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THE PSYCHOLOGY AND DANGER OF SKIN WHITENING PRACTICES: A THEORY OF THE INVISIBLE INK

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ABSTRACT: Over the past twenty years, scholarship in skin bleaching has burgeoned, diversified, and gained prominence in a number of disciplines, but particularly dermatology, public health, and psychology. This positive momentum came about with the efforts of those scholars and researchers interested in mastering the full complexity of skin bleaching through exploring its meaning, motives, ingredients, and the various factors implicated in its practice. Other contributors include researchers devoted to extending the existing understanding of the negative side effects of skin bleaching. This article argues that although an increasing number of pertinent theories have been developed to explain why people engage in skin bleaching and what sustains their involvement in the practice. None of such theories have been developed in such a way as to point to the double-edged consequences of skin bleaching. This article aims to contribute to the theoretical literature on skin bleaching by proposing a new dimension of theory carrying the power for accenting to the often delayed negative outcome of skin bleaching that comes into view only years after the manifestation of its positive consequence. The article is considered important as it aims to convey the complex truth implicated in skin bleaching that it is not a habit associated with just one dimensional consequence which users often presume to be positive in direction but rather an ominous health practice that comes with multidimensional consequences, some of them deadly but hidden from view until the practice has lasted for a considerably long time.
Keywords: The Invisible Ink, Theory of the Invisible Ink, Skin Whitening, Skin Bleaching,
Psychology and Danger of Skin Bleaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the foundational publications by Fanon (1952, 1967) and Du Bois (1903, 1961) on the challenge of skin-colour discrimination in many modern societies in favour of Whiteness over Blackness; a phenomenon that has given rise to the perpetually increasing problem of skin bleaching in various parts of the world but particularly here in Africa, skin bleaching scholarship has burgeoned and diversified. This is particularly so in the last twenty years following the landmark article by F. O. Ajose (2005) entitled "Consequences of skin bleaching in Nigerian men and women", published in the *International Society of Dermatology*, volume 44, number 1, pages 41-43. Within the many years that followed since the publication of that article, a number of eminent researchers have made their mark in the area of scholarship in skin bleaching, skin lightening or skin whitening (these terms are used interchangeably in the literature, Chen & Jablonski, 2023; Abdelaziz et al., 2021; Tabod, 2016; and so too, in this article).

Indeed, among the most important developments that followed the publication by Ajose (2005) include the enormous contributions by researchers interested in answering the question about the factors, both personal, social, political, cultural and economic, that work together to instigate people's interest in skin bleaching and what people involved in such a practice aim to achieve psychologically (Fanon, 1952, 1967; Du Bois, 1903, 1961; Nyoni-Kachambwa, et al., 2021; Kpanake et al., 2010; Motlohi et al., 2023). Others include the efforts of research teams working globally aimed at extending the results of Ajose's (2005) study on the negative health consequences of skin bleaching. Among scholars in this category are international research teams, some of them consisting of select dermatologists from around the world who tackle the topic of skin bleaching as a global public health concern and who have over the years investigated the menace of skin bleaching in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas (Pollock et al., 2021; Sagoe et al., 2019). Their respective contributions were designed to inspire a global discourse to increase public education campaigns and suggest how modern dermatologists can utilize scientific evidence and cultural competency to serve and protect patients of diverse skin types and backgrounds. In conducting their research, such international research teams hoped to promote healthy skin and inclusive concepts of beauty in patients and society (Pollock et al. 2020). Still other researchers in this group are those interested in answering the question about what actually is implied in the practice of skin whitening, and the assortment of ingredients that are drawn upon in effecting such a practice (Yayehrad et. al., 2023).

But perhaps, most importantly, at least in the context of this article, another group of contributors are those scholars, who, following in the footsteps of Fanon (1952, 1967) and Du Bois (1903, 1961) are interested in bringing the influence and precision of theoretical formulation to bear on the difficult question of accounting for the instigative factors such as social marketing and the influence of the environment and political history in getting people allured to such a practice. Among the salient contributors in this regard are those that emphasize the influence of colorism and racism (Fanon, 1952, 1967; and Du Bois, 1903, 1961, with specific reference to his *double consciousness* theory highlighted in his *Souls of the Black Folk*) in promoting people's indulgence in skin bleaching. Some of the researchers in this group emphasize that the practice of cosmetic skin whitening ought to be understood in relation to historical factors, structural inequality, and racial privilege. Others in this same group include specifically such great theorists like Crenshaw (2024) who proposed the relevance of the concept of *intersectionality* as an important framework for understanding the dynamics at work in the practice of skin bleaching. Essentially, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality fundamentally highlights the intricate ways in which oppression and the need to avoid oppression is manifested through the convergence of social factors such as class, race, gender, and mental health.

Still another important theorist that has made his mark in the literature of skin bleaching is Thomas Fraser Pettigrew. Pettigrew's (2020) *intergroup contact theory* emphasized the influence of the context in which people live and work in skin bleaching. In specific terms, Pettigrew's (2008) contact group theory of skin bleaching argues that the urge for skin bleaching comes into effect largely in the context of what happens when exaggerated views (often negative) of the outgroup (e.g., the Blacks' skin colour) is considered extremely different and below par from the in-group's (Whiteness), a trend that appears to echo an earlier concern raised by Fanon (1952, 1967) and Du Bois (1903, 1961).

Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's developmental psychology theory has been applied to the field of skin bleaching in which the notion is suggested that people and groups are embedded within contexts and systems and so have easy access through social modelling to learn from and influence the behaviour and routines of one another, including that of skin bleaching. Hence, one common implication among those theories of skin bleaching drawing from the developmental psychology theory is the implied power and immediacy of the interaction between P (person) and Context (C) in skin bleaching.

