Assessing skin lightening knowledge and practices among students at University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS), Wa, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Despite the serious harmful consequences of skin lightening outlined in medical journals, many Ghanaian students still indulge in the practice. This study assesses the knowledge and practices of skin lightening among students at the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (FIDS), University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS), Wa. Guided by the social learning theory, the study employs a cross-sectional mixed-methods research design, combining questionnaires and in-depth interviews for data collection. The target population comprised all undergraduate students at the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (FIDS), UBIDS, Wa. The study uses a mixed-methods approach. Primary data was obtained through questionnaires and interviews from 100 students selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Qualitative data was analyzed using an interpretative approach and presented in narrative form, while quantitative data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.20) and presented in charts and tables. The study reveals that 52% of respondents could differentiate between skin bleaching and skin toning. However, 71% were unaware of the lethal chemicals and abrasive agents in skin lightening products and their dangers. Only 18% of students self-reported current or previous use of skin lightening products. However, 47 students were initially sampled based on visible physical indicators of potential skin lightening use, suggesting possible underreporting driven by social desirability bias and semantic denial. Sources of knowledge included the internet (42 respondents), friends (30), celebrity endorsements on radio/television (23), billboards (3), and family (1). The findings underscore how digital platforms, peer networks, and celebrity culture create platforms that normalize skin lightening while suppressing awareness of health risks. The study recommends comprehensive health education campaigns, media literacy programs, and psychological support services to address skin lightening practices among university students.

Keywords: Anthropology, Culture and Development, Knowledge, Practices, Skin, Skin-Lightening, Students

I. INTRODUCTION

Skin lightening, also known as skin bleaching, refers to the use of chemical agents to lighten the complexion of the skin (Osei et al., 2018). This corroborates earlier work from Amankwa et al. (2016), who argued that skin lightening entails using materials such as chemicals, soaps, herbs, fade creams, and other agents strong enough to create a quick change in the colour of the skin. The practice has become prevalent in recent times (January et al., 2018), particularly in Asian, Caribbean (Rosen & Givens, 2022) and African Countries (Yusuf et al., 2019). Skin lightening products work by reducing the production of melanin, as noted by Masum et al. (2019), which gives the skin its dark complexion.

The worldwide use of skin-lightening products is motivated by the notion that a lighter grade or tone of the skin results in greater prestige and opportunities (Peltzer et al, 2016). A lighter skin complexion, as noted by January (2018), is linked to attractiveness, beauty and desirability, particularly among females. In sub-Saharan Africa, Lartey et al. (2017), asserts that the incidence of skin lightening remains high, having been prominent for over four decades. This was confirmed in a further study from Sagoe et al (2019), who estimated a skin lightening prevalence of 27.1% for Africa. Ahmed and Hamid (2017), in a survey conducted at the University of Sudan, found out that 8 out of 10

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Sudanese undergraduate ladies had used skin lightening products. This corroborated further scholarship from, Yusuf et al. (2019), who reported that 51.6% of participants admitted to current use in Somaliland.

In Ghana, skin lightening is a prominent practice. Lartey et al., (2017), recognized a prevalence of 50.3% in their study of three urban communities in Accra. Further study from Osei et al. (2018), reported 65.6% of participants admitted to using skin lightening products while Asumah et al (2022) reported a 26.3% prevalence of skin bleaching among young adults. These quantified metrics empirically confirmed the rise in usage of skin lightening at different age groups within the Ghanaian society. Although skin lightening products are frequently marketed as advantageous, adverse effects from prolonged use have been shown to impact the skin barrier and physiology (Darj et al., 2015), and cause health problems (Osei et al., 2018; January et al., 2018). The use of skin lightening creams has been found to lead to ochronosis, rashes and systematic effects such as diabetes mellitus, hypertension and even psychosis (January et al., 2019). Users of skin lightening products are more prone to ailments caused by bacteria, fungi, parasites, and viruses due to the removal of the skin layer (Peltzer, Pengpid & James, 2016). This can be attributed to the chemicals used in the skin lightening products, particularly mercury and hydroquinone (Peltzer, Pengpid & James, 2016). One of the most serious side effects of using mercury-containing skin lightening products is kidney damage (Osei et al., 2018).

Despite the serious health risks involved, skin bleaching products continue to be in high demand (Osei et al., 2018). Peltzer and Pengpid (2017), in a large sample of university students revealed a significant incidence of skin lightening product use. January et al (2018) in a survey of female university students in Zimbabwe recorded a prevalent use of skin lightening use. Agyemang-Duah et al., (2019), recorded 40.9% of respondents having practiced skin toning within the last 12 months. These studies show that skin lightening is prevalent among university students. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to assess the knowledge and practice of skin-lightening among students of University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS).

