

## New Hair Freedom? 1990s Hair Care Marketing and the African-American Woman

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*This article highlights the history of hair grooming rituals and hair care marketing with respect to African-American women. While a number of sources indicated that the 1990s represented the decade of "New Hair Freedom" for black women with respect to hair texture options, an analysis of hair care advertisements indicates that marketers presented hair grooming options as mainly focused on straight textured hair. Cultural cues presenting natural hair texture favorably on African-American women during the decade were more likely to come from sources outside of the hair care industry.*

For generations, hair appearance has been a topic of tremendous concern and controversy among African-Americans. A major issue is hair texture, which carries significant psychological, social, political, and economic implications, especially for black women (Grayson 1995). Historically, the tightly curled texture of natural black African hair, which has been described as woolly, kinky, coily and nappy, has often been disparaged in America, both inside and outside of the African-American community (Ferrell 1993, 1; Sinclair 1993). Frequently, black women who have chosen not to straighten their natural hair texture have faced blatant social criticism and economic discrimination. Thus, except for a brief period during the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s, when the natural or "Afro" hairstyle and a few braided cornrow styles gained popularity - fueled in part by the "Black Power" sociopolitical movement - African-American women have commonly engaged in grooming rituals which involved either covering the kinky natural hair or straightening the hair's natural texture via thermal or chemical processes ("Fifty years of hair styles" 1995). Hair grooming rituals by blacks contributed to a lucrative \$4 billion "ethnic" hair care market in the U.S. in 1998 (McDonald 1998). African-Americans spend three to five times more than non-blacks on hair and personal care products and services - equivalent to about 2% of their annual incomes, compared with 0.8% for non-blacks (McDonald 1998; Wilensky 1995).

According to some sources, the 1990s ushered in - for the first time since the 1970s - an era of improved attitudes toward natural textured hair styles for African-Americans.

Articles in popular black-oriented magazines featured natural textured hairstyles, such as short naturals, Afros, braids, twists and locks on African-Americans ("Hair in the '90s", 1990; Norment 1990). In the fall of 1996 *Ebony*, the largest black-oriented consumer magazine, declared the 1990s the decade of "New Hair Freedom" for African-American women representing a "bonanza of freedom that is unprecedented in modern times" (Norment 1996). The article showcased several straightened and natural texture hair styles, including cornrowed braids on former Senator Carol Mosely-Braun, the only black woman ever elected to the U.S. Senate. The implications of these articles were that hair grooming options for black women had expanded to include natural styles and that natural textured hair was acceptable in social and employment settings, even in traditionally conservative professions. During this period, natural hair styles - particularly braids, naturals or Afros - began appearing frequently on black women in the mass media, including TV, magazine and newspaper supplement advertising for mainstream brands such as Pine-Sol, Pampers, and Tide and retailers such as Target, Sears and WalMart.

### Research Agenda

Assuming that advertising plays a key role in marketing hair care products, this paper investigates advertising's role in hair grooming rituals among African-American women in the 1990s. Studies indicate that advertising's socializing effects may be quite potent for African-Americans and women, especially with regard to personal appearance (Bush, Smith and Martin 1999; Martin and Gentry 1997). Given that some entities presented natural textured hair as an acceptable grooming alternative in the 1990s, how was this phenomenon addressed in hair care advertising aimed at black women? This paper analyzes to what extent and how hair care alternatives - with emphasis on hair texture - were presented to African-American women in hair care product advertising. Using a sample of hair care product advertisements published between 1990 and 1999 in black-oriented magazines, hair texture portrayals on black models are analyzed and discussed.

## ADVERTISING'S INFLUENCE ON PERSONAL APPEARANCE AMONG BLACKS AND WOMEN

### Advertising's role in Consumer Socialization

Grayson (1995) argued that hair texture, like skin tone, supports a multiplicity of meanings in American society; in a culture that is visually-oriented, choices about hairstyle impact upon acceptance/rejection by groups and individuals and also affect personal feelings about oneself. Advertising influences societal and self perceptions when it presents "acceptable" ways of grooming the hair. A number of relevant studies have examined relationships between African-Americans and/or women and advertising. Bush, Smith and Martin (1999), in a study using consumer socialization theory, compared blacks and whites to determine how various agents of socialization (parents, peers and media) were related to attitudes toward advertising. They found that blacks used advertising more as a source of information and held more positive attitudes toward advertising than whites; further, women's attitudes toward advertising were more positive than men's. These conclusions were consistent with Yoon's (1995) findings which also indicated that blacks viewed advertising more favorably than whites and held stronger beliefs that advertising was useful as an information source. Moreover, Yoon (1995) found that blacks held favorable beliefs about advertising's utility in learning proper social images. With respect to consumer socialization and media usage, Feick and Price (1987) established that "market mavens" - individuals highly involved in consumer transactions and in exchange of consumption-related information - read magazines and watched TV more than non-mavens; further, market mavens were more likely to be female and African-American.

