

# Study demonstrates potential support for ban on microbeads in cosmetics

November 10 2016, by Mr Alan Williams

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Some examples of cosmetic products currently containing microbeads -- some brands have since suggested they will phase out the use. Credit: Imogen Napper/Plymouth University

Public awareness regarding the presence of microbeads within personal care products is lacking in some areas but there are strong indications that a ban on their inclusion would be widely supported, according to new research.

A study led by the University of Plymouth explored attitudes regarding the presence of microplastic particles within readily available cosmetics.

It found while certain groups of people were aware such practices existed, there was widespread surprise about the quantities of

microbeads contained, with their use described varyingly as unnatural, unnecessary and 'fake'.

The research comes at a crucial time for policy intervention and sheds light on the kinds of factors that influence people's perceptions and responses, and what sorts of barriers communicators might benefit from being aware of.

In August 2016, the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee published a report urging the Government to ban the use of microbeads in cosmetics, as part of a wider inquiry into the potential of microplastics to cause environmental harm.

This study, published in *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, involved social scientists, marine scientists and psychologists and was funded by the University's Sustainable Earth Institute.

Lead author Alison Anderson, Professor of Sociology at the University of Plymouth, said: "Participants in the study reacted with shock and disbelief when they were shown the quantity of microbeads in the sample products. If microbead content was labelled more clearly we would expect to see a positive response from consumers and also broad support for a ban."

Previous research led by the University has estimated between 4,600 and 94,500 microbeads could be released from an exfoliant in a single use, and they are highly likely to enter domestic waste water, pass through sewage treatment and filter into aquatic environments.

This study explored awareness of plastic microbeads among three groups—environmental activists, trainee beauticians and university students in South West England. It involved a series of focus groups, where participants were asked a series of questions and also shown the

quantity of microbeads found in individual high-street [personal care products](#).

Qualitative analysis showed that while the environmentalists were originally aware of the issue, it lacked visibility and immediacy for the beauticians and students. Yet when shown the amount of plastic in a range of familiar everyday [personal care](#) products, all participants expressed considerable surprise and concern at the quantities and potential impact.

Researchers believe it could inform future communications with the public and industry, as well as policy initiatives, but also say it is a positive indication that a ban would be accepted since effecting change for environmental issues that are perceived to be undesirable and unnecessary is obviously easier than for issues high in benefit and/or necessity.

Professor Richard Thompson, who leads the University's International Marine Litter Research Unit, has worked in this field for more than 20 years and gave both written and oral evidence to the inquiry held by the Environmental Audit Committee. He said: "Microbeads might be a small percentage in the overall picture, but recent reports regarding their use have represented a positive step towards resolving the much wider problem of marine debris. They are an avoidable source of microplastic to the environment and legislation would be a welcome step. This study demonstrates there would be public support for such a measure, and that future policies should be developed in close consultation with natural and [social scientists](#) to ensure they achieve the desired result."

Dr Kayleigh Wyles, formerly based at the Plymouth Marine Laboratory and now at the University of Surrey, added: "It was fascinating to see that many of our participants hadn't really thought how these products work and what the materials are within them. By giving them the

experience of handling the microplastics extracted from the products initiated emotional responses and made them question the relevance of using plastics in the first place."

**More information:** A.G. Anderson et al, Microplastics in personal care products: Exploring perceptions of environmentalists, beauticians and students, *Marine Pollution Bulletin* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.marpolbul.2016.10.048](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2016.10.048)

Provided by University of Plymouth

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