THE LIGHTER SIDE OF MARRIAGE: SKIN BLEACHING IN POST-COLONIAL GHANA

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Abstract

Skin color plays a significant role in the lives of Ghanaian women. Many Ghanaian women’s feelings about beauty, attractiveness and the marriage market are associated with skin complexion. Using sixty Ghanaian students and thirty market trading women, this study investigated skin color (i.e. its lightness-darkness) as a function of social capital in the marriage market. A Skin Color Assessment Procedure was administered to all participants. This study showed that although participants were satisfied with their skin color, they believed that Ghanaian men found lighter-skinned women more attractive. This project expands existing scientific and scholarly literature concerning skin bleaching by presenting the implications of skin bleaching from a psychological perspective.

Introduction

Both journalistic and scientific literatures have repeatedly documented the existence, in various cultures, of social hierarchies where skin tone is an important factor. For example, in the United States, Brazil, Mexico and in West Africa, lighter-skinned individuals are more likely to be employed in occupations with higher status and they are more prone to their upward social mobility compared to darker-toned counterparts (Arderner 1954; Hunter 2002; Rahman 2002).
Lighter skin has also been found to be a valued quality in the contemporary Ghanaian marriage market and the popularity of skin lighteners among Ghanaian women, attests to the high value placed on lighter skin tone in Ghana (Hunter 2002; Rahman 2002).

This study looks at the role of lighter skin as a form of social capital in the Ghanaian marriage sector. It identifies the implications of lighter skin for ideals of attractiveness embraced by Ghanaian women and considers whether the intersection of attractiveness and skin tone causes some women to believe skin bleaching is a necessity. This research argues that for many Ghanaian women, feelings concerning beauty, attractiveness and their marriage marketability are partially determined by the lightness of their skin. In alignment with Hunter (2002), Rahman (2002) and Robinson’s (2004) literature, this research assumes, first, that skin color, specifically lighter skin tone, is an important factor in the definition of beauty and attractiveness for Ghanaian women; second, that there exists a link between skin tone and attractiveness. This research also draws upon literature on traditional marriage and the customary procedure of marriage, the contemporary changes in marriage, the effects of skin bleaching and its perceived benefits and definitions of social capital and social status in Ghana.

The Importance of Marriage

The majority of individuals perceive the benefits of marriage to be only procreation, happiness and intimacy. An overlooked benefit of marriage however, for women, is its ability to serve as an avenue for attaining higher social status. Women gain social capital from marriage through their spouse’s economic status and by gaining societal privileges. One such societal privilege married women receive is the ability to be considered an adult in their community. It is believed that “married people are, by definition, adults” and that people marry to achieve “unambiguous adult status” within the community (Duberman 1974).

To the contrary, unmarried women are stigmatized and “considered a threat to married women” (Duberman 1974). Thus, the single woman is considered a social deviant because “marriage is ‘natural’, and anyone who does not conform to this point of view is challenging the social values” (Adam as cited in Duberman 1974). Adam further states, “women who eschew this modus vivendi [family life] are subject to a subtle array of social sanctions that erode their self-esteem, distort their relationships and disturb their sense of homeostasis in the shifting world scene” (as cited in Duberman 1974). Single women are often, wrongly, viewed as having a lack of sexual appeal, possessing psychosexual conflicts, having the inability or unwillingness to commit oneself to one person and as being lesbian. These negative associations toward single women often drive women to get married.

In conclusion, women often get married to increase their social status – they are not only considered adults within the society but they also escape the stereotypes of unmarried women. Marriage is thus an important avenue for Ghanaian women to gain status within the community.
The Institution of Marriage in Ghana

In their book, *I Will Not Eat Stone* authors Allman and Tashjian (2000) recognize that there are three types of marriage under the existing rules and regulations in Ghana: (i) the customary marriage (the most flexible), (ii) marriage under Ordinance (civil) and (iii) marriage contracted under religious (Christian and Islamic) beliefs and regulations. As of 1994, Allman and Tashjian asserted that 80% of Ghanaians wed under the customary marriage system as opposed to the civil or religious procedure. Traditionally, customary marriages are arranged or agreed upon by the fathers and other senior kinsmen of the prospective bride and groom. This type of marriage served to link the two families together in social relationships. Marriage under the customary law is, therefore, best seen as a formal relationship between families rather than as an individual endeavor (Hamon & Ingoldsby 2003).

Ghanaian anthropologist Kyei (as cited in Allman and Tashjian 2000) identifies five mutually exclusive traditional routes of marriage. They are (i) wooing and courting, (ii) early childhood betrothal, (iii) an offer from a relative or family friend, (iv) the obligatory wife (in the case of chiefs) and lastly, (v) the pledge or pawn wife. This project will look solely at the route of the wooing and courting to obtain a wife. Traditionally within this route, the process always involves a presentation of small gifts called “seeing things” or “doorknocking things” to the woman’s parents or the head of her family. The presentation and reception of gifts serves as a formal notice of the couple’s desire to wed. Then permission is formally sought from the woman’s family for the marriage to take place. This step is followed by the presentation of the “head drinks” (in Akan *tiri nsa*) and in some cases money (dowry) to the woman’s family. Finally, there is the payment of the *onyame-dwan* (god’s-sheep) - this is the final payment. This payment is recognized as a transfer of spiritual protection from the father to the husband. Because of the subservient position of women in Ghana, the *onyame-dwan* also symbolizes that the woman is fully obliged to her husband (Allman & Tashjian 2000).