### Advertising's Role in Establishing Cultural Beauty Standards

A significant number of advertising studies have looked at females and issues related to perceptions of physical attractiveness. Englis, Solomon and Ashmore (1994) concluded that magazine ads, along with music videos, are influential in establishing cultural beauty standards. Both males and females use attractive models in ads as standards by which to judge the attractiveness of "ordinary" females (Kenrich and Gutierrez 1980; Richins 1991). Females may aspire to emulate attractive advertising models and such portrayals play a major role in product/brand choices; this behavior is pronounced when the consumption of the product (or its result) is "socially conspicuous" - i.e. visible to others (Cocanougher and Bruce 1971; Solomon 1992, 359). As many of the studies

on advertising and female attractiveness have focused on issues related to body weight and thinness, some researchers have questioned the ethical role of advertising with respect to promoting specific ideals of female attractiveness (Martin and Gentry 1997; Stephens, Hill and Hanson 1994). While obsession with thin body appearance appears to be of significant concern moreso to Caucasian females (Gustafson, Popovich and Thomsen 1999), concern by African-American females with hair texture appearance may be as significant, and advertisements reflect this. A sociologist estimated that about 33% of the ads published in black-oriented magazines *Ebony*, *Essence* and *Jet* between 1985-1987 were for hair straighteners (Berry 1988). In sum, given their receptivity to advertising, participation in social networks relative to consumption behavior, and the influential role of advertising in promoting beauty standards, African-American women appear to be impressionable prospects for marketing efforts related to hair care and appearance.

## HAIR GROOMING AND HAIR CARE MARKETING IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

### Hair Straightening Issues

Although common, hair straightening has been long been a controversial practice among African-Americans. The motivations for hair straightening as well the straightening techniques themselves resulted in tumultuous debates. Various explanations have been offered as to why black women straighten their hair. Ferrell (1996, 13) argues that when Africans arrived in America for slavery, a significant aspect of their indoctrination was the psychological degradation of their physical characteristics. Blacks were taught that dark skin and kinky hair were ugly and inferior to Caucasian attributes; some were even taught that nappy hair was a punishment from God (Sinclair 1993). Lacking the appropriate implements and time for grooming, black female hair during slavery was considered so unsightly that it was literally covered up. For example, a mid-1800s city ordinance in New Orleans required black females to cover their "coily" hair with a kerchief or tignon when out in public (Ferrell 1996, 14.) Aunt Jemima, a figure rooted in slavery which became one of the most enduring marketing symbols in U.S. history, was - until 1968 - depicted wearing a bandana which completely covered her (presumably nappy) hair (Manring 1998). In 1968, the Quaker Oats Corporation replaced Aunt Jemima's bandana with a plaid headband which allowed some hair, lying flat, with a smooth and shiny appearance, to show; in 1989, the headgear was dropped entirely and she emerged with a straightened hair style (Kern-Foxworth 1994).

Straightened hair on black women has had major social, political and economic ramifications. Peiss (1998)

suggests that hair and skin preparations for black women, marketed between 1890 and 1920, which emphasized straight hair and fair skin, indicated an embracement of white standards of beauty and reinforced notions of black inferiority. Opponents to hair straightening viewed the practice as symbolic of racial oppression and a manifestation of self-hatred (Morris 1997; Sinclair 1993). Cyril Briggs, publisher of the politically-prominent *Crusader* magazine between 1918 and 1922, urged the black press to refuse ads for hair straighteners and skin lighteners arguing that such ads strengthen "the Caucasian's assumption of superiority" (Briggs 1919). According to Ferrell (1993, 18), generations of socialization, passed down from parents to children, prompted blacks to believe that straight hair was good and beautiful and nappy hair was bad and ugly. Further, straight hair was also believed to be easier to comb and style. Sinclair (1993) states that into the 1960s, black females were taught that nappy hair was a thing to be avoided "at all costs" and that black men were taught to prize black women with "good hair" - that which was straight or wavy - prompting a hatred of naturally kinky hair within the African-American community. Boyd (1994) and Wilson (1994) viewed hair straightening as unrelated to any form of self-hatred, but as an adaptation strategy necessary for survival in a culture where one's economic livelihood is often based on "acceptable" appearance, which is often determined by those outside of the culture.

### Hair Straightening Methods

As early as the late 1800s popular hair grooming options for black women involved processes to remove the tight natural curl from the hair. A variety of hair straightening/retexturizing methods were introduced over the years. Up until about 1940, thermal methods were most popular. These techniques included the application of oils to the hair and then pulling or pressing a very hot metal "hair puller" (flatiron) or comb through the hair. After pressing was completed, the hair laid smooth and looked shiny; then it could be styled with hot curlers or other implements. Around 1940, chemically-based hair straighteners, known as "perms" or "relaxers," made with sodium hydroxide (lye), were introduced for the mass market (Ferrell 1996, 16). Lye, a caustic alkaline compound, had been used for years for cleaning purposes and as an agent to melt tallow to make soap (Sinclair 1993). The perceived advantage of chemical straightening, relative to thermal methods, was that it straightened curly hair *permanently*, meaning that the treated hair would never again return to its natural texture. With thermal methods, pressed hair would quickly revert to its kinky state if it encountered moisture in any way - through shampooing, bathing, swimming, perspiration, rain or even humid weather conditions. Black women routinely went to great lengths to avoid the reversion of their pressed hair to its

kinky natural state. In fact, this is why many black women never learned to swim and avoided strenuous exercise.

