

Marion Grimberg with  
Denrele Edun

**Skin tone and human differen-  
tation in Lagos, Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

Local ways of thinking add significant layers of meaning to differentiations based on skin tone. Studies on colorism have highlighted the influence of global racial and racist hierarchies on the privileging of lighter skin tones. This paper examines the complex role skin tone plays in processes of differentiation in Lagos, Nigeria, applying Hirschauer's theory of human differentiation to an underrepresented geographical context. It takes an in-depth look at experiences and skin-lightening practices of Nigerian media personality Denrele Edun, who has longstanding experiences in the entertainment industry and is representative of local valuations of the skin. The study reveals that skin tone functions not only as a racial signifier, but also as a marker of belonging to other categories like beauty, wealth/class, gender, and ethnicity. Edun is 'doing being mixed-race' through lighter skin, but also uses it to signal success, drawing on the notion that only economically successful people can 'maintain' a light complexion in the Nigerian climate. Next to being a marker of human differentiation, skin tone is shown to also be at the core of a distinct social category, that of *light(er)-skinned individuals*. The paper introduces the emic perspective of skin tone as malleable and skin lightening as a form of skin care and strategic investment in the self. It further introduces local rationalizations that explain light(er) skin privilege through notions of internalized racism, and a fascination with foreignness and aesthetic alterity. By prioritizing Edun's perspective and feedback, this paper incorporates principles from decolonial and collaborative research practices.

**Keywords**

skin color, human differentiation, skin lightening, skin bleaching, colorism, body modification

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# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

‘[B]y the time [...] I saw myself on TV, I thought to myself  
‘Mhhhm, I could do better. With my color’,’ Denrele Edun, 2022.

In September 2022, I interviewed Nigerian entertainer Denrele Edun on what skin and skin tone meant to him in the context of Nigeria. The interview became an account of Edun’s biography through the lens of skin tone. In the above quotation, he alludes to the importance of skin tone (‘color’, as he puts it) for success in the Nigerian entertainment and fashion industries. Edun is a Lagos-based media personality with over 681.000 followers on Instagram<sup>2</sup> who has been working in the entertainment industry since his early teens. His eccentricity and energetic personality have led him to host many TV shows and events across the country. His skin tone is considered to be light in the Nigerian context. Over the years, he has faced scrutiny for his skin-lightening practices but remains unapologetic.

This text uses the term skin tone rather than skin color to allow for possible socio-cultural interpretations that go beyond the concept of race. In the humanities, race and colorism<sup>3</sup> have played significant roles in the study of skin and skin tone (cf. Blay 2011; Glenn 2008; Hunter 2011; Jablonski 2012; Lafrance 2018; Tate 2016; Thomas 2020). Some sources have linked the practice of skin lightening to a globally pervasive racist and colorist world order and its discriminatory structures (Blay 2011; Glenn 2008; Mire 2020). Such approaches tend to reduce the agency of those who practice skin lightening. Skin lighteners are portrayed as victims of a global thought and advertisement system, who are complicit in upholding racist/colorist structures. The complicity consists of having internalized these ideologies and engaging in dangerous skin care practices. Other sources highlight the underlying neoliberal rationale of engaging in skin-lightening practices to achieve certain beauty, financial, and social status goals, and restore a level of agency to those who engage in these practices. Pussetti and Pires (2020: 1), for instance, emphasize the malleability of skin and the body, seeing them as a ‘project under construction’ in which skin-lightening practices perpetuate social structures of class, race and gender. Tate (2016) and Hunter (2011) additionally link skin-lightening practices to the beauty and body enhancement industries. Ashikari (2005) introduces the idea of ‘Japanese whiteness’ and Japanese beauty as being traditionally linked to lightness of skin.

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<sup>1</sup> This article presents results from my PhD research on human differentiation based on skin tone and the meanings associated with skin tone in Lagos, Nigeria. It would not have been possible without the contribution of Denrele Edun. It contains a detailed transcribed extract from one of the interviews I made with him. Further, an earlier version of the analysis presented here was commented on by Edun in a feedback conversation and his feedback was then incorporated into the analysis. I therefore mention Edun as a contributor to this article.

<sup>2</sup> This number was taken from his Instagram profile on 07/11/2024.

<sup>3</sup> Colorism can be defined as the preference for lighter skin tones over darker ones (Dixon and Telles 2017: 406), within and across racial categorizations.

His female Japanese informants named these concepts as motivations to use skin lighteners and avoid tanning. Ashikari's study shows that different interpretations of *whiteness* exist around the globe, hence local traditions and preferences should be explored alongside global trends. Balogun and Hoang (2013) similarly argue that Vietnamese high-end sex workers lighten their skin to embody *Asianness* and Asian beauty ideals, taking K-Pop artists as their model and arguing that the Asian women's 'true' skin color is white (Balogun and Hoang 2013:10-11). In the same vein, Saraswati (2010) argues that the desire for *whiteness* is not necessarily a desire for racialized whiteness. Rather, lightness/whiteness of skin is aspirational as it stands for 'cosmopolitanness' in the Indonesian context. In the medical field, numerous papers have demonstrated the negative effects of ingredients commonly found in skin-lightening products, particularly of mercury, hydroquinone, and corticosteroids (Pollock et al. 2021; Olumide et al. 2008). Because of the dangers linked to skin lightening and how widespread it is, some classify it as a public health risk for African countries (Faronbi et al. 2018; Integrated African Health Observatory 2023) and even globally (Pollock et al. 2020; Sagoe et al. 2019).

This paper builds on the above concepts and considerations, while applying Hirschauer's (2023) theory of human differentiation to analyze the complex role skin tone plays in processes of differentiation in Lagos, Nigeria. Human differentiation's praxeological approach allows for a more granular understanding of how skin tone differentiation manifests in specific social situations. Questions of agency and perspectivity (Hirschauer, 2023: 359-363) lead us to ask who is categorizing whom, who is claiming membership to which categories, and who is influencing categorizations. This analytical lens can deepen our understanding of skin tone's role in processes of human differentiation and help identify blind spots in previous studies. The paper asks what role skin tone plays in Edun's biography, both for his identity formation and in his relationship to society. It further seeks to determine what meanings Edun ascribes to skin and skin tone and how they are embedded in local understandings and valuations.

