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**Title:**

Parallel discourses: Leveraging the Black Lives Matter movement to fight colorism and skin bleaching practices.

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The “*Black Lives Matter*” (BLM) movement in 2020 exemplifies efforts to counter prejudices and the colorist narrative.

We discuss the significance of societal perspectives of skin color, efforts to attain self esteem and social mobility through skin lightening practices.

Addressing the inadvertent (or indeed conscious) vehicles of systematic racism and sustaining of skin color prejudices and stereotypes of fair skin beauty by cosmetic companies is warranted.

Targeted health messaging is an imperative.

Harmful use of topical skin lightening agents continues worldwide despite interdiction or restricted use under domestic, European and international regulations.

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## Abstract

*Objectives:* The “*Black Lives Matter*” (BLM) movement in 2020 exemplifies efforts to counter prejudices and the colorist narrative. Harmful use of topical skin lightening agents continues worldwide despite interdiction or restricted use under domestic, European and international regulations.

*Study Design:* Commentary

*Methods:* Narrative review

*Results:* In this *Short Communication*, we consider the significance of societal perspectives of skin color, glocalized whiteness, efforts to attain self-esteem and social mobility through skin lightening practices, and the role of cosmetic products in fueling this phenomenon.

*Conclusions:* Addressing the inadvertent (or indeed conscious) vehicles of systematic racism and sustaining of skin color prejudices and stereotypes of fair skin beauty by cosmetic companies is warranted. Targeted health messaging is an imperative.

