

SOCIOCULTURAL INFLUENCES ON SKIN COLOR IDEALS AND SKIN WHITENING PRACTICES AMONG WOMEN IN KULIYAPITIYA, SRI LANKA

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines the sociocultural influences shaping skin color ideals and skin whitening practices among women in Kuliypitiya, a semi-urban area in the Northwestern Province of Sri Lanka. This research critically examines women's conceptualizations of skin color, the everyday pressures that drive whitening practices, the associations between white skin and marriageability, relationship security and social mobility, and the reasons why women continue to engage in these practices despite awareness of health risks. Data were generated through 25 in-depth interviews with women aged 18 and above, selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity in age, marital status, socioeconomic background, and occupation. The interviews were conducted in Sinhala, audio-recorded with consent, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that fair skin is constructed as a hegemonic ideal that symbolizes beauty, purity, modernity, and personal worth, while dark skin is associated with dirt, rural labor, and lower status. The study concludes that skin whitening is not a singular cosmetic choice but a deeply embedded sociocultural strategy for survival and advancement in semi-urban Sri Lanka.

Keywords: colorism, skin whitening, skin color ideals, semi-urban Sri Lanka, beauty labor

Introduction

Skin color, while biologically determined by melanin concentration, carries profound social meaning across societies. It functions not merely as a physical characteristic but as a socially constructed marker of identity, desirability, and stratification. In South Asia, including Sri Lanka, lighter skin has historically been associated with beauty, virtue, refinement, and elevated social status, whereas darker skin has often been subtly stigmatized or linked to lower social prestige (Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2007). These associations are neither biologically inevitable nor culturally neutral; they are historically embedded and socially reproduced through colonial legacies, patriarchal norms, marriage structures, and global consumer capitalism (Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2007).

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The privileging of fair skin in South Asia must be examined within a historical continuum. Although pre-colonial literary traditions sometimes idealized lighter complexions, European colonial rule significantly intensified color hierarchies. Colonial administrations institutionalized racial classifications that positioned whiteness as a marker of authority, civility, and superiority (Said, 1978). Through bureaucratic structures, missionary education, and cultural representation, European features became associated with progress and power. Fanon (1967) argued that colonial domination not only structured political control but also produced psychological internalization of racial hierarchies among colonized populations. Whiteness became symbolically linked to competence, morality, and beauty.

Colonial rule in Sri Lanka under the Portuguese, Dutch, and British reinforced social hierarchies. Over time, these hierarchies became embedded in local society, contributing to colorism, whereby white skin is privileged over darker skin within the same racial or ethnic group (Hunter, 2007).

In contemporary Sri Lanka, fairness remains deeply embedded within beauty standards, particularly for women. Women's bodies are often subject to heightened social scrutiny. Feminist scholars argue that beauty standards function as mechanisms of gendered discipline, requiring women to constantly regulate and modify their bodies in accordance with socially constructed ideals (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). Within this framework, skin whitening can be interpreted as a form of beauty labor a routine bodily practice undertaken to align with dominant expectations.

The expansion of the global cosmetic industry has further reinforced fairness ideals. The skin lightening market has grown rapidly across Asia, with products ranging from creams and serums to medical procedures. Glenn (2008) conceptualizes skin lightening as part of transnational circuits of capital in which colonial histories intersect with neoliberal consumer culture. Whitening products are marketed not simply as aesthetic enhancements but as pathways to confidence, career success, romantic fulfillment, and empowerment.

Media representation plays a central role in normalizing these ideals. Advertising campaigns frequently portray darker skin as a problem requiring correction, while lighter skin symbolizes transformation and opportunity (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). social media influencers and global beauty content that promote idealized appearance standards (Levin et al., 2025).

Kuliyapitiya, located in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka, represents a semi-urban setting where traditional cultural values intersect with global consumer influences. Women in this community navigate multiple social pressures, including family expectations, marriage norms, peer comparison, educational aspirations, and economic constraints.

While skin whitening products are widely available in local markets and beauty salons, little research has explored how women in Kuliyaipitiya interpret and negotiate these practices.

Existing Sri Lankan research tends to focus on dermatological risks or advertising content rather than lived experience. There is limited qualitative sociological scholarship examining how women understand the relationship between skin color, marriageability, class mobility, and self-worth. Therefore, this study seeks to provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of the sociocultural influences shaping skin color ideals and whitening practices among women in Kuliyaipitiya.

Objectives of the Study

1. To critically examine women's conceptualizations of skin color ideals in Kuliyaipitiya.
2. To identify sociocultural factors that influence skin whitening practices among women in Kuliyaipitiya.
3. To explore how skin whitening is associated with marriageability, relationship security, social status and class mobility.
4. To explore why women continue to engage in skin whitening practices despite awareness of multiple adverse side effects.

Methodology

In order to investigate sociocultural influences on skin color ideals and skin whitening practices among women in Kuliyaipitiya, Sri Lanka, this study use qualitative research methodology. Because it enables a more thorough comprehension of participants' lived experiences, beliefs, and attitudes all of which are influenced by intricate social and cultural factors qualitative research is appropriate (Creswell, 2013; Brown and Clark, 2019). Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena, meanings, and power relations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Design

The study uses a descriptive research design appropriate for systematically describing participants' experiences and practices (Newman, 2014). It is descriptive because it seeks to document women's experiences and narratives. It is exploratory because limited research exists on this topic within semi-urban Sri Lankan contexts. The research was conducted in Kuliyaipitiya, a semi-urban area in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka. This setting was selected due to its transitional sociocultural characteristics, combining traditional family structures with increasing exposure to global media and consumer culture.

This design enables the researcher to provide a rich, detailed account of how sociocultural factors influence skin color ideals and skin whitening practices within the participants' natural context.

Study Area

This study was conducted in Kuliyaipitiya, a semi-urban area in the Kurunegala District of the Northwestern Province of Sri Lanka. Kuliyaipitiya serves as the administrative and commercial center for a cluster of surrounding rural villages. The area has a mixed economy that combines traditional agriculture (mainly paddy cultivation and coconut cultivation), small-scale industries, government employment, and a growing retail and service sector.