Early on, acceptance of chemically-based hair straighteners was mixed. Many considered lye injurious to the hair, contributing to weakened hair strands; the chemical also burned the scalp during application. The first lye-based hair straightening product is attributed to a free black man named Hodges, who demonstrated it around 1856 in New York City (Sinclair 1993). Unfortunately, Hodges' demonstration went awry when the solution was left too long on the model's head, causing the hair to comb out bald. Others subsequently tinkered with lye formulas, adding emollients, oils and other ingredients to maintain the straightening effect while reducing the traumatic burning. During the 1920s and 1930s, some black urban males in Northern cities, especially musicians and gangsters, wore an expensive hair style known as the "conk" or "process" which involved this chemical straightening method accompanied with a cold wave technique to produce a wavy hair appearance. Andre Walker, a professional cosmetologist best known as Oprah Winfrey's hair stylist, referred to these early perms as "a foul, evil brew of Red Devil Lye, potatoes, eggs and Vaseline that was combed through the hair" (Walker 1997, 93). By the late 1930s, the popular "process" was still too expensive for many blacks to afford a salon treatment, so home kits were invented (Sinclair 1993). Throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s lye-based perms represented the only chemical option available for straightening black hair, although technological advances replaced the potatoes, eggs and petroleum jelly with more sophisticated chemicals and conditioners (Walker 1997, 94). The use of lye-based perms became increasingly popular among black women, who applied them at home or used salon services. The potential damage of these products was underscored, even in advertising. A 1948 ad for the Lustrasilk brand permanent, one of the most prominent brands of that era, states that the product is "covered by Products Liability Insurance" (Lustrasilk ad 1948). By the 1970s "no-lye" chemical relaxers, based on calcium hydroxide or other alkaline chemicals, became available, with claims that they were gentler on the hair and scalp. However, some cosmetologists believe that these relaxers are just as potentially damaging as the traditional lye-based products (Ferrell 1996, Kinard 1997, Walker 1997). Packaging and advertising disclaimers for modern relaxer products typically state, "follow directions carefully to avoid hair loss, scalp and eye injury." Over the years, damaged hair and scalps from chemical product abuse became common among black women. These problems were exacerbated by the routine use of thermal implements, curlers and drying styling products, required to shape permed hair into fashionable styles, which further stressed the hair and scalp. As a result, countless black women have suffered some degree of hair breakage or alopecia, a medical term for hair loss (Ferrell 1996, 92-93).

By the late 1970s, other chemical retexturizing options emerged. One was the "curly perm," also known as the "Jheri curl," which appeared to be the answer to the black woman's hair prayers. Especially popular during the 1980s among black women and men, the curly perm provided a low-maintenance controlled curly style which did not require the use of hot curlers or rollers for daily styling. This hair texture was achieved via a two-step chemical process: an ammonium thioglycolate base used to straighten the natural hair followed by a roller set doused with a second chemical solution to create permanent curls. The style is thereafter maintained by liberal daily applications of a curl activator or moisturizing product. This type of product gained notoriety in the 1980s when pop star Michael Jackson was injured filming a Pepsi commercial. Sparks from a pyrotechnic stunt landed on Jackson's curly-permed hair, which was coated with curl activator, causing serious burns to his hair and scalp. While many blacks suffered no ill effects associated with the curly permed style, some did encounter problems, including hair breakage and thinning (Walker 1997, 98). Another chemical relaxer for loosening the tight curl of natural hair was known as the "texturizer," a milder straightening agent left on the hair for a short period of time. Primarily marketed towards men, this product type was also used by women with very short natural hair as it produces a wavy, shiny hair appearance.

Black women's quest for permanently straight hair which could be maintained without damaging chemicals was the apparent basis for a product named "Rio Hair," a straightening agent promoted on late night TV in the spring of 1994. Featuring black women with flowing straight hair in infomercials with the phrase - "Would you like to be chemically free?" - Rio was positioned as a safe, all natural, non-chemical alternative for straightening hair. However, within a few months, at least 2000 consumer complaints emerged claiming that Rio had caused severe hair damage, loss or hair to turn green. Tests conducted by the FDA and the California Department of Health Services revealed that Rio was highly acidic and did contain harsh chemicals - including unsafe levels of cupric and ascorbic acids (Grayson 1995). In January 1995, the FDA ordered the shutdown of the World Rio Corporation and seized the remaining unsold product. A subsequent 1995 class action lawsuit and judgment resulted in total withdrawal of the product from the market and monetary damages paid to plaintiffs.

