

Perception of Skin Bleaching Among Female Secondary School Students in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria

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Abstract

Despite the social, pathological, physiological and psychological effects that skin bleaching presents, it has become a popular practice among individuals of different age groups, gender and religious affiliations in Nigeria. An objective observation would identify a particular group as being mostly involved in the practice than the others. Upon this backdrop, this study investigated the perception of female secondary school students on skin bleaching practice in Ibadan metropolis. The sample comprised six hundred female students across ten secondary schools in Ibadan metropolis. The instrument employed for the study is titled "Perception of Skin Bleaching Questionnaire" (POSBQ) designed by the researchers. The data collected were analyzed using percentage, mean and t-test statistical measures. The major findings revealed that young girls engaged in skin bleaching as a method of receiving desired attention and relationship from the opposite sex and attract the desired marriage partners. The study revealed that religion has no significant influence on the perception of the respondents as regards skin bleaching while age has significant influence. Therefore, counsellors should enlighten female students on best practice in body beautification and guide them on life building skills such as assertiveness, decision making and healthy living.

Keywords: Beautification, Perception and Skin bleaching

1. Introduction

The art of body beautification is not a new practice in the human society. The science of beautification and beauty contests has been in existence from time immemorial. In both the Ancient and Medieval times people have learn to adorn their bodies in different styles. Amongst the area where people acquire skills of adornment include hairdressing, aesthetic facial work and general body management. However, the degree to which attention is been focused on skin beautification, specifically skin bleaching, calls for a special concern. The art of body beautification has progressed from ordinary maintenance of the natural complexion to complete skin bleaching – an art of changing the colour of the body to become lighter. 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 (upper most) layer of the skin, otherwise known as epidemics (Andrew, 2007). In a similar opinion, Adeleye (2007) viewed skin bleaching as the purposeful lightening of the skin, which is most common through the use of different substance or methods. Olumide (2006) identified the constituency of skin bleaching creams as including those that contained hydroquinone or ammoniated mercury. By implication, body bleaching involves the application of substances or solutions that are capable of removing the upper surface of the skin, thereby making the colour of the body to become lighter. Irrespective of the reasons that may be adduced by those that engage in the practice, it is always clear that the dire effect of skin bleaching exist in juxtaposition with the benefits; in some cases the effects overwhelm the benefits.

It is true that skin bleaching practice cuts across all ages, races, beliefs and ideologies. Even the white race that might claim advantage over others still engage in skin bleaching, probably as a method of maintaining their body colour or for other purposes as could be advanced. Nevertheless, the young female adolescents have been identified as most prone to skin bleaching practice (Adebayo, 2008). One may therefore raise a puzzle in order to ascertain the causes of higher involvement of female adolescents in skin bleaching practice. The present study therefore considered it necessary to investigate the perception of female secondary school students (who are incidentally adolescents) in Ibadan metropolis on skin bleaching practice.

The history of skin bleaching spans through thousands of years of human existence with peculiarity to each society. Adeleye, (2007) reported that the first archaeological evidence of skin bleaching substance was found in Ancient Egypt around 4000 BC. In another study (Andrew, 2007), it was 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. Their naturally light skins became darkened because of the scourge of the day time sun. The experience prompted the European slave masters to adopt various methods (skin bleaching) that brought improvement to their skin (Adeleye, 2007). Thus, skin bleaching was practiced in the 16th century. In another study (Agbodeka, 1992), it was reported that during the early years of the 20th century, skin bleaching, which is considered a major component of make-up, became fashionable in the United States of America and Europe. The development became more popular with the launching of skin bleaching cosmetics in Philadelphia in 1950 and 1965.

2. Literature Review

In Nigeria, the history of skin bleaching may be traced to the period when race first appeared on the face of the country. Such initial contact could have created awareness about people with lighter complexion. Hence, the reason for the contact would be the slave trade dispensation and other commercial bloc. However, the method and degrees at which skin bleaching was practice in those days would definitely be difference from the present. Skin bleaching, which resorts to 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. According to Olumide (2006), some forms of skin bleaching region include the face, upper parts, lower parts and private (sexual) parts. The reason for choosing which type or pattern of skin bleaching depends largely on the individual and the purpose of doing it.