II. THE PROBLEM

This article argues that while the above literature and the theories just highlighted are important for grasping the problem of skin bleaching in its full complexity, none is powerful enough, taken singly, as a conceptual foundation, to help to present in one breadth the complex and ambivalent character of the consequences of skin bleaching product use. As a way of further developing this argument, the article hopes to present an overview of other extant theories of skin bleaching apart from those already highlighted above that could show that none of the extant prominent theories of skin whitening has within the framework of their conceptual formulation a perspective that points to the double-edged character of the consequences of skin bleaching practice. To close this gap the article hopes to introduce a new down-to-earth theory of skin bleaching referred to as *the theory of the invisible ink*, with the capacity and the metaphor to suggest that there are two major sides to the effect of skin whitening among its long term practitioners; one, the positive dimension that is first to manifest but which, after a longer term use, is overshadowed and overdetermined by the initially invisible negative dimension that is regrettable when it emerges as it comes with a devastating dermatological, medical, and surgical consequences (Street et al., 2014; Afzal, Deshpande, & Carlini, 2025; Ajose, 2005).

III. METHODOLOGY

As a prerequisite for grasping the significance of this theory and developing the key argument of this article, an attempt will first be made to provide an overview of the various aspects (theory and research) of the skin bleaching literature. Following such a methodology is important. It would serve as a necessary background for introducing *the theory of the invisible ink* that is intended to add to the invaluable contributions of these earlier attempts by previous investigators and theorists to further the meaning and understanding of the complexities that surround the phenomenon of skin bleaching across the globe.

3.1 Review Questions

In implementing this procedure, the following questions are raised and answered. *First, what has the extant literature got to say about the meaning of skin bleaching and the various ingredients that are used in implementing such a practice? What motives instigate people to engage in skin bleaching and what do they hope to achieve in doing so? What are the negative health consequences of skin bleaching that gave some global dermatologists the audacity to tag that practice a public health concern? What other theoretical explanations, apart from those already highlighted above, are available in the literature regarding the factors and contexts that instigate people to engage in skin bleaching?*

Essentially, while explaining the relevance of these theories in the economy of this article an attempt will be made to show that, as earlier indicated, despite the important contributions they have made for understanding the dynamic factors implicated in skin bleaching, such theories have some limitations that call for the need for proposing another theory with the potential to add to the importance of these theories in continuing to move the literature of skin bleaching forward. The content and promise of such a theory will be made clearer later on in this article.

Having said this, some detailed exploration of the above-named questions and the important themes embedding them, are given below.

3.2 Meaning, Ingredients, and Complications of Skin Whitening Practice

In terms of definition, the practice of skin bleaching has been taken to refer to the application of topical creams, gels, pills, injections, soaps, and household products, like JIK, to lighten one's skin. Dadzie & Petit's (2009) more technical definition of skin bleaching can also be mentioned. According to that definition, skin bleaching can be taken to refer to the practice of applying any type of depigmenting agents to specific or widespread areas of the body, with the primary goal of lightening normally dark skin.

The above two definitions strongly corroborate the view of many scholars such as Abdelaziz, et al., (2021, p. 14) according to whom "skin lightening (SL) refers to the use of products to lighten dark areas of the skin or achieve an overall lighter complexion. These products include bleaching creams, soaps, and tablets, as well as professional treatments like chemical peels, laser therapy and injections (Adrienne, 2019)." World Health Organisation (Africa Region) concurs with these definitions when it defines "skin bleaching, also known as skin lightening, skin toning, and skin whitening, as a global cosmetic practice to achieve a lighter skin tone. It is often driven by cosmetic desires rooted in deep historical, economic, socio-cultural and psychosocial factors. It involves the use of topical products containing corticosteroids, hydroquinone, mercury, or other agents to lighten the skin." (Cited in Abdelaziz et al., 2021, p. 14).

Considered from the point of view of economics, Arbab & Eltahir (2010), observed that economically speaking, the unfortunate thing about skin bleaching is not only that it is a dangerous health practice but also that many agents used in the process such as pills and injections are very expensive, affordable only to affluent celebrities and people who are financially strong and stable. Introducing a different perspective, Knight (2018) and The Health Base (2018) suggest that the injection procedure has been found to be safer compared to other skin lightening methods; a factor that explains why the use of injections for skin bleaching are currently said to be gaining in popularity and ascendancy among many well to do users who desire to lighten their skin.

Pollock et al. (2021), commenting on the complications of skin lightening practices emphasize that cutaneous and systemic side effects from skin lightening agents are likely underestimated as a full list of ingredients (particularly in products that are illegal) are rarely disclosed. In their view, the risk of adverse reactions is increased when used for prolonged periods of time or under occlusion. Agreeing with Ladizinski and Mistry (2011), they also observe that Hydroquinone-containing preparations may cause exogamous ochronosis, a paradoxical blue-gray hyperpigmentation due to the deposition of homogenistic acid in the skin (Pollock et al., 2021; Ladizinski & Mistry, 2011). Olumide et al. (2018), suggest that systemic absorption of hydroquinone-containing products may cause peripheral neuropathy, fish odor syndrome, and fetal growth retardation. The same is true, according to them, with absorption of super-potent corticosteroid agents which may result in a number of cutaneous consequences such as local immunosuppression leading to bacterial, viral, and fungal skin infections as well as other worrisome side effects such as a disrupted hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, Cushing syndrome, adrenal insufficiency, diabetes, and hypertension. And the ophthalmologic side effects have been reported to include glaucoma and cataracts (Olumide et al., 2018). According to Hamann et al. (2013), for preparations containing mercury, systemic concerns may include neuropsychiatric toxicity and nephrotoxicity, as well as pneumonitis, nail depigmentation, and mercurial baboon syndrome, Glutathione, has become a major health concern in many countries for its potential adverse sequelae. Dadzie (2016) suggests that significant complications including hepatic, neurologic, and renal toxicity, Stevens Johnson Syndrome, and air emboli have been reported.

The above indications mean that skin bleaching behaviour, according to the literature, is a potentially dangerous health practice. The irony in the literature, however, is that while this is known to be the case no theory available in the literature has been able to capture within its breath this double-edged outcome of such a practice. And it is here that the theory of the invisible ink shortly to be presented in this article will seem to make an important contribution.