### **Natural Hair Texture Issues**

During much of American history, a minority of African-American women avoided straightened hair and wore naturally textured hair styles including naturals, Afros, cornrows, individual braids or plaits, twists and locks. A 1995 trade article predicted that the growth of natural looks for black women and men would mean more emphasis on texturizing rather than straightening the hair

(Cavanaugh 1995). Some women chose to "go natural" for a number of reasons. Some viewed natural textured hair as a source of ethnic pride or enhanced self-consciousness, or as a cultural/political statement (Morris 1997). Some cosmetologists and dermatologists advocated natural hair as a way to avoid hair and scalp problems or for therapeutic reasons stemming from hair breakage/loss related to thermal and chemical use. Others personally found natural styles to be more attractive, economical or easier to maintain. Natural hair texture enjoyed tremendous popularity during the mid-1960s to mid-1970s. During the 1960s, the "Black Power" socio-political movement supported a new black beauty aesthetic and the "Afro" was born. This style engendered political and social distention, within both the African-American and majority communities, due to its association with black militancy and political defiance, and because, for the first time on a large scale, black women wore their hair with its natural kink apparent. By the 1970s, the Afro lost much of its militant connotation as was regarded merely as a hairstyle choice. Also, while large Afros waned by the mid-1970s, the short natural remained. It has become regarded as a classic, conservative hairstyle for black women and is generally acceptable in workplace and professional settings.

In addition to the short natural, other natural hairstyles enjoyed a rise in popularity in the 1990s. In an effort to educate black women about natural styling options, several writers published books on natural hair care for African-American women (Bonner 1991, Ferrell 1996, Kinnard 1997). However, the acceptance of natural styles was mixed and many black women feared or encountered negative reactions to natural hair. For example, an African-American tourist was denied admittance to the British Virgin Islands because she wore her hair in locks and was therefore presumed to be a Rastafarian (Lorde 1990). Locks, also referred to as "dreadlocks," are probably the most controversial of the natural hairstyles. Locking the hair involves entangling natural hair and allowing it to grow in such a way that it becomes permanently rooted at the scalp (Kinard 1997). Because of its association with followers of the Rastafarian religion, those who wear locks are often believed not to wash or comb their hair, allowing it to become dirty and unkempt. Locks are also controversial because they are a permanent styling option. That is, once the hair becomes rooted, the only way to rid oneself of the style is to cut or shave off the hair at the scalp. Thus, there is significant negativity towards locks both inside and outside of black culture. However, new locking techniques and information about locking indicates that locked hair can be cleaned and styled similar to more "mainstream" hair styles (Ferrell 1996; Kinnard 1997). Black female discussants on an Internet site devoted to black hair care described negative comments from family with respect to decisions to wear their hair in its natural texture, which often concerned their ability to attract mates and obtain jobs, especially in the corporate world and professions (www.blackhaircare.com 1999). Some,

especially those considering short naturals, feared they would invite lesbianism or be perceived as masculine. Hair style/texture has also been a contributing factor in employment discrimination for black women. Corporate and government institutions, including the military, have had anti-braid policies. In the late 1980s several women were fired or threatened with dismissal for wearing braids or cornrows to work (Ferrell 1996, 20.) These occurrences led to lawsuits which have essentially outlawed discrimination in the workplace on the basis of hair style and have contributed to the rescission of anti-braid policies. For example, in 1994 the U.S. Navy abolished its anti-braid policy after the Navy Board of Dress Regulators were convinced that braided hair was more practical for ship-bound black women (Ferrell 1996, 20). Both the Smithsonian Institution and the District of Columbia Law Enforcement Department revoked anti-braid policies after negative publicity (Ferrell 1996, 20). However, natural hair texture in the workplace remains an issue with some employers, especially for employees in high visibility positions, like TV news reporters. Some employees have compromised by wearing straight-style wigs to cover their natural coiffures when public appearances are called for (Edwards 2000). In other professional settings, prominent media personalities, including entertainer Diana Ross, talk show hostess Star Jones and supermodel Tyra Banks have publicly admitted to wearing hair weaves, where additions of human or synthetic hair totally or partially cover their own hair.

### Marketing Hair Care Products to African-Americans

The black hair care market in the U.S. was pioneered by African-American entrepreneurs. Several black females catered to this niche by the early 1900s. Among them were Anna Malone (aka Annie Pope-Turnbo) who developed the Poro System in St. Louis, Madam Estella who founded the Nu-Life School of Beauty Culture in New York City and Madam C. J. Walker (Nelson 1983; Bundles 2001). Walker, who eventually distributed her products nationwide, became the most prominent. While most discussions of Walker center on her role as the first black millionaire in the United States, much less is said about her marketing acumen and innovative promotional techniques. Between 1903 and her death in 1919, Walker's successful marketing efforts included product development, product manufacturing in her own plant facility, extensive personal selling, mail order fulfillment, a beauty parlor and training school for hair "culturists," publication of a textbook on hair grooming, conventions for Walker sales agents, and innovations in package design and advertising (Bundles 2001). By the time of her death, Walker had traveled extensively promoting her products and providing demonstrations, had trained more than 5,000 Walker agents and was heavily involved in philanthropy. Walker's use of demonstrations to sell her products, which included a hot

comb straightening of the hair, probably led to Walker's reputation as "inventor" of the straightening comb, *which she did not*. According to Walker's great-granddaughter and biographer, she refined the French pressing comb, making the teeth wider to accommodate kinky textured hair (Bundles 1991). However, Nelson (1983) acknowledges that Walker may be responsible for the widespread distribution of the hot comb in the U.S. among African-American women.

