

Beauty is not in every shade

What are the main factors of the usage of skin whitening products according to women of color?

Campus St.-Jorisstraat

**Auteur:** Rahma Haji Rashid Ahmed

**Begeleider:** Catherine Barbez

**Bachelorproef voorgedragen tot het behalen van**

**het diploma Bachelor in de Toegepaste Psychologie**

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*Indeed, with hardship comes ease.*

# **Abstract**

This qualitative study was aimed to explore the main factors of the usage of skin whitening according to women of color. Thirteen women of various nationalities were interviewed and 24 questions were conducted via Skype. The qualitative analysis from this thesis indicated that the main factors were (1) parents, (2) peer pressure, (3) self-esteem, (4) media and (5) facial imperfections. The participants were also asked which products they used and if they were aware of the side-effects of skin whitening. After the questions, six statements regarding the topic of skin whitening were asked the participants. The statements were designed to gain more information on what the participants currently think of the skin whitening topic. Given to the small size of the sample, these results can not be generalized in the total population of skin whiteners.

**Key words: *skin whitening, skin bleaching, skin lightening***

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#

# **Introduction**

 “Show me the doll that is the nice doll”

“Show me the doll that looks bad”

“Show me the doll that looks pretty”

“Show me the doll that looks ugly”

Psychologist Kenneth Clark conducted “The Doll Test” with young black children in 1947. In this groundbreaking experiment Clark (1947) used two rubber dolls, which were undistinguishable except for their color. The one doll was black, while the other was white. The children were asked to show the psychologist which doll was pretty and which one was ugly. The results of this experiment confirmed that the majority of the black children, who were supposed to choose the doll with the same skin color as theirs as being the pretty doll, actually preferred the doll with lighter skin tone. They attributed the positive characteristics to the light skinned doll and attributed the negative characteristics to the dark skinned doll.

# Part I: Literature review

# **1. What is skin whitening?**

## 1.1 Cultural ideas and differences of beauty

Each culture has its own definition when it comes to beauty. In most countries, having a lighter complexion has been considered as desirable. Hunter (2002) wrote that women of color are being oppressed by the Western ideals of beauty. Fair skin has always been associated with beauty. Various studies (Sherrow, 2001; Hunter, 2002; Pointer, 2005) showed how women used different methods throughout time to achieve and maintain fair skin. Cases have been found many years back, as early as during the Roman Empire. For example, Sherrow (2001) and Pointer (2005) found that women used face whiteners made of ceruse[[1]](#footnote-1) in the Roman era. They applied the ceruse on their faces to get a fairer skin complexion. Indian women bathed in special spices, such as turmeric, to lighten their skin, while Chinese women believed in swallowing powered pearls to become lighter (China Daily, 2006). In Korea, having fair skin has been associated with nobility and pureness (Yoo, 2001).

During the Koyro dynasty, children used to wash their faces with peach flower, as a result to make their skin whiter. Glenn (2008) states that the ideology ‘white is right’ is located back in the slavery. In fact, the foundation of skin whitening dates from the 1850’s, whereas African-Americans were oppressed, insulted and treated badly because of their skin color. During this period of time, dark skin had a negative connation, such as unattractiveness and dirt, while having a fair skin was considered as more desirable (Rush, 2007). Hall (1995) says that this ideal beauty is still alive in the non-Western community, especially within the African-American population. Within this community, there is a skin tone stratification whereas lighter skinned African-American are offered more opportunities compared to their dark skinned counterparts (Coard, Breland and Raskin, 2001).

According to Dadzie and Petit (2009) fair skin does not only stand for beauty, but it has also been associated with better and higher economic status, better education and marriage prospects.

For instance, in India having a fair skin indicates that you belong to the highest position of the caste system, while the dark skinned people are from the low cast and are viewed as underprivileged and unintelligent (Leistikow 2003). Fair skin is a requirement in this society, because it increases the person’s chance to get married (Pettit, 2008).

## 1.2 Definition of skin whitening

As a result of this nearly worldwide spread ideology, women of color are trying to achieve a lighter complexion. With the help of skin whitening products, they are hoping to resemble beautiful and bright women (Glenn, 2008). Skin whitening, also known as skin bleaching or skin lightening, is a procedure where chemical ingredients are used to whiten the skin. These skin whitening products reduce the production of melanin, which is a type of pigment that determines a person’s skin complexion. The skin whitening phenomenon is mainly used in non-white countries. Even though there are different approaches and various methods in cultures to lighten your skin, there is a universal yearning to be white (Hall, 1995).

## 1.3 The prevalence of skin whitening

The World Health Organization defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1946). Skin-whitening products are becoming more and more prevalent throughout the world (Glenn, 2008). The World Health Organization classified skin whitening as a dangerous health threat.

The countries with the highest prevalence of skin bleaching, is Nigeria. No less than 77% of skin whitening products are used by Nigerian women, followed by Indian women as the second highest. The prevalence in Nigeria is significantly high because both women and men engage in the skin-whitening practice (Adebajo, 2002). Moreover, in India, men are also slowly engaging in the use of skin-whitening (Chadha, 2005 and Guha Ray, 2010).

“Fair & Lovely”, a line of bleaching creams is the largest selling and most popular skin whitening product, with over sixty million users in India and over 150 million users worldwide. Its company is worth over $200 million (Karanani, 2007). Their products guarantee that the skin will be three shades lighter within weeks. Fair & Lovely is offered in many countries in Asia and Africa and the company invest millions in ads and commercials, which show that dark skinned women are not desired, unemployed and single. The commercials insinuate and promote the idea that women will be viewed as prettier and more successful in their carrier and love life after the usage of” Fair & Lovely” creams. They also launched a variant for men, ‘Fair & Lovely Max Fairness for Men’ and ‘Fair and Handsome’. These products promote not only fair skin, but also an increase in confidence and self-esteem (Chadha, 2005)

Most of the research regarding skin complexion puts the emphasis on women. However, Hill conducted a study in 2002, in which he describes the difference between women and men concerning their skin color. The respondents were between the age of 18 and 73 and were collected from the National Survey of Black Americans. The aim of this study was to collect data on the relationship between skin color and physical attractiveness. As predicted, the correlation between the two was significantly higher for women than for men. The conclusion was that women believe more than men that the lighter the skin is, the more physical attractive one becomes, while for men other added control variables such as sex or education were more important than the skin color.

**Health risks of skin whitening**

While it is proven that some products are effective and safe to use, others are highly dangerous. Many of their users are not fully aware of the dangers of these products and the damage they can cause. Pettit (2009) states that hydroquinone and mercury, toxic and harmful substances, are found in most of the whitening creams. In Thailand, the dermatologists showed that most of their patients, who used skin whitening products, suffer from ochronosis, an appearance of dark patches on the skin that are not removable (Fuller, 2006).

Studies show that long term users of skin-whitening products can experience serious health problems. A study by Opala in 2001 found that Jamaican women suffer from health issues as the result of the usage of skin whitening products. Furthermore, the usage of these products by pregnant women can also result in skin cancer, kidney and liver failure and severe damage to the brains of unborn babies. Therefore, the Jamaican government launched the “Don’t kill the Skin” health campaigns to raise awareness and educate the people the risks of these products (Opala, 2001). Counter (2003) and Oluimide (2008) agree with the findings of the previously mentioned study by Opala and reveal that these products are responsible for the discoloration of the skin tone. Counter (2003) gives an example, where a woman who used skin whitening crèmes that contains mercury during and after her pregnancy, gave birth to an infant who has been diagnosed with severe kidney and blood conditions.

