Living in a Barbie World:
Skin Bleaching and the Preference for Fair Skin in India, Nigeria, and Thailand

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Abstract

Many developing countries across the non-white, non-Western world demonstrate a societal preference for fair skin tones. This research focuses on three case studies – Nigeria, India, and Thailand – and explores the question of why this colorist bias originated and what historical or contemporary factors are primarily responsible for the evolution of colorism in these nations. This work focuses on contemporary Western media as a potential driver of colorism in the Global South, and considers colonization, domestic media, and pre-modern cultural standards as alternative forces responsible for producing the observed preference for fair skin.

This paper finds that colonization was primarily responsible for the development of colorism in India and Nigeria, while contemporary foreign media has been most influential in shaping Thailand’s colorist preferences. This work concludes that the global association of whiteness with deep material and social privilege is the overarching factor that ultimately fuels colorism in the developing world.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Barbara Millicent Roberts, or “Barbie” as she is known to us, entered the U.S. toy market in 1959. Barbie was iconic of the material comfort and beauty imbedded in the American dream. With a collection of 40 pets, a mansion, her classic pink convertible, and the adoring boyfriend Ken, she painted for Americans a picture of life not as most possessed, but as many coveted. Regarding her physique, slender, Anglo Barbie was intended to represent the 1950s American ideal of feminine beauty. However, given her height-waist-hip proportions, the probability of Barbie’s figure occurring in the real world is less than 1 in 100,000.1

It is no secret that Americans are unusually fascinated with pursuing unattainable standards of beauty. It is also no secret that the media’s imposing image of Barbie idealism is likely correlated with the fact that an estimated 80% of American women are unsatisfied with their bodies; or the fact that Americans spend an average of $10 billion dollars on cosmetic plastic surgery annually.2 The average American’s exposure to roughly 3,000 advertisements per day is not without its psychological costs.3 This dynamic is nothing particularly new.

What is new is the scope of influence wielded by this media image of Barbie idealism. In recent years, Mattel’s signature product Barbie has expanded internationally,  

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3 Killbourne, Jean. Killing Us Softly documentary. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZ80GaNIPOQ&list=PL0Q8ZFrFi3hZgROm1o1J5cyXyK9ql6FqTu
and is now sold in over 150 countries.\textsuperscript{4} Of course, the Barbie phenomenon is just one representation of the U.S.’ growing cultural and media influence around the world. While globalization certainly has its benefits, it also poses serious concerns. The self-image of Americans – women in particular – has arguably been compromised by U.S. popular culture’s unapologetically narrow image of beauty. What happens when that same image is exported to every corner of the globe? Specifically, what happens when a Eurocentric beauty standard of fairness, slenderness, narrow noses, and wide eyes is commercialized in the non-white, non-Western world? Because the globalization of Western media is a relatively new phenomenon, its full long-term impacts on the non-Western world are only beginning to be measured and analyzed.

Fiji and South Korea present two examples of how the prevalence of body-altering practices may increase in response to Western media. In 1995, television was introduced to Fiji, a small island off the coast of Australia that traditionally had little exposure to the outside world. By 1998, rates of bulimia and body dysmorphia among adolescent girls in Fiji increased substantially.\textsuperscript{5} Body-altering practices have similarly taken root in South Korea, though the role played by Western media is less clear. In Seoul, one in five women has undergone cosmetic surgery.\textsuperscript{6} The majority of such surgeries are for eyelid lifts, with the goal of widening the eye to achieve a less Asian, more European look.

\textsuperscript{6}Whitelocks, Sadie. The Economist. \url{http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2134352/One-women-Seoul-gone-knife-South-Korea-tops-global-list-plastic-surgery-procedures.html}
But perhaps the most widespread and one of the most troublesome body-altering practice worldwide is skin bleaching. Skin bleaching, also referred to as whitening or lightening, involves breaking down the top layer of skin with active ingredients such as hydroquinone, mercury, and corticosteroids to lighten the skin or impede the production of melanin. Globally, the skin lightening industry is expected to reach $10 billion by 2015. The largest market for skin lightening is in Asia, with African and Latin American countries also consuming high levels of skin bleach products.

Why do women around the world seek to have thinner frames, wider eyes, and fairer skin? What influence does Western media play in these global body-altering trends? Such trends around the world beg the question that my thesis will explore: How do Western media’s beauty standards impact the preference for lighter skin in the developing world? Specifically, what is the relationship between American beauty advertisements and the preference for lighter skin in three countries: India, Nigeria, and Thailand? Can the observed bias towards lighter skin in each country, as measured by the use of skin-lightening products, be primarily attributed to Western media or to a different factor? This paper will assess four hypotheses that attempt to explain the driving force behind colorism in India, Nigeria, and Thailand. Through these three case studies, this work will explore the social significance of beauty for women around the world, the phenomenon of skin bleaching, and its relationship with Western media.

Ultimately, I find that, in India and Nigeria, colonialism seems to have been the driver behind the fair-skin bias we see today. In Thailand, however, Western and East Asian media consumption has been most salient in making colorism a widespread

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cultural phenomenon. In all three countries and across the Global South,\(^8\) the more fundamental, underlying cause for the preference for fair skin is the transnational correlation of whiteness with personal opportunity, success, and privilege.

**Defining Relevant Terms**

It is important to define the key terms with which this thesis will grapple. *Colorism* refers to prejudice based on skin tone, which is typically practiced within races, as opposed to racism between races. Colorism creates a hierarchical relationship that privileges lighter complexions. The term *West* or *Western* primarily refers to the U.S. and Britain. This thesis refers to *white privilege* as defined by sociologists Neville, Worthington, and Spanierman as “unearned advantages of being white in a racially stratified society,…characterized as an expression of institutional power that is largely unacknowledged by most white individuals.”\(^9\) I will argue that the closer one is to looking white, the easier it is for the individual to access white privilege. The *beauty industry* here refers to the combination of cosmetics, fashion, and skin lightening industries, and the advertising agencies that support all three.

**Justification of Case Studies**

My three case studies – India, Nigeria, and Thailand – were chosen for their unique relationships to my research question. India, the world’s largest democracy, has a

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\(^8\) The Global South is defined here at a geographical region south of North America, Europe, and Northeast Asia. The region extends beyond the Southern Hemisphere and includes roughly 130 countries of Africa, Latin America, and most of Asia with low human development indices (UCC)

population of 1.2 billion with 30% living in urban areas.\textsuperscript{10} India is also one of the world’s largest skin-lightening markets, with an estimated 60-65\% of women using some form of skin-lightening product.\textsuperscript{11} The primary consumers of skin-lightening products in India are women between the ages of 16-35.\textsuperscript{12} During the summer of 2010, I taught at a school in rural southern India. On every billboard and in every television commercial I saw, white-skinned Indians were the faces of the media industry. These images of fair skin contrasted starkly with the dark skin of the Indians I lived with. I regularly heard students calling the darker children names like “blackie” and “crow.” Teachers admitted that parents often showed preference for the lighter-skinned children, and high school girls lamented that their peers with fairer skin were prized for marriage, traditionally paying lower amounts for their dowries. As I learned more about the nation’s $90 million skin-bleaching industry,\textsuperscript{13} I was fascinated and disturbed by India’s widespread preference for light skin. I conducted interviews with several of the students I worked with concerning their feelings on colorism in South India; these interviews serve as a primary source of qualitative data for this thesis. Through my experience in India, I was exposed to the prevalence of skin bleaching in the non-Western world. Since then, I have researched the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\end{thebibliography}
skin lightening industry in other parts of the world, and in Nigeria and Thailand in particular.

Nigeria, the world’s 7th most populous country, is home to 170 million people and 50% of its total population lives in urban areas. Nigeria exhibits the highest use of skin lightening products in the world, with an estimated 77% of women in Nigeria using some form of skin lightening product, according to the World Health Organization. It is important to understand Nigeria’s unsettlingly high demand for skin-lightening products, partly because the country serves as a primary port for these creams to travel to other African nations that have stricter regulations of such products. Sociologist Margaret Hunter observes, “Many skin-whitening products with dangerous chemical ingredients are manufactured in Europe or the United States, sent to Nigeria, and then distributed throughout Africa in both formal and informal markets.” The centrality of Nigeria in Africa’s skin bleaching market renders it an important case study for research.

Thailand has a population of 67 million with 34% living in urban areas. This case study provides a Southeast Asian example of a country that displays a marked preference for lighter skin in its beauty industry. 58% of Thai women between the ages of 18-64 use some form of skin lightening product. Because Thailand was never formally colonized, it also serves as a test case to my second hypothesis (below). The nation’s

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18 Bird, “The Quest for Beauty,” 27.
large sex tourism industry provides an interesting layer of additional interaction with the Western world, which may also contribute to the colorism in Thai beauty standards.

Additionally, all three countries have relatively low racial diversity within their borders, which allows me to focus on the impact of colorism rather than racism. Though each of these countries has significant ethnic and tribal diversity, their populations lack significant variation of racial groups, as defined by general regions of origin. In countries with significant racial diversity, such as Brazil or South Africa, there is a higher chance that the preference for lighter skin results from racial prejudices within the country itself. To narrow my scope of analysis, this thesis will focus on the preference for lighter skin tones in relatively racially homogenous countries of the Global South.

Nigeria and India also have comparable national income levels. Nigeria’s GDP per capita is $2,600, while that of India is $3,700, putting them both in the World Bank’s lower-middle income bracket. Thailand, however, has a GDP per capita of $9,700. In this work’s cross-country comparison, it is important to remember that, due to greater expendable income, Thai citizens may have increased access to consuming media and cosmetic products than Nigerians and Indians.

**Hypotheses**

**Hypothesis 1: Traditional/Pre-modern Preferences**

Some researchers assert that this global fascination with light skin already existed in many non-Western societies long before the existence of Western media, and before the beginning of the colonial era. Many point to the correlation of indoor labor with light skin and class privilege as a source of colorism around the world. This, as well as colorist
undertones in India’s caste system or Nigeria’s pre-modern marriage rituals or Thailand’s traditional oral tales all suggest that the preference for fair skin may have long predated Western interference. I will test this hypothesis through the method of thick description. I will analyze secondary sources to develop a picture of the environment surrounding skin tone and race in each of these societies before the entrance of Western colonizers. From this picture of pre-colonial colorism (or the lack thereof), I will determine whether there has been a notable change in skin tone preferences from the pre-colonial era until now that could be attributed to colonialism, Western, or domestic media.

**Hypothesis 2: Colonization**

Perhaps the observed bias for lighter skin in many parts of the world is primarily a result of colonization, rather than Western media. Many theorists believe that Western media’s impact on international preferences for lighter skin is secondary to, and even dependent on, the foundation of colorism established through colonial rule. Dr. Yaba Amgborale Blay writes, “…much of European manufacturer’s success in marketing and consequently selling their [skin lightening] products to Africans was predicated upon European (colonial) promotion of idealized whiteness.”\(^{19}\) This idealized whiteness is a phenomenon that survives today in much of the Global South. Countries that have experienced centuries of racialized oppression from Western Europe may still grant social privilege to citizens with phenotypes closer to those of European colonizers.

Because India and Nigeria were both colonized by the British for 184 and 60 years respectively, this thesis will assess the impact of British colonialism specifically, though

my conclusions on the effects of colonization may be generalizable to other colonial powers as well.

Due to the fact that it was never formally colonized, Thailand provides a counter-example to this hypothesis. It is important to recognize that Thailand did experience periods of pacts with Western powers, beginning in 1855 with the Bowring Treaty, which allowed the British Empire land and trade rights in Siam (Thailand). As much of Southeast Asia fell to colonial rule, Thailand faced territorial threats from the UK, France, and other European powers into the 20th century but never formally lost its independence. Thus, Thailand is one of the world’s select few non-Western countries that were never formally colonized by Europe. Using Mill’s method of similarity, I will assess how the independent variable of colonial history impacts my dependent variable of interest (preference for lighter skin) across my three case studies. How does Thailand’s experience with colorism impact this hypothesis, given that the nation was never colonized? In testing this hypothesis, I will review secondary texts that illustrate the role of skin tone in India and Nigeria before the entrance of Western media, with the goal of isolating the impact of colonization on colorism in these societies.

**Hypothesis 3: Local/Domestic Media**

A fourth hypothesis is that, not Western media, but in fact local media in India, Nigeria, and Thailand promotes the hierarchy between skin tones. From Bollywood in India, to Thailand’s largest cable television provider TrueVision, to Nigeria’s popular TW Magazine, there are thriving local media outlets in each country. Such outlets could be more influential than Western media in promoting a set standard for female beauty. To assess this hypothesis, I will compare each nation’s consumption of local versus Western
media, with particular focus on print advertisements and films. However, it is possible that local media producers in these countries have adopted Western images of beauty into their own media products, regarding such Western images as more lucrative and marketable. Thus, I will consider whether the content of each country’s local media has noticeably changed since the entrance of Western media to determine the extent of influence Western media has on local forms of media.

**Hypothesis 4: Western Media**

My primary hypothesis is the following: the preference for lighter skin in India, Nigeria, and Thailand can be primarily attributed to the impact of Western media. Since the onset of globalization, Western media has integrated itself into each of these three non-Western societies and has become the primary driver of skin-tone bias. To assess this hypothesis, I will analyze primary interviews, as well as contemporary online and print advertisements from both Western and domestic magazines sold in India, Nigeria, and Thailand. This hypothesis will be explored in depth in chapter three.

**My Relationship To the Subject**

This research question is not only an academic fascination of mine; it is also deeply personal. At age three, I entered my first elementary school class at the predominately white Trinity School in Atlanta, Georgia. Before I was consciously aware of race, I knew that I was unlike my classmates. My early years were marked by a sense that having brown skin and coarse hair rendered me unattractive to my pre-pubescent white male peers. I admired how the white girls effortlessly swung their blonde ponytails in class and seemed somehow more feminine. It would be another decade before I
understood that my reading of long hair and light skin as feminine was the result of my society’s racialized messages of female beauty that I had been receiving since I could see. I remember sitting on the rug in my 1st grade classroom, looking at the light palms of my hands, and feeling a sense of pride that at least some part of my skin looked like theirs. From speaking with peers who had similar experiences growing up, I understand now that my internalized colorism was not unique, but was the product of coming of age in a society where light skin dominates the cultural image of beauty.

As I have gotten older, I have gradually come to understand more about my country’s historical and contemporary premium placed on lighter skin. During slavery, colorism created a hierarchy between darker and lighter skinned slaves. Margaret Hunter writes that white slave owners often gave lighter-skinned African slaves additional privileges, such as “working in the house as opposed to the fields, the occasional opportunity to learn to read, and the rare chance for manumission.” In antebellum America, the small, elite group of black freedmen was disproportionately light-skinned and “became economic and community leaders in the early African-American community.”

