

**Content Analysis of Skin Lightening Advertisements Focused on Black or African
American Women 1945 to 2023: Implications for Education Outreach**

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Abstract

Though potentially dangerous, the use of skin lightening products is popular across the globe Sagoe et al. (2019). In 2020, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has determined that over-the-counter (OTC) skin lightening drug products containing hydroquinone are not generally recognized as safe and effective (not GRASE). Amidst safety issues and potential impact on populations, advertisements for skin lightening products are examined in this study to identify (1) persuasive themes in advertisements, (2) changes in advertisement strategies over time, and (3) how safety of skin lightening products is framed in advertisements. A total of 242 advertisements were sampled -from lifestyle magazines and the internet from 1945-2023. The findings reveal a significant shift from focusing on lightening and bleaching to promoting overall skin health. Terms such as “lighten,” “bleaching,” and “complexion” show a decreasing trend in their usage over time. Words like “serum,” “wrinkles,” and “radiance” show an increasing trend in their usage in more recent years. Shifts toward natural, organic, and healthy skin care suggest that health-first/safety-first messaging strategies may appeal to target audiences. These findings are used to recommend strategic areas for education outreach for communities at risk.

Keywords: skin lightening, advertisements, skin care, hydroquinone

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Content Analysis of Skin Lightening Advertisements Focused on Black and African American Women 1945 to 2023: Implications for Education Outreach

The use of skin lightening products has become a public health issue across the globe, garnering the attention of dermatologists and other health professionals internationally (Pollock et al., 2020). In 2020, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) cautioned that skin lightening products containing hydroquinone and marketed as over-the-counter (OTC) drugs or cosmetics are unapproved and are not generally recognized as safe and effective (not GRASE; U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2022a). Additionally, the FDA has required that hydroquinone must be prescribed by a medical professional and the FDA does not allow mercury in drugs or in cosmetics, except under very specific conditions where there are no other safe and effective preservatives available (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2022a, 2022b). Most users of skin lightening products have reported being unaware of the potential risks associated with their use, and many have reported not considering checking the ingredients due to beliefs that products must be safe for use if they are marketed (Araujo et al., 2023). Safety issues, harmful ingredients, and potential impacted communities are all serious concerns surrounding the sale and use of skin lightening products. Concerns such as these led the FDA's Office of Minority Health and Health Equity (OMHHE) to conduct multi-media public education outreach (<https://www.fda.gov/skinfacts>) with the goal of informing consumers that products containing hydroquinone or mercury are not FDA approved for over-the-counter sale. (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2022b).

This study rigorously examines advertisements for skin lightening products in Black or African American lifestyle magazines spanning from 1945 to 2023. Although advertising trends could be shaped by numerous factors, this longitudinal study provides insight into shifts in

advertising practice. These changes may reflect societal norms, thus contributing to our understanding of the impact of Eurocentric standards of beauty on Black or African American women's choice to seek lighter complexions amidst potentially severe health risks. Specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. Examine advertisements in Black or African American lifestyle magazines over time.
2. Evaluate to what extent risk and harm have been communicated.
3. Support development of evidence-based recommendations for education outreach to target audiences.

Literature Review

Skin Lightening

As early as the 1900s, Black or African Americans in the U.S. have had access to skin lightening products with harmful ingredients (Lindsey, 2011). Skin lightening became a popular cosmetic practice in many African countries as early as the 1950s (Sagoe et al., 2019). Dadzie and Petit (2009) estimated that a staggering 75% of women in Nigeria regularly used skin lightening products, Blay (2011) discovered the use of these products in 50% of their sample in Mali, Dlova et al. (2015) found that about 32% of African and Indian women in South Africa used skin lightening products, and Baxter (2000) estimated 30% for women in Ghana. Skin lightening practices have also been prevalent in the Caribbean and South America. Peltzer et al. (2016) revealed a history of skin lightening practices among Caribbean and South American students, with 8.9% in Barbados, 10.7% in Grenada, 19.1% in Jamaica, 28.3% in Columbia, and 12.4% in Venezuela having used skin lightening products within 12 months of the study. Globally, the lifetime prevalence of skin lightening product use is estimated to be 27.7% (Sagoe et al., 2019).

While skin lightening has been extensively researched in African and Caribbean regions, Sagoe et al. (2019) asserted that skin lightening in the U.S. may be underrepresented due to stigma. This stigma has been especially prevalent among Black and African American communities (Araujo et al., 2023). Daftary et al. (2023) found that 62.9% of people in their U.S. sample who self-identified as Black or African American used skin lightening products. Benn et al. (2016, 2019) found that African and Afro-Caribbean women in New York City commonly practiced skin lightening nearly twice as often and for longer periods than others. Collins et al. (2021) reported that African American women may use unregulated products from Nigeria, Ghana, and the Caribbean. The prevalence of skin lightening practice globally, the relative dearth of knowledge regarding skin lightening in the U.S., the availability of unregulated products, and inadequate awareness of the potential dangers associated with certain skin lightening products highlight the importance of developing culturally tailored interventions to encourage behavioral change.