2.1 Facial bleaching: This refers to the removal of the upper skin layer of the face region to the extent of changing the skin colour, most especially to become lighter (Akerere, 2006). By implication, the person involved applies the skin bleaching agents on the face for a specified period of time or until when he/she feels satisfied with the change. It is evident that facial bleaching is more frequently practiced than any other. Those that prefer facial bleaching above other types might believe that it increases their social acceptance and does add commercial value to their quality.

2.2 Upper parts bleaching: The upper part bleaching is the application of bleaching agents to the upper region of the body. The upper region includes the face, the neck, the arms, the chest and stomach. The practice is aimed at making the upper parts of the body lighter than the lower parts. Adeleye (2007), while reporting the various patterns of skin bleaching in Ghana, stated that the application of bleaching agents to the upper parts helps those that practice the act to remove racial discrimination and other social barriers, thus, upper parts bleaching aims at beautifying half of the body.

2.3 Lower parts bleaching: This applies to the removal of the topmost skin layer of the lower parts of the body. The lower parts region includes the legs, the waist and the feet. Those that practice it believe that the lower parts carry the same value as the upper parts. However, it has been established (Adeleye, 2007) that those that indulge in lower part bleaching equally include other parts such as the face, the neck, the chest etc.

2.4 Private parts bleaching: The practice involves the removal of the topmost skin layer of the private (sexual organs) part. Similar to other types, the skin bleaching agent is applied on the sexually sensitive parts of the body in order to become lighter. The private parts, which may be involved, include the breasts, penis, the bottom and the thighs. The purpose of private parts bleaching could be for sexual attraction of the opposite sex, which is popular among commercial sex workers.

2.5 The whole body bleaching: Some people prefer to completely bleach the whole body parts, not exempting any region. One may adduce the reason as being an attempt to attract public and probably to attain a balance body colour. People not only gained friends through bleaching but they equally attract attention and popularity. It is apparent that many individuals think that bleaching helps them to gain adequate attention at social services. By attending and making contacts at large events, where social hierarchies are created and maintained, women (especially) who bleach their skins gain sense of social prestige (Andrew, 2007). In his own view, Akerere (2006) believe that reasons why people bleach their skin could be to establish relationship, eradicate racial discrimination, deal with inferiority complex, effect body modification, achieve emancipation from slavery, and promote prostitution and fashion.

From the relationship perspective, men tend to show interest in light complexion ladies. Because of the imminent need for young women to get attached to a man (for the purpose of marriage) the former employs all possible bait, which includes skin bleaching, in order to attract their target (men). Nevertheless, the married women equally engage in skin

bleaching with the belief that it helps them to sustain their marriages. Men are not however left apart because they also engage in skin bleaching for the purpose of becoming attractive to their female counterparts.

Racial discrimination is another contributing factor. In some parts of the world where there is the practice of apartheid policy, the Blacks who are being discriminated may resort to skin bleaching with the aim of removing the colour stigma. The problem of racial discrimination, as a result of skin colour was mainly responsible for skin bleaching among African victims of the obnoxious slave trade. Nevertheless, the problem of racial discrimination still exists on the surface of the earth, especially where the blacks may find themselves looking for greener pasture in the white man's countries. People therefore bleach their skins in order to be acceptable in the foreign land.

Inferiority complex compels the black skin individuals to bleach off their inherited dark colour. Adeleye (2007) inferred that "black" has always been associated with inefficiency, counterfeit, adulteration, second class, low quality and evil. In an attempt to compensate these deformities so as to be able to compete favourably with their white counterparts, the blacks end up bleaching their skins. Such practice, they believe, would enhance smooth integration of the black race into the global society.