The National Bureau of Economic Research found that, in 1860 in the urban South, “black-headed households’ mean predicted log wealth was only 20% of white-headed households’ [wealth]” while “mulatto-headed households' was nearly 50% that of whites' [wealth].” In other words, even before the end of slavery, there was a large

21 Ibid, 239.
wealth gap between African-Americans and their lighter-skinned, mixed counterparts. This reality strongly associated lighter skin and looser hair textures with economic opportunity. A lucrative industry developed around the wealth and beauty associated with fair skin and straight hair among Blacks. By the 1880s and 1890s, advertisements for skin bleachers marketed to African-American women had flourished. In *Hope in a Jar*, Kathy Peiss notes that, by the 1920s, 30-40% of advertisements in black newspapers were for cosmetics. Peiss describes the rhetoric in many such advertisements that connected fulfillment and upward mobility with lighter skin. One such advertisement urged, “Bleach your dark skin; Race men and women protect your future. Be attractive! Throw off the chains that have held you back from the prosperity and happiness that belong to you.” In the early 1900s, many elite African-American fraternities, churches, and clubs instituted “brown paper bag” tests, through which only individuals with skin lighter than a brown paper bag could be admitted into the organization. This internalized white superiority complex among black Americans defined economic success and physical beauty based on a picture that was distinctly European. Drawing on the 1987 National Survey of Black Americans, researchers Verna Keith and Maxine Thompson state that, among Black Americans, there is a strong correlation between self-esteem and skin-tone, perhaps indicating an internalization of colorism. Keith and Thompson discovered that this correlation is most pronounced among black women of

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23 Glenn, 287.  
25 Ibid, 213.  
low-income levels. This image of a poor, dark-skinned black woman is one of ultimate marginalization in American society. Beyond income level and self-esteem, one’s skin tone has bearing on his or her educational attainment, prison sentencing, and even likelihood of being elected to Congress. In their exploration of colorism in American society, African-American Studies researchers Jennifer Hochschild and Vesla Weaver found that, “light-skinned blacks received sentences statistically indistinguishable from those of whites, while medium- and dark-skinned blacks received sentences 2.7 percent longer.” Though many Americans do not consciously recognize this multifaceted disadvantage attached to darker complexions, colorism continues to impact American society in divisive ways.

America’s colorism and its economic implications are not unique to the Black community, but span American racial groups. Hunter cites the work of many researchers who have found that, “Given the opportunity, many people will hire a light-skinned person before a dark-skinned person of the same race….” She notes that the wealth imbalance between light and dark skinned African-Americans is true for Mexican-Americans as well. Given the history of miscegenation between Europeans and Natives in the Americas during the colonial era, the category Latino encompasses a range of racial groups, from “white-Spaniard” to “metizo-mixed” to “dark-Native.” Hunter observes, “In 2003, social science researchers found that Latinos who identified as white earned about $5000 more per year than Latinos who identified as black, and about $2500

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more per year than Latinos who identified as ‘some other race.’”31 This correlation of income and skin tone suggests a concerning bias towards fair skin throughout American society.

A cursory glance at America’s celebrities of color conveys that colorism has survived into the 21st century and impacts who is considered beautiful in American society. On the 2011 Internet Movie Database (IMDb) list of the top 100 most beautiful female celebrities, celebrities of color included Halle Berry, Beyoncé Knowles, Eva Longoria, Shakira, and Qi Shu.32 All the women listed possess relatively similar features – straight, long hair, thin noses, wide eyes, high cheekbones, and slim frames. The non-white women listed were notably lighter skin and had more European features than the average woman of their races.

In the U.S., one of the most racially diverse countries in the world, skin tone still has notable implications for one’s socioeconomic success and perceived beauty. Given that the U.S. is the primary driver of the global media industry, what does America’s internal colorist environment mean for the non-Western world that imports the American conception of beauty? What does the growing popularity of the blond-haired and blue-eyed Barbie mean for the Nigerian girl who wants to feel validated in a world where global beauty standards are steadily becoming more synonymous with Western beauty standards? This work will grapple with these questions, as well as what the global influence of Western media means for the soft power of the U.S. around the world.

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32 Note that only two out of these top 100 women were visibly of Asian descent. [http://www.imdb.com/list/U7N2IE3CjUE/](http://www.imdb.com/list/U7N2IE3CjUE/)
Chapter 2

Skin Bleaching Practices in India, Nigeria, and Thailand

“Indeed, female beauty is becoming an increasingly standardized quality throughout the world. A standard so strikingly white, Western, and wealthy it is tempting to conclude there must be a conspiracy afoot” ~ Wendy Chapkis

Social Importance of Beauty for Women

Women around the world face severe and often life-threatening issues, from inequitable access to living wages to unpoliced gender based violence. Surely there are more pressing gender issues for the international community to concern itself with than beauty standards. While that is true, we must also grasp the significance of beauty on a woman’s life opportunity if we are to understand the full spectrum of factors that compromise women’s empowerment today.

Put simply, perceptions of a woman’s beauty have an unjustifiably large impact on her social and economic life opportunity. Part of the patriarchal system’s social subjugation involves reducing a woman’s value to how physical pleasing she is to the male gaze. Sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn asserts,

Women’s worth is judged heavily on the basis of appearance. For example, men who have wealth, education, and other forms of human capital are considered “good catches,” while women who are physically attractive may be considered desirable despite the lack of other capital.

Women in a variety of societies around the world are less likely than their male counterparts to be judged based on assets like intelligence or strength. This socially

34 Glenn, “Yearning for Lightness,” 282.
driven inequity, along with the reality that marriage prospects overwhelmingly determine many women’s life opportunity results in a disproportionate emphasis placed on women’s physical appearances. Given that “beauty” and a “fair complexion” are closely linked, and are virtually synonymous in some societies, there is a correspondingly high emphasis placed on a woman’s skin tone. Exploring the skin lightening practices of women around the world is an important lens for better understanding the interplay between globalization, race, sexism, and capitalism more broadly.

Of course, men across the Global South are also impacted by many of the same racial and color preferences as the women of their communities, and there exists a growing market for men’s skin lightening products. However, this thesis focuses on the impact of colorism on women, largely because of the disproportionate influence fairness and beauty have on life opportunity for women. This chapter will discuss the physical and social impacts of skin lightening for women, as well as how colorism functions in Thailand, India, and Nigeria.

Understanding Skin Bleaching

The preference for fair skin in the majority of the Global South is manifested in a variety of ways, the most tangible of which is the widespread use of skin bleach products. Skin bleaching employs dermatological, cosmetic, or homemade depigmentation products that inhibit the production of melanin and/or remove the top layer of the epidermis. Skin lightening has long been practiced in societies around the world.\(^{35}\) Dating back at least a century, it has not been uncommon for women to produce homemade

\(^{35}\) Glenn. Pg 282.
bleaching products or to buy lightening creams and soaps from small vendors.\textsuperscript{36} These products were typically either ineffective or contained hazardous agents such as mercury or lead that effectively bleached the skin while presenting serious health consequences. Today, skin lightening has mushroomed into a multi-billion-dollar industry, which is currently dominated by three large multinational corporations: France’s L’Oreal, Japan’s Shiseido, and the U.K.’s Unilever.\textsuperscript{37} These corporations and others have perfected the art of marketing and distributing bleaching products that appeal to women aged 18-35 around the world.

Interestingly, in much of the developing world, skin-lightening practices span class levels, though the use of such products is concentrated in urban areas. Corporations have created product lines in a wide range of price categories, such that whiteners are financially accessible for both rural villagers and white-collar urban professionals.\textsuperscript{38} In some cases, such as the Shona women of Zimbabwe, the consumption of skin lightening products is actually most concentrated in working class communities.\textsuperscript{39} In Ghana, and in much of West Africa, middle and upper class women use more expensive imported bleaching products, such as Vantex Skin Bleaching Creme from the African-American company Fashion Fair Cosmetic.\textsuperscript{40} Poor and working-class women more often use homemade concoctions that are more likely to include mercury and other ingredients that make creams more physically dangerous than high-end products. The health risks

\textsuperscript{36} Glenn. Pg 283.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 283.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 290.
associated with both high and low end skin bleachers will be discussed later in this chapter.

Skin bleach companies often market their products as rejuvenating one’s “natural” fairness that the consumer had as an infant before the skin was “damaged” by the sun and the wear of everyday life. Many products make rhetorical appeals through the fact that they were produced in “scientific laboratories” in the U.S. and Western Europe to build a sense of validity for customers in the developing world.

Interestingly, many who ideologically support the manufacturing and use of skin lightening products consider them a path towards female empowerment. In the 19th century, before the birth of the modern cosmetic industry, “‘Beauty may have been considered the birthright of only wealthy or fortunate women.’”42 Today, many skin bleach proponents and industry leaders argue that cosmetic companies have made beauty easily attainable, even for “‘working women unable to afford the time and money

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leisured women spent on beauty culture.”\textsuperscript{43} Cosmetic advertisers have long used this selling point of democratizing beauty. One PEARLEX ad from 1942 informed its Indian consumers,

> Beauty’s first requisite since time immemorial has been a fair complexion. Formerly it was nature which decided on face-appeal of different people but now fortunately science steps in and a pearly-white skin may be easily attained by any-one who uses PEARLEX.\textsuperscript{44}

Like PEARLEX, the directors of Fair & Lovely, India’s largest skin bleach brand, claim that their products are fulfilling a social need for women in the developing world. Like an education, they argue, fair skin is regarded as “a social and economic step up.”\textsuperscript{45}

However, the moral defense of the skin lightening industry breaks down under scrutiny. Supporting women in altering their natural phenotypes to conform to a Eurocentric beauty standard only validates the racism and colorism behind the beauty standard itself. Moreover, not only is skin bleaching ideologically problematic, it presents a myriad of health risks.

**Health Risks of Skin Bleaching**

The active ingredients used in skin lightening products have changed over time. Historically, the substance mercury has been a popular means of inhibiting the formation of melanin in the epidermis. As a toxin, mercury or mercury salt is associated with a high risk of neurological damage, kidney disease, and skin cancer, among other serious health

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 78.
concerns. Most skin lightening products sold in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), including those containing mercury, are produced in Europe. Though distributing mercury soaps and creams has been illegal in the European Union since 1989, their manufacturing is legal if the products are exported. The majority of countries in SSA lack stringent laws regulating the consumption of mercury products and/or lack the means to meaningfully enforce such laws.

Hydroquinone is currently the most popular active ingredient used by the skin lightening industry. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) caps the concentration of hydroquinone at 2% in any formula. When used safely and as prescribed, there are few health risks associated with hydroquinone, though it can lead to “skin irritation or contact dermatitis.” However, when products containing this chemical are abused or the formula exceeds the recommended concentration, hydroquinone can lead to ochronosis: “a disfiguring condition involving gray and blue-black discoloration of the skin.” Ochronosis is most common in SSA, where the abuse of hydroquinone, through the chronic use of bleach products, is quite common. Additionally, exposure to the sun – an unavoidable reality in most of the Global South – heightens the risk of damage to skin that has been treated with hydroquinone.

A variety of other chemicals are commonly used to impede melanin production, including corticosteroids, glycolic acid, mequinol, and azelaic acid. Many of these and other steroids cause redness, thinness, and fine wrinkling of the skin, as well as the increase of one’s predisposition to skin infections. When creams and soaps are applied to

the face, and to the eyes in particular, the user is at risk of eye infections, cataracts, and blindness. Additionally, chronic use of potent topical steroids is associated with “systemic side-effects, including diabetes and hypertension, Cushing’s syndrome, immunosuppression and adrenal insufficiency.” Furthermore, bleached skin is fragile and tears easily, rendering it more susceptible to infection.

Perhaps more concerning is the increased hazard of women using skin lightening products while they are pregnant. In a random sample of 99 pregnant women at a maternity ward in Dakar, Senegal, a whopping 68.7% of women reported that they were using cosmetic skin lightening products during pregnancy. 27% of pregnant skin bleach users in the study actually increased their use of such products because of the pregnancy. Almost half of the women stated that continued skin lightening would help them look beautiful on the days of their children’s baptisms. Mothers who used skin lighteners with potent steroids during pregnancy were at an increased risk of pregnancy complications, including vaginal bleeding, lower weight of the placenta, and an underweight newborn child. Though little empirical research has been done on the issue, there is also anecdotal evidence of women applying skin bleach creams to their children at young ages.

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50 Ibid, 746.
53 Ibid, 185.
54 Ibid, 185.
There exists a large price discrepancy between low-end and high-end skin bleaching products, ranging from a few cents to hundreds of dollars per ounce. As one may expect, the safety and efficacy of skin bleach products are positively correlated with their prices. Cheap bleaches not only contain riskier ingredients; they are also more likely to be mislabeled or lack labels completely, increasing the chances of misuse and eliminating users’ ability to know what chemicals they are applying to their skin. Another complication is the fact that some bleach products are mis-marketed as safer than they are in reality. According to business strategy scholar Aneel Karnani, “Because of the powerful cosmetic lobby, products that are actually drugs are sold as cosmetics to avoid legal constraints.” Given the prevalence of unsafe bleach products that are marketed and sold illegally, more stringent government regulation and extensive public education of the health risks of bleaching are required.

Many higher-end bleach products are beginning to incorporate herbal ingredients, in response to many women’s desire to avoid the health risks associated with chemical ingredients. For example, soy and vitamin C, when used in certain formulas, have been found to inhibit melanin production. In the Indian market, some lightening products “claim to be based on ayurvedic medicine and contain herbal and fruit extracts such as saffron, papaya, almonds, and lentils.” Other natural skin lightening ingredients include rice powder, papaya soap, hesperidin from the peels of citrus fruits, milk, and polyphenols (commonly found in plants). A 2008 study by medical researchers Zhu and Gao asserts that natural skin lightening agents containing plant extracts may be both

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physically safer and more potent than traditional chemicals in inhibiting melanin production.\textsuperscript{59} To date, relatively few natural skin lighteners have been incorporated into the cosmetic industry, partly due to a lack of clinical human trials, but natural bleaches may become a more dominant trend within the bleach industry moving forward. Further research is required to assess the long-term efficacy and safety of herbal skin lighteners.

When considering today’s popular skin bleaches, one must ask whether these products actually work. Many do successfully lighten the skin, at least temporarily. However, in the case of many chemical ingredients, discontinued use of a product results in repigmentation, often darker than the user’s original skin color.\textsuperscript{60} African beauty expert Nakedi Ribane notes that, in much of SSA in the 1960s and 1970s, the danger of skin bleach products was that they appeared to work at first.\textsuperscript{61} Ribane quotes, “‘on first application, the skin would become smooth and yellowish….’” However, with greater use, “the lightening and clarifying effects of ammoniated mercury or hydroquinone turned to darkening as people developed \textit{chubabas} (‘purpled patches of skin on their cheeks and below their eyes’).”\textsuperscript{62} Interestingly, these discolored patches of skin, for some, were an attractive marker of a modern woman who knew to use skin bleach. One user stated, “‘Anybody who knew anything used those creams. If you didn’t have \textit{chubabas}, then you were not an \textit{it girl} of the moment.’”\textsuperscript{63} In other words, this deformation and discoloration of the skin served as “evidence of skin lightener use”


\textsuperscript{61} Glenn, \textit{Shades of Difference}, 203.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 203.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 203.
which “signaled someone who was up-to-date and modern.”64 Certainly, the connotation attached to skin discoloration from bleach use varies widely between communities. Regardless of whether bleach discoloration is considered positive or negative, it is safe to conclude that bleach creams and soaps do not “work,” in the sense that they do not produce long-lasting, flawless, lighter skin as the advertisements promise. Rather, they usually result in uneven patches of depigmentation, flaky irritated skin, and mild to severe skin disorders.

Given the health complications surrounding skin bleaching, why go through the trouble? What are the cultural contexts that lead women to resort to skin bleaching in an effort to access fair-skin privilege? The next section will explore the contexts surrounding colorism in Thailand, India, and Nigeria.

**Colorism in Thailand**

Like much of East Asia, Thailand is experiencing an internal battle between its traditional culture and 21st century modernity. For Thailand, Laos, the Philippines, and other parts of Southeast Asia, the face of modernity is not only Western, but also includes the Northeast Asian international successes: Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan. Both the Northeast Asian and Western images of modern success bear white skin. A 2002 study of adolescents in the northern province of Chaing Mai illustrates how modernity, popular culture, and white skin become conflated for many Thai youth. The study illustrates,

> The girls often admired the beauty of the models and the fashions in the magazine . . . These models have westernized features or are Eurasian rather than Thai and the magazines included articles extolling the virtues of “corrective surgery,” skin lightening creams, and so on.