The analysis is based on two semi structured interviews with Denrele Edun from September 2022 (main interview) and November 2023 (feedback discussion), and nine months of fieldwork in Nigeria that took place between August 2022 and November 2024. I focused primarily on middle- and upper-class<sup>4</sup> Lagosians, as well as professionals from the fields of dermatology, film, entertainment, and skin care. Analyzing one person's interviews and perspective in greater detail follows aspirations of decolonial and collaborative research practices. These encompass for example the recognition of local, non-academic and non-Eurocentric voices and forms of knowledge and the possibility to jointly define and interpret topics (Blank and Nimführ 2023: 13). To these ends, the paper includes a largely unedited interview section, as well as a feedback loop. These choices were made to give the reader a strong and initially unfiltered impression of a local Nigerian perspective, and to show Edun's position as a self-reflective local expert who can foster a deeper understanding of Nigerian evaluations of skin and skin tone. Prioritizing his perspective through direct quotation was

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<sup>4</sup> For thoughts on the concepts of middle-class and elite in Africa, see Lentz (2015).

inspired by the works of anthropologists such as Biehl (2013), Dwyer (1987), and Shostak (1983).

In the initial interview, Edun explores his life's journey from the vantage point of his relationship with skin and skin tone. This opens the conversation to broader societal issues by addressing colorism in present-day Nigeria. He provides a folk theory of human differentiation by listing and illustrating the different socially relevant meanings that skin tone can take on. A picture emerges of skin tone as a multifaceted and flexible marker of human differentiation that draws on notions of wealth, beauty, attractiveness, class, gender, and ethnicity. Edun's interview is particularly interesting to analyze as it synthesizes the local understandings around skin and skin tone I encountered in the field. He can be taken as an example of a typical Lagosian perspective on skin, skin tone and skin care, allowing me to make broader claims about skin tone differentiation in the context of Lagos. Additionally, his three decades-long experience in the Nigerian entertainment industry makes him a local expert of this industry. And his narrative sheds light on particular and personal experiences Edun made because of how society perceived him with regards to skin tone.

Drawing from a postcolonial West African context, this text aims to study a locale underrepresented in the burgeoning field of skin and skin tone studies (cf. Dixon and Telles 2017), and to acknowledge that skin tone preferences are subject to 'local and national variations' (Tate 2016: 119). Nigeria currently has the largest and fastest growing economy on the African continent and is regularly cited as a country with a high prevalence of skin lightening (see for example Dixon and Telles 2017; Olumide et al. 2008; WHO 2011). I observed during my fieldwork that skin care was a widely popular topic in Lagos. And the concept of 'skin care' encompassed the use of skin-lightening products. Entering a supermarket or market stall in Lagos, I had to actively search for non-lightening soaps and creams, as most products displayed catchwords that indicated some form of skin lightening (e.g. 'toning', 'lightening', 'whitening'). Even informants who were affirming not to lighten their skin were often using soaps or other products displaying these words. In short, the relevance and spread of skin-lightening practices in Nigeria is significant, making it an interesting country to do research on skin tone and skin lightening. Nigeria is also known for its vibrant film, entertainment and fashion industries, of which Lagos is the center.

In this paper, I use skin lightening as an umbrella term for practices that aim to lighten a person's skin, regardless of the change's intensity, duration, or extent. I refrain from using bleaching, as this term carries an inherent moral judgement and bears the risk of focusing the attention on drastic cases of skin tone alteration. This then creates a bias towards strong and socially condemned forms of skin lightening, while obscuring a spectrum of practices that are widespread and relevant for social analysis. I further analyze skin lightening as a form of skin care. This might seem counterintuitive at first, as these practices can be detrimental to health. However, this approach is rooted in the emic understanding of skin care I encountered in Lagos. As mentioned above, most products sold and advertised as skin care products (soaps, creams, oils, etc.) are advertised as having skin-lightening properties. During my fieldwork, even the strongest skin-lightening products were collectively and without exception referred

to as ‘skin care products’. I learnt that, in Lagos, ‘doing’ skin care meant ‘caring for the skin’ and ‘taking care of the skin’ in the sense of investing time, effort, and money in it. Caring for the skin in a health sustaining way often came second. This explains why potentially harmful practices were collectively referred to as skin care. I use this emic understanding of skin care, not to minimize the health risks inherent to skin-lightening practices, but because it is important to understand the local perspectives on skin and skin tone discussed here. I further use the terms light(er) and dark(er) skin to emphasize that what is considered to be light(er) and dark(er) is, to a non-negligible extent, inter-relational and context dependent. In Lagos, I came across only two categories, ‘light’ and ‘dark’ skin. There was no clear boundary that separated the two. Instead, the classification into light and dark seemed to depend significantly on comparisons with the skin tones of those surrounding the person being described and categorized. I chose to use light(er) and dark(er) to highlight this relationship between and the contingency of skin tone classifications.

The paper starts with an interview transcript taken from the beginning of the first interview with Edun (09/2022) (Chapter 1). It is followed by an analysis of Edun’s journey to the ‘right’ skin tone (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 interprets the meanings locally attached to the surface of the body (Chapter 3), while the next section investigates the concept of light(er) skin as advantageous skin (Chapter 4). The text ends with an analysis of skin tone in processes of human differentiation (Chapter 5).

