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Colonialism's Role in the Success of the Filipino Skin Whitening Industry

By Francine Singson

Abstract

In the Philippines and other developing countries, the skin whitening industry is prolific and expanding among native populations. However, this desire for white skin has dire health repercussions, both physical and psychological. Many researchers in the field of Filipino-American psychology attribute this desire for whiter skin to the American colonial rule of the Philippines, which began in 1898 and lasted for nearly fifty years. Historians often characterize the American occupation as cruel and demeaning, leading to colonial mentality that has continued into the post-colonial era. As a result, in order to ameliorate this dilemma, one must explore how the internalized oppression and psychological state of the Filipino people caused by America's previous colonial rule of the Philippines contributes to the success of the Filipino skin whitening industry.

To research this question, historical journal articles that contextualize the American treatment of the Filipino people are utilized, in order to explore possible motives for occupying the Philippines. Articles in the field of Filipino-American psychology are also studied, thus exploring the psychological health of Filipinos and Filipino-Americans in relation to colonial rule. Articles in the field of history and sociology show the relationship between colonialism and skin whitening, both in the Philippines and in other countries. To explore other possible contributing factors, in the field of psychology and sociology are utilized.

The success of the Filipino Skin Whitening Industry is greatly attributed to the damaged psychological state of the native people brought on by American colonial rule. This can be attributed to the mistreatment of the native population, and the subsequent development of internalized oppression, colonial mentality, and an ingrained preference for white skin. However, contemporary factors may also contribute to the industry's success, such as the phenomenon of "cosmopolitan whiteness," and Filipino-Americans' tendency to conform to popular culture.

Although colonialism plays a significant role in the success of the skin whitening industry, it is possible that many other factors come into play. As a result, it is imperative to explore colonial mentality more thoroughly, as well as its mental health implications. In addition, it would be valuable to explore the ways in which internalized oppression can be combated, thus decreasing the need for the skin whitening industry.

1. Introduction

In the Philippines, the marketing and sale of skin whitening agents is prolific and expanding among native populations. Roger Lee Mendoza estimates one in two Filipino women have utilized these products at one point in their lives (220). This inclination of Filipino individuals towards the use of these skin whitening products is considerably destructive to both their physical and mental well-being; moreover, one of the implications of this industry is the tendency of Filipinos to dissociate themselves from their native culture by means of their appearance. One cannot help but wonder how the skin whitening industry developed, as well as the origins of the seemingly inherent desire for light skin among individuals of naturally

darker complexion.

An overwhelming number of members in the scholarly community on Filipino American Psychology observe a connection between colonialism and the popularity of skin whitening in the Philippines. The Philippines has an extensive history of colonial occupations, including the United States of America, which is often characterized by considerable oppression and exploitation. The Central Intelligence Agency reports that with a projected population of more than 100 million inhabitants, the Philippines is among those countries with the largest populations in the world. In addition, Filipino Americans are the second largest Asian population in the United States, yet very little is commonly known in the US about the history of the Philippines itself, let alone the psychological state of its people in relation to previous colonial rule. One may wonder the extent to which the psychological effects of the colonial rule of the United States resulted in success of the Filipino skin whitening industry.

Individuals of darker complexions experience the ramifications associated with society's seemingly inherent preference for whiter skin. For this reason, it is greatly beneficial to explore the characteristics of the Philippines, one microcosm that is affected by the sensation of skin whitening, to greater understand the larger macrocosm of a world impacted by this phenomenon. The damaged psychological state of the native people that is brought on by previous colonial rule by the United States results in the success the Filipino skin whitening industry. This can be attributed to the mistreatment of the native population, and the subsequent development of internalized oppression, colonial mentality, and an ingrained preference for white skin; however, contemporary factors may also contribute to the industry's success, such as the phenomenon of "cosmopolitan whiteness," and Filipino Americans' inclination to conform to popular culture.

