

# The Derogatory Representations of the Skin Bleaching Products Sold in Harlem

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## Abstract

This study examines the contents of the images on the labels of 45 skin bleaching products sold in Harlem, New York, and whether or not these images were derogatory. This study is informed by social representation theory. A t-test was used to determine the difference in images (derogatory and non-derogatory) between the general American stores' products (n=12) and an African beauty supply store's products (n=33). Content analyses of the data on the labels were conducted to understand the content of the representations. There were no significant differences in images on the labels of the products between the stores,  $t(43) = 0.86, p > 0.05$ . The overwhelming majority of the images (95.6%) were derogatory images which devalued black skin. The contents of these images suggested that lightening the skin would not only make the user white but would also make their skin healthy, soft and glowingly beautiful. These images suggest that lightening the black physicality is socially acceptable because white skin is the superior and sought after ideal unlike black skin which is inferior. The persistence and resilience of the same images over many decades, and their contemporary manifestations on the labels of various skin products, which are manufactured overseas and sold in different stores in the United States, suggest that they are uniform, rigid and coercive hegemonic representations that drive the sale of skin bleaching products in Harlem.

**Keywords:** Harlem, African Americans, derogatory representations, skin bleaching, colorism

## Introduction

A Detroit public television announcement, aired November 14, 1968, showed a young, worried looking African-American woman staring intently in the mirror, and feverishly applying skin bleaching cream to her black face. The narrator's voice, in a derisive tone, said "free your mind," which suggested that the woman was bleaching her skin because of mental slavery (Kardiner & Ovessey, 1951). This announcement, which was aired during a commercial break of the *Colored People Time* television show, took a satirical look at the prevalence of skin bleaching in the African-American community. The purpose of this article is to understand the contents of the representations of the skin bleaching products sold in the African-American community.

Skin bleaching, which is prevalent in the African-American community (Hall, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1999; Hoshaw, Zimmerman & Menter, 1985), has a long history in the United States (de la Pena, 2005; Phillips, 2004; Porter, 2006; Williams, 2006). Historically, blackness has been devalued in the United States. The alteration of the black physicality is related to African-American subjugation during colonialism and slavery, the continued racial discrimination and segregation during Black Reconstruction, the Jim Crow and the Civil Rights eras (Hone, Hine & Harrold, 2006; Schaefer, 2009), and the manifestation of the contemporary discrimination faced by African-Americans driven by White racism and colorism (Dyson, 1997; Hunter, 2007; Schaefer, 2009; West, 2001). However, very little research has been done on the images used to market the skin bleaching products sold in the African-American community and how these images derogate African-Americans. This article is a modest start to address this paucity of research.

I commence this article with a brief review of social representation theory (SRT), which deals with the social images that structure people's reality and guide their behavior. This review is followed by an outline of the ideology of colorism. From there, I go on to discuss skin bleaching, one of the contemporary manifestations of colorism. Next, I outline my method and results, followed by the discussion in which I use SRT to understand the contents of the colorized images of skin bleaching products sold in Harlem. I now turn to a synopsis of SRT, which is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

## Social Representations

The social production and diffusion of knowledge is germane to the understanding of the social world. Moscovici (1976) traced the movement and representation of psychoanalysis from the clinicians' offices, to social acceptance among the various social groups in France. This research was a precursor to developing a psychology of knowledge (Moscovici, 1976), which was informed by the question "How is scientific knowledge transformed into common, ordinary or spontaneous knowledge?" (Moscovici & Markova, 1998, 375). Moscovici found that there was mutual transformation between the members of the various social groups and the knowledge they acquired of psychoanalysis in France (Moscovici, 1976). Therefore, knowledge acquired in a social context is at the heart of social psychology because it facilitates our understanding of how new ideas seep into all areas of life through social acceptance. People construct representations of the ideas or images that are unfamiliar thereby making these images familiar and common. Therefore, the social production of knowledge is driven by communication and representations. Knowledge is variable which means representations are dynamic. The represented knowledge, both scientific and non-scientific, takes many forms depending upon the context (Moscovici, 2001; Thommen, 2007).