64 Ibid, 203.
Most of them expressed the desire to wear fashionable dresses, were they to have a chance to do so. As one of them said: “just to be modern like others, to dress as people in the modern world dress. It looks awful to wear a Thai sarong while the others wear jeans.”

Valorizing images of biracial Eurasian or Western beauty as modern and desirable creates an inferiority-superiority relationship between what is naturally Thai and what is other. The importance one places on lighter skin seems to be correlated with the woman’s own skin tone. A 2010 study found that young women in all four regions of the country marked a “shapely” figure as the most important physical characteristic, followed by having “bright face skin” and “white-pink skin.” This prioritization placed on “bright,” white skin was most emphasized in the southern region of Thailand, where women tend to have darker brown skin tones than those in the northern region and presumably perceive themselves as further from the beauty standard than lighter women of the North. Thus, this colorist hierarchy seems to be replicated on a local level between northern and southern Thai women. Additionally, the study found that Thai women associate white skin not just with beauty, but also with “high social status, self-confidence, modernity, and better job opportunities.” The perceived psychological and economic benefits of fair skin suggest that Thai women are noticing a system of colorist privilege that extends beyond simply who is considered attractive.

This link between skin tone and economic opportunity has even been infused into

67 Ibid. 112.
68 Ibid, 115.
the Thai language. The word “Tee” is a descriptor that refers to Thais with lighter complexions and also connotes being educated and from a wealthy family.69 “Isan”, on the other hand, refers to darker complexions and is linked with being poor and uneducated. In short, skin tone has long been a signifier of class level in Thailand, though it is unclear when historically this class-based colorism entered the Thai language.

The connection between whiteness, wealth, and modernity is reinforced through Thailand’s beauty pageants. Thailand’s Miss Universe contestants, ostensibly representing the most beautiful and refined that the country has to offer, manifest how Western and Northeast Asian beauty standards of fair skin and wide eyes have been diffused into Thailand’s national image of beauty. For example, with large eyes, high cheekbones, and fair skin with a pink undertone, Thailand’s 2012 Miss Universe contestant could easily be mistaken for Italian.

![Figure 2: Thailand Miss Universe 2012 contestant, Nutpimon Waller](image)

How half-white, biracial Thais fit into this colorist hierarchy has evolved somewhat over time. Independent researcher Walter Persaud writes that, until around the mid-1990s, Eurasian identity was considered undesirable and sometimes taboo, as half-

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white Thais were considered potentially illegitimate children of American soldiers on break from Vietnam.\textsuperscript{70} Today, however, “‘in the globalized epoch of diasporic nationalism, Eurasians have acquired a privileged place in Thailand, especially in the worlds of advertising and entertainment where Thai notions of beauty are being transformed,’” such that a half-White identity is not only accepted, but is in demand.\textsuperscript{71}

The image of white-skinned Asians dominates advertisements in Thailand and contrasts sharply with the darker tanned skin of most Thai citizens. Like most advertisements in Thailand, ads for skin-lightening products typically feature “Asian women with glowing white skin, jet-black hair, and delicate, almond-shaped obsidian eyes.”\textsuperscript{72} Sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn notes that “the message in these ads is clear: It’s okay to be Asian as long as you’re the right kind of Asian.”\textsuperscript{73} In other words, while White Westerners are not the dominant face of beauty in Thailand, white-skinned Northeast Asian and Eurasian women still reinforce the “white is right” complex that is common in much of Asia.

With the advertising industry’s fair-skinned image of female beauty comes a booming skin lightening industry in Thailand. By 2004, whitening lotions accounted for 60% of Thailand’s 1.6 billion dollar (Bt 47.2 billion)\textsuperscript{74} skin care market.\textsuperscript{75} Today, an estimated 58% of women in Thailand between the ages of 18-64 use skin-lightening products.\textsuperscript{76} Alongside multinational corporations, home-based manufacturers and local

\begin{footnotes}
\item[70] Persaud, “Gender, Race and Global Modernity,” 218.
\item[71] Ibid, 219.
\item[72] Glenn, \textit{Shades of Difference}, 68.
\item[73] Ibid, 68.
\item[74] “L’Oreal Claims Leadership of Thailand’s Skincare Market.” Thailand: The Nation. 26 April, 2013. \url{http://www.nationmultimedia.com/business/LOreal-claims-leadership-of-Thailands-skincare-mar-30204816.html}
\item[75] Persaud, “Gender, Race and Global Modernity,” 214.
\item[76] Bird, “The Quest for Beauty,” 27.
\end{footnotes}
Thai companies are competing for a share of the skin bleach market. National brands include Oriental Princess’ “Advanced Whitening Complex” and Thailand’s largest cosmetic producer, Cute Press, which advertises its “White Beauty Body Lotion.”

Like skin bleach products in most of the world, Thailand’s lightening creams and soaps are not without health risks. In “The Quest for Beauty: Asia’s Fascination with Pale Skin,” Deirdre Bird notes that there are warnings against 70 whitening creams in Thailand for their use of illegal bleaching agents. The extent to which Thai women are aware of such health risks is an important area for further research.

One population that experiences colorism somewhat differently in Thailand is male sex workers. Thailand has garnered an international reputation for its bustling sex industry that inclusively employs female, male, and transgender sex workers. Thai customers tend to prefer fairer sex workers. However, many white Western male clients – known as farangs in Thai – who seek male sex workers prefer to do business with darker-skinned Thai men, whom they perceive as more exotically, authentically Thai. Western, gay sex clients’ preference for darker skin is positive in that it increases economic opportunity for Isan Thai men, yet it also reinforces an exotification of dark skin that represents a different form of colorism.

Colorism in India

The preference for lighter skin in India is in no way subtle. From an early age, school children recognize that fair skin affords a range of privileges for some over others. In 2010, I conducted thirty-three interviews at the AGN School in Tamil Nadu, India

77 Persaud, “Gender, Race and Global Modernity.”
regarding students’ and teachers’ perceptions of colorism in their community. Of 29 student interviewees between the ages of 10-17, only five stated a preference for darker skin, four of whom identified as dark-skinned. One female school instructor explained that not only do the children have partiality towards the fairer students but that “even the teachers, even the parents, the neighbors, they take a special care towards [lighter children]. They pay special attention to them. You’ll be boasting them, you’ll be praising them.”

One high school student admitted that she is sometimes teased by her grandparents for her complexion. She explained, “Parents won’t tell [anything about my skin tone] but grandparents will say that you are not in your father’s color; your father is more fair than you. You are so dark than your mother and father. Even they will hurt us.”

This complexion-based prejudice between peers and among families can be psychologically detrimental to children as they form their ideas of self. Playful childhood taunts lined with painful subtext are just one of many manifestations of colorism in India.

Perhaps more perverse is the fact that complexion, as an overwhelming marker of beauty in India, impacts a woman’s chances for marriage. For a woman in a traditional Indian community, the family she marries into is an important determinant for her future quality of life, and not being chosen for marriage is a significant source of shame for her family. In “Gendering Colour: Identity, Femininity, and Marriage in Kerala,” Armali Philips writes that many Indians believe that “a woman without a husband is ‘nothing,’ since a woman’s social identity comes from having a husband.” Thus, the social capital of a fair complexion becomes significant for a woman’s life opportunity in the context of

80 Female school teacher, age 25. Interview by author. AGN School, India, July 2010.
81 Female student, age 16. Interview by author. AGN School, India, July 2010.
marriage. Of the nine 14-18 year old boys interviewed, 7 stated that they would rather marry a girl with a light complexion. One stated, “Darker girls I don’t like because it’s not, like, good. In India, nobody like dark colors. Because we are dark colors. We are also dark so we want only light. White and dark? Only light!” He went on to express the gendered expectations behind skin complexion, asserting, “Black for boys, white for girls.” The disproportionate importance of fair skin for women is reflected in newspaper matrimonial ads as well. In Hindustan Times matrimonial ads: 2.8% of men mentioned their complexion while 13.5% of women mentioned theirs (note that ads generally only mention complexion if the skin is fair). In the marriage market, a fair complexion can often compensate for shortcomings in socioeconomic or caste level, such as an “inadequate dowry, lack of education, or unemployment.” Though it was outlawed in 1961, the dowry practice of a bride’s family presenting financial compensation to the groom’s family upon marriage remains socially compulsory. One interviewee, a female 25-year-old teacher at the school, explained the connection between dowry expectations and skin tone. She states, “If a girl is so pretty with fair skin, the guy will say anything is okay for me. Whatever the bride’s father wants to give…. In the case of the darker girl, they have to pay more dowry, some property.”

The connection between the dowry system and skin complexion affects some females as early as birth. Following the birth of a female infant, family members will first inquire about the child’s gender, and immediately after, will ask whether the child is gori.

83 Male student, age 17. Interview by author. AGN School, India, July 2010.
84 Glenn, Shades of Difference, 154.
85 Glenn via Vaid, Shades of Difference, 151.
86 Philips, “Gendering Colour,” 266.
87 Female school teacher, age 25. Interview by author. AGN School, India, July 2010.
or fair complexioned. Dark-skinned female infants are at a disproportionately high risk of infanticide, because their families know that these infants will one day require higher dowries. As described above, dark skin on an infant functions as a financial liability for the family. Brown baby boys are less at risk for infanticide, partly because “a dark-skinned son is not so much of a liability to a middle-class family as a dark-skinned daughter, for he can easily acquire other socially desirable qualities.” In short, being both female and dark-skinned poses a doubly high financial burden for a family, and puts one at increased risk of infanticide.

Female infanticide, the practice of killing or abandoning a newborn girl, remains an acute reality in much of India. It is estimated that thousands of female infants are killed, abandoned, or selectively aborted each year. Rajasthan’s Jaisalmer district, for example, has a skewed sex ratio of 869 girls per 1000 boys. In my interview with Sandhya Puchalapalli, the director of the Aarti Home – an orphanage that raises abandoned baby girls – she noted that the dowry system is one of the biggest contributors to the financial burden that dissuades impoverished families from raising their girls.

One female student interviewee noted, “If the girl is so dark in color, they want to give more dowry, so they are killing the child in the birth itself…..”, succinctly explaining this relationship between dowry, skin tone, and infanticide.

88 Glenn via Vaid, Shades of Difference, 149.
92 Puchalapalli, Sandhya. Interview by author. Andhra Pradesh, India, August 2010.
93 Female student, age 16. Interview by author. AGN School, India, July 2010.
Like good capitalists, multinational cosmetic corporations have found ways to profit from India’s preference for fair skin. In sheer numbers, Indians in India and in diasporic communities around the world make up the world’s largest market for skin lighteners. By 2000, there were over 30 fairness creams available to Indian consumers. One study found that more skin lightening products are sold in India than Coca-Cola. India’s 200 million dollar skin lightening industry is dominated by the British owned skin bleach company Fair & Lovely, which is infamous for its advertising strategies that overtly equate fair skin with self-worth, family pride, happiness, and life opportunity. One such television advertisement sets the following scene:

A young Indian woman and her father humbly walk into the Modern Beauty Company. The fair-complexioned female employee scoffs at the young woman for her brown skin. Her father returns home and concocts a fairness cream from all natural ingredients. After applying the cream and achieving flawless white skin, the woman strides back into the Modern Beauty Company with full confidence and is admired by the woman who had mocked her. A white male authority figure at the company gasps at her newfound beauty. Immediately after, she is shown elatedly strolling off of a plane and being met by paparazzi clamoring to photograph her. The commercial concludes with her proud father stroking her now-beautiful, white face that has brought the family success and happiness.

The commercial’s message is clear: fair skin will bring an otherwise average Indian girl fame, success, confidence, and the admiration of white men. Fair & Lovely claims that its products whiten skin dramatically in only 6 weeks, and whether this is factual or not, it appears that women around the world are buying that message. Fair &

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Lovely is marketed in 40 countries and claims a customer base of a whopping 27 million worldwide.\textsuperscript{100}

Whether Western media is creating or simply responding to this demand for fair skin will be explored in chapter 4, though one can certainly understand the relationship as somewhat cyclical.

Similar to Thailand and Nigeria, India’s celebrities and beauty pageant contestants provide an additional illustration of how colorism is manifested. Bollywood star and 1994 winner of the Miss World pageant Aishwarya Rai is often referred to as the World’s Most Beautiful Woman.

\textsuperscript{100} Bird, “The Quest for Beauty,” 27.
With hazel-blue eyes, fair skin, brown hair, plump lips, and a slender frame, Rai provides an image of beauty for millions of South Asian women to look up to, yet she bears little resemblance to their natural phenotypes. Though achieving Rai’s European-esque physique is virtually impossible for the majority of Indian women, many try in vain to reach it, spending valuable portions of their incomes on beauty parlor visits and lightening creams.

A 12-year-old boy I interviewed asserted that only rich urbanites purchase lightening creams to show their beauty to other boys and girls at school. Village people, he contrasted, “…think about their culture and not bother about their colors.” To what extent was his statement true? What are the socioeconomic implications of skin lightening in India? Sam Balsara, president of the Advertising Agencies Association of India, contends that skin-lightening products have been making “inroads into poor people’s budgets for a long time” in India. He states that, as early as 1994, mothers in the slums of Hyderabad informed him that their daughters regularly used Fair & Lovely. Bleach products can range from a few cents to hundred of dollars per ounce, and can therefore reach women at almost every level of the socioeconomic ladder. Yet even for the cheapest bleach products, why do low-income women in developing countries like India dedicate portions of their incomes to skin-lightening products? It appears that the combination of life pressures that privilege fair skin – including marriage, employment, and social respect from peers and family – push even poor Indian women to regard skin lightening as an important component of their lifestyles.

101 Male student, age 12. Interview by author. AGN School, India, July 2010.
103 Ibid, 1354.
Colorism in Nigeria

In June 2012, the World Health Organization found that 77% of Nigerian women use skin lightening products, the world’s highest percentage. What does colorism look like in a country where the overwhelming majority of women bleach their skin? Education researcher Irene Durosaro cites the 1940s as the beginning of the formal use of skin lightening products in Nigeria. On a regional level, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) experienced an escalation in the use of skin bleach products throughout the second half of the 20th century. South Africa’s Drum magazine expanded throughout much of SSA, including Nigeria, and, by the 1950s, become the most influential vehicle for marketing skin lightening products to African women. By the 1970s, “skin lighteners were common commodities in most of southern Africa” and the industry was effectively in motion on the continent.

Advertisements for skin bleaching in SSA have adopted less overtly racist marketing strategies over time, yet the message remains the same: “lighter is better.” The early 1900s saw classic colonial-era advertisements for Pears Soap depicting benevolent white people cleaning dirty and savage black Africans.

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106 Durosaro, “Perceptions of Skin Bleaching.”
107 Thomas, Lynn cited in Glenn, Shades of Difference, 201.
108 Ibid, 201.
Figure 5: PEARS Soap ad

A 1968 Satina advertisement publicizes that it provides “the lightest, loveliest skin of all….”

Figure 6: Satina Skin Tone Cream ad

A 2005 advertisement from a magazine ironically named *Black Beauty*, claims that it will “heal the wounds of time” by eliminating hyperpigmentation altogether.

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110 Blay, “Skin Bleaching and White Supremacy.”
Today, Nigeria serves as a port for harmful skin bleaches to enter SSA. Though Nigeria has some level of legal regulation limiting the entrance of dangerous skin bleaches, the country’s lack of state control over informal markets renders such regulations ineffective. Given this state inefficacy, “many skin-whitening products with dangerous chemical ingredients are manufactured in Europe or the United States, sent to Nigeria, and then distributed throughout Africa in both formal and informal markets.”