Kuliyaipitiya was deliberately chosen as the study area because it represents the everyday reality of the majority of Sri Lankan women living outside major urban centers. Much of the previous research on skin whitening practices in Sri Lanka has focused on highly urbanized cities such as Colombo, where higher income levels, greater exposure to international media, and more diverse social networks shape beauty ideals in unique ways (Fonseka and Wijekoon, 2019; Udayanga et al., 2024). By focusing here, the study captures the unique intersection of long-standing rural traditions such as strong family control, arranged marriage practices, and community expectations with modern pressures from media and consumer culture. This setting therefore provides a more representative and contextually rich picture of how women negotiate skin color ideals within Sri Lankan communities.

Sampling Method

This study used a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used as the primary strategy as it allowed the researcher to deliberately select participants with rich information relevant to the research objectives. In this case, women who could provide a detailed understanding of skin color ideals and whitening practices (Paton, 2015). The sample included women aged eighteen and over, residents of Kuliyaipitiya, and individuals with personal experience or clear understanding of skin whitening practices. Snowball sampling was also used to expand the sample. This method is particularly effective for sensitive topics where participants may be more comfortable referring to others in their trusted social networks (Noy, 2008; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The combination of these two sampling strategies ensured both relevance and diversity while respecting the cultural context of Kuliyaipitiya.

Sample Size

Twenty-five participants were recruited for the interview. In qualitative research, sample size is determined by the point at which new information no longer emerges and sufficient depth has been achieved to answer

the research questions (Guest et al., 2006; Malterud et al., 2016). This sample size is consistent with established guidelines for interview-based qualitative studies of social and cultural phenomena, where twenty to thirty participants are generally considered sufficient to generate rich, reliable findings (Morse, 2015). Furthermore, the study was able to generate authentic, context-rich data that directly addressed sociocultural influences on skin whitening practices among women in Kuliyaipitiya.

Data Collection Tools

The primary data collection tools used in this study were semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and observational field notes. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the main data collection method because they provided an appropriate balance between structure and flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore participants' personal experiences, meanings, and sociocultural influences related to skin whitening practices while maintaining consistency across interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

All interviews were conducted in Sinhala, the first language of both the participants and the researcher, in order to ensure cultural familiarity, participant comfort, and authentic expression of experiences. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five to sixty minutes and was audio-recorded only after obtaining written informed consent from the participants.

In addition to interview data, participant observation was used as a complementary data collection tool to better understand the everyday social and cultural contexts surrounding skin color ideals and beauty practices. During field visits, the researcher observed participants' interactions, beauty-related behaviour, use of cosmetic products, and discussions related to appearance and skin color in their natural social settings. An observation guide and detailed field note diary were used to systematically record these observations throughout the research process.

The observational field notes included descriptions of nonverbal communication such as facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, emotional reactions, silences, and social interactions observed during interviews and field engagement. These observations helped provide contextual depth and supported what Geertz (1973) describes as "thick description" in qualitative research. The observation data were analyzed together with the interview transcripts through thematic analysis by identifying recurring cultural patterns, meanings, and social behaviour related to beauty ideals and skin whitening practices.

Together, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes enabled the researcher to generate rich, contextual, and authentic qualitative data that directly addressed the research objectives and captured the everyday realities of skin color ideals and skin whitening practices among women.

Data Analysis Method

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. This method is particularly appropriate for research grounded in interpretivism, as it enables both descriptive and theoretically informed analysis.

The first phase involved familiarization with the data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original language and read multiple times to ensure immersion in participants' narratives. During this stage, initial reflections and analytical notes were recorded to capture emerging impressions and contextual observations. This process allowed the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of the dataset before formal coding began. The second phase involved generating initial codes. Open coding was conducted manually by identifying significant phrases, repeated expressions, emotional statements, and socially meaningful references related to skin color and beauty practices. These initial codes captured both explicit statements and implicit meanings embedded in participants' narratives. In the third phase, codes were examined and grouped into broader thematic categories. Patterns of similarity and conceptual relationships among codes were identified, leading to the development of candidate themes. These themes reflected recurring sociocultural dynamics influencing skin color ideals and whitening practices. The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining themes. The fifth phase required defining and naming themes. Each theme was clearly articulated in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. The defining characteristics of each theme were specified, and sub-themes were identified where appropriate. This stage ensured that themes were not merely descriptive labels but analytically meaningful constructs. The final phase involved producing the report. Thematic findings were organized into a coherent narrative that integrates participant quotations with sociological interpretation. The analysis moved beyond description to interpret how participants' experiences reflect broader structures of power, including colonial legacies, patriarchal norms, and consumer capitalism. While themes emerged from participants' lived experiences (inductive analysis), theoretical frameworks such as postcolonial theory, feminist theory, intersectionality, and cultural capital theory guided interpretive depth (deductive analysis). This blended strategy ensured that findings remained grounded in data while contributing to broader sociological debates.

Results and Discussion

Introduction

Through this focused qualitative investigation, the study contributes a sociological understanding of how women in Kuliyaipitiya actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist dominant skin color ideals, thereby addressing a clear gap in the literature on everyday whitening practices in semi-urban Sri Lanka. Five main themes emerged, capturing how women conceptualize skin color ideals, sociocultural factors that drive whitening practices, links to marriageability/class mobility, and emerging discussions of the use of whitening products despite risks. The themes are supported by oral quotations and sociological interpretations. Findings highlight equality as symbolic capital in semi-urban transitional spaces where colonial legacies intersect with patriarchal norms, media globalization, and economic pressures.

