QUEST FOR BEAUTY AND THE EXPLOITATION OF FEMALE GENDER IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF SKIN CARE AND WEIGHT LOSS INDUSTRIES IN PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT
The demand for skin lightening and weight loss products in Port Harcourt remains high. Many women, including students and young professionals, use these products despite known health risks such as mercury poisoning, hormonal imbalances, and eating disorder. The problem lies not just in the use of these products, but in the systematic exploitation of gendered insecurities by industries that profit from women's self-doubt. These industries promote unrealistic beauty standards, often equating light skin and slim bodies with success, purity, and desirability. This creates a cycle of consumption where women are made to feel inadequate unless they conform. The study used feminist and Commodity Fetishism to explain how power relations, particularly patriarchy, shape women's experiences and how consumers attribute magical powers to products. The study adopted a qualitative research design using phenomenological and ethnographic approaches to understand the lived experiences of women in Port Harcourt. A sample of 20 participants was selected using purposive and snowball sampling. Data collected by interview were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded for recurring themes such as "self-esteem," "peer pressure," "marketing tactics," and "health concerns." Themes were grouped into broader categories for interpretation. Findings confirmed that industrialization of beauty in Port Harcourt is deeply intertwined with gender exploitation. Industries profit by selling the myth that woman must be fair and slim to be valued. Study recommends the need to launch public awareness campaigns on the dangers of skin lightening and unsafe weight loss.

Keywords: Industrialization, Beauty, Gender exploitation, Skin care, Weight loss, Port Harcourt

INTRODUCTION
The industrialization of beauty is a global phenomenon where beauty standards are commodified, mass-produced, and marketed, often leading to the exploitation of women both as consumers and as workers in the global supply chain. This process intersects with capitalist profit motives, where gendered labor structures, such as those in garment factories or beauty service sectors, rely on low-wage, feminized work. In contemporary Nigeria, the beauty and wellness industry has evolved into a multi-billion-naira enterprise, driven by aggressive marketing, social media influence, and deep-seated cultural ideals of femininity and attractiveness. The industrialization of beauty defined as the commercialization and mass production of beauty standards through media, advertising, and consumer products, has become a powerful force shaping self-perception, especially among women (Ogunmola, Akinola & Lawal, 2022).

In Port Harcourt, Rivers State, the proliferation of skin lightening creams, weight loss supplements, and body-shaping products reflects a growing consumer culture that equates beauty with economic and social value (Ahmed, 2025). Local parlours, pharmacies, and online vendors aggressively promote products with slogans like "Get fair in 7 days" or "Lose 10kg in 2 weeks,"

often targeting young women and students. These industries capitalize on insecurities, promising transformation, confidence, and even better marriage prospects.

The skin care and weight loss sectors are particularly exploitative, as they are deeply gendered, primarily targeting women while reinforcing patriarchal norms that equate female worth with physical appearance (Ahmed, 2025; Cole & Griffin, 2025). These industries do not merely sell products; they sell ideals, ideals that are often unattainable, harmful, and rooted in colonial and Eurocentric beauty standards. This study examines how the industrialization of beauty in Port Harcourt contributes to the exploitation of gender, particularly women, through the marketing and consumption of skin lightening and weight loss products. It explores the socio-cultural, economic, and psychological dimensions of this phenomenon, with a focus on how Nigerian industries manipulate gender norms for profit.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite growing awareness of body positivity and self-acceptance, the demand for skin lightening and weight loss products in Port Harcourt remains high. Many women, including students and young professionals, use these products despite known health risks such as mercury poisoning, hormonal imbalances, and eating disorders (Adebayo et al., 2021; Ogunmola et al., 2022).
The problem lies not just in the use of these products, but in the systematic exploitation of gendered insecurities by industries that profit from women's self-doubt. These industries promote unrealistic beauty standards, often equating light skin and slim bodies with success, purity, and desirability. This creates a cycle of consumption where women are made to feel inadequate unless they conform.

Moreover, there is limited academic research on the gendered exploitation embedded in the beauty industry within small urban centres like Port Harcourt. Most studies focus on Lagos or Abuja, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics play out in university towns and semi-urban areas. This study addresses the question: what are the effects of industrialization of beauty and its role in gender exploitation in Port Harcourt, Rivers State?

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to assess the industrialization of beauty and its role in gender exploitation in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The Industrialization of Beauty

The industrialization of beauty refers to the transformation of personal appearance into a profit-driven industry. As Wolf (2021) argues in *The Beauty Myth*, beauty is not a natural standard but a social construct used to control women. In Nigeria, this myth is amplified by media, advertising, and consumer culture.