Wagner (1996) defines social representation as "a socially constructed and organized set of beliefs, opinions, symbols, metaphors and images of socially relevant objects, which plays a vital role in constructing the immediate everyday environment of the people by virtue of its consensuality and its practical implications" (247). Hall (1997) defines cultural representations as signifying practices operating through the medium of language in which meanings are produced and exchanged thereby allowing people to make sense of things. Milgram (1984) also argues that there are two meanings of representations, (a) how the social world is represented by individuals and (b), how the notions of shared meanings are understood.

Moscovici (1988) also identifies three types of representations. There is the polemical representation which arises from social conflict in which there is controversy within a community or group and the members of the community, as a collective, do not share these representations. There is the emancipated representation in which various subgroups that interact within a community share

their own version of the representation. There is the hegemonic representation which is a widely and deeply held representation by a highly structured community or group and this representation is coercive and uniform.

SRT amalgamates the individual and the world because thinking is social. The interaction of individuals creates a structure of common references, which guides how people think about the world. Representations structure how people talk and think about objects that are important to them thereby creating reality for these individuals. Representations of meanings operate in the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind. Objectification and anchoring are two key processes in SRT that explains how representations enter consciousness. During the process of objectification the objects which are unfamiliar or new forms a symbolic core through integration which leads to the projection of images. In the process of anchoring, unfamiliar or new objects are classified and placed into the mental sets of people which facilitates the naming and categorization of the objects (Daanen, 2009; Philogene, 2000)

There are representations held by the majority group that influences its members not to mix with stigmatized minorities in the society (Roncarati, Perez, Ravenna & Navarro, 2009). Representations have a history because they persist over time and guide the behavior of people in their cultural context. On this trajectory, the represented history sometimes legitimizes the inequality of the status quo by negating the historical grievances of minorities (Sibley, Liu, Duckitt & Khan, 2008). However, representations of history are socially organized because this history also allows people to come to terms with the past by highlighting socially relevant courses of action (Tileaga, 2009).

In the societal discourse over courses of action, the arguments of authorities are replaced by the authority of arguments. This replacement occurs because there is consensus and variance among social groups where old arguments are contested by new ones in the public arena (Jovchelovitch, 2001). People who are debating an issue will take perspectives that have some commonalities, not because there is consensus among them, but because the debaters have shared knowledge about the issue. The positions taken by the debaters are the products of their socialization, belief systems and the context (Clemence, 2001). In various contexts, there are representations of identity which suggests there are shared answers to questions of *Who am I?* and *Who are we?*

Representations provide culturally appropriate answers to these questions. These shared answers construct a socially represented selfhood because the self, and the images which inform it, are socio-culturally situated (Oyserman & Marcus, 1998).

The labels “brown sugar” and “redbones” are examples of skin color representations in the African-American community. Although there are disagreements over the high status accorded to brown skin in the African-American community, the label “brown sugar,” for example, has shared meaning and understanding during dialogic interaction within the African-American community. The representation “brown sugar” suggests that African-American females with brown skin are sweet. African-Americans respond to the “brown sugar” image positive or negatively based on their values and belief systems. The responses of African-Americans indicate that the representation of “sweet brown skin” influences their behavior. The “sweetness” accorded to brown skin is informed by the ideology of colorism within the African-American community (Blay, 2010; Cross, 1991; Hunter, 2002, 1998, 2007).

## **Colorism**

Colorism is the ideology which privileges light skin people in the American society over dark skin people (Hunter, 2007). This complexion ideology is prevalent in racist post-colonial societies like the United States, where the White majority dominates African-Americans in particular and minority groups in general (Schaefer, 2009). The source of this complexion ideology is racism, which is the ideology of racial superiority whose adherents deny people they deem inferior their rights and opportunities because of their race (Hunter, 2007; Schaefer, 2007). Colorism is prevalent in the African-American community where there is Black-on-Black discrimination (Berry, 1988). Therefore, the diversity of shades of black makes a social difference in the African-American community (Blay, 2010; Charles, 2003a; Cross, 1991; Seltzer & Smith, 1991).

