

Skin Bleaching Among Somali Women: Exploring Social Drivers and Consequences

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Abstract

In Somalia, where darker skin once represented cultural identity and natural beauty, a quiet transformation is taking place. More and more women are turning to skin bleaching products to make their skin lighter.

Objective: This study aims to understand the reasons behind why Somali women engage in skin bleaching, its prevalence and the health effects associated with the use of skin lightening products.

Methodology: This study combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore reasons, prevalence and effects of skin bleaching among women in Somalia. Qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. While quantitative insights were obtained through structured online questionnaires.

Findings: The study results indicate that skin-lightening practices are quite common among Somali women. The reasons for using skin lightening products include attracting a marriage partner, Peer pressure from friends and Family, seeking job opportunities, Influence of social media, and boosting self-confidence.

Key words: Skin Bleaching, Somali Women, Beauty, Health implication

Introduction

In Somalia, darker skin has historically symbolized cultural pride and natural beauty. However, in recent years, this perception has shifted, with many Somali women increasingly adopting skin-bleaching practices. This growing trend, driven by social, cultural, and economic pressures, reflects a broader transformation in how beauty and identity are perceived in Somali society. Influences from social media, advertising, and global beauty standards have played a significant role in reshaping these ideals, often favoring lighter skin as a marker of attractiveness, success, and higher social status.

Despite the alarming spread of this practice, there has been limited academic research focused specifically on Somali women. While studies from other African countries have examined the motivations, health risks, and social implications of skin bleaching, Somalia remains underrepresented in this field of inquiry. This gap highlights a critical need to explore the local realities, beliefs, and experiences that drive Somali women to engage in skin lightening, particularly in the context of rising youth populations, increasing digital influence, and public health concerns.

This article aims to address that gap. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the study uncovers the key motivations behind skin bleaching among Somali women, its prevalence across age groups, and the associated health risks. The findings offer fresh insights into

how societal norms, economic aspirations, and media influence intersect to shape decisions about appearance.

Literature

Skin bleaching has become a widespread practice in many African countries, including Somalia, reflecting deep-rooted social, cultural, and economic dynamics. Noureen et al. (2025) found that many young urban women lighten their skin to enhance beauty and social appeal. This behavior is supported by Adetoogun et al. (2023), who link skin bleaching to colorism, suggesting lighter skin is seen as more advantageous socially and economically. Dwivedi (2020) highlights the media's role in reinforcing this ideal, portraying light skin as a standard of beauty and success. Charles (2009) and Lewis et al. (2009) found similar motivations in Jamaican and Tanzanian contexts, where lighter skin is perceived to resemble European beauty ideals and higher social status. Marriage prospects Lighter skin is often equated with higher marital value. Adetoogun et al. (2023) noted that women believe skin bleaching increases their chances of attracting partners. Hamed et al. (2010) observed that lighter-skinned individuals often have better access to education, income, and job opportunities. Emmanuel et al. (2017) echoed this, showing that light skin is often equated with professionalism and employability.

Health Risks: A review by Bastiansz et al. (2022) emphasized the public health risks of skin lightening products containing mercury, which can lead to severe outcomes such as kidney failure and neurological damage. Joana (2016) warned that skin bleaching removes the protective outer skin layer, increasing Negative Effect on the Physical Appearance of the Black Skin. Despite these risks, Adamu (2019) found

that social pressures lead many women to continue the skin bleaching practice.

Social and Media Pressures: Pollock et al. (2021) highlighted the role of peer, family, and media influence, particularly through platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which promote skin-lightening products and ideals. Fokuo (2009) pointed out that darker-skinned individuals are often negatively portrayed in the media, reinforcing lighter skin as the societal ideal. Lewis (2012) added that lighter skin is associated with fashion, respect, and modernity.

Methodology

The main objective of this study is to explore the phenomenon of skin bleaching among Somali women by using a mixed methods approach. This method combines both qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the use of skin whitening products, as well as the cultural, social, and personal factors that influence these decisions.

In line with Creswell's (2007) explanation of mixed methods research, this study integrates numerical data with participants' lived experiences to produce a richer, more comprehensive analysis.

The questionnaire consisted of both open and closed-ended questions. This combination allows deeper insight into personal beliefs and societal pressures surrounding beauty standards and skin tone preferences (qualitative), as well as the identification of measurable trends (quantitative)

By combining both forms of data, the study seeks to explore not only the prevalence of skin bleaching but also the meaning women attach to lighter skin, the influence of community norms, and perceptions of beauty. Through this process,

the research aims to understand the essence of women's experiences with skin bleaching in the Somali context.

Population: The target population consisted of all Somali women aged 18 years and above, regardless of their district or region of residence in Somalia.

Sample: Compared with previous studies, this approach offers a more extensive scope. For instance, Amankwa et al. (2016) studied Skin Bleaching and Its Negative Effect on the Physical Appearance of the Black Skin (A Case Study of Youthful Ladies and Women in the Ho Municipality in Ghana) purposively selected 100 young women from Ho Metropolis in Ghana. Building upon these methodologies, the current study aims to provide a more representative understanding motivations of the skin bleaching among Somali women.