Nigeria’s central role in the distribution of skin lightening products to other markets of SSA may contribute to its unparalleled rate of bleaching among women, and among female traders in particular.

The practice of skin bleaching has evolved over the years from simply maintaining one’s natural complexion to complete, full-body bleaching, sometimes including the bleaching of genitalia. Many have internalized the idea that fair skin brings enhanced social capital and material wealth, an association that is also highly gendered. In a recent survey at one skin clinic in Lagos, Nigeria, 92% of female patients

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111 Ibid.
113 Durosaro, “Perceptions of Skin Bleaching,” 42.
had used skin lightening creams, compared to only 5% of male patients.\textsuperscript{114} What privileges does fair skin afford Nigeria women in particular? In a study of female secondary school students in Ibadan, Nigeria, Durosaro found that the girls perceived skin whitening as a route towards achieving a range of social and economic benefits. In addition to enticing men romantically, they believed bleach products would enable them 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.”\textsuperscript{115} Whether real or imagined, the perceived benefits of fair skin expand far beyond one’s appearance.

Like in Thailand and India, colorism is reflected in the overrepresentation of light-complexioned models, actresses, and beauty pageant winners that Nigerians are exposed to. One does not need to look far to see that “women with lighter complexions are more often used to advertise a wide range of products including alcoholic beverages, toiletries, cosmetics, and clothing.”\textsuperscript{116} Famous Nigerian models and celebrities include Munachi Abii, Tonto Dikeh, and Omotola Jalade, all of whom have markedly lighter skin than average Nigerian women. Slightly darker celebrities such as Genevieve Nnaji, the face of Lux Soap, and singer Tiwa Savage provide skin tone diversity in the circle of famous Nigerian women, yet all have straightened hair or weave extensions, reinforcing a Eurocentric image of African beauty.

\textsuperscript{115} Durosaro, “Perceptions of Skin Bleaching,” 44.
\textsuperscript{116} Olumide, “Complications of Chronic Use,” 346.
There is tension between Nigeria’s traditional beauty standard – full bosoms, wide hips, dark skin like ebony to contrast with the brightness of white eyes – and the image of female beauty in the West. Two of Nigeria’s beauty pageants represent this contradiction. The Queen Nigeria pageant seeks a winner who represents traditional Nigerian culture and beauty, a winner who challenges conventional Western beauty ideals. Conversely, The Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria (MBGN) pageant, which feeds candidates into the Miss World and Miss Universe pageants, seeks a “Cosmo girl” who is trendy and fashion-forward. MBGN pageant directors must position their candidates as competitive in the context of international beauty pageants. In other words, pageant winners must fit the basic conventions of international beauty – long hair, relatively light skin, slim figure – in order to be competitive alongside women from around the world. In 2001, Nigerian Agbani Darego became the first black African winner of the Miss World title.

Darego’s light caramel skin, straight hair, slim figure, and thin nose sparked debate in Nigeria regarding the possibility of national beauty standards being confronted with quite different international standards. Should Nigeria succumb to the West’s international

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117 Lawal, Qudus. Interview by author. In-person interview. Stanford, CA, April 2013.
119 Ibid, 369.
definition of beauty in the spirit of global integration, or work to ensure that the next

generation continues to value Nigerian women’s natural beauty?

Nigerians seem to display more timidity and subtlety surrounding their society’s

preference for fair skin compared with Indians. Whereas the Indians I interviewed openly

admitted personal and societal preferences for fair skin, many Nigerian youth I

corresponded with were hesitant to discuss Nigeria’s colorism and skin-lightening

practices. One insisted that she personally had no color preference and that Nigerian

society shows no real preference to fair skin. However, she also stated that lighter-

skinned women do receive social benefits and that she doesn’t mind that fair skin is

considered more beautiful, because she believes that, 9 times out of 10, lighter women

genuinely are more attractive.\textsuperscript{120} This contradiction of describing Nigeria’s colorism yet

asserting that colorism does not exist was common. There was also confusion among my

Nigerian interviewees regarding the prevalence of skin bleach use. One Nigerian student

informed me that “the use of skin lightening cream is not common,” ostensibly unaware

that Nigeria holds the highest rate of skin bleach use in the world.\textsuperscript{121} Perhaps this lack of

recognizing or admitting the extent of colorism in Nigeria is tied to the embarrassment

around skin discrimination in many black communities around the world. Hunter writes

that there is shame around skin lightening in some cultures “either because one should

‘naturally’ have light skin, not chemically derived light skin, or because some believe

that lightening the skin implies a shame of one’s race or ethnic identity.”\textsuperscript{122} The anti-

colonial, anti-Jim Crow international Black Power movement in the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century

struck a chord with blacks throughout much of SSA and the U.S. As a result, many who

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{120} Okoh, Emem. Interview by author. Email interview. Dec 12, 2012.
\textsuperscript{121} Lanre-Ladenegan, Anjola. Interview by author. Email interview. Dec 12, 2012.
\textsuperscript{122} Hunter, “Buying Racial Capital,” 147.
\end{flushright}
subconsciously or consciously pride fair skin experience a level of shame, believing they should “know better.” The shame attached to this internalized racism creates a complicated set of emotions for black Africans who, despite themselves, have bought into the notion that “white is right.”

What About Tanning?

One common counterargument to the assertion that international beauty standards privilege lighter skin is the idea of tanning. Those who subscribe to this argument assert that there is no global bias towards whiteness. Rather, humans simply admire what they lack. After all, white women tan to darken their skin, just as women of color around the world lighten theirs. However, it is important to note that when white women achieve a real or artificial tan, they are not trying to change the way they are perceived racially. Hunter notes that the goal of tanning is “not to look half black or half Mexican. It is to look white with a tan.” Conversely, “Many women of color are trying to alter the way they’re perceived racially, such that people think, ‘maybe she’s half-white.’” White women can tan and still maintain the privileges attached to appearing white, while women of color often alter their bodies with the goal of buying themselves some of those same privileges.

Tanning is fashionable for white Westerners largely because it is a class statement. Year-round tanned white skin is an indication of a luxurious lifestyle in which one has the time and expendable income to vacation in the Caribbean or go to a tanning booth. Whitened skin also functions as a class statement for women in the Global South,

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124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
as it suggests a lifestyle of resting indoors while others toil in the fields. However, the phenomenon of skin lightening is more deeply perverse, as it rests on a foundation of white supremacy that has impacted the majority of the non-European world through the legacy of colonialism and contemporary economic power imbalances. Tanning, in contrast, does not evoke any sense of “brown supremacy” and should not be regarded as the flip side of the same coin. A simple comparison of the rhetorical devices used in tanning and skin lightening advertisements indicates meaningful differences between the two practices. Tanners are asked to “enhance” rather than “correct” their natural color, to “bronze” rather than “blacken” their skin.

![Bomb Shell Bronzer ad](image)

**Figure 9: Bomb Shell Bronzer ad**

As sociologist Ayu Saraswati notes, the real similarity that can be drawn between tanning and bleaching practices is that they both ultimately valorize a “cosmopolitan whiteness” of luxury, modernity, and Eurocentric beauty.\(^{126}\)


One factor common across Thai, Nigerian, and Indian societies is the fact that women seek lighter skin not only for the sake of beauty, but because they perceive fair skin as bestowing a range of social and economic benefits. Hunter explains that, for many
women in developing nations with emerging global economies, they recognize their employment competition to be international and believe that lighter skin will give them a leg up in the job market. Additionally, marriage prospects carry a host of socioeconomic implications for women and their families, such that beauty can produce tangible economic payoffs. What has prompted such diverse cultures, all of which have predominately populations of color, to endow light skin with such economic and social privilege? The next chapter will explore one possible explanation for this international bias towards lighter skin: Western media’s narrow standard of beauty.

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127 Hunter interview, 2012.
Chapter 3

Western Media Beauty Standards

The Western Standard of Beauty

In April 2012, a British television show competition named 18-year-old Florence Colgate the most beautiful woman in Britain. Fair-skinned, blonde, blue-eyed Colgate has appeared on Good Morning America and in a variety of other media outlets that tout her as the scientific physical ideal.

While her 2:1 facial symmetry may naturally appeal to humans across national borders, many around the world have also been socially primed to consider Colgate’s appearance beautiful. Scientific symmetry is only one factor influencing Western society’s perceptions of attractiveness. The media industry, and advertising in particular, wields enormous power over what many are taught to associate with the word “beauty” from a young age. This chapter explores the traits that are valued as beautiful for women in the West and how this standard of beauty expanded globally throughout the 20th century. Additionally, this chapter discusses how Thailand, Nigeria, and India have experienced Western media and its illusive standard of beauty.
The emergence of popular films and magazines allowed American producers to commodify a specific image of ideal feminine beauty. In the 1920s, the first major women’s fashion magazines emerged: *Vogue*, *Queen*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*. Images of beauty in American media were never meant to reflect the range of women’s bodies present in society, but were intended to promote a sort of “capitalist realism.”\(^{128}\) In “The Moral Underpinnings of Beauty,” sociologist Shyon Baumann writes that American media’s “advertising ‘does not claim to picture reality as it is but reality as it should be - life and lives worth emulating.’”\(^{129}\) The bodies deemed most worthy for emulation in 20\(^{th}\) century America looked much like Marilyn Monroe: blonde hair, blue eyes, a slim nose, and unmistakably of European descent. Perhaps, as Baumann suggests, it is natural for human societies to develop an ideal for female beauty that specifies how each physical trait should look. Baumann writes,

> In the United States, as elsewhere, there are dominant ideals held by the majority ethnic group, and known to virtually all members of society, regarding a great number of physical characteristics. For example, there are ideals for height, weight, the shape of the nose, the shape of the mouth, the color and positioning of the teeth, the distances between facial parts, and more.\(^{130}\)

However, the U.S. seems to be the first country to have commodified its beauty ideal into something that can be purchased. In 1999, the advertising industry reached $180 billion per year. Today, the U.S.’ $250 billion dollar advertisement industry thrives off of this commodification of female beauty. The more stringent and unattainable the beauty ideal,


\(^{129}\) Ibid, 3.

\(^{130}\) Ibid, 4.
the more body parts women are urged to “fix” with cosmetics, hair chemicals, and plastic surgeries that produce greater revenue for the beauty industry. Jean Kilbourne, the creator of the *Killing Us Softly* series that critiques U.S. advertising’s attack on women, describes:

> The first thing the advertisers do is surround us with the image of ideal female beauty, so we all learn how important it is for a woman to be beautiful, and exactly what it takes. Women learn from a very early age that we must spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and above all, money, striving to achieve this ideal, and feeling ashamed and guilty when we fail. And failure is inevitable, because the ideal is based on absolute flawlessness. She never has any lines or wrinkles, she certainly has no scars or blemishes. Indeed, she has no pores.  

Necessarily, women of all races fall short of this impossible standard, and many suffer psychologically as a result. However, women of color are at an additional disadvantage, given that the advertised standard of beauty is traditionally white.

Baumann reviewed 1,508 American advertisements and found that they prioritized *fairness* as an important factor in female beauty, across racial categories. He notes that American culture associates moral values with lightness and darkness, which has important implications for that which is considered beautiful. He writes,

> Associations with whiteness or lightness include youth, innocence, purity, virginity, vulnerability, and delicacy. Associations with blackness or darkness include threat, aggression, virility, mystery, villainy, and danger. Lightness and darkness together compose a stable, clear, and well-known cultural dichotomy.

Through this association of whiteness with a host of traits that women are expected to uphold, this color complex impacts women’s perceived beauty in a variety of ways.

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It is important to recognize that the color complex is highly gendered. Baumann found that advertised images of women were significantly fairer than images of men of the same races. Additionally, the gap in skin-tone between women and men was far larger than the gap observed in everyday life.\textsuperscript{133} This prioritization of women’s fairness reflects traditional, gendered views of beauty. Baumann quotes, “In Western Caucasian society, there seems to be a popular image of beautiful women as having a fair complexion, light eye color, and light hair color, in contrast to an ideal image of men as having darker features…. We have the ‘fair maiden,’ and the ‘tall, dark, and handsome’ gentleman.”\textsuperscript{134} In other words, the purity, innocence, and softness associated with lightness in the West impacts the physical worth assigned to a woman far more than her male counterpart. Interestingly, in the advertisements that Baumann reviews, “…the fairest complected women were more frequently depicted in ways that subtly suggested wealth and privilege” through the clothing the models wore.\textsuperscript{135} Not only is a light or white complexion associated with purity, it also connotes financial stability and luxury in American society.

How does this cultural bias towards female fairness effect American’s hair color preferences? Researchers Melissa Rich and Thomas Cash conducted a study of American media and the preference for blonde hair on women. Based on their sample, around 26.8\% of white American women are blonde. Contrast this with the fact that 41\% of women in \textit{Playboy} magazine centerfolds are blonde.\textsuperscript{136} This overrepresentation of

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, 12.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid, 17.
blondes in a popular men’s magazine suggests that blonde women serve as a sexual icon in American culture. Additionally, the image of blonde beauty seems to impact how women view themselves individually. Rich and Cash cite a 1992 study that found that while “22% of women sampled were natural blondes, 39% reported that they wished to be blonde.” Moreover, 84% of women in the sample “believed that men preferred blonde women. In reality, however, only 35% of the men preferred blonde women.”

Even Beyoncé, named People Magazine’s most beautiful woman of 2012, has gradually transitioned from a dark brown hair color to blonde over the years, and her skin is occasionally lightened in advertisements through Photoshop.

With this fixation on blonde hair, it seems that American women have internalized the idea that being blonde comes with disproportionately high social capital.

In short, there exists a social premium on light skin across races and on light-colored hair. In part, this premium is a manifestation of white privilege. Regardless of one’s race, being closer to looking white accrues privileges tied to being white. With a current wealth gap of 22:1 between white and black Americans, whiteness endows

137 Ibid, 122.
138 Ibid, 122.
significant economic benefits. Given that wealth directly impacts education, health, housing, legal support, and a variety of other life factors in a capitalist system, whiteness creates a cycle of social, economic, and political advantages that reinforce one another. Because Western society has come to associate whiteness with both beauty and wealth, advertisers can more strategically promote an idealized picture of reality by using white or white-appearing models. Through appealing to the wishes of consumers to become attractive and financially thriving – both proxies for whiteness – contemporary advertising strategies are highly racialized.

But what about models and actresses of color, who are also represented in American advertisements? As noted in Chapter 1, popular American celebrities of color such as Zoe Saldana or Eva Longoria are not white, yet reflect physical traits that are widely associated with whiteness. Asian female celebrities often have relatively wide eyes, while their black counterparts have atypically thin noses and straight hair. The vast majority of brown and black female celebrities have noticeably lighter skin tones than the average women of their races. Margaret Hunter calls this phenomenon of including light-skinned women of color in advertisements an “illusion of inclusion.” The same essential model of beauty is being promoted, yet industries can congratulate themselves on diversifying their ad campaigns.

Some skeptics of the existence of an international bias towards fair skin point to the fact that black models in fashion magazines often have quite dark complexions.