Conceptualizing Skin Color Ideals - Skin Whitening as Beauty, Purity, Modernity, and Personal Desire

As a core layer of the study's findings, this theme directly responds to the first research question. That is, how do women in Kuliyaipitiya conceptualize skin color ideals? The analysis reveals that fair skin is overwhelmingly constructed as a hegemonic ideal, symbolizing beauty, purity, cleanliness, modernity, sophistication, and personal enhancement. In sharp contrast, dark skin tones are consistently denigrated and associated with dirt, inferiority, rural labor, and lower social status. These conceptualizations are not just superficial aesthetic preferences but carry deep moral, symbolic, and social weight, acting as a powerful mechanism of self-regulation and social stratification in the semi-urban context of Kuliyaipitiya. Participants repeatedly expressed clear differences between fair and dark skin.

It is also worth noting that in order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants in this study, pseudonyms have been used for all individuals interviewed in this study. Throughout the data presentation and discussion sections, each participant has been given a fictitious name. This practice allows for the authentic presentation of the voices and lived experiences of the women of Kuliyaipitiya while ensuring anonymity. All quotes are presented as spoken by the participants during the interviews, with only minor grammatical adjustments made where necessary for clarity in the Sinhala-English translation.

As one participant stated,

“When I see a black person, I feel that they are not really clean. When I see a milky white person, I feel that they are very clean and tidy.” (Madumali, interview held on 04.12.2025)

This statement reflects a deeply internalized association of white with purity and cleanliness, while black is associated with impurity and inferiority, ideas that are not accidental but rooted in the long history of colonial rule in Sri Lanka. Under Portuguese, Dutch, and especially British colonial rule, white skin was gradually privileged as a sign of civilization, authority, and social superiority.

European colonialists and their local collaborators, the burghers and English-educated elites, were placed in a superior position, while dark skin was associated with manual labor, rural backwardness, and lower status (Fanon, 1967; Jayewardene, 2016; Said, 1978). Even after independence, these colonial hierarchies did not disappear; They were reflected through education, employment, marriage, and everyday social interactions. In Kuliyaipitiya, where rural agricultural life still coexists with an emerging consumer culture, this colonial legacy is deeply embedded in the everyday consciousness of women.

Another colleague's workplace example further illustrates how this skin color hierarchy operates in everyday life.

"I worked with another sister at my workplace, she recently got promoted. She was white and pretty, and I was black and short. The boss first took her for training, which was necessary for the promotion, however the boss liked her from the beginning. It's like that everywhere." (Varuni, interview held on 08.12.2025)

Varuni's life experience is a clear illustration of how skin color functions as symbolic capital. Even when qualifications are equal, white skin is automatically seen as an asset that leads to better treatment, opportunities, and recognition. Hunter (2007) argues that within the same racial or ethnic group, skin color creates a system of stratification, where people with white skin receive unearned advantages in education, employment, and social mobility. In the semi-urban setting of Kuliyaipitiya, white skin becomes a visible and immediate advantage. This finding is consistent with colorism theory, which explains how skin color discrimination exists independently of race and operates as a form of intra-group hierarchy (Hunter, 2007; Charles, 2003). In addition to moral judgments about cleanliness and professional favoritism, participants associated dark skin with physical exertion and rural identity. Ideals that echo both pre-colonial South Asian preferences and their intensification during the colonial period (Hall, 1995; Jha, 2016). They shape how women evaluate themselves and others in everyday social interactions, marriage negotiations, and community life. A second important dimension of this theme is the personal desire and internalized aspiration for fair skin. Women were not presented as being white as something imposed by society. Many described it as a personal dream to become more beautiful, confident and modern.

As one girl who attended tuition classes said,

“When a white woman walks around well-dressed, everyone says she is beautiful and turns to look at her, but when we black women walk around, it is not like that. I started getting pimples from the cream I applied to my face, but when I first became white, many people told me I was beautiful.” (Mayumi, interview held on 02.01.2026)

This narrative reveals how colonial legacies have been internalized and transformed into personal desire through the mechanisms of consumer capitalism and neoliberal discourses of self-improvement. Glenn (2008) describes skin whitening as part of the transnational circuits of cosmetic capital that confront colonial histories of whiteness with modern global marketing. Affordable whitening creams, Facebook, Instagram, and Tik-Tok advertisements constantly circulate images of fair, glowing skin as the key to success, love, and happiness. Women therefore experience the desire for fair skin as their own independent choice. This personal aspiration can be understood through Foucault’s (1988) concept of “technologies of the self,” whereby individuals actively work on their bodies to produce an appropriate modern subject. In the semi-urban context of Sri Lanka, skin whitening is seen as a way of aligning with contemporary, globalized standards of femininity and respectability. Bhabha’s (1994) concept of hybridity and imitation is particularly useful here. The women do not strive to be fully Western white. They adopt a hybrid ideal. A radiant, “almost white but not quite” glow that combines ideas of purity with global notions of modernity and sophistication. This imitation allows them to approximate the colonial ideal.

Women voluntarily submit to intensive cosmetic labor because they have internalized the patriarchal and colonial view that defines their value through appearance. This discipline is intensified by the intersection of traditional family expectations and modern media exposure. Thus, the pursuit of fair skin becomes an act of self-preservation and a subtle form of self-surveillance. The research findings highlight the complexity of colorism in trans communities.

Here, fair skin is not only seen as attractive but also as clean, respectable, modern, and worthy of love and opportunity. In contrast, dark skin carries the burden of historical inferiority, rural backwardness, and social devaluation. In summary, skin color ideals are shown to operate at multiple interconnected levels. As a colonial legacy, as a system of symbolic capital, as a moral and aesthetic hierarchy, and as a deeply personal desire shaped by neoliberal and consumerist discourses. By internalizing these ideals, women actively participate in their own regulation while simultaneously seeking empowerment and social acceptance.

Family, Peers, and Education as Key Sociocultural Pressures

Skin whitening is not an individual or personal decision. Instead, it is powerfully shaped by the closest and most enduring social relationships, family, peers, and early school experiences. Women do not start

whitening simply because they see an advertisement. They do it because mothers, grandmothers, aunts, friends, classmates, and even teachers have told them since childhood that white skin brings them acceptance, respect, love, and protection from shame. These everyday interactions turn beauty standards into social bonds that feel inescapable. The data reveal that a continuous system of pressures, in which family encouragement, peer comparison, and school memories work together, begins in early life and continues into adulthood, so that skin whitening is felt not as a personal choice but as a necessary obligation. The family emerges as the strongest and most direct source of pressure. From a young age, mothers, grandmothers and other relatives constantly observe and comment on the skin color of girls, seeing skin color as something that protects the family's reputation and future marriage prospects.

