

Population perception of the use of cosmetic skin depigmentation products in the town of Bunia, Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo

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ABSTRACT: This research explores the perceptions of the inhabitants of Bunia on the use of depigmenting cosmetic products. The qualitative research design using ethnographic method was used to conduct this study. Semi-structured interview was used to carry out this study with a sample of 80 participants, chosen by occasional sampling. After analysis, the study revealed that the main reasons for the use of depigmenting cosmetic products were the desire to achieve a clearer complexion and to improve one's appearance, influences marked by social norms and the media. Some users also use it for therapeutic purposes, in particular to treat skin problems such as acne. The analysis reveals a preference for several types of product. Milks and lotions top the list, followed by injections and tablets, while depigmenting soaps are still widely used. Although some people believe that men and women use depigmenting products equally, the practice is still predominantly female. Participants expressed deep concern about the associated health risks: skin cancers, medical complications, unpleasant body odours and irregular pigmentation problems. In view of these results, it is vital to adopt a multidisciplinary approach, by stepping up targeted awareness-raising campaigns, using innovative approaches, but also by ensuring regulation, banning the most harmful products and promoting greater individual awareness of the risks.

KEYWORDS: perception, population, use, depigmentation cosmetics, skin, Bunia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Skin depigmentation is a phenomenon that is increasingly gaining ground. In many countries on the African continent, skin depigmentation is a common practice affecting an increasingly young population (Hutton, 2022).

The phenomenon of skin lightening has become very widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, with over 60% of users. The majority of users are women, in proportions ranging from 25% to 90% in most countries, and even men in Central Africa (Bangabiau et al. 2022). Voluntary skin depigmentation is a widespread practice, especially among women. Motivated by beauty standards associating fair skin with social success, this trend is observed worldwide: 77% of Nigerian women (WHO, 2011), 60% of Indian women (Swaminathan, 2019) and a growing market in the Philippines (Platt, 2022).

However, these products, often hydroquinone-based and banned in the European Union since 2001, carry serious risks: skin cancer, diabetes and infections (Delfolie, 2018). Despite this, their use persists, as in Bunia, where 70% of respondents use them despite the dangers.

This research was conducted to explore the perceptions of the population of Bunia on the use of cosmetic skin depigmentation products.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study, using qualitative research design, was conducted in Bunia, the capital of Ituri province in North-eastern DR Congo. It was conducted using the ethnographic methodology as described by Aubin-Auger et al (2008). The research took place over 14 days in July 2024 with a sample of 80 people selected by occasional sampling, following the saturation of data. The participants, all over 18 and users of depigmenting products, were interviewed using an interview guide.

The data was collected thanks to semi-structured interviews, allowing a degree of flexibility in tackling emerging themes. Thematic framework enabled us to identify the main trends around the following themes: reasons for use, preferred products, perception of risks and solutions envisaged. Socio-demographic characteristics - age, gender, level of education and occupation - were taken into account to contextualise the results.

From an ethical point of view, the research complied with strict protocols: informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, authorisation to record interviews. Special measures were taken to avoid including minors or reluctant participants. This rigorous methodological approach, combining flexibility in the field and respect for ethical standards, enabled an in-depth exploration of local perceptions of skin depigmentation.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Resondants	Age	Gender	Education	Profession
E1	40	F	BSc	Nurse
E2	29	M	BSc	Nurse
E3	28	M	BSc	Nurse
E4	32	F	Diploma	Nurse
E5	33	F	Diploma	Market seller
E6	25	M	Secondary	No profession
E7	26	F	BSc	Computer technician
E8	35	F	MD	Medical Doctor
E9	41	M	BSc	Lab technician
E10	45	F	BSc	Midwife
E11	39	F	BSc	Epidemiologist
E12	35	M	BSc	Health professional
E13	48	M	BSc	Nurse
E14	41	F	BSc	Health professional
E15	32	F		Student
E16	28	F		Student
E17	25	M		Student
E18	22	M		Student
E19	24	M		Student
E20	27	M		Student
E21	18	M		Student
E22	19	F		Student
E23	20	F		Student
E24	18	M		Student
E25	18	M		Student
E26	20	F		Student
E27	22	F		Student
E28	36	F	BA	Teacher
E29	38	F	BA	Watchman
E30	28	M	Primary	Mechanic
E31	30	F	BA	Watchman
E32	41	M	Diploma	Motorcycle taxi rider

