

# Skin Whitening Soap Opera's: Themes of Female Empowerment Used as Method of Advertising

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## Abstract

Altering one's skin color, or skin bleaching/whitening, is a global phenomenon that is associated with a host of poor outcomes, such as negative health outcomes. Given its popularity and harm, we wished to assess how these products were marketed to women. Using a mixed methods analyses, we analyzed the content of 12 youtube videos that depicted skin whitening. Videos from Ponds, Vaseline, Lux, Garnier, and Olay were obtained and coded for themes related to female empowerment. We hypothesized female models, who engaged in bleaching, would be depicted as receiving greater economic power by having greater career status, and would also display strong sexual agency, and secure greater heterosexual romantic gain than those who did not bleach. Results indicated that economic power was heightened by the ownership of material items, with 66.7% of the videos containing models with more extravagant clothing and 41.7% occupying a wealthier space. However, an attainment of higher career status was not significant to economic power appearing in 25% of the videos. We found that the theme of sexual agency, to have power over your sexual activity and feeling liberated by doing so (Gill, 2007), was represented in the association between lustful gaze prior to whitening and ending up with the male after transformation ( $r=.67, p<.05$ ). Additionally, 66.7% of the models displayed pride about their sexual experience, and 100% exuded confidence after the transformation. Heterosexual romantic gain was achieved in all of the videos that included male actors (83.3%). Future research should analyze themes of female empowerment in a single country to control for cultural differences within Asian countries.

## Introduction

- Harmful substances in skin bleaching products, such as mercury and hydroquinone can lead to serious negative health outcomes (Lopez, Ho, Gonzalez, 2012).
- Yet, despite such outcomes, skin bleaching is a global phenomenon. This may be, in part, due to the way that these products are advertised.
- While previous studies have assessed general aspects of marketing for these products, few studies have assessed how models are depicted in skin bleaching ads.
- The present study analyzed how characters were depicted in skin bleaching videos. In particular, we assessed:
  - **Empowerment** defined as “the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for and a willingness to take action in the public domain” (Rappaport, 1987, 122).
  - “Empowerment is tied to possession of a slim and alluring young body, whose power is the ability to attract male attention and female envy” (Gill, 2008, 43)
  - In feminist discourse, female empowerment is strongly related to **sexual agency and self subjectification** which are defined, respectively, as the ability to fully experience and enjoy a sexual experience, and the use of the body to attract male attention and female envy (Gill, 2008, 38).
- Using a mixed method design, we first quantitatively assess the relation between these constructs, and qualitatively coded for themes present in the videos.
- The rater used the Gill model to assess themes of empowerment in the skin bleaching ads
  - Midriff Figure= power is in the heterosexual woman who understands objectification as pleasurable and chosen.
  - Vengeful Woman= show power by punishing man who has transgressed in some way, competition, erotic attraction