3.3. Goals and Motivations in Skin Bleaching Practice

Remembering the possibility of complications that go with the practice of skin bleaching as highlighted above, several researchers (e.g., Keakile, 2017; Chirove, 2019; Madziwa, 2020; Lewis Kelly and colleagues (2011); Yayehrad et al. (2023); Afzal, Deshpande, & Carlini (2025), and the World Health Organisation, Africa Region, 2021), including Julien (2014) have tried to explore the factors and motivations which in working together instigate people to engage in skin bleaching.

In this regard, the study by Lewis Kelly and colleagues (2011) was conducted in Tanzania, a country located in the Eastern part of Africa. That study investigated, by means of a questionnaire, the motivations in skin bleaching of 42 Tanzanian women. The results of the study were reported in the *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, volume 35, number1, 29-37. The findings showed that there are six major motivations for women's indulgence in skin bleaching. These were identified to include: *the need to remove pimples, rashes and skin disease or the need for self-enhancement; the need to have soft skin; the need to be White, "beautiful" and more European looking; the need to remove the adverse effects of extended skin bleaching on the body; the need to satisfy one's partner and/or to attract male mates; and the need to satisfy and impress friends and peers.* These findings were corroborated by the report of studies by Keakile (2017), and Chirove (2019) respectively, conducted among university students in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

Another study similar to the one by Lewis Kelly and colleagues (2011) is the one conducted in three cities in Ethiopia by Yayehrad et al., 2023), using a multi-stage sampling design involving a total of 362 participants; conducted in all community pharmacies located in three Ethiopian cities. The study was conducted from June 28 to August 28, 2022, among females purchasing Skin Lightening Products from drug retailers. The sample excluded all females below 18 years old, and those who did not use Skin lightening products as well as those who did not come to drug retailers at the time of study.

That research was like the study by Lewis Kelly and colleagues (2011), aimed at answering the question about the determinant factors that influence participants' use of skin lightening products. The result showed that the highly influencing factors for using skin lightening products among the participants were peer pressure from friends (39.9%) and social media (37.4%). This was concluded to be in line with the habit of women in Sudan (Ahmed & Hamid, 2016) and Zimbabwe (Nyoni-Kachambura, 2021) where societal influences, whether from peer or media pressure, have very strong impact on the use of skin lightening products. This explains why the researchers concluded that educating some influential groups in the society by any means will have a direct impact on the larger population. The result was also believed to have a great implication on the prospects of using the social media platform for awareness creation about skin health risks and skin product safety.

Additionally, it needs to be mentioned that the urge to find something to make them more beautiful was also found to be an important factor in the trend of the findings of the study by Yayehrad et al., 2023), as 93% of the respondents believed that the skin lightening products are capable of making those who use them to look more beautiful. This is a trend that is very much in line with the report by Lewis Kelly and colleagues (2011) as well as those by Keakile (2017) and Chirove (2019) among university students in South Africa.

These trends clearly suggest that the aspiration for possessing white and fair skin is the central motivation for women particularly those of them from non-white Asian, African, South American, and Middle-Eastern communities who have their own traditions of skin lightening (Voysey et al., 2021). Yesuf et al's (2019) study also brought results that confirmed that about 38.7% of East African women prefer a lighter skin color; a report which is again in line with the current result by Yayehrad et al. (2023), including those by Lewis Kelly and colleagues (2011), Keakile (2017) , and Chirove (2019).

Also, a review of studies on skin lightening safety conducted by Pollock et al. (2021) underlined that the motivational factor for most African women towards seeking skin lightening products is cosmetic skin lightening than treating skin pigmentary disorders. The researchers (Yayehrad et al., 2023) equally noted that skin lightening products formulated with highly toxic ingredients are straightforwardly accessible from the market; that is, their consumption can lead to diverse adverse effects, with severe and even fatal complications. Hence, skin lightening products have become an evolving health alarm in many countries (Juliano, 2022), but particularly those in Africa and Asia. For this reason they recommended that regulatory restriction be applied on such products in addition to enhance public awareness. In this context drawing from Thomas' (2012) report they noted that *South Africa, Rwanda, Cote d'Ivoire, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ghana* were some of the African countries which already impose regulatory restrictions and bans on cosmetic marketing.

With the above clarifications made, it now appears timely to explore the complex question about the external factors, apart from those arising from within the individual that contribute to the pervasive practice of skin lightening in Africa and the global world. This is an important question to explore anew in an article such as this since part of the aim of this article is to show that although it is clearly known that human practices such as skin bleaching or skin whitening, are not predetermined, they may vary in people's tenacity or ability to stick to its practice based on the practitioners' circumstances, such as their peculiar history, cultural background, gender, upbringing, engagement in self other comparison, constant self-verification, feeling of inferiority and low self-esteem due to their race, exposure to and internalization of the bias and discrimination associated with the principle of colourism (Fanon, 1952, 1961).

Against this background, a more detailed clarification of how some of these broader factors are implicated in skin whitening will now be offered. In doing this, the first point to make is that even though according to Petit (2019, p. 2); and Khan & Khan (2022, p. 1), specifically, "the practice of skin lightening dates back to 200 BC, when ancient Egyptians, Romans and Greeks used honey and olive oil to lighten their skin; it

will not be far from the truth to say that from the point of view of modern history, the foundational precipitants to the problem of skin bleaching as we know it today can be traced from the epistemological violence introduced by the Western perspectives of racism and colourism (Fanon, 1952, 1967; Du Bois, 1903, 1961).

In expiating on this attention must be drawn to the problem of epistemological violence connected to the phenomenon of race; in which, according to Teo (2008), "the term epistemological violence (EV) is introduced in order to identify interpretations that construct the `Other' [particularly, the Black African Other] as problematic or inferior, with implicit or explicit negative consequences for the `Other,' even when empirical results allow for meaningful, equally compelling, alternative interpretations." Offering further clarifications on this, Teo (2010) argued that the concept of (EV) is "closer to personal than to structural violence in that it has a subject, an object, and an action, even if the violence is indirect and nonphysical: the subject of violence is the researcher, the object is the Other, and the action is the interpretation of data that is presented as knowledge" (p. 295).