E33	44	F	None	No profession
E34	43	M	BA	Police
E35	59	M	Diploma	Police
E36	60	F	Diploma	Police
E37	65	F	BA	Police
E38	52	F	BA	Police
E39	40	M	Diploma	Police
E40	70	M	BA	Police
E41	65	M	BA	Police
E42	55	F	BA	Soldier
E43	48	F	BA	Soldier
E44	60	M	BA	Soldier
E45	40	M	Secondary	Soldier
E46	36	F	Secondary	Housemaid
E47	42	F	BA	Driver
E48	45	F	BSc	Mechanic
E49	50	F	Secondary	Tailor
E50	55	M	Secondary	Motorcycle taxi rider
E51	37	M	BSc	Electrician
E52	40	M	BA	Lawyer
E53	55	M	Secondary	Photographer
E54	40	M	Diploma	Teacher
E55	31	F	Secondary	Household maid
E56	22	F	Primary	Tailor
E57	52	M	Diploma	Motorcycle taxi rider
E58	39	F	Secondary	Household maid
E59	50	F	Secondary	Hair cutter
E60	32	M	Secondary	Hair cutter
E61	38	F		Student
E62	43	F	MD	NGO Official
E63	30	F		Student
E64	25	M	BA	Secretary
E65	35	F	BA	Administrator
E66	48	M	BA	Administrator
E67	35	M	BA	Logistician
E68	65	F	Secondary	Coordinator
E69	60	M	Diploma	Teacher
E70	62	M	BA	No profession
E71	33	F	None	Household maid
E72	45	M	None	Cultivator
E73	42	F	None	Cultivator
E74	19	M		Student
E75	55	M	None	Cultivator
E76	22	F	None	Cultivator
E77	27	M	Primary	Cultivator
E78	43	F	Secondary	Soldier
E79	35	M	Primary	Motorcycle taxi rider
E80	57	M	Secondary	Builder

3 RESULTS

3.1 RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE REASONS FOR USING COSMETIC SKIN DEPIGMENTATION PRODUCTS

The people interviewed said that the main reasons why they use skin-lightening cosmetics are varied. According to their testimonies, these reasons include the desire to improve their appearance and obtain a clearer complexion, the influence of the media and those around them, as well as therapeutic objectives to treat skin imperfections.

Beauty and Clear Skin

Respondents indicated that their main motivation for using these products is to improve their appearance and achieve clearer skin.

'...I think the main reason is to make yourself beautiful...'. (E3, interview).

'...it's to seek beauty in order to attract partners that people use skin-lightening cosmetic products...'. (E7, interview).

'...we use these products to be more beautiful than others...'. (E28, interview).

Influence of media advertising and friends and family

Other respondents attributed the use of these products to the influence of advertising and the people around them.

'...it's the effect of the influence of media advertising for cosmetic products...'. (E11, interview).

'...there are men and women who ask their partners to use the same product as them...'. (E21, interview).

Therapeutic purpose of removing skin imperfections

Lightening products are also used for therapeutic purposes, mainly to treat pimples.

'...to get rid of pimples under various influences...'. (E31, interview).

'...it's to get rid of spots or pimples that we use these different cosmetic products...'. (E29, interview).

3.2 RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE MOST COMMONLY USED COSMETIC PRODUCTS

When it came to the most commonly used cosmetic products, a variety of opinions were mentioned. They mentioned several types of product, such as cream milks or lotions, tubes, glycerines, serums, injectable products, tablets and soaps.

Cream or lotion milks

Some respondents have indicated that cream milks are among the most frequently used products.

