



## **Why do women bleach? Understanding the rationale behind skin bleaching and the influence of media in promoting skin bleaching**

Authors: Oberiri D. Apuke  
Submitted: 31. December 2017  
Published: 31. December 2017  
Affiliation: Department of Mass Communication, Taraba State University, Jalingo.  
Languages: English  
Keywords: dvertisement, high status, skin bleaching, the entertainment industry, Women.

# JOSHA

[josh.org](http://josh.org)

**Journal of Science,  
Humanities and Arts**

JOSHA is a service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content

**Why do women bleach? Understanding the rationale behind skin bleaching and the influence of media in promoting skin bleaching: A narrative review**

**Oberiri Destiny Apuke**

Department of Mass Communication, Taraba State University, Jalingo, PMB  
1167, Nigeria

Email: [apukedestiny@gmail.com](mailto:apukedestiny@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

This paper demonstrates the rationale behind skin bleaching and the influence of media in promoting skin bleaching. A narrative literature review was adopted as the design. Data sources included Google Scholar, Google, and the Scopus. The narrative review was conducted from July 2017 to November 2017. This study revealed that women engage in skin lightening because light skin is associated with higher status, privilege, and beauty, thus, women feel the need to bleach their skin to look beautiful and attract high-status mates. In the entertainment industry, music videos project white skin ladies more than the black ones. Thus, corporations manipulate audiences through advertising, making people believe that with lighter skin, they have more chances to succeed. Evidence from this paper demonstrates that the entertainment industry only portrays the “good” part of skin bleaching, completely hiding the dangerous part of it.

Keywords: Advertisement, high status, skin bleaching, the entertainment industry, Women.

## Introduction and background

The whiteness of the skin is considered as important cultures element in constructing female beauty worldwide (Li, Min, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008). This is evident particularly in parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Obuekwe et. al., 2004). In this region, the culture of bleaching has become common among black Africans (Yetunde, 2010). It is no longer news that every lady wants to look good, attractive and beautiful. Therefore, the practice of beautification has become the other of the day.

The practice of beautification has gone beyond tempering with specific parts of the body but the whole body which is an act of changing one's skin to look lighter and attractive. Olumide (2006) inferred that "skin bleaching has taken over all other patterns of body beautification and thus making it complex to define the art of beauty (in the modern world) without mentioning the concept and practice of skin bleaching". Skin bleaching can be considered to be a process of permanent or temporary alteration of the outer (uppermost) layer of the skin, otherwise known as epidemics (Andrew, 2007). In the same vein, Adeleye (2007) views skin bleaching as the purposeful lightening of the skin, which is most common through the use of different substance or methods (See Fig 1).



Fig 1: Skin bleaching (Nwaeze, 2017)

Furthermore, Olumide (2006) identified the constituency of skin bleaching creams as including those that contained hydroquinone or ammoniated mercury. This implies that skin bleaching involves removal of the upper layer of one's skin through the application of creams that contains chemicals. It is the permanent or temporary changing of a person's complexion through the rubbing of various creams that is capable of changing the skin. This practice could be carried out three or two times a day depending on the individual and the level of effectiveness he/she wants the certain cream to perform.

Adebayo (2008) remarked that skin bleaching practice cuts across all ages, races, beliefs, and ideologies. Even the white race that might claim an advantage over others still engage in skin bleaching, probably as a method of maintaining their body colour. Nevertheless, the

young female adolescents have been identified as most prone to skin bleaching practice. The issue of bleaching has become the other of the day most especially among the female gender. One may, therefore, ask the reasons behind such attitude. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to demonstrate through a narrative review the reasons behind skin bleaching, and the influence of the media in shaping the female gender towards skin bleaching.

### *Theoretical framework*

#### Social learning theory

The Social Learning Theory was propounded by Albert Bandura. The theory suggests that much learning takes place through observing the behaviour of others (Anaeto, Onabanjo, and Osifeso, 2008). Bandura (1986) proposed that individuals develop general behaviour and attitudes by modelling the behaviour of others. Individuals learn or model behaviour, values, attitudes, and skills through the observation of other individuals, or through observations of electronic, print media and new media.

