In Search of “Healthy White:” How Whitening Products are Packaged and what that means for Global, National, and Gender Identities

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**Overview**

This interdisciplinary study in South Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and India compares the origin of products—international and local—and the ways in which product labeling targets gender. I examine (1) the extent to which whitening products result from globalization and from local culture and (2) the ways in which whitening products and skincare at large reinforce traditional roles. This study concludes that whitening products (1) reflect neither globalization nor local culture and instead reflect complex and variable interactions between the two, and contemporary framing of national identity, and (2) enforce similar beauty standards on both men and women, but more heavily on women.

**Background**

As some journalistic articles identify, “whitening” products are quite striking to Americans—they seem racist, and honestly surprising. There is a lot of literature from approximately 1997-2007 concerned with whitening products and their implications. These sources generally argue that these products are problematic because they:

1. represent westernization (one-sided globalization)
2. or represent a culture’s traditional (pre-colonial era) preference toward white skin
3. disproportionately pressure women, as compared to men, to mirror certain beauty ideals

**National Identity**

Whitening products have been a part of many Asian countries’ cultures since before globalization: “In the midst of globalization, Japanese aesthetic values and standards of beauty cannot escape the influence of ‘universal’ standards of beauty. Yet Japanese women, through the practice of whitening their faces, are aiming at being beautiful Japanese women, rather than merely beautiful women.” (Ashikari 85)

Whitening reflects not an internationally based identity but instead an identity of home. The practice of whitening in skincare products is perhaps a current-day re-instantiation of “traditional” beauty standards (and the prejudices that come with them).

**Korean Products**

Korean products are trendy, international products, especially in Japan, China, and Thailand. This popularity subverts the idea that trendy, international products are necessarily “western.” This phenomenon also challenges the idea that whitening is an expression of westernization.

**Advertising for Whitening Products: Transcending Gender?**

- Whitening products target men and women. “At present, Thailand and India are bombarded with advertisements for skin-whitening products among men.” (Chaipraditkul 32-33)
- Two limits:
  1. Distinction between skincare and cosmetics
  2. Gendered Advertising

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**Skincare and Globalization**

Globalization is uneven and represents overlapping and sometimes contradictory patterns: “As global flows of [goods, people, images, and ideas] pass through local environments, they are at times discarded, and at other times taken up deliberately” (Fadzillah 87).

The use of English, Chinese, and Korean language on product packaging suggest products are “international.” In some places, these products are high-end, and in some places, they are not.

**Conclusions**

Globalization is not a uni-directional force by which Asian countries mimic the West; skincare better portrays globalization as a set of “global flows” that impact places variably and that do not ignore local conditions (Fadzillah 87).

Advertising for whitening transcends gender boundaries, but only to an extent. As a 2014 online article points out, “Despite flares-ups of controversy about the way lightening products are advertised, the products themselves are generally not controversial in Asia” (Doland).

Achieving whiteness in visual culture supersedes other concerns, including product safety. Since whitening products are not likely to become unpopular in the near future, it is essential to pay more attention to product safety and ensure that chemicals such as hydroquinone are eliminated from market products.

**Selected References**