## 1. The Interview

1	<b>Grimberg:</b> What do you associate with skin, personally and regarding your industry?
10	<b>Edun:</b> Well, that's the million-dollar question rolled into one. Now, skin can represent so many things for me. I mean, it's multifaceted, so it depends on how I look at it. It could be skin as your orientation. Skin as your ethnic group. Skin as your identity. Skin as elements of your character. Skin as a USP. That's your unique selling points, which in Nigeria we say: ‘your markets’, ‘sell your markets!’. Skin as your reference points. Skin also as a yardstick. It just represents so much. And I feel that because we're Nigerians, we're Africans, that there's a certain typeset of how your skin should be. Now, if you do not belong to that demographic, where does this put you? What representation do you hold? [...] What does skin represent for me in terms of entertainment? Ah! A whole lot. [...] Skin is actually at the forefront when it comes to, let me narrow it down to movies and cinema. [...] Now, in Nigeria especially, a lot of actors and actresses feel that people that are lighter have a clear advantage. We call them the ‘yellow skin advantage’ and it feels like they get casted for more roles because the directors or the producers feel that they would illuminate the screen and they'll be more attractive to the audience. And as such, light-skinned actors and actresses or entertainers also tend to land more endorsements because, for some reason, they [i.e. brands and producers] feel like: ‘Oh, they're like lights. They illuminate the room.

20	<p>They illuminate the screen'. They have more unique selling points when it comes to self-definition, when it comes to accountability [meant here: bankability], when it comes to quality, when it even comes to longevity, they feel that the light-skinned entertainers have an upper hand. You know, it's not a myth or it's not that somebody came up and started a wave on yellow skin advantage. Nah! It's just a subconscious mindset. [...]</p>
30	<p>Now for someone like me – I will use myself as a typeset [meant here: prototype] or an experimental guinea pig. Now, because I am mixed-race, but mixed-race where my father's genes were stronger – my sister is a lot lighter than I am. Now, my mom is also mixed. She is half Indian and half Mauritian [...], but she's really light, mere white. So, for me, I felt like I was the dark Indian. And you know, it also felt like 'dark Indian, poor Indian'. For me growing up especially, I was always called 'poor Indian, poor Indian, poor Indian'. And when you will see my mom, and you see myself: 'Oh yes, such a cute looking child. But mhhh, what happened? Why didn't he get his mother's color?' [...] It was thrust upon me that I needed to look like my mom if I was mixed-race. And I saw other mixed-race kids in school, and I was just wondering to myself 'why is my skin color not this way?'</p>
40	<p>By the time I got into entertainment [Edun started his career as a child actor], what sold me was my versatility on screen [...] So, it wasn't now even about the color anymore. It wasn't about being mixed-race or with my coily Creole hair. It was just about my deliverables. So, I started to see myself out of that context of, 'okay, I don't need my mixed-race heritage to get me places. I can actually open doors for myself'. But then by the time the show was over, and I got into university, it was like a different reality. Now, I was stopped on campus every day. 'Hmya? Are you a boy or a girl?' People just didn't understand. 'Where are you from? Ah-ah, you look-'. That is when the name 'poor Indian' came. 'Are you Somalian? Are you one of these Niger suffering beggars on the street?' Because I just looked a certain kind of way. And so, it wasn't a complex, but it was just more self-awareness for me, – but self-awareness not on a positive side, but slightly on the negative of: 'ah-ah. So, if I look this way – am I supposed to look a certain kind of way to be mixed-race? What's going on here?'. Well long story cut short, by the time I got on TV, and I saw myself on TV, I thought to myself: 'Mhhhm, I could do better. With my color.' And because</p>
50	<p>I was working for a music channel at that point in time, [...] because I was under so much stress, I would do so much as a producer, as a presenter, I was running around – I was also part of marketing – I got darker. And even darker and so... –</p> <p><b>Grimberg:</b> How did you get darker?</p> <p><b>Edun:</b> Yeah, because I was working so much. I was always under the sun. You know, like running up and down the whole place. I got darker, darker, darker and it felt, you know, people... – I mean, as much as I was funny, I was vivacious, flamboyant, outlandish... I felt, unconsciously, that people were looking at me, that, 'oh, if only</p>

60	<p>he was, you know..., his heritage, his parentage, you know, the color!'. So, by the time I got out of the channel, I thought to myself: 'now, it's time to take matters into my hands. I need to take care of myself'. And because you see, all through that period, I broke out. I wasn't taking care of my skin so there was so much acne. I was always having irritations. I was always reacting to different stuff. There were allergies and whatnot. So, I sat back, I took a good look at myself, and I said: 'You know what? I'm going to lighten up this skin, baby, but I am going to tone my skin and get my original mixed-race color'. So, I went on a rampage! My good Lord. Name it, I've used it all. [Edun gives examples of expensive local and foreign brands and spa services he has used] I remember there was a time that I had breakouts, that was my skin color. I was very uncomfortable. I had to do a lot of hairstyles. I would mask my face and just leave just the center fold open. [...] It was quite a long journey</p>
70	<p>to get here. First things first, finding the right skin product, finding the right shade, settling for organic and also settling for a color where I just said, 'you know what, I'm fine with this. I'm not going to take it overboard. I'm going to maintain this and look splendid whilst at it'. So, this is where I've arrived! This is deep. I would say for skin color, skin tone and skin identity, this is the final destination that I've gotten to, and I like, I'm comfortable with, I love it.</p>
80	<p><b>Grimberg:</b> Okay. Before you got darker being under the sun, was your skin like this or was it darker?</p> <p><b>Edun:</b> It was a shade in between. [...] I don't know, for some reason I think my dad's genes were stronger, so I got more of the melanin. But it was in between. You could tell I was a colored kid, you know? I was this caramelly-chocolaty brown. [...] I've approached every skin expert and non-expert – the ones pretending to be experts, who have sold me things that have backfired! [...] Now, because I've seen people with skin diseases, skin problems and I didn't want to have my skin close to my vein, that any small cut and then I'll be [in a dramatic tone] bleeding all over the place! So yeah, I just started to maintain a tougher skin. But then just maintain the color which I like and I'm very comfortable with and it blends perfectly with me. [...]</p>
90	<p>So of course, a lot of people say, 'oooooh, yes, eeeeeh, he's bleaching'. They always use that bleaching word for me. But then I realized it's – I said 'I'm not bleaching. I'm mixed-race! I'm just trying to get my color back!' [...]. And I think presently I am in my skin! I'm in a very good place. At first, I wanted to get gr– no, not even great – let me use the word: I wanted to get fancy skin. Fancy skin like 'uhh' [shivers], as opposed to having good, perfect skin that would stand the test of time. I wanted fancy skin. I wanted to look fancy. I wanted to glitter all over the place, shine, and whatnot. But then whilst on that race to get some fancier skin, I realized the need to get good, perfect skin. [...] I'm away from the whitening range now. I'm just with toning and brightening and then the ones that also give you a glow, an inner glow as well. So yeah, I found the ones for my face, what worked for my face,</p>

