

Final Exam – Spring 2025

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In many parts of the world, having a lighter and brighter skin is still considered to be more beautiful and successful than having a darker skin tone. Even in Canada, where many skin

whitening products are banned due to health-related concerns, these whitening creams are still in demand and can be found in most of the local stores. This clearly shows that the problem is not only about the available beauty products but also about the deep social and cultural pressures prevailing in the society. In the women studies course, we learned that body image is not just about individual choices or preferences. Powerful systems of race, gender, and colonialism that define what is considered to be beautiful or desirable is what in real life shapes the choices of people. These ideologies are further strengthened through media, advertisements, and cultural expectations that normally spread the concept that lighter skin is better. This message deeply affects how people see themselves and their bodies, which will pressurize them to use the whitening products to be seen as accepted or as a “normal” woman. In this paper, I will argue that skin whitening products still exist and are used because of the harmful beauty standards set up by racism, colonialism, and gender inequality. Using an intersectional feminist lens, I will show how these pressures affect women of color and will explore what societal changes are needed to ensure that no one ever feels the need to lighten their skin to be accepted or successful.

Using beauty products to lighten one’s skin is not just about a beauty practice. It has a long history that is tied to racism and colonialism. As Carla Rice explains in *Through the Mirror of Beauty Culture*, that for many years white skin was seen as a sign of high status and power. In the past, lighter skin symbolized that she was rich enough to stay indoors and didn’t have to do manual labor in the sun (Rice, 2018, pg. 439). However, during the time of colonization, this idea became more harmful. In many colonized countries, white skin came to mean that the person is smart, powerful, and beautiful, while dark skin was associated with ignorance, dirtiness, and inferiority. European scientists tried to make colonization and slavery seem

acceptable by spreading racist ideas that said people with white skin were better than others (Rice, 2018, pg. 439). These beliefs did not disappear even after colonization ended, and became part of the modern beauty culture. Today, in many parts of the world including Asia, Africa, Canada, lighter skin is still seen as more beautiful and respectable. For example, in the BBC article “I scarred my six children by using skin-lightening creams”, a Nigerian mother explains that she used some harmful creams on her children because of the social expectations, and she thought that having light skin would help them to get accepted in her family as well as in the society (BBC News, 2025). Her story reflects how racism and colonialism continue to influence the choices of racialized women. She did not just do it to make her children look good, but she truly believed that lighter skin would protect them from racism and will help them to succeed. This is indeed the cruel reality of internalized oppression. Feminist critical race scholar Amina Mire calls this idealization as the “globalization of white western beauty ideals,” which means that the beauty standards created in the West are now spread everywhere through media, ads and global companies (Rice, 2018, pg. 439).

One important reason why skin whitening products are still used is because girls are taught from a very young age that their looks are the most important part of who they are. This idea comes from gender socialization, which means learning what society expects from boys and girls differently. As Lipkin says, many parents believe that girls naturally like dolls and makeup items while boys like truck and tools. But the fact is that these beliefs are shaped by the toys and messages children are given and are not made by their nature (Lipkin, 2009, Pg. 17). Girls are often surrounded by toys, clothes, and media that tell them that being pretty and beautiful is what matters most. Lipkin states that a study revealed that 90% of toys that are made for girls

prioritized beauty, shopping, or dating. Some games even gave rewards for putting on the most makeup or buying the most beauty items fastly (Lipkin, 2009, Pg. 20). These messages teach girls that they need to look in a certain way which is generally white, thin, and stylish to be valued in the society. As these girls grow up, these messages make many of them feel pressured to use different skin whitening creams to fit into these narrow beauty standards.

Additionally, capitalism often works with sexism and racism to sell products that keep unfair systems active. Skin-lightening creams are a good example for this. Big beauty companies aim their products at women of color by spreading the idea that having lighter skin means you are more beautiful and loved. Skin whitening creams are advertised with promises like “whiter skin in 14 days”, “total fairness”, etc., making fairness seem like the ultimate key to a better life. These ads are actually playing on the emotions and insecurities of people to make profits. In the CBC article “Whiter Skin in 14 days: Tracking the illegal sale of skin-whitening creams in Canada” reporters found that many of the creams containing dangerous levels of mercury, hydroquinone, and topical corticosteroids were still sold in the stores across Canada, mainly in areas with many South Asian, African or Caribbean people (CBC News, 2020). Even though these products are legally banned they are still available in market because people are coming back to buy them again and again. In the Global News video, Ivan Litvinov, who is the Director of Dermatology at McGill University discloses that if a woman becomes pregnant and continues to use large amounts of tretinoin or hydroquinone creams, it could even potentially harm the developing fetus (Global News, 2023). It was also warned that many of these creams contain mercury and other harmful steroids that can lead to serious long-term health conditions, like kidney damage or severe skin problems (CBC, 2020). What we need to actually think here is that

the demand is not increasing by its own, this demand is created over many years of racism, marketing, and other pressures from the society. This demand is not decreasing because women are taught to believe that if they lighten their skin, they will be more accepted and respected. They are overlooking the side effects of these creams because of the deep societal pressure to look in a standardized way. What is even more dangerous is that women using these products may not always have full knowledge of the dangers, especially when the creams are sold without proper labels or warnings.