In terms of its origin, it is said that this problem emerged during the 16th and 18th centuries, the time when the concepts of race and pigmentation-based hierarchies were developing (Du Bois, 1903). Thus during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, skin colour and associated physical differences were used to distinguish enslaved people, justifying oppression. Colonizers equated pale skin with beauty, intelligence and power, and melanin-rich skin with ugliness or inferiority. This is why Crenshaw's (2024) notion of intersectionality as well as Pettigrew's (2008) contact group theory of skin bleaching appear very relevant for understanding the grounds for skin bleaching among the people of colour in the different parts of the world. Such a situation was worse in the African context, for even after their independence from the colonial rule in the 1960s and 1970s and up to today in the twenty-first century, many postcolonial nations particularly those here in Africa were unable to shrug off those deep-rooted and lingering colonial messages of their inferiority already internalized by the population, with many people attempting to gain power or privilege associated with whiteness through the only means available, namely through the use of Hydroquinone and topical corticosteroids as depigmentation agents, along with lightening creams, which flooded the market in these countries.

And this is as true in the whole of Africa as it is in South East Asia, where, according to Khan and Khan (2022) the desire for fairer skin is still based on hopes of improving social status and economic opportunities. But it must be recognized that the problem of racism that is known to be behind the desire for skin bleaching in some places in our global world, is currently influenced by the ever intensifying techniques of advertising and social marketing which continues their promotions with messages of beauty and success for those endowed with fair colour and for those who want to buy the racial capital (Hunter, 2011) that is found in whiteness. No wonder why Chen & Jablonski (2023) have noted that the discourse surrounding the phenomena of colourism has experienced a notable increase in attention currently, leading to heightened conversations regarding skin lightening, skin whitening or skin bleaching. These skin lightening practices, as earlier noted, are motivated by a desire for a lighter skin tone (Lewis Kelly and colleagues, 2011; Yayehrad et al. 2023; Keakile, 2017; and Chirove, 2019) and are presently experiencing rapid expansion within the worldwide beauty sector.

However, it might not be completely true to suggest that it is only the factors of racism and colourism that are responsible for pushing people to engage in skin bleaching. This is because these factors may not have such instigative power if their pressures are not also fuelled by the factor of culture in which the skin bleacher is born and raised. Hence, according to Afzal, Deshpande, & Carlini (2025, p. 80) research investigating the cultural, societal, and psychological factors related to the use of harmful skin lightening products has identified many reasons for using them. One of such reasons, according to them, is that in many cultures, women are believed to be more attractive if they are fair and have a blemish-free face (Khan et al., 2022). These, however, are perceptions that are influenced by social pressure (Liu et al., 2008), peer pressure (Kaziga et al., 2021), the caste system (Shevde, 2008), social inequalities (Shroff et al., 2017) and the media (Jennifer et al., 2012).

Another angle is the social stigma attached to the dark skin and the belief that fair skin guarantees an alluring job and perfect marriage prospects (Bamerdah et al., 2023), all of which, in turn influence the use of harmful skin lightening products. Thus, in some Asian cultures, dark skin tones may cause women to be exiled from their community, subjected to more labour and face higher rejections in arranged marriages (Nagar, 2018; Kukreja, 2021).

Psychosocial pressures such as those stated above may lead to a psychological state where women feel internally demoralized because of their complexion, thereby triggering a psychological desire to attain a socially acceptable and preferable skin tone. Such desires may, if adequate care is not taken lead to one choosing harmful skin lightening products and bleaching practices with potential bodily harm (Alrayyes et al., 2020).

Also, it needs to be noted that it is not merely the influence of culture per se that is forcing people to conform to the framework of racism and colourism as highlighted above. This is because, a decision to go for a particular form of skin bleaching practice is not made by culture but by the individual practitioner as a human being endowed with personal ambitions, rational considerations, aims, and expectations. So apart from the influence of one's culture are those that are specifically related to one's individual psychological characteristics.

Similarly, although Shroff et al., 2017) do believe in the instigative power of advertisements in alluring people to skin bleaching, what is argued in this article is that these advertisements do not, on their own, force a decision to engage in skin bleaching. Rather such a critical decision is largely determined by the personal convictions, goals, and expectations or in particular the rational convictions of members of the general public exposed to such advertisements.

This means that over and above the foundational factors (e.g., racism and colourism, and culture and upbringing) external to the individual there are others, mainly psychological in nature internal to the individual (e.g., personal factors, such as preferences, rational calculations, personal interests, self-verification, self-other comparison), which must be borne in mind when accounting for factors that can push people to engage in skin bleaching.

3.4 Negative Health Consequences Associated with Skin Bleaching

In conducting an overview of the literature on the above theme, a prominent research report available is the one credited to Street et al. (2014). That report was based on a systematic review which examined the documented health risks associated with skin bleaching. It also explored whether these health consequences met the criteria set by the CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention), for causing injury. The study was considered pertinent to be drawn upon here as it took a unique interdisciplinary approach by examining literature spanning over a quarter of a century, including those conduct before Ajose (2005), across several disciplines (e.g. biological sciences, psychology, public health) and utilized qualitative content analysis in making meaning of its findings.

A major research question that guided the study was: What are the documented health risks associated with skin bleaching?

The findings highlighted a variety of health risks associated with skin bleaching, among which *harm to the skin* was most commonly identified. Commenting in this regard, many researchers covered in the review reported cutaneous conditions such as acne, burns, and dermatitis associated with skin bleaching (de Souza, 2008; Ly et al., 2007; Petit et al., 2006; Suzuki, Yagami & Matsunaga, 2012; Toombs, 2007). Additionally, most researchers covered in the review commonly found skin bleaching to be associated with cutaneous infections caused by bacteria, fungus, and parasites such as dermatophyte infections, skin lesions, and scabies (Ajose, 2005; Akiibinu, Arinola & Afolabi, 2010; de Souza, 2008; Ly et al., 2007; Mahé et al., 2003; Petit et al., 2006; Suzuki et al., 2012).

