

---

## Original Article

# “Oh yeah, they’re looking”: A thematic analysis of indoor UV tanning industry advertising and articles

Suzanne M. Prior\*, and Lindsay P. Rafuse

Department of Psychology, St Thomas University, 51 Dineen Drive, Fredericton, NB, Canada E3B 5G3

E-mail: prior@stu.ca

\*Corresponding author.

**Abstract** Skin cancers are becoming more prevalent even though many can be prevented. Women are more knowledgeable than men about skin cancer, yet they are more likely to sunbathe deliberately and to use artificial tanning equipment. The purpose of this article is to examine messages that women receive about the benefits of a tan. Particularly, we focused on how the indoor UV tanning industry represents the value of a tan to women. We subjected five issues of *Smart Tan Canada* to thematic analysis. We examined language in advertisements and articles that promote an artificial tan to women. Four themes emerged: Be Beautiful and Sexy; Look Young; Feel Better; and Science, Health, and Nature. These themes are especially effective in a culture that routinely objectifies women and places a high degree of value on their appearance. We suggest that appearance-based interventions, media literacy training, and legislation could counteract the messages in the themes.

*Journal of Public Health Policy* advance online publication, 3 September 2015;

doi:10.1057/jphp.2015.24

**Keywords:** skin cancer; indoor UV tanning; advertisements; women; ultraviolet radiation; prevention

## Background

Globally, the incidence of skin cancers is increasing among white (light skinned) populations.<sup>1–3</sup> The United States, for example, experienced a 53 per cent increase from 1996 to 2008 in the total number of skin cancer cases treated.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, skin cancer rates rose in Canada. Between 1986 and 2010, the incidence rate of melanoma, the most deadly skin cancer, increased 2 per cent per year for men and 1.5 per cent for women.<sup>5</sup> The increase for women was greater during the last 8 years,

at 2.6 per cent per year.<sup>5</sup> These cancers are largely preventable through sun-protective behaviors or avoidance of ultraviolet (UV)-emitting tanning devices. It has proven to be difficult to convince people to commit to these protective practices, particularly women who tend to be more knowledgeable about skin cancer risks than men, yet are also more likely to sunbathe and to use artificial tanning devices.<sup>6,7</sup>

How can we explain women's persistence in pursuing a tan and a 'disconnect' between their knowledge of skin cancer risks and their deliberate exposure to UV radiation? More women than men believe that a tan enhances their appearance and that it makes them look healthy.<sup>6,8</sup> The quest for beauty outweighs health concerns. A tan satisfies women's appearance motives and is more immediately salient than the more distant prospect of skin cancer.<sup>7-12</sup>

To challenge the tan beauty ideal for women in prevention programs and health policy, we must understand how it is constructed; how the benefits of a tan are portrayed. So armed, health program developers and policymakers can address and counteract these messages. The indoor UV tanning industry is a major source of such information. In 2012, it generated revenue of more than US\$4.9 billion in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Indoor UV tanning accounted for 58.7 per cent of this revenue.<sup>13</sup> Analysis of their advertisements and how they represent the benefits of a tan to the public may help inform prevention programs and health policy.

We analyzed advertisements and articles in an online magazine called *Smart Tan Canada*, published by the International Smart Tan Network, Inc., a membership organization and lobbying group that has served indoor tanning retailers since 1996. Its 3000 members represent about 6000 tanning businesses ([www.facebook.com/SmartTan](http://www.facebook.com/SmartTan)). Another magazine, *Smart Tan*, is directed at the US market. Although designed for artificial tanning businesses, *Smart Tan Canada* is available free online. Its information is also available through popular social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter.

The magazine offers educational material for those who work in the industry and publishes numerous advertisements. Because *Smart Tan Canada* contains advertisements as well as information about how to build and maintain a profitable business, it constitutes a window into how the industry represents artificial tanning to potential consumers. To our knowledge, no such analysis has been conducted to date.

## Methods

*Smart Tan Canada* is published five times a year ([SmartTanCanadaCanada.epubxp.com/title/10841](http://SmartTanCanadaCanada.epubxp.com/title/10841)). We subjected all online issues from 2012 to a thematic analysis using Braun and Clark’s methodology<sup>14</sup> – a widely used qualitative research approach that involves six phases of analysis: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the report.<sup>14</sup> We examined language in the advertisements and articles that promote an artificial tan through UV-emitting equipment, as well as for products that enhance a tan achieved through these devices, such as *bronzers* that are intended to get better results from tanning and to prolong the tan. We did not analyze material that pertained solely to spray on tans or were directed specifically at men.