Previous Studies on Marriage

Ghanaian traditional marriage customs and mate selection patterns have changed tremendously. These changes are the result of factors such as: the imposition of British colonial rule, the development of a cash-based economy, Western forms of schooling and religious ideologies especially Christianity and Islam as well as the effects of urbanization (Hamon & Ingoldsby 2003). Scholars believe these factors have moved the underlying reason for spouse selection from the influence of family and kin members to a more Western (modern) ideal in which the individual choices and actions are the most important.

Hamon and Ingoldsby explain the mate selection pattern in Ghana. They analyzed the Ghana Female Autonomy Micro Study (GFAMS) conducted in 1992 and 1993, which asked those surveyed how they chose their partners. The study inquired whether respondents made their selection independent of their family and kin, whether the choice was made with the help of others, and whether consent was received from family members or if the union was arranged. In
analyzing the data, sociologists have found that the largest shift in mate selection patterns is that more and more Ghanaians are choosing their own life partners. Among the couples surveyed, 75.9% of the men and 69.0% of the women reported selecting their current partners by themselves. Of those percentages the younger generation (18-38) was more likely to choose their own mates. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of men (ages 18-38) and 74% of women (ages 18-38) were choosing their own mates as compared to 69% of men and 58% of women 39 and over.

Even though Ghanaian men and women are choosing their own spouses, the survey showed that the influence of family and kin has not been completely ignored. Fifteen and a half percent (15.5%) of men and 22.1% of women sought the consent of their family members in choosing their partners. These data imply that the traditional system has not been completely abandoned. Rather, the involvement of family members in selecting potential mates shows that the Ghanaian society is blending the traditional system of marriage with the new system of mate selection.

In *Marriage and the Family: A Study of Social Change in Ghana*, Osei-Kofi (1974), recognizing this shift in mate selection and blending of marriage practices, investigates the characteristics that Ghanaians used choosing their life partners. In accordance with the average age of marriage as of 1974, secondary school students were the sample group (Oppong and Abu 1987). Two hundred and ninety-two (292) secondary school students were instructed to rank emotional, financial, educational and physical appeal on a scale of one (least important) to four (most important) qualities they would consider in potential partners. Women ranked the financial appeal as the most important quality they would look for in a partner while men ranked physical appeal as the most important. This ranking, however, did not define “physical appeal”. Traditional symbols of physical beauty such as complexion, body shape, and hair texture are not explored in this study. Although men highly ranked physical attributes, Osei-Kofi neither questioned what men consider attractive nor did he explore what women perceive to be attractive to a man. His study also ignored what measures men and women take to ensure they are within those boundaries of attractiveness.

**The Process of Skin Bleaching and Its Biological Implications**

Skin bleaching is defined as the purposeful lightening of the skin, primarily through the use of lightening agents such as mercuric soaps and hydroquinone creams (Findlay & DeBeer 1980). The agents in these creams prevent the production of melanin in the epidermis, which causes the skin to be lighter.

Findlay and DeBeer (1980) discovered that the use of hydroquinone causes exogenous or endogenous ochronosis. High doses of hydroquinone also cause the destruction of the collagen and elastic fiber in the skin (Teddy 2002). This destruction causes the skin to become atrophic, losing its ability to renew itself. The epidermis develops striae as it loses elasticity. The loss of elasticity also allows for rapid formation of wrinkles and the growth of superfluous hair on the face of the bleacher. The bleacher also has a nauseating smell as a result of the alteration of the
bacterial flora on the skin. This alteration makes them more susceptible to skin diseases such as ringworm, tineas and pyodermas (Teddy 2002).

It is an undisputable fact that skin bleaching is hazardous to the human body. However, lighter-skin women are considered more beautiful than darker-skin women (Teddy 2002). Hence, lighter-skin women receive the societal advantages of having positive qualities according to the reinforcement theory (Dermer and Thiel 1975). This theory suggests that others tend to believe that beautiful people at the very least have positive qualities such as better socially desirable skills (Dermer and Thiel 1975).

**Skin Bleaching in Ghana**

Skin bleaching has been practiced by Ghanaian women (and men, to a far lesser extent) for over forty years. The practice is believed to have started after World War II. After World War II, skin bleaching was heavily practiced among *ashawo-yei* (Ga for “prostitutes”) as a way of attracting European customers (Teddy 2002).