Beauty is no longer a personal trait but a commodity, something to be bought, sold, and perfected. Industries profit by creating a perpetual sense of inadequacy, then offering products as the solution (Bartky, 2020). This cycle ensures continuous consumption.

Paresh, Pradeep, and Zori (2022) Skin care and weight loss Industry is a fast-paced field where product innovation is critical to success (Kumar et al., 2006). Businesses in today's hypercompetitive environment need constant innovation and a long-term core competence to thrive. Fulfilling customers' needs is the most important factor in gaining market share or

gaining a foothold in a new market. Green products have emerged as the future of product development, and this is a response to the public's urge to protect the environment owing to businesses' significant pollution and waste.

Most people buy green items for their own needs and wants rather than because they care about the environment, according to a study of the research. Instead of concentrating on how to create a successful marketing plan, marketers must first understand why customers are interested in their product. It should choose for environmentally friendly items instead of conventional ones. As a result, this study aims to shed light on the factors that influence consumers' desire to buy green personal care and skin care and weight loss goods. With the arrival of the "appearance level economy", skin care and weight loss, as consumer goods that can rapidly improve the overall image, is in an era of large-scale popularization and use. The continuous enhancement of woman's social status, the expansion of beauty makeup penetration rate, and the improvement of consumption intention are the long-term factors driving the growth of skin care and weight loss consumption. Skin care and weight loss have gradually become one of the six major areas of China's "appearance level economy". They made an attempt to analyze the marketing strategies of luxury skin care and weight loss brands, an evaluation of the relevant marketing strategies of certain brands will be made. Also, at the end of this paper, some recommendations will be provided for those premium skin care and weight loss brands and making prospects into the future of the skin care and weight loss brand marketing methods.
Barani and Sushmaa (2020) the skin care and weight loss marketplace stays a rapidly developing quarter, in which additionally most of the enterprise is turning into more and fiercer due to competition. Skin care and weight loss and personal care industry vendors are continuously looking for ways of improving their sales. Online advertising has come to be popular as one technique of reaching those goals and is now a necessary part of any modern-day industries. Because of coronavirus, various health organizations have requested the general public to observe various activates to stop or to cut the chain of this pandemic. One such thing is washing or sanitizing the hand because of which the viruses spread would be controlled. While all the different industries have a downfall but, soap, hand care, skin care and weight loss, and personal care industries are flourishing. The study tries to realize that, what marketing strategies are creating an impact on the beauty and personal care industries in the course of COVID-19. This panic leads to protective private care at the rise, parallel the skincare merchandise also has a call for and domestic supplies are more waited with the aid of the customers. By having all this as a key the entrepreneurs and the industries can design marketing strategies for his or her customers, now not only for income cause, however, to allay them from this panic level.

Jashim Uddin Ahmed (2018) focused on one of the oldest neighborhood cleaning, soap businesses in Bangladesh named Keya Skin care and weight loss industries Ltd. It portrays the toilet soap market and elaborates at the countrywide and worldwide soap companies running in the USA. In spite of the worldwide shift in buy styles in the direction of liquid and gel soaps, many Bangladeshis (in particular of the lower socio-monetary instructions) nevertheless, decide on the traditional bar soaps for all forms of cleansing desires. Rojanadilok and Nanagara (2013) in their study, they investigated the factors that influence the marketing strategies of herbal skin care and weight loss products in Thailand by comparison between Thai and imported product where the imported products are manufactured from Australia and U.S.A. This study is both quantitative and qualitative research. The facial herbal skin care and weight loss products in this study were moisturizer, whitening lotion, cream, power, toner, make up cleansing mask, cleansing oil, soap bar, and anti-aging lotions. Finding from the study revealed that the marketing strategy of Thai herbal skin care and weight loss products have the 4Ps;

Product strategy by improving the quality of products, research and development for launching the new products to the market, creating beauty packaging and new product launch attracts the market's attention. The role of new trends in beauty industry is huge. For instance, if a particular look of a celebrity goes viral, all the youth is fascinated by it. They try to imitate the look, and the products used in the look also become popular. So, you will have to get insights into the latest trends in beauty industry while formulating a marketing strategy for beauty products. The trend in the makeup industry of using products made from Ayurvedic and herbal ingredients has crept in India. So, you can see various brands shifting their focus from skin care and weight loss ingredients to herbal raw materials. Such changes or trends in beauty industry often lead to a disruption (Varsho & DeGeorge, 2018).

Feminist theorists like Susan Bordo (1993) and bell hooks (2000) argue that women's bodies are sites of social control. Cultural norms dictate how women should look, move, and behave. The body becomes a project—one that must be disciplined through diet, exercise, and cosmetic modification. In Nigeria, these norms are further complicated by colonial legacies that valorise light skin and European features (Adepoju, 2018). The preference for fair skin is not merely aesthetic but tied to class, marriageability, and social mobility.

