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## **Skin-lightening products linked to serious health risks and social pressures**



Meagan Jacobs-Alfred

Photo: Supplied

A doctoral study from the University of Cape Town (UCT) has shed light on the motivations, risks and social pressures behind the use of skin-lightening products in South Africa.

The study, conducted by Meagan Jacobs-Alfred, examined the perceptions and experiences of people who use skin-lightening products in Cape Town and the broader social forces that sustain the practice.

Jacobs-Alfred's thesis, *Perceptions and experiences of skin lighteners in Cape Town*, also explored the effectiveness of regulations governing such products and the continued demand for them despite known health risks. She will graduate from UCT on Tuesday, 31 March 2026 with a PhD in Public Health.

### **Curiosity sparked by colourism**

Jacobs-Alfred said her interest in the subject began during an internship at UCT funded by the National Research Foundation.

"I encountered issues related to colourism and skin tone, which sparked curiosity about why skin tone is socially valued and why some people use skin-lightening products," she said. "As a person of colour myself, I was also interested in understanding the social meanings attached to skin tone and the motivations behind these practices."

Jacobs-Alfred said previous research mainly focused on the dermatological and medical effects of skin-lightening products. "My study aimed to address the lack of research on people's lived experiences, perceptions and daily practices related to skin lightening, particularly in the context of Cape Town."

### **A practice shaped by social environments**

To better understand how skin-lightening practices are sustained, Jacobs-Alfred included both users and service providers in her research.

"Including both groups allowed the study to examine the entire social environment surrounding skin-lightening practices," she said.

"Service providers such as beauty salon workers, hairdressers and shop owners influence product availability, advice and marketing, while users provide insight into motivations, experiences and outcomes. This combination gives a fuller understanding of the practice and how it is sustained."

### **Colourism and beauty standards**

The research highlights how colourism – the preference for lighter skin within communities of colour – continues to influence perceptions of beauty and success in South Africa.

"Colourism in South Africa is closely linked to colonialism and apartheid, where lighter skin was historically associated with privilege, status and access to opportunities," Jacobs-Alfred said.

"As a result, lighter skin continues to be viewed as more attractive and socially desirable, while darker skin may be stigmatised."

She added: "These perceptions often begin early in life, as individuals internalise societal beauty standards promoted by media, social norms and historical hierarchies related to skin colour. Over time, these beliefs may influence self-esteem and identity formation."

### **Media influence and social pressure**

The study also found that media and celebrity culture play a role in shaping consumer behaviour.

"Media and advertising portray lighter-skinned celebrities and models as symbols of beauty, success and sophistication," Jacobs-Alfred said.

"These images influence consumers through social comparison, encouraging people to imitate the appearance of admired celebrities. Marketing strategies often associate lighter skin with happiness, success and attractiveness and this in turn affects consumer behaviour as they choose to engage in skin lightening practices."

Participants in the study also described social and economic pressures linked to lighter skin.

"Lighter skin is often associated with higher social status, success and attractiveness, which can create pressure for individuals to conform to these beauty standards," she said.

"In some cases, lighter skin is believed to increase opportunities for employment, relationships and social acceptance."

### **Health risks and public health concerns**

Jacobs-Alfred noted that skin-lightening is widely regarded as a public health issue.

"Skin-lightening is considered a public health issue because the products are associated with serious physical and psychological health risks, including permanent skin damage, low self-esteem and even skin cancer," she said.

"Many products contain harmful ingredients such as mercury and hydroquinone, which can cause severe medical complications."

Users in the study reported several health risks, including skin irritation and burning, discoloration, thinning of the skin and increased sensitivity to sunlight, as well as possible long-term conditions such as exogenous ochronosis and skin cancer.

However, many consumers are not fully aware of these dangers.

"Many users were not fully aware of the risks, partly because negative effects often appear only after long-term use," Jacobs-Alfred said. "This delayed appearance can lead users to believe that the products are safe when in fact they are not."

### **Misconceptions and covert marketing**

Misleading packaging and marketing also contribute to confusion about product safety.

"Many consumers assume products are safe if they are widely available in stores or labelled as cosmetics, even though some contain banned or harmful ingredients," Jacobs-Alfred said.

South Africa has strict regulations governing skin-lightening products, including bans on mercury and hydroquinone and restrictions on advertising. However, covert marketing and illegal markets continue to exist by using indirect language to avoid explicit claims.

"I was consistently struck by the secrecy and concealment surrounding these products and information about them," Jacobs-Alfred said. "The illegal nature of the overall skin-lightening trade means that service providers are fearful of being exposed to authorities."

"Instead of explicitly advertising skin-lightening products, companies use euphemistic terms such as 'skin brightening', 'skin toning' and 'dark-spot removal'," she said.

### **Tackling the root causes**

According to Jacobs-Alfred, the continued demand for skin-lightening products reflects broader social attitudes about race and beauty. She highlighted that the demand for skin-lightening products reveals entrenched social attitudes regarding race and beauty, linking lighter skin with attractiveness and social success.

She emphasised the need for public health campaigns not only to address health risks but also to tackle the underpinnings of colourism. These campaigns, she said, should promote positive depictions of darker skin, educate on the dangers of skin-lightening products and foster body positivity. "Additionally, the media and advertising sectors must contribute by embracing diverse beauty representations and refraining from associating lighter skin with success."

***ENDS***

***Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department***

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