To emphasize the importance of culturally tailored messaging, consider the rhetoric surrounding skin lightening products in Ghana, where individuals who lighten their skin may argue that they are not “bleaching” their skin, but rather “toning” it (Asante, 2016). Because many Ghanaians who use skin lightening products do not consider the practice “bleaching”, messages warning of the dangers of “bleaching” may be ineffective. Other groups may also have different euphemisms, such as “to chase beauty”, translated from the isiXhosa dialect used by some in South Africa (Dlova et al., 2015). Additionally, many women are first introduced to skin lightening products by trusted friends and family and may not obtain information from medical professionals due to mistrust or lack of access (Ashley, 2021). For example, Daftary et al. (2023), found that 77.3% of skin lightening product users in their U.S. sample did not consult

medical professionals regarding the products. These factors underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to conveying safety information. It is crucial to ensure that reliable information is disseminated throughout the community, while also actively engaging medical professionals in the conversation to enhance credibility and support.

Advertising, Media, and Eurocentric Beauty Standards

Few studies exist on skin lightening advertisements, though most women in one study agreed that skin lightening advertisements influence women's preferences for lighter skin tones (Yusuf et al., 2019). While this area remains underexplored, parallels can be drawn from research on other beauty standards, such as thinness. A meta-analysis by Grabe et al. (2008) explored how advertisements affect self-perception. Women exposed to media idealizing thin women reported lower body satisfaction, greater internalization of thinness as the ideal beauty standard, and greater prevalence of eating disorder behaviors. Similarly, Selensky and Carels (2021) found that ads representing thinness as ideal correlated with a greater dislike of larger-bodied individuals and participants feeling worse about themselves. However, viewing advertisements showing body diversity in a positive light led to increases in self-esteem and acceptance of diverse body shapes and sizes. As discussed above, media idealizing thinness can cause harm to self-perceptions. Though there is less research on media idealizing lighter skin tones, drawing parallels between the idealization of beauty standards of thinness and light skin, it could be possible that media idealizing light skin could cause harm to self-perceptions.

While few studies have focused on skin lightening advertisements, several have explored the impact of Eurocentric standards of beauty on Black and African American women's self-esteem. Perkins et al. (2023) found that increased exposure to mainstream media, rife with Eurocentric beauty standards, may lead to increased acceptance of Eurocentric beauty standards

among Black women, followed by increased body shame and mental health symptoms. Sekayi (2003) found that many Black or African American women are uncomfortable with the media's representation of beauty for Black or African American women, and many Black or African American women have found that they are judged by Eurocentric beauty standards regardless of whether they hold those standards as their own.

Historically, advertisements reinforced Eurocentric standards of beauty. Some advertisements have even gone as far as labeling darker women as “sad” and lighter women as “happy”, in what appears to be a value judgment of skin tone itself (Crosby & McKeage, 2013). In more recent years, magazines have been accused of perpetuating stigma against darker skin by editing photos of Black or African American celebrities to appear lighter (Crosby & McKeage, 2013; Mitchell, 2020). Celebrities may also perpetuate this stigma by endorsing skin lightening products, leading to individuals with darker skin tones perceiving themselves as inferior (Khan et al., 2022). Additionally, modern magazines (post-2000s) have been found to primarily feature models with medium to light skin tones and portray Black or African American women with other Eurocentric features as well (Mitchell, 2020; Boepple & Thompson, 2018; Hazell & Clarke, 2008; Leslie, 1995). Black or African American

These challenges are not limited to traditional media, such as magazines, newspapers, and television, especially as new media (e.g., social media) sources continue to become more prevalent. Social media influencers have been pinpointed as influencing people's choices to use skin lightening products (Araujo et al., 2023). On one social media platform, the most viewed skin lightening videos not created by healthcare professionals commonly mention changing one's appearance (93%), bleaching the entire body (74%), or transforming oneself (66%), while very few of these videos mention the dangers of the products (14%; Basch et al., 2018). Of the

top 100 most watched skin lightening videos found on a social media platform, only four were created by healthcare professionals (Basch et al., 2018).

The continued idealization of lighter complexions in media may influence and perpetuate negative self-perceptions among Black or African American or African American women (Mbure & Aubrey, 2017). Labels on skin lightening products have overwhelmingly featured images devaluing Black or African American skin (Charles, 2011). Advertisements may obscure risks associated with skin lightening (Dobkin & Landmesser, 2021; Hamed et al., 2010). Additionally, beauty advertisements have historically overwhelmingly featured women, leaving women more likely than men to be targeted by such skin lightening beauty products (Mastin et al., 2004). Women have also been shown to have higher skin lightening product usage than men across most of the globe (Peltzer et al., 2016). These factors may leave Black or African American or African American women more susceptible and more likely to buy potentially harmful skin lightening products. There has been an increase in media portraying Black or African American skin in a positive light over time, such as the “Black is Beautiful” movement of the Civil Rights era (Crosby & McKeage, 2013). However, it is unclear how much, if any, this increase mitigates the effect of the idealization of lighter skin tones in media.

Research Questions

In this study we aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What are dominant strategic changes in persuasive themes in skin lightening advertisements in lifestyle magazines focused on Black or African American women from 1945 to 2023?
2. What are strategic changes in language and its valence in advertisements over time?
3. How is the safety of skin lightening products framed?

Methods

Description of Data

Purposeful sampling was employed to select more than 500 advertisements from Black or African American lifestyle magazines, following Patton's definition (2002, as cited in Palinkas et al., 2015). Research assistants gathered ads from digital archives and visited libraries, including the Library of Congress. The sample incorporated digital ads from 2023, as magazines sampled no longer have print editions. Selection criteria included advertisements containing (1) a product related to skin care (either facial or body), (2) text only or image and text, and (3) one or more of the following *keywords* specifically tied to the topic of interest: bleaching, lightening, whitening, brightening, fading, spots, blemishes, fair, evening, tone, luminous, and glow.