The theory suggests that a lot of learning takes place through observation first, prior to doing it personally. Thus, observing the behaviour of others influence adolescents' behaviour. Therefore, through exposure to an advertisement on Television, Print, Internet which projects fair skin ladies, women perception, and attitude is affected making them believe that a fair skin person is more acceptable in the society. Social Learning Theory recognizes that much of human behaviours are learned through watching other people. Accordingly, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) remarked that youths are affected once they are exposed to the media. Such exposure leads to change in knowledge, attitude, and behaviour. By implication, female youths and women tend to imitate their fellow that engages in bleaching as well as the media which projects light skin ladies as the most appropriately accepted in the society. As the theory suggest, the more a person is exposed to certain behaviours the more he/she tends to copy them. The advent of social media has made it easier for women to get exposed to various adverts that projects light skin female advertisers, therefore, their perception is influenced into believing that lightening of the skin is a good practice.

### *Aim, objectives and article structure*

The main thrust of this paper is to demonstrate through a narrative review the reasons behind skin bleaching, and the influence of the media in shaping the female gender towards skin bleaching. As set out in (Fig. 1), this paper is divided into four main sections describing the introduction and background, methodology, results/discussion, and conclusion.

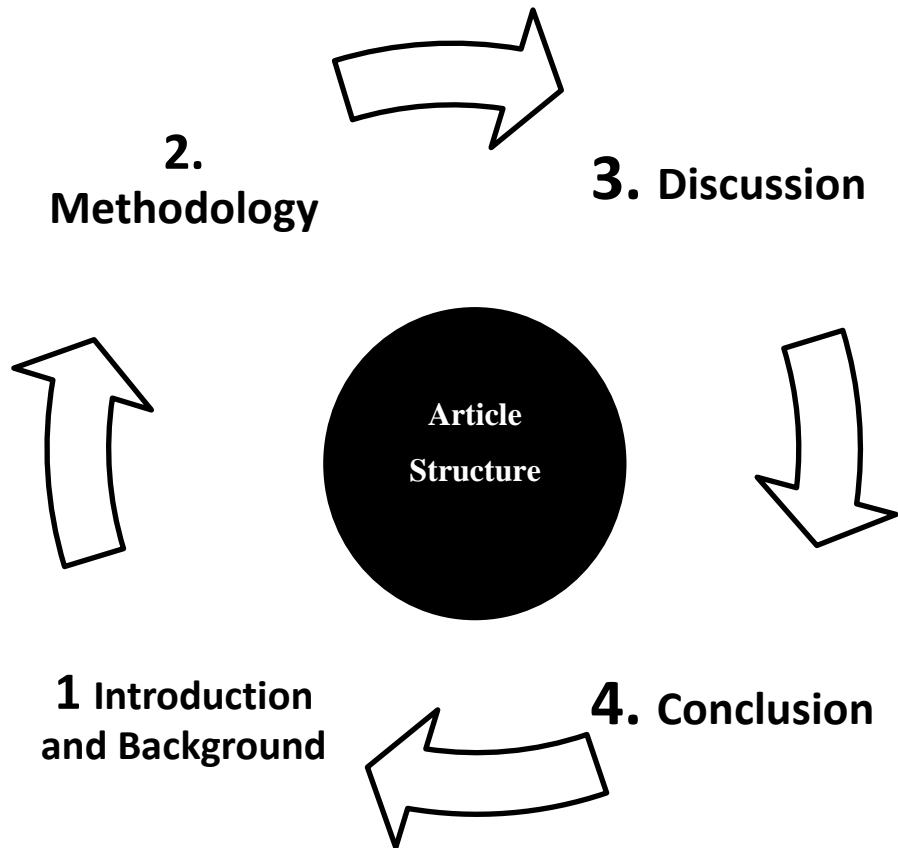


Figure 1: Paper Structure

## **Methodology**

### *Design, searching procedure, and keywords*

This study made use of narrative literature analysis method. The review was undertaken from July 2017 to November 2017. A systematically searched format was used to retrieve literature from the following database sources: Google, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Search words and phrases included skin toning, media influence, skin bleaching, history of skin toning and bleaching, and reasons for skin toning.