Raising Demand for Beauty and Skin Care and Weight Loss Industries Products

Government initiatives to encourage entrepreneurship, coupled with a growing emphasis on sustainability and organic products, have further fueled the industry's evolution. The demand for cruelty-free and environmentally friendly beauty products is on the rise, reflecting a shift in consumer preferences towards ethical and responsible choices. Thus, the beauty and cosmetic industry in India has experienced exponential growth and development, driven by changing consumer attitudes, technological advancements, and the globalization of beauty standards. The industry is poised for continued expansion, with a focus on diversity, innovation, and sustainability shaping its future trajectory. India, with its rich cultural diversity, has a thriving beauty and cosmetic industry that caters to a wide range of consumer preferences. The market is characterized by a mix of traditional formulations and modern beauty trends. Here are some popular beauty and cosmetic products in India:

1. Ayurvedic Skincare: Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, has a significant influence on skincare. Ayurvedic skincare products, enriched with natural ingredients like neem, turmeric, and aloe vera, appeal to consumers seeking holistic and chemical-free solutions for their skincare routines.
2. Herbal Hair Care: Herbal hair care products, such as shampoos and hair oils, are deeply rooted in Indian culture. Ingredients like henna, amla (Indian gooseberry), and bhringraj are commonly used to promote hair health and maintain lustrous locks.
3. Fairness Creams: Fairness creams have been a prominent category in the Indian beauty market. Although the industry is moving towards inclusivity and diversity, fairness creams are still popular among consumers who desire lighter skin tones.
4. Haldi (Turmeric) Face Packs: Turmeric, known for its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, is a staple in Indian households. Face packs containing turmeric are widely used for their skin-brightening and complexion-enhancing benefits.
5. Kajal and Eyeliners: Eye makeup holds cultural significance in India. Kajal and eyeliners, often made from natural ingredients, are used to define and accentuate the eyes. Traditional kohl formulations have made way for modern, long-lasting eyeliners.
6. Natural and Organic Products: With an increasing focus on wellness, natural, and organic beauty products are gaining popularity. Consumers are seeking products free from harmful chemicals, and brands are responding with a variety of organic skincare and makeup options.

7. Bold Lip Colors: Vibrant and bold lip colors, such as shades of red and maroon, are favored in Indian culture. Lipsticks, lip tints, and lip liners in rich hues cater to diverse preferences and cultural occasions.
8. Multifunctional BB Creams: BB creams, offering multiple benefits like moisturization, sun protection, and light coverage, have gained traction in the Indian market. They appeal to consumers looking for a quick and convenient makeup solution.
9. Perfumes and Attars: Fragrance holds cultural significance, and traditional attars (perfume oils) continue to be popular. Additionally, modern perfumes from both international and Indian brands cater to diverse fragrance preferences.
10. Bridal Makeup Kits: With weddings being elaborate and significant events in India, bridal makeup kits have a dedicated market. These kits often include a range of products to achieve the traditional and glamorous bridal look. However, the beauty and cosmetic landscape in India is a dynamic fusion of traditional and modern influences. From Ayurvedic skincare to bold lip colors, the market caters to a diverse consumer base with products that celebrate the country's cultural heritage while embracing contemporary trends.

Marketing Strategies of Skin Care and Weight Loss Industries

The skincare industry uses influencer partnerships, social media storytelling, and values-driven campaigns focused on sustainability and clean beauty. Brands leverage AI for personalized recommendations and engage through omnichannel experiences like virtual try-ons and pop-ups.

The weight loss industry combines digital and traditional tactics—using targeted social content, seasonal urgency, and before-and-after visuals. Pharmaceutical brands emphasize clinical data and doctor outreach, while others use free trials, subscriptions, and influencer testimonials. Both industries rely on data-driven, hyper-targeted marketing to drive engagement and sales.

The beauty and skin care and weight loss industry, being highly dynamic and globally competitive, demands effective marketing strategies for sustained success. Several factors underscore the critical need for well-crafted and adaptable approaches:

1. Diverse Cultural Preferences: The global beauty and skin care and weight loss market spans diverse cultures with distinct beauty standards and preferences. Effective marketing strategies must be culturally sensitive and flexible; catering to the unique needs and tastes of consumers in different regions.
2. Rapidly Evolving Trends: Trends in the beauty and skin care and weight loss industry evolve swiftly. To stay relevant, companies need marketing strategies that are agile and responsive to emerging trends, ensuring that their products align with the latest consumer demands and preferences.
3. Digital Transformation: The industry has witnessed a significant shift toward e-commerce and digital platforms. Effective online marketing strategies, including social media engagement, influencer partnerships, and e-commerce optimization, are crucial for reaching a global audience and maximizing sales.
4. Competitive Landscape: Global competition is intense, with numerous brands vying for consumer attention. Successful marketing strategies must differentiate products, highlight unique selling propositions, and create compelling narratives that resonate with target audiences.
5. Regulatory Compliance: Different regions have varying regulations related to skin care and weight loss and beauty products. A robust marketing strategy must take into account compliance with diverse regulatory frameworks to ensure seamless market entry and continued operations.