100	<p>what worked for my body. And trust me, it was a Herculean journey to get here, but I sure got there. And I've had a lot of failed – [I've] tried and tested so many. So many that backfired. Like I said, I had this horrible acne I can never forget it. [...] I was using so much. So I couldn't pinpoint if this was the brand that was responsible for it. I just knew I was to blame for trying out too many things. [...]</p>
110	<p><b>Grimberg:</b> And when you used the more chemical products, were you scared or what did you think in that moment?</p> <p><b>Edun:</b> Scared? Me? I'm a bloody-a** Nigerian, a Mainland<sup>5</sup> boy! I don't give a hoot. I wasn't scared about anything. I just wanted to – not necessarily have the yellow skin advantage or, but I – because I've gone through so much: modelling, acting, where, you know, the light-skinned ones were always picked – except they were looking for something different. So, for all the modelling assignments I did back in the day and editorials, I was always picked because I looked different from everybody else. My hair and they could tell from my color that, you know, 'this one is not from here'. But then still, that is a minority – [the] majority of the jobs, we never got. And I felt like, okay, maybe I needed to be more visible. I needed to be seen. I needed to be acknowledged, recognized, celebrated, and appreciated. And that could only happen, if I was a little, or rather an octave higher from my present skin color.</p>

## 2. The Journey to the 'Right' Skin Tone

The first aspect of Edun's skin-focused biography that will be analyzed, is the journey to his current skin tone. Edun tells us that, as a young adult, he embarked on a 'Herculean' (line 99) journey, thereby equating his journey to a heroic one. Edun's journey to the skin tone that feels right to him involves two key elements: selecting the 'right' shade and using the 'right' appropriate products.

The first aspect is 'finding the right shade' (l. 71) and then 'settling for a color' (l. 72). Edun frames the concern about his skin tone as something that was initially external to him but eventually forced upon him (l. 33). His social environment mirrored that, as the son of a dark(er)-skinned Nigerian father and a light(er)-skinned Indian Mauritian mother, he should look a certain way – namely light(er)-skinned – in order to be perceived as truly and rightly *mixed-race*. It becomes clear in Edun's narrative that the people around him shared a collective idea of what it means to look *mixed-race*. For them, *mixed-race* was equivalent to being light(er)-skinned. With his complexion, Edun stood out as an anomaly. In his recollection, society's

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<sup>5</sup> The city of Lagos was formed on a small island at the mouth of the Lagos lagoon. It started growing rapidly from the 1960s onwards, spreading on other islands and on the adjacent mainland. Lagos is colloquially divided into 'Island' and 'Mainland', with most of the 'Island' districts attracting more affluent citizens, and parts of the Mainland being associated with having some poorer and 'rougher' areas.

gaze and judgement of his skin tone eventually caught up with him and made him question why he looked the way he did, assess whether this was the way it should be, and later, whether there was anything he could do about it. Thus, his first questions about skin tone revolved around issues of identity, namely racial identity and ancestry.

Edun's years at university mark a turning point in his narrative. Taunted by others, he became increasingly self-conscious about the appropriateness of his appearance, particularly his skin tone. The story then moves on to the consequences of this self-questioning: Edun says that he thought he could 'do better' (l. 50) and decides to start lightening his skin. At this point, he seems to have internalized the idea that light(er) skin is more 'visible' (l. 114). This introduces a second meaning of skin tone as a predictor of visibility and success. Edun felt the need to be 'seen' (ibid.), 'acknowledged, recognized, celebrated, and appreciated' (l. 115). Lightening his skin tone seemed to him like an effective and perhaps even the only solution to achieve this (see l. 116-117). His narrative portrays skin lightening as a logical consequence to life experiences in the particular socio-cultural context of Nigeria, and as a promise of a better, more successful life. It echoes Hunter's (2011: 143) argument that people who engage in skin lightening 'try to acquire [...] the social and economic status that goes with [lighter skin]'. Edun's accounts unveil local arguments and motivations for skin lightening, the two dominant ones being a collective imagination of what it means to look *mixed-race*, and an expected increase in visibility and career opportunities.

The second part of Edun's skin tone-related journey focuses on product use. By 2022, Edun had realized that the products enabling him to achieve his desired skin tone were 'toning and brightening' (l. 97) products. When it comes to terminologies used to talk about skin lightening, the interview exemplifies how Nigerians distinguish between different intensities of skin lightening. In Lagos, the terms used by interlocutors to designate the intensity of skin lightening, from the mildest to the strongest, were glowing<sup>6</sup>, toning, brightening, lightening, whitening, and bleaching. Bleaching was a pejorative term that was not used by those who lightened their skin to describe their practice. Instead, it was used by those who do not lighten their skin to criticize skin lightening. It was also used by people who lighten their skin to distance themselves from negatively connotated forms of the practice. To speak about what they were doing, they preferred using the terms 'glowing', 'toning', 'brightening', 'lightening', and sometimes 'whitening'. Saying that one was 'only toning up' was sometimes used as a strategy to veil the intensity of one's skin-lightening practice that others would have termed whitening or even 'bleaching'. A strategy to avoid saying that one was lightening one's skin altogether was the use of terms such as 'clearing up' the skin or 'maintaining one's color'. In the first case, the interlocutors were underlining that they were focusing on getting rid of impurities and blemishes. Though this was usually done by consuming skin-lightening products that claimed to get rid of 'dark spots' and 'clear' the skin, the lightening aspect of the products was concealed in this narrative. In the second example, 'maintaining' is used to

