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Skin Bleaching

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Transcript

- White means beautiful: an attitude too often shared by African women living in Paris. Creams to whiten the skin are in huge demand, but turning pale can be dangerous. That's the message Isabelle Mananga is trying to get across to consumers.
- I know cosmetics, and I know brightening products. Brightening products should be about evening out skin tone and diminishing dark spots gently. It shouldn't be about putting your health at risk.
- The problem is some products touting radical results contain toxic chemicals that harm the skin. Side effects can include stretch marks, infections, diabetes and ulcers.
- There's no product, or a series of products, or a mixture of products that can whiten the skin greatly without complications, both in terms of general health and aesthetically. So if a product makes you a lot whiter then it is very dangerous.
- The creams are banned in France but they're still sold illegally on the street or under the counter by unscrupulous store owners looking to make a quick buck. A trafficking network was dismantled earlier this year. An awareness campaign will soon be launched in Paris to warn consumers. The aim? To show women that turning white can come at a price.

The pursuit of beauty is universal, and the cultural standard of beauty is based on the white European body, a standard established through colonization and the institution of slavery. The perpetuation of whiteness continues today through the use of mass media. The ability to achieve this standard of beauty (or not) impacts a person's self-esteem and identity. Having white or light skin color is one of the most significant beauty standards that women of color try to emulate next to body weight, and hair length and texture. The process used to attain the skin color standard of whiteness or lightness is skin bleaching; this process is also referred to as skin whitening and is used by many women globally.

Skin bleaching in Asia goes back to ancient China and Japan, where a white complexion was seen as noble and aristocratic. The Chinese ingested ground pearls to achieve whiteness while Japanese Geisha girls used white chalk to powder their faces. Whiteness continues to be a demarcation of wealth and status as only the wealthy can afford to stay out of the sun. India is not immune to the socially constructed messages that "fair is lovely" and that black or brown is inferior. In combination with the caste system and the Aryan myth, whiteness is a symbol that indicates where one is social and economically.

Bleaching creams and whiteners are used by more than 50 percent of the black population globally, including men. Blacks in Latin America, Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean have an added "burden" in meeting the European standard of beauty—African physical features. Short of plastic surgery, the use of creams, chemical peels, and laser treatments does not change physical features. It should also be noted that skin whitening or bleaching is not limited to people of color. Darker-skinned eastern and southern European immigrant women in the United States during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s would bleach their skin to assimilate and blend in with their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. This is prior to the advent of tanning as the new status symbol for the Western elite.

Perceived Advantages and Consequences

Some common perceived advantages to having white or light skin across cultural groups is

the notion that there are better opportunities for marriage partners, job prospects, and overall happiness. In Africa and Asia, for instance, many men prefer their partners to have light skin. As a standard of beauty, women with light or pale skin are preferred as they are seen as more physically attractive, intelligent, and moral.

To bleach or not to bleach? That is a serious question. While some individuals in the United States and Europe prefer tanning and adding a brown or copper glow to their skin by lying in the sun or applying chemical dyes, others prefer the bleaching or whitening of their skin. Although both bleaching and tanning are problematic, there is one thing among many that can be said about tanning: In most instances, the color fades, and individuals return to lighter or white skin.

Skin bleaching/whitening can be achieved through the use of pills, creams, gels, chemical peels, injections, and laser treatments. The active ingredients used for whitening include but are not limited to hydroquinone, mercury, arsenic, alpha hydroxy acids, transamine, lemon juice, and Vitamin c. Common side effects of bleaching are itching, burning, and redness; however, there are more serious side effects linked with cancer, organ failure, and permanent disfigurement.

The National Institute of Health identifies the substance hydroquinone as a possible carcinogen that has been shown to cause cancer in rats and is linked to a skin-disfiguring condition called ochronosis that results in darkening and thickening of the skin with occasional grayish spots. Bleaching creams containing mercury used for long periods of time are hazardous to one's health because mercury accumulates in the cells of the body and can cause poisoning. Too much mercury exposure can lead to mental illness, liver damage, and kidney failure.

Economic Impact

Even the damaging health effects that are caused by skin bleaching do not slow demand for pills, potions, topical products, chemical peels, or laser treatments. Skin bleaching/whitening is big business in Asian countries like China, Korea, Japan, and India, and African countries like Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria. This industry also boasts huge profits in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. In Asia alone, analysts predict that the skin bleaching industry is expected to grow to \$10 billion by 2015.

- skin
- whiteness
- mercury
- beauty
- color
- cosmetics
- Paris

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See Also

- [Brazilian Bikini Wax](#)
- [Human Hair Weaving](#)

- [Tanning](#)
- [Tattoos](#)

Further Readings

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