

Is Vitiligo in Vogue? The Changing Face of Vitiligo

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Vitiligo is a disfiguring skin condition that is thought to result from autoimmune destruction of melanocytes in the skin, leading to patchy depigmentation. The prevalence of vitiligo is estimated at 1% worldwide.¹ Once seen as merely a cosmetic disorder, it is increasingly recognized for its devastating psychological effects. As skin quality, texture, and color are a few of the first things people notice about others, skin plays a major role in our daily interactions with the world. Vitiligo often affects the face and other visible areas of the body; thus, it is associated with impaired quality of life, and affected individuals often experience psychosocial impairment including anxiety, depression, stigmatization, and self-harm ideation.² Indeed, vitiligo is a condition with not only a visible skin component but a deeper psychological component that also is important to recognize and address. However, due in large part to recent exposure to vitiligo through mainstream media, general understanding about and attitudes toward this condition are changing. As a result, vitiligo has seen a surge in outreach by those affected by the disease.

Perhaps the most well-known current face of vitiligo is Chantelle Brown-Young, a black fashion model, activist, and vitiligo spokesperson known professionally as Winnie Harlow. Diagnosed with vitiligo in childhood, she revealed she was teased and bullied and at one point contemplated suicide. "The continuous harassment and the despair that [vitiligo] brought on my life was so unbearably dehumanizing that I wanted to kill myself," she disclosed.³ After competing on America's Next Top Model in 2014, Winnie Harlow became a household name for redefining global standards of beauty and, in her own words, accepting the differences that make us unique and authentic.⁴ She went on to speak at the Dove Self-Esteem Project panel at the 2015 Women in the World London Summit and was presented with the

Role Model award at the Portuguese GQ Men of the Year event that same year.⁵

More recently, Amy Deanna, a model with vitiligo, was featured in videos for CoverGirl's 2018 "I Am What I Make Up" campaign in which she is shown enhancing her various skin tones rather than hiding them by applying both light and dark shades of makeup on her face. In a press release she stated, "Vitiligo awareness is something that is very important to me. Being given a platform to [raise awareness] means so much."⁶

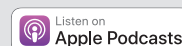
Additionally, Brock Elbank, a London-based photographer, recently launched a photograph series of men and women with vitiligo on the digital platform Instagram.⁷ In a recent interview he stated, "I see beauty in what many see as different. Unique individuals who stand out from the crowd are what inspire me to do what I do."⁷

Lee Thomas, a television broadcaster and author of the book *Turning White: A Memoir of Change* is yet another example of a vitiligo patient who recently stopped hiding his condition. He admitted he has had people refuse to shake his hand due to his condition but has used the experience to educate others. He stated, "Because I'm in this position, I think this is where my next thing is supposed to be. It's supposed to be about sharing and helping, and hopefully leaving the planet a little better for everybody else who comes along with vitiligo."⁸ Thomas is dedicated

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to inspiring others with the condition and started the Clarity Lee Thomas Foundation to provide emotional and mental support to those with vitiligo.

Critics may say this vitiligo movement is merely another example of exploitation of what is unique or different by mainstream media and the fashion industry, similar to prior movements for plus-sized models, natural hairstyles in black women, and transgender identification. Even if partially true, the ultimate effect has been an increase in attention and representation of individuals with vitiligo in mainstream media. At the time this article was being published (September 2018), an Instagram search for #vitiligo yielded approximately 226,000 posts. For comparison with other much more common dermatologic conditions, #eczema returned approximately 958,000 results, #moles returned approximately 65,000 results, and #skincancer returned approximately 104,000 results. Additionally, the Vitiligo Research Foundation currently has more than 5000 followers on Instagram, which is as many as the Melanoma Research Foundation and almost twice as many as the Skin Cancer Foundation, supporting the idea that mainstream representation of individuals with vitiligo is contributing to raising awareness and backing of organizations aimed at making advancements in this area of dermatology.

As more individuals gain an understanding and curiosity about this disease, perhaps more research and investigation will be done to improve treatment options and outcomes for patients with vitiligo. With this

movement, perhaps vitiligo patients will feel more comfortable and confident in their skin.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The first Hospital Consult column, "Investing in the Future of Inpatient Dermatology: The Evolution and Impact of Specialized Dermatologic Consultation in Hospitalized Patients," produced in partnership with the Society for Dermatology Hospitalists appears on page 226. This column will be published quarterly and will serve to educate dermatologists on patient care in the inpatient hospitalist setting.

Look for Hospital Consult columns in upcoming issues of *Cutis* and online.