Aside from the physical problems, users of skin whitening products also suffer from psychological consequences. Fuller (2006) further discusses that these users not only suffer from skin conditions, but are also confronted with shame and low self-esteem.

To diminish the use of these products and lower the prevalence of health issues caused by skin whitening, governments of most countries have set strict regulations for the production and sale of these products, but there are still products for sale that contain these unsafe ingredients (Mire, 2005). These products are still easily purchased over the counter (Charles, 2009). The emergence of online shopping is also a major facilitator in the availability of skin bleaching products (Anderson, 2006).

**Problem statement**

The purpose of this thesis is to determine which are the main factors that motivate women of color to use skin whitening products. Gillen and Lefkowits (2009) have shown that women of color are more affected by appearances compared to men, who experience less pressure of physical appearance. The main research question is formulated as:

*What are the main factors of the usage of skin whitening products according to women of color?*

**Sub questions**

In order to answer the research question, the following sub questions have been formulated as:

1. *What is skin-whitening?*
2. *Who is the risk-group?*
3. *Which products do they use?*
4. *Are they aware of the side-effects?*

# **2. Theoretical background**

## 2.1 Sociological theories on skin whitening

Past researches have come up with several theories that suggest to explain the usage of skin whitening products. The highest rated theories are the Black Identity Development theory (Jackson, 2005), Internalized racism (Bivens, 2005) and Social Representation Theory (Charles, 2009).

Black Identity Development

According to Jackson’s theory (2005), the Black Identity Development consist of five stages that black people go through in order to develop their identity. These stages are naive, acceptance, resistance, redefinition and internalization. Jackson (2005) explains the relationship with skin whitening as follows: the stage of ‘acceptance’ is crucial in explaining the behavior of women towards skin whitening. Jackson believes that during this stage, black people become more racially conscious. He states that black people go along with the dominant group standards and therefore value the Western esthetics more than their own, which leads them to the use of skin whitening products to fit into these standards.

Internalized racism theory

A second theory developed by Bivens (2005), further elaborates this view by introducing the concept of ‘internalized racism’:

“[Internalized racism] is the situation that occurs in a racist system when a racial group oppressed by racism supports the supremacy and dominance of the dominant group by maintain or participating in the set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures and ideologies that undergird the dominating group’s power and privilege and limits the oppressed group’s own advantages.” (p. 46)

Internalized racism is viewed as a form of oppression, that supports the idea of people of color that ‘white is right’. In line with this idea, women of color whiten their skin in order to be a part of the dominant group.

Social Representation theory

Lastly, the Social Representation theory by Charles (2009) explains that women objectify their own physical appearances negatively from a very young age on, as a result of being exposed to the notion that white is beauty and black is not. Self-objectification could be a motivational factor for women of color to practice skin-whitening, because it is the only way to accomplish Western beauty.

## 2.2 Motivational theories and skin whitening

In this chapter, we will discuss academic research regarding the motives behind skin whitening. Throughout this chapter, it will become clear that most studies focus on the black community, more specifically African-American women. The thought of pursuing the idea of Western beauty seems to be standard among the women of color. According to Lewis et al. (2011) 38% of the women who used to practice skin whitening, desired to look ‘Western’ in the hope of becoming more beautiful. Lewis et. al (2011) believe that the historical context is an important factor and refer to it as “psychological colonization”. Because of the colonization and slavery, African-American people are taught that white skin is right and black skin is not. Fokua (2009) interviewed 30 Ghanaian women in his study, and found that the main motivation to use skin whitening products is the perception of skin color by the opposite sex. Fair women are seen as to be more desirable and attractive to men from their own color. In a second study, Charles (2009) cross-examined 58 young adults in Jamaica on the reasoning behind skin whitening and came to similar conclusions. Among those participants, at least 72% whitened their skin. The main intentions for engaging into skin-whitening were (1) to become beautiful, (2) to be lighter and (3) to remove facial imperfections. A study conducted among 310 Jordanians, showed that 62% of them associated fair skin with beautiful and dark skin with ugliness (Hamad et al., 2010).

Another motive founded in academic research to whiten the skin is poor self-representation. Mosocvici (1988) defines self-representation as” the shared images of the object in the minds of people that arise from social thought, which guides people’s behavior”. Coard et al. (2001) believe that the preference and desire to have fair skin among the African-American society is passed down generation after generation, which leads to poor self-representation. These self-representations are also portrayed by the media. Bandura (1977) suggests in “The Social Learning Theory” that learning takes place by observing. Gabriel (2007) states that the fair skin is portrayed as beauty for most African-Jamaican women in the media and in order to achieve that, they whiten their skin.

A third motive for skin bleaching refers to acculturation. Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936) define the meaning of acculturation as follows:

“Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when a group of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns or either or both groups.”

Berry (1997) invented a model where four acculturation strategies are represented: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. The term assimilation implies that an individual wishes not to maintain own culture and identity of origin and identifies more with the culture of majority group. Integration refers to when an individual wants to maintain their own culture and identity, as well with the majority group. Marginalization stands for when an individual not wants to identify with his own culture and identity as well with the majority group. And whereas, separation associates with their origin, nevertheless rejects the majority group.

Hall (1995) suggest that assimilation is a possible factor that drives the motivation to whiten one’s skin. In his study among African-Americans, he found a correlation between assimilation and the skin complexion of the participation. Participants felt excluded from the American society and therefore they felt the need to bleach their skin to become lighter, in order to feel accepted into the society.  However, Nguyen, Messe and Stollak (1999) stated results that are in contrast with Hall’s findings (1995). In their research, they found that Vietnamese people, living in the United States, did not have the desire to assimilate into the dominating culture, although they experienced racism and discrimination on a daily base. The main reason was that they wanted to keep their own identity and culture alive, despite of the considerable psychological distress, they experienced. This may show that although there is a correlation found in Hall’s study, it does not imply a causal relationship between the need to assimilate and the use of skin whitening products.

In conclusion, there are different explanations for the increase in the use of skin whitening products. The studies above illustrate motivational reasons for pursuing skin whitening. However, this thesis wants to investigate other factors that may play an important part in the attitude towards skin whitening, which are media, self-esteem, parents and peer-pressure. In the following part of thesis, these factors will be discussed and examined in an in-depth analysis.