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Black fashion models typically reflect either a Tyra Banks physique of light brown skin and long, straightened hair or very dark complexions and short, natural hair. The former represents the “illusion of inclusion” dynamic described above, whereby black women reinforce the same basic image of white beauty. To understand the latter, one must consider the fact that the range of medium-completed black women is virtually nonexistent in popular Western fashion industry and media more broadly (with notable exceptions such as Naomi Campbell). Why does the fashion industry incorporate dark-skinned black models, yet lack a true range of black beauty? A key explanation is that dark black models serve to exoticize blackness in a way that medium-toned black women would not. Sociologist Balogun describes, “...dark skin is important for Africans in the international modeling industry because it makes them exotic looking so they stand out.”\(^{141}\) Dark skin is often displayed as a jolting artistic statement, rather than a genuine incorporation of a wide spectrum of phenotypes. If the latter were the case, one would see a wider range of black beauty represented in the fashion world.

Perhaps unexpected is the fact that magazines marketed to African-Americans,

\(^{141}\) Balogun, “‘Idealized Femininity,’” 371.
such as *Jet, Ebony,* and *Essence,* uphold this same “illusion of inclusion.” Of 96 *Ebony* covers from 2000-2008, 73 prominently feature black women, yet the women on 67 of those covers reflect a European image of beauty: straightened hair, light brown skin, thin noses, and large eyes. These magazines targeted to black consumers in the U.S. are important to analyze because they too are a form of Western media that has gone global, circulated in urban areas of SSA and the Caribbean. What’s important is that this narrow standard of beauty is no longer relevant to just the U.S., but is an issue of global concern.

**International Consumption of Western Beauty Image**

As the U.S exported its popular media and advertisements throughout the 20th century, it also transported a picture of female beauty around the world. With the end of World War II came the accelerated global emergence of the modern beauty industry. 142 As discretionary incomes and urbanization increased in both the developed and developing worlds in the mid-20th century, the worldwide beauty industry gained greater traction. This global emergence was primarily driven by the U.S., which emerged from World War II as the most financially stable country with the largest beauty industry. 143 Europe and North America increasingly disseminated “commercial capitalism, consumption, and visual culture” after 1945, and in doing so, disseminated to the rest of the world the idea of “modernity.” 144 Given the overwhelming role of the Western world in defining “modernity” as young, groomed, wealthy, and consumerist, those in the non-Western world wishing to become “modern” were incentivized to purchase Western

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143 Ibid, 131.
144 Thomas, et. al, “The Modern Girl.”
media. Fortunately for American producers, this globalization of a “modern” beauty industry “coincided with the rapid globalization of the world economy during the second half of the nineteenth century.” Economic globalization allowed individuals around the globe to purchase American beauty products with unprecedented ease. Arguably, in purchasing American beauty products, communities around the non-Western world implicitly bought into American values as well – specifically the value that turned beauty and hygiene products into a necessity rather than a luxury. This strategic value shift was largely successful for Western advertisers. Packaged products such as toothpaste or bath soap, with previously little to no presence in the developing world, grew in popularity. By the mid-1950s, the skin-care giant Pond’s sold in nearly 120 countries while a similar firm, Max Factor, sold in 106. Business historian Geoffrey Jones notes that, by the 1970s, Western hygiene practices and toiletries were “widely diffused in developing countries.”

Through much of the 20th century and still today, economic growth in the developing world has been a boon to the beauty industry. Industry estimates from the mid-1960s found that consumer purchases of personal care items worldwide tended to increase about 112% for every 100% increase in income. In other words, as global income levels rose, the beauty industry grew exponentially.

To drive these sales, American beauty firms required extensive and effective international advertising. To sell products, the U.S. first had to sell values through images of what it looked like to be “successful” in the modern world. Jones notes that American

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145 Jones, “Blonde and Blue-eyed?” 129.
146 Ibid, 132.
147 Ibid, 140.
148 Ibid, 149.
149 Ibid, 133.
beauty advertisements leaned heavily on American images of beauty, rather than on the local beauty standards of consumer countries.\textsuperscript{150} Many U.S. firms, in fact, regarded “American beauty ideals as universal” and played on “the global popularity of Hollywood and the prestige of the United States” to give their brands validity in advertisements.\textsuperscript{151} Some cosmetic companies did begin using local models in their advertisements by the 1970s,\textsuperscript{152} though one must ask whether new, local models maintained the same essential “look” that Western models had long promoted. While many local, non-Western beauty preferences have persisted around the world and forced U.S. firms to nuance their marketing strategies, some beauty ideals have become relatively homogenized worldwide.\textsuperscript{153} The global ideals that developed included “a lack of body odor, white natural teeth, slim figures, paler skins, and rounder eyes.”\textsuperscript{154} This idealized woman in advertisements was intended to represent what it meant to thrive in the modern age. Putting a face on modernity by tying physical beauty to economic and romantic success was a lucrative, strategic move on the part of the American advertising industry. Jones acutely describes, “From a historical perspective, corporate strategies contributed to a reduction in the range of global variation in beauty ideals, while simultaneously developing products which enabled more and more consumers to aspire to capturing the beauty premium.”\textsuperscript{155}

It is important to note that the Western advertisement industry has also sought to diversify and localize its strategic appeals to various cultural standards in order to

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, 141.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid, 141.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid, 150.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, 150.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid, 150.
increase global traction for Western products. However, the images of beauty displayed in global advertising have not undergone that same process of diversification. As described earlier, while advertisements in various countries typically display models of the same races as local consumers, such models on the whole reflect the same basic phenotypic ideal present in Western media. In short, the emergence of the modern age has been marked by a more universal image of what constitutes a successful life and the globalization of products to fulfill that image.

Limiting the Scope of Media Analysis

The term “media” is an umbrella term that encompasses television, movies, newspapers, magazines, music, and various other forms of commercialized art. Because the spectrum of media is too broad for this thesis to address sufficiently, I will focus on print advertisements and women’s fashion magazines as a primary unit of analysis for two key reasons. One, Western magazines and print advertisements have an advantage over Western films and television programs in their long-term, global viability. Historically, American television programming and films have been the most popular forms of Western media internationally. Throughout much of the 20th century, Hollywood enjoyed relative dominance over the entertainment industry internationally and made great inroads in emerging market nations. However, the past few decades have seen the rise of highly competitive domestic entertainment industries. India’s Bollywood film industry produces over twice as many films annually as Hollywood and its viewer base is growing at a rate of 15% each year, compared to Hollywood’s viewer growth rate.
of 5-6%.\textsuperscript{156} Nigeria’s Nollywood is the third most successful film industry worldwide, after Hollywood and Bollywood, and generated $800 million between 2010 and 2012.\textsuperscript{157} Thailand’s domestic film production increased by 20% in 2001-2002 alone and has incorporated modern filmmaking technologies to increase its competitive value.\textsuperscript{158} 

Alongside the American film industry’s rising competition is another notable trend: the importation of television programming is decreasing worldwide.\textsuperscript{159} In the late 1980s, the U.S. produced 71% of television material worldwide. By 1995, that figure had dropped to 60%.\textsuperscript{160} Studies assessing the waning dominance of American movies and television programs have found that, “when given a choice, audiences prefer domestic and regional content to foreign programs.”\textsuperscript{161} In other words, communities prefer to watch stories that reflect lifestyles relevant to their own rather than Western lifestyles. Professor Chioma Ugochukwu refers to this idea as a “cultural discount” that diminishes the appeal of foreign cultural products. Such products present difficulty for viewers around the world in identifying with the “styles, beliefs, institutions, and behavioral patterns of the material in question.”\textsuperscript{162}

Magazines and advertisements also face this cultural discount, but less so than movies and television programs. Print advertisements enjoy greater flexibility in adjusting to local cultures when necessary. The U.S.’ most successful advertising

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid, 370.
\textsuperscript{162} Ugochukwu, “Cultural Resistance,” 39.
agencies have developed keen strategies for localizing their ad campaigns, in response to feedback that consumers prefer buying from companies that tailor their advertisements to the relevant society. While magazines and print ads can communicate in the local language, incorporate recognizable cultural symbols, and remove content that is irrelevant to a given society, television shows and movies are fixed productions that cannot easily adjust in the same ways. Additionally, a direct image that can be easily interpreted across cultures is less vulnerable to the cultural discount than a complete story that requires greater cultural context to understand. Thus, Western magazines and advertisements seem to hold greater long-term potential for international success (and therefore greater relevance to this thesis) than Hollywood films and American television shows, which are experiencing growing competition from emerging markets.

Second, this paper focuses on print media because advertisements are unlike other forms of media in that they almost exclusively sell idealized images of life, rather than reality. With this enhanced picture comes an image of perfected appearances for consumers to aspire to. Additionally, print media can employ Photoshop technology to sell an unrealistic or even impossible image of beauty. Thus, magazines and print advertisements provide the best text for analyzing Western standards of idealized beauty.

The following section will describe how various forms of Western media, and print advertisements and magazines in particular, are marketed and consumed in Thai, Nigerian, and Indian societies.

**Western Media in Thailand**

With the Vietnam War came a flood of American personnel into Southeast Asia.

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163 Ibid.
Partly because Thailand and U.S. had a strong political and economic relationship during the war years, Thailand’s access to American media increased during the 1960s.\textsuperscript{164} Thai citizens today rank television as the primary form of media they consume.\textsuperscript{165} In 1973, only 18% of Thai television programming was imported from abroad.\textsuperscript{166} Today, Thailand continues to have a vibrant domestic television industry that produces the country’s most popular mode of entertainment. While Western programs do not overwhelm Thai television airways, Western companies play a notably larger role in Thailand’s advertisement industry. Researchers Punyapiroje and Morrison describe, “In the advertising industry, Western advertising agencies have dominated since the 1940s. …Western advertising knowledge and theories were adopted, widely used, and accepted in the Thai advertising industry, even among Thai owned or Thai run agencies.”\textsuperscript{167} Largely due to the influence of Western companies in the Thai advertising industry, Thailand today is among the world’s 20 fastest growing countries in advertising expenditures,\textsuperscript{168} with the national advertising industry grossing $1.66 billion per year.\textsuperscript{169} While only 24 out of 180 advertising companies in Thailand are foreign-owned, those 24 are responsible for the majority of the industry’s revenue and help guide stylistic trends that the industry adopts.\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid, 66.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid, 465.
While television is the most popular venue for advertisement distribution, magazines and newspapers are ranked the second most influential form of media in Thai society. In the market for women’s fashion magazines, Elle magazine has been the most successful, followed by Marie Claire and Cleo, which has an estimated readership of 156,000 in Thailand. In 2012, Elle grew 13% in advertising revenue, while Cleo grew 6% and Marie Claire 30%. Advertisers for magazines such as this must determine whether to globalize or localize their marketing strategies, appealing to internationally standards or local aesthetics. Some advertising researchers such as historian Patrick Jory argue that Western companies in Thailand often tailor their strategies to the local culture. Some advertisement campaigns integrate illusions to Thai mythology or Thai cultural symbols, such as elephant patterns or the official seal of the Thai Ministry of Interior. Marketing researchers Razzouk, Seitz, and Vacharante reviewed 100 magazine advertisements targeted to Thai women and found that only 23% were totally localized to Thai culture, while the majority (57%) mixed a combination of globalized content and elements of Thai culture. Western advertisements in Thailand that promoted fashion and beauty products in particular were most likely to employ globalized appeals, using Caucasian models, English wording, and Western aesthetic ideals. The popular women’s magazine Cosmopolitan, for example, publishes

176 Ibid, 122.
international editions around the world, and has published 29 monthly magazines tailored to Thailand over the past three years. On the covers of those 29 magazines, 23 of the women are racially white (or white-appearing), one is a light-complexioned black woman, and three are Asian. Of the Asian women, two reflected a European standard of beauty: rosy cheeks, pale white skin, wide eyes, and dyed brown hair. Of all 29 covers of *Cosmopolitan*’s recent Thai publications, not one model on the cover looked ethnically Thai. Thus, while some advertising strategies may incorporate local Thai culture, companies selling beauty and fashion products seem to standardize their advertisements based on globalized, or more accurately, *Americanized*, norms. Considering that almost two-thirds of Thai women work outside of the home (the highest rate in the Asian-Pacific region), these women have greater potential exposure to Western advertisements, thereby increasing the potential psychological impact of such advertisements.

**Western Media in Nigeria**

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, is projected to become the fourth most populous country in the world by 2050. Given this population rate and the fact that Nigeria is one of Africa’s more urbanized nations, this country presents a significant marketplace for international media consumption. In an effort to increase domestic revenue from this consumer base, Nigeria has built its media industry to compete with Western imported entertainment. For example, when Nigerian television programming was in its infancy in the 1960s, foreign programming dominated the country’s airways. During a period of protectionist policies in the 1970s, foreign programming fell to 10%
and has now stabilized to occupy around 18-23% of Nigerian television. Western film consumption has also been challenged, with the rise of Nigeria’s thriving film industry Nollywood after 1992. Nigeria has built a star system similar that of the U.S., with THEMA awards to mirror the Oscars, as well as celebrity and film publicity magazines. Researchers of Nigeria’s film industry Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome write, “Nowhere else in Africa has a domestic market been captured so successfully.”

Print newspapers and magazines constitute a thriving media market in Nigeria, and most are privately owned and urban based. Whereas in 1965, around 80% of Nigerians were uneducated and illiterate, Nigeria’s adult illiteracy rate today has fallen to 39%. This increasing level of education among ordinary Nigerian citizens provides a ripe market for print media. However, though Western print media is occasionally consumed by the Nigerian elite, the majority of print media in Nigeria is domestically Nigerian rather than American. Interestingly, like television programming and films, Nigerian print media often reflects some of the same colorist rhetoric present in Western media. In his analysis of hundreds of advertisements in Nigeria, communications researcher Emmanuel Alozie found that there is a relatively even balance between appeals to what he calls “Nigerian values” and “Western values” in Nigerian

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178 Ugochukwu, “Cultural Resistance,” 43.
180 Ibid, 106.
Appeals to the values of family and savings are balanced with invocations of youth and individualism. After comparing advertisements from three SSA nations, marketing professor Adesegun Oyedele concludes that one advertisement appeal that seems not to be balanced with local cultural characteristics is beauty. Appeals to physical appearance are less localized to specific national standards, and span cultures more broadly than other appeals in popular SSA advertisements. The extent to which domestic Nigerian media reinforces colorist preferences will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 4.

**Western Media in India**

India boasts one of the world’s largest middle classes, with 300 million stable consumers. To meet its consumer demand, India has developed a famously thriving market for domestic media that challenges the notion of Western media’s universal appeal. Bollywood, the largest film producer outside of Southern California, reaps annual revenue of roughly $3 billion, as of 2011. Indians primarily consume domestically produced television programming and have one of the lowest rates of imported programming worldwide. In 1990, “only 8% of the programming shown on Indian

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television…was obtained from abroad.”\textsuperscript{188} India’s largest television network Zee TV reaches over 6 million households weekly, compared with the international STAR TV network, which broadcasts to 1.6 million weekly.\textsuperscript{189}

In part, this prominence of domestic media has been intentional. In 1974, UNESCO reported that cultural production almost exclusively flows in one direction: from the developed to the developing world. This report gave empirical validity to the idea that globalization is more accurately \textit{Westernization}. India, as a country that has long been wary of foreign media, provides a counterexample to this theory of cultural neo-imperialism from the West. For example, “…India’s ruling Hindu nationalists have attacked foreign satellite television networks, arguing that ‘their growing presence undermines Indian traditions and promotes Western-style decadence.’”\textsuperscript{190} Since gaining independence from Britain in 1947, India has instated a variety of regulatory constraints on foreign businesses, including international media companies. However, the past decade has seen significant loosening of regulations on international media in India. In 2002, the Indian government allowed increased foreign ownership of and investment in media publications. This deregulation of foreign business and investment has strengthened India’s robust consumer economy.\textsuperscript{191}

In the world of print media, 2007 and 2008 saw an “explosion of Western magazines” on Indian newsstands, including Indian versions of \textit{Vogue}, \textit{Rolling Stone},

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\textsuperscript{190} Sonwalkar, “India,” 417.