As one of the participants mentioned,

“My family often compares my skin color to others. Grandma always says you are like your father's family, like your mother, you are not white, our sister is a little white, so my mother calls my sister ‘Suddi’ (an alternative name for the family instead of her own name). My family calls me ‘Loku’ (often used to refer to the eldest child in a family).” (Siwanthika, interview held on 02.01.2026)

This quote is a powerful illustration of how colorism is reinforced within the intimate space of the family. Families are simply told to prefer fair skin. This practice is deeply rooted in post-colonial history. During Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial rule, white skin was systematically associated with higher social status, better jobs and marriage into “respectable” families (Jayawardena, 2016; Fannon, 1967; Said, 1978). Even after independence, these ideas persisted and were passed down through generations as family wisdom. Hunter (2007) and Glenn (2008) explain that white skin functions as symbolic capital. An asset that families can use to improve their social status and secure better marriages. In semi-urban Kuliyaipitiya, where arranged marriages and community gossip are strong, dark skin is seen as a threat to family honor.

This pressure was clearly articulated in a focus group discussion. As a companion stated,

“Only when we are white and beautiful will even those who abandoned us understand our worth.” (Sapuni, interview held on 08.12.2025)

As a married participant stated,

“I am married to a very fair-skinned man, but my husband's family did not want me to marry him, but now we are married. My husband's sister says that our children's skin color will also be dark, and she says so right where I am. Actually, I am black and short.” (Janaki, interview held on 25.12.2025)

These findings suggest that family oppression does not end with marriage. It continues as a lifelong control mechanism that links skin color and family image. Feminist scholars such as Bartki (1990) and Bordeaux (1993) describe this as “beauty labor.” This describes the daily disciplinary work that women must perform on their bodies to meet patriarchal and colonial standards. This labor is not only individual but also collective. Mothers and relatives become the primary enforcers, and whitening has become a family project rather than a personal preference. Recent studies have shown that family views are among the strongest predictors of the persistence of skin whitening in South Asian contexts (Adbi et al., 2021; Koththigoda, 2025). Thus, what may seem like loving advice from family is, in reality, the transmission of colonial and patriarchal norms that measure a woman’s worth by her skin color. Peer comparisons and opinions form the second layer of sociocultural pressure. Friends and classmates constantly compare skin colors, complimenting fair skin or making fun of dark skin, creating an environment where appearance becomes a currency for social acceptance.

Two participants who shared their experiences together explained how peer influence led them to start using whitening creams.

“Neither of us are very fair-skinned. An older sister who lived near my house first applied ‘carotene cream’, and then I bought it too. It turned my skin a beautiful yellow color after about two weeks. Then we both started applying it, and after a few weeks, I was able to get a beautiful color, but after stopping the cream, I got more pimples on my face, and my face became messy, so I tried to apply it again.”
(Shaluki, interview held on 25.12.2025)

This shared story has been interpreted as a classic example of peer socialization and social comparison. Young women closely observe each other’s bodies and develop their own habits to gain approval and avoid ridicule. Bartki (1990) argues that women control each other’s appearance under patriarchal surveillance, making beauty a competitive rather than a cooperative practice. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) adds important depth to this. young, unmarried women feel this pressure more intensely because they are still constructing their social identities and have fewer resources to resist group norms. Banala et al. (2023) and Nambiar (2023) found similar patterns in South Asian communities, where peer opinions often outweigh health concerns and push women toward whitening products. Although many participants are now adults, memories of school remain vivid and emotional. Light-skinned girls received more attention from teachers and boys at school, while dark-skinned girls were teased or ignored.

One participant recalled a painful childhood incident,

“While I was practicing for a dance competition, my dance teacher put me behind a white kid because I was black. I went home crying and asked my mother, ‘Mom, am I ugly?’ I was eleven years old at the time.” (Parthana, interview held on 17.01.2026)

This quote reveals how educational institutions unwittingly reproduced colonial hierarchies. During colonial times, schools were places associated with white skin, intelligence, discipline, and upper class (Sayed, 1978; Bajwa, 2025). These patterns persist today through subtle but powerful practices such as teacher attention. Because of school-age experiences of being judged by skin color, girls are still influenced to have fair skin even after they leave school. Taken together, family encouragement, peer comparisons, and school memories form a powerful, interconnected system of sociocultural pressures that begin in childhood and persist throughout life.

The women in this study do not describe becoming white as a purely personal experiment. They describe it as a response to the constant, loving, yet controlling voices of those close to them. This theme therefore challenges the idea that becoming white is a free, individual choice. Instead, it demonstrates that beauty standards are learned, enforced, and maintained through the most intimate social institutions family, friendship circles, and schools that perpetuate the legacy of colonial and patriarchal ideas about women’s worth. These pressures intersect with postcolonial hierarchies, colorism as symbolic capital, feminist disciplinary beauty labor, and the vulnerability of intersectionality to create a situation in which being white feels necessary and normal.

By listening to this voice, the study reveals that real change cannot come from health warnings alone. It must address the love, respect, and deep social connections that are the bright spots of semi-urban Sri Lankan life.

Media and Advertising as Powerful External Drivers

Participants’ narratives indicate that television advertising and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tok-tok play a significant role in reinforcing fair-skin ideals among women. Media representations frequently associate desirable appearance with positive attributes such as attractiveness, confidence, success, and social acceptance, thereby shaping perceptions of beauty and self-worth. Repeated exposure to idealized beauty content can strengthen appearance-based comparisons and increase pressure to conform to dominant beauty standards (Fioravanti et al., 2022). The findings further suggest that media influences do not operate independently; rather, they interact with family, peer, and school influences, contributing to the normalization of skin-lightening practices. Social media platforms are particularly influential because they provide continuous exposure to visual content, including influencer posts, beauty

tutorials, and appearance-focused images that promote idealized standards of beauty (Fioravanti et al., 2022; Cohen et al., 2022). These findings demonstrate how contemporary digital media can reinforce color-based beauty ideals in everyday life.