1.1 Research Objectives

i. To assess the level of knowledge and practices of skin lightening among students at the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (FIDS), University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS), Wa.
ii. To examine the sources of information that influence skin lightening knowledge and practices among students at FIDS, UBIDS, Wa.
iii. To identify the negative effects and motivations associated with skin lightening practices among students at FIDS, UBIDS, Wa.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Social Learning Theory

This study adopted the Social Learning Theory propounded by Albert Bandura in 1977. The theory suggests that much learning takes place through observing the behaviour of others. Individuals learn behaviour, values, attitudes, and skills through the observation of other individuals, or through observations of electronic, print media and new media. Therefore, through exposure to an advertisement on Television, Print, Internet which projects fair skin ladies, women perception, and attitude is affected making them believe that a fair skin person is more acceptable in the society.

Accordingly, Yuan and Lou (2020), remarked that youths are affected once they are exposed to the media. Such exposure leads to change in knowledge, attitude, and behaviour. Female youths and women tend to imitate their fellow that engages in bleaching as well as the media which projects light skin ladies as the most appropriately accepted in the society (Apuke, 2018). The advent of social media, as noted by Apuke (2018), has made it easier for women to get exposed to various adverts that projects light skin female advertisers, therefore, their perception is influenced into believing that lightening of the skin is a good practice.

The Social Learning Theory is particularly relevant to understanding the knowledge and practice of skin lightening among university students at FIDS-UBIDS because it explains how students acquire information about skin lightening not through direct instruction, but through observation and imitation of peers, celebrities, and media figures. The findings of this study, which identified internet (42 respondents), friends (30), and celebrity endorsements on radio and television (23) as the dominant sources of knowledge on skin lightening, strongly validate the theoretical assumptions of Bandura (1977). Students who observed peers with lighter skin tones or encountered media content glorifying fair complexions were more likely to develop favourable attitudes toward skin lightening, regardless of their awareness of its health consequences. This observational learning dynamic explains why 71% of respondents lacked knowledge of harmful chemicals in skin lightening products, yet the practice persisted. These students modelled behaviour they perceived as socially rewarding without critically evaluating the associated risks.

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Furthermore, the theory highlights the role of reinforcement in sustaining skin lightening practices within the university environment. When students observe that lighter-skinned peers attract social admiration, professional opportunities, or romantic attention, the perceived positive outcomes serve as vicarious reinforcement that encourages others to adopt similar practices (Bandura, 1977). This is consistent with the qualitative findings of this study, where respondents acknowledged that lighter skin was believed to open doors professionally and romantically, and that euphemistic language such as "maintaining the skin" or "skin enhancement" was used to normalise and perpetuate the behaviour. The theory therefore provides a robust lens for situating the knowledge gaps, peer influence, and media-driven motivations that characterise skin lightening practices at FIDS-UBIDS and underscores the need for interventions such as media literacy programs and positive body image campaigns that present alternative, health-affirming social models for students to observe and internalise.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Knowledge and Practice of Skin Lightening Among Students

Empirical evidence from a study conducted amongst 19 female university in Sudan conducted by Ahmed and Hamid (2016), confirmed that light skin and full figure are adored. Most of the participants and their friends confessed not knowing the constituents of the products they used to lighten their skin. Some participants used a mixture of creams made by shopkeepers comprising unidentified creams with unknown adverse effects. Others, as noted by Ahmed and Hamid (2016), discontinued usage once they realized the hazardous health consequences, or experienced undesirable effects themselves.

Further study from January et al., (2018), revealed that 61.7% of students expressed satisfaction with their skin colour, while 83.3% preferred the light skin tone. In terms of awareness, almost all (94.9%) women knew of someone who uses skin lightening creams. Participants who reported to be bleaching their skin gave a prevalence of 31.6%. Of the women who did not bleach their skin, 36% reported that they would consider skin bleaching given that the side effects were very minimal. Just above half of the women (52.3%) who reported to bleach their skin admitted they knew about the side effects. Of the women using skin lightening agents, 92.6% reported to be applying them externally and the rest used injections and tablets. A total of 66.6% of those who applied skin bleaching products externally, according to Nyoni-Kachambwa et al. (2021), reported to be applying the products at-least twice daily.

Rahiman et. al (2021), indicated that 75% of participants reported awareness of the negative effects of skin lightening. This high prevalence rate reported within this study cohort could possibly be a result of students being knowledgeable of the adverse effects. Keakile (2016), suggested that tertiary educated individuals are more likely to familiarize themselves with issues of social interest and are therefore more aware of the negative consequences associated with the practice. In furtherance, a study from Egbi and Kasia (2021), discovered that about (82.7%) knew that there were adverse effects associated with use of SLP, (4.5%) did not know there were adverse effects while (12.7%) were not certain. In terms of complications, only (21.9%) respondents knew that kidney disease was a possible complication. About (15.5%) participants correctly identified liver failure as a possible complication. 'Cancer' was identified as a possible complication in (64.5%) respondents. About (20.9%) respondents correctly identified foetal toxicity as a complication while only (0.9%) respondents correctly identified diabetes mellitus as a possible complication. Also, about (50.0%) respondents claimed that they knew the ingredients in SLP while (46.4%) did not. The harmful ingredient implicated by respondents were hydroquinone in (42.7%), mercury (26.4%), arsenic (10.0%), steroid (8.2%), chromium (3.6%), and cadmium (2.7%) responses (Rahiman et al. 2021). The source of information about SLP among users were internet and social media (Egbi & Kasia, 2021).