There are many manifestations of the complexion ideology in the United States such as the attractiveness ratings among African-Americans in their interpersonal relationships which in turn influences their mate selection preferences (Ross, 1997). One study of African-American females finds that the majority believe that African-American men find light skin women most attractive (Bond & Cash, 1992). Light skin African-American women are more

likely to marry high status partners, earn a higher income and attain higher levels of education than dark skin African-American women. These differences suggest that colorism stratifies the lives of African-American women (Hunter, 1998) and gives the light skinned women social capital (Hunter, 2002).

The influence of complexion crosses gender because light skin African-Americans in general tend to have spouses with higher socio-economic status compared to dark skin African-Americans (Hughes & Hertel, 1990). Therefore, skin tone operates as a “black tax” against dark skinned African-Americans in the United States because it leads to social stratification in terms of parents’ socio-economic status, occupation and income (Keith & Herring, 1991; Stephen, 2008). Similarly, skin complexion is a greater predictor of employer attraction to a potential employee than the employee’s level of education and prior work experience (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). There is an intergenerational transmission of colorism as African-American children hold stereotypical memories of skin color that include negative images about their racial group based on skin color ratings (Averhart & Bigler, 1997). A similar attitude exists among adolescents in the personal identity domain where there is a relationship between their satisfaction with their skin color and their self-esteem (Robinson & Ward, 1995). The impact of skin color differences also influences the self-esteem of African-American adults (Alford, 1997; Coard, Breland & Raskin, 2001; Daniel, 2001; Wade, 1996). Threats to the African-American sense of self and the evaluation of self occur because complexion dogma circulates negative images about dark skin which influence the life chances of African-Americans (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Hunter, 2007). The alteration of the black physicality through skin bleaching is one response to the disturbing reality of colorism (Charles, 2009a; Hall, 1994; Porter, 2006).

## **Skin Bleaching**

Skin bleaching, which is the use of dermatological creams, cosmetic creams and home-made products to decrease the melanin in the skin, is a global phenomenon (Charles, 2009b). Several studies have documented the occurrence of skin bleaching in the Middle East (Al-saleh & Al-Doush, 1997), Africa (Blay, 2007; de Souza, 2008), the Caribbean (Charles, 2003a, 2010b; Menke, 2002), Asia (Ashkari, 2005; Easton, 1998; Karan, 2008), Europe (Mire, 2005; Petit, et al,

2006), North America (Hall, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) and Latin America (Winders, Jones III & Higgins, 2005).

International cosmetic companies have embarked on aggressive global marketing of skin bleaching products, including the use of the internet by tapping into the racial and colorized norms and values, and the class and gender differences within White and non-White markets. L'Oreal, which is one of the largest cosmetic companies in the world, reported sales of \$14 billion in 2001 (Charles, 2010a; Mire, 2005). Some of the cosmetic ads, including some from L'Oreal, discursively equate whiteness with racial superiority and youthfulness, which suggests that white skin is marketed as the ideal for dark skinned people. Some of these products are labeled as White Perfect, Bi-White and Blanc Expert. The less dangerous skin bleaching products are marketed by cosmetic companies in Europe and Asia and the more toxic products are marketed in Africa and its Diaspora (Charles, 2010a; Mire, 2005).

There are safety concerns about the constituents of mercury and hydroquinone in skin bleaching products, which has led to the regulation of skin bleaching products with hydroquinone in the United States, Japan and Europe (Charles, 2010a; Draelos, 2007). There are a range of health problems arising from the use of skin bleaching products. Some of these are neurological problems in the peripheral and central nervous system such as irritability, memory loss, neuropathies and insomnia. Some long term users of skin bleaching products have experienced immuno-suppression and have developed tuberculosis and vulval warts. There are also reports of renal damage which requires dialysis. The sudden stopping of the practice has led to Cushings syndrome and adrenal insufficiency. There are dermatological problems such as striae atrophica, colloid milium ochronosis, scabies, cutaneous atrophy and pitch black pigmentation. Sun damages such as elastosis and sun burn have also been reported. Other reported problems are fragile skin, body odors, infectious bacterial and parasitic diseases, acne, dermatitis artefacta, melanoleucoderma, hypochromia and hyperchromia (Charles, 2010a; Ly, 2007; Mahe, Ly & Perret, 2005). The contemporary evidence suggests that skin bleaching is not just a historical phenomenon in the United States. Ochronosis-like pigmentation has been seen among African-Americans who bleach their skin (Hoshaw, Zimmerman, & Menter, 1985).