By the early 1970’s, the biracial child had “gained acceptance and recognition” in the coastal tribes of Ghana (Teddy 2002). More Ghanaian women were marrying Caucasian men or Lebanese men and having biracial children. Gradually these children’s complexion became “an influential and major determinant of beauty”; thus, skin bleaching became a necessity to be considered beautiful (Teddy 2002). By the 1980s, skin bleaching had gained “purely aesthetic recognition” and social advantages (Teddy 2002).

By the late 1980’s and 1990’s, skin bleaching was no longer solely practiced by prostitutes. The popular culture of the 1980s praised lighter skin tones. This praise encouraged the spread of skin bleaching across gender lines and throughout all socio-economic classes of women. On Saturday, August 15th 1998, a local Ghanaian newspaper, the *Weekly Spectator*, reported that “the practice [of skin bleaching] has moved from disreputable women to teachers, police women, nurses, junior or senior civil servants, businessmen/women, politicians and even people in the media” (as cited by Teddy 2002). The music media helped lighter skin tones gain high status and became a sign of respect, recognition, good living and a source of confidence (Teddy 2002). Several songs perpetuated the concept of wanting the Ghanaian *me bron* (my white lady). Local expressions also placed social value on lighter-skinned women. Sayings such as Ṣbaa kɔkɔ mbodam (Akan: a lighter skinned woman doesn’t lose her composure), Ṣbaa kɔkɔ dɛɛ esumu kora, a wobehu no (even in the dark you can make out a lighter skinned woman) and kɔkɔ kata stan so (lightness covers ugliness) show how the Ghanaian culture has established an intense desire to be of lighter complexion (Teddy 2002). These local expressions are examples of the way the Ghanaian culture encouraged skin bleaching. Lighter skin tones were equated to desirability, beauty and higher status. These social benefits of lighter-skin tones caused darker-skinned Ghanaians to resort to skin bleaching in order to enhance their complexion, and lighter-skinned women to also bleach so as to “retain” their lighter-skin tone.
Studies Conducted on Skin Bleaching in Ghana

A Teddy (2002) study examined the root of skin bleaching in the Ghanaian culture. She asserted that the Ghanaian definition of beauty drove women to bleach their skin. Teddy interviewed 50 men and women in the Greater Accra Region. Her data indicated that skin bleaching was considered a “bad practice” (40%), “not beautiful” (78%) and 86% of her participants responded that they would not encourage skin bleaching. However, fifty-four percent (54%) of her sample, believed lighter skin tones were “very beautiful, attractive and appealing to the human eye” and preferred them to darker tones (42%). Also, 82% of the participants believed that lighter skin tones were more appreciated by other Ghanaians than darker skin tones. Fifty-two percent (52%) of her sample pool believed that the Ghanaian culture “influenced the practice of skin bleaching” because Ghanaians respect and appreciate lighter-skinned people, particularly women. Participants also indicated that, during some special occasions, skin bleaching is required if you are of darker skin tone. These social gatherings, including naming ceremonies, marriages, festivals and funerals, mandate according to her sample that women look beautiful and “beauty means having a lighter complexion” (Teddy 2002). Twenty-eight percent (28%) disagreed with the Ghanaian culture influencing skin bleaching. Twenty percent (20%) indicated that they had “no idea” if Ghanaian culture influenced skin bleaching.

Teddy’s research also showed that there is an awareness of the medical and financial consequences – 78% and 82%, respectively. Eighty percent (80%) of her participants also knew of “bleaching materials” and 68% knew of the skin bleaching process. Her data also revealed that most women bleach around the peak Ghanaian marriage age, 24-33. When the question of “why” people bleach was posed to the participants, 84% believed that people bleached in order to look beautiful or attractive whereas 6% believed that skin bleaching was practiced to “cure skin rashes and diseases” and 10% believed skin bleaching was practiced “to please their friends or sexual partners.”

Teddy’s research provides insight into skin bleaching in Ghana. However, she did not look specifically at women who bleach and why they feel the need to bleach. She did not investigate why women feel skin bleaching is a necessary procedure of beautification. Nor does this study investigate the correlation of the marriage age and the onset of bleaching in women. It is also hard to determine her participants’ demographics. That is, her report does not provide participants’ gender, age and socioeconomic class. These are important variables to mention, as these demographics also help in shaping one’s understanding of beauty and why women skin-bleach.