## 2.3 Factors stimulating skin whitening

**H1: Media**

An important possible factor in explaining why women use skin whitening products are the media. Media such as television, magazines, radio and social media play an important role in our society and have a profound effect on how women view their physical appearance. Barak and Fisher (1997) found in their research about how women really feel about themselves after being exposed to the media that (1) they are extremely sensitive to what the media projects, (2) that this exposure has a significant effect on how they view and feel about themselves, (3) that there was an impact on other aspects of their lives such as sexual awareness and how they interact with their environment. Past research focused more on the unhealthy and unrealistic representation of beauty in the media (Hawkins, Richards, Granly & Stein, 2004). Women are daily confronted with these misconceptions which affect especially young women and this may result in psychological disorders, such as depression (Holmstroms, 2004). How can we understand these results? Glenn (2009) stated that the media representation is based on the ideologies of the colonization. Those ideologies still live through the representations in the media. Being fair skinned has been celebrated in magazines, television commercials, billboards, movies and in music videos, while dark skinned women are portrayed as unattractive and unwanted. To illustrate an example, a study has been conducted regarding the media representation in Jamaica. The findings in this study were that African-Jamaican women are daily exposed to advertisements of Western beauty. The major conclusion of this study was that these women will continuously feel the need to bleach their skin (Brown-Glaude, 2007). Also, Hunter (2011) found similar results and believed that the constant media representation of these Western ideologies through various advertisements is aimed at the African-Jamaican women. A study by Lewis et al. that also dates from 2011 stated that racial hierarchies are reinforced by the media, meaning that having a lighter skin tone is being presented in a more classy manner over the dark skin. For instance, one of the largest social media sites, Facebook, launched an application that was sponsored by Vaseline, a famous cosmetic beauty line. The application allowed Facebook users to lighten their skin on their profile pictures. The reason behind the application is to promote their new product “Healthy White: Skin lightening Lotion” (Lewis et al., 2011).

Lastly, another interesting link has been found between dark skinned people and crime. This study concluded that people with dark skin are halfheartedly accused in participating in crimes (Hall, 1995). Long (2009) also agrees with him and states that the Western Media represents dark-skinned women in a very unflattering way. Dark skinned people are giving roles that are associated with violence, criminalities and prostitution (Long, 2009).

**H2: Self-concept**

Self-concept refers to the perception of how someone thinks about and views himself. Baumeister (1999) states the definition of self-concept as: “The individual’s belief about himself or herself, including the person’s attributes and who and what the self is.” (p. 13) Rogers (1959) believes that there are three different parts of this self-concept, which are self-image, self-esteem and ideal self. Self-image stands for how one sees himself or herself. Self-esteem indicates the value that someone have on themselves, while ideal self implies on how an individual wishes to be like. Bartlett, Smith & Bonds-Raacke (2005) describe the idea of having a negative self-image as having a significant impact on self-confidence.

A citation from Taylor (1974) on self-esteem:

“By self-esteem we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself; it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy.”  (p.56)

There are limited studies about the correlation between self-esteem and skin complexion. Charles (2003) is of one the few researchers who attempts to find an association between skin whitening and low self-esteem. It is important to mention that in this research, the participants included not only women, but also men. Charles (2003) used the ‘Rosenberg Self-esteem scale’ to measure the self-esteem and dived the group in two. The two groups were a bleaching group and a non-bleaching group. The results revealed that the bleaching group had a lower self-esteem than the non-bleaching group.

**H3: Parents**

It is the responsibility of the parents to provide a stable and a safe environment for their child and to participate in the happiness of their child. The parent-child relationship is the most important relationship (Ultee et al.,1996) and is characterized by reciprocal love and sincerity (Pollak, 1985). According to Gray (1999), parents play an important role in teaching values and standards. However, parents are not the only source for children, but also the broader environment in which they live (Bronfenbrenner,1996). Yet he emphasizes that the opinion parents have about dark skin, can have a huge impact on the child. Research shows that children are exposed to stereotypes and convictions at a very young age (Afrifi, 2012). This explains why women continuously use skin whitening products on themselves and are encouraging their children to lighten their skin. Mothers are telling their daughters that they are too dark and should whiten their skin, because they have been conditioned that light skin is the right skin. For centuries they have been participating in this unhealthy and very dangerous cycle. In the Daily Gleaner Journal (1999) was states that the majority that uses skin whitening products are women between the ages of 20 to 30. However, Ritch (1999) found that there are 10 year-old children who take skin whitening pills in order to lighten their skin, and that parents not only influence their children to whiten their skin, but also force them to do so in some occasions.

**H4: Peer pressure and conformity**

Peer pressure and conformity has been said to be one of the main factors that women of color whiten their skin (Charles, 2009). Santor, Messervey and Kusumakar (2002) define peer pressure as an indirect or direct encouragement from ones own age group to engage in activities that they may or may not want to engage in. They further discuss how peer pressure indicates risk-taking behavior, meaning that peers introduce risky activity to other peers (Kinard, 2010). Kinard and Webster (2010) found in their study that adults within the peer group do not reflect on the negative consequences of their risky activity. Social identity theory explains this phenomenon by the concept of need: adults tend to want to feel accepted by their peers and the environment; they want to belong. According to Updegraff et al. (2001), teenagers spend more than half of their time in high school by the company of their peers, which concludes that peer pressure can significantly influence the activities of a young adult. In a study on peer pressure, Borsari and Carey (2001) found that college freshmen students who do not drink easily give into peer pressure in order to become a part of the popular group. Charles (2003) believes that in Jamaica peer pressure is the main factor in why women whiten their skin. He further explains that women, especially teenagers, long to be a part of the society and are still searching for their own identity.

# Part II: Analysis

# **1. Reasoned Action Approach**

Figure 1: Reasoned Action Approach (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010)

As stated, the aim of this thesis is to determine which are the main factors that cause women of color to use skin whitening products. In order to explain what the intentions and these factors are, the reason action approach model designed by Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) will be conducted in this research. The reasoned action approach is their most recent work and attempts to explain how behavior is determined by the intention. The reasoned action theory by Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) could possibly explain the intention towards skin whitening. They defined intention as the willingness of people to behave in a certain way (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010, p.21). Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) explained that the greater the intention is, the more likely that the intended behavior, in this case applying skin whitening products, will be performed (Lechner et al., 2012). In this research, the willingness could be that women of color whiten their skin by one the hypothesized factors.

According to Fishbein and Ajzen (2010), the intention is influenced by three crucial factors: the attitude towards the behavior, the perceived norm and perceived behavioral control. These factors described above are further influenced by the actual background factors. These factors will be discussed below.

## 2.2.1 Attitude

Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) define attitude as “a latent disposition or tendency to respond with some degree of favorableness or unfavourableness to psychological object” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010, p.76). Ajzen (2012) states that the attitude of an individual is one of the most important significant and important factors in social psychology. If individuals start to believe that the results of engaging in a specific behavior result in positive outcome, they will adapt a positive attitude towards that behavior. For example, as long as women of color continue to get lighter and not experience any severe health risk, they will still continue with this behavior.

## 2.2.2 Perceived norm

While the attitude can be seen as a personal norm, for perceived norm this is not the case. An individual believes that she/he should act the way other people, for example family or friend, perceive them. Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) categorized these people as “relevant others” and described this norm as the social pressure that people experience to behave or not to behave in a certain way (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010, p.130). According to this definition, the social pressure is divided in two parts. The first part is called the “subjective norm”, which stands for what other people think one should do or think (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In line with this research, women of color are conditioned to believe that they have to whiten their skin, because society believes that being fair is beautiful (Glenn, 2009). The second part is “perceived descriptive norm”. Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) explain for this norm that social pressure is shaped by how other people behave (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). An example is provided regarding the subject of this research. A woman that is surrounded by people who engage in skin whitening, will also feel pressured to start using these products.

## 2.2.3 Perceived behavioral control

## Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) define “perceived behavioral control” as “the extent to which people believe that they control over its performance” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010, p.154), meaning that individuals are also influenced by the expected ability to do something. This factor can be divided in categories, which are internal behavioral control and external behavioral control (De Boer, 2011). In this research, the cultural views of the participants will be important as every culture has its own perception of beauty. Culture can be defined as an ‘external behavioral’, as women of color are constantly surrounded by the influence of their culture. Note that culture can also be a background factor, which will be discussed next.