6. Brand Image and Trust: Building and maintaining a positive brand image is paramount. Effective marketing strategies should focus on conveying authenticity, transparency, and the values that resonate with consumers, fostering trust and loyalty on a global scale.
7. Consumer Education: Education is key, particularly in a market where consumers are increasingly conscious of ingredients, sustainability, and ethical practices. Marketing strategies should include initiatives to educate consumers about product benefits, usage, and the values embedded in the brand.

Skin Care and Weight Loss Industries Construct and Promote Gendered Beauty Ideals

The skin care and weight loss industries construct and promote rigid gendered beauty ideals by defining femininity through youth, flawlessness, and thinness, while defining masculinity through muscularity. These multi-billion-dollar sectors shape societal expectations by commercializing self-improvement, directly profiting from—and perpetuating—consumer insecurities.

Feminine bodily ideals are evolving rapidly and constantly redefining the way we perceive beauty with myriad ways of achieving it. They range from padded hips, corsets, fillers, beauty hacks, through butt lifts, botox injections, penciled jaws, surgeries- rhinoplasty, liposuction, implants, and other cosmetic procedures. In a recent study on the implication of liposuction and Brazilian butt lift for courtship behaviour in Nigeria, Nwakanma (2022), noted the rapid evolvement and redefinition of beauty standards through cosmetic procedures and surgeries. The study identified changing definitions of beauty as one of the predisposing factors for the growing adoption of cosmetic procedures and surgeries. There is a cultural shift in norms of feminine beauty and the representations of beauty in Nigerian cultures. This shift does not tend towards the adoption of any standard rather a more expansive understanding of beauty that incorporates different standards. Being white or black, natural hair, weaves, braids or straight slender, sensual or curvy constitute the variegated forms of beauty.

Since beauty is a cultural construct that varies considerably from time and space that makes it imperative that a singular western standard of beauty cannot apply to other cultures. Indeed, there are competing standards (Vartabedian, 2018) arising from complex racial systems. Beauty ideals represent culturally listed and approved 'looks' that includes the different features of the face, body, and cultural indicators of physical attractiveness (Calogero et al, 2007). Beauty ideals are shifting but the desire to conform to the trending standards remain unchanged. The drive to achieve the ideal status leads women to engage in practices that craft the body into desirable shape. Body work is an indication of the female body as a site of the contested nature of beauty. The female body has become an entity that can be shaped and perfected (Shilling, 2003). Dieting, work –outs and other weight-loss mechanisms have been embraced at the expense of fattening procedures observed in most traditional Nigerian cultures.

In molding the women into the ideal feminine beings, considerable importance is attached to the ways she carries herself, the way she sits, stands, talks and interact with others (Shilling, 2003). In addition to bodily movement, gestures, and behavior, the development of femininity places considerable emphasis on a woman's physical appearance. Across societies and cultures, significant value is ascribed to the physical appearance of women, shaping ideals of beauty that define an image of the "ideal" feminine being. Therefore among all the social and cultural contexts against which a woman's identity is continually defined, her 'bodily beauty' is a central aspect of this definition. To clarify the concept of "beauty," we referred to the Oxford Dictionary's definition, which describes beauty as a combination of qualities that delight the

senses or an attractive feature or advantage. Again, OED (2006) also defined beauty as "a combination of qualities that is very pleasing to the senses or the mind". However, these definitions raise complex questions when applied to physical or bodily beauty, particularly in the case of a woman

What exactly constitutes a beautiful woman? What are the qualities that delight the senses? More critically, we must ask: who determines what is considered beautiful? As Tate (2009) argues, the judgment of beauty is not solely an individual matter but is deeply embedded in social processes. Beauty is something we are socialized to recognize and appreciate, and thus, our understanding of beauty is shaped by collective cultural norms and shared social practices. Beauty, often regarded as a central asset in a woman's life, is seen as a quality to which women are expected to aspire a standard not equivalently imposed upon men. Thus, beauty becomes a distinctly feminine attribute, central to the construction of feminine identity. Furthermore, a woman's identity as a feminine being is not static; it is an ongoing, continuous process of becoming, shaped by adherence to these aesthetic and behavioral norms. Accordingly, beauty is not only external, it is internal, too. Yet, women are misled by shaping their identities depending on the physical appearance only (Marwa, 2019). But in constructing a feminine appearance integral to their gender identity women themselves actively participate through every day practices. To produce the feminine appearance women are seen engaging in certain grooming as well as beautification practices of their bodies. When we look at different culture and society, we see various society and culture defining a woman's beauty in various ways. It can be argued that beauty is a currency in every society.

