

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



WOMEN'S KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND PRACTICES REGARDING VOLUNTARY COSMETIC SKIN LIGHTENING: THE CASE OF THE MARKETS IN LIBREVILLE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Voluntary cosmetic artificial depigmentation (VCAD) is a practice that aims to lighten the skin using depigmenting substances (DS). Understanding the motivations of certain women to engage in artificial depigmentation led us to conduct this study, the purpose of which was to assess women's level of knowledge and practice regarding artificial depigmentation (AD).

Materials and methods: Our study was conducted in Libreville. The following markets served as the setting for our study: the Mont-Bouet Market, the Nkembo Market, the Akébé Market, the Petit Dubaï Market, the Oloumi Market, and the Nzeng-Ayong Market. This was a prospective, descriptive, cross-sectional study conducted over a 4-week period from Monday, April 13, to Sunday, May 3, 2026. We included female customers and female vendors who frequented these markets in our study. Data were collected using a standardized questionnaire, entered into Microsoft Word, and analyzed using EpiInfo version 7.2. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study.

Results: Out of a total of 200 women, 28 used skin-lightening products, representing 14% of the study population. The 26- to 40-year-old age group accounted for the majority of skin-lightening product users (n=15; 53.57%). Single women were in the majority (n=18; 64.29%). Half of the women using skin-lightening products had a high school or college education (n=14; 50%). The majority of women had a good understanding of the definition of VCAD (n=184; 92%); among this group, the primary motivation was the desire to please others (n=140; 70%). Regarding knowledge of the complications of VCAD, the majority of women cited skin cancer (n=197; 98.5%), followed by skin infections (n=45; 22.5%). Among the 200 women, a significant proportion were unaware of depigmenting products (n=66; 33%), the most commonly cited products were topical corticosteroids (n=88; 44%) and hydroquinone (n=30; 15%). Most of the 28 women who used depigmenting products purchased them at markets (n=10; 35.71%). The most common monthly

spending range among female users was less than 10,000 FCFA (n=15; 53.58%). The reasons these women gave for continuing to use VCAD were changes in skin color after stopping the use of depigmenting products (n=19; 67.86%). The most commonly used skin-lightening products were primarily fruit acids (n=16; 57.14%) and artisanal skin-lightening creams and soaps with no listed active ingredients (n=7; 25%).

Conclusion: Artificial depigmentation remains a major public health problem among young African women; fruit acids are the most commonly used, followed by hydroquinone and topical corticosteroids. Skin complications continue to occur.

Keywords: Knowledge, Practice, Women, Artificial Depigmentation, Libreville

1 INTRODUCTION

Artificial depigmentation (AD), also known as voluntary depigmentation (VD), voluntary cosmetic artificial depigmentation (VCAD), or skin tone mimicry, can be defined as a social practice aimed at reducing the skin's natural pigmentation through the use of depigmenting or skin-lightening products. This practice affects women far more than men in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa. (1,2).

Its prevalence varies by country and is steadily increasing across Africa, ranging from 8% to 70%. (1,3–5) This practice is primarily carried out by women, whose main motivations include personal aesthetic satisfaction, being admired by the opposite sex, and feeling beautiful among other women; these motivations are found in most studies conducted among women. (6,7)

In dermatology, depigmenting products are used to reduce or eliminate post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation. Certain products, such as topical corticosteroids used for inflammatory skin conditions or low-concentration hydroquinone for localized dark spots, are now used for unintended purposes—to lighten virtually the entire skin. (8,9).

Many women who use skin-lightening products are often unaware of the active ingredients contained in depigmenting creams, soaps, or gels, and thus are unaware of the short-, medium-, or long-term risks or complications. These risks and complications are common reasons why women who use skin-lightening products seek dermatological consultation. Exogenous ochronosis, fungal or bacterial infections, atrophy, stretch marks, white spots, and sometimes skin cancer are the main dermatological manifestations prompting these women to seek medical care. (10–12).