## 2.2.4 Background factors

These above-mentioned determinants are furthermore influenced by the background variables (Lechner et., 2012). These background factors can be media exposure, personal characteristics and culture. The background factors consist of three categories, which are individual, social and information factors. Firstly, the individual factors contain the intelligence, mood, emotion, personality and past behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010, p.224). Secondly, the social category includes factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, income and culture. And thirdly, the information group contain aspects such as intervention, media and knowledge. As stated, the background factors will influence people’s beliefs. In this thesis research, media and self-concept will be stated as background factors.

# **2**. **Methodology**

## 2.1 Type of research

In this thesis, the aim is to find a deeper understanding for the skin whitening phenomenon and determine which are the main factors that cause women of color to use skin whitening products. To achieve the most relevant and correct results, we have selected an exploratory qualitative research study as the most suitable design, since qualitative research puts focus on the participant’s thoughts and perceptions towards a particular matter.

## 2.2 Participants

Since skin whitening is defined as the use of whitening products that lighten the skin, participants for this research had to meet up with certain requirements. These requirements were: (1) currently using or having used skin whitening products, (2) identify themselves as women of color, (3) be able to communicate in English, (4) between the ages of 18 and 60. The participants who met up with the requirements were recruited for the research.

Tabel 1: *participants*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participants  | Age  | Nationality  | Occupation  |
| Participant 1  | 19 | Nigerian  | Student |
| Participant 2 | 19 | Somali  | Student |
| Participant 3  | 21 | Senegalese | Student |
| Participant 4  | 22 | Sudanese  | Student |
| Participant 5 | 18 | Ghanaian | Student |
| Participant 6 | 22 | Pakistani  | Student |
| Participant 7  | 20 | Indian | Student |
| Participant 8 | 46 | Indian | Public-speaker |
| Participant 9 | 20 | Nigerian  | Student  |
| Participant 10 | 21 | Somali | Student  |
| Participant 11 | 23 | Philippine  | Student |
| Participant 12  | 20 | African-American | Student |
| Participant 13 | 22 | Bengali  | Student  |

In this thesis, we opted for selecting respondents worldwide, since the Belgian community of women of color is not that large. Women were approached via social media (cf. Appendix 1). From the 60 women approached, only a small amount was willing to participate in this study. A possible explanation for this low response rate is that the the subject of skin whitening is considered as a taboo, so women were not open to the idea to be interviewed. Eventually, 13 female participants of different nationalities were recruited. Eight of the participants were from African descent[[2]](#footnote-2) and five women from South-Asian decent[[3]](#footnote-3). The age of the participants lies between 18 and 46 years. Among some participants, there were a hesitation in participating in this research. The users of skin whitening products often experience judgment and shame from others. The majority of the participants felt uncomfortable to video call on Skype. In order to increase a pleasant cooperation between the interviewer and the interviewee, the researcher suggested to audio call instead. During the interview, the participants were also encouraged to talk liberally without any fear of judgment. In the end, the research obtained a very non-judgmental attitude and assured the participants’ safety and anonymity. They also were given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the research and were debriefed at the end of the interview.

## 2.3 Materials

The materials that were used for this study were a laptop, smartphone and a tablet. The interviews were carried via Skype at the participant’s home. All the interviews were audio recorded with the recording program QuickTime Player. As a back- up, a tablet and smartphone were also used to record the audio, since Baarda (2009) stated that recording the interviews is a way to capture the important data in the research and to ensure reliability and validity.

## 2.4 Procedure

### 2.4.1 Informing the participants

The participants were recruited via the social media networks Tumblr, Twitter and Instagram. Some of the participants were also recruited via a snowball sampling method. This sampling technique allowed the researcher to locate participants through the other interviewees. It was a crucial technique that provided more participants for this study. Further, an informative letter (cf. Appendix 1) was sent to the participants, explaining who is qualified for this research and what the study aims for. After selecting the participants, an informed consent (cf. Appendix 2) and drop-off (cf. Appendix 3) was sent and was filled in by the participants before the start of the interview. The received informed consent contained an explanation of the research. The participants were also assured that their interview would be kept confidential. Finally, the drop-off form consisted of basic required information (cf. Appendix 3).

### 2.4.2 Data collection

The stated aim of this research was to determine which are the main factors that cause women of color to use skin whitening products. In order to accomplish this, participants were first screened to confirm they were convenient for this study. Afterwards, an open-structured interview was used to conduct the data. The most effective method in finding qualitative data is through interviewing, because interviews allow to access to the participants’ personal concepts, opinions and perceptions, which guarantees informative data (Baarda, 2009). Therefore, interviews were identified as the most appropriate method for the study. Online open-structured interviews were conducted in this study with individuals who engaged in the practice of skin whitening.

The questions of the interview (cf. Appendix 4) were designed to gain more information about and depth in the motives for engaging in skin whitening. All the interviews were conducted in English to guarantee that all participants were asked the same questions. It was also more appropriate to carry the interviews in English, because of the lack of finding some Belgian participants who were willing to cooperate with this research. The interview consisted of 24 questions and began with an introduction of the light vs. dark skinned controversy, followed by the questioning of what the participants considered as a beauty ideal. The next questions were designed to investigate the main factors of engaging in skin whitening products, the experiences and the results of skin whitening and the health-risks of it. At the end of the interview, six statements regarding the topic of skin whitening were asked the participants. The statements were designed to gain more information on what the participants currently think of the skin whitening topic. After the given statements, the participants were compelled to choose an answer between a) strongly agree, b) agree, c) I don’t know, d) disagree, e) strongly disagree. The length of interviews varied from 20 to 35 minutes.

### 2.4.3 Data-analysis

The largest part of the received data from the interviews was audio recorded. Two participants refused to take an interview via Skype due to fear and shame. Luckily, these participants were willing to answer the questions through email. The other 11 interviews were recorded with Quick Time Player through Skype. Each interview was transcribed, coded and labeled according to the grounded theory approach. The grounded theory approach is a form of qualitative research that allows to study people’s experiences or process and generates a theory from the collected data and was developed by Strauss and Glaser (1967). However, Strauss worked later on with Corbin and came up with a new improved definition of the theory defined as:

“A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other”. (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p.418).

In order to label the data, certain steps should be taken to process the data (Baarda, 2009). First and foremost, the interviews were transcribed with the help of the recorded audio. Note that the researcher read the interviews multiple times to comprehend and avoid misinterpretations. In order to make it efficient to analyze the data, all irrelevant information was scratched off and the relevant parts of the interview were divided in fragments. Each fragment was coded. For instance, the code 3.5 stands for the fifth statement stated of the third participant. Secondly, each fragment was labeled and ordered into categories (cf. Appendix 5). Lastly, the research reflects on the labels and manifests to integrate the data into head categories (cf. Appendix 6).

## 2.5 Reliability and validity

To increase the reliability and the validity of this study, the participants were asked to read their own interview transcriptions and conform if the written information was accurate. Also, Baarda (2009) stated that a researcher can be distracted by certain expectations and it is important that the study has been read by an expert who was not included in this research.