### *Study selection procedure*

Priority was given to online peer-reviewed journals; however, depending mainly on simple electronic searches of databases was not that easy, thus, other sources such as books/book chapters, and print journals were also utilized. There was no restriction on article publication dates. The “snowball” method was equally utilized which involves scanning the references of retrieved articles for additional relevant material and earlier studies. The selection was based on careful consideration of the title and the abstract that are related the subject matter. All the articles that were not related to skin toning and bleaching, media influence on skin bleaching were excluded.

## **Results and discussion**

As of July 2017, the initial search results yielded about 62 references, which is related to the work on a closer look, but on an advanced screening only 19 was found more related and used for this narrative review. The main reason for using the included references was because they covered the exact subject matter.

### *Brief history of skin toning and bleaching*

The first archaeological evidence of skin bleaching according to Adeleye (2007) was found in Ancient Egypt around 4000 BC. Similarly, a growing body of research reported that the art of skin bleaching with Kohl and Henna have long ago been recorded in North Africa. In the slave-trade era, it was discovered that the slave masters (Europeans) had their skin affected by long exposure to sun, prompting them to adopt various methods (skin bleaching) that brought improvement to their skin (Adeleye, 2007; Andrew, 2007).

Durosaro, Ajiboye, and Oniye (2012) submit that in Nigeria, the history of skin bleaching may be traced to the period when the race first appeared on the face of the country. Such initial contact could have created awareness about people with a lighter complexion. Hence, the reason for the contact would be the slave trade dispensation and another commercial bloc. However, the method and degrees at which skin bleaching was practice in those days would definitely be the difference from the present. Skin bleaching, which resorts to the artificial removal of the topmost layer of the skin, could be done in different styles. Irrespective of the means by which the practice is been carried out, the part of the body that is bleached suggests the type or the pattern of skin bleaching. Olumide (2006) submits that some forms of skin bleaching region include the face, upperparts, lower parts and private (sexual) parts.

## Reasons for skin toning and bleaching

The reason for choosing which part to bleach the most depends on the individual. Fokuo (2009) submits that “women engage in skin lightening because light skin is associated with higher status, privilege, and beauty, women feel the need to bleach their skin to look beautiful and attract high-status mates”. Other reasons why women indulge in skin bleaching is prostitution i.e to attract opposite sex. This implies that men are more attracted to white women than black women (See Fig 2).



*Look how men flock around*  
the girl with the clear, bright, Nadinola-light complexion

If you want to be pretty and popular, begin with your skin. There is no beauty secret more important than a clear, bright NADINOLA-light complexion. Don't let dull, dark skin rob you of romance. Don't let oiliness, big pores, blackheads cheat you of charm. Don't let a poor complexion make you look lots older than you are. For a change of face, try NADINOLA Bleaching Cream! Nothing—absolutely nothing—will improve your complexion so many ways, so fast!

Nadinola contains wonder-working A-M! This remarkable medicated ingredient of NADINOLA penetrates the pores—works deep down within the skin to brighten and lighten it, combat blackheads and externally caused pimples. Soon your skin feels cleansed and cleared, fresh and fascinating, glowing and glamorous. Your friends will say you look years younger!

There are two types of NADINOLA. Buy whichever suits your skin—with our absolute guarantee of satisfaction. Nadinola, Paris, Tennessee.

