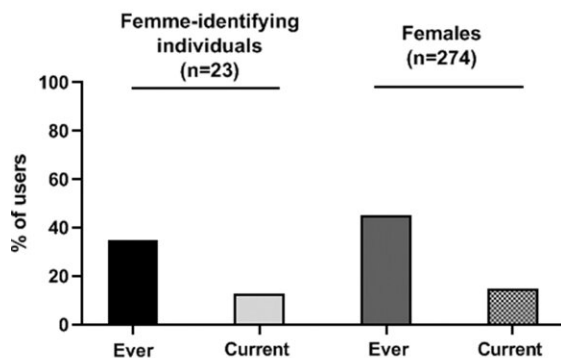


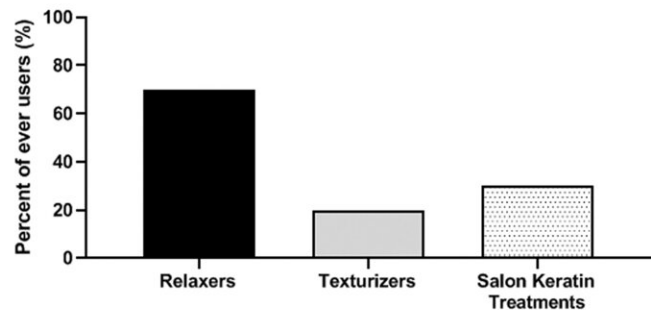
# How racialized beauty norms motivate the use of toxic beauty products among women of color

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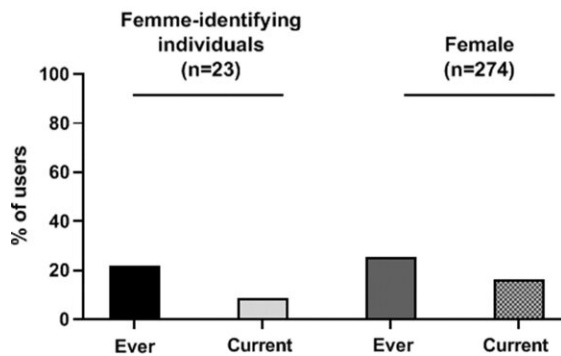
**a** Chemical straightener use



**b** Types of chemical straighteners used by ever users



**c** Skin lightener use



**d** Types of skin lighteners used by ever users



Chemical straightener (a) and skin lightener (c) use for respondents by gender identity defined as female or non-binary, gender queer, gender non-conforming, or femme-identifying [femme-identifying]. Types of products used across all respondents who have ever used chemical straighteners (b) or skin lighteners (d). Respondents could choose more than one product type. Respondents who

responded as “unsure” about product use or did not respond to the question are not shown. Credit: *Environmental Justice* (2023). DOI: 10.1089/env.2022.0053

A new study sheds light on racialized beauty norms that motivate the use of chemical hair straighteners and skin lighteners linked to poor health outcomes. Among survey respondents, beauty was the leading reason for using both chemical straighteners and skin lighteners. Evidence suggests chemical straightener use has declined among Black women, in line with the rise of the natural hair movement, while skin lightener use by Asian woman remains steady, the study also finds.

Data analysis was led by researchers at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health in close partnership with [environmental justice](#) group WE ACT for Environmental Justice, which also led the design and execution of the study. Findings are published in the journal *Environmental Justice*.

Historically, [chemical](#) straighteners and [skin](#) lighteners are disproportionately used by women of color, as a result of racialized [beauty](#) norms that prioritize straight hair and [light skin](#).

The disproportionate burden of toxic chemicals from beauty products among women of color is an environmental injustice of beauty since intersectional systems of oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, classism) influence Eurocentric beauty norms (e.g., societal preferences for light skin and straight hair) and racialized beauty practices, all of which can have long term consequences on the health and well-being of marginalized populations.