It is in this context that we conducted our study to estimate the frequency of skin-lightening product use among women frequenting the main markets in Libreville and to assess their level of knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding voluntary cosmetic skin lightening.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our study was conducted in Gabon, specifically in the markets of the city of Libreville. This city is divided into six districts. Each district has markets that serve as important centers of commercial activity and are heavily frequented by women, making them suitable locations for this study. The following markets served as the setting for our study: the Mont-Bouet Market, the Nkembo Market, the Akébé Market, the Petit Dubaï Market, the Oloumi Market, and the Nzeng-Ayong Market. This was a prospective, descriptive, cross-sectional study conducted over a four-week period from Monday, April 13, to Sunday, May 3, 2026. We included in our study female customers and female vendors who frequented these markets and agreed to participate in our study, all of whom were over 17 years of age. Our sample consisted of 200 women. Data were collected using a standardized questionnaire, entered into Microsoft Word, and analyzed using EpiInfo version 7.2. Qualitative results were presented as counts and percentages. The anonymity and confidentiality of the information collected were preserved. Furthermore, free and informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to conducting this study.

3 RESULTS

A total of 200 women participated in our study; 28 used skin-lightening products, representing 14% of the study population. The 26- to 40-year-old age group accounted for the majority of skin-lightening product users (n=15; 53.57%). Single women were in the majority (n=18; 64.29%). Half of the women using skin-lightening products had a high school or college education (n=14; 50%). Of the 200 women surveyed, the majority had a good understanding of the definition of VCAD (n=184; 92%); among this group, the primary motivations were the desire to please others (n=140; 70%), followed by the influence of friends and social media (n=26; 13%), personal satisfaction (n=23; 11.5%), and a minority did not know the reasons for their use among women (n=11; 5.5%). Regarding knowledge of the complications of VCAD, the majority of women cited skin cancer (n=197; 98.5%), followed by skin infections (n=45;

22.5%), then hypomelanosis and atrophy (n=12; 6%), dependence (n=7; 3.5%), and diabetes and high blood pressure (n=3; 1.5%). Of the 200 women, a significant proportion were unfamiliar with depigmenting products (n=66; 33%); the most commonly cited products were topical corticosteroids (n=88; 44%), hydroquinone (n=30; 15%), fruit acids (n=15; 7.5%), and mercury derivatives (n=1; 0.5%). Most of the 28 women who used skin-lightening products purchased them at markets (n=10; 35.71%) and online (n=8; 28.57%), and their choice of these products was based on personal preference (n=12; 42.85%), or based on recommendations from sellers or people in their social circle (n=8; 28.57%). The most common monthly spending range among female users was less than 10,000 FCFA (n=15; 53.58%), followed by 41,000 to 50,000 CFA francs (n=8; 28.57%), and then 21,000 to 30,000 CFA francs (n=3; 10.71%). The reasons these women continued to practice VCAD were changes in skin color after stopping the use of depigmenting products (n=19; 67.86%), satisfaction and self-esteem (n=6; 21.43%), and the feeling of no longer belonging to the past (n=3; 10.71%). The most commonly used depigmenting products were primarily fruit acids (n=16; 57.14%), homemade skin-lightening creams and soaps with no listed active ingredients (n=7; 25%), hydroquinone (n=5; 17.85%), topical corticosteroids (n=3; 10.75%), and beta-carotene, niacinamide, vitamin C, and glutathione (n=2; 7.14%). The majority of women had been using skin-lightening products for 2 to 3 years (n=16; 57.14%), and half experienced skin atrophy with white patches as a complication (n=14; 50%), while a proportion had exogenous ochronosis (n=10; 35.71%). A quarter of these women wish to stop voluntary cosmetic depigmentation (n=7; 25%), while half want to continue because they are personally satisfied with the results (n=14; 50%).

Table 1: Breakdown of female users of skin-lightening products by age group

Age group	Number (N=200)	Percentage %
17-25 Years		
Yes	6	3
No	29	14,5
26-40 Years		
Yes	15	7,5
No	93	46,5
Plus de 40 Years		
Yes	7	3,3
No	50	25

Table 2: Breakdown of female users of skin-lightening products by their knowledge of the causes of VCAD

Causes of VCAD	Number (200)	Percentage %
Pleasing others	140	70
Personal satisfaction	23	11,5
Influence of friends and family and social media	26	13

Table 3: Breakdown of female injecting drug users by their knowledge of the consequences of VCAD