**NADINOLA**  
BLEACHING CREAM

**FOR OILY SKIN:** Nadinola For Oily is a specially formulated, lightweight skin beauty cream of the same type. 2oz. net \$7.25

**FOR DRY SKIN:** The original Nadinola is enriched with fine cosmetics oils to restore dryness. 2oz. net \$7.25

Fig 2: A wide believe that light skin attracts-

[http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/vieilles\\_annonces/4040407462/](http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/vieilles_annonces/4040407462/)

Even in the workplace sometimes white skin ladies are preferred to dark skin ladies. Hunter (2002) elaborates that people who have lighter skin have more chances regarding educational attainment, income, and spousal status. By implication, women bleach because they believe that white skin color attracts spouse, income, and social status. Additionally, Akerele (2006) highlighted other reasons why people bleach their skin such as to establish a relationship, eradicate racial discrimination, deal with an inferiority complex, affect body modification, achieve emancipation from slavery, and promote prostitution and fashion. Durosaro et al. (2012) study on the perception of skin bleaching among female students demonstrates that most highly considered factor is the belief that skin bleaching helps female to get desired male partners because they (the girl) become attractive and appealing. The young girls



(respondents) equally perceived that skin bleaching is a practice which enhances success and self-concept. By implication, men tend to show more interest in light complexion ladies. Because of the need for young women to get attached to a man for the purpose of marriage they do everything possible including bleaching their skin to look more attractive. The unmarried women are not the only ones engaging in bleaching, the married women also engage in skin bleaching with a strong belief that doing so will help them sustain their marriages.

#### *Media influence on skin bleaching*

The issue of skin toning has become a usual practice among the female gender. Female youths want to look beautiful and fair, thereby making them rub various skin tone cream. The propagation of beauty creams on different advertisement has affected female psychological preference for creams, most skin toning adverts on social media show only the positive aspect of skin toning neglecting the negative, and this, in turn, persuades the female gender to indulge in either skin bleaching or toning as the case may be.

The practice of bleaching was initially reported among adult members of the society, but a change is occurring which involves larger number most especially among the female adolescent group. Adebayo (2008) observes that there is high incidence rate of cosmetic skin bleaching among young adults in the urban centers. Similarly, Adeleye (2007) found that in Mali, 25% of the country's population practice skin bleaching while in Senegal up to 52% prevalence was observed.

Evidence from a study demonstrate that on social media such as Facebook, Twitter one encounters countless cosmetic advertisements for make-up, hair-enhancing shampoos and conditioners, anti-wrinkle creams, skin firming lotions, face creams that reduce dark spots and even out the skin tone, sunless tan lotions and sprays, hair dyes, hair relaxers, and other items that are all targeted towards women (Swain, 2012).

In the entertainment industry, music videos project white skin ladies more than the black ones. For instance, most advertisement prefers to use a white skin lady than a black one (Swain, 2012). According to Verma (2010), corporations manipulate audiences through advertising, making people believe that with lighter skin, they have more chances to succeed (See Fig 3).



Fig 3: Light skin advertisement-

<https://tr.pinterest.com/pin/129408189269164041/?lp=true>

They do that neglecting the negative aspect of skin bleaching which could be detrimental to the skin, making the skin decay and make it even smell. Evidence from studies demonstrates that the entertainment industry only portrays the “good” part of skin bleaching, completely dismissing the dangerous part of it (Fokuo, 2009; Charles, 2003). In fact, skin bleaching can be very detrimental to one’s health and well-being. Continuous application of skin bleaching creams can cause skin cancer or acne, or lead the skin to lose its elasticity, meaning skin with more wrinkles.

As reported in a study, music media associate light skin with high status and confidence (Fokuo, 2009). This corroborates with Thompson and Keith (2001: 339) postulation which states that “the media has encouraged greater negative self-appraisals for dark skinned women.” Women who have dark skin tend to have lower self-esteem, thus they bleach their skin to feel they are beautiful, which raises their self-esteem (Fokuo, 2009). This implies that a lot of media artist bleach their skin and encourages their fans to do so thereby making them copy their stars.