# **3. Results**

This chapter presents the results from the interviews. The main research question was ‘*What are the main factors of the usage of skin whitening products according to women of color’.*

The aim of the study was to explore the main factors that cause women of color to whiten their skin. In accordance with the aim, specific questions were asked (cf. Appendix 4). The data was analyzed according to the Grounded Theory Approach and the analysis resulted in the the identification of numerous added themes. The themes that were emerged from the data collection are presented as followed: (1) main factors, (2) age of started and stopped using skin whitening products, (3) frequency of use, (4) products, (5) expected and actual results, (6) side-effects, (7) motives for discontinuing with skin whitening, (8) skin whitening users in the environment, (9) awareness of the health-risks.

Next, the following questions regarding the controversy about light vs dark skin movement were asked. All of the participants (*N*= 13) were familiar with the theme and the controversy. One participant noted:

*“It kind of make me sad but also kind of angry just because its so deep-rooted within our culture that being lighter is better. It makes me sad that today we still think that way and getting remarks from family members or either other people of color that would make these remarks ‘you look better lighter or don’t stay too long in the sun’. All these comments like that upsets me, because even though I understand why it happened that people think like that my anger is towards the fact it happened in the first place.” (participant 11, 23 year-old)*

Another participant stated that: “because *of the history and slavery people are learned that being lighter is better and prettier*”. (*participant 3, 21 year-old)*

The main factors consist of 5 segments: media, peer pressure, parents, self-esteem and facial imperfections.

**Factors for engaging in skin whitening**

Table 2: *Main factors*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Code** | **Amount of women**  | **Coding references**  |
| Peer pressure  | 6 |  |
| * Friendships
* Community/ Society
* Bullying
* Boys
 | 4332 | 5432 |
| Media  | 4 |  |
| * Lighter
* Too ugly
* Beautiful
* Too dark
* Attracitive
 | 10563 | 168395 |
| Parents  | 4 |  |
| * Parents
* Mother
* Guilt
* Bad
 | 2411 | 3411 |
| Self-esteem  | 4 |  |
| * Low self-esteem
* Confidence
* Lighter
* Too ugly
 | 14868 | 68168 |
| Facial imperfections  | 3 |  |
| * Acne
* Sun spots
* Skin discoloration
* Patches
 | 1211 | 2221 |

Peer pressure

The participants listed several reasons for engaging in the practice of skin whitening. Most of the participants (*N*= 6) engaged in this practice due to peer pressure. The most talk category within peer pressure is friendship (5 coding references), followed by pressure from community (4 coding references), bullying (3) and boys (2). One participant cited:

*“my best friend came back from vacation and she was suddenly lighter. She mentioned that she started using skin bleaching products. In my eyes she became more beautiful and I thought yeah I want that too.” (participant 2, 19-year old)*

Another participant said she was surrounded by lighter skinned girls and she felt pressure to lighten her skin. Everyone around her was associating fair skin with being beautiful.

3 other participants shared during the interview that being bullied was a factor for engaging into skin whitening. One participant quoted her experience as:

*“umm well I was bullied. I really have never noticed my skin color like… I knew it was black. I knew it was dark skin. But it wasn’t nothing really like that affected me. I just kinda live my life as it is. Basically like guys who are African who were dark skinned, same skin tone as me or darker, they would always make fun of me. And then that made it worse. I don’t know that triggered me for some reason, because before I was like never (pauses) …it was just like ok yeah I’m dark skinned. But with them it was like…(pauses) it really got to me.” (participant 3, 21-year old)*

The participant also mentioned that before the bulling she was satisfied with her skin color and had not any desire to get lighter. But after getting bullied, she developed obsessive thought to get lighter. She believed that getting lighter would make her feel more attractive and make the bulling stop.

“Boys” were for 2 participants a motive to whiten their skin. One participant stated that her best friends were lighter than her and were approached by boys. She felt pressure by her peers and also wanted to have attention from boys. She noted that after she whitened her skinned, she starting getting attention from boys and were asking to get her number. It made her feel more confident and happier.

Media

Media is among the main factors that cause women of color to whiten their skin. The participants (*N*=4) noted that media (5 coding references) was a crucial factor towards the behavior in engaging in skin whitening products. They also indicated that being lighter (16 coding references) was better and more beautiful. A participant voiced her opinion on how the media had a huge impact on her skin color. She expressed:

“*I thought that lighter skin black women were prettier than dark skin black women. All the models, singers and actresses were of lighter skin tone and I wanted to look like them.” (participant 12, 20 year-old)*

And participant added: “*But um yeah and you know that whole Beyoncé is light and the best. And that made me also want to be a bit light skinned as well.” (participant 1, 19 year-old)*

Finally, another participant noted quite clearly that it is the medias fault for portraying dark skinned women as ugly and brainwashing daily young girls.

Parents

Several participants (*N*= 4) admitted that their parents (3 coding references) forced them into the activities of skin whitening. 3 of the participants cited that the mother (4 coding references) was the main reason for engaging in the practice of skin whitening and also liking the idea that lighter is better.

A participant from a Pakistani background stated: “*I used to use it until the age of 14 because my mum used to use the product ‘Fair and Lovely’. I thought that it was a moisturizing cream that was available and…umm mum said its good for your skin… makes it lighter. When I kind of realized I don’t need it because what does is matter how light or dark my skin is, I also got the awareness that I can buy products on my own and I stopped”. (participant 6, 22 year-old)*

The participant above was not aware at the moment that she was whitening her skin. In the interview she revealed that her mom has been using “Fair and Lovely” ever since she was a little girl. Her mom contemplates that having a lighter skin equals to beauty. For the participant herself, she had no desire whatsoever to be light and was more concern with her pimples instead of the color of her skin. She further explained that her mom was still remarking her after she decided to stop.

The mother of another participant with a Philippine background mentioned how her mom criticized her from a very young age and forced her into the usage of skin whitening. The participant cited: “*my mom I guess made me use skin whitening lotion…soaps when I used to be darker so it was kind off I did use it. But it wasn’t necessary out of want or choice but because I was pressured to.”* *(participant 11, 23 year-old)*

She also stated that she felt like she couldn’t do anything because its her mom and was aware of the health problems. She further quoted: “*my mom was just so pressuring I couldn’t say no to her and also part of me wanted her…approval and that’s way I was ok with using it.” (participant 11, 23 year-old)*

Furthermore, this same participant shared that her mom made comments such as “*you look better with lighter skin”, “don’t stay too long in the sun you will get darker”* and *“you look ugly with your dark skin”.*

The following participant reminisced about her first experience with skin whitening products. She cited: “*Basically, one time we went to a party and I didn’t know what a skin whitening product was and she told me to put this on my face and it smelled really weird strong chemicals. Put this on your face and arms, I will make you lighter and prettier I didn’t want to put it but then she would make me feel bad about and I put it on to not make her upset. It was like tingling it was stinging my face and afterwards I was like oh my god what did I put on my face. After I took it off my face looked like patchy, it is weird.” (participant 7, 20 year-old)*

The participant above also shared: “*I didn’t know that there were skin whitening products until my mum made me use it. The way it felt after using it, I didn’t want to use it ever again.” (Participant 7, 20 year-old).* She experienced negative feelings as guilt (1 coding reference) and bad (1 coding reference) feeling.