Robinson’s 2004 study examined the practice of skin bleaching among Ghanaian women, and argued that this phenomenon is rooted in a locally determined, “(dis)empowering” heritage of bodily commodification practices in Ghana: slavery, prostitution and fashion. Robinson interviewed numerous Ghanaian market women and found that skin bleaching was believed not only to boost the careers of the women themselves but also the careers of their husbands.
Likewise, Robinson looked at a 1965 article published in the *Sunday Mirror* entitled “How do you back your ambitious husband?” In the article, the author focuses on how women play a crucial role in their husband’s careers, “big business organizations everywhere tend to take an avid interest in the wives of their up-and-coming men” (as cited by Robinson 2004). The 1965 article claims that men without “good and attractive” wives can “flounder” in the lower ranks of the business. Contemporary standards of beauty define a lighter-skinned woman as the fashionable wife and, according to this article’s logic, she can enhance her husband’s career. Robinson found that women also gained monetarily from their lighter skin tone. One of Robinson’s interviewees explains, “people just give you gift(s) for looking nice” (Robinson 2004). Lighter skin for women, Robinson concluded, functions as a form of social capital, and according to this article’s logic, she can enhance her husband’s career. Robinson’s work expands on existing literature on skin bleaching in Ghana, focusing on Ghanaian men’s preference in women as it relates to skin tone, skin bleaching advertisements and perceptions of beauty for children. Using questionnaires and informal interviews, Caporiccio collected her data from men at the University of Ghana, Legon (UG), the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (K.N.U.S.T.) and men with secondary school education or less (S.S.S). Many of her male participants believed that prostitutes had a need to bleach. They believed prostitutes have to be attractive in order to get customers; thus, they had a legitimate financial need to skin-bleach. Her data however revealed that men had a strong preference for naturally lighter skinned women over bleached women (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naturally Dark (ND) vs. Bleached (B)</th>
<th>Naturally Dark (ND) vs Naturally White (NW)</th>
<th>Naturally White (NW) vs. Bleached (B)</th>
<th>Naturally Black vs. Naturally Lighter (NL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knust</td>
<td>96% (ND)</td>
<td>87% (ND)</td>
<td>100% (NW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UG</td>
<td>96% (ND)</td>
<td>78% (ND)</td>
<td>91% (NW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSS</td>
<td>100% (ND)</td>
<td>69% (ND)</td>
<td>100% (NW)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Caporiccio’s work expands on existing literature on skin bleaching in Ghana. Her focus on men presents insightful information on the preference of Ghanaian men. However, her data neglects the preference of Ghanaian women. Although she interviewed bleached Ghanaian women, Caporiccio does not consider which feminine skin tone is considered beautiful and its role in mate selection.
While some scholars have explored the role of marriage in Ghana and its changing trends, none have closely examined the possible intersection of these two concepts. This project will present data showing that there is an intersection between women who skin bleach and their understanding of their marriage marketability. Skin bleaching is, according to the theoretical framework of this research, a form of feminine social capital. Social capital is defined in both the cultural and economic sense. The cultural sense of social capital is a form of prestige related to social status, reputation, and social networks. All of these forms of prestige can be converted into the economic sense of social capital, such as material gain and educational capital. The attainment of social capital makes skin bleaching a perceived necessary procedure to undergo for ensuring economic and social success. I will attempt to determine if lighter-skinned women gain more social capital through marriage. This will allow a study on the place of skin bleachers in Ghanaian feminine culture as it relates to women’s pursuit of social capital in Ghana particularly through the avenue of marriage.

Definitions

Status within Ghanaian Culture:

Status can adopt many definitions. Relational (Weberian) status is dynamic, historically and culturally sensitive, and has no strict binary categories. Structured status (Lintonian), on the other hand, is operationalized as a single measure located along a one-dimensional scale. This scale usually uses prestige and occupation as bases (Borocz 1997; Rahman 2002). This study defines status using both the Weberian and the Lintonian models, looking at cultural attributes, historical prestige and financial attainment.

Social Capital and an Explanation of the Use of Theoretical Framework:

This project uses Hunter’s (2002) theoretical framework and definition of social capital: gaining status based solely on marrying a spouse who possesses a high status as defined in the Ghanaian community. Hunter’s framework finds a link between skin tone, marriage marketability, and social capital within the African-American and Mexican-American communities. These two communities have a history of colonization and slavery similar to the Ghanaian community, thus making Hunter’s work relevant to this project. In previously oppressed communities, social capital for women in this aspect is defined through spousal economic status. Hunter asserts that beautiful women are able to obtain social capital based solely on their physical appearance. In such communities, like the Ghanaian community, Hunter redefines feminine beauty as possessing a lighter hue. She asserts that lighter hue is considered more beautiful due to colonial influence. Other contemporary scholars looking at perceptions of beauty in colonized countries such as Mexico have found skin color biases on the dimension of educational attainment, reduced psychological stress and spousal income (Hunter 2002). These findings attest to the power and enduring nature of white supremacy and privilege.
Using psychological and sociological findings regarding lighter skin as a type of privilege in post-colonized communities, this research contends that lighter skin works as a form of social capital in Ghana. Similarly to Hunter, this research interprets lighter skin tone as a facet of beauty, and beauty operates as social capital in the Ghanaian community for women. Women who possess this form of social capital receive benefits and greater opportunities from the Ghanaian society, particularly through the institution of marriage. Darker-skinned women, according to Hunter, are not considered both by men and women to be as beautiful as lighter-skinned women. Thus, this research investigates whether lighter-hued women are able to marry spouses who possess occupations that are of higher income than their darker-skinned counterparts.