Similarly, many of the researchers encompassed in that review found skin pigmentation abnormalities such as hypo- and hyperpigmentation, and exogenous ochronosis associated with skin bleaching (Adebajo, 2002; de Souza, 2008; del Giudice & Yves, 2002; Ly et al., 2007; Mahé et al., 2003; Petit et al., 2006; Phillips, Isaacson & Carman, 1986; Tse, 2010). Furthermore, Street et al. (2014) found in their review that skin bleaching was associated with epidermal atrophy or thinning and fragility of the skin (Ajose, 2005; de Souza, 2008; Mahé et al., 2003). Apart from harm to the skin, the studies reviewed reported changes at the cellular level associated with skin bleaching. Among such cellular abnormalities is stunted Purkinje cell dendrite growth which was identified as a health risk associated with skin bleaching and was coded as belonging in this category by Washam (2011). Other health risks related to the use of skin bleaching products in this category unearthed by Street et al.'s (2014) review were disruption of normal DNA functioning and changes at the gene level (Akiibinu et al., 2010; Westerhof & Kooyers, 2005). Renal and neurological complications due to mercury exposure were also cited (Harada et al., 2001; Mahé et al., 2005), as well as cataracts and glaucoma (Olumide et al., 2008). Additionally, the researchers covered in their review described organ diseases and abnormalities associated with skin bleaching to include Cushing syndrome (Ajose, 2005; Mahé et al., 2005) and cancer (Kooyers & Westerhof, 2006).

According to Street et al. (2014), six studies tested skin bleaching products and found that they included chemicals which have been documented as toxic or causing poisoning in humans (Copan et al., 2012; Peregrino, Moreno, Miranda, Rubio & Leal, 2011; Washam, 2011). For example, the studies reviewed reported that skin bleaching products had toxic levels of mercury (Copan et al., 2012; Harada et al., 2001; Peregrino et al., 2011; Washam, 2011), hydroquinone (Kooyers & Westerhof, 2006; Petit et al., 2006), and clobetasol (Petit et al., 2006).

As mentioned earlier, two of the articles reviewed by Street et al. (2014), also identified birth defects/problems with offspring health as health risks associated with skin bleaching. More specifically, Mahé et al. (2005) presented initial evidence of renal dysfunction and cataracts in new-borns related to the mother's use of skin bleaching products. This was further evidenced by a study which found that pregnant skin bleachers had smaller placenta and children born at low birth weights, low cortisol levels, and higher rates of birth defects associated with mercury exposure (Mahé et al., 2007).

These results clearly demonstrate that skin bleaching, as it is currently practised, is a major threat to skin safety. Additionally, they suggest that skin bleaching products currently contain toxic concentrations of chemicals such as mercury and hydroquinone which are known to cause damage to the body at cellular level (e.g. trophic diseases, DNA mutations) and injury to other internal organs. There was also alarming evidence that skin bleaching may not only harm users, but also foetal development, although research in this area is said to be still limited.

Now, although these findings must be interpreted with some caution given that Street and colleagues (2014) did their systematic research from which the above conclusions emerged almost a decade ago. Yet recent studies by Owolabi et al. (2020); and the very recent systematic research by Afzal, Deshpande and Carlini (2025) have corroborated the conclusions noted by Street et al. (2014). And given the validation of Street et al.'s (2014) findings by these more recent studies, the conclusion can therefore be made that as highlighted in the systematic research reported by Street et al. (2014) skin bleaching behaviour is a dangerous health practice, particularly when it is engaged in over a long time.

3.5 Social Psychological Theories of Skin Bleaching

Although we were able in the earlier part of this article to highlight some general theories of skin bleaching all of which focused on exploring some factors associated with skin bleaching, most of such theories did not draw from social psychological literature. To close this gap, some effort is made below to explore important theories proposed in social psychology literature that are considered relevant for understanding the need for beautification and self-grooming practices in human selective behaviour. Such an exploration is necessary as it will help to draw attention to more relevant factors instigating people's indulgence in skin lightening product choices. In conducting an overview of such theories the following must be mentioned.

- *Rational Choice Theory (RCT)*

This is a pertinent theory that has been applied for achieving effective understanding of people's behaviour in the context of skin bleaching. *Rational Choice Theory* (RCT) in general focuses on explaining why people choose to do what they want (Grüne-Yanoff, 2012). The theory is based on the assumption that all humans base their decisions (including the decision to engage in skin bleaching) on rational calculations, take a rational approach when choosing, and aim to increase either pleasure or profit (Homans, 1961; Becker, 1976; Coleman, 1973 & 1990) in the decision taken. Concurring, Elster (1989) noted that the essence of Rational Choice Theory is that human beings will usually take actions that they feel convinced will lead to the best outcome. It is from this angle that the present author believes the rational choice theory has some limitation since most people who engage in skin bleaching do end up engaging in that process without having full rational knowledge of the multiple consequences that await those who engage in such a practice.
And it is here that the theory of the invisible ink shortly to be presented will have a valuable addition to make.

- *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*

A detailed description of the concepts reported in the literature of skin bleaching pertain to psychological elements such as the desire to gain beauty, dissatisfaction with skin color, low self-esteem, poor body image, emotional distress, and self and body consciousness (for instance, see Mena et al., 2020; Nyoni-Kachambwa et al., 2021). Following this understanding, two important social psychology theories that best explain factors influencing the basis for people's engagement in skin bleaching practice have been identified. They include the postulates of *objectification theory and cognitive dissonance theory*. The import of these two theories in the context of skin bleaching is presented below, starting with the cognitive dissonance theory.