Therefore, for the focus group discussion (FGD) involved eight women, while the questionnaire distributed 100 women but each respondent was asked to identify "Out of 10 female relatives in your close family, how many bleach their skin?" The study aimed to estimate this behavior based on responses that reflect the bleaching practices of approximately 10,000 women, providing a broader understanding of the trend in the target population.

Data Collection

Phase one of the data collection was conducted FGD and it took place at the offices of the Somali Research Association (SRA) and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Participants were informed about the purpose of the discussion and were asked for consent to be recorded. semi-structured FGD were conducted face-to-face with respondents about their

perception on their experiences skin whitening practices

The focus group consisted of eight Somali women with diverse skin tones and experiences: Two participant was observed to be currently bleaching their skin, two others were identified as having dark skin, and three were noted to have light skin. A discussion guide was prepared in advance, which included questions such as: "What do you think is the reason why some women choose to use skin whitening products?", "How are women with dark skin perceived?", "Is there skin discrimination?", "How do you think Somali society views white skin versus dark skin?", and "Which color do you think is considered beautiful?" Participants were encouraged to share their personal experiences and reflect on how these issues relate to wider societal beauty norms and pressures.

The session was documented through detailed note-taking and video recordings. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaHHOFFEajl> with prior permission obtained from all participants.

The session was transcribed using Microsoft Word after carefully reviewing the recorded video footage. Following the recommendation of Sale (2007), the transcripts were verified by listening to the recordings to ensure accuracy. Although the participants were not invited to review their transcripts, the final documents were reviewed collaboratively by the SRA research team. This internal review ensured agreement on the content and confirmed the validity and reliability of the transcriptions for analysis.

To determine the percentage of women who engage in skin bleaching, a specific question was included in the survey: Participants were also

asked to indicate the age range of those who bleach to understand the most affected age groups. These questions were created using KoboToolbox, and data were collected via mobile devices.

Analysis: All audio recordings from the discussions was transcribed verbatim. Key words, phrases, and recurring ideas identified and coded. These codes then be organized into broader themes that reflect the women participants' perspectives, experiences, and emotions regarding skin bleaching. The themes interpreted to extract deeper insights into the meanings and implications behind the views shared.

For the quantitative data analyzed, applying descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means to summarize the data.

Result

Question 1: What do you think of Somali society's perception of light skin vs. dark skin? Which color is considered beautiful?

"Both light and dark skin are desired, but personally, I prefer light skin."

"In Somali society, 95% consider light skin to be beautiful. In my opinion, there's no real difference between light and dark skin."

"I think most Somali women believe light skin is beautiful, but personally, I don't think there's a big difference."

Participants agreed that Somali society generally prefers lighter skin, viewing it as a sign of beauty. Although some respondents personally don't differentiate between skin colors, society largely favors those with lighter skin.

Question 2: How are dark-skinned women viewed? Are they discriminated against because

of their color? Do you believe darker skin affects job or marriage opportunities?

"Yes, dark-skinned girls are discriminated against; people say things like 'Your dark like the night, go lighten up.'"

"Dark-skinned women face discrimination. The world has changed; people use skincare and lighten their skin, so when someone is dark-skinned, they're told, 'Why are you so dark? Go lighten yourself.' In places like restaurants or front desks, fair-skinned girls are preferred."

"Some restaurants hire dark-skinned girls but assign them to beauty stations so customers will see them as an example of the lightening products' effectiveness."

"They believe lightening increases marriage chances, especially for women who have never married before. People joke that to attract a man, they should lighten up to look more appealing."

Dark-skinned women face societal criticism and are often labeled as incomplete in terms of beauty, damaging their self-esteem. Derogatory comments and discriminatory practices affect their opportunities in marriage, employment, and social life. Skin tone can even influence hiring practices, especially in industries that sell beauty products.

Question 3: Why do you think some women choose to use skin-lightening products?

"Women lighten their skin because society favors light skin. People are pressured by comments like 'Why haven't you lightened up?' Men like lighter women. Even friends encourage it."

"They believe light-skinned women get better opportunities in work, life, or relationships so they lighten their skin to succeed."

Women cited various reasons for lightening their skin: to appear more beautiful, gain social acceptance, or access better job and marriage opportunities. Pressure from peers, family, or partners was also a significant factor. Some participants felt lightening brought them more respect.

Question 4: Do you believe changing your skin tone can help you gain more opportunities like love, work, or social respect?

"The person who loves me should accept me as I am. Religion does not allow such pressure."

"I don't think being light-skinned brings advantages in work or love. What matters is behavior and character."

"Some women believe lightening helps get love and jobs, and they do achieve that."

There were differing views. Some believed true love and success aren't based on skin color, while others said light skin provides easier access to opportunities, including employment and relationships.

Question 5: Is there societal pressure on Somali women to change their skin color?

"Yes, it comes from society. People believe light skin equals beauty, so dark-skinned people are pressured to lighten up."

