

February 2021: Public outreach, risk perceptions, and behavioral change: Skin-lightening agent use in Ghana



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Skin-lightening agents have a long and storied past, and their adoption has been closely tied to cultural perceptions—and misperceptions—of beauty. In their recent article in *JAAD International*, Owusu-Agyei et al¹ highlight the self-reported skin-lightening practices of a group of shoppers in Kumasi, Ghana. The authors found that approximately 40% of respondents engaged in the use of skin-lightening agents, even in the face of legal restrictions on their sale.² Moreover, the popularity of skin lightening was not limited to women because more than a quarter of men surveyed also admitted to using these agents.

Despite a ban on the importation of hydroquinone-containing products in Ghana since 2017, the authors found that the public persisted in their use, and that those who engaged in skin lightening were more likely to associate lighter skin with beauty and wealth. Although legal restrictions seem to have little effect on lightening-agent use, shifting even slightly some of the latent cultural assumptions that drive their use may be a fruitful avenue to explore.

In the midst of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, in which significant push-back remains

on such basic public health steps such as mask wearing,^{3,4} it is perhaps unsurprising that the general public would engage in behaviors that have significant risk and when governmental and medical advice has weighed in against them. It is hoped that the authors' work addressing skin-lightening practices will help prompt further research into this important area in which the worlds of global health, dermatology, and behavioral medicine collide.

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Funding sources: None.

Conflicts of interest: None disclosed.

IRB approval status: Not applicable.

Reprints not available from the author.

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J Am Acad Dermatol 2021;84:262.

0190-9622/\$36.00

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2020.12.015>