The pressure to use skin lightening products is also strongly influenced by marketing strategies that links whiter skin to social acceptance and beauty. Amine Mire, an assistant professor of sociology tracks the advertisements of skin whitening products from early 19th century (CBC News, 2020). Products such as Fair & Lovely have been marketed to women promising to give them a desirable appearance. The product even included a fairness meter as a promotional plan which helped to track the progress of their skin tone. Such strategies help to create an image in the consumers that the product will really help them in gaining better complexion. Fair & Lovely is owned by Unilever, a MNC that owns many brands including Dove. Though Dove's "real beauty" concept and "shattering beauty stereotypes" campaigns promoted self-acceptance for all skin types, brands like Fair & Lovely still continue to push the idea that lighter skin is better. These types of mixed messaging create confusion and stress women to accept the unrealistic beauty ideals (CBC News, 2020).

In the article "Flipping the script: The Dangerous Bodies of Girls of Color", Venus E. Evans-Winters explains how Black girls are treated as threats in schools because their bodies do not meet the expectations based on white, middle-class norms. The youth researchers in her study

revealed that school officials frequently questioned their hair, clothing, behavior, etc., considering Black girlhood as inappropriate and aggressive. For example, school staff might call them “ghetto” or say that they are a distraction because of their looks and skin color. This shows that girls of color grow up learning that their natural appearance is seen as a problem (Evans-Winters, 2017, pg. 418-419). This forces them to try different products to whiten their skin thinking that it would save them from discrimination and to help them fit into the society that values lighter skin. It must be noted that their stress or tension to change their natural features like skin color comes from intensive ideas about beauty that are based on race. These ideas are strengthened by media, schools, family members, and communities. Being a woman of color I could say that this is not a personal choice but it is a forced option made due to years of societal messages and racism that make girls feel that their natural beauty is not enough.

Another important reason behind people using skin whitening products is the influence of media. As feminist scholars have pointed out, the media plays a central role in patriarchal, capitalist societies, where it often seeks to control women through body insecurity (Dhillon & Dhawan, 2011, pg. 546). This continuous portrayal of lighter skinned women as the standard of beauty and success creates a sense of inferiority for women with darker skin tones. Media platforms including social medias, advertisements and television shows reinforces this idea by showing fair skinned models and celebrities that makes women of color to strive for lighter complexion in order to achieve the beauty standard. As the article notes, “It’s innate in every woman to compare herself to the woman sitting next to her” (Dhillon & Dhawan, 2011, pg. 546). This tendency to compare oneself to others is increased by media’s representation of beauty which

makes it almost impossible for darker skin toned women to feel confident in their natural appearance.

So, in order to stop this harmful cycle of using skin-lightening products, I believe we need to take more initiatives more than simply banning these products. We must first change the systems that define beauty. This includes challenging racism, media representation, advertising, fashion, and at the same time teaching kids to appreciate diversity. Children should be taught to find real beauty in all skin tones which helps to fight stereotypes, making space for new ideas about the concept of beauty. The community programs, medias, schools and other departments should highlight dark skin toned women in powerful roles so that it will break the connection between lighter skin and success. Also, in medias, advertisements, and magazines more people of color should be given chances to represent themselves and to celebrate their natural features. Another problem is that sometimes women bring each other down instead of supporting one another. Dhillon and Dhawan (2011) explains that this happens when women criticize each other based on looks which is very common in schools and online platforms (Dhillon & Dhawan, 2011, Pg.547). This should be changed and women must promote and support each other which also helps to break the cycle of comparison and insecurity. Similarly, social media also has a big role in how girls see themselves. We should teach girls about the effects of social media on body image starting at a young age. This education should begin when girls are around 11-12 years old, as that's when they start using social media and goes through physical changes. Schools, parents, and friends can help by teaching girls how to analyze the photos and messages that are seen in online platforms. For example, teaching "social media literacy" in schools can help them to understand that many of the beauty standards they see in social medias are exaggerated

(Papageorgiou, Fisher, & Cross, 2022, pg. 7). This helps them to develop a healthier body image and feel better about themselves from a young age.

Thus, skin whitening products exist due to the harmful beliefs about beauty that are tied to racism, colonialism, and gender inequality. These beliefs are spread through media, advertisements, and public expectations which makes women feel that lighter skin is more acceptable. By looking at these issues through an intersectional feminist approach, we can understand and identify the need to change the way society views beauty and identity. To stop women from feeling stressed to alter their appearance, we must together break the systems that support these unrealistic beauty standards.

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