2.2.2 Sources of Information for Skin Lightening Knowledge and Practices

In the past, the practice of skin lightening has always been reported among adults, but the trend has changed with involvement of large number of female adolescent group. Data from a study conducted by Charles (2018), showed that 33% reported voluntary use of skin bleaching products, with 42.3% of the girls using them in combination (soap and lotion) and frequently (twice daily). This suggested a strong determination to engage in skin bleaching. In Benin three quarters of female students are reported to be applying skin lightening cosmetic products twice daily and in 70% of cases, parents provide for the purchase of the cosmetic products. Rusmadi et. al (2015) in Malaysia reported that female university students selected bleaching cosmetic products as a function of the cost with respect to their monthly income. Although the commercialization and use of these products have been banned in several countries because of the risk of toxicity, they are still available on the African market in the form of "antiseptic soaps" (Charles, 2018).

In Nigeria, studies indicate a much higher prevalence in young, unmarried and educated women. According to Amodu (2018), facial whitening is more frequently practiced than any other patterns. At the initiation of the practice, a total body surface application is often used for maximum effect, then maintained with daily application. Multiple products containing different agents may be used concurrently or sequentially. In Malaysia 60% of respondents who

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were mostly (85%) less than 25 years of age among female university students were users of skin brightening agents according to a study from Kouotou et al. (2017).

2.2.3 Negative Effects and Motivations for Skin Lightening

The side effects of skin lightening with harmful chemicals can be serious. Within communities, Adewoyin (2020), notes that skin bleaching trends have great health and cultural implications. This corroborated earlier work from World Health Organization [WHO] (2019), where they identified the effects of inorganic mercury in skin bleaching products include kidney damage, skin rashes or discoloration, and scarring and reduction in the skin's resistance to bacterial and fungal infections. According to Egbi and Kasia (2021), the identified side effects included skin irritation, discoloration, sunburn, skin veins, skin peeling and acne. Others were rashes, atrophy, infections, ochronosis and stretchmarks. Other effects include slow healing from wounds, thinning of the skin, osteoporosis, and muscle weakness (Mohiuddin, 2019). There are increasing risks of serious health-related problems associated with the use of skin cream agents, including skin damage, cancers, and liver and kidney failure (Adewoyin, 2020).

The colour of the skin tends to influence the perception of beauty among black women. In South Africa among some black South Africans, a black girl is called a 'yellow bone', which according to new trends is a beautiful light-skinned black girl. The history of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, as confirmed in a study from Motseki (2019), shows that black skin colour was denigrated by the colonizers and as such black skin was not seen as beautiful or attractive. Previous studies indicate that very early in the development of black social structures, the quality of 'lightness' became associated with the highest social and occupational class (Motseki, 2019). Often in black society, light skinned people are considered better and more civilized or open-minded as compared to dark skinned people. Moreover, it is believed that light-skinned women have better chances of getting married to more successful men as compared to dark-skinned women (Motseki, 2019).

III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the cross sectional mixed method to improve on evaluation by ensuring that the limitations of one type of data are balanced by the strengths of another. This ensured that the issue is not explored through one lens, but a variety of lenses which allowed for multiple facets of the phenomena to be revealed and understood. The study sourced primary data through the administration of questionnaires among students in the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (FIDS) to assess their knowledge and perceptions of skin lightening. The faculty was randomly sampled using the fish bow method. The study sourced secondary data from websites and reports prepared by research scholars to augment the primary data from the field.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to obtain 100 students from all undergraduates at the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (FIDS), the study's targeted population. Purposive sampling, as argued by Kalu (2019), helps gain information from those who have experience in the study area. This sampling technique was used when questionnaires were administered to respondents who had visible signs of having bleached their skin. For this study, 47 students were purposively sampled. Snowball sampling was also used to sample 53 students because the nature of the academic calendar has made students not readily available on campus and difficult to access, as they are in the field for the third trimester program. This produced a total of 100 respondents for the entire study. The sampling strategy deliberately oversampled students with visible indicators of skin lightening (n=47 through purposive sampling) to ensure adequate representation of users for in-depth interviews. This stratified approach explains why the purposive sample size (47) exceeds the self-reported usage rate (18%), as not all students with visible indicators acknowledged use during questionnaire administration. The discrepancy between physical indicators and self-reports became an important finding regarding measurement validity and social desirability bias in skin lightening research.

The qualitative data was analysed using the interpretative approach and interpreted in a descriptive form based on the thematic areas. Quantitative data was obtained through the use of questionnaires and presented in the form of frequency distribution tables and charts. Percentages were analysed through the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 purposively selected students (15 current or former users, 10 non-users) to complement quantitative data. Participants were identified through self-disclosure during questionnaire administration and through snowball referrals. Interviews lasted 20-45 minutes and explored motivations, experiences, knowledge sources, and observed effects of skin lightening. All interviews were conducted in English language. Participants provided verbal informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained. The qualitative data was analysed thematically, identifying recurring patterns across narratives related to knowledge acquisition, practice motivations, health awareness, and social influences. These qualitative insights were integrated with quantitative findings to provide comprehensive understanding of skin lightening practices at SDD-UBIDS.