Psychological, health risks, social effects and ethical implications associated with beauty industrialization products

Understanding beauty has become increasingly instrumentalised as a form of capital, with individuals expected to invest in their physical appearance as a means of enhancing social and economic opportunities. The emphasis on aesthetic labour is one key aspect of neoliberal beauty oppression, which refers to the time, effort, and resources individuals dedicate to maintaining or conforming to societal beauty standards. Women, in particular, face heightened pressure to engage in this aesthetic labour, as beauty norms often dictate narrow and unrealistic ideals that prioritize youthfulness, thinness etc(Ikenyei 2017).

This expectation extends beyond mere grooming practices or consumption of beauty products to encompass a range of activities, including dieting exercise regimens, cosmetic procedures etc. With the advent of consumer culture and industrialization, the body has increasingly become a project which is in constant need of modification and beautification, for which people spend more time and money on. Expectations that we have from our bodies have a direct impact on the formation of our body image. Body image is regarded as an important aspect of one's gendered identity, because as pointed out by Thapan (2015) and Ikenyei & Lawal (2019)body image is one of the important aspects of gender consciousness. The phrase 'body image' was first coined by an Austrian neurological and psychoanalyst Paul Schilder (Schilder, 2020). He defined body image as a person's feeling of the aesthetics and sexual attractiveness of their own body. Body image is the mental picture of one's body, an attitude about the physical self, appearance, state of health, wholeness, normal functioning and sexuality. One's experience of her body is highly subjective and is a product of their perception, thoughts, and feeling about her body size, competence, and function (Cohen et.al, 2018 and Ikenyei 2020).).

As discussed by Mazzeo (2019) the multidimensional construct of body image consist of three important elements: A) Perception; which depicts one's own and also others perception

regarding the body. Our self perception towards body is often influenced by the perceptions of others as well as the media. B)Attitude, this is also another important element of body image which implies people's satisfaction with their body shape, size or the way they view their bodies. From their attitudes towards their bodies both positive and negative body image is formed. C) Preoccupation is the third element of body image as given by Mazzeo (1999). It deals with importance placed on physical appearance and strength of these beliefs. Excessive preoccupation might lead to negative body image.

Positive body image formed when their expectations meet the societal standard of desirable and attractive body. Again while fails to meet those standards result in formation of a negative body image leads ultimately to body dissatisfaction. Body displeasure is a trouble in body image or in the way one perceives his/her body mass or figure and has possibility to influence mental health and value of life. Body image is the 'mental image' of his/her body and almost everyone has a body image. It is how we see our-self in mirror and picture of our-self in our mind. We judge this image as good or bad by comparing it with the standard of 'ideal body image' set by society, family & friends and their culture. This judgment is called 'body esteem'. Individual with positive body image tend to have higher body esteem in comparison to those with less positive body image.

According to certain studies it is showed that women's dissatisfaction with their bodies is higher than men. The reason behind this is the society placing higher value on women's physical appearance and attractiveness than their counterpart. And also evaluate their worth primarily on the basis of their looks. Body dissatisfaction also linked too many adverse psychological consequences including disordered eating, Anorexia, Nervosa, depression, and feeling of anxiety, hampering sexual functioning, and poor self esteem and diminished quality of life (Cash, 2014). Hence negative body image formation is closely associated with loosing self confidence and low self esteem. Contemporary media, social networking sites etc also plays an important role shaping people's perception towards their bodies. Grogan (2017) pointed out some pivotal factors that influence the process of their body image formation. Body image can be both positive and negative.

Negative body image is the result of the negative evaluation of one's own body or by others which often leads to body dissatisfaction. People feel dissatisfied with their bodies mainly their physical appearances when failed to meet the societal standards of ideal beauty and body. Grogan (2017) further discusses about the slim body ideal obsession of the western society, where women's bodies are expected to be shapely and slim. Slenderness is generally associated with happiness, success, youthfulness and social acceptability. Association of beautiful with goodness and also assign more favourable personality traits and life outcomes to those perceived as attractive. And negative stereotyping attached to the body which is not considered attractive. Mainly overweight people are often stigmatized. With the emergence of fashion beauty complex 'slenderness' has become the body ideal, other body modification processes like tattooing and body piercing has also become wide spread. According to certain studies it is showed that women's dissatisfaction with their bodies is higher than men (Ikenyei & Akpotor 2020).