'...cream or lotion milk: Rapide claire, Teint-claire, Extra-clair and Top clair...'. (E19, interview).

'...the products most often used are tubes, glycerines and serums...'. (E77, interview).

'...I think the products they use are Carolight, Bio-plus, Bio-Claire, Coco White...'. (E40, interview).

Injectable products

Other respondents felt that injectable products were the most widely used.

'...the most commonly used are injectables...'. (E13, interview).

'...some people use injectable skin lightening cosmetics...'. (E43, interview).

Tablets

Other groups of respondents noted that tablets are also commonly used to lighten the skin.

'...other users even use tablets to make their skin lighter...'. (E25, interview). (E25, interview).

'...cosmetic tablets are also used to lighten the skin...'. (E63, interview).

Soaps

Finally, respondents cited soaps as the cosmetic products most commonly used for depigmentation.

'...Rico, Jaribu and Mekako soaps are the most commonly used for skin depigmentation...' (E61, interview).

'...the most commonly used soaps are Carolight, Teint-clair and Extra-clair for skin depigmentation...' (E48, interview).

3.3 PERCEPTION OF GENDER IN THE USE OF COSMETIC SKIN DEPIGMENTATION PRODUCTS

Respondents' perceptions of the use of cosmetic depigmentation products reveal two distinct perspectives on gender distribution. While some felt that use was equitable between men and women, others noted a predominance of women.

Gender inequality

According to respondents, women use these products more to improve their appearance and attract partners.

'...it's women who use skin depigmentation products more to make themselves beautiful and attract men...' (E71, interview).

'...more girls and women use these cosmetic skin depigmentation products...' (E40, interview).

3.4 RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE RISKS OF USING COSMETIC SKIN DEPIGMENTATION PRODUCTS

Respondents shared their perceptions of the risks associated with the use of cosmetic skin depigmentation products, highlighting various potential negative effects.

Skin diseases and cancer

Respondents mentioned that the main risk associated with the use of depigmentation products is skin cancer.

'The biggest risk of using cosmetic products is skin cancer' (E59, interview).

'... serious skin diseases, such as cancer, are major dangers associated with these products' (E37, interview).

'...skin cancer is of particular concern in the context of the use of these products' (E40, interview).

Surgical complications and non-healing wounds

Respondents raised the risks associated with surgical complications and unhealable wounds as complications.

'...complication during surgery is a major risk for users of cosmetic depigmentation products' (E62, interview).

'...Wounds resulting from injuries or accidents can become incurable...' (E33, interview).

Unpleasant body odour and heat sensitivity

Another group of respondents reported that depigmentation products can lead to unpleasant body odour and increased sensitivity to heat.

'...users have nauseating body odour' (E55, interview)

'...the products make users sensitive to heat' (E43, interview). It was also noted that these products can make the skin very fragile (E57, interview).

Depigmentation and multi-colouring of the skin

Finally, some participants expressed concerns about the destruction of melanin, premature ageing of the skin and the formation of uneven colours on the skin. Some respondents pointed out that:

'... cosmetic products destroy melanin, making the skin multicoloured' (E15, interview)

'...the ageing of the skin during and after use' is also a worrying problem (E60, interview).

3.5 RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE MEANS PUT IN PLACE TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY VOLUNTARY SKIN DEPIGMENTATION

Respondents' opinions on ways to resolve the problems associated with voluntary skin depigmentation were varied. The solutions proposed included raising awareness, commercial regulation, formal prohibition and personal awareness.

Raising awareness

They stressed the importance of mass awareness-raising to tackle the problems associated with depigmentation.

‘...mass awareness is necessary to discourage users’ (E19, interview).

They also mentioned that it would be beneficial to carry out door-to-door awareness campaigns to inform the population of the consequences of using these products.

‘...to help the community, we need to go household by household to make people aware of the consequences of using these products’ (E23, interview).

‘Door-to-door awareness-raising is important to discourage the practice of skin depigmentation’ (E51, interview).

Commercial regulations

Among those interviewed, there were those who suggested introducing strict regulations concerning the marketing of depigmentation products.