To ensure a diverse and unique dataset, the study included advertisements with distinct products, images, or text, carefully removing duplicates. This process resulted in a final sample of 242 unique advertisements, covering the period from 1945 to 2023. Advertisements were categorized into three phases based on significant societal events. Phase I (1945-1969) highlights a time of less regulation, beginning after World War II and including the Civil Rights Movement's influence on beauty standards. Phase II (1970-1999) reflects changes as Black or African American women's participation in the workplace grew, emphasizing assimilation into dominant cultural standards. Phase III (2000-2023) focuses on the modern era, where advertisements are highly personalized and targeted, indicating a shift in how beauty products are marketed to individuals.

Analytic Approach

Content analysis was utilized to examine skin lightening product advertisements in Black or African American lifestyle magazines from 1945 to 2023. Persuasive themes and the

evolution of advertising strategies, along with methods of communicating risk and harm are explored. NVivo 14 software was utilized to calculate word frequencies for terms of interest such as “beauty”, “fade”, and “bleaching”, among others.

Results and Discussion

The 242 advertisements examined were distributed evenly across three phases: Phase I (1945-1969) with 80 ads, and Phases II (1970-1999) and III (2000-2023) with 81 ads each. Marketing trends transitioned from promoting skin lightening for beauty to emphasizing overall skin health and tone. Advertisements evolved to suggest skin lightening for a healthy glow, maintaining a consistent focus on women across all decades. The findings offer insights into the changing landscape of skin lightening product marketing over the years.

RQ1: What are dominant strategic changes in persuasive themes in skin lightening advertisements in lifestyle magazines targeting Black or African American women from 1945 to 2023?

The evolution of skin lightening advertisements targeting Black or African American women from 1945 to 2023 highlights significant shifts in societal attitudes towards beauty, reflecting changing gender dynamics, romantic themes, and emotional appeals. Initially, these advertisements leveraged Eurocentric beauty ideals, suggesting that lighter skin equated increased happiness, success, and desirability. This period’s marketing strategies not only mirrored societal biases but also perpetuated a color hierarchy that linked lighter skin with broader social acceptance and mobility.

However, as cultural and civil rights movements gained momentum, advertising narratives began to subtly shift. In the 1970s, there was a gradual move towards embracing diverse beauty standards, with ads incorporating themes of personal empowerment. Despite this

progress, the appeal of skin lightening remained, rooted in more covert expressions of Eurocentric ideals.

Gender Dynamics

Out of the 242 advertisements analyzed, 193 (80%) showcased images of women alone or with men. Advertisements depicting women and men in apparent romantic relationships were observed in Phases I and II. No advertisements solely featured men. The final 20% of the advertisements primarily featured product images with a few containing text-only.

Table 1 demonstrates the breakdown among advertisements featuring women only, women accompanied by a man, and advertisements that feature other images such as products or text only. This analysis supports the assertions that advertisers (1) targeted skin lightening products to women, (2) emphasized the connection between lighter skin and romantic success, and (3) transitioned away from connecting skin lightening with romance in later years.

Table 1

Gendered Images in Advertisements Over Time

Phase	Female	Male & Female	Product Image or Text Only	Total
Phase I	46	31	3	80
Phase II	61	5	15	81
Phase III	50	0	31	81
Total	157	36	49	242

Romantic Themes

Approximately 15% of advertisements featured images portraying a woman and a man in a romantic relationship. A detailed analysis of references to the keyword “Romance” over different decades indicates its presence solely in Phase I advertisements. Phase II advertisements more often portrayed women independent of male counterparts or in professional roles.

The portrayal of romantic relationships in skin lightening advertisements targeting Black or African American women has evolved significantly from 1945 to 2023, reflecting broader societal changes in beauty standards and gender dynamics. Phase I advertisements insinuated that lighter skin could improve romantic success and social acceptance, reinforcing societal biases. As societal attitudes shifted, possibly influenced by the civil rights movement, Phase II advertisements suggested that skin lightening was a matter of personal preference rather than a necessity for love or success. In Phase III, advertisers introduced a more diverse array of beauty standards. The underlying message that lighter skin enhances desirability persisted in subtle ways, revealing the enduring influence of Eurocentric beauty standards.

Emotional Appeals

An analysis of the textual headlines in skin lightening advertisements across decades highlights fluctuating sentiments, notably with a substantial surge in positive sentiments during the 1990s. Negative sentiments may indicate the utilization of fear or scare tactics in these advertisements, while positive sentiments suggest the incorporation of emotional and motivational appeals. This analysis suggests that the sentiment of advertisements' headlines has fluctuated over time.

A comprehensive analysis of the entire text was conducted utilizing NVivo 14 software to pinpoint recurring themes. Several recurring themes were identified, among which health, nature, and beauty were prominent. Themes were isolated by excluding direct references to brands or product names. The trend analysis further explicated how themes evolved, best seen broken down by decades (Table 2). The findings demonstrate a significant shift in thematic focus across time, with later decades showing a noticeable pivot towards health. This shift underscores a transformation in societal values and consumer priorities, where health and wellness, along

with “clean” products, are at the forefront of the beauty industry (Marketing Mag, 2021). This transition may indicate a broader cultural evolution towards valuing health and wellness, as well as reflecting changes in marketing strategies.