The reason behind this is the society placing higher value on women's physical appearance and attractiveness than their counterpart. We all have witnessed that various trends in fashion, beauty ideals are emerging every now and then; due to which the followers or viewers of such consistently want to enhance and shape their bodies to perfection. In this process they end up being dissatisfied with their own physique. Body dissatisfaction often linked with many

adverse psychological consequences including disordered eating, Anorexia Nervosa, depression, feeling of anxiety, hampering sexual functioning and poor self esteem and diminished quality of life (Cash, 2014).

Negative body image formation is closely associated with loosing self esteem and self confidence which hampers a person's psychological well being. In contemporary times a wide range of mental health difficulties arises out of poor body image. Body image concerns are highly present in almost all societies around the globe because of a strong pressure to pursue appearance ideals. Hence the relationship between body image issues and poor mental health needs to be viewed from academic lenses. The sociology of the body has become an established discipline in the 1990s, with Bryan Turner coining the term 'somatic society' to describe the new-found importance of the body in contemporary sociology (Grogan, 2018). Hence, the body images concerns also need to be viewed from a critical feminist lens because of the gendered nature of body ideals. Women are socialized to be invested in achieving an unrealistically slender and highly groomed appearance which diverts energies and resources away from other activities and continues to perpetuate systems in which women's social worth is indexed to their appearance (Widdows, 2018 and Ikenyei2017).

To understand body dissatisfaction among woman we need to understand their experience of bodies in everyday life. Body image concerns are present across the globe due to strong pressures to pursue appearance ideals. Social media platforms play a significant role in shaping people's perceptions of beauty and body image, particularly among women. Mainstream media content, including advertisements and editorial images of fashion, tends to reinforce a narrow set of ideals surrounding beauty and appearance (Bauman, 2018). A slender or fit physique, a pore-less facial complexion, and whiteness or light skin are often privileged in press pages and across campaign images reinforcing the importance of these features as markers of beauty (Laan & Kuipers, 2016). And other women who do not match these ideals are rendered invisible. It is important to understand the bodies celebrated by these images and videos online display a kind of social privilege mostly among younger women.

Because it is true that in the social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook conventionally beautiful and hegemonically attractive users are rewarded with visible metrics of popularity and public praise including likes and comments (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Chen & Kanai, 2021). Promotion of such unrealistic beauty standards has a detrimental effect upon young women's body image formation and mental health. Negative body image has a complicated relationship with mental health and can result from a number of things, such as cultural ideals of beauty, individual experiences, and psychological factors (Bajwa & Chandola, 2023). Although these concerns may vary with cultural context, their prevalence and association with poor mental and physical health is global (Rodgers, 2022). Given these high rates and the negative effects of body image concerns, it is important to increase our efforts to prevent and decrease them across the globe.

Gender Exploitation in the Beauty Industry

The beauty industry is inherently gendered. While men also face pressure to look good, the burden is disproportionately placed on women. As Bartky (1990) notes, women are expected to be perpetually under surveillance, constantly monitoring and improving their appearance.

In Port Harcourt, this manifests in the way beauty parlours and vendors speak to female customers: "You'll get a better man if you're fair," "Slim girls are more elegant." These messages reinforce

the idea that a woman's value is tied to her looks. Moreover, the industry rarely holds men accountable for their preferences, instead blaming women for not conforming.

Society and Policymakers on Gender Exploitation in the Beauty Industry

Society is pushing back against gender exploitation in the beauty industry by demanding inclusive representation, body positivity, and the end of harmful stereotypes—prompting brands to diversify products and drop discriminatory practices. Policymakers are responding with regulations like the EU's Cosmetics Regulation and FTC guidelines to curb deceptive marketing, while labor and consumer laws are being used to fight the "beauty tax" and exploitative norms (Liu and Li, 2020). International frameworks like the UN Guiding Principles also hold companies accountable for gender equality, and research on gender bias is fueling calls for anti-discrimination policies and workplace training. The beauty industry exploits gender insecurities and power dynamics, perpetuating unattainable beauty standards to drive consumption. Society is increasingly pushing back through inclusive consumer movements, while policymakers are responding with stricter regulations on product safety, aggressive marketing, and labor conditions to protect vulnerable populations.

"Pink tax" refers to a widespread gender-related budgetary imbalance in consumer markets, such that goods marketed to women are routinely set at a higher price than their masculine counterparts despite inherent functional equality. This represents a business pricing methodology and not a tax levied by the state, but the collective economics resulting impose a large and sustained budgetary penalty for women such that the budgetary flexibility and larger economy mobility are curtailed (Liu and Li, 2020).