\textsuperscript{191} Parameswaran, Cardoza. “Melanin on the Margins,” 216.
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OK!, Hello, and Maxim.¹⁹² Today, India is one of the world’s fastest growing markets for magazine advertising, with 20% growth in 2008, reaching $302 million.¹⁹³ Still, like in Nigeria, India’s most popular magazines circulated are domestically owned. For example, Femina, a domestically produced women’s magazine, leads the market with a circulation of 2.25 lakh (225,000) copies. Compare this with India’s longest standing international women’s magazine – Cosmopolitan – which only circulates 100,000 copies and Elle’s circulation of 81,000.¹⁹⁴ It is important to recognize that Western magazines sold in India are often tailored to feature local content. The New York Times article “In India, Magazines That Translate Well” notes that India’s Western magazines are typically “written, photographed, edited and designed almost completely in India” and reflect localized content that differs from the American and British versions.¹⁹⁵ Even still, there exists much overlap in American and Indian advertising techniques. Researchers Rajaratnam, Hunt, and Madden explain, “Most of the ad agencies in India have partnerships with U.S. ad agencies, and as such are greatly influenced by U.S. advertising.”¹⁹⁶ This difference between American and Indian advertisements is further minimized in their depictions of female beauty. In “Melanin on the Margins: Advertising and the Cultural Politics of Fair/Light/White Beauty in India,” Parameswaran and Cardoza describe,

Almost all magazine and television advertisements produced in India feature light-skinned models. On browsing the pages of the dozen national and global glossy

¹⁹³ Ibid.
¹⁹⁵ Timmons, “In India.”
¹⁹⁶ Rajaratnam, Hunt and Madden, “Content Analysis.”
women’s magazines that target middle-class Indian consumers, even a casual reader would learn quickly that light skin color and flawless skin devoid of pores and blemishes define ideal feminine beauty.\textsuperscript{197}

Like in local magazine advertisements, the covers of Cosmopolitan’s Indian edition typically display Indian models and Bollywood actresses, though many appear to be racially white at first glance. All have long black or brown hair, fair, lightly tanned skin, slim figures, angular facial features, slim noses, plump lips, and high cheekbones.

India’s edition of Cosmopolitan can be contrasted with the magazine’s Thailand edition in that it typically uses local rather than Western models for its covers. Cosmopolitan in India, like Western media in India more generally, is tailored and localized to India far more than media in Thailand. However, the same fundamental image of female beauty is reflected in both Western magazines tailored to Indians and Western advertisements more generally. Allison Kimmich, executive director of the National Women’s Studies Association, asserts that, even as the magazine has gone global, “Cosmo is still pushing

\textsuperscript{197} Parameswaran, Cardoza. “Melanin on the Margins,” 228.
'the same standards of beauty’ around the world…. ‘I don’t know that that’s a global export that we want to be proud of.’”

There is no doubt that the range of phenotypes present in the West’s international media is narrower than the range of phenotypes present worldwide. Nor is there much doubt that the phenotypes that are present in Western media follow a decided pattern that privileges women who look something like Jessica Alba. The question now at hand is, how powerful is Western media in influencing women’s behaviors around the world? To what extent can skin lightening in societies as diverse as Thailand, Nigeria, and India be attributed to the impact of Western media, versus other potential driving forces? The next chapter will delve into this question and seek to explain what ultimately motivates the preference for lighter skin in the non-white, non-Western world.

Chapter 4

Methodology and Findings

What has led young women like one 19-year-old Zimbabwean to believe, “If I am to keep my boyfriend from being snatched away by other ladies, skin bleaching is the only solution”? What has led skin creams in Thailand to include lightening agents almost by default? How did we get here? This chapter delves into answering this paper’s central question of what force has been most influential in propelling the preference for lighter skin in India, Nigeria, and Thailand. In answering this question, four potential driving forces will be assessed: pre-modern cultural standards, colonization, local media, and contemporary Western media. Ultimately, I conclude that the various social and historical forces motivating colorist preferences in each country share one underlying reality: the positive correlation between fair skin and individual prosperity. The equation of whiteness with social and economic privilege is present in each hypothesis this paper assesses. It is this association that can be understood as the fundamental force driving the preference for fair skin and incentivizing millions of women across the Global South to practice skin bleaching.

Methodology

To empirically assess the question at hand, I cannot simply analyze the changing prevalence of skin bleaching over time. Skin lightening may have been relatively rare in 17th century South Asia, for example, due to a lack of access to bleaching products, but that does not mean the preference for fair skin did not exist. This paper treats skin lightening as a proxy for colorist preferences. Thus, I analyze separate time periods for each country to determine when colorism as a sociocultural phenomenon seems to have become noticeably prevalent. For Nigeria, I look at the pre-colonial (pre-1900), colonial (1900-1960), and post-colonial/global mass media (1960s-present) eras. Similarly, I break India into pre-colonial (pre-1800s), colonial (mid 1800s-1947), and post-colonial/global mass media (1950s-present) eras. Thailand is broken into the pre-modern era (pre-1900s), the period of the emergence of local and Western media industries in Thailand before the explosion of Northeast Asian influence (1900-1970s), and the age of global mass media (1980s-present). Based on anthropological studies, historical accounts, and primary text reviews of print advertisements from each case study, I determine which time period seems to have been the first in which colorism became hugely salient as it is today. I then attach that time period to an explanation for the source of colorism – 1) traditional, pre-modern culture 2) colonization 3) local media 4) Western/foreign media. No one hypothesis necessarily fits all case studies. Rather, there may be a different explanatory phenomenon for each country at hand.
Hypothesis 1: Traditional/Pre-Modern Preferences

A 1986 study of the Human Relations Area Files concluded, “Of 51 ethnically diverse societies for which such information is available, ‘47 state a preference for the lighter end for the locally represented spectrum, though not necessarily for the lightest possible skin colors.’” How could it be that, of such diverse societies around the world, the vast majority demonstrate a preference for relatively fair skin tones?

One pre-colonial theory for explaining colorism is the idea that histories of conquest and class stratification privileged fair skin in Nigeria, India, and Thailand alike. In Nigeria, and West Africa more broadly, there is evidence to suggest that notions of racial hierarchy existed long before European colonialism. Race historian Lynn Thomas describes the process of female initiation that was common in many traditional SSA communities. In preparation for marriage, young women would undergo periods of seclusion from the community. Part of the logic behind this practice was the idea that girls would experience a small transformation in appearance through cleansing, exfoliation, and a lightening of the skin from being out of sun. This example suggests that a bright, clear complexion held social significance in pre-colonial Nigerian society.

Additionally, historian Bruce Hall writes extensively of the history of race in Muslim West Africa. Particularly in the 17th century, he explains, Arabs from North Africa increasingly dominated culturally and militarily over blacks to the South, marking what he calls the “Arabization” of the Sahel. This Arab influence created a racialized

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differentiation between Arabs (who often considered themselves white), Berbers, and black Africans. Hall writes,

By entering even more fully into the world of Arab Islamic culture, and by constructing and elaborating on genealogical connections to important Arab Islamic ancestors, the elite stratum in Sahelian pastoralist societies increasingly defined itself as part of one world and distinct from another.  

The process of African elite in the Sahel defining themselves as culturally and racially distinct from the masses marked an increased ethnic stratification of society that predates colonization. Interestingly, in the period of Arabization, whiteness became less about actual skin color, and more about “genealogical connection to important people in the historical and religious pantheon of Arab Islam. Blackness, by contrast, was defined most fundamentally by the lack of such connections.”

In “The Historical and Cultural Influences of Skin Bleaching in Tanzania,” a group of Georgia State University professors writes of a similar dynamic in the region of east Africa today known as Tanzania. Trade between local Africans and northern Arabs created a hierarchical relationship, in which “dark-skinned Tanzanians were considered ‘primitive’ and inferior to lighter-skinned Arabs.”

A similar narrative of external groups obtaining power over indigenous peoples and creating skin-based hierarchies applies to India. According to a commonly accepted narrative of history, Aryans invaded India from the north around roughly 1500 BC and

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203 Ibid, 58.

defeated the local dark-skinned Dravidians. Within the Aryan’s Vedic civilization, a rigid caste system was established that tied skin tone into the class-based hierarchy.

“Lightness” and knowledge were associated with the upper castes, privileging the Aryans, while darkness and ignorance were attributed to lower castes.205 There is dispute over whether the Aryans ever actually invaded India, whether the caste system existed before the Aryan invasion, and whether skin tone was initially an explicit component of the caste system. In an examination of the Manusmriti text - written between 400BC and 200AD – which includes a detailed description of caste code, “no reference to skin color as the basis of the ranking of castes” was found.206 In short, there is insufficient evidence to conclude whether the initial design of India’s caste system was stratified by color lines. However, today, it is apparent that caste affiliation and skin color are highly correlated. Whether this correlation developed during British colonialism will be explored in the next section.

Beyond India’s caste system, some scholars assert that colorism is imbedded in the Hindu religion: “Kali, a dark-skin goddess, is a symbol of ugliness, cruelty, and destruction and manifests the negative association of dark skinned women in Indian society.”207 While there exist some indications of class and religious based colorism in Indian society that predate Western colonialism and media, such indications do not seem powerful enough to account for the rampant fair-skin bias we see in India today.


There is moderate evidence regarding how race and skin color have historically been understood in Thailand. Thailand, like much of East Asia, has long considered skin tone to be an indicator of one’s occupation and class level. Outdoor menial field labor indicated that one was of a lower class. Due to low levels of social mobility, the same families fulfilled such laborious occupations from generation to generation, and their skin tones notably darkened under continuous high sun exposure. Conversely, indoor jobs protected light skin tones and signified class privilege.

A more recent social reality that has helped conflate light skin with class privilege is the presence of Chinese merchants in Thailand. Dating back to the 1855 Bowring Treaty that the British forced upon Thailand, British and Chinese traders benefited while the Thai elite was burdened. This began a long-standing dynamic in which the Chinese in Thailand had above-average economic power. Regarding contemporary Chinese-Thai relations, Thailand expert Ansil Ramsay asserts, “Persons of Chinese ancestry dominate the financial and manufacturing sectors of the Thai economy and compose most of Thailand’s growing, affluent, and politically influential middle class.” While Chinese economic power in Thailand may not be as absolute as Ramsay describes, it is clear that there is some level of ethnic division along class lines in Thailand. Given the fact that ethnically Chinese individuals typically have lighter skin tones than the Thai, this income disparity between Sino-Thais and indigenous Thais likely strengthens the association between fair skin and class privilege in Thailand – though the association is albeit weakened by today’s more common practice of intermarriage.

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209 Ibid, 65.
More recently, the 1990s have seen a rise in the number of foreign migrant workers in Thailand.\textsuperscript{210} Low-income domestic workers are predominately Cambodian, Burmese, and Lao migrants with darker tanned skin tones, reinforcing the wealth disparity between light and dark skinned Asians in Thailand.

Beyond the financial implications of skin color, there are literary and linguistic indications of Thailand’s pre-modern colorist preferences. In Thai classical literature, heroes and heroines are often portrayed as having golden skin, while the villains are described as ugly and black. Similarly, an old, popular creation story in Thailand narrates, “In the beginning god created man. At first, he cooked the people too much (dark skinned people). Then he cooked them too little (pasty Westerners). Finally, he cooked them just right (light skinned Asians).”\textsuperscript{211} Cultural tales like this in which skin tone is salient demonstrate some level of long-standing color consciousness in Thai society. Linguistically, as mentioned in Chapter 3, an old common insult in Thai language is tua dam, or “black body,” which is often used to denigrate someone of a lower social standing.\textsuperscript{212} However, another common Thai expression used to admire dark skin is dam-kham, or “attractively dark.”\textsuperscript{213} Overall, Thai society seems to have historically prioritized light skin, though not nearly as dramatically as India. The explicit


nature of Thailand’s contemporary colorism appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Hypothesis 2: Colonization**

Though historical indications of colorism existed before the onset of colonialism in Nigeria and India, racial hierarchies that were loosely forming beforehand were cemented during British rule. The colonialism hypothesis for colorism essentially argues that the success in marketing and selling skin lightening agents today is “predicated upon European (colonial) promotion of idealized whiteness.” ²¹⁴ It is colonization, this theory asserts, that decisively imbedded skin-tone hierarchies into indigenous societies from West Africa to South Asia. Even though 21st century young women may not be acutely aware of their countries’ colonial experiences with race, colonial legacies persist today such that there is an indirect, generational transfer of preferences for fair skin.

Under the British’s classic colonial strategy of indirect rule, colonial administrators carefully selected local populations that they deemed capable and worthy of helping rule the masses. ²¹⁵ This power differential exhibited strong colorist undertones and promoted intra-racial discrimination. Evelyn Nakano Glenn explains that British colonizers,

> …Made invidious comparisons between lighter-skinned groups, whose men they viewed as more intelligent and marital and whose women they considered more attractive, and darker-skinned groups, whose men they viewed as lacking intelligence and masculinity, and whose women


they considered to be lacking in beauty.  

This middle category of “superior natives” was established to different degrees in both Nigeria and India.

Colonialism in Nigeria lasted from 1900-1960. The British “came to northern Nigeria desirous of identifying and collaborating with a group of rulers representing a cultural and political entity that they deemed ‘civilized’ and sophisticated enough to be partners in the colonial project.” In the North, colonial administrators showed political preference to the Hausa Fulani, who they considered “members of a higher race distinct from the indigenous Negroid peasant population,” largely due to their slim, tall builds, fair skin, and finely arched noses. While the British intensifed the Muslim Fulani’s local power in Northern Nigeria, a Christian Nigerian elite developed in the South as well. This elite was considered to have bought into the “moral and cultural superiority of European civilization.” Many studied in the West and “created a distinctive style of life built around Christianity, Western education and British manners and customs.” However, while these elite groups were given privilege over other locals, they were still decisively oppressed by British control. Regardless of class level, black Nigerians were residentially segregated from white colonizers, were denied quality jobs, and were regularly supervised by less-qualified whites. Yet, again, British colonialism did not oppress all equally in Nigeria. Whether they were phenotypically more “European” or

\[\text{References:}\]

218 Hall, A History of Race.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid.
they projected European cultural and religious values, Nigerian elite indirectly helped cement a racial and cultural hierarchy that valorized the British. On the most basic level, this colonial phenomenon equated whiteness with power and desirability. For the first time, the material payoff of being or appearing white became omnipresent in everyday Nigerian life. If this race/culture-based power gradation were not enough to embed a bias towards fair skin into Nigerian society, the British also intangibly assigned morality to different skin colors. Blackness symbolized ugliness, evil, and the dark side of the soul, while whiteness signified goodness, beauty, and godliness.222

India similarly experienced the brunt of British colonization, formally from the 1850s–1947. Like in West Africa, the British colonial regime in India selected local peoples through whom administrators could rule indirectly. In many Indian states, “the British recruited or recognized pre-existing martial and princely races, Muslims in many cases, and gave them significant administrative sway over Hindu peasants.”223 The British’s determination of who should comprise the country’s martial class of soldiers classified Indians into superior and inferior groups. This classification was largely established along phenotypic and caste lines. Much evidence of these classification criteria comes from British recruiting handbooks that contain thorough descriptions of the physique of martial classes.224 For example, in supporting why the Jat Sikhs were worthy of their membership in the martial class, the British describe the Sikhs as “famous for their fine physique…surpassed by no race in India for highbred looks, smartness, and

222 Gwaravanda, “Shona Proverbial Implications,” 211.
223 Ochonu, “Colonialism within Colonialism.”
soldierly bearing." Similarly, the Dogras were considered a “good looking race…generally fair owing to the temperate climate in which they live, and among the higher castes, owing to the purity of their descent.” This racialized justification for granting some Indians privilege over others helped cement the well-established, color-based hierarchy that exists in India today.