Table 2

Positive Versus Negative Sentiments in Advertisement Headlines

Decade	Polarity	Positive/Negative
1940	0.106	slightly positive
1950	0.172	slight increase positive
1960	0.096	slight decrease
1970	0.054	further decrease
1980	0.151	increase
1990	0.270	significant increase
2000	0.90	decrease
2010	0.175	increase
2020	0.065	slight decrease

RQ2: What are dominant strategic changes in language and its valence in these advertisements?

Over time, skin lightening advertisements have incorporated strategic changes in language and valence. These shifts provide insight into broader societal and cultural changes, as advertisers influence and are influenced by the culture surrounding them. The examination of top recurring words in each phase serves as a valuable tool. By scrutinizing linguistic patterns, insights are gained into the nuanced ways advertisements adapt, reflect, or even drive societal and cultural shifts. Understanding the language dynamics over different phases contributes to a comprehensive analysis of the advertisement landscape, offering a lens through which we can discern the intricate interplay between language, cultural context, and societal norms.

Top Occurring Words

Analyzing the frequency of keywords in Table 3 provides insight into advertising strategies. Phase I focused on bleaching creams and lightening complexion, indicating an emphasis on skin lightening and cosmetic products. Phase II introduced words and phrases to include “fade dark spots,” and “glow” suggesting a shift towards addressing specific skin concerns and overall skin appearance. Phase III appears to signal a shift towards overall skin health and appearance (“tone”, “glow”, “beauty”) with a continued emphasis on addressing specific concerns like “dark spots”.

Table 3

Top Word Occurrences across Time

Phase I (1946-1969)	Phase II (1970-1999)	Phase III (2000-2023)
Skin (423)*	Skin (370)*	Skin (288)*
Cream (184)*	Cream (86)*	Tone (56)
Bleaching (131)	Fade (62)	Dark (55)
Complexion (127)	Dark (59)	Spots (44)
Lighter (86)	Tone (58)	Cream (38)*
Just (71)	Beauty (57)*	Formula (37)
Beauty (70)*	Glow (53)	Fade (32)
New (69)	Spots (52)	Beauty (30)*
Jar (62)	Just (47)	Face (30)
Blackheads (59)	Formula (47)	Body (28)

Note. * indicates Words that occur across all three phases

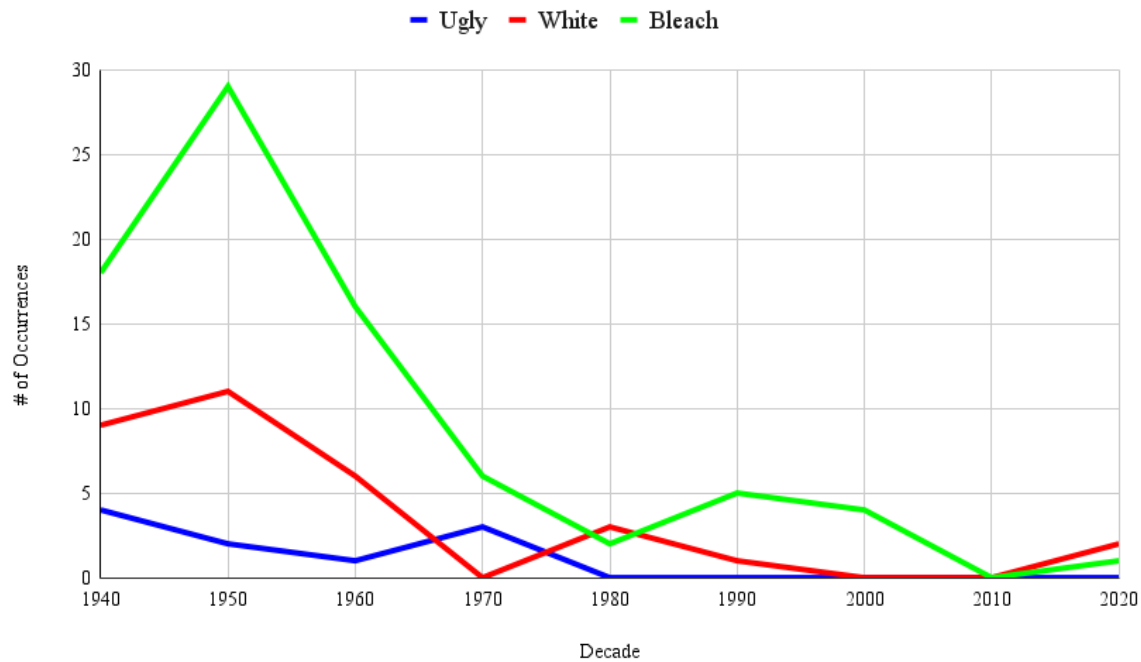
Changes in Specific Terms

The presence or absence of specific terms reflect shifts in advertising strategies and nuanced changes are best examined broken down by decades. For example, Figure 1 visualizes the mentions of the words “ugly”, “white”, and “bleach” in skin lightening advertisements by

decade. Data reveal that the highest number of mentions of “white” occurred in the 1950s, indicating a significant focus on “whiteness” as a desirable attribute in skin lightening products. A noticeable decline in mentions occurs after the 1960s, with several decades showing no mentions at all. Only one advertisement retrieved from the internet in 2023 used the term “white.” There is also evolving usage of the term “ugly”, illustrating its role in shaping consumer behavior over time. “Ugly” appeared in advertisements until being phased out in the 1980s. The diminishing presence of this term suggests a move away from negative framing to highlight product benefits or address consumer insecurities. “Bleach” is another term that appears in skin lightening advertisements over time. Its usage was prevalent in the 1950s, but has shown a large decrease in usage over time, becoming much less common between the 1980s and 2020s. This analysis offers valuable insights into the language nuances within skin lightening advertisements, specifically in framing concepts of beauty and desirability juxtaposed with terms such as “ugly.”