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<sup>6</sup> 'Glow' or 'glowing' does not always include skin lightening but can represent a mild form of it. The concept of 'glow' additionally includes radiance and plumpness of the skin.

signal that one always had the current skin tone but had needed products to uncover this ‘real’ or ‘original’ skin tone. The wish to ‘maintain’ one’s skin tone was the skin care wish I encountered most frequently among my Lagosian interlocutors. They feared that their skin would ‘darken’ in Lagos, an environment that was usually described as ‘harsh’, climate wise and figuratively (e.g. stress, fast-paced lifestyle etc.).

Edun’s vocabulary also includes the term ‘maintain’ (l. 73 and 86). He expressed that, with his updated skin care routine, he wanted to ‘maintain the color’ he had at the time of our talk (l. 86). This exemplifies how, in the Nigerian context, ‘good’ skin and its color was not seen as a given, but as something that needed to be permanently produced and sustained through work on the skin. Edun shared this understanding that I have found to be widespread in Lagos, namely that the skin is a malleable body part that can be brought to display almost any skin tone, provided one is using the ‘right’ (l. 71) products. As I came to know during my fieldwork in Nigeria, engaging in skin care practices was seen as a way of taking care of oneself. Conversely, skin problems were sometimes interpreted as a lack of effort and investment in the self, and therefore a lack of care for oneself. For those who saw the skin as malleable at will, the results of skin care were understood as a realization of their innate potential: caring for and working on the skin was believed to bring out features that were previously hidden but achievable through product consumption. In this understanding, skin lightening was seen as an investment that brings out one’s innate beauty and supposed ‘original’ (l. 66) color. This can be likened to the desire to achieve an ‘improved version’ of oneself cited as a motivation for skin lightening by Dixon and Telles (2017: 412). It also exemplifies Hunter’s (2011: 146) argument that contemporary body manipulation is about presenting the ‘new body as ‘natural’.

Initially, Edun embarked on a journey of skin tone alteration without knowing what his end goal and end skin tone would be. Back then, the visible short-term effects of products seem to have been more important than knowing how these effects would be achieved and how sustainable they would be. This made him open to trying many different potent products simultaneously. It was only after experiencing negative consequences<sup>7</sup> (breakouts etc.) that he realized what he wanted and concluded it was ‘good, perfect skin that would stand the test of time’ (l. 93). He contrasts this with the very light ‘fancy skin’ (l. 92) he initially pursued. Edun mentions the wish to ‘maintain a tougher skin’ (l. 86), which exemplifies the idea that milder skin lightening is healthier and more sustainable. He opposes this to having his skin

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<sup>7</sup> Potent skin-lightening products often contain one or several of these chemicals: hydroquinone, corticosteroids, and mercury. All of them can lead to serious side-effects affecting the skin and other organs or bodily functions (e.g. kidney failure, hypertension) (see Olumide et al. 2008; Pollock et al. 2020; WHO 2011). The concentration of chemicals, way of application, and length of use play a role in the risk of side-effects. A prolonged use of products (Pollock et al. 2020: 161), for instance, significantly increases the probability and seriousness of side-effects.

'close to [his] vein'<sup>8</sup> (l. 84), a state he wishes to avoid. The journey of Edun's product use can thus be summarized as a journey towards moderation. It further shows a trial-and-error mentality and boldness towards skin care, which is an approach I frequently encountered in Lagos. Skin care was an opaque field where self-appointed 'skin experts' were very influential. They would advise clients on what skin care products to buy, focusing on the lightening 'results' clients were asking for (e.g. 'I want to be three shades lighter'), while often disregarding potential risks of what they sold. It was difficult for customers to access information about products, as many sellers offered home-made and home-mixed products without disclosing their ingredients. Even larger local brands and imported products often did not disclose their ingredients or provided incomplete information, thereby concealing the presence of potentially harmful ingredients and concentrations. This phenomenon was already noticed by Olumide et al. in 2008 (345) and can be observed to this day. The effect – or promised effect – of the product is highlighted on its package (e.g. 'get white in three days'), while the way in which this effect is achieved is obscured, making the consumption of skin care a risky endeavor for people in Lagos. At the same time, 'good skin' as well as light(er) skin had a high social value, which explains why skin care was extremely popular and the willingness of trying out various products and routines was high.

### 3. Meanings Going Below the Surface

Edun portrays the skin as much more than a mere shell or organ that fulfils biological functions. His opening statement reveals the many layers that he, as a Nigerian entertainer, associates with skin and, more specifically, skin tone. For him, skin tone can function as a signifier of (sexual) orientation, ethnicity, identity, personality, character, and marketability. Skin tone as 'orientation' (line 4) can be understood in two ways. First, as an interpretation of where one locates oneself on the social strata, i.e. whether one is well off and has a high social status or not. This idea of skin tone showing one's position in society is also conveyed by Edun's mention of skin tone as a point of 'reference' (l. 6) or 'yardstick' (l. 7). The second way of interpreting orientation is as a sexual orientation. Globally, light(er) skin is a strongly gendered category that has been associated with femininity and feminine beauty (Blay 2011; Dyer 1997; Jablonski 2012: 167-168; Mire 2020). In Nigeria and for women, light(er) skin tones were associated with sexual desirability and, particularly for lightened skin, sexual promiscuity. The femininity associated with light(er) skin is sometimes transferred to light(er) men, meaning that some of my interlocutors saw light(er) men as being closer to femininity. Lightened men were additionally often associated with homosexuality. They occasionally faced criticism and suspicion, as some interlocutors considered it to be vain and inappropriate

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<sup>8</sup> Here, Edun is alluding to the phenomenon of 'skin thinning' or skin atrophy, a common side effect of prolonged use of corticosteroids that jeopardizes the skin's healthy functioning (Niculet, Bobeica, and Tatu 2020).

for a man to care strongly about his appearance. Blay (2011: 23) also observed these associations with light(er) and lightened men and women in Ghana.