Here's how one participant described how a simple Tik-Tok ad inspired her to buy a cream.

“I bought the cream from a girl on Tik-Tok, there were many comments saying it was good, so I bought it too.” (Charuni, interview held on 17.01.2026)

Another companion shared a similar experience,

“I was browsing Facebook and saw this whitening cream. Under that post, there were many comments like, ‘The best cream, my skin is brighter now, I saw results after two weeks’.” (Kanthi, interview held on 02.01.2026)

Another woman explained how a Tik-Tok creator's promotion influenced her decisions before marriage,

“I started using a whitening cream three months before my wedding. A famous content creator on Tik-Tok was marketing the cream. They were promoting it as the best cream for getting married to get a golden skin tone. But after marriage, I became whiter than before. I stopped using the cream. But then I started getting acne on my face. Now I am taking medicine for acne.” (Udeshika, interview held on 27.01.2026)

These findings demonstrate how social media is transforming colonial legacies into contemporary consumer desire. Fanon (1967) argued that colonized people learn to hate their own skin because they internalize whiteness as the standard of beauty and progress. Today, Tik-Tok, Facebook, and Instagram deliver the same message in a faster, more personalized way. Often, societal norms favor women with bright, fair skin, giving them favors, comments, marriage proposals, and praise, while making dark skin feel outdated and inappropriate. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity is particularly relevant here. The women of Kuliypitiya are not simply copying Western whiteness. They are creating a hybrid ideal. A “shining” or “golden” look that blends ideas of local Sri Lankan radiance with global equity. This imitation feels more empowering and modern than colonialism. Koththigoda (2025) observed the same strategy in Sri Lankan social media advertisements, deliberately using the word “shiny” to make whiteness seem like self-care and empowerment rather than colorism. Glenn (2008) describes this as part of the transnational circuits of beauty capital where colonial histories meet digital marketing. With high-speed internet now commonplace even in ordinary homes, social media has made global beauty standards instant and attainable.

Feminist theory further explains the power of these platforms. Bartky (1990) and Bordeaux (1993) argue that media teaches women to engage in constant self-observation, turning the body into a project to be monitored and improved daily. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights why young and unmarried women feel this pressure most acutely. They are at a stage in their lives where social media shape's identity, marital expectations, and peer acceptance. If others are white and successful, then becoming white becomes the logical choice. The cycle often continues even after marriage because of the fear of losing the “glow” appearance. Social media is not just about advertising products. It socializes women to see fair skin as essential for modern femininity and personal success.

Television advertisements remain an important external influence on beauty perceptions. Studies have shown that fairness-product advertisements frequently portray lighter skin as desirable and associate it with attractiveness, confidence, social acceptance, romantic success, and career advancement. Such representations reinforce the notion that fair skin is linked to positive life outcomes and contribute to the normalization of color-based beauty ideals among women (Akram, 2025; Hunter, 2007). Repeated exposure to these messages through television can strengthen existing social preferences for lighter skin and influence beauty-related attitudes and practices.

As the experiences of the participants described,

"When I finish all my homework in the morning and sit in front of the TV, I watch all the programs. They always tell me something new to make women skin brighter than it already is. Then I think, somehow, I need to lighten my skin tone a little more."(Shashini, interview held on 25.12.2025)

The findings suggest that television continues to function as a cultural teacher. Despite the rise of social media, television remains a shared family medium, reaching women across age groups and socioeconomic levels. Postcolonial theory provides a clear lens through which to understand this impact. Fanon (1967) explained that the colonial gaze taught colonized peoples to see their own dark skin as inferior and their whiteness as superior. Television advertisements enliven that gaze by repeatedly presenting fair skin as the “right” and “beautiful” appearance. Said (1978) showed how Orientalist discourses positioned Western beauty standards as universal. Sri Lankan television advertisements today still echo that positioning by associating fairness with progress, happiness, and modernity.

Feminist scholars such as Bordo (1993) argue that these advertisements teach women to discipline their bodies as a personal duty. Findings suggest that beauty is not natural but can be achieved through daily effort, and that failure to make that effort is a failure as women. Intersection (Crenshaw, 1989) helps explain why married and older women also feel this pressure. Even after marriage, television reinforces the idea

that maintaining fair skin is necessary for continued family acceptance and social respect. Many households watch television together, and these advertisements become collective family experiences rather than private viewing. Repeated exposure normalizes whiteness as a normal part of women's routines, such as cooking or cleaning. This finding is particularly important because many studies of urban Colombo have focused on social media while underestimating the continuing power of television in semi-urban and rural areas (Fonseka and Wijekoon, 2019; Udayanga et al., 2024).

The combined impact of social media and television advertising creates a powerful feedback loop. Social media provides personalized, interactive validation through opinions and impactful stories, while television provides emotionally charged, family-shared narratives. Together, they keep the colonial ideal of white superiority alive in new digital and domestic forms. A woman may first hear from her family that she must be white for marriage, then see that promise reinforced on Tok-tok, and then watch a television ad that shows exactly that transformation leading to family happiness.

This constant reinforcement makes resistance difficult. The media doesn't just sell cream. It sells a version of self-worth that associates white skin with love, success, and entitlement. As a result, women continue to be white despite the known risks, because stopping means stepping outside the powerful messages they encounter on their phones and television screens every day. Skin whiteness is shaped by a powerful combination of intimate social pressures and pervasive external media forces. Television and social media do not simply reflect beauty standards. They actively produce and reproduce them, keeping colonial ideas about racial and aesthetic hierarchies alive in everyday life.