The black hair care market was generally seen as a small niche market until the Civil Rights era, and was primarily catered to by small black-owned companies. Recognition of a viable black consumer market became pronounced after 1950 and afterwards mainstream firms became increasingly active in pursuing this market (Rothstein 1979; Weems 1998). By the mid-1980s, large companies like Alberto-Culver, Clairol and Revlon had engaged the smaller black-owned firms in a fierce battle for market share (Freeman 1986; Furman 1987). Given that the black-owned firms tended to lack the production capacity, distribution systems and promotional budgets of the large firms, many appealed to ethnic pride in their marketing efforts, believing that African-Americans preferred to buy from black-owned firms (Furman 1987). Concerned with survival, the black-owned firms established a trade group - the American Health and Beauty Aids Institute (AHBAI) - in the mid-1980s. This association also developed a branding symbol, the "Proud Lady" which could be placed on product packaging and advertising of its members products to indicate products manufactured by black-owned companies (Clingman 1998). Controversies and legal battles ensued over ethnic appeals used in hair care marketing. Many products aimed at African-Americans used black-oriented terminology or the word "African" in the brand name or the colors of the African nationalist flag - red, black and green. For example, white-owned firms established the brand names "African Pride," "Dark and Lovely" and "Right On Curl" while black-owned companies developed brands called "African Natural," "African Royale" and "Mother Africa." In 1993, a white-owned hair care firm unsuccessfully sued a black-owned firm over the use of the word "African" in a product name (Jones 1993). In 1994, another white-owned firm sued black firms charging that photos used in relaxer ads appropriated the company's trademarked "look" ("Battle for..." 1994). Such marketing tactics created anger and confusion for consumers. According to a 1993 brand awareness study, black consumers were dismayed when informed that brands like African Pride, Dark and Lovely, Let's Jam and TCB were made by white-owned companies; further, 79% said it was important to purchase products made by black companies and 77% said they would prefer to purchase from black companies in the future (Jones 1993). Nevertheless, by the mid-1990s, the hair care product industry had seen significant consolidation and by the end of the decade, three of the largest black-owned companies, Johnson Products, Pro-line and Soft Sheen had

been acquired by larger white-owned concerns (Cavanaugh 1995; Clingman 1998).

## METHODOLOGY

In order to obtain a sample of hair product advertisements targeted at African-American women, two magazines were selected: *Ebony* and *Essence*. *Ebony* was selected because it is the most widely circulated black-oriented monthly magazine with over 1.7 million subscribers; according to its publisher's statement, "*Ebony* is a black-oriented, general, picture magazine dealing primarily with contemporary topics" (SRDS 1999, 420). *Essence*, a monthly promoted as the "magazine for today's black woman," had a circulation of 1,000,623; according to its publisher's statement, it is "edited for career-minded, sophisticated and independent achievers" (SRDS 1999, 898). Replicating a sampling scheme developed by Nussmeyer and King (1999), three issues of each publication, representing each calendar year from 1990 to 1999, were randomly selected. This procedure yielded a sample base of 60 magazine issues. All advertisements at least 1/8 of a page in size for products relevant to hair care and grooming were included in the analysis. A preliminary examination of the ads yielded the following hair care product categories:

1. Conditioners/oils/moisturizers - essentially lotions for the hair, these products generally coat the hair to help combat dryness, add moisture, strengthen and/or reduce hair breakage.
2. Growth aids - often similar to conditioners, ads for these products made specific claims about promoting hair growth.
3. Hair coloring - products which change the hue of the hair.
4. Perms/Relaxers/Texturizers - Chemically-based products which permanently straighten or loosen the natural curl of the hair.
5. Shampoos - products which cleanse the hair; may also combat scalp problems, such as dandruff.
6. Styling aids - any of a myriad of products used to form and maintain specific hairstyles, including hairsprays, gels, setting lotions, pomades, mousses, glossers and curl activators.
7. Wigs, hairpieces and hair extensions - any manufactured product with a hairlike appearance that is used to completely cover one's own hair or added to one's own hair or; these products may be made from human or synthetic material.
8. Mixed product line - any combination of any of the above products shown in a single ad for the same brand.
9. "Other/miscellaneous" - these products consisted of items related to hair grooming, such as styling implements and instructional books or videos.