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IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Data was gathered from both male and female students in the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (FIDS) in the of University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS) for the study, ranging from the ages of 18-35 plus. See table 1 for demographics of respondents.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 100 respondents)

Variable	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Sex	Male	52	52
	Female	48	48
Total		**100**	**100**
Age	18 – 24	42	42
	25 – 35	40	40
	35+	18	18
Total		**100**	**100**
Marital status	Single	54	54
	In a serious relationship	18	18
	Married	20	20
	Engaged	7	7
	Divorced	1	1
Total		**100**	**100**
Program of study	BA Development Communication	29	29
	BA Integrated Development Studies	28	28
	BA Environment and Resource Studies	19	19
	BA African Discourse Studies	9	9
Total		**100**	**100**

The sample comprised 52% male and 48% female students. The majority (82%) were aged 18-35 years, with 42% in the 18-24 age range and 40% in the 25-34 age range. Most respondents (54%) identified as single, while 18% were in serious relationships, 20% were married, 7% engaged, and 1% divorced.

4.1.1 Knowledge on Skin Lightening

This section presents data concerning the knowledge of respondents on skin lightening practices, specifically their capacity to differentiate between skin bleaching and skin toning. The empirical data is visually depicted in Figure 1, where participants' responses to "Can you differentiate between skin bleaching and skin toning?" are categorized into "Yes" and "No".

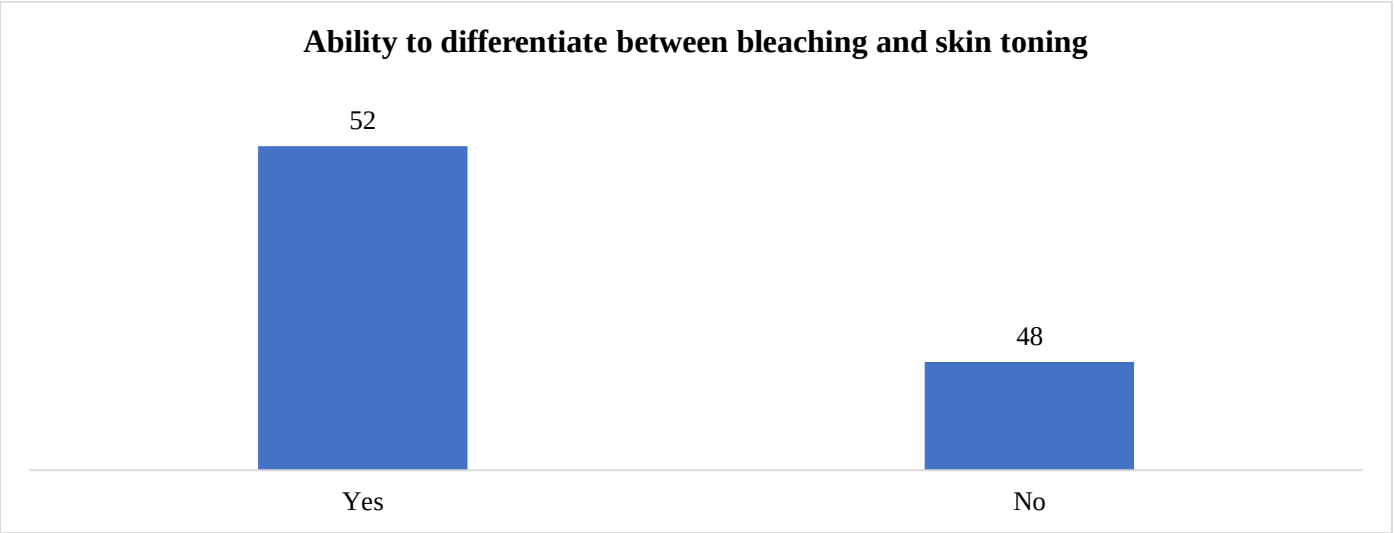

Figure 1

Differences between Skin Bleaching and Skin Toning

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Figure 1 reveals that 52 participants asserted their ability to differentiate between skin bleaching and skin toning, while 48 respondents expressed their incapacity to make this distinction. The findings align seamlessly with Asumah et al. (2022) who revealed that majority of their respondents were knowledgeable of skin lightening and could differentiate between skin bleaching and skin toning.

The division between respondents who could distinguish between these practices and those who could not may be attributed to variations in educational backgrounds, exposure to skincare information, cultural influences, and personal experiences. Individuals with comprehensive understanding of skincare products are more likely to discriminate between these practices through exposure to information via media outlets, healthcare professionals, and beauty experts as indicated by Hexsel et al. (2017) and the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Respondents able to distinguish between these practices are more likely to possess deeper understanding of the potential hazards posed by skin bleaching, which agrees with George and Kumar (2011).

The qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into students' understanding of these practices. One female respondent from Development Communication explained:

> *"Bleaching changes your natural colour completely, but toning is just maintaining and clearing dark spots. My friend used to bleach and now her knuckles are black while her face is yellow."* (Field interview, August, 10, 2025)

A male student noted:

> *"I didn't know there was a difference until I saw my roommate's skin peeling. He thought he was just using a body cream, but it was actually a bleaching product. Social media influencers call it 'glow up' or 'skin enhancement,' so many people don't even realize they're bleaching their skin."* (Field interview, August 10, 2025)

These narratives highlight the confusion between terminology and the influence of euphemistic marketing language in obscuring harmful practices.

4.1.2 Sources of Knowledge on Skin Bleaching and Skin Toning

This section explores the sources of knowledge that individuals draw upon concerning skin bleaching and skin toning practices. This information is presented below.

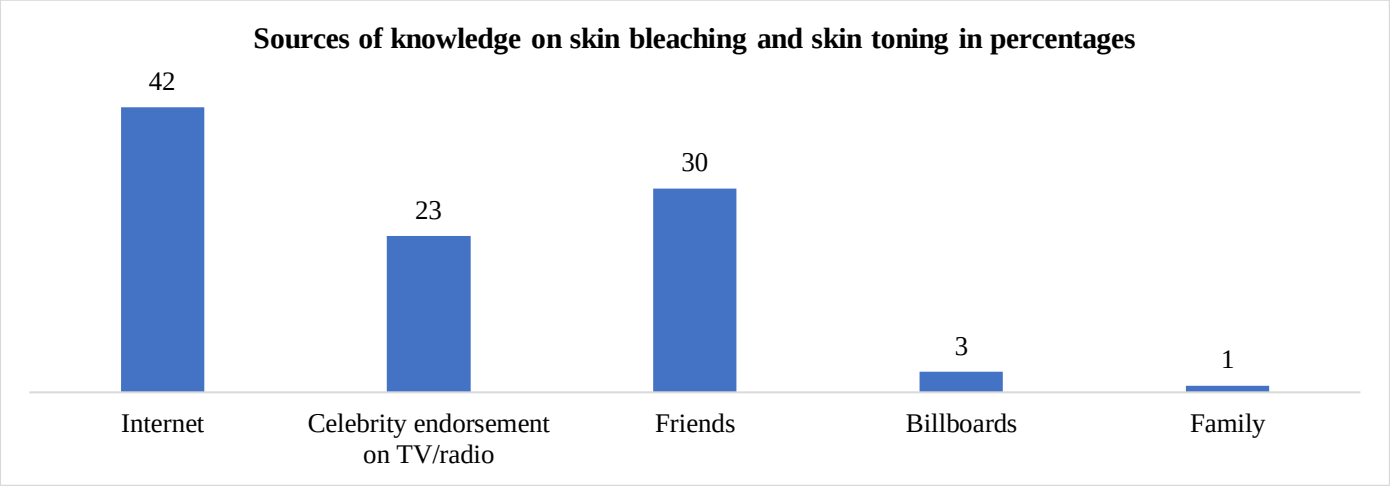

Figure 2

Sources of Knowledge on Skin Bleaching and Skin Toning

Figure 2 highlights a range of avenues through which individuals acquire information about skin bleaching and skin toning, as indicated by the Social Learning Theory Bandura, (1977). The Internet emerged as the leading source of knowledge with a frequency of 42 out of the 100 respondents. Egbi and Kasia (2021), and Rahiman et al. (2021) revealed that internet is a dominant source of skin bleaching products and information which aligns with the study findings. Celebrity endorsements on TV and radio accounted for 23 responses, indicating the significant role that public figures hold over perceptions of beauty and skincare practices. Friends as a source of knowledge had a frequency of 30, highlighting the significance of personal relationships in disseminating information about skincare practices and peer-driven information exchange, which aligns with the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Billboards and family represented minor sources with frequencies of 3 and 1 respectively. Interviews revealed the intricate ways students acquire information about skin lightening. A 23-year-old female student stated:

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> *"I first learned about bleaching products from Instagram ads and YouTube tutorials. The influencers make it look so glamorous and safe. My friends in the hostel share products and tips. Nobody talks about the dangers; they only show off their 'glow.'"*(Field interviews, August 12, 2025).

One male student however observed:

> *"Celebrity endorsements on TV normalize it. When you see successful musicians and actors with lighter skin promoting these products, you think it's acceptable. I searched online about skin toning because I had acne scars, but the search kept showing me bleaching products instead."* (Field interviews, August 12, 2025).

These accounts underscore how digital platforms and peer networks create echo chambers that promote skin lightening while minimizing health risks. These findings align with Yuan and Lou (2020), who argued that social media influencers shape parasocial relationships that influence product adoption among young people. The narratives also support Apuke's (2018) assertion that media representation of light-skinned individuals as successful reinforces the desirability of skin lightening, particularly when enhanced by algorithmic content curation.