Hall, (1994, 1995a, 1995b, 2006) points to the potency of racism and its corollary colorism, which drives skin bleaching in the United States. The power

of Whites and their oppression of African-Americans, from slavery to the present, renders Whites the powerful and dominant Other. White racism thwarts the assimilation potential of African-Americans which leads to intra-psychic conflicts among the African-Americans who want to assimilate in the United States. The internal tensions experienced by these African-Americans triggers the “bleaching syndrome,” which is a systematic pattern of related behaviors that is preoccupied with benefitting from the societal status of light skin.

Phillips (2004) and Williams (2006) note that skin bleaching in the United States has a long history where White entrepreneurs have supplied skin bleaching products to the African-American community. In 1935, Fan Tan Bleaching Cream was advertised as a product that made African-American women beautiful by removing the blotches and blemishes from their skin. Customers were promised a refund if the products did not bleach their skin within one week. Similarly, Palmers Skin Success Ointment touted that it would assist African-Americans to remove their “unattractive” complexion. The Palmers Skin Success products, with their negative social images, were also marketed overseas by Valco Trading Company of Chicago Illinois. The Valco Trading Company also advertised in the *Daily Gleaner* in Jamaica during the 1950s, seeking sales representatives to sell their products (Charles, 2010a).

The historical significance of colorism in the African-American community is also highlighted by a controversial article in *Look Magazine* in 1949, written by Walter White, the Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The article, which was entitled, “How Science Conquered the Color Line,” stated that African-Americans could erase the color line by using hair straighteners, and hydroquinone to bleach their skin, and plastic surgery to alter the Negroid face. These changes would validate African-Americans and make their physicality acceptable to Whites (Porter, 2006). Several decades earlier in 1904, Dr. Henry Pancoat and his colleagues used radium and X-ray to treat African-Americans for discoid lupus, erythematosus and keloids among other ailments. Although none of the patients who underwent X-ray treatment had bleached more than a few blotches, newspaper reports from New York to Georgia to California heralded that Dr. Henry Pancoat and his colleagues had turned black skin white with the use of radium and X-ray. The alarm sounded in the news reports suggested that there was White fear in the media in particular and the society in general that

African-Americans could surpass Caucasians in Whiteness with the use of X-ray and radium (de la Pena, 2006). The foregoing reveals the pervasive influence of race and skin color and how they structure the relationship between African-Americans and Whites and the privileges and opportunities accorded to Whites and their policing of whiteness. Colorism also structured the relationships in the African American community and devalued dark skinned African-Americans by derogating and invalidating their complexion (Charles, 2010c; Hunter, 1998, 2002, 2007).

The objective of this paper is to understand the contemporary representations of the skin bleaching products sold in an African-American community in the United States. It is important to understand the content of the colorized images of the skin with which African-Americans contend and which type of stores sell products with these images. Deconstructing the contents of these images will reveal the discrimination and derogation experienced by African-Americans. Therefore, the research questions are: (1) What are the contents of the representations of the skin bleaching products sold in the African-American community? (2) Are their differences in derogatory and non-derogatory images on the labels of the products sold in American stores versus African beauty supply stores?