To eliminate gender-based price disparities, clear legal frameworks must first be established. Governments could draw lessons from legislative practices in the European Union and certain U.S. states by incorporating gender pricing discrimination into consumer protection and pricing laws (Liu and Li, 2020). Explicit provisions should prohibit charging higher prices for products of equal function and quality solely on the basis of gender. Additionally, tax exemptions on sanitary products should be promoted to alleviate the financial burden on women (Wei, 2022). Establishing a nationwide price transparency database—managed by government or third-party institutions—would also allow consumers to compare product prices across different channels, thereby weakening the market space for the "pink tax" (Chen, 2024). Legal and informational interventions together could effectively curb this discriminatory practice.

Brief Overview of Empirical Studies on Skin Lightening and Weight Loss in Nigeria

Several studies have documented the prevalence of skin lightening in Nigeria. A study by Adebayo et al. (2021) found that 68% of women in Lagos had used skin lightening products, with many citing marriage and job prospects as motivations. Similar findings were reported in Port Harcourt by Ogunmola et al. (2022).

In Rivers State, a survey by Ekechi (2023) revealed that 55% of female students in Port Harcourt had used skin lightening creams, with brands like "Fair & Lovely," "Glow & Lovely," and local concoctions like "Zeta White" being popular. Regarding weight loss, Nwankwo (2021) found that 42% of young women in Nigerian universities used weight loss pills or teas, often without medical supervision. Many associated slimness with modernity and attractiveness.

Gaps in Literature

While studies exist on skin lightening and weight loss in Nigeria, few focus on university towns like Port Harcourt. Additionally, most research is quantitative; lacking qualitative insights into

women's lived experiences. This study fills these gaps by combining interviews, observations, and critical analysis to explore the cultural logic behind beauty consumption.

THEORETICAL THRUST

Several theories complement each other to provide adequate explanation to the phenomena under study. These include:

Feminist theory - provides the primary lens for this study. It examines how power relations, particularly patriarchy, shape women's experiences. As hooks (2000) notes, capitalist patriarchy uses media and advertising to sell the idea that women must change themselves to be loved or successful. Feminist theory helps uncover how the beauty industry profits from women's oppression, turning self-hatred into revenue.

Social Constructionism - posits that reality is created through social processes. Beauty standards are not natural but constructed through culture, media, and language (Berger &Luckmann, 2016). What is considered "beautiful" changes over time and across cultures. In Port Harcourt, beauty is constructed through Nollywood films, social media influencers, and local advertising—all of which promote a narrow, often unattainable ideal.

Commodity Fetishism (Marxist Perspective) - Marx's concept of commodity fetishism explains how consumers attribute magical powers to products. A skin lightening cream is not just a chemical product—it is sold as a ticket to confidence, love, and success (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). This ideological function masks the exploitation behind its production and marketing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design This study adopts a qualitative research design using phenomenological and ethnographic approaches to understand the lived experiences of women in Port Harcourt. This design allows for in-depth exploration of personal meanings, motivations, and social contexts.

Population of the Study The population consists of female consumers of skin care lightening and weight loss products in Port Harcourt , aged 18–35, including students, traders, and young professionals.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique A sample of 20 participants was selected using purposive and snowball sampling. Participants were chosen based on their use of beauty products and willingness to share experience. Five beauty vendors and three pharmacists were also interviewed to understand marketing practices.

Research Instruments The following research instrument used for the study

- **i.** Semi-Structured Interview Guide – Used for in-depth conversations with women and vendors.
- **ii.** Observation Checklist – Used to document advertising content in shops and online.
- **iii.** Focus Group Discussion (FGD) – One session with 8 female students to explore peer influence

Validity and Reliability The interview guide was reviewed by two sociology lecturers. A pilot interview was conducted to refine questions. Data saturation was achieved after 18 interviews.

Method of Data Collection The data was collected by interview. Interviews were conducted in English and local languages (translated). Observations were made in 10 beauty shops and online marketplaces (WhatsApp, Instagram).

Method of Data Analysis Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded for recurring themes such as "self-esteem," "peer pressure," "marketing tactics," and "health concerns." Themes were grouped into broader categories for interpretation

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
18–22	10	50%
23–25	6	30%
26–30	3	15%
31–35	1	5%
Occupation		
Student	10	50%
Trader	5	25%
Civil Servant	3	15%
Hairdresser	2	10%
Products Used		
Skin Lightening Creams	15	75%
Weight Loss Pills/Teas	12	60%
Body Shaping Creams	8	40%

Table 1 shows that 50% of respondents within the age of 18-22 years, 30% of the respondents are 23-25 years of age, 15% of the respondents are within the 26-30 years of age and 5% of the respondents are 31-35 years of age.