Each author read and reread the five issues. Through a process of constant comparison and discussion,<sup>15</sup> 17 initial codes were generated and then combined into four overarching themes.

## Results

### Be beautiful and sexy

The first theme encompasses messages that suggest that a tan will bring appearance benefits. Many statements equate beauty and a tan. Adjectives and adverbs highlight and strengthen various words representing beauty:

- All three of these amazing lotions serve a different function for every individual, but each product will make your skin look and feel startlingly beautiful. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- Don’t hide that bronze hue! Show off just how breathtakingly beautiful your skin can be with So Naughty Nude by Devoted Creations. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- AquaCool releases a fine water mist for a cooling sensation while the high-pressure lamps ensure gorgeous colour in a short time. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 3, 2012)

A tan is also promoted as a means to achieve a thin, toned, or athletic appearance, which is also equated with beauty:

- And you can only get that drop dead gorgeous shape by using VIP at the Mansion by Playboy. Your photo-ready bod will bring a shower of coveted attention and a plethora of glamorous admirers. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 3, 2012)
- Get the tan of an Olympian with Iced Bronze Couture Sport by Devoted Creations. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 4, 2012)
- Skinny Couture. Envision it ... Be it! Ultimate bronzing formula with the most advanced skinny ingredients. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 1, 2012)

In addition, a tan is characterized as helping women feel sexy and objects of sexual desire. A tan leads to feelings of sexual vitality and yearning as a byproduct of appearance benefits:

- Deeply penetrating, highly stimulating, ecstatic action, climactic reaction: That's What She Said! Who knew it could be this good? (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- For some people, sexy just comes naturally. If that sounds like you, then Primal Instinct from Australian Gold is your perfect bronzer. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)
- Spray on your sexy, natural glow effortlessly with this potent 30X bronzer, featuring a succulent light melon fragrance. Smoothing silicones and vitamin D deliver sensual softness to complement your elegant tan. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)

Claims that women will be noticed for their tan accompany statements about the beauty benefits of a tan. Much of the admiration is sexual:

- Oh yeah, they're looking. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 3, 2012)
- Instant bronzers create a sexy golden glow that admirers will find irresistible. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 3, 2012)
- DHA clear bronzers add more oomph for a deeper tan; so deep, in fact, the centerfolds will be asking for your secret. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)

## Look young

The second prominent theme is that a tan leads to a youthful appearance. Tanning is promoted as a 'fountain of youth' that holds off aging.

Statements equate a tan with youth. The industry asserts that tanning can lead to younger-looking skin by reducing the appearance of wrinkles and other signs of aging:

- Matrixyl 3000 works to reduce wrinkles and signs of aging while dF complex further enhances tanning. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)
- Compared to a conventional R160W lamp, the Bronzing Sun HPK90 features more UVA1 to maximize pigment darkening and less UVA2, which can cause wrinkles. This combination makes it the perfect lamp for a dark, youthful tan. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)
- Not only does this product give you an astonishing tan, it also contains anti-aging and firming agents to keep skin looking young and vibrant. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- Get dark and youthful skin with the un-bee-lievable power of honey. Introducing Honey Face Facts by Swedish Beauty. Antioxidants keep skin smooth and nourished while it tells wrinkles to buzz off! (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 1, 2012)

### Feel better

This theme encompasses messages that a tan makes women feel better and is therefore a tool of self-care. Tanning brings not only a sense of physical well-being, but also feelings of self-worth. Physical well-being is reflected in statements that portray tanning as relaxing. Relaxation, in turn, is characterized as leading to positive affect and self-esteem:

- I started tanning because I wasn’t able to get any sunlight. It was very relaxing and it made me feel good. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- Invigorate your mind and rejuvenate your skin with Hot Mess from Devoted Creations. This replenishing ultra bronzer contains caffeine and matrixyl for an extra boost of energy. Its ultra-bronzing blend and anti-reddening formula ensure that your beautiful tan will put you in a better state of mind! (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)
- You make people look and feel great. We ask customers about their experience when they leave, and everyone is in a great mood. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 1, 2012)

This theme is also reflected in statements about feeling like a celebrity, or feeling like someone who is admired and envied by others. A tan helps

women to be noticed and appreciated; such admiration makes them feel better about themselves and their lives:

