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Original article

A qualitative study of the decision to engage in tanning behaviors among female college students[☆]



L'utilisation des lampes UV chez les étudiantes : une étude qualitative des processus décisionnels

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Indoor tanning is associated with increased risk of melanoma and is particularly prevalent among female college students in the U.S.

Objectives. – The present study aimed to explore why female students decide to engage, and keep engaging in indoor tanning.

Methods. – We included eighteen female undergraduates who participated in group discussions. The group discussions were recorded and transcribed, then they were organized into themes.

Results. – Three main themes appeared: appearance reasons for tanning, tanning-related health risks, and tanning salon-marketing strategies. Students were overall informed regarding tanning-related health risks, and suggested that they justified their tanning behaviors by rationalizations. They also revealed that the marketing strategies employed by tanning salons made them more likely to tan frequently. Finally, students spoke about how the health risks, the affects on appearance, and leaving the college setting might lead them to stop tanning.

Conclusions. – These findings suggest that tanning among students could be reduced both by engaging students in programs addressing rationalizations about the risks associated with tanning, and policies targeting marketing techniques and tanning salon locations.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – L'utilisation des lampes UV – particulièrement fréquente chez les étudiantes – est un important facteur de risques de développement de mélanomes.

Objectif. – Notre étude avait pour but d'explorer les raisons pour lesquelles les étudiantes décident d'initier et de poursuivre l'utilisation des lampes UV.

Méthode. – Nous avons recruté 18 étudiantes de licence qui ont participé à des entretiens en groupe ou individuels. Les entretiens ont été enregistrés, retranscrits, puis analysés pour en extraire les thèmes fréquents.

Résultats. – Trois thèmes ont émergé : les motivations liées à l'apparence, les risques de santé liés à l'utilisation des lampes UV, et les stratégies de marketing. Les étudiantes se montraient bien informées des risques de santé, et semblaient justifier leur utilisation des lampes UV à l'aide de rationalisations.

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Les participantes ont aussi évoqué comment les techniques de ventes et les promotions faites par l'industrie concernée les poussaient à utiliser les lampes UV plus fréquemment. Enfin, les participantes ont évoqué les risques de santé, le vieillissement de la peau, et la transition hors du contexte universitaire comme des facteurs pouvant les inciter à cesser leur utilisation des lampes UV.

Conclusions. – Ces résultats suggèrent qu'une prévention auprès des étudiantes ciblant les rationalisations, ainsi que la réglementation des techniques de vente et de l'emplacement des boutiques pourraient réduire l'utilisation des lampes UV au sein de cette population.

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Indoor ultraviolet light tanning is particularly widespread among female college students in the U.S., with over 50% of female students reporting previous tanning bed use, thus displaying higher rates than their male counterparts (Poorsattar & Hornung, 2007; Wehner et al., 2014). This is particularly troubling as it is associated with a number of health risks, including increased risk of melanoma, the most serious form of skin cancer (Boniol, Autier, Boyle, & Gandini, 2012; Day, Wilson, Hutchinson, & Roberts, 2014; Ting, Schultz, Cac, Peterson, & Walling, 2007). Young women under the age of 25 who engage in indoor tanning have been shown to be over 60% more likely to develop skin cancers such as basal or squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma compared to those who have never engaged in the behavior (Ting et al., 2007). While in some countries tanning has been shown to vary according to demographic factors such as socioeconomic status (Køster, Thorgaard, Clemmensen, & Philip, 2009), in the U.S. it is highly prevalent among women under the age of 30 in college or who have attained a college degree, and particularly in the North of the country (Heckman, Coups, & Manne, 2008).

Appearance considerations have been identified as the main motivation for students to engage in indoor tanning (Bagdasarov, Banerjee, Greene, & Campo, 2008; Cafri, Thompson, Jacobsen, & Hillhouse, 2009), and, somewhat surprisingly, it has been suggested that the health risks may be well known among this group (Day et al., 2014; Knight, Kirincich, Farmer, & Hood, 2002). The high prevalence of indoor tanning for appearance reasons has been documented in female college students, but it is less well understood why rates are particularly high among this population. The aim of the present study was therefore to explore the motivations and decision-making processes related to indoor tanning among female college students.