Again, 50% of the respondents are students, 25% of the respondents are traders, 15% of the respondents are Civil servant and 10% of the respondents are Hairdresser.
Similarly, 75% of the respondents uses skin care lightening creams, 60% of the respondents uses weight loss pills/teas while 40% of the respondents uses body shaping creams.

Thematic Findings

Theme 1: Marketing Exploits Insecurities

All vendors admitted using emotional appeals:
> "I tell them, 'If you're fair, even rich men will notice you.' That sells the cream fast." – *Pharmacist, 38*
> "I show before and after pictures. Even if it's fake, they believe." – *Beauty Shop Owner, 42*

Theme 2: Beauty Linked to Marriage and Success

Many women associated fair skin and slimness with better life outcomes:
> "My boyfriend said he likes fair girls. So I started using a particular Whiting product." – *Student, 20*
> "I lost 8kg and got a job. I think the slim look made me look more serious." – *Trader, 28*

Theme 3: Peer Pressure and Social Comparison
This revealed intense peer influence:
> "When your friends are all fair and slim, you feel left out." – *Participant 1*
> "We compare ourselves on Instagram. It's stressful." – *Participant 2*

Theme 4: Health Risks Ignored
Despite knowing risks, many continued use:
> "I know mercury is bad, but I've been using it for two years. I can't stop now." – *Civil Servant, 31*
> "The tea makes me go to the toilet every hour, but I'm losing weight." – *Student, 22*

Theme 5: Lack of Regulation
Vendors admitted selling unapproved products:
> "NAFDAC doesn't come here. We sell what people want." – *Market Vendor, 45*

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings confirmed that the industrialization of beauty in Port Harcourt is deeply intertwined with gender exploitation. Industries profit by selling the myth that women must be fair and slim to be valued. This finding is in corresponded with Wolf (2021) who opined that the use of fear-based marketing aligns with feminist critiques of the beauty myth. Women are made to feel inadequate, then offered a product as salvation. The health risks are alarming, yet consumption continues due to social pressure and lack of regulation. This reflects a broader failure of public health policy.

The study also reveals the intersection of class, gender, and colonialism; light skin is associated with elite status, while fatness is linked to poverty and laziness. These findings support feminist theory and social constructionism, showing how beauty standards are manufactured and internalized.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study examined industrialization of beauty and gender exploitation by Nigerian industries: a case study of skin care and weight loss industries in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. To achieve this study four research questions and objectives were raised for the study. Some related literature on the industrialization of beauty and gender exploitation by Nigerian industries was reviewed. A qualitative research design was adopted for the study.

The population of the study was female customers within the age of 18-35 years, a sample of 20 participants was selected using purposive and snowball sampling, five beauty vendors and three pharmacists were also interviewed. The research instrument used for the study is Semi-Structured Interview Guide, Observation Checklist and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The data collected were analysis using thematic analysis.

Major Findings include:

1. The skin care and weight loss industries in Port Harcourt use exploitative marketing strategies that targets women's insecurities.
2. Beauty is industrialized through advertising that links fair skin and slimness to success, love, and social acceptance.
3. Women consume these products due to peer pressure, media influence, and patriarchal expectations.

4. Many products pose serious health risks, yet are widely available due to weak regulation.
5. The industry reinforces gender inequality by placing the burden of beauty on women

CONCLUSION

The industrialization of beauty in Port Harcourt is not just an economic phenomenon but a form of gender exploitation. Nigerian industries profit by perpetuating harmful beauty ideals that degrade women's health and self-worth. This study confirms that beauty is not neutral; it is a tool of control embedded in patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. Until society challenges these norms, women will continue to pay financially, physically, and emotionally for an unattainable ideal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Government (NAFDAC):

1. Ban the importation and sale of skin lightening products containing mercury and hydroquinone.
2. Enforce stricter advertising regulations on beauty products.
3. Launch public awareness campaigns on the dangers of skin lightening and unsafe weight loss.

For Educational Institutions

4. Integrate body positivity and media literacy into the curriculum.
5. Organize workshops on self-esteem and critical consumption.

For Civil Society:

6. Support feminist movements that challenge beauty exploitation.
7. Promote diverse representations of beauty in media.

For Women:

8. Practice self-acceptance and resist harmful beauty standards.
9. Share experiences to build collective resistance

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study contributes to feminist scholarship by documenting the localized mechanisms of beauty industrialization in a Nigerian university town. It provides qualitative evidence of how global beauty capitalism operates at the grassroots level.

5.6 Suggestion for Further Research

Future studies could:

1. Share experiences to build collective resistance
2. Explore male experiences with beauty standards
3. Investigate the role of Nollywood in promoting beauty myths.

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