It is important to note that the British’s preference for phenotypically whiter Indians overlapped with the caste hierarchy that already existed. Though the British considered the high-caste Brahmins and Rajputs less loyal and more deceitful, they appreciated them for being “more refined than most for their narrow arched eyebrows, fine nose and narrow nostrils.” Colonial administrators relied heavily on physical features as measurements of Indians’ social quality, dismissing cultural and linguistic indicators as excessively mutable, due to the perceived ease of inter-group cultural appropriation. One famous colonial administrator Sir Herbert Risley saw the caste system as a convenient tool for indicating the social and physical worth of Indian subjects. He insisted that “the social rank of a caste varies inversely with the average nasal index of its members.” Unambiguously lacing race into India’s centuries-old caste structure propelled the Eurocentric notion that to have fair skin was to be socially, financially, and politically valuable.

The connection between class, caste, and physical appearance is certainly not scientifically precise; there is considerable phenotypic diversity within castes, and

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225 Ibid, 114.
226 Ibid, 114.
227 Ibid, 114.
Indians of different castes in the same state often share more physical similarities than they would with members of the same caste in a different part of the country.\textsuperscript{231} However, controlling for geography, Indians of higher castes do tend to have lighter skin and eye colors than average.\textsuperscript{232} Importantly, even if high-caste Indians were not more European in phenotype, what matters for this research question is that they are \emph{perceived} to be. The widely accepted representation of upper castes as fair and lower castes as dark perpetuates the social and financial incentive to pursue lighter skin in India. The idea that one’s appearance is a reliable indicator of their class status and social worth may have existed before colonization, but was heavily popularized by the British.\textsuperscript{233}

Unlike Nigeria and India, Thailand was never colonized, which provides a test case for this hypothesis. While Thailand has developed a strong societal preference for lighter skin despite its uncolonized history, colorism in Thailand is arguably more temporary and less deeply rooted than colorism in the other two nations. If Thailand’s colorism is indeed more of a modern-day, short-lived trend, the Thailand case study may in fact \emph{support} the hypothesis that colonization is the primary force that cements preferences for lighter skin. As discussed below, whether or not Thailand’s fascination with fair skin is a relatively temporary fad remains to be seen.

\textbf{Hypothesis 3: Domestic Media}

The hypothesis that domestic media drives colorism is a challenging one to evaluate. In particular, it is difficult to determine whether the roots of colorism in

\textsuperscript{231} Deshpande, Ashwini. “Caste and Diversity in India.” \emph{The Elgar Companion to Social Economics}, 2008, 23.

\textsuperscript{232} Beteille, “Race and Descent,” 450.

\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.
Nigerian, Indian, and Thai media initially sprang from Western influence or are homegrown. In the local media of all three countries, the vast majority of celebrities and models are the same race as the country’s consumers, yet their phenotypes are typically more in line with Eurocentric ideals than the average woman of each country, as is discussed in Chapter 3.

In the case of India, local media seems to have developed colorist undertones quite independently of Western media’s influence. Since it gained momentum in the 1950s after independence, Bollywood has played an enormous role in the South Asian film market, and is forecasted to hit a net worth of 1.96 billion by 2016. The vast majority of Bollywood actresses throughout the 20th century have reflected a relatively narrow image of beauty: bright (often hazel) eyes, fair skin, and long (often brown rather than black) hair. Since their inception in the 1950s, Indian beauty pageants, such as Femina Miss India and Miss India South, have reflected a similar standard of beauty. Even in Tamil Nadu – the southern state with some of India’s darkest skin tones, where I conducted my research – the winners of Miss Tamil Nadu and Miss Chennai (the state’s capital) have medium to fair skin on average.

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In reviewing a variety of Indian magazines – included *Femina* (1959), *New Woman* (1996), and *Outlook* (1995) – I found the same homogeneity in the physiques of women portrayed: fair skin, bright eyes, long hair, and narrow frames. In popular culture magazines, women with medium and dark skin tones are generally only found in rare lifestyle articles about poverty, natural disasters, or village life. As mentioned in chapter 3, while the consumption of Western media has drastically increased in recent years, Indian consumers still primarily consume domestic film, television, and print media products. However, while India’s local media is widely consumed and certainly reflects a colorist standard of beauty, it is likely not the driving force behind India’s preference for fair skin. Given the substantial evidence of India’s color-based hierarchy before the rise of modern media, such media seems to be responding to rather than creating colorist biases.

Nigeria’s local media market is somewhat different. Popular forms of media include the myriad of wedding magazines that flood Nigerian newsstands, hip-hop music videos, and of course, the Nollywood film industry – which gained momentum in the
1980s and has a net worth of roughly $200 million per year. Early forms of Nigeria’s fashion and lifestyle magazines began in the late 1940s. Today, an average magazine typically costs less than one American dollar. The 1959 establishment of Western Nigerian Television (WNTV) marked the beginning of Nigeria’s television industry. Between 1959-1984, 34 stations were initiated at a rate of 1.5/year. In the same time span, the share of imported programming dropped from 90% to 20%, suggesting a growing demand and capacity for local media production. While many Nigerian actresses and magazine models are lighter-than-average, there is significantly more skin tone diversity in Nigerian media than that of India. Dark and medium skin tones are surprisingly represented in publications like Drum magazine’s Nigeria edition and fashion magazines like Bella Naija marketed to Nigeria’s middle class. However, while color diversity does exist, medium to light skin tones are still disproportionately represented in Nigerian media, particularly in music videos of popular rappers like P Square and D’Banj.

Like in India, Nigeria’s local media does not seem to be the primary force behind colorism. This is partly because the beauty image in Nigerian media is not that radically different than women’s natural phenotypes in the area. Moreover, widespread consumption of popular media in Nigeria is relatively recent, whereas Nigeria’s colorism proves to be a long-standing phenomenon.

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238 Ibid., 59.

239 Ibid., 59.
Thailand, a country that has long been inundated with foreign media, has a somewhat less thriving domestic media market than Nigeria and India. Cinema came to Thailand in the early 1900s.\textsuperscript{240} Thailand’s first commercial motion picture was produced in 1912, though the overwhelming majority of films consumed in the period were Western.\textsuperscript{241} The first women’s magazines and newspapers of the 1910s and 1920s included \textit{Kulsatri, Satri Niphon, Satrisap}, and \textit{Ying Thai}.\textsuperscript{242} In 1934, Thailand’s first beauty pageant Miss Siam (renamed Miss Thailand after 1939) was initiated. In \textit{Woman, Man, Bangkok}, Scot Barme asserts that Thailand’s emerging pageant culture in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century “…promoted a view that female beauty was fundamental to a woman’s social advancement and success, the pursuit of beauty being held to be her primary goal.”\textsuperscript{243} Alongside this growing emphasis on feminine beauty came the increasing importance of Western modernity in Thai culture, facilitating the conflation of beauty with Western ideals. Interestingly, the 1941 State Convention “required that, in the name of ‘civilization’ and national progress, the Thai public was to adopt European modes of dress.”\textsuperscript{244} Given Thailand’s unreliable press freedom throughout much of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the fact that the state apparatus was willing to engage with Western culture allowed Westernization to exert a larger impact on Thai society than it would have without state blessing. This 20\textsuperscript{th}-century drive towards Westernization in the name of modernization played a large role in shaping domestic Thai media, such that today’s popular media in Thailand must be understood as highly influenced by external actors.

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\textsuperscript{240} Barme, Scot. \textit{Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand}. Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland, 2002.\\
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid, 52, 48.\\
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid.\\
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid, 236.\\
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid, 235.\\
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Thailand did not experience the same degree of legal, political, and social backlash against Western culture as India and Nigeria during their post-colonial retaliations against Westernization. This is not to say that no tension exists between traditional and “modern” culture in Thailand. However, over the past several decades, Thailand’s relative willingness to incorporate Western aesthetics into its local media has played an important role in enabling external influence on Thai culture.

Thailand’s contemporary image of female beauty and its validation of Eurocentric ideals can be observed in the country’s domestic fashion magazines. In 1954, Thai publishing giant Sri Siam Printing Press was founded, and now circulates popular women’s magazines, including *Kwanruen Magazine* (1968), *Fashion Review* (1982), and *Fashion Bangkok Show* (2003). The ubiquitous magazine image of pale white skin, wide eyes, a thin figure, and dyed brown hair noticeably contrasts with the phenotypes of everyday Thai citizens.

Even Thai village communities are increasingly exposed to this urban portrayal of Thai modernity. As anthropologist Mary Beth Mills describes, “…national television and
the print media as well as villagers’ own encounters with educated, middle-class women...have made images of modern femininity increasingly familiar to the entire population." The power of Bangkok’s mass media to reach Thailand at large helps perpetuate “dominant meanings about ‘progress’ and the desirability of modern styles and attitudes” throughout the nation. Thailand’s mass media messages help collapse notions of Western/Northeast Asian modernity and global desirability into one.

Hypothesis 4: Western Media

Clearly, there existed some degree of bias towards fair skin in each case study long before the rise of Western media. However, this hypothesis argues that contemporary Western media is the force that took preexisting colorism and made it an overwhelming bias, to the point where 58%, 61%, and 77% of women in Thailand, India, and Nigeria respectively are enticed to use skin lightening products. After having studied the global skin-lightening phenomenon, Evelyn Nakano Glenn advocates this hypothesis. She writes,

> This recent rise in the use of skin lighteners cannot be seen as simply a legacy of colonialism but rather is a consequence of the penetration of multinational capital and Western consumer culture. The practice therefore is likely to continue to increase as the influence of these forces grows.

Unlike colonialism, Western media promotes colorism in a subtler manner, such that consumers can feel they are voluntarily buying into the preference for fair skin. The

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246 Ibid, 40.

increased moral legitimacy of soft imperialism over pre-modern imperialism may
decrease local backlash against it, rendering consumers more receptive to its messages.
Unlike most local media, Western media typically embodies the image of global
modernity and progress, an idea that seems to be increasingly appealing to women in the
developing world who want to claim membership in a transnational, cosmopolitan
culture.

While this hypothesis is compelling, it does not hold true for India and Nigeria.
India only opened its economy to foreign media in recent decades, with a large push
towards openness in 1991.248 By the time Indians began consuming foreign media in
large numbers, the bias towards lighter skin was already well entrenched in Indian
society. Even the most impactful Western product that advocates colorism, Fair &
Lovely, began sales in India in 1974, and by that point, was responding to a thriving
demand that already existed. Moreover, the majority of media and cultural products that
Indians consume are indeed local. Similarly, the fact that colorism was a strong force in
Nigeria before the entrance of Western media, and the fact that Nigerians consume more
local media than Western media suggests that American and British media is not the
driving force behind Nigerians’ preference for lighter skin.

Thailand is a different story. Unlike with Nigeria and India, there is little
compelling evidence that a thriving preference for lighter skin existed before the onset of
Western media. Also unlike the other two case studies, Thailand produces little of its own
cultural media and is a net importer of popular media. In the case of Thailand, the foreign
media hypothesis must be expanded to include not only Western media, but Northeast
Asian media as well. Evidence from Thailand, unlike India and Nigeria, does

248 Chandrashekar, Santhosh. “Neoliberal India, Fairness Creams, and Desires of Whiteness.”
demonstrate a rapid increase in colorist biases in recent decades. According to Asia Pacific specialist Otto von Feigenblatt, Thailand’s standard of beauty for women before the 1970s was “smooth light brown skin with a golden shine to it, about one meter sixty centimeters tall, strong small dark eyes, long dark straight hair, a small round nose, and a strong healthy complexion.”

In the early 1970s, Thailand experienced rapid economic growth and industrialization and an influx of American soldiers in Indochina due to the Vietnam War. Moreover, a national market emerged, which began broadening Bangkok culture to Thailand at large. Together, these developments made Thailand highly susceptible to the impact of foreign media for the first time. Feigenblatt describes that, after the 1970s, a new female ideal emerged: “tall - about one meter seventy five - with fair skin, large eyes, pointy nose, curly hair and slim.”

Other scholars hold that the transition to Westernized beauty standards began long before the 1970s. In *Contesting the Margins of Modernity: Women, Migration, and Consumption in Thailand*, Mills describes, “…from the 1920s, the urban population was increasingly exposed to modern – that is, Western – images and ideas of beauty and fashion through both the press and film.” Amidst the growing presence of Western media product, the 1980s saw the beginning of rapid urbanization and an exodus of Thai youth from villages to urban centers. Young people were drawn to urban life by not only the desire for economic opportunity, but also a desire for modernity. As described

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250 Ibid.

251 Ibid, 61.

252 Mills, “Contesting the Margins,” 234.

253 Ibid.
above, wrapped into modernity were notions of social status, capitalism, and white skin. Mills notes that, today, part of the urban appeal is the opportunity to work indoors and avoid darkening one’s skin. Older villagers “often describe women and men moving into Bangkok as ‘going to get [white] skin’ (*pay aw phiw*).” In short, Thailand’s urbanization movement has had colorist implications, in that it increased both the appeal and perceived attainability of fair skin.

By the 1980s and 1990s, South Korea and Japan, and later China, had developed thriving markets exporting their cultural products, largely to consumer nations like Thailand in Southeast Asia. As these Northeast Asian media exports grew in popularity, so did the images of beauty they propagated. Today, the new image of the “Korean pretty” - complete with porcelain white skin, wide eyes, and rosebud lips - is hugely popular in Thailand.\(^{255}\)

![Figure 16: Classic image of "Korean pretty"](image)

Many, like the deputy secretary of Thailand’s Mental Health Department Dr. Thawee Tangseree, believe Thailand’s whitening craze is a temporary fad. In a September 2012 interview, Tangseree stated, “This white skin business is just a fad that comes and goes. Soon it’ll be replaced by other fads. Now it’s not just women who pay attention to white, 

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\(^{254}\) Ibid, 45.  
\(^{255}\) Salyasombut, “Thailand’s Skin Whitening Craze.”
shining skin. The men are also starting to adopt the same value and want the Korean-style white skin as well….” Whether or not this assertion that Thailand’s colorism is short-lived remains to be seen. What is clear is that, while Thailand shows spotted evidence of a pre-modern preference for lighter skin, the vigor of this preference appears to be quite recent.

While contemporary foreign media appears to be the primary driving force behind colorism only in Thailand, its impact on Nigeria and India is still significant. In all three countries, Western media has intensified an important dimension of colorism. To be urban, English-speaking, light-skinned, and global is now collapsed into a singular image of progress and prosperity. As this image is propagated on billboards, television screens, and in the words of aunts and uncles, the drive for young women in the developing world to achieve this ideal of beautiful, fair modernity is increasing. In truth, we in 2013 are likely only beginning to see the impact that Western (and Northeast Asian) media will have on the preference for fair skin globally.

Ultimately, while different forces have driven colorist preferences in different countries, these various forces are all being reinforced by global media. As Glenn concludes in her work, regardless of unique national histories, “the desire for lighter skin and the use of skin bleaches is accelerating in places where modernization and the influence of Western capitalism and culture are most prominent.” Whether it is creating (Thailand) or simply reinforcing (Nigeria, India) colorism, global mass media is a hugely significant piece in the puzzle of how the world has come to prefer fair skin.