2. The Filipino Skin Whitening Industry

The success of the skin whitening industry leads many individuals to believe that lighter skin can be equated with an improved lifestyle. According to Mendoza, skin whitening is prolific in many countries that are in the process of improving socioeconomically, especially the Philippines (223). In these developing countries, skin whitening products are highly popular among the lower class, as darker skin is associated with undesirable characteristics such as low income and inferior social status. Unbeknownst to the lower social class that is inclined to use these products, skin whitening and bleaching agents can cause harmful side effects, such as poisoning from harmful chemicals, discoloration, scarring, acne, skin rashes, infections, eye irritation, and increased blood pressure, and can potentially lead to long-term health problems (227). The sunscreen and chemicals found in skin whitening agents decrease the natural production of melanin, the protein responsible for coloration of the skin; however, the chemicals are often poisonous, and detrimental to one's health (Mendoza 220). In spite of these harmful side effects, medical communities in the West and other parts of the world fail to end the production of skin whitening products featuring these toxic chemicals. The pharmaceutical industry continues to dispense skin-bleaching agents that are detrimental to consumer health, with the intent of exploiting the population's ignorance for a profit. Although the Philippine government instituted policies to control the buying and selling of these products, they ultimately have not been successful, due to the influence of third parties in the country. The Philippine FDA has attempted to institute a policy to create safety standards for whitening products, to prohibit the manufacturing of toxic substances, and to educate individuals about the effects of skin whiteners. However, they are being stunted in their efforts due to political pressure from interest groups who have considerable influence and tend to promote their own affairs (Mendoza 225). This unwillingness to control the industry results in a ruthless cycle of

buying and selling skin whitening products among the Filipino population.

Those of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to use skin whiteners to try to improve their current situation. According to a study carried out by Mendoza, the continued use of skin whitening products can be credited to lower-income groups using them to achieve aesthetic appeal, with the hopes of improving economic and social status. Mendoza's study attempts to find the best method with which to confront the health risks connected to skin whitening. Additionally, the study explores ways in which the government should regulate information that sellers release to buyers of skin whitening products. First, Mendoza and his team develop questionnaires to obtain a probability sample. They then use a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to randomly select households (n=147) with at least one individual who uses skin whiteners from Metro Manila, the Filipino city with the highest concentration of inhabitants who use skin whiteners. Section 1 of the questionnaire asks for socio-demographic information, while section 2 asks for information regarding the purchase and use of skin whitening products. The researchers divide the socioeconomic statuses of participating households into 5 segments (A-E): upper incomes (A and B), middle incomes/white collar jobs (C), blue-collar workers (D), and the extremely poor (E). Their results reveal that about 3 in 10 consumers of skin whitening products came from classes D and E, with incomes that fall below the poverty line (222). In addition, those with less education have a higher likelihood of buying these products. Mendoza finds that the drive to whiten skin, like in most developing countries, is to achieve aesthetic appeal with the hopes of improving "economic opportunities, class affiliation, and social networking" (220). Mendoza attributes this to the development of "asymmetric information," meaning that producers and sellers of skin whiteners know more information regarding the dangers of the products than consumers do. He also references cognitive bias, which suggests that patrons overlook health hazards of skin whiteners and exaggerate their benefits. Mendoza finds that 80 percent of consumers rely on commercial information sources (like brands endorsed by famous individuals) regarding whitening products when considering how safe the product is. Less than 20 percent of participants consult medical professionals (223). If they do visit a physician, they only visit upon encountering adverse side effects, or overall dissatisfaction with the outcome of the skin whitening product. Regardless, the defining factor for whether or not the participants choose a product was low price and affordability. Toxic whiteners, including banned products, are cheaper and more accessible to D and E participants, who made up the majority of the study. Most participants believe that the whiteners they purchase are safe due to their widespread over-the-counter availability and secondhand testimonials from others, as there are few to no labels regarding the ingredients of the skin whiteners on the products' packaging. Even though the lower class's ignorance regarding the dangers of skin whitening products contributes to the industry's popularity, there are deeper, more complex reasons one must take into account when gauging the reasons for its success. The underlying reason for the proliferation of the skin whitening business can be derived from the Philippines post-colonial experience.

3. The United States' Occupation of the Philippines and US Exceptionalism

Following the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States, ending the Spanish reign that spanned almost four hundred years. Although the Philippines had escaped the rule of one colonial power, with the relinquishing of the nation from Spain to the US, it subsequently fell into the hands of another. Regardless of Filipino revolutionaries' desire for independence, the United States felt a moral obligation to govern the Filipino people following the Spanish-American War to prevent lawlessness among the Filipinos, who they perceived as unfit to govern (Morley 229). The discontent of the Fili-

pino people regarding the United States' rule manifested itself in the Filipino-American war; however, the formal independence of the Philippines was not realized until 1946.