According to this theory, beauty as social capital in previously colonized communities deems lighter hue a necessity. For this project, this theory of necessity will be extrapolated to the Ghanaian society. Much like the communities Hunter analyzed, the Ghanaian community, and specifically the institution of marriage, has been affected by British colonization. Colonization has caused a change in not only beauty standards but also in the importance of marriage for Ghanaian women. The Ghanaian system of marriage places women as an extension of their spouses’ social status. Marrying a person of high social status is believed by some Ghanaian women to be a privilege limited to women of lighter skin tone. This is why there are high percentages of women in Ghana who skin bleach. Skin bleaching allows darker-skinned women the chance to be more marketable within the institution of marriage.

The present study was designed to examine the skin-tone preference of Ghanaian women. Self-appraised skin color, personal skin color ideals, and the assumptions about the opposite sex’s skin color preference were assessed. Attitudinally, participants’ focal feelings about their skin color, their face and their global evaluations of their overall appearance were measured. In view of the above literature, this research expects to observe a greater idealization of lightness than darkness in Ghanaian women. Due to the greater importance of beauty for women than for men (Hill 2002), this initial study on skin-tone preference focused on Ghanaian women.

Methodology

Qualitative Analysis

Using qualitative analysis, semi-standard interviews were conducted. Interviews were carried out to determine Ghanaian women’s perceived ideals concerning lighter-skinned women, skin bleaching and social capital gained through marriage. This project uses interviews as a form of information retrieval for women in commerce, as opposed to using a standard psychological experiment, because interviews allow the researcher to extrapolate more information. Also, interviewing market women instead of the University of Ghana’s female students allows the researcher to receive answers that reflect the ideals of a broad spectrum of Ghanaian people, as market women interact with the general Ghanaian population on a daily basis.
Population

Thirty (30) women between the ages of 21-54, who work in the arena of commerce, were interviewed. Their interaction with the Ghanaian population makes them proficient as agents of beauty modifications such as clothing trends; hair styles, make-up trends, acne lotions and soap. Women in commerce (market women) were selected, given that commerce is the second largest labor force for women (Oppong & Abu 1987). These women included: salesgirls, wholesalers, traders, storekeepers/kiosk owners, provisions, beauty goods or food sellers, seamstresses and hair stylists. Market women were also used in the interview section of this project, paralleling previous research projects, which used interviews as a source of investigations and identified “market women” as having the highest population of women who bleach (Caporiccio 2005; Robinson 2004).

Procedure

Participants were randomly selected. Women were initially asked to volunteer and a time was set according to the woman’s availability. All interviews were conducted in the presence of an interview assistant. The interview assistant was a middle-aged Ghanaian woman. Considering the ancestral hierarchy present in Ghanaian culture, the interview assistant’s age served as a balance of maturity for the researcher, who is much younger than the respondents. All interviews were administered in the interviewees’ native language, Twi. Interviews were conducted in markets or street-side stalls. Respondents were told the purpose of the experiment and an informed consent form was signed by the respondent. All interviews were recorded on a tape recorder. After the respondents’ demographical information was obtained, the researcher began the interview.

Questions targeted respondents’ definition of beauty and what they believed Ghanaian men define as beautiful in Ghanaian women. The initial background questions were asked, respondents were asked which skin tone they considered beautiful, which skin tone they believed Ghanaian men considered beautiful, and which skin tone they believed the general Ghanaian population finds beautiful. Then respondents offered their opinions on whether women received social benefits by virtue of their skin tone, particularly through marriage. The interview then focused on skin bleaching. Questions about skin bleaching asked to respondents included: why they thought women bleach; if they had bleached; and if they had thoughts of bleaching; (whether for personal reasons or for occupational-related reasons). Once the interview was completed, the respondent was thanked and the researcher left. Respondents were not compensated.
Quantitative Analysis

Participants

Participants were sixty (60) University of Ghana female student participants. Participants were all between the ages of 18-24. They were recruited to participate in the experiment by random selection. Advertisements for the project were also placed around the campus of the University of Ghana as a means of recruiting participants. Due to the wide variety of female skin tones in Ghana, participants whose skin tone ranged from extremely dark to extremely light were recruited. Three Ghanaians and an African American served as judges (three females and one male). Participants were not provided any compensation for their voluntary participation in a study.

Materials and Procedure

This project utilized a questionnaire called the Skin Color Questionnaire (SCQ) (Bond & Cash 1992). However, the question list was slightly altered to account for cultural differences (Appendix A). The SCQ items were designed to assess, respectively, skin color satisfaction, self-perceived skin-color (light-dark) and ideal skin color. Responses to these questions ranged from 1 (dissatisfied) to 13 (satisfied).

A set of 4 x 4 inch color squares of nine “black” skin colors were used in this project. The color tones were selected from a standardized color system (Pantone Matching System (PMS)), which provided hundreds of standard colors and hues used in the printing industry (Bond & Cash 1992). The PMS skin colors ranged from 1 (very light, cream colored) to 13 (very dark, ebony) see appendix C (Bond & Cash 1992). These tones have been proven to be reliable, original tones from light to dark. The squares were randomly positioned on a numbered white 20 inch x 30 inch poster board color wheel. There were three color wheels used in this project. There was also an observational answer sheet that went along with the color wheel. Participants were asked to observe the three color wheels and choose tones that closely reflected their own facial skin tone, their ideal facial skin tone, and the skin tone that best describes the tone they believe the opposite sex finds beautiful in women. This was called the SCAP questionnaire (Appendix B). This questionnaire was a replication of Bond & Cash’s methodology in their 1992 study “Black Beauty: Skin Color and Body Image among African-American College Women.”