The cognitive dissonance theory (Chatterjee et al., 2023; Festinger, 1957) posits that individuals experience discomfort when their attitudes and behaviours are inconsistent. In the context of the urge for opting for skin bleaching products, people may experience cognitive dissonance if they believe that a fair skin tone is more beautiful while they have a darker skin tone. In that case, to reduce cognitive dissonance, or the internal conflict being faced, those affected may change their beliefs about skin tone by rationalizing that dark skin is equally attractive or else may choose to apply skin bleaching products to attain a lighter skin tone to achieve concord with their beliefs and behaviour. Alternatively, the individuals, according to this theory, may stop using skin bleaching products and believe in equality in the attractiveness of all skin tones; although this can be a difficult undertaking, as it may require standing against one's own principles or peer pressures that may have contributed to the belief in the first place. All in all, however, the point of cognitive dissonance theory is that people who engage in skin bleaching often do so to ensure harmony between their beliefs and behaviour.

- *Normative Conduct Theory*

According to Bergquist et al. (2021); Cialdini et al. (1991); and Saleem et al. (2021), normative conduct theory is a framework that seeks to explain how and why people conform to the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of others in social situations. The theory postulates that people are heavily influenced by the presence and actions of others in their environment and that this influence can come in many ways including persuasion, obedience, conformity, and compliance. In other words, according to normative conduct theory people conform to the attitudes and behaviours of a group to fit in or avoid rejection, even if they do not personally agree with the group's beliefs. Hence in the context of this article, the theory suggests that informational influence may play a role in skin bleaching. In this way, when people lack knowledge or understanding of the harmful effects of skin bleaching products they may look to others for guidance and end up adopting the practice of skin bleaching adopted by their peers.

- *Social Marketing Theory*

As some recent studies (Akbar et al., 2022) have suggested, policy measures alone may not be sufficient to control the proliferation of harmful products. Consequently, it is argued that social marketing can improve the creation of awareness about and the reduction of harmful products (Akbar et al., 2022). This highlights the crucial role that social marketing theory and practice can play in understanding and influencing consumer behaviour related to the use of harmful products, such as skin bleaching treatments. Social marketing campaigns leveraging advocacy, traditional, and social media channels can therefore be the first step towards creating awareness, changing attitudes about the desire for fair or light skin tone, and reducing the consumption of skin bleaching products (Dwivedi, 2020). Hence, the important use that is made of celebrities in helping to dissuade young people from engaging in skin bleaching. In that case beautiful celebrities with good skin tones are employed to dissuade their fans from engaging in skin bleaching. Some typical examples in this regard is the nonprofit campaign, "Dark is Beautiful," which is based in India and created to challenge the long-held belief that value is determined by the fairness of the skin (Tarafdar & Bowen, 2015). Similarly, celebrities such as Amara La Negra, an Afro-Latina singer, speak publicly against skin bleaching and advocate for increasing the number of dark-skinned Latin performers in the media (Meraji & Richmond, 2018).

It is heartening to note that in the aftermath of such campaigns, Johnson & Johnson, have recently stopped its sales of skin-whitening lotions, while the popular Unilever cream Fair &Lovely has been renamed Glow & Lovely. Based on the above understanding, the normative conduct theory postulates that since many people get enticed to engage in skin bleaching in order to avoid rejection by the general society. Anti-bleaching social campaigns like those staged by the celebrities holds a lot of power in assisting young people to resist the influence of peer and social pressures in their decision against engagement in skin bleaching.

- *Public Policy Laxity Theory on Skin Bleaching*

The public policy laxity theory of skin bleaching posits that the level of ease of access to dangerous chemicals for the preparation of skin bleaching creams is responsible for the increasing number of young people getting involved in skin bleaching. According to this theory on account of a lapse in consistency in policy implementation and the lack of enforcement of rules and regulations against the use of dangerous skin bleaching products (Mah'e, 2014), an easy playing ground is created enticing people to engage in skin bleaching. In other words as far as this theory is concerned, in most of the countries in Africa in particular, where skin bleaching is the norm, there seems to be no coordinated public policy, rules, and regulations regarding direct control of skin bleaching products. And in such countries people find it easy to engage in skin bleaching. What this theory implies is that to actually succeed in discouraging people from engaging in skin bleaching there is need for our public policy rules and regulations against use of such harmful products to be tightened up.

IV. RESTATING MY ARGUMENT

Having completed my exploration of the main social psychological theories of skin bleaching as highlighted above, I wish now to restate my principal argument in this article. And that is that although each of those theories and the ones earlier presented at the beginning of this article has made important contributions towards enhancing our understanding of what influences people's decision to engage in skin bleaching, and what people aim to achieve in doing so, none of them has been able to state in one go the fact of the complex nature of the outcome of the practice of skin whitening or the decision to engage in skin bleaching. For example, while the *rational choice theory* makes it clear that consumers take actions that they feel convinced will lead to the best outcome, none of the extant theories in the skin bleaching literature is able to point out in its formulation that skin bleaching behaviour is a habit where one is confronted with a tantalizing option with a double-edged outcome; an option in which the negative consequence in the bargain is hidden from view until later on after a decision or commitment to the practice has already been made. Hence there is need for another theory that is more conceptually or metaphorically equipped than each of those available in the literature just highlighted.

V. THE THEORY OF THE INVISIBLE INK: A PROPOSAL

It is in response to this need that the theory of the invisible ink shortly to be espoused is being proposed as one with a potential to add something new to, and extend the theoretical literature on skin bleaching practice. However, before clarifying what this theory is all about it appears necessary to first of all acknowledge that the expression, *the invisible ink*, which is part of the architecture of this theory, was first introduced into the literature by Toni Morrison, the 1993 Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, in her (2019) lecture entitled, "Invisible Ink: Reading the Writing and Writing the Reading" which she later published in her book of essays, named, *Sources of Self-regard*.

> In using the notion of *the invisible ink* Morrison aimed to probe "the way in which a reader participates in the text – not how she interprets it, but how she helps to write it". According to Morrison, this process of the reader helping to write the book she is reading, *and in that way saying something more about the book than the book actually provides* is often necessary in certain works where there is the failure of words to fully represent or carry the full weight of what is being communicated in the book. In this way, Morrison, rejects the notion of the stable text for one that is dependent on an active and activated reader who is writing the reading *in invisible ink.* This means that according to Morrison, lying "under, between, outside the lines, hidden until the right reader discovers it," invisible ink engages with the problem of representing the ineffable, or "say[ing] things that are pictures," by pointing to the inevitability that the totality of lived experience cannot be captured in language by the author alone, but must be filled in by an active reader.