Commodification, as a factor, has a long history through the slave trade period. In the 1600 AD, when the slave masters were busy with their inhuman business, they equally created value in the female Africans. Having realized the interest of the "superior creatures" the African women took pleasure in marketing themselves for better offer from the slave masters. Adeleye (2007) reported that during the 19th century the West African women adopted fashionable clothing, using their bodies as valuable goods to develop social capital especially within the Gold Coast. Beginning from the 1940s, and continuing to the present day, women created similar form of social capital and material wealth by bleaching their skin (Buah, 1998). Hence, skin bleaching, just like slavery, prostitution and fashion is a means of turning the female body into a valuable commodity. According to Adeleye (2007), the element of "to-be-looked-at-ness" is what defines a commodity. Skin bleaching shares this element with other related practice (prostitution and sex slavery).

Prostitution is another significant factor which could be responsible for skin bleaching practice. The concept of the body, especially the female body, as a commodity may also be traced to prostitution. It is however worthwhile to examine alone the act of prostitution from other factors. Skin bleaching is major strategy most often employed by the sex workers for the purpose of making their bodies attractive to the target individuals. Prostitution, which started in Ghana shortly after the Europeans built trading outposts in the 15th century, was promoted and globalized through body advertisement. Skin bleaching change body colour of African women and made them to appear more acceptable to the non-Africans. Going by history, it is apparent that prostitution, as a strictly commercial venture, did not exist in Ghana prior to the presence of the Europeans. Hence, the act of skin bleaching, which was adopted by the sex workers might be a strategy for social integration with the white men.

Fashion as an element of body beautification, has close relation with other factors discussed earlier. Buah (1998) stated that fashion (bleaching) is arguably the arena within which the wares of consumerism are fervently endorsed as constituting a way of life. Hence, skin bleaching could be seen as part of the process of bodily commodification through fashion. In the wake of the 19th century, successful West Africans began to emulate body colour fashions in order to show prestige, becoming part of a new world class of wealthy merchants men and women and adopting European fashions in the name of civilization (Adeleye, 2007). He further stated that skin fashion has reached a stage of provoking controversy as men and women use it to express support for contested ideologies and gain commercial attention.

It is true that skin bleaching has been adopted as a significant aspect of the entire art of body beautification. Many individuals have adopted the practice for different purpose; some for private value while others may be for social relevance, body commodification, professional beauty pursuit, racial emancipation and many more. However, the good reasons why people adopt skin bleaching practice do not remove its consequences.

Irrespective of the method applied in carrying out the (skin) bleaching, the part of the body affected usually becomes unnecessarily exposed to infections. This is because the exposure of inner parts of the skin to infections. Naturally, the uppermost part (surface) of the skin is potentially protective because it is resistant to foreign attack. The part of the

body that has been bleached becomes very light, fragile and tears easily. Bleaching also leaves spots on the skin after being scratched or hard hit by an object. Such spots make the body surface to look rough and unattractive.

The Toxic-Shock Syndrome (TSS), a recently discovered illness caused by a toxic produced by staphylococcus aureus, has been identified with the extensive use of skin bleaching agents. The illness is severe with a mortality rate of 10% (Olumide, 2005). Some of the symptoms of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) are severe muscle pain, drop in the blood pressure, dizziness, the eyes, mouth and vagina become sore, reddish spot on the skin and few days after the appearance of the illness there is peeling of the skin of the hands and soles of the feet. Walvin (2001) submitted that, the persistent use of skin bleaching agents containing hydroquinone usually causes ochronosis and the formation of pigmented colloid millium. It leads to an extensive degeneration of dermal collagen, which causes proneness to tearing of skin when stitching especially during surgical operations.