The turbulent nature of the Filipino-American War establishes the groundwork for the fifty-year US occupation of the Philippines. According to David, although the United States government depicts itself as a benevolent ruler, mistreatment of the Filipino people heavily characterizes the US rule (24). Believing in the importance of spreading US values, the United States believes in the inherent justness of their cause. Franklin D. Roosevelt, president of the United States of America during some of this time of imperialism, saw the US as a "champion to the colonial people" (Shaffer 237). Regardless, the United States frequently patronized the native population. For instance, Morley asserts that the United States built modern, westernized cities during their colonial rule of the Philippines because they viewed the existing society as subordinate to Western culture. He associates the US' building and renovation of cities in Metro Manila with the desire to "dissociate the Philippines away from its 'uncivilized' past and to create a fresh national identity by instigating new physical and cultural environments that epitomized imperial hopes, principles and pride" (229).

Once the United States finally granted the Philippines independence, it was "incomplete and unequal" (Morley 235). Although the United States formally left the country to govern itself, the US retained considerable economic and political influence, which resulted in the emergence of an unpopular, abusive party (Shaffer 239). Doubting the Philippine's ability to govern itself, the United States belittled the Filipino people by allowing for only a partial independence. In addition, United States soldiers treated Filipino civilians with racial hostility, which was highlighted with the passage of legislation like the Brigandage Act and the Reconcentration Act, which criminalized "Filipinos opposed to US 'development' as bandits, terrorists and insurgents, sanctioned military operations as part of policing the country and permitted the holding of people in concentration camps" (Morley 239).

Regardless of this exploitation of the Filipino people, the US continues to view itself as an altruistic ruler. This opinion creates the phenomenon of "American Exceptionalism," or the idealized perception of the United States' role in the world (Pisares 424). The US government saw its occupation of the Philippines as a righteous mission, regardless of the negative effects it wrought on the native Filipino people. Pisares supports this statement, as she claims the "culture of U.S. imperialism denies its history of colonial conquests and promotes a myth of innocence" (424). David and Nadal assert that the United States' denial of its culpability in its colonial occupation of the Philippines fostered a psychological environment where Filipinos came to disdain their native culture.

4. The Psychological Impact of American Colonialism

Due to the nature of the United States' colonial rule and the acceptance of American Exceptionalism, several negative psychological dilemmas impact the lives of Filipinos and Filipino Americans. David and Nadal argue that the previous colonial rule of the Philippines results in a mentality of perceived inferiority towards the native culture. This self-imposed subordination can be readily observed, as remnants of colonialism still exist in common Filipino society. For instance, English is used as the preferred language in school, government, business, and other bodies of work (299). Christianity, a faith brought to the Philippines by colonial conquerors, remains the official religion of the Philippines (299). Colonialism especially manifests itself in that Filipinos also have an overwhelming preference for light skin, and use skin whitening products and bleach to achieve this look. This implies that many Filipinos consider their own culture and appearance inferior to that of their European and American counterparts. David and Nadal state that the scorn towards the Filipino culture results in "colonial

mentality” (CM) or a type of internalized oppression that is “characterized by a perception of ethnic or cultural inferiority... [That] involves an uncritical rejection of anything Filipino and an automatic uncritical preference for anything American” (299). According to David and Nadal, American culture is highly glorified in Filipino culture. They state:

Colonialism (and its legacies) has fostered a perception that... the standard of living... in the U.S. is the mark of a highly sophisticated society (and culture)... Children dream of becoming Americans in the hope that they will finally be able to live in Disney’s Kingdom... For many Filipinos, coming to America means the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. (299)

In turn, many Filipinos discriminate against counterparts who do not assimilate to Western standards of what is acceptable. If an individual is not Christian and not well-versed in the English language, Filipino society perceives them lesser human beings.