Chemical straighteners, such as relaxers, can contain harmful chemicals such as phthalates, parabens, and formaldehyde. Studies have linked

relaxer use with earlier age at menarche and increased risk of uterine fibroids and breast and uterine cancers. Skin lighteners can contain corticosteroids, which can disrupt cortisol regulation and lead to metabolic problems, and mercury, which can cause kidney and nervous system damage.

The researchers surveyed 297 women and femme-identifying individuals in Northern Manhattan and the South Bronx through the WE ACT Beauty Inside Out campaign.

## **Chemical straighteners**

Forty-four percent of female respondents reported ever using chemical straighteners and 34 percent of femme-identifying respondents reported ever using them. Current use of products was lower at 15 percent and 13 percent for female and femme-identifying respondents, respectively.

Black respondents were most likely to use chemical straighteners. Among non-Hispanic Black respondents, 60 percent reported ever use and 19 percent reported current use. Among Hispanic Black respondents, 48 percent reported ever use and 24 percent reported current use.

Half of all respondents said they think others believe straight hair makes women more beautiful, while only 36 percent of respondents said they personally felt this way. The researchers found similar results when respondents were asked about whether straight hair makes women look younger, wealthier, or more professional. Respondents who thought that others believe that straight hair makes women look wealthier or more professional were more likely to use chemical straighteners in their lifetimes than women who did not have these beliefs.

## **Skin lighteners**

Twenty-five percent of female respondents reported ever using skin lighteners and 22 percent of femme-identifying respondents reported ever using them. Current use was lower at 16 percent and 9 percent for female and femme-identifying respondents, respectively.

Asian respondents reported the highest frequency of skin lightener use, with 57 percent ever and current use. Skin lightener use among Asian and Hispanic respondents was higher for respondents born in other countries versus the U.S.

Similar to the findings for straight hair, half of respondents said others find light skin more beautiful, while only 33 percent of respondents reported personally feeling this way. They found similar results when respondents were asked about lighter skin making women look younger, wealthier, or more professional. Respondents who thought others believe that lighter skin makes women look more beautiful or younger were more likely to currently use skin lighteners than women who did not have these beliefs.

## **Conclusion**

"We found evidence that racialized beauty norms that are shaped by historical and present-day racism and sexism continue to determine the use of these products," says study first author Lariah Edwards, Ph.D., associate research scientist in the Department of Environmental Health Sciences at Columbia Mailman. "Respondents' perceptions that others believe straight hair and/or lighter skin confer benefits were associated with greater product use."

While the evidence suggests a decline in the use of chemical

straighteners by Black women as women opt for hairstyles that feature their natural hair texture, the researchers caution that there is a lack of data on the chemical content of hair products sold to style natural hairstyles. Researchers say the lack of a similar decline in the use of skin lighteners is facilitated by gaps in the regulations of the products that make them easily available to buy online.

"Programs and policies are needed to counteract natural hair discrimination and colorism and transform the markets that depend on racist beauty norms. Educating consumers about racialized beauty norms could motivate them to advocate for legislation, such as the Safer Beauty Bill package, which ensures safer products for all," says co-senior author Ami Zota, Ph.D., associate professor of environmental health sciences at Columbia Mailman School.

"WE ACT is dedicated to using this data to advancing policy at all levels of government, understanding that the health and quality of life of [women](#) of color and femme-identifying folk is of the upmost importance. These Euro-centric standards of [hair](#) care, and toxic chemicals in [beauty products](#) are endangering the lives of people that we know and love, and change must happen immediately," says co-senior author Beaumont Morton, Director of Environmental Health and Education at WE ACT for Environmental Justice.

**More information:** Lariah Edwards et al, Beauty Inside Out: Examining Beauty Product Use Among Diverse Women and Femme-Identifying Individuals in Northern Manhattan and South Bronx Through an Environmental Justice Framework, *Environmental Justice* (2023).  
[DOI: 10.1089/env.2022.0053](https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2022.0053)

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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