they don't have money’” -Sahii

Conclusion

My findings are consistent with previous research indicating that men and women who bleach their skin do so because of factors such as insecurities and family influences, or the desire to move upward in their social circles. This is somewhat more important to women than to men.

While the findings in the study have given more insight on why individuals choose to bleach their skin; the study itself is not without limitations. Only a small sample was used for analysis purposes, but for future research, understanding why men have also joined in on skin bleaching practices should be explored.

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