4.1.3 Knowledge on Lethal Chemicals and Abrasive Agents in Bleaching Products

This section presents data on respondents' knowledge of lethal chemicals and abrasive agents in bleaching products. Respondents were asked whether they were aware of lethal chemicals and abrasive agents in bleaching products. The data is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Specific Harmful Chemicals Identified by Knowledgeable Respondents (n=29)

Chemical/Agent	Frequency	Percentage (of 29)
Hydroquinone	16	55.2%
Mercury	8	27.6%
Steroids	3	10.3%
Other/Unsure	2	6.9%

Among the 29 students who claimed awareness of harmful chemicals in skin lightening products, hydroquinone was the most recognized ingredient, identified by 16 students (55.2%). Mercury was recognized by 8 students (27.6%), while only 3 students (10.3%) identified steroids. Two students (6.9%) were unsure of specific chemicals. This pattern shows that even among supposedly knowledgeable students, chemical literacy is limited and focused primarily on hydroquinone, likely due to its frequent mention in media and health campaigns. These findings reveal a concerning knowledge gap. While hydroquinone receives the most attention, equally dangerous ingredients like mercury and steroids remain largely unrecognized. This suggests health education campaigns may focus too narrowly on certain chemicals while neglecting others. The results align with Egbi and Kasia's (2021) Nigerian study, where similar patterns of selective chemical awareness were observed. Comprehensive education programs are needed to address the full range of harmful ingredients in skin lightening products.

The qualitative data revealed alarming gaps in chemical literacy among students. A female respondent admitted:

> *"I used a cream my friend gave me for months without knowing what was in it. When I finally checked, I couldn't even pronounce most ingredients. I heard about hydroquinone on the news, but I didn't know it was in common beauty products sold in our markets."* (Field data, August 12 2025).

A male student observed:

> *"The products don't have proper labels. Some are packaged in unmarked containers, so you can't even know what chemicals you're putting on your skin."* (Field interviews, August 12, 2025).

One respondent who discontinued use explained:

> *"Only when my skin started burning and peeling did I research the ingredients. I discovered my cream contained mercury, which can damage kidneys."* (Field interviews, August 12, 2025).

These testimonies highlight the dangerous disconnect between product accessibility and consumer awareness, supporting the study's quantitative finding that 71% lack knowledge of harmful ingredients. These narratives corroborate Ahmed and Hamid's (2016) findings in Sudan, where participants used cream mixtures from shopkeepers without knowing the constituents or adverse effects. The lack of product transparency described by respondents echoes Charles (2018) observation that dangerous bleaching products continue circulating in African markets disguised as antiseptic soaps, deliberately obscuring their true nature and chemical composition.

4.1.4 The Practice of Skin Lightening amongst Students

This segment explores skin lightening practices among the student body at UBIDS. The insights are presented in a bar chart, figure 3.

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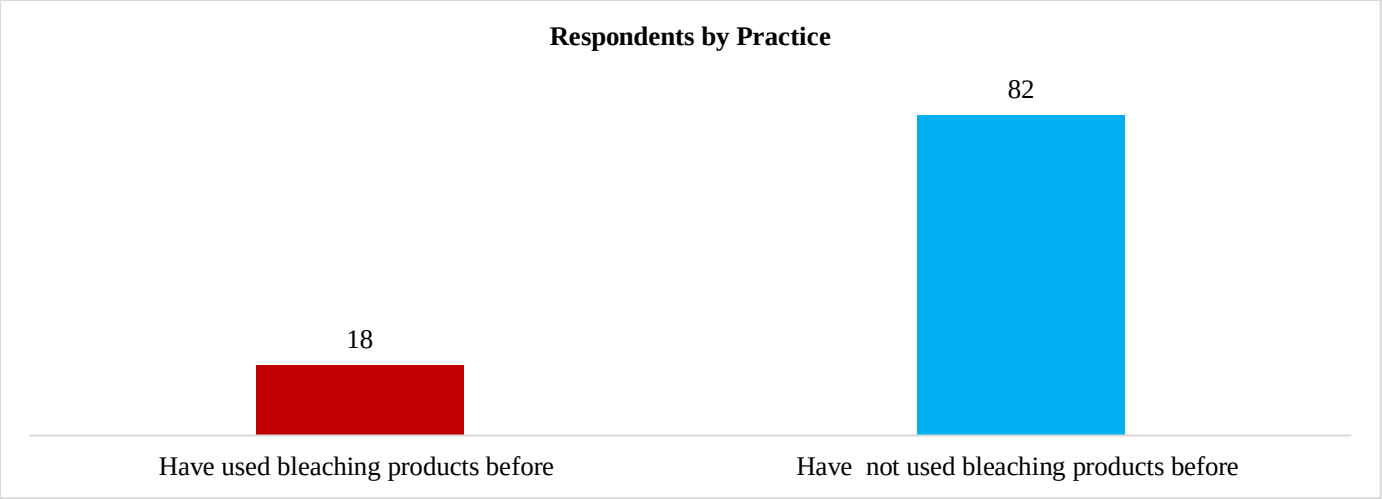