## Key Words

Colourism, skin lightening, skin bleaching

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4 At the time of writing this *Short Communication*, media has been swarming with news about  
5 protests and outcry of the “*Black Lives Matter*” (BLM) movement. This movement started in the  
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7 United States (US) but moved to the United Kingdom (UK), Canada and other areas to counter  
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9 racism and build community activism. Although it has arisen from a complex network of factors  
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11 and amplified since the death of George Floyd, it is worth considering the significance of societal  
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13 perspectives of skin color, how skin color relates to glocalized whiteness<sup>1</sup>, and efforts to attain  
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15 self-esteem and social mobility through skin beautification, and the role of pharmaceutical and  
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17 cosmetic skin lightening products in fueling this phenomenon.  
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24 We still cannot underestimate the power of fair skin and the stigmatization of dark skin in  
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26 all corners of the world. Historical origins of this “*somatic norm image*” coined by Dutch  
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28 sociologist Hoetink in 1967 are steeped in colonialism and colourism, despite contemporary rights  
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30 based domestic laws and international instruments prohibiting discrimination relative to skin color.  
31  
32 For more than 60 years, social-science literature has debated the significant role that skin color  
33  
34 plays in the lives of communities and people in different parts of the world<sup>2-3</sup>. The perception that  
35  
36 white or radiant fair skin is associated with social privileges (e.g. marital and employment  
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38 prospects) persists, alongside the emergence of normalization and vernacular reflecting skin  
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40 lightening as part of daily life is well documented<sup>2-5</sup>. Efforts to lighten skin tone has far reaching  
41  
42 historical origins and contemporary value in cultures across the world (for example India, China,  
43  
44 Japan, Pakistan, South Korea, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Benin, Cameroon, Mali, Senegal, Rwanda,  
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46 Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria)<sup>1-5</sup>. In India, skin lightening/bleaching it is deeply rooted in India's  
47  
48 complex caste-driven history where lighter skin was associated with the “*Bramhins*” and the dark-  
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50 skinned “*Dalits*” have been deemed for hundreds of years as “*untouchables*.” Japanese traditions  
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52 deem that a fair skinned woman compensates for “*seven blemishes*.” Socio-political factors  
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4 fueling cosmetic skin lightening in sub-Saharan Africa have centred on colonialism, apartheid and  
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6 domination by people of lighter skin tones <sup>3-5</sup>. The US has a chequered history where mixed race  
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8 children were conceived between slaves and slave master. This was known as the “*mulatto*”  
9  
10 hypothesis deeming these individuals to be more beautiful, civilized and smarter. This is similar  
11  
12 to the ideologies behind “*blanqueamiento*” in Latino cultures which further promoted the idea of  
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14 euro-centricism and social hierarchy, based on features and the fairer skin tone. Consequently, for  
15  
16 many African Americans and Latinos the concept of skin lightening speaks of this unspoken  
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18 hierarchy, is taboo and constitutes a rejection of black identity. Whilst some dark-complexioned  
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20 individuals view their skin color proudly, there are others who view their blackness as a “*mark of*  
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22 *oppression*” <sup>6</sup>.  
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29 Skin lightening practices are not confined to countries of origin, with the migration of  
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31 culturally accepted skin lightening/bleaching practices in communities of colour observed <sup>7-8</sup>.  
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33 Symbolism around functionality of light skin color centres on the perceived attainment of social  
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35 mobility through beautification, financial success and social capital<sup>1-5,7</sup>. In order to circumvent the  
36  
37 taboo of relinquishing ones color, cosmetic companies have utilized abstract marketing language  
38  
39 on skin products containing chemicals capable of lightening skin tone. Examples include; “*Naomi:*  
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41 *Ultra lightening lotion*”, “*Natural White*”, “*Ambi Fade Cream*”, “*Fair and Handsome*”, and  
42  
43 “*Clean & Clear Fairness Cream*”. Such topical agents are applied to specific or widespread areas  
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45 of the body in order to lighten normally dark skin (or dark patches and blemishes) and act by  
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47 reducing the concentration or production of melanin, typically in individuals with Fitzpatrick skin  
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49 phototypes IV (moderate brown) to VI (deeply pigmented dark brown to darkest brown) <sup>2,5</sup>.  
50  
51 Consumers are mostly women, and dark skinned individuals with melanin pigmentation disorders  
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53 (‘*dyschromias*’) <sup>5,9</sup>. Use of topical skin lightening agents are however associated with health harms  
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4 centring on toxicity and a diverse range of systematic side-effects, as reported in Africa, Europe,  
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6 the US, Australia and Hong Kong <sup>4,5,9,10</sup>. They typically contain one or several of the following:  
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8 mercury-containing compounds (known as mercurials), hydroquinone and its derivatives  
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10 (monobenzyl ether and monomethyl ether), potent corticosteroids and retinoids <sup>4,5</sup>. Skin lighteners  
11  
12 may also contain kojic acid, alpha hydroxyl acids, plant-derived products (containing active agents  
13  
14 such as arbutin) and hydrogen peroxide <sup>4,5,10</sup>. Homemade concoctions sold on the black market  
15  
16 typically contain adulterants (washing powder/liquid/soda, hair straighteners, sand, toothpaste,  
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18 automotive battery acid, cloth bleaching agents) <sup>3,5</sup>. Side effects may range from just local irritation  
19  
20 or allergic reaction, or extend to include carcinogenicity, permanent depigmentation, kidney and  
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22 liver malfunction, blood poisoning, convulsion and even coma <sup>3-5,8</sup>. Blue discoloration induced by  
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24 hydroquinone known as “*ochronosis*” has been predominantly observed where cultural practices  
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26 of skin bleaching are highly prevalent <sup>4,5,10</sup>.  
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34 Notwithstanding the deeper racial and prejudicial undertones amid aspects of social  
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36 colourism, and despite the evidence for health harms, skin lightening/bleaching is a multi-billion-  
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38 dollar industry <sup>1-2, 4-5, 9-10</sup>. Consumer interest is undoubtedly associated with historical prejudices  
39  
40 against darker skin, colourism and the potent marketing tactics of multinational cosmetic  
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42 companies. Attempts to reduce harms and regulate the skin lightening industry globally have  
43  
44 failed, and whilst some countries (e.g. Rwanda, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa) impose full or  
45  
46 partial bans on skin bleaching products, enforcement is problematic. The unregulated nature of the  
47  
48 skin bleaching business in many countries has fueled counterfeit production of illicit products,  
49  
50 online sourcing, trafficking and sale by non-medically qualified individuals. The “*Black is*  
51  
52 *Beautiful*” slogan in the late 60’ and “*Back to Black*” and “*Dark is Beautiful*” campaigns attempted  
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54 to raise awareness of potential health hazards of skin bleaching, and to counter the dominant  
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4 negative connotations of all things dark/black. These campaigns have now gained greater traction  
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6 in 2020 in the wake of media reporting of global BLM protests. Actors particularly those from  
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8 India advertising skin bleaching creams have faced intense criticism. Contemporary efforts also  
9  
10 include the Twitter feed “#adswedontbuy” to counter skin lightening cosmetic products. In June  
11  
12 2020 Johnson & Johnson announced it would stop selling skin-lightening products in the Middle  
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14 East and Asia. Online petitions demanded the same from Unilever who subsequently replaced the  
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16 word “fair” with “glow” on all products. L’Oréal also announced it would remove the words;  
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18 “fair/fairness”, “lightening” and “white/whitening” from its products. The South Asian dating  
19  
20 and matrimonial website “Shaadi.com” removed the ‘skin’ filter option, which allowed users to  
21  
22 search for individuals with fair or light complexions. In late June 2020, Johnson & Johnson  
23  
24 announced the launch of production and sale of skin tone specific plasters. Amendment of  
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26 terminology however falls short of addressing the underlying marketing messages on these  
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28 cosmetic products and greater ethical responsibility of multinational cosmetic companies is  
29  
30 warranted <sup>4</sup>. Addressing the inadvertent (or indeed conscious) vehicles of systematic racism and  
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32 sustaining of prejudices and stereotypes of beauty in skin bleaching practices constitutes a global  
33  
34 health challenge. This *Short Communication* wishes to add to the discourse by highlighting the  
35  
36 imperatives of pharmaceutical regulation and the key role of intense public health messaging  
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38 around harms of skin bleaching. Concurrent with the empowering nature of the BLM movement  
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40 in tackling the politics of skin colour and promoting racial equality, a concerted societal effort will  
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42 lay the foundation to shift contemporary concepts of skin tone and beauty, promote social capital  
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44 of diversity and reduce related health harms.  
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#### 54 **Author Declarations**

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58 **Ethical approval:** Not applicable  
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6 **Competing Interests:** None to declare  
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