Each wheel was presented in a random order. Participants were alone when responding and deposited their coded answer sheets in a box on their way out of the room. Before the participants were debriefed, using a hand-held palette of the nine colors, two judges independently rated the facial tone of the participants at a cosmetics-free site on the lower mid-cheek, approximately 1 inch above the jaw line. Due to the nature of the experiment, participants signed their consent forms at the end of the experiment.
Results

Viabilities of skin color ratings

Two judges individually rated the participants’ actual skin colour. Overall, 70% of the participants received identical skin colour ratings by the two judges, 13% of the judges’ ratings were consistent within 1 scale point, and 10% were within 2 points. Thus, only 6.7% (n = 4) of the participants received a rating difference of 3 scale values. For participants who did not receive identical ratings by both judges, ratings were averaged, rounded up to the nearest whole number and assigned to the participant.

In addition to the judges’ ratings of the participants’ skin colour, the participants rated their own skin colour on two scales: (a) the SCAP self-rating (choosing of one of the thirteen PMS color squares); and (b) the 13- point SCQ self-rating of lightness-darkness “relative to most Ghanaians.” Pearson correlations were calculated to examine the convergence among the three skin tone indices. Judges’ ratings correlated well with participants’ SCQ light-dark self-ratings ($r = .51, p < 0.01$) and with the SCAP ratings ($r = .57, p < 0.01$). The two self ratings correlated significantly ($r = .59, p < 0.01$). Thus, the level of congruence among the two self-ratings and the judges’ ratings reflect the convergent validity of the skin color indices. There is, therefore, a great degree of convergence between skin-tone colors assigned to the participants and the skin tones that participants self-selected.

Actual, Self-Perceived, Idealized and Opposite Sex Preference in Skin Tones

The first hypothesis was that participants would judge opposite-sex members as preferring lighter skin tones than their own self-rated skin tones on the SCAP scale. As shown in Table 2, lighter-skinned women rated the opposite sex as preferring women who were in their own lighter skin tone range.

The remaining participants were placed into two groups according to a sign difference test. Their groupings were based on their choice of facial skin tone and the skin tone that they perceived the opposite sex found attractive. Participants were placed in either “the opposite sex prefers the same skin tone as my facial skin tone or darker” or the “opposite sex prefers lighter skin tones in women than my skin tone” group. A binomial test was conducted to examine expected distribution of observations across the two groups. The obtained probability was .30 and .70 respectively with a significance .011, showing that participants chose lighter-skin tones than their own self-rated skin tones as the preference of Ghanaian men.

Also, using mean comparisons (by Newman-Keuls) as seen in Table 2, there was an average of 4.90 on the SCQ (self-rating of lightness-darkness) and a 4.98 on the SCAP (selecting one of 13 PMS color) scale measuring the skin tone women believed men found attractive in women. That is, participants chose lighter skin tones as the skin tones preferred by the opposite sex.
Table 2

Mean Comparisons of Actual Skin-Colour Groups on the SCAP Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skin tones</th>
<th>Actual skin color as assessed by judges</th>
<th>SCAP skin colour self rating</th>
<th>SCAP skin colour personal ideal rating</th>
<th>SCAP Perceived opposite-sex ideal rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Light</td>
<td>5.05 (.91)a</td>
<td>4.89 (2.23)a</td>
<td>5.53 (2.44)a</td>
<td>4.47 (2.01)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>8.42 (.71)b</td>
<td>7.33 (1.85)b</td>
<td>6.91 (2.08)b</td>
<td>5.24 (2.81)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark</td>
<td>11.00 (2.56)c</td>
<td>9.38 (2.88)c</td>
<td>9.00 (2.25)c</td>
<td>4.50 (1.60)c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7.70 (2.31)d</td>
<td>6.83 (2.57)d</td>
<td>6.75 (2.46)d</td>
<td>4.90 (2.44)d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are given in parentheses. Row and column means with different subscripts are significantly different. Averages are based on 1 (Very light) to 13 (Very dark) scales.

The second hypothesis was that participants would generally be satisfied with their skin tone. Using descriptive statistics, on a scale of 1-13 (extremely dissatisfied- extremely satisfied), women averaged an 11.32. Women were, therefore, generally satisfied with their skin tone.

The third hypothesis was that women using the SCQ measure would select their own self-rated skin tone as the ideal skin tone. As reported in Table 2, women generally idealized their own skin tone. Using the SCQ measure (PMS colors 1-13): lighter skinned women averaged 4.89 on self ratings and a 5.53 on self-idealized. Medium brown women averaged a 7.33 on self and a 6.91 on self-idealized. Darker skinned women averaged a 9.38 on self rating and a 9.00 on ideal skin tone.