Self-esteem

A third theme that emerged during the interview was centered on self-esteem. 4 of the 13 participants suffered from low self-esteem (6 coding references) that pursued them to use these products. One participant shared the following quote on having a self-esteem issues:

*“I felt really low and like I’m really ugly. Like I wouldn’t even look in the mirror for like 2 and half year. I wouldn’t never want to…like it was yeah I wouldn’t look in the mirror for 2 and half year. Like I didn’t know what I looked like until I was like… (silence) it was also like self-confidence. The skin color issue was covered with self-confidence… self-esteem it was all combined together. (participant 3, 21 year-old)*

Another participant cited: ‘*my self-esteem and low confidence affected me so much. I had thoughts of using skin whitening products from when I was 8 years old. The thought of wanting to be lighter hunted me for awhile. I remember when I went to my mom’s room and used her bleaching crèmes. (participant 9, 20 year-old)*

One particular participant who was forced by her own mother to engage in skin whitening clearly stated that even though she had no desire to take any precautions to whiten her skin, she clearly noted that she suffered from low self-esteem and self-hate.

*“Before…when I was younger I had really serious self-esteem issues. I didn’t really like my skin, I didn’t like my face, I didn’t like how I look at all. I had very low self-esteem. (participant 7, 20 year-old)*

It was noteworthy how much these female participants experienced low self-esteem. These participants further noted they experienced more confidence (6 coding references), beautiful (3 coding references) and lighter (16 coding references). One participant shared that she excited to getting lighter. She cited: “

*“uum I just got light so I was like yes I’m getting lighter finally. So that was the main one”.*

After applying these skin whitening products, the majority of the participants (*N*=11) saw results within 2 weeks. They noticed difference and mentioned that they effectively got lighter (16 coding references). Also the data collection revealed that the participants (*N*=12) viewed themselves before engaging in skin whitening as too dark (9 coding references) and ugly (8 coding references). Noted that not only the participant perceived themselves as too dark, but also their environment. 2 participants shared that people repetitively referred them as “too dark” and too ugly” and believed this. One participant projected her skin color as dirty (1 code reference). *“Before using the skin products. Ooh. I mean based on what people sad, I was too dark skin. And yeah, I was too dark skin. It wasn’t acceptable then I guess.” (participant 4, 18 year-old).*

The other participant explained on how her mother persistently used to call her ugly and made her feel bad for choosing not to use these skin whitening products.

*“She treated me differently and would guilt trip me by saying you look very ugly without it and boys wont be looking at you, I used to feel really really bad about myself after she said that en started to even feel guilty and terrible, why is she saying all those things, she even used words like you need to look fresh and clean, those words she associates it with lighter skin (participant 3, 21 year-old).*

A second participant also mentioned: “*I wanted people to see I looked lighter and got more confident. You know? Yeah (laughs)” (participant 1, 19 year-old)*

There was one participant who stated that she felt respected (3 coding references) and important (2 coding references) by her environment. Her confidence grew significantly and she perceived herself as attractive (5 coding references). Not to mention, while using the skin whitening products she experienced happiness. In line with the third participant, she stated that it was one of the first times she taught pretty (4 coding references) of herself.

*“Participant: Yes I became a shade lighter! I think the reason why, because when I was younger I was more fair skinned! But then as I grew older, living in Canada in the son, I was an outdoor kid always in the sun! my skin got darker and “so in my head I was saying I’m inverting my skin back to the shape that I was originally born with”! So when I would see pictures from when I was younger at the age of 17 I was the same shade, it gives me satisfaction it made me happy!*

*Interviewer: It made you happy! You felt happiness afterwards!?*

*Participant: I did because... I viewed myself as more beautiful now! I knew I was beautiful, but now that my skin is a bit lighter I look even better! And the compliments that I would get “ooh my gosh you skin look so nice”, “what are you using” ... Just taking care of my skin, taking care of my skin!”*

Facial imperfections

Lastly, another fascinating factor that emerged was that the participants (*N*=3) stated using skin whitening products as cosmetic reasoning. The facial imperfections contain of 3 categories which are coded in: acne (2 coding references), sun spots (2 coding references), skin discoloration (2 coding references) and patches (1 coding references).

As mentioned before, the researcher had the opportunity to interview one of the participant’s mother. The mother claimed that she used skin whitening products only for cosmetic purposes. According to this participant, these skin whitening products were used for her acne and wrinkles.

*“When growing up I had a lot of acne and I always picked on it, even though they told me not to. By doing that I ended up having a lot of scars and marks on my face. I’m considered executive in health care management; Holding that type of position I’m supposed to always look some type of way. For that reason, when growing up I started to notice that my scars where getting noticeable so I began to use the products just for occasions, just when I had to give that kind of image. I don’t use it on daily basis. So one of the reason is because of my acne and the other one is because of my job and the third reason is that I’m getting older now, so your skin start to show signs of aging, new marks start to show up on your face. But like I said I would only use the product on big occasions. The last time I used it, was at my brother’s wedding and an other time was when we had a big dinner for thanksgiving. I knew there would be a lot of us and I wanted my skin to look nice. I don’t want acne scars and aging points being visible on the pictures. That’s kind the reason, S. knows that I don’t use it all the time.” (participant 8, 46 year-old)*

Also another participant shared her experiences and confessed during the interview that her only motives to whiten her skin was for the skin discoloration and patches on her face. As a result, her skin got lighter and viewed herself as more beautiful (2 coding references).

She cited: *So now…I wasn’t lightning my skin. In the beginning I was just lending it to fix, I had some discoloration here and there. My mom who doesn’t like her skin a little bit she was like “ok! Use this just to help whole entire body back to the same shape! But as I progressed and you know my skin did get clear up and my skin got better! And I noticed being lighter skin, and I fell in to the trap of being lighter skin is better! (Participant 4, 22 year-old)*

While the final participant who also engaged in skin whitening products due to facial imperfections such as sun spots (2 coding references), she used these products only for that purpose and was a proponent of not altering her skin color.

The rest of the themes that have been emerged will be discussed.

Table 3: *head categories*

|  |
| --- |
| **Head categories: themes** |
| * Main factors
* Age of started and stopped usage of skin whitening
* Skin whitening products
* Side-effects
* Frequence of use
* Motives for discontuing skin whitening
* Expected and actual results
* Skin whitening users in environment
* Awarness of health-risk
 |

**Age of started and stopped usage of skin whitening**

Most of the participants (*N*= 12) started using skin whitening products from a very young age. It is striking that the majority of these women continued practicing skin whitening for a very long time (see table above). Participant 11 was whitening her skin for 7 years. At the in the end of the interview, the researcher asked participant 11 of she is aware that skin whitening products can cause health problem. She quoted:

*Oh yeah, and I told my mom about it! Yeah, I mean I know it was bad and also I used it because I had nothing to say about it. My mom’s logic was that if everybody was using it, I should also use it! If tanning is fine so would this skin bleaching product! (Participant 11, 23 year-old).*

It it remarkable that even though she was aware of the side effects, she continued applying skin whitening products until the age of 17. Two participants shared that their length of using was short. One of them used skin whitening products one and the other participant only for 2 days. Participant 8 confessed she is still using these products.