Colonial mentality causes a serious impact on Filipino psychological well-being, as this mindset damages ethnic identity and the collective self-esteem of Filipinos, as well as other post-colonial ethnicities. To elaborate, colonial mentality causes Filipinos to have a lack of pride in their native ethnicity or culture. According to David and Nadal, CM results in “tolerance and acceptance of contemporary oppression” from both internal and external sources (299-300). Colonial mentality is also a possible factor contributing to depression in Filipino Americans. According to Kuo, Filipino American adults have higher rates of depression than their white counterparts (as cited by David and Nadal 300). A study carried out by David reveals a model gauging depression symptoms that includes CM as a variable is more effective in capturing Filipino Americans’ experience of depression than those that do not. Using the Colonial Mentality Scale (CMS), David observes whether CM impacts depression symptoms to a greater degree than previously studied variables that are known to predict the mental disorder. The CMS is a “self-report measure that assesses feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that are manifestations of CM” (120). It is divided into five categories: Internalized Cultural/Ethnic Inferiority (e.g., “There are situations where I feel inferior because of my ethnic background”), Cultural Shame and Embarrassment (e.g., “There are situations where I feel ashamed of my ethnic background”), Physical Characteristics (e.g., “I would like to have a skin tone that is lighter than the skin tone I have”), Within-Group Discrimination (e.g., “I make fun of, tease, or bad mouth Filipinos who speak English with strong accents”), and Colonial Debt (e.g., “Filipinos should be thankful to Spain and the United States for transforming the Filipino ways of life into a White/European American way of life”) (120). Participants report their experience with each category on a scale from one to six, with six indicating a higher manifestation of CM. David also distributes questionnaires that gauge acculturation, self-esteem, ethnic identity, depression, and anxiety in the subjects (121). The researcher then calculates whether there is a correlation between data from the CMS and the respective data from the subsequent questionnaires. Based on data gleaned from 266 Filipino American participants, David finds that the CM has a direct effect on depression symptoms, even after controlling for other factors (120). To elaborate, there is a 62.4% increase in depression symptoms in a conceptual model including CM than in a model that does not (123). This reveals that Filipino history of colonial rule has a significant impact on the mental health of Filipinos and Filipino Americans. Through this study, David finds that Filipino American mental health must be viewed from not only the viewpoint of “ethnic identity, collective self-esteem, and acculturation,” but also “historical and contemporary oppression” (121).

In addition to CM, another psychological phenomenon called “social invisibility” affects the lives of Filipinos and Filipino Americans. According to Pisares, social invisibility is the derivation of social identity through imperceptible characteristics (423). Pisares argues that

Filipinos are socially invisible, as they develop their social identity through the misrecognition of their culture in US history (423). Because the United States has the tendency to deny its missteps in the Philippines and asserts a reputation of innocence, Filipinos are infrequently recognized and represented in Western culture. This leads to Filipino individuals' exclusion from racial discourse. Because of the widespread dispute as to whether the United States was justified in its conquest of the island nation, the Philippines is disregarded in historical discussions, damaging Filipino self-worth and racial identity. There is a lack of language with which to articulate the struggles that the Filipinos underwent under colonial rule, resulting in "historical amnesia," a failure of Filipino Americans to acknowledge the traumatic memories brought on by United States imperialism (Caronan 349). Political scientist Jenny Edkins states:

[Survivors] of political abuse in the contemporary West have something compelling to say, but it is something that is unsayable in the vocabulary of the powerful, and it is dangerous to the political institutions in place.' (Caronan 349)

The consequences of colonialism in the lives of Filipinos and Filipino Americans take many other forms. For instance, Caronan argues that colonialism continues to have negative effects on individuals from postcolonial countries in the form of institutionalized narratives. Caronan states that "institutionalized narratives," or stories accepted and proliferated by established governing systems, are not only used in an educational setting, but also at home, in order to separate second-generation Filipino immigrants from the immediate negative effects of United States colonialism. Regardless, she maintains that remnants of this colonialism pervade the lives of these immigrants (337). These institutionalized narratives convey the United States as a justified, compassionate ruler. Consequently, United States colonialism is commonly justified, even praised, in the Philippines, as individuals attribute the United States' occupation of the country as a saving the island nation from the "mismanagement of Spain and from the brutality of Japan," and educating them in democracy, eventually granting them political independence in 1946 (360). This type of rhetoric implies that the Filipino people were considered inferior, and needed the help of the "racially superior" Americans to form a proper governing system (342). The widespread acceptance of this historiography of US imperialism in the Philippines results in a colonial mentality. Caronan also discusses how many young Filipino Americans do not know about the colonial history of their native country, due to their parents' hesitance to discuss the mistreatment that transpired under the US occupation and those prior to it. Caronan cites a group of young Filipino American performance artists she interviewed. The performance artists provide stories that detail the hardships of their native country's people under US rule, but were not aware of these adversities until their adulthood; moreover, their parents chose not to educate them about United States imperialism at home. This reveals how young Filipino Americans are detached from a significant piece of their country's history.