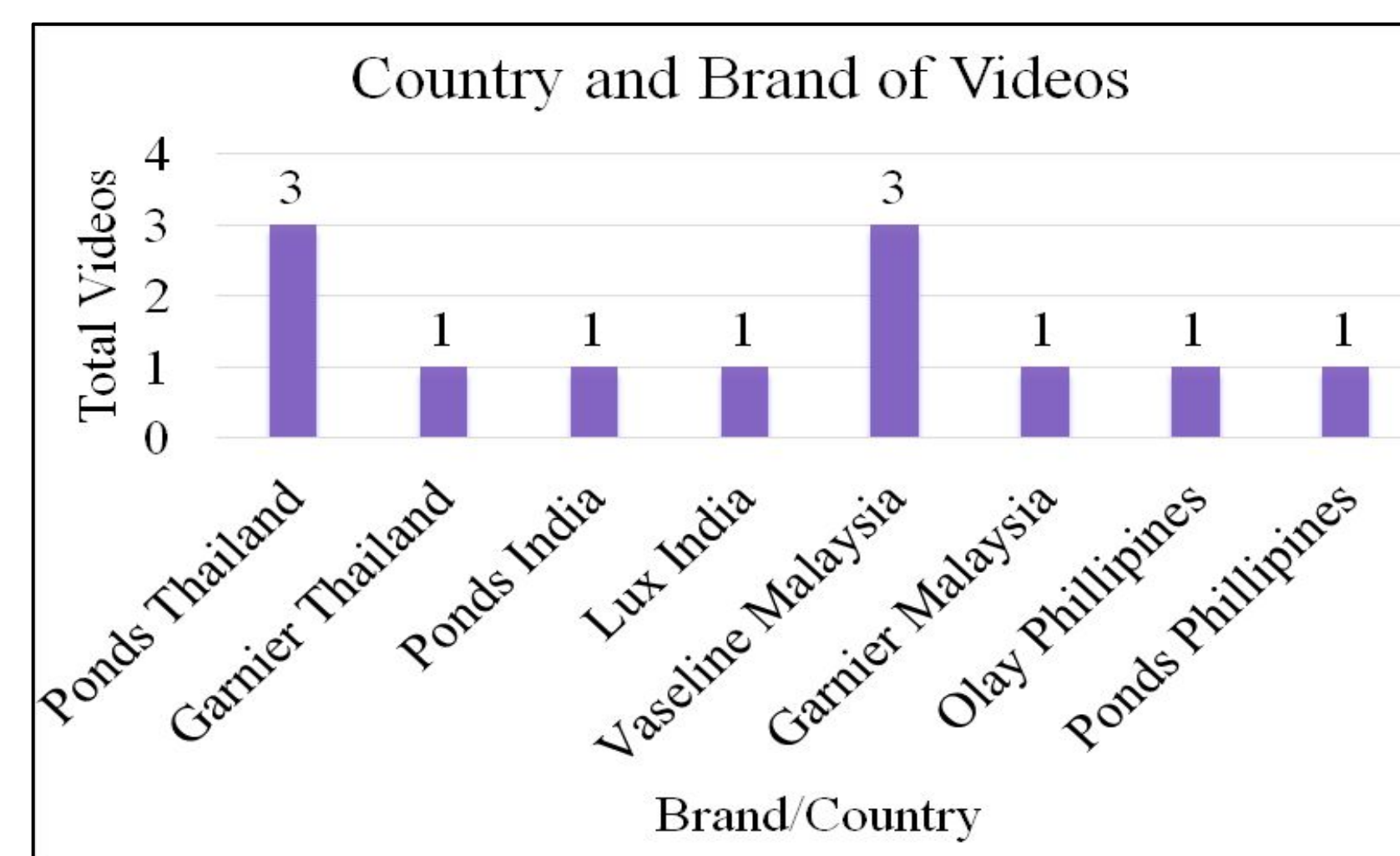
## Methods

We conducted a mixed methods study based on content analysis of skin whitening advertisement videos available on Youtube.

- The companies and products were chosen based on the top three companies in global sales
  - 1) L'Oreal (27.6 billion) → *Brand: Garnier*
  - 2) Unilever (22.3 billion) → *Brands: Ponds, Vaseline, Lux*
  - 3) Procter & Gamble (18 billion) → *Brand: Olay*

Raters then filtered each channel into viewing videos by “Most Popular”.

- Criteria for Video Selection
  - Video has to be longer than 1 minute 30 seconds long; the protagonist must be female; a skin transformation with lighter outcome must occur; a theme or narrative must be evident; a plot with characters must be present; the video must be understood by an English speaker; Tutorials and documentaries were excluded
- The final sample size is 12 videos for a total of 86 minutes 41 seconds.
- The raters viewed each video while answering 60 dichotomous or multiple choice questions, and 5 open-ended questions. A consensus between the raters was reached on all the variables.



## Discussion

The marketing of these skin bleaching ads utilizes post feminist rhetoric that employs themes of female empowerment which includes sexuality, the body, financial independence, and **self subjectification/ sexual agency**. Self subjectification is defined by how women present themselves as active and desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in an objectified manner purposefully (Gill, 2008, 42). The display of enjoying the objectification of your own body by being playful, showing freedom, and choice and thereby winning admiration is a theme of empowerment that was evident throughout these ads. Marketers for these products utilize sexual agency as a theme of empowerment in these ads to claim that if you use these products to lighten your skin, you will experience greater sexual agency because you will feel better about your body, and hence objectify yourself willingly. We propose that this theme of empowerment is not real empowerment, but a fake representation. The sexual subjectification these ads use to convince consumers can have negative effects on the overall goals of feminism which is to create social equality amongst genders. **Limitations** to our study included the use of English only videos due to translation restrictions, this could have excluded different themes of empowerment in videos without English speakers or subtitles. Additionally, the small sample size presented limitations on analyses, however, it allowed us to focus on many details of empowerment which is an important first step in researching these feminist theories in the under researched field of skin bleaching.