These analyses confirm the existence of similar personal ideals and self-rated skin tone for the present sample of Ghanaian women. Additionally, regardless of their actual skin colour, most of the participants believed that Ghanaian men prefer lighter skinned women.

Interview Results

Interviews conducted in Ghana among 30 (thirty) educationally disadvantaged (secondary school education or less) female traders between the ages of 21-54 reinforced the psychological data. The interview data revealed that Ghanaian women have a perceived notion that lighter-skinned women are considered more beautiful and more attractive by Ghanaian men. Many women believe that Ghanaian men found lighter-skinned women more beautiful than darker skinned women:

Ghanaian men find the lighter-skinned women more beautiful (Interview 14, 2006)
Ghanaian men like lighter-skinned women (Interview 16, 2006)

Men like the lighter-skinned one, than the Black (dark) one. Men like lighter-skinned women. They say ‘look at that light-skinned girl, almost like a white person’ (Interview 4, 2006).

Interviewees believe that Ghanaian women generally bleach so they can attract men for marriage with their bleached lighter complexion:

Sometimes if you really want to marry a particular man, you have to bleach (Interview 14, 2006)

Lighter-skinned women tend to attract more men by virtue of their lightness. So if they are at marrying age they get more men coming to court them earlier and quicker than darker-skinned women. (Interview 16 2006)

Darker-skinned women look at themselves and realize that they need to bleach to be beautiful. Just so men can call them beautiful (Interview 17, 2006)

Even the wealthy men tend to marry the lighter-skinned women. Because when he is walking with a lighter-skinned woman…it is just beautiful. (Interview 18, 2006)

Some interviewees also reported that some married women are made to bleach by their husbands, saying, “some [husbands] even want their wives to use creams to be light” (Interview 4 2006). Interviewees believe that husbands demanded that their wives bleach “because they want their wives to be beautiful” (Interview 4, 2006). Similar to the interviews conducted by Robinson, interviewees commented on the effects of skin bleaching on marriages. Some husbands discourage the practice while others encourage it. An interviewee who is a former bleacher recounted her experience:

When you talk to a lot of women, they will tell you that the reason they bleached is just like my story, my husband started cheating on me with this light-skinned girl. So I decided I needed to be light, so I started bleaching. That’s what they say. I, for instance, if it wasn’t for my husband cheating on me with a light-skinned girl, I would have never started bleaching, but I had to stop because I was ruining my face, especially the skin of my face. So I left him to do whatever he wants. […] Yes when I became lighter, he stopped cheating for a little while (Interview 24, 2006).

Although interviewees believe that lighter-skinned women receive no social privileges over darker-skinned women, they indicated that lighter-skinned women are more likely to marry wealthier Ghanaian men.

Interviewees also indicated, like the women at the University of Ghana, that there was an idealization of lighter skin among them. Many interviewees indicated a preference for lighter
skin to darker skin because they believed that lighter-skinned women, “have the opportunities to wear whatever colour they want because every colour looks good with their complexion. The only time a light-skinned person doesn’t wear a colour, it is because they personally don’t like that colour” (Interview 5, 2006). Others revealed that they preferred to have lighter skin because lighter-skinned women are “bright.” “Bright” was explained by an interviewee as generally “making lighter-skinned women stand out in a crowd of [majority darker skinned] Ghanaians so people think you are more beautiful” (Interview 8, 2006).

One interviewee however said that bleaching in Ghana was not as a result of women wanting to look beautiful but rather it is done as a sign of modernity. She believes that:

It has to do with women wanting to go abroad and going abroad they [the ones who bleach] want their complexion to be like that of the people who live abroad. So they bleach to look “white.” You know some women are lighter than most Ghanaians and I think they bleach so that their complexion will be like that of the people abroad [white people]. I don’t think it has anything to do with looking good for Ghanaian men (Interview 15, 2006).

Although there was an idealization of lighter skin tones, interviewees were generally satisfied with their skin tones. When asked if they would want to change their skin tones, many expressed that they wanted to retain their original skin tone.

Discussion

Perhaps due to the sensitive nature of skin bleaching, little psychological research has been performed in Ghana. This present study brings to light a number of striking findings. The first hypothesis, that participants will choose PMS colours that are lighter than themselves as what is preferred by the opposite sex, was confirmed. This hypothesis provides evidence that supports the idea that there is a belief that lighter skin tones are more desirable to a Ghanaian man within the Ghanaian female society. Being lighter for Ghanaian women perhaps promotes a sense of self worth, a higher sense of self esteem and a higher regard of self attractiveness. Lighter-skinned women may, therefore, be provided with a false sense of superiority, as their skin tone is considered the most attractive to the opposite sex. Alternatively, for darker-skinned women, this perception may lead to self-hatred – a devaluation of one’s self worth, low self-esteem and a false sense of inferiority (Hunter 2002; Rahman 2002; Robinson 2004). This perceived need to be lighter (considered beautiful by Ghanaian men) appears to cause darker-skinned Ghanaian women to believe that skin bleaching or being of a lighter skin tone is a necessity in their evaluation of their personal beauty and self worth.