Hair textures, the focal point of this study, were classified on the basis of appearance, using the five descriptions here. Straight hair was that which had a

smooth appearance or laid flat against the scalp and reflected light well; the hair shaft also tended to flow downward. Hair which was curly permed or texturized had a loose curl or wave pattern and also reflected light; moreover, if the ad was for a curly perm or texturizing product, it was assumed that the product produced the indicated hair texture. Natural hair was that which showed very small tight coils/curls and/or diffused light, rather than reflecting it; often the hair shaft stood up or out from the scalp, rather than flowing downward or lying flat against it. In addition to the close-cut natural or Afro, natural hair might be styled into braids, cornrows, twists or locks. Ads which showed both straight and natural hair textures on different models in the same ad were labeled "mixed texture" and an analysis of these depictions was conducted. Finally, in some ads no model or picture of hair appeared; these were simply labeled "no picture."

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This method yielded a sample of 685 advertisements for hair care products published between 1990 and 1999 in *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines. The appendix provides a statistical summary of hair texture depictions in these ads for the decade and for each respective calendar year. All of the ads depicting hair featured black models. Overall, nearly 73% of the ads depicted straightened or chemically-derived curly/wavy hair textures; only 7% of the ads featured natural textured hair exclusively. Just over 13% of the ads featured different models wearing hair in various textures; in these ads, adult women were typically pictured with straight hair, while natural hair textures appeared overwhelmingly on men and boys and sometimes on girls. Another 7.2% of the ads did not graphically illustrate hair at all, but only photos of packaged hair care products.

### Hair Care Product Category and Texture Representations and Dominant Advertising Copy Appeals

Ads for relaxers were the dominant hair care product category represented over the decade, accounting for 161 ads or 23.5% of the total sample. With the exception of the waning of the curly perm, few discernible hair grooming trends were observed over the decade. In 1990 and 1991, ads exclusively for perms, curly perms and texturizers accounted for 15.8% and 12.5% of the totals for each respective year. This proportion rose significantly thereafter, and from 1992 through 1999, the proportion of ads for relaxers exclusively accounted for a minimum of 20% (1998) of hair care product ads to a maximum of 34.3% (1994) per year. In addition, during each of these years, ads featuring a mix of products in the same brand family generally included a relaxer product. These results are consistent with Berry's (1988) findings on hair straighteners advertised in black magazines in the mid-

## MILESTONES IN MARKETING HISTORY

1980s. Copy appeals for relaxers linked relaxed hair with attractiveness, sex appeal and career success. Further, some of the claims were quite provocative. For example, a 1990 ad featuring a career woman for the Excellence brand stated, "Now that you've exceeded, it's time to Excelle"; a 1992 ad for the Kink brand promised beautiful wavy hair "if you weren't born with it," and a 1997 ad for the Optimum brand stated: "You like your hair the way you like your men...straight, nice body and rich." The curly permed style had waned by the early 1990s and by 1993 all advertising for this type of chemical process had disappeared. Ads for texturizing products, which loosen the natural curl, were featured consistently; they portrayed male models exclusively, often wearing suits and ties suggesting professional or formal social activities. It was also observed that nearly all of the relaxer products featuring female models were promoted as "no lye," suggesting that these preparations were safer than the traditional lye-based hair straighteners. For example, a 1993 for the Vitale brand claimed, "Now silky straight hair never has to hurt" and a 1994 ads for Gentle Beginnings kiddie perm was promoted "as gentle as your love." Some brands (Dark and Lovely, TCB) claimed that they were so gentle, that the user could safely "relax and color" the hair the same day, contradicting a long-held belief that multiple chemical treatments on black hair the same day are very damaging. In addition, a noticeable number of relaxers were promoted specifically for use on young girl's hair. The Tender Care brand claimed it was "mild enough for first time users" while the same ad also stated "follow directions carefully to avoid skin and scalp burn, hair loss and eye injury." The PCJ Pretty and Silky brand offered "help for Moms who dread battling your daughters' unruly hair." Finally, with respect to hair straighteners, the Tame brand, using the slogan "Tame your hair with herbs," was positioned as a chemically-free alternative to traditional perms, similar to the Rio Hair product. Ads for Tame appeared in every issue of the *Ebony/Essence* sample in 1994 and 1995, around the same time that Rio was promoted on TV. Tame's final ad appeared in the December 1996 *Essence* with the copy "get away from chemical relaxers...they may be killing your hair." Despite its claims, it is speculated that the Tame brand was withdrawn in light of the outcome of the World Rio Corporation legal debacle. With the exception of the Tame ads, which were relatively small and in black and white, the ads for chemical relaxers were typically full page, four-color insertions.