Figure 3

Self-Reported Current or Previous Use of Skin Lightening Products among Respondents (n=100)

Figure 3 presents respondents' self-reports regarding their history of skin lightening product usage. Among the 100 respondents, 18 students (18%) acknowledged current or previous use of skin lightening products, while 82 students (82%) reported that they have never used any form of skin lightening products. Notably, this 18% self-reported usage contrasts with the 47 students who were purposively sampled based on visible physical indicators suggesting possible skin lightening use. This discrepancy between observed indicators (47%) and self-reported use (18%) reveals a substantial gap that may be attributed to several factors: (1) social desirability bias leading respondents to deny use despite visible signs; (2) some visible skin changes resulting from factors other than deliberate skin lightening, such as medical conditions, sun exposure, or natural pigmentation variation; (3) students not recognizing their products as 'skin lightening' agents when marketed euphemistically as 'brightening,' 'toning,' or 'glow-enhancing' creams; and (4) stigma associated with the term 'bleaching' causing respondents to reframe their practices semantically.

This measurement challenge suggests the actual prevalence likely falls somewhere between the self-reported 18% and the observed 47%, indicating that between 18-47% of students may engage in some form of skin lightening practice. The qualitative interviews support this interpretation, as several respondents described peers who use lightening products but refuse to label their behaviour as bleaching. This finding does not align with Osei et al. (2018), whose study recorded high number of university students practicing skin lightening.

The insights can be contextualized within the broader discourse on skin lightening practices. Hall (1995) elucidates the role of media in perpetuating racial ideologies, which can influence perceptions of beauty and contribute to practices like skin lightening. Charles (2018) explores the psychological implications of skin bleaching and its links to self-identity and cultural perceptions.

The field interviews revealed complex motivations and concealment behaviours. A female user explained:

> *"I started using lightening cream because I believed it would make me more attractive and confident. In our society, lighter skin opens doors professionally and romantically. Some students don't call it bleaching; they say they're 'maintaining their skin' or 'evening their tone,' which makes them feel it's not harmful."* (Field interviews, August 13, 2025).

A discontinued user shared:

> *"I used to bleach secretly because my family would disapprove. When the side effects started showing, I had to stop and face their judgment anyway."* (Field interviews, August 13, 2025).

These accounts suggest the 18% usage figure may represent underreporting due to stigma and semantic denial, explaining the discrepancy with the 47 students purposively sampled with visible signs. The motivations expressed by respondents align with Motseki's (2019) findings in South Africa, where light skin is associated with beauty, success, and better marriage prospects. The concealment and euphemistic language used by students support Charles's (2018) analysis of how skin bleaching becomes intertwined with self-identity and cultural perceptions of beauty, leading to cognitive dissonance where users reframe harmful practices as legitimate self-care.

4.1.5 Some Features that are Visible in the Victims of Skin Lightening

This section explores the physical manifestations that characterize individuals who have participated in skin lightening practices. The data, as presented in Figure 4, offers insight into the array of features evident in individuals who have undergone skin lightening processes.

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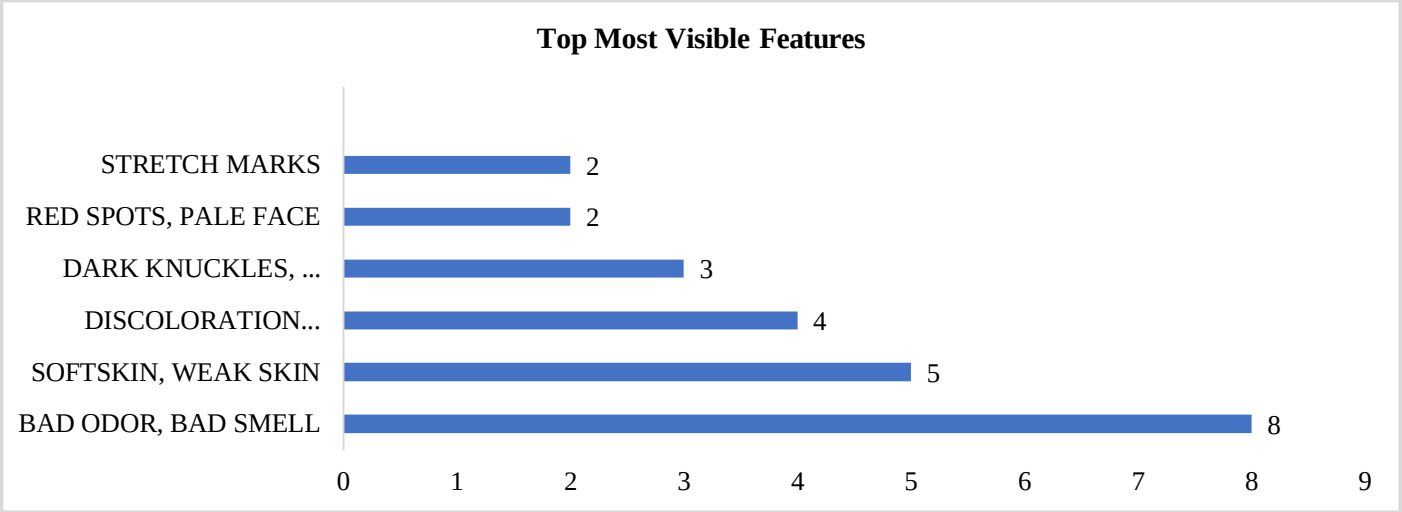