Skin whitening as symbolic capital for marriageability, and relationship security

The findings reveal how women do not bleach their skin just to look beautiful. They do so as something useful that they can "invest" in to gain real benefits in life, such as money, education or good family relationships. According to the participants, fair skin helps them win better marriage proposals, feel secure and accepted in relationships, gain family approval and gain more respect and opportunities in society and work. Women see fair skin as something that can be "used" like money or education. It is not just about looking pretty. The research findings reveal that it offers real benefits for marriage, relationships and success in life. As already explained in the literature review, family and marriage are very important in Sri Lanka and fair skin acts as a "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1984). This theme shows how the research findings show how fair skin helps women to get better marriage offers, family approval and respect in society.

In the marriage market, fair skin is considered a desirable quality when families are choosing a bride. Research findings show that parents and relatives often say that a girl with fair skin is more “suitable,” more beautiful, and more likely to attract a good husband and enjoy a happy married life. Women are under intense pressure to lighten their skin to match the expectations of matrimonial advertisements and family members. This pressure begins before a girl leaves school and intensifies as marriage negotiations begin.

A participant in the research vividly described her own experience,

“Before I got married, my parents were looking for many marriage proposals. My parents looked at the ones in the newspapers. When we looked at the ones in the newspapers, most of them asked for a white, educated and attractive young woman. Also, I graduated from a public university, but I am not white. Finally, I married a brother from my mother’s family. After I started my first job, I spent a lot of money on whitening cream. Now I can’t stop using the cream. After I stop using the whitening cream, my skin becomes darker than before.” (Iroshani, interview held on 17.01.2026)

Iroshani’s report can be interpreted as a powerful illustration of how fair skin functions as symbolic capital in the marriage market. Although she had an education and a government job, traditionally valued assets, her dark skin was still seen as a deficit that needed to be corrected through whitening creams. Hunter (2007) explains that light skin functions as symbolic capital within the same ethnic group, conferring higher value and better choices in the marriage market.

Women with fair skin are perceived to bring greater social prestige to the family, which leads to higher status husbands and more favorable alliances. Hunter (2002) further demonstrates that light skin brings tangible marital advantages to women of color. Postcolonial theory deepens this understanding. During the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial rule of Sri Lanka, fair skin was systematically associated with better jobs, education and social respect, creating a lasting association between white skin and higher status (Fanon, 1967; Said, 1978; Jayewardene, 2016). Even decades after independence, families unwittingly continue to implement this colonial logic, viewing fair skin as “respectable” and “modern” while tacitly associating dark skin with lower status. This is precisely what Fanon (1967) described as the “epidermal schema”, where people judge a woman’s future primarily based on her skin color. Koththigoda (2025) confirms that contemporary Sri Lankan marriage negotiations and family expectations continue to perpetuate the fair skin ideal. Families that carry forward rural traditions openly and emotionally discuss skin color, especially in arranged marriages, which makes the pressure on women more direct and intense. Therefore, women lighten their skin not out of vanity, but as a practical strategy to succeed in the marriage market. White skin provides women with relationship security and family acceptance, providing a sense of security and belonging in both romantic partnerships and extended families. When a woman has fair skin,

her boyfriend's or husband's relatives accept her more easily and show her more respect. Many participants explained that fair skin reduces the fear of rejection, comparison, or criticism based on skin color.

A woman described her ongoing struggle,

“My husband and his family members have fairer skin than me. But I am a brown-skinned girl, so my husband’s mother still says some things to hurt my heart, even our babies have dark skin, his mother says. So, I got injections to get white skin. But it was expensive, I stopped it, now I apply whitening cream on my whole body.” (Dhanushi, interview held on 02.01.2026)

Another woman shared a similar story,

“My husband’s younger brother’s wife is white and beautiful. When we go to my husband’s mother’s house, they compare me to my cousin. I feel very sad. I searched a lot to find the best way to get a little whiter. I was afraid of getting injections, so I started using a whitening cream.” (Subashi, interview held on 27.01.2026)

These findings suggest that family relationships I see this as clear evidence that white skin acts as a protective capital. Sri Lankan families often judge a woman’s worth by her appearance, and fair skin is interpreted as evidence of “good character” and “suitability” for family life. Feminist theory powerfully explains this pressure. Women are expected to perform “beauty routines” every day to keep their relationships safe and stable (Bartkey, 1990; Bordo, 1993). This is not a free choice but a daily obligation to protect their place in the family. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) shows why some women feel this pressure more strongly. Mishra et al. (2023) in the journal *Body Image* found that South Asian women face intense pressure from elders and aunts about their appearance in order to secure marriage and family acceptance. Women who do not meet the white skin standard often feel insecure and worry about rejection. Similarly, Banala et al. (2023) in the *Journal of Women's Psychology* found that parental and family pressure to lighten their skin is directly related to better relationship security and social acceptance among South Asian women. When joint family lifestyles and close kinship ties are strong, these pressures feel more emotional and inevitable, arranged marriages, extended families, and community gossip are central to daily life, and fair skin becomes an embodied form of capital that women cannot easily ignore. By lightening their skin, women are not simply following fashion, but they are strategically navigating postcolonial legacies, patriarchal expectations, and economic realities to gain a better position in both the private and public spheres.

Persistence of skin whitening despite awareness of health risks

Women are aware of the health risks associated with skin-lightening products, including skin damage such as burning, thinning, hyperpigmentation, acne, and long-term risks linked to harmful ingredients like mercury and steroids. Some studies also highlight potential severe health consequences, including hormonal disruption and cancer risk from unsafe cosmetic use. Despite this awareness and personal or observed experiences of adverse effects, usage continues. Findings suggest that sociocultural pressures and beauty ideals are stronger influences than health concerns, sustaining continued use of skin-lightening products (Dlova et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2019).

During the focus group discussion, one participant said,

"I have been using a skin whitening cream for about 6 months now, and I can't stop using it. If I stop using the cream, my face starts to get pimples. So, I use it for about 3 more days a week. When I go out in the sun, it gets really dark, so I apply the cream again." (Tharushi, interview held on 08.12.2025)

Another participant expressed a similar interpretation.