5. Origins of the Skin Whitening Industry

The development of internalized oppression and perceived inferiority among the Filipino people fosters an environment where the skin whitening industry could flourish. Furthermore, there exists a relationship between colonialism and the popularity of skin whitening products in postcolonial countries. Mendoza states that postcolonial, internalized racism results in the success of skin whitening products among lower classes in the Philippines, as darker skin is associated with negative characteristics such as lower income and social status (223). The Western influence of Spanish and United States colonialism over several centuries contributes to a Filipino value system with a mixture of both indigenous and westernized concepts. For example, the Caucasian, Western standard of beauty engenders the widespread belief that light

skin is superior to dark skin, because people associate “improved income, less discriminatory treatment, and greater social acceptance [with] people who use bleaching products to achieve lighter skin tones” (219-220). According to Blay, This association of whiter skin with positive characteristics is a result of Colorism, or prejudice based on the social meanings attached to skin color (37). Blay highlights that people of darker complexions attempt to whiten their skin to “gain access to the humanity and social status historically reserved for whites,” and to improve their current lifestyle (5). This engenders a setting where individuals with dark skin must take on a lighter complexion to avoid the negative effects of a racial hierarchy which favors white complexions.

The success of the skin whitening industry can also be attributed to a global history of white supremacy. Blay states that white supremacy, or the “historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples classified as ‘non-white,’” is responsible for the contemporary success of the skin whitening industry (6). This suggests the United States engenders the practice of desiring white skin in the Filipino people to maintain a system of wealth, power, and privilege for themselves. For instance, Mire argues that a phenomenon called “commodity racism” is used to maintain a culture of white supremacy and imperialism. This includes any media or goods that exploit the “narrative of imperial progress into mass-produced commodity spectacles” (Race, Representation, and Construction of the White Body section para. 6). According to Mire, whiteness is used both as a commodity spectacle to fuel capitalist material production, and as a way of excluding those who are not white (para. 6). In this system, Mire claims that whiteness can be possessed by anyone who can pay for it; moreover, whiteness is marketed in order to bolster the economic, cultural, and political domination of the white population (para. 9). Blay bolsters this argument by stating that because imperialists instilled the idea that colonized subjects are inferior due to their skin color, colonial powers further exploit that mindset by selling commodities like soap, powder, detergent, and skin bleaching products that promise lighter skin (21).

White supremacy also manifests itself in the spread of Western religion. Introduced by colonial powers in the Philippines, Christianity gives rise to an environment that facilitates the growth of the skin whitening industry. To elaborate, the Bible lay the foundations for colonization and enslavement in modern times, as well as white nationalism. According to Ani, white nationalism is “an expression of European nationalism which identifies Caucasian racial characteristics with superiority and African racial characteristics with inferiority” (xxvi). White nationalism contributes to the popularity of Manichean Dualism, which upholds the idea that lightness is associated with godliness, morality, and goodness, while black represents damnation, immorality, and evil, is often associated with Christian religious imagery (Blay 8). As a result, Jesus Christ is typically portrayed as white, or light in general, creating a preference for whiter skin in those who spread the religion during colonial times.

6. Contemporary Influences of Skin Whitening

Although the Filipino colonial experience under the United States widely explains the derivation of the Filipino skin whitening industry, other factors contribute to its popularity. It is possible that contemporary rather than historical influences impact the psychological well-being of Filipinos, Filipino Americans, and other ethnic groups.