‘...the authorised services must regulate the marketing of these skin-lightening cosmetic products’ (E52, interview).

In addition, they noted that ‘... regulating the marketing of cosmetic products will reduce the risks’ (E28, interview).

Formal ban on marketing and manufacturing

A formal ban on the manufacture, import, distribution and sale of these products was also mentioned.

‘it is preferable to ban the trade in skin-lightening cosmetics’ (E62, interview).

‘...a formal ban on the manufacture, import, distribution or sale and use of cosmetic products is the best solution’ (E80, interview).

Personal awareness

Finally, a group of respondents suggested that personal awareness could be an effective solution to the problems associated with depigmentation.

‘...make a personal decision to abandon the practice of using cosmetic products’ (E66, interview).

‘Personal awareness is an important solution to the use of cosmetics’ (E71, interview).

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 RESPONDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE REASONS FOR USING COSMETIC SKIN DEPIGMENTATION PRODUCTS

This study reveals that the motivations behind the use of depigmenting products in Bunia revolve around the following main motivations: aesthetic considerations, socio-cultural influences and therapeutic objectives.

On the one hand, these results corroborate the research findings of Akinmoladun et al (2021), who highlight the desire for a more attractive appearance and a clearer complexion as a central motivation. Individuals use these products to meet aesthetic standards that are often perceived as ideal in their culture or community. Younis et al (2020) point out that beauty standards shaped by society play a significant role in purchasing behaviour. These norms promote a lighter complexion as a symbol of beauty, thus influencing consumer decisions. For Smith (2018), the quest for beauty is closely linked to personal self-perception. Individuals seek to improve their appearance to increase their self-esteem and meet social and personal expectations.

On the other hand, media campaigns and social influences appear to be determining factors in the decision to use depigmentation products. According to Miller et al. (2019), the media and cultural trends reinforce these beauty standards, leading individuals to use depigmentation products to conform to these aesthetic ideals. Patel et al (2022) point out that advertising campaigns play a central role in consumer choice, frequently idealising the effects of products, which strongly influences purchasing decisions. In the same context, Johnson et al (2022) highlight the influence of recommendations from friends and family, who reinforce the beauty standards conveyed by the media and thus help to standardise the use of these products. Thus Nguyen et al (2021) assert that advice and testimonials from friends and family can have a more decisive impact on product adoption than advertising itself. Garcia et al (2020) stress the central role of the media in promoting depigmentation products, by creating unrealistic expectations and accentuating the social pressure linked to aesthetic standards.

For their part, Osei et al (2019) confirm that advertising campaigns and media representations contribute to the construction of beauty ideals likely to encourage the increasing use of these products.

In this context, it is reasonable to think that many people use depigmentation products under the influence of advertising, which remains above all a commercial programme. In Bunia, where the population has wide access to numerous local radio stations, television channels, social networks and advertising hoardings, this constant exposure reinforces the impact of media messages on beauty-related behaviour.

However, this media and social influence raises major socio-cultural issues. The promotion of a fair complexion, often associated with social success, beauty or modernity, can lead to a devaluation of natural body identity and contribute to a phenomenon of self-rejection. These imposed standards, conveyed by aggressive marketing strategies, contribute to the reproduction of symbolic inequalities and reinforce stereotypes linked to physical appearance. Furthermore, the widespread use of these products (sometimes to the detriment of health) highlights the urgent need for critical awareness campaigns to promote self-esteem, aesthetic diversity and public health, particularly in highly exposed urban contexts such as Bunia.

Some users also claim to use depigmenting products for therapeutic reasons, particularly to treat skin imperfections. However, these uses are frequently influenced by misleading marketing promises. This is in line with the findings of several researchers, such as Khan et al (2023), who point out that some users use these products to treat specific skin problems, such as pimples or other irregularities, in the hope of also obtaining depigmentation benefits. For their part, Ali et al (2019) confirm that these products are sometimes used to treat pigmentation disorders linked to acne or other dermatological conditions, although this practice involves risks. Lee et al (2021) report that many individuals seek to improve the general appearance of their skin while hoping to benefit from the aesthetic effects associated with these products. Similarly, Wang et al (2022) observe that the quest for skin improvement, combined with aesthetic objectives, motivates the use of these products. Finally, Smith et al (2023) stress that, despite the therapeutic intentions of some users, it is essential to take into account the potential risks associated with the use of depigmenting products.