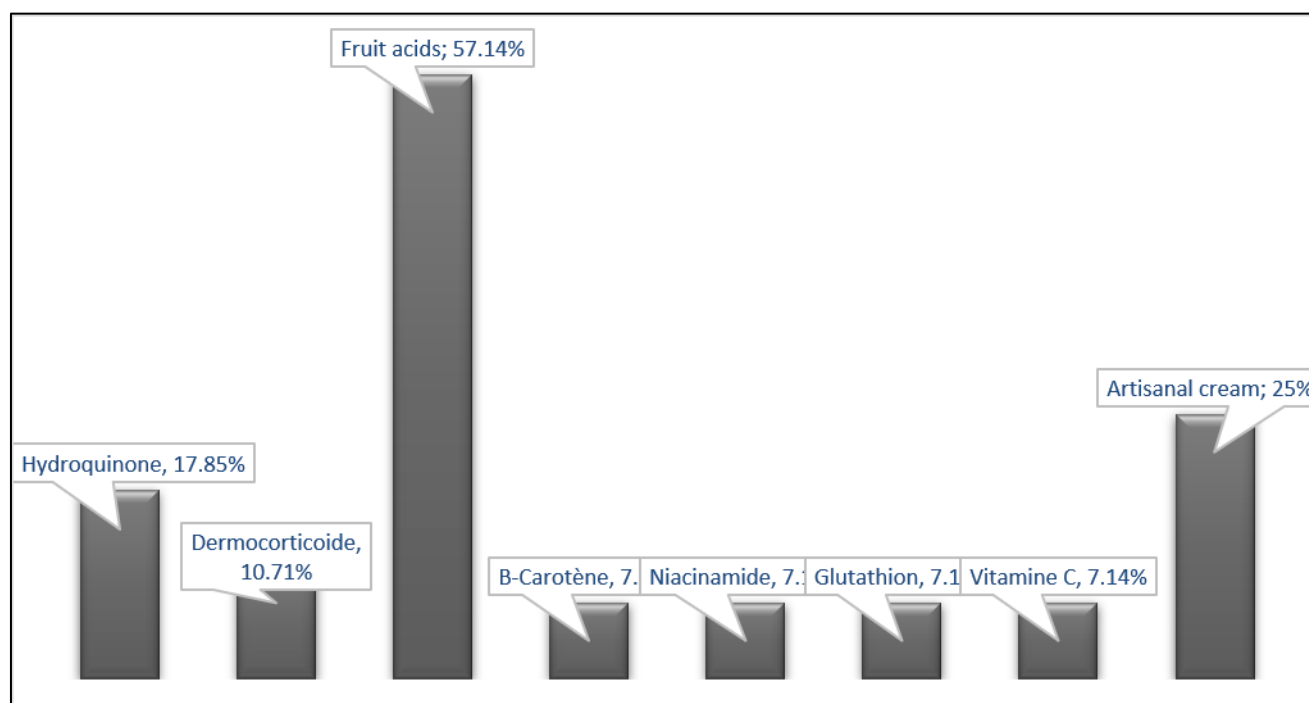
The consequences for the VCAD	Number (200)	Percentage %
Skin Cancer	197	98,8
Skin infection	45	22,5
Hypomelanosis, Atrophy,	12	6
Diabetes, arterial hypertension	3	1,5
Addiction	7	3,5

Table 4: Breakdown of female users of skin-lightening products by monthly budget spent on skin-lightening products

Monthly budget for skin-lightening products in CFA francs	Number(28)	Percentage %
Fewer than 10.000	15	53,57
11.000-20.000	2	7,14
21.000-30.000	3	10,71
31.000-40.000	0	0
41.000-50.000	8	28,57
More than 50.000	0	0

Table 5: Breakdown of Female Users of Skin-Lightening Products by Their Reasons Related to Dependence on Artificial Skin Lightening

Reasons for addiction to artificial skin lightening	Number(28)	Percentage %
They can't live without them anymore	3	10,71
The skin changes after discontinuing the depigmenting product	19	67,85
Satisfaction and Self-Esteem	6	21,42

**Figure 1: Illustration of the depigmenting substances found in women who use skin-lightening creams**

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Prevalence of voluntary cosmetic skin-lightening among the women surveyed

The prevalence of depigmenting product use among women in our study was 14%. This result is higher than that reported by Charles TD et al. in Senegal, who found that 8% of individuals used skin-lightening products, and lower than the findings of Ouedraogo et al. in Burkina Faso and Hormi O et al. in Morocco, who reported rates of 72% and 60%, respectively. (1,3). This difference could be explained by the fact that those studies were conducted in a dermatology

department that sees more women, and the reasons for consultation are not necessarily complications from artificial depigmentation—unlike our study, which focused on artificial depigmentation in a binary population.