"I know it is not good to use this whitening cream every day, but after stopping applying the cream for a month or two, my skin tone returned to its previous level, so I now use it once or twice a week." (Rohini, interview held on 04.12.2025)

This strong evidence can be shown that awareness of health risks alone is not enough to stop skin whitening practices. Many women have detailed, lived knowledge of the physical and long-term dangers, but they persist because the social, cultural, and symbolic costs of stopping are felt to far outweigh the physical harm.

Feminist theory explains this situation very well. Women feel that they cannot escape beauty standards (Bartki, 1990; Bordeaux, 1993). Although they know that the cream is harmful, they still see whitening as something they have to do every day to feel accepted and safe in society.

The body becomes a site of constant discipline. Banala et al. (2023) studied South Asian women and found that many had a high awareness of the risks of mercury, cancer, and skin damage, but continued to use the products because they felt social and family needs were more pressing. Jacob et al. (2023) reported that many women were aware of side effects such as acne, but still used the cream because they believed that fair skin was more important. A recent study on risk awareness by Wehlie et al. (2025) showed that although women were aware of the dangers such as burns, skin thinning, and hormonal problems, social pressure did

not stop skin whitening. Fonseka and Wijekoon (2019) found in their Sri Lankan study that 85% of women continued to use the cream despite being well aware of the risks. These international and local studies echo exactly what the women described in this study. The difference lies in the context.

The participants expressed their situation well,

"I have a sister in Colombo, she told me not to apply a cream that whitens in two weeks. Since I earn a monthly salary, she told me to please channel a good dermatologist in Colombo and buy good products. However, I also saw a cream on Facebook, ordered it, and applied it." (Wasuki, interview held on 08.12.2025)

Women first learn the moral superiority of fair skin in childhood through family and school, they see the promise of success and happiness in fair skin reinforced daily through the media and advertising, they internalize fair skin as a symbolic capital necessary for marriage and family acceptance, and by the time they become aware of the health risks, this practice is already deeply embedded as a survival strategy. Wasuki's decision to order a Facebook cream despite the warning of her sister in Colombo is particularly clear. It shows how social media and family pressure can override external advice and even medical knowledge. Women therefore manage risk rather than eliminate it. They use the cream "once or twice a week," challenging the dominant public health approach that assumes that some increased awareness will automatically reduce harmful practices. Knowledge of the risks is already widespread, but use persists because the symbolic, social, and emotional benefits of fair skin outweigh the known physical costs. Despite clear awareness of the risks of burnout, thinning, hormonal imbalances, and cancer, the continued use of each woman is a testament to how deeply these forces shape daily life in communities. By centering women's voices, this study shows that real solutions must address family education, media regulation, school curricula, marriage norms, and economic support for safer alternatives.

Economic Constraints

This theme shows how financial concerns strongly influence women's use of cheap skin lightening creams. Many women know the risks, but they are unable to afford safer alternatives or stop altogether. Fair skin is seen as a cheap "investment" that can help them secure marriage proposals, better treatment at work, or greater respect in everyday life. When incomes are low, cheap creams from the market become the only option, even if they suffer burns, thinning skin, or other damage. In Sri Lanka and South Asia, poor families are trapped in risky practices because they cannot afford expensive "safe" products or clinic treatments. In the *Quarterly Journal of Women's Psychology* (2023), Banala et al. found that low-income South Asian women frequently use skin lightening products because they know the risks but cannot afford safer

alternatives. Vijaya and Bhullar (2022) in the Asian Journal of Social Psychology pointed out that colorism creates economic inequality, as dark-skinned women from poor backgrounds face greater employment barriers to compete, which forces them to bleach their skin. Pollock et al. (2021) noted in their international review that half of all skin care spending in South Asia goes on whitening products, and poor women suffer the most because they cannot switch to safer alternatives. The findings of this research highlight how Sri Lankan women face economic barriers when purchasing beauty products.

A girl described her experience during her A-level studies,

“When I was doing A-level, I first used a ‘Gori’ cream that I bought for nine hundred rupees in Kuliyaipitiya. After about 4 months, my face was completely ruined.” (Darshi, interview conducted on 04.12.2025)

Another woman expressed a similar interpretation,

“I really wanted to be a little fairer, but since I don’t have a job, I can’t afford expensive beauty products. I can’t even ask my husband for it, so I bought cheap creams.” (Sakunthala, interview conducted on 27.01.2026)

Many participants expressed a desire to improve their skin tone but faced financial constraints that limited their access to branded or medically approved skin care products. Due to these constraints, some women were reluctant to use the product. Despite awareness of the health risks, people turned to low-cost or unapproved products. Therefore, economic inequality has shaped not only access to beauty products, but also the skin lightening methods adopted.

Darshi’s decision to buy a “Gori” cream for nine hundred rupees during her senior year of high school to temporarily whiten her face, and Sakunthala’s inability to ask her husband for better products because she has no income of her own, reveals a clear pattern. Fair skin is not a luxury, but a survival necessity that must be purchased within the constraints of a typical household budget. In Kuliyaipitiya, where many families depend on agriculture, small shops or daily wage work, monthly income often leaves no room for expensive creams or clinical treatments prescribed by dermatologists. So, women turn to low-cost methods sold in local markets and on social media, accepting the cycle of short-term results and causing long-term harm. This is not risk ignorance. It is rational economic calculation. A nine-hundred-rupee cream gives visible fairness within a few weeks, which can translate into better marriage proposals, fewer jokes from in-laws, or quicker service in government offices. It illustrates how skin whitening is transformed from a cultural practice into a structural trap. Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of symbolic capital helps explain why women invest in cheap creams despite the harm. White skin acts as a transformable resource that can be

exchanged for marriageability, family acceptance, and everyday respect, but only if it can be maintained at minimal cost. When incomes are low, the cheapest cream becomes the only viable way to keep that capital intact. Hunter (2007) and Glenn (2008) have shown that colorism exacerbates economic inequality, as dark-skinned women from poor backgrounds face additional barriers in the job market and marriage market, pushing them to spend what little money they have on whitening products. Women know that creams can cause burns, skin thinning, dark spots, hormonal imbalances, and long-term cancer risk, but the immediate social benefits of looking fairer outweigh the future health costs. Feminist theory adds another layer. Bartki (1990) and Bordo (1993) argue that beauty work is a form of disciplinary power that women perform daily, and that economic constraints make this work even more burdensome, as women must do it with the cheapest and most dangerous tools available.