- Roll out the red carpet, it's your turn to be the hit of the party! The champagne is flowing, the party is going wild and you're in your element with all eyes on you. Watching your next move as you strut around. The Mansion with your drop dead, gorgeous colour. You know your life is better than most peoples' (sic) vacations, yet you look so calm and cool. You belong and it shows! (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- Dreams of the lifestyles of the rich and the famous come true with CoCo de Ville by Designer Skin. Admirers won't just be drooling over your colour, but from the Crushed Pineapple and Coconut fragrance that will fill minds with champagne wishes and coconut dreams. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 3, 2012)
- Embrace your inner celebrity with Social Status dark tanning VIP bronzer from Supre Tan. Social Status' exclusive PureDark tanning technology will have you looking red-carpet ready in no time! Chromatic colour extenders help prevent colour fading and prolong the life of your tan, ensuring that your sophisticated colour will last much longer than 15 minutes of fame. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)

### Science, health, and nature

The final theme reflects messages that UV exposure is safe, natural, and healthy; moreover, that such claims are supported by science. Little distinction is made between UV exposure from the sun and from artificial sources because the latter are by definition not natural:

- The New Scientific Truth: UV-induced vitamin D is the only natural solution. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)
- Tanned skin is natural and intended, say dermatology spokespeople, who also point out that tans are natural sunburn prevention, that melanin is in fact an antioxidant, that humans need UV to make vitamin D naturally and that sun avoidance is unnatural and has always been prompted by society rather than biology: Humans are naturally attracted to the sun. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 1, 2012)
- Maintaining natural vitamin D levels – physiologically consistent with getting regular sun exposure – could keep thousands of women a year

from lying on that kind of bloody radiation therapy table because research has firmly established that vitamin D prevents breast cancer. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 3, 2012)

While touting the benefits of vitamin D acquisition from UV exposure, the industry simultaneously downplays or disputes research concerning UV radiation’s carcinogenicity. Scientific argumentation is deployed and medical professionals and researchers are cited who claim that tanning is healthy:

- In December, noted Norwegian researcher Dr Johan Moan reviewed 30 years of research to conclude that the benefits of regular tanning – most notably improved vitamin D levels – far outweighed the risk of skin cancer. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- A few short weeks ago, a study confirmed that the supposed epidemic of malignant melanoma wasn’t real at all. The study by Dr Earl Glusac from Yale University strengthened previous studies that the reported increase in incidence was really caused by more aggressive diagnosis. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- And the grand daddy of them all came in early January on ‘The Dr Oz Show’ when renowned health guru Dr Joseph Mercola revealed the health benefits of indoor tanning on national television, explaining the benefits of UVB exposure for vitamin D production. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)

The industry questions the research by groups like the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). They suggest that research by cancer prevention groups is suspect because of funding by Big Pharma, which has a vested interest in claims of carcinogenicity because they produce cancer treatment drugs:

In July – almost to the day the IARC Report came out in 2009 – a Big Pharma-funded institute called International Prevention Research Institute did a rehash on the IARC Report, adding eight more studies. They still were hiding the fact that the research included home, commercial, and medical units. What they don’t want the government to know is that professional salons had a statistically insignificant increase in risk, especially when you remove Skin Type 1. The research did not even reveal the source of their funding. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)

The industry further discredits opponents of artificial tanning by labeling them as using a ‘sun scare’ tactic. By referencing the sun, this again makes UV exposure from artificial sources seem more natural and equivalent to the sun, and also serves to characterize opponents of tanning as having an irrational bias against nature. In contrast, the industry portrays its members as objective crusaders of the truth:

- Sun Scare messaging about UV exposure has gone from simply inaccurate to completely disregarding the truth. Where do professional tanning facilities fit into the answers about UV exposure? UV and vitamin D experts present research that makes the case for a new, balanced message about UV exposure. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)
- Twenty years from now, the world will look back at how ridiculous it was to be afraid of UV exposure. With the messaging we’ve seen recently, I’m thinking that reality will come much sooner. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- Most importantly, this course gives your staff simple tools and the desire to spread the good word about UV light, turning the tanning community’s 160,000 employees into an army delivering our core message: UV exposure is natural and intended, and indoor tanning is part of the solution – not part of the problem. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 5, 2012)

Finally, references to food and naturally grown products are prominent. These are mainly associated with tanning products that can be used to enhance a tan. The industry appropriates references to well-known health foods, as well as health trends and their benefits, such as antioxidants, gluten free, and vegan:

- Like taking a cold, crisp drink of water, Caribbean Blue by Organic Tan will give skin that refreshing gulp it’s craving. This lotion is fragrance free, but loaded with potent antioxidants to protect against cell damage (sic) and nourish extra-dry skin with organic Inca inchi seed oil from the Peruvian Amazon. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 2, 2012)
- Hemplessly in Love comes from the 2012 Pun of a Kind Collection – a product line that is paraben free, gluten free, and 100% vegan. So it’s good for you, and good for the planet too! (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 3, 2012)