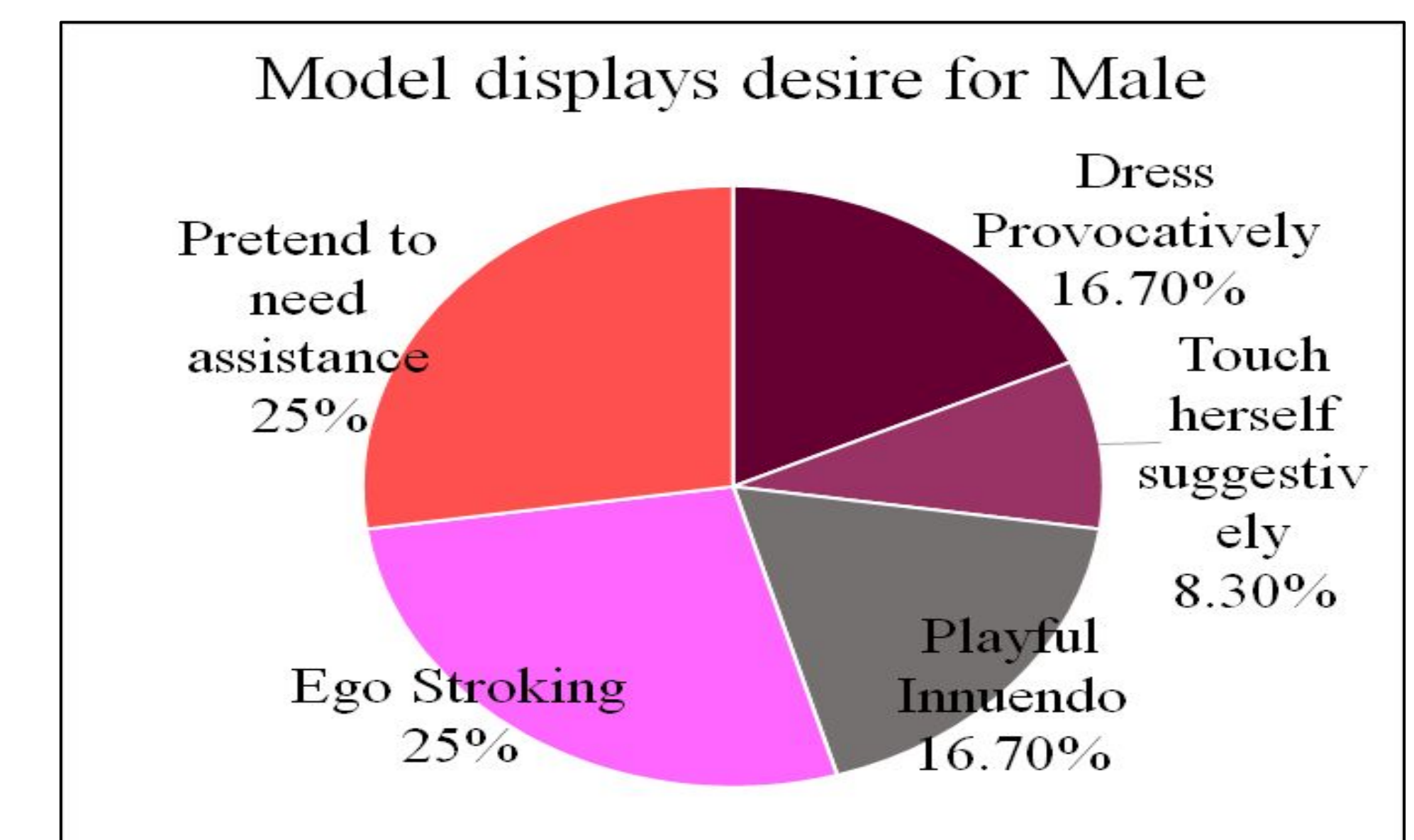
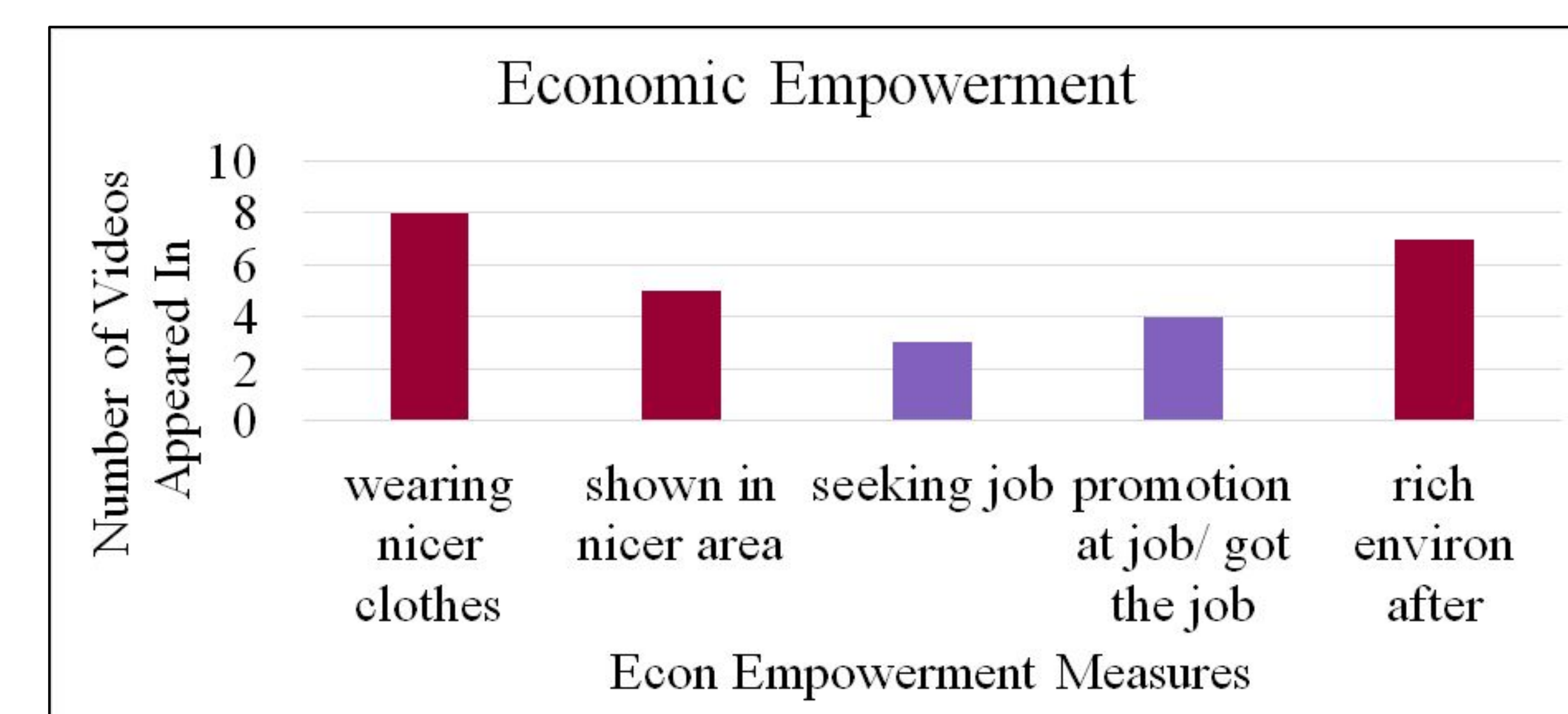
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## Results

**Quantitative Data Analysis-** Associations and Descriptive Statistics

- Economic Power after the transformation was evident in the wealth of dress and space (66.7% dressed nicer, 41.7% were in nicer space).
- Women were shown to exude confidence in 100% of the videos, a trend was determined between a lustful male gaze and a flattered model reaction ( $r=.55, n=12, p=.061$ ), a positive association between lustful male gaze and ending up with the man after the transformation ( $r=.67, p<.05$ ), strong association between woman displaying pride about sexual experience and an envious female gaze ( $r=.62, p=.027$ ).



**Qualitative Data Analysis-** Single-rater used Gill & Goffman Models

- Emergent Themes→ Reasons for Skin Bleaching
  - Ads placed a large focus on younger women by employing social media, dating, friendships, job searching, education, and parties.
  - Fairytale plotlines were very common (prince charming)
  - Heteronormative romantic purpose, win admiration, obsess over yourself, create envy
- Morale of the Ads: If you use our product...
  - Forbidden and forgotten love come true, man of your dreams will appear, your crush will notice you
  - You won't embarrass yourself, you will incite envy, become more popular on social media, discover talents
- Common Language
  - Glow, bright, whiter, fairer, soft, delicious, radiant, wish.

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