## **Method**

### ***Sample***

A convenience sample of 45 products was selected. Skin bleaching products were bought from a supermarket and two pharmacies (n=12) and a local African beauty supply store (n=33) in Harlem, New York. The products were purchased over a period of 14 months from March 4, 2009 to June 10, 2010 to capture the range of skin bleaching products sold in these businesses. These four businesses were selected because they are popular businesses with a large African-American customer base in Harlem. The supermarket and pharmacies were deemed “regular American stores” because they are a part of a national chain of stores that sell a wide range of products that cater to Americans generally. The local neighborhood beauty supply store was deemed an “African store” because it caters specifically to Blacks including African-Americans based on the products it sells. These two groups of stores were selected because the

regular American stores are more likely to sell products with images which derogate African-Americans (given the history and legacy of racism and colorism in the United States), compared to the African beauty supply store which caters specifically to African-Americans in particular and Blacks in general, and therefore is less likely to sell products with derogatory images of Black skin. Harlem was selected for the study because it is one of the oldest and most famous African-American communities in the northeast and is a magnet community for African-Americans from all over the United States.

### *Procedure*

**Coding:** The content of the labels of the skin bleaching products were recorded and read several times in an open-ended way (without preconceived ideas about what would be found), and the emerging themes, exemplars and representations on the labels were identified (Massey, Cameron, Ouellette & Fine, 1989). A recurring issue/idea on each label on the products was coded as a theme about skin bleaching. An exemplar is a typical statement on the label of each product. SRT was chosen because it deals with the images that are socially produced which influences people's behavior. The manufacturers of the skin bleaching products expect that the images on the labels of the products are socially shared by African-Americans so they will purchase these products. These images (which are signifying practices) are identified from the language used on the labels of the products. A representation is defined as the logical meaning-imbued statement about skin bleaching which is embedded in the content of communication on the labels of the skin bleaching products.

Derogatory and non-derogatory representations were identified. A derogatory representation is a statement on the labels that disparage or denigrate black skin by promoting white skin as the standard. A non-derogatory representation is a statement on the labels that validates or praises black skin as the standard or a label with no statements about skin complexion. The themes or issue categories and representations were coded by the author and two independent coders who were unaware of the research questions. The inter-coder agreement is .83, .86 and .89.

**Data Analysis:** The quantitative data were analyzed by t-test to determine the difference between the general American stores and the African beauty supply

store in terms of the images (derogatory and non-derogatory) on the labels of the skin bleaching products they sold. The qualitative data of the study were processed and analyzed using content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Massy, Cameron, Ouellette & Fine, 1998). The content on the product labels were read in an open-ended way and the emerging themes were documented. The data were further engaged in two ways. First, nested meanings and sub-codes within the documented data codes were sought. Second, comprehensive themes, exemplars and representations were then used to construct an organizing framework to recognize analytical patterns of convergence and divergence within the data to understand the content and social relevance to the images on the labels of the skin bleaching products.

## Results

In the total sample,  $M=1.73$ ,  $SD=.44$  for the stores and  $M=.95$ ,  $SD=.20$  for the images. The African beauty supplies store accounted for 73.3% of the products and the general American stores account for 26.7%. Some 46.7% of the products are creams of which 9.5 % of this amount are prescription drugs (Dermovate Cream and Clovate Cream), 29% of the products are soaps, 13.3% are gels, 6.6% are serums and 4.4% are lotions. Some of the brands sell all of these products. Most of the products were made in the United States (46.7%), 22.2% were made in France, 11.1% were made in Switzerland, 6.7% of the products did not display where they were manufactured, 4.5% were made in Cote d'Ivoire, 2.2% in Spain, 2.2% in Saudi Arabia, 22.2% in England and 2.2% stated Europe. The products with hydroquinone accounted for 31.1% of the sample, of which the majority of this amount (92.8%) were made in the United States.

There were no significant differences between the images on the labels of the skin bleaching products sold in the general American stores and the images on the labels of the skin bleaching products sold in the African beauty supply store,  $t(43) = 0.86$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . The overwhelming majority of the images (95.6%) were derogatory images which devalued Black skin.