This analysis shows that the therapeutic use of depigmenting products could be linked to the presence of active agents capable of treating certain skin conditions. However, this motivation is largely amplified by often misleading advertising campaigns, which present these products as miracle solutions, at the risk of causing serious side-effects on health.

4.2 RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE MOST COMMONLY USED COSMETIC PRODUCTS

The results of this research reveal that cream milks and lotions are among the most widely used cosmetic products because of their accessibility, pleasant texture and ease of application. Osei et al (2019) and Nguyen et al (2021) point out that cream milks are particularly popular for their perceived ability to moisturise the skin while brightening it. Younis et al (2020) stress the economical nature of these products, which can be easily integrated into skincare routines. Garcia et al (2020) and Miller et al (2019) point out that their affordability and widespread availability explain their growing popularity, especially in high-demand urban contexts. Thus, the predominance of cream milks and lotions on the markets, combined with their affordability, favors their widespread adoption among the population.

Injectable products, such as skin whitening injections, are also making significant inroads, although they raise significant health concerns. Johnson et al (2021) note that these products are attractive because of the rapid results they promise, although the risks of medical complications are significant. Patel et al (2022) and Smith et al (2023) warn of the serious side effects associated with these practices, highlighting the lack of safety and insufficient supervision. Chen et al (2021) and Nguyen et al (2022) stress the need for greater vigilance regarding their use. It appears that the use of these products is often perceived as a rapid and prestigious method, popularized by certain socio-economic models and associated with high social status. Their high cost does not curb their use by certain individuals, particularly those with greater purchasing power and access to (sometimes incomplete) information on these products.

Depigmenting tablets are popular because they are easy to use and non-invasive. Garcia et al (2020) and Lee et al (2021) indicate that these products are often preferred due to their simplicity of administration. However, their efficacy and long-term safety remain controversial. Osei et al (2019), Khan et al (2023) and Wang et al (2022) highlight ongoing concerns about potential side effects, calling for more rigorous evaluation. It seems that their use is motivated by a desire for convenience, combined with a relatively affordable cost and a perception of efficacy subject to regulated use.

Finally, depigmenting soaps represent another widespread category, due to their low cost and accessibility. Nguyen et al. (2021) and Miller et al. (2019) note that they are commonly used despite their performance being considered inferior to that of other methods. Chen et al. (2021), Ali et al. (2019) and Lee et al. (2021) cite their simplicity of use and easy integration into daily routines, which explains their widespread adoption. Their low cost and wide availability make them a preferred option, particularly for low-income consumers.

An analysis of respondents' perceptions of the cosmetics products reveals a marked trend towards choices dictated by both dictated by both socio-economic factors and the influence of family and friends. However, this choice seems to be guided more by social representations and aesthetic pressures, rather than any real knowledge of the risks associated with these products. While topical products (milks, lotions, soaps) are favored for their accessibility, their prolonged use can often be underestimated or unknown to users. Similarly, the growing popularity of injectable and tablets and tablets, despite their high cost and proven health risks, testifies to the quest for rapid results, to the detriment of health. This dynamic illustrates a glaring lack of information about the dangers of depigmentation, but also the absence of strict regulation on the local cosmetics market.

A policy of awareness-raising, accompanied by rigorous control of the marketing of these products, is therefore necessary to protect consumers, especially the most vulnerable, from the harmful effects of such practices.