Table 4: *age of started and stopped usage skin whitening*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participants  | Age use started  | Age use stopped  | Length of use  |
| Participants 1 | 14 | 15 | 1 year  |
| Participants 2 | 13 | 13 | 4 months  |
| Participants 3 | 15 | 17 | 2 years  |
| Participants 4 | 17 | 20 | 3 years  |
| Participants 5 | 9 | 15 | 6 years  |
| Participants 6 | 12 | 14 | 2 years  |
| Participants 7 | 12 | 12 | 1 time |
| Participants 8 | 22 | / | 24 years (still using)  |
| Participants 9 | 8 | 8 | 2 days  |
| Participants 10 | 15 | 18 | 3 years  |
| Participants 11 | 14 | 21 | 7 years  |
| Participants 12  | 12 | 13 | 1 year  |
| Participants 13  | 4 | 10 | 6 years  |

**Skin whitening products**

In the first chapter, “Fair and Lovely” has been mentioned as one of the most used and famous skin whitening products among skin whiteners. However, in this research the majority of the participants (N=6) used the product ‘Caro white’ (9 coding references)*.* The other 2 used the *“Jolen’* (2 coding references)and one participant used a skin whiteningsoap (1 coding reference). The rest of the participants don’t recall the name of the used product. In this study, two of the participants revealed that the mix different skin whitening products together. According to them, they believed that this will increase their lightening process. An interesting fact that was stated by other two participants was that the whitening products smelled horrible. One of the participant shared:

*“It was called caro white and umm yeah and it smelled really bad also, which it was terrible. But um literally I just put it on my face and that’s it”. (participant 1, 19 year-old)*

**Side-effects**

It is concluded from the data collection that 6 out of the 7 participants experienced side-effects. Two participants noticed that their skin became dry (2 coding references), followed by other two who developed rashes (2 coding references) and patches (2 coding references) all over the face. Another participant shared that her skin became inflamed. Its was very sensitive and hot (1 coding references). She cited: *“after using after couples of months I saw that my skin was getting very sensitive and my skin became really hot or my skin was becoming really patchy.” (Participant 1, 19 year-old)*

One participant also revealed that after two weeks of using the whitening crèmes her skin started to peel off (2 coding references).

*“1 problem was there was my skin started, you know between my eyebrows, peeling off”*

*(Participant 2, 19 year-old)*

Lastly, the final participant noted that she experienced acne (2 coding references) and sweating (1 coding reference).

*“Ooh yeah, I used to sweat a lot on my face.” (Participant 5, 18 year-old)*

**Frequency of use**

The majority of the participants (N=10) used the products consistently ranging from once a day (6 coding references) to twice a day (4 coding references). It is worthy to mention that some of these long-term users stared using skin whitening products from an early age. One participant started whitening her skin when she was only 4-year-old.

*“I used to use them as a child… probably since the age 4 to age 10. So that’s around 6 years. I used Fair and Lovely face cream, which is advertised to lighten the skin”. (Participant 13, 22 year-old)*

4 of the participants used the products twice a day each morning and each evening. The remaining participants (*N*=3) noted that they have been using the products inconsistently. One participant mention that she only used every 3 weeks (1 code references). The other admitted that after the first time applying they had no more desire to continue. However, they stated during the interview that a woman is considered attractive if she is lighter. The following participant stated that she has been taught when she was young that fair skin was perceived as the best skin.

*“I don’t know. I was so small. I’m sure I didn’t hate myself or my skin tone, but I was aware that light skin was considered the best skin tone.” (participant 3, 21 year-old)*

**Motives for discontinuing with skin whitening**

The data revealed that 12 participants stopped using skin whitening products and 1 is still using it. Among the 12 participants, 4 participants discontinued due experiencing side-effects, 3 other participants shared that the reason they stopped using the products was because of their parents. One participants also mentioned that her parents sent her to therapy because of it.

*“umm…my parents like flipped out. And even took me to counseling to stop using it. Like we would like to talk about the side-effects. They were trying to tell me I am beautiful and I should stop using it…umm so I stopped using it.” (Participant 3, 21 year-old)*

Another participant shared her experience on how her parents found out. They were shocked and concerned for their daughter’s health. The parents enlightened her about the the side-effects. She cited:

*“They found out because I was hiding them in the cupboard in the toilet. And then I forgot to put it back in there. And then my cousin saw it and she knew it was bleaching crèmes she showed my mom and that’s how the find out. they were kinda like it is better if you don’t use it because of the side-effects may have… you may develop skin cancer. They were afraid for me...yeah…but then yeah.” (Participant 2, 19 year-old)*

The 3 other participants responded with self-love and acceptance after asked ‘what made you stopped using these products’. They accepted themselves and were happy with who they are. Faith was one reason for a participant to stop. The remaining 2 stopped because they were getting too light.

**Expected and actual results of skin whitening**

During the interview, the researcher explored the expectations of the participants who engaged in the practice of skin whiting. The majority participants (*N*=10) expected to become lighter (16 coding references). Two participants shared an expectation of getting rid of acne and spots. The other participant expressed that she wanted the disappearance of the discoloration on her face. Also, one participant mentioned that she expected to gain more attention from boys. Another participant also repeated that often that she was hoping to get a better treatment from people.

**Skin whitening users in the environment**

Most of the participant are surrounded by someone who currently uses skin whitening products. Five participants admitted during the interview that their mothers (3 coding references) are engaged in the practice of skin whitening. Four participants shared that several aunties (3 coding references) whiten their skin. Two participants mentioned that their older sisters (3 coding references) use skin whitening and the final participant noted that her best friend (4 coding references) uses these products. One participant shared the first memory of seeing her older sister using the whitening crèmes. She cited: *“Well… the first time I think when I saw my sister using it I was pretty young. I think I was like 11, 10 or something like that. And she had the same side-effects and used it on her legs and her skin was peeling-off and it looked like …for me it was so bizarre and weird at* the time. But now …now that I have used it I just…I still find it very weird to do it, knowingly its going to harm *you and still doing it” (Participant 2, 19 year-old).*

**Awareness of the health-risks.**

Lastly, the final theme that emerged was regarding the health awareness. 7 participants were aware of the health-risks of skin whitening, which was an unexpected result. 2 participants admitted that even though they were aware of the dangers in practicing of skin whitening, they continued with the products. One participant opened about her aunty. She expressed her feelings and vented to researcher on how her aunty died because of the consequences of skin whitening. She further cited a powerful statement: *“people care more about beauty than health” (Participant 10, 21 year-old)*

The other remaining participants (*N*= 6) were unconscious about the health-risk at the time of using these products.

#

# **4. Discussion**

The results of this thesis have been discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter focuses on the overall conclusion of this paper. The conclusion of this research will be discussed, followed by the limitations of this research. To end this chapter, the future recommendations and implications for a professional practice will be explored.

## 4.1 Conclusion of the research

The main research question was ‘*What are the main factors of the usage of skin whitening products according to women of color’.* Qualitative interviews (cf. Appendix 4) were conducted with 13 participants. The participants were females and were between the ages of 18 and 46 years.

***Peer pressure***

Kinard (2010) examined how peer pressure can indicate risk-taking behavior. In line with this research, the participants were indeed engaged in risky activity. Most of the participants did not consider the possibility of the negative consequences of skin whitening and want to be accepted by their peers. Discontinued use of skin-whitening products were reported due to side-effects. Daily Gleaner (1999) found in his study that the majority of the skin whitening users are women between the ages of 20 and 30, which is in fact in line with this study. 12 of out of the 13 were young adults, who are still searching for their identity. According to Charles (2003) peer pressure is the main factor that influences the usage of skin whitening products by women.