Another prominent hair product category involved manufactured hair: wigs, hair pieces and hair extensions. Made from synthetic or human hair fibers, these products allow individuals to create any hair texture, length or style desired. Some African-Americans use manufactured hair in order to achieve style variety without abusing their own hair; others use it for therapeutic reasons related to previous hair/scalp damage; others use it to cover hair loss related to various medical conditions and treatments. There were 128 ads for manufactured hair, equal to 18.7% of the total

sample. Although these ads tended to be relatively small (1/4 to 1/8 of a page) and most often printed in black and white, they appeared consistently in most of the *Ebony/Essence* issues. The smallest percentage (12.7%) of these was observed in 1997; and the largest (27.8%) was observed in 1991. Ads for full wigs and hair pieces ads typically presented straight textured hair on women and kinkier textures on men. Hair extensions are important because of their role in hair weaving and braiding. Wefted hair extensions are attached onto one's existing hair into styles commonly referred to as "weaves." Ads featuring unattached hair extensions illustrated a mix of hair textures from bone straight to kinky, however, female models were far more likely to be portrayed in hair weaves with straight or wavy textured extension hair. Bulk hair extensions can be intertwined with one's own hair to add thickness or length to braided and twisted hair styles, which can then be shaped to mimic nearly any straight-haired style. Many ads featuring bulk extension hair did not portray braided styles, but merely showed a variety of detached bulk hair textures stating that the extensions were for "hair weaving and braiding."

Advertisements for the remaining hair grooming products, which included conditioners, oils, moisturizers, hair coloring and styling aids and implements, primarily showed adult women with straight hair styles. Interestingly, only 1% of the ads were for shampoos exclusively, a basic component of any hair care regimen; in many years, no shampoos appeared unless shown as a part of a mixed product line. Among the shampoo ads was one for the Wash N' Straight brand, which claimed to "wash curly hair straight" (July 1994 *Ebony*). A significant number of ads - 6.3% - were for products positioned as hair growth aids. Where long hair on black women has been historically sought after nearly as much as straight hair, copy appeals for these products played on that desire. Common copy points included, "is your hair too short?" and grow "longer, thicker, stronger" hair. The African Pride brand offered oral vitamin supplements for hair growth and Wild Growth Hair Oil promised "instantly re-texturized, soft, shiny and manageable hair, progressing to neckline, shoulder and below lengths." On a brand named Spanish Sur Gro, the model's hair literally hangs down to her kneecaps. Ads for the Organic Root Stimulator brand show a "before" model with a bald crown and "after" with hair growing to cover that area. Reflecting on hair damage that is frequently experienced by African-American women, copy appeals for growth aids, conditioners, moisturizers and oils typically claimed to repair to hair that was "weak," "broken," "thinning" or "falling."

### **Natural Hair Portrayals and Copy Appeals**

As indicated, portrayals of natural textured hair exclusively in hair product advertisements were limited to 7% of the total sample. Curiously, the numerical extremes of these portrayals were observed in adjacent years, ranging

from a high of 14.3% of the 1998 sample to a low of 2.1% of the 1999 sample. Examining the decade as a whole, in a few cases, natural textured hair was portrayed as undesirable. For example, in a May 1990 ad in *Essence* for Dr. Petay's brand of hair growth aid, short, natural hair is presented as the "before" picture and long straight hair is presented as the desirable "after" effect; in a July 1992 *Essence* ad for LeKair conditioner, a woman with long natural hair pleads "Fix this mess!" Hair product brands which showed attractive natural styles on African-American women included African Pride, Dark and Lovely, Kemi, L'Oreal, Motions, Mizani, Paul Mitchell and Soft Sheen. Copy appeals for natural styles tended to focus on gentleness, naturalness, fashionableness, personal and ethnic pride, as demonstrated in the following examples: "Bring your child into a world of gentle, more loving hair care" (Baby Love brand); "Braids are in fashion" (Hair Factory brand); "Confidence, Pride, Power" (African Pride brand) and "Heritage that shows through with style" (Cream of Nature brand). A 1993 ad for hair care products available at K Mart featured a middle-aged woman with a hand-rolled (type of curl) Afro style with the slogan "Classic Beauty with an Afrocentric flair." For women, the short natural was shown most frequently followed by a variety of larger or curly Afros, braided and twisted styles. Typically, the short naturals on women were presented as sculpted (shaped with a precision cut), molded (shaped with gel or pomade), or colored blonde. A number of ads showcased braided styles, especially cornrows or plaits on young girls and female teens. Several companies featured females in braids promoting instructional "how-to" braid books or videotapes. One wig manufacturer featured a braided wig shaped into a pageboy style and a few ads for hair extensions showed braided styles on women. The African Pride brand prominently displayed its braid sheen styling aid, the only brand to do so. Only three hair product ads featured (dread)locks, one on a male child, one on an adult male, and one on an adult female in ads for the Paul Mitchell (April 1995 *Ebony*), Kemi Sava'ge (November 1996 *Essence*) and Dark and Lovely (October 1999 *Ebony*) brands, respectively. Notably, the female model's dreadlocks were presented in a dramatic blonde upsweep style for a Dark and Lovely hair coloring product; this same image also appeared on the brand's packaging for that color variety.