This is where light(er) skin as an indicator of one's sexual orientation comes into play. During our feedback conversation, Edun explained that, by orientation, he had meant a sexual preference for light(er)-skinned individuals. He clarified that skin tone was a 'defining factor for people who want something exotic and, as we call it, 'something light' or 'something soft''. Here, it is lightness that makes the skin evoke exoticism and softness. Edun developed the idea of light(er) skin as a sexual preference as follows:

The average Nigerian guy would say, 'ah, you know, I would favor a light-skinned girl over...'. [...] Then also, I was speaking towards the angle of a community, I was going to mention the LGBTQ community, and I even know of people who appreciate lighter-skinned [individuals]. It does happen a lot, even in this part of the world, where 'oh, yes o! We love our Africans', but for someone who is looking for something effeminate, sensual, they usually... borderline [meant here: lean] towards light-skinned and crystal-skinned, crystal-clear skin.

Here, Edun's statements underline the Nigerian tendency to associate lightness of skin with femininity, softness, attractiveness, and even homosexuality. He also underlines how discourse and actions sometimes differ, when people locally claim to 'love [their] Africans' but pursue light(er)-skinned love interests. Here, one might interpret that Edun further associates Africanness with darkness of skin, equating dark(er) skin with a higher degree of Africanness.

Indeed, other important meanings projected onto skin tone in Lagos concerned a person's notion of identity and origin. Here, concepts of lineage, race, ethnicity, but also personality and character came into play. When Edun mentioned 'ethnic group' (l. 4), for instance, he was referring to widespread ideas associated with Nigerian ethnic categorizations. In Lagos, the concept of 'ethnic groups' was often put forward to explain why there were differences in skin tones within the population. Skin tone was believed to be an indicator of a person's belonging to a specific ethnic group, with some groups being associated with light(er) (e.g. Igbo and Fulani) and dark(er) skin tones (e.g. Hausa and Yoruba). By stating that his current skin tone 'blends perfectly' with him (l. 87), Edun gives us an example of how he also associates his skin tone with himself on a subcutaneous level, such as personality and character. This gives us an indication that Edun understands skin, and especially skin tone, as telling us deeper things about an individual: Skin tone showcases on the outside (surface of the body) how one is or believes to be on the inside (personality, character, 'true self').

## 4. Light(er) Skin as Advantageous Skin

'Skin as a USP' (l. 5) is another interesting point Edun makes in his opening statement. The concept of USP, or *Unique Selling Point*, is used in business administration to describe what makes a company, product or service stand out from its competitors. It suggests that, in Nigeria, skin tone can be marketed and used as a competitive advantage to gain access to

spaces and resources. In the interview, Edun introduces the concept of the ‘yellow skin advantage’ (l. 13-14, 23, 107-108). Globally, this is referred to as light skin privilege. The idea is that, at an individual level, light(er) skin can be used as a marketable asset in capitalist self-branding. According to Hunter (2011:), light(er) skin can be ‘transformed’ into other forms of capital (social, symbolic, and economic capital), which is only possible in a ‘social context that sees the body as a commodity’ (ibid.). The higher value socially ascribed to an individual with light(er) skin can help them secure jobs and brand endorsements or gain access to other sources of income and visibility. This is particularly true in industries such as the Lagos film, entertainment, and modelling industries, where one is booked largely for one’s physical appearance and for what one represents.

To shed light onto central terms Edun uses in his interview, I will now elaborate on the meanings of the local terms *yellow*, *white* and *oyinbo*. *Yellow* is commonly used to refer to a person of African descent with a light to very light complexion perceived as brown to brown-yellow. *White* is used to talk about someone with very light skin. Just as in Ashikari (2005) or Balogun and Hoang (2013), it is not necessarily meant in a racialized sense but rather signals that a person’s complexion is considered to be so light that it is associated with the lightest color, i.e. white. This explains why some Nigerian skin-lightening products are called ‘whitening’. The people who use them are not seeking to transcend racial boundaries and obtain racial *whiteness*. Instead, the whiteness they seek is limited to a strong lightness of skin within the realm of Africanness or racialized Blackness. The meaning and use of *oyinbo* is slightly different. *Oyinbo* is a Yoruba and Pidgin English word that refers to foreigners who are light(er) in complexion. It is often translated to *white* in a racialized sense but does not fully overlap with the Western-coined understanding of racial *whiteness*. Instead, I experienced people of Indian, Chinese, and Lebanese descent also being referred to as *oyinbo*. Furthermore, it can be used flexibly and sometimes ironically, for instance, to emphasize a person’s foreignness in the case of an African American visitor, or to emphasize the lightness of someone’s skin by referring to a light(er)-skinned Nigerian as *oyinbo*.

In another part of the interview, Edun referred to yellow skin advantage as a form of ‘individual classism’: ‘because you’re placing an individual over the other, irrespective of class, but then you’re classifying them on color, which should not even be in the conversation in the first place’ (Interview with Denrele, 09/2022). Here, social class based on wealth and status is replaced by a color class that classifies people according to their skin tones. The relationship between class in the traditional sense and Edun’s ‘individual’, or rather ‘skin tone classism’ is well illustrated in the following passage. I asked Edun if skin tone remains important even when someone has money, and he replied:

It still matters. Irrespective of your social status, your standing in society. Some people are more well received and well acknowledged with their skin tone. You don’t even have to be mixed-race at that. You just have to be very light-skinned and then you get more VIP and preferential treatment over even those who come in the most exotic diamonds and gleaming and glittering from head to toe. The moment a light-skinned b\*tch walks in in the latest apparel, designers and whatnot, there’s a rush to attend to this person [rather] than the other person.