3. Statement of the Problem

The skin bleaching practice in the society is a phenomenon that raises attention of people from all spheres of life. The practice has always been reported among adult members of the society in the past but the trend has changed with the involvement of larger number of (especially) female adolescent group. What agitate the mind are the dire consequences of bleaching, not only on these young individuals who are the hope of the society but also on the coming generation that may carelessly adopt the practice (skin bleaching) through socialization. Some previous studies had focused on different areas of skin bleaching. Adebayo (2008) established that there is high incidence rate of cosmetic skin bleaching among young adults in the urban centers. Adeleye (2007) found that in Mali, 25% of the country's population practice skin bleaching while in Senegal up to 52% prevalence was observed. There is however an indication that various studies in the past have not specifically considered the perception of female secondary school students especially in Ibadan metropolis on skin bleaching practices. Ibadan is the largest town in the whole West Africa sub-region, which may predispose the inhabitants to different modern world practices. Such could happen as a result of the influx of skin bleaching agents, easy access to information and practice in other parts of the world, urban civilization and competitive pattern of city life. In most cases the young female is always at risk of various social practices, such as skin bleaching.

3.1 Main Research Questions

What is the perception of female secondary school students in Ibadan metropolis on skin bleaching?

3.2 Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the perception of female secondary school students in Ibadan metropolis on skin bleaching on the basis of religion.
2. There is no significant difference in the perception of female secondary school students in Ibadan metropolis on skin bleaching on the basis of class level.

3.3 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to find out the perception of female secondary students in Ibadan metropolis on skin bleaching. The study obtained the required information through a questionnaire titled "Perception on Skin Bleaching Questionnaire" (POSBQ). The two hypotheses generated were tested in relation to religion and age variables.

4. Method of Data Analysis

The frequency counts, percentages, mean score and t-test statistical methods were used to analyse the data. The frequency counts and percentages were applied to describe the demographic information; the mean score was used to determine the responses to the items while the t-test was adopted for testing the hypotheses at 0.05, alpha level of significance.

5. Results

This section presents the results obtained from the data collected and analyzed. Table 1 indicates that 235 (39%) of the respondents are Christians while 365 (60.8%) are Muslims. Also, 512 (85.3%) of the respondents are within the age of 11 and 14 years while 88 (14.7%) are 14 years and above.

The result, as it appears in table 2, revealed that item 3 was ranked 1st because it has the highest mean score of 3.46. On the contrary, item 9 was ranked 10th with the least mean score of 2.65. The implication of the ranking is presented under discussion of findings.

5.1 Hypothesis

The result in table 3 shows that the calculated t-value (.63) is less than the critical t-value (1.93). The null hypothesis stated that there is no significant difference in the perception of skin bleaching on the basis of religion. The result of the t-test revealed that the hypothesis is accepted.

The null hypothesis states that, there is no significant difference in the perception of female secondary school students on skin bleaching on the basis of age. The result of the t-test shows that the hypothesis is rejected because the calculated t-value of -2.18 is greater than the critical t-value of 1.98.

5.2 Discussion

The result of item ranking indicates that respondents perceived skin bleaching as helping girls to gain attention of male folk. Closely related, the study equally revealed that female secondary school students is of the opinion that skin bleaching helps to get desired marriage partners and successfully maintain pre-marital relationship. It may be inferred that the female folks indulge in skin bleaching practice in order to entice the male counterparts and enter into relationships as could be required. Other than these, the respondents hold the perception that skin bleaching assists girls to enter into connection with high calibers, attain high social standard, become more successful in life, look fashionable, express positive self-concept and be able to compete well with their male counterparts. This may suggest that, those that engage in skin bleaching practice perceive it as a route to attaining success, especially having been able to attract public recognition through a “better skin complexion”.

The findings in this study are supported by the study of Adeleke (2007) that the major reasons why people bleach their skin are, to build heterosexual relationship and become public figure. In another study, Walvin (2001) established that skin bleaching practice is a product of individual’s self concept which is complemented by observed self-image. Thus, an individual adopts skin bleaching in order to compensate the assumed personal deficiencies. The result of the present study contradicts what Adebayo (2008) discovered while considering attitude of secondary school (male and female) students towards cosmetic skin bleaching. In the study, respondents felt that cosmetic skin bleaching makes the user vulnerable to skin infections. The reason for the difference between the two findings could be that, Adebayo (2008) focused specifically on cosmetic (chemical) pattern of bleaching, which may predispose the respondents to subjectivity. The present study only emphasized skin bleaching from the general perspective, which in turn might help to remove prejudice in the mind of respondents.