Three major themes were coded from the product labels. These are: (1) the problems with black skin, (2) the range of complexions which result from skin bleaching, and (3) the resultant aesthetic and health outcomes. The labels purport that skin bleaching removes the problems associated with black skin such as dark

complexion, blemishes, impurities, brown spots and dark spots. Skin bleaching also even out the skin tone of discolored skin by removing age spots, freckles and dark complexion arising from over exposure to the sun. In addition, the labels state that skin bleaching removes minor scars, such as marks from pregnancy and the use of the birth control pills. The resulting complexions are clear skin, light skin and white skin. The aesthetic outcomes are bright skin, radiant skin, successful skin and beautiful skin. The health outcomes articulated on the labels are smooth skin, soft skin and moisturized skin. The derogatory representations were coded from the product labels based on the definition of representation outlined in the procedure section. Some of the derogatory representations that were coded from the labels of the products are “Whitening the skin beautifies it,” “Skin bleaching removes dark complexion,” “Lightening black skin removes the imperfections,” “Successful skin has light complexion without dark spots.” See Table 1 and Table 2 for more derogatory representations. These representations are derogatory because they devalue black skin. The contents of the representations suggest that black skin is dull, impure, ugly, dry, hard and rough unlike its opposite, clear, pure, pretty, moist, soft and smooth white skin.

**Table 1**  
Derogatory Images of the Skin Bleaching Products Sold in the  
African Beauty Supply Store

<b>Products</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Exemplars</b>	<b>Representations</b>
55H+ Paris	4	12.2	This soap lightens your skin, leaving it smooth and radiant	<i>Light skin is smooth and radiant</i>
Clear Fast	4	12.2	will give you that light beautiful, clear skin you have always desired.	<i>There is yearning for the beautiful light skin</i>
Rosance	4	12.3	is able to reduce pigmentary blemishes. Thanks to its whitening agents	<i>Lightening black skin removes the imperfections</i>
Sure White	3	9	Thanks to its special composition, this bleaching cream lightens the skin without irritation	<i>You will become White by lightening the skin</i>
Clair and White	3	9	This is a high quality skin bleaching lotion for hand and body	<i>Skin bleaching can make you skin clear and white</i>
Body White	2	6	lightens the complexion of all pigmentation	<i>Lightening the skin can make the body white</i>
Ami White	2	6	with is whitening complex the AMI powerful gel is the ideal response to visibly... lighten your complexion	<i>Lightening your complexion can make you white</i>
Maxi White	2	6	is a high quality lightening treatment...to fight against brown spots	<i>whitening skin via lightening protects it from brown spots</i>
Xtreme Brite	2	6	Perfecting and brighten your complexion giving it uniform radiance	<i>Light complexion is flawless and glowing</i>
Miracle Maxitone	2	6	Clarifying complexion fading soap; advance lightening cream	<i>Works miracle by lightening the skin</i>
Palmers Skin Success	2	6	Our skin lightening formula is clinically proven to remove dark spots	<i>Successful skin has light complexion without dark spots</i>
Dermovate	1	3.1	Dermovate Cream	<i>Lightens skin</i>
Clovate	1	3.1	Clovate Crema	<i>Lightens skin</i>
African Queen Beauty Cream	1	3.1	lightens, softens, smoothes, MJ yellow	<i>Beautiful African skin is soft and smooth light complexion</i>
Total (n)	33	100		