4.2 Age Group and the Practice of Artificial Depigmentation

The majority of women who used skin-lightening products were young, with an age group under 40 ($n=21$; 75%). This finding is similar to that of Etobo et al. in Côte d'Ivoire, who reported a rate of 77%, and to Julien Chongwang's report on skin depigmentation, which found that 65% of users were under 40 years of age. (12,13). Our finding could be explained by the fact that the Gabonese population is predominantly young and female, and that this age group is associated with self-esteem, which is characterized by the desire to be beautiful and attractive. (14,15).

4.3 Educational Level and the Practice of Artificial Skin Lightening

Our study found that the 28 women who used skin-lightening products had either a high school education ($n=14$; 50%) or a college education ($n=14$; 50%). This result is similar to that of Yolaine et al. in Benin, who found a rate of 78%, and comparable to that of Sarah K. et al. in Côte d'Ivoire, who reported that 69% of women had a higher level of education (15–17). Educated women appear to be more likely to use skin-lightening products or to be influenced to do so due to their exposure to social media and advertising, unlike women with no formal education.

4.4 Marital Status and the Practice of Artificial Skin Lightening

Our study found that unmarried women used skin-lightening products much more frequently ($n=18$; 64.29%), followed by married women ($n=5$; 17.86%). This result is consistent with data from Issa A et al. in Niger and Pitché et al. in Togo, who found that unmarried women (single or divorced) used skin-lightening products significantly more than married women. (7,18). This reflects the desire of single women to find a spouse, as many of them—who confided in us during our survey—are convinced that men prefer women with lighter skin.

4.5 Knowledge of the Women Surveyed Regarding the Definition of Artificial Depigmentation

Among the 200 women surveyed, 184 (92%) provided a correct definition of voluntary cosmetic artificial depigmentation (VCAD), while 16 (8%) provided an incorrect definition. This high level of knowledge can be explained by the extensive media coverage of this practice, its prevalence in the community, and discussions between users and cosmetic product salespeople. Our results are comparable to those reported by Sarah K et al. in Côte d'Ivoire, who found that 77.5% of the women surveyed were able to define voluntary cosmetic artificial depigmentation. (16). This difference could be explained by the characteristics of the populations studied, the sociocultural context, the participants' educational level, or the widespread dissemination of information regarding depigmentation in our study setting.

4.6 Surveyed Women's Knowledge of the Causes of Artificial Depigmentation

Regarding the causes of voluntary cosmetic artificial depigmentation, 140 (70%) participants believed that this practice is primarily motivated by the desire to please others, 26 (13%) participants cited the influence of their social circle and social media, while 23 (11.5%) participants mentioned personal satisfaction. Finally, 11 (5.5%) participants stated that they had no idea what motivated this practice. These results show that participants primarily perceive artificial depigmentation as a practice driven by the pursuit of social approval and physical attractiveness. The influence of peers and social media also emerges as an important factor, reflecting the role of aesthetic norms and beauty standards prevalent in society. Personal satisfaction, although cited less frequently, is also a significant motivation. These findings are consistent with those of Sarah K et al., who found in their study that 80% of women were convinced that women with light skin were more attractive and more beautiful than women with dark skin. Furthermore, 50% of the women in their study reported engaging in skin lightening to lighten their complexion, remove dark spots, and become more beautiful. (16).

4.7 Knowledge of the Women Surveyed Regarding the Consequences of Artificial Depigmentation

Regarding the consequences of voluntary cosmetic artificial depigmentation, 198 (98.8%) participants cited skin cancer as the main complication. In addition, 45 (22.5%) participants mentioned skin infections, 12 (6%) mentioned hypomelanosis, skin atrophy, and stretch marks, 7 (3.5%) cited dependence on depigmenting products, and 3 (1.5%) participants cited diabetes and high blood pressure as possible consequences. These results suggest that women's knowledge is more focused on the consequences most widely publicized in the media, while the most common adverse effects remain insufficiently recognized.