In Western societies, a heavy emphasis is placed on physical appearance, and sociocultural agents such as the media promote a largely unachievable physical ideal (lean, toned, and tanned for both men and women). During the last decades, this ideal has been increasingly tanned (Banerjee et al., 2008; Duncan, 1994), which may lead to young women engaging in indoor tanning in an attempt to bring their physical appearance closer to the socially defined ideal. More recently, social discourse has also focused on "healthism," that is, the disciplining of the body into a socially defined "healthy body," which is mainly constructed through its appearance rather than its functionality (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009). In line with this, tanned bodies have become a sign of a healthy appearance as well as attractiveness, providing additional incentive to tan (Shoveller, Lovato, Young, & Moffat, 2003). Furthermore, indoor tanning is frequently believed to protect from future sunburn or to help maintain adequate levels of vitamin D (Lazovich, Choi, Rolnick, Jackson, Forster, & Southwell, 2013).

In view of the strong association between indoor tanning and skin cancer risk (Green et al., 2007), much effort has been focused on usefulness of increasing health literacy to deter tanning behaviors. However, little evidence has supported the relationship between increased health literacy and tanning behaviors, suggesting that awareness of health risks may not be strongly associated with the decision to engage or not engage in tanning behaviors (Altsitsiadis

et al., 2012; Poorsattar & Hornung, 2007; Schneider, Zimmermann, Diehl, Breitbart, & Greinert, 2009). Faced with this impasse, some scholars have drawn parallels with the literature surrounding smoking behaviors in youth—a similar risk behavior that has a high incidence in college students—in order to understand the factors which maintain tanning behaviors (Banerjee et al., 2012; Gosis et al., 2013). Using an adaptation of a scale created for assessing cognitive rationalizations among smokers, Banerjee et al. (2012) identified cognitions associated with tanning that were related to skepticism regarding the dangers of indoor tanning, rationalizations that danger is ubiquitous in our society regardless of personal risk taking, and cognitions related to finding the risk-gain balance in favor of tanning despite the risk ("worth-it" cognitions). Similarly, qualitative work with adolescents has suggested that health risks are downplayed or purposefully ignored by youth engaging in indoor tanning so as to justify continued engagement in the behavior (Lake, Thomson, Twelves, & Davies, 2014).

Aspects related to college culture also may emerge as important decision factors. The college years and the transition into early adulthood constitute important developmental periods and a unique socialization experience as it is a time when peer influences may become increasingly important compared to parental influences (Murray & Turner, 2004). As peer influences have been shown to be important in indoor tanning (Bagdasarov et al., 2008; Cafri et al., 2009; Murray & Turner, 2004), this is likely to emerge as an important factor in the decision to engage in indoor tanning among college students. Finally, financial considerations associated with being a student might play a role in tanning behaviors. Price considerations have been suggested to be an important motivator (Beasley and Kittel, 1997) and tanning salons have been shown to respond to this by offering targeted financial incentives such as student discounts and promotions for school functions (Oliphant et al., 1994).

Gaining a better understanding of the factors students consider when deciding whether or not to indoor tan, and the role of factors specific to college environments, is important to the development of successful interventions to decrease the prevalence of tanning in this group. The present study explores the motivations and decision-making processes among female college students reporting to frequently engage in indoor tanning around a college campus. We chose to examine this question through group discussions in order to best understand and more fully explore the experience of these students.

1. Methods

1.1. Participants and procedure

The study design was approved by the Northeastern University institutional review board. Female undergraduates who engaged in indoor tanning in a salon around campus were recruited via advertisements placed around campus and contacted the researcher via email who, after verifying that they fulfilled the criteria for the study provided them with a link for the online survey. Participants were compensated with a \$10 gift card for their time. Potential

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