The Role of Consumption and Advertising in the Creation and Perpetuation of Beauty Stereotypes of African-American Women

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African-American women face stereotypes in their everyday lives. Since stigmas and stereotypes are socially constructed and historically situated (Crocker *et al.*, 1998), they are also fluid and constantly evolving. One of the major areas African-American women encounter stigmatization is with their physical appearance. Researchers find that Eurocentric beauty ideals are not only prevalent, but also prized in Western culture (hooks, 1993). Society reinforces the idea that women are supposed to possess a light complexion and straight, flowing hair. The idea that “whiteness has come to be the defining zenith of physical attractiveness” forces African-American women to face the stereotype that they are unattractive and juxtaposes them against Caucasian women as the “other” (Shaw, 2005, p. 143). Research finds that stigmatization can negatively affect individuals’ physical, emotional, and social well-being. For example, many stigmatized individuals suffer from low self-worth and depression (Abramson *et al.*, 1989) and increased stress levels (Allison, 1998). Due to the significant effects of stigmatization, it is important for researchers to delve into how stereotypes are created and perpetuated. This research utilizes historical data to examine the role of consumption and advertising in the development and continuation of African-American women beauty stereotypes. For this research, we examine archival advertisements as well as historical accounts of the time.

While Eurocentric beauty ideals mandate that hair be straight and flowing, African-American women’s hair is often textured and less fine than their Caucasian counterparts (Thompson, 2009). In fact, African-American women are often teased and bullied about their natural hair. African-American women’s hair is often referred to as “kinky” and “nappy” and considered not as attractive as straight hair. In order to combat this beauty stereotype, many African-American women struggle to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards by straightening or perming their hair or wearing a weave, despite the significant pain and monetary costs they incur (Tate, 2007; Thompson, 2009). Failure to conform leaves them not only “not beautiful” in society’s estimation but also at risk of being considered militant and anti-white. Additionally, Westernized standards of beauty prize lighter skin over darker skin (Hill, 2002). Lighter skin is prized and considered more beautiful than darker shades. In an attempt to adapt to Eurocentric beauty ideals some African-American women purchase skin-lightening creams despite the fact that these products can be dangerous to their health.

The stereotypes surrounding African-American women’s hair and skin tone can be traced back to slavery (Byrd and Tarps, 2001). Prior to arriving in the United States, African women wore elaborate, intricate hair styles. Moreover, these women adorned their hair with decorative accessories. When they were brought to the United States and forced into slavery, they no longer had time or resources to care for their hair. Intricate knots and braids became matted; head scarves and handkerchiefs replaced ornamental combs not only to protect the women from the harsh sun while working in the fields, but also to hide unkempt hair. During the 1700s, wigs became fashionable among wealthy Caucasians (Banks, 2000). Since African-American hair texture was different from Caucasian hair texture, the Caucasians considered it ugly. Some did not even consider it “real” hair and insultingly referred to it as “wool,” in essence comparing African-Americans to sheep (Byrd and Tarps, 2001). In order to cover up what they considered unattractive, Caucasian plantation owners ordered African-American slaves with textured hair who worked inside the house to wear wigs. Similarly, the plantation owners prized pale skin (Collins, 2000). African-American women slaves who possessed lighter complexions were
considered more beautiful because they more closely resembled Caucasians. These women were given prized jobs working inside the house rather than the fields.

After slavery was abolished, American society still attempted to force African-American women to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals. Oftentimes hair product advertisements from the Reconstruction era featured before-and-after pictures of African-American women to illustrate how much more beautiful these women looked after adopting Caucasian beauty standards, such as an 1899 advertisement in the Indianapolis Recorder. This type of advertising continues today, reinforcing the stereotype.

Skin tone stigmatization also continued after the end of slavery. In the 1900s, African-Americans were subjected to the “paper bag test” by society (Russell et al., 2002). If a black person’s skin was darker than a paper bag, he or she was restricted in terms of societal access. For example, certain churches and restaurants were off limits to them. Skin lightening advertisements were prominent in newspapers. As with the hair advertisements, the skin lightening advertisements often featured before and after shots, with the before being labeled as “sad” and the after as “happy”. Other advertisements emphasize the supposed happiness associated with lighter skin. These beauty stereotypes have continued in part due to these types of presentations in advertising. Even today similar advertisements can be found in leading fashion magazines. In recent years, there have even been accusations of advertisers and magazine photographers lightening African-American women’s skin in advertisements and on magazine covers. For example, L’Oreal was accused of lightening singer Beyoncé’s skin tone in a 2008 hair color advertisement. Similarly, Elle magazine fell under fire when it appeared that they lightened actress Gabby Sidibe’s skin. Many argue that these actions just perpetuate hurtful stereotypes.

However, some companies have used advertising to combat these stereotypes. Hair straightening and skin lightening became controversial during the 1960s and 1970s Civil Rights Movement (hooks, 1995; Patton, 2006). Many Civil Rights leaders at the time denounced conforming to Westernized beauty ideals and promoted the “Black is Beautiful” movement, encouraging African-American women to embrace their natural beauty. Since that time, there have been advertisements espousing this philosophy. Proctor and Gamble ran the “My Black is Beautiful” advertising campaign in fashion magazines like Cosmopolitan.

There is a broad range of interpretations for embracing natural beauty and eschewing westernized beauty standards. Wilson and Russell (1996) find that for African-American women, physical appearance often becomes a political statement. For these women adopting Eurocentric beauty ideals means assimilating to white culture. Keeping their natural hair and skin tone, then, comes to symbolize pride in their heritage and resistance to the dominant culture. However, Orbe and Harris (2001) point out that oftentimes these women must find a balance between expressing their identity and combatting prevalent stereotypes. In fact, Patton (2006) argues that women often find it easier to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals than to deal with the political repercussions of natural hair and skin. So, on one hand, natural hair and skin can be read positively as pride in one’s heritage, but may also be construed as ugly, militant, and anti-white. Adopting Eurocentric beauty ideals may be considered attractive by Western standards, but may be interpreted as turning their back on their race. Many feel they should be able to make these decisions without the weight of the stereotypes on their shoulders. For example, if they want to straighten their hair, they should be able to do so without feeling like they are contributing to the continuation of the Westernized beauty ideal stereotypes. Similarly, if they want to keep their hair natural, it should not be considered as a militant act. Perhaps Caldwell (2000) expresses these sentiments the most succinctly: “I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me, before I lost the right to me, before I knew that the burden of beauty—or lack of it—for an entire race of people could be tied up with my hair and me” (p. 275).

Selected References