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256 Ibid.
257 Chandrashekar, “Neoliberal India,” 8.
Whiteness as Class Privilege

In summary, it appears that colonialism cemented social preferences for fair skin tones in Nigeria and India, while in Thailand, foreign media was the most influential force. Though these hypotheses are analyzed independently in this chapter, in reality, they overlap and reinforce one another in inseparable ways. For example, a group of Georgia State University researchers explain,

“Colonialism and westernization can be understood as intersecting rather than as a distinct, unrelated phenomena. In its aftermath, colonialism left a region vulnerable to Western influences, including media images that portrayed lighter-skinned individuals as valuable and more powerful. Western media images reinforced the earlier racial hierarchies that were in place…”260

In short, pre-colonial histories, colonialism, and modern-day media have intersected to produce a widespread preference for fair skin that shows no signs of abating in the short-term.

Beyond this overlap, there is a deeper common thread linking colorism in Nigeria, India, and Thailand. Regardless of the impetus for colorism in each case study, the real propeller of the preference for lighter skin in these disparate parts of the world is the “global association of light skin with power.”261 In cases of colonization, conquest, and the caste system, fair skin was forcefully equated with political and economic power. In cases of local and Western media selling images of wealth and happiness through fair-skinned bodies, whiteness has been more indirectly conflated with power. Either way, the

http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00223980309600598#preview
rhetorical message is the same. If you seek high social status, political voice, and economic security, whiteness will help you achieve those ends.

In the end, skin lightening is not so much about beauty as it is about broader societal privilege, particularly financial advantage. In behavioral surveys, women who practice skin bleaching often reference their “perceptions that light-skinned individuals in the middle and upper classes typically fare better during economic turmoil than do darker-skinned individuals.”

In communities where educational and employment opportunities are limited, skin lightening is perceived as a way to buy into white privilege and increase one’s life opportunity.

In truth, this perception that light skin translates into economic advantage has much validity. With a global Gini coefficient of .893, the world’s distribution of wealth cleanly falls along racial lines. According to the 2007 World Distribution of Household Wealth survey, North America and Europe alone own 64% of global wealth and the developed Asia-Pacific countries (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand) own 24%. India holds .9% of global wealth, Thailand .2%, and all of Africa a shockingly low 1%. For women in the developing world observing this regional distribution of global wealth, it is difficult to ignore the uncanny association of whiteness with class privilege. Writing around the turn of the 20th century in the U.S., W.E.B. Du Bois points to the “public and psychological wage” attached to whiteness that functions much like an economic wage. Similarly, Cheryl Harris describes whiteness as a form

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264 Ibid, 8.
265 Ibid, 22.
of property, drawing on James Madison’s definition that property “embraces everything to which a man may attach a value and have a right.”\(^{267}\) Like property, whiteness – as a nonbiological social construct – is both desperately defended and sought after. Even after the end of slavery or colonialism, “…as the capacity of whiteness to deliver is arguably diminished by the elimination of rigid racial stratifications, whiteness continues to be perceived as materially significant.”\(^{268}\) These perceptions of the historical and current material benefits of whiteness largely drive the $10 billion skin lightening industry. It is important to note that “whiteness” as a construct is relative, such that, even by lightening one’s skin just a couple of shades, an individual can theoretically gain relative advantage over others in the community.

Some push back on this idea and argue that women lighten their skin not because of rational social and financial incentives, but because of perverse, irrational psychologies. Proponents of the psychological argument assert that women of color who practice bleaching have subconsciously internalized white supremacist ideologies and suffer from low self-esteem and self-hatred. One 2010 study of 97 Shona women in Masvingo, Tanzania finds that “68% (28 out of 41) of skin bleachers saw dark skin as embarrassing and humiliating” and therefore participate in their own “self-destruction.”\(^{269}\) Proponents of this idea argue that, because skin bleaching is “based on racist assumptions rather than reasoned analysis,” women must just be taught to love themselves and embrace their racial identities.\(^{270}\) The fallacy in this thinking stems from

\[^{267}\text{http://homepages.gac.edu/~lwren/AmericanIdentititesArt%20folder/AmericanIdentititesArt/WhitenessProperty.pdf}\]
\[^{268}\text{Ibid, 279.}\]
\[^{269}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{266}\text{Gwaravanda, “Shona Proverbial Implications,” 214.}\]
\[^{270}\text{Ibid, 214.}\]
the fact that women’s decisions to bleach are often based in reasoned analysis. As
Margaret Hunter describes, many female bleachers observe the acute correlation between
race and socioeconomic class and want to improve their opportunities in the local
employment and marriage markets, as well as adopt a cosmopolitan, modern identity.271
It would be both unfair and inaccurate to assume that such women are simply
hoodwinked, drowning in their own self-hatred.

Granted, the psychological and financial explanations of skin bleaching cannot be
completely separated into distinct categories. Race historian Lynn Thomas notes that the
two have become highly entangled. It is hard to imagine that one could be consistently
economically and socially devalued in society because of her skin tone without some
negative psychological repercussion.272 In their work on skin bleaching in SSA, a group
of Georgia State University professors aptly summarizes,

As a function of living in a color-conscious society where
people of darker skin tones are systemically and socially
regarded as less desirable, individuals who fall within this
group may begin to develop feelings of inferiority and
internalize negative beliefs about themselves, come to
value lighter skin tones, and reject aspects of themselves.273

The very real social and economic disadvantages attached to dark skin around the world
feed into a compromised psychological sense of self. Disrupting this psychological
damage requires addressing the larger system by which dark skin comes to symbolize a
lack of life opportunity. Given that the power attached to white skin globally has deep
historical roots and is reiterated by contemporary popular media, this is not an easy
paradigm to shift. It would be naïve to expect women of color in the developing world to

simply embrace their dark skin in the name of self-love and abandon skin-lightening practices. A sustainable solution for countering the fundamental motivation behind skin bleaching requires disrupting the perceived link between disproportionately high life opportunity and fair skin.

The next chapter will explore some of the methods countries in the Global South have pursued to curb skin bleaching and to reassert dark skin as valuable.
Chapter 5

Where to go from here

Growing Resistance to Colorism

Having explored the historical and contemporary factors driving colorist preferences in India, Nigeria, and Thailand, we must turn to the question of now what? At the end of the day, young girls and women across much of the Global South continue to receive from family members, social networks, and media one simple message: your natural body is not good enough. Amidst deep-seated colorism, how can local communities disrupt the perception of whiteness as exclusively appealing? What movements currently exist to reclaim brown and black complexions as worthy of being embraced?

Like America’s 1970s “Black is Beautiful” movement, anti-racist backlash against the skin-whitening phenomenon has gained momentum in various countries. In 2009, the Chennai-based Indian organization Women of Worth (WoW) launched the campaign “Dark is Beautiful.” Through visual art, poetry, and media exposure, WoW publicizes the voices of women who embrace India’s full spectrum of skin complexions as beautiful.\(^{274}\) The campaign is gaining visibility around India and is beginning to disrupt the previously monolithic rhetoric around fairness as exclusively appealing. A similar campaign has been launched in Senegal, where skin lightening Khess Petch (“All White”) billboards were met with public outrage in 2012. The cheap and physically dangerous Khess Petch cream purports to result in dramatic whitening after 15 days.

While this was certainly not the first bleach cream to be sold in the Senegalese market, it surprisingly struck a cord with Dakha citizens, and 2,000 signed a petition for the removal of the product’s billboards. In response, the Nuul Kukk (“Pitch Black”) campaign was launched to promote “black is beautiful” rhetoric in Senegal. Primarily through social media and word of mouth, the campaign raises awareness of the dangers of depigmentation while promoting self-love and black pride. The campaign has been publicized to some degree in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, which, over time, could potentially have a reverberating, positive impact in the region.

Additionally, the entrance of vaginal skin lightening products onto African and Asian markets has backfired in some communities, increasing skepticism and distaste for bleaching practices more generally. In 2012, the Clean & Dry Intimate Wash for vaginal whitening aired a commercial in India depicting a dejected woman being ignored by her boyfriend. After the woman uses the vaginal bleach cream, the man’s attention towards her increases dramatically and they flirtatiously dance around the living room. This, and other vaginal whitening products like “18 Again” have sparked controversy in India and

abroad surrounding the idea that no part of a woman’s body is safe from colorist and consumerist critique.\footnote{Eade, Catherine. “The Fairer Sex? Indian Company Launches an Intimate Wash Designed to ‘Brighten’ the Vagina.” Daily Mail. April 12, 2012. \url{http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2128854/Vagina-lightener-Indian-company-launches-intimate-wash-designed-lighten-vagina.html}} A similar vaginal lightening product Lactacyd White Intimate was recently launched in the Thai market and seems to have been more successful than its Indian equivalent, though Lactacyd has also met some resistance, particularly in the Thai blogosphere.

In Nigeria, there does not seem to be extensive public backlash against skin lightening practices, though spurts of resistance have arisen. In 1976, musician Fela Kuti released the famous song "Yellow Fever?" which satirized the use of skin bleaching agents by drawing attention to its uneven discoloration of the skin.\footnote{Uzokwe, Alfred. “Those Skin Bleaching Creams and Soaps – They Just Might be Harmful to the Skin.” Nigeria World: Letters & Viewpoints. Sep 3, 2001. \url{http://nigeriaworld.com/columnist/uzokwe/090301.html}} The song drew West Africans’ attention to the unappealing aspects of the practice. Similarly focusing on the blotchy effect of bleaching, a common insult children shout at those perceived to have bleached is “fantacoca” or "iru fanta, ukwu coke” – referring to the yellowish, orange Fanta drink color of the face, contrasting with the dark, Coca-Cola color of the body.\footnote{Ibid.} However, the existence of a mild stigma against bleaching in some Nigerian communities has not seemed to translate into reduced usage.

In Nigeria and much of Sub-Saharan Africa post-independence, the governmental and grassroots emphasis on black empowerment made it taboo to explicitly express a preference for whiteness. Yet bleaching practices continue to thrive. Perhaps this disconnect between pro-black rhetoric and colorist practice is rooted in the ineffective strategy for addressing the fair-skin bias. When disparaging skin bleaching, African
leaders and scholars often point to self-hatred and internalized racism as the causes of colorism, failing to address the underlying realities that incentivize the practice – namely, the observable linkage between whiteness, success and power. More impactful resistance to colorism should incorporate rhetoric of empowering communities of color despite the material benefit of fair skin, rather than ignoring or disregarding that benefit.

In the commercial world, some ostensible resistance to the preference for white skin has been misleading and may in fact promote the bias it professes to undermine. In 2010, Vogue’s India edition published an issue titled *The Dawn of Dusk*, with the tagline: “Vogue India celebrates the skin tone the world covets.”

![Figure 18: Vogue India, “The Dawn of Dusk,” 2010](image)

Vogue News proudly reported that the unconventional magazine issue helped tackle India’s color prejudices by embracing bronze skin.\(^{280}\) Interestingly, the skin tones on the issue’s cover (and indeed throughout Vogue India’s website) are just that – bronze. The golden, light-brown skin tones the magazine portrays reflect the sun-kissed tan many white women in the West seek, and are certainly lighter than the average Indian woman. Thus, through its embrace of “dusky” skin, this deceptively nonsubversive issue of

Vogue in fact reinforces the reality that even the dark complexions praised in popular media are still, in context, relatively fair.

Beyond the backlash to skin lightening, broader resistance to the U.S.’ narrow image of female beauty is growing. American documentaries including America the Beautiful (2007), Miss Representations (2011), and Killing Us Softly part 4 (2010) draw awareness to the U.S.’ fixation on an impossible beauty standard. This movement to democratize beauty standards recognizes that such highly exclusive physical ideals disempower not only women in the Global South, but virtually every woman who does not fit the mold of a young, tall, thin, lightly tanned white woman with long hair and wide eyes. Though widely critiqued for a variety of reasons, the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty has contributed somewhat to embracing the natural spectrum of female bodies as valuable and praise-worthy.

Additionally, Eve Ensler of the organization V-Day has become one of the most visible leaders in the movement for women to reclaim their bodies as inherently beautiful, advocating, “Stop trying to fix your body. It was never broken.”

In a society of all-too-common physical and psychological disorders as a result of body-hatred, it is a slow but

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necessary process to disrupt the mainstream, patriarchal beauty myth that only a select few female bodies are acceptable.

**Who Benefits?**

In increasing numbers, people around the world are pushing back on the singular equation of whiteness with beauty, and on the narrowness of mainstream beauty standards more generally. However, in the foreseeable future, will that backlash ever be sufficient to meaningfully disrupt the status quo? How can such backlash be successful in shifting the status quo if powerful players in the U.S. have a direct interest in the maintenance of narrow beauty standards?

When women globally seek to emulate the appearances of Natalie Portman or Rihanna, that does two things for the U.S. financially and politically. The first reflects the relatively self-evident Marxist critique of the global beauty industry. A narrow beauty standard that is falsely marketed as attainable entices women to pay significant sums to achieve the consumerist fantasy of physical perfection. In theory, the narrower the beauty standard, the more women must pay to pursue it. When this same dynamic is expanded to a global audience, the potential profit margin for Western advertising, cosmetic, and fashion firms expands exponentially. Second, America’s soft power – the international appeal of its films, fashion, food, and other cultural products – is aided by a narrowed beauty standard that privileges white skin. The fantasy of what it means to be white and American is indirectly marketed to and consumed by women across the developing world. In the classic Joseph Nye Jr. view of soft power, this increased appeal of
American culture through Westernized beauty standards can help the U.S. achieve political ends through attraction rather than coercion.²⁸²

There are significant ethical concerns with Western companies profiting politically and economically from the international perception of blackness as inferior – a perception that thrives from the remnants of Western colonialism. The fact that American professionals – primarily men – profit from women across the Global South exposing themselves to serious health risks in their fierce attempts to look like white, cosmopolitan women in the West more deeply problematizes the skin-lightening phenomenon. Moreover, the realities of who benefits from colorism pose not only an ethical dilemma, but also, as stated above, make addressing the status quo a more onerous task. There exists a handful of distinctly powerful players who are financially incentivized to perpetuate the preference for fair skin throughout the non-white, non-Western world. This dynamic of the winners and losers of colorism ultimately reinforces a broader global power imbalance along lines of gender, race, class, and nationality.

Conclusion

I write this thesis because I would rather my daughter not grow up in a world where she’ll be taught, as I was, to equate “lighter” with “better.” I write this thesis because I fear that this is just the beginning. As capitalist consumerism imbeds itself more deeply in traditional societies around the world, as popular media and the global wealth gap continue to privilege fair skin, the beauty hierarchy may become further entrenched. And I write this because “Black is Beautiful” is more than a post-Civil Rights

Movement slogan. Those three words promote emotional self-empowerment and serve to disrupt the political power imbalance that has denigrated brownness and blackness for centuries. What connects my Southwest Atlanta black community with South Indian Tamil communities should not be a mutual disdain for dark skin, but rather a deep appreciation for the spectrum of brown tones and the histories associated with them.

De-stigmatizing brownness and blackness around the world requires both an individual shift in attitude and a structural disruption of the material deficit attached to dark skin. Because colorism exists in a broader context of racial wealth disparity and historically internalized racism, combating it will not be easy, yet is not impossible. Widely dispersed awareness of how colorism has historically taken root and of the motivations behind skin bleaching can help demystify the issue and empower local community campaigns to disrupt it. Ultimately, colorism functions alongside sizeism and ableism to ensure that vast numbers of individuals simply cannot buy into the material and social benefits attached to being perceived as physically appealing. Thus, not only should physical beauty standards be more attainable for ordinary women in the communities they target, but physical beauty should matter far less for women’s social capital around the world.
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