***Media***

As expected, the findings showed that the media was one of the main factors that influenced the usage of skin whitening, according to the women of color.. The participants expressed their feelings on how they feel the need to whiten their skin because of the media. The participants stated that dark skinned women are presented negatively in the media, whilst lighter skinned women are deemed beautiful. These findings are similar to Brown-Glaude (2007). He concluded in his study that the media advertises Western beauty and had major influence on African-Jamaican women.

***Parents***

The mothers of 4 participants encouraged and forced their children to use skin whitening products, who also were engaged in this practice. These findings are consistent with Afrifi’s (2012). The participants stated that their mothers perceive being dark as ugly and poor. Afrifi (2012) stated that the reason as to why mothers encourage their daughters to use skin whitening is because the mothers themselves have been taught to use it as well.

***Self-esteem***

From this study, the results confirmed that indeed self-esteem was correlated with the usage of skin whitening. The participants shared their stories on how low self-esteem was a crucial factor into using skin whitening products. Most of the participants believed that their low self-esteem was because of their skin color. The participants experienced more confidence as their skin got lighter. These findings are similar to Charles (2003). In his research, he concluded that the participants who were whitening their skin had a lower self-esteem than the other group, who were not practicing skin whitening.

***Facial imperfection***

The final factor came up as an unexpected result. There were 3 participants that claimed to using skin whitening products to eliminate acne, sun spots, patches and skin discolorations. This motive had been discovered by Charles (2009), whereas he conducted a study with 58 young adults. In his research, he revealed three main intentions behind using the skin whitening, which are (1) to become beautiful, (2) to be lighter and (3) to remove facial imperfections. The last intention also emerged as one of the main factors within this thesis.

***Skin whitening users in the environment***

The majority of the participants were surrounded by someone they knew that is currently engaged in the practice of skin whitening. These discoveries are correlated with the theory of Fishbein and Ajzen (2010). They suggested that social pressure is shaped by how someone else is behaving in an environment (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). These participants felt pressured by their environment, which resulted in the usage of these products.

***Skin whitening products***

Karanani (2007) stated that “Fair & Lovely” is the most popular and skin whitening products. However, in this thesis the findings showed that “Caro White” is the most used products among the participants. Only one participant of the thirteen was using “Fair & Lovely.

***Side-effects and awareness***

Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) stated that an individual will continue with a behavior as long it results in a positive outcome. Most of the participants continued using skin whitening products until they experienced side-effects. Also, the majority of the participants were aware of the side-effects before engaging in the practice of skin whitening. Note that these participants still have the desire to whiten their skin if there were not any side-effects.

## 4.2 Implications to the model

The results of the thesis were in line with the Reasoned Action Approach model. The model explained that if the intention is greater, it is more likely that the indented behavior will be performed (Lechner et al.,2012). The findings of the thesis revealed that the intention of participants was undeniably to whiten their skin by one of the found main factors. After the analysis, 5 main factors emerged which were media, parents, peer pressure, self-esteem and facial imperfections. Most of the findings presented that the majority of the participants kept engaging in the practice of skin whitening, as long as they have not experienced any side-effects. This means that they have adapted a positive behavior towards skin whitening and continue this behavior until they experience side-effects. Next, the Reasoned Action Approach model suggest that individuals act the way they are based on the perception of others perceived by others. (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010, p.130). In this case, the participants whitened their skin due what society thinks of them. The majority of the participants felt the pressure from their peers to look lighter. Also, the participants admitted their still surrounded by friends and family member who still use skin whitening. Therefore, the participants stated that this was a motive for them to start using the products on themselves, because they felt pressured to start using these products. Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) described this as perceived descriptive norm.

## 4.3 Limitations

There are few limitations to this research that need to discussed. Firstly, there was a case of social desirability. The researcher had the opportunity to interview a mother and her daughter, who both practice skin whitening. During the interview, the daughter mentioned that her mother forced her in engaging in the practice of skin whitening. She further explained that her mother whitened her skin when she was younger and also compels her younger brothers to use it. According to the mother, she only whitens her skin due to her acne. She also stated that she will never force her own children to use skin whitening products.

Secondly, it is important to mention that recruiting the participants was a challenging process. Fortunately, by means of the snowball sample method and social media some participants were open enough to cooperate. However, the participants that were recruited via the snowball sample often shared the same beliefs and values regarding skin whitening, which may have influenced the results.

Thirdly, the language barrier was also a limitation to the study. Many women reached out to the researcher in French and Arabic. Because the study was limited to English, these participants were unfortunately not selected.

Another limitation of the study was that majority of the participants were from African decent. It would have been more interesting to include more Asian participants to the study. Also, due to shame, anxiety and judgment, some participants were no longer interested in the study and withdrew themselves. Furthermore, this study was conducted in an online-interview, which is not sufficient to guarantee reliability and validity. The researcher was not able to observe the participants’ non-verbal language because of this. These would have been an asset to the study. Finally, incentive was also a limitation that should have been included in the study. Some participants were only interested in the research if there was some compensation offered.

## 4.4 Recommendations for future research

For future research, some ideas emerged from this study. It would be interesting to investigate and explore the perception of beauty and the usage of skin whitening among some male participants in order to compare their motives with the women. Another suggestion would be to explore the Arabic and Hispanic community regarding the usage of skin whitening products. In this research, none of the participants were from an Arabic and Hispanic decent and it would have been noteworthy to explore what their motives are and compare with the other nationalities. in order to compare with other nationalities.

## 4.5 Implication for professional practice

The results of this study show that the majority of women who use skin whitening products are influenced by peer pressure, media, parents, self-esteem and facial imperfections. Some of them also revealed that skin whitening is related to shame and embarrassment. During the interview, the researcher asked the participants *‘what was the most important part of the interview?’* The majority of the participants’ answer was the ability to talk about it and not to be judged. For that reason, an online platform (cf. Appendix 7) has been created, where women of color can share their thoughts, experiences and testimonies regarding skin whitening anonymously. The goal of this platform is to reach, as much as possible, women of color and also to create a safe platform for them. It is also important to stimulate the awareness of health risks and and the importance of self-acceptance.

In clinical settings, it would be important to encourage the women of color to seek therapy and be guided at a professional level. Note that is important that a psychologist takes a non judgmental role, otherwise this might frighten the individual. A non judgmental attitude is a key factor during the therapy, in order to avoid fright by the individual.

## 4.6 Overall Conclusion

This study attempted to investigate the main factors of the usage of skin whitening. The findings of this study showed that these factors are namely, peer pressure, media, parents, self-esteem and facial imperfections. The last factor was an unexpected result. It was also significant to explore the emotional aspects of the participants. In conclusion, these participants shared a very emotional experience, that was followed by regret and self-acceptance among some participants. Finally, the majority of the participants were also aware of the side-effects of skin whitening.

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# **Attachments**

The following attachments were attached on CD-ROM.

* Appendix 1: Informative letter
* Appendix 2: Informed consent
* Appendix 3: Drop-off
* Appendix 4: Interview guide
* Appendix 5: Themed labels
* Appendix 6: Head categories
* Appendix 7: Professional practice
* Appendix 8: Inlichtingenfiche valorisatiepeter of –meter
* Appendix 9: Participants ( transcripts, labeled transcripts, Informed consents, drop-off and audio).
1. A ceruse is pigment composed of white lead [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Somalia, Nigeria, South-Sudan, Ghana and Senegal [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and The Philippines [↑](#footnote-ref-3)