#### **Natural Hair Texture Portrayals in Non-hair Care Advertisements**

Notably, numerous natural textured hair styles on adult women (except where indicated) did appear in advertisements in these magazines, for brands *outside* of the hair care product categories. Short naturals and various Afro styles appeared in ads for Ambi skin cream, Bank of America, Betty Crocker, Calvin Klein fragrance, Capri cigarettes, Cheerios, Chic jeans, Chrysler cars, Cover Girl Cosmetics, Crest toothpaste, Depo-Provera birth control

(teen girl), Just My Size panty hose, Lady Speed Stick deodorant, Legg's panty hose, Kraft foods, Lincoln-Mercury cars, Nordstrom's department stores, Oil of Olay skin cream, Plymouth cars, Porcelana skin cream, Savannah Lights cigarettes, Tide detergent, and Virginia Slims cigarettes. A 1996 Miller Lite ad featuring a man proclaims "Your Afro is back in style." Braids appeared in ads for Cheerios cereal, Depo-Provera birth control (teen girl), Dove soap, Fluid Milk Producers "Got Milk?," Kodak Advantix camera (teen girl), Newport cigarettes, Pine-Sol cleaner, Polaroid cameras (girl); Tide detergent and Wal-Mart stores. Twists were shown in ads for Amway (adult male), AT&T, Colgate toothpaste, Motions skin care, Tampax tampons and Wal-Mart stores. (Dread)locks were presented in ads for AT&T (adult male), Cheerios cereal (young boy), Courvoisier cognac (adult male) and Wal-Mart stores. The diversity and numerical representations of natural hairstyles appeared to accelerate toward the end of the decade, in 1998 and 1999 in particular.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Marketers of hair care products have long played upon African-American women's deep-seated shame and negative feelings toward their naturally textured hair and American society's general lack of appreciation of kinky African hair as a beauty aesthetic. Marketers of hair care products in the 1990s did little to change these perceptions, despite indications from other sources that the 1990s represented an era of "New Hair Freedom" for hair grooming options among African-American women. An analysis of nearly 700 hair product advertisements targeted at African-Americans through popular black-oriented magazines *Ebony* and *Essence* indicates that straightened hair styles on adult women were presented as the norm and as quite desirable. While advertising suggested that natural textured hair was appropriate for black men, teenagers and children, natural hair on adult women was presented far less as appealing. (Dread)locked hair, particularly on women, was indicated as minimally acceptable. Even among the limited portrayals of natural hair on black women in hair care advertisements, the depictions of blonde-colored tresses emphasized a non-black beauty aesthetic. As an agent of consumer socialization and influencer of beauty standards, hair product advertising's emphasis on relaxer products and on straight-textured "fake" (manufactured) hair teaches African-American women to continue to embrace a non-black standard of beauty, often at great monetary expense (via costly salon services and numerous hair maintenance/repair products) and frequently to the detriment of the health of their own hair and scalps. This orientation is particularly disconcerting in light of the advertisements which encouraged relaxer products for young girls' hair. This emphasis perpetuates the cultural beauty ideal of straightened hair as the most desirable and continues to stigmatize kinky hair. These circumstances perpetuate anxiety and self-doubt among African-American



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women contemplating wearing their hair naturally. From a managerial standpoint, marketers who ignored natural textured hair also missed an opportunity to cater to the needs of these women, who - perhaps contrary to popular belief - do require products and services to achieve and maintain healthy, well-groomed natural textured hairstyles. Interestingly, the analysis showed that a much greater diversity of acceptable hair grooming options for African-American women was presented by entities *outside* of the hair product industry, demonstrating that cultural influences presenting natural textured hair in a positive light did not come from the hair care industry.

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### APPENDIX HAIR TEXTURES DEPICTED IN HAIR CARE PRODUCT ADVERTISEMENTS IN EBONY AND ESSENCE MAGAZINES

	Straightened		Chemically curled/ Texturized		Natural		Mixed texture		No picture		Total ads	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	N	(%)
1990	50	(52.6)	12	(12.6)	8	(8.4)	17	(17.9)	8	(8.4)	95	(100.0)
1991	35	(48.6)	9	(12.5)	7	(9.7)	12	(16.7)	9	(12.5)	72	(100.0)
1992	31	(45.6)	14	(20.6)	7	(10.2)	10	(14.7)	6	(8.9)	68	(100.0)
1993	50	(66.7)	6	(8.0)	2	(2.7)	6	(8.0)	11	(14.7)	75	(100.0)
1994	45	(67.1)	1	(1.5)	6	(9.0)	8	(11.9)	7	(10.4)	67	(100.0)
1995	51	(75.0)	2	(2.9)	3	(4.4)	9	(13.2)	3	(4.4)	68	(100.0)
1996	44	(77.2)	4	(7.0)	4	(7.0)	5	(8.8)	0	(0.0)	57	(100.0)
1997	66	(83.4)	1	(1.5)	2	(2.5)	8	(10.1)	2	(2.5)	79	(100.0)
1998	38	(67.9)	0	(0.0)	8	(14.3)	9	(16.1)	1	(1.8)	56	(100.0)
1999	36	(75.0)	3	(6.3)	1	(2.1)	6	(12.5)	2	(4.2)	48	(100.0)
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>446</b>	<b>(65.1)</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>(7.6)</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>(7.0)</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>(13.1)</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>(7.2)</b>	<b>685</b>	<b>(100.0)</b>