This passage shows how ‘skin tone classism’ cuts across social classes, establishing a skin-tone based stratification on top of and cutting across the traditional class categorization. In Edun’s example, the light(er)-skinned woman still wears the latest fashion, but she does not need diamonds to fill the room with her presence and attract the most attention. Her light skin is enough to produce this effect. In the context of Lagos, very light skin that is seen as ‘fancy skin’ (l. 92-94) transfers the quality of fanciness to its bearer. The transfer of fanciness from the skin to the person elevates the person classified as light(er) to a higher individual social status, which to some extent obscures the person’s social origin. Or rather: a high social origin is expected of and granted to someone with light(er) skin. Race can additionally come into play, as *oyinbos* and *mixed-race* individuals, who often display light(er) skin, enjoy a privileged social position.

We can ask ourselves why light(er) skin is privileged and charged with so much meaning. I will attempt to answer this here, although a much deeper analysis would be needed. Not explicitly mentioned in the interview, but widely discussed in academic and activist circles, is the idea that the greater appreciation of light(er) skin tones is, at least partly, a result of a racist ideology that places those closer to racialized *whiteness* above others (see for example Blay 2011; Hunter 2011; Glenn 2008). When asked where it comes from, many of my interlocutors in Nigeria viewed the preference for light(er) skin tones as a form of internalized racism, sometimes referring to it as ‘colonial mentality’<sup>9</sup>. The connection Edun sees between racism and the widespread valorization of light(er) skin became more apparent in the feedback discussion we had in November 2023. There, he linked the Nigerian preference for light(er) skin to the British colonial era and a sense of curiosity about things that look different:

As much as we were colonized by the British, I feel that some Nigerians see white people and they get very excited. [...] it's a thing of intrigue, a thing of mystery [...] and then, some people would look and be like, ‘ah, I no go mind date oyinbo o.<sup>10</sup> I would love to’. It's an unconscious thing. [...] ‘Ahh!, oyinbo!’, there is always that certain level of excitement. Even I, at the time when we used to go to the Indian carnivals, when my mom was with the Indian community, I would see lighter Indians and be intrigued, like ‘wow!’. I'd be like, ‘why am I not as light-skinned as they are?’

**Grimberg:** So would you say that the lighter-skinned [individuals] are also associated with ‘oyinbo’? Do people see a closeness there?

**Edun:** Well, kind of. [...] once you're like oyinbo-looking, yeah, you definitely might even get some perks. Because you're in [...] a country that kind of appreciates, acknowledges, recognizes, and chooses to celebrate, every time, oyinbos. So, if you're close to an oyinbo or you're oyinbo-ish looking, there's every tendency that you'll be treated like a-, you'll be given VIP levels.

This passage shows that both proximity to *oyinboness* and racialized *whiteness* lead to preferential treatment, and this proximity to *oyinboness/whiteness* is based on lightness of skin,

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<sup>9</sup> Influential Nigerian musician and political critic Fela Kuti used the terms ‘colo-mentality’ and ‘colonial mentality’ in his 1977 song ‘Colonial Mentality’. The term was sometimes taken up in everyday situations in Lagos.

<sup>10</sup> ‘I wouldn’t mind dating an oyinbo person!’ (my translation).

next to other attributes such as facial features and hair texture. As exemplified by Edun, proximity to *oyinboness* might lead to preferential treatment in terms of ‘perks’ and being treated as a VIP, or lead to higher popularity in the realm of dating. Next to Nigeria’s past as a British colony, Edun mentions the excitement of seeing something different as an explanation for the appreciation of light(er) skin. He speaks of a fascination with foreignness and this foreignness is embodied. I experienced instances of preferential treatment in Nigeria myself, such as the readily granted ‘VIP levels’ Edun mentions. At invitation-only events, my place at these events was not questioned, although I was not part of the entertainment industry. I discussed this with a few interlocutors, who explained that, in Nigerian hospitality culture, it was an honor to receive a foreign guest and show them one’s customs. Having a foreign guest could also make the party seem hipper or more interesting, giving it an international flair. The positive connotation of foreignness gave me access to events most Lagosians did not get to enjoy. Important here is the fact that my foreignness was embodied. I am very light, which contributed to my status as popular guest to invite to events.

Also relevant in explaining Nigeria’s light(er)-skin privilege is the local idea that one must be doing well, i.e. be economically and socially successful, if one displays a light(er) skin tone. It is believed that a light(er) complexion can only be ‘maintained’ with expensive products in the ‘harsh’ Nigerian climate and stressful environment, as mentioned in Chapter 2. During my research, I also came across the idea that avoiding stress and having a lifestyle that makes it possible to stay ‘under the AC’ lightens the complexion. These aspects were all associated with greater wealth and social status. Becoming darker, on the other hand, was often interpreted as a sign of hardship, as stress and hard work were thought to be bad for the skin, making it dull, dark(er) and prone to breakouts. We see in the interview that Edun also associates the times when he was dark(er) with being stressed and working a lot. Upon my asking, he elucidated that he worked in the sun back then, but the first association that came to his mind was that of stress and hard work. Due to these associations with complexion changes, light(er) skin was pursued by some of my interlocutors, while the rest was trying to avoid getting darker to avoid uncomfortable questions about why their complexion had changed.

The third reason as to why light(er) skin is perceived more beautiful and more valuable is given in Edun’s statements on film directors: light(er)-skinned actors are believed to ‘illuminate’ (l. 15, 18) the room and the screen. Light(er) skin tones attract – or are believed to attract – the attention of others. Attraction in the context of light(er) skin privilege has two meanings. It is an attraction in the aesthetic and carnal sense, as some find light(er) skin to be visually appealing, and sexually attractive. It is also an attraction in the sense of drawing attention to oneself by standing out from the crowd. The visual contrast of a light(er)-skinned person in an otherwise dark(er)-skinned group is central here and may contribute to the high value placed on light(er) skin in Nigeria: The light(er)-skinned person is noticed as an aesthetic

alterity<sup>11</sup> and is more likely to catch the viewer's attention. The higher value placed on light(er) skin is thus also linked to different types of attention generation.