Figure 1

References to “Ugly”, “White”, and “Bleach” in Skin Lightening Advertisements



Positive and Negative Correlation of Key Terms

Changes in the use of key words over time (Table 4) further support a shift in advertising strategies. The positive correlation over time for words like “serum”, “wrinkles”, and “radiance”, indicate an upward trend in their usage. This shift may signify a growing emphasis on anti-aging and advanced skincare solutions. Conversely, words such as “lighten”, “bleaching”, and “complexion” display a negative correlation, signifying a declining trend in their usage. This shift suggests a departure from skin lightening themes towards a broader focus on healthy skincare. These correlations provide valuable insights into the evolving language and focal points of skin lightening advertisements, potentially mirroring changing consumer preferences, market trends, and regulatory landscapes.

Table 4*Positively and Negatively Correlated Words over time*

Positively Correlated Words	Negatively Correlated Words
Based: 0.52	Directed: -0.58
Serum: 0.50	Lighten: -0.58
Visibly: 0.49	Guaranteed: -0.59
Free: 0.45	Smoother: -0.59
Wrinkles: 0.45	Complexion: -0.59
Signs: 0.45	Lighter: -0.60
Complex: 0.45	Bleaching: -0.61
Radiance: 0.44	Blackheads: -0.62
Advanced: 0.44	

RQ3: How is the safety of skin lightening products framed?

Findings suggest that there have also been shifts in the framing of the safety of skin lightening products within advertisements. The presentation of skin lightening ingredients in advertisements, with a specific focus on mercury and hydroquinone, are examined. Additionally, by examining how the potential risks and harm associated with the use of skin lightening products are communicated, specifically in caution or warning statements, light is shed on the industry's approach to consumer safety. This also contributes to a broader understanding of how information related to the safety of skin lightening products is conveyed to the target audience.

Skin Lightening Ingredients

Various factors regarding the framing of ingredients and associated harms or risks of skin lightening products were examined. 47% of advertisements did not include references to ingredients. Among the 113 advertisements that mentioned one or more ingredients, 45% referenced a unique or miracle ingredient and 49% listed one or more specific ingredient such as

Vitamin E or C. Phase I contained most references to the unique or miracle ingredients while Phases II and III advertisements contained references to specific ingredients.

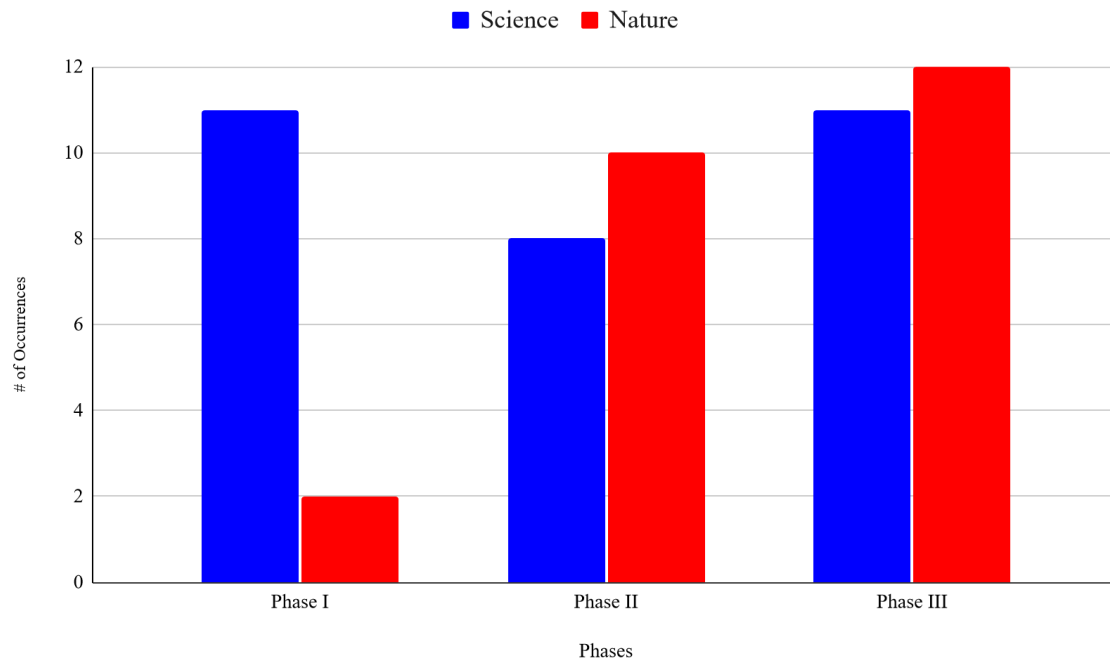
The ingredient hydroquinone was listed six times as a beneficial ingredient in Phases I and II. Two references in Phase III stated that the cosmetic product did not contain hydroquinone. The ingredient mercury appeared in four product labels, visible in advertisements.