Nevertheless, the two null hypotheses were analyzed with the t-test statistical method; one out of the two was rejected. The results show that there was no significant difference in the perception of female secondary school students on skin bleaching on the basis of religion. Thus, both Christian and Muslim students have similar perception on skin bleaching. The result agreed with the findings of Adebayo (2008) where religion did not play significant role in the incidence of cosmetic skin bleaching among the respondents. It may be true that both religions perceive the concept of skin bleaching in the same way because the adherents are integrated members of the same society where the practice is being appreciated; hence their view would be similar. The other null hypothesis, which sought to determine whether there exists significant difference in the perception of respondents based on age, was rejected. Thus, the perception of the two age groups used in the study was different from each other. The finding of Adebayo (2008) was different because the null hypothesis on the basis of age in her study was accepted. The reason which may be adduced for the present study is that, the level of understanding and perception of age group 11-14 years old (early adolescence) is often different from age group 15 and above (middle adolescence). Adegoke (2005) identified the different characteristics of each stage of adolescence; the categorization shows significant difference in the behaviour pattern of the groups. This implies that, female secondary school students of different age groups should be treated differently because of dissimilarity in their understanding and perception.

6. Implications for Counselling

The results of the findings suggest that young girls adduce diverse reasons for skin bleaching. The 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. Since, it is true that the reasons adduced do not really remove the side effects of skin bleaching; counselling profession has a lot responsibility in educating the society about the best practice in body beautification. School counsellors should emphasize life building skills (assertiveness, decision-making and group formation). These could be developed through various counselling approaches such as the Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) and the Transactional Analysis (TA). The adolescents need to deal with self-guilt and irrational thought which is possible through cognitive reconstruction. In order to achieve the various goals which target the health and mental wellbeing of the adolescent, it is imperative to talk about the best practice in body beautification. The counsellor could help to educate the students (female), the parents and the school management about dangers inherent in skin bleaching and how to improve on one's self concept. As much as possible, the Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) should help to entrench the concept of best practice in body beautification into school curriculum. Nevertheless, counselling profession may network with other interest agencies in the area of public awareness and inculcation of social skills (especially assertiveness and decision making) that will help to enhance positive self-concept.

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Appendix

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by religion and age

Religion	Frequency	Percentage
Christianity	235	39.2
Islam	365	60.8
Total	600	100.0
Age		
11-14 years old	512	85.3
Above 14 years old	88	14.7
Total	600	100.0

Table 2: Rank order (by the mean scores) of responses to items on perception on skin bleaching

S/No.	Content	Means	Rank
	Skin bleaching helps to;		
1.	Express positive self-worth	3.28	8 th
2.	Look fashionable	2.91	7 th
3.	Gain the attention of the male folk	3.46	1 st
4.	Compete adequately with males	2.77	9 th
5.	Attain high social standard	3.25	5 th
6.	Get desired marriage partners	3.41	2 nd
7.	Get connected with high caliber in the society	2.86	4 th
8.	Successfully maintain pre-marital relationship	3.36	3 rd
9.	Gain public support	2.65	10 th
10	Become more successful in life	3.20	6 th

Table 3: Means, standard deviation and t-value of respondents' perception on skin bleaching on the basis of religion

Religion	No.	Mean	SD	Df	Cal. t-value	Crit. t-value
Christianity	235	28.8				
	64.46			598	0.63	1.96
Islam	365	29.10				
	4.50					

Table 4: Means, Standard deviation and t-valued of respondents' perception on skin bleaching on the basis of age

Age	No.	Mean	SD	Df	Cal t-value	Critical t-value
11-14yrs and above	512	28.94				
	4.56			598	-2.18	1.96
Above 14 yrs old	88	27.20				
	4.12					

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