## 5. Skin Tone in Human Differentiation Processes

Skin tone and light(er) skin appear to play two distinct roles in human differentiation processes in Lagos. First, skin tone is used as a marker of category membership within classification systems such as ethnicity, attractiveness, or gender (cf. Boll 2017: 23). Second, 'light(er)-skinned' and 'dark(er)-skinned' emerge as distinct categories of human differentiation. When skin tone is a marker of category membership, it is used as an indicator of a person's belonging to a category: 'They are light-skinned, therefore they must belong to the category mixed-race/successful/beautiful/etc.'. This role of skin tone led Edun to conclude that he needed to lighten his skin to 'do' being *mixed-race* and 'do' being in the spotlight (cf. Hirschauer 2021 and Boll 2017). By using skin-lightening products, he actively facilitates, or even produces, other people's (e.g. the public's) categorization of him as *mixed-race*: he adjusts his skin tone to what he and the society he lives in perceive as an appropriate skin tone for a *mixed-race* individual. This example illustrates the role of agency in human differentiation processes where the 'objects' of differentiation are human beings who 'participate in their own differentiation' (Hirschauer 2023: 360). Through their actions, individuals can bring about a change in their categorization, for example from male to female. The change may be 'carried out to completion' (Hirschauer 2023: 360; cf. Brukaker 2016), resulting in a migration from one category to another, or it may be incomplete, making the person a categorial hybrid. In Edun's account, we can observe a migration from the category 'poor Indian' that is associated with dark(er) skin to that of 'mixed-race'. This also raises questions of perspectivity (Hirschauer 2023: 362-363): for a category migration to be successful, self-categorization and external categorization must overlap. In Edun's case, the two match, as he sees himself as light-skinned and his surroundings do so too.

In Lagos, skin tones are so socially relevant that 'light(er)-skinned' and 'dark(er)-skinned' also emerge as categories in and of themselves. Categories of human differentiation include and exclude (Hirschauer, 2023: 363), and certain category memberships can confer advantages of a social, monetary, or other nature. In Lagos, this is particularly the case for the category 'light(er)-skinned'. The idealized view of light(er) skin is not shared by everyone, but it is widespread enough to have social consequences. The privileges inferred to light(er) skin are an incentive to self-categorize and be categorized as light(er)-skinned. Skin lightening, then, becomes a means of achieving skin tone capital (cf. Dixon and Telles 2017: 411; Hunter 2011: 145; Glenn 2008: 282).

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<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of aesthetic alterity in the highly visual field of international modeling and advertisement, see Krings (2017).

## Conclusion

The skin-focused biography of Nigerian media personality Denrele Edun, paired with additional findings from fieldwork in Lagos between 2022 and 2024, provided insights into local understandings of skin, skin tone, and skin care. The paper asked what meanings Edun ascribed to skin and skin tone and how these were embedded in local understandings and valuations. It examined the role of skin tone in Edun's biography (e.g. identity formation and relationship to society), and in processes of human differentiation in Lagos. Edun's journey to his current skin tone was analyzed along two lines: his choice of skin tone and his choice of skin care products. Through the journey narrative, Edun rationalized the decision to lighten his skin, portraying his lightened skin as a promise of greater alignment with his *mixed-race* heritage and of greater professional success. His use of skin care products revealed a journey towards moderation, and a trial-and-error approach embedded in a local view of the skin as a malleable body part. The paper introduced the emic perspective of skin-lightening practices as a form of skin care. In Lagos, doing skin care was often understood as investing time, money, and effort in one's skin, sometimes at the expense of one's health. It was seen as a part of self-care and as an investment in oneself. Those who viewed the skin as malleable saw the results achieved through skin-lightening products as a realization of their innate potential.

Edun linked skin tone to various aspects of a person's identity. These were social status and class, sexual orientation and sexual preference, gender, ancestry, racial categorization, ethnicity, beauty, personality/character, and marketability. He framed light(er) skin as a competitive advantage for the positioning within these categories. He further saw light(er) skin privilege as a form of 'individual classism' where social class was trumped by skin tone class. Local rationalizations to explain light(er) skin privilege in Nigeria were the internalization of a racist skin tone stratification, the fascination with difference and foreignness, the connection between doing well and being/becoming light(er), and visual aspects such as light(er) skin attracting attention in dark(er)-skinned contexts (aesthetic alterity).

One aim of this paper was to examine skin tone from the standpoint of human differentiation. The different roles that skin tone plays in Nigerian society were translated into the vocabulary of Hirschauer's (2023) human differentiation theory. Skin tone was shown to be a marker of various category memberships within classification systems such as ethnicity, class, ethnicity, and so on. *Light(er)-skinned* and *dark(er)-skinned* were additionally identified as locally relevant social categories in and of themselves, with *light(er)-skinned* being a category generally associated with positive attributes such as attractiveness, personal worth, and wealth. By actively managing his skin tone, Edun influenced the way he was categorized along the lines of skin tone, for instance by the public, and thus participated in 'doing being mixed-race' or 'doing being in the spotlight'. This exemplified the agency that 'objects' of human differentiation have, as they participate in their own categorization. Questions of perspectivity were raised as well, since a change in category is only successful when self- and external

categorization overlap. In Edun's case, the skin tone he envisioned for himself was realized through skin-lightening practices and led to an alignment of self and external categorization. This paper was inspired by collaborative writing approaches. It gave space to Edun's unfiltered perspective by including an extensive interview excerpt and incorporated a feedback loop into the analysis. Edun's feedback served as a control mechanism to test interpretations. It was also an ethical exercise to make the local expert more aware of what was being done with his data and to make his voice heard in an academic context.

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