5.1 What the theory of the Invisible Ink proposes in the Context of Skin Bleaching

Drawing from the wisdom and the metaphor embedded in Morrison's perspective highlighted above, on the role of the invisible ink in the contest of getting more meaning from what is represented in writing, *I use the term invisible ink in this article to formulate a theory of skin bleaching that proposes that skin bleaching behaviour is a consumer behaviour imbued with an inevitability of double-edged consequence that the totality of lived experience of skin bleaching ultimately entails, particularly in long term practitioners; namely, positive and negative*. *The theory posits further that while such a practice may at the beginning present the user with a desirable outcome in terms of body tone and fairness, or removal of blemishes; this positive outcome does not last indefinitely as with time and more prolonged engagement with the skin bleaching behaviour, its negative and deadly side effects or dimension on the cells and other body organs of the practitioner may set in, usually to the discomfort and embarrassment, and distress of the practitioner.*

The above proposition implies that according to the theory of invisible ink in the context of skin whitening practice, what is suggested is that in the practice of skin bleaching, the multidimensional consequences (positive and negative) of such a practice do not appear *in tandem* or get manifested at the same time; since in the usual order of their manifestation, the positive outcomes are usually the first to emerge, until, for the majority of the practitioners, the long term practitioners, several years after the adoption of such a practice. This is the mature or later phase when some of its negative consequences will start to manifest and to become dominant and end up spoiling any possible joys that the initial positive outcomes of the practice had tended to present.

Following this understanding, my proposed theory of the invisible ink of the ominous double-edged consequence that ultimately go with the practice of skin bleaching appears to immediately make sense and is offered in this article to give due recognition to the hidden deadly dimension that usually tends to hide behind the initial positive attractions of skin whitening practice. Presenting such a theory in a discussion such as this is considered crucial as many researchers such as Askari et al. (2013), Charles and Mclean (2017), and Keakile (2017) have tended to suggest that many women/men who engage in skin whitening practices in Africa, in particular, are not fully aware of the unintended health dangers that accompany its use.

In seeing the matter in this way, what I argue is that it is through the propagation of such a theoretical prospective that those working with young people in Africa and the global world can draw upon in helping the youth *to see together* the multiple effects (good and bad) of skin bleaching that include not only the desirable aspects the emerges with the immediate onset of its use (the outcome that users only think about) but also the ominous dangers that might be late to manifest themselves after the practitioners have become habituated in their use of it.

This is another way of saying that my key point in proposing the theory of the invisible ink in the context of skin bleaching *is to emphasize that within the initial months/years of engaging in skin whitening process, those who engage in it are typically rewarded with what would seem to be a desirable outcome of the practice. However, that this initial positive outcome is often displaced by the unfortunate arrival of the initially invisible or hidden negative health complications, which come with a more prolonged engagement in the practice.*

This means that in specific terms one important message of this theory is that there are two major sides to the effect of skin whitening among its long term practitioners; one, the positive dimension that is first to manifest but which, after a longer term use, is overshadowed and overdetermined by the initially invisible negative dimension that is regrettable when it emerges as it comes with a devastating dermatological, medical and surgical consequences (Street et al., 2014; Afzal, Deshpande, & Carlini, 2025).
To put this theory in clinical perspective, two illustrative case vignettes will now follow.

5.2 Illustrative Case Vignettes of the Clinical Presentation of the Theory of the Invisible Ink

Given below are two case vignettes that respectively illustrate some clinical representations of the theory of the invisible ink espoused in this article. Each of the two case examples demonstrates that as highlighted in the theory of the invisible ink, the practice of skin bleaching results in a doubled-edged outcome; one of which is a positive dimension which is the first to manifest, and thereafter followed by the second dimension, which is a negative outcome and the last to manifest in long term practitioners. These case vignettes are presented respectively, as follows:

- **The Case of Nodima (A Pseudonym)**

This case concerns the problem of Nodima, a South African black female student. Nodima is a third year undergraduate student of psychology in a South African university. On securing admission to the university Nodima wasted no time in taking it as her first point of duty to engage in skin bleaching that would help to transform her black skin colour into white. To achieve this goal she engaged in purchasing and combining several pills and (moisturising) creams that help to turn black colour quickly into white. While the aim of achieving a white skin look following her skin whitening practice was being realized to her utmost delight, she was referred to the psychologist on account of the moderate depression she was going through resulting in almost a 24/7 sadness.
This problem came about because she could not get adequate sleep (a negative side effect of her skin bleaching practice) to enable her to prepare well for her degree examinations. On account of this she ended up with resits in three of her compulsory modules. The worst thing of course is that during her preparation for the resits the load shedding (rotational switch off of electricity) going on in her area of residence means that the electric fans that she had relied on to cool herself from the excessive heat she suffers as a negative consequence of her use of various skin whitening creams, are not in operation. With the extended experience of not sleeping well, Nodima often rises with peppery or dry eyes, light headed and dizzy (all aggregate negative side effects of her skin bleaching practice); and unable to concentrate and prepare for her resits. The result is her having to fail these resits and being required to reregister for these failed modules again. This negative scenario threw her into instant deeper depression, reflected in her lack of appetite and severe sullenness of mood.

