



A Euro Vision of Beauty?

Dr Amina Mire explores the growing skin whitening industry

In eighteenth century America women of colour began using skin whitening products in response to racial segregation and racial oppression. Unlike legal slavery, since then the skin-whitening trade has grown not died. Worse still is that whilst skin-whitening was once used to mask women of African origin, desperate to pass in a white society that deemed their natural skin ugly and unacceptable, it now provides a Venetian mask for all women of colour.

A recent Middle Eastern advertisement for Unilever's Fair and Lovely Skin Cream features a young woman who is trying to gain work as a television presenter. When things aren't going to plan she has a revelation, 'the obstacle to obtaining my dream job was my skin'. The ad ends with the words, 'Fair and Lovely... For total fairness'¹.

The quest for white skin continues to Japan through Mikiko Ashikari's 2005 article *Cultivating Japanese Whiteness*². Here Ashikari details the language commonly found in Japanese adverts:

- The sensation of *whiteness* (shiro) on your skin (Helena Rubinstein)
- The best shortcut to *whiteness* (Givenchy)
- Let's cultivate *whiteness*, every day (Clinique)
- What I have touched is a drop of *white* science (Yves Saint-Laurent)
- Double action, for the skin of the future which goes beyond *whiteness* (Dior)
- Clarins has discovered the *white* skin (Clarins)
- A new experience of *whiteness* (Carita) (Accuracy)

In Pacific Asia alone, where the skin-whitening market outside of Europe and North America is anchored, 2009 estimates rated its value at €13bn³. Whether the thought originated in slavery or class, or elsewhere, some consider that a war on skin colour is

1 'Fair and Lovely' Middle East
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIUQ5hbRHXk>

2 Journal of Material Culture Vol. 10(1): 73-91
 Copyright © 2005 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)
 [DOI: 10.1177/1359183505050095]

3 Source: cosmeticsdesign-europe.com 'In-Cosmetics Asia focus on skin lightening trend' 25-June-2009

being fought on the faces of women of all hues, from golden brown to black, Asia to Africa and South America.

As with all wars, not everyone plays fair. On the one hand there is the perfectly made up world of commercial cosmeceutical purity, yet this can be contrasted with some illegal products available on the black market which can contain banned chemicals such as mercury, hydroquinone and corticosteroids.

In London in 2007 shop owners Yinka and Michael Oluyemi⁴ were fined £100,000 for selling 'banned' skin-bleaching products⁵ that contained the regulated substance hydroquinone and other illegal steroids.

With the reported illegal trade of products containing regulated substances such as hydroquinone, EU law enforcement and customs are fighting a losing battle against under-the-counter sales and the systematic use of the internet as the main medium for reaching customers. Just Google 'hydroquinone', 'skin whitening' or 'skin bleaching' and see how many opportunities to buy arise.

Unsurprisingly, not everyone is happy with what some perceive to be the mass marketing of whiteness. In India, where skin colour and class has been inexorably linked for centuries, a 2008 article in The Independent detailed a row that followed the broadcast of mini series of adverts promoting 'White Beauty', a skin whitening cream produced by Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL).

Some observers consider that there are two distinct sectors to the contemporary marketing of skin-whitening cosmetics:

1. High-end,,relatively expensive skin-whitening products which have been developed for, and simultaneously marketed to affluent women of colour to 'fade discolouration', and to white middle aged women for removing the corporeal signs of the aging and achieving a youthful-looking, flawless white skin.
2. Cheap, low-end and often highly toxic products aimed mainly at poor non-white consumers.



From Hydroquinone to the Future

Molecular formula: $C_6H_4(OH)_2$

Hydroquinone is a pigment control/ melanin inhibiting product designed for cosmetic use that is banned in European Union member states, Pacific Asia and in some African countries. In the USA over the counter sales of skin-whitening products must contain less than 2% hydroquinone.

⁴ Skin bleaching cream couple fined:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/6232343.stm>

⁵ Skin-whitening adverts ignite race row in India
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/skinwhitening-adverts-ignite-race-row-in-india-863936.html>

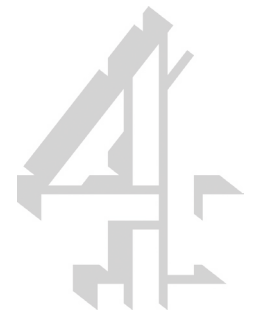
A 1996 World Health organisation report on Hydroquinone referenced cases suggesting that 'skin lightening creams containing 2% hydroquinone have produced leukoderma, as well as ochronosis. Leukoderma is a loss of skin pigment that effectively turns skin white and its opposite ochronosis, increases pigmentation, effectively turning patches of skin brown.

On 9 September 2009, Reuters⁶ reported on the FDA's (Food and Drug Administration – USA) continuing investigation into whether or not to continue with their 2006 proposal to ban the use of hydroquinone in pigment control products due to fears that it may act as a carcinogen.

The cosmetics industry have responded to this increasing global demand for skin whitening products by addressing the associated health risks that might limit their ability to take advantage of huge potential markets in East Asia, Africa and beyond through the development and production of new, safer skin-whitening agents.

In a 2007 press release for Actiwhite LS 9808 the manufactures Cognis⁷ acknowledged that 'The skin whitening market is no longer limited to Asian countries, but has become an essential part of the global face and body care market' and that they were offering a product with 'a high capacity to decrease melanogenesis – the process which is responsible for the creation of melanin, which in turn is responsible for the coloration of the human skin.' By 2010 the worldwide anti-aging product market is estimated to reach U.S.\$ 115.5 billion (Global Industry Analysts 2008).

When considering the desire to alter our image and the money involved, the question that remains in 2009 is this: are women of colour still actively seeking a Euro vision of beauty or is the desire to achieve skin a few shades lighter now inherent in our make up?



Dr Amina Mire

6 <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS129255+08-Sep-2009+PRN20090908>

7 http://www.cognis.com/company/Press+and+Media/Press+Releases/2007/Press+Room+CC+March+15_2007+%28Eng%29.htm