- Organic, sustainable, renewable, fair trade ingredients, paraben-free, propylene (sic) glycol-free, fragrance free. (*Smart Tan Canada*, Issue 3, 2012)

## Discussion

Thematic analysis of *Smart Tan Canada* advertisements and articles shows how the tanning industry frames tanning as a ‘smart’ thing for women to do. A tan enhances women’s appearance, not only by making them beautiful, but also by making women appear fit, sexy, and young. These beauty outcomes in turn guarantee that women will be desired by men. The industry further promotes the allure of a tan by portraying tanning as a self-care tool for women to relax and pamper themselves. A tan helps women feel good about themselves and to feel that others value and even envy them.

The beauty and self-care themes are especially effective with women because they resonate strongly in a culture that routinely objectifies women. Objectification theory, a widely cited theory within the fields of the psychology of women and body image, is a useful framework for understanding how the experience of objectification can lead women to engage in unsafe beauty practices like tanning.<sup>16</sup> According to this theory, women are regularly exposed to messages through advertising and other media that they are objects of gaze valued only for their appearance.<sup>16</sup> Within a culture of objectification, women’s bodies come to define them and exist for the use and pleasure of others. One of the most harmful effects of objectification is self-objectification, adopting an observer perspective of the self. When women self-objectify, they treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated.<sup>16</sup> Appearance becomes primary and the self-conscious body monitoring leads women to seek products that they believe will help them meet various beauty standards, such as the tan ideal.

The relentless surveillance of one’s appearance can increase shame and anxiety, and reduce awareness of internal bodily states, such as illness.<sup>17</sup> When preoccupied with achieving a particular outward appearance, women are more likely to put their health at risk.<sup>17</sup> In this context, it is not surprising that many women tan deliberately, despite knowledge of skin cancer risks. For women, the beauty benefits and admiration promised by the tanning industry are more salient, immediate, and

therefore desirable than the less obvious and more distant possibility of skin cancer. Moreover, when tanning is promoted as a tool of self-care, it obscures the fact that it is actually an instrument of self-harm.

The beauty and self-care themes appear alongside prominent messaging that a tan is natural and healthy, and that these claims are backed by science. This interweaving of themes makes the messaging to women about the value of a tan particularly powerful. Knowledge of skin cancer risks can more easily be doubted or ignored when supposed scientific claims are made about tanning's health benefits.

## Implications

The four themes require a deliberate and systematic response. In particular, the tanning industry's promise that a tan enhances appearance needs to be counteracted. Campaigns that highlight skin damage and the harm caused to appearance by tanning may work, such as the posters currently in use by the American Academy of Dermatology that equate tanning with leathery skin ([www.aad.org/File%20Library/Global%20navigation/For%20the%20public/Skin%20cancer%20prevention%20downloads/before-you-tan-sun-safety.pdf](http://www.aad.org/File%20Library/Global%20navigation/For%20the%20public/Skin%20cancer%20prevention%20downloads/before-you-tan-sun-safety.pdf)). Perhaps appearance-based interventions that use software to show how an individual's face is predicted to age with and without UV exposure can be used to demonstrate the longer-term skin-damaging effects of tanning, thus addressing the tanning industry's assertion that a tan makes women look younger. These interventions also make future skin damage salient to the individual and help offset the appeal of the short-term benefits of a tan. Appearance-based programs are more effective than those that emphasize health risks only.<sup>9,18,19</sup>

Many health promotion programs already challenge the tanning industry's self-interested contention that a tan is healthy, natural, and supported by science. The industry, given a platform to argue their position, has responded by disputing facts and research, and planting seeds of doubt.

Opponents of tanning may find it more effective to combine health risks education along with media literacy training. Such training helps consumers see that businesses like the tanning industry use media and advertising to sell products and behaviors that are not healthy.<sup>20</sup> This kind of training would help women to analyze and resist harmful messages about beauty, self-care, and health.