**Table 2**  
Derogatory Images of the Skin Bleaching Products Sold in the  
Pharmacies and Supermarket

<b>Products</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Exemplars</b>	<b>Representations</b>
Dr. Fred Summit Skin Whitener	2	16.8	Skin whitener tone and bleach cream; Complexion beautifier... For fading skin discoloration	<i>Whitening the skin beautifies it</i>
Nadinola Skin fade cream	2	16.8	Fade dark spots for a more even skin tone. Moisturizes and conditions your skin leaving it soft, smooth and radiant	<i>Lightening the skin improves it and makes it glow</i>
Porcelana skin lightening cream	1	8.3	Skin discoloration authority, night skin lightening cream; fades dark spot, evens skin tone	<i>Lightening the skin removes dark spots</i>
Concha Nacar de Perlop	1	8.3	uniquely formulated to bleach, cleanse the pores, remove impurities, aid in fading spots and blemishes, and generally beautify the skin	<i>Skin bleaching cleanse and beautifies the skin</i>
Othine Skin Bleach	1	8.3	Gradually fades areas of skin discoloration	<i>Skin bleaching removes dark complexion</i>
Madre Perla	1	8.3	Fade cream, lightens and brightens the skin; reduce the appearance of dark spots and even out areas of discoloration	<i>Lightening the skin makes it glow like a pearl</i>
Genuine Black and White cream	1	8.3	lightens-brightens darkened skin areas and help face unsightly freckles. It is a greaseless vanishing cream that moisturizes and brings out natural beauty	<i>Lightening improves the black skin by making it white and beautiful</i>
Dermisa Skin Fade Cream	1	8.3	Helps lighten and prevent age spots, freckles and skin discoloration; help fades discoloration caused by over exposure to the sun, aging pregnancy, minor scars and birth control pills	<i>Lightening the skin protects it from darkening due to wear and tear</i>

**Table 2 (cont.)**  
Derogatory Images of the Skin Bleaching Products Sold in the Pharmacies and Supermarket

<b>Products</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Exemplars</b>	<b>Representations</b>
Ultra Glow Cleansing Bar and Skin Tone Cream	1	8.3	to fade skin discolorations while its greaseless moisturizing action smoothes and softens the skin	<i>Lightening cleanse the skin by making it smooth, soft and radiant</i>
Clear essence Complexion Soap	1	8.3%	Formulated for people of color. For beautiful radiantly healthy skin use Clear Essence... Gradually fades dark spots...	<i>Making dark skin clear is healthy, glowing and beautiful</i>
Total (n)	12	100%		

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the contents of the representations of skin bleaching products sold in Harlem and whether these images were derogatory or non-derogatory to the African-American community. The 45 skin bleaching products purchased for the study came from 24 brands. Some of these brands sold several products to be used together for skin bleaching such as soaps, creams, lotions, gels and serums. The largest number of products in the sample were manufactured in the United States (46.7%). International cosmetic companies are also engaged in globalized marketing as many of the products used in the study were manufactured in several regions around the world, including the Middle East, Europe, North America and Africa. This finding supports the findings of the studies that skin bleaching occurs in the Middle East (Al-saleh & Al-Doush, 1997), Europe (Mire, 2005, Petit et al, 2006), North America (Hall, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) and Africa (Blay, 2007; de Souza, 2008) among other regions.

There was no significant difference in the images of the skin bleaching products sold in the regular American stores and the African beauty supply store. These representations were mostly derogatory social images which devalued

black skin. Some of the African-Americans who shop at these stores will come into contact with these products (such as Body White, Sure White, Maxi-White, Ami-White, and Clair and White) whose images derogate their black physicality. The images on these products are similar to some of the images of the skin bleaching products advertised on the internet by the international cosmetic companies such as Bi-White, White Perfect and Blanc Expert (Charles, 2010a; Mire, 2005). The content of the images in the present study suggest that lightening the skin would not only give the user white skin but would also cleanse and purify the skin making it healthy, soft and glowingly beautiful. These images suggest that lightening the black physicality is socially acceptable because white skin is the superior and sought after ideal unlike black skin which is inferior. According to SRT, the images that derogate black skin structure the reality of some African-Americans and influence their behavior (Moscovici, 1988, 2001). The United States manufactures the majority of the products in this study which contain the chemical hydroquinone, about which there are safety concerns (Charles, 2010a; Draelos, 2007). There are negative health outcomes associated with the use of skin bleaching products (Charles, 2010a; Ly, 2007; Mahe, Ly & Perret, 2005).