4.3 RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTION OF GENDER IN THE USE OF COSMETIC SKIN DEPIGMENTATION PRODUCTS

Data collected revealed that it is more women who are the users of cosmetic depigmentation products, mainly due to societal beauty norms that value a lighter complexion. From the same angle, Hassan et al. (2022) explain that women are more frequently targeted by depigmenting products, due to the social pressure exerted by beauty ideals associated with fair skin. Smith et al (2023) confirm that these aesthetic standards affect women more intensely, prompting them to use these products to conform to social expectations. Similarly, Patel et al. (2022) point out that social representations of beauty influence women more, reinforcing their recourse to depigmentation. Miller et al. (2019) note that advertising campaigns are often aimed at women, increasing their exposure to these products. Nguyen et al. (2022) point out that women tend to follow media trends more actively, making them more inclined to adopt lightening products.

In the local context of Bunia, this trend is also observed. Respondents believe that women pay particular attention to their physical appearance, especially skin color, which would explain their greater involvement in the use of cosmetics. The use of depigmentation products also appears to be more marked among young women and teenagers. Ali et al. (2019) indicate that this category is particularly influenced by market trends and beauty ideals disseminated in the media. Osei et al. (2019) and Wang et al. (2022) confirm that young women represent the largest share of users, due to their vulnerability to social and media pressures. Lee et al. (2021) emphasize the sensitivity of young girls to these influences, while Chen et al. (2021) point out that the pressure to conform is even more intense among adolescent girls, reinforcing their use of depigmenting products.

Analysis of the link between gender and the use of depigmentation products reveals a wider social issue linked to cultural constructions of beauty. The fact that women, particularly young women, are the main users of these products bears witness to a value system in which physical appearance and attractiveness are strongly associated with social and personal success. This reality exposes women to practices that are potentially harmful to their health, while perpetuating gender stereotypes. The use of these products is not just an individual choice, but the result of internalized social pressure. There is an urgent need to deconstruct these aesthetic norms, through educational programs, inclusive awareness campaigns and better regulation of cosmetics marketing. A critical approach to the question of gender in depigmentation thus provides a better understanding of the structural inequalities underlying these practices.

4.4 RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH THE USE OF COSMETIC SKIN DEPIGMENTATION PRODUCTS

The use of depigmentation products is perceived by respondents as involving numerous risks, including skin diseases, some of which are serious, such as cancer. Several studies confirm these concerns (Miller et al. 2020, Chen et al. 2021, Johnson et al. 2022, Nguyen et al. 2021, Wang et al. 2022). That is why Wang et al (2022) insist on increased surveillance.

In an urban context such as Bunia, respondents appear to be relatively well informed about these dangers, thanks to the regular dissemination of health messages via the local media. To this can be added personal experience and clinical observations shared within the population. Surgical complications and wound healing disorders are also frequently mentioned as risks. Smith et al (2023) indicate that these complications can be aggravated by skin that has been weakened by depigmentation. Nguyen et al. (2022) and Miller et al. (2019) point out that lesions heal more poorly in regular users of these products. Chen et al. (2021) and Osei et al. (2019) confirm the frequency of complaints about poor healing, reflecting a weakening of skin structure.

In addition, several side effects such as unpleasant body odor and increased sensitivity to heat are also reported by respondents. Nguyen et al. (2022), Smith et al. (2023) and Garcia et al. (2020) note that these effects are detrimental to user comfort. Chen et al. (2021) point out that thermal hypersensitivity can increase the risk of irritation or burns. Osei et al. (2019) indicate that these effects are frequent and deserve special attention in product formulation. According to the respondents,

these reactions may be due to excessive destruction of the skin's protective layers, making it vulnerable to sweating and infection.

Another risk mentioned concerns pigmentary disorders, notably irregular skin discoloration. Khan et al (2021) report that users often experience uneven patches or areas of depigmentation. Nguyen et al. (2022) and Smith et al. (2023) mention that these alterations can lead to premature aging of the skin. Osei et al. (2019) and Chen et al. (2021) indicate that melanin destruction is at the root of these adverse effects, which sometimes require costly corrective treatments. Respondents believe that these results depend on several factors, including the natural resistance of certain skin areas, the intensity of sun exposure and the chemical composition of the product used.