- ***The Case of Saidia (A Pseudonym)***

Saidia, unlike Nodima, is not a university student. She is rather a post-high school student from Tanzania; who believes like many modern African ladies, that it takes having a lighter or white skin colour to be attractive to men and make a catch of wealthy men as lovers. To achieve this aim, she worked hard to transform her black skin colour into white by engaging in several techniques of skin bleaching she came to know about in the internet. One of these techniques is the application of Phyto-Blanc Intensive Lightening Serum which is an intensive serum that lightens the skin and combats the appearance of dark spots. Phyto-Blanc Intensive Lightening Serum contains a Vitamin C derivative, combined with Lemon, Scutellaria and White Mulberry extracts, which helps to lighten the skin and reduce the appearance of dark spots. This is in addition to a complex of essential oils, vitamins and natural extracts that boosts the skin's radiance. The fluid and light texture of Phyto-Blanc Intensive Lightening Serum is also claimed to be non-sticky and is quickly absorbed, leaving a matte, imperceptible veil on the skin. It is also claimed that Phyto-Blanc Intensive Lightening Serum is non-comedogenic. With it the skin is soft, supple and hydrated. The complexion becomes luminous and flawlessly evened. Enticed by these claims, Saidia embraced the practice of skin bleaching with extraordinary vigour and conviction. And after applying this serum plus other procedures that come in the form of dietary combinations, Saidia achieves the fair or the light skin colour she craves for. Unfortunately, the end result came with some loathsome cost and baggage: she acquired an unacceptable/ uncomfortable odour that makes men who come to date her to abandon her after a relatively short time, leaving her in continuous search of male friends that appear so easy to attract but difficult to retain or have them stick with her. And the greater irony with Saidia's case is that even though she has achieved the light skin she had craved for and believed in as the royal road for attracting men after her own heart, she is still unable to make men who chase after her affection to settle down with her after they have gotten her and dated her. This anomaly throws her like, Nodima, into instant clinical depression that went on and on, compelling her need for a psychological consultation.

5.3 Interpreting the Two Case Vignettes in the light of the theory of the Invisible Ink

These two case vignettes have brought out in clear relief what my theory of the invisible ink in the context of skin bleaching practice has espoused; namely that skin bleaching comes with multidimensional outcomes, positive and negative. That while the positive dimension is the first to manifest, the negative outcome is the last to manifest, and that when it does; its negativity embarrasses the user and overshows the joys that the positive outcome had initially generated.

For this reason, a major mistake that a clinician or counselling psychologist could make in working with clients such as Nodima and Saidia is the tendency to focus on addressing the presenting symptoms, giving no attention to the precipitative, background factor (skin bleaching) that gave rise to the bleached body, and the repulsive smell it generates (in the case of Saidia) or the excessive heat it comes with (in the Nodima's case), and the challenge of sleeplessness for those affected who had to live without electricity during the load-shedding period of the COVID-19 challenge in their area of residence.

6. Implications for Interventions to Discourage Harmful Skin Lightening Product Use

In this regard, a major lesson to learn in relation to the two cases, against the background of the theory of the invisible ink is that in some instances in the life of our clients, sources of clinical depression may come from the life style they live, such as indulgence in skin bleaching and not from something that comes from within themselves or just out of the blue. In that case, successful intervention with such clients must involve listening to their accounts or stories to get at what they are doing to themselves (in this regard, skin bleaching) which is causing the external manifestation in symptoms; and unless such background history is carefully taken and attended, the symptoms may well keep occurring despite the effort that has been made to keep them at bay.

This means that in attempting any comprehensive clinical work with such clients as Nodima and Saidia there is need for the intake clinician to go beyond the treatment of symptoms of depression, to include taking them through the liberative and the eye-opening process of psycho-education intended to address the route source of their anomalies. In many cases, such psycho-education procedures may not wait until the clients consult with such problems as highlighted above, but might be delivered through the community intervention process.

Indeed, while some general guidelines with regard to reducing skin lightening produce use can be traced in medical and social policy literature, such as public health campaigns, education and outreach, and policy changes to promote diverse beauty standards and discourage discrimination based on skin tone, there is a need for developing and deploying interventions grounded in a relevant theoretical framework to discourage skin lightening product use.

This is an angle where my theory of the invisible ink proposed in this article may have some important contribution to make. For example, in responding to the need for targeted interventions in discouraging skin lightening product use, as highlighted by Lewis et al. (2012), my theory of the invisible ink would suggest *that the main theme to focus on in such targeted interventions is the need to make people aware of the double-edged consequences of skin bleaching practice.* In this way such interventions should emphasize that people who contemplate getting involved in such a practice must not only focus their calculations on the positive results to come from it (such as acquisition of fair skin or becoming more beautiful or gaining of racial capital) but also the documented health hazards that over time can emerge to embarrass the user in the long run (Street et al. 2014; Afzal, Deshpande, & Carlini, 2025).

VII. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it seems pertinent to share the following important observations by Ajose (2005) who posits that in following closely the story of people who are trapped in the habit of skin whitening, the painful irony that dominates all others is that:

> In the end the original purpose for using these (bleaching) agents is defeated, because in the middle age the skin is permanently damaged and many require surgical dermabrasion. Users are the poorer because of their dependence on some of these agents and on expensive moisturisers, as well as the cost of treating induced diseases. Socially, there is loss of self-esteem and possibly loss of a marriage partner. Clothing modification is often to be adopted to cover up the damaged face, neck and upper trunk (p. 14).

Seen against this eloquent observation by Ajose (2005) highlighted over two decades ago the salience of my theory of the invisible ink of skin whitening practices espoused in this article appears to stand out. Such a theory points to the fact that over and above the positive outcome that usually attends the phenomenon of skin whitening at the initial stage of its practice, a more devastating consequence usually invisible to the user at the start of the practice will arise with the extended application of the practice. Seen in this way, the proposed theory of the invisible ink of skin whitening practices proves to be a very clear and, yet simple, parsimonious, and explanatory framework for highlighting not only the multiple and contradictory dimensions of the effects attendant to the skin bleaching phenomenon among its long term practitioners.

It also draws attention to the invisible ink of the psychological correlates that together with the external factors of racism and colourism, to instigate people to get involved in such a practice. Identifying and presenting such a rich construct that is relevant for pointing to the multiple elements (some seen, some not seen) in accounting for the factors and effects attendant to skin bleaching practices is among the important contributions of this article since through such a theory the reader is made to understand that skin bleaching is not a crisis associated with just one dimensional effect that is often positive in direction; the theory rather proposes that it is a phenomenon that comes with multidimensional effects, both positive and negative, with the negative outcome often hidden from view and delayed in emergence until later on in the skin bleaching practice.

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