Few advertisements made direct assertions about the safety of their products. In Phase I there were 5 references to safety, along with 9 in Phase II, and 6 in Phase III. Outside of direct mentions of safety, there were several other key phrases used to imply product safety, including “scientifically proven”, “dermatologist recommended”, and “clinically tested”.

Out of the 242 advertisements examined, 54 contained implicit references linking safety either to science or nature. Specifically, 12% of ads referred to a scientific aspect of safety, including mentions of doctor recommendations or terms such as “clinical” or “scientific,” while 10% included references to nature and natural effects. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of trends over time. Notably, scientific aspects like doctor recommendations were equally present in Phases I and III, with fewer references in Phase II. The trend toward referencing nature in Phase III likely signifies a marketing strategy implying increased safety of skin lightening products due to natural ingredients.

Figure 2

References to Science and Nature in Skin Lightening Advertisements



Cautions and Warnings

Among the 242 advertisements, only 19 included a cautionary statement regarding the product's usage. Notably, the majority of these references were concentrated in Phase I, primarily taking the form of general instructions to use the product as directed. In contrast, Phase III demonstrated a shift towards more specific and explicit warnings. These included cautionary notes such as "for external use only," "do not use near eyes," and recommendations to use the product in conjunction with sunscreen. This evolution in the nature of cautionary statements across phases indicates a progressive enhancement in the precision and clarity of safety-related communication within skin lightening advertisements.

Qualitative Analysis

Phase I (1945-1969)

Phase I primarily emphasized the skin lightening effectiveness of products and perpetuated the beauty ideal of lighter skin tones. Themes like bleaching and whitening were employed, associating dark skin with undesirable traits, as exemplified by the frequent use of the term “ugly” in ads from 1946-1969. However, this negative term disappeared entirely after 1970.

In Phase I, skin lightening was linked to romantic relationships, social acceptance and positioned as a means to achieve a lighter, smoother, and softer complexion. This phase propagated the belief that lighter skin could enhance one’s chances for romantic success and overall enjoyment of life as encapsulated in the following 1946 advertisement:

“Clear lovely kissable skin.... It’s a shame how many girls miss out on romance and good times because their complexion is unfashionably dark or spoiled by blackheads and other blemishes...” Ad #4

Ads in Phase I blatantly focused on dark skin and made several extreme promises. Advertisement #12 from 1946, for example, promoted a “whitener” that claimed to bleach the skin lighter while you sleep. It specifically targeted individuals with dark skin as opposed to individuals trying to correct a specific skin condition which may cause uneven tones. The advertisement further offered a money-back guarantee and highlighted a new and improved formula that is double strength.

Another 1949 advertisement promoted a “Bleaching Cream” with extreme claims to lighten skin that will “dazzle” a man. It further emphasized the product’s safety and scientific formulation, highlighting a quick method to achieving lighter skin:

“At last you can have shades lighter, smoother, softer, skin. It’s true. Fairer loveliness can be yours. With safe...scientific [product] bleaching cream that is not one, not two, but three times stronger than before. For those breathless moments when you’re together -- a vision of loveliness to dazzle his eyes ... This amazing cream special ingredient works directly on the color in your skin to make it shades lighter -- and this direct bleaching action goes right into the layer in your skin where skin color is regulated ... Modern science knows no faster method of lightening skin.” Ad #13

Advertisements used several strategies to communicate direct or implied safety of their products. These strategies included the use of terms such as “safe and effective,” “Scientifically proven”, “guaranteed” and “doctor recommended.” Findings indicate an evolution from safety claims to more subtle claims of clinically tested products. For example, advertisements in Phase I introduced hydroquinone in a skin tone cream as a positive ingredient:

“... contains Hydroquinone, the magic beauty ingredient. It works gently yet thoroughly--gives you lightness that lasts, brightness that turns all eyes in your direction! ... Contains hydroquinone, lightens, brightens, softens skin ...” Ad #69

Mercury was listed as an active ingredient in a 1963 advertisement. An image of the product included the following: “Active Ingredients 3% Ammoniated Mercury.” Ad #73

Noticeably missing from Phase I advertisements are warnings about risk and harm. For example, hydroquinone was presented as doctor recommended in a 1961 advertisement which claimed that their skin tone cream “... contains the bleaching ingredient proven safe for normal skin---Hydroquinone.” (Ad #59). While products are marketed as fast acting (three days to six weeks), there are no warnings against risk associated with extended use.

The word “hydroquinone” appeared a total of 8 times, with a positive connotation in six instances. The word “mercury” appeared a total of four times in advertisements. The years in which “mercury” was mentioned are 1963, 1965, and 1967, and importantly, it was only visible on product labels and was not included in the advertisement text.

Phase II (1970-1999)

Phase II reflected a shift from lightening the skin to achieve “whiteness” to using products to address specific skin concerns. Usage of words like “fade”, “dark”, and “spots” demonstrated a shift towards targeting specific skin concerns, such as dark spots or uneven skin tone. Also noted is a broader focus on skin health and appearance reflected in the use of terms such as “glow” and “beauty.” Advertisers continued to target women; however, they shifted from romantic relationships to career in the early years of Phase II.

The following 1979 advertisement included a testimonial to persuade the target audiences to use the product. A celebrity’s wife shared views about skin care. The advertisement did not overtly suggest a relationship between skin lightening and successful romantic relationships. Rather, the fact that the woman featured was married to a celebrity has a similar effect. The dominant themes of even tone and fading black spots are consistent with Phase II messaging.

