

What's Hair Got to Do with It?: An Analysis of *Ebony* Magazine Hair Advertisements from 2011 to 2015

Ashney Williams, Courtney Johnson, Archana Edmond, and Eulanda A. Sanders
Iowa State University

Keywords: *Ebony* magazine, Hair, Black women, Advertisements

Introduction. Black hair product advertisements communicate both overt and covert messages to consumers through their phenotypic traits, facial expressions, and body language. The problem with the ads is that the messages communicated sometimes appear stereotypical of Black women. Other times, the message is a denouncement of a certain set features in favor of another, a less “ethnic” set. Similar studies of Black advertisements have been conducted by Leslie (1995), who studied a broad range of advertisements of *Ebony* magazine from 1957 to 1989, and Gitter, O’Connell, & Mostofsky (1972), who studied *Ebony* magazine advertisements from 1952 to 1968. However, there is no study that inquired: What are the trends and messages communicated by Black hair product advertisements between the years of 2011 to 2015 in *Ebony* magazine, a time when the natural hair movement gained momentum? *Ebony* magazine was used, as it is the longest printed Black magazine with the widest distribution.

Background. In 2009, comedian Chris Rock released the documentary, *Good Hair*, creating a global and controversial dialogue about Black women’s hair. For most outside of the Black community, much thought *was not given* to the styling processes Black hair and the pressures for Black women to assimilate to European hairstyle norms. Appearance communicates nonverbal messages from originator and sender to receiver (Stone, 1965). For Black women and particularly the slave woman, her identity and status was strongly linked to the “grade, style, and care of hair” (Rooks, 1996, p. 7). Women globally, understand that hair is a strong communicative part of their appearance. In the United States, Black women’s hair has historically been controlled, manipulated, and targeted by majority populations or used as a source of agency by Black women.

Theoretical Underpinnings. Conscious use of symbols can be powerful in defining situations (Horn & Gurel, 1981), such as in advertisements. Advertisements are conscious signs and symbols used to not only sell products, but to communicate societal attitudes. Semiotics, one of the theoretical underpinnings of this research, is the study and theory of signs, their actions and what they perform in cultural settings (Deely, 1990). Black hair advertisements are messages and messages have directionality -- thus a source and a goal, a social context and purpose (Hodge & Kress, 1988). The researchers, to interpret the findings that emerged, also used Black Feminist theory (Collins, 2002) and Critical Race Theory – CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Methods. The two of the four researchers, counted all the advertisements in the each issue of *Ebony* magazine from the January 2011 issue to the December 2015 issue and marked in

physical copied the Black hair advertisements. Both researchers crosschecked the advertisements and initiated a coding guide from their observations. All four researchers met to discuss the initial observations and the coding process, then each researched coded two sets of 13 issues of the magazine, thus the Black hair advertisements in each issue was coded twice. A few a priori categories were listed on the coding guide, but the researchers also open coded or list new codes. Through negotiations and discussions, among all four researchers a 95% inter-rater reliability was achieved, above the threshold recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). The research team met frequently to categorize main themes and sub-themes into a taxonomy.

Findings and Discussion. Between, 2011 to 2015, there were a total of 3104 advertisements in *Ebony* magazine. Black hair advertisements made up 474 advertisements, or 15% of the total ads. There were less Black hair ads during years with presidential elections in the United States. After dividing the advertisements by product type, the researchers discovered that advertisements for chemical, hair-straightening relaxers (n=43) and natural hair products (n=191) differed greatly in number and messaging. For example, relaxer advertisements contained glamorous, models with long hair, while the natural hair models were styled more soft and earthy with minimal makeup. Regardless of ad product type, words such as *anti-breakage*, *smooth*, *moisturizing*, *strength*, and *rejuvenate* were prevalent. Many messages found in Leslie's (1995) and Gitter's et al., (1972) study, were still prevalent in the trends found of this study. The presentation will include a taxonomy of themes that emerged and representative visual examples.

References

- Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
- Deely, J. (1990). *Basics of semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. NYU Press.
- Gitter, A. G., O'Connell, S. M., & Mostofsky, D. (1972). Trends in appearance of models in *Ebony* ads over 17 years. *Journalism Quarterly*, 49(3), 547-550.
- Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1988). *Social semiotics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Horn, M. & Gurel, L. M. (1981). *The second skin: An interdisciplinary study of clothing*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Leak, R. L. (2014). Situational effects of ethnic phenotype in marketing: investigating inter- and intra-ethnic preferences for minorities in advertisements. *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, 18(2), 135.
- Meyers, Y. J. (2011). Skin tone as the signifier of race: The effect of consumer ethnic identity on targeted marketing. *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, 15, 77.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Rooks, N. M. (1996). *Hair raising: beauty, culture, and African American women*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Stone, G. (1965). *Appearance and the self. Dress, adornment, and the social order*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.