Economic constraints act as the glue that holds the entire system together. By making cheap, dangerous creams the only practical option, poverty ensures that the colonial ideal of fair skin is not only desirable but achievable for even the poorest women. This finding is particularly important for policy and intervention, as it demonstrates that education alone is never enough when it comes to health outcomes. Together, the six themes that emerged from twenty-five in-depth interviews paint a clear and compelling picture of why women engage in skin-whitening practices.

Women do not whiten their skin out of vanity or ignorance. They do so because white skin has become a practical tool for their survival and success in their daily lives. Overall, white skin is not simply seen as beautiful. It is considered clean, modern, and respectable, while dark skin is tacitly associated with dirt, rural labor, and lower social status. This moral binary is a direct result of the colonial history that continues to live on in people's minds. Further exploration reveals that the strongest push comes from those closest to them, family members, friends, and even school memories. Mothers, aunts, classmates, and teachers tell girls from a young age that fair skin brings love, respect, and security, and that being fair is not a personal choice but a family necessity. Media, including television ads, Facebook, Instagram, and Tok-tok, have acted as constant teachers. Using these creams to become a fair-skinned woman, cheap local commercials, and even short videos have brought the old colonial message to life in simple but powerful ways. It's not just about looks, it's an investment that women use to get better marriage proposals, feel safe with in-laws and family, gain respect in offices and shops, and move up in life. In this Kuliyaipitiya region, where arranged marriages and strong families are well-established, women are somewhat aware of health risks, but social pressure and the pervasive sense that "everyone is doing it" prove to be stronger than the fear of harm. Economic constraints bind everything else together. Many women cannot afford expensive protective products or clinic treatments, and since access to such products is limited, they are tempted to buy creams that are popular in regular retail stores and on social media. Taken together, the findings of this research

fully answer all four research questions. Women see fair skin as a way to feel beautiful, gain family acceptance, secure marriage, gain respect, and advance in life. The research findings prove that colonial history, family pressures, media messages, marriage market demands, and financial concerns work together like a strong network. But they cannot escape them easily. This study makes an important contribution to the existing literature. The findings prove that skin lightening is not a free choice. It is shaped by history, society, family, and money.

Conclusion

The central argument of this thesis is that skin whitening practices among women in Kuliyaipitiya represent much more than personal cosmetic choices. They are a collection of deeply embedded sociocultural strategies shaped by historical, relational, economic, and symbolic forces. Colonial rule instilled the idea that fair skin symbolized superiority, respectability, and progress, and this idea has been continuously reproduced through family teachings, school experiences, media messages, marriage negotiations, and the realities of limited income. Postcolonial theory explains the enduring psychological internalization of these hierarchies, while colorism theory reveals how fair skin confers tangible social consequences within the same ethnic group. Feminist perspectives and intersectionality highlight the gendered and overlapping pressures that make whitening a daily necessity, especially for young, unmarried, or low-income women with few options. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital captures the practical ways in which fair skin translates into marital security, family acceptance, respect in the workplace, and upward mobility. Taken together, the themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews with twenty-five women paint a clear and compelling picture of why women in this semi-urban community engage in skin whitening. Fair skin is not simply seen as beautiful. It is seen as clean, modern, and respectable, while dark skin is tacitly associated with dirt, rural labor, and lower social status. This moral binary is a direct result of the colonial history that continues to live on in people's minds. The strongest push comes from those closest to women: family members, friends, and even long-standing school memories. Mothers, aunts, classmates, and teachers teach girls from a young age that fair skin brings love, respect, and security, making being fair a family necessity rather than a personal choice. Media, including television ads, Facebook, Instagram, and Tok-tok, act as constant external teachers who reinforce the same message in simple but powerful ways. Fair skin serves as symbolic capital that women "invest" in order to get better marriage proposals, gain acceptance from in-laws, receive respectful treatment in offices and shops, and open up avenues for social and economic mobility. Although women are aware of the serious health risks of skin irritation, burns, skin thinning, dark spots, hormonal imbalances, and cancer, social normalization and the widespread belief that "everyone is doing it" prove to be stronger than the fear of harm. Limited income prevents women from purchasing safe

or branded products, so they rely on cheap creams that do more harm, transforming bleaching into a low-cost survival strategy for marital prospects, workplace respect, and everyday situations.

The unique contribution of the study lies in its focus on a semi-urban setting where traditional family authority intersects with growing digital exposure and persistent economic constraints. Women in this Kuliyaipitiya area face strong interpersonal surveillance and few resources, and bleaching has become a tool of survival rather than a luxury. The persistence of these practices, despite many women's awareness of the health risks, underscores the inevitability of deeply normalized social habits. It reveals how colonial and consumerist influences have overshadowed Sri Lanka's rich heritage of natural beauty and self-acceptance. Finally, the findings show that skin whitening is a sign of larger structural inequalities rooted in history, patriarchy, media globalization, and economic inequality. Addressing it requires more than individual awareness. By listening carefully to the lived experiences of women in Kuliyaipitiya, this dissertation contributes to a grounded, context-specific understanding that challenges simplistic ideas about women's beauty practices and opens pathways for culturally sensitive change. The voices of these twenty-five women remind us that real transformation must begin with dismantling the intertwined forces of colonial legacies, family expectations, media messages, marital norms, and economic hardship that continue to make white skin feel like a non-negotiable price for respect, security, and belonging in everyday semi-urban life. As a final recommendation, future research should expand qualitative studies to include men's perspectives on skin color ideals.

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