“Being married to [celebrity], my skin is always in the limelight. Thank Goodness for [product]! ... It gently penetrates the surface of my skin to blend and even out my skin tone and help fade any dark spots. Best of all, my skin feels softer and smoother, and looks so healthy and glowing. Try [product] as part of your daily routine. You should see an improvement in just 6 weeks...” Ad #82

Phase II advertisements also framed products as natural and cited scientific evidence. For example, a 1994 advertisement claimed a “600%” boost in skin moisture among other strong assertions based on data:

“... Measurable results in laboratory tests: instantly, skin’s moisture is boosted by over 600%! In just one week, fine dry lines and wrinkles are reduced by over 38%! After 2 weeks, skin’s surface contour is more than 36% smoother! After 3 weeks, 90% of women tested found improved “brightness” and clarity! Guaranteed results: get skin that acts and looks younger in just 3 weeks or get your money back!” Ad #155

Phase III (2000-2023)

In Phase III, a notable shift from skin lightening to a holistic approach to skin health occurred. Advertisements from 2023 focused on achieving an even skin tone and addressing specific skin problems such as melasma, acne scars, and age spots. With the use of words such as “sustainable,” “raw,” “natural” and “plant-based ingredients,” recent advertisements further illustrated a shift in focus to a more organic and health-based approach as more products are promoted as healthy and natural. Advertisement #234 exemplifies the shift to holistic skincare for the entire body, and further supports the continued emphasis on natural ingredients in Phase III:

“... Face & Body - Suitable for all skin types, our dark spot corrector cream features natural Alpha Arbutin to hydrate and correct hyperpigmentation. Even Tone - Experience timeless skincare with plant-based compounds like Arbutin, Aloe Vera, Licorice, Citric Acid, and Lemon Essential Oil, which provide nourishment and even out your skin tone. Radiate with confidence!” Ad #234

In addition, Phase III advertisements used several techniques to demonstrate product safety and efficacy. For example, advertisers highlighted natural ingredients, clinical studies, and dermatologist recommendations. A 2022 advertisement states that the product includes “Vitamin C derivative for improved efficacy resulting in a visibly brighter, more even skin tone” (Ad #225). This ad is also recommended by a board-certified dermatologist.

Advertisements labeled as hydroquinone-free are presented for the first time in Phase III, perhaps as a result of FDA regulations and educational outreach. Ad #235, for example, states that their product has “No Hydroquinone, Parabens, Phthalates, Sulfates, MI or Dyes. We strive to use only the finest natural, raw ingredients.”

The portrayal of ingredients such as hydroquinone and mercury as positive elements disappeared by Phase III. Hydroquinone-free products align with FDA educational campaigns warnings that hydroquinone is not GRASE. This qualitative analysis of advertisement content offers a richer understanding of the dynamic landscape of skin lightening advertisements and illuminates the evolving strategies employed by advertisers to resonate with changing cultural norms, societal attitudes, and consumer preferences.

Conclusion

The comprehensive analysis of 242 skin lightening advertisements spanning three distinct phases, Phase I (1945-1969), Phase II (1970-1999), and Phase III (2000-2023), demonstrates shifts in marketing strategies and messaging. The sample was evenly distributed across the phases, revealing an evolution in the marketing from an emphasis on lightening and bleaching to a more holistic approach to achieving overall skin health, tone, and beauty.

Persuasive themes unveiled the nuanced ways skin lightening advertisements targeted Black or African American women. Gender dynamics, romantic portrayals, and emotional

appeals were used to influence consumer perceptions and choices. Notably, the dominant focus on women across decades underscores the persistent targeting of this demographic. Changes in language and its valence exposed dynamic linguistic shifts over time. The positive and negative correlations of key terms highlighted industry shifts towards emphasizing advanced skincare solutions while departing from skin lightening themes.

Product safety framing strategies also provided valuable insights. Claims of miracle ingredients in earlier advertisements were replaced by specific cautions and warnings. For example, in Phases I and II, references were made to the beneficial effects of hydroquinone as “the magic beauty ingredient” and as working “beneath the skin’s surface where the problems begin” References to science were used to convey product safety. Phase I advertisements often included assertions that products were scientifically proven. Phase II and III advertisements often emphasized natural, organic ingredients. Cautions and warnings progressively became more precise and specific across phases. Phase III, in particular, stood out for its inclusion of specific warnings, indicating a heightened awareness of safety concerns and more transparent communication. In Phase III, only one positive reference to hydroquinone as a “dermatologist recommended ingredient” appeared in a 2005 advertisement. Two products labeled as hydroquinone-free in 2023 coincide with the FDA’s educational campaign identifying hydroquinone as not GRASE.

This study not only unveils the historical trends in skin lightening advertisements but also contributes to a broader understanding of the intersection between advertising strategies, societal changes, and consumer perceptions. The findings emphasize the need for continuous scrutiny of advertising practices to ensure alignment with evolving cultural norms, consumer preferences, and safety considerations.