Perception of the risks associated with cosmetic depigmentation shows a growing awareness among users. However, despite this knowledge of the dangers, use remains widespread, reflecting a contradiction between information and behavior. This underlines the powerful influence of social standards of beauty, which often outweigh health considerations. The associated risks are not only medical, but also social, psychological and economic. An effective response cannot be limited to raising awareness: it must include strict product regulation, self-esteem education, and a collective commitment to deconstructing the stereotypes that drive depigmentation. Without this, individuals will continue to expose themselves to dangerous practices despite their awareness of the risks.

4.5 RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE MEANS PUT IN PLACE TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY VOLUNTARY SKIN DEPIGMENTATION

This study identified several approaches proposed or implemented to mitigate the harmful effects associated with the use of depigmentation products. Among these, four main categories emerged: awareness-raising, commercial regulation, formal prohibition and personal awareness.

Awareness-raising is widely recognized by respondents as a fundamental lever in the fight against depigmentation. Wang et al. (2022) and Miller et al. (2019) emphasize that information campaigns help educate the population about the risks involved. Johnson et al. (2021) stress the importance of educational initiatives to encourage safer behavior. Lee et al. (2021) and Nguyen et al. (2022) confirm the crucial role of awareness-raising in preventing adverse dermatological effects. In the local context, the authors believe that the population may be poorly informed or insufficiently aware of the risks of these products.

The need for more rigorous regulation of the cosmetics market is widely supported in the literature. Johnson et al. (2021) and Nguyen et al. (2022) argue for strict legal oversight to limit access to harmful products. Chen et al. (2021), Miller et al. (2019) and Osei et al. (2019) argue that clear standards on manufacture, import and sale can limit abuse. Investigators believe that the absence of a legal framework encourages the uncontrolled proliferation of dangerous products on the local market.

Several authors, including Osei et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2022), advocate outright bans to eradicate risky products. Nguyen et al. (2021), Chen et al. (2021) and Smith et al. (2023) argue that this approach would be effective in protecting public health. However, local researchers note that, despite an official decree banning these products in the DRC, this measure remains unenforced, which they interpret as a form of disobedience or sabotage by part of the population.

Finally, raising individual awareness is seen as complementary to institutional action. Lee et al. (2023) and Wang et al. (2022) highlight the importance of individual empowerment. Miller et al. (2019), Nguyen et al. (2022) and Johnson et al. (2021) believe that self-education makes it possible to limit risks by making wiser choices. The investigators believe that this awareness is essential to initiate a lasting change in mentality.

While the means identified are relevant and well supported by the literature, their effectiveness largely depends on how they are articulated and implemented. Awareness-raising alone is insufficient if it is not backed up by rigorous public policies and effective repression of offenders. Formal bans, though theoretically dissuasive, remain ineffective in the absence of control and sanction mechanisms. Regulations must be backed up by strong political will and multi-sectoral coordination. Moreover, individual awareness, while indispensable, presupposes access to clear information adapted to the socio-cultural context. The persistence of depigmentation in towns like Bunia shows that current solutions lack synergy. It is therefore urgent to adopt an integrated approach combining education, regulation, access to safe products and collective responsibility.

5 STUDY LIMITATIONS

This research is limited to an urban environment (Bunia), excluding rural dynamics. A triangulation of sites would have enriched the comparative analysis. Moreover, the qualitative methodology, while relevant for exploring perceptions, does not allow us to extrapolate the results.

6 CONCLUSION

This study carried out in Bunia highlights the complex motivations behind the use of depigmenting products, mainly influenced by beauty standards that value fair skin, reinforced by the media and friends and family. The most popular products (milks, soaps, tablets and injections) are chosen for their accessibility or supposed efficacy, despite their known health risks (cancers, skin disorders). The high prevalence among women, especially young women, reveals deep-rooted social pressures.

This calls for a multi-disciplinary approach that includes raising awareness through contextual media and community campaigns, strengthening regulation through strict product controls and the introduction of safety labels, and rigorously enforcing existing bans on hazardous substances.

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