Figure 4

Some Features that are Visible in the Victims of Skin Lightening

The reported visible features encompass a range of adverse outcomes observed after using skin lightening products, revealing both immediate and long-term dermatological consequences. "Bad odour and bad smell" emerged as the most frequently cited feature with 8 respondents noting this characteristic chemical scent. "Soft and weak skin" was reported by 5 respondents, indicating compromised skin barrier integrity. "Discoloration and discoloured skin" affected 4 respondents, while "dark knuckles and knuckle discoloration" were mentioned by 3 respondents. Additionally, both "red spots and pale face" and "stretch marks" were each reported by 2 respondents.

These observations align with Muthee et al. (2020), which indicated that skin bleaching can lead to adverse skin outcomes, including discoloration and uneven pigmentation. The visible manifestations reported by students reflect alterations to the skin's natural barrier function and pigmentation processes that Okoro and Iwu (2018) documented as consequences of improper usage of skin lightening products.

Interview participants provided vivid descriptions of observable consequences. A respondent observed,

> *"You can tell who's bleaching by the contrast, dark knuckles, elbows, and knees. Some people's veins show through their skin like they're transparent. My skin became so sensitive that sunlight would burn me immediately. I developed dark patches that were worse than my original complexion."*(Key Informant, August 14, 2025).

Another student noted:

> *"There's a peculiar smell that comes from people who use certain bleaching products. It's chemical and unnatural, like mixing perfume with medicine. I've seen students whose skin looks stretched and shiny, almost artificial. When they sweat, you can see discoloration patterns that reveal their natural skin tone underneath"* (field interviews, August 13, 2025).

These detailed observations validate the quantitative findings and demonstrate peer awareness of bleaching consequences, even among those who claim limited knowledge. These descriptions closely match the adverse effects documented by Muthee et al. (2020), including discoloration, uneven pigmentation, and heightened photosensitivity. The visible vein phenomenon and chemical odour reported by respondents support Okoro and Iwu's (2018) findings regarding skin barrier damage and altered dermal structure from improper use of lightening agents. The artificial appearance and discoloration patterns described align with WHO's (2019) documentation of mercury-related skin damage, including the characteristic dyschromia that reveals underlying natural pigmentation.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study reveals significant knowledge gaps and concerning practices regarding skin lightening among SDD-UBIDS students. While 52% could differentiate between bleaching and toning, 71% lacked awareness of dangerous chemicals in these products. The measurement of actual prevalence proved complex: 18% of students self-reported current or previous use, yet 47% were identified with visible indicators suggesting possible use. This 18-47% range, with a likely midpoint around 30%, suggests substantial underreporting driven by social desirability bias and semantic denial. The qualitative data exposed how students reframe harmful 'bleaching' as benign 'skin maintenance' or 'toning,' allowing psychological distance from stigmatized behaviour while continuing potentially dangerous practices.

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Both male and female students demonstrated engagement with skin lightening, though motivations differed, with females citing beauty standards and males mentioning professional appearance. Social media, peer networks, and celebrity endorsements emerged as primary influence sources, validating the Social Learning Theory framework. The visible consequences documented through interviews exposed urgent public health implications extending beyond individual choice to systemic issues of consumer protection, accurate health education, and evidence-based intervention design.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the outcome of the study, the following recommendations were made: The Students' Representative Council (SRC), the University and Ghana Health Service (GHS) need to collaborate and organise comprehensive health promotions/educational campaigns on skin lightening. Given the limited awareness about hazardous constituents in skin bleaching products, there is an urgent need for comprehensive education campaigns. Workshops, seminars, and awareness sessions should be organized to equip students with accurate information about the potential risks and consequences of skin bleaching. These campaigns should emphasize the differences between safe skin toning practices and harmful bleaching practices, empowering students to make informed decisions about their skincare.

The university should provide media literacy programs for students. Considering the significant influence of media, particularly the Internet and celebrity endorsements, implementing media literacy programs is crucial. These programs can help students critically analyse media messages, recognize potential biases, and make informed judgments about the information they encounter. The Students' Representative Council (SRC) should collaborate with the Counselling and Guidance unit of the university to provide psychological support for student body. University Management should create workshops on self-esteem, body positivity, and coping strategies that can empower students to navigate societal pressure and build resilience against negative self-perception. Finally, celebrities and models serve as role models and mentors for many youths, therefore, they should reconsider the roles they play that have contributed to the growth of the skin bleaching industry in Ghana. Most of the youth imitate the lifestyle of their admired celebrities as they see in the movies, music videos, internet and on billboards.

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