## Conclusion

The main thrust of this paper is to demonstrate through a narrative review the reasons behind skin bleaching, and the influence of the media in shaping the female gender towards skin bleaching. The study discovered that the first archaeological evidence of skin bleaching according was found in Ancient Egypt around 4000 BC. Furthermore, the review revealed

that Women engage in skin lightening because light skin is associated with higher status, privilege, and beauty, women feel the need to bleach their skin to look beautiful and attract high-status mates. Other reasons why people bleach their skin is to “establish a relationship, eradicate racial discrimination, deal with an inferiority complex, affect body modification, achieve emancipation from slavery, and promote prostitution and fashion.

In the entertainment industry, music videos project white skin ladies more than the black ones. Thus, corporations manipulate audiences through advertising, making people believe that with lighter skin, they have more chances to succeed. They do that neglecting the negative aspect of skin bleaching which could be detrimental to the skin, making the skin decay and make it even smell. Therefore, the constant portrayal of fairer and beautiful ladies on media influence the younger female generation to emulate and bleach their skin.

## References

- Adebayo, B.S. (2008). *Incidence, consequences, and attitude towards cosmetic-skin bleaching as expressed by secondary school students in Lagos, Nigeria*. An M.Ed project submitted to the University of Ilorin, Nigeria.
- Adeleye, G. (2007) *Youth crime watch in Nigeria*. Retrieved on August 6th, 2017 from [www.oycwu/htm](http://www.oycwu/htm).
- Akerele, .A. (2006). The browning consensus. *Observer Teenage Writer*. February 18th, 2006.
- Anaeto, S. G., Onabanjo, S. O., & Osifeso, B. J. (2008). *Models and theories of communication*. Maryland: African Renaissance Books Incorporated.
- Andrew, M.A. (2007). Epidemiological survey on the cosmetic use of bleaching agents by the women in Jamaica. *Dermatol Venerol* 120 (12), 870-3.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall.
- Charles, C. A. (2003). Skin bleaching, self-hate, and black identity in Jamaica. *Journal of Black Studies*, 33(6), 711-728
- Durosaro, A. I., Ajiboye, S. K., & Oniye, A. O. (2012). Perception of skin bleaching among female secondary school students in Ibadan metropolis, Nigeria. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 3(7), 40-46.

- Fokuo, J. K. (2009). The lighter side of marriage: Skin bleaching in post-colonial Ghana. *Institute for African Studies Research Review*, 25(1), 47-66.
- Hoffner, C., & Buchanan, M. (2005). Young adults' wishful identification with television characters: The role of perceived similarity and character attributes. *Media psychology*, 7(4), 325-351.
- Hunter, M. L. (2002). "If you're light you're alright" light skin color as social capital for women of color. *Gender & society*, 16(2), 175-193.
- Li, E. P., Min, H. J., & Belk, R. W. (2008). Skin lightening and beauty in four Asian cultures. *ACR North American Advances*, 35, 444-449.
- Nwaeze, A. (2017). Pros and cons of skin lightening, toning, and bleaching. <https://buzznigeria.com/skin-lightening-toning-bleaching/>
- Obuekwe, I. F., Uche, M. O., & Pharm, M. (2008). An epidemiological survey on the presence of toxic chemicals in soaps and cosmetics used by adolescent female students from a Nigerian University. *Readings in Social Research Methods*, 86.
- Olumide, Y. M. (2006). Effect of skin bleaching on Nigerian men and women. *International Journal of Dermatology*; 67; 65-66.
- Swain, F. O. (2012). Negotiating beauty ideals: Perceptions of beauty among black female university students. (Thesis). Georgia State University. Retrieved at [http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/anthro\\_theses/65](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/anthro_theses/65)
- Thompson, M. S., & Keith, V. M. (2001). The blacker the berry: Gender, skin tone, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. *Gender & Society*, 15(3), 336-357.
- Verma, S. B. (2010). Obsession with light skin—shedding some light on the use of skin lightening products in India. *International journal of dermatology*, 49(4), 464-465.
- Yetunde, M.O. (2010) Use of Skin Lightening Creams. *British Medical Journal*, 341, c6102.