4.8 Knowledge of Depigmenting Substances Among the Women Surveyed

Regarding knowledge of substances used in artificial depigmentation, 134 (67%) participants reported being aware of the existence of depigmenting substances, while 66 (33%) participants had no knowledge of them. Among the

substances mentioned by the participants, topical corticosteroids were the most frequently identified (n=88; 44%), followed by hydroquinone (n=30; 15%), then fruit acids (n=15; 7.5%), and mercury derivatives (n=1; 0.5%). No participant mentioned glutathione as a substance. These results show that a majority of participants have some knowledge of depigmenting substances, but that this knowledge remains limited regarding the diversity of active ingredients used. Topical corticosteroids appear to be the best-known substances, likely due to their frequent use in certain commercially available skin-lightening products. However, the low recognition of hydroquinone and mercury derivatives may reflect a lack of awareness regarding the actual ingredients present in the products used. According to the AFSSAPS in 2011, the active ingredients most frequently found in products used for voluntary depigmentation are primarily hydroquinone—often used in high concentrations—and very potent topical corticosteroids, particularly 0.05% clobetasol propionate. The agency also emphasizes that these substances can cause serious skin complications when used for prolonged periods or without medical supervision. (19).

4.9 Monthly Cost of Depigmentation Products for Female Users

In our study, 53.57% of women who voluntarily undergo artificial cosmetic depigmentation reported spending less than 10,000 CFA per month on depigmentation products. In contrast, 28.57% spent between 41,000 and 50,000 CFA francs per month, while 10.71% and 7.14% spent between 21,000 and 30,000 CFA francs and between 11,000 and 20,000 CFA francs, respectively. No budget exceeding 50,000 CFA francs was reported. Our results are generally consistent with those of Andonaba et al. in Burkina Faso, who estimated the average monthly cost of skin-lightening products among women in Bobo-Dioulasso at approximately 1,700 CFA francs, with ranges from 900 CFA francs to 70,000 CFA francs. These results underscore that the relatively affordable cost of skin-lightening products is a factor likely to encourage their use. They highlight the importance of strengthening awareness campaigns about the dangers of this practice, as well as regulating the sale of skin-lightening products to limit their consumption. (20).

4.10 Skin-lightening products used by the women surveyed

The most commonly used skin-lightening products were primarily fruit acids (n=16; 57.14%), homemade skin-lightening creams and soaps with no listed active ingredients (n=7; 25%), hydroquinone (n=5; 17.85%), topical corticosteroids (n=3; 10.75%), and beta-carotene, niacinamide, vitamin C, and glutathione (n=2; 7.14%). Two of these skin-lightening substances were also identified by Koutchoro et al. in Benin. This is because hydroquinone and topical corticosteroids are the most commonly found ingredients in creams containing depigmenting agents, particularly in Africa. (19,21).

4.11 Skin-lightening products and skin complications among female users

Among the 28 participants, 14 (50.00%) reported observing atrophy and hyomelanosis after using skin-lightening products. In addition, 10 (35.71%) participants reported the onset of exogenous ochronosis, while 4 (14.28%) participants reported no side effects. These results show that the majority of users experienced at least one effect related to voluntary cosmetic artificial depigmentation. The occurrence of skin atrophy and hypomelanosis may be attributed to the properties of topical corticosteroids. In contrast, the appearance of exogenous ochronosis patches is a frequently reported adverse effect of hydroquinone. (22,23).

4.12 Duration of Use of Skin-Lightening Products Among Female Users

In our study, the majority of women who voluntarily underwent cosmetic skin lightening (57.14%) reported having used these products for 2 to 3 years. In addition, 17.85% of participants had been using these products for less than 6 months, 17.85% for between 7 months and 1 year, while 10.71% had been using depigmentation products for 4 to 5 years. No participant reported having practiced depigmentation for more than 6 years. These results show that depigmentation is a relatively recent practice among the majority of participants, but one that has been ongoing long enough to expose users to adverse effects associated with repeated use of depigmenting products.

5 CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of our study, we can say that voluntary cosmetic skin lightening appears to be a practice deeply ingrained in Gabonese culture. This study has given us the opportunity to better understand this phenomenon, which has become a genuine social and public health issue that should not be taken lightly. It is a practice that primarily affects Gabonese youth and women. The pursuit of beauty and the desire to be attractive appear to be the main motivations for users. The black market and cosmetic stores that sell these banned and hazardous products play a significant role in this phenomenon. Fruit acids, hydroquinone, corticosteroids, mercury, and glutathione are the primary skin-lightening agents. The most common side effects are stretch marks, acne, and dark spots. The main reasons that led some users to stop using skin-lightening products were the harmful effects on their bodies and aesthetic dissatisfaction.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Statement of informed consent

Information from the women was collected with respect for their privacy and on an anonymous basis. All participants were informed that their data would be used for scientific publication.

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