"Yes, especially from within the home sisters or neighbors who've lightened up may tell you to do the same to improve your life."

"Personally, I'd say it's jealousy. When you see a light-skinned girl advertising products, it triggers envy and leads to purchases."

"Social media and platforms like TikTok are major sources. Ads and influencers promote lightening, and group pressure happens like when one among

three friends lightens up and the others feel pressured to follow."

Social pressure plays a major role in the decision to lighten skin. Light skin is strongly associated with beauty, causing dark-skinned women to lose self-confidence. This pressure comes from family, partners, and media including social media and ads pushing women toward skin alteration for acceptance.

Question 6: What role do social media and films play in decisions to lighten skin?

"They play a big role. In movies, the beautiful girls are always fair-skinned. Ads show light-skinned women, which makes people think that's the standard of beauty."

"Even in international ads, light-skinned models are used. Beauty is often linked to skin color."

Media especially films and advertising shapes perceptions of beauty by consistently presenting light skin as ideal. This influences women's decisions to lighten their skin to fit this promoted image.

Question 7: Do skin-lightening products have health risks?

"Yes, they can thin the skin and lead to skin cancer."

"Lightening reduces melanin, which makes you sensitive to sunlight. Wounds heal slowly. It's dangerous."

"Women use a product called 'Qas Qas' a mix of unknown substances. It can cause itching or rashes."

"I developed itching and pimples from lightening products without proper descriptions some even caused burns."

Health risks were clearly identified: thinning of the skin, higher risk of skin cancer, lower melanin,

slow healing, rashes, and allergic reactions. Poor regulation and product mixing make it worse, leading some women to quit using them.

Question 8: How does skin tone affect self-confidence?

"Confidence doesn't depend on skin color, but once I lightened, I felt superior to dark-skinned girls."

"Being dark-skinned gives more confidence; when you lighten, you start worrying about scars or redness."

"If you embrace your natural color, you feel peace. Some regret lightening their skin."

"Dark-skinned women feel confident among others like them, but lose confidence when surrounded by lighter-skinned people."

While self-confidence can be independent of skin color, societal standards affect it deeply. Light-skinned people receive more admiration, while darker-skinned women may lose confidence, especially in mixed groups. Some who lightened their skin later regretted it.

Question 9: Have you or someone you know stopped lightening their skin? Why?

"Yes, I used to, but stopped after getting pimples I'd never had before. I regret it."

"Yes, I know someone who stopped after their skin tone became uneven. They couldn't tolerate the products anymore."

Some women stopped skin-lightening due to side effects like acne or uneven skin tone. Regret and negative health reactions were key reasons for quitting.

Question 10: What advice would you give to girls who are bleaching their skin or are planning to start?

"To those who haven't bleached and are keeping their natural skin tone, I would say: you have the best color, you are beautiful, and be confident. Know that the day you start bleaching is the day your problems begin. To those who are bleaching, I would say: it's already affecting you, stop it because it's harming your body."

"To dark-skinned girls, I would say: don't listen to people or let society pressure you. Be proud of your natural color. And to those bleaching: please stop and return to your original tone; I'm saying this out of concern for your health. Dark skin doesn't mean ugliness, and light skin doesn't mean beauty."

"You have the most beautiful color, and even those who bleach regret leaving their natural tone. Every fair-skinned girl you see is not necessarily more beautiful than you, so be confident in your own skin."

The women who participated in the focus group offered strong advice against skin bleaching. They encouraged dark-skinned girls to embrace their natural beauty and ignore societal pressures. They also advised against using harmful chemicals, recommending instead safe and natural skincare methods that do not harm the body.

To assess the prevalence of skin lightening among women, participants were asked: "Out of 10 close female relatives, how many use skin-lightening products?"

The responses showed that skin lightening is widely practiced, with 55.32% of participants saying that 3 out of 10 of their close female relatives lighten their skin. Another 19.15% reported 5 out of 10, 14.89% indicated 7 out of 10, and 10.64% said 9 out of 10.

These results suggest that skin-lightening practices are quite common within Somali

households/women, with nearly half of the respondents' relatives reported to be using skin bleaching products.

To understand the age group most engaged in skin-lightening practices, participants were asked to specify the age of the female relatives who use these products.

Findings revealed that the majority of users fall within the 18–25 age group, making up 65.96% of the responses. This was followed by 29.79% in the 26–32 age group, while 2.13% were between 33–39 years, and another 2.13% were 40 years or older.

Overall, the data highlights that skin lightening is especially widespread among younger women, suggesting that it has become a normalized and widely accepted practice within families and the broader Somali community.

Conclusion

This study shows that many Somali women use skin-lightening products because society sees light skin as more beautiful. They do it to look better, find a marriage partner, get jobs, or feel more confident. Social media, family, and friends also add pressure to lighten the skin.

The practice is very common. About 55.32% of women said 3 out of 10 of their close female relatives bleach their skin. Others said even more. This shows that skin bleaching has become normal in many Somali homes, especially among young women. But this comes with health risks. Women reported itching, redness, rashes, pimples, uneven skin, and long-term skin damage.

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