This finding also revealed the notion that lighter skin is believed to be a form of social capital in the marriage market. Since lighter skin tones are considered a privilege, it promotes the belief that darker-skin women need to be of lighter skin tone in order to have greater accessibility to the marriage market. This notion creates an unnecessary hierarchy in the marriage market for Ghanaian women.
Previous research has shown that lighter-skinned women in the African-American, Hindu Indian, Mexican and Mexican American communities tend to have the social benefit in the marriage market of marrying men with higher income than their darker skinned counterparts (Hunter 2002; Rahman 2002). This may also be the case in the Ghanaian setting. Ghanaian women perhaps believe that wealthy men are more likely to wed lighter-skinned women as opposed to darker-skinned women; therefore, being of a lighter skin tone is vital.

Skin bleaching is not a practice imposed on the Ghanaian community by the Western world. Although Ghana’s interaction with Europeans, African-Americans, Lebanese, biracial individuals and even the influential nature of bleaching advertisements—as seen in the bleaching market of India (Parameswaran & Cardoza 2009)—encourages the practice of skin bleaching, it is Ghana’s longstanding social structure that maintains it. Ghanaian culture deems marriage as a vital component in the completion of the Ghanaian person (Osei-Kofi, 1974). Marriage is a sign of maturity and responsibility in Ghanaian culture. Social practices in Ghana mandate that all its citizens marry, particularly its women. Therefore, it is the Ghanaian society, not the Western society, which causes Ghanaian women to believe that they need to bleach in order to reap the benefits of marriage.

This project’s results raise several questions. What are Ghanaian men’s ideals compared to Ghanaian women’s perceptions of what men prefer? This study purposely excluded men in order to investigate the notions of beauty that are circulating and maintaining this form of beautification among women. Thus, since this present study emphasizes the feminine perceptions of masculine standards of beauty and desirability, one must be cautious not to infer that their assumptions are accurate for Ghanaian men. However, it does set the foundation for further research. For instance, Fallon and Rozin (1985) observed that although women believe men hold extreme standards of thinness, what men actually regard as the most attractive female body size is somewhat more moderate and flexible than women believe it to be. A second area that could be investigated is age. An experiment could be conducted looking specifically at age as a variable. That is, do Ghanaian women have varying concepts of beauty with respect to age? Gender is another area to be studied, as to why Ghanaian men bleach. Bleaching for Ghanaian men, although not rampant in Ghana, symbolizes that some Ghanaian men judge their own personal attraction by the lightness of their skin. This concept would contradict Mark Hill’s (2002) theory of darker skin tones being a form of masculinity and lighter skin tones being a form of femininity. Lastly, other regions can be investigated in Ghana. Accra was chosen for this research project because it provides a larger sample pool. Basing this research in Accra allows contact with multiple ethnic groups as the city is rich in varying ethnicities and socio-economic statuses. Restricting the sample pool of this research to a particular ethnicity would have prevented proper evaluation of a possible preference for lighter-skinned women. A significant preference for lighter-skinned women and lighter skin being a form of social capital may not be present in a particular ethnicity due to homogeneity of skin tones in certain ethnicities. However, further research could look at particular ethnic groups that have a higher percentage of female skin bleachers and solely investigate their concept of lighter skin preference.
It is clear that skin bleaching has genetic, behavioral, socioeconomic and environmental determinants. The root cause is a response to a deep-seated need for individuals to cope with the suffering they perceive or experience resulting from social norms. Skin bleaching is not only a psychological and social problem, but also a public health issue that needs to be addressed with targeted interventions aimed at changing perceptions and educating people on its consequences.

**APPENDIX A**

**Skin-Color Questionnaire (SCQ)**

**Gender:** M F (circle one)

**Age:**

1. “Compared to most Ghanaians, I believe that my skin color is.” Responses range from 1 (extremely light) to 13 (extremely dark).

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11  12  13
   (Extremely light) (Medium brown) (Extremely dark)

2. “How satisfied are you with your skin tone?” Responses range from 1 (dissatisfied) to 13 (satisfied).

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11  12  13
   (Dissatisfied) (Neutral) (Satisfied)

3. “I think Ghanaian men find women more beautiful whose complexion are ...” Responses range from 1 (extremely light) to 13 (extremely dark)

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11  12  13
   (Extremely light) (Medium brown) (Extremely dark)

4. “If I could, I would change my skin color (with no detrimental effects) to....” Responses again range from 1 (much lighter) to 13 (much darker)

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11  12  13
   (Much lighter) (Neutral) (Much darker)
APPENDIX B
Pantone Matching System

Gender: M F (circle one)
Age:

1. This PMS color shade best describes my facial skin color ...........................
2. This PMS color best describes my ideal skin color .................................
3. This PMS color shade best describes the complexion the opposite sex (Ghanaian men) find beautiful in women ........................................

APPENDIX C
Coded Shades

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References


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