Finally, legislation can play a key role in counteracting the messages embodied in the themes. Laws that prohibit underage tanning in commercial tanning operations also often prohibit advertising of health benefits. In our home province in Canada, New Brunswick Bill 54 (*Artificial Tanning Act*) prohibits advertising that creates any impression of health benefits ([laws.gnb.ca/en/showfulldoc/cs/2013-c.21/20140604](http://laws.gnb.ca/en/showfulldoc/cs/2013-c.21/20140604)). This prohibition needs to be extended to claims that tanning is relaxing or has self-care benefits. Legislation such as Canada’s *Tobacco Act* can serve as a useful model. The *Tobacco Act* prohibits any advertising of products that could be reasonably construed as appealing to youth ([laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/T-11.5/FullText.html](http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/T-11.5/FullText.html)). There are many lessons that can be learned from prohibitions in tobacco advertising that could be applied to advertising by the tanning industry.

In short, knowing the mindset of the tanning industry can help us devise a number of strategies to counteract their harmful messages.

## About the Authors

Suzanne M. Prior is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

Lindsay P. Rafuse recently completed an MSW at Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Portions of this research are based on her honours thesis research completed at St. Thomas University.

## References

1. Lostritto, K. *et al* (2012) Lifetime history of indoor tanning in young people: A retrospective assessment of initiation, persistence, and correlates. *BMC Public Health* 12(1): 1–9.
2. Godar, D.E. (2011) Worldwide increasing incidence of cutaneous malignant melanoma. *Journal of Skin Cancer* 2011: 1–6.
3. Rogers, H.W. and Coldiron, B.M. (2013) Analysis of skin cancer treatment and costs in the United States medicare population, 1996–2008. *Dermatologic Surgery* 39(1): 35–42.
4. Lomas, A., Leonardi-Bee, J. and Bath-Hextall, F. (2012) A systematic review of worldwide incidence of nonmelanoma skin cancer. *British Journal of Dermatology* 166(5): 1069–1080.
5. Canadian Cancer Society. (2014) Canadian Cancer Statistics 2014. Special Topic: Skin Cancers, <http://convio.cancer.ca/site/R?i=WBOw1LedkO16pvbjwW8SIQ>, accessed 9 June 2015.
6. Stanton, W.R., Janda, M., Baade, P.D. and Anderson, P. (2004) Primary prevention of skin cancer: A review of sun protection in Australia and internationally. *Health Promotion International* 19(3): 369–378.
7. Devos, S.A., Baeyens, K. and Van Hecke, L. (2003) Sunscreen use and skin protection behavior on the Belgian beach. *International Journal of Dermatology* 42(5): 352–356.

8. Mahler, H.I.M., Kulik, J.A., Gerrard, M. and Gibbons, F.S. (2010) Effects of upward and downward social comparison information on the efficacy of an appearance-based sun protection intervention: A randomized, controlled experiment. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 33(6): 496–507.
9. Hillhouse, J.J. and Turrisi, R. (2002) An examination of the efficacy of an appearance-focused intervention to reduce UV exposure. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 25(4): 395–409.
10. Hillhouse, J.J., Turrisi, R. and Kastner, M. (2000) Modeling tanning salon behavioral tendencies using appearance motivation, self-monitoring and the theory of planned behavior. *Health Education Research* 15(4): 405–414.
11. Olson, A.L. and Starr, P. (2006) The challenge of intentional tanning in teens and young adults. *Dermatologic Clinics* 24(2): 131–136.
12. Thomas, K., Hevey, D., Pertl, M., Ni Chuinneagain, S., Craig, A. and Maher, L. (2011) Appearance matters: The frame and focus of health messages influences beliefs about skin cancer. *British Journal of Health Psychology* 16(2): 418–429.
13. Ferrucci, L.M., Vogel, R.I., Cartmel, B., Lazovich, D. and Mayne, S.T. (2014) Indoor tanning in business and homes and risk of melanoma and nonmelanoma skin cancer in 2 US case-control studies. *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* 71(5): 882–887.
14. Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
15. Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
16. Frederickson, B.L. and Roberts, T.A. (1997) Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21(2): 173–206.
17. Moradi, B. (2011) Objectification theory: Areas of promise and refinement. *The Counseling Psychologist* 39(1): 153–163.
18. Williams, A.L., Grogan, S., Clark-Carter, D. and Buckley, E. (2013) Appearance-based interventions to reduce ultraviolet exposure and/or increase sun protection intentions and behaviours: A systematic review and meta-analyses. *British Journal of Health Psychology* 18(1): 183–217.
19. Williams, A.S., Grogan, S., Clark-Carter, D. and Buckley, E. (2013) Impact of a facial-ageing intervention versus a health literature intervention on women's sun protection attitudes and behavioural intentions. *Psychology & Health* 28(9): 993–1008.
20. Martens, H. (2010) Evaluating media literacy education: Concepts, theories and future directions. *The Journal of Media Literacy Education* 2(1): 1–22.