Filipino Americans’ exclusion from racial discourse in the United States may result in a desire to alter their complexion. In studies by Museus and Maramba, the researchers find that because Asian Americans and Pacific Americans are squeezed into one homogenous group during dialogue and research regarding higher education, there is a tendency of minori-

ties to alter their social identity to conform to dominant campus culture (232). Museus and Maramba claim that discounting the Asian American ethnic group is harmful, as it proliferates the misleading model minority stereotype that “Asian Americans are a monolithic group that achieves universal academic and occupational success” (232). This preconception hides the challenges that many Asian American students undergo, such as, “pressure from cultural conflict, unwelcoming racial climates, pressure to conform to racial stereotypes, racial discrimination, and relatively high rates of mental health issues” (233). As a result, Asian Americans and Pacific Americans, including Filipinos, may feel the need to alter their appearances with the hopes of being accepted and acknowledged in foreign settings. Maramba and Museus offer several theories as to why college students desire to separate themselves from their native backgrounds. Tinto’s theory of student integration, the most popular theory of institutional departure, hypothesizes that in order for students to persist in an academic institution, “students must dissociate from their precollege culture and adopt the values and norms of their dominant campus cultures to achieve integration into the academic and social subsystems of their college campus, thereby maximizing their likelihood of success” (as cited in Museus & Maramba 234-235). Tierney argues that minority students deliberately choose to assimilate into campus culture and separate themselves from their culture, in a practice called “cultural suicide” (as cited in Museus & Maramba 235).

Those who feel a greater sense of belonging culturally are shown to do better in academic settings. Museus and Maramba discuss the findings of other researchers such as Kuh and Love, who surmise that the differences between students’ cultures of origin and culture of immersion are inversely related to their likelihood of success, as students who come from cultures that are highly different from their original cultures encounter the most difficulty when adjusting to college (236). Kuh and Lovey support this by stating that students from considerably dissimilar cultures feel as if they must assimilate to dominant campus cultures or find membership in several cultural “enclaves” (i.e., subcultures) to maximize their success in higher education. Studies by Museus and Quayle, which record the experiences of 30 ethnic students at a primarily white institution, confirm that cultural dissonance, or the “tension that results from incongruence between a student’s home and campus culture,” is inversely related to students’ likelihood of persistence; moreover, those who have cultures that are different from that of the people at the campus they attend are less likely to succeed (as cited Museus & Maramba 237). In their study, Lewis, Chesler, and Forman interview 74 Asian American, Black, and Latino undergraduates at a predominantly white institution, and find that these students feel pressure to conform to the dominant campus culture (as cited in Museus & Maramba 237). These studies reveal that minorities must separate themselves from their native cultures to do better in the United States’ educational institutions.

Although much of the world’s population compiles Asian American ethnic groups into one “homogenous racial category,” the differences that exist between these factions necessitate a more comprehensive study of each individual ethnicity (232). According to Wei, the term “Asian American” arose during the 1960s, but America did not coin the term “Asian Pacific Islander” until the 1970s (as cited in Museus & Maramba 233). Hune and Lee state these two groups include more than 50 different ethnicities, each varying in “national origins, educational attainment, immigration patterns, language, and socioeconomic status” (as cited in Museus & Marimba 234). Perhaps if the cultures are acknowledged and accepted for their evident differences, they would feel less of a need to change their culture and their appearance.

Other researchers argue that the desire for lighter skin stems from a phenomenon called “Cosmopolitan Whiteness,” or whiteness that is not associated with a race or nationality, but is valued across national boundaries as something posh or fashionable. L. Ayu Saraswati

argues that this yearning for lighter skin is not equivalent to the desire for “Caucasian Whiteness” (16). For example, Saraswati highlights that existing studies regarding skin whitening in different countries are limited, as they are based on the assumption that “whiteness is an ethnic or racially based category, however marked it may be by biological, social, and visual signifiers” (16). The author deviates from former studies by claiming that the desire to be white is not the same as the desire to be white in a Caucasian sense, as she maintains that in contemporary Indonesia, a country similar to the Philippines in many respects, skin whitening ads market “cosmopolitan whiteness,” which she defines, saying:

By cosmopolitan whiteness, I refer to whiteness when represented to embody the ‘affective’ and virtual quality of cosmopolitanism: transnational mobility. In using the term ‘affect,’ I am drawing on Theresa Brennan’s definition of the term as ‘physiological shift accompanying a judgment.’ (17)

She supports this by discussing the burgeoning use of advertisements to encourage the use of skin whitening products in Indonesian magazines. In June 2006, Indonesian Cosmopolitan featured Estée Lauder’s “Cyber White” ad on the inside front-cover spread (15). In July of the same year, the magazine featured another ad with the slogan “Skin of Innocence” (16). None of these ads featured Indonesian women; moreover, one utilized a Caucasian model, while the other included a woman of Japanese descent. As a result, whiteness is not only associated with Caucasian women, but with women from Japan or Korea as well. Thus, Saraswati defines whiteness beyond a racial and ethnic category.

Saraswati provides context for the article by discussing the racialized beauty ideal in Transnational Indonesia; furthermore, beauty ideals, manifest in race, skin color, and discussions regarding gender, are historically multinational. This same pattern exists today. For example, in archaic Indonesian and Indian literature, such as the Ramayana, light skin was the prevailing beauty ideal of the time. In this literary work, the author describes beautiful women as having “shining faces, like the full moon” (19). The existence of this text implies that a penchant for light skin predates European colonialism, and that this beauty standard is not unique to contemporary Indian and Indonesian people; moreover, the desire for lighter skin color is a transnational construction, in both India and Indonesia (19). These opinions about beauty continue on to the present day. Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia strengthened the local preference for lighter skin, as images of Caucasian white women were seen as the pinnacle of beauty in ads of this time. Later, when Japan ruled in Indonesia in 1942, they preferred light skin color, but inspired by a different race (20). In postcolonial Indonesia, the pro-American government fosters the use of American beauty ideals. Currently, light-skinned “Indo” or “mix-raced” women are considered the pinnacle of beauty. Indonesian feminist Aquarini Prabasmoro argues that mixed-raced women’s ability to be seen as “white in a non-white culture,” but not white enough “to be white in the global context” allows them to be considered desirable by Indonesian standards (as cited by Saraswati 20). Additionally, wanting to be Caucasian white or full-white is looked down upon, as it is a reminder of colonialism.

7. Conclusions and Implications

The success of the Filipino skin whitening industry is a result of the damaged psychological state of the native people brought on by United States colonial rule. Although it has been more than 60 years since the US granted the Philippines independence, Filipinos and Filipino Americans alike continue to suffer from the ensuing effects of the mistreatment of the native population, including the development of internalized oppression, colonial mentality, and a higher prevalence of mental disorders such as depression. These psychological consequences result in the mounting popularity of the skin whitening industry, as Filipinos

associate a lighter complexion with positive characteristics, and darker skin with the opposite. In addition, white supremacy and commodity racism further bolster its success.

Regardless of the strong influence of colonialism on the industry's popularity, contemporary factors may also contribute to the widespread use of skin whitening products in the Philippines, including the phenomenon of "cosmopolitan whiteness," which maintains that whiteness is not associated with the desire to be white in a Caucasian sense, but white beyond a racial or ethnic category. This does not imply that United States colonialism in the Philippines does not influence Filipinos' desire to have lighter skin; however, this does suggest that Filipinos may have different, modern motives for bleaching their skin, which must be further explored in depth in future studies. For instance, Filipino Americans' tendency to conform to popular culture may have an impact in their desire for lighter skin, as research in higher education by Samuel Museus and Dina Maramba reveals that individuals thrive when they separate from their own background to assimilate to a new environment.

Although the Philippines is a small island nation, the social and psychological dilemmas attached to skin whitening and Western influence are not unique to this country. The struggle to achieve the social status associated with lighter skin tones is a constant theme in the lives of individuals living in post-colonial countries. For instance, since the first slaves were seized and brought to American soil, Colorism, or prejudice based on the social implications attached to skin color, has been a rampant dilemma in the United States. The suffering that this preference for white skin causes culminates in an untold amount of suffering amongst millions of people, even in modern times. As a result, it is beneficial to find ways in which to combat the success of the skin whitening industry in not only the Philippines, but in all countries where Colorism is prevalent.

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