A large portion of the derogatory skin color images African-Americans have to contend with when they shop in Harlem were on the labels of products manufactured by American companies. Recall that Williams (2006) and Phillips (2004) noted that White entrepreneurs have historically supplied the African-American community with skin bleaching products such as Fan Tan bleaching cream and the Palmer's Skin Success bleaching products among others with their negative social images of African-Americans. The Palmer Skin Success bleaching creams and soaps are still on the market as they are among the products purchased for this study. SRT suggests that African-Americans use these images to generate knowledge about skin color (Moscovici, 1988, 2001). Although there is no research evidence that skin bleaching is more prevalent among African-American women than men, the skin bleaching products depict an image of beauty which targets women who wants to avoid the "black tax" (Keith & Herring, 1991; Stephen, 2008). It is important to remember that the threatening images of the complexion dogma influence the life chances of African-Americans in general (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Hunter, 2007).

The pervasive complexion ideology and its derogatory images of black skin and the history of skin bleaching (e.g. the 1949 proposal by the head of NAACP for Blacks to conquer the color line by bleaching) among some African-Americans in the United States over many decades (Hall, 1995a, 1995b; Parker, 2006), suggest that the derogatory images on the skin bleaching products found in this study are hegemonic representations. These representations are articulated by some members of the dominant group as well as some African-Americans that black skin is inferior to white skin. These persistent, rigid and negative historical images, which are uniform across skin bleaching products and across stores in the contemporary period, targets African-American customers who are expected to purchase skin bleaching products. These historical representations legitimize the status quo about skin color in the United States and ignore minority grievances of discrimination arising from colorism and racism. The African-Americans who bleach their skin use these derogatory images to answer the crucial identity questions of *Who am I?* and *Who are we?* It is important to recall that these colorized images, which drive the “black tax”, influence income, employment, social capital, perceptions of beauty, self-esteem and mate selection preferences, and the life chances among African-Americans in general.

There are some important issues about the African-American community which should be taken into account given the findings of this study. The African-American community is not homogenous in terms of its physicality or how African-Americans view blackness which suggests variance in the shared knowledge African Americans have of skin color (Charles, 2003b; Cross, 1991). Therefore, there are on ongoing debates over the controversial advantage of having light skin (Berry, 1988; Charles, 2010a; Hall, 1994; Hunter, 2007) which suggests there are polemical representations about skin color since not all African-Americans adhere to colorism and its most blatant expression—skin bleaching. There are also African-Americans who are very Afro-centric (Cross, 1991, 1995) which suggests that some of these people hold emancipated representations of blackness. These Afro-centric African-Americans interact with Whites and color conscious African-Americans but these Afro-centric Blacks share their own group representation of black skin which is positive (Cross, 1991, 1995). SRT argues that various groups of African-Americans have shared knowledge about colorism and skin bleaching within their community but there is no consensus on these issues in the societal discourse (Clemence, 2001; Hall, 1994; Hunter, 2007).

This study has contributed to the literature by showing how the globalized marketing of colorized images by the international cosmetic companies is expressed in the African-American community of Harlem. This article also highlights the fact that these colorized images are derogatory to the African-American community because they devalue black skin. Despite these contributions, there are some limitations of the study. A convenience sample of skin bleaching products and a few stores in one community were used, so the results should not be generalized to African-American communities in the United States. Also, African-Americans who purchase skin bleaching products and bleach their skin were not interviewed. Therefore, the social images in the study were defined as derogatory because they devalued black skin and not because they were perceived as derogatory by African-Americans in the community. Therefore, future researchers should randomly select shops that sell skin bleaching products in the African-American communities in order to understand how widespread the colorized skin bleaching images are, and in order to gain an understanding of their contents. Surveys of African-Americans about how they perceive the circulating colorized images on the labels of the skin bleaching products should also be conducted to understand the meanings of these images and whether African-Americans view them as derogatory and threatening.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the contents of the images on skin bleaching products sold in Harlem and whether or not these images were derogatory. There were no differences in the images on the labels of the products between the stores studied and the majority of the images were derogatory images which devalued black skin. These derogatory skin color images which are used to market the skin bleaching products in Harlem have a long history in the United States. The persistence and resilience of these derogatory images over many decades suggest that they are uniform, rigid and coercive hegemonic representations that drive the sale of skin bleaching products in Harlem.

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