Implications for Educational Outreach

The complex issue of skin lightening practices within Black or African American communities necessitates educational outreach efforts that focus on community engagement, which has been defined as “the process of working collaboratively with groups of people who are affiliated by geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations with respect to issues affecting their well-being,” (CDC, 1997, p. 9). Many women receive their first exposure to skin lightening products through trusted members of their community, such as family or close friends, and do not seek medical advice regarding these products for reasons such as historical mistrust and mistreatment in medicine (Daftary et al., 2023; Ashley, 2021). Due to these factors, health information originating in the community may be more trusted and more effective. It is important to partner with community leaders to ensure that the potential dangers of skin lightening products are communicated through culturally sensitive, appropriate messages that have been tailored to the target groups. Community-led conversations by trusted leaders (such as those among schools, neighborhoods, public health, faith-based groups, community groups, and coalitions; *Ensuring Access in Vulnerable Communities: Community Conversations Toolkit*, 2017) ensure that information is considered trustworthy and comes from a place of care for the community.

Such community-led strategies have been used across England, for example, in the form of health champions - trusted community members who are trained in certain health topics in order to enact interventions and improve health outcomes in their communities (Woodall et al., 2013). Another successful initiative enlisted community health champions with prior medical backgrounds from their home countries to promote HPV screening among other immigrant women in their communities (Lofters et al., 2023). This initiative found that the champions were

effective in promoting HPV screenings and that women felt much more comfortable speaking with them, likely due to their shared culture and background, ability to communicate with women in their native languages and in comfortable spaces, and ability to take time communicating (Lofters et al., 2023). Community initiatives such as these have been associated with valuable community outcomes such as health and social benefits, improved self-esteem and self-confidence, and greater senses of personal empowerment, among community members and community leaders (Woodall et al., 2013; Attree et al., 2011). Building trust and rapport with community health leaders will facilitate open dialogue surrounding the historical context of skin lightening practices in their communities in a way that is comfortable and effective for community members.

Second, these community-based education initiatives should be designed to tackle specific concerns. In light of the comprehensive analysis of skin lightening advertisements specifically focused on Black or African American women, it is recommended that education and outreach focus on aspects such as: historical awareness, gender dynamics, language and societal attitudes, safety and ingredients, consumer empowerment, regulatory environment awareness, cautions and warnings, transparent communication, continuous scrutiny, and the intersectionality of advertising. Because “[T]he purpose of women’s magazine advertisements is not to educate society... but to stimulate product purchase,” (Mastin et al., 2004) it is important to educate impacted communities about the risks associated with products targeting their demographics. Advertisements are made to convince people to purchase, so they paint products in the best light they can. It is important for consumers to understand what they are buying, especially for products that can affect their overall health. Each education recommendation aims to empower the community with knowledge and critical thinking skills,

fostering a deeper understanding of the evolving landscape of skincare advertisements and promoting informed decision-making within the context of cultural norms, consumer preferences, and safety considerations.

More specifically, the outreach content should address the persistent focus on Black or African American women in skin lightening advertisements, and emphasize that all skin types share similar skincare challenges. Workshops and discussions could explore the impact of gender dynamics and evolving beauty standards on consumer perceptions. Communities should be encouraged to embrace diverse definitions of beauty, increasing self-esteem and a greater acceptance of diversity (Selensky & Carels, 2021).

A further area of focus is linguistic awareness. Communities need to understand the dynamic linguistic shifts in advertising, highlighting changing societal attitudes reflected in terms such as “white” and “ugly.” Consumers must also be encouraged to read labels. Studies have shown that many people do not read labels and assume all products on the market are safe (Araujo et al., 2023). Often the language used in beauty-related advertisements and labels is obscure or technical, making it difficult for the general public to understand.

Consumers should also be encouraged to prioritize safety and transparency when selecting skincare products. Outreach programs could inform consumers about the dangers and risks associated with specific agents in skin lightening products, such as mercury and hydroquinone, framing the conversation around product safety. This is especially important, as many users of skin lightening products are not aware of these ingredients or their potential dangers (Araujo et al., 2023). Community conversations and workshops could be effective in teaching individuals how to read and interpret labels and take a safety-first, health-first mindset when choosing skincare products.

Lastly, community leaders represent credible advocates for continuous scrutiny and transparency in the beauty industry. They could educate communities about how the advertising industry has responded to changing regulatory environments, emphasizing the shift towards natural ingredients, and provide suggestions for scrutinizing ingredients, warnings, and other labels. The need remains to improve cautions and warnings, and cultivate a safety-first mindset. Recommendation of creation of resources to help consumers make informed decisions. People with darker skin tones are more exposed to advertising strategies to promote skin lightening, as these products tend to feature images devaluing Black or African American skin (Charles, 2011). They must be included in dialogues on the role of advertising in shaping beauty ideals, empowering the community to critically engage with and influence the narrative.

Limitations of the Study

While frequencies and correlations were examined to identify trends over time, this was effectively a qualitative study and is thus limited to exploring trends. It is not possible from this study to say what caused certain trends in skin lightening advertising or to elucidate how these trends directly affect consumers. The full text of the advertisements was examined to interpret the trends in context. The sample is not generalizable and no assertions are made regarding the statistical significance of changes observed over time.

It is also recognized that skin lightening products are advertised on the internet and social media using highly personalized and targeted marketing strategies. An analysis of skin lightening products advertised on the internet could provide further insight and opportunities to improve education and outreach to impacted populations. Artificial intelligence and machine learning could also facilitate such research.

Additionally, this research is focused on Black or African American women in particular, despite the fact that the dangers of skin lightening affect individuals outside of these demographics. This focus on Black or African American women was due to the researchers' partnerships and existing connections within Black or African American communities. These connections improve the chances of the researchers to support community conversations as trusted community members moving forward. However, this limits the research in that findings may not directly transfer to other communities, such as Asian communities where skin lightening practices are also prominent.

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